

The school in Bosnia and Herzegovina after the wars in the Balkans. Processes of conflict and peace in education

La scuola in Bosnia Erzegovina dopo le guerre nei Balcani. Processi di conflittualità e di pace in ambito educativo

Luca Bravi
Research Fellow
University of Florence

Abstract

The Dayton Accords (1995) officially marked the end of wars in the Balkans, but the situation of political fragmentation and ethnic hatred resulting from the conflict continued to be present in the social context. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, school policy is a result of hatred that flared up in the years of conflict. Bosnia and Herzegovina was a multicultural territory before the war, in which Muslim, Serbian and Croatian communities coexisted peacefully. Since 1995, Bosnia represents a case of pacification accomplished through the international diplomacy, but which has materialized in a division of internal borders. *Two schools under one roof* is the title of a project that was conceived in the post-war period, in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This model provides the separation of students on an ethnic and religious basis: different programs are adopted in the various classes, depending on the *enclave* to which they belong to; in this context of growing conflict expressed in educational policies, attempts to meet and dialogue are built by students and civil population.

Keywords: social history of education, Bosnia and Herzegovina, two schools under one roof, ethnic school, peace project.

Sommario

Gli Accordi di Dayton del 1995 segnano ufficialmente la fine delle guerre nei Balcani, ma la situazione di frammentazione politica e di odio etnico conseguente al conflitto continua a essere presente nel contesto sociale in quei territori. In Bosnia-Erzegovina l'attuale politica scolastica porta i segni dell'odio divampato negli anni del conflitto. Questo territorio era una zona multiculturale, in cui convivevano pacificamente comunità musulmane, serbe e croate. Dal 1995 la Bosnia Erzegovina rappresenta un caso di pacificazione realizzato attraverso la diplomazia internazionale, ma che si è concretizzato in una divisione dei confini interni. *Due scuole sotto lo stesso tetto* è il titolo di un progetto che è nato nel dopoguerra, nella Federazione di Bosnia ed Erzegovina. Questo modello prevede la separazione degli studenti su base etnica e religiosa: nelle classi sono adottati programmi differenti, a seconda dell'enclave di appartenenza. In questo contesto di crescente conflittualità espressa nelle politiche educative, si stanno costruendo tentativi di incontro e dialogo, spinti in particolare dagli studenti.

Parole chiave: storia sociale dell'educazione, Bosnia Erzegovina, due scuole sotto un tetto, scuola etnica, progetti di pace.

1. At the end of the Second World War

Since the end of the Second World War, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, under the command of Marshal Josip Tito, consisted of six republics formally recognized in a federation: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia; there were two autonomous provinces in addition: Kosovo and Vojvodina. Bosnia and Herzegovina had a marked specificity compared to the other Yugoslav republics: it was absent a clear ethnic-national majority and it was composed of three main groups that were numerically similar: the Bosnian Serbs, the Bosnian Croats, and the Bosniaks. The three groups differed especially in terms of religion: Orthodox Christianity for Bosnian Serbs, Catholicism for Bosnian Croats, and Islam for Bosniaks.

In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina and before the wars in the Balkans, the three groups were symbols of cohabitation, peace and coexistence in a common territorial space. Tito's death, on May 4, 1980, can be pointed out as the moment in which the autonomist and nationalist pressures exploded in a more organized way within the different federated states. No longer the message of *Brotherhood and Unity* that had been advocated by Tito but a new nationalist discourse expressed by Slobodan Milošević, president of Serbia, and Franjo Tuđman, president of Croatia, from the beginning of the 1990s. Ethnic distinctions became elements to build a public claim of ethnic dominance and to inflame the crowds through the instrumentalization of historical discourses. In 1991, the censuses that followed in all the States of Yugoslavia marked the beginning of the territorial divisions, the starting of the war, and the end of the experience of the federation. Between 1991 and 1995, the conflict extended to all the federated nations to achieve autonomy and to affirm governments based on the greater numerical presence of ethnic groups. In 1995, Dayton Accords marked the official end of the conflict, but didn't erase entrenched hatred between the various groups. The educational processes that were developed after those international agreements in the Balkan area were deeply affected by the ethnic conflict that remained present in the population involved in the war. For this reason, Bosnia and Herzegovina represents a case study to be described and observed: after 1995, the school and the educational paths have often preserved ethnic differentiation. It was a specific government choice. Schools born in that area are still based on differentiated programs on ethnic and religious affiliation. Individual or community peace processes are built from *below*, by students and civilian population who seek to overcome the era of nationalist conflict through messages of brotherhood that find their roots in the educational context.

