

# The Memoirs of Arbih Generals: The Scope of Memoir Literature for Understanding the Military History of Sarajevo Between 1992-1995


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**Abstract:** This article delves into the abundant war memoir literature originating from the countries of former Yugoslavia, which has been driven by various wars and the inclination of soldiers, officers, and generals to extol their wartime accomplishments. The prevalence of this literature is especially noteworthy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the most represented memoirs hailing from World War II, followed closely by those concerning the Yugoslav Wars. These memoirs offer diverse perspectives, reflecting the authors' personal experiences and thoughts during war. While these memoirs do provide rich insights, a critical approach is essential given the inherently political nature of these works. As a valuable source for understanding military history, memoirs play a crucial role in shaping the comprehension of the past. The article underscores that, despite potential biases, the memoir literature presents opportunities for further research and for expanding knowledge about the war in Sarajevo, particularly when complemented by other military sources and archives.

**Keywords:** Bosnian war, memoirs, Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Army of the Republic Srpska, Siege of Sarajevo, generals

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## Introduction

The countries of former Yugoslavia abound with many works of the memories of war, certainly because of the various wars but also because of the tendency of soldiers, officers, and generals to glorify their own war achievements. That is not unusual, especially when taking the Balkan tradition of handing down heroic epic poems from generation to generation into account. Over time, the genre of memoirs has crystallized differently. Epic folk songs and poems glorify heroes, equating them with mythological demigods, while contemporary memoirs are more abundant in factual data. The lyrical additions and various epithets are obviously unnecessary for describing bloody battles. Memoirs from the period of World War II are the most represented in Bosnia and Herzegovina. While the memoirs from the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001) come in second place. The reason is simple: Far fewer actors were involved in the war that was limited to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, and, to a much lesser extent, Slovenia.

So far, several generals of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ARBiH) have published memoirs: General Hasan Efendić, the first commander of the Territorial Defense of the RBiH; General Sefer Halilović, the first general of the ARBiH; General Rasim Delić, who replaced Halilović after his dismissal; General Fikret Muslimović, who held several security, intelligence, and counter-intelligence functions; General Hamid Bahto, who also held several different functions, and lastly General Mehmed Alagić, Commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Corps of the ARBiH. All of them gave their literary contribution to the study of the military history of Bosnia and Herzegovina, specifically in this case, the siege and defense of Sarajevo. The fact that the memoirs of these generals of the ARBiH are politically colored in some places, except in the case of General Alagić, whose memoirs are focused on the military operations of the Third and Seventh Corps of the ARBiH, needs to be understood.

That this paper will not take into consideration the diaries of ARBiH generals is important to note, and the reasons are purely methodological. Different conclusions can be drawn from the study of texts that were written fresh after certain events compared to those that represent the author's self-reflection on events from the past. One of the issues in this paper is the question of memory and how it can be treated as a field of literature for the study of military history. Ultimately, the study will not subject to

analysis the war diaries of General Stjepan Šiber, General Jovan Divjak, Colonel Mirsad Ćatić and others.

The issues of the defense and siege of Sarajevo are often debated in the memoir literature of these aforementioned authors, because that was certainly the most important battlefield in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The army headquarters, the Presidency, and all vital institutions were located in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which had remained under siege throughout the war. In this essay, the main things I will attempt to answer are in what kind of scope the memoir literature can be discussed and whether the authors of memoirs provided some new explanations, as well as to ask some important questions regarding the war in Sarajevo, all using the literature of the mentioned authors.

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina is considered to have begun in April 1992, but the first activities of the reservists and active military personnel of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) date back to September 1991. Large movements of the JNA from Serbia and Montenegro were noticeable in the areas of eastern Bosnia and eastern Herzegovina. The first victims of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina probably fell during that period. At the end of 1991 in eastern Bosnia, the savagery of the JNA was a daily occurrence. In the rest of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the situation was peaceful, even the war in Slovenia and Croatia had not received sufficient warning. Without any resistance, the JNA occupied large parts of eastern Bosnia and eastern Herzegovina (Tucaković, 2017).

