

“WHERE EAST MEETS WEST”

Report on Excursion to Sarajevo – Bosnia and Herzegovina

Summer, 2023



COLOPHON

This report contains findings and reflections of students, who participated in the 2023 study trip to Sarajevo as part of their education in the master specialization program “Peace, Trauma, Religion” at the Faculty of Religion and Theology of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

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Introduction

Peace, Trauma, Religion. Three big words of which the definitions are always changing, adapting, and are being contested. When thinking about these terms it is understandable why they are placed next to each other. The students and staff of the master specialization 'Theology and Religious studies: Peace, Trauma, Religion' (PTR) of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam study the intermingling of these research fields in different contexts. To do so, they use critical hermeneutical lenses to read and interpret religious texts and traditions, as well as political policy documents and different narratives of the people involved. Each year, students and staff go on an excursion to experience, listen, and put themselves in a given context to learn more about peace-building, trauma coping, and the role of religion therein.

The master's students of 2022-2023 went to Bosnia and Herzegovina to study the Balkan region in its post-Yugoslavian phase. With thanks to connections of the Amsterdam Centre for Religion, Peace & Justice Studies (ACRPJ), the team collaborated with the European Centre for The Study of War and Peace in Sarajevo (ECSWP). The ECSWP tailored a special program for the PTR group, focusing on 'The Other Europe: Conflict and Reconciliation where East meets West'. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the crossroad between East and West, ethnic, religious, and cultural differences can do both, unite and divide people. The city of Sarajevo served as the location to explore the conflict – armed in the past, still lingering in the present, to study historical and political events, and the impact these had and continue to have on local communities and individuals, religious and national identities – in the context of Europe and international relations.

For us, studying, living and/or working in Western Europe, going to Bosnia and Herzegovina meant meeting the 'Other Europe', and learning to see how we 'other' this part of Europe in order to discover ways to overcome this framing. Which practices and attitudes can help to find ways of peace in a context that is torn by endless conflict. Although in Western Europe we have a tendency to see the Balkan region as being in a state of 'frozen conflict' – ready to

explode with one spark – some people of Sarajevo questioned the use of this perspective.¹ We need to focus on the positive relations, the friendships and warm bonds between people, and the moments where people helped each other – to be inspired to do so ourselves. There is a need to find ways to remember rightly and to become people of just peace who are willing to walk the path of peace *together*.

We like to express our gratitude to the people that have been with us in this journey. Dr. Petra and Dr. James Taylor from ECSWP, who introduced us to the (hi-)story of the Balkans and showed how all historical narratives matter in today's realities; Dr. Amra Pandžo, who – by her very way of being and relating – taught us one of the most valuable lessons: If you want peace, *be* a peacemaker; Prof. Dr. Zilka Spahić-Šiljak and Prof. Dr. Ahmet Alibasic, who inspired us with their research, activism, story, gentleness and joy.

In this report you can find small snippets of our learning-journey. A story we all played a meaningful part in. None of us was a soldier of Dutchbat with the original task to protect the people in Bosnia, a child of Sarajevo, or a descendent of a family who does not live in the place they once called home, or one of the 'Mothers of Srebrenica', or any of the other people in Bosnia and its neighbors who lived through alienation, dehumanization, conflict, and trauma. Yet, we share as humans who seek humanness in a world torn apart by hate – sometimes even motivated and legitimized by religion. What are the seeds of justice and peace in those very religions and beliefs practices?

In this report, we collect reflections of the participants of this excursion. We hope it will inspire you – as we feel inspired by the great hospitality of the people we met in Bosnia.

BY: ELINE VAN DER KAADEN – STUDENT-ASSISTENT ACRPJ

¹ We did experience the tenseness in the region. Days after our arrival back in the Netherlands, we heard the news that one of the restaurants near Srebrenica where we enjoyed a meal, run by a Bosniak, was again attacked by Serbian nationalists.



