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## Reasons for the War

NURDZIHANA: *People descend to such an unbelievably low level, trying to justify themselves by saying the war was for some goal—that someone demanded it of them. But there was no reason for the war—except robbery.*

KRISTINA: *War wasn't caused by simple people. This wasn't a popular, national movement.*

VALENTINA: *I don't think smart people, even professionals, can explain why all of this happened.*

“What caused the war?” I’d ask, trying not to be too leading in my question. I wanted to give the woman across from me free rein, invite her to tell me what she really thought. Twenty-six times I asked, each time waiting for some version of the sigh of resignation (“That’s the Balkans!”) put forward by many international leaders and repeated by obedient bureaucrats and soldiers. Looking for corroboration, I was consistently disappointed. These women had a very different perspective.

Just trying to survive, they weren’t listening to policymakers’ declarations I heard of how this was an age-old and inevitable conflict the rest of the world had best stay clear of. In fact, the international community, represented by the so-called Contact Group, was paralyzed by opposing allegiances that reached back to World War II and by the dual key agreement that required UN approval before the use of air power. In short, the United States was part of an international response mechanism that virtually guaranteed no confrontation of the Serb aggressors. This was “alliance” at its lowest form.<sup>1</sup>

But in our conversations the women didn’t list the ineptness of the international community as a reason for the war. They didn’t have access to the news-

papers delivered to my polished desk in Vienna, some of which parroted the partitionists' explanation about intractable hatred—the tidy justification for the tidy restructuring of the country being proposed by many columnists and editorial writers in too-simple synchronicity. Nor were they privy to the classified reports and analyses of the United States intelligence community, which frequently warned of worst-case scenarios that served to frighten off would-be helpers.

In discussions far removed from Sarajevo, many political observers laid the blame indirectly on Marshal Tito, the architect of the fifty-year history of Yugoslavia. The Partisan leader led the first defense against the Nazis, then maintained a communist state independent of the Soviet Union (no small feat, for which he was amply rewarded with American aid—ironically, supporting the creation of a powerful Yugoslav army, which the Americans later bombed). Tito also led his country through a transitional period following atrocities committed by Nazi-sympathizing Croats, not only against Jews but also Serbs. Half Croat, half Slovene, he was well positioned as a uniting leader, but his early methods were repressive. His achievement died with him when he failed to put into place a stable plan for his succession. His death in 1980, at eighty-eight, was a critical variable in the onset of the conflict. Tito had watched Serb domination during the monarchy lead to internal conflict. As leader, he assiduously suppressed those tendencies. With his disappearance, there was no strong leader to counter the propensity of leaders in all parts of Yugoslavia to pursue their own interest—that political vacuum allowing Milosevic to try to turn Serb numerical dominance (as the largest ethnic group) into political dominance. Over the next ten years, given the shift from a strong centralized government to the “ludicrously feeble collective presidency” that was left in place,<sup>2</sup> local politicians vying for power cut into the seams Tito had so carefully stitched. The garment unraveled.

A different hypothesis about the cause of the war is the split between rural villagers and urban sophisticates. (The majority of the pre-World War II population lived in or around villages. By 1991 Sarajevo was the largest city in Bosnia, with 500,000 people, but most of those city dwellers had strong rural connections as well, either with family or friends.) Although there were some urban/rural dynamics that figured into the war, only two of the women I interviewed mentioned the notion of the war being village-based. NADA, a physician from a small town, said the war was started by villagers, who seemed more extreme and more nationalist. *Towns had more mixed marriages, so we were shocked by the war. Villages are more homogeneous; their population is more or less one ethnic composition.* AMNA agrees. *This was a war of village against town. There were soldiers on the hill, shooting*

into East Mostar. They got a new machine gun from abroad, and they didn't even know how to aim it. Then one soldier said "I'll do it," and he simply began to fire. And they said to him, "How do you know how to use this gun?" And he said, "I don't know how to use it, but any shell will hit Mostar." And the other soldiers said, "But there's an East Mostar and a West Mostar, and East is Bosniak and West is Croat, and we're shelling the Bosniaks." And he said, "It's all the same to me. They're all city folk." RADA, on the other hand, who had a rural upbringing, insisted that country folk were more tolerant, not less. Living close to nature teaches an acceptance of differences, she claimed.

A broader geopolitical theory regards the Bosnian war as a fallen domino after the collapse of communism. The connection is indirect. Polish and Hungarian societies were opening. After exploiting its role between superpowers, Yugoslavia was no longer the buffer between East and West. Thus U.S. policymakers could voice more criticism about internal issues such as human rights abuses, especially in Kosovo, where the basic civil rights of the ethnic Albanian majority were being quashed.<sup>3</sup> The political shift had economic repercussions. No longer the favored child of the West, Yugoslavia's economy was plummeting with the rest of Eastern Europe. The internal unrest fed into the hands of the demagogue, Milosevic, who was playing to nationalists for support. What some may regard as historical inevitability—as if lifting the heavy lid of communism allowed ethnic tensions to rise to the surface—should not eclipse the fact that nationalism was already rising before the breakup of the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia was relatively free from Soviet dominance. (Tito broke with Stalin in 1948.) The end of the Cold War may have been a factor—but in a different sense, in that it marked the end of vigorous attention to Yugoslavia by the West just as a new tyranny was on the rise.<sup>4</sup>

A more psychosocial theory of the cause of the war holds that weak core values and civil structures in Yugoslavia couldn't withstand the changing times. Bosnian political leader Haris Silajdzic, raised in a devout family, remarked to me that communism stripped people of their core religion and left a vacuum. That space was filled by nationalist fervor after Tito's death. Given their relative affluence, citizens weren't miserable enough to form strong opposition to an ever more untrustworthy group of political leaders. Apolitical young people didn't rise up against Milosevic's nationalism. They were after all free to travel. A policy of encouraging workers to emigrate was used to suppress unemployment. There was relative openness in the media. Products were freely traded, both East and West. But as communism broke down, Yugoslavia's political and economic structures dissolved. Profiteers, fearing for their privileges, fomented

rage and hatred. There was no strong cadre of upright civil leaders to save the nation as old nationalist ideas emerged.<sup>5</sup>

War is a flood fed by many streams. It's reasonable to assume that these myriad ideas about the cause of the war—the death of Tito, the rural/urban split, the end of the Cold War, lack of solid values—have some degree of merit. Still, while the women might nod their heads at one of these theories, their narratives, which determined the content of this book, describe prewar Yugoslavia as a well-run society with an engaged populace—not without challenges, but certainly not heading toward dissipation and ruin. What, then, do they say is the confluence of factors that can turn a citizenry into a maniacal mob? Leadership. Slobodan Milosevic emerges instead of Vaclav Havel, and a civilized nation goes careening off course. There are further variables. The leader must have a vision, a dream, a goal—which may not be apparent in early political speeches or on the airwaves. To create the war cry, bits and pieces of ideology can be dug out from the historical trash. Existential urgency builds as masses are told, and told, and told again that they're in grave danger. Their survival is at stake. It's kill or be killed—not just themselves, but their families.

