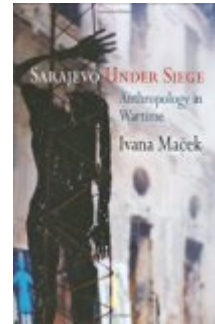


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## Narrating Chaos: The “Normal Lives” of Sarajevans during the Bosnian War

Nancy Scheper-Hughes has criticized classical cultural anthropology for orienting its students “like so many inverse bloodhounds on the trail and on the scent of the good and the righteous in the societies that we study” while averting their gaze from the violence that so often affected the daily lives of their subjects.[1] In recent years, an important shift has taken place whereby anthropologists increasingly apply their skills of observation and inquiry in the aftermath of mass human rights violations, as in the case of Alexander Hinton, Beatriz Manz, and Carolyn Nordstrom. These ethnographers have made substantial contributions to the field of genocide studies, by adding complexity to the various paths people choose during periods of violent upheaval and the ways they make sense of their experiences. To this end, Ivana Maček’s new volume *Sarajevo Under Siege*—one of the most recent additions to the prolific University of Pennsylvania Press series *The Ethnography of Political Violence*—is a valuable and timely contribution as it offers yet another example of the rich detail and inquiry that can result when the ethnographer embeds him or herself in ongoing conflict. Of even greater importance, Maček’s skill is applied to the siege of Sarajevo from 1992 to 1995, a period and region of the world that seems to be rapidly falling out of vogue with the international community. Within this conflict, she draws attention to the lived experiences of Sarajevans from different ethnonational backgrounds as they negotiated the violence that surrounded them, providing a novel contribution to the literature on the Bosnian War from 1992 to 1995.

Maček has a personal connection to the former Yugoslavia and the wars that forced its disintegration, which she lays out in the preface and continues to reflect on throughout her book. She was born in Zagreb and later moved to Sweden to pursue a university education, first in languages and later in cultural anthropology. Within one month of the start of the war between Serbia and Croatia, Maček “felt compelled to go to Zagreb and see for myself what was going on” (p. viii). During this initial visit, she visited the front lines on the outskirts of the city. She recalls: “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 the 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” (p. ix-x).

With this in mind, Maček followed the war to Bosnia in the spring of 1992, when a group of nationalist Bosnian Serbs declared war on the newly independent Bosnian state. She began working for Swedish authorities as a translator, a role that placed her in constant contact with Bosnian refugees. Maček remembers feeling overwhelmed by a sense of “utter injustice,” asking herself “how could 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?” (p. x). This sense of injustice was further amplified by the realization that the Western media was portraying

Bosnia, and the former Yugoslavia in general, as “a boiling pot whose lid had suddenly been lifted, allowing people whose mutual hatreds had been suppressed to show their true nature” (p. x). Maček’s native Croatia was not the ideal choice for a study aimed at refuting these conclusions; she was distressed by the idea of studying the aggressive Croatian nationalism that had taken hold in the country starting in the 1990s. As a result, she focused on Bosnia and the capital, Sarajevo, which she believed would be “less personally fraught but also potentially more politically revealing” (p. xi).

What emerged from Maček’s time living among the besieged people of Sarajevo is an at times sporadic account of her attempts “to make some sense out of the war in the former Yugoslavia, to put my world together again, so to speak, to make it somewhat more comprehensible, predictable, and safe again”—a journey that is often mirrored in the narratives and experiences of her informants (p. xi). She divides her contribution into two sections according to the analytical model she used to understand the siege of Sarajevo. The first section, “Life Under Siege,” considers how Sarajevans’ struggles to maintain a sense of normalcy dominated many aspects of their lives during the war. The second section, “Ethnonationalist Reinventions,” describes the dynamic moral stances that Sarajevans adopted during the siege when trying to make sense of the danger posed by the siege and the Bosnian War more generally. As a reviewer, I remain unconvinced that the division of the book into two sections was entirely necessary. At times, the division seems artificial and awkward, given the complementary themes present in each section, though this is a minor issue that may simply represent a matter of personal preference. Regardless, the resulting contribution is thought provoking and a highly valuable addition to the literature on the Bosnian War.

