TEACHING WAR AND PEACE IN BOSNIA:
THE LIBERAL ARTS AND
THE USES OF CRITICAL EMPATHY

A Course Description for
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INTRODUCTION

This paper is about our attempt as an historian and a political scientist to develop a study abroad program dealing with the theme of war and peace. As academics, we knew well the value of books and traditional, classroom-based intellectual inquiry. But we were also well aware of their limitations, and thought a visit to a region that had recently experienced war and was currently attempting to build a lasting peace would provide invaluable additional understanding to our students. One of us is a specialist in international relations and peace studies with particular expertise in land-mine issues; the other is a specialist in Eastern European history with a particular focus on ethnic identity and inter-ethnic conflict. A colleague at the University of Wisconsin-Superior, Judy Dwyer, was a social worker who worked with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Zagreb, Croatia during the Bosnian war. As we sat talking one day in 2001 and put all of our experiences and skills together, we thought: why don’t we take students to Bosnia? Neither of us had ever developed such a course before, or for that matter had ever even heard of such a war-focused study abroad course. But, perhaps more akin to fools than angels, we went ahead.

Over the past decade we have travelled with students to Bosnia and Hercegovina eight different times. They have been profoundly successful and transformative experiences—not only for the students, but for us as well. We believe that the model we developed for the course—through much trial and error over the years—may serve as a good example for the basic question posed for this year’s Conversation: “How can a Liberal Arts education equip students to engage justly and effectively in issues of war and peace?” What we learned while doing these courses is that in order to understand these kinds of wars—not just why they happen and how they can be prevented or responded to once begun, but also what is truly lost in such wars, why they matter—students need to be able to empathize, to identify, albeit critically, with the variety of identities at play in the conflict: not only this ethnic group and that ethnic group, but also victim and aggressor. And it also means going beyond the roles and identities during wartime, to those before and outside of the hostilities.
This faculty of critical empathy, we believe, is at the core of the idea of the Liberal Arts, and something that is sorely lacking in today’s society, even in today’s universities. We have structured the War and Peace in Bosnia course in a way designed, we hope, to facilitate critical empathy and so encourage not only a better, truer understanding of what happened in that country in the 1990s, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, to help create a more promising foundation for engaging in peace and social justice work back in the students’ own countries and communities.

What follows is not so much a theoretical argument, as simply a practical description of our course. We begin with a discussion of the challenges we have faced, assumptions we have encountered in teaching about war and peace, and the resulting purposes we had in mind as we set out to develop the Bosnia course. We then move on to describe the courses we developed—a spring, on-campus orientation course and the summer study abroad course—to try to serve those purposes. In so doing we also try to bring attention to our learning curve—what we’ve learned, hiccups we’ve encountered, changes and adaptations we’ve made over the years.

CHALLENGES IN TEACHING WAR & PEACE

One common belief that we often encounter among students is that wars occur not so much because of any specific human action, but rather because ‘human nature’ dictates that wars will periodically occur. The effort to understand and prevent war, in this view, becomes a futile exercise in bleeding-heart naïveté. Wars simply happen. But whether or not wars are ultimately preventable or an ineradicable part of the human experience, it remains true that wars are not the only human activity. They occur at certain specific historical junctures, and not at others. They are therefore as susceptible to intellectual analysis and explanation as anything else in the human experience. Why now, and not then? Why here, and not there? We wanted students to learn to question and analyze the specific contexts of war.
A subset of the ‘war is natural’ theory is the conviction that wars are more natural and inevitable in certain regions; that some societies are just more prone to war than others. The Balkans are infamous in this respect. The idea of ‘ancient ethnic hatreds’ fueling a never-ending war that has no other rational explanation, or resolution—most notoriously expressed in Robert Kaplan’s fatefully influential book *Balkan Ghosts*—thus became semi-official U.S. policy towards the violent disintegration of the Yugoslav federation.¹ This is an attitude, which, disturbingly, we often find among people in the Balkans themselves—the idea that every generation must have its war. And it is an attitude aided by Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” thesis, which sees any conflict between Christians and Muslims, or, in the case of Serbs and Croats, between Orthodox and Catholics, as due to an inevitable and unavoidable ‘civilizational’ incompatibility, a view which remains alarmingly fashionable in the post-9/11 West.² But, while we cannot simply dismiss the reality and deep-rootedness of these conflicts, such a view, like the ‘war as human nature’ theory, fails to account for the equally deeply-rooted commonalities and integration within these regions and between these ostensibly different ‘civilizations.’ The history of peace and positive interaction between the various communities of the Balkans is at least as long as that of the hostility and warfare between them, and, we are convinced, at least as important for an understanding of the nature of those identities and their prospects for the future together.³ In studying the darkest side of humanity, students can be overwhelmed by the cruelty of war. It is imperative for them, too, that they understand that war is only one moment in the rich history of these societies and that they can recover from it and move on.

¹ Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993). During the Bosnian war, President Bill Clinton invoked Kaplan’s argument as justification for the U.S. refusal to intervene militarily, although he had campaigned in 1992 for such intervention.


