

Genocide and the Perception of History Crimean Tatars and Bosniaks seem to have little in common at first since they do not share any ethnic background or geographical location. However, both of these ethnic groups share the same religion and a similar experience of ethnic cleansing. Although the world witnessed the Bosnian genocide as it was happening in the 1990s, the ethnic cleansing of Crimean Tatars in 1944 by Stalin went unnoticed. Nevertheless, “the destruction of Crimean Tatar cultural heritage parallels the destruction of Muslim culture in Bosnia by Serbs and Croats in the 1990s”¹ as they were being eliminated from their native lands. Given that both of these groups share an Ottoman legacy that stood in sharp contrast with the Christian Orthodox history of their perpetrators, there was a tendency to eliminate many elements of culture such as mosques and manuscripts that proved the existence of Islamic presence in Bosnia and in Crimea. This process was inherently linked with the physical elimination of these ethnic groups. Therefore, the destruction of cultural heritage seems to have been an integral part of genocide and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Crimea. Most of the historians writing on these two cases argue that the destruction of culture was aimed at the creation of a sense that the two ethnic groups in question have never existed. One can even call this phenomenon ethnic erasure. Given that this process of ethnic erasure happened under the general realm of genocide and ethnic cleansing, it seems that genocide does not only represent an act of eliminating a group of people, but it also implies a systematic remodeling of history. In that sense, genocide is a process that goes beyond rewriting historical data (although it necessarily includes it), and aims at

Dragicevic 2 changing the general historical perception of both the oppressors and the targeted group through the destruction of cultural heritage. In examining the destruction of cultural heritage, one cannot avoid using the concept of ethnocide to analyze this particular type of atrocity. However, trying to argue that this form of destruction is a separate category would mean ignoring the concept of intent that constitutes genocide. In his book *The Crimean Tatars* Brian G. Williams argues that by removing Crimean Tatars from Crimea “the Kremlin was engaged in a more subtle policy now known as ethnocide, i.e. the eradication of an ethno-

national group’s communal identity, spirit, collective memory, language, customs and history (an objective that is, in its most extreme case, achieved by genocide).

”² While this definition accurately describes the destruction of cultural heritage, the problem with it lies in the lack of assessing the goals of ethnocide. Robert Bevan addresses the interplay between genocide and the destruction of ethnic cleansing in his article *Charged with genocide* in which he cites the ICTY judge Shahabuddeen who said that “The destruction of culture may serve evidentially to confirm an intent...to destroy a group as such.

”³ In that sense, the goal of destroying culture is to show intent to eliminate a people, a necessary component of genocide. One can, thus, conclude that ethnocide is not separate from genocide, particularly if it happens simultaneously with the physical removal of an ethnic group (as in the case of Bosnia) or after that process (as in the case of Crimea). Therefore, the destruction of cultural heritage is an important element of genocide, and not a separate category that can be explained with the term ethnocide. Furthermore, the implications of destroying culture within the framework of genocide show the power of eliminating heritage in reshaping history. In order to achieve this reshaping of history in the case of Crimean Tatars, it was

Dragicevic 3 necessary to establish the idea that they historically did not belong in Crimea. While the reason for their expulsion in 1944 was their alleged collective collaboration with Nazis and their consequent status as a “population deemed guilty of betraying the Soviet Motherland,

”⁴ the roots of Soviet animosity towards the Tatars of Crimea date further back and have a deeper historical background. Williams even writes that the charges for treason were “a pretext for ethnically cleansing (Stalin actually used the term *ochistit'*, ‘to cleanse’ in his orders) the Soviet Union’s borderlands of non-Slavic, predominantly Islamic, populations.

”⁵ Consequently, one can argue that it is no coincidence that the great majority of the people targeted for ethnic cleansing were Muslims (including the Tatars of Crimea) and that their very religious culture was one of the reasons for their expulsion. In addition, dating back to the years before the Bolshevik Revolution, “the Tatars were oppressed doubly as a hard working population and as eternal aliens (*inorodtsy*)”⁶ which shows their status as outsiders in the eyes of Soviet Slavs in Crimea. Although this quote is from a 1921 article arguing for Tatar autonomy as a way of their integration into Soviet society, it still shows their status as “aliens” compared “with the rest of Soviet Russia.

