



Sarajevo Under Siege: Anthropology in Wartime (The Ethnography of Political Violence)

By Ivana Maček

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Sarajevo Under Siege offers a richly detailed account of the lived experiences of ordinary people in this multicultural city between 1992 and 1996, during the war in the former Yugoslavia. Moving beyond the shelling, snipers, and shortages, it documents the coping strategies people adopted and the creativity with which they responded to desperate circumstances.

Ivana Maček, an anthropologist who grew up in the former Yugoslavia, argues that the division of Bosnians into antagonistic ethnonational groups was the result rather than the cause of the war, a view that was not only generally assumed by Americans and Western Europeans but also deliberately promoted by Serb, Croat, and Muslim nationalist politicians. Nationalist political leaders appealed to ethnoreligious loyalties and sowed mistrust between people who had previously coexisted peacefully in Sarajevo. Normality dissolved and relationships were reconstructed as individuals tried to ascertain who could be trusted.

Over time, this ethnography shows, Sarajevans shifted from the shock they felt as civilians in a city under siege into a "soldier" way of thinking, siding with one group and blaming others for the war. Eventually, they became disillusioned with these simple rationales for suffering and adopted a "deserter" stance, trying to take moral responsibility for their own choices in spite of their powerless position. The coexistence of these contradictory views reflects the confusion Sarajevans felt in the midst of a chaotic war.

Maček respects the subjectivity of her informants and gives Sarajevans' own words a dignity that is not always accorded the viewpoints of ordinary citizens. Combining scholarship on political violence with firsthand observation and telling insights, this book is of vital importance to people who seek to understand the dynamics of armed conflict along ethnonational lines both within and beyond Europe.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Mažek succeeds in her aim of offering an anthropological perspective on war, telling the stories of Sarajevans during the siege with clarity, empathy, and intellectual integrity. . . . Mažek's study represents a valuable contribution to the study of war in general and the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia in particular."—*Slavic Review*

"Original, important, and exciting. Most ethnographies of war aren't actually conducted at the epicenters of war, nor even on the front lines. Mažek's is. She stands among a handful of scholars who combine true ethnography of war with enduring commitment to both academic and personal ethics."—Carolyn Nordstrom, University of Notre Dame

About the Author

Ivana Macek is Associated Professor of Cultural Anthropology and Senior Lecturer in Genocide Studies at the Hugo Valentin Center of Uppsala University, Sweden.

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Preface

In the summer of 1991, war broke out in the former Yugoslav Republic of Slovenia. On my television set in Uppsala, I watched tanks belonging to the former Yugoslav People's Army (JNA, *Jugoslavenska narodna armija*) tear up the lawns in the parks of the Slovenian capital, Ljubljana. I realized that something entirely beyond my comprehension was happening. I knew about wars in the past and in other parts of the world, but I had been taught that the Second World War was the last war there would ever be in Europe. Now, it was here. I did not know what it meant or what forms it would take, but I was sure that my understanding of the world would never be the same again.

The next shock came at the end of the summer: the war started in Croatia. I listened to a Swedish radio reporter saying that the air raid alert had just been heard in Zagreb, my hometown. He sounded very agitated, reporting from his hotel room near the railway station. The streets were empty as far as he could see, peering through his window despite the warning to keep away from the windows. Journalists were cautioned not to use cameras, as snipers could easily mistake them for weapons. On television, I saw young armed men in black and camouflage clothing, mixing military and civilian garb, with black bands around their heads. Someone called *Crni Marko* ("Black Marko") was giving an interview to the Swedish television network. With an air of self-satisfaction, he identified himself as a unit leader in the new Croatian army and explained that they were fighting for the long-awaited sovereignty of Croatia and freedom from Serbian hegemony. At the end, with a wide grin, he sent greetings to all the lovely Swedish girls. It was strange to see these big Rambo-like boys standing there as representatives of my own people and country.

I was even more deeply disturbed when I heard that one of my best friends had volunteered for the Croatian

army. This young man had a genuine pacifist temperament. The year he did his obligatory military service he developed a nervous ulcer, not only because of the meaninglessness of his duties but also because he was an individualist who disliked any form of authoritarianism. He spoke four European languages, loved to travel, and relished mountain climbing, spelunking, and skiing in loose clothes which would flutter in the wind, giving him a sense of freedom. He had introduced me to Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix, Friedrich Nietzsche and Erich Fromm. I simply could not put these things together with what I had heard. I could not believe that he had turned into a *Crni Marko*.

Like many young people in the former Yugoslavia, I had believed that conditions of life and work were better in the West than at home. Before the war, however, few had the opportunity to leave. I came to Sweden in 1990 as student in the language cooperation program between Zagreb University and The Swedish Institute. My grant was for the spring term, and after that I decided to use my private resources in order to study cultural anthropology in Uppsala. I enjoyed my studies and the new friends I made.

