ABSTRACT

Compared to neighboring Serbian and Croatian National movements, the development of a sense of nationality among the Bosnian Muslims has been relatively recent; it has become truly apparent only in the later half of the 20th century. Nationality is a distinctive form of group identity and its development among the Bosnian Muslims has been a process spanning the past 500 years. The culture of the Bosnian Muslims, as well as their claims of distinction from their neighbors are primarily the result of the distinction accorded them by the different governments that have ruled the region.

Introduction

During the early 1990’s, Yugoslavia was torn apart in a civil war that was marked by nationalism and genocide. Western reporters were quick to claim that this region, a myriad of ethnicities and cultures, was historically defined by ethnic conflict. This was a mischaracterization of the history of the Balkans. The Bosnians themselves would disagree with this characterization. In conversation with Bosnian Muslims in the rural village of Dolina, Tone Bringa was told, “We always lived together and got along well; what is happening now has been created by something stronger than us.”

The history of Bosnia is not a series of ethnic conflicts, as many believe, but rather one of tolerance and pluralism. The violence that can be observed in the history of the region has been largely the result of external sources such as conquering empires; ethnic civil war appears only rarely and usually during periods that are already marked by violence. When viewed broadly over the past 500 years, the area that covers modern day Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia, is more easily characterized as a model of ethnic civility or pluralism than of ethnic hatred. Even the powerful hand of nationalism, the ideological juggernaut of the modern age, was stayed for over a century in the name of peaceful unity. The question that thus presents itself is how could an area that succeeded at peace and cooperation for so long suddenly erupt in a nationalist civil war. The media, in the search for a quick and comprehensible answer, blamed the differences that had defined the people of the region. As history proves this explanation false, we must search for a less direct answer.

The ethnic pluralism found in the history of the Balkans has grown largely out of necessity. This is a region that has served many masters. It has been against the interests of the rulers of the area, to say nothing of the citizens themselves, to experience fracture and war over ethnic or religious difference. War is costly, but peace is productive. Pluralism, therefore, has been the goal of the masters of the region since the Ottoman invasion in the 15th century. Pluralism, whether encouraged or enforced, kept the region stable. The unintended effect of this presents itself in the reinforcement of the ethno-religious identities that define the area. Pluralism (the tolerance of, and coexistence among, varied ethnic groups) requires an understanding and definition of those ethnicities. The principal rulers that this essay will highlight (the Ottomans, Austro-Hungarians and Yugoslavs [Royal and Communist]), all worked more to define or placate the different ethno-religious groups than to dissolve them. This process can be most clearly outlined in the recent development of a nationalism centered on the Bosnian Muslims. That a

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1 Tone Bringa, Being a Muslim the Bosnian Way (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 4. My own conversations with Bosnian Muslims, especially high school students in Sarajevo, has confirmed this attitude of peaceful pluralism.
people whose definition was generally limited to their religion or geographic location a century ago should rise and claim not only ethnicity but nationality is testament to the power of nationalism, but even more to the unique historical properties of the region. The practice of pluralism throughout Balkan history has created an environment that demands ethnic definition and division among its people and has given birth to the Bosniak nation.

**Nations and Nationalism**

If we are to analyze the history of the Bosnian Muslims in search of a growing national identity, we must have a working definition of the term “nation.” Bosnian history is one of multiple identities, many of which this essay will examine. It is important to distinguish national identity from those identities that compose or preceded it if we are to understand the unique nature of nationalism in the Balkans.

National identity can be loosely defined by three criteria. First, national identity must be a synthesis of two or more distinct identities. National identity is a collective, or group, identity. By synthesizing two or more identities into a single, national identity, nationalists are able to distinguish their nation from other groups that may possess the same identities. That the identities be distinct is just as important as is their plurality because this is the way in which nationalists determine who belongs within a nation, as well as who is excluded. Distinction implies that there is no necessary connection between the identities. For example, the English live on the island of Britain and under the influence of the English Monarchy. Those under the influence of the Monarchy do not necessarily live on the island of Britain but those who live on the island are all under the influence of the Monarchy (at least most of the time). These identities are therefore not distinct and could not be used in defining the English nation. The identities used in the construction of a nationality must be applicable to all presumed members. The Bosnian Muslims offer an example of distinct identities. Not all Bosnians are Muslim; nor are all Muslims Bosnian. The identities are multiple and distinct. The Bosniak nationality may be boiled down to the combination of these distinct identities into a single, national identity. If one is Muslim, they might not be a Bosniak. If one lives in Bosnia, they might still not be a Bosniak. If one is Muslim and Bosnia is their homeland, then they may be a Bosniak. This synthesis alone will not provide nationality though, or the title “Bosnian Muslim” would have remained sufficient. A group identity requires further definition before it becomes a nation.