2. At school in Yugoslavia

In the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1992), school system reflected the presence of different communities coexisting on the same federal territory. Compulsory education was provided from the age of 7 to 14. During this period, students were in elementary school. The study subjects were the same for all six republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro) with specific exceptions for Slovenia, Macedonia and the area of Kosovo where Slovenian, Macedonian and Albanian were permitted alongside the compulsory learning of Serbo-Croatian. Students in Bosnia and Herzegovina had to alternate the alphabets used in their area: one week writing Latin characters and the next with Cyrillic ones. Instead, physics, mathematics and biology programs were identical for all; in literature, the study of poets and storytellers from all over Yugoslavia was compulsory, but it was also possible to choose some literature of local authors. Compulsory school was followed by high school, between the age 14-18. These institutes diversified between classical studies and training courses with more specialized programs in economy and commerce, in medicine, in technical or industrial fields. At the end of high school, university was open to all people and study plan had an average duration of four years, with the exception of Medicine which required at least five years. There were four university centers in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Mostar and Tuzla. There were faculties of literature, law, engineering, medicine and economics. These four universities were also places of training for many foreign students from countries characterized by extreme poverty (Di Mauro, 2019).

The dissolution of Yugoslavia led to a definitive collapse of school system for all the federal republics. Some practical examples allow us to understand how the sphere of

education played a decisive role in the subsequent construction and diffusion of nationalism in all its cultural forms: from the period of independence in Serbia, poems of Bosnian poets are no longer studied, in Croatia the Serbian poets have been set aside, in Slovenia only the Slovenian ones enter the anthologies. From the point of view of history, each State has begun a rewriting of the events of the Balkans linked to a precise selection with respect to *what to remember collectively and how to remember it*. The public monuments that are present in various areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina also testify it: within the borders with a Serb majority, the deeds of Serbian soldiers are told as national heroes; in areas with a Muslim majority, the massacres committed by those same Serbian soldiers are commemorated as extermination of innocent people. It is a result of a recent conflicting history: the same events narrated in a divergent way (Slack and Doyon, 2001).

It's not a surprise, because the development of divisive narratives between different factions that have experienced wars has often been repeated over the centuries. From an educational point of view, it is useful to ask ourselves how it is possible to introduce a critical look at the story narrated by each of the parties involved, with the aim of producing knowledge and mutual recognition as a common element.

3. Hate narratives

The processes of building collective memories have played a key role in the development of national school programs after 1995; the example of Bosnia and Herzegovina is paradigmatic from this point of view. It is useful to consider the narrative of the Second World War promoted by nationalist leaders in Balkans, to underline how public memory has been used to identify scapegoats to justify the subsequent violence enacted in the 1990s. From an international point of view, the period *after Auschwitz* was characterized by the commitment to ensure that extermination on racial and ethnic basis could no longer exist, but Balkan wars demonstrated the opposite. In this context, pedagogical-educational processes remain a tool that can generate brotherhood or ethnic hatred, if it is distorted to feed nationalism (Bravi, 2014). The rampant nationalism that was so violently built up in those lands underlined a link between the public narrative of Second World War and its use in nationalist propaganda in Balkan area in the 1990s; the personal story of Ratko Mladić is a paradigmatic example of this kind of *hate process*. Mladić was the general who headed Serbian army in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995; he was directly responsible for the Srebrenica massacre (July 1995) for which he was finally convicted of genocide. Between 1941 and 1945, Mladić's parents had been killed by the Croatian Ustashe, the local fascists under the orders of Ante Pavelić, when Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were a single independent State collaborating with the Nazi and fascist governments. Pavelić's goal was to create *a Croatia of Croats only*. Ustashe began a systematic physical elimination of Serbs, Gypsies and Jews through immediate executions or deportation to concentration camps such as Jasenovac, known today as the *Auschwitz of the East* (Lutuchy, 2006). No form of official apology has ever been expressed for these inter-ethnic massacres that took place in the Balkans during the Second World War by the Croatian government. Dormant desires for revenge ready to explode have left in the victims, as in the individual case of Mladić.

