

**Q&A with Robert Donia, author of:
*Sarajevo: A Biography***

Sarajevo: A Biography is a work of erudition and compassion, nimbly capturing the spirit of one of the world's great cities as it survives one epoch, one political regime, one religious dynasty after another. Through the stories of individual Sarajevans-leaders and common folk alike-Donia illustrates his beloved city's significance as a site of great civilizational exchange, of political intrigue, cultural efflorescence, human tragedy and eternal hope.

Here, the author discusses his book, his inspiration for writing it, what Sarajevo means to him, how the many wars in the region have affected Sarajevo, his role as an expert witness in several war crimes trials at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the Hague, and what the future may hold for this celebrated city.

University of Michigan Press: The title of your book sums it up, but what is *Sarajevo* about?

Robert Donia: *Sarajevo: A Biography* is the history of the city that highlights the developments that have shaped its character and the roles of people who have helped made it what it is today.

UMP: Why Sarajevo? What inspired you to write about this city?

RD: I don't believe I had a choice: I felt compelled to write this book by the magnetic pull the city has exerted on me as I have conducted historical research in its many institutions of memory, visited on dozens occasions since 1965, and come to know some of its people. After having watched Sarajevo bask in the spotlight during the Olympic Winter Games in 1984 and then in 1992 enter the agony of war and siege, I was driven to discover and relate to others the city's course through history and the sources of its unique propensity for enduring difficult times. The work started out as a history of the siege and war of the 1990s, but I soon realized that capturing the character of Sarajevo required a deeper look at the influences that have shaped the city over many centuries. It is a tale of successes and growth but also of tribulations and setbacks, and furthermore the story continued as I wrote. It was just those elements of struggle, contradiction, and constant change that drew me to the challenge of writing a history that centered on the modern period and ended as close as possible to the present day.

UMP: Why the subtitle, "A Biography"? It creates the notion that you are almost talking about a person rather than a city.

RD: Through both personal experience and historical research, I've become convinced that Sarajevo has a personality. It is manifest in many ways: the intimacy that Sarajevans feel toward one another, their hospitality to visitors, their determined resistance to outside

intrusions that threaten to divide them, and their shared commitment to the integrity of their community. I also concluded that the city's personality can best be discovered through its history, as the city's residents developed these characteristics over time through a myriad of differing historical experiences.

UMP: You talk about Sarajevo as city of human diversity. Please expand on that a bit.

RD: Sarajevo is diverse in the composition of its population, in the cultural influences that flourish there, and in the wide variety of historical experiences that have molded it. I have chosen the historical path to explicate this diversity. I explain how a combination of migration and religious conversions produced a mix of Serbian Orthodox, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim religious communities by the end of the sixteenth century, and how religious affiliation became the basis for secular national identities of the Croats (Catholic), Serbs (Serbian Orthodox), and Bosniak (Muslim) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These people got along relatively well over the centuries and came to share values and goals in common even though they never merged into a single ethnonational community. The city also absorbed very different influences, both from the Ottoman east and from the Habsburg and European west, that fostered uniquely blended cultural expressions. So the city's diversity is personal, cultural, and historical, and above all the common property of its residents.

UMP: You speak of the "common life" of Sarajevans. Can you explain what is meant by that term?

RD: In the early 1990s, westerners described what they found in Bosnia-Herzegovina, particularly in Sarajevo, as "multiethnic" or "multicultural" life. Sarajevans have long used another term, "common life," to capture what they value in their unique relations with one another. In the book I have used the Sarajevans' preferred pre-1990 term, "common life," to capture the values that bind Sarajevans together. Common life took different forms in each of the city's historical epochs and mutated over time, but it was belief in common life that enabled its citizens to mold the city's unique character.

UMP: Besides the war in the 1990s and those earlier in the twentieth century, what other major political, military, religious, or social events have shaped Sarajevo?

RD: Today's Sarajevo is principally the result of three major building campaigns, each undertaken by leaders with an inclusive vision of a dynamic, expanding city. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, leaders of the Ottoman Empire oversaw the building of religious establishments, commercial centers, and neighborhoods that have ever since define the basic contours and character of the old city. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, officials of the Habsburg Monarchy expanded the city by building structures in the historicist and Secession style that strengthened the city's secular, European dimension. Victorious Partisans and socialists provided the third great impetus

for development after the Second World War, creating a city of half a million residents and a diverse blend of cultural, religious, and ethnonational influences. The multifaceted achievements of these city builders from various eras were proudly displayed to those who attended or viewed on television the 14th Winter Olympic Games in 1984.

