

Research Article

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Reading for your Life: The Impact of Reading and Writing During the Siege of Sarajevo

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Abstract: In the spring of 1992, the city of Sarajevo was surrounded by nationalist Serb troops and bombarded with shells, bullets, and terror for four long years. Isolated from the world, Sarajevans found a refuge and a freedom that took them beyond their circumstances: they read, they wrote, and they survived. This paper examines how these activities impacted the mental, physical, and spiritual survival of Sarajevans during the war. Diaries, memoirs, personal histories, letter collections, and oral histories are analyzed for what they may reveal about the value of reading and writing during this time of crisis. What we learn from these accounts is that even during the most trying times, activities such as reading and writing give us a space for control and self-preservation. This paper strives to learn about the power of literacy and writing from those who faced adversity in war-torn Sarajevo.

Keywords: Siege of Sarajevo, intellectual activities, trauma, libraries, reading

1 Introduction

Between 1992 and 1996, the city of Sarajevo was attacked by pro-Serbian forces that wished to demoralize and eliminate the city's Bosnian Muslim population and create a Serbian outpost in Bosnia. Once an international beacon of culture, intellect, and multiethnic peace, Sarajevo became a symbol for interethnic struggle and religious warfare within the late twentieth century. The Sarajevans caught in the middle, both Bosnian and Serbian, found their everyday lives completely transformed to one without running water, electricity, or a sense of security. Isolated from the world, trapped in their homes with nothing to do but listen to the soundtrack of war outside, Sarajevans found a refuge and a freedom that took them beyond their circumstances: they read, they wrote, and they survived.

While many of us have not had to experience the traumatic upheaval and violence of war, we can still relate to being drawn to the refuge of the page during difficult times in our lives. A fast-paced detective novel or nostalgic revisiting of a childhood favorite can be the helpful distraction we need when facing stress. Others process their days by writing in a journal or typing messages to their social media followers. This impulse to mentally escape, process, and share our negative experiences existed in the prewar, cosmopolitan Sarajevo and during the darkest days of the siege.

There have been many academic works investigating the intellectual activities of those living through a crisis or war. Intellectual activities are those that primarily require the processing of the mind in order to enjoy or accomplish, such as reading a novel or writing a letter. What we learn from these accounts is that even during the most trying times, activities such as reading and writing give us a space to escape and take control of the chaos surrounding us. Still, there is much to learn from those who went through these

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adversities and how they escaped within intellectual activities. The siege of Sarajevo, an often-overlooked historical event, provides us an interesting setting to examine survival through reading and writing. Through examining the diaries, memoirs, and personal narratives of Sarajevans as well as speaking to an individual who lived in the city during the siege, this research explores how these activities served as elements of strength and peace, allowing individuals to mentally, physically, and spiritually survive.

2 Sarajevo and the Siege

In the spring of 1992 the world watched as Sarajevo, the capital of the newly independent country Bosnia-Herzegovina, was surrounded by enemy combatants and shut off from the modern world. Wartime correspondents and cable news crews filtered into Bosnia, transmitting images of the war to viewers across the globe. The gory images from Sarajevo, a product of indiscriminate shelling and sniper fire, gave the world some of the most graphic reminders of war since coverage of the Vietnam War. Pools of blood left in marketplaces, orphaned appendages, pockmarked skyscrapers; these brief and impersonal shots seared a new image of the Balkans as a violent, unstable region where centuries old tensions between religious and ethnic groups had boiled over into madness.

While the overseas reporting of Sarajevo may have made it seem that a bloody war was inevitable, Sarajevans themselves were surprised and shocked when war landed on their doorstep. Often hailed as the “Jerusalem of Europe,” Sarajevo has long had a reputation for being a city of ethnic plurality and religious tolerance (Simmons, 2002). These values of multiculturalism and national identity were part of the legacy left by Sarajevo’s time within Yugoslavia, first a kingdom and then Socialist Republic made up of the modern-day countries of Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Kosovo.

Slowly encroaching on Yugoslav unity since the death of leader Josip Broz Tito was the rise of ethnic nationalism in the Balkan region. When Bosnia declared independence and left Yugoslavia in March 1992, nationalist Serbs living in Bosnia demanded the creation of their own ethnically distinct state within the new country’s borders. Bosnian Serb paramilitary groups formed and joined with the already Serb-dominated Yugoslav Army (JNA) to surround Sarajevo and blockade the city until demands for ethnic-based partitions were met.

Positioned in the surrounding hills with tanks, long-range artillery, and sniper rifles, the Serb nationalists besieged the Bosniak-dominated (Bosnian Muslim) Sarajevo for the next 1,425 days, making it the longest siege of a capital city in modern warfare (Connelly, 2005). Making this event particularly brutal was the specific targeting of the civilian population. Hilltop snipers shot indiscriminately at passersby in the streets. Mortar shells were launched at busy marketplaces. Even crowds gathering for funerals were open game to the combatants.

Besides the violent attacks on life and property within the city, the Serb nationalists also managed to control and deny Sarajevans access to the resources of daily life. Water, electricity, food, gas, and medical supplies were all strictly controlled and strategically withheld from citizens. The random violence, daily deprivation of needed supplies, and destruction of a city’s way of life impacted the citizens profoundly, leaving the people of Sarajevo disturbed and rattled. For the thousands of people living in the city throughout the siege, every day was a test of human wills.

