

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

## Bridges on the Drina

by Chandler Rosenberger

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Dear Peter,

**PALE, BOSNIA-HERCEGOVINA:** Before the fall of Yugoslavia, only one of the bridges on the Drina River held the soldiers of the Yugoslav Army under its spell. The stone bridge at Visegrad, built by the Ottomans, had been immortalized in Ivo Andric's novel The Bridge on the Drina as the symbol of the multi-national state the army had been charged to defend. An army commander in Kosovo picking through my possessions was thrilled to find I had a copy with me. He recommended that I read it.

Much of the border between Bosnia and Serbia runs along the Drina River. Ever since Serbia rose against Ottoman occupation in the middle of the last century, the river has stood as a challenge to Belgrade. If the Serbs crossed it, would they be able to take on the burden of maintaining Bosnia's delicate ethnic balance of Serbs, Croats and Muslims, or would a Serb government necessarily favor its cousins on the other bank? In describing the collapse of that balance under the pressure of Serb expansionism, Andric's novel calls on Serbs to preserve the local peace they find.



Ivo Andric on the 5,000 Yugoslav dinar note

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True believers in the old Yugoslavia believe Andric's novel portrays the multi-ethnic tolerance the state aspired to preserve. The fall of Yugoslavia is, metaphorically, the collapse of the bridge at Visegrad.

But there are other bridges on the river. When I crossed the Drina to enter Bosnia, I passed over a bridge of different character and different significance. The bridge at Zvornik, occupied by the Bosnian Serb army and until recently the main safe passage for its weapons, represents everything Andric feared -- a deadly tie between chauvanist Serbs and their mother nation. By the time I travelled to Bosnia, the peace of the bridge at Visegrad had long since been shattered by the violence of the bridge at Zvornik.

### **A bridge lost**

Visegrad lies directly east of the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo, in the heart of the eastern Bosnian region that was traditionally Muslim. At the opening of Andric's novel, the town is embedded in the Ottoman empire. It is the middle of the 16th century. The Grand Vizer, or chief administrator, of the empire, having been raised in a village near Visegrad, orders that bridge be built there.

Andric charts the rising and falling hopes of the town's ethnic groups as the town flourishes, then fades, along with the empire. At first, the bridge brings the trade through Visegrad. But as the Ottomans lose their lands in Hungary, the bridge takes on more strategic than commercial significance. Turks who had brought prosperity and ruled with a benign hand begin instead to oppress Serbs, whom they accuse of revolt. The Serbs, in turn, look to rebellion in Belgrade of a resurgent Serb kingdom for their salvation. Peace in Visegrad is preserved by a common enemy, the floods that sweep away their shops, and, indirectly, by faith in the bridge which survives every flood and becomes a symbol of hope and strength to both communities.

The ties the Serbs and Muslims find in a common natural threat is undermined, however, by a common political threat. When the Austro-Hungarian empire occupies Bosnia in 1878, the town's two communities react differently. To the Muslims, the "Schwabes" are merely another master, with whom it is better to get along than challenge. But the Serbs, especially students returning from Vienna and Zagreb full of 19th century infatuation with the nation-state, dream of uniting with their cousins in the Serb kingdom. When the "Schwabes" formally annex Bosnia to their empire 30 years later, the radical Serb students plot rebellion. Their terrorist group, the "Black Hand," assassinates the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne in Sarajevo. Austria retaliates and attacks Serbia.

World War I begins.