Once the war began, it became easier to enter Western countries, but coming out of necessity, as a refugee, was much more difficult than making this choice of your own free will. For my part, the start of war in my hometown meant that within a month I felt compelled to go to Zagreb and see for myself what was going on. Was anything left of the world I knew, and did I have anything in common with the people who once were close to me? Together with Karine Mannerfelt, a Swedish friend and journalist, I took the train to Zagreb in October 1991. We encountered the first signs of war in the Munich railway station. Sitting at a table near ours in the café was a Yugoslav family: an elderly couple dressed like villagers, a younger couple in modern clothes, and some children. In the evening when the train to Zagreb arrived, we realized that the elderly couple was going back to Zagreb while the younger generations were staying in Munich. The only others getting on the train was a group of young men who looked like a college sports team, except that we understood that they were volunteers, perhaps second generation Croats living in Germany and elsewhere, traveling to join the Croatian troops in war against the Serbs. When we arrived in Zagreb the next morning, the railway station was empty. I spotted a man in military—style civilian clothes with a big camera bag over his shoulder getting off the train. This was war: emptiness and foreign correspondents.

As I write this account sixteen years later, I realize that as outsiders we all receive the same first impression of war, usually through media. We see a society collapse into a state of war, which empties out meanings and causes a vacuum of norms. War correspondents, shooting cameras instead of weapons, equipped with lenses of different calibers, their combat jackets stuffed with film instead of bullets, usually provide us with this information. The problem with Western media reports on events in former Yugoslavia was that they rarely filled this vacuum with anything except politically empowered actors on the highest international institutional levels. News reports most often showed images of destroyed villages and homes, people on the run, and many other varieties of human misery, while the studio voice would read the latest announcements about peace negotiations that were planned, a ceasefire that was broken, and the statements made by diplomats and heads of state. This strange juxtaposition left the viewer with a sense of incomprehensibility mixed with terror and empathy for the people hit by the war. After a year or two of such information, a sense of powerlessness, sometimes combined with rage, took over, as information combined with passivity led to indifference.

To my enormous relief, when I met the people I was looking for in Zagreb, I found that our relationships remained essentially intact. They dismissed out of hand my vaguely patriotic impulse to leave Sweden and be with my family and friends when times were hard. When I asked my best friend whether I should return, she said simply that it would do no good to anyone if I were in Zagreb. I could only go down into cellars when the air raid sirens sounded. It was much better that I was in Sweden, doing what I wanted to do with my life. A meeting with a colleague, who had outspoken pro Croatian national feelings before the war, proved to me that people's ideas were changing, but that this process was by no means a one way road to

nationalism. You know, she said, I always thought that the immense emigration of Croats in this century was due to the Serbs pushing us out, but now I have realized that the Croats were leaving because other Croats would not let them live. A year after this she moved to London with her husband and daughter.

As I was in Zagreb with a journalist, for few days we went to the most obvious site of war: the frontline. It was only about 30 kilometers south of Zagreb. The units watching the line were mostly composed of local residents, some of whom had been drafted, and others who had volunteered. After showing us the no man's land and the positions of Serbian snipers on the other side, they invited us for pancakes in one of the deserted houses that functioned as their base. Inside the country kitchen, seated at one long table, eating and chatting with all these men of various ages and one girl, the atmosphere suddenly felt familiar—like being at scout camp, or coming to a mountain hut after a long day's strenuous climbing in the Alps. I understood that, had I not been living in Sweden, I would be one of these people guarding the city's last line of defense. It scared me, and for a moment I felt privileged to be just a visitor from abroad. Later on, after the war had started in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I realized that during that day the war had entered me. It was no longer happening somewhere else to somebody else. It was my war, and I was in it.

During the late spring of 1992, when war broke out in full in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I was finishing my first term of doctoral studies in cultural anthropology at Uppsala University. I had written about the situation in former Yugoslavia and national identities during my undergraduate education, but my eyes were opened to new worlds through anthropology, and I wanted to study Africa and such intriguing phenomena as witchcraft. That summer, refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina started arriving in Sweden in large numbers, and since I needed a summer job I began interpreting for the Swedish authorities. For three months, I worked full time at a refugee center, with the feeling of utter injustice constantly hovering over me. How can it be that these people, who had always been the least nationalistic of all Yugoslavs, had to suffer because of nationalist ideologies their leaders were promoting? Slovenes had always been Slovene patriots, Croats had a history of nationalistic movements, and Serbs took particular pride in their defense of the nation against both German fascists and Turks, but Bosnians? They were the most anti nationalistic people of all. How could they be nationalists, when they lived good lives in a milieu composed of at least four major nationalities? They married and raised children in that mixed milieu; they made friends and had neighbors across ethnocultural lines. I was certain that there would be bloodshed if a war defined as a confrontation between different national groups ever started in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and because of that I thought it was impossible. But just that sort of war began, and unfortunately my worst fears materialized. For the whole summer I wanted to do something about it. I wanted to write about Bosnians and explain that they were not nationalists as the media had portrayed them, that Yugoslavia was not a boiling pot whose lid had suddenly been lifted, allowing people whose mutual hatreds had been suppressed to show their true nature. I had time only after my summer job was over, and I wrote. During the following term I realized that I was living as a split person when it came to my work: I was doing my Ph.D. course on Africa, while all my energies went into following, understanding, and explaining to others what was going on in former Yugoslavia. I searched for a way to fuse my intellectual work and my personal engagement.

