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# In “No Man’s Land”: Libraries in Post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents the complex situation that libraries in Bosnia and Herzegovina face and suggests possible avenues for improvement. After brief coverage of the history of libraries in the country from the Middle Ages to the communist period, the paper focuses on the devastation that occurred during the war that took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995, which was formally brought to an end by the Dayton Peace Agreement. The problems that libraries have faced in the current period of peace cannot be understood without reference to this episode of the war. The most difficult problems they face today are the lack of adequate legislation, the politicization of library activities, and the war devastation. In addition, at the beginning of 2014, the library and information system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is based on a computer program for cooperative cataloging, was split into two parts. The fragmentation of contemporary Bosnian and Herzegovinian society is evidenced by the damage and division that politics has managed to effect, which the war did not.

## INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper is derived from the plot of a 2002 Bosnian Oscar-winning film titled *No Man’s Land*, a war drama in which one of the characters (after all fighting has subsided) remains lying wounded on a land mine without any prospect of being able to survive if he moves. The character is abandoned and forgotten by all, but not without consequence in that theater of the absurd. It can perhaps be considered a metaphor of the overall situation in Bosnia or, in this case, of the state of the libraries in this country. Postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina faces

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many problems: the reconstruction of the country destroyed during the 1992–1995 war; the introduction of a market economy; coping with the effects of the global economic crisis; and the internal political and social problems that have impeded the country's recovery following the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 1995 (General Framework Agreement, 1995). The overall situation is not favorable for the reconstruction and development of libraries in Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the communist period,<sup>1</sup> libraries were formally significant but essentially ignored as cultural and educational institutions. Currently, they are barely surviving, and some of them are on the brink of subsistence. The present state of library infrastructure, library collections, and the professional work, education, and status of librarians in Bosnia and Herzegovina will not be on par with libraries in other countries of the former Yugoslavia for some time to come. This is even more true when Bosnian and Herzegovinian libraries are compared with libraries in the developed countries of the European Union. The joining of forces and sharing of resources for the purpose of achieving common goals represents the sine qua non condition for all libraries in the world, but this is still far from reality for libraries in Bosnia and Herzegovina of the present day.

### THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the Middle Ages, Bosnia and Herzegovina was an independent kingdom called Bosnia. Later, it was an “*eyalet*” and part of the Ottoman Empire (1463–1878), and a “*corpus separatum*” under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1878–1918). The civilizations and cultures of the Orient and the West are, therefore, peculiarly interwoven in its soil. After World War I, Bosnia became a part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, beginning in 1929 as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, at which time it was divided into four areas. After World War II, Bosnia became a federal unit—a state within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY)—with its present borders and name. However, the lack of an objective and comprehensive review of the long history of Bosnia and Herzegovina motivated Malcolm to write *A History of Bosnia* in 1993, which two years later was translated into Croatian as *Povijest Bosne*.

After World War II, Yugoslavia was not behind the Iron Curtain; it adopted a milder version of communism than that in the Soviet satellites. In the present-day perception of many citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this period of almost fifty years (1945–1992) was one of peace and general prosperity. Bosnians were proud of having hosted the Olympics in 1984, and also because their country was known in the worlds of film, literature, music, food, sacred and cultural objects, and historic cities. It seemed that their country was becoming modern, and although Bosnia and Herzegovina was not economically developed at the time, many Bosnians, even today, tend to regard the period with nostalgia. Due to the collapse of the Eastern

Bloc in the late 1980s, the federal Yugoslav state gradually broke apart, with individual republics declaring independence.

### THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a young European country located in the west Balkans; it has a population of approximately 3.8 million and gained its independence following a referendum in 1992. That same year, a war broke out in Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to some interpretations, this was a "civil war" and "ethnic conflict" caused by "ancient animosities." In the opinion of the majority of the local population, the war was the result of aggression of one state against another internationally recognized state. According to Malcolm (1995, p. 9), it had no historic basis or connection with "centuries-old hatred." He writes that "the biggest obstacle to any understanding of this conflict is an assumption that what happened in that country is the consequence—natural, spontaneous and in the same time necessary—of the forces that operate within the history of Bosnia itself." The war produced vast human and material destruction, and even today, its consequences continue to affect the country's culture and politics.