This is the backdrop against which Bosnian women described what they saw in the day-to-day unfolding of the war. Responding to my questions about their experiences, the women didn't attempt or pretend to provide a balanced, carefully constructed analysis of what caused the war. Their opinions and anecdotes give a ground-level view of what others were saying, and what they themselves surmised. Just as important is what they didn't name as a cause of the war: ethnic hatred or religion. They leave such theories to academics writing in their offices. But historical analysis should be informed by the experience of people on the ground. Those who disagree with the women may dismiss them as mouthing popular misconceptions, but the onus is on analysts observing from a distance to explain why their interpretation is more valid than those experiencing the situation firsthand. Observers who would particularize the war as some sort of regional cultural experience—as if the Balkans are more prone to violence than Germany or the United States—miss the point. Even as World War II was not caused by hatred of the Jews, ethnic hatred was a theme, but not a primary cause, of the Bosnian war. This conflict, according to those who lived it, was strikingly similar to others: with greedy politicians exploiting an imbalance of privilege, using a media machine to whip up fear among the citizenry.

## Those Greedy Politicians

SABIHA: *Politicians led us into war. They committed horrible crimes and must be punished.*

EMSUDA: *One lie built on another. The politicians created social problems then manipulated the citizens by giving out money at critical moments.*

SUZANA: *The killing was all in the service of politics. The big powers could have stopped the fighting before it began. Then the politicians divided Bosnia, cutting it up, town by town. In that treachery, no side is innocent.*

IRMA: *Politicians started it.*

How could such a relatively prosperous country on the Adriatic (where Westerners brought their families for Dalmatian coast vacations), with ample trading partners, rich resources, apparent political stability, thriving arts, an educated citizenry, and international attention as an Olympic site fall into want and ruin?<sup>6</sup> The women insist repeatedly that the sickness didn't come from within their community; the contagious conflict that swept across their country was the work of individuals. Yugoslavia did not die a natural death. It was deliberately and systematically killed off by men who had nothing to gain and everything to lose from a peaceful transition from state socialism and one-party rule to free-market democracy.<sup>7</sup> In a socialist country, with limited private economic or civil society activity, politics is not just a high stakes game; it's the whole game. For decades in Yugoslavia, a government position had been a person's easiest route to housing, employment, health care, travel, education, even a car. As in many countries around the world, politics was a breeding ground for corruption. It allowed unbridled greed.

The women had strong negative opinions about their political leaders in general. But I was surprised to find a general sentiment that no current politicians could hold a candle to Marshal Tito. The honor, respect, even laud afforded their former leader make more sense when he's juxtaposed with the politicians who led Yugoslavia into ruin. Tito's mixed Croat/Slovene heritage was rarely mentioned by the women with whom I spoke—and rightly so, since one of the hallmarks of his tenure was his purging of individuals or groups who flirted with nationalist politics. Similarly, the practice of religion was discouraged (although

not prohibited), which tended to limit it as a differentiating characteristic among peoples. Granted, in 1969 Tito allowed Bosnian Muslims to identify themselves as a nation (like Croats or Serbs), for the purpose of political representation on councils or committees.<sup>8</sup> But the designation was more ethnic than religious, and the communists consciously repressed Islam, as a religion and even more as a political factor.<sup>9</sup> In addition, nationalism (meaning ethnic egocentrism, rather than patriotism) could bring harsh prison terms. The most notable example was the incarceration of the future president of Bosnia, Alija Izetbegovic, as punishment for his philosophical *Islamic Declaration*, which called on Muslims around the world to support each other. At the 1983 “most famous trial of the decade,” the piece was described by prosecutors as a manifesto for the creation of an ethnically pure Muslim Bosnian state, even though Izetbegovic pointed out that the text said nothing about making Bosnia ethnically pure, and in fact made no reference to Bosnia.<sup>10</sup>

Thus when Tito’s would-be successor, Milosevic, played a nationalist/religious trump card to incite the war, it was both predictable (since nationalist sentiments had been Tito’s great fear) and shocking (since such thoughts had been severely repressed for decades). The rise of Slobodan Milosevic has been documented not only in several outstanding historical works but also by observers from the media and his interlocutors within the diplomatic community.<sup>11</sup> The world sleepily watched the step-by-step progression by which he chose an idea that was culturally gut-wrenching—alleged ethnic Albanian “terrorists” in Kosovo victimizing the Serb minority. It was a well-known ploy of tyrants. To respond to this terrifying prospect, he then transformed the multiethnic Yugoslav National Army into a force loyal to him, with Serb commanders, and unloosed them on the Albanian Kosovars. The other Yugoslav republics saw the handwriting on the wall.

How astounding to think that Slobodan Milosevic will vie with Marshal Tito for the place of the most influential Balkan leader of the past century.<sup>12</sup> It took Hitler about ten years to be named Germany’s chancellor. Milosevic rose twice as fast, marked from his rabid “No one will ever beat you again” speech to Kosovar Serbs in 1987. Both used power politics: media takeover, ruthless military and police force, fear, and the hateful labeling of another people.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to Tito’s straightforward if heavy-handed leadership, Milosevic led his people into a paranoid frenzy, built around the historic Serb banner of victimhood, with media tactics straight out of Nazi propaganda.<sup>14</sup> But what conditions allowed such a figure to win the confidence of the Bosnian Serbs? Partnership was essential.

