

Books of The Times**Beyond Facts to the Realities of War**

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

"There mustn't be any more war," an old French peasant woman is reputed to have said to Aristide Briand in 1917. "It disturbs too many people." Judging from what is now going on in the Balkans, war disturbs people so extremely that they tend to push its reality from their minds.

As Slavenka Drakulic writes in the introduction to her moving collection of 18 essays, "The Balkan Express: Fragments From the Other Side of War," seven of which have been translated from Croatian and the rest of which the author wrote in English: "War also heightens your awareness of the outside world. Astonishment gives way to anger, then resignation at the way Europe perceives this war — 'ethnic conflict,' 'ancient legacy of hatred and bloodshed.' In this way the West tells us, 'You are not Europeans, not even Eastern Europeans. You are Balkans, mythological, wild, dangerous Balkans. Kill yourselves, if that is your pleasure. We don't understand what is going on there, nor do we have clear political interests to protect.'"

It is Ms. Drakulic's intention in these essays to make us understand what is going on in the Balkans. Not the battle lines or the problems of strategy. Not even the justness of any party's cause. Simply the horrifying reality of an unspeakably brutal war. The author of a nonfiction book called "How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed" and a novel, "Holograms of Fear," Ms. Drakulic explains that "The Balkan Express," composed of "short half-stories, half-essays," picks up "where the news stops; it fits somewhere in between hard facts and analysis and personal stories, because the war is happening not only at the front, but everywhere and to us all."

Her first example of a person inclined to reject the reality of war is herself, the child of Croats and the ex-wife of a Serb. In a chapter called "Paris — Vukovar," she describes taking a bath in a Paris apartment after cutting her finger slightly. The blood from her wound reminds her of a photograph she has recently seen of a slaughtered family of four. Suddenly she feels her "fragility and impotence." She writes: "This body was no longer mine. It had been taken over by something else, taken over by the war. I had thought that the death of the body was the worst thing that could happen in war; I didn't know that worse was the separation of self from the body, the numbness of the inner being, extinction before death, pain before pain. Instinctively I licked the wound on my finger. But it didn't help, the blood continued to ooze."

Having begun to absorb the horror, she travels to the last southeastern stronghold of the Croatian army and

interviews her guide. He tells her, "No, the treachery of friends was not the hardest thing, the hardest thing is to kill a man." Recalling a time he lay in ambush, he says: "I know that at some point sweat began to pour down my forehead and that I suddenly remembered Camus's 'Stranger.' The scene on the beach before he starts shooting at the Arab."

After she has learned of the atrocities committed by both sides, she interviews a young Croatian soldier who helped dispose of Serbian corpses by burning them. He tells her: "You turn into a machine. You simply work like a machine. You think like a man and act like a robot."

But confronting death and mutilation is only part of the suffering. There is also the psychological dislocation of becoming a refugee in other people's eyes and of turning one's friends into refugees. "Aren't we Slovenes nice to you?" a university professor says to her when she flees Zagreb for Ljubljana during a bombing siege. Later she catches herself begrudging a friend exiled from Sarajevo the luxury of wearing high heels.

As bad as anything, Ms. Drakulic writes, is having a sense of nationality forced on you by default. After growing up a Yugoslav, she herself has had to become a Croat out of self-defense. A film star she knows tried to resist such narrow definition, arguing in a public letter that art "must not and cannot put itself in the service of any political or national ideas." For taking such a position the actress was reviled as a traitor and forced into exile.

How does Ms. Drakulic account for the Balkan tragedy? Her view is far from conventional. She blames the post-World War II Communist regime, as comparatively benign as it was. She writes: "If there is any reason at all behind the historical animosities dividing the Yugoslav nations, it is that this society never had a proper chance to become a society not of oppressed peoples, but of citizens, of self-aware individuals with developed democratic institutions within which to work out differences, conflicts and changes and instead of by war. Continuing to live with the same kind of totalitarian governments, ideology and yet untransformed minds, it seems the people were unable to shoulder the responsibility for what was coming — or to stop it. War therefore came upon us like some sort of natural calamity, like the plague or a flood, inevitable, our destiny."

This view is, of course, a relatively optimistic one, discounting as it does the possibility suggested by the incredible brutality of the conflicts that human beings are after all biologically inclined to hate anyone perceived

to be alien.

Yet if the author's hopeful outlook on human nature fails to convince the reader that the Balkan countries she writes about are a territory like any other on the face of the earth, then many of the details of her eloquent narratives do serve to make the land seem touchingly familiar. This reader was particularly struck by a sentence the author tosses off almost casually: "Fat white geese waddle in the yard of a bombed house we pass." But a dozen similar details remind one that much as it resembles some unimaginable hell, the region Ms. Drakulic writes about is part of the same earth all of us must live upon.