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Bosnian Fragments: II
Yugoslavia's Moslems

Gosp. Jevremova 32A
Belgrade, Yugoslavia
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

In 1963, according to the latest Yugoslav census, there are over a million Moslems out of a total population of 3.3 million in the Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Hercegovina. That one can say this at all requires some explanation, for the Yugoslav census does not normally ask a citizen's religion. The category therefore appears under the breakdown by nationality, although no one would claim that "Moslem" is a nationality. It is instead the regime's way of turning its back on an old dispute.

These people are Slavs, speaking the Serbo-Croat language. The Serbs therefore claim that they are Serb, the Croats that they are Croat, and since the normal way of telling the difference - that the Serb is Orthodox, the Croat Catholic - cannot be applied, no one can really say. They used to call themselves Turks, to the confusion of many foreign readers of Ivo Andrić's Bridge on the Drina, but that they are not. The question is politically loaded, in view of the historic claims of both Croatia and Serbia to the allegiance of the provinces and in memory of the bloodbath of 1941-45. It was at least partly to avoid taking sides in this quarrel that Tito's Government at the end of the war established a separate republic for the region, independent of both Zagreb and Belgrade. In the same way they again side-stepped the whole issue at the time of the most recent headcounting, in 1961, by tactfully inserting two unorthodox categories into the census forms: if these people did not know whether to call themselves Serbs or Croats, they could put down Moslem or Yugoslav: 842,248 of them chose the former; 275,883 the latter alternative.

The existence of this "what's in a name?" problem is itself a symbol of the peculiar position and special history of the only numerically significant body of Moslem Slavs to be found in the ethnic mosaic of Eastern Europe. They are Moslem today, we are told, because they once were Bogomils. And the tale of their conversion and the motives for it is also said to account for some of the communal characteristics they have maintained even under Titoist rule.

Wandering across Bosnia one frequently encounters an extraordinary necropolis. The tombstones are massive blocks often four feet high, two feet wide and six feet long, with a top like a peaked but eaveless roof and primitive carvings of men, animals and longbows on the sides. They are markedly different from both the Christian and Moslem graves of the district. In all probability this is the work of these Bogomils, devotees of a Medieval Christian heresy that was the lineal descendant of Gnosticism and of the beliefs of the dualist Manicheans, who attempted to resolve the problem of

evil in a world created by a good God by elevating the Devil into the position of an autonomous creative force. The Bogomil heresy came here from Asia Minor, by way of Bulgaria, in days when Bosnia was a religious no-man's-land on the frontier between Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, and it appears to have taken hold of the Bosnian nobles and perhaps of their subjects as a token of national independence, a sort of medieval Titoism, defying the Empires and ideologies of both East and West. In this way it survived until the Turkish invasion of the Fifteenth Century.

The Turks arrived in Bosnia in 1463, ten years after their conquest of Constantinople and four years after the fall of the last independent Serbian despotate in the Morava valley. The Bogomil nobles of the highland kingdom had less reason than any of the other Balkan Christian peoples to fear these Islamic conquerors. They had already been rejected by the Orthodox patriarchs and were at war with the Catholic popes, who had wanted to send a crusade against them. Indeed, Christianity in both its Orthodox and Catholic forms seemed as foreign to them as Islam, and to be identified as Christians by the Turks had definite practical disadvantages because it was Turkish policy to deprive Christian nobles of their lands and privileges. Bogomilism had in any case been little more than a symbol of loyalty to a state that no longer existed. They embraced Islam and thereby retained their lands and titles.

The social situation created by this conversion distinguished Bosnia from the rest of Turkish Europe. In Serbia, Bulgaria and Macedonia the Slav nobility remained faithful to Orthodoxy. They were therefore dispossessed and reduced to equality with their own former subjects, all slaves of the Sultan, while the conquerors replaced the native aristocracy. Turks ruled Christian Slav peasants, whose Church became the rallying ground and haven of their sense of nationality until the day of liberation. In Bosnia, however, the native aristocracy survived until modern times by means of conversion to Islam. Moslem Slavs ruled Christian Slavs in the name of a distant Sultan. So great was the power of these notables that they were even able to prevent the Sultan's official Turkish representative from residing in the real capital of the province, Sarajevo; he could come within its walls only one day a year, but otherwise must live at Travnik, sixty miles away.