Milosevic had his political lieutenant in Bosnia: Radovan Karadzic, president of the Bosnian Serbs, who actually hailed from Montenegro, not Bosnia.<sup>15</sup> The psychiatrist/poet promoted a radical agenda and blatant racism toward non-Serbs, asserting that Serbs had a right to any territory where they were living, or where their ancestors were buried. He envisioned a Berlin-type wall across Sarajevo to satisfy an apartheid that was more extreme than in South Africa.<sup>16</sup> The relationship between Milosevic and Karadzic was symbiotic, with each denying—with great conviction—any influence over the other.

Meanwhile, Franjo Tudjman had stated publicly that the alternative to an all-out war in the tottering Yugoslavia was a separate state for Croatia, and he schemed to divide Bosnia between Croatia and Serbia.<sup>17</sup> At the very moment that Germany was lobbying for recognition of Croatia, citing the principles of self-determination and inviolability of borders, Tudjman was advocating that these lofty ideals be ignored in the case of his neighbor.<sup>18</sup> But Tudjman and Milosevic weren't acting in a vacuum. In the period leading up to Bosnia's first multiparty elections, dozens of political parties formed, including several claiming to represent the interests of Bosnia's different ethnicities. Three of these nationalist parties won the majority of seats in the November 1990 elections. They were euphemistically named the Party for Democratic Action (SDA), which appealed to Muslims; the Croat Democratic Community (HDZ), a branch of Tudjman's party in Croatia; and the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), formed with the backing of Milosevic and nationalist intellectuals in Belgrade.

The coalition government formed by the three parties was rife with divisions and internal contradictions. The governance structure required the sign-off of all three nationalist groups. As a result, in eighteen months, not a single law was passed.<sup>19</sup> While publicly weighing questions such as the future political structure of a confederated Yugoslavia, the three parties were privately dividing up Bosnia's resources among themselves. Prime positions at the head of publicly owned firms or in the police departments went to party allies, and ethnicity mattered more than qualifications. In parts of Bosnia that had Serb and Croat majorities, political leaders took the carving up of Bosnia's assets one step further: to the territory itself. Following the model used earlier in Croatia, Serb autonomous regions were created in Bosnia in the fall of 1991 under the guidance of Belgrade and public leadership of Karadzic and Momcilo Krajisnik, who eventually declared the creation of Republika Srpska in December. The HDZ followed suit, declaring the Autonomous Region of Herceg-Bosna, the chunk of southwestern Bosnia they intended to be annexed to Croatia.

In the discussion that follows, imagine six women around a table, holding miniature cups of strong, muddy coffee as they tell stories that confirm or contradict the analysis of outside observers. Those who still claim the Bosnian war was rooted in ethnic conflicts may note that it's virtually impossible to guess ethnic backgrounds based on the sympathies expressed by the women in this discussion.

JELKA survived the Mostar nightmare with her artist husband and two sons as the Croats relentlessly pounded what they considered the Bosniak side of town, where she lived. *Although I'm a Croat, I have to confess: Croatia, as a state, directly supported the division of Bosnia. They wanted Mostar to be their center. But to turn Mostar into a pure Croatian town, you'd have to throw out almost 70 percent of its population. It was a dark idea. Maybe those words are too soft. It was fascist.* She doesn't accept the argument that local hard-liners were the primary culprits. *Tudjman's political party shaped opinions and attitudes in Bosnia and carried out policies hatched in Croatia.*

Whether as a reactionary but logical political strategy, or because of the natural contagion of avarice, the grab for power eventually spread from the Serb and Croat parties to the Bosniak. SUZANA has investigated political corruption, support for terrorism, and drug trafficking: *It was devastating to see how, after 1994, the SDA started doing similar things, like the ideological purging of the Bosnian army and other institutions of power. They colluded in negotiations on the division of Bosnia.*

Three more women—Serb, Croat, and Muslim—reflect on the politicians' responsibility. In the Republika Srpska town of Sipovo, KRISTINA will have none of the back and forth about one political party or another. *In each group there were extremists who fueled the war. She'd rather lay the blame on leaders. This was a political game, and the politicians were the ones responsible, with their fights and their ambitions. They tailored it.* Kristina doesn't interpret recent history as the result of Serb and Croat aggression. Is her unwillingness to attribute responsibility to any one party simply generous and conciliatory—or because she's a Serb assessing Serb responsibility? *I can't really say what side is to blame for the war. I don't want to divide Serbs, Croats, and Muslims in three parts and say only one group. A lot of men had to join the army, not because they wanted the war, but because they were drafted. That happened with my husband, and it happened on all three sides. Simple people—who just want to live, work, and provide for their families—aren't to blame. They were sacrificed in this game.* As proof, Kristina describes her work on the cusp of restoration, welcoming back students of diverse backgrounds to a town from which Bosniaks had been forcibly expelled. She recounts a reunion of teachers. *My Muslim colleague in Sipovo had become a refugee in Sarajevo. When she ar-*

ried at the gathering, we all hugged and kissed her. Everyone cried. I think that says it all.

As if to respond to Kristina, KAROLINA wonders if anyone really gained in the Bosnian war. Having endured years of shelling in the besieged capital, she ruminates: *You can't explain this war to anyone — why all this happened. Who is the villain? Who is the loser? Nobody knows. We were misled. Our beautiful country was so splendid before the war. Now our parks, where young people used to play sports, are filled with their gravestones. Why? Just because a few people wanted to plunder our land.* Karolina isn't talking about the spoils of war, but a get-what-you-can mentality that creates and is created by war. *Even in Sarajevo, where there were no Serb armies, there was still looting. Flats and shops were broken into.* In addition, led by many of the politicians themselves, black markets across the Balkans have flourished. Karolina ponders the forces that led to such hardship and heartache. *Something evil emerged in our young people. And what was the result? The Serbs raided our factories, but the Serbs aren't better off now. I recently visited Bratunac, near Srebrenica in the Republika Srpska; I saw Serb people there with rotten teeth and tortured faces. You can't say any one of us is better off with this war. Now we're all miserable and poor.*