”⁷ What contributed to the perception of Crimean Tatars as cultural aliens was the fact that they were referred to as Crimean *Turks* by some members of the Turkish diaspora in Berlin. Williams writes that this

misidentification “did much harm to the Crimean Tatars in the fateful year of 1944 because of ‘Russia’s long history of distrust with the Turks’

”⁸, which further suggests that their cultural background added to the intent of ethnic cleansing.

Although there was no direct devastation of culture in the process of misidentifying Crimean Tatars, from this example it becomes evident that their cultural identity was used to establish the need for their removal. In that sense, their treatment as “aliens” or “outlanders” throughout history

Dragicevic 4 combined with their cultural affiliation with the Turks shows that the removal of the Crimean Tatars consequently meant the removal of an “alien” culture. It is this idea of historically “not belonging” that later influenced the need to remove the Crimean Tatars and the physical aspects of their culture, and eventually eliminate them from history as if they had never existed. Similar to Crimean Tatars, Bosniaks of Bosnia were also deemed outsiders in their native land. Although the popular belief among Serb nationalists was that Bosniaks were all “really” Islamicized Serbs (Croat nationalists on the other hand believed that they were all “really” Islamicized Croats), at the same time, “and in total illogical contradiction, Serbians insult Bosniaks as ‘Turks’, that is as outsiders with an alien culture.”⁹ The parallel here is even more interesting since in both the case of Crimea and Bosnia, the targeted population is seen as a Turkish, non-Slavic alien group. While it is true that the Crimean Tatars are a Turkic people strongly influenced by the Seljuk Turks who settled in the mostly Slavic Crimea in the 13th century¹⁰, the reality, however, is different in the case of Bosnia. Noel Malcolm writes that the vast majority of Bosnian Muslims are in fact Slavs, either previously Orthodox Christian or Catholic, who converted to Islam when the Turks conquered Bosnia in the 15th century. That needed to be removed in the 21st¹¹. Nevertheless, in both cases the culture of the group in the 21st century was seen as not belonging to the native Slavic land. Hence, the cultural identity of Bosniaks — reflected primarily in their religion — became the source of the need for their removal. The connection between the removal of culture and ethnic cleansing is important for understanding the rationale behind the destruction of cultural heritage. According to András Riedlmayer, “a Croat nationalist militiaman, interviewed in Mostar in September 1993, explained to a British reporter why

Dragicevic 5 he was trying to destroy the 427- year- old Ottoman bridge: ‘ It is not enough to clean Mostar of the Muslims,’ he said, ‘ t he relics must also be removed.’ ’

’¹² Therefore, a need was created to both remove the people as the bearers of a certain culture and certain objects as the embodiment of that same culture. These two processes became inherently linked as a result of the necessity to eliminate a cultural sentiment reflected in a historic monument that to the perpetrators symbolized the “alienness” of the targeted group. So on after the ideology of destroying culture was established, the actual destruction of religious object followed. In the case of Crimea, the Soviet regime took the approach of primarily eliminating minor bearers of Islamic culture. It is particularly interesting that “ small village mosques of less historic importance, local *medreses* [religious schools] and ancient marble fountains were destroyed throughout the Crimea ”¹³ without major damage to larger and more important objects. By focusing on the devastation of marks of the local Islamic culture and Crimean Tatars’ identity, it seems that the Soviet machinery was trying to cut the Crimean Tatar culture off from its roots, a process to which the destruction of cemeteries most vividly testifies. The local character of this kind of approach to destruction speaks to a sense of systematic extermination that starts at the very origins of the targeted group. The fact that most of these object had little historic importance, but that were certainly important for the local and personal history of the Crimean Tatar villagers suggests that the aim was to eliminate the individual notion of homeland for the Crimean Tatars. For most of the people who were expelled and survived ethnic cleansing, their personal history was related to their villages and their local community gathered around mosques or local monuments. Furthermore, the Crimean Tatars rightfully claimed that “by destroying such monuments one cannot prove that [their] culture ever existed.”¹⁴