Nations must be possessed of a common, professed history or culture. The word *history* here has multiple meanings (as do nations themselves). It may be the historical account of significant events in the nations past or it may be more intrinsic, such as the presumed genealogy of nations that are formed around a previous ethnic identity. This point is significant because it is the only part of this definition with which nationalists are likely to disagree. Historians, sociologists and other students of nationalist history have largely declared it to be a condition strictly of the modern world. Ernest Gellner gives the credit for the rise of nationalism to industrialization and the social and cultural homogenization that occurs in its wake. Nationalists, however, give their nations a much older history and, in their minds, a greater legitimacy. The nation, in the eyes of the nationalist, is old enough to be an intrinsic identity, inseparable from those who are born to it. The nation is thus often presumed to have rights distinct from those of its individual members, such as the right to a state that primarily serves the nation. This presumed history separates nationalism from other political movements. Its claim to statehood (where such a claim exists) is not based on the merits of the ideology, but on its historical entitlement.

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2 Serbs and Croats do live in Bosnia, indeed Serbs make up a significant amount of the population, but they are certainly not perceived to be Bosniaks.
As membership in a nation is typically perceived to be hereditary, and nationalist claims are typically found in regions that have been exposed to enlightenment principles regarding the equality of man (which by now includes the vast majority of global societies), nations are defined finally by their professed practice of political and legal equality. This is perhaps the most elusive concept of the three hallmarks of nationalism. Nations do not presume to eliminate class, especially since they are often initiated by elite classes, but they do seek to impose legal rights and duties on all members. This would mean that members of all classes are subject to the same laws and are privileged by basic rights derived from their nationality. In other words, the particular rights and duties of members of the nation are determined by class and social position, but every member has general duties to the nation and receives rights that non-members do not, even if those non-members live within the same state.

The presumption of political and legal equality is easy to observe in this age of constitutions and charters, to say nothing of the speeches and writings of nationalists, but is also easy to debunk as a social or political reality. Class privilege is perhaps more inherited than nationality, in that wealth and its privileges are very tangible and have profound effects even on infants, whereas nationality must be indoctrinated. So it is the presumption of equality that matters more than the reality. This allows the definition to be stretched over those nations that do not have states.

The definition of nations requires all three of the above components: a synthesis of identities; a presumed history of events or ethnicity; and a presumed legal and political equality. With a clear description of a nation, defining nationalism becomes easy. Nationalism is simply the assertion of nationhood. It is the process of a group’s defining itself according to the tenets listed above. The subject of nations and nationalism is not a chicken and egg argument: nationalism must come first.

We could speculate further about this definition, particularly if we were to examine the differences between so-called failed and successful nationalisms but in the case of the Bosniaks this is unnecessary as we do not yet have a verdict on the success or failure of this particular nationalism. Instead we may proceed with the investigation of the Bosniak nation itself and pursue the source of this complex identity.

**Ethno-genesis**

The early part of the 15th century saw the Bosnian region in a unique geo-political position. Bosnia’s uniqueness stemmed largely from its independence. The country’s isolation and rugged, mountainous terrain offered protection from invasion by nearby Serbia and Hungary. Similarly, this exclusionary terrain protected the medieval Bosnian nobles from one another as well as from the Bosnian king, allowing them near autonomy. Bosnia was therefore uniquely politically unstable without the usual result of military vulnerability.5

Largely because of this extended isolation and independence, Bosnia found itself both distanced from and lodged between the influences of the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches.6 The people of the area experienced cultural pressure from both as migrants filtered in, and both churches proselytized for the faith of these people.7 During this period a curious and controversial new faith was formed. The Bosnian Church was denounced as a heretical cult by both major churches, but in reality was likely a mixture of practices from the two competing faiths. This church, which represents a blending of people and ideas, is frequently cited as the ethno-genesis of the Bosniak ethnicity.8 Many of the historical details of the Bosnian church are

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6 Ibid, 16.
8 Bringa, Being a Muslim the Bosnian Way, 15.
surrounded in mystery, but that mystery does provide an excellent starting point for the modern history of the Balkan region.

