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Review scientific article

RETURN AND BELONGING – THREE DECADES OF STRUGGLE IN SREBRENICA

Abstract: After the Bosnian War and genocide against Bosniaks destroyed the homes of many Bosniaks, the international community considered the right to return to be both a human right and form of restorative justice. Though symbolically powerful, return efforts often overlooked the more complex realities of restoring community after genocide. This chapter examines postwar return initiatives in Bosnia, and specifically Srebrenica, that sought to reverse wartime acts of domicide. We question an underlying premise: that a return to a pre-war house could return what had been destroyed.

Keywords: Genocide in Srebrenica; Refugee Return; Destruction of Home; Post-Genocide Reintegration; Restorative Justice; Republika Srpska and the Post-Dayton Structure

POVRATAK I PRIPADNOST – TRI DECENIJE BORBE U SREBRENICI

Sažetak: Nakon rata u Bosni i Hercegovini i genocida nad Bošnjacima, koji je uništio domove mnogih, međunarodna zajednica je pravo na povratak smatrala i temeljnim ljudskim pravom i oblikom restorativne pravde. Iako simbolično snažni, naponi da se omogući povratak često su zanemarivali složenu stvarnost obnove zajednice nakon genocida. Ovo poglavlje

analizira poslijeratne inicijative povratka u Bosni i Hercegovini, posebno u Srebrenici, koje su imale za cilj poništiti ratne akte domicida. Autori preispituju osnovnu pretpostavku: može li povratak u predratni dom doista vratiti ono što je uništeno.

Ključne riječi: genocid u Srebrenici, povratak izbjeglica, uništenje doma, poslijegenocidna reintegracija, restorativna pravda, Republika srpska i postdejtonska struktura.

Introduction

The 1992–1995 Bosnian War and genocide against Bosniaks destroyed many Bosniaks' houses along with their very sense of home.¹ The destruction of these physical structures and spaces with emotional attachments was not merely collateral damage, but central to the Leadership of Republika Srpska's systematic strategy and implementation of "ethnic cleansing" to displace and eliminate Bosniak presence. Scholars Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Carl Dalhman apply the term "domicide," or "the intentional exercise of violence to destroy a particular type of spatiality: homes," to describe this "deliberate killing of home," a process that extended beyond individual dwellings to include the destruction of mosques, community gathering places, and familiar spheres of comfort in Bosnia.² Erasure of these physical and symbolic spaces sought to eliminate Bosniak culture and sever Bosniaks' sense of belonging to their homeland.

Following the genocide, the international community considered Bosniak minority return a human right and form of restorative justice,

¹ In this chapter, we use *Bosniak* to recognize the nationhood of this population after genocide, rather than the term "Bosnian Muslim," which reduces collective identity to a matter of religious affiliation, rather than a sovereign community. Jasmin Mujanović, *The Bosniaks: Nationhood After Genocide*, Oxford University Press, 2024, 1-4.

² Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Carl Dahlman, "Post-Domicide Bosnia and Herzegovina: Homes, Homelands and One Million Returns," *International Peacekeeping* 13, no. 2, 2006, 244.

facilitating repatriation, restoring property rights, and revitalizing communities. While symbolically powerful, these return efforts overlooked the more complex realities of restoring community in the wake of genocide. Behind the notion of reconstruction lies an inaccurate premise: that a return to a pre-war house could return what had been destroyed. This chapter examines postwar return initiatives in Bosnia, and specifically Srebrenica, that sought to reverse wartime acts of domicile. Three decades later, Bosniak survivors' struggle to contend with that loss remains unsolved.

Immediate Aftermath and the Challenges Associated with the Possibility and Implementation of Return

In the immediate aftermath of the genocide, the Dayton Peace Accords offered an opportunity to redress the Bosnian domicile. The return of minorities to Serb-dominated regions was a central focus in promoting survivor repatriation. By 1999, the idea of “minority return” was a “cornerstone of official policy,” promising a future of re-habitation and reintegration.³ To address the politics of domicile, international policy centered itself around what scholar Anders Stefansson describes as “‘small home’ politics.”⁴ Postwar reconstruction, thus, meant the return of individuals and families to their prewar residences through local-level property restitution.