PTR-Group of 2022-2023

Sarajevo's Leopard Skin Garment of Faith

Interreligious Tour of Sarajevo with NGO 'Small Steps'

Dr. Amra Pandžo is a part of the fabric of a city and country whose interreligious atmosphere confounds the average person. One of the first images that the founder of the grassroots interreligious peacebuilding NGO "Small Steps", shared with the group was of Sarajevo as a "leopard skin" of all religious groups. This city for her serves as a platform to learn and feel how these dynamics of religion in their conflict and peace can live in harmony together in a place. Amra's approach to an interreligious tour was a mingling of her own stories with the narratives that members of local religious communities shared with us. Naturally, our group also brought our own stories, spoken through questions or personal reflection to these spaces as well.

The story which began our tour was the story of a special resistance here in Sarajevo, to show itself as a community that tried to show with everything that it was against violence. As an illustration of this, Amra told the story of cellist Vedran Smailovic who, in the midst of the siege that took place from 1992-1996, played his cello every day for 22 days for the children who were killed at the site of the attack.² Vedran's response to those who told him he was crazy for playing music at this dangerous site was that he was not the one who was crazy, it was the situation of violence that was unfathomable. Our group was prompted to use this as an example of questioning the role of the "victim" and peace as the way of jumping out of the spiral of violence.

Our visit to the Emperor's Mosque allowed for a candid conversation about Amra's own practice of faith and coming to faith in a post-conflict space. This was also an opportunity to be witnesses to Amra's questions and wonderings about peace, forgiveness, and



Emperors Mosque.

victimization. Although Amra's path to God was her desire for peace she vulnerably shared her struggle with promoting forgiveness. From her religious worldview, forgiveness cannot be ordered, it is a gift from God, something hoped and prayed for.

Sitting together in the Mosque, we spoke about religion's role in both the dehumanization process and more importantly the humanization process. Humanization, for Amra

as a Bosnian Muslim means remembering what things a person is made of, including bad or

² <https://myhero.com/vedrans>

evil tendencies and yet or our capacity to do radical good. She expressed the necessity of also having a community that supports this approach to humanization. These can be our religious teachers who strive for peace work, or in Amra’s words: the people who strengthen us because, “If I am a sea, they are an ocean.”

Our brief tracing of the religious life of the city of Sarajevo ended in Bosnian style– with laughter. Amra shared with the group that Bosnia and this city frustrate people looking to fervently convert religious people. This is simply not the city for this, people are used to living their own faith and encouraging their neighbor on the way. While there clearly exists a host of other narratives related to religion in this place, this remains a story we need to hold amongst the others.



Amra in the Emperors Mosque

BY: GRACE SHOCKMAN

Remembering Rightly

On a Lecture by Dr. James Taylor

After our religious tour of the morning, we gathered in the Franciscan monastery in the afternoon for a lecture by Dr. James Taylor in which we reflected on an article by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, about memory, forgiving and forgetting. James spoke about individual versus collective identity on one axis and melancholy and mourning on the other axis. A memory is more than an uncontrollable thought, it is also an action. In the light of the horrific events between the different ethnic groups during the 1990's, it is important to think about the way people decide to remember and to forget.

Without going to summarise the whole meeting, let me mention the difference between melancholy and mourning, according to Paul Ricoeur. With melancholy, one's existence seems to be determined by the loss of something that used to be vital. You can't go on with your life, but a return to the previous situation is also not possible. It colours everything. – I thought about the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt (Hebrew Bible). In that story, they face a wall of water before them and they hear the noise of Egyptian armies from behind, coming after them. They seem to be stuck, not able to find a way ahead, and passively longing to the past. I tried to imagine if such a position of feeling emotionally locked in a corner could also add to melancholia? With mourning, there is also sadness, but without a continuous replay of the events and thus leading into a certain level of acceptance. It is a process of stepping into that space of loss, but with the ability to find language and signs so the object of the loss can be internalised. In this step-by-step process, reconciliation with the new reality may be found. What is the individual or collective narrative you want to listen to?

