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Brandeis 1998 Ethics and Coexistence Student Projects Fellows

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Ethnic Conflict and Human Rights in the Former Yugoslavia

Internship with the Center for Anti War Action
Belgrade, Yugoslavia

Summary of Paper

This thesis uses the crisis in Kosovo, as the situation stood before the out break of war, as a prism through which to examine several fundamental problems with the basic principles of international law that are supposed to put limits on international political behavior. Such problems are based on the clash between the principle of self determination and other concepts that are at the foundation of the international order, such as state sovereignty, the inviolability of national borders, and non-interference in the internal affairs of another state. This thesis attempts to answer the question of how different groups living within an established state justify their conflicting actions on the basis of the clashing principles of state sovereignty and self determination. It will also answer how and under what conditions the United States responds to such conflicting claims to state formation. I will use the Kosovo conflict as a means to examine the clashing and contradictory principles of international relations. I will also examine ethnic tensions in Macedonia as another example of the uncertainty that the international community has about the definitions and consequences of the principles of state sovereignty and self determination.



Project Goals:

- To educate youth and professionals in Yugoslavia about coexistence and tolerance.
- To peacefully protest oppressive governmental policies in Yugoslavia.
- To promote human rights in Yugoslavia.

Personal Goals:

To learn about the ethnic and political situation in the heterogeneous region of the former Yugoslavia.

To receive hands-on experience working in an NGO dealing with ethnic conflict and conflict management.

**Activities:**

Observed interactions between people in the community who have passionate feelings about the situation in Yugoslavia.

Visited and interviewed representatives of regional and international NGO's involved in human rights work and conflict management in Yugoslavia.

Participated in the Forum for Ethnic Relations' summer school in Zjablak, Montenegro, where I explored issues of Balkan psychology, as well as the crisis in Kosovo and its effects on the Albanian population in Montenegro.

Key Dilemmas:

How can I, as an American, empathize with and understand the powerful emotions associated with nationality and ethnicity in the Balkans?

Is it possible to negotiate, or talk rationally and logically, with people who seem extremely set in their beliefs and convictions? If so, how?

Can historical events and myths be used in forward looking and progressive ways? How?

**Important Learnings:**

Being a good listener and observer is important while trying to gain close understanding of another culture's way of thinking.

Different versions of history play an important role in ethnic conflict.

Problems in ethnic relations are not only about racism and prejudices. Ethnic tensions increase when issues of wealth and social status come into play.



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