However, these policies often romanticized the concepts of home and return, giving in to an impractical nostalgia for a past before the war – that in many cases, no longer existed. The international community, in the aftermath of the war, focused on returning displaced persons to their “homes,” which had become houses – physical structures occupied by others, emptied of memory, creating what Richard Black identifies as a

³ Richard Black, “Return and Reconstruction in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Missing Link, or Mistaken Priority?” *SAIS Review* 21, no. 2, 2001, 182.

⁴ Anders H. Stefansson, “Homes in the Making: Property Restitution, Refugee Return, and Senses of Belonging in Post-War Bosnian Town, *International Migration* 44, no. 3, 2006, 117.

“problematized notion of home.” These return efforts cultivated a sense of unattainable “longing” for a home filled with familial memories, now a “mythical status for a place.” For many Bosniaks, that home existed in the past, irreversibly altered by war.⁵

Several early post-war programs facilitated survivors to visit their former homes, through initiatives, including “Look and See,” “Go and See,” “Test the Water,” and “Explore and Prepare.”⁶ However, the very structure of these programs was contradictory. Amid the harsh realities of the postwar period, these programs offered Bosniaks, vestiges of their former prewar lives, along with an opportunity to “make a reasoned individual judgment about whether they can personally contribute to the reconstruction and reconciliation process.”⁷ The programs supported displaced Bosniaks – including those living outside of Bosnia – to visit their former homes.

At the same time, these programs also reinforced Bosniak displacement. The visits were “temporary,” leaving survivors often unable to enter their former homes, restricted by the moods and hostility of Serb occupants. Instead of facilitating a meaningful return, these visits placed survivors in a position of mediated observation, which reinforced the distance between their past and present. In many cases, “local conditions were still not conducive to their permanent return.”⁸ The experience, then, became a retraumatization, forcing survivors to confront the loss of home up-close and being denied any straightforward pathway to reclaim what was taken.

Many Bosniak houses had suffered extensive war damage and had been desecrated by collateral damage and Serb occupation. While certain houses faced structural issues, compromised by bullet holes, unstable roofs, and collapsing walls, others lacked essential utilities including water and electricity, which were often inaccessible. Homes that had

⁵ Richard Black and Saskia Gent, “Sustainable Return in Post-conflict Contexts,” *International Migration* 44, no. 3, 2006, 21, 22.

⁶ Richard Black, “Return and Reconstruction in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Missing Link, or Mistaken Priority?” *SALS Review* 21, no. 2 (2001): 186.

⁷ Black, “Return and Reconstruction,” 186.

⁸ *Ibid.*

been once associated with comfort, safety, and familial protection became uninhabitable ruins.

The displaced who participated in these programs confronted a painful contrast between their imagined futures and the new realities of their conditions. Their homes had been spaces where generations had lived and shared memories together. While assessing the physical destruction, many also dealt with an emotional interstice between their former lives and the current impossibility of recovering the loss of home and return.

In isolated cases, the process worked, and return was possible. Šaćir and Mevlida Halilović, both octogenarians, were among the first Bosniak survivors to return to Srebrenica as permanent residents after the genocida.⁹ Of course their lives had dramatically changed, but they found their experiences relatively smooth, with support from Serb neighbors who brought them coffee, food, and assistance with minor building repairs.

In other cases, the process proved far more problematic. Former head of the Mothers of Srebrenica, Hajra Čatić, was among female survivors who sought an early return, determined to see her home again. On one occasion, Serb police blockaded the buses of women, only permitting a cemetery visit. She saw her house from afar and later reflected, “I couldn’t reach it, I couldn’t get to it.” Čatić was finally allowed access to her former home, now occupied by Serbs. She found the structure left no trace of her son or the life she had known.¹⁰

Thus, while in theory return aligned with seeking to fulfill and attain the human right to home, its implementation was far too narrow and missed the essential larger regional dynamics, or what Stefansson calls “‘big home’ politics.”¹¹ This limited scope of individual restitution weakened efforts at the micro-level and failed to achieve Black’s idea of a “sustainable” return for Bosniaks.¹²

⁹ Lara J. Nettelfield and Sarah E. Wagner, *Srebrenica in the Aftermath of Genocide*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, 86.