Two days later, we traveled to Srebrenica. How can we ever understand what happened there? How can we really listen to people who have experienced severe suffering? We had a discussion about the starting point of pastoral care. Some of us thought that such a starting point lies in a kind of common ground, by expressing that we understand what suffering is and how life can be so harsh. Others wanted to stay far away from any kind of understanding and words of comprehension. Presence and a true listening ear are perhaps more valuable than a (misplaced?) sense of understanding. Especially when it comes to crimes against humanity, only very few of us are able to understand, fortunately.

BY: JELLE WARINGA



Petra and James Taylor in the Franciscan monastery.

Srebrenica

Tour to Memorial Site

In the days leading up to Srebrenica, several discussions took place on how to prepare ourselves for this day with what we are about to experience. We heard the history, stories, seen images, but visiting the site itself, the United Nations safe house that failed and the cemetery with the names of the people who were killed, we are confronted with the reality of this atrocity and that evil exists in our world. What does it do to you when you see something like this and how do you take care of yourself?

As we were driving the winding roads through the mountains to Srebrenica our guide Amra Pandžo, a Bosnian woman who survived the siege of Sarajevo, asked us this and how we cope when we see something shocking, when we feel sorrow or when something causes us pain. We can pray, find support and companionship, we can sit in silence with others and be silent within ourselves, and we can cry, something Amra finds to be a beautiful thing as it shows that this touches you. Amra explained to us that we will see humanity for what it is on a very basic level, that evil does exist and we will be confronted with this darkness. Amra told us that we can let the sorrow in our arms, legs, and head, but do not allow it into our hearts and let it grow.



Busride to Srebrenica.



Prayer at Srebrenica

It is natural to ask the question of how could the world and how could a God allow this to happen, something I thought about the entire time being there. However, we should not ask if or when the next conflict will break out. We must change our thinking and believe in peace. It is when we stop talking to one another that we lose understanding and a sense for the other.

On the road back to Sarajevo, Amra shared that for us to come to Bosnia and Herzegovina means we have become part of the story. We were only witnesses on this trip yet it has impacted us, even though it might not be entirely clear how. I do agree with Amra, and continue to think about this, when she said that after seeing this you want to do good and be as good as you can be.

BY: SUSANNE SCHWICKART

What do we know?

Reflection on Srebrenica Tour

There were three things I knew about Bosnia and Herzegovina prior to visiting the country: one, there is great food; two, with 24 kilometres, the country has the second smallest coastline in the world; and three, Franz Ferdinand was assassinated there and that is how World War I started. Oh, and there was also a genocide. Okay, four things then. Over the course of this study trip, I would come to know more about the country, mainly about the Srebrenica genocide. There was a lot of information, including testimonies from people who survived. It was a heart-breaking experience, but the realization hit me the hardest when we visited Srebrenica.

We drove for hours until we reached our destination. As we pulled up to the building, I thought: “Wait, *this* is where it happened?”. The place where this genocide was committed was an old battery factory, which was run down at this point. I remember thinking that if I were traveling alone in my own vehicle and no-one told me that this was where we needed to be, I would have easily passed it. This place looked nothing like the big dark Nazi concentration camps, for example, which were specifically designed to terminate lives. This battery factory, however, was intended to do nothing other than produce tiny sources of electric power.

The idea that something so extraordinary happened in a place so ordinary is hard to grasp. I grew frustrated with these two polar opposite facts as I walked through it. This frustration stuck with me. When we shared our experiences and thoughts in the group, I brought this up. Fernando responded with Hannah Arendt’s finding of the “banality of evil”. It is the idea that evil is not this big monstrous Satan, but rather terrifyingly normal. Arendt said this in reference to Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, who appeared to be ‘just’ a regular bureaucrat during the trials in Israel. This hit the nail right in the coffin. Srebrenica echoes this thought by being nothing like concentration camps.

At the same time, it is sad to realize that evil *can* be so banal. When we are not told of the bodies and buildings that harbour evil, it is easily neglected, easily passed by. Perhaps the sight of Srebrenica is similar to how we have treated this genocide in our history books: in passim and easy to forget. But the trip gave me more insight and understanding into how important it is to share this part of history. At least I can say that I know now more than four things about Bosnia and I hope more people will.