Yugoslavia born after the Second World War returned to live in peace in a single federation under the presidency of the communist Josip Tito, but from the 80s, in conjunction with a deep economic crisis, nationalism returned to influence the population. Leaders of different factions were able to fuel hatred also through a painful and instrumental remembrance of the past. In 1989, Slobodan Milošević became president of

Serbia, one of Yugoslavia's most populous and best-armed countries in Europe. He built a strong anti-Croatian and anti-Muslim propaganda: he publicly remembered the Serbian victims who fell under Croatian violence in Jasenovac concentration camp during the Second World War, while he used to bring back to national memory the *Battle of the Blackbirds* (or battle of Kosovo), fought and lost against Muslims who caused so many deaths (Arru, 2010). The nationalist propaganda built on these two events supported an image of Serbs as helpless victims, both of Croats and Muslims, and helped to build a public memory that sent out a clear message: if Serbs don't defend themselves, the other groups will try to exterminate them again. The goal was creating a *Serbia of Serbs only*, where any area where there was a Serbian enclave was considered territory to be annexed and liberated from other enclaves. This nationalist narrative was inserted in a general context characterized by declarations of independence progressively expressed by all the member states of the Yugoslav Federation; Slovenia and Croatia were the first to declare independence in 1991 and it had triggered the initial conflicts (Bennet, 1997).

Ethnic nationalism, particularly in multi-ethnic territories with numerically balanced majorities and minorities, always produces an explosive mixture that risks sliding towards war. The declaration of independence in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992) exploded the internal conflicts in the most violent way: Croats and Muslims declared they would preserve Bosnia as a multi-ethnic state, but Serbians did not participate either in the parliamentary process or in popular referendum, pending the intervention of President Milošević's army. In Milošević opinion, Bosnia and Herzegovina was a territory to be *liberated and cleaned* from the presence of Muslims and Croats: they were considered extraneous to the new project of a mono-ethnic Serbian state. Some concentration camps were born again to herd Bosnian Muslims, awaiting the physical elimination of the prisoners (Rumiz, 2013). Naturally, there were also numerous refugees who left their homes to try to take refuge abroad. International intervention under the flag of the United Nations was unable to offer adequate responses to defend those subjected to ethnic cleansing (Pirjvec, 2014); propaganda was very strong in that period: the physical elimination of Bosnian Muslims was justified through folk legends accusing Bosniaks of having killed hundreds of helpless Christian infants. It was the construction of a monstrous image which made elimination of enemies as a justifiable and useful practice. At that time, United Nations had intervened with the establishment of six protected areas in Bosnia inhabited by Muslims, all directly threatened by the Serbian army; Srebrenica was among those cities.

A direct witness talks about the events that took place from 11 July 1995, when Serbian soldiers (commanded by general Mladić) entered Srebrenica, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite the fact that it was among the areas protected by UN.

It was 1995, the military put the tape on the ground and I found myself there in front and behind remained my mother, my sister and my cousin. I was 13 years old. My mom called, «Come back with me» and I said no. I was afraid. We took water from the only fountain and the corpses piled up beside us, to make an impression on us, it seems normal to me. I heard the screams of the raped women and kept silent (Nuhanović, 2007, p. 228).