¹⁰ Hajra Čatić Testimony in Ann Petrila and Hasan Hasanović, *Voices From Srebrenica: Survivor Narratives of the Bosnian Genocide*, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2021, 140-141.

¹¹ Stefansson, “Homes in the Making,” 117.

¹² Black and Gent, “Sustainable Return,” 25.

The re-drawing of the map of postwar Bosnia – particularly the creation of the entity of Republika Srpska (RS) under the Dayton framework – fragmented the nation by ethnically segregating territories designated as either majority-Bosniak, majority-Serb or majority-Croat. This larger-scale structural division undermined efforts focused on rehousing through a process of “minority return” in majority-Serb regions and ignored deeply entrenched anti-Bosniak animosities. Moreover, Serbs commonly occupied former Bosniak homes and were unwilling to relinquish them, complicating efforts for any meaningful, long-lasting reintegration. Reintegrating Bosniak survivors into majority-Serb communities was often fraught with discrimination, hate, and othering.

In practice, return entailed the dual burden of providing proof of their former ownership to evict Serb occupants, reclaim their property, and physically reconstruct their homes. Certain parts of Srebrenica and the surrounding Podrinje region remained uninhabitable due to the sheer destruction of infrastructure, resources, and shelters.¹³ The lack of essential services, including “water systems and roads,” as well as “[k]ey bridges, rail lines, and airports” further impeded “return efforts in areas where people had been massacred.”¹⁴ Despite the physical challenges of reconstruction, those who returned to Srebrenica, like Hatidža Habibović, persisted. She recalled that she “just kept going” and “didn’t expect anything anymore” – “[n]o electricity, no toilet, no water, nothing.”¹⁵

Returning survivors also faced a different cultural and political environment. There was a process of renaming towns and villages – adding “Srpski” and “Srb” as prefixes – as part of a larger effort to Serbianize the region under the direction of Republika Srpska. Courts later determined this renaming process perpetuated “intimidating landscapes of fear and trauma.” However, such rulings had limited impact. Local leadership remained complicit and a culture of “supremacy and intimidation” continued despite legal challenges.¹⁶

¹³ Nettelfield and Wagner, *Srebrenica in the Aftermath*, 88, 90-91.

¹⁴ Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Carl Dahlman, *Bosnia Remade: Ethnic Cleansing and its Reversal*, Oxford University Press, 2011, 138.

¹⁵ Hatidža Habibović Testimony in Petrila and Hasanović, *Voices from Srebrenica*, 203.

¹⁶ Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Carl Dahlman, “Post-Domicide Bosnia and Herzegovina:

Survivors faced the social struggles in navigating hostilities from Serb occupants and neighbors. Tensions rose amid widespread local impunity, where many war criminals occupied positions of power or lived freely in towns. Reports of violence against Bosniaks persisted even after the war, including the 1999 stabbing of an elected official at city hall, which prompted serious concerns of security and safety.¹⁷ While “organized violence against returnees” was less common, “[a]dministrative obstruction was common and unfortunately, widespread.”¹⁸

In this climate, repossession frequently became a forum for micro-level identity politics. In international relations scholar Lara Nettelfield and anthropologist Sarah Wagner’s scholarship on Srebrenica, they share a story of Bosniak survivor Nura’s return home. Upon return, Nura recognized there was “much more than the physical task of reconstruction and of clearing away brush and debris and the material vestiges of former occupants.”¹⁹ Despite reclaiming her pre-war home, she found the Serb occupants “had taken almost everything of value physically possible, leaving behind only one item in the kitchen: a religious calendar from 2002, its image of Christ on the cross.”²⁰ That remnant of the home’s temporary occupants constituted a desecration of the space. Clearly, repossession was not merely about reoccupying a space, but about reclaiming its dignity and identity.²¹

For their part, local law enforcement and municipal housing authorities – hardly neutral actors – functioned as gatekeepers who “discouraged many displaced persons” from returning, often redirecting many to “resettl[e] elsewhere.”²² Further, local elected officials and nationalist politicians imposed bureaucratic barriers, deliberately hampering the

Homes, Homelands and One Million Returns,” *International Peacekeeping* 13, no. 2, 2006, 256.

¹⁷ Nettelfield and Wagner, *Srebrenica in the Aftermath*, 85.

