

To Whom Does Bosnia Belong?¹

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According to Slovenian ethnologist and anthropologist Božidar Jezernik, the Balkans are a strange land between East and West, Europe and Asia, civilization and barbarism. For Europeans during the 19th and 20th centuries, they were an exotic, almost oriental world. The newcomers from the West did not understand the Balkans, seeking the exotic and the unusual, and treated them contemptuously, with a sense of their own superiority. Those inhabitants of the region who adopted European fashions and customs were particularly despised. For a Balkan “savage” dressed in Western garb resembles “any thing but a gentleman,”² he becomes pathetic.

In Poland, interest in the Balkans, and especially in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, is not waning. New books on this region of our continent are published every year. The spectrum of published texts is very wide, ranging from academic studies on history and works by sociologists or political scientists, through reportage literature, to journalism and essays. Much attention is still paid to the wars that tore Yugoslavia apart in the 1990s.

One of the independent states that emerged from these cruel and devastating wars is Bosnia and Herzegovina. Today, there is no state in the world with a comparably complex legal and political structure (there are, inter alia, fourteen Councils of Ministers, Prime

¹ Review of the book: Andrzej Krawczyk, *Czyja jest Bośnia? Krótka historia kraju trzech narodów*, Kraków: Znak Horyzont, 2021.

² Božidar Jezernik, *Wild Europe. The Balkans in the Gaze of Western Travellers*, London: Saqui, 2004, 230.

Ministers, and Parliaments and three State Presidents). The functioning of this three-part entity, inhabited by three feuding peoples and administered by national bodies under the authority of the UN, is extremely difficult (or, to put it bluntly, inefficient), and its equilibrium is very shaky. This very country is the subject of a study by Andrzej Krawczyk, a historian and diplomat, who served as the Polish ambassador to Bosnia for five years. The author himself describes his book as historical journalism and does not claim it to be a scholarly work.

The book consists of fifteen chapters of varying length and degree of detail. The first part (up to p. 183) is devoted to the history of Bosnia from medieval times, through the period of Ottoman rule and its modern history, until the break-up of Yugoslavia. The historical outline is necessarily very simplified and cursory. The author devotes five pages to medieval Bosnia and eight pages to the Ottoman rule (compared to 42 pages on the siege of Sarajevo in 1992–1996). The period after Bosnia's incorporation into the Austro-Hungarian Empire (from 1878 onward), which was a time of huge institutional change, is discussed more extensively. Among other things, Krawczyk focuses on the fundamental transformation of the social structure, for example, the replacement of Muslims, who had hitherto constituted Bosnia's clerical elite, by people of the Catholic faith.

The history of this country was complicated from its very beginning. National tensions between Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats were already apparent there under Austrian rule. Benjamin Kállay, the Austrian Minister of Finance, who was entrusted with the administration of Bosnia (1882), tried to ease them. He sought to introduce an efficient administration so as to eliminate the need for any local organizations, associations, or political parties. This concept is sometimes referred to as "administrative absolutism." Kállay intended to make Bosnia a homogeneous state without internal national and religious divisions. However, this attempt failed. National and religious tensions proved stronger than any administrative attempt to "glue together" a state whose inhabitants felt no connection to each other. Sources of conflict were never in short supply there, and successive "administrators" of Bosnia departed from Kállay's concept.

It is worth noting the fact, little-known in Poland, that at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, about 1,200 Polish peasant families (especially from the districts of Nisko and Tarnobrzeg) settled in north-western Bosnia (Banja Luka-Prijedor region). This is the origin of the Polish saying "opowiadać banialuki" ("to tell balderdash"), which is used to this day.

Another chapter in Bosnian history opened in 1918 with the birth of the South Slav state of Yugoslavia. The creation of the federated state, however, did not resolve the nationality problems that continued to divide the communities, this time the Muslim and Serb ones in particular. The new state in the inter-war period was a very unstable structure torn apart by internal conflicts.

Much space (pp. 95–156) is taken up by a description of Bosnia's position within the Yugoslav state structure during World War II and in the following decades. What is outlined here, however, is the history of the whole country under Josip Broz-Tito

rather than the part of Yugoslavia that interests us. Bosnia and Herzegovina as such basically disappears from view for several decades, and the Muslims living there enter the author's field of vision only occasionally.

The main focus of the author's interest, however, is the emergence of the independent Bosnian state in the 1990s and its problems in modern times. After the break-up of Yugoslavia (1990–1991, described on pp. 157–183), Bosnia and Herzegovina began to function as an independent state (since 1992). The remainder of the book, which constitutes more than half of its volume, is devoted to this period, and the narrative here becomes very detailed. The first 180 pages of the book are basically just an introduction to this essential part.

Although Bosnia succeeded in gaining independence, it was at the same time torn apart by ethnic conflicts that lasted for years and, in practice, have not died out to the present day. This small, regionally backward, and divided country has suffered a lot in gaining independence. After the murderous siege of Sarajevo, the second issue extensively covered in this book is the genocide in Srebrenica, described in an objective, balanced way, without emotional involvement. Depending on the attitude of the reader, this can be a great advantage or an unforgivable disadvantage of Krawczyk's work.

The author of this essay, which borders on historiography, is mainly interested in political history and some economic history, in addition to military, political, and institutional questions of recent times. He devotes much attention to religious issues (e.g., changes in church organization after Bosnia passed from Ottoman rule to that of the Catholic Austrian monarchy) and national-religious conflicts, which are the daily bread of the Bosnian population. Journalism as a craft, as well as the work of journalists and the role of the media in covering the siege of Sarajevo and the war in Bosnia, are reflected upon in greater depth. The establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the trials before it are described in more detail.

In fact, the main question posed by this book is not so much "to whom does Bosnia belong?" ("Czyja jest Bośnia?") but rather: are three nationalities and three religions capable of building a common state there? Bosnia and Herzegovina as we know it today was created by the Dayton Agreement in 1995. As is often emphasized, this conference ended the war but failed to produce peace. There is still no end in sight to the crises plaguing Bosnia: political, economic, demographic, and so on. The country is still teetering on the brink of disintegration, and, unfortunately, its future does not look optimistic.

Andrzej Krawczyk's systematic narrative allows the reader to put the facts about the war in Bosnia in order (the text is supplemented by a "Calendar of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992–1995"). It is a compendium that systematizes our unstructured knowledge on the subject, which we all possess to some extent due to media coverage.

Thanks to its essayistic form and the author's unprejudiced detachment, the book reads easily, even though it deals with difficult topics. It makes one reflect on the helplessness and passivity of governments, international organizations, and public opinion in the face of war crimes, as well as on the negligence and procedural absurdities

of bringing criminals to justice. It is a story about the still unhealed wounds of ethnic cleansing that do not allow the three peoples of Bosnia to build a common future.

References

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