The significance of the Bosnian church and the ethno-genetic claim ascribed to it rest upon their generation from a conflict between the two groups that would grow to become the most visible of the Yugoslav nationalities. Though Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs would both later claim the Bosnian heretics as their own, the church actually represented a secession from the two groups.

Serbs and Croats of medieval Bosnia were defined by both a religious and a regional identity. Croatians were predominantly Catholic while Serbians could be identified by their orthodoxy, but the ties between ethnicity and religion did not possess the same strength in the 15th century as they do in the 20th and were certainly not absolute. The Bosnian Church offers strong evidence not only of the weakness of the link between ethnicity and religion, but also of the weakness of the Bosnian Catholic and Orthodox churches themselves. That many Bosnians were able to establish an independent church demonstrates that their loyalty to their previous religions was not as ingrained or hereditary as ethnicity tends to be. It is much easier to abandon one’s faith or ideology than one’s heritage. That many Bosnians did so suggests that religion was not an essential part of that heritage. Just as important as the Bosnians’ willingness to establish a new church was their ability to do so. Both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches declared the Bosnian Church to be heretical, yet were unable to prevent its continuing operation except through isolated and, frequently diplomatic efforts. The Eastern and Western Churches were therefore as institutionally weak within Bosnia as was the faith of many of their practitioners.

The Ottoman conquest in 1463 was followed by a large conversion to Islam by Bosnians. This conversion is the subject of some debate. Bosniak nationalists, including scholar Adil Zulfikarpasic, claim that the conversion of the Bosnian heretics was en masse and the logical course for a church whose practices were already similar to Islam. Scholars seeking to discredit the legitimacy of Bosniak nationality, such as Mustafa Imamovic, describe a more gradual and voluntary conversion for the people of Bosnia. The en masse theory lacks historical evidence but remains nonetheless important to nationalists such as Zulfikarpasic because it provides an early history of the nation acting as a group and in their own interests. Historically speaking, Imamovic is factually correct, but Zulfikarpasic’s ideas cannot be entirely dismissed. The conversion to Islam was not necessarily undertaken by the same people who created and participated in the Bosnian Church, but it was caused by the same conditions that allowed the development of the heretical religion.

The Islamization of Bosnia was a gradual process that encompassed several decades and surely was not comprised solely of members of the Bosnian Church. Noel Malcolm goes so far as to proclaim the Bosnian Church largely defunct by the time of the Ottoman Invasion. The evidence supports a clear distinction between those who practiced the Bosnian heresy and those who converted to Islam, but the conditions that allowed for both events were the same. The weakness of the other religious institutions as well as the weakness of the religious identity of the Bosnians allowed them more freedom in their choice of religion. Islam was actually more enticing than the Bosnian church as it was the religion of the conquering state. The early Ottoman period in Bosnian saw no forced conversions, aside from the devshirme that took non-

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12 Evidenced by Donia and Fine’s Religious population charts which show a slow increase in the number of Muslim households in the Sarajevo region and Lepenica between the years of 1468 and 1509. Donia, Robert J. and John V.A. Fine, Jr., *Bosnia & Hercegovina: A Tradition Betrayed* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 42.
13 Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History*, 42.
Muslim boys and inducted them into the Janissaries, a centralized military organization that often supplied government officials and bureaucrats. Despite this apparent freedom from religious persecution, it was nonetheless beneficial to convert to Islam if for no other reason than that it avoided the additional taxes placed on Christians.