As a civilian population that had no direct experience of war since World War II, the people of Sarajevo were placed in the incomprehensible position of having to adjust to the violence of the Bosnian War and the powerlessness that accompanied it. In her first chapter, “Civilian, Soldier, Deserter,” Maček identifies three nonsequential and often overlapping modes according to which Sarajevans made sense of their experiences of siege. First, she describes the “civilian mode” of perceiving war, whereby people experience disbelief that the peacetime social norms have collapsed, leaving them vulnerable to violence. Next, she identifies the “soldier mode,” during which people align themselves with one or more of the warring factions in an attempt to negoti-

ate some kind of protection and solidarity, and lend some rationality and acceptability to the violence they experience. Finally, as people become disillusioned with the ideological rationale for the conflict, they enter the “deserter mode,” wherein ideological justifications and affiliations are rejected and they take responsibility for their role in the violence.

Having articulated these theoretical points of reference, Maček then moves into a discussion of her unconventional methodology. Unlike classical ethnographers who spend several years studying their subjects through one or two key informants, Maček was forced by the circumstances of the war to organize short stays of a few weeks in Sarajevo from September 1994 to September 1996, at the end of which she had acquired multiple key informants. She then briefly describes the ethical challenges she experienced related to conducting research on suffering, namely, adjusting to drastic changes in her standard of living, the reasonable fear that something might happen to the people she had come to care about, and the realization that her skills might be of greater use to these people if she worked for an aid organization. These are constant sources of anxiety for researchers who work among conflicted communities, and yet they are rarely referenced, even briefly, in the methodological literature.

In chapter 2, “Death and Creativity in Wartime,” Maček describes how Sarajevans negotiated the all-encompassing quality of war that threatened to render their existences meaningless due to its ability to resist communication. She employs the first-person accounts of her informants’ daily feats of survival in an attempt to articulate the “experience of chaos that was characteristic of Sarajevans’ struggle to recreate normality during the siege,” and emphasizes the importance of “magical thinking,” “macabre humor,” artistic expression, and other survival mechanisms aimed at helping civilians regain a sense of control over their lives (pp. 35, 48, 53). Maček’s balanced discussion helps to bring her informants into focus, without resorting to oversimplifying generalizations about civilian behavior during wartime.

In chapter 3, “Struggling for Subsistence,” Maček explores the complex ways that Sarajevans struggled to maintain their peacetime standards of living during the war, a process that her informants referred to as an “imitation of life” (p. 62). This is a valuable contribution to the literature on the Bosnian War, as well as the field of genocide studies more generally, as it alludes to many of the difficult compromises that people make during pe-

riods of conflict in order to ensure their survival, such as entering into a potentially disingenuous relationship with political or religious organizations to receive aid, or forming advantageous alliances based on mutual interests rather than natural affinity. However, Maček goes beyond a discussion of the potentially negative or humiliating compromises that Sarajevans were forced to make to consider the many positive examples of ingenuity that people demonstrated during this period to ensure they had a relatively reliable supply of local necessities, such as coffee, during the siege, and thereby ensured the continuation of some semblance of a “normal life.”

Maček concludes the first section of her book with a chapter titled “Tests of Trust,” which provides an overview of the decision-making processes that civilians resorted to in evaluating prewar social bonds among their neighbors. Faced with growing nationalist and religious divisions, several prewar friendships dissolved due to tangible physical separation created by the heavily manned front lines and many people’s decisions to flee Sarajevo as refugees, as well as ideological separations emerging from political and moral tensions. Simultaneously, new social bonds were continuously being forged. These divisions and new allegiances did not always occur, as might be expected, along familial, ethnic, or religious lines, but related more to individual behavior and what people interpreted to be selfish or immoral behavior in response to their need for assistance. Maček explains these dynamic relationships by referencing her informants, who claimed that “people changed during the war and that they showed their ‘real’ character, whether selfish or altruistic. This contradictory notion arose when people tried to make sense of others’ unexpected acts” (p. 89).