The first attacks and crimes in Sarajevo were characterized as terrorist acts. The blockade of Sarajevo by the JNA and the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) paramilitary formations were not enough to declare a state of war. Unfortunately for the people of Sarajevo, the war began in April. Hasan Efendić argues authoritatively about the negligence and incompetence of the largest state bodies, for on the Bosnian side, the war had been started legally and formally by reluctant decision making. No orders or calls for mobilization occurred, nor any declaration of martial law (Efendić, 1998). Chronologically speaking, General Efendić was the first commander of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (R BiH) armed forces, and his testimonies best describe the state of affairs on the ground, especially when discussing the city of Sarajevo. Very little afterthought occurs in Hasan Efendić's writing, but at the end of his book and unlike many

others, he admits his mistakes and omissions during his short command. During the first days of the war in Sarajevo, Efendić states that the disarmed Territorial Defense, part of the disbanded units of the Ministry of the Interior (MUP), the professional fire brigade of Sarajevo, a company of prison guards in the Central Prison, and less than 200 poorly armed citizens, were almost all that could oppose the JNA forces.

Efendić is also one of the rare critics of paramilitary formations such as the Patriotic League and the Green Berets. He argues his view, stating, "The Patriotic League referred to 120,000 members who existed only on paper or in someone's imagination" (Efendić, 1998, p.129). Taking into account that the forces of the Patriotic League in the wider area of Bosnia and Herzegovina had very few weapons at their disposal, this statement can be taken as a reference. In military terms, Efendić believes that the forces of the Patriotic League and the Green Berets would have been effective at guarding one building. In his criticism, Efendić asks an interesting question, "Why were the Institutions of the RBiH allow the Patriotic League units, insufficiently organized, untrained, partially armed with hunting weapons, and without military-trained senior staff, allowed to fight armed with the aggressors at the beginning of the aggression without the use of legal forces? Because that's what they had been organized for over four decades?" (Efendić, 2018, p. 189).

The topic of this paper is not an answer to Efendić's question, but it is useful for understanding the memoirs. Therefore, Efendić is the only author as well as member of the Main Staff to ask this and a number of other important questions that can help in understanding the various filigreed phenomena in the war which had a strong influence on how the situation developed. In his memoirs, Hasan Efendić criticizes everything that is not military-conceived, and even though his command was short-lived, it left quite a mark. His two books provide a lot of interesting military information from the field, and he is one of the better experts on the history and concept of Territorial Defense. General Efendić is one of the most representative examples of post-war memoirs in BiH, as in his books he presents numerous authentic reports, dispatches, and orders, as well as a lot of original material from the military province.

After a short period of command, Efendić was dismissed,<sup>1</sup> and Major Sefer Halilović, who had been head of the Operations Center until then, took his place (Čekić, 2017).

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1 The proposal to the Presidency of the RBiH for the dismissal of the first commander of the TORBIH hea-

Halilović was born in Prijepolje on January 6, 1952. He graduated from the military academy in Belgrade and served as a soldier in Vinkovci, Đakovo, and Mostar. As one of the founders of the Patriotic League, he was appointed commander of the ARBIH on May 25, 1992 (Halilović, 1997). Sefer Halilović published his memoirs in 1997. At first glance, they do not appear to be typical memoirs of a commander, as they have no detailed descriptions of battles, military operations, or the like. Halilović decided to write about more political topics and less about Sarajevo as a battlefield in his writings. He doesn't even overtly describe *Operation Neretva 93*, which he personally led. Halilović's focus of interest includes the Counter-Intelligence Service (KOS), State Security Service (SDB), and other similar intelligence and counter-intelligence structures of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. According to Halilović, as early as 1991, KOS had been largely subversive against the legal authorities of the MUP. In many places, the representative of the legal authority of the RBiH was brought into contact with the KOS and SDB. Despite the fact that his memoirs have many interesting contributions, not all of them have been published. Some were published in the book from Halilović's son, Semir Halilović, under the sensational title *State Secret*. Despite the fact that Sefer Halilović's memoirs do not provide sarcastic testimonies and observations regarding military operations, the siege of Sarajevo, or the construction of the Dobrinja-Butmir (DB) tunnel, he does offer his own judgment about the Patriotic League and many interesting situations behind military and political events. In the context of intelligence and counterintelligence work and political turmoil during the war, this book can serve as a unique starting point. While many polemics act like conspiracy theories in some places, Sefer Halilović's book presents his own view of political developments against the background of the war's events and bloody everyday life. He is very authoritative and gives many answers to various questions about the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sefer Halilović's command ended after the various vicissitudes that had happened during *Operation Neretva 93* and the problems on Mount Igman. He was replaced by

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dquarters, Hasan Efendić, was submitted by Jerko Doko, the Minister of Defense. In the explanation for the requested dismissal, Doko cited the Decree with legal force OS RBiH, which was adopted by the Presidency on May 20, 1992. Izetbegović announced his dismissal, because of calls that people were looking for a younger commander. The second reason was that Efendić had 44 years and 11 months of service and that he met all the requirements for a pension. These were just reasons for dismissal, though, as Efendić did not meet any conditions for retirement (see Smail Ćekić, Vahid Karavelić, Nedžad Ajnadžić, Selmo Cikotić, Šefko Hodžić, Muhamed Smajić, Mesud Šadinlija, *First Corps of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Institute for Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law of the University of Sarajevo, Sarajevo, 2017, p. 83).