There are those who maintain that these people have always retained the pragmatism that once led them to change their religion rather than surrender their privileges. But no suzerain since the Turk has ever demanded that particular sacrifice of them again. The Austro-Hungarian occupation of 1878 in principle brought Bosnia and Hercegovina again under a Christian prince. This change came about as the result of a rising of the Christian peasants which had been directed more against oppression by these fellow-Slavs of different religion than against the Sultan, and Western readers of the Bridge on the Drina are also familiar with the dismay and resentment with which the Moslem Slavs of Bosnia greeted the new order. But for reasons of their own the Habsburg officials did not touch the local social structure. The Moslems remained a favored people and Islam in effect a favored religion, even under the most Catholic Emperor.

There was in fact only one brief period in which their religion was a disability for these Moslems. The Yugoslavia of 1918-41, which was in many ways a Greater Orthodox Serbia, saw the abrogation of their privileged status,

and Rebecca West in Black Lamb and Gray Falcon records scenes in 1938 that demonstrated their nostalgia for the departed Turkish Empire.

Then the break-up of Yugoslavia and the inclusion of Bosnia and Hercegovina in the Ustase's Independent State of Croatia in 1941 brought about a restoration of the lost privileges. Imitating Habsburg policy in this as in other fields, the Ustase state again favored the Moslems, even granting Islam equal status with Catholicism as an official religion. A special SS division was recruited from among the Bosnian faithful, and it had the honor to be inspected by the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem himself.

As a result, the position of organized Islam in the new, Titoist Yugoslavia established after the war did not appear favorable. Like the Catholics of Croatia, the Bosnian Moslems were compromised by the collaboration of many of their religious leaders with the Ustase regime, and they now faced an avowedly atheistic Government eager to make use of such compromises to undermine the standing of church and mosque. Moreover, they were suspected of still considering Istanbul - "Carigrad" or "the Emperor's City" - their capital, not Belgrade. On the other hand, they had the reputation, from the day of their conversion to the present, of being faithful and flexible servants of every political master.

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With the Albanians of the Kosovo-Metobija and the real Turks who stayed in Macedonia and southern Serbia after the ebb of empire, these Bosnian Moslems give Yugoslavia a total of more than two million citizens (out of 18.5 million) who profess, or whose fathers professed, Islam rather than Christianity. Those of this considerable minority who are still active in the faith look for spiritual guidance to the Bosnian capital, to the council called the Highest Islamic Authority in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and to His Excellency the Reis ul Ulema, Hadži Sulejman efendi Kemura.

At 58 years of age Hadži Sulejman ef. Kemura is a man of medium height and gentle warmth with graying hair and moustache. He has been Reis ul Ulema since December 1957. Before that he was the director of the Gazi Husrevbeg medresa (seminary for Moslem priests) in Sarajevo, an institution founded by a Turkish governor of Bosnia early in the sixteenth century and today, with 165 students, the most important medresa in Yugoslavia. He comes from an old Sarajevo family, with at least one prominent Islamic theologian, orientalist and historian to its credit, and his life has been spent as a religious educator and official of the Moslem bureaucratic apparatus in Bosnia.

He received me in the offices of the Highest Islamic Authority, next door to the Republican Executive Council building. The room was tastefully furnished in the Turkish style, with oriental rugs on the floor and on the wall a prominently displayed colored photograph of the mosque in Washington, D.C., a gift of the late American Consul in Sarajevo. During the ninety minutes I spent with him he was an effusive and relaxed host with a disconcerting habit of slowly turning a single rose held delicately between the thumb and index finger of his left hand. He is used to this sort of appointment, for one of his responsibilities toward the Government is to receive visiting Moslems from the countries of President Tito's league of the non-aligned and assure them that Islam in Yugoslavia is free.

