

Trauma and Memory in Sarajevo

By Björn Krondorfer, PhD

For three long years, in the heart of Europe, Serbian bombardment of Sarajevo proceeded with impunity and the city was shredded into pieces without any intervention.

On July 9 of this summer, I landed at the airport in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

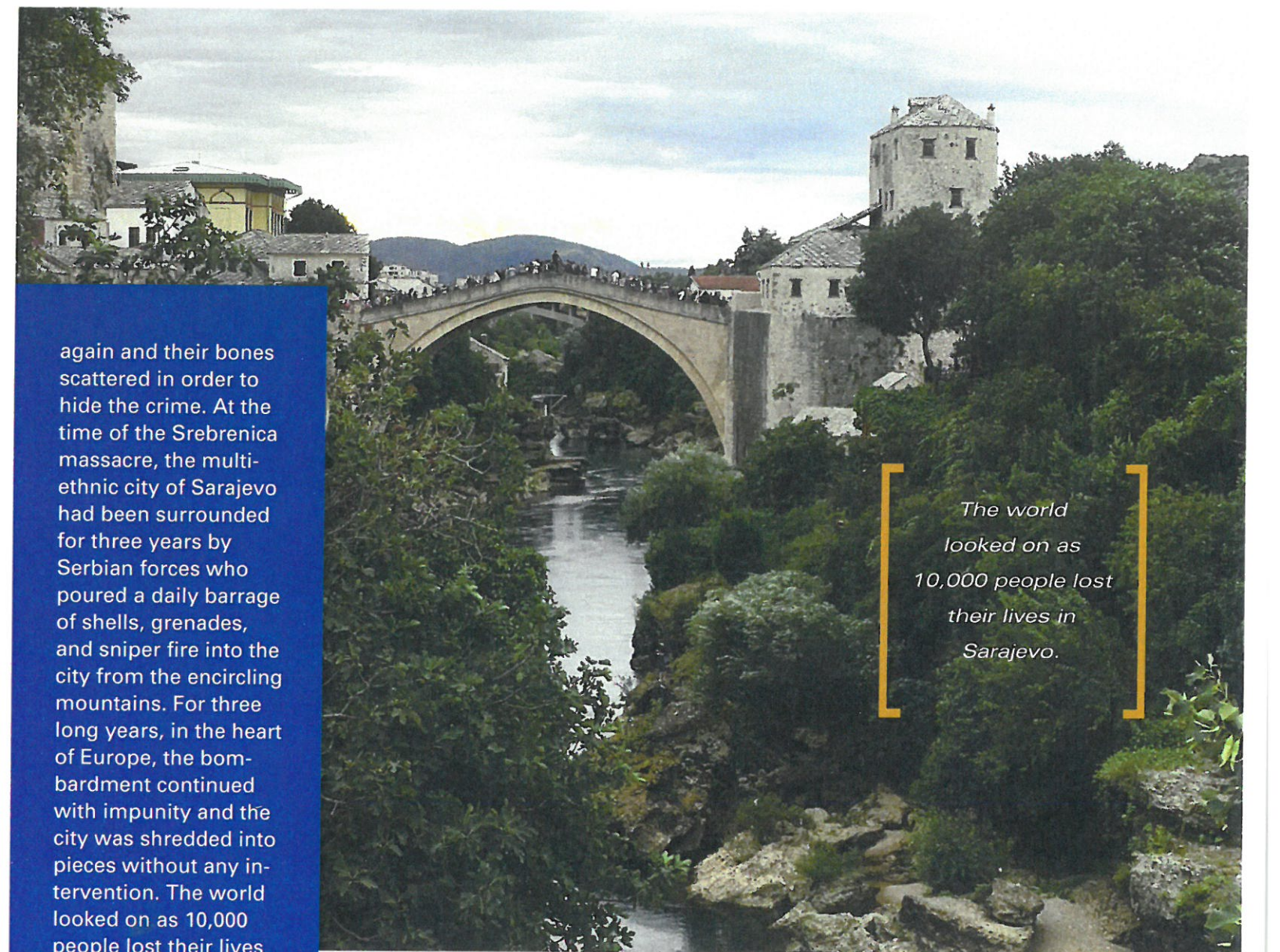
Two days later, an international conference was to begin on *Trauma, Memory, and Healing in the Balkans and Beyond*.

The conference took place in a Catholic boarding school and was organized by Dr. Zilka Siljak, a Bosnian Muslim woman scholar-activist with research interests in religion, gender, and peacebuilding. If it seems that the above combination of words—Catholic, Muslim, gender, peacebuilding, and healing—might raise any eye-

brows today, we may reflect that, twenty years ago, they would have been rewarded with a bullet rather than the genteel applause of an academic audience.

