

# I

## Madness





From the stairwell to the *Zena 21* office. December 1995.

# I

## Madness

ALMA: *War is madness, where everything abnormal becomes normal.*

RADA: *In the center of Sarajevo, normal life was continuing. It could just as well have been sunny California. Nobody knew that on the edge of town, this craziness was happening.*

ALMA: *It was a crazy, crazy time. God forbid that this happens ever again. I'd rather die than live it over.*

DANICA: *Then the nationalists came in, and people just went crazy.*

MAJA: *They say only insane people are not afraid.*

Alma, Rada, Danica, and Maja are not insane. Fear was in their voices as they described to me UN soldiers protecting food supplies, but not the people who should eat; neighbors raped, by long-time neighbors; dazed refugees sleeping on the floor, the banker, high school principal, mayor. In short, madness.

These women grew up in an ordered society, with clear rules and norms. Their lives were set on a course. They had lovers, found jobs in factories, tilled farms, completed university, raised families. In a socialist society without entrepreneurial surprises, with low divorce and child mortality rates, as well as relatively low unemployment, they had confidence in their futures.

Suddenly, war came flooding into their lives. Swept up in a political tidal wave, they grasped for whatever might keep them afloat. They hoped the United Nations could save them. Apart from limited delivery of humanitarian aid, the UN failed. Hampered by weak internal leadership, a cumbersome bureaucratic process, reluctance among pivotal member states (particularly Russia), insufficient resources, and the arrogance of some key officials assigned to the field, the

response of the UN to the crisis in Bosnia was woefully inadequate. Europe was disunited, and American leadership wasn't forthcoming: Governor Clinton, in the 1992 presidential campaign, had criticized President Bush's inaction, a result of discord within the upper echelons of that administration. But once in office, President Clinton faced the same split between the State Department, which advocated intervention, and the Pentagon, which didn't want to get involved. Clinton waffled. U.S. and European pundits argued about the line between a state's sovereignty in determining affairs within its borders, versus the justification of military intervention to halt genocide. Meanwhile, the death toll was climbing toward 200,000. Eventually, in mid-1995, Clinton abandoned the "dual key" arrangement that required UN sign-off for NATO action, saying that NATO's role as a stabilizing force in Europe was called into question by the paralysis, and the humanitarian cost of inaction was unconscionable.

The international community's paralysis was due in part to discrepant interpretations of Balkan history. Local nationalists revised the past to fit their desired future, with tales steeped in stale victimhood that reached back centuries. The region was painted as one giant battlefield stretching across hundreds of years. Outsiders could throw up their hands. "They made their bed, let them lie in it," commented a British diplomat to me in late 1993. It was a particularly odd remark, disregarding the fact that the Balkans had been invaded, divided, and ruled by one outside imperial regime after another over the centuries, leaving behind a hodgepodge of cultural identities.

The country once known as Yugoslavia resulted from the post-World War I dissolution of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires. Bosnia and Herzegovina had been part of both of these opposing empires, and its population—Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, Muslims converted under Ottoman rule, and Sephardic Jews—was integrated. Yugoslavia was first known as "The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes." This monarchy fell apart at the onset of World War II. A Nazi puppet regime ruled in Croatia and fascist collaborators in Belgrade nominally controlled much of the rest of Yugoslavia, although they were fiercely resisted. Contrary to outside perceptions, that was the first time Bosnians witnessed ethnic conflict on their soil. Throughout Yugoslavia, one million people died in fighting among Ustashas (supporters of the fascist Croatian regime), Chetniks (royalist Serb supporters), and Partisans (communist resisters). The Croats were infamously ruthless in their slaughter of Serbs, but Serb paramilitaries also committed massacres of Muslims and Croats. In addition, 60,000 Yugoslav Jews were murdered by Nazis.<sup>1</sup> Josip Broz (better known by his nom de guerre Tito) led the Partisans to victory. Soviet forces entered Belgrade in 1944.

Yugoslavia under Tito enjoyed a unique position in the world. After breaking with Stalin's Soviet communism in 1948, Tito developed policies of economic decentralization and independence from the two superpower security blocs. He understood how high the geopolitical stakes were: Truman and Eisenhower wanted to convince Eastern European countries that they could survive outside the Iron Curtain. Yugoslavia's independence was a thorn in the side of the Soviet Union. Western powers showered Tito with favors.<sup>2</sup> He, in turn, skillfully played the game of balancing East and West, developing socialism on his own terms with the benefit of loans from the International Monetary Fund. Tito also established a delicate balance in Yugoslavia's internal politics. He proclaimed an ideology of "brotherhood and unity," and Yugoslavia's constitution created a complicated system of six republics (Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Macedonia, and Montenegro) and two autonomous regions within Serbia (Vojvodina and Kosovo), tied together by one man at the top: Tito himself.