The war ended in 1995 with the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Dayton (Dayton Peace Agreement), resulting in the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The agreement was a welcome accomplishment because it stopped the war, but Bosnia and Herzegovina became a complex administrative structure, consisting of two entities: the Republic of Srpska (with Serbs as the majority) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (with Bosniaks and Croats as the major populations), and the Brčko District. The federation is decentralized by the creation of ten cantons, each with its own constitution and government, while Srpska is fully centralized. According to Bieber (2004, p. 83), "The complexity of the Bosnian political system is not only frightening for each analyst but it is also, with no exception, the subject of an attempt to try to define the nature of its institutional system."

A massive state apparatus has formed in response to this complexity, and the structure of society has accordingly been divided in several ways. For a long time, Bosnia and Herzegovina has faced serious economic, political, and social crises, which are far from being over. Although the international community is engaged in helping Bosnia and Herzegovina on a path toward integration with European and transatlantic countries, it seems that the main obstacle to achieving this goal has been the country's political system itself, which was essentially established by the Dayton Peace Agreement. Since its signing, the situation in the country has deteriorated, and it has become popular to blame the agreement for neglecting the deep divisions that define Bosnian society (Bieber, 2008, p. 3). These divisions have multiplied and deepened over the past two decades, consequently the

need for constitutional reform is mentioned ever more frequently in the current political stalemate.

### LIBRARIES IN THE PAST

There is a long tradition in Bosnia and Herzegovina of writing, collecting, and preserving books, dating back to the Middle Ages (*Pisana riječ*, 1982), during which time Catholic and Orthodox monasteries maintained their own libraries. This tradition continued through the Ottoman period, followed by Islamic and Jewish-Sephardic customs that also entailed the cultivation of book culture. In 1537, the first public library was established in Sarajevo—the Gazi Husrev Bey Library. Thereafter, the Austro-Hungarian era brought European spirit into Bosnian and Herzegovinian libraries, and state and ethnic libraries within various cultural and educational associations were created. Throughout these turbulent historical periods, Bosnian and Herzegovinian libraries were able to preserve invaluable written treasures, testaments to centuries of multiculturalism in the region created by a confluence of ethnicities, religions, and languages. Medieval manuscripts, including Orthodox and Catholic prayer books, transcriptions of the Qur'an and other valuable Islamic works, the Jewish Haggadah, and incunabula and printed books from the sixteenth century to the present day—all have been preserved throughout the ages.

During the communist period, Bosnia and Herzegovina glorified its cultural development and heritage and openly supported cultural institutions for the purposes of political propaganda. Libraries were considered to be “socially useful” in nurturing the “socialist citizen’s spirit”; they were regarded as essential state institutions whose resources and historical significance were marshaled in support of the day-to-day politics of the ruling party. Library collections were purged of any “unsuitable” or ideologically “incorrect” literature thought to be politically harmful. Stipčević (1992) has written about censorship in libraries in both totalitarian and democratic societies, claiming that in all of Yugoslavia, “there was no library that was not well equipped with sets of Marx, Lenin, and Tito,” and that the “book shelves in company and institution directors’ offices were full of such sets that no one, absolutely no one, ever looked through” (p. 78). All totalitarian regimes left behind poor libraries that were riddled with insufficient policies, inadequate funding, outdated collections and equipment, poor infrastructure, a lack of skilled personnel, and compromised social and financial status for librarians in the eyes of society. Anghelescu (2001, 2005) has extensively analyzed the communist legacy in libraries; her description of events in Romanian libraries is applicable to libraries in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well. Libraries in both countries have always been marginalized, underfunded, and suffered from a lack of strategic development. Romanian and Bosnian and Herzegovinian libraries have instead remained static repositories of books, with no focus on access or

the evolving needs of users. It is interesting to consider that the major reference work, the *Encyclopedia of Yugoslavia* (1983), in its chapter on the nation of Bosnia and Herzegovina does not explicitly mention libraries at all, as if they were entirely nonexistent.

What distinguishes Bosnian and Herzegovinian libraries of the present day from libraries of other postcommunist countries is the devastation caused by war, inadequate legislation, and the politicization of library activities. The lack of cooperation and coordination among libraries and various library systems has crucially hindered development in the postwar period, but this is not specific to modern Bosnia and Herzegovina. As noted above, Anghelescu (2005) identifies these issues in Romania and finds the cause to lie in “inexplicable personal and institutional vanities” (p. 445). She argues that librarians need to work on three major concepts—cooperation, communication, and coordination—because these will lead to visible improvements in their professional activities and have the most positive impact on the communities they serve.