¹⁸ Tuathail and Dahlman, *Bosnia Remade*, 168, 243.

¹⁹ Nettelfield and Wagner, *Srebrenica in the Aftermath*, 75.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Tuathail and Dahlman, “Post-Domicide Bosnia”, 254.

processing of proof of ownership applications and eviction requests.²³ These local government offices often refused to provide financial aid or even basic public utilities, like water, electricity, and roads “making the conditions of life unbearable in returnee communities.”²⁴

For many survivors, there remained a very real possibility of continued violence. Their “fear of violent retribution should they return” was grounded in the reality of local hostility. This made the decision to return fraught with hesitation and uncertainty – whether to confront prejudice, hate, violence, and retraumatization was a psychologically formidable prospect.²⁵ Local media sensationalized stories fueling fear through dramatic stories of Ustaše, Četniks, and mujahideen, portraying certain regions as “dangerous.”²⁶ The “uncovering of mass graves easily fed fear and paranoia that dissuaded returns” further deterring many individuals from returning to their former homes.²⁷

Some survivors encountered open hostility. Though Hajra Ćatić, a prominent activist involved in the Mothers of Srebrenica, returned to her prewar home in Srebrenica only to face harassment from drunk Serbs yelling and singing “What else is left, we killed you and raped you and kicked you out from here, what else is left.”²⁸ Similarly, Mevludin Orić, a Srebrenica execution site survivor and returnee, described a similar reality with injustice that pervades throughout the region. There are “people working in the police who were killing people in the war” who “laugh at the returnees... laughing like they want to say we killed your loved ones.”²⁹

Rebuilding the home was not just about reconstruction, but also required social reintegration and access to community organizations and programs. Returnee families confronted difficult questions of schooling for their children and concerns of discrimination and bullying. What kind of future would their children have upon return?

²³ Black, “Return and Reconstruction,” 191.

²⁴ Tuathail and Dahlman, *Bosnia Remade*, 243, 245.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Hajra Ćatić Testimony in Petrila and Hasanović, *Voices from Srebrenica*, 141.

²⁹ Mevludin Orić Testimony in Ibid, 61.

In Srebrenica schools, Bosniak students are the minority, and the curriculum in Republika Srpska has been heavily influenced by political propaganda and heritage myths, rather than historical realities. A striking incident occurred at a primary school when Serb students posing for a photo made the Serbian nationalist gesture alongside a Bosniak student, perhaps in an attempt (ultimately unsuccessful, in this case) to drive the Bosniak family away. Persistent microaggressions and blatant acts of hate and discrimination were not unusual and made for challenging adjustments given Bosniaks' "minority status in the school system."³⁰

Outside of educational barriers, many who returned had limited or no access to employment pensions, healthcare, and other forms of social services.³¹ Many continue to face discrimination.³² While some returnees fully resettled, others existed in a gray zone, unable to gain stability or achieve economic self-sufficiency while "stuck in shelters, with extended family, or squatting in someone else's empty apartment."³³ Without jobs, they were trapped in poverty, "immobile and dependent upon public transportation for movement."³⁴

Despite these challenges, the implementation return policies nonetheless held some promise for a peaceful reintegration of Bosniak minorities. Beginning in 2000, the number of returnees began to steadily increase, and these efforts culminated, when Bosnia marked the achievement of one million displaced individuals returning in September 2004 to Bosnia, the "height of the return process," including thousands who resettled in Srebrenica.³⁵ From 1999 to 2003, a large transition occurred with a movement for Bosniaks returning to their former homes.³⁶

³⁰ Nettelfield and Wagner, *Srebrenica in the Aftermath*, 96-97.

³¹ Black, "Return and Reconstruction", 192.

³² Tuathail and Dahlman, "Post-Domicide Bosnia", 255-256.

³³ Tuathail and Dahlman, *Bosnia Remade*, 168, 173.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Nettelfield and Wagner, *Srebrenica in the Aftermath*, 91-92; Carl Dahlman and Gearóid Ó Tuathail, "Broken Bosnia: The Localized Geopolitics of Displacement and Return in Two Bosnian Places," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 3, 2015, 656-657.

³⁶ Tuathail, and John O'Loughlin, "After Ethnic Cleansing", 1048, 1052.

