

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert J. Donia, John V. A. Fine. *Bosnia and Hercegovina*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. xi + 318 pp. \$59.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-10160-8.

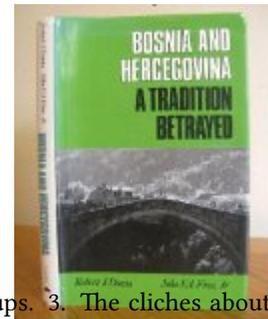
Reviewed by Charles Ingrao (Purdue University)

Published on HABSBUURG (October, 1995)

This book is a very useful history of a very important part of today's world. It is written by two Balkan specialists with unimpeachable credentials. John V. A. Fine is a Harvard-educated professor at Michigan; Robert J. Donia is one of his former students, himself the author of *Islam under the Double Eagle: The Muslims of Bosnia and Hercegovina, 1878-1914*. Although the authors don't explicitly say so, there's little doubt that they wrote this in order to refute the numerous misconceptions that have fueled Western indecisiveness during the ghastly Bosnian conflict. It is this context that defines both the book's strengths and its limitations.

On the positive side, *Bosnia and Hercegovina* offers a far more sophisticated view of the situation than either the press or our political leaders. It explodes several myths that merit special attention: 1. Contrary to the claims of those who would partition it, Bosnia is not an artificial creation of recent vintage, but a well-defined entity that has enjoyed its own stable borders, institutions, and regional identity for centuries. Even its residents represent a single, homogeneous Slavic ethnic group that eventually absorbed the two obscure Iranian tribes (a.k.a. Serbs and Croats) who conquered Bosnia in the seventh century. 2. Far from being religious zealots, Bosnia's peoples are the largely secular by-product of historically remote religious establishments whose hold has been weakened further by nearly a half-century of Communism. If Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Islam have served to divide the Bosnian people, it is because they were classified separately by faith during three centuries of Ottoman overlordship. Even then, it was only in the final quarter of the nineteenth century that the growth of nationalism in nearby Habsburg Croatia and the independent kingdom of Serbia induced Catholic and Orthodox Bosnians to begin seeing themselves as belong-

ing to distinctive national groups. 3. The clichés about "age-old" ethnic hatred and violence ignore centuries of peaceful relations between Bosnia's various religious groups. Even after its peoples became nationally conscious, Bosnia was a model of multiethnic coexistence and collaboration. Far from dividing the country's religious and ethnic groups, the many revolts against Ottoman misrule actually united Bosnia's Catholics, Orthodox, Muslims, and Jews in a single cause. Although Austria-Hungary's annexation of Bosnia in 1878 did accelerate ethnic awareness and friction, thereafter there were only two outbreaks of ethnic violence until the current conflict: (a) after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, which inspired urban riots and repressive government measures against Bosnia's Serbs, and (b) during World War II, when the Ustasha launched its bloody genocide against the Jews, Gypsies and Serbs. In both cases, the violence was triggered (as it has been recently) by the intrusion of outside forces. Moreover, the authors argue that, since World War II, Bosnia has experienced the least ethnic tension of any of the six Yugoslav republics. Far from resorting to violence, Bosnia's three major "ethnic" groups have adapted well to the multi-party parliamentary political institutions first introduced by the Habsburgs. The Muslims have proven especially adept at playing an opportunistic, balance-of-power game with Bosnia's Serbs and Croats to formulate compromises that protected their own interests. The ease with which all three groups have coexisted is especially evident in Bosnia's more heavily Muslim urban centers, where nearly forty percent of marriages are confessionally mixed. When there has been conflict, both in the past and the present, it has invariably involved social tensions between Christian peasants and Muslim landlords, or between rural communities and urban centers. 4. The



prospects for successful outside military intervention are good. In reviewing the historical record, the authors rebut the stock claim that Bosnian irregulars have always managed to frustrate foreign occupiers. For 350 years the Turkish empire held onto Bosnia without serious difficulty. In 1878 the invading Austro-Hungarian forces needed only six months to secure Bosnia, despite the hostility of most of the population. Even Tito's epic struggle against the Ustasha regime and the German Wehrmacht was rather less successful than the legend suggests. If the partisans held out against the fascists, it was mainly because the Germans showed only a spasmodic interest in subduing them: pursuing Tito across the mountainous Bosnian countryside was not a high priority to the mere four divisions that Hitler initially committed to all of the former Yugoslav state. Only in 1943, when it appeared that the allies might enact Churchill's plan for an Adriatic invasion, did the Wehrmacht commit significant forces to the region. Moreover, every German offensive in Bosnia forced a full retreat by the partisans, who never won a battle. 5. Nationalist rhetoric about centuries of persecution are misplaced. While hardly enlightened, Turkish rule was both tolerant and tolerable, fostering an autonomous political and cultural development that the Bosnians defended in 1878. The Austro-Hungarian regime not only won popular acceptance (largely by courting the country's Muslim ruling class), but benefited Bosnia by investing heavily in the country's infrastructure.

The book's final chapter, which deals with the country's tragic "Descent into War" has fewer "misconceptions" to dismiss, largely because it must rely heavily on accounts by the very journalists whose analyses it criticizes. It remains, however, a solidly detailed recapitula-

tion, during which we meet the entire cast of characters. There is no mistaking the arch-villains: Milosevic, Serb extremists like Seselj and Arkan, and military men like Ratko Mladic, who forsook Yugoslav federalism for the lure of a Greater Serbia. By comparison, Franjo Tudjman is merely a garden variety national chauvinist, whose own commitment to a united Croatian nation-state led him to conclude a secret partition of Bosnia with Milosevic in March 1991.

The book has other strengths. The authors do a good job of blending Yugoslav with Bosnian developments. Nor do they ever miss the opportunity to tie past experience with present circumstances. The volume has several excellent maps, a useful pronunciation table and glossary, and attractive black-and-white plates. But the fact remains that the entire book has been written less as an historical work than as an appeal for intervention in Bosnia, an objective that ostensibly undermines its credibility, notwithstanding the authors' — and especially Fine's — credentials. It also leads to a curious organization that serves their purpose of exploding myths and answering specific questions about the civil war, but leaves the reader with sections of widely differing lengths that are sometimes episodic and disjointed. Undergraduate readers are unlikely to complain about such shortcomings, especially in a well-written, survey-level overview drawn exclusively from secondary sources. Nevertheless, at \$25, the book may be more suitable as a source of lecture material than as a class text.

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

**Citation:** Charles Ingraio. Review of Donia, Robert J.; Fine, John V. A., *Bosnia and Hercegovina*. HABSBERG, H-Net Reviews. October, 1995.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=186>

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).