POSITIONING THROUGH HATE SPEECH: IMMEDIATE EFFECTS AND LASTING CONSEQUENCES OF SERBIAN WARTIME MEDIA DISCOURSE

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This study outlines the socio-political conditions in Serbia at the time of Slobodan Milošević’s ascent to power, highlights the role of the media in Serbian national mobilization during the Milošević era, and analyses the key media messages in the early stages of the wars from the point of view of positioning theory. Because the author’s primary academic interest is conflict resolution, not discourse analysis per se, the latter part of the study examines long-term effects of such positioning on Serbia’s collective psyche and group identity, introduces the concept of cultural trauma to better describe those effects and their implications for peace in the region, and proposes a way forward.
And what happens if the cultivated language is made up of poisonous elements or has been made the bearer of poisons? Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets in after all.

Victor Klemperer, LTI
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Introduction

The hypothesis that language is not just a way of voicing ideas, but that it influences and even shapes ideas has been the subject of a continuing academic debate since the premise was proposed in the 1930s. Few modern linguists subscribe to its most extreme interpretation: that language determines what we can think about, so that what is not named remains opaque to us and eludes comprehension. Most social scientists, however, take it is as a given that the language in which one is immersed has some bearing on one’s perception of reality. Indeed, this notion has been frequently evoked in postwar liberal critiques of totalitarianism and, more recently, by both sides in the debate about “political correctness”: does society by proscribing certain terms encourage civility and push back prejudice, or does it merely stifle honest dialogue about difficult topics? (Cameron, 1999: 154). An even more important question for the modern era is what happens if those in positions to influence public discourse manipulate language so that it becomes uncivil, vitriolic, aggressive and dehumanizing? Does it change the way people think, act and perceive each other?

Serbia in the early 1990s was a perfect laboratory for the study of ways in which a change in the public discourse can alter individuals’ understanding of their world. As he moved to consolidate his grip on as much of the territory and resources of former Yugoslavia as he could as it disintegrated, Serbia’s President Slobodan Milošević systematically subjugated the media to his party’s control. Journalists and editors deemed unreliable or unpatriotic, or those who belonged to other ethnic groups, were purged in favor of loyal purveyors of Milošević’s
nationalist agenda. As this process unfolded, the media were used to construct highly polarized
group identities, define a new moral universe and alter peoples’ thinking and behavior.

Throughout the wars that destroyed the former Yugoslavia, the media discourse in Serbia ranged from uncivil and discordant to outright belligerent and racist; it was histrionic, intolerant, propagandistic, entirely unconcerned with evidence or even reality. As the linguistic relativity hypothesis\(^a\) would predict, deprived of other sources of information and lacking exposure to alternative discourses, people gradually began to adopt this new language of hatred and fear and the moral norms embedded in it, and they indeed began to think, act and treat one another differently.

For the previous fifty years, Serbs had lived in relative harmony with other ethnic groups that comprised Yugoslavia, under the Communist Party slogan of “Brotherhood and unity of our nations and nationalities\(^b\)” . Yet, after just a few years of exposure to Milošević’s nationalist message, ritualistically delivered every day on the 7:30 P.M. television news, many of those same Serbs lined up on highway overpasses to greet and throw flowers at tanks as they rolled out of Serbia toward Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the name of a different unity – that of all Serbs within the boundaries of one nation-state, “the Greater Serbia”. To achieve this new

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\(^a\) The linguistic theory hypothesis is more commonly known as the Sapir Whorf Hypothesis, after the linguists who first proposed it.

\(^b\) “Nationality” (narodnost) is socialist-speak for an ethnic group that is not quite large enough to be considered a nation. Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, ethnic Albanians and others were nations; the Hungarian, Romanian and Italian minorities were among the “nationalities” of the former Yugoslavia.
unity, hundreds of thousands of the Serbs’ erstwhile “brothers” – Croats, Bosniaks and Albanians – were murdered or expelled, their homes destroyed and their livelihoods stolen.

Over a hundred books and scores of academic articles have been written over the past two decades about the violent break-up of Yugoslavia (Silber & Little, 1995; Sell, 2002; Mesić, 2004; Ramet, 2005, and many more). They highlight different angles and offer different and sometimes contradictory explanations as to why the former Yugoslavia, long considered the freest and most prosperous socialist country in post-war Eastern Europe, imploded so violently. Many of these books and articles mention the role of political language and the media, and a handful place the rhetoric and the media at the center of their inquiry (Snyder & Ballentine, 1996; Thompson, 1999; Popov, 2000; Kuršpahić, 2003; Kolstø, 2009).