Rasim Delić, who'd become an army general. Delić wrote several books about the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and ARBIH. Due to the fact that Delić had held several different positions during the war, his book is also richer in content. His views regarding the attempts to unblock Sarajevo are interesting. Namely, he believes that the command had invested too little time (only 15-20 days) in preparing the unit for such a feat. That was not even enough time to pull the planned units out of the battle and bring them to the area of use, let alone enough time for them to get their needed rest.

Like most foreign and domestic authors, Delić regularly states that the ARBIH had constant problems with the lack of ammo, especially a lack of adequate artillery tools, cannons, howitzers, self-propelled guns, and mortars. This situation was especially effective in the besieged Sarajevo, where the artillery of the ARBIH First Corps could not match the strength and capabilities of the artillery of the Sarajevo-Romanian Army of Republica Srpska (VRS) Corps, which held the capital in a ring. Delić describes in detail the preparations and execution of each serious attempt to unblock Sarajevo, especially the last attempt, Operation T (*Tekbir*). In his final assessment, General Delić believed that the army was not ready even in 1995 to carry out such a complex operation (Delić, p.440 2005). When considering how Halilović and Delić had been in a silent conflict, this can also be noticed in Delić's writing. Halilović was the one who'd mentioned Operation *Trebević 2* in a negative context, namely when the military turmoil had occurred in Sarajevo and the army had broken the will of the commanders of the 9th and 10th Mountain Brigades. Ramiz Delalić-Ćelo and Mušan Topalović-Caco were the main antagonists of this operation. Delić remained at the ARBIH Staff until his retirement in 2000. After the war, he was sentenced to three years in prison for failing to take the necessary and reasonable measures to prevent and punish the perpetrators who were under the responsibility of his command for the district-level crimes from the *El Mujahid* detachment (United Nations, 2008).

Major General Firkret Muslimović is one of the most important senior officers of the ARBIH in the field of security, intelligence, and counter-intelligence work. He is the author of numerous books and articles related to the war in BiH and to safety, security, and geopolitics. Just like Halilović, Muslimović is not inclined in his memoirs to describe the preparations and execution of military operations within the First Corps, instead writing about military-political events far behind the front line. The political turmoil and conflict with Halilović are also represented in his memoirs. As for Sarajevo

during the siege, Muslimović's works are mostly focused on the tasks of the State Security Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. For anyone familiar with wartime conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, conflicts between the high-ranking officials of these institutions are nothing new. Muslimović was always a witness and even a participant in this turmoil.

In his memoirs, Major General Muslimović presents his plan and vision for the possible unblocking of the capital. Interestingly and unlike most generals who had operations at the operational or proposed level against almost every blockade, Muslimović had proposed a multi-composite, combined tactical operation, where a larger number of smaller strike groups would act in a partisan manner against the blockade.<sup>2</sup>

During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, General Hamid Bahto spent most of his time in the area of the besieged Sarajevo, in the ARBIH command in Kakanj, and in the besieged Goražde. He led the first military operations under the banner of the Patriotic League and was one of its first organizers. He was one of the participants in the illegal delivery of weapons in Sarajevo and Rogatica. However, he devotes much more space in his memoirs to the defense of the city of Goražde and provides a lot of interesting information on the ground. His memoirs can be used as a significant source in the study of the original structures of Territorial Defence of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (TORBiH).

Hamid Bahto presents the structure, appearance, and commanders for almost all of the units in Sarajevo in his book. Although he was a member of the Patriotic League, he quickly realized that war can only be waged by respecting the legal institutions of defense. He also mentions the problem of disrespecting the handling and command system in his book, stating that in addition to the lack of infantry weapons, materials and technical means, and heavy artillery, the most complex problem involved placing all armed groups, units, and individuals under the single command of the General Command. The most stubborn were the Green Berets, whose leaders had minimized,