An alternative, yet equally simplistic and analysis-resistant assumption we often encounter is that violence is committed by ‘bad’ people, for evil reasons. The fixation with charismatic ‘evil-doers,’ like Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot or Slobodan Milošević, tends to absolve us of the need for rational explanation and for understanding the larger context. These are not normal people, the argument goes, and their actions cannot be considered a profitable subject for historical or political analysis—only, at best, for criminal psychology. Such a belief implies, too, that once the war-bent leader is dead or removed from the scene, there need be no concern for a repeated outbreak of violence. People do not make wars; evil or deranged leaders do. But this assumption overlooks the question of why so many people follow such leaders; why perfectly ordinary individuals pick up weapons and with no compulsion or signs of prior hatred turn them against their former neighbors, friends, even family members. The inescapable implication that the vast majority of humanity are guileless sheep is not only deeply distasteful, but it flies in the face of everything else we know from history. The scholarly literature on the Nazis’ genocidal violence during the Second World War, which used to be fixated on Hitler’s personal anti-semitic mania and putative control over the German population, has for some decades now been calling attention instead to the role of the many thousands of “ordinary men” (and women) who participated in and benefitted from the abuse and murder of their fellow countrymen.4 While debates continue to rage over the precise motivations and meaning of this participation, there can no longer be any question of such mass violence being entirely explainable by the actions of a leader or even a small clique of fanatics. While such individuals may be key to understanding the events that lead to the outbreak of war, they do not carry it out alone. The perspectives and motivations of those who do are perhaps an even more important subject for inquiry if we are to develop a meaningful response to war.

And in the case of civil wars like those of the former Yugoslavia, the stark and unpleasant reality is that much of the violence, while itself condemnable, is committed for reasons which are quite

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understandable. Most of the time our students, secure in their sense of their own righteousness, approach study of these wars with the conviction that they could never engage in such actions; that they would always be able to differentiate between an easily recognizable ‘Right’ and ‘Wrong.’ Entertainment news and 140-character attention spans love clearly defined, evil-doing ‘Aggressors’ and innocent ‘Victims.’

History sometimes obliges, but mostly the reality is far more complex. The Second World War and the Holocaust are again useful cases in point. The Holocaust survivor Primo Levi has written about the moral “Gray Zone” that the denizens of Auschwitz—inmates and guards alike—found themselves inhabiting. And more recently, the histories of the civil wars in both Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia are full of examples of such blurring between the categories of Victim and Perpetrator. Svetlana Broz, for example, has written a revealing book about how the lines of moral complicity and resistance became blurred for many ordinary people during the Bosnian war.

Understanding and responding to war in multicultural societies like the former Yugoslavia is made additionally difficult by the tendency to overlay the Victim-Perpetrator dichotomy with ethnic stereotypes. Mainstream US media reports and the claims of the combatants themselves present the conflict as a narrative of This Group vs. That Group: clearly defined, self-contained and fixed identity-communities that are manifestly and starkly differentiated from each other. In this narrative, the conflict tends to be viewed as an, if regrettable, yet nevertheless easily comprehensible, almost inevitable result of fundamental differences and incompatibilities. It is easy for students to come to the conclusion that such wars are carried out by, e.g., ‘the Serbs’ or ‘the Muslims,’ without any differentiation within those

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categories. The reality, of course, is that such identities, whether ethnic or sectarian, are constructs. Not all Serbs are Chetniks, and not all Muslims are Mujahedeen. In fact, before the outbreak of the wars, individuals’ ethnic-sectarian identities, while not completely negligible, played a surprisingly inconsequential role in their daily lives; indeed their ethnic identities were sometimes not even known to their closest friends. And even more problematically once the wars began, many Yugoslavs, particularly in Bosnia, ‘belonged’ to multiple ethnic communities. The plight of a Serb, for example, who had married a Croat, or someone whose mother was Bosnian-Muslim and father was Serb, became truly wrenching and dangerous, as we have heard first-hand from many people during our visits.

It is important for students to understand the role of individuals in war. But it would be just as misleading to reduce the complex social phenomenon of war to nothing more than the deeds of autonomous individual actors. Socially constructed identities are powerful forces, for both good and ill. Individuals can manipulate the loyalties to such identities to gain support for their cause and their war. But those same identities can also be a support and protection in times of crisis. What is most important for students to understand about war is the interaction between the individual and the ‘collective,’ and that there is variation within the so-called ethnic groups.

An additional problem with the ethnic dichotomization is its elision from all analysis of the ‘invisibles.’ One important example is the Croats, who tend to be relegated to a minor role in examinations of the conflict. The war between the Serbs and Muslims overwhelms the narrative to the point that one finds the Croats only at the margins of the analysis, although in terms of practical consequences they benefitted from the war more than any other group. There are also minority groups, like the Bosnian Jews and Roma (Gypsies), or for that matter those who steadfastly resist any ethnic-sectarian identification, who are completely absent from the analysis, and yet who played a role in the war—as victims, rescuers, and even perpetrators.

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8 There is still relatively little scholarship on this phenomenon. An eloquent example, however, is found in the film “Comrades,” (dir.) Mitko Panov, Pirej, 2002, about a group of men who served in the Yugoslav army together during the 1980s. We have heard many similar stories from people during our visits to Bosnia and Hercegovina.
A final assumption that we wanted our students to reconsider has to do with the idea of peace. Students, in fact most people, rarely think about what ‘peace’ actually means, assuming that it is merely the absence of war. But conflict occurs in a variety of forms short of active warfare, none of which can properly be considered ‘peace.’ If war is not natural or inevitable, then neither, in fact, is peace. Most notably, as the U.S. experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq have illustrated, while battles may be easily won, the ensuing period can be even more explosive and more difficult to predict. Issues of state-building, physical security, disarmament, pursuit of war criminals, refugee settlement and the creation of economic opportunity often interact with many others aspects of post-conflict society.