In 1994, the single largest loss of life in the city during the war was recorded when shells were dropped on a busy marketplace, killing 68 civilians and injuring 200. After two years of watching from afar and offering cursory aid packages, the international community began to intervene. By the time the siege was lifted, over 9,000 civilians were killed, including 1,500 children. Over 50,000 civilians were wounded (Bassiouni, 1994).

3 Literature Review

3.1 The Value of Reading

The act of reading is quite a marvelous feature of the human experience. We can become lost in extraordinary new worlds, unlock knowledge that we may not have other access to, and travel within our own emotional landscape. Numerous researchers, authors, and readers have worked to understand the value of this mundane, yet extraordinary activity. Bibliotherapist Joseph Gold (1990) astutely reminds us that “reading is not necessary to our survival” in the sense that other needs such as eating, sleeping, and staying warm will keep our body running. However, reading is “necessary to our larger survival...to an enriched, aware life in which we exercise some measure of control over our wellbeing, our creativity and our connection to everything around us” (Gold, 1990). Reading is a powerful tool that allows for a controlled expansion of our emotional selves and gives us a space to live alternative lives.

One transformational aspect of reading, particularly while reading fictional literature, is the ability to escape the present and become lost in the world of the book. In a study that asked readers about the contribution of reading to their lives, researchers Usherwood and Toyne (2002) discovered that the term “escapism” was a typical first response. Richard Gerrig (1993) terms this an “opportunity to abandon the here and now,” as readers lose track of time and self-awareness in a narrative. Victor Nell (1988) differentiates escapist readers as either those who want to dull consciousness or those who want to heighten it. The first group seeks to fortify themselves with books in order to stave off an inner life of anxiety and fear whereas the second group hopes to enliven their world by living intensely through literature (Nell, 1988). Especially for those reading to lessen a harsh reality, this escape can be a form of “therapy for living” (Selwark, 1999). Garber and Seligman (1980) connect the ability to escape within a book as an important stress reducer. For those who cannot physically escape their environments, methods of cognitive escape may be a survival technique that allows sufferers to keep their sanity by “reconstructing and reframing their psychological environment” (Gold, 1990, p. 243).

The act of reading allows the reader to not only cognitively escape, but also control and hold sovereignty over their experience. O’Rourke (1993) describes reading as a “way of being simultaneously absent and present at the same time...not only do you have something to occupy your mind and deal with boredom, but you also have a way to create inner, private space for yourself.” Unlike other common forms of entertainment such as television and radio, book readers have the ultimate control over the pace and imagery of the text.

Within this safe space of a book, readers can experience and explore emotions both foreign and familiar. Oatley (1999) describes fiction reading as a simulation for our brains where readers might recall old emotional experiences or confront new emotional landscapes, which can allow the individual to gain personal insight. Books offer a “laboratory space that, relative to real life, is safe and can make the relations of emotions to goals and action easier to understand” (Oatley, 1999, p. 101). These emotional experiences drawn out by reading can also make readers more mindful and empathetic. Neural webs are activated while reading, which allow narrative events to be simulated mentally by the reader (Kidd & Castano, 2013). Further evidence suggests that reading about another person’s emotional experiences can activate the same neural structures as if one were experiencing that emotion oneself (Gallese, 2001).

While the act of reading can be an emotional experience, the denial of reading material can also trigger an emotional reaction. In two studies that asked readers how they imagined life without reading, interviewees spoke about trying to replicate the experience through writing or imagination, but then on feelings of loss. Readers connect the loss of reading with dying, showing an inextricable link between reading and identity (Usherwood & Toyne, 2002).

3.2 The Value of Expressive Writing

For as long as humans have been reading, we have also been writing. It is one of the most powerful, human-created tools to express ourselves. Humans have an innate drive to share their experiences, especially when they are emotional in nature. According to one study, 95% of emotional experiences are shared within the same day of occurrence (Rime, 1995). Repressing this urge for disclosure is thought by many to be a form of both physiological and psychological work (Pennebaker, 1989). The act of writing, whether it be in diary, letter, or narrative form, is both a method of expression and release that can have physical and mental value.

Researchers have looked at the effects of writing on a spectrum of human health. Writing about emotional topics reduces physician visits and has beneficial outcomes on immune functionality (Pennebaker, Barger, & Tiebout, 1989). Written disclosure also aids in reducing heart rate and muscular activity, which are physical manifestations of relaxation (Dominquez et al., 1995). The activity of writing about both positive and negative emotional experiences can also affect your sleep and self-reports of illness symptoms (Mosher & Danoff-Burg, 2006).

Besides benefiting physical health, writing can also give a boost to one's emotional and mental health. While writing about negative and stressful experiences can be upsetting in the short-term, Pennebaker and Chung (2007) find that this writing can actually produce long-term mood improvement as well as a significant reduction in distress. Niedhoffer (2002) found an increase in wellbeing of individuals who wrote about their life traumas. Writing can also help individuals find a balance in emotional response through self-regulation, which is related to depression, anxiety, aggression, and withdrawal (Lepore & Smyth, 2002).

So just why is expressive writing so powerful, especially in dealing with negative emotions and experiences? As Pennebaker and Chung (2007) note, expressive writing helps people “build meaning and understanding around traumatic events, thus rendering those experiences less potent, aversive, and harmful.” Putting thought into words also allows one to construct and share one's story, giving one the means of taking back control over the situation. These findings show us the tremendous ability of writing to impact our physiological and psychological health, especially when writing about negative or traumatic experiences.

