

bosnia

The violent disintegration of Yugoslavia became the most vicious conflict in Europe since World War II. Militant ethnic nationalism led to a brutal war fought between the republics of Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia. Lasting from 1992 to 1995, the war in Bosnia was characterized by extreme violations of international humanitarian law. The siege warfare of ethnic cleansing inflicted upon its civilian population was both shocking and horrifying. An estimated fifteen thousand children were killed, many of them deliberately targeted.

During the war in Bosnia, children were systematically shot at by snipers, terrorized by relentless bombing and shelling, and forced to flee burning villages; many witnessed their parents or friends being killed, and often, in the case of young girls, were sexually abused. There were no “safe havens” for the children in Bosnia. Many suffered grave injuries, both physical and psychological. Boys and girls lost their childhood, saw too much, and endured too much anguish and pain. At the same time, many of Bosnia’s children displayed amazing resilience in the more than three years of war. Against all odds, they showed both strength and dignity when confronted with mortal danger.

Less than a hundred miles from Sarajevo, Mostar is a five-hundred-year-old city that sits in a narrow, mountainous valley. Bosnia’s third largest city, it is divided in half by the Neretva River, and its most famous landmark is the Stari Most or Old Bridge. Completed in 1566 in what was then part of the Ottoman Empire, the bridge was for hundreds of years a symbol of the unity between cultures in the former Yugoslavia. Bosnian Muslims, Croats, and, to a lesser degree, Serbs lived together in Mostar. There were also marriages between people of different ethnic groups. But the harmony and peace of this multi-ethnic city dramatically unraveled with the onset of the war.

Mostar first came under attack by the Serbian army after Bosnia declared independence from Yugoslavia. Serbian people fled the city as it became no

OPPOSITE: The famous Stari Most Bridge in Mostar, completed in 1566, withstood earthquakes, floods, and two world wars, only to be destroyed by Croatian artillery in the 1990s.



longer safe to live there. The Muslim and Croatian militias joined together and successfully defended their city against the Serb forces. Then Croatia declared war on Bosnia, and Mostar became a violently divided city as Croats and Muslims turned their guns on one another. As the children of Mostar looked on in alarm, neighbors they had known or lived with for years became their feared enemies. Families were forcibly evicted from their homes overnight. The Croats took control of the west side of the city and drove the Muslims into a ghetto on the east side of the Neretva River.

During the Croat-Muslim siege, Mostar endured eleven months of relentless bombardment that reduced the city center to ruins. The Stari Most Bridge, which had withstood earthquakes, floods, and two world wars, was destroyed by Croatian artillery. The destruction of the ancient bridge symbolically ended the centuries-old link between the two cultures in the former Yugoslavia and became a sad monument to the demise of tolerance in the Balkans.

It was against this dramatic backdrop that we commenced filming during the last year of the war in Bosnia. We arrived in Mostar during one of many ceasefires when all fighting was suspended for a week or two as mediation continued. These ceasefires inevitably ended, usually without any forewarning. People were busy stockpiling food provided by relief agencies, children were actually playing outside for the first time in months, and even young couples were getting married and driving through the streets. Everyone knew that this freedom would end, and the uncertainty of the future never really left the public consciousness. But at least for a time, people could move about the city in relative safety.







What we saw made a deep impression upon us. Every park, playground, and open space in Mostar had been turned into a makeshift graveyard. Many of the simple wooden grave markers were those of dead children. Gazing on grave markers dating from 1989 to 1994 was hard evidence of the war's toll. On block after block of the city, nothing remained but the skeletons of buildings standing among enormous mounds of rubble. Every inch of every wall of these destroyed buildings was splattered by shells and grenades.

In the Muslim ghetto of East Mostar, the buildings which people were living in were extensively damaged. Few had intact windows or doors. Gaping holes in the walls or roofs were covered with plastic sheets. There was no electricity or running water in this half of the city. A makeshift system of open spigots on the street had been set up for people to collect water. Children were the ones usually sent to do this. It was a very risky errand for they exposed themselves to shelling and snipers, and many children were wounded or killed while performing this simple task.

For most of the war, children lost their chance to play. They were forced to live for long periods of time in temporary underground bomb shelters or cellars, or they were kept inside by their parents for safety's sake. But with the ceasefire in place, there were kids everywhere on the streets: jumping rope, kicking soccer balls, climbing on the bombed-out mounds of rubble, or just running around. It was as if they were making up for three years of lost playtime.

In the midst of all this rubble was a little boy with a huge grin on his face, chasing a soccer ball. His name was Sanel. He was a twelve-year-old, blond, blue-eyed Muslim boy with a very outgoing personality.

He told us a little of his family's history. They were displaced, driven out of their home village of Gacko by the Serbian army or, as he referred to them, "the Chetniks." The family fled to Macedonia but were again driven out by the Serbs. Eventually they came to West

children in war

Mostar to live with a cousin but was once more forced to leave, this time by the Croatian militia or, as Sanel called them, “the Ustashas.” Sanel and his family finally ended up in East Mostar where they took a fully furnished, abandoned apartment that another family had fled. This was a common practice as approximately half of the city’s population was living in apartments or houses that weren’t originally their own.

Sanel was very good at concealing his war injury by tucking his sleeve into his trouser pocket. It wasn’t until we were talking with him for a few minutes that we realized he was missing an arm.

Interviewer: What would you say to children who don’t know what it’s like to live in war?

Sanel: I would like to tell children wherever they may be, God forbid that they have to live what we’ve gone through in Bosnia. God forbid that shells would fall near them all the time.

It’s very difficult to live in war. You just wait for the moment you will die.

One night we were waiting for Dad to come home from work. Mom was sitting between us and we had fallen asleep. Shells were constantly falling around the house. You didn’t even hear the shells fall.

My pajamas and pillow and bed were all bloody. My arm was hanging by a piece of skin and I came to the terrace and fell down. My mother took me in her arms and brought me to the medical center where they had to perform surgery immediately. But there was no electricity at that moment.

That is when my life was in limbo—would I live or would I die? And just at that time, the generator went on. My arm was full of shrapnel and they operated.

They couldn’t save my arm—the shrapnel had ripped apart all the bones and nerves. I stayed in the hospital for a long time—a month.

I felt very good. But when I awoke after they had given me an injection that put me to sleep to operate on me, I felt that my arm was in a cast. My mother told me that they cut off my arm and that I shouldn’t be upset. My mother sat next to me that entire night.

Interviewer: Is your arm OK now? [*Sanel’s arm was amputated just above his elbow.*]

OPPOSITE: *Sanel, age 12.*

PAZI
SNAJPER

