

Christian Witness in War

Situated on the Vrbas River in north-western Bosnia, the city of Banja Luka is the second largest in Bosnia and Herzegovina. With a population of 220,000, it is the largest city and administrative capital of the Republika Srpska. Banja Luka is famous for its beautiful location and diverse culture, which dates back to the Middle Ages.

A catalogue of horror

It has been estimated that 1.2 million men, women and children fled Bosnia Herzegovina during the crisis in the Balkans in the early 1990s. Of this number, more than 30 per cent were women; nearly 20 per cent were children; many of the remainder were elderly people. That's a lot of very vulnerable people. Thousands of children were separated from parents and siblings. Vast numbers lost other family members. Many were ethnic Serbs, who settled in neighbouring Yugoslavia, too frightened to go back to their homes. A large proportion of those who did go back found their homes destroyed and remain internally displaced and exposed to harsh weather conditions and reprisals from opposing forces or communities sicked by war.

Although no heavy fighting took place in Banja Luka itself, observers from around the world (including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other UN agencies) found evidence of pervasive ethnic cleansing (mainly directed at Muslims) in the surrounding towns and countryside. Banja Luka's once large Bosniak and Croat population is now virtually nonexistent. Entire villages are either empty or ruined houses have been occupied by Serbs (many of them also fleeing from fighting) who moved in after the Bosniaks and Croats fled for their lives. Many Serbs from the outlying countryside moved to the city in the 1990s. More than one third of the population of Banja Luka are refugees or displaced persons.

There continues to be widespread danger from unmarked landmines and other unexploded ordnance, particularly on minor roads, unpaved surfaces and in abandoned or derelict buildings.

Extremist elements among Serbian refugees brutally attacked local Croats and Catholic religious symbols. Everywhere, people were uprooted by military activity. The tragedy was not limited to any one side. Thousands of Croatian Serbs were forced to leave their homes and settle in collective centres and with families in and around Banja Luka. More than 10,000 Serb civilians were forced to abandon their homes to seek safety from the military offensives by Bosnian Government forces against the Bosnian Serb Army in different locations in northern Bosnia.

Whether uprooted by ethnic cleansing or military activity, whether Muslims, Croats or Serbs, these victims of violence had their physical and mental strength sapped by four years of war, compounded by poverty, lack of food and shelter against bleak weather. Throughout the conflict, hundreds of

thousands of innocent civilians paid the ultimate price for the actions of their leaders.

Desolation

It was against the background of this deeply distressing picture of intense suffering that I made my first visit to Banja Luka, in the company of Australian Assemblies of God missionary friends.

After travelling overland from Belgrade we crossed the wooden bridge that separated Yugoslavia from the Republika Srpska. The late afternoon sun shone brightly and verdant foliage welcomed us as we drove along the narrow roads through the hills on the way to the city. This first thing that struck me was that there no farm animals in the pastures. No birds in the trees. No people to be seen. The first village we approached had an eerie feeling about it, as there were no cars on the road, no children in the streets. On closer inspection, I noticed that the houses had no windows and that all the window frames were blackened; many had been reduced to charcoal. They had been subjected to rockets, grenades and arson as the advancing enemy destroyed everything in its path. As we drove further, we encountered crumbling ruins of what were once peoples' homes. Only empty, black shells remained. Some buildings were flattened completely; others were barely standing, propped up only by fractured pillars.

Hopping out of the car I ventured into one of the abandoned, ruined houses. The doors had been blown off their hinges; the ceilings inside were hanging precariously. The first room had the appearance of a living room, although the only elements of furniture that remained were sticks and fragments of cloth that had been burned. The floor was littered with scraps of paper. I wandered into the kitchen, where I found broken bricks and tiles. As I picked up one of the tiles and brushed off a coating of dust, to reveal the pattern that still lay beneath, I wondered about the family that used to live here. A mother would cook for her family; the father would finish his work in the field at the end of the day and spend the evenings telling his children stories about the past or helping them with their homework. Where were they now? Were they even alive? Had their mangled remains been picked up off the floor and hastily buried, or were they living in a refugee camp somewhere?

I was disturbed from my reverie by calls from my friends, who told me to take care where I walked because nearby signs indicated the presence of land mines. Trusting that the house was not booby-trapped (as many had been by departing residents who did not expect to return), I pocketed one of the tiles and beat a hasty retreat to the relative safety of the street..

As we drove through the village every house was the same. It was a ghost town. All sides in this conflict defended their positions and behaviour with well developed rhetoric based on ancient histories, vendettas, half truths, prejudices and tales of intense suffering. All believed they were the aggrieved parties and the "others" were war criminals. People I met spoke angrily about events as long ago as the fourteenth century, slaughters that they resurrected

again and again to justify similar barbarities half a millennium later. There was no forgiveness; only talk of vengeance. The established church was at the forefront of fanning violent nationalism. (Since when has God become an instrument of our culture of violence?)