3.3 Reading and Writing within War and Crisis

There is not a great amount of literature on intellectual activities within the setting of war and crisis, but the literature that does exist covers many of the devastating conflicts of the twentieth century. In situations of great stress, fear, upheaval, and confinement reading has shown to create a space for perseverance, escape, and even resistance.

For men and women facing the extreme horrors of twentieth century warfare, reading was a tool to maintain their mental sanity. Army libraries built for Australian soldiers during World War I provided a psychological respite for the war-weary soldier and could relieve the monotony of army life (Laugesen, 2006). The British government sent books to prisoners of war in order to provide comfort and intellectual stimulation (Davies, 1917). Civilian organizations hoping to lift morale also recognized the soothing quality of literature. The British National Home Reading Union declared systematic and regular reading would lead to a “calmer, cooler” mind that would remain “fresh and sane” during the long drawn out conflict (Liebach, 2015).

One form of psychological aid books provided was a way to normalize an incredibly irregular situation. Political prisoners in a South African prison used books to create as normal a life as possible within their circumstances, with one prisoner even hoisting herself up to a window to read the daily newspaper (Dick, 2008). Prisoners of the Czech ghetto Theresienstadt during World War II read as a way to maintain normalcy when they faced extreme deprivation, violence, and uncertainty within ghetto life (Intrator, 2003). This attempt at continuing the habits of their daily lives allowed prisoners to preserve the identity the Nazis were attempting to strip away from them. The continued habit of reading not only marked a continuation of life, but also was a symbol of their mental strength and resilience (Intrator, 2003).

Another form of the mental fortitude this reading provided was in the ability for readers to escape their circumstances and be transported to a time and place far from violence. Upon simply reading the words on a page, readers could withdraw from their geographical locations and “enter a world of the imagination” governed by their own norms and ideals (King, 2013). During the air raids of WWII, small lending libraries emerged in the tube stations of both Moscow and London, allowing residents to mentally escape the bombing they tried to physically flee (Meyer, 1945; Snaith, 1942). Theresienstadt prisoners also read as a means for temporarily escaping the oppression and sadness they faced each day (Intrator, 2003). Novels created an opportunity to retreat into another world that did not contain barracks of malnourished children or rumors of gas chambers.

In these situations of confinement and repression, reading allowed for individuals to not only mentally escape their surroundings, but also carve out an interior space where they could reclaim their identity and humanity. Edmund King (2013) notes that British POWs were able to create “minor acts of resistance” by finding sanctuary in reading and “negating” their captive experience. Books representing the prisoners’ national culture served as tokens of identity and could strengthen ideas of patriotism (King, 2014). While aggressors in war may seek to take away one’s freedom, culture, and even life, reading can work to resist this oppression and restore one’s humanity.

While little literature exists on the effect letter writing has within a wartime setting, a few authors have explored this activity’s ability to relax, connect, and heal both the letter reader and writer. In a collection of letters from the Second World War, Deborah Montgomerie (2005) characterizes letters as symbols of hope and remembrance that connected soldiers to loved ones living outside a war zone. Letters, according to Montgomerie, allowed soldiers to get along with the “business of living in a world rendered strange and uncertain by the possibility of dying.” Alongside Montgomerie, Andrew Carroll (2001) views these war letters as tangible connections to loved ones that provided relaxation and consolation in the darkest chapters of some lives.

One striking example of letter writing during wartime comes from our second First Lady, Abigail Adams, whose letters to her husband worked as a coping strategy during a time of great stress. Historian Edith Gelles (1994) suggests these letters allowed Adams to express her feelings when she went through a period of social isolation set within the violence of the Revolutionary War. Adams describes the effect writing had on her mental state: “my Pen is my only pleasure, and writing to you the composure of my mind” (Butterfield, 1963). These letters served as a comforting connection to her husband and a tool to express her anxieties, fears, and hopes regarding an uncertain war.

4 Methodology

The first step in beginning my research was forming guiding questions that would give my study direction and depth. These questions were: Were Sarajevans reading during the siege? What types of reading materials did they choose and why? What sort of reading materials did they have access to? Were library services available to them during the siege? What other intellectual activities took place in Sarajevo? Did they write? What kind of effects did reading and writing have on them in their situation? Did these activities affect their physical, mental, or spiritual survival?

Responses to these questions were sought through an analysis of memoirs, personal narratives, diaries, and letter collections of individuals living in Sarajevo during the siege. Within my content gathering, I looked for both sources written during the siege and reflections published after. I only analyzed documents written or translated into English, as I do not know Bosnian or Serbo-Croatian. The ethnicity and religion of the writer were not used as selection criteria, as I hoped to collect data from anyone living in Sarajevo at the time, regardless of ethnicity or religion. While I read these sources, I noted any time there was a reference to books, reading, libraries, and writing. I collected these references and examined them to determine common themes for discussion.

This method of examining documents created during or shortly after the siege allows us to gain a unique view into the everyday lives of Sarajevans during the war. Through examining diaries and journals, we are

able to examine a snapshot of their emotions, desires, wishes, and experiences captured in their natural state. Also, because these sources were not created to be the focus of my research, they are ‘unguarded’ testimonies of experience that may render a more accurate representation of the siege (Neuman, 2006). However, this also leads to the inability of the researcher to control what is inside the documents and know the exact way to interpret it (Wildemuth, 2009). Regardless of the length of time between lived experience and writing, these artifacts have all gone through a process of being edited and revised. Memoirs may have gone through multiple revisions over many months while diary entries go through mental revision before pen is put to paper. Knowing these limitations, I worked to collect as large and diverse a sample as possible to have data that is more authentic and reliable. Before the content analysis even started, I worked to familiarize myself with the history, culture, and background of Bosnia, Sarajevo, and the various ethnic groups living within. I believe this context helped me more accurately interpret my findings, as life experience is “situated” and should not be divorced from its social, cultural, and historical context.

