

## THE NEW VOICE OF UKRAINE

### Author of books about war crimes in the Balkans names the reasons for the brutality of the occupiers

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Slavenka Drakulić, the author of books about war crimes in the Balkans. (Photo:Jure Eržen)

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**Russia's war in Ukraine is the second war in Europe since the Yugoslav wars, and both conflicts share many similarities - not least in the preponderance of war crimes and atrocities committed by one side.**

NV's Olya Dukhnich spoke to noted Croatian journalist and essayist Slavenka Drakulić about the ideologies of these wars, and what lessons we can draw for the consequences of war, on both Russia and Ukraine.

**NV: Observing the war in Ukraine, do you draw parallels with the war between Serbia and Croatia? If so, in what ways are these conflicts similar, and in what ways are they different?**

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Drakulić: There are several parallels but also big differences between the war in Ukraine and in ex-Yugoslavia. It has been already noticed that Putin is using a similar method as the former president of Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic.

Namely, he was "saving" the Serbian minority in Croatia from the Croatian "fascists" for example, as Russian soldiers in Ukraine are "saving" the Russian minority from genocide of the Russian speaking people and Ukrainians themselves from "Nazism."

The use of the war propaganda, of creating enemies of people who lived together in peace only yesterday, lies, false promises, manipulation of history - that is the same, too. But when we come to the effects, to the importance, there is no comparison. Wars in former Yugoslavia were regarded as a fire in the backyard of the EU.

Nobody paid much attention to it at the beginning. it took years and at least 100,000 dead, at least 30,000 raped women, and millions of refugees and displaced persons until the big powers realized that the killing won't stop without foreign intervention. These wars were marginal and unimportant, since no big powers were involved, it was not dangerous for the rest of Europe. War in Ukraine has is dangerous and that fact had already changed Europe. Russia is a big power, it is an extremely dangerous enemy, armed with atomic arms.

**NV: The Balkan Wars and the Ukrainian one have in common that the warring peoples were part of quasi empires - Yugoslavia and the USSR, they spoke the same or similar languages. In the Balkans, religious differences were relevant, in Ukraine, even they did not divide people. A number of psychologists and psychoanalysts say that the absence of big differences (narcissism of small differences) makes opponents even more aggressive. Do you agree with this hypothesis?**

Drakulić: My experience tells me that usually, people behave aggressively because they can - because the circumstances permit it. For example, Russian soldiers and officers think they are not going to be punished for the terrible acts they commit, like hundreds of executions in Bucha.

What makes them so sure? The fact they are prepared by propaganda: they are "liberating" Ukraine from Nazism; they are not killing people, but the enemy, and the enemy is no longer a human being.

This is the first step of any war propaganda, to dehumanize the enemy, to turn it into a non-being. Once they are brainwashed, terrible crimes become possible...

I remember even today how in Bosnia, days before the breakout of the war, the president, Alija Izetbegović, stated on national television that Bosnia cannot be divided because on the EACH floor of a building, people of all different nationalities live together: Serbs and Croats and Bosniaks. Well, they were divided, and even families and marriages split up. War is unimaginably ugly.

**NV: You watched the Hague Tribunals for the key perpetrators of the Balkan Wars. What did these men have in common? Did they repent of what they had done?**

Drakulić: All these men have one thing in common – they were just ordinary people. This is a terrible thing to say, because it means that those murderers and rapists used to be bakers, teachers, taxi drivers, state bureaucrats, policemen, workers, maybe peasants etc.

*It is an act of a psychological self-defense to believe that such people are evil monsters and that a normal person would not be able to commit such unspeakable crimes.*

They could have been our neighbors and friends, even relatives. Every normal person rejects such a thought.

But many authors who study human behavior demonstrated the opposite. One book about WWII shows in detail just how ordinary people become mass murderers: " Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland" by American historian Christopher Browning. This battalion, composed of volunteers of all professions and all walks of life who were not especially anti-Semitic, was sent to occupied Poland in 1942 to round up and mass execute Jews. Those men could have rejected to take part in these executions, without any consequence. Out of 500, only a dozen did so.

Once on trial, accused war criminals are more likely to deny their guilt than to repent. I remember a single man out of more than two hundred tried at ICTY, who repented taking part in the mass execution of some 8,000 men after the fall of Srebrenica.

**NV: "I was just following orders." Adolf Eichmann said this phrase before his execution, and Russian soldiers who were taken prisoner say it now. It was said by a Russian soldier to my friend whose wife he shot. What are the thoughts and feelings behind this phrase?**

Drakulić: No one, except a mad man, kills for the sake of killing. Sure, there are such people - but they are few, and crimes committed are too many to be done only by madmen or monsters. A soldier executing a person is acting against the biggest human taboo: Don't kill!