Taxes were not the sole distinction between Ottoman-ruled Christians and Muslims. The millet system organized Ottoman society on the basis of religion. Each religion, namely Muslims, Christians and Jews, possessed its own millet, which marked a social distinction. A person’s millet was the definition of their cultural character. It determined dress, social duties and under whose legal jurisdiction a person fell. Social institutions such as education, marriage, charity and civil courts were all regulated by the separate millets. Having converted to Islam in an environment where religious institutions, and therefore religious identities, were notably weak, the Bosnian Muslims found themselves characterized by an identity that did not determine just their religion, but their entire culture. They were thus undergoing the synthesis of two identities, religious and cultural, and reinforcing both so as to make them inseparable. One could not be a Muslim in Bosnia without also being a member of the cultural community associated with that millet. Nor could one participate in the institutions of the Muslim millet without being first a Muslim. While the identities provided by the millet system were applied throughout the Ottoman Empire, the divisions it caused remained a part of the conflicting identities of Bosnia even after the fall of the Empire. The ethno-cultural identities of the Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims are as tied to religion as any other aspect of their respective cultures. Indeed, these groups cannot be separated from their religious identities. To be Serb is also to be Orthodox, and to be Croat and Catholic. To be a Muslim in Bosnia means two things, even after the departure of the Ottomans. It is a practiced religion, to be sure, but it is also a cultural identity. The cultural identity constructed by the millet is powerful and total enough to assume a more inherent feeling, as with ethnicity. This means that even if a Bosnian Muslim should renounce Islam, he/she would remain, in the eyes of most Bosnians irrespective of religion, a Bosnian Muslim. It is in fact possible that she would continue to perceive themselves as ethnically Muslim, if not religiously Islamic.

The advantages possessed by the Muslims of Ottoman Bosnia were few during the early years of the Empire’s control of the region, but as centuries passed, Muslims began to dominate the upper class. The Ottoman Empire awarded land primarily to its Muslim warriors in exchange for military service. In Bosnia, many of these soldiers were able to convert these large estates into private holdings. These private holdings imbued their owners with the bulk of Bosnia’s wealth and power. The place of Islam in Bosnian society was therefore secure by this point, but the rise to power of a few Muslim landowners does not constitute nationality, especially since the differential between the classes was likely large enough to counter any common Muslim identity. What it did accomplish was to project the image of a more local and influential Islamic state Muslims and potential converts could look for the advantages of being Muslim because the institutions of local government, including the Bosnian Pashalik, were populated by members of the Muslim millet.

Aydin Babuna’s article, “Nationalism and the Bosnian Muslims” focuses on the development of Bosnian Muslim identity during the Ottoman and Austrian periods. He

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14 ibid, 46.
15 Donia & Fine, Bosnia & Hercegovina: A Tradition Betrayed 41.
17 ibid 53.
describes an intriguing series of events at the close of the 17th century that served to solidify the identity of the Bosnian Muslims through conflict with the Austrians, who would eventually come to rule the area. The Bosnian Muslims faced the obvious external threat of invasion by the Austrians, but the rise of Serbian and Montenegrin nationalism created an internal threat that had an edge of ideology. A perception developed that the conflicts were based in religion rather than territory. These combined threats forced the Bosnian Muslims into a defensive position in which the upper and lower class drew closer together. For Bosnia’s upper class of Muslims, the threat presented by the Austrians, as well as their Christian allies in Serbia and Croatia, was on their position. If they had gained or retained their wealth and power by virtue of their alignment with the state religion, it followed that they would lose said benefits if the religion of the state changed. The lower classes were under a more direct threat from the Austrians as they comprised the bulk of Bosnia’s military, which saw extensive fighting and numerous casualties. Caught, therefore, between Christian Austria and Christian Serbia with only the weakening Ottoman Empire to defend them, the wider Islamic identity of Bosnia’s Muslims was becoming more relevant, if only because the coming persecution, which many Bosnians believed inevitable, would afflict Muslims of every class. Religion thus provided a common ideology around which Muslims of all classes were beginning to flock in times of crisis.

The Austro-Hungarians

Following the Austrian invasion of Bosnia, the Berlin Congress of 1878 gave control of the country to the Austro-Hungarian Crown, though not without serious consideration. Bosnia’s position between Croatia and Serbia offered a vexing question. Serbia was practically independent and a dire concern to any empire that would presume to rule it, as evidenced by their declaration of war against the Ottomans in 1876. To allow them to gain control of Bosnia could quite easily make them an uncheckable force in the Balkans. Control of Bosnia by the Austrians would therefore be preferable than to allow it to fall into the hands of the Serbs. Imperial control presented its own problems, however. Croatia, Bosnia’s westward neighbor, was occupied by the Austro-Hungarians but remained mostly self-rulled and constantly sought to increase its standing in the Empire or to achieve independence outright. Thus bonding Bosnia with Croatia or allowing self-governance could allow the two countries to create the same problem for the Austro-Hungarians as Serbia did for the Ottomans. These considerations caused the Empire to take control of Bosnia to keep it from the Serbs while making it a Crown territory to keep it from the Croatians. The regional distinction of Bosnia was thus not only recognized by the Austro-Hungarians, but was of paramount importance.