DESIGNING OUR COURSE: PUTTING THE LIBERAL ARTS INTO PRACTICE

Our primary goal in developing the War and Peace in Bosnia course was less to impart specific knowledge about that conflict than to help our students develop a set of skills that would allow them to better address and engage with issues of war and peace. While the focus is specifically on Bosnia, we emphasize throughout that the skills and perspectives developed to analyze that conflict are applicable to many other conflicts as well. But we did not want a cookbook-style methods course: ‘Here’s how you make peace.’ Instead, we wanted to encourage our students to question their own assumptions and ‘common-sense’ explanations for the wars; to consider the different perspectives and theories about what happened and why; and to examine with a critical eye the different options for intervention (or non-intervention) that were debated at the time. Above all, in the spirit of the Liberal Arts (from the Latin liber, meaning “one who is free”), we aimed to free students to construct their own narratives of what happened, and what it means, rather than passively receiving the answers from us, or anyone else.

A recent study by the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research has revealed that over the past three decades, American college students’ ability to empathize has been steadily declining;
dramatically so since 2000.\(^9\) The growing inability to imagine others’ points of view and to feel and respond to others’ problems—two of the key indices measured by the Michigan study—has obvious negative implications for the goal of teaching about war and peace, and enabling students to justly and effectively engage in issues of war and peace. But we believe that as a capacity for empathy is the very foundation of the Liberal Arts, they can be the ideal perspective for approaching such a topic. Aiming as they do at the liberation of the Self, the Liberal Arts intend not merely critical thinking in a detached, ‘objective’ manner, from above; but rather from within, from personal conviction and commitment. They are not about mere knowledge, but rather personal and social transformation—that is to say, liberation.

**The On-Campus Preparatory Course**

After our first study-visit to Bosnia and Hercegovina in 2002, it became clear that our students needed better intellectual preparation for what they would see and do in the country. Put simply, we needed to design an orientation course that was more than simple pre-departure advice (how to deal with jet-lag; how to say “hello” and “thank you” in the local language), but would provide students with the necessary academic learning about the history and basic theories of conflict, peace-building and international intervention that they will need to engage in a meaningful way with the people and on-going civil reconstruction efforts that make up the activity of the study-abroad course. To that end, we developed a traditional, semester-long, on-campus course on The Wars of Yugoslavia: Seminar on Peace-building (HIST 315/POLS 356), which is offered each year the semester before our departure. The course is open to any student, but is required for those who intend to participate in the summer semester’s study abroad trip.

The course is divided into three sections. The first and most basic thing the students need is an understanding of the larger historical context of the war. One part of this is to bring home to the students

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that the history of the Balkans actually is so much more than conflict and war. Due attention is given to the many wars in the region, going back to the collapse of the Roman empire and the Ottoman conquest. But our historical investigations bring home to the students how much of Balkan history is in fact not involved in war. While the conventional wisdom about Yugoslavia, for example, from the perspective of the post-1990s, is that it was a ‘failed state,’ an unnatural conglomeration whose violent disintegration was inevitable, from the perspective of the 1960s, Yugoslavia was in virtually all respects—economically, socially, culturally, politically—an impressive ‘success story’ that offered a great deal of inspiration to other multicultural and developing societies all over the world, and its collapse hardly a foregone conclusion.

To encourage critical thinking and to help the students begin to understand the nature and role of ethnic identities, our approach is to emphasize history not simply in terms of an objective, ‘true’ chronology of events, but more importantly in terms of memory and how different collective memories of the ‘facts’ are constructed, maintained and changed over time by different sectors of the population, and how those collective memories—which often conflict diametrically with the established ‘official’ history—can affect the experiences of ordinary people. In pursuit of both those goals, we ask students for example to read Ivo Andrić’s classic Bridge on the Drina, a novelistic tracing of the history of the town of Višegrad from Ottoman times to the outbreak of the First World War.10 In group discussions we ask students to generate a list of the conflicts that occur throughout the book, and then discuss their causes. Is this region really plagued by endemic conflict? And where there is conflict, do the people of this region fight only because of ethnicity, or are there other reasons for these conflicts? Instead of being told so by a textbook, in working with this rich historical document, students are able to begin to think in concrete terms for themselves that while there have been severe conflicts in the region, these are mirrored by periods of peace and integration. Left to define the conflicts and groups on their own, they are quick to

recognize class, gender, regional and role-based identities as at least as important and influential as ethnicity in the characters’ lives, and in their conflicts. ‘Conflict’ itself becomes for them less a ‘fact’ than a matter of definition; and it is not always, or essentially, rooted in ethnicity, thus dealing a serious blow to the ‘ancient hatreds’ thesis. The film “Comrades,” referred to earlier, makes very much the same point, introducing the students in a very immediate and sympathetic way to a number of real people for whom ethnicity in Yugoslavia was only one of many identities and hardly the most prominent or meaningful. The palpable confusion, fear and helplessness felt by these young men as the wars overtook and destroyed their lives and the world they had loved so much mirrors, in a different way, the confusion about the war felt by our students, a fact of which they become immediately conscious.