That may be, but some are more miserable and poor than others; and perhaps a survivor of carnage has earned the right to the final word regarding those who planned and carried out the war. As usual, KADA's account cuts straight to the quick: *Very often I ask, who were those "brains" who destroyed the life we had before the war? They brought poverty. Misery. Hatred. Somebody did this on purpose. Somebody put a virus inside us. They made promises and then misled us. We were all cheated. I don't want to talk about what made the attackers of Srebrenica do what they did. It's clear, and everyone knows it. Someone hatched this idea of having a war.*

Unlike Kristina, whose husband, after all, fought in the Serb army, Kada is quite ready to lay blame on one side; but she confines responsibility to the leadership. Although her son and husband were executed by Serb soldiers, she refuses to extend the burden of blame to those who were carrying out orders. *As far as I know, the Chetnik leaders promised their soldiers they'd get all sorts of things. They told them they were in danger. The soldiers didn't know what that meant. Who was threatening them? They were told they should fight against that threat. Then religion got mixed in. God would favor people who fought. It was the same on the other side.*

Kada concludes by echoing Karolina's theme of the futile losses in war. *Did anyone gain or win? Did Chetniks get rich and make everything around them great and beautiful? No, they didn't. First, they lost their authority. Whatever they gained is now gone. They had casualties. They lost property, and now they're in one narrow territory.*

For Kada, whose family was destroyed in the conflict, the senselessness of war is particularly tragic. To die for an important cause is one thing. But to lose her son, husband, brother, home, career, friends, identity for nothing? *The leaders were just plain stupid when they let this happen.*

### Preservation of Privilege

FAHRIJA: *We just thought from time to time the Serbs liked to reassert their superiority. It was like an old joke—tasteless, but nothing to get so worked up about.*

RADA: *They planned everything very cleverly. We knew our colleagues at the radio station were members of the SDS, but somehow we thought of it as a game; we used to joke about it.*

Violence in response to deprivation is not uncommon. Riots erupt among oppressed people who become enraged enough to act. But a component of conflict is also the transformation of privilege into a victim mentality, bred by and breeding distrust, then fear, then violence. In a circular pattern, privilege, rather than instilling a sense of security, becomes a position that must be ruthlessly defended.

Milosevic not only tilted the balance of power toward Serbs in terms of positions and privileges. He also understood the power of fear as the ultimate motivator, stimulating self-preservation, an instinct so powerful it can overwhelm the civilizing norms that regulate society. So it was in Bosnia. First Serbs in Serbia, then Bosnian Serbs were fed a stream of reports that Orthodox churches and cemeteries were being defiled and Serb girls and women were being raped. In response, curfews were imposed in the villages, house-to-house searches of Bosniak homes ensued, and weapons were confiscated.<sup>20</sup> In an environment hauntingly reminiscent of Nazi treatment of Jews, in some areas in the north Bosniaks were forbidden to meet in groups of more than three or to travel by car. Some began to fly white flags from their balconies, indicating that they would leave.<sup>21</sup>

This was not the first time victimhood had been introduced in Serb culture. Milosevic was playing on an old theme in his campaign to whip Serbs into a fear-fed frenzy, then call for preemptive action. Many Serbs felt they had not

been adequately rewarded as victors in World War II, when Tito, half-Croat, half Slovene, made Kosovo and Vojvodina autonomous regions. An anti-Serb conspiracy theory grew throughout the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>22</sup> The depth of this victim mind-set is evidenced in the statement signed by two hundred prominent scholars and writers in Belgrade in January 1986, declaring, in language laced with hyperbolic claims, that the noble Serb people had been vilified and were being persecuted by the majority ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. The reality was that Kosovar Albanian professionals had been literally locked out of their jobs for several years.<sup>23</sup>

It is difficult to sort through accounts of ethnic-based privilege or lack thereof, because of the prevalence of “statistical oppression . . . and bogus ethnic history.”<sup>24</sup> Still, it seems the Serb victim theme is ironic in that, although Marshal Tito went to great lengths to impose proportional leadership, Yugoslav society was politically weighted in favor of ethnic Serbs.<sup>25</sup> That privileged status was reinforced by the overly high esteem with which many spoke of their heritage.<sup>26</sup> Despite an ethnic key imposed to require proportional appointments to public jobs in Bosnia,<sup>27</sup> the practice of stacking positions with people who had Serb names was carried out on a widespread basis, laying the groundwork for Milosevic’s campaign for “Greater Serbia.” Milosevic fired anyone deemed not loyal to him, from factory workers to local officials.<sup>28</sup> As nationalism spread, the practice of purging according to ethnicity was mirrored by Tudjman in the parallel Croatian institutions that developed. Serbs were fired, for example, from the Croat police force, which was then refashioned into an army.<sup>29</sup> Within Bosnia, in Tuzla, Serb citizens received threatening phone calls, and many were fired without explanations as the Serb army and paramilitary took over large portions of the surrounding area.<sup>30</sup>

The women in these pages are, of course, not only firsthand observers but also subject to influence by propaganda promoted from all sides of the conflict. A postwar critique of prewar Bosnia by those who suffered personally from the violence can hardly be assumed to be untainted. However, the women’s accounts confirm two streams of ethnic-based discrimination that, with hindsight, they judge to have blended into a slow poisoning of the society. The first was the social bias that intensified under Milosevic, elevating Serbs into positions of authority exceeding their representation in the population. Second was a mirror response by other groups. As conflict spread through the heart of multiethnic communities, ethnic identity was suddenly pertinent. Minorities of any stripe came to be distrusted, resented, and sometimes forced out of their homes, jobs, and even

relationships. In the first case, ethnic discrimination was a cause of the war. In the second, ethnic discrimination was an effect of the war.