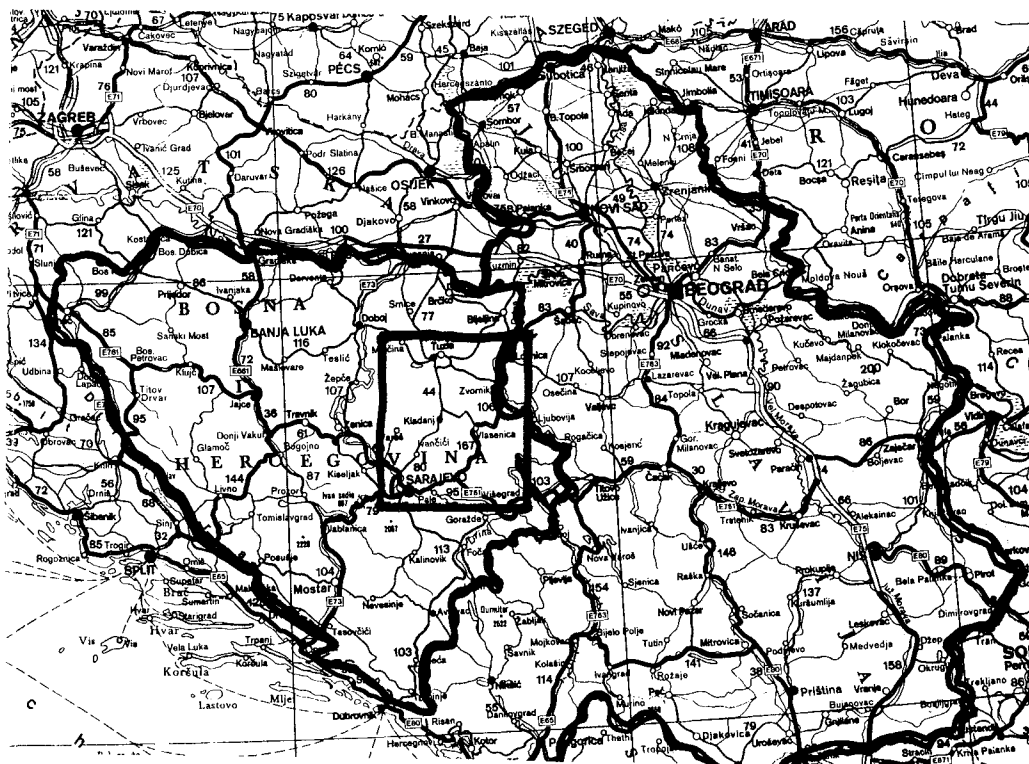
The last scenes of The Bridge on the Drina, which portray the fiery young Serbs, can easily be read as Andric's *mes culpa*. Andric was himself one of the young Serb nationalists of Bosnia portrayed so unsympathetically in the novel. Its tragic heroes are the local businessmen and women -- the quiet Serb trader, the Muslim shop-keeper, the Galician Jewess who runs the local hotel -- who have earned their humble stature in honest trade. Their modest wealth, wiped out this time by war rather than flood-waters, has been sacrificed, Andric makes clear, to the vanity of Serbs dreaming of national glory.

### **A bridge built**

The border between Bosnia and Serbia has opened and closed twice since the First World War. A multi-national Kingdom of Yugoslavia was established after the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed, then re-established as a Communist federation after World War Two. But with the death of Yugoslav president Josip Tito, Serb nationalism grew, triumphing in the 1990 election of Serb president Slobodan Milosevic.

Milosevic's election posed the leaders of the other Yugoslav republics with a threat. Milosevic had made his career in Serbia by shutting down the autonomous regions of the republic, such as Vojvodina and Kosovo. Could he be trusted to respect their rights? After a few months of negotiations, the leaders of Croatia and Slovenia decided he could not and declared independence. The war of 1991, during which Milosevic supported the Yugoslav Army against the new states, terrified the Muslim and Croat communities of Bosnia. In December 1991, they too opted for independence -- against the wishes of the republic's Serbs. Milosevic and his Bosnian Serb allies turned their attention to the question of the Drina river. Would it again form a state border between Bosnia and a Serb state, or merely a line through two halves of a "Greater Serbia?" Suddenly, it was the bridge at Zvornik, not the bridge at Visegrad, that mattered.

Supplies from the Yugoslav Army began to flow over the bridge at Zvornik to Bosnian Serb irregulars, who carried out the "ethnic cleansing" of Muslim communities that stood between the two Serb communities. The largest pocket of Muslims lay along or south of the Drina itself, around Visegrad, the town Andric had made famous, and villages, such as Srebrenica and Goradze, that newspapers and CNN have immortalized.



Yugoslavia and Bosnia-Hercegovina (area in box is area of detail presented on other map.) When I visited in May, leading Serbs on both sides of the Drina appeared to have begun to destroy the spirit of the new bridge. The Bosnian Serbs had just rejected a Milosevic's call to accept the Vance-Owen peace plan, which would have required that they join an independent Bosnian government. Instead, they said, their "Bosnian Serb Republic" would decide for itself with whom it would form a larger federation. Maybe Bosnia, maybe "Greater Serbia." Milosevic responded by saying he would cut off the supplies flowing over the bridge at Zvornik. But at this writing this he had not yet allowed U.N. officials to monitor the border. There's no way to know if the bridge at Zvornik didn't still holds sway in Belgrade.

