



STEPS TOWARD CONFLICT PREVENTION PROJECT

Case Study

Tuzla, Bosnia: Cross-Ethnic Solidarity in the Face of Ethnic Cleansing

This case study is one of a series of case studies developed as part of the Steps Toward Conflict Prevention Project (STEPS), directed by the Collaborative for Development Action (CDA), in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. The STEPS project seeks to understand how certain communities are able to exempt themselves from the violence that surrounds them. The Project is gathering case studies from such communities around the world, in an effort to identify patterns and to draw lessons about conflict prevention.

*The cases were written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across a range of situations. Each case represents the views and perspectives of a variety of people—the case writer(s), individuals, agencies, participants, and observers—at the point it was written. **This case study is not intended for citation or publication. It is not a final product of the STEPS Project.***

The Project would like to acknowledge the generosity of the individuals and agencies involved in donating their time and experience for these case studies, and for their willingness to share their experiences. Not all of the cases will be made public, in deference to the people and communities involved.

This case study is a working document. We welcome all feedback and comments. For more information on the STEPS project and CDA, see www.cdainc.com.

The STEPS project has been funded by the government development agencies of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, and the German agency Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst (EED).

Marshall Wallace

August 2002

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects

17 Dunster Street, Suite 202, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA

1 617 661 6310, Fax 1 617 661 3805

Tuzla, Bosnia: Cross-Ethnic Solidarity in the Face of Ethnic Cleansing

Background and Context

The city of Tuzla, in northeastern Bosnia, has been an ethnically mixed city for centuries, with a population of Muslims, Croats, and Serbs living together. During the Balkan War of 1992-1995, while almost every other municipality saw ethnic strife and active ethnic cleansing, Tuzla remained ethnically mixed and united around a common identity. This case study explores this experience. How was Tuzla able to resist the pressures of the conflict? Why was Tuzla able to maintain a common identity while other similar municipalities splintered?

Before the war the city of Tuzla was about 60% Muslim, 15% Croat, 15% Serb with about 10% “other” (Roma, Italian, etc.) in a population of 110,000. While many people left the city both before and during the fighting, it is estimated by UNHCR that the population of the city has rebounded to about 100,000. Although no census has been taken since 1990, UNHCR and others think that the ethnic makeup of the city is quite similar to what it was before the war, but with a slightly higher proportion of Muslims and Croats to Serbs. However, one person uneasily guessed that the Serb population is now about 8-10% of the total (a significant drop if 8% is accurate).

Whatever their judgments about the current population ratios, however, everyone seems to agree that as war approached, the tensions, as elsewhere, mounted within the city of Tuzla. While all citizens of the city were worried about the war, the Serbs in particular felt a lot of pressure. The war along the Eastern edge of Bosnia had quickly become defined as Serb against Muslim and no one was certain what would happen in Tuzla with its Muslim majority. Many people chose to leave the city before the fighting broke out, including a very large contingent of Serbs who left within the first week of May, 1992. Many questions remain about this sudden mass flight and about what prompted it.

The war was fought all across Bosnia. The city of Tuzla was not exempt from the conflict and was, in fact, on the front lines of the war for nearly three years. Throughout the three years the Serb, Muslim, and Croat citizens of Tuzla fought side-by-side in defense of their city, not making the sorts of distinctions between the ethnic groups and religions that were being made elsewhere in the Balkans. This experience of Tuzla during the Balkan War is nearly unique.

When the war began, the mayor and the municipality agreed that they would support the Bosnian Federation. The military units stationed in and around the city of Tuzla were given the choice of supporting Bosnia or of leaving the city. Some units chose to remain. The first fighting in and around the city began on May 15, 1992 as military units stationed in Tuzla made decisions about which side to support. Units which supported the Bosnian Serb cause moved out of Tuzla and set up artillery in the hills to the East of the city. The shelling from these hills continued sporadically until the cease-fire three years later.

Elements of Tuzla's Resistance

How was Tuzla able to avoid the ethnic cleansing and the attitudes of group hatred that characterized the conflict elsewhere in the Balkans? Several other Bosnian municipalities were as (if not more) ethnically mixed as Tuzla. The communist regime of Yugoslavia had made a point of building new communities with mixed populations such as Zenica, as well as offering incentives for people to intermarry. Nonetheless, these communities fractured along ethnic lines and people were driven from their homes. This did not happen in the city of Tuzla.

There were, and continue to be, several elements that assisted the city of Tuzla to maintain pluralist attitudes even in the face of extreme pressure. To explore them, I interviewed a wide range of people from Tuzla, from the man who had been mayor during the war and some of the people who had been in the municipality government, to some of the religious leaders, to a number of people—normal citizens—who stayed in Tuzla throughout the war.