This, his personal history, and the history of Islam in Bosnia are all relevant to the things he had to say to me. They comprise, therefore, my comments on the interview, or perhaps it would be better to say that they serve as a bank of spotlights which can pick out and give significance to some of his remarks that otherwise might appear trivial or obvious. If this is a legitimate technique, then it only remains to set down my notes of what he had to say, grouped by subject matter and shortened by necessity, because it was a pleasantly long chat.

-Moslem organization in Yugoslavia. Religious life is conducted in accordance with the Constitution of the Islamic Religious Community, a document now in its third postwar incarnation, a process which demonstrates an enduring wish on the part of the Community to achieve a more complete life. In this country religion is separated from the State and every religious association carries on its own life in its own field. In the beginning this novelty was regarded with some skepticism, but as time passed it was seen to be very useful that the Islamic Community should be independent. In pre-war Yugoslavia the highest Moslem officials were appointed by the Minister for Religion in the Government; there were instances in which officials were appointed who were unacceptable to the Community. Today the Community is completely free to select its own leaders.

(The Community traces its origins back to 1882, when the first Ulema court was nominated by the Austro-Hungarian authorities; it became self-governing in 1909. The present Constitution contemplates a seven-level pyramid for the Islamic bureaucracy and legislation.* There is a network of communal committees, elected by the faithful for a four-year term. Supervisory and executive functions are performed by a smaller network of regional trusteeship commissions, with seven to fifteen members each. These are appointed by the Republican Synods which exist for each of the four republics in which Moslems are found - Bosnia-Hercegovina, Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro. The Republican Synods, varying in size from sixteen to thirty, are elected by members of the religious community. They also nominate their own Republican executive organs, called Higher Authorities of the Islamic Religious Community. On top of the pyramid, in Sarajevo, are three Federal bodies: a Federal Synod of 35 members, elected by the Republican Synods from among their own membership; the Highest Islamic Authority, consisting of the Reis ul Ulema, the Presidents of the four Republican Higher Authorities, and six nominees of the Federal Synod; and the Reis ul Ulema himself, who is elected by the Highest Islamic Authority. This structure is interesting because it is characteristically Yugoslav, combining democratic and hierarchic elements and carefully tilted to give a slight advantage to the latter.)

The problem today is one of personnel. During the German occupation, schools were not open and many Moslem priests were killed in the fighting. After the liberation the Community was in a particularly difficult situation,

* "Ustav Islamske Vjerske Zajednice u FNRJ", in Glasnik Vjerskog Islamskog Starješinstva, no. 7-9, 1959

because of the physical destruction or alienation of many buildings and other property, while many younger Moslem priests did not want to stay in their mosques but preferred to seek Government jobs (sic). This crisis was overcome as a result of financial support from the State. At present there are two higher schools preparing Moslem priests - at Sarajevo and at Pristina, with 165 and 45 students respectively.



As a result of this situation, it was not possible to send pupils abroad until last year, when five entered al-Azhar in Cairo to continue their studies. The Community is now planning to send more to Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.

The Community maintains a religious publishing house in Sarajevo, which edits a bi-monthly magazine (the Glasnik Vjerskog Islamskog Starješinstva) with a circulation of 9000 and publishes religious books and textbooks, in both Serbo-Croat and Arabic. There is therefore no need to import religious printed matter, and indeed 5000 copies of the Koran, printed in Arabic in Sarajevo, were recently exported to Pakistan.

- Religious life. (I had asked His Excellency whether he found the faithful more or less active in their faith than before or immediately after the war. The question was

intentionally naive, but I had not expected the Reis ul Ulema to laugh at it. He did. Then he answered:) "I have traveled in the world, and especially in Islamic countries, and to my surprise I have found few young people in mosques and other religious institutions. I had thought this was a special Yugoslav phenomenon, but I see it is a general one, the result of the entertainments offered by modern life, etc." However, in Islam the quality of religious life is not measured by strict performance of religious duties, but rather by support for the Community, and "without any exaggeration we are very satisfied with the religious life here." Usually on Friday His Excellency goes to some other part of Bosnia and Hercegovina to attend mosque and talk with the faithful, and there he sees such signs of this support as the renovation of mosques, paid for by the voluntary contributions of believers. In Goražde, for example, a new mosque was recently completed which cost 30 million dinars, every one of them given by the faithful of the district and not one from either the State or the higher Islamic authorities.