To supplement the content analysis and add another element of understanding, I also conducted an interview with a local individual who lived in Sarajevo during the siege. The interview was semi-structured with a combination of open-ended and close-ended questions. A set of core interview questions and follow up questions to probe deeper guided the interview. Some core questions and probes were:

1. Did you read during the war? [Probes: What did you read? Where did your reading material come from?]
2. Describe the effect this reading had on your experience within the war. [Probes: What difference did it make? How did it help you?]
3. Did you do any form of writing during the siege? [Probes: What did you write? Why?]
4. Describe the effect this writing had on your experience within the war. [Probes: What difference did it make? How did it help you?]

The main goal of the interview questions was to come to a better understanding of the role reading, writing, and other intellectual activities played within their wartime experience. This information was to supplement the data collected in the memoirs, personal narratives, diaries, and letters to create a robust picture of reading and writing within Sarajevo during the siege. The interview was conducted in compliance with the University of North Carolina Institutional Review Board’s ethics requirements. The participant’s permission was received to do the interview and be recorded for later transcription.

After collection, a multi-step process of qualitative analysis was conducted using the strategy of data coding. Through the method of open coding I reviewed the data multiple times and began to delineate chunks of data, creating tentative labels for them. Then, I worked to identify the relationships between the open codes through the process of axial coding. Finally, the process of selective coding allowed me to create inclusive core categories, or themes, that the raw data could fit within (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). I transcribed the audio recordings and reviewed them and the field notes multiple times, noting down broad themes and patterns. With each subsequent pass through the data, these themes and patterns were narrowed down and crystallized.

5 Findings

The activities of reading and writing occur all throughout our everyday lives. They are often most associated with times of leisure and relaxation or times of learning, study, and expression. But what happens when our everyday lives are disrupted by war? When schools are closed to keep children safe and the day’s quiet is punctuated by the sound of explosives? When each day brings new mortal challenges and our daily focus narrows to simply surviving? How does a seemingly mundane activity such as reading a novel or writing a letter fit into this new world?

During the Bosnian War, besieged Sarajevans found themselves asking these very questions. Through their own words, many documented during the war, we learn that the people of Sarajevo continued to read and write throughout the war. In fact, many of the living conditions caused by the war created an environment friendly to these activities. Especially during the first year of war, the chaotic, frequent fighting

and power outages left people stranded inside their homes with nothing to do. Without jobs to go to, school to attend, safe streets to roam, or a television to watch, many turned to intellectual activities to spend their time. Many Sarajevans found this environment conducive to writing. Some wrote novels, others continued academic works, but a great many wrote letters. They wrote to friends in the city, loved ones abroad, and in appeal to the outside world to intercede in the war. They wrote in journals and diaries, seeking to capture their extraordinary experiences.

Alongside writing, many Sarajevans spent their time during the war between the pages of a book. In a survey that collected responses from the city's inhabitants during the war, the question of how individuals spend their spare time is posed (Kapic, 2000). Quite frequently individuals cite "reading" as a common pastime. For some, the war allowed them to read more than they had ever done so previously. As Alma Lazarevska describes in FAMA's Oral History collection, she used her newfound free time to read, "I experienced the war as another, long, long holiday, which gave me time to read everything I had failed to read" (Kapic, 2000, p. 728). While more overtly positive in her portrayal, Alma's sentiments are mirrored by others who also found themselves with a surplus of reading time. One individual that I interviewed spent the war as an adolescent hunkered down in the suburb of Dobrinja, a neighborhood built for the 1984 Winter Olympic Games that found itself on the front lines of the fighting. He describes fighting going on in the streets and gun battles occurring inside apartment buildings, "You couldn't really go places, and parents wanted you to be safe somewhere so we were always inside." He states, "by far, the most I'd read in my life was during the war." The amount of time individuals had to read during the war depended on their living situation and the amount of resources they had at hand. Great time and effort was dedicated to finding food, water, and fuel within the city. The Sarajevans that had better access to these resources or ones living within heavily contested areas were likely to have more reading time since they did not or could not travel around the city.

Just like during their prewar lives, personal interests and access informed the choices Sarajevans made on reading material during the war. Children read comic books, teenagers read fashion magazines, and Sarajevans all over the city read the daily newspaper, *Oslobođenje*. Receiving numerous achievements in journalism for its continued reporting throughout the war, *Oslobođenje* was a daily staple for the information-hungry in Sarajevo. Housed in a sleek office building in downtown Sarajevo, the *Oslobođenje* headquarters was repeatedly hit by sniper fire, grenades, and artillery shells during the spring and summer of 1992, causing the building to collapse and operations to move underground (Gjelten, 1995). For the next two years, *Oslobođenje* produced an edition every single day. As Tom Gjelten (1995) describes in his chronicle of the newspaper's wartime effort, *Oslobođenje* took on an important role, "It provided information in a city starved for it, and it survived as a relic of prewar life in a city desperate to remember normal times" (p. 14).

Another significant source of reading came from the letters sent by family and friends residing outside of Sarajevo. With phone lines either down or inconsistent, letters were the most effective way to communicate with those outside of the city. While the postal service was not operating during the war, letters found their way to intended recipients with the help of neighbors, friends, and foreign workers. Beside loved ones, letters also came from strangers hoping to impart their care and hope for the war's victims.