Dragicevic 6 Therefore, once these cultural objects were eliminated, the individual memory of the survivors was deconstructed since the potential return of survivors and the sight of objects embodying personal and communal history missing would leave them with the feeling that their past, individual or shared, was never there. The ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks was also accompanied by the destruction of religious objects that symbolized a communal sense of history and the idea of historical presence. Considering that Islam was the key characteristic of differentiating Bosniaks from Serbs and Croats, religious identity became synonymous with historical identity. Andras Riedlmayer suggest that “in a context where ethnic identity is defined by the religious choices made by one’s ancestors, it is religious buildings — mosques, churches, monasteries— that serve as the most potent markers of a community’s presence”¹⁵ implying the strong relationship between religion, identification with the past and the sense of belonging. It is no surprise then that a Muslim man said that the burning of a 500-year old mosque in the town of Trebinje meant that his foundations were burned down, and that he was destroyed.¹⁶ Additionally, Riedlmayer also suggest that there were instances of razing Muslim graveyards in Bosnia, which also speaks to the intent of eliminating the landmarks of Bosniak historical presence reflected in the choice of their ancestors. The act of attacking the deceased, almost like a replica of the Crimean model, is another example of destroying the core foundation of a group’s both personal and cultural identity. In his book, Robert Bevan suggests that “we recognize our place in the world by an interaction with the built environment and remembering these experiences and by being informed of the experiences of others [resulting in] the creation of social identity located in time and place,”¹⁷ which shows the importance of our physical cultural environment for

Dragicevic 7 who we are as individuals and as members of a group. In that sense, the destruction of cultural heritage did not only imply the destruction of history, but it also implied the elimination of individual and group historic identity. Just like in the case of Crimea, through the destruction of all of these objects of significance the very roots of cultural identity were cut to distort the mental perception of historical belonging. Aside from being aimed at the mental distortion of history, the destruction of cultural objects often symbolized the remodeling of historical landscape that symbolized the presence of culture. While it is true that in the process of ethnically cleansing the Crimean Tatars the Soviet regime focused mainly on destroying smaller mosques and villa monuments, Williams writes about an interesting exception. He states that "the only major mosque destroyed during the exile period was the Ottoman-style mosque which dominated the skyline of the coastal city of Gurzuf,"¹⁸ which suggests the visual impact that the mosque had on the overall landscape. It seems as if this particular mosque was targeted because it was so dominant in the perception of the town's visual identity. Therefore, by destroying such an object of historical and cultural importance, the Soviet regime reshaped the visual history of the town marked by the presence of the Gurzuf mosque. Consequently, the Slavs in Gurzuf would never have to be reminded that Islam or Muslims ever existed in their town. A similar phenomenon was noted in the case of the Bosnian genocide, given that many mosques dominating skylines of Bosnian towns suffered complete devastation. Nevertheless, as opposed to only one major mosque destroyed in Crimea, the process of attacking Bosniak cultural heritage left almost all of the major mosques in what is now the Republic of Srpska completely destroyed. The two major mosques that suffered complete

Dragicevic 8 destruction on today's RS territory are the Ferhadija mosque in the town of Banja Luka and the Aladža mosque in the town of Foca.

a. Just like the Gurzuf mosque, these two religious objects were an essential part of Banja Luka's and Foca's visual and historic identity, which means that their destruction implied the creation of a new visual identity marked by the absence of Islamic culture and history. In addition, "most of [Sarajevo's] historic mosques were damaged; minarets were a favourite target and were repeatedly bombarded until they were toppled or reduced to stumps" ¹⁹ to ensure that any physical marks of Islamic culture dominating the city were eliminated. Sarajevo was not the only example of the attempt to distort the visual perception of history.

When writing about the town of Stolac where Croat nationalists destroyed almost the entire cultural heritage of the town, Riedlmayer states that "the continued presence of the mosques and of the slim spires of their minarets were visible signs of [the Muslim] community and of its history in that town."

²⁰ In that sense, it was not only enough to eliminate the mental sense of past and belonging which was done through the destruction of smaller monuments, cemeteries and fountains, but it was also important to remodel the physical perception of history by destroying major cultural objects and clearly visible symbols or cultural identity. While many writers suggest that

this destruction sent a message to Bosniaks that they no longer belonged in these places, it seems as if the goal was also to create a sense among the population that remained that Islam and Muslims never existed in their community. Therefore, the population that was being directly affected by this destruction was the population that stayed as much as the one expelled.