Four of the most important elements cited in conversation were the Leadership and the roles the municipality leaders played; the uses people made of Symbolism; the uses of History of the city; along with the Shared Identity of the people. All four of these are intertwined in such a way that any story told to illustrate one or another of these elements inevitably has components of one of the other elements in it as well. In the following, some stories are loosely grouped under each element, but the connections across them will also be discussed.

Shared Identity

People in Tuzla had quite a lot to say about identity. As elsewhere in the Balkans, ethnic identity plays an important part in how people define the war and their part in it. However, in Tuzla there is also a fierce sense of local identity, a “Tuzla identity” that everyone from Tuzla shares.

Ethnic identity as an abstraction came up in every conversation, as well as some mention about the political manipulation of it. However, ethnicity was almost always brought up to provide a contrast with the experience of Tuzla, where ethnicity was said to have played little if any role in people's lives before the war. Ethnicity mattered elsewhere, they said, not in Tuzla.

When asked about the identity of people in Tuzla, which group someone belongs to, several people said, “There are only two kinds of people from Tuzla: those who stayed during the war and those who left.” This phrase was said with a sort of steely determination and a certain amount of anger at those who chose to leave. The majority of people stayed in the city throughout the war and the shelling even though many had opportunities to leave. When asked about this, people often said, “I'm from Tuzla. It was important to stay here.”

It is true that several thousand people did leave Tuzla during the war, escaping to other countries in Europe or crossing over into Republika Srpska. Those who stayed do not consider those people as Tuzlites any longer. When confronted by plausible stories told by people who left of why, often the response was, “They can say whatever they like. I don’t believe them.”

The people of Tuzla say that they suffered together and that this suffering formed a bond for those who stayed. Now that the war is nearly a decade in the past, several people said that the solidarity they felt then has disappeared and that people are only interested in money now.

Some younger people note that in school now, history is taught in such a way that students cannot avoid knowing the ethnic identity of their classmates. They say that it used to be that people did not know what was a Serb name, a Croat name or a Muslim name. “Now everyone knows”.

Nonetheless, according to everyone interviewed, the unity of the city of Tuzla remains an active and integral part of the self-identity of people from Tuzla. People who are too young to have any real memory or understanding of the war still claim that being from Tuzla means “that you accept everybody”.

The shared identity of people from Tuzla does have another side. As they group Bosnians as “from Tuzla” or “not from Tuzla”, people from Tuzla feel some smugness compared to the other towns and cities. They say they are living the dream of a multi-ethnic state already—and, they say, always have been. People from Tuzla contrast their attitude with that of people in Sarajevo where, they say, everybody knows what ethnicity everybody else is. People from Tuzla say that people from Sarajevo look down on them, claiming that people from Tuzla are rustic hicks and not cosmopolitan. But the real reason, say the people from Tuzla, is that Sarajevo fell to pieces in the war and Tuzla did not.

History

When the people of Tuzla talk about the history of the city they talk about the spirit of solidarity that “always” existed. They claim that the city of Tuzla has always been a place where people from different faiths and ethnicities could live together. People have lived and worked side by side for centuries they say. Explanations of this vary. As different people talk about the different eras in Tuzla’s history, they suggest that the history of the sense solidarity originated at different times.

Alternative explanations include:

The city of Tuzla’s largest industry is mining, with many other industries and operations that accompany mining. The word “Tuzla” means “salt” in Turkish and Tuzla began as a major salt mine. An early story says that the citizens of Tuzla demanded concessions from the Turks five hundred years ago and that they were led by a Muslim, a Croat, and

Serb. There are stories of defiance and demands for independence from the Austrians as well.

Others say that the sense of solidarity really grew out of labor organization. Partly as a result of being an early industrial town in the Balkans, Tuzla was a hotbed of labor organizing during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The labor unions forged a strong sense of working-class solidarity across the ethnic groups and religions. Everybody worked side-by-side in the mines and factories and what someone was not nearly as important as the union.

Others referred to the experience of Tuzla during the Second World War. The city of Tuzla resisted the Nazis and the Chetniks (the fascist collaborators). It has become a source of great civic pride that the city did not join the collaborationist regime.

Several people mentioned that as a result of the strong socialist movement in Tuzla, accompanied by a relatively strong economy, religion had faded as an influence on people's lives over the years. People contrasted this role of religion in Tuzla to other regions and people in Bosnia.

In the elections of 1990, Tuzla was the only major municipality that did not vote for a nationalist party. Tuzla voted instead for the Social Democrats, a socialist (not communist) party. The mayor elected in those elections, Selim Beslagic, was also mayor throughout the war. Mr Beslagic is now the governor of the Canton of Tuzla (the larger administrative region). When this case was written, elections were scheduled to take place in a few months. At the writing, the Social Democrats still controlled the city municipality and the administration of the region.

The history of the war provides several examples of people remaining and working together.

The police force in Tuzla remained multi-ethnic throughout the war, even increasing the proportion of Croat and Serb officers. This is in marked contrast to other cities in Bosnia-Herzegovina (particularly Sarajevo).