July 11, the day the conference started, also marked the 21st anniversary of the genocidal murder of over 8,000 Muslim men in Srebrenica, a small mountain town about a two-hour drive north of Sarajevo. There, in 1995, Muslim men, young and old, were methodically taken from an UN-Safe Zone that failed to protect them. They were then systematically slaughtered by Serb nationalist forces, their bodies dumped in mass graves, later dug up

photo this page: markers to victims of the conflict



again and their bones scattered in order to hide the crime. At the time of the Srebrenica massacre, the multi-ethnic city of Sarajevo had been surrounded for three years by Serbian forces who poured a daily barrage of shells, grenades, and sniper fire into the city from the encircling mountains. For three long years, in the heart of Europe, the bombardment continued with impunity and the city was shredded into pieces without any intervention. The world looked on as 10,000 people lost their lives in Sarajevo.

The religio-ethnic war that erupted in 1991 in the former Yugoslavia pitted nationalist Orthodox-Christian Serbs against Catholic-Croatian nationalists against Bosnian Muslim nationalists. The former Yugoslav Republic broke apart into ethnic enclaves. The scholar Paul Mojzes (2009) summarizes the strategically pursued ethnic cleansing operations in these words:

[P]aramilitary units of one ethnic group would take over a town and first kill those members of their own ethnicity who were known as proponents of pluralistic integration... [T]hey would then start killing the most prominent citizens of the other ethnicities...[and put them] into concentration camps where the most fearsome tortures were common. These included genocidal rape (of women and men), beatings, electric shock, sexual mutilation...and so forth.

After the killing spree in Srebrenica, the international community was finally moved to enforce a peace treaty in 1995. But the damage had been done. People who had lived together for decades as neighbors had been pushed into homogenous ethnic regions, towns, and neighborhoods. Today, in 2016, these communities continue to live apart, mistrusting each other intensely, and each with memories of pain and loss.

The world looked on as 10,000 people lost their lives in Sarajevo.

Twenty years later, life in Sarajevo is flourishing again. In this Muslim majority city, we walked freely and without fear, frequenting the many cafes and bars and enjoying the bustling promenades in stari grad (the old town), where French, Kuwaiti, Dutch, Saudi, and occasional American tourists mingle. The city's Catholic, Russian Orthodox, and Jewish places of worship are open to the public, and

(continued on page 8)

from the rebuilt mosques, which had been so heavily damaged in the 1990s, the Muezzin calls for prayer five times a day. Yet, the wounds are everywhere: buildings still carry the scars of shrapnel and bullet holes; the cityscape is dotted with the white gravestones of Muslim cemeteries that sprang up in parks and soccer fields during the siege; and red resin on sidewalks marks the places where mortar shells landed with deadly precision: in markets, pedestrian zones, or in front of houses of worship. These Roses of Sarajevo, as they are called, are the visible scars in the city. The invisible scars reside as traumas and memories within people. The city is full of *joie de vivre* today, but just beneath the sur-

*The city is full of
joie de vivre
today, but just
beneath the
surface linger
injuries,
dejection, and
shame.*

face linger injuries, dejection, and shame. Silenced shame—so prevalent according to experts at the conference—is the effect of extreme sexualized violence that had been unleashed especially against women in those years of carnage.

How do we bring into speech unspeakable atrocities? Scholars from around the world who met

in Sarajevo for the three-day conference on Trauma, Memory and Healing provided provisional ideas, concepts, histories, data, and explanations. Some of us came from academic backgrounds, others from NGOs currently working in conflict zones. My own contribution addressed the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by looking at trauma through the lens of “unsettling empathy.”

The conference ended with a field trip to Srebrenica. At the official memorial site, which is also the burial ground for reinterned victims of the massacre, we met Hasan Hasanovic, a Muslim, who, in perfect English, told to us how he, as a teenage boy, had survived the slaughter. We also met with the “Mothers of Srebrenica,” a

group of Bosnian women who had lost their husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, and uncles in the genocide but who decided to keep living in Srebrenica despite the fact that it has become a majority Serbian town after 1995. The women invited us to a lavish home-cooked meal. Warily, in their mother tongue, they tried to convey some of what they had witnessed—fragmented memories of cruelties, pain, and loss.

As director of the Martin-Springer Institute, I want to bring some of what I saw and heard in Bosnia and Herzegovina to NAU. For example, I want to invite Hasan Hasanovic to our campus next year to meet with our students and faculty; we also have





red resin on
sidewalks marks the
places where mortar
shells landed with
deadly precision: in
markets, pedestrian
zones, or in front of
houses of worship.

established a good working relation with Zilka Siljak, the organizer of the Sarajevo conference: in 2012 we invited her to NAU where she spoke about Bosnian women's interfaith alliances that seek to counter the shaming effects of sexual violence.

Returning to Flagstaff, I could not help but think about the calamities that are occurring right now. Sarajevo was violently torn apart in the years 1992-1995, and it still has not healed. Today the world watches as the Syrian city of Aleppo is shelled daily, now in its third year, just like Sarajevo. And there is no end in sight.

Bjorn Krondorfer, Director of the Martin Springer Institute and Endowed Professor of Religious Studies at NAU

