Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne
An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

Men of War (2010)

James T. Synder

THE SIEGE of Sarajevo was the longest in modern European memory. For one thousand days, beginning on April 5, 1992, Yugoslav-backed Serbian separatists surrounded the young capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina and shelled and shot its residents. Confronting a determined armed resistance and a stoic population, the besieging force never attempted to take the city, and after the Dayton Agreement ended the war in 1995, the siege was lifted on February 29, 1996. Sarajevo didn't fall as other Muslim enclaves did, such as Srebenica, Gorazde, and Zepa, but thousands were killed and tens of thousands were driven from their homes, most never to return. Fifteen years later, Bosnia-Herzegovina has recovered unevenly from the war. The international tribunal prosecuting criminals for the war in Yugoslavia is three times as old as the conflict itself, with arrest warrants still outstanding. The Serbs who attempted to ethnically cleanse the famously cosmopolitan Sarajevo—Orthodox and Catholic bishoprics are seated a bridge away from synagogues in a city of a hundred mosques—achieved the virtual opposite: they cleansed themselves from the city. Today it is almost entirely Muslim. But the population never recovered; Sarajevo is estimated to be three-quarters the size it was in 1991.

The country is a virtual protectorate of the European Union and remains mired in a byzantine constitutional governing structure, both of which were the price for concluding the conflict. Divided along religious lines—Catholic Croats, Bosnian Muslims, and Orthodox Serbs all speak more or less the same language, although the Serbs use the Cyrillic alphabet—the Dayton Agreement has locked the country into homogenous regions and effectively perpetuates this insularity because no politician sees an advantage to expanding influence beyond his region to achieve national office. The result is political stalemate and economic stagnation for the country of four million.

The war's inheritance has held Bosnia-Herzegovina back while its neighbors surge forward. Slovenia and Croatia, both former Yugoslav republics, are now members of NATO, and Slovenia recently held the rotating presidency of the EU. Macedonia, which narrowly averted civil war in 2001, has overtaken Bosnia in GDP per capita and purchasing power parity, with only half of Bosnia-Herzegovina's population. Nonetheless Bosnia-Herzegovina still harbors Western aspirations and has petitioned NATO and the EU for membership.

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA'S SITUATION makes the work of the small Sarajevo-based publishing house Connectum all the more extraordinary, important, and valuable. Founded in 2004, Connectum has a catalogue of about 100 titles. Nearly all are in Bosnian (the fracturing of the former Yugoslavia has also broken up language families) except for the two books reviewed here, which were written by Bosnian expatriate authors and published in English translation. These books are—for the time being—available only in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Connectum has no international distributor.

One hopes that will change because so few Bosnian Muslim voices from the war exist in the West. Zlatko Dizdarevic, editor of the Sarajevo daily *Oslobodjene* (which heroically didn't miss an issue during the war), published *Sarajevo: A War Journal* in 1993. Nadja Halilbegovic published *My Childhood Under Fire* in 2006. Semezdin Mehmedinovic published *Sarajevo Blues*, a volume of poetry, in 2001. Connectum's contributions effectively double the number of Bosnian Muslim works in prose about the war available in English translation.

It is important to recognize the enormous difference between one's own clear voice, even in translation, and those mediated through foreign authors. In *Why Translation Matters*, Edith Grossman argues that "[t]ranslation expands our ability to explore through literature the thoughts and feelings of people from another society or another time. It permits us to savor the transformation of the foreign into the familiar and for a brief time to live outside our own skins, our own preconceptions and misconceptions." This subjectivity is important: how Bosnian Muslims view their persecution is quite different from how the rest of the world viewed it.

Sarajevo: Exodus of a City by Dzevad Karahasan has been reissued by Connectum in a revised translation by Slobodan Draculic, who died unexpectedly in September 2010 in Toronto. Originally published in 1994, it is an elegiac contemplation of the city and the suffering of its residents during that time. Karahasan is an accomplished and prolific playwright and essayist, and his observations pour out onto the page. But far from being a snapshot of a hell long since gone cold, Karahasan's essays remain eerily relevant and fresh.