Srebrenica Graveyard.

We are in need of a Feminist Peace!

Reflection on Srebrenica Gallery

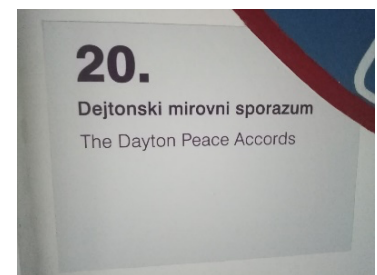
*Let me cry to not forget that they (women) create life and they (men) make the laws, no! no!."*³

On 4 July 2023, as part of the PTR-Excursion to Bosnia-Herzegovina, we went to visit Srebrenica. During the days before and during our way there, we talked about things that this specific part of the trip could do to us; we talked about how we deal with difficult experiences, our ways to respond to them, etc.

The visit was divided into two parts; first, we visited the Srebrenica Memorial Center; second, we went to the Srebrenica–Potočari Memorial and Cemetery for the Victims of the 1995 Genocide. There were so many emotions, thoughts, and body reactions; it would be impossible to describe all that here. Then, among all the things that call my attention, I will highlight specifically one from the visit to the Memorial Center. I would refer only to the pictures that appear on the right.

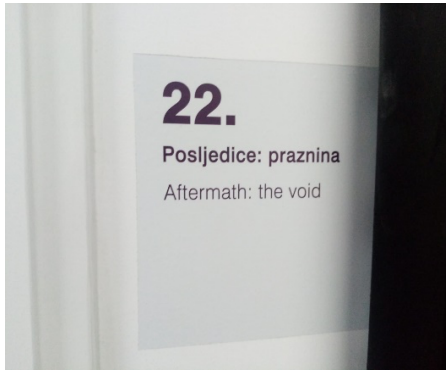
The Srebrenica Memorial Center is located on the renovated historical site of the UN Dutch Battalion headquarters in Potocari. On the second floor, you will find the permanent exhibition called "The Failure of the International Community." It has different rooms, and each one has a number. The rooms with pair numbers are on the right side, and the rooms with odd numbers are on the left side of the hallway. What I found in rooms 20 and 22 caught my attention. Once again, it was a reminder of who is making wars, who signs the agreements, and who is invisible and silenced in the decision-making processes.

Room number 20 is called "The Dayton Peace Accords," and it has a big picture where only men appear. In the chairs (front, left to right) Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, and Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic signing copies of the Dayton Agreement in the Palais de l'Elysée, Paris, on 14 December 1995. Standing behind, you can see former USA president Bill Clinton and other so-called "world leaders." The Accord ended nearly four years of conflict in former Yugoslavia.



Room 20: The Dayton Peace Accords

³ Diamante Eléctrico.202. "Los chicos sí lloran."Track 2 on MLQMHH. No label, Spotify.



Room 22: The Void

Besides this room, you find room 22, which is called "the void." It shows pictures of women after the war who decided to create survivor's associations; they seek what happened to their missed loved ones and claim justice. As the room's title, they represent the void always left by wars. I do not pretend here to romanticize or essentialize the role of women in conflict, peacebuilding, and post-conflict scenarios. I want to highlight how these pictures confirm, first, that women's interests and needs, most of the time, are not met or taken into account in peace negotiations and, second, that women's roles as peacebuilding partners are still not well-recognized. This situation calls urgently, then, for a feminist approach to peacebuilding.

As in the Bosnian case, in conflicts and wars around the world, indeed, the dead bodies are mostly male bodies. There is a significant loss that we all should mourn. On the other hand, female bodies do not necessarily die, but they are raped, harassed, and used to "humiliate the other side" in the conflict. Women are also those who survive full of wounds, and despite all that, they fight for justice and play an essential role in building peace in daily life and building again the social fabric after the war. However, as the pictures reflect, the "formal peace", peace agreements are discussed and signed only by men.