Approximately 454,220 Bosniak minorities resettled as of December 2005 in Serb-dominated regions.³⁷

For Bosniak survivors, returning to Serb-dominated regions was an assertion of their identity and an act of resistance against the ethnic cleansing and genocide that had destroyed their communities and families and sought to erase them. In this way, return was more than reclaiming property. It meant “moral defiance, ethnic pride” and what some called an “ethno-national duty and justice.”³⁸ Many Bosniak survivors, especially those who worked within the housing programs and property restitution efforts, saw their return as “an act of defiance” in the face of the violence that tried to permanently displace them. For some, their return was “first and foremost a personal choice... to re-occupy... to return to the place where they had grown up and where they intended to finish their lives.”³⁹ However, for those without financial resources, alternatives abroad, or family support networks, return was a necessity – not a choice. Those who returned to live permanently in their prewar home tended to be “among the poorest” and most vulnerable – often the “victims of discrimination.”⁴⁰ Many were Bosniak or Bosnian Croat survivors who remained in their prewar communities enduring severe discrimination, and stayed despite their ensuing hardships.

Returning home was not simply a logistical hurdle. Return meant facing a psychological and emotional nightmare, where the past was not the past, but lingered into the present, with a future clouded with denial, unacknowledged grief, and the presence of unpunished perpetrators.

Many of those returning to Srebrenica and other municipalities were women – those who had lost husbands, fathers, and sons to the gender-based targeting that characterized the genocide. These women made an intentional decision to confront unbearable memories and reclaim their dignity. Their decision to reestablish themselves in former sites of

³⁷ Gearóid Ó Tuathail, and John O’Loughlin, “After Ethnic Cleansing: Return Outcomes in Bosnia-Herzegovina a Decade Beyond War,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99, no. 5, 2009, 1047.

³⁸ Stefansson, “Homes in the Making,” 127.

³⁹ Nettelfield and Wagner, *Srebrenica in the Aftermath*, 84-85.

⁴⁰ Tuathail, and John O’Loughlin, “After Ethnic Cleansing,” 1051-52.

atrocities was an intentional act of defiance against ethnic cleansing and the erasure of their families and communities.

Their return encountered stiff resistance from Serbs who had dominated the area since 1995. In May 2000, returnee women “were pelted with rocks” left without any official protection.⁴¹ And in the “first few years after the genocide... lived in wretched conditions; some still do, because they feel attached to the area and have nowhere else to go.”⁴² Others remain uncertain about whether to return. One such woman, Hatidža Habibović, female survivor of Srebrenica, “lives alone, but hopes that the rest of her family will follow her.” But even after she “rebuilt her home, it burned again.”⁴³

Still, they returned.

Rukija Hasić, a female survivor of Srebrenica, returned to “the edge of Srebrenica in a sparsely populated neighborhood” because it was her “preference.” Srebrenica, she explains, was where she “gave birth to my children and raised them here, made men out of them and taught them to be good workers.” She had no interest in going elsewhere. She “wanted to come home and nowhere else.”⁴⁴ Similarly, Saliha Osmanović of the Mothers of Srebrenica from Dobrak found she “had nowhere to go and I decided to return because my children were born there.” But returning was also an act of defiance. She “wanted to show the Serbs that I came back to my house,” a space that carried “the memory of my children and my husband.”⁴⁵

For Hatidža Mehmedović, Founder of the Mothers of Srebrenica, there was no alternative. She believed she “could never live in any other place other than Srebrenica.” To her, the city was her home, but even more so, it was “the symbol of suffering, the memorial place is our holy place, our

⁴¹ Leydesdorff and Richardson, *Surviving the Bosnian Genocide*, 198.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 202.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Rukija Testimony in Selma Leydesdorff and Kay Richardson, *Surviving the Bosnian Genocide: The Women of Srebrenica Speak* (Indiana University Press, 2011, 201-202).