In his essay, "An Argument with a Frenchmen," he muses philosophically on the futility of discussing his condition and state of mind with a foreigner who parachuted into his country during the siege. How can he convince this interloper, with his Western notions of material comfort, what home means to him even under the conditions of war? "[T]o all my attempts to convince him that I am better off than I deserve, the Frenchman responded by repeating that I must be feeling terrible," Karahasan notes with irony. It is a counterpoint with political consequences, as Sarajevo's survival, prior to Dayton, was probably predicated on its residents well outnumbering its attackers. But Karahasan's point is important for other besieged societies that need their citizens to re-stitch the social fabric after a supreme emergency has receded, but also require that the international community understand their subjective condition before flooding them with assistance and pity they don't need or want.

Karahasan later explores how language is destroyed and becomes a tool of destruction

in conflict. This is perhaps a strange thing to care about, when mortars and artillery laid waste to Sarajevo's landmarks and snipers filled the cemeteries with fresh graves. But he understands how the nefarious employment of language can stoke and perpetuate conflict, and his experience applies well beyond the Balkans. His essay "Literature and War" is a cold rebuke, in the finest tradition of George Orwell and Czeslaw Milosz, of the abuse of language and literature for political or aesthetic purposes. Language is sacred for Karahasan. "[T]he world is written first," he writes. "[T]he holy books say that it was uttered in words and all that happens in it, happens in language first." When language becomes a mere tool, he argues, when it becomes stripped of its moral purpose, language is defiled. And when language becomes part of the landscape destroyed by war, it can become a weapon. This is more than an attack on postmodern word games, of which he is sensible. He launches a two-pronged assault on writers who aestheticize human experience, especially human suffering, and those who write what he calls "heroic" literature. His bitter insight seems arcane at first glance but reveals itself to be startlingly germane given our experience in Iraq and Afghanistan during the last few years.

Parsing the first target—"art for art's sake literature," in Karahasan's summary—one may forget some of the best journalism of the 1990s focused on the former Yugoslavia. Samantha Power, Christiane Amanpour, Roy Gutman, and others made their names with morally engaged reporting. But today's forever wars have favored those who abandon the hard labor of rendering judgment for the task of pure craft. Sebastian Junger's and Dexter Filkens's self-conscious, literary wartime reportage, for example, surrender moral and human judgment to untainted evocation. Verisimilitude becomes the supreme value. While we may understand something about the nature of warfare from reading these books, we won't understand much more about human conflict. This is "literature that has liberated itself by removing its meaning and sense, reasons and values."

That is the guilt of this art-for-art's-sake literature, which is indirectly responsible for all the horrors of the contemporary world.…The decision to perceive literally everything as an aesthetic phenomenon—completely sidestepping questions about good and the truth—is an artistic decision. That decision started in the realm of art, and went on to become characteristic of the contemporary world.

When Karahasan goes on to describe heroic literature—"People in this literature are Serbs, Croats, Communists, Royalists, or something similar, in the first place, and only after that, in the second or third place, are they people with personal traits," he explains—he is writing about political tracts, polemics, and invective. Indeed, what made the wars of the former Yugoslavia particularly alarming was the role of self-styled nationalist intellectuals calling for the destruction of the Yugoslav international experiment, and Karahasan calls these writers out by name. But we need only remember that peculiar consensus of liberal interventionists and neoconservatives on the invasion of Iraq, and the screeds they published to make their names, to hear Karahasan's point resonate fifteen years later. Language's ability to explore and render human judgment is regularly abandoned for its conscription in the service of blunt political interest.