Why the violence?

The Balkan conflict had its genesis in a volatile mix of religious, historical, nationalistic and Cold War ingredients. Serbs are predominantly Orthodox Christians. Croats are mainly Roman Catholics. A large proportion of Bosnians are Muslims, a hang-over from the Ottoman invasion of the region, and defeat of Serbian forces at the Battle of Kosovo at the site of modern-day Pristina in 1389. The remains of Ottoman buildings in Yugoslavia are a constant reminder of that loss and touchstones for Serb nationalism.

Emotions have run high for centuries, fuelled more recently by Croat support of the Nazis during World War II, Serb vengeance visited on Croatia after the defeat of the Axis powers and nearly fifty years of control by Belgrade after the installation of Marshall Tito as the pro-Soviet Balkan strong man toward the end of the war. Tito consolidated power in February 1945 in the wake of the Yalta Conference by purging his government of non-communists. He organized a strong army and secret police force that systematically imprisoned and executed large numbers of Nazi collaborators, Catholic priests, those who had opposed the war effort and communists who did not agree with him. For decades he held the country together until his death in 1980, after which internal forces began fractured its artificial unity.

Many Christians I talked to spoke of ethnic division. However, few offered a Biblical, Christian response. Talk of forgiveness was usually spurned. I was dismissively informed that, as an outsider, I didn't understand. Maybe so, but the Word of God is good for every generation, and applies to every generation. The Gospel still challenges those who claim to act in its name. Only the power of Christ can reconcile enemies.

Compassion in Jesus' name

In Banja Luka I had the privilege of visiting an orphanage run by a group of Christians who were determined to show the Christian alternative. As we toured the orphanage and spoke to the children and distributed a small shipment of toys from friends in Australia, my attention was drawn to a young boy who refused to get involved and seemed to be alienated from his colleagues.

The head of the orphanage told me his tragic story. He came from a small village an hours drive from Banja Luka. At the height of fighting in his area soldiers burst into his home with pistols and knives. While he hid and watched, his mother, aunt and sister were raped at gunpoint. Then the soldiers took the women, his father and brothers into an outside yard and killed all of them. The same thing happened throughout the village. After the carnage, the soldiers departed and he cautiously emerged from his hiding

place. He was the only surviving member of his family. When people came from the adjoining village they found him and gave him food and shelter until he was placed in the orphanage. When I met him, his carers said he had not spoken a word since arriving many months previously. They had never seen him smile. He simply ate, slept and sat, in a traumatised daze, day after day, month after month. According to my missionary friends, the only help available to him and many others like him was the shelter of the orphanage. I was reminded of Jesus words, "Insofar as you have done it to the least of these, my brothers, you have done it to me" (Matthew 25:40). In many parts of the world relevant Christianity involves loving the unloved, providing for the ungrateful, caring for those who are abandoned by the victors of this world's struggles, reaching out to the dispossessed and alienated, in his name.

Only genuine Christians are helping

I was to see more of the casualties of the Balkans struggle, in a refugee camp where we handed over glasses donated by churches in Australia. Here, whole families slept with scores of others in huge dormitories. Those who managed the facility said they had no money and were worried about what would happen when the winter snows started. Only evangelical Christian organisations abroad were providing financial and material support.

Back in Belgrade we visited a couple who lived in a tiny, damp cell underneath one of the city's streets. Long-term residents of the capital, many of whom were untouched by the war, were embarrassed about the presence of literally thousands of refugees eking out an existence in there, but did little to alleviate their sufferings. The man coughed persistently and his wife told us they had no medication; she was worried about pneumonia setting in. The floor was damp and covered with sheets of newspaper. Rats were a problem. Tattered clothes, a tiny portable fuel stove and a rickety single bed were their only visible possessions. He had served most of his adult life as an official in a town in Croatia, now he lay humbled, visibly ill beneath the feet of those who walked the city. Doctors predicted an increase in tuberculosis cases. The only people caring for the needy on, or under, the streets of Belgrade were Christians and Christian organisations who were both marshalling funds to purchase and send supplies of food to the hungry and coming to Yugoslavia to show by their example that God loved them. Religion has contributed to their plight. Christ wanted to set them free and give them hope. Some churches refused to get involved, for a range of parochial and particularistic reasons. Those who did so worked long and hard against almost impossible odds, keeping compassion fatigue at bay, appealing for supplies that ran out almost as quickly as they arrived, but saving many lives in the process.

The world has lionised its heroes and demonised the villains of the Balkan crisis. To me, the real heroes have been Christian men and women like my friends who faced down prejudice and apathy and reached out these poor and suffering in Jesus' name. They may not be rewarded in this life, but they are not "home" yet.