Ordinary People in the Balkan Wars: Ethnic Nationalism, Opportunism, Fear, Conformity and Confusion

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There are a number of sophisticated social science theories about the causes of ethnic conflict. Stuart Kaufman [Modern Hatreds. The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War, 2001] reviews the most prominent: ancient hatreds, manipulative elites, economic rivalry, spiral of insecurity, etc. and the theoretical foundations they rest on, primordialism, constructivism, rational choice, symbolic politics. Although expressed in causal language, they are actually sensitizing ideas and hypothesis. Between these theories and the grassroots actions of individuals and groups in ethnic conflict, there is a long and contingent causal chain, and that is my topic. I am focusing on ordinary people rather than the political leaders and intellectuals. By ordinary people I mean neighbors and workmates, voters, officials, soldiers and police, fighters, bystander publics, victims and perpetrators: their actions are described in news stories, interviews, survey data, election campaigns, narratives, and war crimes trials.

The Serb political analyst Aleksa Djilas writes that “The nationalist ambitions, fears and frustrations of Yugoslavia’s constituent groups…were not inventions of nationalist intellectuals and political elites. However the Yugoslav civil war would not have happened if elites…had not irresponsibly and deliberately manipulated nationalist sentiment with their propaganda and policies. The force of nationalist passions whipped up by these opportunistic leaders not only made conflict inevitable but …it made it exceptionally brutal. New borders were created not just by force, but ethnic cleansing and the rape, persecution and murder of civilians.’ [“Fear Thy Neighbor”, 1995].

Although Djilas may well be right about nationalist passions, there are many motives and reasons that make members of ethnic groups suspicious, fearful and aggressive towards
one another. Propaganda exploiting ethnic sentiments and antagonisms is one reason, yet may not be the most important, or not for most people. Fear, security concerns, opportunism and greed, confusion, survival in a failed economy, group solidarity, conformity to authority, are some other reasons. How could such mundane motivations be harnessed by political leaders for carving out ethnically homogeneous states and territories with so much violence against civilians?

Collective violence against civilians has three levels of perpetrators and enablers. 1. Political leaders and elites in a party-state with an ethno-national program. They organize a cadre of violence specialists for destructive actions that are normally viewed as immoral and criminal. They convince a substantial part of the public that such violence is necessary and justified. 2. The perpetrators are violence cadres, made up of special forces and paramilitaries, assisted by police and army and some citizens. 3. A public, not necessarily a majority, that supports and is complicit with the policies and the violence, and at a minimum votes the leaders into power. 4. As for the rest of the people, some are in opposition, others are confused, indifferent, or intimidated. The internal dynamic of these four entities and the conflict between adversaries has to be explained with specific causal mechanisms in addition to broad sensitizing ideas [cf. Michael Mann, The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing, 2005; Anthony Oberschall, Conflict and Peace Building in Divided Societies, 2007].

To begin with, I establish a baseline of social science knowledge on the social psychology of nationalism, mass media effects, persuasive communication, the behavior of soldiers and fighters in war, public denial of crimes and atrocities, the political economy of “new” wars, political mobilization and conflict escalation, the security dilemma in deadly conflict, and the like. The baseline gives a standard for assessing whether the Balkans were different from what takes place in comparable situations and conflicts, e.g. the breakup of the Soviet Union and the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

The baseline
Communications research has found that people accept the prevailing beliefs of their group; agreement is a validator of their identity and confers membership in good standing. There is selective attention to media that agree with one’s point of view, and screening out of opposite views. There is selective perception of the same information, i.e. two groups select and interpret from the same content and draw different conclusions. In mixed groups (political, ethnic, religious), contentious topics are avoided for the sake of maintaining cooperation. Thus it is possible for work mates and neighbors in mixed group to be ignorant of their political differences, and feel betrayed when differences erupt in a crisis. Media consumption confirms rather than changes political views. On balance, these social psychological processes make it problematic for political leaders to manipulate the public into backing positions it is disinclined to agree with, yet leaders can awaken dormant ethno-national sentiments and beliefs rooted in personal experiences and culture. [Carl Hovland et al, Communication and Persuasion, 1963; Anthony Pratkins and Eliot Aronson, The Art of Propaganda. The Everyday use and Abuse of Persuasion, 2001; Diana Mutz, Impersonal Influence, 1998]

There is strong experimental and public opinion evidence that publics are susceptible to propaganda that induces anxiety and fear with threat messages. Herman Goering at the Nurnberg war crimes trial put it thus: “The people can always be brought to do the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them that are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to greater danger. It works the same way in any country.” Research on how the Bush administration manipulated the public and the Congress to back the Iraqi war has confirmed the Goering hypothesis [American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear. Threat Inflation since 9/11, eds. Trevor Thrall and Jane Kramer, 2008].