Although the media were similarly used in other former Yugoslav republics to define national identities, set political agendas, shore up nationalist regimes and mobilize for war, this study focuses on Serbia. Several reasons informed this choice of topic: Milošević was the driving force behind the wars in Slovenia (1991), Croatia (1991-95), Bosnia and Hercegovina (1992-95) and in Kosovo (1998-99). He had the initiative for more than a decade while other participants, regional leaders and the international community alike, for the most part were responding to his moves. His regime’s media campaign to prepare the Serbian nation for what was to come predated similar efforts by his counterparts in Croatia and Bosnia by several years. Moreover, the effects of this national mobilization are still felt in Serbia in different and perhaps more insidious ways than elsewhere.

\[c\] Bosniaks are Slavic Muslims who live mostly in Bosnia and the Sandžak region of Serbia and Montenegro. The term Albanians in this context refers to the inhabitants of Kosovo, the former Serbian province that gained independence in June 1999.
2. Contents, Data and Research Methods

The next chapter introduces the problem of discursive creation of polarized identities. Several examples of media-driven wartime national mobilization campaigns are briefly reviewed: the British in the First World War, the Nazis in the Second, Communists during the Cold War, and a few others. I also introduce Critical Discourse Analysis, which has over the past twenty years become established as the standard framework for analyzing media discourse, including that which fuels violent conflict.

The Chapter Four proposes that we can look at the problem of political polarization and ensuing conflict through a different lens: positioning theory. I outline positioning theory’s main principles and propose that this approach can yield insights that may not emerge through other methods of conflict analysis. Specifically, I am interested in ways that positioning theory helps us think about group identity and morality. Using the positioning triad (narratives, positions and acts) I illustrate how the regime positioned Serbs apart from the rest of the world, making them believe that the world is against them and that they alone are righteous. The narratives that the regime systematically repeated (Serbs are defending Yugoslavia/Europe/Christianity/themselves) were used to reinforce those positions, so that acts (occupation, murder, war crimes, violations of civil and political rights) could be justified.

Chapter Five begins with the starting point that it is necessary to examine the media discourse in the context of wider cultural, social and institutional constraints in order to accurately interpret the discourse and understand the aims and strategies of those who control it.
(van Dijk, 2007: 5). I therefore describe at some length the socio-political conditions in Serbia, including real historic grievances as well as the mythology that the regime abused to prepare the nation for war.

Chapter Six describes how Milošević put the Serbian media under his complete control. It lists the basic principles which the media in Serbia and in conquered regions of Croatia and Bosnia used to alter people’s perceptions of reality and effect a profound and rapid change in group identities and the adoption of a whole new set of values.

Examples from the Serbian media, most of them from early 1993, are analyzed in Chapter Seven, with an emphasis on positions, rights assumed (for self) and rights denied (others), narratives constructed, and the implied moral norms. The decision to limit the study to that period is partly a matter of convenience: most of these examples have been assembled in a booklet published in 1994 by the Belgrade-based non-governmental Center for Anti-War Action under the title *Hate Speech*. Although I supplemented those with examples from other sources, having a sample already prepared by a reliable researcher spared me countless hours of pouring over microfilms. Another reason to limit the examination to this period was that early 1993 was the peak of national mobilization in Serbia. Belgrade-backed Serbs had at that time 27 percent of Croatia firmly under their control (Galbraith, 2006: 125) and most of Bosnia was already in the hands of Bosnian Serbs and the Serbian armed forces, their non-Serb inhabitants murdered or expelled. The regime was at the height of its power. The key positions had by then crystallized and were not yet undermined by competing narratives.

The choice of that narrow snapshot of the Serbian media, rather than a historic survey of how media-defined positions and narratives changed in the years between Milošević’s rise and
fall, allows me to shift attention to long-term effects of such malignant positioning on the Serbs themselves: like an abusive partner in a domestic relationship, the regime managed to isolate its people from the rest of the world, depriving them of allies and discrediting all alternative political, ideological and moral standards. It normalized the abnormal, made heroes out of criminals, and established violence as the legitimate method of solving disputes. Putting aside for a moment the enormous suffering of the victims of Serbian aggression, I want to show that Serbs themselves are profoundly traumatized and that they are unlikely to resolve those traumas, which continue to affect social relations and politics more than a decade after Milošević’s fall, without outside political intervention.

I introduce the concept of cultural trauma in Chapter Eight and show how it applies to Serbia. In the final chapter, I conclude that the loss of moral bearings and the attendant loss of self-respect are enormously traumatic for the perpetrator society and must be remedied in order for peace and stability to take hold. Reversing the effects of the Milošević-era political propaganda, defining new positions and new narratives for self and others, is essential for Serbia’s full democratic transition and consolidation, and for stability in the region.

3. Language and Political Propaganda

History abounds with examples of political elites using polarizing language to construct group identities and justify wars. One of the early studies of wartime propaganda was Arthur Ponsonby’s *Falsehood in War-Time: Containing an assortment of lies circulated throughout the*...

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This section draws on Kathryn Ruud’s review of seminal works about linguistic political propaganda strategies (Ruud, 2003).
Ponsonby identified eight distinct strategies that were used by the British press during WW I:

- Negative stereotyping of the enemy (“bull-necked Prussian officer”);
- Derogatory names for the enemy (“Huns”);
- Negative characterization of the enemy (Germans are “militarists”);
- Exaggeration or outright fabrication of reports of the enemy’s alleged cruelty (“Belgian nuns violated”, “hands of children cut off”);
- Suppression or minimization of developments that reflected negatively on the British (they were not retreating - they were “straightening the front”);
- One-sided reporting (small British victories exaggerated, large defeats glossed over);
- Creating in-group unity (“every patriot joins up”), and
- Repeated use of catchy phrases and slogans (“a war to end all wars”).