Aside from destroying monuments and religious objects, the perpetrators of ethnic cleansing in both Crimea and Bosnia engaged in a mission of actually redefining historical

Dragicevic 9 data. This process was performed in two phases. The first phase included the burning of books, manuscripts and records containing historically relevant accounts testifying to the existence of the targeted people and their culture, which Riedlmayer suggests is necessary for inventing the new past.²¹ In the second phase, the destroyed history was replaced by a new one that was aimed at either completely deleting the ethnic group in question from history or redefining their role in the past. Almost everything related to the Crimean Tatars in written form was burned after the Soviets expelled most of the people belonging to this group from Crimea. In an "Open Letter from the Russian friends of Crimean Tatars" it was revealed that during the 1944 ethnic cleansing "everything written and printed in Crimean Tatar was burnt - from ancient manuscripts to the classics of Marxism - Leninism inclusive."²² This type of destruction could have only been motivated by the idea to deny the existence of the Crimean Tatar language and any form of the Crimean Tatar contribution to human cultural expression. In addition, "the Communist authorities also destroyed books by Russian and foreign historians and literary authors about Crimea" attempting to literary eradicate the Crimean Tatars from history. Therefore, it is the combination of destroying the written language and historical accounts about Crimean Tatars that shows the intent to eliminate the Crimean Tatars' presence in time, almost as if trying to make them an abstract phenomenon. This was an act of the cruelest rape of history because it was driven by the idea that one ethnic group needs to be perceived as never having existed in civilization. The burning of history reflected in the destruction of books and manuscripts was also an essential part of the ethnic cleansing process in Bosnia. The 1992 burning of Bosnian's National and University Library in Sarajevo is considered the largest book - burning in

which shows the scope of the destruction that took place when millions of valuable volume Dragicevic
s disappeared forever in flames. One of the volunteers who helped save some of the books s
aid that they “ managed to save just a few very precious books. Everything el
se burnt down. And a lot of [Bosnia’s] heritage, national history lay down there in a
shes.”²⁵ What distinguishes this example from the book -
burning in Crimea is the issue of national identity that lies behind the destruction of Bosnia’s
National and University Library. The heritage stored there was that of entire Bosnia and al
l of its peoples, Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs. Given that the Serb nationalists were fighting ag
ainst the idea of a unified Bosnia, the attack on the library meant the attack on the hist
ory of Bosnia as defined by culturally one national unit and all of its ethnic groups combine
d. Therefore, the destruction of the National and University library shows the intent of elimi
nating the history of coexistence. On the other hand, the burning dow
n of the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo was aimed at specifically eliminating the Islamic prese
nce in Bosnia’s history. The Serb nationalists caused the deliberate burning of over 200,000
invaluable documents and manuscripts in Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Tur
kish and Bosnian in Arabic scrip t
s²⁶ in a successful attempt to destroy historical evidence of Islamic influence on Bosnia’s cul
ture. It seems as if these anti -
civilization acts were aimed at creating an identity crisis for Bosniaks. If their history was b
eing deleted, how will they justify their presence in Bosnia? If their past was being killed, w
hat will become of them? In many ways, these acts constituted systematic cleansing of histo
ry that was only an introduction to the physical elimination of Bosnian Muslims. Not only
did this carnage of historical documents pave the way for actual ethnic cleansing, but it also
left the history pages blank and open to new and invented history that was to replace the o
ne that was destroyed.

Dragicevic 11 The invention of a new past was, thus, the next step in the factual reshaping of history that took place in Bosnia and Crimea. This process has left serious consequences on the awareness of history for both the perpetrators and the targeted group. In both cases the new history was supposed to fit the nationalist ideology that motivated ethnic cleansing. In the new history of Crimea, the Tatars were either ignored or made to look like traitors. Fisher writes about a work entitled "The Bolshevik Party in the struggle against Tatar Bourgeois Nationalists" in which the period from the eleventh century to the nineteenth century was completely ignored.²⁷ Nekrich found that "it was [also] important to write 'a new history' of Crimea and literature about it [in which] Tatars are traitors, disloyal, bandits, and, in the final analysis, not a full-fledged ethnic group"²⁸ as if to justify their expulsion if anyone ever dared to ask where did that people disappear. It was all part of a systematic process in which "one position was to root out of the people's consciousness the history of Crimea, which was indissolubly bound to Crimean Tatars, and to defame the people"²⁹ in an attempt to change the perpetrators' psychological perception of the Tatars' historical presence. It is as if they were trying to justify their actions and lie to themselves through a machinery of historical deception. Therefore, it was not only enough to distort the Tatars' role in history, but it was also important to convince everyone else (including themselves) of the lie that the Crimean Tatars either never existed or were not historically relevant. Similarly, Bevan suggests that in the case of Bosnia the "history [was] being rewritten; a new future and a new past were being invented in the service of a Greater Serbia and a Greater Croatia,"³⁰ which speaks to the use of history for promoting nationalist ideals and paving the way for ethnic cleansing. By making this new history serve nationalist ideologies, historical consciousness became an element of every individual's sense of

