

Sarajevo and L.A.: A Tale of Two Cities

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(NLNS)--The cities of Sarajevo and Los Angeles are about 8,000 miles apart, but they share a lot in common.

They were both sites for the 1984 Olympic Games -- pageants of "peace and brotherhood" in cities of striking ethnic diversity. But eight years later, parts of both cities were simultaneously aflame, Army troops patrolled their streets, and ethnic groups battles with guns.

What happened? That question can't be answered with a look only at those eight years, without a look at the setting of the crises in both cities, and the ethnic groups that carry centuries of history with them.

Sarajevo

Sarajevo--the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina--is a mosaic of Muslim Slavs, Catholic Croats, Eastern Orthodox Serbs, and Jews. Their differences would seem to be insurmountable, given their deep historic roots in the Great Christian Schism, the Ottoman Turkish occupation, and the two world wars. Yet until recently, Sarajevo was known as an oasis of diversity, where inter-ethnic marriages were not uncommon, and different ethnic groups worked side by side.

However, Sarajevo was in Yugoslavia, whose identity was centered on the Serbs since the country was founded after World War I. Resentment against this control fuelled the Croat Ustasha Nazis who committed genocidal acts against Serbs in World War II.

In the 1950s, Communist leader Josip Broz Tito made Yugoslav unity his top priority and--in an undemocratic way--spread political and economic power more equally among the republics. But Serbs continued to dominate the Army, and Serbian nationalist sentiment remained strong in the countryside. We may be poor, the idea went, but we're Serbs.

Los Angeles

Los Angeles is similarly a mosaic of European Americans, Latinos, African Americans, Asians, and Native Americans. Their conflicts date from the days of slavery, from the U.S. annexation of Mexican and Native lands, and from the different waves of immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and the rest of the United States, each given their own place in the pecking order.

While there has been less inter-ethnic contact than in Sarajevo, in recent years L.A. has been seen as a sort of multicultural Mecca, where Americans could glimpse their future.

However, Los Angeles is in the United States, a country where one racial group has predominated since the late 17th century. After English and Irish indentured servants joined with African slaves in uprisings against plantation owners, the owners freed the servants, and gave them relative privileges to win their loyalty against the Africans. Europeans of all classes were then grouped as "whites" for the first time. We may be poor, the idea went, but at least we're white.

This system of white racial solidarity survived civil war and reconstruction, and was most strongly challenged by the civil rights movement founded in the 1950s by African Americans, but followed by other groups. Despite some meaningful victories, most centers of power--such as some police departments--remained under white control.

The backlash in Yugoslavia

In both Sarajevo and L.A., some progress had been made by the 1980s, but it was threatened by economic troubles and the emergence of new national leaders. Ethnic tensions in the former Yugoslav (and Soviet) republics are often presumed to have always been boiling under the surface, with state repression keeping the lid on until the collapse of Communism. But a more complete picture shows the new republican leaders stoking prejudice into a full-blown hatred--playing the ethnic card in order to cling onto power during hard times. The leaders want war, even if the people don't.

Tito died in 1980, and the resulting power vacuum was largely filled by republican governments. While he had kept power through national unity, they claimed power through national disunity. Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic and Croatian President Franjo Tudjman skillfully played the game of divide-and-conquer during the economic downturn of the early '90s. Their TV stations broadcast hate propaganda against the rival republic, and the "hooligans" in rival ethnic movements.

Turning public anger away from a domestic elite and toward a foreign enemy is a skill used by leaders from World War I to the Falklands, but this time it was used against ethnic groups next door. Serbians and Croats who had never been nationalistic backed their armies against secessionists, and the armies were sent into newly independent Bosnia. TV war coverage highlighted the atrocities committed by the other side.

The backlash in the U.S.

The 1980 election of a Republican administration in the United States similarly brought racial tensions into full view.

The verbal assault by presidents Reagan and Bush against so-called welfare queens, racial quotas, and Willie Hortons represented a turning back of the civil rights movement. TV and Hollywood showed even stronger images of African Americans and Latinos as gang members, and focused almost exclusively on the white victims of black "criminals."

The logical result was the police beating of Rodney King, the acquittal of the police, and the violence that followed. Though the violence had the marks of both a spontaneous riot and a political uprising, TV images emphasized looting and the beating by blacks of a white truck driver.

Who was really at war in Sarajevo?

However, the violence in Sarajevo and L.A. cannot be easily dismissed as a conflict between ethnic populations. The New York Times reports that Bosnian civilians still have a "striking lack of animosity" toward civilians in other ethnic groups, even as they are being shelled by a rival ethnic army. Serb civilians are victims of Serbian shelling, and some serve in the Bosnian army. Serbs, Croats, and Muslims alike express dismay at the war, given the relative tolerance that preceded it, and most oppose an ethnic territorial partition of Bosnia.

In the Yugoslav capital of Belgrade, tens of thousands of Serbians have demonstrated for peace, and groups of soldiers' mothers have urged the government to bring their sons home. A few brave Serbians are even backing ethnic Albanian autonomy in Serbia. A good number of Serbs oppose Serbian expansion, knowing full well that dominating other peoples does not ultimately bring economic security.

Who was really at war in L.A.?

Similarly, the events in Los Angeles can't be seen simply as a race riot.

From the first minutes of the rebellion, it was clear that many Latinos, and some whites and Asians, were participating. They didn't simply take part in the looting, but expressed their outrage at the jury verdict and the pervasiveness of urban poverty. A multiracial crowd besieged police headquarters on April 29, overturning squad cars and fighting police. (It shows the weakness of our political culture that the crowd didn't stay at Parker center to force changes,

in the style of Tiananmen Square in 1989 or Moscow's Parliament building in 1991.)

Photos of handcuffed arrestees and curfew violators show that not only African Americans were involved in L.A.

In San Francisco, whites were the largest group in a series of militant demonstrations (one of which was banned under a state on emergency--a ban that did not happen even in wartime Belgrade). A good number of whites in California began to look up the social scale, rather than down, to find the source of their problems. A study could probably prove that what happened in California was the most multiracial civil unrest in this country since the late 17th century.

Ending artificial hatreds

The lessons of Sarajevo and L.A. are only now emerging. Such conflicts don't come out of disagreements over skin color, cultural norms, or religious doctrine, but out of the uneven spread of economic development and political power. There are some Yugoslav Serbs and U.S. whites who can play a key role in breaking these vicious historical circles.

Prejudice is always simmering somewhere, but violent conflicts rarely originate from people simply not liking each other. We are not floating around the universe, accidentally bumping into one another. The violence at its core is an exercise of power by a dominant group--through a Yugoslav Army or LAPD--which is met with resistance by other groups. Racial, ethnic, and religious hatreds are not innate human traits. They have to be taught, sustained, and kept in reserve to be used at the most opportune and divisive times.

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