From Maček’s description, however, the reader is left with the impression that the loss of prewar friendships in particular is central to how Sarajevans perceive themselves as a community in the present. In a final aside titled “Does Sarajevo Still Exist?” Maček notes that among her informants “the prewar Sarajevan population was often seen as the bearer of ‘Sarajevan spirit,’ a way of life produced by a centuries-long melting pot of various cultures and religions, free-spirited and traditional at the same time.... Without that spirit, many people felt that Sarajevo never could be itself again” (p. 119). This haunting conclusion to the first section leaves the reader with the sense that Maček has witnessed and documented the death of a way of life in Sarajevo, the loss of which is still tangible when spending time in Sarajevo today. This is one of Maček’s most valuable contributions, as the rel-

evance of the loss of trust and the destruction of interpersonal relationships is rarely if ever discussed in such detail in the literature on war and related atrocities. Her conclusions point to a potentially valuable area for additional research in the future: namely, the necessity of better evaluating and addressing the loss of trust within communities that occurs during violent conflicts when trying to overcome local communities’ resistance to reconciliation and nation building in the aftermath of conflicts.

The second section begins with chapter 5, “Political and Economic Transformation,” wherein Maček describes the consequences of local and international politics for the transformation of Sarajevan society. Maček quite rightly promotes the use of the terms “ethnoreligious background” and “ethnonational identity” over the more conventional term “ethnic identity” to better encapsulate the complex variations according to which people began to identify themselves with the start of the Bosnian War (p. 124). She draws attention to the nationalist elites who promoted the division of Bosnian civilians along ethnoreligious lines in order to assert their own agendas, including the Bosnian government’s controversial decision to use the term “Bosniacs” to reference Bosnian Muslims separate from their Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat counterparts, while simultaneously professing a desire to maintain a multiethnic Bosnia (p. 129). Yet despite efforts among Sarajevans to resist pressures to identify with a single ethnoreligious community, “the war itself acted as a major force in making ethnonational identities count” (p. 32). Maček correctly notes the growing discomfort this caused many Bosnians, who “were used to religion being part of the private sphere of family life and unaccustomed to seeing it in politics”—a sentiment that many Bosnians continue to voice in the present (p. 130).

Chapters 6 and 7 describe the methods used by nationalist elites to gradually acclimatize the Bosnian people to conceiving of themselves in ethnonationalist terms. Chapter 6, “Language and Symbols,” describes how the nationalist elites used the media to conduct a renovation of Bosnian language and symbols in order to gradually accustom the civilian population to their new ethnoreligious identities. As in the case of the previous chapter, many Sarajevans found ways to resist, but over time these renovations—most obviously apparent in the introduction of Bosnian pronunciations, vocabulary, and greetings in daily speech, and the use of the color green (the color of Islam) for government signs and uniforms—“became an unavoidable fact of life” that continues to dominate many aspects of Bosnian life even fifteen years

following the end of the Bosnian War (p. 136).

In chapter 7, “Mobilizing Religion,” Maček articulates the processes through which nationalist elites used, and continue to use, religion to polarize the Bosnian civilian population, a practice that has once again been met with considerable resistance among Sarajevans. While celebrating religious holidays was not new to Sarajevans, the increased importance placed on public religious identification and observance, particularly for those civilians in need of humanitarian aid or education, made many secular Bosnians uncomfortable. This tendency is particularly salient in Maček’s discussion of the *šehidi*,<sup>[2]</sup> Bosnian Muslim soldiers who are granted heroic status above those Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat soldiers who died fighting for the Bosnian Army during the war. Maček remarks: “The assistance that *šehidi* families received during this war continued an established custom, and most Sarajevans would agree that it was necessary, fair, and moral. The problem was that it was given only to Muslims, and not by Sarajevans’ own government but by the IGASA [International Islamic Relief Organization], which demanded that beneficiaries comply with some Muslim rules. Non-Muslim soldiers who lost their lives were placed in the somewhat lesser category of ‘fallen soldiers’ (*pali borci*), and their families were dependent on the Sarajevo government’s irregular donations on occasions when it promoted the recognition of religious pluralism” (pp. 159-160). The differing degrees of respect and reparation associated with the Bosnian Army’s war dead is a point of great controversy in Bosnia today, and one that helps contribute to the sense of national disarticulation and dissatisfaction so tangible in Bosnia at present.

