

Years to Forget: Memoirs of a Forgotten War
By Hase Dervisevic, August 10, 2004

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I have nothing but happy memories from growing up in what the civilized world considers a Third World country, Bosnia. My life was very ordinary.

After a great childhood I ended up in the Military Academy in Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital. Knowing that the military was a priority in Communist Yugoslavia, graduating from the Academy meant a guaranteed career, the best salary, free apartment, even a free car and some other benefits. With an unemployment rate of 40%, I would say that was a pretty good deal I had waiting for me.

Everything was going well until 1991. I was in my last year of high school, well on my way to becoming an officer when it all started.

I never before had trouble with Serbs or Croats. It was never an issue. I lived in a Muslim region, but during those high school years I met and befriended every possible ethnicity that there was.

All of a sudden, as a result of a few nationalistic speeches it became an enormous problem. No one could live with any other ethnic group.

Slovenia got their independence very quickly. Croatia wanted the same, of course. Well, Serbs would not let them. That's when real fighting broke out.

ARMIES AND MEN

Being a student in the Academy qualified me as a member of Yugoslavian People's Army (JNA). I was fighting Croats while still in high school, on the side of Serbs, or what was left of Yugoslavia. Shortly, when Bosnia started fighting Serbs for their independence, I had to make a decision: abandon school after three years of extremely hard work, or stay and fight an enemy that was not yet defined.

I asked some senior officers at the Academy for advice. They told me to stay put, that it would die down quickly and that everything would go back to normal.

I don't know why I even asked. I left the JNA and went home to Krajina to defend my town. I left Sarajevo in February 1992, two months before the infamous siege of the city. I joined Fifth Corps, and fought against Serbs for about a year. While in the Fifth Corps I met with some of those senior officers from the Academy that advised me to stay in Sarajevo and fight for Yugoslavia. They, of course didn't follow their own advice.

THEATER OF BATTLE

Fifth Corps was formed to defend the region I lived in. We call it *Krajina*. Krajina consisted of three or four bigger cities and numerous little villages. Approximately 300,000 people lived there.

We held our own for a year or two, but we often questioned why the Serbs had not attacked. There was fighting on the front lines, people died, but they never launched any attacks on the inside, which they were very capable of. I know they were because I had been a member of that same army not long ago. Some experts had previously evaluated the JNA to be the third-largest European military power.

The speculations about some secret deal not to ever attack were very much alive. It all looked staged at times.

We were completely surrounded in Krajina during those years. No outside access. Hungry, exhausted, and bored. Alija Izetbegovic, the President of Bosnia, was preaching an "all-Muslim state." Some people liked that idea. But most people I knew realized that something like that would never happen. Not in Bosnia, where you had an almost even split of population amongst Muslims, Croats, and Serbs.

Soon, Fikret Abdic, *Babo* ("papa"), came out with an idea to end the siege and live happily ever after with everyone.

ANOTHER CIVIL WAR

Babo was born and therefore most popular in Krajina, but he was very well known in other parts of Bosnia. Earlier, he had teamed up with Alija's party and won the election, but for never explained reasons gave Alija the title of President and the office of the presidency.

I liked his idea. This was true for most people I met while fighting for Babo's cause. I was just sick of all the rhetoric and fanaticism. I wanted to move on. Get my life back on track. I was losing my best years on those front lines, wet and cold, with no legitimate cause and no end in sight. I was no coward though, I was never afraid of a gunfight. I was just trying to find something better to do with my life.

Well, they wouldn't do it. The Bosnian government and its fanatic followers despised the idea. They immediately called Babo a traitor. They wanted to continue with their pointless fight against people they would eventually have to live with.

We fought for a couple years. It got very ugly. Neighbor against neighbor, and in many cases brother against brother. It was all very confusing. At the very beginning, before I knew what it was all about, I was arguing passionately with one of my neighbors. He was all pumped up for Babo's cause, and I was against it. Later, I joined Babo's People's Defense. He stayed in the Bosnian Army.

A THEATRICAL DEFEAT

They defeated us in 1995. Even though we were largely outnumbered, the Bosnian Army never would have beaten us if it weren't for the Croats breaking through the Serb lines that surrounded Krajina. That whole operation also looked quite theatrical.

We fled. Babo's fighters scattered all over the world. Most of us settled nicely, got our lives straight, and keep sending money to relatives that stayed in Bosnia.

They won against us, but still had to settle with Serbs and Croats to carve up Bosnia into several pieces. The country is now destroyed. The economy is almost non-existent. The future looks depressing. They now beg to escape from what they once thought would be the greatest Islamic state.

I almost feel sorry for them!

We would all be better off if the 1990s never happened.

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