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War Within : Everyday Life in Sarajevo under Siege

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In this ethnography of the war in Bosnia, the author examines the ways in which the people of Sarajevo negotiated the meaning of normality in their everyday lives, which became dominated by the war situation and the siege of the town. The study explores the ways of dealing with everyday threat to life, ways of providing the subsistence, changes in social relations, and the role of religion and ethnic traditions in the process of constituting national identities. Six months of fieldwork was conducted in Sarajevo between 1994 and 1996, and an additional six months in Croatia and Hercegovina between 1991 and 1993. The analysis is based on extensive informal interviews with about 60 people in Sarajevo as well as the author's own experience of the war. The study shows that the need to establish a normality in a situation where pre-war norms of conduct and ideology had become obliterated, was the key to a successful coping with the war. The constant fear for one's life could be counteracted by ignoring the dangers, creating a distance by joking, and inventing personal magic routines. In their struggle to uphold pre-war norms of subsistence Sarajevans demonstrated an immense creativity in their 'imitation of life', as they called it. Social relations of friendship in neighbourhoods, and in families changed as roughly half of the pre-war

population left the town during the war. Changes were also brought about by the deterioration of material living conditions, as well as by the emerging differentiation into three antagonistic nations. People witnessed an increasing public presence of religious customs and symbols, and as ethno-religious traditions were the only difference between the different Sarajevo nations, they were confronted with the question of the meaning of their own national identifications as well as those of the people they interacted with. Finally, the study examines how a firsthand experience changes our perception of the phenomenon of war.

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