Chapter 8, “Reorienting Social Relationships,” considers the impact that shifting ethnonationalist identities had on the way that the people of Sarajevo interacted as the war progressed. Maček notes: “Before the war, whatever concern they had with identifying others’ ethno-religious background and ethnonational identity was aimed mainly at being respectful of differences. During the war, however, it became vital for people to identify one another’s position—their ethnonational identity, their feelings about other groups, and their opinions about nationalism itself and who was responsible for the war—in order to know whether a reliable relationship could be established or maintained” (p. 167).

Biases emerged against members of the enemy “Other.” The Serbian media frequently referred to Bosnian Muslims as “Turks,” forming an artificial con-

nection with the long gone Ottoman invaders that implied Bosnian Muslims were “foreigners, with lesser right to the land, or as Slavs who had converted and were of lesser moral standing because of their disloyalty to their Slavic roots and brethren” (p. 169). Simultaneously, the Bosnian government equated Serbs with the Chetniks of the Second World War. While Serbian soldiers might use this term to refer to themselves in order to establish historical continuity between themselves and those who had fought for the Serbian king and the former kingdom of Yugoslavia, in Sarajevo, the term was “loaded with moral condemnation. Chetniks fought unfairly, their behavior was inhuman, they slaughtered women and children, and they destroyed everything people had. In short, a Chetnik was an immoral, bad person” (p. 169). Finally, extreme Croatian nationalists commonly referred to themselves as “Ustashas,” a term that implied continuity between the contemporary soldiers and the fascist soldiers who fought with the Nazis during the Second World War. As a result, this term was commonly adopted to refer to any person judged to be a Croatian nationalist, though Maček fails to consider the negative qualities attributed to those who were labeled Ustashas, perhaps because her own Croatian ethnonational identity prevented people from speaking openly about the subject in her presence.

In the final chapter, “Reconceptualizing War,” Maček describes the emergence of an official Bosnian narrative in 1996 that sought to explain the origins of the Bosnian War. The emergent narrative began with the identification of Suada Dilberović, a young Muslim woman who was murdered by a sniper while crossing a bridge in Sarajevo, as the first victim of the war, and later adopted such terms as “aggression” and “genocide” to attribute legal responsibility for the war to the Bosnian Serbs and Serbia more generally (pp. 204-205). Maček then shifts from the official Bosnian narrative of the war to the experiences of one Sarajevo man, who, at different points in the war, could be identified as a civilian, soldier, and deserter. Maček highlights his experiences with the goal of demonstrating “when we grasp the civilian, soldier, and deserter perspectives on war, and let the necessity of the contradictions enter our own world, we come to comprehend the war as Sarajevans experienced it” (p. 33). This is a powerful claim, but while this chapter certainly captures the complexity of the shifting ways that people came to make sense of the war and their varied roles in it, I remain unconvinced that these three categories represent the sum of Sarajevo war experiences, particularly with regard to experiences of guilt, terror, loss, and other evocative phenomena that resist communication, result-

ing in powerful silences in people's narratives. Maček's model, while potentially useful for understanding those aspects of people's experiences that can be communicated, does little to probe those experiences that would resist communication and thus cannot completely initiate outsiders into the world of Sarajevo under siege.

Maček's work is nonetheless impressive considering the substantial methodological challenges she had to overcome in the course of her research and analysis. In her preface, she notes "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" (p. xi). Yet Maček represents her informants with remarkable balance and coherence, considering she lived among them during the siege. As a reader, I was not left with enough life history context to be fooled into thinking I understood much about who her informants were beyond their ethnonationalist affiliations and daily struggles, but this is acceptable given the necessity of protecting informants' confidentiality under the circumstances. As for her own narrative contributions, Maček typically writes with simplicity, clarity, and focus, resulting in a style common to public anthropologists that will undoubtedly be accessible to a wide range of readers.

However, when viewed in comparison with classic texts in the field of genocide studies, Maček can be criticized on several points. First, she does not provide much historical overview of the conflict, despite referencing events and key parties of the conflict. The glossary at the end of the text helps address some of the more straightforward questions a novice might have, but does not provide any cohesive historical analysis of the events leading up to the war. While this does not detract from the overall quality of her contribution for an audience interested in ethnographic methodology, or for readers with a general level of expertise on the region, it could hinder the book's accessibility for others working in the field of genocide studies who do not share such backgrounds, as well as students of the discipline.