These lessons were not lost on the Ministry of Propaganda in the National Socialist Third Reich, which was tasked with spreading “information” through publications and speeches. They were ultimately able to command the public discourse for 12 years and turn ordinary men into mass murderers.

Of the many studies of the use of language and symbols in Nazi propaganda, perhaps the most accessible to non-linguists is *Language of the Third Reich: LTI -- Lingua Tertii Imperii*

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\(^{\text{c}}\) Originally published in the UK in 1928; reprinted in the US in 2011.
\(^{\text{f}}\) Cited by Brekle (1989: 85-86)
(1946/2002), by German philologist Victor Klemperer. In the lead up to the war, Klemperer began to notice that his friends and colleagues were adjusting their use of language to resemble that used by Hitler in Mein Kampf.\(^g\) He proceeded to document this use of altered words and phrases through the end of the war in the hope of contributing to what he called the “mass burial” of the linguistic tricks that helped bring the Nazis so much power. Among the methods that Klemperer identified were:

- Recurrent use of words whose emotional connotation was gradually altered to suit propaganda needs (“fanatical”, “spontaneous”, “pure”);
- Systematic repetition of phrases which gradually became accepted as truths (the war was “imposed upon the peace-loving Führer”);
- Use of neologisms (to “Aryanize,” to “de-Jew”), and
- Use of emotionally neutral euphemisms (“evacuation”, not deportation; “special treatment”, not murder).

Numerous other studies of the language of the Nazi era documented how polarization of groups was achieved partly through the use of contrasting descriptive language. Kathryn Ruud cites German linguists Siegfrid Bork and Nicoline Hortzitz, who analyzed the vocabulary used by the Nazi press and Hitler in his speeches. They found that metaphors, concepts and evaluative adjectives and adverbs used to describe Nazi party members and their supporters were

\(^g\) Incidentally, Hitler reflected in Mein Kampf on the superiority of the British propaganda during WW I, and he rebuked his predecessors for failing to understand that propaganda can be a powerful psychological weapon.
unfailingly positive, so that they were routinely labeled, for example: “heroic”, “healthy” and “loyal”. Those used to describe foes, Jews, political opponents and, later, the Allied Powers, were consistently negative: “deceitful,” “cunning,” or “conspiratorial” (Ruud, 2003: 30).

Writing about language in post WW II Britain, George Orwell denounced the political language across the political spectrum as being largely used for “the defense of the indefensible” – murder, war, colonialism and various forms of human rights abuses. “[It is] designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind” (Orwell, 1946).

The totalitarian language of communism has also been subjected to scientific scrutiny in an attempt to understand how and to what extent immersion in a completely manipulated system of language, along with other symbolic systems, can contaminate the everyday thinking and speaking of ordinary people. Françoise Thom analyzed communist langue de bois in an eponymous book, published in 1987.\(^h\) Translated approximately as political double-speak, waffling or stonewalling – or Newspeak, following Orwell - the term “langue de bois” is used by linguists to denote the language of totalitarian systems.

At a 1993 conference, linguists from former communist countries discussed how everyday language had changed in each of their respective countries since the collapse of the Soviet bloc. One of the most interesting conclusions was that langue de bois is inherently flexible, adaptable to various political circumstances. Participants found parallels between

\(^h\) The English edition was published by Claridge Press in 1989 under the title: Newspeak: The language of Soviet Communism.
linguistic strategies of Stalinism and the anti-Semitic and nationalist discourse in post-communist Eastern Europe (Ruud, 2003: 31)

Study after study has found that political language has enormous potential to influence the listeners’ worldview. Of these studies, some rely on quantitative content analysis – the measuring and comparing of the frequency of use of certain terms or phrases in press reports and political speeches, or the amount of time spent discussing or reporting on particular topics. These results can tell us a lot about a speaker’s priorities and political agenda and, in aggregate, about the regime’s social, political and military aims.

Far more nuanced results are obtained through critical discourse analysis (CDA), which is concerned with explaining how language is used to constitute and transmit knowledge, define ideas and ethical norms, but also - significantly - to reinforce structural relationships of power, control and discrimination and to promote ideologies (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 10). CDA draws on the study of classical rhetoric, text linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, social psychology, cognitive science, literary studies and sociolinguistics, as well as applied linguistics and pragmatics (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 1). Often, several approaches are combined: for example, linguistic analysis and ideological critique were successfully incorporated with the construction of cognitive models of how people think (van Dijk, 1998). With so many methods of analysis and a wide array of alternate data sets at its disposal, CDA has become the standard framework

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1 The term Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is often used interchangeably with Critical Linguistics. Critical Discourse Studies, a related field, has a narrower range of methods and scope of inquiry than the more multi-disciplinary, multi-methodical CDA (Wodak, 2008: 2)
for analyzing media discourse. A recent addition to that framework is the new discipline of positioning theory, a sub-specialty within the broader field of social psychology.¹

Positioning theory offers an original way of analyzing discourse and conflict by putting the emphasis on the importance of the rights and duties that people assume are rightfully theirs, and the rights and duties that they grant or deny to others in social episodes. This multilayered network of rights and duties, a catalogue of actions mandated or proscribed in certain kinds of social interactions, is a reflection of a society’s moral order and provides the framework within which people’s actions are interpreted. It also serves to anchor a sense of group identity: “We do not invade other countries,” “Our soldiers are valiant on the battlefield,” “We do not mistreat women,” etc.