Many people who lived in Srebrenica or who had taken refuge in the city, mostly Muslims, fled towards Potocari area, at the entrance to the inhabited zone, where Blue Helmets compound was located, but a large part of population was abandoned under the direct control of Serbian army which killed more than eight thousand people in a few days (Nuhanović, 2007). Many of families who had victims in the genocide, they have not yet

been able to recover the remains of their loved ones, because they were buried in mass graves from which the bodies were repeatedly exhumed and the bones mixed. Those who had escaped into the woods of Srebrenica were recovered, taken to schools, tortured and shot. Many women were raped before being deported with their youngest children to the city of Tuzla (Selmanagic, 2018). Houses and properties of Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica were handed over to the rest of population. Srebrenica genocide represented the central symbol of ethnic hatred expressed in Balkan wars. The subsequent attempt at international peace, passed through Dayton agreements: they represented a crystallization of ethnic separation accepted and managed. After the war, school organization of Bosnia and Herzegovina was a concrete expression of this approach of separation and the *two schools under one roof* project is the most evident and worrying symbol of it.

4. School in Bosnia and Herzegovina after 1995

The current school system fully reflects the paradoxes of Bosnia and Herzegovina designed through the Dayton Accords. It is an educational organization more linked to the maintenance of divisions, rather than to attempt of a peaceful encounter between peoples. The goal of new school programs is to guarantee ethnic and religious specificities of the various territories. The war is over, but it has left a social disintegration that could not be underestimated: communities living together for a long time within the borders of Yugoslavia attending the same schools, after the war, they have to manage a very high level of conflict. The subdivision into independent states did not resolve rather exacerbated the fractures (Tolomelli, 2015).

Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to international agreements, was divided into two internal territorial entities and a common district: Republika Srpska (Republic of Serbia with a majority of Orthodox Serbs) with institutional headquarters in Banja Luka; Federacija Bosne i Hercegovine (Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina with the presence of Muslims and Catholic Croats) based in Sarajevo and the district of Brčko which is formally part of both previously mentioned areas, but under control of International Community (it has the same population distribution as the federation). The idea that this territorial division could correspond to a clear ethnic and religious subdivision represented only an illusion: in each territory various enclaves still coexist, with different percentages (Pasalic Kreso, 2008).

From this point of view, Bosnia and Herzegovina was a Yugoslavian area characterized by a mixture of different groups: Bosnian Muslims were 45-55% of the population, Serbs about 30%, Croats were about 20% and therefore no one had an overwhelming majority that allowed to impose themselves on the others. Even today, the proportions have remained similar: half of the inhabitants are made up of *Bosniaks*, slightly more 30% are Serbs (usually Bosnian Serbs Orthodox), about 17% are Croats (usually Catholic Bosnian Croats) (Marzo Magno, 2015). After the war and the ethnic cleansing/genocide, Bosnia and Herzegovina is subjected to a disruptive demographic decline: in 1991 the national census counted over 4 million inhabitants, the most recent data (2013) report 3 and a half million, but all those who own a house in that area and who actually work and live elsewhere are also counted as inhabitants (Aleotti, 2017). If demographic decline continues, in 2070 the population could be composed of only 1.5 million inhabitants, due to the collapse of the birth rate, but above all of mass emigration (SeCons, 2020).

5. Two schools under one roof

The educational model of the so-called *Two schools under one roof* was conceived in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina which is administratively organized in ten cantons, each canton has autonomy of choice about school system. It was designed after the Dayton agreements and provides that students are divided according to the group they belong to, following differentiated school programs that respond to their ethnic-religious identity. In the part of Serbian Republic of Bosnia Herzegovina, a single centralized school system is in force and it responds to the massive Serb majority by providing curricula in a mono-ethnic and nationalist manner, scarcely shared with the other communities present in the area (Tolomelli, 2015). The idea of *Two schools under one roof* was designed in the immediate post-war period as a temporary solution. It wanted to encourage people to return in Bosnia and Herzegovina because a lot of them were refugees and displaced due to the conflict. However, even today, decades after the end of the war, there are still more than thirty schools of this type in the central and southern part of the country (Kabil and Kunugi, 2009).

According to this model, Bosnian Muslim and Bosnian Croat students are separated into different classrooms, they follow different programs and they are sometimes divided by fences and forced to use different entrances. Teachers themselves are selected on ethnicity references. This model is applied to both elementary and high schools and it provides for differentiated scholastic programs according to the reference group (Lallo and Torresini, 2004). Each program conveys identity messages that polarize extremisms. In this context, religious aspect has become an integral part of curriculum and it has assumed a centrality that was unknown in the period of Yugoslavia: religious element has taken on a strong political value (Russo, 2000).

Over the last decade, some structured integration projects have started. The first was started in Brcko, where Bosnian and Serb students share the same desks and classrooms and where schoolbooks revision process has begun to obtain the same texts for all students. At the same time, Pedagogical Institute of Bosnia and Herzegovina based in Sarajevo is trying to create a climate of respect for all three main cultures present in the country spreading multicultural poetry and novels.

6. Processes of resistance to ethnicization in Bosnia

Attempts to respond to ethnic segregation in schools have been activated in areas that still have *Two schools under one roof*. Resistance is necessary because this project continues to be replicated in more recent years: in 2017/18, administration of Jajce (a town of Bosnia and Herzegovina) has inaugurated a secondary school reserved for Bosniaks; another school reserved for Croatians was already there to ensure *students' right to have lessons in their native language*. In 2018, some students of *two schools under one roof* have denounced the school segregation suffered at Jajce by promoting a single multicultural institute for all. Young movements are essential to accompany changes, considered that in 2014, Supreme Court of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina have argued that the *Two schools under one roof* model represents a form of ethnic segregation (OSCE, 2018).

Dijana Pejic is one of the young people who can tell about her experience of resistance to ethnic segregation: during the conflict, she started working as volunteers in a refugee camp in Serbian territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Later she founded the NGO Genesis. NGO's activities are based on spreading a culture of peace through reading and playing with children entertaining them through a traveling library or puppet shows. The

activities are especially aimed at children attending ethnic classes; some young students who protested in Jaice for existing ethnic schools are the same ones who attended Genesis activities when they were children. Each of these activities wants to teach dialogue with other people described as enemies also at school.

Sport has been another possibility of peace education in Bosnia and Herzegovina: FK Guber was a football club founded in 1924 in Srebrenica, by a Serbian and a Muslim who built a little stadium on their grounds. Until the outbreak of war, Guber has always been a multicultural club but Balkan war caused the players to conscript into their respective armies and become enemies. At the end of the war, some old Guber players of different nationalities met together and in 2004 they resumed the activity of the football team with the aim of building peace. For this reason, they have chosen to open a football school for young athletes in Srebrenica without looking at ethnicity.

In international memory Srebrenica remains the site of genocide, but Irvin Mujcic has chosen this city to create his project aimed at peace; for this reason, it is titled *Srebrenica, City of hope*.

Here in Srebrenica, time is divided between time of peace, (before the war) and time of war; in the end there is only the time of return. It has always been interesting to me that nobody refers to peacetime to indicate the present in Srebrenica. It seems that war continues to be fought on a different level. If young people and children don't come back, there is no future and Srebrenica will always remain only the city of genocide (Bravi, 2014, p. 86).

Irvin Mujcic was born in Srebrenica in 1987 and he left his home at the age of 5 due to the dangerous situation in his city. He travelled across Europe with his mother, sister and brother. His father remained in Srebrenica and he was one of the victims of genocide, although his remains have not yet been recovered. The members of Mujcic family were finally welcomed in Italy, as war refugees, in Val Camonica area.

In 2014, Irvin Mujcic decided to return to Srebrenica, abandoned by more than half of the population who lived there before the war: 37.000 lived there before 1992, today only 6.000 remain. His project has its roots in Irvin's autobiography: he is trying to transform a site remembered for a genocide into an opportunity for education at international level. His project involves the reconstruction of an ancient village in Srebrenica with the aim of making it a welcoming site for people and students who intend to visit a place of nature to discover its beauty and to learn about the population and its history. The village is built to have zero environmental impact, according to the dictates of sustainable tourism. It is a meeting place where you can talk with people who have survived or returned to Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the name of peace and brotherhood. The project is based on an educational reflection shared with hundreds of schools throughout Europe who arrive to visit the village and to meet people who live there. *Srebrenica lesson learned* are the symbolic words that emphasize the central message of the educational process: they are different from *never again* because Srebrenica genocide demonstrates a new genocide has been possible after Auschwitz. *Lesson learned* are words indicating that there is a real need to learn from history if we want to say *no more ethnic hatred* and *no more war* in our life; it is an invitation to be active in the choices of peace. *Srebrenica city of hope* represents the opportunity to re-elaborate and compare with the events of the past, without accepting that Srebrenica remains only the label of a mass death. This transformative process is rooted in the community relationships that the project has built with associations, institutions, individuals and that aim to bring life back to Srebrenica after having deeply understood the *lesson* it has left us. This project produces a constant

reflection on what happened in Bosnia, but it focuses on the life of those who have returned to live in the city, and it doesn't produce a sacralization of the victims of genocide. It makes Srebrenica the place where sharing the *lesson learned* of peace to be achieved in the present.

Bibliography

- Aleotti P. (2017), *Che cosa (non) resta della Bosnia Erzegovina*. In «Limes», n. 4, pp. 78-92.
- Arru A. (2010), *Un caso di uso politico della storia: la Battaglia della Piana dei Merli (1389)*. In «Acta historica et archaeologica mediaevalia», n. 30, pp. 93-118.
- Bennet C. (1997), *Yugoslavia's bloody collapse: causes, course and consequences*, New York, NYP, 1997.
- Bravi L. (2014), *Percorsi storico-educativi della memoria europea*, Milano, FrancoAngeli.
- Di Mauro M. (2019), *Scuola di ieri, scuola di oggi nella ex Jugoslavia (parte prima)*. In «Dirigere la scuola», n. 1, pp. 36-51.
- Kabil S. and Kunugi J. (2009), *Education in BiH*, Sarajevo, Unicef.
- Lallo A. and Torresini L. (2004), *Il tunnel di Sarajevo*, Portogruaro, Nuova dimensione.
- Lutuchy B.M. (2006), *Jasenovac and the Holocaust in Yugoslavia*, Jasenovac, Jasenovac Research Institute.
- Marzo Magno A. (2015), *La guerra dei dieci anni. Jugoslavia 1991-2001*, Milano, Il Saggiatore.
- Nuhanović H. (2007), *Under the UN flag: the International Community and Srebrenica Genocide*, Sarajevo, DES.
- OSCE (2018), *Two schools under one roof. The most visible example of discrimination in education in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Organization for security and co-operation in Europe.
- Pasalic Kreso A. (2008), *The war and post-war impact on the educational system of Bosnia and Herzegovina*. In «International Review of Education», n. 54, pp. 353-374.
- Pirjvec J. (2014), *Le guerre jugoslave 1991-1999*, Torino, Einaudi.
- Rumiz P. (2013), *Maschere per un massacro*, Milano, Feltrinelli.
- Russo J. (2000), *Religion and education in Bosnia: integration not segregation?*. In «Law Review», n. 3, pp. 945-966.
- SeCons (2020), *Population Situation Analysis in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, New York, United Nations Population Fund.
- Selmanagic E. (2018), *Genocidio e genocidio. Gli stupri di massa in Bosnia Erzegovina (1993-1995)*. In «Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile», n. 36, pp. 20-40.
- Slack A.J. and Doyon R.R. (2001), *Population, dynamics and susceptibility for ethnic conflict: the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina*. In «Journal of Peace Research», n. 38, pp. 139-161.
- Tolomelli A. (2015), *Two schools under one roof. The role of education in reconciliation process in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. In «Ricerche di pedagogia e didattica-Journal of Theories and Research in Education», n. 1, pp. 89-107.