Furthermore, while *Sarajevo Under Siege* is thoroughly immersed in relevant anthropology literature, it falls short as a text in genocide studies due to its limited interdisciplinary engagement. While reading narratives that referenced the stigmatization experienced by newcomers to Sarajevo in the postwar period, or the moral shifts that occurred related to theft and other criminal activities, I was constantly drawn to the relevance of Kathleen Blee's oral historical account of working with the

narratives of "unloved groups" whose messages might be dangerous, hostile, or frightening.[3] Though Maček's informants are very different from those of Blee's Ku Klux Klan informants, Maček does not reflect on the impact that propaganda and changing morals may have on her research trajectory, or how it influenced the way she views and writes about her informants as a result. I felt there was a consistence silence in her writing regarding the point that many of her informants may have engaged in activities that, according to Maček's peacetime standards, were morally unacceptable to her.

Finally, the relevance of Maček's study for genocide scholars is limited by her refusal to engage with the related theoretical literature emerging from the field of genocide studies. Maček has made a conscious effort not to engage with the debate regarding whether the atrocities perpetrated against Bosnian Muslims during the Bosnian War constitute genocide in an attempt to avoid feeding into local political agendas. She applies the term "war" to describe the siege of Sarajevo and related experiences of violence "because that was the term most commonly used internationally as well as locally" (p. 205). She then goes on to argue that her use of the term "admits of multiple sides and does not assign blame automatically" (p. 205). While I can understand her reluctance toward being trapped in a semantic debate or being labeled as privileging narratives of suffering from one side of the conflict over the other, her position in this instance does not address the importance of acknowledging that some acts during the Bosnian War did constitute serious violations of international humanitarian law. In many ways, Maček may have been uniquely poised to comment on these violations, yet she resists the discussion entirely. Furthermore, despite her attempts to avoid local political agendas, there is a political agenda inherent in using the term "war," particularly when viewed in the context of Serbian nationalism, which continues to label the conflict in Bosnia a "civil war" in a political attempt to distance themselves from the atrocities Bosnian Serb militias perpetrated throughout the region, particularly in Vukovar and the Republika Srpska. Likewise, the consistent use of the term "war" does not account for the complexity of people's participation during the conflict. While some people engaged in warfare, others pursued a course toward genocide, whether toward the Bosnian Muslims or another community. To label the conflict as war, therefore, is just as politically charged as using the term "genocide," because it glosses over the differing degrees of participation and experience in favor of promoting a view of the Bosnian War as a case of just war. Per-

haps distinguishing between formal acts of warfare and what David Scheffer refers to as “atrocities crimes” might be a useful way of negotiating this semantic and political quagmire.[4]

These criticisms aside, Maček’s book should be applauded as an excellent example of ethnographic analysis during periods of conflict, and should be widely read by anthropologists and genocide scholars alike who share an interest in atrocity crimes. The field of genocide studies would benefit from more analysis of the type exemplified by Maček, which takes place, wherever safety permits, as atrocities are occurring and which focuses on adding complexity to, rather than simplifying, the everyday actions of the civilian population as the political landscape is transformed by violence. Her research and analysis clearly demonstrates the value of a reflective, anthropological approach to the study of conflict by offering richly detailed accounts that demonstrate the incomprehensibility of war and the varied ways people struggle to make sense of their previously unimaginable experiences. Having said this, some genocide scholars may experience frustration with the often self-imposed limitations to the study, seeing greater potential for her research and analysis than Maček has explored in this volume.

#### Notes

[1]. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “Coming to Our Senses: Anthropology and Genocide,” in *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide*, edited by Alexander Laban Hinton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 348-349.

[2]. This term is traditionally used to refer to Muslims who die in defense of Islam, but the Bosnian government has adapted it to refer to Bosnian Muslim soldiers who died fighting for the Bosnian Army, regardless of whether they were practicing or not.

[3]. Kathleen Blee, *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 12. Blee borrows the concept of “unloved groups” from Nigel G. Fielding, “Mediating the Message: Affinity and Hostility in Research on Sensitive Topics,” in *Researching Sensitive Topics*, edited by Claire M. Renzetti and Raymond M. Lee (Newbury Park: Sage, 1993), 146-180.

[4]. David Scheffer, “Genocide and Atrocity Crimes,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 1, no. 3 (December 2006): 229-250.

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