When a regime systematically positions groups and individuals in opposition to each other, if it propagates malicious narratives, it can foment conflict and undermine the local moral order. If conflict becomes violent, the prepositioned group, no longer sure of its identity and now trapped in a regime-generated alternate moral universe, may commit acts of violence that were previously anathema. This violation of their own moral standards leads to a loss of self-respect and profoundly undermines the group’s identity. Additionally, it can trap a group in a narrative that is sharply at odds with the way it is perceived by others, which can make reconciliation impossible. With Serbia in mind, let us now explore positioning theory:

¹ More specifically, positioning theory is part of a movement in social psychology that has been called “discursive psychology,” which focuses on the psychological motives, attitudes and morals that underpin conversations and interactions.
4. Another Lens: Positioning Theory

Social psychology is the study of the manner in which the personalities, attitudes, motivations, and behavior of individuals are influenced by their social groups and cultural settings. The individuals’ cognitive states - particularly their personalities, attitudes and prejudices - are assumed to be relatively stable and resistant to change. In this view, conflict is seen as a result of the unbridled expression of entrenched prejudices and hostile attitudes.

However, research and experience suggest that people’s opinions are often fickle and their personal relationships fluid, and that the balance of power among the same participants can shift markedly from one encounter to the next. This insight has led some scholars to narrow the focus of inquiry from the study of the behavior of individuals in their broad social settings, to the study of their behavior in social episodes – which can last as briefly as a few moments. Of particular interest are the conventions that govern participants’ behavior within these social episodes, and the meanings that those episodes hold for each participant. Shifting the focus from causes and effects to meanings and conventions is the starting point of positioning theory.

Positioning theory has been described as “the study of local moral orders as ever shifting patterns of mutual and contestable rights and obligations of speaking and acting” (Harré and van Langenhove, 1991: 1). It assumes, among other things, that human behavior is goal-oriented and constrained by group norms, and that each person’s subjectivity is a product of their history of interactions with others.
It is seen as complementary to the older framework of Role Theory (Goffman, 1974, 1981). Roles are relatively static and often formally defined, delineating possible and forbidden kinds of action. Positions are more dynamic, informal and negotiable.\(^k\)

Even more than roles, positions are relational. For example, a woman and a young child might be defined by their roles of “mother” and “son.” Those are long-term, stable roles that profoundly influence the lives of their occupants. Within that fixed mother-son framework, the two might assume and assign to the other countless positions, most of which will be temporary and negotiable. Each of those position-pairs will exist within a story line, or a narrative, within which the participants’ words and actions acquire meanings. Once imbued with meaning, their actions become social acts. Positioning is thus understood in terms of a triad of interrelated concepts: storyline, positions and actions/acts (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999; Harré and Slocum, 2003; Moghaddam, Harré & Lee, 2008.)

Each position delineates a set of rights and duties for its occupant, as well as assumptions about what the occupants of other positions may, may not or ought to do. Positioning theory is interested in the relation between what one believes one has the right to do, or is barred from doing, and what one does in the light of those beliefs (Harré and Slocum, 2003: 105).

In the mother-son example, the boy might be positioned as the tech savvy one, which might give him the right to voice an opinion about what kind of a computer the family should purchase (in a storyline of a family buying a new computer). His position would also carry an

\(^k\) Moghaddam (2008) does not sharply delineate between positions and roles, but sees them instead as lying along a continuum. In his view, the rights and duties embedded in a position can become crystallized into the requirements of a role. In this sense, positioning acts can be the “birth place” of roles (p. 9).
expectation that he help the mother, positioned as less competent in this domain, to resolve a computer issue. In the next moment, the boy might ask his mother for a snack, positioning himself as a dependant who has the right to expect to be looked after, and his parent as the caregiver, with a presumed duty to provide the nourishment (within the narrative of caring for the child). It should be noted that different positions entail different powers, or rights, to position others (in our example, the young child is unlikely to successfully resist the mother’s positioning of him in a social episode, even if he is not pleased with it.)

In this example, the mother asking her son for help with the computer is both a request for assistance and an act of empowering the child, showing that he is seen as capable of helping out an adult. However, had she been positioned as technologically competent, the same action could have been interpreted as an unreasonable act.

A distinction is thus made between the *illocutionary force* of an utterance – that which is achieved *in* saying something (requesting help with a computer) - and the *perlocutionary force* - that which is achieved *by* saying something (making the child feel responsible and competent) (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999: 17).