Once our students begin to question the ‘naturalness’ and inevitability of this war, we can move into the 1990s wars and their real causes in more detail. Here, too, we emphasize that we are not going to ‘give’ them the ‘true’ explanation for the war, but that we want them instead to develop their own thesis as to why the war occurred and what it was about. Putting to use what they’ve learned about the larger history, we ask them to consider a simple time-line for the war: when should it start? Should a meaningful history of the war begin in 1389, when Ottoman forces defeated the medieval Serb kingdom, as some, especially Serb nationalists, would have it? Or with the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire and the creation of the first Yugoslavia in 1918? The genocidal violence of the Second World War, which remains in living memory for many in the region? Or was the death of Tito in 1980 the more important catalyst to the war? Or Milošević’s rise in 1987? Or was it perhaps really the larger geopolitical ending of the Cold War in 1989? As we discuss all of these various perspectives together, our goal is for students to recognize that how one answers this seemingly simple question depends very much on one’s beliefs, or assumptions, about what the conflict was about: ethnicity, power, economics, etc. In the final assignment for this first section, students write short Reaction Essays, where they are asked to reflect on these questions and their implications, then make their own choices in constructing a time-line and explanation for the war, and justify them. If these groups really hate each other so much, then why
did they agree to a common Yugoslav state not once, but twice? If Tito was all that held Yugoslavia together, and his absence from the scene explains the war, then why did it take another 10 years for the wars to break out? This exercise is perhaps the most challenging activity because students are used to simple cause and effect and expect us or a textbook to provide it for them. But instead of that, they have to wrestle with the region’s history and make sense of it for themselves. They also have to appreciate that there are different ‘histories’ and that one of their tasks as peace-builders is to understand the significance of these different versions of the past for the present and the future. Some of our peace studies students initially complain that there is too much history in the course; they want to focus on the immediate problems facing the country today. But it is our job to teach them that peace-building occurs in an historical context. One cannot resolve a conflict without understanding how the populations became engaged in conflict in the first place.

The second portion of the course builds on the realizations achieved in the first section and focuses on the idea of ethnicity. What does it mean to ‘be’ a Serb, a Bosnian-Muslim, a Croat, or for that matter a Yugoslav? What are the determinants of these identities? What kind of practices determine whether one belongs to one group and not another? Are these identities fixed or do they evolve over time? Who gets to decide who’s what? What do ordinary people ‘get’ from their ethnic identities? And, perhaps most importantly, what happens to ethnic identities once war has begun? An intriguing film that we use, called “Picture Me an Enemy,” features two refugees now in the US, one a part Serb-part Croat woman from Croatia, the other a Bosnian-Muslim woman, who discuss their lives in Yugoslavia before the war—who they were and how they thought of themselves and others—and the pressure under which they then came to identify exclusively with ‘their’ group, as well as the stereotypes to which they were subjected by ‘others’ (including Americans) after the wars began.11

We focus particular attention in this section on the nature, origins and evolution of Serb identity and its role in the Bosnian war, in part because so many students come into the course with a distinct, if unreflected, anti-Serb bias. Tim Judah’s book, *The Serbs*, offers a unique and very useful perspective on the war by focusing on the interaction between Serb collective memory and the events of the war. Constantly shifting back and forth between history and the present-day of the 1990s, he charts the ebb and flow of Serb collective memory and how it was manipulated by Serbian leaders to mobilize the population for war. Once students become sensitized to the flexibility and mutability of ethnic and national identity, we have them work with the texts of some speeches by Slobodan Milošević from shortly before the outbreak of the wars, as well as the infamous 1986 nationalist “Memorandum” from the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, to analyze the language and images being deployed, how they fit, or don’t, Serbian history, and what kind of impact they were likely to have had on their audience—why they ‘worked’ to mobilize the population for war. While it’s important to help students realize that identities are constructs, it is equally important that they understand that these identities have meaning to people; people act on identities because they believe in them. This perspective is reinforced by the students’ viewing and discussion of the film “Pretty Village, Pretty Flame,” a Serbian film about the Bosnian war based on actual events. Managing to be simultaneously sympathetic and critical, this film effectively allows our students to interpret—to feel—the events of the war from within a Serb perspective and imagine how they might have felt, what they might have seen as their options, and how they might have responded.

At the same time, we want the students to resist the temptation to generalize from the acts of many to the all. Horrendous acts of violence, war crimes and crimes against humanity were committed in Bosnia in the 1990s, and many of them were committed in a collective manner. But not every Serb is a


13 “Pretty Village, Pretty Flame,” (dir.) Srdjan Dragojević, Cobra Films, 1997. Interestingly, the film has been condemned both by Bosnian-Muslim nationalists as pro-Serb and by Serb nationalists as anti-Serb.
war criminal, or even a nationalist. Not all of the victims were Muslim and not all of the aggression was committed by Serbs. We spend a significant amount of time discussing the very vigorous—though mostly neglected by the West at the time—Serbian opposition and anti-war movements, focusing particularly on the role of dissident media like the radio station B-92, which also allows for a discussion of the ways in which the Milošević government manipulated the public media and how vulnerable the students feel the United States might be to such popular media manipulation.\textsuperscript{14}