#### DEVASTATION OF LIBRARIES DURING THE WAR (1992–1995)

Domestic and foreign authors have written extensively about the tragic events and dramatic changes that have occurred both during and after the war. In these texts, along with accurate and scientifically based facts, there are many lies, myths, misconceptions, and misrepresentations about the history and nature of life in Bosnia (Malcolm, 1995). Misconstrued perceptions of Bosnia are rampant and inadvertently reinforced by, for instance, the US Central Intelligence Agency, which, on its website, *The World Fact Book*, among the other facts about Bosnia and Herzegovina, offers several photographs of unspecified rural areas and of the periphery of Sarajevo that allegedly illustrate the central city. It does not include any photos that authentically depict the panorama of the capital, the biggest city of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Central Intelligence Agency, 2014). Little has been written about the destruction of Bosnian cultural and historical heritage as a result of the war of the 1990s, which has left deep and indelible scars on the lives of the people of this area.

In his book *Biblioteka u dvadeset prvom veku* (The Library in the Twenty-First Century), Brophy (2005) writes that the burning of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo symbolizes not only the loss of a beautiful building and unique collection but also a descent into barbarism by virtue of the fact that libraries are symbols of a civilized society and the value placed on knowledge, learning, and truth. In the summer of 1992, when the Serbian forces attacked with grenades the National and University Library (which was located in the Vijećnica [the city hall], the symbol of Sarajevo), many people were aware that this act was actually an attempt to destroy the cultural identity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The event marked the definitive “beginning of the end,” as the

aggressors would have it, of the multiethnic and multicultural community that was Bosnian society. In the burning of the library, the entire country lost a significant and irreplaceable part of its cultural heritage, its religious, educational, and cultural artifacts—the historical evidence of its multifaceted cultural identity and tradition of tolerance. To date, no one has been held accountable for this act of cultural annihilation.

Riedlmayer (1995) addressed in detail the significance of the destruction of libraries and other institutions of cultural heritage in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war. At the 1995 IFLA conference, he delivered a speech titled “Libraries Are Not for Burning: International Librarianship and Recovery of the Destroyed Heritage of Bosnian and Herzegovina” in which he related various facts about the events that have transpired in Bosnia. Riedlmayer claims that the burning of libraries and archives represent a crime against humanity and violate international laws and conventions—a crime that now requires an organized, effective response:

In the past three years, the cultural heritage of Bosnia-Herzegovina has suffered major destruction. The result is what a Council of Europe report has called “a cultural catastrophe.” Historic architecture (including 1,200 mosques, 150 churches, 4 synagogues and over 1,000 other monuments of culture), works of art, as well as cultural institutions (including major museums, libraries, archives, and manuscript collections) have been systematically targeted and destroyed. The losses include not only the works of art, but also crucial documentation that might aid in their reconstruction. Our Bosnian colleagues need the assistance of the international library community to help them recover and reconstruct some of what has been lost and to rebuild the buildings and institutions that embody their country’s cultural heritage. (n.p.)

Ten years later, Riedlmayer (2005) wrote about “the most famous book in Bosnia,” the *Sarajevo Haggada*, saying that

throughout Bosnia, public and private libraries, archives, museums, and other cultural institutions were targeted for destruction, in an attempt to eliminate the material evidence—books, documents, and works of art—that could remind future generations that people of different ethnic and religious traditions once shared a common heritage and life in Bosnia. In hundreds of towns and villages, communal records (cadastral registers, parish records, endowment deeds) that documented the historical presence and properties of minority communities were torched by nationalist extremists as part of “ethnic cleansing” campaigns. (p. 40)

In Riedlmayer’s (2007) thesis regarding the systematic and targeted destruction of Bosnian and Herzegovinian libraries, he placed these events into a broader theoretical and legal context by showing that the destruction of libraries, archives, and other cultural heritage institutions committed in the countries of the former Yugoslavia was deliberate. He revealed the intentional destruction of Bosnian cultural heritage during the war of

1992–1995, and, by gathering evidence of war crimes against culture, succeeded in raising international awareness. As a result, this type of crime was given a specific classification by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague, as well as in local courts.