The fluctuating system of rights and duties is referred to as the *local moral order*. These rights and duties are usually tacit, but may be made explicit if one party challenges the way s/he or the others have been positioned. In our example, the mother might reject the position of the nourishment provider and tell the boy to get his own snack. Whenever a position is assigned, rather than voluntarily assumed, the receiver may “acquiesce in such an assignment, contest it or subvert it (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999: 2).”
Conflict may develop because of a growing resentment about existing positioning by one or more parties involved, within a shared narrative. The civil rights and the feminist movements in this country, and more recently the struggle for LGBT rights, can be seen in this light.

Alternately, conflict may be fueled by the adoption by different participants of conflicting storylines, such that two positioning triads exist and there is no discursive bridge from one to another (Harré and Slocum, 2003: 111-112). The “pro-choice” and “pro-life” movements seem to be locked in such a struggle.

As positioning theorists have ventured into the domain of conflict analysis and resolution, they have shown that this approach can provide useful insights into conflicts among family members (Sabat, 2001, 2008), groups of various sizes and even among ethnic groups or nations (Rothbart and Bartlett, 2008; Mogahdam and Kavulich, 2008). Some studies have focused on the use of the media to spread political propaganda, position participants in conflict and establish frameworks of their respective rights and duties (Rothbart and Bartlett, 2008; Moghaddam & Harré, 2010).

4.1. Positioning and the Media

When a regime uses the media as a mouthpiece, it can result in entire communities being unilaterally positioned, and denied an opportunity to contest or subvert the assigned set of rights and duties. As Klemperer documented in Nazi Germany, media messages begin to permeate everyday life and influence private discourse. If no alternate storyline is offered, most people
will eventually come to accept the official narrative as the truth. The majority will gradually internalize these new values and conform to new standards of behavior.

A positioning theorist would thus frame Klemperer’s analysis of Nazi propaganda slightly differently: language was used to position the Nazis as superior and their opponents as racially inferior, morally base and unworthy of consideration. Within the storyline of creating a master race and establishing a 1,000-year empire, this absolved the believers of any duty to treat opponents with civility or compassion, and gave them license (right) to kill them with impunity. Deprived of even the most basic rights, the victims had no way to contest their assigned position. No alternate storylines were available as there were no independent sources of information and dissenters were swiftly eliminated.

The Nazis used pamphlets and public rallies, and to a lesser degree radio, telegraph and newspapers, to spread political propaganda. The advent of television and the proliferation of radio technology, combined with urbanization in the decades following WW II, meant that the Serbian government in the 1990s had much more powerful vehicles for disseminating political propaganda and simultaneously reaching a much larger segment of the population.

“[T]hey did nothing but reuse certain techniques and methods tried and tested in other contexts, especially Nazi Germany of the thirties where the techniques of manipulating crowds using propaganda and disinformation had prepared and conditioned German public opinion for the Second World War and the genocide that came with it,” stated the prosecution’s expert witness at the trial of Slobodan Milošević before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in 2003 (de la Brosse, 2003: 10).
5. Serbia

To understand the media discourse in the 1990s, and why it was effective, we need to consider Serbia’s cultural, social and institutional constraints, which stem from the country’s history, as well as the national mythology.

5.1. History

Serbia was a poor, semi-feudal, pre-industrial kingdom until the middle of the 20th century. Following the Axis invasion and partition of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1941, the Serbs split into two camps: the Christian Orthodox monarchists, whose military arm comprised the Četnik troops\(^1\), and the pro-Yugoslavs, who joined or sympathized with the secular, socialist resistance movement under the leadership of Josip Broz - Tito. After the devastation of World War II, Serbia became a constituent republic of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Widely dispersed Serbian diaspora communities, from Macedonia and Kosovo to Bosnia and Croatia, were finally united within the borders of one state. As the federation’s largest ethnic group, Serbs gradually came to dominate the political and economic life of the country, along with the military and the omnipresent state security services.

However, like the Croats, Slovenes, Albanians and others, the Serbs were expected to forgo their national identity in exchange for the meta-identity of “Yugoslavs.” To create the

\(^1\) The Četniks were Serbian royalist irregulars who pledged to restore the monarchy. One wing of the movement was committed to ousting the Germans from Serbia, while another openly collaborated with the occupiers. Their lack of discipline, reluctance to engage the Nazis, instances of collaboration, as well as reports of massacres, looting and rapes of non-Serbs, eventually convinced the Allies to withdraw support and back the Partisans.
harmonious whole, tragic episodes of inter-ethnic strife, including the murder of tens of thousands of Serbs, Jews and Roma by Croatia’s pro-Nazi Ustaša\textsuperscript{m} regime, were not talked about in public (or taught in schools). This relegated the very real historical trauma of Croatian Serbs into a strictly private domain, where it festered for 45 years, only to resurface again with a vengeance after Milošević’s media began to portray the new Croatian government as a modern-day incarnation of the Ustašas.

For several decades, the various ethnic groups coexisted peacefully within the federation. Together they enjoyed the highest standard of living and greatest political freedoms among East Europe’s socialist countries. Cultural and economic ties between the republics proliferated, mixed marriages were common, and generations of young people grew up with little or no interest in assuming narrower, ethnic identities.