In further pursuit of this kind of critical empathy we discuss in substantial detail the 1995 massacre at Srebrenica. This atrocity is generally described in the press and even most of the scholarly literature as the massacre of ‘8,000 Muslim civilian men and boys’ by the Bosnian Serb army. But the city’s swollen refugee population included a number of Bosnian Serbs as well, and at least a few of those killed were in fact women. More importantly, although there can be no rationalizations for the killings themselves, our goals in this course make it imperative that the students think about what happened within the larger context, which included the reality, again rarely discussed in most Western accounts, that the city also sheltered a small Bosnian army unit, which periodically raided the surrounding, primarily Serb, communities and did kill Serb civilians. The Bosnian-Muslim commander of that unit, Nasir Orić, was convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague of war crimes in 2006, only to have that conviction reversed on appeal in 2008. Informed by a number of documentaries from varying viewpoints, our discussions of this case raise in a pointed and vexing manner the issues of how one defines ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator.’\textsuperscript{15} How are ‘combatants’ defined, and what constitutes ‘justifiable’ action in war-time? As in all other parts of this course, the goal is not so much to ‘instruct,’ to tell the students what is ‘true,’ but also certainly not to minimize, relativize, or in any way justify any of the horrors of the war. It is, rather, to confront the students with the messy and confusing

\textsuperscript{14} There are chapters on both the official use of media and the opposition media in Serbia in Udovički, \textit{Burn This House}.

\textsuperscript{15} For example, “Safe Haven: The United Nations and the Betrayal of Srebrenica,” (dir.) Ilan Ziv, Icarus Films, 1996; and “Yugoslavia: The Avoidable War,” (dir.) George Bogdanich, Hargrove Entertainment, 2002, a revisionist pro-Serb view; or a similar film which focuses particularly on Orić, “Srebrenica: A Town Betrayed,” (dir.) Ola Flyum and David Hebditch, Fenris Film, 2009.
reality of war; to force them into a position where they must negotiate for themselves among the competing values, principles, needs and demands that characterize all wars, and so develop an appreciation—a critical appreciation—for the predicament of those who live through them.

The final section of the course examines the fraught questions of the international community’s response to the conflict, and what comes after. On this issue too, at the beginning of the course students tend to be certain in their views about what the ‘right’ thing to do is. By the last third of the semester, however, they have lost much of that certainty, beginning instead to view all options critically, with a self-conscious eye towards their complexity—the costs and trade-offs inherent in all such acts of international policy. To begin with, the discussions are designed to help students distinguish between the various types of options and approaches to intervention, ranging from the least degree of commitment to the most: peace-keeping, peace-making and peace-building. The idea is for the students to begin to grasp the distinction between negative and positive peace, and how different policies and structures can contribute to different notions of peace and what is necessary to sustain them.

The question of international intervention into the Yugoslav conflicts obviously provides an excellent opportunity for making comparisons to the U.S.’s ongoing interventions around the world today—it is a question which has far more resonance to students in the 2010s, than it did for the American public in the 1990s, and our students who are veterans returning from those theaters bring with them a very unique, though not necessarily unified, perspective that adds a great deal to the class’s discussions. For this question, too, we tend to focus particular attention on the issue of Srebrenica—the actions that the international community (in the form of the United Nations) took and why, how well they worked (or didn’t), and what other actions might have been taken. The documentary “Safe Haven: The United Nations and the Betrayal of Srebrenica,” referenced earlier, is particularly good on the frustrating position in which the Dutch peacekeeping soldiers stationed in Srebrenica found themselves. Also excellent for viscerally, but entertainingly, highlighting both the stupidities of official international action and the frustrations of the ordinary soldiers hoping to do good (while simultaneously keeping a similar
eye on the stupidities of Bosnian behavior too) is the Academy Award-winning Bosnian film “No Man’s Land,” with whose director, Danis Tanović, we meet during the study abroad trip. And Samantha Power’s ‘A Problem From Hell’: America and the Age of Genocide is an invaluable resource which lays out in a very clear and judicious, yet still human and passionate way what the various options facing the United States were and what each would have cost, in every sense of that word. The films and readings we utilize on this question all have very clear standpoints—they take sides. But in the way they are written or presented they also allow, in fact demand, that the students assess those positions, understand their limitations and costs, and develop their own conclusions.

From there we move to the issue of ending the war and constructing the peace. For this we have the students work very closely in groups with the text of the Dayton Peace Accord itself. Aside from the specifics of the treaty, this is important because it helps students to understand that peace doesn’t just happen; it requires a foundation and a plan. Whether or not this particular plan is a good one—whether it sets the foundation for a sustainable peace, responsive to the real causes of the war and the real problems facing the post-war society—becomes the guiding question for the students, and each group, responding to a particular article of the treaty, is asked to make that judgment and defend it to the rest of the class. In addition to putting the provisions into the context of the larger history of the war and the region that they have gained during the previous weeks, this requires students to grapple with the question of goals beyond the simplistic ‘stop the fighting’: Is the goal simply to maintain stability in the existing context (peace-keeping), or to create a better future (peace-building)? What kind of a society do they wish to see emerge? Do they see the re-establishment of the status quo ante as the most desirable goal? Or do they believe it is best to separate the warring parties as autonomous or independent entities? Do they believe that accountability and facing the problems and crimes of the war and pre-war period are the most secure route to a true peace, or would it be better to turn a blind eye towards past wrongs and ‘move on’?


Should the post-war society be built on the basis of compromise and reconciliation—that all ethnic groups had legitimate grievances, all groups were equally victimized, and equally guilty—or does peace demand that rights and wrongs, guilty parties and victims, be identified as the basis for moving ahead? Does ‘justice’ mean that sanctions against wrong-doers be meted out only on the basis of strictly individual accountability, or is there a case to be made for denying the fruits of victory to nationalist groups, e.g., Radovan Karadžić’s Serbian Democratic Party and the war-created ‘Republika Srpska’ within Bosnia?

In studying the text students are always astonished to discover how minutely detailed, and very long, a peace treaty actually is, and needs to be. And in discussing and evaluating its provisions, they learn in a very practical way that the signing of the peace treaty doesn’t necessarily mean the end of conflict. Rather, they leave numerous problems that need to be addressed and numerous challenges that could bring the country back to war. Issues ranging from refugee return, the repair of destroyed homes and roads, disarmament, police protection, landmine removal, bringing war criminals to justice, and minority rights (e.g. the place of Roma and Jews in the new society) are among the issues that are discussed and debated. For the capstone project, the students, again working in small groups, choose one of these issues which they independently research, and then report their findings back to the class: what are the specific problems and how were they caused by the war? What is done, or not done, about them in the Dayton treaty? And what more do they feel needs to be done? This is revelatory work for the students, as most of them have never thought about the end of a war as a period of challenge and difficulty, or peace as something that must be constructed.

Perhaps the most important lesson in this section is that peace is possible in this region. We hope that our students will come to believe that it is not only possible but morally necessary to think about what moves a society towards real peace rather than merely settling on the first possible plan to end hostilities. The ‘reality on the ground’ needs to be responded to, but it should not dictate the goals of the peace and the future of the country. Realism and vision both have their place in this kind of work, and they need to inform each other.
The Study-Abroad Course

Immediately following the spring semester course, students who are interested and able have the opportunity to travel to the country that served as our primary case-study, the Republic of Bosnia and Hercegovina, for a four-week, six credit course. Our purpose in bringing students to Bosnia is on the one hand simply to deepen and enrich the knowledge and understanding they gained the previous semester; to make it more ‘real’ by confronting them with the physical reality of the scars of war and the pressing needs of a society trying to recover from war. But it is no mere cliché to add that our students also learn a tremendous amount about themselves from this experience—about what they are capable of, what ties them to others and makes them human, what makes them different and unique, what they want from life. In exactly the same way, we have also learned a tremendous amount about ourselves through the eight trips we have made to the country—about ourselves as scholars, as teachers, as citizens of the world.

There is no book-learning or lectures or structured academic discussion during the trip. Nevertheless, this is meant to be a true study-abroad, not simply a travel-abroad course—though it is ‘study’ of a notably different type. The emphasis throughout the course is, first, that students reflect on what they are seeing, hearing and doing, and attempt to relate it all back to their academic learning from the spring semester—or, conversely, note where the academic, book-learning fails in confrontation with the reality they have experienced. To that end, students are required to keep a journal—not simply a diary or travelogue of what they’ve done and seen, but an intellectual, academically-informed, but still very personal working-through of their experiences in the country. The journals are not graded, but they are collected and commented on periodically throughout the trip. Secondly, and more importantly (though this wasn’t completely clear to us when we first began in 2002), the course calls for students to become personally involved, not merely in terms of developing strong feelings about the country and what happened to it, but also in terms of giving something of themselves to the country and its people; to become in some small way a part of Bosnia’s recovery.
Our first concern in introducing the country to our students was that they should become familiar with all of the major population groups and their cultures. The country has historically been ethnically inter-mixed, but certain areas and cities have been associated with particular ethnic groups (an ethnic segregation which is much more pronounced now, after the war). Thus, we spend substantial amounts of time in Sarajevo (majority Muslim), Banja Luka (majority Serb), and Mostar (nearly equally divided between Muslims and Croats, but considered the unofficial ‘capital’ of the Bosnian-Croats). During the first two trips we had scheduled the stay in Banja Luka towards the end of the four weeks, purely out of logistical considerations. But we observed both years that the students exhibited a certain low-key hostility towards the idea of going to Banja Luka by that time—we believe because they had already ‘bonded’ so emotionally with Sarajevo and the Bosnian-Muslims, coupled with their lingering belief that ‘the Serbs’ collectively were somehow the ‘bad guys’ in the war. After that we moved the stay in Banja Luka to the first week to prevent the students’ developing an unwarranted preference for one group over another, and, while a certain anti-Serb bias persists to some degree, it has been much less marked. The students find, somewhat to their surprise, that they rather like Banja Luka, and the abstraction of ‘the Serbs’ becomes much more personalized and nuanced for the rest of the trip.

We also make shorter visits to Foća, Goražde, Višegrad, Srebrenica, Gradačac, Travnik, Tuzla, Žitomislići and Jasenovac. All of these sites played important roles in the war—some of them quite horrific roles. Foća, for example, was the site of one of the war’s infamous ‘rape camps’ and a mass killing of Muslims (we take a look at the building that housed the rape camp, now a “Youth Center”). Jasenovac was the site of a concentration run by the Croatian fascists during the Second World War, where nearly 100,000 people—mostly Serbs but also Jews, Gypsies, and anti-fascist Muslims and Croats—were murdered, a living memory which played a powerful, but too often overlooked role in the mentality and fears of many Serbs during the war. In traveling from one such site to another, from the site of one ethnic group’s victimization to that of another, in such close proximity, it brings home to the students in a way that no book or even documentary ever could, how complicated and inter-connected,
shared (though not necessarily equally), are the horror and sadness of, and also responsibility for, the war. The memorial to the Srebrenica massacre is an excellent case in point. The huge memorial cemetery and brand-new interpretive center is a somber and deeply moving place—one visited by hundreds of foreign visitors every year. Just a couple kilometers down the road there is a memorial erected by the Republika Srpska government to the memory of those Serbs from the region killed during the war, most notably by Nasir Orić’s raiders. This memorial receives very few visitors of any sort—foreign or Serb. The juxtaposition of the two ‘dueling memorials’ and their dueling senses of victimhood, and the prominence of the one and neglected state of the other, prompts very useful questions and discussion.

