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Experiences from the war in Yugoslavia: the diary of a journey

A reader
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A WSWS reader, whose parents live in the north of Yugoslavia and whose son lives in Belgrade, visited her family in the middle of May. She "could no longer tolerate following the war from Germany without doing something". Her report provides a picture of the war which is missing from the usual media coverage. The author emphasises that while she visited the North, the situation is much worse in the South of the country.

On the afternoon of the May 14 I arrived at the Hungarian-Yugoslav border. Because of fuel shortages there were barely any cars to be seen. Everything was spooky. On the way military control posts. No awkward questions. It was pointed out that the sirens and air raid alarms had gone off. My route passed close by a military air base and the roads had been damaged in the first nights of bombing. I did not fancy playing Russian roulette and took another route.

At my parents' house everything proceeds as "normal" as soon as the front door is closed. There is enough to eat. The previous night NATO had once again cut the electricity. No electricity, no water. But I was lucky. At the time of my visit both were functioning. But otherwise they are only available for hours at a time. In the course of the day the water supply stabilised, the situation with electricity deteriorated. The temperature rose steadily. The foodstuffs in the deep freezer threatened to go rotten. The deep freezer is only opened when absolutely necessary and then just for a few seconds. In the evening there was no street lighting.

Towards ten in the evening the sirens sound as if by command. The air raid lasts the entire night. Soon afterwards one hears the planes. Sometimes they flew overhead for more than an hour. No sign of air defence. Everybody knows that the planes are loaded with bombs which can fall anywhere at any time. Everybody is aware of the danger of "collateral damage". "These things happen in war." The son of a friend, 22, was killed while he slept in a barracks in Kosovo. The death notice read "Fallen Defending his Fatherland". Like most of those called up he didn't have any

choice. There is no way of avoiding the call-up. Deserters are dealt with by a court of war under the rule of war. They have the choice between the bomb or the bullet. If they are lucky they are not hit by the bombs.

The enemy has no face. It flies at a height of between 10,000 and 11,000 metres and possesses the most modern technology. The Yugoslav soldiers have no chance of defending themselves. The son of an old school friend is currently doing his army service. Another is in Kosovo. The parents know that only a wonder can ensure the return of their sons. There are reports of demonstrations in the South but the flow of information is bad. Nearly all of the communication channels have been destroyed. People live in the dark.

On Whit Sunday I drove in my car to Belgrade. I thought ... it is a bank holiday, perhaps the pilots will take a break. I was lucky. It rained cats and dogs. People in Yugoslavia are pleased when the weather is bad. They know from experience that there will be less bombing. The Croatian state television closes its news reports with the sentence: "We wish all our viewers a quiet night and for the Serbs clear skies." No comment.

After a crossing near Novi Sad I passed through villages that I had never seen before. Because of the destruction of the bridges over the Danube in the area of Novi Sad it is only possible to reach Belgrade through diversions. On route one sees that the electricity has been cut everywhere. Not a single traffic light functioned. There were queues everywhere at small bread shops. The bakers have preferential treatment when it comes to electricity. Even so, many return home with an empty shopping bag.

On the way there were some dark clouds of smoke. According to the locals it has not been possible to quell the fire of bombed oil tanks. Following regular bombing of its oil refinery a cloud of smoke hung over Novi Sad for days. In some parts of the town people hadn't seen the sun for days at a time.

After three hours of driving I went over the only remaining bridge over the Danube with a queasy feeling in my stomach. Over the past few days the NATO jets had been especially "active". It seemed to be confirmation of Clinton's promise: "With good weather we will bomb around the clock ... "

I saw the first streets of Belgrade. The tower blocks look decrepit. For years there has been no money to repair the facades but now everything looks even worse. The street Knez Milos was worse than I could have imagined. Every third building has been destroyed. On the left is situated the general staff, an old building in the art nouveau style with pillars at the entrance—completely destroyed. Across the road in the "Nemanjina", the Military Academy, known for its modern architecture and red marble, flattened to its ground floor. Everywhere protruding bits of instruments and charred blocks of stone can be seen. Facing is the building of the Foreign Ministry pocked with holes from bits of bombs. The American embassy with graffiti slogans: "Murderers! Murderers!" Situated next door the German embassy with similar slogans. At an angle is the Canadian embassy which appears to be in quite bad shape. At the end of the street ruins on both sides: on the left the Yugoslav Interior Ministry and on the right the Interior Ministry of the Republic of Serbia (a relatively new building, about 1990).

In the nights that followed the ministry buildings were hit once again. You ask yourself how flat are they to be bombed, or has NATO just run out of new targets? (Thank God, according to the people, putting a conspirative finger to their lips ... keep quiet and don't tempt fate.) The windows of the apartment blocks lying between the ministry buildings are all shattered. Nylon bags have been hung in the holes. The view is eerie.

Because there is no electricity the traffic is mainly regulated by police. On this Sunday morning it was especially desolate in the streets of Belgrade. Only a few men and women with bags were under way looking for food, of which there is supposedly enough. At market vegetables are sold, the quality of which is questionable (because of the destroyed refinery and chemical works in Pancevo). One asks no questions and buys what is available. Only a few streets give any semblance of normality.

People seem sombre and unkempt. One sees desperation in their faces. Everybody is occupied with day to day concerns: is there electricity, water, how long will my money hold out, how long to the next meal? ... Everyone has been silenced. There are a number of different nicknames for the president. No one speaks his name. There is uncertainty regarding who is to blame. And everybody knows that something is wrong. Nobody really knows why the bombs are being dropped. Everybody agrees it is wrong and knows it is against

international law. But "those above" do what they want anyway and "do not recognise God", as the Serbs say. The connection between the stopping of the bombing and the reaction of the people is not clear. The decisions will in any event be made independently of those suffering.

I collected my son and we quickly unloaded my "humanitarian aid" from the back of the car. I was pleased about the miserable weather and that no air raid alarm had sounded. We visited a relative in another part of town. Everyone pretends to act relaxed and normal. I cannot understand their optimism but I am glad about it anyway. I am well looked after: with traditional "Gibanica" (sort of cheese strudel) and good cake. There's cola as well. Everybody is pleased that there's enough water and electricity today. But there are other parts of the town where people have been without both for days. I heard stories of the housing blocks without water and electricity and how the stores in deep freezers were rescued. Grills were set up on the grass with a couple of bricks and then everything was fried that could be fried. The fruit couldn't be saved. One granny cooked Turkish coffee over the open fire and played "Gypsies" with her grandson, who enjoyed the game.

Early in the afternoon I left Belgrade over the only undamaged (Sh!!!) bridge over the Danube and asked myself when it would be hit and why it had survived up until now. The destruction of these bridges was simply a catastrophe: Many occupants of the city go to work over the bridges—across the bridges is the biggest food factory providing Belgrade with milk. Nobody dares to speak about the quality of the milk products following the emission of poisonous gas from the destroyed chemical works.

I returned to my parents. Luckily my fuel held out because the only source for petrol is in Hungary. At home with my parents it was almost like normal—aside from no electricity.

In the meantime all sorts of "negotiations" are taking place. Chernomyrdin, Milosevic, Fischer, Schroeder ... in any event the bombing continues, because "Milosevic must not see any sign of weakness or disunity". And NATO has to save face. For their part the "pride" of the Yugoslavians prevents them from allowing themselves "to be sold out". An occupation is unimaginable. The concept of "pride" is quite relative after all. Standing in queues for bread is for most of the people more "honourable" than "enemy occupation". Nothing is said about the dictatorship which exists. The prisons are full as it is.



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