One of the greatest challenges to reading during the war was the issue of access to reading materials. Many personal libraries were lost during the shelling or left behind when their owners sought safer shelter. In one letter to a friend, a Sarajevan laments the destruction of his personal collection, "My house has gone, and so has my library of five thousand volumes that I loved in the true sense of the word" (Cataldi, 1994, p. 112). Other collections were lost in order to keep individuals warm and fed throughout the cold winter months. Journalist Barbara Demick (2012) observed life for one street in a Sarajevo suburb and observed this act of using books for fuel, "few people were ready for winter. When it came, they were forced to burn their cupboards and bookshelves – and eventually the clothes and books that they contained" (p. 53). For many suffering through the brutal winters, books were fuel for the furnace and not the mind.

Perhaps the most well-known and beloved source for books and information was the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, located in the heart of Sarajevo. Functioning as a research and depository library, the institution was one of the largest in the Balkans, holding an impressive collection

of over 1,500,000 volumes and 600,000 serials at the start of the war. After three days of repeated shelling in August 1992, the library and about 90% of its holdings were destroyed. Incendiary artillery were lobbed at the building to ensure its collection went up in flames, while snipers shot at librarians and firefighters attempting to save books. The library, more than a source of knowledge, was a symbol for the city. Zlata Huseincahajić lived near the library and saw the burning pieces of paper falling from the sky as an ominous turn of events, “We all were very attached to the National Library building...I did feel sorry about that building, but I also thought we were finished” (Kapic, 2000, p. 226). Besides targeting the National Library, Serbian shells destroyed eight branches of Sarajevo’s municipal public library. Both scholarly and popular, the city’s print culture was targeted by Serb nationalists.

In 1992, during the most volatile part of the war, Sarajevans had to be inventive in order to access new reading material. Comic book exchanges popped up in multiple neighborhoods that allowed for reading materials to be shared amongst children. The individual who lived in Dobrinja during the war described how he and his friends opened up a comic book library in a shared apartment. These libraries had their own set of rules to keep them going. To join, one needed only to bring one comic book. Members could loan out three comic books at a time for one week. These libraries gave children a setting to gather, read, and socialize in the absence of formal schooling.

Later in the war, both cultural centers and booksellers began to pop up as access points for books. In 1993, the American Cultural Center opened a reading room that enabled access to American editions. When the fighting stabilized between 1993 and 1995, some open-air markets began offering a range of titles not yet seen in Sarajevo. Elma Softić described the excitement of seeing tables of books that opened a window to the outside world, explaining, “time stopped for us two years ago – since that time we’ve had no idea what is being read, written, painted, composed, invented, discovered, built, filmed in the world” (Softić, 1996, p. 138).

The forces surrounding Sarajevo sought to create a wholly unlivable reality for the inhabitants of the city. Besides depriving Sarajevans of food, water, electricity, fuel, and medical care, the besiegers worked to destroy the cultural and intellectual lives of Sarajevans. By attacking the National Library and *Oslobođenje*, Serb forces targeted key institutions that could house collective memory, spread information, and serve as symbols of Bosnian culture. Despite these attacks and the deprivation the people of Sarajevo faced, the activities of reading and writing continued throughout the war.

Not only did the data give insight into the reading and writing habits of Sarajevans, it also illustrated the sorts of impact the activities had on their everyday lives. In order to answer the question of what effect these activities had on individuals during the war, four major themes are outlined and discussed. These themes show how reading and writing served as a form of mental armor for Sarajevans, giving them a space for control and self-preservation.

5.1 Connecting to Prewar Life and Identity

Sarajevans found their lives profoundly changed by the siege and had to quickly adapt to wartime living. Journalist Janine Di Giovanni (1995) describes pre-war Sarajevo as a cosmopolitan city filled with, “cafés, discos, parties...summer at the beach, winter trips to Venice, magazines, books” (p. 52). Her description matches the quality of living enjoyed by many major European cities during the close of the twentieth century. The war caused a major disruption in the habits, rituals, and lifestyles of thousands of individuals. Along with the disruption came heartache for the way that life used to be. The deputy editor of *Oslobođenje* displays this longing for a remembered life, “All I want...is to sit outside on a Sunday afternoon and read the newspapers without being frightened of a shell coming in” (Di Giovanni, 1995, p. 6). Simple moments of peace and leisure were denied to Sarajevans throughout the war. In adapting to an extraordinarily hostile and miserable reality, Sarajevans sought to continue and connect with their prewar lives and identities.

One way to do this was to read materials that brought to mind one’s past reality. University student Elma Softić (1996) writes in thanks of her cousin sending her magazines, “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” (p. 100). Cookbooks were another item that people read to remember prewar lives. Teenager Atka Reid (2011) remembered perusing through her mother’s cookbooks, “we talked about food all the time and looked with longing at photographs of food...some days there was nothing to eat and we were weak with hunger” (p. 87). Materials such as fashion magazines and cookbooks not only supply readers with light reading on models and food, but also contain visual stories that allow readers to put themselves in another world momentarily. This world was one that was familiar, comforting, and did not contain hardship.