### **A question of maps**

The collapse of the Ottoman empire and the Yugoslav state both sent Bosnians scurrying for their maps. Andric's novel describes what I saw for myself -- Bosnians pondering where the latest historical tide would leave them. Like the ebbing of Ottoman power, the collapse of Yugoslavia has left one of the two communities in Bosnia feeling stranded. In Andric's novel it had been the Muslims. Now it was the Serbs.

In Andric's novel, unease settles briefly on the Muslims of Visegrad in the middle of the 19th century, when the faltering administration in Istanbul first faced a serious Serb insurrection. The empire at first responds with brute force; guards

installed on the bridge behead an innocent *Pop* of the Serb Orthodox church and plant his bearded head on spikes erected on the bridge's *kapija*, or porch. But as the revolt dies out, the soldiers withdraw from the bridge, allowing the villagers to return to their evening habit of drinking coffee there. The Ottoman threat becomes merely a local curse -- "May your mother recognize your head on the *kapija*!" -- whose origins no one can remember.

"Thus the generations renewed themselves by the bridge," Andric writes, "and the bridge shook from itself, like dust, all which transient human events had left on it and remained, when all was over, unchanged and unchangeable."

Once the imperial borders themselves shifted, the threat to the Muslims of Visegrad became more pronounced. First, the Ottomans allow the Serb Prince Milos to take administrative control from Belgrade. Muslim men gather under the *kapija* to listen anxiously to a second-hand account of a visit from the prince's delegate charged with marking out the border.

When the delegate's men began to drive in stakes along the crest below Tetrelica, Micic came and pulled them up and threw them aside. The mad Vlach (may dogs eat his flesh!) flew at the delegate, shouted at him as if he were a subordinate and threatened him with death. That, he said, was not the frontier; the frontier . . . It now ran along the Lim down as far as the Visegrad bridge and thence down the Drina; thus all this land is part of Serbia. This, too, he said, is only for a certain time; later it will have to be advanced. The delgate had great trouble convincing him and then they fixed the frontier above Veletovo. And there it remains, at least for the present. (p. 95)

Relieved by their narrow escape from Serb government, the Muslims of Visegrad sink back into complacent evenings on the bridge. They are upbraided by a fugitive from the less fortunate town of Uzice. "You sit here at your ease and do not know what is happening behind Stanisevac," he shouts as he crosses the bridge. "Here we are fleeing into Turkish lands, but where are you to flee when, together with us, your turn will come?"

Today it is the Bosnian Serbs who feel uneasy, this time at the collapse of Yugoslavia. Their bridge, the bridge at Zvornik, would lull no one into complacency; it is a war memorial, a call to arms.

The Serb tri-color flies from all four corners of the bridge. It is not carved from stone; its wooden planks and steel braces were strung together, if not to last, then at least to be used. Once across, a driver is left staring at the facing hillside while border guards examine press credentials issued by the government's office in Belgrade. The hillside is covered with wooden crosses festooned with blue, red and white wreaths.

The border guards gave my translator strict instructions on the route we were to take to Pale, the headquarters of the Bosnian Serb government and our destination that evening. We were not to stop anywhere along the way except military checkpoints. The road, we were told, closed at 4 p.m.

