

The Impact of Reading and Writing During the Siege of Sarajevo

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How does reading and writing impact your life?

Siege of Sarajevo, 1992-1996

For much of history, Sarajevo was known as a multi-ethnic and tolerant city. When Bosnia-Herzegovina declared independence from Yugoslavia, Serb nationalists surrounded and besieged Sarajevo in an effort to create an ethnically distinct state within the nation's borders.

For the next 1,425 days the people of Sarajevo were subjected to deprivation and violence. They were denied the resources of daily life and were the target of indiscriminate sniper and shell fire. Over 9,000 civilians were killed by the time the siege was lifted in 1996.



Research Questions

1. What did reading and writing look like in the lives of those living in Sarajevo during the siege?
2. What effects did reading and writing have on them in their situation?
3. Did these activities affect their physical, mental, or spiritual survival?

Connecting to Prewar Life and Identity

The siege profoundly changed the shape of everyday life and people quickly had to adapt to wartime living. Along with this disruption came a heartache for the way that life used to be. Individuals could gain strength, hope, and resolve by reading materials that reminded them of their prewar lives. The daily newspaper, *Oslobođenje*, became a symbol of normality.



It takes me back to the life I lived long ago...for a moment at least, you get the idea that you need only take a single step to find yourself somewhere over there.

Elma Softić reading prewar fashion magazines

Maintaining Sanity

Narratives provided an opportunity to escape the reality of war by giving mental refuge. Books also offered optimism and entertainment to provide distraction from the war.

Writing allowed for individuals to process and express their emotions and traumatic experiences, as well as wrestle back a feeling of control while living in a chaotic warzone.

...in the uncontrollable fear and uncertainty, the only space I had that I could truly control was writing in my diary. I realize today that it helped me keep sane.

Zlata Filipović



Connecting with Others

The Serb nationalists effectively cut Sarajevo off from the modern world, creating both a physically and psychologically isolated environment. Sarajevans sought to maintain their connections with loved ones through letter writing. Reading letters from those outside of the warzone gave them hope for reunification and a peaceful postwar life.

As soon as I finish writing you one letter I immediately put another sheet of paper in the typewriter to start the next. This continuity, my adored one, represents the communication that binds me to you.



Letter from a young Sarajevan to his girlfriend

Gaining and Spreading Information

Instead of reading to distract from reality, many read to better understand their situation. *Oslobođenje* was widely read for information on the siege. Many Sarajevan writers organized to share their experiences with the outside world and advocate for international intervention.

...they might be able to describe a reality in which we are not a band of savages who deserve nothing better than suffering, stench and death, but that we are, or were until yesterday, people like you in the rest of Europe.

Zlatko Dizdarević



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