The daily publication of *Oslobođenje* also served as an important link to the past. Deputy editor Gordana Knezević recalls that even working without ink, paper, and power, the paper would come out daily and soon be passed throughout the city. She says, “It became a lifeline, a symbol of normality. There were two semblances of normal life in the city – the bakery and the newspaper” (Di Giovanni, 1995, p. 58). Sarajevo resident Hamza Baksic associates *Oslobođenje* with a prewar, peaceful life, “this is the significance of *Oslobođenje*...because it occurred daily in Sarajevo. As long as one possibly had one’s cigarettes, possibly one’s newspaper, and possibly one’s coffee” (Kapic, 2000, p. 826). Continuing the ritual of reading the daily newspaper allowed for individuals to connect with their memory of a life without chaos and fear.

Many writing projects started before the war such as novels, theses, and academic articles were continually worked on throughout the conflict and served as links to a past life and identity. In one letter, a Sarajevan discusses the continuation of her work as a translator with the hope that her work will be useful again one day, “Every now and then I translate something, invariably on a subject totally unrelated to the war, and wait for the time when my translations will once again be of interest to someone” (Cataldi, 1994, p. 101). In the process of adapting to a new life, projects from their past lives were carried over. An economist living through the war recounts spending his spare time writing his Master’s thesis, studying foreign languages, and writing articles for business magazines. For him along with many, the disruption of war was not enough to end years of study and academic dedication. Poet Mladen Marković was inspired to write based on the memories of his peacetime life with his family:

I was in two separate worlds, one real, war, killings, sufferings and second, my past and future family life with Veronika and Boris. That’s how my poetry started which kept me going day by day. Many of my poems were more predictions for the future than poetry: everything was completely fulfilled. (Demick, 2012, p. 212).

Remembering his past life not only inspired him to write poetry, but also helped him focus on an imagined postwar life where he would be reunited with his wife and son. Just as the besiegers were trying to demoralize and defeat the citizens of Sarajevo, these linkages between past and present allowed for individuals to be strengthened by their former identities. Remembering a time without war, without fear, and without strife gave Sarajevans an image of a peaceful life to hold on to and strive for.

5.2 Maintaining Sanity

Many individuals regarded reading as a way to gain mental fortitude and maintain sanity amidst the trauma and stress they faced. In a diary kept hidden during the war, Mladen Vuksanović (2004) describes his actions of giving books away to friends and neighbors encouraging them to, “Read, just read...that’s the best way to defeat insanity” (p. 71). In a post war interview, Sead Fetahagic recounts the tremendous value books had on the city during the war, “Books were the only things around us that made us alive, that helped us to feel our own pulse, that made us feel human” (Kapic, 2000, p. 466). Narratives present us with the unique opportunity to escape our reality while also connecting our own lives and experiences with the world of the story. If insanity is a way of losing one’s identity and humanity, then reading allows individuals to find themselves within the stories they fall into.

One way reading helped to stave off madness was by offering the reader an opportunity to escape their reality and enter into a new world. One Sarajevan notes, “Books meant support for all of us in Sarajevo... to our knowledge people read much more than in peacetime because they could in some way separate

themselves from the cruel reality in which they lived” (Kapic, 2000, p. 826). Writer and professor Dzevad Karahasan (1994) wrote of his “warm gratitude” for his books during the war. He exclaims, “Literature had saved me from reality and from those who wish to dictate that reality...it gave me a refuge” (p. 35). The activity of reading offered Sarajevans a mental retreat by immersing themselves into places that were worlds away from besieged Sarajevo.

Along with escaping into the world of a story, many Sarajevans found peace of mind through the entertainment and optimism of the material they read. A soldier in the Bosnian army remembered carrying around a rucksack with several books inside, “none of them challenging or deep, just entertaining” (Doucette, 2008). Reading something fun or lighthearted was particularly helpful during intense times of stress. Barbara Demick (2012) chronicles how one family would retreat to a sturdy orphanage in order to escape the shelling taking place in their neighborhood. The family’s daughter, Delila, would bring romance novels to help take her mind off the explosions. While recovering from a shrapnel wound, fourteen-year-old Amir would read and reread a stack of comic books that his friends gave him, enjoying the carefree hijinks of Denis Napast, or Dennis the Menace. The editor of *Oslobođenje*, Zlatko Dizdarević (1995), recalls lending his friend a book of old heroic ballads that detailed Bosnian victories from a past era. Trying to focus on a victorious Bosnian people, his friend said, “Please, don’t bring me those that say we’re losing, I only want the ones where we win. Man, I really don’t like it when we don’t win” (p. 89). While under siege, Sarajevans found hope, humor, and entertainment within the pages of the books they read.

Sarajevans also found peace and sanity through the writing process. What is put down on the page is at the ultimate control of the writer. In a reality where random violence and death is all encompassing, establishing control through the writing process can help create a sort of order from the surrounding chaos. After publishing her diary and reflecting on its creation, Zlata Filipović (2006) strove to understand where her will to write came from:

[Writing was] a way of getting things out of my heart and my head, a way of getting some perspective on problems and ideas. I think it was really important for me to have written during the war, because in the madness that was around me, 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. (p. xiii).

We see this same effect of writing helping to establish order and gain perspective expressed by other Sarajevans during the war. Atka Reid (2011) described having “so many thoughts running through my head” that writing about them “helped me to look at things more clearly” (p. 181). Dzevad Karahasan (1994) reflected on his own urge to write during the war, “My own experience with this war tells me that to write is, above all, to try to establish some kind of order in chaos...writing itself is proof that human beings can behave rationally” (p. 122). While Sarajevans may have felt powerless in their daily lives, they held absolute control over the stories they told.