Just below the surface, however, there were signs of decay: fundamentally authoritarian, the regime imprisoned or silenced anti-communists, monarchists, liberals, nationalists, suspected Stalinists and other “enemies of the state.” Occasional nationalist revivals were brutally suppressed. Religion was discouraged. Free and compulsory primary education succeeded in eradicating illiteracy, but the nation overall remained poorly educated. Rapid industrialization resulted in massive population movements from rural areas to urban centers, disrupting traditional social structures - the extended families and tightly-knit agricultural communities – and creating a sizable population of uprooted, maladjusted lumpenproletarians. Serbs remained patriarchal, and inclined to follow powerful leaders.

\textsuperscript{m} The Ustaša were the military arm of the Nazi puppet state, the Independent (sic!) State of Croatia.
The party-state discouraged critical thinking, rewarded obedience, and even removed initiatives for hard work. “The whole economic system functioned on the principle of receiving, not earning […] everything was received: salary, apartment, position, credit, money,” wrote a prominent clinical psychologist who explored the psychological consequences of living under communism (Biro, 1994: 14-15). Because of the nature of the regime, no civic culture or a sense of responsibility to the community ever developed. Significantly, there was at the time also no tradition of independent media in Serbia, or in other parts of Yugoslavia.\(^n\)

Tito wielded dictatorial powers and the entire regime pivoted upon his will. His authority was rooted in his roles as the head of the Communist Party and the commander in chief – particularly the latter. Not long after his death in 1980, the regime begun to cave in. In time, the centrally planned economy floundered. Corruption became rampant. Inflation soared. Dissatisfaction grew to bewilderment, but no group of dissidents emerged and proceeded to build their legitimacy through sustained ideological opposition to the decaying regime. When socialism eventually collapsed throughout Eastern Europe, there was no one who could facilitate a transition to democracy in Yugoslavia. There also was no value system left standing, faith-based or atheist, no tradition of tolerance and of dialogue, no respect for differences among individuals, for laws or institutions, for sanctity of facts. Ethnic nationalism, promoted by the Serbian intelligentsia and politicized by Slobodan Milošević, filled the ideological void and the media were used to carry the message.

\(^n\) Under communism, journalists were “social-political workers” who had to adhere to the ideals of Marxism-Leninism.
September 1986 was by many accounts the beginning of the end of Yugoslavia: a small group of intellectuals at the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences caused a political storm when excerpts of a so-called Memorandum which they had written were leaked to the press. The authors condemned the political, social, economic and cultural discrimination that Serbs allegedly suffered in Yugoslavia and warned that “the general process of disintegration which has encompassed Yugoslavia […] is directed toward the total breaking up of the national unity among the Serbian people” (Judah, 1997: 4).

The notion that Serbs living in other republics of the former Yugoslavia were in danger of annihilation and should be protected at all costs was used to justify four wars over the following twelve years. The august institution had more than given its blessings - it had charted the way.

The Memorandum positioned Serbs as historic victims by alleging that:

- Two and a half million Serbs died in WW II. Their descendants were being victimized again by other nations in the Yugoslav federation;
- Serbs in Kosovo were victims of Albanian-perpetrated “physical, political, judicial and cultural genocide;”
- Serbs in Croatia, who “already survived attempted genocide” at the hands of the pro-Nazi regime in WW II, were now facing the same threat and confronted “the refined and efficient policy of assimilation”, and
- Throughout Yugoslavia, Serbs were subjected to “assimilation, exploitation, expulsions, denial of freedom of expression, and marginalization in the political, economic, cultural and scientific domains” (Judah, 1997: 4).
The Memorandum authors concluded that “one cannot imagine a worse historical defeat in peacetime.” It was an obvious next step for the then up-and-coming politician, Slobodan Milošević, to call his ethnic brethren to arms in the defense of “innocent Serbs” in other parts of Yugoslavia. “If we do not know how to work . . . at least we know how to fight,” he roared from a podium to the delight of the crowd (Judah, 1997: 5).

5.2. Mythology

The Memorandum echoed themes from Serbian folklore, most notably the amalgam of history and myth surrounding the battle of Kosovo in 1389. Very few facts are known about this clash between the Christian armies under the command of the Serbian knight Lazar Hrebljanović (Knez Lazar) and the Ottoman forces, led by Sultan Murad. It is generally accepted as historical fact that both leaders died in battle, but even the battle’s outcome is uncertain. In the Serbian interpretation, the Ottomans/Muslims won on the battlefield, but the Serbs/Christians were the undisputed spiritual victors. The main themes of the story of the Battle of Kosovo, as espoused by Orthodox clerics, are martyrdom, betrayal and the idea of the chosen people (Šuber, 2004).

- **Martyrdom**: According to legend, on the eve of the battle, God gave Lazar the choice of either an earthly kingdom (victory for his forces against the Sultan in this world) or a heavenly kingdom (death and defeat on the battlefield but access to the heavenly kingdom.) Lazar chose the latter, for the earthly kingdom lasts for a limited time, while the heavenly

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° Quoted in Judah, T. (1997): 4
kingdom is eternal (MacDonald, 2002: 69). The lessons contained in this story are that military defeat can be a moral victory and that sacrifice is heroic (it is only a slight stretch to also conclude that Turks need to be punished to avenge Serbian loses.)