Sarajevo has also been shaped by adversity and the determined campaigns of its citizens to resist those who sought to ruin or divide the city. Sarajevans organized sabotage and resistance to the Nazi-Ustasha occupation of the Second World War and protested their atrocities through various civic organizations. Equally remarkable were the various forms of resistance to the siege of 1992-1996, which highlighted the commitment of citizens from all ethnonational communities to a city of diversity and tolerance.

UMP: Given the Iraq war and the moves by the present U.S. administration, have you seen any anti-American or anti-Western agitation among the Muslims of the former Yugoslavia?

RD: If only the rest of the world's Muslims shared the warm feelings of their brethren in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina toward the United States! The positive feelings have proven almost, but not quite, unshakeable in the course of two wars against Iraq. In fact, Bosnia-Herzegovina has three platoons of soldiers deployed in Iraq, specializing in the destruction of mines (a skill well developed in the decade since their own war ended in 1995), but most of the public opposes the deployment.

The Muslims' gratitude to the US for its role in ending the Bosnian war, and for ending the Serb oppression of Kosovar Albanians, continues to the present day for most Muslims. But the Bush Administration has taken certain steps which have alienated some. In 2002, six Algerian-born terrorist suspects were forcibly extradited from Sarajevo to Guantanamo Bay in violation of the applicable constitution, which was dictated by US lawyers some eight years before. And in 2005 the US delivered the Legion of Merit to the family of Draža Mihailović, a Serb guerilla leader in the Second World War who slaughtered tens of thousands of Muslims. Both acts generated great bitterness among politically articulate Muslims in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina, but much of it is directed against President Bush rather than the US as a whole. There is little enthusiasm for the US presence in Iraq, but this has not developed to the point of anti-American agitation. Sentiment in the future will probably depend on how many more bone-headed moves our leaders undertake to alienate our best friends in the Muslim world.

UMP: Is it correct to say that none of the countries that make up the former Yugoslavia are part of the European Union, even while some are candidate states? If so, what stands in the way of their being part of the EU?

RD: Of the six republics of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, only Slovenia is a member of the EU. In a part of the world in which people agree on almost

nothing, most everyone desires their country to become part of the EU and NATO. Each of the five former republics has begun the protracted process of qualifying for membership, and the merits of that process may be more significant than ultimately joining the association. The lure of Euro-Atlantic integration is the single most powerful force for democratization, reform, and development of the rule of law in the region. While many politicians still obstruct the specific measures required to qualify for membership, the destructive influences of extreme nationalism, kleptocracy, and corruption are very slowly giving way to more democratic practices as these countries strive to join European and Atlantic institutions. It is likely to be a slow, painful process, but it has already yielded significant results in defense reform and the growth of central state institutions in Bosnia-Herzegovina. My own hope is that the process will continue indefinitely, for when these countries eventually acquire membership, one of the main drivers of democratization will vanish from public life.

UMP: Your biography says that you served as an expert witness in seven war crimes trials at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the Hague. How did you come to be a witness, and what was it like?

RD: In 1997 I received a phone call from a prosecutor in the Hague inviting me to visit the Tribunal to see if I could provide historical background to aid the court in understanding the context in which alleged atrocities were committed. Shortly thereafter I testified in one such trial, and my role subsequently expanded in other cases to include the historical interpretation of documents gathered by the Office of the Prosecutor. Most interesting was my testimony in the trial of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević and his cross-examination of me. I felt my testimony was helpful in portraying the nature of relations between Milošević and the Bosnian Serbs prior to and during the war. It certainly proved to have some merit, as several of the excerpts from documents were cited in the trial chamber's judgment denying Milošević's motion to dismiss charges at the end of the prosecution's case.

UMP: Do you have plans for biographies of any other cities in the former Yugoslavia?

RD: With my book on Sarajevo, I hoped to break the mold of treating history in the region at the national level, to the neglect of units of human habitation such as local communities and geographic regions. I don't foresee writing any further city biographies, but I hope to explore further how history looks when viewed through prisms other than the national experience.

Robert Donia is a Research Associate at the University of Michigan's Center for Russian and East European Studies, a Visiting Scholar in history at the University of California at San Diego, and holds a courtesy appointment as Associate Professor of History at the University of Sarajevo. He is the author of *Islam under the Double Eagle: The Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1878-1914*, and co-author with John V.A. Fine

of *Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Tradition Betrayed*. He has served as an expert witness in seven war crimes trials at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague.