

Lessons Unlearned: Bosnian War Stories Amid Modern Conflicts

It was Thursday, December 5, and London was amidst a severe blizzard. Cars were immobilized, and visibility was near zero. I expected my interviewees were going to ask to reschedule. I was already 45 minutes late. To my surprise, however, I got a text from Avdija Ramic, one of the interviewees, stating, "We're still here. Take your time."

They wanted to tell their story – a story almost 30 years in the making.

After trudging through the snow, I finally arrived at the Bosnian Canadian Islamic Centre. It was my first time visiting a mosque. As I opened the door, it flew open, no thanks to the wicked winter wind blowing ferociously outside. Begrudgingly, it was quite the first impression to make.

I was greeted graciously by Avdija, the Imam at the mosque and Nazifa Beganovic, my second interviewee. We sat down at a table in the mosque. For the next two hours, I sat still, gripped by every word shared by these two individuals.

Ramic and Beganovic began to recount their stories of the Bosnian War. A war that occurred almost thirty years ago in the Balkans from 1992-1995. It was a war that some say has been forgotten by history or deemed extremely complex and difficult to understand. It was a war within a war, often seen as the darkest period of the Yugoslav Wars due to the genocide in Srebrenica.

Beganovic was 10 years old when the war broke out. It was 1992, and she was living in the Republic of Srpska. She remembers feeling uneasy as her fellow Bosniaks were thrown into a chaotic world as war erupted. "I was watching television, and Slobodan Milosevic, the President

of Serbia, declared that he was going to remove the Muslim people,” Beganovic stated. “That’s when my mother knew we had to leave the country.”

That same year, Beganovic, her mother and her brother packed up what they had and headed to Croatia by bus, leaving behind her father. “I will always remember April 16, 1992. That was the last time I saw my father alive,” she said, holding back tears.

Ramic was a young six-year-old boy when the war began. He remembers hiding in a basement, sometimes for days, with hardly any food or water. “It was a traumatic time in my life, and I still suffer from PTSD now as a 38-year-old,” said Ramic.

For Ramic and Beganovic, the most devastating aspect of their story was not the war itself but rather the genocide that unfolded in 1995, which shattered their lives.

Srebrenica then, Gaza now

The Srebrenica massacre was a genocidal killing that took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina in July 1995. [More than 8,000 people, mostly Muslim men, were systematically executed](#) by the Serb-led Yugoslav Army.

“People had this delusion that the men trapped in Bosnia were alive. With everything in life, you hold out hope. But we all knew the truth, that they were going to die,” stated Beganovic. Both Ramic and Beganovic lost over 80 family members collectively during the genocide. Beganovic was particularly affected, as her father was executed on July 15, 1995.

However, she only learned of his death in September 2008, when some of his remains were found in Visoko, located 168 km from the site of his murder. “They found his remains scattered

and determined that he had been dismembered. He was essentially thrown out like garbage,” cried Beganovic.

According to the International Commission on Missing Persons, bodies are still being found from the genocide. In 2024, 14 additional bodies were discovered, increasing Srebrenica’s death toll three decades later.

Despite the genocide's horrors, Ramic believed that some justice was served to those responsible for the atrocities, such as Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic and Serbian military officer Ratko Mladić. Bosnia and Herzegovina gained independence, and the people of the former Yugoslavia began rebuilding their lives.

To this day, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia has prosecuted more than 161 individuals who participated in war crimes during the Yugoslav Wars.

Ramic and Beganovic consider themselves "the fortunate ones," having survived the horrific circumstances of the Bosnian war and subsequent genocide. Although they have since reconstructed their lives, a new conflict has caught their attention: The war in Gaza.

Ramic described Gaza as the “younger sister of Bosnia,” adding, “The same thing is happening to the Palestinians that happened to the Bosnian people,”

Although there has not been international consensus determining whether or not a genocide is occurring in Gaza, Ramic—who holds a Master of Laws from the University of Toronto and who is affiliated with the Institute for Research of Genocide Canada, believes that the situation in Gaza mirrors the events in Bosnia, describing it as a "copy/paste" scenario.

“There is a big difference between a genocide and a war. There is one sentence that separates the definition of war and genocide. Genocide means exactly when you have a plan and strategy to remove or cleanse a nation. That strategy is missing in the definition of war. This is what I see happening in Gaza,” said Ramic.

Ramic deeply supports the Palestinian freedom cause and wishes for an end to the violence and terror plaguing the region. As the Imam of the Bosnian Canadian Islamic Centre, he has organized numerous events to support those impacted by the ongoing crisis in Gaza.

“We organize Pro-Palestinian events any chance we get. It’s not just because most Palestinians are Muslims; it is because we see the injustices that are going on in Gaza. As a survivor of genocide, it’s our duty to be supportive and caution others about the dangers and tragedy of genocide,” said Ramic.

The mosque’s solidarity and support for the Palestinian community in London have not gone unnoticed. Fariha Islam, a member of the Canadian Palestinian Social Association of London Ontario (CPSALO), praised Ramic for his advocacy efforts.

“The Imam and his mosque have supported our organization’s cause wholeheartedly. Our people have faced similar struggles, and his compassion means a lot to us,” said Islam.

Community helps, and community heals

According to Ramic, the Bosnian community in London was established in 1997. He views the mosque as a refuge from the trials and tribulations of the outside world.

He shared the story of Prophet Muhammed, highlighting that upon migrating from Mecca to Medina, Muhammed's first action was to construct a place of worship before establishing his own home.

“As Imam, I want people, especially the youth, to come to the mosque. The mosque fosters community. The mosque is home,” he said.

Ramic views the mosque as the heart of the Bosnian community in London. There was a time when the Bosnian mosque housed Bosniak refugees, acting not only as a place of worship but also as a shelter, calling back to the story of Muhammed’s migration to Medina.

Except in this case, it was from Bosnia to London.

‘We cannot forget – so we must remember’

As the 30th anniversary of the genocide’s end approaches on July 12, 2025, Ramic and Beganovic discussed the commemoration plans which are set to occur at the Civic Gardens in London.

“Genocide isn’t supposed to happen to anyone; we cannot forget – so we must remember,” declared Beganovic.

According to the United Nations, genocide denialism regarding Srebrenica is an issue in certain parts of the world, specifically among Serbian Nationalists.

Ramic has experienced genocide denialism regarding Srebrenica right here in London. “Even after all these years, people still don’t think it happened. They acknowledge the war but not the

genocide. It's awful," said Ramic. "*Historia magistra vitae*, history is the teacher of life. Even with all of this tragedy, the lessons still remain unlearned."