⁴⁵ Saliha Osmanović Testimony in Petrila and Hasanović, *Voices from Srebrenica*, 154.

pilgrimage, our sorrow.” She “returned to live from the memories of my house.” From her house, she can look out and see “three trees which my youngest son planted... the trees are big now.” She stayed because she decided to “live where my children once walked, I always imagine them coming, whenever I am alone I always imagine.”⁴⁶

Elvisa Avdić, another survivor of Srebrenica as a child, chose to return because she refused to remain a refugee. She “returned to Srebrenica because we didn’t want to live in refugee camps, where we had nothing.” With determination, she returned with “the strength to look in the eyes of those people who ruined my life.”⁴⁷ She believed she “had a strong resolve to return home,” and believed that “most survivors would come back, but that didn’t happen.” Instead she, like many other Bosniak survivors, were “faced with almost daily denial of what we survived” particularly from “politicians who want division and who support war criminals.”⁴⁸ In this way, “[b]urying the dead proved to be easier than returning to Srebrenica.”⁴⁹

As the third decade since the genocide comes to an end, the window for return and reintegration is closed, leaving behind many survivors permanently displaced. Thousands remain in refugee camps, unable to return to their former homes. Mujo Hrustanović, a 75-year-old survivor, moved to Ježevač refugee camp in 1997 and remains there today living with his “wife, son, daughter-in-law, and their two children” in approximately 320 square feet of space in what was meant to be a temporary shelter.⁵⁰ Mujo’s 25-year-old son, Avdo, expresses disappointment and disillusionment with international efforts. He believes “[t]hey’ve abandoned us” and denounces his family’s “dilapidated home, forgotten by everyone and everything.”⁵¹ Further, he criticizes the performative nature of international attention, explaining “journalists go to Srebrenica for the anniversary of the genocide, but no one comes to Jezevac to see

⁴⁶ “Hatidža Mehmedović - A mother’s legacy,” *Remembering Srebrenica* (website).

⁴⁷ “The Courage of a Child - Elvisa Avdić,” *Remembering Srebrenica* (website).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Leydesdorff and Richardson, *Surviving the Bosnian Genocide*, 198.

⁵⁰ Lorenzo Tondo, “‘They’ve abandoned us’: Srebrenica survivors still living in camps,” *The Guardian*, February 17, 2020.

⁵¹ Tondo, “‘They’ve abandoned us.’”

how the survivors of that genocide live now.”⁵² The Hrustanović family is one example of a larger phenomenon of failed returns, continued displacements and insufficient processes that have not provided survivors with reconciliation or justice.

The Genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina fundamentally made the idea of home impossible. While international policies and aid focused on the physical reconstruction of houses, they neglected to support the re-establishment of community, cultural traditions, social cohesion, and a sense of belonging. The return of survivors to Srebrenica and other towns was entangled with policies that failed to facilitate the true reintegration of individuals. This left survivors with little more than a symbolic gesture that only addressed surface-level problems. Camil Duraković, the former mayor of Srebrenica and current Vice President of BiH entity RS, criticized this failure – “[i]t’s like you still have the Third Reich and the Gestapo existing after the Holocaust,” condemning efforts that sought to “negotiate” with perpetrators rather than holding them accountable through a legal process of justice.⁵³ Prioritizing individual returns and conceding land redistribution to establish Republika Srpska and the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), policymakers failed to address the existence of maintained local Serb power structures and the continued influence of the perpetrators of atrocities and those complicit. While some programs sought to provide financial support, there was no guarantee they would move back and reintegrate as a permanent resident.⁵⁴ However, Clifford Bond, Former U.S. Ambassador and Special Envoy to BiH, found that the small number who permanently returned made international aid efforts less enthusiastic to continue.⁵⁵ As a result, many rebuilt homes have been left abandoned, structures restored in form perhaps but not in function, empty of those who once made these structures their home.⁵⁶

⁵² Tondo, “‘They’ve abandoned us.’”

⁵³ Jeremy Bowen, “Bosnia shivers as ghost of nationalism returns,” *BBC*, February 8, 2022.

⁵⁴ Nettelfield and Wagner, *Srebrenica in the Aftermath*, 93.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Black, “Return and Reconstruction,” 192-193.

Emigration, Disillusionment, and the Future of Return

In the face of the failures of return programs and limited reintegration, BiH has experienced significant emigration. Significantly, at least 600,000 people have left Bosnia in the past decade.⁵⁷ Further compounding this high rate of emigration is a declining birthrate and a rural-to-urban demographic shift resulting in serious long-term challenges for population and social organization.⁵⁸ Traditional forms of agricultural life and local networks have eroded in the process.

