



BOOK REVIEW

Kenneth Morrison. *Sarajevo's Holiday Inn on the Frontline of Politics and War*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2016. 248 pp.

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One of the unexpected symbols of the wars of Yugoslav dissolution was a hotel. Yet it was built to be an emblem: designed in a challenging modern style, painted a garish yellow, and provocatively different from the buildings that characterize its home city, the Sarajevo Holiday Inn was always intended to symbolize an open, cosmopolitan Sarajevo. But when the wars erupted and Sarajevo was besieged, the hotel itself was often the de facto frontline between the besieging snipers and the besieged defenders—and civilians. Indeed, after peace was reestablished, the hotel continued to emblemize Bosnia's, and Sarajevo's, ongoing difficulties in reestablishing a civic and social equilibrium in the twenty first century.

The building was erected in a spirit of great optimism. The hotel was built in 1983 with the intention that it would serve as a major accommodation for Sarajevo's Olympic Winter Games in 1984. Hosting

those games allowed Sarajevo to present itself to the world as a progressive, civilized, multiethnic city. The citizens rightly felt a sense of pride in their accomplishment in having welcomed the world. The city seemed to have a promising future, as did the hotel: it was run by a major American Holiday Inn business group which—although less prestigious than the Hilton brand that had initially been preferred—nonetheless brought the influence and managerial expertise of an international hospitality chain to Sarajevo.

The hopes of Sarajevo lasted less than a decade. When the siege of Sarajevo began, the city became again an unwilling symbol of war, just as it had been earlier in the century when Franz Ferdinand's assassination on a street corner there began the mobilizations that led to World War One. For three years in the last decade of the twentieth century, it seemed as though the processes of tribalism and bloodshed would never cease to curse the people of Sarajevo. Images of civilians being killed or wounded by snipers on city streets became distressingly common staples of news reports around the world.

Many of those images were filmed from, and beamed from satellite dishes within, the Sarajevo Holiday Inn. The hotel suffered the fate of its city. It became one of the more prominent hotels in the world because the building itself often defined the combat front line in Sarajevo, and it was home to an uncommonly large press corps housed there. The reporters, in turn, stayed because the staff also stayed and made the hotel work under incredibly difficult circumstances. Windows were shot out or blown out by mortars; the south side of the building was rendered uninhabitable by sniperfire; guests came and went in reckless speed

dashes in armored cars into or out of the hotel basement. And yet somehow the staff managed to provide water some of the time, electricity with unexpected regularity and, perhaps most astonishingly in a besieged city, food and alcohol to supply the diplomats and journalists who were guests in the hotel. The sheer professionalism of the Holiday Inn waiters, concierges, cleaning staff, and electricians, is breathtaking.

Kenneth Morrison, who teaches at De Montfort University in Leicester, U.K., has written this admirable book about the intertwined destinies of the hotel and of Sarajevo. It is a compelling narrative. Although the initial two chapters about other 'war hotels' around the world seem included more for academic completeness rather than an inherent similarity among these hotels in warzones, the book on the whole blends institutional and civic history elegantly. Morrison has interviewed the journalists who stayed in the hotel and the workers who hosted them. These individual perspectives give a crucial personal element to a text that is committed to describing a private institution in wartime. Morrison insists that the hotel's story is, above all else, the story of the individuals inside it.

The author rightly does not avoid some of the more worrisome elements of this history. He acknowledges that the Holiday Inn was probably somewhat protected during the siege, either through a deliberate shady deal, or through the simple prudence of combatants who wanted to avoid the negative reaction that would ensue from targeting journalists. He notes also that the food and drink items must certainly, at some level, have been black market items or were otherwise illicit. The people who lived in the Holiday Inn reported from a frontline hotel, but one in which

the journalists were safer, and better fed, than were the people running for cover in the streets around them.

It often happens to individuals who find their identities in war that they cannot then adjust to peace thereafter. The hotel experienced the same process: it made large sums of money catering to international news organizations during the war, but did not have a significant competitive advantage in providing warm beds inexpensively to later vacation tourists. The history of the hotel after the war seems as absurdist and unlikely, as aspirational and as disappointing, as Bosnia and Hercegovina itself. The hotel was repaired and reopened but could not find a particular appeal in the developing hospitality market of twenty first century Sarajevo. It persevered, but eventually chose not to renew the affiliate agreement with the Holiday Inn corporation. Various people of dubious legality became involved in the hotel, or wanted to. Ownership and planning fluctuated while rumors of gangsters and prostitution refused to disappear. The building is still there, but seems directionless and uncertain. The irony is not lost on Morrison: a building built in hope, and defined by defying a bloody siege, seems determined to drift into oblivion not with a bang, but a whimper, brought down not by mortar barrages and snipers, but by market forces, tourist fickleness, and the uncertain Bosnian economy.

The Review Copy of this book has been deposited in the SEEU Library 'Max van der Stoel,' where it may be consulted or borrowed by SEEU students and staff.