This peace also came from the calming effect that expressing one’s emotions can produce. Grief, anger, or fear was commonly expressed in the form of diary keeping or letter writing. Elma Softić (1996) reflected on her own process of writing in her war journal, viscerally explaining having a “heap of feelings piled up between my stomach and my throat that needed to be released somehow. And I do it with words. I don’t complain, I don’t cry, I don’t get depressed. I simply write” (p. 159). As these examples illustrate, by transforming thoughts into words on a page, writing was a way for these charged, negative emotions to be released from one’s mind and body.

5.3 Connecting with Others

One consequence of the siege was that it was incredibly isolating. Many people had loved ones flee before the start of the conflict. Many also found themselves unable to travel inside the city because of various roadblocks and obstacles the armed forces had put up. Phone lines were commonly down and the postal service was unreliable. Those living in the city shared a collective feeling of being cut off from the modern

world. One way to fight this isolation forced upon them was to find reminders of one's connection with their loved ones and the outside world.

One of the most powerful ways Sarajevans maintained this connection was by reading letters sent to them by family and friends. News from loved ones, even if sent sparingly, brought tremendous amounts of joy into the lives of those trying to survive. In a letter to her brother, Amela relates the happiness she felt at reading his last letter, "We wept with joy to know that you realize what is going on here and that you are thinking of us. Those tears seemed to lift a weight from my heart, and I feel better now" (Cataldi, 1994, p. 95). In another letter between loved ones, Seka writes on his joy and frustration at not being able to consistently communicate with Sylvia, "Your letter came as a great surprise after hearing nothing for eight months. When I opened it, believe me, it was quite a while before I could read it through the tears that filled my eyes" (Cataldi, 1994, p. 106). Often the only way that letters could get in and out of the city were with the help of foreign aid workers and journalists who could cross in and out of the war zone with relative ease.

When these letters did arrive, their reading also strengthened the connection between individuals who were living miles (and centuries, it seemed) apart. With only their words and handwriting, friends could be transported into Sarajevan apartments and their readers could be transported out. In one letter to a friend a Sarajevan rejoices, "I can't believe it...your own beautiful handwriting is here in my hands at this very moment! To touch something so fresh, smelling of the warm sea, is a privilege very few people in Sarajevo can enjoy" (Cataldi, 1994, p. 52). Zlata feels this connection to friends as she reads through letters, "Letters are all I've got left of my friends. I read them and they take me back to my friends" (Filipović, 2006, p. 183). For Professor Karahasan (1994), reading a letter from friends proved that they "are not alone in the world" and was well worth the valuable oil burned while reading (p. 45). While their world seemed strange and foreign, the world written about in these letters established that there was normal life going on elsewhere. Reminders of their relationships also gave them reminders of their identity and life before the war. These connections tethered Sarajevans to feelings of hope; hope that peace would return, normal life would resume, and friendships would continue.

While their delivery was uncertain, people also continued to write letters to their loved ones outside of the city. In these letters, they were able to share their experiences and feel connected to the ones they wrote to. Pavle, a young Sarajevan writing to his girlfriend, found that just the act of writing brought him closer to his love, "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" (Cataldi, 1994, p. 163). These letters and the words written within could represent a physical manifestation of one's love. Professor Karahasan (1994) tells the story of the sickening feeling he felt when a Serbian soldier picked up a letter that was sent through a journalist, "I felt terrible when I found out about that...My letter, full of love, caring, tenderness—being held and read by an unwashed vagabond, capable of raping, killing a child, shooting rockets at a city" (p. 109). These letters held the raw, emotional outpourings of those dealing with tragedy and deprivation on a daily basis. More than just communication, they were symbols of individual love, hope, and survival.

Besides connecting with loved ones, Sarajevans also wrote letters of appeal in an effort to voice their frustration to leaders around the world. These writers fought the Serb aggression in their own way, with a pen instead of a gun. Atka Reid (2011) observed her father write hundreds of letters to foreign leaders after a close family member was killed. When asked if she thought the letters would really make a difference her father replied, "No, but I want the rest of the world to know that the spirit of this city is not dead" (p. 66). While these communications may have been ignored or even lost, Sarajevans wrote as a way to express their voice and resist the imposition of war.

5.4 Gaining and Spreading Information

Enes Kujundzic, the director of the National and University Library, spoke on the way literature kept Sarajevo "spiritually alive" during the siege, saying that when Sarajevans were "reading some novel or poem or remembrances of some other people of some other wars or the past, they were looking for answers

regarding the situation we had found ourselves in” (Kapic, 2000, p. 826). As in art, we can find answers in literature that help us understand our lived reality.

There are many examples of Sarajevans looking to books to find clarity. In his diary, Mladen Vuksanović (2004) writes that on a sleepless night, “with the aid of *Signs by the Roadside* I try to decipher the future course of our madness” (p. 23). Professor Karahasan (1994) searches through his own personal library in order to speculate on his country’s future, “I keep theorizing on, I deduce analogies, I search through history, looking for models for Bosnia’s fate” (p. 51). Instead of using reading as a means to block out reality, many used it as a way to better understand their situation and find examples of how to live.