Dragicevic 12 national belonging. This element was then transformed into an instrument subordinated to a greater nationalist cause. Under the realm of this process of transformation, it was then easy for everyone belonging to the perpetrators' group to justify ethnic cleansing as a necessary component of the greater historical remodeling. In examining the cultural destruction in Crimea and Bosnia, one can see how multilayered the process of ethnic cleansing is since it is often motivated by not just the desire to eliminate a people, but is also often driven by the desire to eliminate a people's culture. In that sense, ethnic cleansing becomes a project of brutally playing with history in order to cement nationalist ideology in both time and place not just through the removal of an entire population, but by also eliminating the traces of their existence. The most concerning part about this horrific phenomenon is the implication that it leaves on the future. Given that the return of the Crimean Tatars to Crimea in 1991 was marked by the destruction of newly rebuilt mosques in Bosnia was met with a lot of hostility,³¹ and that rebuilding mosques after the war in ³² one can argue that the destruction of cultural heritage is an ongoing process. It seems that the legacy of that destruction is the protection of a newly formed history and its constant maintenance through the denial of the right to rebuild. In a way, the sites of destruction ironically become monuments to ethnic cleansing and the new history that was established through genocide. Therefore, the destruction of cultural heritage in genocide shows how distorted history creates a distorted perception of the reality of ethnic cleansing in the future. The awareness of history and culture was, thus, reconfigured by the destruction and ethnic cleansing to the point where the newly formed historical consciousness has to be protected with more violence.

Notes: 1

Dragicevic 13

²³⁴⁵⁶⁷⁸⁹ William
s 403 Williams 40
2 *Charged with gen
ocide* 4 Williams 38
2 Ibid., 386 Ibid.
~~, 382 Ibid., 362 I
bid., 383 Bevan 3~~
3 ¹⁰ Fisher 2 ¹¹ Malco
lm 53 ¹²¹³ Williams 4
04 ¹⁴ Fisher 172 ¹⁵ *Fr
om the Ashes*
... 10 ¹⁶ Ibid ¹⁷ Beva
n 15 ¹⁸ Williams 40
4 ¹⁹ Bevan 38 ²⁰²¹ *Fro
m the Ashes...* 14²² Fi
sher 172 ²³ Allwort
h 192²⁴ *Crimes of Wa
r...* 110²⁵ Ibid., 11
2 ²⁶ Ibid ²⁷ Fisher 17
2 ²⁸ Nekrich 192 ²⁹ I
bid., 208 ³⁰ Bevan 4
7 ³¹ Allworth 22³² Bev
an 175

*From the Ashes: The Past and Future of Bosnia's Cultural He
ritage* 13

*Crimes of War, Crimes of Peace: Destruction of Libraries duri
ng and after the Balkan Wars of the 1990s* 118

Bevan, Robert. "Charged with genocide." *The Australian Financial Review* 11 12 2009: 1-4. Bevan, Robert

. *The Destruction of Memory*. London: Reaktion Books, 2006. Fisher, Alan. *The Crimean Tatars*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1978. Nekrich, M. Aleksandr. *The Punished Peoples: The deportation and fate of Soviet minorities at the end of the Second World War*. New York: Norton & Company, INC, 1978. Riedlmayer, Andras. "Crimes of War, Crimes of Peace: Destruction of Libraries during and after the Balkan Wars of the 1990s." *Library Trends* 2007: 107-

132. Williams, G. Brian. The Crimean Tatars: The Diaspora Experience and the Forging of a Nation

. *Brill's Inner Asian Library*. Leiden: Brill, 2001. Riedlmayer, Andras. "From the Ashes: The Past and the Future of Bosnia's Cultural Heritage." *Islam and Bosnia: Conflict Resolution and Foreign Policy in Multi - Ethnic States*. Ed. Maya Shatzmiller (Montreal: McGill - Queens University Press, 2002), pp. 98-

135. Malcolm, Noel. *Bosnia: A Short History*. New York: New York University Press, 1996. Allworth, Edward A., ed. *The Tatars of Crimea: Return to the Homeland*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998

Dragicevic 14

Works cited:
