

Rebuilding Balkan Bridges

15 years after Yugoslavia's bloody breakup began, teams of scholars from the region and from the West are trying to find common ground

By RICHARD BYRNE

Philadelphia

Sitting at a table in a downtown restaurant here, Charles W. Ingrao is more than 4,500 miles away from Sarajevo. But as he talks with a reporter on a blustery January morning, Mr. Ingrao, a professor of history at Purdue University's main campus, could be sitting at a cafe in Bosnia and Herzegovina's capital. There's coffee and Coca-Cola on the table, and the rapid-fire conversation is thick with Balkan controversy and history. Only the fog of cigarette smoke found in any Bosnian cafe is missing.

Mr. Ingrao is project director of the Scholars' Initiative, an international effort to resolve lingering questions about the decade of wars in former Yugoslavia. Those wars not only brought about a violent end to that country but also severely tested international institutions like the United Nations, the European Union, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The plan of the Scholars' Initiative was simple enough: Create research teams combining reputable scholars from the Balkan region with their counterparts in the United States, Canada, Western Europe, and elsewhere. The groups would address historical flashpoints created by the conflicts, with the goal of writing a history — anchored in solid scholarship — by consensus.

A clear plan, but its execution has been anything but simple. The wounds of conflict are still fresh. Not even a decade has passed since some of the events in the wars that created five nations. Agreement has been hard to forge among scholars in the region — and, at times, even among Western scholars of the conflict whose own views clashed. Even mundane things — paying scholars, arranging for travel — have been complicated by the relative poverty of Balkan universities and the vagaries of regional banking systems.

Mr. Ingrao has made 29 trips to the Balkans over the past five years to organize, cajole, and even bully the initiative's participants. He and the project's associate director, Thomas A. Emmert, a professor of history at Gustavus Adolphus College, have made uncounted hours of telephone calls, sent thousands of e-mail messages, arranged meetings, and raised almost \$100,000 for the program from organizations including the

U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the German Marshall Fund.

Mr. Ingrao recalls one trip to a meeting of scholars in July 2002 in Sarajevo, much of which he spent attempting to secure stipends for participants in the proper currency. "I missed half the conference in Sarajevo," he says with a chuckle. "Dealing with banks. Getting 50-euro pieces."

At many times, the initiative appeared quixotic. "If anyone had doubts," says Mr. Emmert, "they saw the doubts being realized whenever you got to any issue that is contentious."

Yet the project has achieved tangible results. Drafts of eight out of 11 planned papers are complete. More than 250 scholars from 28 countries have participated. Indeed, Mr. Ingrao and Mr. Emmert were in Philadelphia because three panels of the American Historical Association's annual meeting were focused on the initiative.

Some participants have found the process exhausting. Others criticize aspects of the scholarship produced — specific chapters, they say, have been too soft on one party or another — and even the notion that consensus necessarily creates good research. But longtime observers of the region say that the Scholars' Initiative has made important strides, including a recent meeting between Mr. Ingrao and the Croatian president, Stipe Mesic, to discuss the scholarly effort.

"The initiative has introduced a very important notion into discussions in the region," says Daniel P. Serwer, a vice president at the U.S. Institute of Peace and director of its Center for Postconflict Peace and Stability Operations. "That notion is that if we are historians, committed to the truth, we should be able to talk with each other."

Battling Myths

The seeds of the Scholars' Initiative were sown in 1997, when Mr. Ingrao traveled to Belgrade to talk with Serbian scholars during a lull in the Balkan conflict that fell between the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords, in November 1995 — ending the war in Bosnia — and February 1998, when Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic sent troops into the Serbian province of Kosovo to attack areas controlled by the Kosovo Liberation Army, or KLA.

Those Serbian attacks — many of which killed civilians — bore a striking resemblance to the violent "ethnic cleansing" that had occurred in earlier conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia. Along with military operations conducted by the KLA — which sought independence for the majority-Albanian province — the attacks led to NATO's bombing campaign to expel Serbian troops from Kosovo in 1999.

During his visit, Mr. Ingrao found that nationalist Serbian scholars were ready to talk candidly with him about the conflict. Their candor surprised him, he says, because of the role played by Serbian scholars in fomenting and justifying the wars that led to Yugoslavia's breakup. Many observers point to an incendiary memorandum drafted by a committee of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1986 as a key event in the

lead-up to violence. (At the heart of that document was an argument that Serbs were threatened by other nationalities in Yugoslavia.)

"They knew what really had happened," Mr. Ingrao says of his conversations with Serbian scholars. "They just had no motivation to speak out."

He believed that attracting such scholars to take public stands might help combat violent nationalism. But hostilities in Kosovo, along with Mr. Milosevic's continued grip on power, forced the historian to shelve the initiative until the Serbian president was voted out of office in October 2000.

With Mr. Milosevic gone, Mr. Ingrao's project took off. One immediate problem was his own credibility with scholars in Serbia, who knew about his strongly worded critiques of Serbia's foreign policy in American newspapers during the Bosnia war. His solution was to enlist Mr. Emmert — whose research on medieval Serbia, including his 1990 book, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo, 1389* (East European Monographs) is both influential and respected in that country — as associate director of the project.