Publics react favorably to actions on behalf of “kith and kin” who are believed to be threatened. The Nazi aggression to “save” the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia and the Danzig Germans against Poland were extremely popular and so was Margaret Thatcher rescuing the Falkland islanders from Argentine rule.
What state one belongs to matters, i.e. sovereignty and state boundaries. Most don’t want to be a minority in another state if they can be a majority in their state. Whether Northern Island is in the UK or in the Republic, most people there, Protestants and Catholics alike, will live in the same homes, have the same jobs, pay the same taxes, elect the same legislators, marry the same spouses, drive the same autos, shop in the same places, go to the same churches, travel in the same places, enjoy dual citizenship, etc. as they now do. Yet stateness does matter to many of them.

The diaspora ethnics and those living outside state boundaries are more aggressively nationalist than homeland ethnics. Evidence from Croatia and Kosovo.

In national crises and war, media practice “patriotic journalism.” [For the Balkan wars, Mark Thompson, Forging War. The Media in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Hercegovina, 1994.]

Once the fighting actually starts, there is a “back our fighting men” surge that favors the government and allows it to paint the opposition as disloyal.

In war, the fighters are motivated by survival and supporting the peer group. They obey officers’ orders even when it harms non-combatants and are in violation of the Geneva conventions. [Evidence from World War II studies, Vietnam war and case studies like Christopher Browning, Ordinary Men, Srebrenica, Siege of Sarajevo, ICTY trial transcripts]

Those guarding detainees and prisoners abuse their authority by beating, humiliating, abusing, robbing, and torturing them [Social psychology experiments on the ‘Lucifer effect’, Omarska and other detainee camps in BiH, Abu Ghraib detainees]. As Ervin Staub writes, “under particular circumstances most people have the capacity for extreme violence and destruction of human life.” Most (sometimes hundreds) who are not perpetrators but know about abuses and atrocities look the other way, approve, or are afraid to speak out (knowing what happens to ‘whistleblowers’).
As the normal economy fails, a *political economy of war* takes its place: criminal groups loot and rob civilians, black markets spread, trading across enemy lines is routine, properties and goods seized from adversaries are assigned to loyalists by the authorities, and relief and social welfare are provided only in lieu of political conformity. War profiteers escape punishment because many belong to the government and armed forces, and some others benefit from their patronage [Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, 2001; Paul Collier et al, *Breaking the Conflict Trap*, 2003].

The public is indifferent and/or in *denial of atrocities* and war crimes and other abuses perpetrated by its ethnic group and fighting forces against adversaries, including civilians. Its support of the war wanes only when it is not successful [aftermath of My Lai massacre, Turkish denial of Armenian genocide, etc.]

These are the findings I apply to the Balkan wars.

**Grassroots ethno-nationalism: the 1990 elections**

When the Yugoslav constitutional crisis was growing in 1989 and 1990, survey data indicated that a large majority of respondents, except in Kosovo, reported that their relations with members of other nationalities in neighborhoods and workplaces were “good” and “satisfactory”; only 7% believed the country would break up into separate states and 62% said that the “Yugoslav” designation was very or quite important for them; 24% wanted the federation to continue, and 33% wanted a modified federation, compared to only 7% who preferred Yugoslavia to break up [Oberschall “From Ethnic Cooperation to Violence and War in Yugoslavia”p.133 in Daniel Chirot and Martin Seligman eds, *Ethnopolitical Warfare*, 2001]. Yet in the fall of 1991 the Croatian war started, and in the Spring of 1992, the Bosnian war. As Misha Glenny put it for Knin, and was true for many other districts, [The Fall of Yugoslavia, 1992, p. 19-20] “Before May 1991 Croats and Serbs lived together (in Knin) in relative contentment…nobody in their wildest fantasy
would have predicted that within 12 months…Croat soldiers would massacre innocent Serbs while Serb fighters would mutilate innocent Croats.” How could this happen?