There is now an emerging generational shift – the youth are not preoccupied with “the ability to ‘return home’” but rather, “the chance to ‘get out.’”⁵⁹ While previous generations remained grounded in their ties to home, family, and land, this connection has gradually weakened. Amid “few work prospects... corruption and political paralysis,” the younger generation has led the charge in seeking opportunities abroad.⁶⁰

Students at the University of Sarajevo frequently contemplate the dilemma of “whether to stay or leave,” often “divided” about what their future holds.⁶¹ Enis Katina, a criminology student, hopes to work in the police force but believes leaving may be “the only future we have” due to the lack of employment opportunities. Muris Čičić, President of the Academy of Sciences believes that “[p]olitical instability” is a major

⁵⁷ “More Than 600,000 People Have Fled Bosnia-Herzegovina In Past Decade,” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty Balkan Service, June 19, 2023. Quantifying the “exodus” and what Bosnia’s Academy of Sciences deemed a “demographic winter” has proven difficult due to the lack of an updated census. Emir Krenić, Director General of Bosnia statistics agency, has advocated for a revised census due to address the uncertainty and lack of information on “how many people there are living here” and the precise number leaving. However, nationalist fears have interfered with efforts to collect accurate, up-to-date demographic data, out of concerns by political factions of “losing out in the numbers game,” that is, certain ethnic identities outnumbering others and shifting the balance of power. Andrew Higgins, “A Land Once Emptied by War Now Faces a Peacetime Exodus”, *The New York Times*, February 28, 2024.

⁵⁸ Higgins, “A Land Once Emptied by War”.

⁵⁹ Black, “Return and Reconstruction,” 196.

⁶⁰ Higgins, “A Land Once Emptied by War”.

⁶¹ Ibid.

influence in this outward migration, since younger people view the “system here is unworkable,” plagued by the constant factionalism and an ineffective political elite.⁶²

A 2020 study identified youth’s “dissatisfaction with public services and high level of corruption” as central factors driving emigration.⁶³ This outward shift has, in turn, led to a “brain drain” as Bosnia struggles with a diminishing pool of “educated and skilled” professionals due to inadequate investment in education, social welfare, and community development.⁶⁴ A 2021 survey conducted by the United Nations Population Fund found that a majority of younger people are “generally dissatisfied with the quality of their living environment,” perceiving a “stagnation or deterioration” of living standards in their communities, and widespread belief that the country is “systematically corrupted.”⁶⁵ Many also reported “below average trust in media” and a sense that reform is unlikely.⁶⁶ In other words, this trend toward “intensified emigration of young people” in the region stems from the “high level of dissatisfaction caused by under- or unemployment rates among youth, high levels of corruption, frequent political disputes and radicalization, slow progress in reforms, deteriorating living conditions, as well as the prevalent hopelessness and despair.”⁶⁷

Younger individuals “do not perceive themselves as a significant driving force for changing the existing political and social system in BiH.”⁶⁸ Instead, they seek to distance themselves from it. Survey participants “expressed high levels of migration aspirations,” linked to a desire “to actively pursue better living conditions and escape below-

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Selena Begović, Lejla Lazović-Pita, Velma Pijalović, and Bojan Baskot, “An Investigation of Determinants of Youth Propensity to Emigrate from Bosnia and Herzegovina”, *Economic Research-Ekonomska Istraživanja* 33, no. 1, 2020, 2574.

⁶⁴ Begović, Lazović-Pita, Pijalović, and Baskot, “An Investigation”, 2586.

⁶⁵ Andrea Soldo and Lamija Spahić, “Survey on Youth Emigration in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Research Report,” United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA, August 2021, 10-12.

⁶⁶ Soldo and Spahić, “Survey on Youth Emigration”, 10-12.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 14-15.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 12.

standard living conditions associated with underprivileged economic, political, and environmental factors” that define life in Bosnia.⁶⁹ As this next generation leaves, disconnected to their homeland, they take with them the potential for “economic and social contributions of the educated and skilled people... creat[ing] workers’ shortages in all sectors, decline in overall productivity, and deficits in pension funds.”⁷⁰ They leave behind aging parents and grandparents who once fought for the right to return home. No longer is this desperate fleeing of the country a matter of genocide – but emigration of descendants who no longer feel connected to Bosnia as a place they can make their “home.”

