



## **Centropa Lessons**

Two lessons on community and civic values  
For public, parochial and charter schools

## **Teacher Fact Sheet**

These lessons challenge students to explore civic values in a global world. You do not need to know the complicated details of the Bosnian conflict, or the long history of the Jews in the Balkans, in order to teach them. We offer this fact sheet with basic background explanations, links to maps, and other sources so you can provide students with the basic historical context for your discussions, or include them in your lessons, if you wish.

For those interested in furthering their understanding of the Bosnian conflict or Jewish history in Sarajevo, please visit Centropa's [Survival in Sarajevo web site](#).

### **What was the Ottoman Empire?**

The Ottoman Empire was founded by Muslim Turks in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and reached its greatest power and influence in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, when it spanned from Hungary and the Balkans to the Middle East and parts of North Africa.

When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, the Ottomans welcomed them, valuing their skills in medicine, pharmacy, trade, leather tanning, and as silversmiths. In Ottoman lands Jews (and Christians) were considered “dhimmi,” meaning protected subjects. They lived under some restrictions but over the centuries, particularly under the more lenient Muslim rulers, Jews in Ottoman lands generally were treated well and had good relationships with their neighbors.

[Click here](#) for an excellent, short overview of the Ottoman Empire from the BBC.

[Click here](#) for a map of the Ottoman Empire at its peak.

[Click here](#) for a Jewish Virtual Library article on Jews in the Ottoman Empire.

[Click here](#) for more details about the history of the Ottoman Empire.

### **Where is Sarajevo?**

Sarajevo is the capital of Bosnia and Hercegovina, which is in [southeastern Europe](#) in an area known as the Balkans. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century this territory was part of Yugoslavia, which fell apart during the Bosnian war that is the context for the Survival in Sarajevo story (see below).

[Click here](#) for an excellent BBC timeline of the history of the Balkans with short explanations of the transition points that will help you understand the historical context of the war in the Survival in Sarajevo story.

[Click here](#) for a Jewish Virtual Library article about Jews in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

### **What was Yugoslavia? When was it formed?**

After WWI, the Versailles peace agreements created the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in southeastern Europe, and in 1929 the name of this state was changed to Yugoslavia, which means land of the southern slavs.

Yugoslavia was a country made up of different ethnic groups with a long histories of conflict with one another. We recommend you read [this excellent overview of the important turning points in 20<sup>th</sup> century Yugoslav history](#) for succinct and clearly written explanations accompanied by maps.

The breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s is the backdrop for the Survival in Sarajevo story. The last section of this fact sheet provides you with basic background information about Bosnian war, with a focus on the siege of Sarajevo.

### **Who are the Sephardim?**

Sephardic Jews are Jews whose ancestors were originally from Spain and expelled in 1492, within days of Christopher Columbus setting sail for the new world. The term comes from the Hebrew word for "Spain," Sepharad. Upon expulsion, Jews fled to Brazil, North Africa, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and the Ottoman Empire (see above), which included the Balkans.

[Click here](#) for a brief article about the differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews.

[Click here](#) for a Jewish Virtual Library article on the expulsion from Spain.

[Click here](#) for a short description of the expulsion decree from Spain, along with the translated text of the expulsion decree.

### **The Bosnian War in the 1990s**

The Bosnian war is one of the most complex and contested conflicts in history. The below description of the Bosnian war, along with the summary of the legally adjudicated facts from the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague, Netherlands, is taken from the [Survival in Sarajevo web site](#).

We at Centropa do not accept that the war in Bosnia was a civil war. This was a war of aggression by the Bosnian Serbs (and later, the Croats in Hercegovina) who said they could not possibly live with Muslims, even though the Muslims of Bosnia were (and are) of the same genetic Slavic stock as the Serbs and Croats, who have peopled the region since the sixth century. Those who are Muslims in Bosnia (and in neighboring Serbia) are Slavs who converted to Islam during the centuries of Ottoman occupation (1463 to 1878). It

should also be noted that the Bosnian Serbs were wholly financed and supplied by the government of Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade.

*These are the legally adjudicated facts, as set forth by the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague. Thanks to Chuck Sudetic, a war crimes investigator, for his input.*

Belgrade-backed Bosnian Serb military forces besieged Sarajevo from late spring 1992 until late-summer 1995. These forces were under the command of General Ratko Mladic and the political direction of the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, both of whom are now on trial on genocide charges at the United Nations war crimes tribunal in The Hague.

Bosnian Serb troops controlled the city's water, electricity, and food supplies and used this control to apply pressure on the Sarajevo government. During the early months of the siege, it was possible to bring goods into the central city through Bosnian-Croat held areas on the city's western edge. But this lifeline was severed by Bosnian Serb military operations in the late summer of 1992 and by the Zagreb-backed Bosnian Croat militia, which, from October 1992, turned against the mostly Muslim Slav Bosnian government forces in an attempt to force the Sarajevo government to agree to a three-way carve up of the country that would have effectively left the government in control of an unsustainable patch of territory around the capital.

Subsequently, Sarajevo had only two tenuous lifelines: an international airlift into Sarajevo's airport, whose operations were too frequently shut down by attacks and threats by the Bosnian Serb military, and a route that ran along the treacherous mountain road over Mt. Igman and linked up with persons who were willing to risk their lives to sprint across the grounds of the city's airport, which was patrolled by the United Nations and under sniper and mortar fire, or pass through a crude tunnel dug beneath the airport tarmac and grassy aprons.

More than 10,000 people were killed and about 50,000 wounded in Sarajevo by snipers or mortar attacks. The deaths included scores of people cut down in Serb mortar attacks on water stations, a bread line in the central city, and the city's main outdoor market.

Despite shrill international condemnation of the wholesale human rights violations committed by the Bosnian Serb army and Bosnian Croat militia as well as civilian killings carried out by individuals attached to the Bosnian government forces, the outside world undertook no effective action to halt the bloodshed until after Bosnian Serb soldiers and Serbian paramilitary police troops, under General Mladic's orders, executed more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys, along with a number of women and children, after the takeover of the United Nations safe area at Srebrenica in July 1995.