The crucial events that turned around public sentiments on ethnic relations were the 1990 elections in the Republics, the first post-communist multiparty elections, and their aftermath. A great opportunity for aggressive ethno-nationalism and for political mobilization through ethno-national appeals was the formation of political parties and the election campaigns of 1990. Every town and city experienced the founding of local party chapters, often at a huge rally in a public building or a sports stadium, during which speaker after speaker gave vent to venomous nationalist rhetoric and made hostile attacks against other nationalities. From my content analysis of Oslobodjenje’s coverage of the campaigns I will mention two examples: on 6/9/90 in Bosanska Gradiska the local HDZ handed out flags that read “Serbs are swine, Serbs should leave.” Two days later in Novi Pazar, Vuk Drasovic, the Serb firebrand, proclaimed at an election rally “all those who like Turkey (i.e. Muslims) should go to Turkey” and pledged that he would personally cut off an arm that raises the green (Muslim) flag. The rally precipitated a fight that ended with teargas and arrests by police. Such rhetoric and election fights occurred in lots of places and saturated television news of the campaigns.

Political coverage in the media abounded in ethnic stereotyping, falsification of history, outright lying and fabrication, and hate mongering. According to Helsinki Watch [1992], “By the end of the 1980s, political debate at the federal level had declined to merely the politics of resentment between various national groups…history has been used …to excuse mistreatment.” Susan Woodward [Balkan Tragedy, 1995, p.232] noted that much propaganda was meant to persuade of the impossibility of nations living together.

“Patriotic journalism” flourished. Newscasters and journalists broadcast and printed the politicians and partisan commentator’s exaggerations, unconfirmed rumors and misinformation when they knew them not to be true. I asked several media professionals why they disseminated falsehoods, as they had in the communist era under political masters, even though they no longer had to. The explanation boils down to “the other side was doing it, and it was effective, so we decided to do it as well.” The dynamic of
patriotic journalism is a Prisoner’s Dilemma. It is the negative ad dynamic familiar from U.S. elections, except that it was not political advertising, it was the news itself.

Ordinary people responded positively to the flood of nationalist propaganda. A Croat-American young man who happened to be an undergraduate student of mine and whose family originated from the Croatian island Olib in Dalmatia had spent three weeks every summer on the island in the 1980s and early 1990s and wrote an essay on the growth of Croat nationalism there. Only a few hundred people live on the island all year round, and 90% are Croats. Before the war in 1991, people from all over Yugoslavia came for summer holidays, and the islanders and summer people got along well. In the 1990 election, the HDZ won on 103 of 111 votes. Every one watched the Croat state TV, which was extremely nationalist. The local station broadcast the non-nationalist YUTEL program at 1 a.m. when everyone slept. He writes that “During three weeks watching television news, I did not observe a single critical opinion about President Tudjman or the HDZ.” Even sports coverage was patriotic. When a Zagreb soccer team lost to a Belgrade team, none of the Serb goals were shown on the nightly sports summary.

The media awakened the latent Croat nationalism of the Olib islanders. These were some manifestations of it: singing Ustasha songs in taverns; a new “Croatian” way of saluting drinking pals; singing the Croat national anthem during Catholic mass; removal of Tito portraits from public places and restaurants, and replacing them with Croat crest and flag; vandalizing of local partisan World War II hero’s grave and memorial; looting and squatting in Serb summer homes; anonymous threats sent in letters to former officials of the Tito era and moderates; replacement of village leaders in the Olib government by HDZ members and sympathizers; growing rudeness to non-Croats, especially Serb summer people, who stopped coming. It is telling that in the absence of Serbs to harass, the Olib nationalists targeted individuals and symbols identified with the communist Tito regime which had stood for a single Yugoslav state uniting all nationalities.