This shift in power represents a pivotal moment in the history of Bosnia’s Muslims if for no other reason than the change in state religion. Now under the rule of a Christian government, Bosnia’s Muslims no longer possessed the social advantages of alignment with the state religion, though they did retain the freedom to practice Islam. This may seem incidental when compared with the historical reality of Bosnia’s class structure. As mentioned above, Bosnia’s land-owning elite had obtained their holdings by virtue of their religion but were largely successful at converting them to private estates and were no more beholden to the Austrians than they were to the Ottomans. The class distinctions among Muslims were thus unchanged. The psychological

19 ibid 199-200.

20 ibid 199-200.


22 Or more specifically by their military positions, which were largely reserved for Muslims. This doesn’t change the fact that most land-owning elite were Muslims, which, while incidental at first, becomes all the more important when the state religion changes.
effect of the conversion, though, cannot be ignored. Islam in Bosnia no longer enjoyed the privilege of state sponsorship, and thus one of the primary ingredients for its growth and strength in the region was gone. With the millet system gone, their identity could no longer be attached to a culture that spread far beyond Bosnia; it would now have to be more regional. In other words, where they had been Ottoman Muslims, they now had to become Bosnian Muslims.

The Austrians placed Bosnia under the control of the Joint Ministry of Finance. Benjamin Kallay, Joint Minister of Finance, observed a crucial problem within the Bosnian social and political structure. Serbian and Croatian national movements were gaining in strength and could pose a threat to the stability of the region. These national movements had been developing at a steady pace over the course of the previous century. Why they developed nationalisms during the end of Ottoman rule while the Bosnian Muslims did not is worth at least a cursory examination. The geographic regions of Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia are close enough that it is difficult to argue a regional distinction that caused these areas to establish nations because the distinction would have also caused Bosnia to nationalize. The primary difference between Ottoman Serbs, Croats and Muslims lay in their religious millets. The millet system had taken religious identity beyond belief systems and made them into distinct cultures. The religious institutions themselves received very different treatment from the Ottomans. Catholics were met with a much greater suspicion than the Orthodox, likely because Istanbul could control the Serbian Patriarch while Rome remained outside their reach. The common thread between them was that they were both Christian religions under the imperial rule of an Islamic state. Ernest Gellner argues that the creation or maintenance of a national state is the basis for nationalism. While other motivations for nationalism may exist, particularly in the case of the Bosniaks who do not pursue a national state, this is likely the premise behind the growing national movements of the Serbs and Croats. It is also important to note that it was not the difference between the religion of the state and nation that drove these national movements. If this were the case, at least Croatian nationalism would have disappeared with the arrival of the Austrians and their Catholic crown. The gap between these two nations and the Ottoman state was actually a cultural one. The millets created a culture for the Orthodox and Catholics of the Ottoman Empire that was universal throughout the region but within the Balkans, those millets would have been associated largely with Serbia and Croatia respectively. The culture of the Orthodox and Catholic millets within Serbia and Croatia became the culture of Serbs and Croats. When the Austrians gained control of Croatia, the Croats were not seeking a Catholic state; they were pursuing a Croat state.

In order to counterbalance these growing nationalisms, Kallay turned to the Bosnian Muslims, who comprised Bosnia’s upper class. His goal was to establish a Bosnian nation, based more on territory than religion, that could provide a buffer between the potentially conflicting national movements of the Serbs and Croats. Kallay’s attempt was unsuccessful. Though he received minor support from some Bosnian intellectuals, the Christian government of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was largely opposed by Muslims who had recently lost their privileged status.

More important than the attempt by Kallay to nationalize the Bosnian Muslims was the state’s recognition of them in relation to other nationalities. Until this time, Bosnia’s Muslims had been defined by the state in terms of their religion alone. In this respect, Bosnian Muslims were no different than any other Ottoman Muslims. The policies of the Austrians characterized the Bosnian Muslims according to their geographic region. It was more important to the Austrians that Bosnia provide a buffer between the Croats and the Serbs. This sent two messages to the Bosnian Muslims. First, it tells them that where the Ottomans perceived them as primarily Muslim, the Austrians view them as Bosnian. The policy also shows that the Austrian government recognizes three native peoples in the region; the Serbs, Croats and the Bosnian Muslims.

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Muslims in between. Where they had previously been defined primarily by their religion, Bosnian Muslims were now defined by place as well.

**Royal Yugoslavia**

The Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, or Yugoslavia, seemingly offers little evidence in support of a state-sponsored construction of Bosnian Muslim identity. They were not recognized as one of the predominant ethnic groups upon which the Kingdom is based and so may be dismissed by the casual historian as unimportant or insignificant to the ruling ethnic parties. A more in-depth look, however, reveals the Bosnian Muslims playing a significant, if not pivotal, role in the political landscape of the period.

The Bosnian Muslims, particularly the formerly elite landowners, found themselves at the heart of one of the central political questions of the new Kingdom: agrarian reforms. The Ottoman system had awarded most of Bosnia’s farmland, and consequently power and wealth, to Muslims. This system was unacceptable within a Kingdom largely controlled by Serbs. The solution that developed allows historians to view the nature of the relationship between the different ethnicities. The Agrarian Reforms began with the Interim Decree of King Alexander in 1919 and were legally completed in 1931. They provided compensation to previous landowners in the forms of cash and government guaranteed bonds. They also ended serfdom and divided the larger estates so as to remove the inherited power of the Muslims landlords. It is possible to infer an ethnic conflict here from the observation that Christian rulers targeted a privilege of another ethnicity, namely the land and accompanying power of the Bosnian Muslims. It would, however, be unfair to use the Agrarian Reforms as evidence of ancient ethnic hatreds. The Muslims landowners were not forcibly stripped of their land, it was bought. It is also important to note that the problem being addressed here is not simply that Muslims own the bulk of Bosnia’s farmland, but that a small group of people wielded an inordinate amount of control over a critical resource. Breaking up the power of large landowners, regardless of their religion, seemed to be of greater political importance than simply depriving Muslims of their land.

Further eroding the argument that the Agrarian Reforms were an ethnic conflict is the fact that they were largely supported by the Yugoslav Muslim Organization. The primary concern of this political group was to ensure fair compensation for Muslim landowners. As their support was critical for the passage of the upcoming Vidovdan Constitution, they were successful at acquiring a payoff large enough to dispel accusations of Muslim discrimination.

The Yugoslav Muslim Organization (YMO) itself speaks to the status of Bosnian Muslim identity. Robert J. Donia and John V.A. Fine, Jr. highlight a consistent voting pattern among Bosnian Muslims that kept the YMO as their predominant representatives. They claim that this shows a clear identity among the Bosnian Muslims of the period. That an identity among Muslims in Bosnia exists is hardly surprising. The definition and scope of that identity is slightly more difficult to ascertain. A Bosniak nationalist history would require that the Bosnians of Yugoslavia believed themselves a separate people, ethnically independent of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. For our purposes, however, the perception of the Bosnians themselves of their status is not as important as the perception of the Yugoslav State. Officially, Bosnian Muslims were not a recognized ethnicity within the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Politically however, the Bosnian Muslims were not only a recognizable group, but a critical one. The YMO was not beholden to any of the Kingdom’s primary ethnicities and could thus provide important swing votes in Parliament, as with the Vidovdan Constitution in 1921.

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26 ibid, 124-125.

27 ibid 124-125.
this particular action shows that Bosniak Nationalism was not the driving force behind the YMO. A nationalist party would have likely pursued a Bosniak state while the Vidovdan Constitution placed most of Yugoslavia’s power in the hands of the Serbs.

That the YMO was not a nationalist party does not necessarily mean that they were not elected for the purposes of representing a nation. Between 1920 and 1927, Bosnian Muslims consistently voted as a cohesive unit in favor of the YMO. This means one of two things. Either Bosnian Muslims were identifying themselves chiefly by their religious ethnicity or the Yugoslav state was so ethnically divided that no non-ethnic party existed for the Bosnian Muslims to choose as an alternative. As several parties did offer alternative, non-ethnic platforms, we can assume that Bosnians were beginning to perceive their ethnicity, or at least their religion, as a primary political concern. Either way, the period of the first Yugoslavia was one of continued ethnic development on the part of the Bosnian Muslims, who were already behaving as a separate ethnicity or as the nature of Yugoslav Partisan politics forced them to in order to achieve adequate representation.

**Tito’s Yugoslavia**

The end of World War II saw the creation of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Tito and the communist government were cognizant of the existence and firm identity of the existing nationalities and took deliberate steps to recognize them for the sake of cooperation and unity. The relatively brief history of Communist Yugoslavia, from Tito’s founding of the SFRY in 1944 to the declaration of independence by Croatia and Slovenia in 1991, marked a period of national and ethnic recognition and conciliation in which the Bosnian Muslims asserted their ethnic and national identity.

Yugoslavia was comprised of six member narodi, or nations. It also contained several narodnosti, ethnic groups large enough to be defined or labeled, but too small to represent a nation. Typically, the narodnosti were groups whose national home or ethnic region existed outside of Yugoslavia while the narodi were indigenous to the country and represented one of the six republics of Yugoslavia: Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia. These definitions are relatively sound except when referring to Bosnia and the Muslims. Muslims were one of the six narodi, but their home republic, Bosnia, is also considered the home of the Serbs and Croats. By that point in history then, the Bosnian Muslims have achieved recognition by the State as a partial nation, recognized as an ethnicity but seen as occupants of a land to which they do not have a complete claim.

In classifying the Bosnian Muslims by their religion and watering down their connection to a place, it would seem as if the state were dissolving their identity. The Bosnian Muslims seemed to be a group without national, or even ethnic, identity. Compared to the national movements of the Croats and Serbs, the Muslims appeared to be a people bound only by religion. The Communists therefore treated the Muslims as a non-ethnic group whose only defining characteristic was the practice of a religion that was not even native to Bosnia. It is likely then, that the Communists believed that the Muslims could either be treated as another minority or included among the ranks of the nationalities that flanked them. They were wrong for two reasons. The Bosnian Muslims possessed an identity that not only connected them to Bosnia but separated them from the other Yugoslawan narodi. What the communists had also failed to understand was that they had already constructed a government based on national division. Each of the narodi possessed its own territory because it was perceived that each represented a different people and culture. Including the Muslims among the narodi would create the impression among Muslims that they, too, represented a different people and culture.

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28 Donia and Fine, Jr., *Bosnia & Hercegovina: A Tradition Betrayed* 125.
When the Muslims were included among the narodi, it was not because they were perceived as a nation or ethnicity in the sense of the other narodi. They were simply a recognizably separate group that represented a majority of Bosnia’s population. Serbs and Croats both claim the Bosnian Muslims as wayward members of their own nations. Religion however, is a paramount difference in Bosnia. The word that most closely represents nationality in Serbo-Croatian, nacija, actually refers to one’s religion, for religion and ethnicity are all but inseparable in Bosnia. This is because religion is largely hereditary in the sense that it is passed from parents to children and conversion is far less common than in the 15th century. Thus, despite whatever their ancestry might be, the Bosnian Muslims do not believe that their ethnicity belongs to the Serbs or the Croatians but is independent and separate. In attempting to accommodate this attitude, the Communist government discovered, through several censuses taken between 1948 and 1971, that the identity of the Bosnian Muslims existed in the same sense as the identity of the Serbs and Croats. Each census sought population numbers for the varied narodnosti living within the various republics. As the Yugoslavian government did not regard Muslims as a nationality, the 1948 census allowed them to describe themselves as Serb, Croat or “Muslim of Undeclared Nationality.” By 1961, the census allowed Muslims to describe themselves as “Muslimani u smislu narodnosti” or Muslims in the national/ethnic sense. By 1971 Muslim is listed in the Narod category. As the census definitions grow more declarative, more Muslims identify themselves as such. As no major immigration of Muslims took place, these censuses show that the state’s increasing acceptance of Muslim nationality allowed more Muslims to adopt the identity of ethnic Muslims.

Bosnia-Herzegovina sits, geographically and culturally, between Croatia and Serbia. Both republics possess strong national identities throughout the twentieth centuries and both ethnicities join the other national narodi in accompanying Muslims on the list of those that make up Yugoslavia. Bosnia, in other words, is literally surrounded by nationalism. It is not hard to imagine that Muslims will look to their fellow narodi as they seek to define themselves. A clear example of this is found in the insistence upon different languages for the different nations. The language of the former Yugoslavia, Serbo-Croatian, is, phonetically, a single language. The only noticeable difference is the use of the Cyrillic alphabet by the Serbs while the Croats and Bosniaks use Latin letters. The insistence by Serbs and Croats that they speak different languages is a clear assertion of their national identities. It is their belief that a key feature of a nation is language and they claim not only that their languages are distinct, but each also claims that theirs is the original tongue from which the variants descend. Following the breakup of Yugoslavia and the assertion by the Bosniaks of a national identity, nationalists began to proclaim theirs to be a separate language. Bosniak nationalist Alija Isakovic believed the Bosnian language to have developed with, rather than from, Serbo-Croatian. Finally, the breakup of Yugoslavia saw Bosniak Nationalists pursuing equal recognition for their language.

The Bosniak Nation
The capstone on the progress of the Bosnian Muslims toward nationhood seemed to come during the second All Bosniak Congress during September of 1993 in the midst of the siege of Sarajevo. The members voted to title themselves “Bosniaks” so as to associate themselves with the land that they and their ancestors had inhabited for five centuries. The name was also intended to disassociate the nation from the religion that had defined it throughout its history. It was the belief of the members that the Bosniak nation was more than just a religion. It represented a culture and a history that was tied to a place: Bosnia.

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30 ibid, 21.
31 ibid 27.
It is generally a sound assumption that nationality is an identity mostly separate from ethnicity, though many nations are centered around or include some form of ethnic identity. The definition of the Bosniak nation is generally tied to the ethnic identity of the Bosnian Muslims. The development and character of Bosniak nationalism has been closely tied to the circumstances that fostered and defined Bosniak ethnicity, namely state mandated ethnic pluralism. This process may be satisfactory in portraying the development of national identity, but it cannot completely address the process of Bosniak nationalism.

National identity need not be the dominant identity in an individual or group. A nation experiences nationalism when it synthesizes several or all relevant identities into a single, national identity. The rise of the Bosniak nation exemplifies this process. Bosnian Muslims have possessed several identities throughout their history and, as none had very much prominence over the other, we can identify distinct groups. Within the Ottoman Empire, Muslims would have been distinguished from Christians, but so also Bosnians would be distinguished from other Ottomans. The rule of the Christian Austro-Hungarian Empire sharpened the religious identities, but would also have highlighted the class based identities that were later addressed and perhaps further defined by Royal Yugoslavia. These identities, as well as those others that may be possessed by the Bosnian Muslims, grew and diminished in importance without any particular one becoming primary. It was only when national identity became the primary identity, by incorporating the other identities, that a nation emerged. It may be fair to claim that “Bosnian Muslim” is the title of the ethnicity while “Bosniak” is the name of the nation. “Bosnian Muslim” refers to the very specific people within Bosnia, separate from Serbs and Croats, that happen to be Muslim. This is a term of political necessity that has arisen from the various efforts of the state to deal with them. “Bosniak” however, is a term that deals with a group whose national identity has gained greater significance than all others. A Bosniak remains a Muslim, which may in fact be a necessary trait, but they would be more Bosniak than Muslim. Similarly, they would be more Bosniak than even Bosnian, as Bosnian Serbs and Croats generally cannot be assumed to be Bosniaks. If the ethnicity were simply the Bosnian Muslims, then that title would suffice, but as the national identity has incorporated and exceeded the prominence of region and religion, a new title must be used to define the nation. Hence the birth of the Bosniaks.

Even the establishment of a nation is not quite the same as the process of nationalism. Nations can exist without nationalism, though admittedly it is more likely that they are born out of the process. The definition of nationalism can be described, systematically, as action taken by a nation, in the name of the nation, that results in further definition of the group. For Ernest Gellner, this action would be the process or attempt to unify the state and the nation. But this need not necessarily be the action taken by the nation. In the case of the Bosniaks, the action seems to be the continuation of the process begun by the different states that contributed their development in the first place. This expansion on my earlier definition of nationalism is necessary in order to highlight what exactly takes place in the assertion of nationality. Nations are not asserting simply their nominal identity, but the specific tenants that compose it. The nation is seeking to distinguish itself from the other nationalities and is further defining itself in the process. The effort to define their distinction will thus result in their further distinction.

Conclusion

The Bosniak nation developed out of a history that saw cultures and governments working endlessly to define the people of Bosnia. In doing so, they created a social and cultural environment that necessitated difference. Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, Macedonians and Muslims all have a history of being ruled by external governments that exert equal power over all of them but administer different treatments. Even the communists, who pursued an equal treatment of all ethnicities and nationalities, managed only to reinforce those identities. The war that engulfed Bosnia in the 1990s was not the result of ancient ethnic rivalries but rather the final
rending of a people that had existed together for centuries while being told that they were irreconcilably different from one another.
Works Cited