- **Betrayal**: Serbian nobleman Vuk Branković allegedly betrayed Lazar. Numerous Serbian folk stories and poems deal with themes of discord and betrayal among the Serbs, which doomed the nation to ruin, as well as heroism and martyrdom, which secured it moral supremacy. The moral of the story of Branković’s alleged betrayal is encapsulated in the slogan “Only unity can save the Serbs” (*Samo sloga Srbina spasava*).\(^p\)

- **The chosen people**: In the mythical narrative, the Serbian state is a gift from God, a reward for the Serbs’ sacrifice on the battlefield and for their piety.

  Not just the Battle of Kosovo, but the ensuing centuries of Ottoman rule, numerous Serbian peasant rebellions brutally put down by the occupiers, and several regional and two world wars were also interpreted metaphorically by the Orthodox clergy and the Serbian intelligentsia. The resulting narratives of martyrdom, suffering, exile, death and resurrection, are familiar to all Serbs. The intelligentsia and the clergy used them in the 1990s to convince the people that they were in imminent danger and to prime them for war.\(^q\)

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\(^p\) The slogan is graphically represented as four Cyrillic S’s arranged around a cross, with a double-headed eagle in the middle. This symbol of Serbian nationalism was made notorious by the Četniks of WW II and the Serbian soldiers and paramilitaries, who again wore it on hats and uniforms as they rampaged through Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, during the wars of the 1990s.\(^q\) Some analysts believe that the Battle of Kosovo is a historic trauma which still haunts the Serbs. I maintain that this is not so; rather, the “code words” associated with the battle in the folk mythology (betrayal, unity, martyrdom, defense of Christianity, etc.) were used by the Serbian nationalists to galvanize – and terrorize – their own people.
Another particularly effective strategy was the “Jewish Trope” (MacDonald, 2002: 73-75; Ţivković, 2011: 198). The Serbian myth-makers declared that the Serbs were the “Jews of the Balkans” - righteous, innocent victims, forever persecuted, always valiantly defending themselves, never attacking. Equating the historic fates and political missions of the Serbs and the Jews was intended both to provide a theological basis for the Serbs’ mission and to frame future violence in terms of the victim’s right to self defense: just like the Israelis, the Serbs must use military force to defend their brethren and unite them in one state where they will finally be safe from attack (Popov, 2000: 104).

Milošević also used these mythical images in the speech that he delivered at the site of the battle of Kosovo on its 600th anniversary. Upon emerging from a helicopter before an exuberant crowd of tens of thousands of Serbs from around the world, he spoke in terms of “us against them” and promised to defend “Serbian interests”, if necessary by “military means” (Judah, 1997: 7, MacDonald, 2002: 71). With that speech, this former Communist Party official secured his position as the political and spiritual leader of the Serbian nationalist revival movement. In a short period, he succeeded in generating a great deal of fear among the Kosovo Albanians and other non-Serbs in Yugoslavia, who realized that Serbia’s ascendant leader was setting the stage for war even as he was tightening his control over the Yugoslav military. Frightened too were the Serbs, who were becoming convinced that they were indeed in danger of annihilation by other ethnic groups, and that only the army could protect them (Popović, 2006: 46).
6. The Media in Milošević Serbia

6.1. Strategy

Elevated to general secretary of Serbia’s socialist party, Milošević moved swiftly to replace unreliable editors of newspapers and the state-run television and radio stations. At a February 1987 session of the Belgrade Socialist Party Committee, he announced that a radical political “differentiation” in Serbian journalism was underway: “The editor-in-chief of [Belgrade daily] Duga has been replaced, but the situation in Duga will not change before we implement broader changes in the editorial staff […] We are [also] talking about a new editor-in-chief of the weekly NIN. Regardless of the solution we reach, we shall not solve the problem in NIN unless a serious reconstruction is carried out.” (Nenadović, 2000: 553). In effect, Milošević was announcing the beginning of a political purge of those journalists and editors who would question his nationalist policies. Indeed, the regime proceeded to engineer editorial boards, appoint editors and journalists and force out those deemed unreliable or disloyal (Reljić, 2001).

It took the regime a few years longer to place the electronic media under complete control. Even as the editorial policy of Radio Television Belgrade (RTB) was increasingly hitched into serving the ruling Socialist Party, some professional reporting could still be heard, particularly on Belgrade’s three radio channels. That changed with the passage of the Radio Television Act of 1991, which created Radio-Television Serbia (RTS) by merging RTB with the stations in Novi Sad and Priština, nationalized all of their physical property and transferred

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“Differentiation”, in Serbian communist *langua de bois*, denoted the identification and elimination of ideological opponents.
parliamentary control over the newly-established RTS from the parliament directly to the government (Thompson, 1994: viii-xi). The regime was then free to “differentiate” the RTS’ 8,000 journalists and other employees.