GIVEN KARAHASAN'S acute pain in the destruction of his city, it is perhaps awkward

to note that the other English-language book published by Connectum, *Black Soul*, is a war novel. The book has traveled a circuitous route to its country of origin. The author published a Bosnian-language version first in the United States and then in Bosnia-Herzegovina before self-publishing the English translation by Faruk Rahmanovic, which Connectum then bought. *Black Soul* is valuable for the unique perspective it provides: Muslim fighters defending Sarajevo and the experience of refugee and expatriate life in the United States. Rahmanovic's story is bifurcated between the brutal war on the ridgelines and peaks around Sarajevo and the cold canyons of Chicago, where the main character seeks asylum. In the absence of a hoped-for international intervention, the protagonist goes in search of a mythic American promise—an ideal deferred.

Rahmanovic served in the defense of Sarajevo, along with a misfit band of cops, kids, idealists, former federal soldiers, gun runners, and petty thugs. Their doomed, ragbag character is captured in the first part of the novel, as Rahmanovic follows an irregular unit during a final winter mission of attrition against Serb positions above the city. *Black Soul* treats the story's physical violence with a mix of video-game detachment and intimate consequence unknown in most fiction, suggesting that Rahmanovic has had an appalling acquaintance with the war. The main character, witnessing the murder of his family, notices one of the perpetrators vomiting in the aftermath of the slaughter. One of his own men, stumbling across the dead of the enemy, becomes violently ill and emotionally distraught. The author's characters are maimed and killed, and those who survive are psychologically devastated.

The central character is Hamza, badly wounded on the desperate mountain mission. He is sent by his parents first across the Adriatic to Italy and then on to Chicago, where he broods over the war and its traumas. He finds an apartment and a job, gets beaten up by local thugs, and meets a nice girl. He is otherwise isolated in the American wilderness—a sympathetic portrait of both post-traumatic stress and the refugee's predicament—and it is not altogether clear where the story will lead, a tension Rahmanovic balances tightly until a very terrible end.

The basic narrative structure of *Black Soul* is a revenge fantasy, and an immaculate one at that; one imagines Rahmanovic adapting the elaborate religious mysticism of John Woo's violent films to his Bosnian characters and milieux. It is hard to begrudge a conventionally satisfactory if tragic denouement to an otherwise morally complex story ranging over such extraordinary geography and characters. From Sarajevo to Rome to Chicago, Rahmanovic sharply etches his supporting characters: an ambivalent teenaged soldier; the towering moral presence of Hamza's father and the gossamer enigma of his American-born mother, a convert to Islam; a rich but homesick Bosnian expatriate in Italy; and a kindly but haunted black Vietnam veteran who puts Hamza up on Chicago's west side. It is only in reading the supporting cast that Hamza's essence feels coreless and lost. But the characters and story, if not the structure, are utterly original, and Rahmanovic himself succeeds in Karahasan's moral literary task of exploring the nature and consequences of the war.

What Connectum has accomplished with these two books is remarkable and laudable. The young Sarajevo house has published Bosnian Muslim voices for the larger public to hear. That Connectum has done this without native English editors or a global

distributor demonstrates a confidence in its own literary judgment in advance of the more prosaic practicalities of finding a wider audience. For now these books and their authors may remain confined to the international community in Sarajevo and the larger cities of Bosnia-Herzegovina. But with the country's European aspirations, that won't remain the case. Let us hope Connectum finds a partnering publisher and distributor willing to take a risk on future translations and original voices from Bosnia-Herzegovina and the rest of the Balkans. Our literature will be richer, and this aspirant nation will only benefit, for the effort.

Black Soul
By Ahmet M. Rahmanovic
Translated by Faruk Rahmanovic
Connectum (Sarajevo) 2010, 24.00 KM ($16)

Sarajevo: Exodus of a City
By Dzevad Karahasan
Translated by Slobodan Draculic
Connectum (Sarajevo) 2010 20.00 KM ($13)

Review first published in December 20, 2010 in *Dissent*.

James Thomas Snyder is the translator of *Justice in a Time of War*, Swiss journalist Pierre Hazan's history of the Yugoslav war crimes tribunal. He works for NATO in Brussels. The opinions expressed here are his own.

The preceding text is copyright of the author and/or translator and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.