Even so, the nationalist HDZ in Croatia won less than a majority, with 41.5%. Its leader, Franjo Tudjman, had run a nationalist pro-Coat, anti-Serb and anti-communist campaign.
The electoral system rewarded HDZ with 58% of seats in the legislature and Tudjman became head of the government. In Serbia, the most nationalist party, the Serbian Renewal Movement headed by Vuk Draskovic, got only 16%. The winner with 65% was the Socialist Party of Serbia, headed by Milosevic. Milosevic had been instrumental in the revival of Serb nationalism defending the Serbs in Kosovo, yet his party ran on an economic recovery platform (“With Us There Is No Insecurity”) that was a continuation of the policies of the League of Communists.

In neither Croatia nor Serbia did the electorate get a chance to vote for or against a Greater Croatia/Greater Serbia, which is what Tudjman’s and Milosevic’s goals became in 1991-2. The two even agreed to carve up BiH between them, with “just enough land left for the Muslims to stand on,” as a joke put it at the time. That deal collapsed; instead war broke out between Croatia and Serbia and later in BiH. When elite political deals to save the federation collapsed, Tudjman and Milosevic armed violence cadres (e.g. the secret RAM program to distribute arms throughout the Serb communities of BiH) that harassed and attacked minorities and later ethnically cleansed them, fostered armed secession movements among Croatian Serbs, and covertly transferred military resources and manpower to Bosnian Serbs and Croats for fighting the Bosniaks.

In Bosnia, with its numerous mixed-ethnic districts, the election campaign was especially contentious. Content analysis of Oslobodjenje however also shows that there was grassroots resistance to nationalist polarization. Municipal governments, youth and veterans’ organizations, and trade unions repeatedly protested ethnic polarization and hate mongering. For instance, the municipal association of Nevesinje called for a “decisive struggle against national divisions and territorial claims in Bosnia-Hercegovina” and veterans’ organizations in Novi Pazar, Kladaj, and Baja Luka condemned “attempts to break up Yugoslavia…” Thousands attended a huge concert in Sarajevo against national divisions. Important as the opposition to nationalism was, it was identified with organizations from the communist era which were discredited, whereas populist nationalism was spreading at the grassroots through new party organizations. In the event, in BiH, ethno-national block voting resulted in three dominant ethnic parties
entrenched where their nationality was dominant, and power sharing in mixed municipalities.

Thus the 1990 election campaigns unleashed anxieties, fears and uncertainty about the future of the Yugoslav state, the boundaries of successor states, and the security of ethnic minorities in the Republics, and whether one would become a minority in a hostile majority. These are precisely the conditions that make people susceptible to threat and fear propaganda and get them to support political leaders who promise to remove the threat.

Nationalism and opportunism joined: the ethno-national party-state

Already before the 1990 elections, the nationalists started dismantling the communist party-state and appropriating its considerable resources. When Milosevic took over the Serbian League of Communists (LOC) and remade it into the Socialist Party of Serbia, he not only purged his political opponents and rivals but inherited huge LOC resources: resorts, conferences centers, fleets of autos, printing presses, newspapers and magazines, bank deposits, etc. After the 1990 election victories the nationalist leaders and parties gained control of public resources, most importantly state TV, and control of the police and security forces, which they exploited for creating a nationalist party-state patronage system and for remaining in power. When the Croat nationalists in the HDZ won, they purged the police, the media and state enterprises of Serbs and their political rivals. Those ousted were not protected by non-discrimination laws and civil rights, nor could they argue their case before impartial judges and employers. To get public support for expulsions, the targets were charged with treason, disloyalty to the state, subversion, plotting armed rebellion, and the like.

It is instructive to learn how Croat nationalism and opportunism joined for expelling the Serbs in Zadar, a peaceful city on the Adriatic with a tolerant tradition in ethnic relations that had a 10% Serb minority in 1990. My account is based on interviews in Belgrade in 1998 with Serb refugees from Zadar who provided documentation. After the HDZ
victory, Croat nationalists, some of them non-locals, harassed the Zadar Serbs. Militias camped in the courtyard of the police barracks and carried weapons in public. The new HDZ authorities pressured the police to do house searches and arrest Serbs on trumped up charges of subversion. For instance, the Serb manager of a construction company described to me how his office was repeatedly ransacked and searched for weapons and for a shortwave radio transmitter he was allegedly hiding for communicating with accomplices in Knin, a center of Serb secessionists. His home was also searched and he was repeatedly detained. One morning he found a letter of resignation on his desk, drafted by his board of directors. He signed it.

