

Twenty years on, Sarajevo still scarred by siege

In the 1990s, Sarajevo was home to the longest siege of modern times, and one of the bloodiest. It began twenty years ago this week – and though it is over, many still suffer from its effects.



**CITIZENSHIP
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Sarajevo is a beautiful city. A forest of spires and minarets attests to its rich history and diversity; its centuries-old streets bustle with attractive bars and cafes. Yet for most people, Sarajevo means only horror and misery: it was here that many of the worst atrocities in Europe's postwar history occurred.

This week marks twenty years since the of the Siege of Sarajevo began. For four years, the city was surrounded by Serbian troops – the longest siege in the history of modern warfare. Citizens were deprived of food, water electricity and medicine. Every day shells rained down in their hundreds, on homes, football pitches and markets. Whole streets became known as 'Sniper Alleys' as passers-by were picked off by gunmen. Over 10,000 were killed, with countless more abused, wounded and forced out of their homes.

The siege was part of a series of conflicts that erupted after the breakup



A family in besieged Sarajevo risks snipers to collect firewood © Christian Maréchal

of Yugoslavia, a communist country in Southeast Europe. The region was crowded with many different ethnicities, and several states declared independence. Conflict soon broke out between Christian Serbs and Muslim Bosnians.

Nationalist Serbian leaders like Radovan Karadžić laid claim to large parts of Bosnia. With far superior arms, they waged a war of 'ethnic cleansing' on the Muslims who lived there. For the first time since World War II, concentration camps returned to Europe.

Massacres followed in many multi-ethnic towns, and Sarajevo was besieged. In 1994, after much delay, the international community finally intervened; a year later the war was over.

But the memory of the 1990s still haunts inhabitants of Sarajevo, and across Bosnia the wars have left scars. Residents speak of suspicion between people of different backgrounds, who once lived relatively easily alongside one another.

And there are more concrete issues too: the conflict displaced 2.7 million people, and hundreds of thousands are still without permanent homes. This month, the UN is leading a drive to raise 500 million for Bosnia's 74,000 most vulnerable and needy refugees.

GHOSTS OF WAR

For 15 years Bosnia has struggled to come to terms with the conflicts of the 1990s. Now, some urge the country to examine its troubled history actively and openly. Ring-leaders must face justice, they say, collaborators accept responsibility and victims offer forgiveness. Confronting the truth is the first step towards healing the scars.

But in Sarajevo, many would rather try to forget. The conflict is too raw for forgiveness and reconciliation, they say: that is for future generations. In the meantime, it is best not to speak of the atrocities of the past. The only thing powerful enough to heal these wounds is time.

Q & A

Q How can anyone just forgive and forget atrocities like that?

A Some say they can't. But to some extent we all have to ignore the past to get along with one another: history is full of atrocities, and bitter wars between groups of people who now coexist peacefully. No matter who you are or where you come

from, your country or race has almost certainly been involved in past atrocities on one side or the other – or both.

Q Sure, but a lot of that's ancient history – it's different, isn't it?

A It might be different and it might be history, but that doesn't mean it doesn't matter. Many feel they still suffer from the effects of past oppression and injustice –

slavery, empire, war. How much we should be held responsible for our ancestors' crimes is a fraught and complicated question.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Some wrongs can never be forgiven – or forgotten.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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WORD WATCH

Modern warfare – Although of course the meaning of ‘modern’ changes as time goes on, ‘modern warfare’ has mostly been used to describe the types of war developed during and after the WW II. It involves heavy vehicles like tanks and bombers. According to some theorists, modern wars affect civilians more than the wars of the past.

Yugoslavia – When the map of

Europe was redrawn after World War I, Yugoslavia was created as a monarchy. During the Second World War, communists led by Josip Tito eventually triumphed in struggles between different factions. He kept Yugoslavia united under a constitution modelled on the Soviet Union, and ruled as a dictator until 1980. Yugoslavia collapsed in 1992.

Radovan Karadžić – Karadžić ruled as president of the territories that Serbs laid claims to in Bosnia. He has distinctive shock

of grey hair, trained as a psychiatrist and is a published poet – but he is also blamed for many of the conflict’s worst atrocities. Along with other Serbian leaders, he is now imprisoned in a UN detention unit, awaiting trial for war crimes.

Concentration camps – Although the term ‘concentration camp’ is now mostly associated with the terrors of the Holocaust, it had been used before. In the Boer War of 1899-1902, Britain set up concentration camps for rebellious black Africans, where thousands died.

YOU DECIDE

1. Time heals all wounds... or does it?
2. Should we take responsibility for the sins that our nation, religion or ethnicity has committed in the past?

ACTIVITIES

1. Imagine you are a Serb who collaborated in the atrocities against Bosnians. Write a letter to the families of those affected by your actions asking for forgiveness.
2. Do some research and make a timeline of Southeastern European history since 1991.

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 **NOTES**