Many non-Serbs resented what they believed was the political and economic domination of Yugoslavia by Serbs, who then used their dominant presence in federal institutions as a means for cultural hegemony, manipulating political and administrative structures to secure their interests at the expense of the other republics, particularly Croatia and Slovenia. Not surprisingly, after Tito's death, political decentralization was advanced by those two republics, which resented their income being absorbed by the federal government to subsidize less developed areas closely affiliated with Serbia. The perception of Serbian expansionism under Milosevic contributed to Croatian nationalism, which in turn confirmed Serbian fears.<sup>31</sup>

Many of the women went on at length explaining to me their perception of how leadership positions were heavily weighted toward Serbs.<sup>32</sup> A businesswoman, EMSUDA was quick to give numbers to support this claim and point out how the same was true throughout the management structure of government-owned factories and other enterprises. But her intent wasn't to complain. Instead, she was making the connection for me between the systemic favoring of Bosnian Serbs and their subsequent support of Serb aggression, spawned in Belgrade when Yugoslav leadership was up for grabs at Tito's death. *When the multi-party system was to be implemented, those Serbs knew they would have to stop living at the government's expense. They knew there would now be regulations, fines, and the like to constrain them.*

According to Emsuda, Bosnian Serbs benefiting from the status quo had much to lose if a political breakup meant their capital would now be Sarajevo rather than Belgrade. They would shift from being in the plurality among Yugoslavs to being in the minority among Bosnians. The Belgrade government had a lot to lose as well, as viewed from Emsuda's position inside industry. *I saw how petty cash boxes were dipped into. All the funds went through the Yugoslovenska Banka, directly to Belgrade. In '91 and '92, the factory workers received minimal salaries — paid in coupons that could be spent only in certain shops. When the war started, we realized those shops had Serb managers. War also meant the Bosnian government needed to mobilize an army to defend against the well-equipped and well-financed Yugoslav army, which, through Milosevic's manipulation, now had almost exclusive Serb leadership. The government of Bosnia and Herzegovina didn't have any funds, since they all had been diverted to Belgrade. Citizens weren't able to withdraw their personal savings from banks from around 1991 forward.*

DANICA, like Emsuda a businesswoman, but of Croat heritage, believes Serbs dominated Bosnian culture. But her tone isn't bitter. *Sure more Serbs ruled than their proportion of the population; they tried to dominate. But we were still happy. Serbs fought for governing positions more than the rest of us. If I'd done the same — who knows? Maybe I'd be the head of something. We let them govern. Maybe Tito is to blame, but only because he was head of state. He fought for equality across Yugoslavia and put everything in one pot. All weapons and technology went into the Yugoslav National Army. Everything that belonged to our country was concentrated in Belgrade. The Serbs owned us. Yugoslavia had six republics. If we'd acted like a family and divided roles: "You're going to have this many weapons, here's some capital, and here's some . . ." Instead Tito centralized it. If he hadn't, we probably wouldn't have had this catastrophe. It's just like if a father gave it all to one son, then died, and the son was terrible and mistreated everyone else. Compounding the danger, Yugoslavs were told that their army was one of the most powerful in Europe. They thought, "Why not? We can use these weapons."*

Danica begins to speak longingly of the past, her eyes welling up with tears. *Ours was a beautiful little town, with two big rivers and two bridges. The people in the surrounding rural area were Croats, but in town there were more Muslims. Her nostalgia takes a turn as she tells how the incremental discrimination against non-Serbs crescendoed into runaway social pathology. During the war, non-Serbs were arrested, sent to camps, or killed. Some were exchanged, but pretty much everybody had to leave. Of the five to six thousand people of our town, only Serbs remained. She mentions other towns, where only a few Bosniaks and Croats were left after the ethnic purges. Largely the elderly or those in mixed marriages, they were humiliated in a style reminiscent of Germany five decades earlier. They had to wear ribbons around their arms and do forced labor. Teachers had to mop the floors. Doctors and lawyers were made garbage men, forced to clean in front of the police station or the city hall, so everyone could see them. [Danica pauses for a long time.] All their rights were taken away. One of our more prestigious lawyers in town was cleaning the streets. Suddenly, from one day to the next, he was branded. Other people were simply gone. Those who had stayed behind were sent to Serb work camps. They dug ditches and trenches for soldiers or cleaned institutions, like slaves.<sup>33</sup>*

Addressing the gnawing question of how a well-functioning social structure, led by highly trained and educated professionals, devolved into sadistic ruin, FAHRIJA connects her recent experience of Serb violence with the past: *The more I've thought about it, the more I've realized how there's a centuries-old wish for domination and removal of the Muslim people by the Serbs. Suddenly I wondered: How come we have relatives in Turkey? We're ethnic Albanians. But after the Second World War,*

Muslims—especially in Sandzak [part of Serbia]—were pressured, harassed, told that they were “Ottomans,” and that Turkey’s their country and they should live there. They left their houses in Yugoslavia or sold them for nothing. Once they arrived in Turkey, they weren’t accepted, because they weren’t Turks. The relatives I found when I was a refugee spoke to me about this history of hard times. In the suburb of Istanbul they lived in—and where we stayed—the whole town shares that same history. A very small percentage of its population is actually Turkish in origin.

BILJANA also reaches into the past to understand the current conflict. From her U.S.-based perspective, she measured the changes in her country in much larger units of time. *I was given a beautiful video of Muslim nuns singing. I was struck with how different it was from when I grew up. Then, you weren’t known as a Muslim or a Catholic. No group would do something so public as making a video of services in the mosque. Religion was always very private. So when this came, I was shocked. Why was it all of a sudden important to be known ethnically? That wasn’t the statement we made as a people. My cousin told me that all the Muslims were being removed from public positions. She said we needed to make some kind of statement as an ethnic group, because nobody else would do it for us. She said we were being pushed aside, and everything was being taken away from us through legal maneuvers. The Serbs wanted a “Greater Serbia.” They were methodically preparing their takeover long before the war, removing non-Serbs from important places where they could make a difference. Like the other speakers, Biljana supports her political assessment with personal examples: My cousin was director of intelligence for Bosnia and Herzegovina before the war. He was removed from his position by the Serbs and placed in an unimportant job, then totally expelled. He ended up in Norway as a refugee.*

Biljana has another example as well, from 1989, when her mother was on her deathbed in Croatia. A homeopath came from Belgrade. He was a very intense, extremely bright, charismatic figure—reminiscent of Rasputin, to hear Biljana describe him: *He had a natural power to heal, and we had a soul connection.* Biljana spoke candidly with him about the turmoil in Kosovo: *The Serbs said the Kosovars were giving them problems, but it was really the other way around. So I made a very innocent remark like, “Why don’t you just leave those poor people alone? I mean they live there. You can’t just say that it’s your country; it actually belongs to the ethnic Albanians.” He was absolutely shocked—and so self-righteous. It was unbelievable to me that he could act as if the land were his. There was a sense of Serb entitlement that allowed them to go into the home of the lady that worked for my mother, kill her husband, expel the family, sleep in her bed, and say that was OK.* Biljana moves from the concrete to the broad lesson: *There were no moral standards. The Serbs—and the Croats, in the end—were bullies. It was greed. It’s that simple. It wasn’t philosophical. It wasn’t that*

intelligent. Not some ultimate, wonderful, idealist view of life that you want to impose on others.