A former judge gave me a copy of a four page letter of protest signed on November 20, 1990 by 142 police officers, both Croat and Serb, and sent to President Tudjman and the Ministry of Interior objecting to the unprofessional and illegal use of police for political purposes. The Serb police officers were all fired, and the non-Serbs suspended and disciplined, but later readmitted to the force. New loyal police were hired, some with criminal records. With the police under HDZ control, the purge of Serbs got into full swing. Serbs received anonymous threat letters in the mail with “orders to leave Zadar”. The authorities refused to intervene because they were actually the organizers of the intimidation campaign. A list of names of Serbs in Zadar was published in the local newspaper. Many residents did not each other’s nationality and hadn’t cared, and quite a few Serbs belonged to mixed Serb/Croat families. On May 21, the HDZ organized a mini-Kristallnacht with local teenagers for breaking the shop windows of Serb merchants and looting them. The wrecking teams were told “to have a bit of fun” and that the “police will arrive late.” The news media framed the incident as an angry crowd demanding revenge for a Croat police officer from Zadar killed in a clash in Borovo-Selo.

I asked the judge why Zadar citizens did not protest to the authorities about such persecution, especially in view of the tradition of tolerant ethnic relations. Here is what the judge and his friends answered. No one on the Croat side was bold enough to come forward, and the Serbs feared being identified with a Serb cause. He estimated that 80% of the Croats in Zadar belonged to the HDZ or were in sympathy with the persecution of
Serbs, though he admitted that some were intimidated by HDZ militants. Anti-Serb sentiment “sprouted overnight”, meaning there was a huge change from mid-1990 to mid-1991 when the war broke out. On August 5, 1991, 98 Croat firemen voted to expel the six Serbs from the force: 94 voted to expel, only 4 not to expel. The reasons were not incompetence, but vague charges like “Serbs irritate non-Serbs on their shift.” A year earlier, the police men had acted together, Serbs and Croats, to defend their professionalism. Aside from the internal dynamic of the HDZ party-state, people in Zadar were reacting to the secession of the Serb Krajina and the violent clashes between the Croat police and Serb paramilitaries and the opening clashes of the Croatian war in Dubrovnik and Vukovar.

There was a sea-change in grassroots ethnic relations in Zadar, and elsewhere as well in the former Yugoslavia as the state was breaking up amid mounting violence and anarchy. Without protection from laws and the authorities, many bystanders are caught in a security dilemma. If they don’t take sides, they get targeted by the militants of both sides. Or they can pack up and leave for a safer place protected by their fellow ethnics. Or, they can arm and defend themselves. All of these responses occurred in mixed ethnic districts.

Ethnic threats and fears, together with mounting violence, increased polarization and the rise of extremists at the expense of moderates. In Croatia, in the elections of 1990, the HDZ got 1.2 million votes, whereas the reformed communists and allies got one million. The Serb nationalist party got very few votes. Many Croats did not vote for the most Croat nationalist party, and most Serbs did not vote for the Serb nationalists. A year later, on May 19, 1991, almost all Croats voted for independence, and almost all Serbs boycotted the vote and favored Serb independence for the Krajina. A human rights activist told me in Zagreb how he and other advocates of Serb-Croat reconciliation went on peace missions to mixed villages but became discouraged by the summer of 1991: “moderates just vanished; some joined the nationalists.” Milar Pupovac, a Serb political leader who stood for Serb-Croat dialogue and conciliation, was vilified by both sets of extremists. A Serb economist from Osijek described the situation there in 1990-91 in an interview with me: “it was safer to take sides than being for peace in the middle.” A
Muslim businessman from Banja Luka described to me what the moderate did when non-
Serbs were fired from their positions, evicted from their homes, and the Ferhadiya 
mosque (an architectural treasure) and other mosques were dynamited by Serb extremists: 
“They (the moderate Serbs) were scared. Even death threats were not uncommon.” This 
was confirmed by an academic in Banja Luka, a Serb who refused to join the SDS and 
serve in the army. He was fired from his faculty position; former friends crossed the 
street when they saw him to avoid meeting him; he made a living as a petty trader. He 
was totally marginalized.