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2 The original idea of Major-General Muslimović was to form a battalion-level unit that would be made up of 600 selected fighters who were young and mentally strong; among them would be enough of those who knew the infrastructure and geographical objects, trails and roads in the area of Višegrad, Rogatica, Sokoca, Gorazde, Foče, and Gacka. Furthermore, from the formed battalion, the personnel should be divided into 30 to 40 divisions of 15 to 20 fighters each. For more information, see Fikret Muslimović, Fikret Muslimović, *Argumenti i sjećanja o ratu, Knjiga prva 1990-1993.*, Udruženje za zaštitu tekovina borbe za Bosnu i Hercegovinu, Sarajevo, 2006, 253-255.

obstructed, and ignored the significant power of operation of the Municipal headquarters of the Territorial Defense (OpŠTO) in uniting all armed formations. The Green Berets insisted on the independence and autonomy of their own headquarters, which meant parallelism in military command. Such a policy, could only mean greater complications in command in the long run that would be reflected in human casualties and irreparable military losses on the ground (Bahto, 2008).

General Mehmed Alagić is one of the most famous ARBIH generals. He is known for being the commander of the Third and Seventh Corps of the ARBIH. His military skills were best reflected in the operations in central Bosnia, especially in the liberation of Kupres and Mount Vlašić. Alagić's presented his memoirs somewhat differently than most, giving them in the form of short interviews where Alagić provides details about military operations and everyday war situations in central Bosnia. In his memoirs, General Alagić testifies mostly about the war events in central Bosnia while giving no less importance to the operation to unblock Sarajevo.

As is known, Sarajevo was not militarily liberated; the ARBIH had failed to break through the encirclement of the Sarajevo-Romania VRS Corps after several attempts to unblock it. Alagić states that the main cause of the failure had been poor preparation and secrecy. VRS had learned very quickly about the plans to unblock the capital, and even journalists had been regularly writing about it. Some media reports were more in line with the actual plans and estimates; moreover, these had only delayed the execution of the same operations. For the Sarajevo-Romania Corps VRS, media openness had been beneficial in the besieged Sarajevo. The reports and reportages provided enough time and instructions for the Main Staff of the Sarajevo-Romania Corps to prepare as much as possible for the upcoming operation to unblock the capital. Alagić believes the mistake to have been the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Corps of the ARBIH failure to attack from the flanks, in addition to the lack of a modern agreed-upon attack and the big delay with the preparations. In the end, Alagić attributes part of the blame to the Croatian Council of Defence (HVO) in Kiseljak (Latić, i dr., 1997). I believe that for Alagić, the operation to unblock Sarajevo had been a failure because he had aspired to direct all the military capacities of the Seventh Corps in one moment from Central Bosnia toward the Bosnian Krajina.



Memoirs can be a significant source for understanding military history. This type of material contains the personal emotions and thoughts of the author. Using detailed descriptions and vivid explanations with enough subjective expressions, memoirs are able to allow people to experience a part of the past with a precise understanding of certain topics, and based on the memoirs of an author whose works are the main topic of this study, one can notice the personal justification in many places and faith in their correct behavior. Such dimensions of the discussion of military issues cannot be found in military archives. Documents describing military arrangements are brief, clear, and concise and have no excessive explanations. Memoir materials are incomparably wider and often serve as an interpreter of various issues. All the authors mentioned herein have set themselves as the main characters of the war, often ignoring the situations in which they did not participate; still, they try to present their view of the war. No need exists to describe in more detail what kind of risk a literal understanding of memoirs can pose, and memoirs need to be understood to leave little space for polyvalence. A critical approach is indispensable, given that these are highly politically colored works. The memoirs of Fikret Muslimović and Sefer Halilović lead in this and present two conflicting narratives with much dynamism.

The authors deal almost in a pattern-like manner with similar issues; however, they provide new explanations and ideas in some places that do not fit into everyday public discourse. The true scope of memoir literature occupies a wide space in the discussion and understanding of the military history of Sarajevo. With such a perspective on understanding the memoir literature that is at least in some way related to the war events in Sarajevo, these memoirs have the potential for further research, despite the temporary lack of military sources. Numerous memoirs, or at least some issues that the authors have touched on, was stated earlier to be able to form a starting point for further questioning. The scope of the memoir literature is not constant and always tends to expand. By opening the closed archives, many questions that former officers have asked and debated can be denied or affirmed.

All memoirs share common features; they are limited in scope within historiography by focusing on specific aspects of the author's activities. Often, memoirs do not portray the entire spectrum of the author's experiences. Most importantly, memoirs are inherently subjective, representing the author's memories and interpretations of events. In the case of a memoirs, the authors often position themselves at the center of events,

emphasizing the key importance of their actions. Selective memory is undoubtedly one of the drawbacks of this genre. Keeping in mind that people tend to forget is crucial when analyzing any memoir.

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