I defend the idea that the most crucial part of peacebuilding occurs at the grassroots level. However, if the policies are decided only by men and the whole setting is proposed by them, how will peace be holistic? If the peace agreement reflects and reproduces what happens in the patriarchal system, can we call that a just peace? War is fed by patriarchy, and patriarchy continues to exist thanks to wars. Then, if different feminisms are already fighting patriarchy worldwide, would that not be an important reason to put feminist approaches to peacebuilding at the center of the discussion? I believe, yes, we need more feminist women in peacebuilding agreements and formal peace negotiations if we want a just, holistic, and lasting peace.

So many women are already seeking and earning more and more space in peace negotiations. However, I wonder, what is the role of male leaders in all of this? Should they not object to negotiating or dialogue if women are not in the room? Should not men be talking less and listening more to what women or others with less privilege have to say? These are just some questions. I do not have all the answers yet, but if more and more people start to think and act about it, we might get a chance of non-repetition of the war nonsense.

As the song's lyrics at the beginning of this text, I lament that women through history defend and create life, but the laws to “protect” women and the rest of humanity are made only by men.

BY: MARÍA LEÓN-OLARTE, PHD CANDIDATE

Religion & Identity

On a Lecture by Dr. Zilka Siljak

During the sharing session with Dr. Zilka Siljak, one of the points that kept lingering in my head was about identity. As Zilka has mentioned, historically religious freedom and ethnic diversity in Yugoslavia did not exist due to the strong influence of Stalin. It was not until the governing of Tito that they split from Stalin and opened up religious freedom. During this period, this new spirit of Yugoslavia, mixed marriages were commonly practised. However, when the war started in the early 1990s, this changed entirely, for example, Bosnian Muslims became Bosniak which emphasised and enclosed their ethnic identity. Religion and ethnicity merged into one package. Since then, switching religion is considered betraying your religious and ethnic group. As a result, people had to side with their ethnic group and many couples were divorced.

In terms of the cause of the conflict, it is fair to say that the drastic change of identity from fluidity to exclusivity was only one of the substantial reasons. Another related factor is connected to the change of economic mode in Yugoslavia since the switch from a socialist system to a free capitalist market triggered economic competition between people. These intertwined factors cannot be overlooked, which makes the situation more complicated.

In the context of Bosnia, identity has been appropriated to unite people within their ethnic group. This is a strategy that has been frequently used in different political movements. Especially with the advocacy for marginalised groups, as it is an efficient strategy to amplify their voices in society. However, it also comes to my suspicion that when one identity is being strengthened, there is always a counterpart that would build up their identity. As a result, such a process often leads to polarisation that minimises the chance of dialogue between groups. While it may



*Religious Identities.
Greek Orthodox, Muslim, and Jewish.*

seem impossible to optimise a social movement without the emphasis on identity and such a strategy always ends up evoking a counterparty, what are the alternative paths from the peace-making point of view?

Facing such an impasse, any simple solution would seem to be like a castle in the air. However, from Zilka's sharing, three points may be able to guide us to an alternative path. First is the benefit of seeing identity as fluid. During the time of Tito, mixed marriage and religion could be practised freely, there was a sense of fluidity of religious and ethnic identities. Interestingly, this was the time when ethnic and religious groups were able to live peacefully together. Secondly, it is about distancing ourselves from our own identity. When the Franciscians facilitate inter-religious dialogue, instead of emphasising their own religious identity and theology, they engage people of other religions as human to human. Finally, it is about the awareness of mutuality. As she mentioned that pain has no ethnicity, all humans share the pain of losing someone in the war, we must realise that perpetrators also were carrying suffering as victims in their past. While these may not appear as substantial changes in strategy, they do facilitate alternative perspectives that we can be mindful of when it comes to the appropriation of identity.



Franciscan Monastrv.

BY: ERIC SIN

A Mother of Srebrenica

Poem

I had a son;
A good boy and did very well at school.