- Postwar reforms: lifting the veil. This was "not so easy," because these habits and customs, although they have nothing to do with true religion,

have become dogma through use. The veil in particular, however, was considered "one of the most important elements in backwardness," and a maximum effort was required to explain to the faithful that it was not a religious requirement. Now all that has changed, and His Excellency has recently talked with Moslem peasant women who told him they would not put their veils back on even if the Government changed its mind and forced them to do so.

- Marxism and Islam. "Islam has its dogmas and principles. As we build our country as citizens of this country we perform duties as citizens, and no matter what our profession we find ourselves united in matters that benefit the community as a whole. Otherwise we go to the mosque and pray and live our religious life. As religion and the State are separated, so we can separate them and live according to our conscience, whether atheist or not. Another thing: since all confessions are equal, we no longer have the problem we had in pre-war Yugoslavia, which in practice, though not in theory, was an Orthodox State, in which instances of invasion of privacy and enforced conversions occurred. This problem is there no longer. For instance, elementary school children before the war were forced to join in celebrating St. Sava (patron saint of Serbia)...."

During the occupation, he continued, Bosnia and Hercegovina were part of the Independent State of Croatia, which in theory had two equal religions - Catholicism and Islam - but which was in practice a Catholic State. For example, in a village near Travnik in which the Orthodox and Moslems had lived in good harmony for centuries the whole village was one day ordered to convert to Catholicism. The Moslems protested that Islam was also an official religion, and the Orthodox embraced Islam to save their lives, but the Ustaše came and killed them all, Moslem and Serb. Cardinal Stepinac was a leading figure in attacking both Orthodoxy and Islam, and as the Reis ul Ulema sees it, the Croat authorities' real plan was to destroy first the Serbs and then the Moslems.

The history of the Islamic Community is therefore one of a prolonged struggle to achieve equality with other religions, and this it has achieved only since 1945. (And under the Habsburgs? I asked. Ah, well, His Excellency smiled, that is quite another story.)

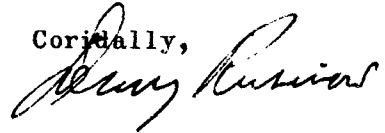
- The Turkish legacy. The Turks, although they brought Islam, were occupiers like any others, interested primarily in exploiting their colonies. But one cannot say that they left nothing here. They brought a good administration, hygiene, public buildings, roads and baths; but this was also due to Islam, which preaches care for personal hygiene. In any case, however, the Bosnian Moslems were often anti-Turkish and provided even their begs to the anti-Turkish resistance. If it was inevitable, after five hundred years under the Turks, that some Bosnian Moslems should lose their sense of nationality, there were really not many of these because few Bosnian Moslems spoke Turkish.

Today, however, the Moslems of Bosnia and Hercegovina feel stronger ties with the United Arab Republic of President Nasser than with Turkey.

- Arab unity. The Moslems of Yugoslavia follow the movement for Arab unification with great interest and judge it "absolutely positively", believing that it will bring many benefits to all of the Arab nations (sic), which were under colonial rule and therefore underdeveloped and in fact behind where they once were. "And especially because the Yugoslav Government is supporting this movement, we regard these efforts with double sympathy." The extent to which these Arab peoples were de-nationalized under colonial rule is illustrated by Algeria (which the Reis ul Elema has visited), where President Ben Bella and Ferhat Abbas did not even speak Arabic at all.

...The world moves on, and the Moslems of Yugoslavia, it seems, move with it.

Cordially,



Dennison Rusinow

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