### LEGISLATION AND LIBRARY ACTIVITIES

Post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina is managed via a complex and very expensive system comprising four levels of decision-making authorities: state, entities, cantons, and local communities. This system has been negatively affecting the performance of libraries because they fall under the jurisdictions of two of the most complex sectors—those of education and culture. The constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina has delegated these sectors to the authority of the entities. Through the constitution of the federation, responsibilities for the education and culture sectors are in the hands of cantons and local communities. Every canton has the authority to regulate its area according to its own constitution and laws. These complex layers of jurisdiction often overlap, intertwine, and divide and are the fundamental cause of the slow and difficult process of recovering libraries in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the Federation, the Law on Library Activities, although adopted in 1993, before the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, still applies because a new one has not yet been passed. But now, this law is not adequate for the constitutional structure that was established by that agreement. Among other things, the law regulates the status of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a national institution. All libraries in the federation still rely largely upon the National and University Library in Sarajevo, where, to date, librarians from this entity are required to be certified by passing a professional examination. However, public libraries in cantonal administrative centers are now urged to participate in activities that were once under the jurisdiction of the National and University Library, such as the reconstruction and linking of fragmented library systems in its administrative territories. They have not yet been able to do so, however.

The situation is completely different with libraries in the Republic of Srpska in which a centralized cultural and educational system manages everything. Srpska adopted its own Law on Library Activities two years before the signing of the peace agreement. To date, this legislation has been changed and modified several times. In 1997, Srpska founded its own National and University Library, located in Banja Luka, and has taken responsibility for the continued development of library activities. As far as the establishment of the library system goes, librarians in today's Republic of Srpska are going one step further by separating their system from the federation's one. The process of automation and networking of libraries into a library and information system in the entire country began during the

1980s and continued after the war. This activity was initiated by the Virtual Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is located in the federation, in Sarajevo. The National and University Library of Srpska was also included, but its librarians consistently demonstrated a desire for an autonomous system, and the preconditions for this were completed at the beginning of 2014. Komlenić (2010) stresses the necessity of establishing an autonomous library and information system in Srpska.

Rešidbegović (2005), as assistant director of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, describes the numerous norms that regulate library activities. She illustrates the complex legislation with figures representing the seven laws that were enacted to target library activities (at both the entity and cantonal levels), which were “inconsistent, inadequate, and inappropriate. In addition, there were four invalid, outdated, and inapplicable standards for four types of libraries, plus a series of outdated regulations, ordinances, statutes, and unequal rules related to the operation of libraries and librarians” (p. 13). Rešidbegović concludes that “anarchy rules” in the legislation regarding the governance of libraries (p. 14). The norms that are discussed are related to public library activities, while the activities of academic and school libraries are regulated by legislation referring to education or by the laws on institutions and organizations, such as special libraries. These laws are under the jurisdiction of cantonal ministries and educational institutions, which have nothing in common; hence, this complicated picture of the legislation becomes even more complex.

However, Rešidbegović’s statement about “anarchy rules” actually refers only to libraries in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina because in the Serbian entity, the situation is legislatively arranged and regulated, as described above. On the other hand, the federation has a total of fifty libraries that are networked and included in the COBISS system, while only one library from Srpska was included. Rešidbegović (2005, p. 14) called this situation the “illusion of network” because “the existing network was created based on technological infrastructure rather than on the actual library community.” COBISS is the library and information system that enables libraries to perform shared cataloging by using similar software; it includes all of the countries of the former Yugoslavia except Croatia, which has own system. COBISS.Net includes more than 700 libraries in the region, and 51 from Bosnia and Herzegovina (<http://www.cobiss.net/default-bh.asp>).

According to data presented by Alidžanović, Ovčina, and Rešidbegović (2008), Bosnia and Herzegovina has a total of 1,177 libraries of all types, out of which 800 are in the federation, 376 in Srpska, and 1 in the Brčko District. Out of the total number of libraries in Bosnia and Herzegovina, over 900 are school libraries, approximately 600 of which belonging to the federation, and less than 300 to Srpska. There remains no solution for the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, how-