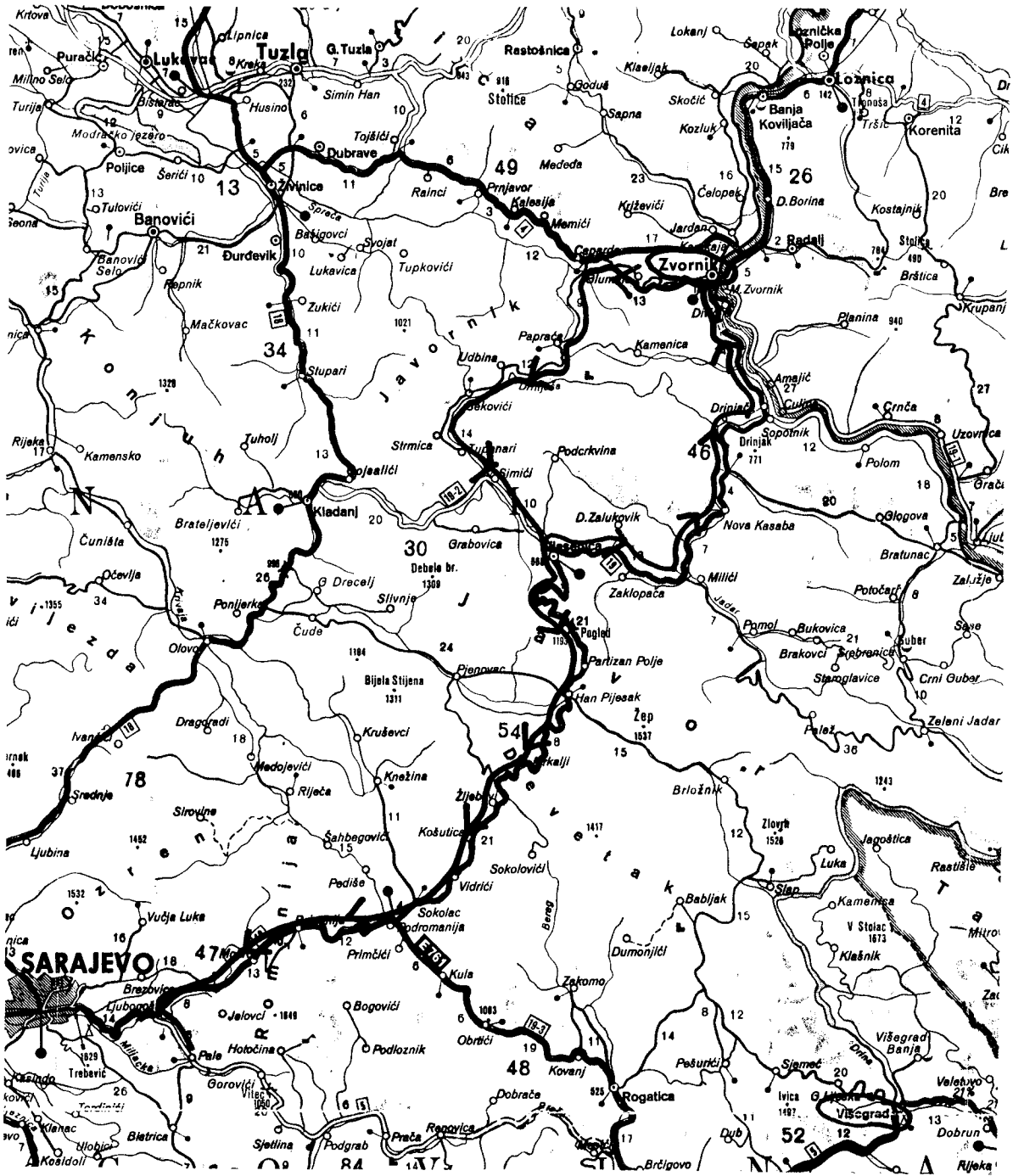
At our fourth checkpoint, outside the village of Papraca, the guards had a further request. Could we take an elderly man with us as far as Sekovici?

My translator opened the door for the tanned and silver-haired villager, who hopped on one foot before settling his right one, wrapped in blue plastic, into the car. As we drove, he twisted his wooden cane and told us his story.

In 1991, he said, he had looked forward to retiring and collecting his pension from the milk-bottling factory in the predominantly Muslim town of Tuzla, where he had worked for 30 years. But he had volunteered to fight the newly-independent Bosnian government, he said, once he had seen the Vance-Owen peace plan, which he referred to as "the maps." Since then he had lost, in addition to the use of a foot, his son-in-law and his home outside Tuzla, now a besieged Muslim town.

It was the fault of the maps, he said. "All this would be Muslim," he said as we drove along the winding sun-spottled road. When we pulled out above a valley, past stone mountains bearded with pines, he spoke up again -- "And this would be Serb" -- then sunk back into silence. Later, in Sekovici, "and this would be Muslim again. It's crazy -- how could we live this way?" We dropped him off near his summer cottage and wished him luck.

The Vance-Owen plan, proposed by westerners for the sake of the Bosnians, in



Bosnia east of Sarajevo, featuring Zvornik, Visegrad and route of travel.

some ways resembles the Austrian occupation of the region in 1878 as described in Andric's novel. Like the Bosnian Serbs of today, the Muslims of that time faced losing a multi-national government tilted heavily in their favor and risked being left cut off from their capital. Andric describes Turkish soldiers crossing the

bridge in Visegrad on their way from Sarajevo who mutter darkly that the Sultan plans to cede the region without a fight.