"A number of us have spent our lives on this area," says Mr. Emmert. "We bring a rich, experienced historiography and a perspective that come from a long study of the history of the region. We are concerned about the region as human beings."

The two men have taken different roles. Mr. Ingrao has prodded and poked the participating scholars. He has also pushed the project beyond academe and into policy-making and political circles. Mr. Emmert has played a lower-key, behind-the-scenes role, smoothing ruffled scholarly feathers and quietly but firmly pushing for alterations in papers.

"My role is to be kind of a muscler," says Mr. Ingrao. "Tom is a very important stabilizing influence on the project. When people meet him, they instantly like him. The tag-team thing is indispensable."

Initially the project was aimed at building bridges between Serbian scholars and their Western counterparts. "The Serbs were the greatest source of instability," says Mr. Ingrao. "The project was — and is — Serbocentric because we recognize that." But when it secured financial support from the U.S. Institute of Peace, an independent, nonpartisan group established and financed by Congress, the institute wanted the project to include scholars from other Balkan nations as well.

Mr. Ingrao took on the vast change in the initiative's scope. "I was happy to be seduced into a more ambitious project," he says with a grin.

Collaborative Tensions

Those increased ambitions, however, were accompanied by unwieldiness and scholarly tension. First was the sheer number of scholars involved.

Early on Mr. Ingrao and Mr. Emmert decided that openness was a key to the initiative's success. "Anybody who is qualified joins the project," says Mr. Ingrao. "We are inclusive."

That principle has led more than 250 scholars to participate, although to varying degrees. "Many of them are not engaged," says Mr. Emmert.

As might be expected in the atmosphere of continuing bitterness over the wars, some scholars refused to join the project if other particular participants were involved. Occasionally, these decisions were made on ethnic grounds. Other times they resulted from profound disagreements over issues. But the only scholars who were excluded by the project's directors were those who did not bring an open mind to the effort.

"Our rule was that the agenda for each group needed to be based on scholarly evidence and human reason," says Mr. Ingrao. He adds that while some scholars did drop out or refused to sign particular chapters, others who left came back after seeing the collaborative work that had been done.

Even deciding on an agenda created difficulties. The project began with a plan to investigate seven issues involving Yugoslavia's violent breakup, but eventually three more were added — plus an examination of how Yugoslavs lived together in the decades between the ethnic violence of World War II and the country's dissolution.

Even the titles given to the papers in the history-in-progress were altered by scholars' suggestions. A chapter that was first titled "The Fate of the Serbs in Kosovo" was changed to the more-neutral "Kosovo Under Autonomy." Another chapter that originally focused only on "Operation Storm," a 1995 Croatian offensive to retake land occupied by Serbs, was expanded to encompass the entire 1991-95 war between Croats and Serbs.

The collaborative process created some controversies of its own. Scholars are accustomed to producing work that undergoes peer review and then attracts praise or criticism via reviews. In the Scholars' Initiative, however, discussions led to initial drafts of papers that were open to critique by all participants, mostly via the blunt and affectless medium of e-mail.

John B. Allcock, an honorary reader in sociology at the University of Bradford, in Britain, edited and revised a chapter on the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia after initial drafts drew sharp comments from other participants. The instantaneous feedback, he says, "created a fuzzy area between academic and personal communication.

"As a sociologist, I found it very interesting," says Mr. Allcock, who adds that the experience did fall "outside the normal forms and rules in which academics write and communicate with each other.

In an e-mail interview, Darko Gavrilovic, a professor of history at the University of Banja Luka, in Bosnia's Serb Republic who worked on a paper about the U.N.'s "safe areas" in Bosnia, reaches for a metaphor to describe the collaboration: "Try to imagine that seven or eight writers of different nationalities write a novel. ... The novel would not be finished soon, but at the same time, ... when it is finished, it will demonstrate beliefs and thoughts that are cultivated from the different cultures and countries. It will bring different opinions, sometimes disagreements."

Sabrina P. Ramet, a professor of political science at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, and a senior associate at the Centre for the Study of Civil War at the International Peace Research Institute, in Oslo, is a prolific scholar, with 18 books to her credit. She describes reactions to her draft chapter as varying greatly in quality. In it she examines competing national myths about the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

"Some comments are insightful, some are stupid and polemical," says Ms. Ramet. "Not everyone in the project is equally conversant in the issues. People have to weigh the quality of the responses."

Finding an Audience

Two basic questions about the Scholars' Initiative create continued debate as its directors move to finish the last chapters and edit the collected work for joint publication by Purdue University Press and USIP Press in 2007.

As Ms. Ramet observes, a "tension below the surface of the project is the difference between truth and consensus. If we agree on something, it isn't necessarily true."

Both Mr. Emmert and Mr. Ingrao acknowledge that tension. They emphasize the value in the process itself, as participants seek the truth together, rather than reach final conclusions on their own.

"The project is a foundation to build upon," says Mr. Emmert. "It will be critiqued."