In case I'm missing her point, Biljana adds an important historical element: *Those kinds of attitudes came only after Tito died.* In his decades of rule, in addition to political maneuvering, the strongman had not stopped short of secret police, summary executions, imprisonment, or whatever else he deemed necessary to maintain a unified state. Some historical analysts contend that this repression was based on Tito's correct assessment that if the tight lid were removed, prejudice and intolerance would boil up. Others insist that Yugoslav society was no more divided than most, where one group dominates others.<sup>34</sup> Be that as it may, in the heat of war, discrimination, like a social virus, spread through many (although not all) Bosnian communities. Vesna and Amna make the case from their personal experiences. VESNA had worked fourteen years in the world of finance. *Then, in 1992, I was fired just for being a Croat. Everybody else was Muslim. My husband is Serb, and he was fired too. We're not isolated cases.*

On the other side of the Croat-Bosniak divide, AMNA describes a mirror image: *While I was in Split, my parents and sister were in jail in Mostar — fortunately just ten days. One Croat put them in the jail, and another Croat let them out. I stayed in Split to finish my fourth year at the university. But in 1993, war started between Muslims and Croats back home in Mostar. Since I was a Muslim, and I was a student in [the newly declared state of] Croatia, I suddenly became a foreigner. They started to use special ID cards so only Croats could go to the university. One day they posted a list on the dorm wall: who could stay. I wasn't on the list, so I had to pack all my stuff, and I was expelled from student housing. The dorm director suggested that since I was Muslim, I should go to Turkey! Fortunately, my friends offered me a place to stay. It was hard for me but also good, because now I knew who my friends were: All those from before the war stayed my friends during the war — and they're still my friends.*

Similar to Amna's account, KADA, in rural eastern Bosnia, describes: *A belief rooted deep in the old people around here. The Serbs put themselves above everyone else and want to take over more territory. They think everyone belongs to them.* In her typically straightforward manner, Kada speaks of "Muslims" instead of "Bosniaks," insisting that she's not interested in "political correctness." *We've always been Muslims. Why should we change?* That same pride helps her not be cowed by Serb attempts to dominate. *They think Muslims are here by mistake. But whoever knows Bosnian history knows that's not true; that's just how the Serbs justified their crimes.* This isn't an ethnic slur on Kada's part. After all, Bosnian Serb President Karadzic actively advocated dividing Sarajevo into ethnic sections, claiming that any development on what once was farmland populated by Serbs now rightfully be-

longed to them. Muslims were regarded as converts who had abandoned their true identity as Croats or Serbs.<sup>35</sup>

Ugly policies have a source. Lawyers don't spontaneously decide to go into garbage collecting. Jobs don't disappear on their own. Lists don't tack themselves to the dormitory wall. Pernicious policies are born in the hearts and minds of individuals in key positions of leadership. The ultimate irony of this Serb-weighted social discrimination is that it didn't result in the beneficiaries feeling more secure. Like those whites in America who adamantly fought the civil rights movement that would distribute basic privileges among all, those who were benefiting from an uneven distribution of power easily slipped into a victim mind-set. From another historical parallel, GRETA, as a Holocaust survivor and Jew remaining in Europe, is intimately acquainted with the power of cultural stereotypes to instill fear. As she was growing up in multicultural Vojvodina, she didn't think about ethnic imbalances. *Wherever you had bosses, you had a lot of Serbs—not just in Serbia, but in Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Still, to hear the politicians tell it, the Serbs were always the victims, facing intolerance and injustice. Milosevic made this big speech in 1989 about Prince Lazar losing the battle of Kosovo in 1389.<sup>36</sup> Lazar's remains in his coffin were displayed. Milosevic began talking about how the Serb people always lost the battle, but never lost their identity.*

RADA, an ethnic Serb herself, describes the power of those stories: *Serbs have had a kind of awful, permanent tragedy stretching from decade to decade, century to century. That woeful tale has been transformed into myths, with stories of sufferings transferred from generation to generation. It's become pathological: They prefer being tied to suffering than to something positive. The need for tragedy becomes a means of evading reality. The child in the cradle is taught that the Serb people have been through tragedy, individual and collective, and there's no way to escape that destiny. Rada isn't so much concerned about refuting the Serb view of history as understanding the roots of Serb political attitudes. The tragedy may be a pure fiction, but it creates a victim position from which Serbs react.*

*Serbs haven't learned from history. We love epic narratives—tales and songs about heroes. Many of these stories have great artistic value, but politics manipulated literature. In every story, someone who used to be a victim becomes a hero. They wake up one morning, changed, and then they take revenge in the name of the rest of the Serbs. So the only way to become a hero is to start as a victim. There's a huge power in being a victim. People identify with the victims in the stories and hold tight to their victimhood. In normal life, a victim becomes a perpetrator. It's cyclical. Historically, it's true that Serbs have suffered. But how does that justify what they did?*

So the tragic myths became a catalyst, turning an imbalance that actually favored the “victims” into a fear that they would lose their privileges. This shift from the ease of abundance into the “dis-ease” of violent self-preservation is traceable in the words of GALINA, speaking from an enclave awash for years with propaganda broadcast from Serbia—the “cleansed” city of Banja Luka, which was 55 percent Serb before the war, 95 percent after. First, to counter the demonization of the Serbs, she’s determined to normalize what occurred. *It’s not true that people didn’t love each other. Look how many mixed marriages we have. It was like a family splitting up, with brothers going to court. In spite of their love, they may even shoot each other. The problem was a few psychopaths, very extreme nationalists. Normal people didn’t want to have this war. There were dangerous nationalist parties, and ethnic cleansing occurred on all sides.*

