



## Sarajevo: Reflections on the Day No One Died

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The first story on the television newscast on a night in mid-February was that no one had been killed or wounded in Sarajevo -- not by snipers, not by mortars or rocket fire, not by artillery shells -- for 24 hours. The latest in a long futile series of cease-fires was holding; children were playing in the streets. (Not all the children; on this same day, the absence of gunfire permitted the evacuation of 14 more young victims of the recent marketplace massacre to hospitals overseas.)

The second story on the newscast was from the besieged eastern half of Mostar. From February 1 to this day, the reporter said, 37 Bosnian Muslims had been killed -- 35 of them children -- and more than 130 wounded, by snipers and mortar fire. But there had not been, and could not be, a Sarajevo-style marketplace massacre, he explained, because there was no marketplace, because there was no food to sell, and in any case there were no crowds because, for safety, East Mostar lives under a daytime curfew. Only one person per family is allowed out, special pass in hand, to collect food and water from relief agencies. Some 50,000 Mostar Muslims, the reporter added, "live like rats in cellars -- almost everything above ground is too dangerous -- and venture out only at night." That is when most deaths now occur.

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On the same day, Bihac in northern Bosnia was shelled, but there were no detailed reports, and no television pictures, from Bihac or from the besieged "safe havens" in Tuzla, Srebrenica, and Zenica in the east, and therefore no international public outrage.

The slaughter of civilians in wartime is hardly a new phenomenon. In World War II, the London blitz and the firebombings of Berlin, Dresden, and Tokyo killed almost half a million noncombatants. Hiroshima and Nagasaki followed. But television and news coverage during the two years of conflict in former Yugoslavia have presented a much more personal view of such deaths. Nothing is hidden, not even the image of a now-useless prosthetic leg -- the rehabilitating instrument of some earlier wartime injury -- flung aside as the corpse of its owner was dragged from the Sarajevo market. One consequence of our prolonged and repeated exposure to such images (and rarely, since Vietnam, have so many atrocities been witnessed in such intimate detail by so many observers) is what Robert Jay Lifton has termed "psychic numbing," a diminished capacity or inclination to feel. The converse of this exhaustion of empathy is that the threshold for outrage rises. Months ago, it was a dozen terribly wounded children; then a score of people killed on a headline, now 68 dead in a market.

But the total of deaths in Sarajevo is in the tens of thousands; in former Yugoslavia overall, hundreds of thousands, and the refugees, driven from their homes, 2 million. All wars are accompanied by human rights

violations; the special feature of the conflict in former Yugoslavia is that its central purpose is a crime. "Ethnic cleansing" is a euphemism for the forced deportation of whole populations, a violation of international humanitarian law. There is, of course, another word for what has been happening in Bosnia, assiduously avoided in numerous Departments of State and Foreign Offices: genocide.

These uniformly gloomy reflections have their origin in two missions to former Yugoslavia, over the past 15 months, under the auspices of Physicians for Human Rights. It seems to me now that my colleagues and I were dealing, almost always and of necessity, after the facts: interviewing prison-camp survivors after their brutal tortures, listening to the despairing pleas of mothers after their sons had disappeared; finding the presumed mass grave of those sons when all that was left was their bones. Like the U.N. troops -- and most of the rest of the world -- we functioned, mostly, as immobilized bystanders, sustained primarily by the need to document and bear witness.

Although the word itself is never used, thoughts of genocide recur. In a poignant passage from *Sarajevo: A War Journal* [1], the journalist Zlatko Dizdarevic writes of this city:

"In the concentration camps we know from history, people were held prisoners without any opportunity to move from place to place. That's how it is here. Every now and then those people were given a few spoonfuls of food, just like here. They were deprived of all the rights fixed and enumerated in the international declarations and codes, just like here. Collaborators and traitors, the Fifth Column, had a chance to survive. Like here. The inmates had no way of communicating with their relatives and friends on the outside taken away from them...Here too. And finally, inmates from those camps were murdered according to some criminal "rationale": the old, the weak, the Jews, the Communists, the Gypsies, those accused of anything at all.

"Here no such rationale applies. We are being murdered at random...."

The weeks and months to come will determine whether the murders, the sieges, and the enforced starvation will come to an end, or if the mid-February silence of the guns in Sarajevo will prove to have been an

aberration, the transient product of the nth U.N. and NATO threat to use force to end civilian slaughter. Today's newscast, then, was an ironic inversion of the norm. Today, no deaths was news.

## Reference

1. Dizdarevic Z. *Sarajevo: a war journal*. New York: Fromm International, 1993.