Mr. Ingrao concurs. "There's nothing wrong," he says, "with putting two views of things out and saying that this question needs more research."

The other question is whether or not the chapters produced by the project will reach their intended audience: scholars, politicians, and the general public in the Balkans. The project has publicists in each country in the region, and completed drafts of the reports are placed online at the Web site of the Scholars' Initiative. The editors hope that the chapters, which are being translated into regional languages, will also be published in book form in various Balkan countries when they are all complete.

Dusan Janjic, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences in Belgrade, worked on two chapters about Kosovo. He hails the project as a chance for Balkan scholars, long isolated by war and international sanctions, to connect with "new ideas, new literatures, and new terminology" in their disciplines.

But, he also says, "the conflict is not finished." He regrets, for instance, that Kosovar Albanian colleagues would not sign a report that he worked on, even though it had benefited from their contributions. Their choice, Mr. Janjic says, is a signal of "their perception of the risks in openly signing something that is common with Serbs."

The project "has not been easy," Mr. Ingrao says. Yet many participants agree that it has come this far because of his belief that scholars from different sides of a fractious war — and their fellow citizens — could gain much by talking.

"I applaud Charles for his inexhaustible optimism," says Mr. Emmert. Indeed, he shares it: "I would never be involved if I did not have an optimism that we could change perspectives."

DISTINGUISHED COMPANY

The Scholars' Initiative boasts a number of accomplished researchers who have written extensively about the Balkans and about Central and southeastern Europe in general. Here is a sampling of book-length publications by some of the participants:

John B. Allcock, *Explaining Yugoslavia* (Columbia University Press, 2000).

Robert J. Donia, *Sarajevo: A Biography* (University of Michigan Press, 2006).

Eric D. Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

James Gow, *Defending the West* (Polity Press, 2005).

James Gow, *The Serbian Project and Its Adversaries: A Strategy of War Crimes* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).

Sabrina P. Ramet, *Thinking About Yugoslavia: Scholarly Debates About the Yugoslav Breakup and the Wars in Bosnia and Kosovo* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Sabrina P. Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavias: State-Building and Legitimation, 1918-2005* (Indiana University Press and Wilson Center Press, forthcoming in 2006).

Gale Stokes, *Three Eras of Political Change in Eastern Europe* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

Gale Stokes, *The Walls Came Tumbling Down: The Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

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Writing the Conflicts

By RICHARD BYRNE

On a topic as contentious as the wars in former Yugoslavia, it is not surprising that scholars disagree. Yet the work produced by the Scholars' Initiative has forged some consensus among its participants on thorny issues raised by the war:

- **Was the collapse of Yugoslavia inevitable?** The team report on "The Dissolution of Yugoslavia," written by Sabrina P. Ramet, a professor of political science at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, argues that "while the violent breakup was not inevitable, it was nonetheless overdetermined, so that it would have taken wise leadership, committed to the Yugoslav

community as such and acting in good time, to pull the country back from the brink."

In another team report, on the international reaction to the breakup, Matjaz Klemencic, a professor of history at the University of Ljubljana, in Slovenia, argues that foreign powers and institutions "should have tried much sooner to foster a peaceful dissolution of Yugoslavia. It should also have insisted on meaningful rights for Serbs in Croatia before international recognition. All this may well have failed, but it would have been 'the right thing to do.'"

- **Is there bias in the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY)?** The tribunal has been criticized by many observers, both inside and outside the region, as unfair toward one side or another. But the team report, edited by John B. Allcock, an honorary reader in sociology at the University of Bradford, in Britain, concludes that "the belief that the ICTY pursues a policy which is deliberately biased for or against any of the states or ethnic groups of the former Yugoslavia has no foundation of which we are aware."

The report concludes that "perceptions of bias within the Yugoslav space, however, have been widespread. In large measure these can be explained as the unintended and often unrecognized consequences of the manner in which the tribunal was created and has operated, and policies which have not been deliberately partial to any group or state."

- **What would have happened if NATO had not intervened in Kosovo in 1999?** The team report, written by James Gow, a professor in the department of war studies at King's College London, with Miroslav Hadzic, a professor of global and national security at the University of Belgrade, in Serbia, sketches out a bleak picture of events in the majority-Albanian province if the Western powers had not acted to expel Serbian troops there:

"NATO believed that extensive ethnic cleansing by Belgrade forces was imminent. Belgrade's record during the 1990s in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo (where up to 300,000 people were displaced in the months preceding NATO's initiative) appeared to support this view. So, even more, did the onset of operations in March 1999, as the attempt to find a negotiated outcome in Paris failed and the Serbian campaign started, four or five days before NATO action occurred. To this extent, it seems reasonable to conclude that ethnic cleansing would have occurred."

Summaries and current drafts of many of the papers in the Scholars' Initiative can be found at its Web site

(<http://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/history/facstaff/Ingrao/si/scholars.htm>). A thumbnail guide to controversies addressed by the initiative can be found in a U.S. Institute of Peace briefing

(http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace_briefings/2006/0105_narrative.html).