I find it difficult as an outsider, not having been subjected to brainwashing reports in Banja Luka every day, to castigate the Galinas of Bosnia for the discrepancy between their accounts and those of observers. Is her view wrong but understandable, given the information she had? Is her unwillingness to lay blame on her own group a psychological defense among Bosnian Serbs (especially outside Sarajevo), feeding on the tragic myths described by Rada and Greta? Galina fingers many culprits, not only among the Bosnians but also among propagators of the divisive message. *The international community . . . talks about “Serbs, Muslims, and Croats.” But people are just good or bad. You always have bad people who don’t have faith in God, and that’s why there’s war. But the bad ideas of bad people can be furthered by the bad policies of outsiders, she insists. The international sanctions were unfair and didn’t work.<sup>37</sup> The people are the ones who suffered. That policy fed the idea that the world is against us. We had to fight or the world would destroy us.*

Ultimately, that view among Serbs that they were victims grew into a drive to preserve what they had. *In these parts there’s always this idea that someone is threatening someone else. Even business people and highly educated people feel like they’re in danger. Then when there was a real threat, real danger, when it was a question of whether there would be war, people—not me—thought if something ought to belong to Serbs, then Muslims had to leave, and vice versa. People thought they had to grab a cut for themselves. The Serb “cut” turned out to be bigger than their proportion in the society. Bosnian Serbs, who represented one-third of the prewar population, ended up after Dayton controlling 49 percent of the territory. Galina doesn’t note the inequity, but adds, instead, a critical distinction for those seeking to understand the reasons for the Bosnian war. *I don’t think it was hate. It was fear—and the need for our own piece of land.**

Biljana Plavsic, during her sentencing at The Hague, admitted, "In our obsession that Serbs should never again become victims of their neighbors, as they were in World War II, we allowed ourselves to become victimizers."<sup>38</sup> Still, it's too easy to say that war was the result of a Serb victim mentality, which fed into a fear of losing their political and economic position if they became minority members of an independent Bosnia rather than Yugoslavs. That political situation was stoked with extraordinary virulence and effectiveness by the media. *When I heard the rhetoric that started overnight on TV, terms like "Chetniks" and "Ustashas," I recognized war. Some people didn't have radio or television. Maybe they heard by word of mouth, but they all repeated like parrots "Chetniks," "Ustashas," "Mujahadeens."* As the masses drifted with the flow into what they perceived as the inevitability of war, Galina read as many newspapers as she could find and tried to listen to Voice of America and the BBC. But it was a struggle, as the local papers continuously reinforced the Belgrade message. *Someday I'll cut out the headlines. Whoever looks at them will say, "These people hate each other. They can't live together."*

### The Media Machine

SABIHA: *Ninety percent of the stuff they were showing on TV was rubbish. Most of what they were saying on the radio was propaganda, preparation for the war, to incite hatred.*

VALENTINA: *We didn't have newspapers during the war, and TV depended on electricity, which we didn't get all the time. There was a Bosnian and a Serb channel. Both sides claimed killings. They might have lied; I wasn't there to see.*

KRISTINA: *The politicians used the media, which of course had enormous power over people in a communist system. . . . You know, we were used to listening to doctrine.*

MAJA: *Violent people controlled the media, but that was the source from which we had to extract the truth.*

*Imagine a political climate around you is being created. Somebody is suddenly telling you somebody did something they didn't do. Or this was said, which wasn't said. And*

*you see this huge fight erupting. Then you start to feel you're about to lose something, because your politicians are saying you are. They're fashioning a political happening that doesn't exist, but is about to exist. You're caught up in something that's actually in the making. There are interminable parliamentary sessions broadcast live on TV. Suddenly people begin to hate, fighting some enemy who, they're told, is threatening their way of life. That enemy, as such, doesn't exist yet, because the people who are supposed to be the enemy feel exactly the same way you do. It's just a political game, created through TV and other media.*

That account of the psychology of media warfare is all the more gripping coming not from an outside analyst, but from KRISTINA, a small-town Bosnian Serb schoolteacher. Her words give a graphic account of how the wartime news media didn't have the primary function of providing unbiased information to the people. Without a tradition of independent media, politicians started up radio and television stations and used print media to twist real events into powerful propaganda or even create stories from whole cloth.<sup>39</sup> The tactic was so successful that, after the war, Bosnia had the double-edged distinction of having the highest number of media houses in Europe, with over 400 print and broadcast media outlets for a population of fewer than four million.<sup>40</sup> It was a tactic Milosevic used until the demise of his political career.<sup>41</sup>

The disintegration of the former Yugoslavia was a product of, and in turn produced, arguably the most effective manipulation of media in Europe since Hitler's Third Reich. Like that campaign half a century before, the politicized media blitz that led to the Balkan wars of the 1990s stretched over several years before the shooting started, becoming progressively more virulent. Milosevic's goal was to create the perception of distinct—and incompatible—identities among people for whom such distinctions either had not existed or had not been important. Even as Hitler strengthened and evoked Aryan identity by creating an "other" (the Jews), the nationalists in post-Tito Yugoslavia launched media campaigns that reduced a complex, multicultural society to distinct nations (ethnic groups), with Serb and Croat politicians arguing that their ethnic group was entitled to dominion over land that had long been shared. Different events and periods of history could be invoked to "prove" the rightful owner of territory, ignoring migration and intermingling, as well as changes in political structures or the evolution of culture and religion. The inconsistencies, and sometimes bald-faced lies, promoted by politicians using the media for these purposes were astounding.<sup>42</sup>

Each nationalist leader sought to establish control of local media—perhaps most effectively through television and radio, although print was not exempt. In

some cases, international media picked up themes being promulgated locally. As nationalist leaders used the media first to separate and then unify their subgroup (as if these were people separated by culture and language), the international press carried stories of a citizenry who could not conceivably live together in harmony — forgetting that they'd been doing just that, with few exceptions, for the most of the past several centuries.