The European Union and UN High Commissioner for Refugees supported and financed the Regional Housing Program (RHP), led by BiH, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia, which sought to rehouse displaced refugees. Though envisioned in 2005 and supported in 2010 and 2011, this specific rebuilding project commenced in 2015. While return may have functioned as a form of resistance, many returns were not, in Black’s terminology, “sustainable.” Returns did not ultimately mean reintegration or a renewed sense of belonging within these communities. Instead, returns often meant the physical reconstruction and property restitution of former Bosniak homes. The RHP, in fact, led to the completion of more than 11,300 housing units as of 2023. However, for those with financial means and resources, return to their former homes signified the creation of vacation residences that would never be their true “home.” These properties became seasonal retreats, a place of occasional inhabitation allowing for a continued connection to the region, without remaining anchored to the past.

These vacation houses remain unoccupied for most of the year. Their summer inhabitation signals “economic success abroad,” and, a demonstration of “comparative wealth” in contrast to Bosniaks without the ability to leave and the “generally impoverished displaced Serbs” who had “effectively had become homeless,” evicted after occupying

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 15.

Bosniak homes.⁷¹ Those “transnational refugees” had already built home in Western Europe or the U.S., treating their pre-war locales as vacation spots with nostalgic connection rather than sites of daily life. Property owners of these vacation houses post their properties on websites such as Airbnb, marketed as offering an “oasis of peace,” with “relaxing,” “calm,” and “stylish” accommodations despite being situated near sites of previous mass violence.⁷²

Conclusion

In the wake of war, reconstruction and repopulation are essential ingredients to a nation’s recovery. The same may be true in the aftermath of a genocide, but the pernicious nature of the latter makes the task orders of magnitude harder. The experiences of Bosniaks displaced by genocide from Srebrenica illustrates the challenges of post-genocide reintegration as well as any case in the world: state policies promoted and facilitated the return of genocide survivors. However, they did so in a literal and legalistic manner that overlooked the importance of reconstructing the notions of belonging and community, tied to community, kinship, safety, and meaningful memories that makes a place home.

The task of recreating community after genocide is inevitably immense. After the Holocaust, most Eastern European Jews emigrated to Israel or the United States, rather than try to forge a new belonging to communities that had either actively abetted or passively tolerated their elimination during the war years. After the Genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda, it took a domineering state and a decade-long, country-wide transitional justice exercise to make reconstructed communities even thinkable. Even then, resentment and inter-ethnic competition can still linger.

⁷¹ Stefansson, “Homes in the Making”, 127.

⁷² “Unique Lake House – Paradiso, Entire cabin in Novo Selo, Zvornik, Bosnia & Herzegovina,” “Lovely Chalet with Jacuzzi, Entire cottage in Tuzla, Bosnia & Herzegovina,” Airbnb, accessed April 14, 2025.

In Bosnia, core elements of the Dayton Accords worked against the reestablishment of belonging a community in genocide-afflicted areas. The creation of Republika Srpska, an entity defined by Serbian ethnic nationalism, made it likely that local communities within the entity would not feel compelled to welcome non-Serbs, and especially the Bosniaks whom they had persecuted and fought against during the war. That the Dayton structure favored nationalist parties and extremist politics exacerbated the situation.

The fissures between communities and the failures of community building remain glaring in 2025. In March, almost 30 years after the genocide, the Srebrenica Memorial Center shut its doors in response to security concerns arising from a dispute over law enforcement access and responsibilities with RS.⁷³ Although the center opened its doors within two weeks, the episode underscored the broader reality of contentious everyday politics – and of denial of genocide.⁷⁴ For Srebrenica, and likely for other parts of RS and elsewhere Bosnia and Herzegovina, the interconnected legacies of genocide and domicide endure.

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⁷³ “Srebrenica Genocide Center Closes Citing Security Fears as Dodik Defies Government,” *RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty*, March 7, 2025.

⁷⁴ “OHR and DKPT Ensure Security at Srebrenica Memorial Center as Employees Return to Work,” *Sarajevo Times*, March 18, 2025.

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