After a talk with my supervisor, I decided to change the subject of my dissertation to the processes through which national identities were being formed in Bosnia. I chose Bosnia, rather than my native Croatia, not only because it seemed most unjust that Bosnians were being hit hardest by a nationalistic war but also because I could not stand the idea of working with the aggressive Croatian nationalism of the early 1990s. This decision was painful, because it meant leaving the exciting world of African anthropology. But I had become entirely occupied by the challenge of understanding the situation of people in my former homeland. I say former homeland, because by 1992, Yugoslavia had become my former homeland in double sense: I had left it for Sweden, and while I was gone it had ceased to exist. I was born and raised in former Yugoslavia, and when contemporary Croatia was formed I was already in Sweden. Croatia today is a strange state construction for me; it makes me feel more like a foreigner than its citizen, although the country and people

still feel like home. Focusing on Bosnia, the least nationalistic of former Yugoslav republics, seemed not only less personally fraught but also potentially more politically revealing.

This book is a result of my endeavors to make some sense out of the war in former Yugoslavia, to put my world together again, so to speak, to make it somewhat more comprehensible, predictable, and safe again. In this sense, the story of the Sarajevan siege that I tell here has a wider meaning for anyone with experience of massive political violence or the drive to understand it. Students and researchers may find in these pages meaningful theoretical tools for framing war and a method for fieldwork during wartime. Diplomats and humanitarian workers may find it useful as a guide to the local knowledge that is crucially important for any constructive work in circumstances of war. People caught in the midst of war or recovering from its ravages may find that it eases the damage to know that others, in different times and different places, have shared their experiences.

The main difficulty with telling a story of such a massive destruction is that the social fabric, cultural habits, political ideas, moral beliefs and even language are destroyed along with the physical environment. So much destruction creates a void in which nothing seems to remain. Nothingness has no form, so how can it be presented? We communicate through words and storytelling; we need language and forms to articulate our experiences and knowledge and make them available to others. In writing this book about the social consequences of war, I have utilized the same strategies that Sarajevans used to cope with its destructiveness. I found forms in Sarajevans' everyday lives in a city under siege: in the artifacts, practices, ideas, and phrases they came up with while living amidst utter devastation. The description of these creative processes and their results in all aspects of life, including the complicated story of national feelings and politics, gives form to the destruction of war, much as a photographic negative or a shadow image can make a form emerge before our eyes. My hope is that, although this is my story, it will be recognizable to Sarajevans who were there during the war.

In this book, I have not attempted to explain why or how the war occurred, the key questions that interest many political and social scientists. I focus instead on constructing an account of what happened to people on the ground, because this is the basic knowledge that we generally lack. What happened cannot be comprehended through an analysis of Milosevic's negotiations with Lord Owen, or by counting the dead and the bombs that hit Sarajevo. The war cannot be encompassed even by such powerful abstractions as "genocide" or "crimes against humanity." What happened was incomprehensible to both locals and outsiders. The Sarajevans whom I got to know shared their lives, experiences, and perspectives with me as best they could. Through the discipline of anthropological analysis and reflection, I share the knowledge built on this lived experience with readers.

I have employed two models to understand what had happened during the siege of Sarajevo. One is based on Sarajevans' concern with whether they were still "normal." This question judged wartime existence by peacetime standards. It was almost always directed to those of us who came from the outside, for Sarajevans knew full well how profoundly their daily lives had been transformed by war. The other model is based on the seemingly contradictory moral stances that Sarajevans—like others in similar situations—adopted when it comes to destruction and the killing of human beings. In the existentially lethal and ethically sensitive circumstances that cannot be evaded in wartime, most of us respond by espousing a variety of positions, sometimes sequentially but often simultaneously, trying desperately to reconcile and justify our beliefs and practices despite grave instability and serious doubt. None of these positions prove entirely satisfying or tenable, but all of them are grounded in efforts not only to survive but to retain our common humanity.

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