Although it was the most affluent country in communist Europe, after Tito's death in 1980, Yugoslavia's economy drifted. Its republics entered a rotating power-sharing arrangement that quickly fell prey to nationalist politicians. In 1987, Slobodan Milosevic, a second-rung Belgrade politician, began to accrue power, leaving a wake of embittered colleagues.<sup>3</sup> Using the official Serb media, he stirred up World War II memories of division and encouraged those calling for "Greater Serbia," particularly turning up the acrimonious volume against the ethnic Albanian majority in Kosovo. These tactics of social division raised alarm among many of Serbia's progressive citizens and throughout the other republics. Croatia responded with its own nationalist politics, led by former general of the Yugoslav National Army, Franjo Tudjman. Known as the "Father of all Croats," Tudjman was openly anti-Serb and anti-Muslim.<sup>4</sup> He was hugely influential, not only in Croatia, but also the western part of Bosnia, where many ethnic Croats lived.

Milosevic was artful and experienced. A party apparatchik and sometime banker, he had visited the United States; and his English was excellent. At home, his rhetoric was consistent with the tide of Serb nationalism, but he carefully consolidated his power through purges within his political party, key media outlets, and ultimately the Yugoslav National Army.<sup>5</sup> When he had reached the limits of power he could achieve peacefully and shifted to military means, he held the high trumps.

History is still sifting and sorting the views of those who participated in or observed the disintegration of Yugoslavia over the next years. The first fighting was in the republic of Slovenia. Conflict there between the Yugoslav National Army

and resident Slovenes lasted about a week. Hundred of civilians were killed and wounded as the JNA bombed private homes and farms, or shot citizens sitting in cafes or tilling their fields.<sup>6</sup> Slovenia had virtually no Serbs, so the war cry of “Greater Serbia” inspired no one, including the mothers of Serb soldiers who confronted military commanders and urged their sons to come back home where they belonged. These women-led public demonstrations spread. On July 2, 1991, the mothers demonstrated at the Serbian Assembly in Belgrade, shouting: “We haven’t borne sons to die for Milosevic!” The next day, hundreds of women went to Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, to find their sons and bring them home.<sup>7</sup>

Croatia’s fate was not so tempered. One-third of its territory was overtaken by the Serb army in a ruthless onslaught.<sup>8</sup> Tens of thousands of non-Serbs fled the barbarity. Many who tried to stay in their homes were killed or forcibly expelled. The tactics were sadistic and grotesque, replete with summary executions and throat slitting.

Bosnia, with a population of about four million, was the third largest of the republics by land mass and population. The 1991 census recorded that Bosnian citizens were approximately 44 percent Muslim, 32 percent Serb, 17 percent Croat, and 8 percent “other.” In two-thirds of the districts, none of the three ethnic groups constituted more than 70 percent of the population. The other one-third was evenly divided: 11 percent were mostly Muslims, 11 percent were mostly Serbs, and 10 percent were mostly Croats. Division along ethnic lines was, thus, out of the question, without great disruption of the population.<sup>9</sup> Thus in 1991 Bosnians watched fearfully as Serb forces destroyed whole towns and villages in neighboring Croatia, torturing and executing non-Serbs who did not flee. Their apprehension was well-founded. When, unstopped by international on-lookers, the Serb-controlled Yugoslav army and paramilitaries had overpowered large chunks of Croatia, the military turned its attention to Bosnia with the same bloody campaign, cruelly understated by the euphemistic term “ethnic cleansing,” driving Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks from their homes.

Listening to details of the women telling me about their lives, I thought of Europe sixty years earlier. Their stories, like those of refugees being interviewed by my embassy staff, harkened back to the Nazi regime: ritualized torture, gang rape, and killings. Those of us who only studied World War II in history books had the luxury of attributing the Holocaust to the failure of other people, in another era. But Bosnia was happening on our watch. We, not our parents, were sitting in front of our TVs, watching the smoke rise from burning villages. As the carnage dragged on, we were distracted by the likes of O. J. Simpson and White-

water—even after CNN and the BBC brought the Balkan conflagration into our living rooms.

Our consciences should be troubled by the women's accounts. We hear stories that conflict with what we want to believe about ourselves and the rest of humanity. The barbarity related in this volume forces us to ponder the source of evil that runs rampant in these stories. What was unleashed? From where? Why?<sup>10</sup> Is raw malevolence merely one spot on a continuum of good-to-bad, or is it sui generis, requiring that we stop and wonder at the power of the unique force before us? Such questions can become their own agenda, feeding on themselves, without compelling the asker to action. So it was with Yugoslavia. Not only the general public but also many policy shapers—including some media professionals—seemed simultaneously fixated on and confounded by the sadism. The resulting inaction was devastating. Perhaps Milosevic understood that by unleashing the strongest possible torrent of terror, he could distract world attention from his overarching political designs.<sup>11</sup>

The women in this book did not simply draw back in repulsion, resignation, or exhaustion. For them, ordeal was a precursor to action. To understand their work, I have tried to understand their world, including the wartime madness they experienced. The war had barreled into their lives, wiping out the known, leaving wild impossibilities. But the unexpected onslaught is only the beginning of their story. A few of the women's accounts of the chaos—the decision to stay or flee, and atrocities endured by those caught in the conflict—are related here. They are followed by a look at war not just from an external view of hell on earth but also with an interior eye, as the women described the war to me in the language of personal connections: mothers caring for children and elderly parents, lovers courting or being separated, friends sticking together or drifting apart, relationships that became a ponderous burden, and yet remained a crucial source of meaning to resist the madness.



Bus becomes barricade. Dobrinja, suburb of Sarajevo. December 1995.