The looming annexation divides the region's Muslims, Andric writes, into insurgents and fatalists. Osman Effendi, a *mufti* from nearby Plevlje, pleads with the Visegrad Muslims to join the revolt. "The time has come to die," he announces to those gathered under the *kajma*. "We will die to the last man." Against the wishes of the Visegrad Turks, he seizes and promises to defend the bridge.

Tellingly, the Muslim charged with maintaining the Visegrad bridge leads the opposition to armed struggle. "If it is only a question of dying," Alihojda replies, "then we too know how to die, Effendi, even without your assistance. There is nothing easier than to die." Instead, he puts a case popular with his townspeople; impeding disaster looms but risking their tranquility to fight the inevitable is the worst way out.

That's not to say that Alihojda doesn't appreciate the disaster the occupation represents. He later reads a declaration from the Austro-Hungarian emperor posted on the *kajma* that promises the Bosnians the restoration of "the peace and prosperity that you have long lost" and is filled with dismay. The sudden redrawing of maps, he realizes, has destroyed the peaceful terms to which the Serbs, Muslims and Jews of the small town had come to on their own. "It seemed to him," Andric writes, "that

this bridge, which was the pride of the town and ever since its creation had been so closely linked with it, on which he had grown up and beside which he had spent his life, was now suddenly broken in the middle, right there at the *kajma*; that this white paper of a proclamation had cut it in half like a silent explosion and now there was a great abyss; that individual piers still stood to the left and the right of this break but there was no way across, for the bridge no longer linked the two banks and every man had to remain on that side where he happened to be at that moment." (p. 123)

Thirty years later, when occupation has turned to annexation, Alihojda is still unwilling to argue that the Muslims should join the Austrian *schutzkorps* in putting down the Serbs. And as the Muslims of Visegrad, against their custom, begin to read the newspapers from Sarajevo while drinking their coffee under the



*Kapla*, fatalism settles firmly upon them. "All this came from God," Andric writes, "and was, without a doubt, envisaged in the ordinances of God. . . (but) they felt as if the solid earth was being drawn irresistibly away from under their feet as if it were a carpet. . . frontiers which should have been firm and lasting had become fluid and shifting, moving away and lost in the distance like the capricious rivulets of spring." (p.230)

The Serbs I met in Bosnia were equally disturbed by the evaporation of Belgrade's power over their region. But, unlike the Muslims of Andric's novel, they had decided to fight.

I didn't pick up any armed hitch-hikers but did stop just north of Pale to offer a man dressed in unsoiled camouflage a ride. Like the Bosnian Muslims just before 1878, he feared his nation's capital had capitulated to the West. Milosevic had betrayed the Bosnian Serbs, he said, by pushing them to sign the Vance-Owen plan. The hitch-hiker promised, however, to vote against the plan in an upcoming referendum and fight Western forces should they attack to enforce it. "We will endure anything," he said. "We will go without oil, we will risk being bombed. But we will not be governed by Muslims."

At a press conference later that evening, Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadzic predicted (correctly) that his citizens would vote against accepting the Vance-Owen peace plan in the republic's upcoming referendum. "We are not ready to accept the maps," he said. "That is quite clear." Karadzic also predicted (again, correctly) that the Bosnian Serbs would vote in a second question to empower their government to choose with whom they should form a larger coalition. It need not, he said, be Belgrade. "We are keeping the door open to join the Muslims and Croats in a confederation," he said. "We don't want to ruin bridges to other communities."

### **National confrontation rather than local truces**

The Bosnian Serbs were willing to fight to re-draw national boundaries because they had no faith in local agreements with the Muslims. The pensioner I picked up said he had worked peacefully along-side Muslims in Tuzla but could not submit to a government run by the president of independent Bosnia, Alija Izetbegovic. "He's an Islamic fundamentalist," he said.

It wasn't always so, if Andric is to be believed. The citizens of Visegrad, Andric notes, were famous in eastern Bosnia for their dreamy tranquility, a quality that made both Serbs and Muslims living there poor cannon fodder for insurgents. The people of Visegrad, one Turkish militarist noted, would "rather live foolishly

than die foolishly." Tensions that arose were quickly soothed, Andric writes, by the healing power of the bridge and those who lived according to its example.