In all our travels, too, the students are able to see for themselves the physical destructiveness of the war. Although there is a bit less of that to see every year, outside of the major cities and even in Sarajevo and Mostar if one knows where to look, there is still plenty to see—bullet-pocked facades; burned-out buildings; ghostly, burned-out entire villages; ruined bridges; ominous signs and red-tape warning of landmine fields; and the collections of plaques on virtually every school, office, or apartment building in Sarajevo listing the inhabitants, pupils or colleagues who were killed during the war. Seeing the destruction first-hand, so many years after the end of the war, brings home to the students, again in a way no book or film can, what war means, what it costs, and how long-lasting its effects are.

Another valuable effect of these travels, however, is to enable our students to see how closely these groups lived together and how integrated their lives actually were, physically, socially and culturally. The physical and cultural remains of centuries of peaceful interaction are just as easily observable, and just as impressive, as are the remains of the war. Students can see the personal and cultural integration, . . . and then ask themselves how it could have disintegrated into such hatred and inhumanity. And in a similar vein, they see how simply beautiful the country is—the dense forests and green-clad mountains, the shockingly clear rivers, the elegant fusion of Eastern and Western architecture. Bosnia ceases to be merely a by-word for war and hatred, and becomes for the students a real place, and a place of great beauty and humanity. The war no longer seems in any sense natural or inevitable to them.
And the juxtaposition of those realities with the still inescapable reality of the war, again, provokes very useful questions in the minds of our students.

In each location we meet with representatives of the three dominant ethnic-nationalist political groups—the Serbian Democratic Party in Banja Luka, the Croatian Democratic Union in Mostar, and the Party of Democratic Action in Sarajevo—giving them the chance to talk about how they view the war—what it was about, and what it achieved or destroyed—as well as what they see as the most important problems facing the country today. We also talk to representatives of non-nationalist parties which attempt (without, so far, much success) to represent all the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, like film director Danis Tanović’s Our Party. It is interesting, and important, for students to hear such radically different perspectives on what happened and what it means, expressed with such conviction and sincerity.

And this is also where it is crucial that the students have already been exposed to the academic study of the war’s history. The students on our first trips were often overwhelmed by the disparities and felt at a loss as to what to believe. The prior academic learning gives them the tools to compare those perspectives critically to each other, and to the history they learned, and to react to them with their own perspectives. In all of our meetings, the students are not expected merely to listen, but rather, explicitly, to engage. The meetings are described to them as interviews, and they are the interviewers, their job to understand their interlocutors’ points of view on their own terms, but also to probe, even to challenge (politely). And the people we meet expect no less. One of the things we learned in our very first trip was that everyone we met in the country, every group, official or unofficial, wanted to interact with our students. They wanted to respond to our students’ questions and beliefs; they wanted to hear what our students thought about their country and what happened to it. Most Bosnians and Herzegovinians feel forgotten by the world, and our students have always been enthusiastically welcomed by all groups.

In order to afford the students a fuller and more realistic and human view of what happened, it is of course important that we go beyond the ‘official’ standpoints, and include other types of community voices. The students also meet with people who fought in the war; people who were victimized by the
war, losing loved ones and/or homes; concentration camp survivors; international community and local NGO aid workers; community activists; academics; university students; and high school teachers and pupils. Given the relevance of gender for the way the war was fought and its consequences, we make a particular point of meeting with several organizations that deal particularly or exclusively with women’s issues. We also make a particular point of meeting with community activists from the two most important—though usually quite forgotten—minority populations in the country: the Jewish community of Sarajevo, and Roma rights activists in Tuzla. The visits with these groups not only frustrate the standard This Group vs. That Group narrative that still dominates accounts of the Bosnian war; they also give the students a rare look at the nature of these two populations and their identities, which tend to be known by the typical student from our region only as crass stereotypes. It is extraordinary—and in the current international climate invaluable—for them to hear, for example, about how the Jewish community in Sarajevo opened a free pharmacy during the 1991-95 siege to help the entrapped, mostly Muslim population; and how during the Second World War, the city’s Muslim population worked actively to hide and save Jews from the Germans. After this trip, the categories ‘Muslim’ and ‘Jew’ appear quite different to our students.

This also connects with our desire that the students come to see Bosnia and Hercegovina, its people and history as more than simply war. Even if the war is our reason for bringing them to the country, in order to truly understand that war and what it meant to the people who lived through it, it is essential that our students understand that the war of the 1990s was only one period in a very long and rich history. To help them to an appreciation of the cultures and peoples of the country we include, for example, visits to an Orthodox church service in Banja Luka, a Catholic mass in Mostar (or alternatively in Međugorje), a Jewish Shabbat service in the Sarajevo synagogue, and a visit to the main mosque in Sarajevo. Seeing and participating in these things personally on the one hand helps provide our students with a richer texture than books can provide to their understanding of what, e.g., Serb or Muslim identities are about, what they’re based on (even if religiosity is not essential to them). And in addition,
the sheer beauty and ancient eloquence of the buildings and services themselves are profoundly moving, and again help to shatter the students’ preconceptions about who these people are and what they were fighting for.