But to be able to do that, he needs a justification. So, we are back to soldiers who are brainwashed into believing that they are liberating the country and eliminating enemies.

Hannah Arendt wrote about the capacity of a perpetrator to split into a private person and a professional, who personally would not kill a fly, but executes people only because it is demanded of him.

**NV: A week ago, Ukraine and the whole world saw the crimes of the Russian army in the Ukrainian towns of Bucha, Irpin, and Gastomel: hundreds of people shot, women and children among them, dozens of rapes. It seems to us that only monsters are capable of this. At what point does one become a monster? What allows him to cross the line?**

Drakulić: I wish we could write off the perpetrators of these horrific crimes by simply saying they are evil people. But there are well-known experiments (Milgram, Stanford) that proved that people are quite capable of crossing the line if an authority ordered them to harm others, or if they are given such a task.

There is quite a number of books describing this mechanism of crossing the line. It must be that the Russian soldiers were ordered to clean the town of enemies, Ukrainian civilians.

However, crimes committed in Bucha, just like in Srebrenica, point to the aim of this war. I read a report about one man who did not want to leave Bucha because he did not want to abandon his dogs.

Russian soldiers executed him and his two dogs. Now, why would they do that? Dogs are not enemies. But it is a mistake to think that dogs are collateral victims, or soldiers did it out of their madness. In this context, killing even dogs reveals more than it should: the intention to eliminate every living being, to finish off life as such in Bucha. Precisely such details by eyewitnesses tell a lot about the kind of war and occupation this is. Someone always survives, even most horrible killings, so there is always a person left to tell the truth.

**NV: Sexual crimes against women and children. After the war, are those who committed them able to understand the horror of their actions?**

Drakulić: No, not in my experience.

**NV: Victims of sexual crimes. Perhaps you know what enabled the women and children who survived the abuse during the Balkan wars to move on, what helped them to persevere?**

Drakulić: There are many factors such as hope, defiance, love, despair etc. - but although it sounds brutal and too simplistic, it boils down to survival instinct. To illustrate that, in Bucha, a woman offered to be raped instead of her 14-year-old daughter. It all happened in front of her mother. Human beings are incredibly resilient.

**NV: In Ukraine today we know of conversations between captive Russians and their mothers, who hate their sons for being captured. There is often no warmth in their voices, but irritation and anger. "Why did you call me?" - mothers often ask their sons. There is no support and love in their voices. They rejoice in the enemy's deaths and the spoils of war, like mixers and TV sets. What happens to a society whose soldiers carry out military aggression?**

Drakulić: Not much, judging from my experience. because this looting is not new, it happens in almost every war. We in Croatia saw a much worse kind of looting. We witnessed not only looting done by enemy soldiers like in Ukraine. Besides looting enemy houses (the Serbian minority in the war was considered an enemy), our soldiers plundered houses belonging to Croat refugees, their own people.

They did not differentiate. There were convoys of cars going to war zones just for that purpose. There were trains organized to carry back looted goods from our own territory, from one town to the other. What could be worse for any society? And yet these criminal deeds went mostly unpunished.

The Russians had such an experience both in Chechnya and Syria. I don't see evidence that their society suffered much, or even paid any attention to such looting. People save themselves by forgetting, or at least by sweeping the dirt under the carpet.

**NV: In your opinion, is such a society capable of accepting collective guilt?**

Drakulić: No, not at all. There is not collective guilt, only collective responsibility, because guilt is individual - and also a judicial category - while responsibility is a moral issue. In my view, citizens could be responsible, but

not guilty. For example, when during a war a country holds elections and citizens vote for a pro-war party or a politician, which happened in both Serbia and Croatia, citizens are responsible for the election outcome.

Or take Russia now, citizens there are showing evident indifference to what is their government doing in Ukraine. Out of fear and lack of information, yes, perhaps we could say that these are mitigating circumstances. But even so, by and large they behave indifferently. By doing so they are collaborating with Putin's regime. This is another example of collective responsibility.

I know only one society capable of accepting its responsibility, it is Germany after WWII. But they lost the war, and it took the Nurnberg trials, time, collective effort and self-examination to come to terms with the war crimes and genocide committed.

**NV: In one of the last chapters of your book, you write that war criminals of enemy countries in the war were held together before and after the trials. Suddenly the hatred between them disappeared, and they stuck together - what rallied the people who were each other's toughest enemies?**

Drakulić: In the detention center in Scheveningen, although their soldiers fought each other in wars, war criminals on all sides were all *personally* on good terms. They were born in the same country, Yugoslavia, they spoke the same language, they had similar habits and tastes... Again, we can observe what H. Arendt wrote about the division between a professional and a private person. War enemies? Yes, but that was nothing personal.

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