During the war, Sarajevans did not lose their intellectual curiosity. In the beginning, schools were largely closed or met sporadically, causing many to turn to books in order to teach themselves new things. Many Sarajevans began studying a language during the war with the hope of one day traveling to the faraway and peaceful locations in which these languages were spoken. A mother whose child was sent to Italy before the conflict writes, “I’m studying Italian, I managed to get hold of a book and a cassette, so when we next see each other we can speak in Italian” (Cataldi, 1994, p. 51). When the fighting stabilized slightly in 1993 and 1994, schools began opening and offering new language courses. Barbara Demick (2012) explains, “Foreign languages were enjoying a tremendous boom in wartime, because so many families hoped to emigrate” (p. 78). The desire for learning did not stop when bombs and gunfire interrupted schooling. Sarajevans of all ages continued to use books to develop their knowledge in new and relevant areas.

During the chaos of the siege, Sarajevans craved information on what was happening in their city. Without television, the only other major sources of information were the radio and newspaper. Radios, however, needed power and when batteries ran low, the newspaper remained a steadfast supplier of information. Demick (2012) writes on the obsession Sarajevans had with knowing when their utilities might be turned on or off. She reports, “they scanned *Oslobođenje* for reports about why the gas and electricity kept going on and off and when it might happen” (p. 135). The newspaper held the latest news on the locations of front lines, warnings of mortar strikes, updates on the world’s reaction, and death notices of those killed in the fighting. Even when the paper became thinner and doubled in price, as *Oslobođenje* editor Zlatko Dizdarević (1995) observed, “Sarajevans, many of whom are too poor to afford bread, bought up the entire edition in one hour” (p. 58).

The newspaper was dedicated to providing daily information to its readership. In 1992, after the *Oslobođenje* building was hit repeatedly with artillery fire and shells, the staff of *Oslobođenje* continued working to produce a paper every day. Writers gathered information without access to computers, television, or foreign sources. Editor Dizdarević (1995) illustrates the stubbornness of the writing team in maintaining their service to the people of Sarajevo:

...we don’t need that building now. We have our paper, and we have Sarajevo, a city that needs our paper. This paper, even if it’s smaller and thinner, will go on printing everything that excites the hatred of idiots, but there will no longer be anything they could destroy...As for us, we’ll go on producing and preserving our paper. We’ll hold on to our paper and we’ll even know how to produce reprints, to refresh the memories of those whose memories will need to be refreshed. (p. 60).

Throughout the entire siege, the staff of *Oslobođenje* worked tirelessly, with little to no resources, in order to provide the city of Sarajevo information about the war. This information allowed Sarajevans to feel more aware and confident of what was going on within their own backyards. It also reminded them that the war was not yet lost.

A community of writers, journalists, academics, intellectuals, and actors also used their pens to articulate the horrors of the war to an international audience in order to appeal for aid. Zlatko Dizdarević (1995) illuminated the opportunities those with writing talents had on the war effort, saying, “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” (p. 67). Many writers organized through PEN International, a literary and human rights organization. In a letter to fellow members Professor Karahasan (1994) writes, “At this moment, it is most important for you to get out of Sarajevo and to write, speak, and testify” (p. 103). This group of writers believed that through their skill

and art they could best articulate the horrors of the siege and gain international awareness and sympathy in doing so. Like the journalists at *Oslobodjenje*, these writers used their writing to spread information on what was occurring in Sarajevo and shed a light on the deadly conflict.

6 Conclusion

The war in Bosnia and the accompanying siege of Sarajevo represented a dark time in European history when a particularly virulent strand of chauvinistic nationalism ravaged an entire region. A city that once stood as a symbol for ethnic and religious plurality and tolerance was surrounded, besieged with heavy artillery, and starved of resources. Despite more than three years under siege, thousands of civilians dead, and the lives of each Sarajevan radically changed, the people of Sarajevo refused to yield to their aggressors.

To better understand how the people of Sarajevo survived and withstood the stress and trauma of war, an analysis was done on the reading and writing habits and impact that had on individuals during the war. Through examining wartime diaries, letters, and memoirs, as well as speaking with an individual who lived through the war, we begin to see how individuals used books and writings as a means of maintaining and preserving the self and drawing strength from this act of self-defense. Through reading and writing, individuals could find and preserve their identity, sanity, relationships with others, and connection to the world. These efforts were in constant battle with the city's besiegers whose actions were motivated by a sectarian ideology that sought to dehumanize and destroy people based on religion and ethnicity. The act of preserving one's identity, sanity, and relationships through the violent onslaught can be seen as ultimately an act of resistance.

The vast majority of us share the belief that literacy is a powerful tool that can transform our lives and worldviews. However, when war breaks out and our focus turns to meeting physical needs for survival such as food, water, and shelter, we may forget just how valuable reading and writing are as tools in this fight. As demonstrated here, we can see these activities as a sort of mental armor adopted by people in crisis. Within our reading and writing we can both retreat into the page and be bolstered by it. We can seek refuge within this space, escaping reality and healing ourselves with this period of time out. We can also remember who we are and the lives we want to lead, strengthening both our resolve and hope for a different reality we must return to. It can change our outlook of the world and give us hope that we might, in fact, prevail.

Sadly, there are still people living under fear, violence, and deprivation because of conflicts going on in the world today. Those currently dealing with persecution, just like the Sarajevans of twenty-five years ago, are searching for answers to their situation. As librarians, understanding the value that reading and writing have on individuals living through war and crisis can help us better serve these populations. With this research we may better advocate for the protection of libraries within battlegrounds and the proliferation of books, writing material, and information resources in places such as refugee camps and war zones. By understanding the power of books and writing as tools for survival, we can better work to equip people with access to the materials that allow them to survive and resist oppression. Even if we never come into contact with these populations, we are still better prepared to serve patrons facing their own form of adversity.

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