While President Tudjman in Croatia and President Izetbegovic in Bosnia were also guilty of manipulating the media, the women telling me the story of the Bosnian war, regardless of their own ethnic identity, refer most pointedly to Slobodan Milosevic, who by the end of 1987 had achieved control of Radio-Television Belgrade as well as *Politika*, the largest circulating newspaper in Yugoslavia. Several Belgrade media outlets were known for high-quality journalism even under the communists. These outlets were transformed — through purges, personal threats, and other pressures — into sources of disinformation that sowed seeds of fear and intolerance.<sup>43</sup> In his bid to take over Croatia, Milosevic created a ministry of information that achieved pervasive media control. Likewise, the Yugoslav National Army helped Bosnian Serbs take over tv-Sarajevo repeaters across the country and reprogrammed them to carry tv-Belgrade.<sup>44</sup>

The media success of the political architects of a fantasized Greater Serbia is illustrated in two accounts, both by Bosnian Serb women who could contrast their Sarajevo life experience with misinformation the Serb media was feeding the public. AS RADA says: *The Serb nationalists were phenomenal in their manipulation of the media. First they created a wonderful staff, taking the best journalists. Some of my radio colleagues were members of the nationalist political party, the SDS. The Croat nationalists followed suit.*

*The Serbs used the media in the most terrible way, isolating their coverage area. They “cleansed” the region so they could do whatever they wanted; radio and tv signals were provided from Serbia for their territory in Bosnia, and all other relays were destroyed so other media couldn’t reach them.*<sup>45</sup> *Take my mother, who — with all due respect — even after the time we spent in Sarajevo, still can’t believe that someone was shooting at the city from the outside. During the war, she was in her mid-seventies, listening to the broadcasts from Serbia about how “those Muslims” were destroying the capital. She lives only seven kilometers from Sarajevo. She heard the roaring of the shells. She’s not a nationalist, but still she can’t believe it! For her, it was “the Muslims” who were shelling Sarajevo. Then she asks me, “Why don’t you have a flat?” [Rada laughs.] I tell her my flat was destroyed. She asks me, “Well, who destroyed it?” And I can’t tell her “It was Chetniks.” As a Serb, Rada’s mother might be offended to hear her daughter using*

a term that had acquired a derogatory meaning against all Serb people. So I tell her, “Mother, my flat was destroyed by Rajna.” *Rajna* is a Serb who lived opposite my building, where the paramilitary White Eagles had their sniper and machine gun nest, which faced my building directly.

Sarajevans were shelling themselves? Who could believe such an outlandish notion?<sup>46</sup> Yet Rada’s account is confirmed by TANJA, university professor turned politician: *Today I meet people from Serbia who really didn’t know Sarajevo was destroyed, and they’re amazed at what they see. They actually thought we Sarajevans were shooting at ourselves! And after a market massacre in the center of Sarajevo, the Serb newspapers wrote that those sixty-eight bodies were dummies!*<sup>47</sup> The twists were sometimes diabolical, such as footage of Serbian soldiers raping Croat and Bosniak women, shown on the news in Serb-controlled Banja Luka, described as Serbian women being raped by Croatian and Bosniak men.<sup>48</sup> Tanja goes on to reflect on the lessons of those years, and the damage that continued after the shooting stopped. *State media control is a dangerous thing. Now the nationalist political parties, which brought about this war, are in power. Using the media, they keep setting one ethnic group against another. Their propaganda is disastrous.*

“Disastrous” is a strong word. Disinformation is certainly disorienting. But in and of itself, how dangerous can it be? Dangerous indeed, when it emboldens fear and demands action. The Serb media, in particular, became a weapon of war by communicating an impending crisis, a threat to the very existence of the Serb people.<sup>49</sup> But all three nationalist parties were guilty of attacks on the independent media. The director of Sarajevo TV was forced to resign when he insisted on broadcasting daily newscasts from Zagreb and Belgrade, as well as Sarajevo. All three nationalist political parties demanded that Radio-Television Sarajevo stop transmitting the meetings of the All-National Parliament, in the first week in April 1992, to protest ethnic divisions.<sup>50</sup>

Fear, in turn, begat fear. Several women described the cycle of terror as an essential element in the mobilization of people to fight or flee. FAHRIJA relates how, just as the war was about to break, she escaped Sarajevo by bus with her two small children. *The radio was on full blast. The speaker referred to Ejup [her husband] and the president [Izetbegovic] as propagators of war who wanted to turn Bosnian people against Serbia and rally Muslims to kill them — like in the Ottoman times. It was ridiculous, of course. The Bosniaks weren’t even armed. The driver was cursing my husband out loud while he patted my little Emir’s head. I prayed for Emir to be quiet.* For Fahrija and the bus driver, abstract notions of “the enemy” were suddenly strikingly personal. People who had been neighbors for fifty years now feared death

at the other's hands. Media had become a weapon of war, with myths promulgated by greedy politicians now popularized and disseminated among people who began to see themselves as threatened.

So how did Milosevic pull it off, this dramatic rewriting of current affairs and history?<sup>51</sup> ALENKA's answer packs a wallop, a blunt but effective antidote to the gentility of academic policy analysis: *Masses are just stupid — really easy to influence. Hitler was a genius at manipulating crowds. Many of these crazy politicians were psychiatrists, so they probably knew how to sway the people.* But Yugoslav society was peaceful, multicultural, and relatively well educated. So how did those “crazy politicians” gain such influence? *The campaign was composed of small bits. We didn't recognize the whole picture, because it came in tiny, invisible pieces. Propaganda filled the air. Here's a typical jewel from an extremist Tuzla newspaper: “Every good Muslim should kill at least one Serb.” Sure the people in Tuzla knew this was junk. But that's what was out there. And from other sides, disgusting examples: “We're the best; others are worthless.” A year or two before the war, some newspapers started with horrible propaganda to drum up support for Greater Serbia; they called for revenge from World War II atrocities. The campaign produced fear, which is the mechanism that runs war. They tell you, “Kill them, or they'll kill you!” Then you have a chain reaction.* Alenka goes on to distinguish between rural and urban people, saying that the extremist message resounded in the hills around Tuzla, but not in the city itself. She cites election results to prove that her town didn't succumb to the nationalist craze that swept the nation. Still, she's very wary of the power of the mass media. *You get so used to it — the propaganda, step by step — that you can't recognize it anymore. That's why you need someone from outside to analyze everything and say, “This is bullshit.” And it is bullshit because, if someone tells you lies all the time, you forget it's a lie. And it becomes the truth.*