**Bosnia and Ukraine: two rails of the same track**

If you stop a person on the street in Sarajevo and ask them what they think about the war in Ukraine, they’ll tell you they think that almost everything that happened in the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina is also happening in Ukraine.

Someone wrote on Twitter that the war in Ukraine was a game of fast chess compared to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina because everything in Ukraine was going on at a frantic pace.

Several days before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, I did an interview with a young Ukrainian writer, and he told me that Russia’s goal was to conquer the whole of Ukraine. It’s not that I didn’t believe him, but my brain is configured to insert a grain of optimism into even the worst apocalyptic mood.

It was blatantly obvious that Russia was going to attack because you don’t set up field hospitals to receive wounded if you’re just holding manoeuvres. People unfamiliar with the mechanisms of war think it’s easy to shut down a war machine of 190,000 personnel with thousands of tanks, armoured vehicles, artillery pieces and logistical units.

That war machine roared into action on 24 February, and all hell broke loose over Ukraine.

Recently we commemorated the 30th anniversary of the aggression and war against Bosnia-Herzegovina. We consider early April 1992 the *watershed* when a new era began (before, during and after the catastrophe).

On 21 April 1992, the attack began on my home town in far western Bosnia.

I was studying in Zagreb at the time. I returned to my town because I knew the war would soon begin; regular and irregular Serb formations had begun attacking towns in eastern Bosnia in early April.

I watched as towns burned along the River Drina, the natural border between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, even though the country was still called the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. But not even the letter Y remained of Yugoslavia because Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina declared independence and seceded from it.

I was sitting at the Casablanca café when the attack began on Bosanska Krupa, the town where I grew up. I was wearing Levi’s, a down jacket and Adidas trainers. I was drinking beer and listening to music on the café terrace. It was a lovely day, but shortly after 6pm an artillery attack began. That’s when I realised what the expression “mortal terror” means. Militants of the Serb Democratic Party, aided by forces of the former Yugoslav People’s Army, shelled the city from the surrounding hills.

I neither volunteered nor was I conscripted. We were surrounded by enemy forces and there was no way out of the area (later called the *Bihać Pocket* or Bihać District) unless you could fly. I took up arms because I was driven out of my flat, my street and my neighbourhood. My conscience demanded that I fight.

I fought for 44 months. Once I was badly wounded in the left foot. I needed crutches to walk for six months. The pain was more or less bearable because I was young and my body had the strength of steel.

I remember having to go to the toilet in a special wheelchair, which had a hole in the seat for doing a number two. Urinating was very awkward too, but I recovered quickly. I returned to the unit and to the same duties as before I was wounded, as a platoon commander of thirty men. After being wounded, I could have had myself transferred somewhere safer, away from the front line, but I didn’t want to wait around in a logistics unit for the war to end. I wanted to use my fighting skills to contribute to ending the war, which we often felt was interminable.

Chronological time stops ticking during war. We wore watches on our wrists but they showed a meaningless time. There was no TV, we listened to the radio, and there were no newspapers. We were cut off from the rest of our country and the civilised world. It was a small enclave just five hours’ drive from Vienna, at least before the war. Now we lived as if we were at the end of the world, so time was irrelevant. A new time was ticking inside us – the one you count from the moment your idyllic, civic life collapses and you become a refugee. After the first moments of shock, we were quick to embrace the apocalyptic way of life.

The experience of war is not something you want to have. No sane person wants it. It’s a return to the Stone Age and the time of commodity-money exchange. In the war, you could sell a tube of toothpaste or a pocketknife and then get tanked up with the money. We did that once: we went to a town far behind the lines, drank beer and listened to Whitney Houston singing *I will always love you* on MTV. It’s not as if we were fans of hers. We preferred grunge, and before that we listened to new wave, but no one asked us about our musical or any other urban identity.

We didn’t even know that the Serb nationalists saw us as the Others, who were to be expelled from “Serbian lands”, killed, raped and imprisoned in concentration camps. In the summer of 1992, when the Serb army and police occupied the town of Prijedor, all non-Serbs had to wear white armbands and hang white sheets out the windows of their houses and flats. The genocide began there, and it ended with the court-proven genocide in Srebrenica in July 1995.

Although I and my family, comrades-in-arms and fellow citizens went through the worst possible ordeals and suffering (as refugees, soldiers and civilians), I’ve never allowed myself to hate an entire people. I’ve only hated ultranationalists and war criminals, not other members of the Serbian people.

We had to fight for our sheer survival. And when you fight like that, you can never be defeated because no *idea* is stronger than the idea of ​​your own life. Right now, Ukrainians are fighting a life-or-death struggle. Being in the position of having nothing to lose but your own life is when you’re strongest. The will to live is impossible to kill. Our vitality and will to live were indestructible. We were unbreakable like diamonds, plus our bodies were young and full of primal energy.

In the autumn of 1995, we finally manged to retake our town after being driven out of it in the spring of 1992. The town was in ruins, but we rebuilt it. Years after the war, you realise that life will never be the same as it was before. Once you lose that Arcadian life it can never be renewed.

All this is not what concerns the people of Ukraine at the moment. They currently hope the war will end as soon as possible, but war has a logic of its own that is nothing like human logic.

The day the war in Ukraine began, I wrote on Twitter that the Russians would commit war crimes, even though they had not yet occurred. It was clear to anyone who watched and listened to Mr Putin, during the speech in which he recognised the independence of the fake statelets of Luhansk and Donetsk, that war and atrocities would soon follow. He referred to Ukraine as a fake state and the Ukrainians as a fake people.

Milošević and Karadžić said the same things about Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bosniaks – that they are fake and do not deserve to exist. Those words were later turned into the worst crimes in Europe after the Second World War. I hope the crimes of the Russian army will not surpass those committed in my country.

The massacre uncovered in the small town of Bucha, near Kyiv, will be minor compared to the horrors that will occur if the war continues at this pace. We do not yet know the scale of the crimes in Mariupol. Ukraine is in a state of severe shock because it was attacked while people were sleeping. The night before the attack, life for people in Kyiv was completely peaceful. The streets were full of people, the bars crowded.

When someone attacks you *out of the blue*, you’re bewildered – you don’t believe what’s happening to you. We will discover the true atrocities and crimes of the Russian invasion of Ukraine when the war is over. The most important thing now is for the Russian war machine in Ukraine to be broken and brought to a halt. The dictator understands only the language of force, while the politics of *appeasement* bolster his power.

The cities of Ukraine will be rebuilt from the dust and ashes. The whole country can rise again. What cannot be brought back are the dead. These wounds never heal, but you can live with them. I believe in the grit and courage of the Ukrainian soldiers and citizens. And in the victory of life over death.