When troubles did arise between the nationalities, it was due to the ill deeds of scoundrels, Andric writes. The Turkish administrator who oversaw the laying of the bridge's first stones, for instance, presses the Christian Serbs into slave labor, not because he has orders to do so, but because he is pocketing their salaries. From the mid-nineteenth century on, the imported Turkish soldiers who put down Serb insurrections are sketched as coarsened, embittered and far more brutal than the local Muslims. "A few Turkish families had arrived in town whose property had been destroyed by the insurgents," Andric writes of the first Ottoman guard placed on the *kapija*. "They spread hatred and called for vengeance."

But peace among the Visegrad Serbs and Turks survives the trials of Ottoman cruelty. A great flood at the end of the seventeenth century brings the *mukhtars* (Muslim leaders) and *kmeti* (Christian elite) to the large ground-floor room of a merchant lucky enough to live high above the town. "Turks, Christians and Jews mingled together," Andric writes. "The force of the elements and the weight of common misfortune brought these men together and bridged, at least for one evening, the gulf the divided one faith from another." (p. 77) Even though the Serb *Pop* who ministers to drenched children that evening is later executed by the Turks, his son, also a *Pop*, carries on the tradition of solidarity with the Islamic Mula in misfortune. "On occasions of draught, flood, epidemic or other misfortune," Andric writes, "they found themselves together, each among men of their own faith." Their tie is commemorated by a local saying to describe good friends -- "They are as close," townspeople would say of a pair, "as the priest and the *kapija*." (p. 128)

The secret of the peace the two manage to preserve in times of natural disaster is revealed shortly before political disaster overwhelms them. Just before they meet the Austrian occupation force as two of the four appointed "leaders of the community," Andric recounts that the two often met on a hill overlooking the bridge. " 'All that breathes or creeps or speaks with human voice down there is either your or my responsibility,' " the priest would say to the *kapija*.

" 'It is so, neighbor,' Mula Ibrahim would stutter in reply, 'indeed they are.' "

Did the priest mean that the two religions were incompatible and that both acknowledged, in a quiet truce, that one of the two of them was right, the other wrong? Or did he mean, in the spirit of Micah 4, that the nations will one day

"beat their swords into plowshares" and every man shall sit "under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid" ? The text doesn't make clear whether the *Pop* is a proto-multi-culturalist or a benign bigot. But their examples prove that, if anyone is to manage religious differences, the work is best left to religious leaders.

The peace they have achieved together is lost under Austrian occupation, Andric writes, because the two communities responded to the new empire so differently. The Muslims of Visegrad were quick to accommodate the new order, however mournfully. The Serbs, on the other hand, swept up into German-speaking universities, quickly absorbed the nineteenth-century obsession, born by the writings of Hegel and Herder, with nation-states. The new ideology will not tolerate peaceful negotiations on a local level. The future, these students believe, is in the solidarity of nations -- even if against other nations.

Take his description of Janko Stikovic, son of a tailor but famous in Prague and Zagreb for nationalist articles penned under a pseudonym. Stikovic returns for a summer of evenings of rancorous discussion on the *Kapla*. One evening Stikovic assails an opponent, a socialist. Although dismissive of leftist Hegelians, he expounds belief in the sanctity organic Slavic nations -- a theme of another German thinker, Herder. "'Things do not come to pass according to the forecasts of German theoreticians,'" he argues, "'but advance in complete accord with the deep sense of our history and our racial destiny. From Karageorge's words: Let each kill his Turkish chief.'"

Or take Toma Galus, Stikovic's rival in rhetoric, as he argues with his Muslim friend Fehim. When Fehim, dismissive of the idea of forging new nations, cites the bridge they sit on as evidence of the fruits of stability, Galus rounds on him. "'You will see, Fehim,'" he argues. "'We will build new, greater and better bridges, not to link foreign centres with conquered lands but to link our own lands with the rest of the world.'"

 (p. 245)

Milosevic's support of the Bosnian Serbs seems a natural extension of the idea that Belgrade must "defend" its cousins across the Drina. The Serb Ministry of Information hands every foreign journalist English translations of Izetbegovic's radical fundamentalist writings from the 1970s, texts Izetbegovic has himself renounced.

The moving spirit of Milosevic's Serbian Socialist Party, Mijalo Markovic, denied that Milosevic was a Serb nationalists. "Despite Western reports, Milosevic has never wanted a 'Greater Serbia,'" he said. "His goal has always been much

smaller than that," Markovic said, "to ensure that Serbs outside of Serbia be assured of being an equal party in any peace process."

Milosevic had cut all but humanitarian aid to Serbs across the Drina, Markovic said, because the Bosnian Serbs were no longer taking the interests of all Serbs into account and risked dragging all Serbs into a conflict with the West. The Vance-Owen plan offered them adequate protection, he said, but Karadzic had decided not allow the U.N. and European Community to redraw the maps. The Bosnian Serbs, he said, would prefer to arrange any land swaps themselves.

There is some support for that militant stance in Belgrade. Vojislav Seselj, the leader of the Serb Radical Party, has argued that the Bosnian Serbs could fight NATO for 10 years if supplied with weapons from Belgrade. And it's not clear that Milosevic's party has really cut off supplies going over the bridge. Markovic said the rump Yugoslavia would stay out of the war in Bosnia so long as the West did not attack Serbia. What would constitute such an assault? "Any attack on the bridges on the Drina," Markovic said.

### **Victims and profiteers**

Who benefits when nationalists decide to take settle local scores that had been held in the balance by local peace? Who loses? Andric offers a scathing portrait of the pomp of self-appointed heroes. "The countless and uneasy saviors who pop up at every step," says one muslim shortly before the First World War begins, "are the best proof that we are heading for catastrophe." Sadly, the proud Bosnian Serbs fighting today bear a familial resemblance to their ancestors. And trip up the Drina shows that the sins of the fathers have been committed again by the sons.

The delicate balance between Serb and Muslim in the Visegrad of Andric's novel is destroyed once the radical Serb students of the "Black Hand" assassinate Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914. Unlike the floods, the subsequent Austro-Hungarian crackdown and attack divides the Serb and Muslim communities, who hide in separate enclaves in the city. The Serb nationalists, strutting around the town in grey uniforms, begin to loot shops. "As so often happens in the history of man," Andric writes, "permission was tacitly granted for acts of violence and plunder, even for murder, out of the name of higher interests, according to established rules, and against a limited number of men of a particular type and belief." (p. 283)

A Galacian Jew who built the town's first hotel watches her savings erode and her customers disappear as inflation destroys the first and the war drives the second away. Some Serbs lose out too, of course. One local merchant, Pavle, had come

to the town as an orphan, apprenticed in a local shop, saved to buy it from the owner and had risen, "through industry, common sense and circumspection," to become the main shareholder in the Serbian Bank and president of the Serbian Choral Society. After the later invasion of the imperial army, he finds himself caught in the ruins of his shop between two coarse Hungarian sergeants. "That's the way," he muses. "everyone teaches you to work and to save. . . then, all of a sudden, the whole thing turns upside down. . . when those who have made their money honestly and with the sweat of their brows lose both their time and their money, and the violent win the game." (p. 307)

Today, if you find yourself among the right set in the Bosnian Serb republic, life is quite comfortable. We drove back from Karadzic's press conference to the Olympia Hotel, where Karadzic's daughter, the republic's press officer, was sipping a glass of white wine on a wooden porch over-looking a green valley. The hotel's manager pulled a cordless phone from his pocket to call around to find us some rooms for the night, then served us a fine roast in exchange for some Deutsch marks. The day's work was done and the journalists stayed up until 11 p.m. drinking with their hosts. They all seemed to be having a fine war.

We drove off for other hotels in a ski resort in Jahorina, above Sarajevo, where my translator had celebrated New Year's Eve two winters ago. We first tried the "Vrucko," or "Little Wolf," named after the mascot of the 1984 Winter Olympic Games. Here again there were signs of prosperity; several black Mercedes were parked in the lot next to tanks and mobile guns. But if the owner were making a profit by housing the Bosnian Serb militia, he hadn't spent it on repairing the lobby's lights or cleaning the stains in the carpets. And no, they weren't open for business.

When we did find a room, it was in another ski resort. Ours was the only car in the lot but the desk clerk put down his rifle long enough to find a cigarette lighter and lead us down the water-stained corridors to two of the few rooms with electricity. An older woman served us a fine breakfast of sweet tea, jams and bread. We took a minute to read Bosnian Serb declarations plastered over maps of the ski trails before driving back to Belgrade.

Serbs without the right connections have clearly suffered. Back in the capital I spoke to Zeljka Josko, a schoolteacher who had lost her apartment in Zenica the previous April when members of the Muslim militia, dressed in black, had seized and plundered it. "I just wanted to live normally," she said. "I think they should put more effort into a peaceful solution, but they have insisted on the military option, on this threat from others."

She had no intention of voting in the referendum Karadzic had organized. "This is not my war, what's going on there," she said. "The war has made all of us unhappy. None of the aims or goals justify the suffering of the victims. This is a war of the war-profiteers."

Milosevic's men had just picked up on this theme as a justification for his apparent break with the Serbs across the Drina. His troops had prevented Biljana Plavsic, a member of the Bosnian Serb parliament, from crossing the river to return to her Belgrade villa. A government spokesman justified the act by complaining on Yugoslav television that "the Bosnian Serb leadership live in relative comfort in Belgrade while ordinary people suffer."

But no one had suffered more than the victims of the weapons that Milosevic had previously allowed to pass over the bridge at Zvornik.

We drove a different route back to Belgrade, this time passing a little closer to Visegrad. The roads south also led to Srebrenica, a "beseiged Muslim enclave," so there was no hope of visiting the bridge itself. We passed through the towns near the Drina, however, that had been "ethnically cleansed," and whose former residents are now awaiting their fate in the enclaves. It was enough to prove that, even if the bridge at Visegrad was still standing, all it had stood for has since collapsed.

Rather than drive back along the mountain road through Papraca, we turned east at Vlasenica and headed into the river valley. We started seeing a few burnt-out stucco cottages immediately but were assured by soldiers on the road that there was no fighting ahead. We crossed over a make-shift bridge, again decorated with Serbian flags, at "Nova Kasaba," or "New Castle" in Muslim Serbo-Croat.

The name "Nova Kasaba" had been spray-painted out; the Serb equivalent, "Novo Naselje" was scrawled on instead. Here every single house, well-built chalets of stone capped with red-tile roofs, had been bombed out, apparently from the within. The town was entirely empty, but its last visitors had left their calling card. A wrecked bus was adorned with the word "Arkan," the nick-name of Serbia's most famous vigilante. About a mile north of the village lay the ruins of a mosque. It appeared not to have been attacked in a "civil war"; it had been pulverized, squashed so flat that the rubble stood no higher than six feet.

Further north, Drijaca had less damage; while a few houses had been destroyed, the Serbian Orthodox church stood unscathed above the river's bank. A Turkish

restaurant nearby had been torched. Just before we turned right to cross the bridge at Zvornik, we saw graffiti that explained all. "Ovo je Serbska," someone had painted on a white concrete wall. "This is Serb."

"So be it," thinks Alihojda, the Bosnian Muslim of Andric's novel, once he has seen that the bridge on the Drina has been destroyed.

"If they destroy here, then somewhere else someone is building. Surely there are still peaceful countries and men of good sense who know of God's love? If God had abandoned this unlucky town on the Drina, he had surely not abandoned the whole world that was beneath the skies? But who knows? . . . Anything might happen. But one thing could not happen; it could not be that great and wise men of exalted soul who would raise lasting buildings for the love of God, so that the world should be more beautiful and man should live in it better and more easily, should everywhere and for all time vanish from the earth. Should they too vanish, it would mean that the love of God was extinguished and had disappeared from the world. That could not be. (p.314)

We clattered back over the bridge at Zvornik and made our way back to Belgrade. I settled up with my translator over a coffee and pulled out a 5,000 dinar note to leave as a tip.

My translator laughed. "Don't leave that," he said. "That's worthless. It would be an insult."

TALISMANIN DE KULTURA TO ZVORNIK

БЕОГРАД 1992 БЕОГРАД



Inflation has so ravaged the Yugoslav economy that the central bank has stopped printing national heroes on the currency; the 100,000 and 500,000 dinar notes bear the faces of anonymous peasants. The 5,000 dinar note was the last to bear a known face -- Andric's. On the back is a sketch of the bridge on the Drina at Visegrad. Worthless, in Milosevic's Yugoslavia? That sounded about right.

Yours,  
  
Chandler

All page references are to the 1977 paperback edition of Ivo Andrić's The Bridge on the Drina, published by the University of Chicago's Phoenix Fiction imprint.