Similar dynamics of the party-state patronage system, the wedding of nationalism to 
opportunism, polarization and the intimidation and suppression of the moderates by the 
extremists within their community occurred in Prijedor, Bihac and elsewhere. These 
 dynamics can be explained with conflict theory and models of mobilization, polarization, 
confrontation and consolidation, some of which I have described in the “baseline” 
section. Here I want to reflect on how much grassroots ethno-national sentiment was 
complicit with the nationalist goals of the political leadership and with the ethnic 
cleansing and other coercive actions implemented by the violence cadres.

Based on these materials, I am confident that before the Yugoslav crisis became a 
dominant concern of the population, say about late 1989-early 1990, ethnic relations were 
satisfactory for the vast majority. There was no bottom-up demand for walling off and 
attacking other ethnics. I am also fairly confident that by the start of the Croatian and 
Bosnian wars, a substantial grassroots sentiment solidified in local majorities to get rid of 
minorities, i.e. they backed intimidation and ethnic cleansing. They did so for a number 
of reasons: ethno-national sentiments and prejudices which were latent but got awakened 
and legitimized in nationalist mobilization and propaganda, fear, opportunism, 
conforming to the majority, and so on. In terms of numbers, I believe a Serb lawyer had it 
just about right when he told the journalist Peter Maas about Serb ethnic cleansing of 
non-Serbs in Banja Luka: “30% (of Serbs) oppose such things (ethnic cleansing); 60% 
agree or are confused and go along with the 10%” who “have the guns and control the 
television tower.” The 10% are the violence cadres and leadership in my model; the 30%
in opposition are unorganized and ineffective – the marginalized moderates; the 60% are the base of the party-state pyramid.

I don’t believe that the Serbs, Croats and Muslims differed fundamentally from Russians, Ukrainians, and the Baltic people in their views, sentiments and relationships to one another, nor from Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. I also believe that the same social science knowledge applied to specific situations and specific conflict dynamics can explain different outcomes in Yugoslav and the Soviet state. What was the difference? In a nutshell, and simplifying a great deal, by the late 1980s, Gorbachev and his reformers had come to realize the Soviet Union was a failing state (the economy, the army in Afghanistan), and they wanted a liberal democratic Russia in a new Federation, and not a Russian empire in lieu of a Soviet empire. In Yugoslavia, the communist political leaders were not liberal democrats, nor could they run a credible electoral campaign on liberal democratic principles and win against the few liberal democrats and reform communists. The golden parachute from communism to post-communism was populism and nationalism. To gain and consolidate power in an ethno-nationalist state, they counted on fear, opportunism, conformity, ethnic solidarity, confusion, and also of course ethnic-nationalism.

The wars between armies and the war on civilians

The goals of the Serb and of the Croat nationalists was to carve out a large chunk of Yugoslavia for a national state linking all their ethnic population clusters into one territorial entity, and expelling much of the non-Serb and non-Croat populations from the new national state. The goal of the Bosniaks was survival as a viable state entity. It was not possible to achieve nationalist goals without many, persistent and severe war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Except for sporadic military fighting military, the armies remained in static defensive positions. In Bosnia, the frontlines of the armies came into existence quickly, and there was little change in the next three years. There were few pitched battles. Especially
during the long winters, the soldiers facing each other were trying to keep warm, getting
supplied with food and liquor, for which they raided nearby civilian populations and
looted humanitarian aid convoys destined for refugees. As Tim Judah remarked for
Sarajevo [The Serbs, p.213] “the besiegers, not only the defenders were fed by the UN.”
Getting low pay, soldiers supplement income in the black market and trading across
enemy lines. Judah again [p.242] “…hundreds of millions of Deutsch Marks worth of
weaponry, ammunition, fuel and goods were traded across the front lines, and even more
was looted…” There are instances of Croats renting a tank from Serb soldiers for 1000
DM a day for use against Bosniaks. The October 1994 Bosniak Fifth Corp breakout
attempt from the Bihac pocket (under siege by Bosnian Serb army and surrounded for
two years) was made after the Bosniaks purchased forty to sixty truckloads of weapons
from the Serbs themselves. As one Bosniak soldier said about weapons “we make some,
we steal some, and buy some from the Serbs themselves…after all we know them, they
were our neighbors before the war.” [Judah  p.243]. Another soldier told me that the
Bosniak soldiers, though getting more to eat than the non-combatants trapped in the city,
were often so hungry that they attacked the Serb frontlines in the hope of looting the Serb
food stores, and not because of nationalist enthusiasm or hatred of the Serb soldiers.

In 1998, I interviewed several soldiers and black marketers on how the people in Bihac (a
population much increased by refugees from the hinterland) were fed during the siege.
They showed me a price list of commodities at the Serb front line: one liter of gasoline,
DM20; one liter of cooking oil, DM 50; 50 kg of flour, DM 1000; one kg of sugar DM 50;
one kg coffee, DM 300; one pack Marlboros, DM 20. Telephone lines out of Bihac were
purposely not cut so that the besieged could phone their relatives in Austria and Germany
to deposit into black market accounts there After confirmation by phone, Serb black
marketers delivered the purchases in Bihac. Some of the goods sold had been looted
(“taxed”) from UN humanitarian aid convoys destined for Bihac, which were frequently
stopped for days at checkpoints until the right “tax” was extracted.

For Bihac, because all the Bosniak military dead were buried in the same cemetery in a
special section, and each grave had a photo of the soldier and date of death, I counted 408
deaths for two and a half years in an army of about twelve thousand during this period (according to officers). This comes to a mortality rate of 1.5% per year, which is a very low figure compared to various theaters and campaigns in World War II [Trevor Dupuy, Numbers, Predictions, and War, 1985]. Serb casualty rates were probably lower still because they possessed heavy weapons like tanks, and the Bosniaks had none. These figures agree with the notion of low intensity fighting between armies in siege warfare.

The bloodiest battle in the Croatian war, the long siege of Vukovar which ended with its total destruction, was primarily a battle between Croat and Serb militias and paramilitaries, with artillery and tank support from the regular militaries. The Bosnian war was mainly heavily armed fighters assaulting helpless civilians face-to-face, or more remotely with siege artillery, tanks, mortars, heavy machine guns, and snipers firing at houses and apartment buildings where civilians lived. Tadeus Mazowiecki (ex Polish prime minister), the UN’s Human Rights Raporteur in BiH, wrote about the ethnic cleaning along the Drina valley that “The assaults on the villages involved widespread terrorization of the residents, eviction and destruction of their homes, killing the livestock, raping of women…villagers fled in fear of their lives.” The professional military did not question these war goals, and there is abundant ICTY trial evidence that they were complicit in war crimes and crimes against humanity, and exercised few restraints on their soldiers’ conduct.

Ethnic cleansing was lucrative. According to the Prijedor police chief, one of organizers of the cleansing in his district, “The assets of 50,000 Muslims and Croats expelled from the region amounted to several millions DM…the greater parts of these resources have either been transferred to Serbia (by the paramilitaries) or have been expropriated by private individuals (Serbs in Prijedor)” [Judah, p.254]. The worst crimes and abuses against civilians were perpetrated by paramilitaries and special forces who were loosely linked to the military chain of command but were trained and supplied by their armies and governments and vigorously pursued nationalist war goals. At the start of the fighting, these ‘volunteer’, paramilitary and special forces filled a manpower shortage for the armies; later, as General Mladic contemptuously said, the paramilitaries terrorized the
Looking over these data on the wars and military, it is plain that the overall enterprise of nation-state creation by ethnic cleansing was fundamentally criminal, yet the micro-mechanics of it can be explained with social science applied to comparable conflicts: a criminal and predatory political economy of war substitutes for the failed normal economy; physical and economic survival goals predominate among combatants; diffusion of responsibility, obedience to authority, peer solidarity, acceptance of the war goals of the political leaders and nationalist justifications (‘they’ are doing it to us, ‘they’ started it) numbs the peacetime moral restraints on harming non-combatants. Even for the violence cadres (volunteer fighting forces and the local ethnic cleansers) there is much opportunism (for economic and financial gain) on top of ethnic antipathy and hatred. For extreme behavior there are social psychological finding about the cruelty, harm, and abuse inflicted on powerless victims by those who control them, absent accountability and supervision, and absent an ethnic factor. If Serbs, Croats and Muslims hated each other, how is it that their military units who were supposed to fight each other as enemies cooperated for mutual advantage in the political economy of war? Identity differences did not impede the war and mafia economy from blossoming. Ordinary soldiers and local politicians figured out how to organize them, and did not have to be manipulated by top leaders.