ever. Since 1998, it has been temporarily located in the former Maršal Tito barracks and survives only through some miracle (fig. 1). The library’s management has the daily responsibility of overseeing the most prosaic existential problems, such as the payment of utility bills and employees’ salaries, neither of which are assured. In essence, the library has survived as an illusion for almost twenty years, with occasional assistance from various institutions. Paradoxically, the problem stems from its former status as a cultural institution of national importance during a time when there was no national Ministry of Culture. The Dayton Peace Agreement does not cover national cultural institutions, hence the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina does not, in effect, belong to anyone. There is no political interest in solving this problem, especially regarding the Serbian political-administrative entity, which has its own national library now. Other former national cultural institutions and custodians of cultural heritage are in an unenviable situation as well: namely, the National Museum, the Museum of Literature and Theatrical Arts, the History Museum, the Art Gallery, the Cinematheque of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Library of the Society for the Blind and Vision Impaired. To complicate matters, the building known as the Vijećnica, which was the home of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina for almost fifty years, until 1992, has been restored and, in 2014, returned to its previous owner, the municipal administration that had been located there before the National and University Library. Therefore, the National and University Library will continue to remain homeless. The National Museum, unfortunately, was closed in 2012. Now the question looms: Which state-owned cultural institution will close next?

## LIBRARIANS AND PROFESSIONAL WORK

Under these circumstances, it is difficult to expect that dynamic work related to professional development and fruitful communication within the library community could occur. On the contrary, dissatisfaction and lethargy have, in fact, been the dominant ethos for a long time. Professional activities have been reduced to a minimum in order to merely maintain existing resources in libraries and to perform basic tasks. One cannot say that during the past twenty years there have not been attempts to resolve the main problems that hinder the recovery and development of the library profession in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but these attempts have not made any significant impact. The Association of Librarians of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was very active during the communist period, during which time it published its own professional journal, fell apart at the beginning of the war in the 1990s. Later, there were attempts to restart the association’s activity, but all such efforts have failed. Since 1997, librarians in the Republic of Srpska have had their own association and publish a professional journal, *Librarianship in the Republic of Srpska*. The National



Figure 1. The entrance to the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo. (Photo: Courtesy of the author.)

and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina is the publisher of the professional journal *Bosniaca*. Each entity takes care of the professional training and education of its staff. Employees receive basic professional education through courses and exams conducted in the two national libraries. There are two university departments where future librarians are educated—one at the University of East Sarajevo, which is in Srpska; the other at the University of Sarajevo, in the federation—but both have dual-major programs related more to the study of world literature than to modern library and information science.

It is therefore easy to conclude that an association of librarians, or any other professional body, at the national level that could serve as an authoritative force to address the country's present library situation does not exist. The reality is that there is no professional dialogue between librarians of the two entities, and even intracommunication among them is poor. Ethnic, political, linguistic, and other divisions that characterize contemporary Bosnian society have had a deleterious impact on the library community. Such a situation usually leads to the formation of powerful groups and people who work for their own individual interests and not those of the professional community at large; further, this situation helps maintain the status quo—the vicious circle of problems that continue to afflict libraries and librarians.

## CONCLUSION

After the longest and bloodiest conflict in Europe since World War II and involving the most complicated political systems on the continent, the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is such that there is a question of whether a coherent national culture is possible to identify at all. There is also a question of whether there is any cause for optimism with regard to the future of Bosnian and Herzegovinian libraries and the direction in which they might proceed. Considering the history of the country, it is difficult to be optimistic when it comes to the future of its libraries. The institutional structure that was created by the international community has become an obstacle to the effective implementation of a process of integration. Much depends on the political will, which to date has been weak and failing to envision a viable future. For this reason, the current situation could last for a decade or more. A second scenario, which seems more likely, is that constitutional changes—should they actually happen—could lead to the final partitioning of the country into two or three parts based on ethnicity, or, alternately, to the centralization and strengthening of state institutions at the expense of two political-administrative entities.

In February 2014, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina was confronted with popular demonstrations, which were mostly organized by young people that found one another through social media. These demonstrations reflect the extreme despair and dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in the country, and because they are so recent, their outcome cannot be foreseen at present. Regardless of all the problems they are facing, the libraries of Bosnia and Herzegovina exist as an interesting paradox: the libraries of one entity (Srpska) have developed a legal framework, while those of the other (the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) have merely implemented an automated system. In such a situation, partnership between the libraries in the two entities would be the logical arrangement, but the problem is that logic does not, in fact, prevail here. As it is often said, "At the point where logic stops, Bosnia begins!"

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