

SECTION 4 Fissures and Connections

25. INSIDE: Family Ties

During the war, families faced dreadful choices. When troops approached, when a house next door was blown up, when military barricades blocked the road, mothers and fathers had to make terrible trade-offs to save their children's lives.

The war ripped apart the fabric of families, leaving them frayed. There was a sense of helplessness for many parents and children—not only for mothers, but also fathers and sons, who traditionally were responsible for protecting their families. Sons weren't around to bury elderly parents or grandparents who collapsed along roadways during village purges. Husbands couldn't save their wives from being raped. Fathers couldn't stop grenades from exploding in schools where their children huddled in fear, cut off from home.

One Bosnian friend told me of Fadila, a university-educated professional, and her engineer husband. The couple and their two teenage sons lived with all the trappings of middle-class comfort: a television and VCR; an apartment in town and vacation place in the mountains. Hearing of advancing Serb forces, the engineer drove into the hills in a last-minute attempt to save what he could at their cabin. He didn't return that night. Soon, Fadila received word that he was dead. Witnesses told her that the killer said he didn't want to waste a bullet on her husband and so cracked his skull with the butt of a gun.

Distraught and terrified, Fadila fled with her two boys, boarding the next bus with only her purse—no documents, hardly any money. The bus took them to the coast of Croatia, where the threesome spilled into a pool of hundreds of thousands of refugees. There, Fadila faced a new

threat: as soon as her boys turned seventeen, they would be inducted into the Croatian army and sent to the most perilous front lines. The widow was desperate to get her sons out of Croatia. With help from a friend abroad, she arranged for them to be sent as refugees to Germany. They were safe; but now she was alone.

Others had more excruciating escapes. A sickening story on the evening news told of a Bosnian father who, when his village was attacked, fled with his wife and several children into the night. As they crept through the underbrush to circumvent enemy checkpoints, the infant son began to cry. The mother did everything she could to silence the baby, without success. “Better one dies than all of us,” the father finally muttered, as he put his hands around the baby’s throat and strangled his child.

26. OUTSIDE: Federation

My lobbying efforts seemed to be falling on deaf ears. Analysts continued to discourage intervention. Adding to the other justifications, they mentioned the mind-boggling complexity of not only multiple armies but also paramilitary groups with little or no central command. Early in 1994, the State Department made a new attempt to manage the chaos. If Washington could unite the Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats (headquartered in the south, in Herzegovina), a three-way war would be consolidated into a Serb offensive and a Bosniak-Croat counteroffensive. But given the terrible losses inflicted on the Bosniaks by the Zagreb-backed Croats, getting the two groups to join forces, figuratively and literally, would be difficult at best.

After almost two years of war, in a dramatic shift of alliances, Croatian President Tuđman presented to Bosnian President Izetbegović a rough plan for a Bosniak-Croat Federation, which would cover approximately half of Bosnia. The proposal was premised on an undefined “confederation” of this federation with the Republic of Croatia. (When I apologetically asked a State Department official to explain the difference between “federation” and “confederation,” he said, sardonically, “No one really knows what these words will actually mean, but if Tuđman wants a ‘confederation’ we’ll give him a ‘confederation.’”)

The framework of a settlement was brokered by the United States, with a detailed agreement to be hammered out in Vienna. As the local ambassador, I would host the talks; Ambassador Chuck Redman, an accomplished career diplomat, would be the US negotiator.

The delegates arrived at the embassy, meeting in our large conference room under the gaze of a dozen international press cameras. Given the