The diversity of opinion and perspective the students are exposed to is extreme, and very deliberate on our part. In pursuing our goal of critical empathy, we feel it is necessary to challenge not just the usual ethnic narrative of the war, but all narratives, including the narrative of war itself. Some of the community groups, such as the Mothers of the Enclaves of Srebrenica and Žepa, for instance, are highly critical of all ‘national’ leaders, most especially their own, which allows our students to consider the recent history not just in terms of this ethnic group against that ethnic group, but in terms of governmental leaders vs. ‘ordinary’ citizens. And in recent years many (though certainly not all) of the high school students with whom we spend an entire day have no personal memories of the war and are sick to death of hearing about it and having their country associated with it. For these younger people, the war is no longer so relevant to their lives and who they are. Again, the effect that we hope for is that our students, in being presented with such an extreme variety of perspectives and viewpoints will find themselves questioning essentially everything they had taken as ‘given,’ and find themselves compelled to create their own narrative—in the absence of any sure givens, to be forced to decide on the basis of their own values and experiences in the country what matters.

We also insist that our students get to know Bosnia as their peers know it. We deliberately schedule the meeting with students from the Philosophical Faculty (essentially the College of Liberal Arts) of the University of Sarajevo early in the trip in the hopes that our students will make some lasting connections, and that the Bosnian students will take our students to the most popular student bars and discos. We have not yet been disappointed in that hope. We always schedule visits to traditional music concerts (folk music--Sevdalinka--remains enormously popular with all age groups) and also to professional soccer games, as well as arranging pick-up games with local kids—who regularly trounce us. Food, too, is incredibly important. The cuisine of Bosnia and Hercegovina—an intoxicating mélange of
Slavic, Turkish, Austrian and Italian influences—in its own way allows our students to experience the history and the ethnic intermixing of the region through their stomachs, a lesson quickly learned and appreciated by them. In 2012 we arranged to have our landlady in Sarajevo give our students a cooking lesson in how to make the local meat-pie specialty, *burek*—a great success. These things are all fun, and when we spend so much time talking to survivors of war, rape and genocide, it is imperative for their own mental health that the students have some respite. But, again, there is another rationale for all of this that is intimately connected to our learning goals about this—or any—war. The war was not ‘natural’ or pre-ordained. It was a tragedy, and a tragedy not only in the individual sense—the killing and suffering that individuals were subjected to—but also in an historical and cultural sense. That, too, is worth understanding and knowing, by experiencing it first-hand.

Lastly, we came to feel strongly after the first several trips that we should try to arrange to have our students give something back to Bosnia. In part this is because our students take so much away, in knowledge, insights, caring and friendships, while the needs there are still so great—even now, 18 years after the end of the war—that we felt an obligation to not just come, see, express sympathy, and leave—no war tourism—but rather to do something to repay Bosnia for what it has given us and help its people in their recovery efforts in whatever small way we are able. But in addition to that, in the spirit of the recent trend towards ‘service-learning’ in the Liberal Arts, we have come to believe that student engagement not simply in their own learning process but in the subject matter itself—in this case in Bosnia’s efforts to recover from war—and the opportunity to apply what they’ve learned in a real-world context are extremely valuable, indeed essential from an educational point of view. The little that we can do to give something back will be a modest help to Bosnia; but it will, we think, be a very large help, in fact a transformative, a liberating experience, for our students. So for the last several years we have been arranging with an organization of survivors of concentration camps in Sarajevo for our students to help with English language classes for their members, most of whom are older. We are also working with an
organization that provides scholarships and summer activities for children who have lost parents in the war to explore ways in which our students might be able to work in some capacity with those children.

Our short travel schedule and restricted resources limit what we can offer in this regard, but we hope to expand this type of activity in the future. However, there is a great deal our students can do and still ‘give back’ to Bosnia upon their return to the U.S. (or whatever their country of origin). We ask, for example, that they be willing to share, informally as well as in formal campus presentations, their experiences, stories and understanding of the conflict and current situation in Bosnia and Hercegovina, and to act as advocates, on whatever level they choose, for urging a better, more humane and more productive U.S. response to Bosnia, and to the problems of war and human rights violations more generally. One student, who worked at a day-care facility in a neighboring town, mobilized his day-care charges to design and sell t-shirts to benefit amputee children in Bosnia. He raised and sent to Bosnia several hundred dollars, not only helping out many Bosnian children, but in so doing raising awareness among the American children and their parents.

From the start of the spring semester, this sequence of courses is explicitly based on encouraging the notion of active citizenship. It reminds our students of their civic responsibility to the rest of humanity while providing them with the skills, knowledge and experiences to formulate their own visions of the kind of future they would like to see. Our aim is to call forth, and strengthen the students’ ability to empathize, critically. Empathy, unlike sympathy, requires not simply knowledge or even understanding, but personal experience and commitment. This, we believe, is the very essence of the Liberal Arts. And it is a very productive way to teach and engage with issues of war and peace.