

Research Team 11: Living Together or Hating Each Other?

Marina Blagojević, team leader

David Bruce MacDonald, team leader and editor

Executive Summary

Team 11's Report explores ways of gaining an objective or at least more neutral understanding of the 1990s and before. We revisit a central justification of the nationalists: that the peoples of former Yugoslavia could not live together in a single state – and that war was inevitable. We challenge this fatalism by reexamining the state of interethnic relations on the eve of Yugoslavia's demise. We also consider the feasibility of strengthening confidence in the viability of multiethnic coexistence within the newly formed successor states by advancing a more balanced representation of the past. This would afford equal space to the "positive" experiences of life in a multiethnic society. Our report seeks to emphasize the "success stories" of peoples living together in harmony in the former Yugoslavia, especially prior to 1987.

War developed for two primary reasons. The first was manipulation of the population by political, intellectual, and media elites, facilitated by the lack of institutional power to stop conflict. Without this mobilization of propaganda, ethnic conflict made no sense for most of the actors, who were and remain the main losers. The second contributing factor was unresolved trauma from the past, which helped create an emotional climate where negative myths could be promoted and readily believed. The prevailing "negative" history is not easy to overcome as they often played an identity-defining role for many individuals. Myths, by their very nature, are deeply rooted in the psyches of individuals and groups.

The basis of this report lies in engendering forms of "positive history" – a narrative of cooperation and tolerance that cuts across ethnic and religious divisions, stressing the commonalities of people and their shared experiences of hardship, powerlessness, and victimization during the succession wars of the 1990s. Such a narrative would not replace the heretofore dominant narrative of national consciousness, competition and conflict, but deserves to be placed alongside it in any recounting or analysis. Its presence alone challenges the notion that these conflicts were "logical" and "inevitable" simply because they occurred by stressing the undeniable periods of cooperation and association of the peoples of the former Yugoslavia.

In everyday life, resistance to war politics was faced with two sets of limitations: lack of institutional channels to express attitudes against war, with an overwhelming feeling that it was not "us" who wanted the war, but "they"; and secondly, exhaustion of resources due to survival pressure. Nevertheless, even in the chaos of the war, there are many cases where individuals acted with bravery and tolerance in dangerous situations, to counteract animosity, hatred, and destruction. Crucially, the support given to leaders was not "for the wars", but for "self-protection". Even if largely invisible, there were numerous initiatives, actions, and organizations which included many different actors in Yugoslavia during the conflict: autonomous women's groups, peace and anti-war organizations, organizations for the protection of human rights, and outstanding intellectuals.

Our report also interrogates institutional failure in Yugoslav society, from the failure of the media to report the wars objectively, to the role of the mainline churches, and the educational system. In Serbia and Croatia, the media became an active participant in the escalation of nationalist violence. At times it became a mouthpiece of the government. At other times it promoted more radical interpretations of the nationalist message, spurring national leaders to greater excesses. After the wars, media promoted the transformation of the nation into something more palatable for the West. However, neither Serbia nor Croatia has fully engaged with the history of atrocities in the 1990s. Few media institutions feel inclined or empowered to explore national guilt too far. A change in attitudes will slowly evolve, but the space for an independent media depends not only on government acquiescence but also public support. Ultimately improving the media will help reshape civil society, but the public must also be persuaded that an open and objective media serves their individual and collective interests.

While the role of religion during the collapse of Yugoslavia was sometimes divisive, the evolving political climate after 2000 provided an easier environment for the development of relations among religious communities and their congregations. However, the role of religious communities remains problematic. Issues of truth and reconciliation do not often make the agenda. In fact religious communities, in the main, deny their responsibility for wrongdoing during the recent wars, or have only accused each other for contributing to war efforts. Inter-religious relations have witnessed some improvement on a formal level; however, there is still intolerance of and attacks against religious communities.

Education is crucial to the development of a more tolerant and cooperative society. However, it can also be used in the wrong hands to perpetuate stereotypes, intolerance, and even violent ethnic chauvinism. In general there are positive and negative examples from the Yugoslav region. Slovenia is noted as a positive example, while we raise serious questions about history and memory in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Macedonia. School textbooks and teacher training, while significant, are only one part of the task. Children, and older students and adults, will have to be helped to confront the narratives that have taken hold within themselves.

Truth and reconciliation may be helped by the creation of public commissions, bringing together government, churches, NGOs and other institutions of civil society to come to terms with the crimes of the 1990s, promoting memory, justice, and healing. We discuss the highs and lows of the TRC process in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In neither case has a long-term viable TRC been established to address the serious breaches of human rights that accompanied the dissolution of Yugoslavia. We recommend the continuation and extension of NGO efforts to document and come to terms with crimes committed in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

If justice is the outward means of addressing the ills of the past, mourning is its internal counterpart. The lingering memory of trauma suffered by individuals or groups does not fade with time. It can place burdens on individuals and become the chief source of meaning-making in groups. A society that wishes to move beyond its past must seek ways to lay that past to rest. Mourning is a necessary reaction to loss and change. If mourning can occur, the next generation creates a new version of the event, strengthening the group's self-esteem and moving into the future without

having to carry the burden of the past. Beyond talking about the past, societies can mourn their past by building monuments or museums, creating days of remembrance, or using music, art, theater, literature or film creatively and collectively to remember.

Recommendations

We advance a series of recommendations, extracted from the themes elaborated in our report, which can form the basis for further debate and discussion:

1. Promote a more “positive” balanced history of the pre-1990s wartime era, focused on experiences of cooperation, tolerance, and diversity. Such a narrative should chronicle ordinary people’s experiences during the 1990s conflict. This can deal with forms of victimization that are shared by groups not bound by ethnicity – for example, residents of a particular community like Sarajevo. It should also emphasize the struggles of peace movements and opposition parties and NGOs working for peace against the rise of nationalist extremism and should stress the victimization of women across ethnic boundaries, as well as their role in promoting peace and countering violence.
2. Promote international support for and training of independent non-nationalist oriented media, committed to fostering pluralism and a diversity of opinions. Part of the process of creating a freer and better informed civil society must also include support for alternative media like the Internet.
3. Promote encouragement of religious leaders from all faiths to work towards reconciliation. This must involve exploration by religious leaders of what people of one’s own nation have endured, both as victims *and* as perpetrators.
4. Continue the revision of school textbooks, with an effort to unify the curriculum across ethnic divides. New education can and should include the privileging of individual stories and experiences, to which students can relate.
5. Continue international support for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Bosnia-Herzegovina, and for similar TRCs in Serbia, Croatia, and the other warring republics. This can be a crucial step in allowing victims and perpetrators to speak publicly of their experiences. Information gathered in the process of such trials can create a crucial body of information for historians and the general public to draw upon.
6. Encourage collective and individual mourning and memorialization as a crucial alternative to resentment, hatred and the desire for revenge.