

Melissa Benn is devastated by an account of war-crimes in the former Yugoslavia

The harvest of silence

They Would Never Hurt A Fly: War Criminals on Trial in the Hague

by Slavenka Drakulic
182pp, Abacus, £8.99

When Slavenka Drakulic first sat down in courtroom number three of the war crimes tribunal in The Hague, the sole public spectator of proceedings that day, she found herself drifting into sleep. As the first hour dragged by, she discovered that, as the title of her second chapter declares, "Justice is Boring". "But this is exactly as it should be. A trial is not a show for the audience . . . It is a serious thing: justice is in question, human lives are at stake, and there is nothing spectacular in proving someone's guilt or innocence." A moment later, Drakulic hears a witness talk of "blood on the walls". Suddenly, she — and we — are returned to what these tribunals are really about: the most murderous conflict in modern Europe for at least two generations in which hundreds of thousands died.

Drakulic, a Croatian citizen now living in exile in Sweden, demonstrates no little moral courage in her insistence, by this book, on reviving the horrors of the war so soon. Within the various nations of "what was once the beautiful country of Yugoslavia" there has been fierce political resistance to any form of trial, whether at home or in The Hague, of those suspected of war crimes. Domestic attempts at justice have degenerated into farce with court spectators cheering the accused and terrorising witnesses. After giving evidence in The Hague, Milan Levar, an ordinary but brave citizen of a small Croatian town, was blown up in his mother's yard, in front of his 11-year-old son. As Drakulic keeps saying, the war is not yet over.

This slim, lucidly written book is a devastating read. While western feminists wrangle over an allegation of sexual harassment by an eminent literary critic nearly 20 years ago, Drakulic provides us with pen portraits of murder and rape on a mass scale that occurred less than a decade ago in the heart of Europe. And, while the book opens with tales of Croatian atrocity and cover-up, most of her case studies concern alleged Serbian outrages.

We read in horrible detail of the three Bosnian Serb soldiers who made Muslim women dance

naked on tables before gang-raping them, or of Goran Jelusic, the patient fisherman, who always shot his Muslim victims in the head over the same drainage grating. Drazen Erdemovic, a reluctant soldier, was forced, under threat of execution himself, to kill hundreds of men in the course of one day. Many accused of war crimes have so far evaded the tribunal, such as the Serbian general Ratko Mladic, wanted on charges of genocide for the slaughter of up to 200,000 Bosnian Muslims.

Drakulic made her name in the west penning ironic prose about the deprivations of life under communism. Her subject matter has shifted dramatically, but her direct, personal style does justice to the weight and grimness of these stories. Only occasionally, when she speculates on the family dynamics of one of the accused or retreads accounts of the "autistic" relationship between Slobodan and Mira Milosevic, does her pop psychology begin to grate.

But the central question of this book is an important one, of long and distinguished lineage: how do apparently ordinary citizens turn into callous, death-peddling brutes? During the five months she spent observing court proceedings, Drakulic studied the defendants' faces through the court glass. Sometimes the idiotic little half smile of an unrepentant rapist would drive her to distraction, but mostly she could not coax sense or true cause from the bland faces of the men before her.

"The more I have occupied myself with the individual cases of war criminals, the less I believe them to be monsters." In the end, Drakulic locates these stories of individual evil on a broader canvas. Extremism begins with the thousands of small acts committed by ordinary people: the petty refusal to greet citizens of another nationality or ethnic origin, or the consistent electoral support given to militant and manipulative nationalist leaders such as Milosevic or Tudjman of Croatia. "War does not come from nowhere." Reflecting on

Milosevic . . . on trial

her own childhood in communist Yugoslavia, Drakulic argues that silence about the truths and terrible ethnic conflicts of the past were part of the reason for their re-emergence in this latest war. There is a crucial difference, she believes, between memory and history. Individuals were certainly haunted by images of past terror but there was no opportunity honestly to investigate the cause or legacy of earlier hatreds. Everything was airbrushed over by Tito's vision of "brotherhood and unity". And then, after the fall of

communism, the same mistakes and silence happened all over again.

And yet, in an angry, ironic epilogue Drakulic observes how the accused being held at Scheveningen detention unit in The Hague have somehow revived the "brotherhood and unity" of the old Yugoslavia. Serbs accused of killing Muslims happily play cards with Muslims charged with the torture of Serbians. As Drakulic says: "They have obviously reached a compromise that enables them to live

together — something that people back home can only dream about." But if the apparent harmony inside Scheveningen is indeed the mysterious, frustrating epilogue of this war, one cannot help but echo Drakulic's final cry: what was it all for? Nor can one help but cheer and weep at her simple two-word answer: for nothing.

Melissa Benn reported from The Hague for *Forgive and Forget*, a BBC Radio 4 series. To order *They Would Never Hurt A Fly* for £8.99 with free UK p&p call Guardian book service on 0870 066 7979.

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