I was so happy for he was smart.
I was so thankful for he was kind.

But all these were only before he was taken from me.

I told the man that he was just a child.
I begged him not to take my boy.

I asked for help, but no one heard.
I prayed to God, but no answer.

I don't know why people hate me so much because of my
faith.
I don't know why they kill us because of our faiths.

Why do I have to bury the bones of my son?
Why not those bullets that kill my son?

Why do I have to live my life with this pain?
Why not live a simple life with my son?

They call me a mother of Srebrenica.
But I never want to be.
I just want to be a mother of my son.

What I learned the day I was in Srebrenica was that I had been ignorant of the persecution of Muslims for their Islamic faith. I wrote this poem from the perspective of a Srebrenica mother who had lost her son in 1995 genocidal killing of Bosnian Muslim men and boys.

BY: HTET PAING YEMAUNG



Statue at Srebrenica

Meeting with survivors of Srebrenica

This activity had an enormous impact on me. Survivors of the massacre of Srebrenica have messages of enormous significance to tell to the contemporary world, as they deal with acceptance of ethnic and religious diversity, and the rejection of violence.

From the stories of survivors of the Bosnian genocide, we can learn what horrible deeds humans do to each other in the name of religion and nationalism. At the same time, the survivors told messages of hope and reconciliation with Serbians. It appears that the survivors would give us, with their stories, the courage to reject violence, and choose to accept diversity and strive for peace. We, as the PTR-group, prayed for the victims, and that such a genocide would never occur again.

We saw the monument of the genocide during our tour. This monument is a lasting memory to the genocide. I pray that this monument has a positive impact on the world's politicians, who should not abuse their link with religion for their personal goals. When they do not divide but connect the people, they will use their powers for better.

BY: WEDAD SOLTANI ZADEH



Prayer at the Srebrenica Memorial.

Sarajevo's War Childhood Museum

In 2018, the War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo was awarded the 'Council of Europe Museum Prize' for the museum's contribution to advocating peace, reconciliation and the value of cultural diversity. During our trip to Sarajevo, our guide Ana recommended we visit the museum for a different perspective on the war. On our last Friday before departure, I went to visit the museum.



Museum items.

Zerina, the museum guide, explained to me how the exhibition is set up. Ever since the museum's genesis in 2017, the museum displays fifty stories, represented by objects, of people who were children (up until 18 years old) before and during a period of conflict. While most of the stories exhibited are of children who grew up during the Bosnian War (1992-1995), the exhibition also showcases six stories from conflicts elsewhere—this year, children's stories from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Kosovo, Syria, and Ukraine were displayed. Every year, the exhibition showcases different items and stories.



Quote in museum

Photographs of the items and the accompanying stories can also be found in the book *War Childhood*, created by the project's and museum's initiator Jasminko Halilović.

Different from the other museums we visited during our trip, the War Childhood Museum offers a more lighthearted perspective on the Bosnian War and other conflicts. This does not mean, however, that the harsh reality is avoided: in the stories accompanying the childhood items, experiences, and memories that should not belong to any child are shared. Along with the cartoon figures pictured in the photograph above, Sanin, born in 1981, remembers how he and his friends used to exchange novels and play marbles. One day during the war, two of his friends were killed by an explosion. Sanin, showcasing incredible resilience, writes that “these stickers—which feature Zagor and Chico, the unyielding warriors of justice—remind me of my friends and the days of our wartime survival.”

In the museum, I found it hard not to break down and cry. Having family heritage in Kosovo, where not too long after the Bosnian War ethnic cleansing also took place, likely made the stories hit even harder. Our childhood is something we all share, and to learn and witness how some childhoods are marked forever by missing parents and missing friends is simply devastating. We can only pray that children who grow up in conflict zones can hold on to some sort of innocence and lightheartedness. To me, this is exemplified excellently by Amila, born in 1989, as quoted in *War Childhood*: “Loving Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and watching Michelangelo eat pizza and NOT KNOWING WHAT PIZZA IS?!”

BY: LYDIA SHALA

