

THE EUROPEAN (Weekly - Friday)
Orbit House, 5 New Fetter Lane, London

ISSUE
DATE 11. 2. 93

GRAHAM TROTT



War arrives on the doorstep: Drakulic describes everyday life

View from the middle ground

A YEAR ago Slavenka Drakulic wrote a book about queues, make-up, recycling old clothes and not being able to find sanitary towels. These accounts of the privations of daily life in eastern Europe, published as *How We Survived Communism and Laughter*, now have an almost nostalgic air.

In her latest collection of essays the Croatian author, who lives in Zagreb, writes about the monster of civil war that is devouring the few good things of the old Yugoslavia – peace and some prosperity, for instance – and whatever hopes there may be for the future. Again Drakulic concentrates on daily, seemingly mundane concerns, reasoning, rightly, that the mass of information bucketing out of Yugoslavia – TV images of destroyed towns, the meaningless talks, the tired clichés of journalism – do not complete the picture.

In *Balkan Express*, a book which has sold 10,000 copies in Germany and is published this month in Britain and Holland, Drakulic writes about what happens when war, consciously maintained as an abstraction when on the TV screen, even by Yugoslavian peoples, at last arrives at the doorstep.

One essay describes a once adored Croatian actress who performs in Corneille's *L'illusion comique* in Belgrade and is then ostracised. Justifying herself in Zagreb's main newspaper she writes: "Each individual who personally accepts the war is in fact an accessory to the crime." Ah, the know-alls among her new fellow nationals decide, her mother was a Jew and her husband is a Serb. She now lives in New York.

Then there are the stories from the front of how young men harden into killers – and how families mourn their deaths. In a rare essay addressing politics, Drakulic describes President Tudjman taking coffee – an espresso, because Croatians are

A Croatian author looks beyond the tired clichés, says Sebastian O'Kelly

Balkan Express

Slavenka Drakulic
Hutchinson £8.99

Europeans, unlike the Serbs who prefer Turkish-style brews. Outside there is a demonstration by the veterans and refugees of Vukovar: yesterday's heroes and today an embarrassing problem. He ignores them; no one wants to think that what happened to Vukovar could occur to a city of a million inhabitants, even if the front is 40km away. "The myth of Europe, of our belonging to the European family and culture, even as poor relations, is gone," Drakulic writes.

One of the most effective elements of these essays is her central role. Aged 40, educated and well travelled – there are dinner parties in New York and shopping at Laura Ashley in London – Drakulic's past life, what she is, counts for less as the war grinds on.

On a visit to Slovenia, the land that escaped, she is treated as just another Croatian refugee. Critical of the government, hostile to demonising all Serbs, she refuses to surrender herself to the national struggle. Why don't you leave, neighbours ask?

Of course she could, and she is honest enough to say that if Zagreb ever gets ethnically cleansed it is unlikely that she will be around. But she will stay for the moment: her friends are there, she writes in Croat and, she admits, "I want to be here to see what will happen: it may be a mixture of intellectual curiosity and emotional ties."

Despising the rabid nationalism on all sides, Drakulic's credo is "I am a Croat, but ..."

The middle ground could not be more uncomfortable than now.

Next week we publish an essay from 'Balkan Express'