In addition, there were army units in Tuzla, in particular a completely Croatian one, who declared their loyalty to the Bosnian state as well as to Tuzla. These units defended the city throughout the war and became more mixed rather than less over the course of the war.

Symbolism

People in Tuzla readily discuss the symbols they used during the war to emphasize the solidarity and common identity of people in Tuzla. There were several ways that people were able to demonstrate their solidarity with their neighbors, and also ways to emphasize the singular identity of being from Tuzla.

Because religion was such a significant divider during the war, it took on a heightened importance in Tuzla. (As noted above, this was something of a surprise to people who explained the non-religious/socialist identity of Tuzlites.)

Early in the war, the Bosnian Serb artillery fired a shell that destroyed a major Orthodox church in Tuzla. The mayor immediately called on all the workers who were doing repairs in the city to come to the church and to rebuild it. The workers worked even during the night, under floodlights in full view of the gunners, in order to rebuild the church as quickly as possible.

The mayor said that the church was important because “Our citizens of the Orthodox faith need a place to worship. We must support them in their faith”. Furthermore, “This church belongs to all of the citizens of Tuzla and we cannot allow anyone from outside to destroy it”.

During the war, celebrations of religious holidays became civil events, celebrated citywide. Celebrations of any sort were important for morale, but also served to bring people together. In Tuzla, everybody became aware of their neighbors’ different religions and the holy days they celebrated. The people began to celebrate the holiday with each other, learning the proper times and dates of each other’s religious holidays .

An important part of the celebrations were the traditional foods that were cooked. Everybody in a neighborhood would join together to cook the correct food for each holiday, even if was for another religion.

The city also held secular events to bring people together. There were plays and concerts organized by the municipality as well as ones organized spontaneously by the citizenry. The mayor formed an orchestra for Tuzla and asked them to “keep a smile on the face to citizens”. They were commissioned to write new “patriotic” songs and to play them whenever they had the chance. The aim was to get people to sing the new songs.

Late in the war, a sporting event was organized for the youth of the region. Young people from all over the area gathered in Tuzla to participate in athletic events. The gathering was attacked by artillery and a shell exploded in the crowd, killing seventy young people.

Even with this tragedy, the mayor was able to interpret it and respond in a way that bolstered the togetherness that had carried Tuzla this far. He immediately suggested that all the young people who had been killed should be buried side-by-side in a location provided by the city. The message would be one demonstrating the unity of the city. A monument would be erected to all the youth of Tuzla (the monument is now the site of a memorial service every year).

While most of the children’s families agreed with this idea, there was some resistance. Some imams said that the Muslims went to them and did not want their children buried next to Christians. The mayor did not overreact to this. He asked who was objecting. It

turned out that only a few Muslim parents had objections to the plan and this was because they wanted their children to be buried according to their traditions. The mayor met them and they achieved an understanding. It was agreed that no one had to have their child buried in the common cemetery; each family could bury its child the way they wanted to. Fifty families chose to bury their children together in the community plot.

One family had a daughter who was killed and another who was injured. When the injured daughter came out of the hospital, she asked her parents where her sister was buried. The sister had been buried apart from the other children. The injured girl insisted to her parents that her sister must be reburied with the other children. It was extremely important to her. The parents finally agreed and the body of their daughter was moved.

Leadership

The leadership of the city of Tuzla was extremely important during the war. The civic and military leaders all played a visible role in keeping the city together.

In particular, it is difficult to overemphasize the role the mayor played in maintaining the morale of the citizens of Tuzla. His indefatigable efforts even earned him a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. He was said to have been ubiquitous. He was everywhere, constantly exhorting people to stay cheerful, to not let the enemy win.

The mayor was not the only one in the administration of the city who was committed to keeping the city together. Several other members of the administration were active in working for the city. Of the six hundred workers in the municipality, only sixty left the city and their posts during the war. This commitment of the city workers to staying on at their jobs was cited by many as inspiring them to stay as well.

As soon as the war started, the mayor established a war cabinet, consisting of the chief of police and the local army commander along with some of the civic department heads. This group met every single morning to (as the mayor said) “to prepare for the challenges for that day”. They worked collectively to organize the defense of the city and the maintenance of the civil services at the same time. They agreed that the police department would remain a part of the civil service and not acquire military functions, or be used as an auxiliary force by the military. One result of this decision was that Tuzla did not suffer from much criminal activity during the war. The police maintained civil order without being distracted by other duties.

The chief of police was determined to keep the police force multi-ethnic. He did not let his officers split into factions as happened in other cities. He also continued to hire new officers during the conflict, and made sure that they were drawn equally from all groups. One goal was to change the mostly Muslim force that existed before the war into proportion with the population of the city.

The army commander also insisted on mixed units where feasible. When the war broke out he offered his soldiers the chance to leave if they were unwilling to fight in a mixed army.