Vukašin Jokanović, the chairman of the RTS Executive Board, who was also the deputy speaker of the Serbian Parliament, confirmed in a 1992 television interview that this was part of an orchestrated strategy: “RTS, as the national and state television, is of exceptional importance. It cannot, at this time of pressure and genocide against the Serbian people and the denial of their basic national and human rights, be a-national or refuse to protect vital national interests. RTB was more Yugoslav than representative of Belgrade and Serbia. This is also the case with a number of papers and magazines. In those papers, there are people who actually work against Serbia” (Veljanovski, 2000: 577).

Indeed, the RTS was crucial for the regime because during the early 1990s, 60 percent of Serbia’s citizens listened to the main evening news, while a mere 2% read the daily papers (Biro, 1994: 84). The regime could then afford to maintain the façade of media freedoms so it allowed a small independent weekly, Vreme, and a radio station, B92, to continue to work in Belgrade. Milošević’s power base was outside of the capital, and he kept that population entirely in media darkness. To limit their circulation, the independent print media were forced to pay four times as much for newsprint than the loyal government-controlled papers and were subject to high taxes and capricious regulations (Thompson, 1994: 65). A new provision under the Serbian Penal Code (Art. 98) made it an offence to criticize the government or cast doubt on the country’s leadership (Thompson, 1994: 59-60).
Complete control over the main sources of information allowed Milošević’s regime to combine propaganda, biased information, false news, manipulation, non-coverage of certain events and other such methods. The media became weapons of war, used to achieve nationalist objectives, all part of a strategy of conquest and affirmation of identity. Truth was defined through the language of opinion, based on the ideology and evaluative beliefs of the in-group (van Dijk, 1998: 26–30). An analysis of the reporting of the main Belgrade daily, Politika, revealed that in almost one fifth of the articles, no sources were mentioned at all (Gredelj, 1997: 210). Across the media scene, pro-regime reports dominated, critical voices were not heard, and a growing number of stories cited no sources. Commentary and information were entwined so that the audience immediately knew how to interpret a particular story (Čurguz-Kazimir, 1997: 167-8). The media engaged in raw advocacy. The viewpoint of the opposition had no merit, and was not discussed.

A small study of the RTS’s coverage of the 1992 presidential election campaign revealed that 72.4 percent of the prime-time news program comprised voice-overs by reporters and presenters. The study’s authors concluded that the structure of the evening news broadcasts showed the primacy of interpretation over news. “RTS-speak is based much less on reporting facts than on transmitting interpretations.” Another well-informed observer, writing about the same period, agreed: “No information of any importance has reached the public without comment or interpretation. The public was continuously kept in a state of mental adolescence (Čurguz-Kazimir, 1997: 165).”

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5 Screening the Elections (1993), by Snježana Milivojević and Jovanka Matić (Veljanovski, 2000: 581)
Nightly television news featured reports of alleged attacks on Serbs in Kosovo, Croatia and Bosnia, describing the Serbian population there as targets of hate crimes, threatened with genocide, in need of protection from the motherland of Serbia. For months leading up to the wars, Serbian media also covered macabre, bizarre ceremonies, where bones of Serbian civilians murdered during World War II by the Ustašas in Croatia and Bosnia were dug up from mass graves. The remains were then blessed by teary-eyed Orthodox priests before audiences of wailing women and somber men, and reinterred in crypts in Serbia proper. The urgent, slightly paranoid, conspiratorial tone of those reports served not only to collapse the preceding 45 years, as if those were yesterday’s victims, but also created an impression that Croatia was swarming with Ustašes preparing to throw Serb civilians into graves again.

Intentionally opening up and exploiting real, unresolved historic traumas was only one way the regime manipulated the emotions of the increasingly disoriented population. It also sought to convince the Serbian people of their nation’s exceptionalism. To that end, it encouraged the proliferation of theories about the Serbs’ origins. These “theories” differed in details, but all sought to plant the root of the modern Serbian nation in ancient history and demonstrate that the Serbs predated all other ethnic groups on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. In most of these scenarios, Serbs were said to have left their alleged ancient homeland, India, around 4500 BC. Then they migrated to Mesopotamia, where they participated in building the Tower of Babel and eventually colonized most of Europe, long before the ancient

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1 Throughout Yugoslavia, and especially during the turbulent 1990s, all activity would cease for half an hour at 7:30 PM each night, as people stopped to watch the main television news program, Dnevnik.
Greeks and Romans established their civilizations. The nonsensical exercise of “out-ancienting” the ancients was politically charged, for it justified claims to others’ lands: if the Serbs were here before the Croats and the Albanians, then surely at least Croatia and Kosovo are rightfully Serbian?

The promoters of such fiction which masqueraded as science - various historians and archeologists of questionable credentials, morals or mental health statuses - were interviewed over and over again on state-run television and in regime-controlled newspapers. Books with titles such as “Serbs - The Most Ancient People” were discussed in public forums and sold in newspaper stands, which was an uncommon practice at that time.

Adding to the public’s growing confusion, soothsayers, astrologists and self-styled psychics were given air time to discuss national horoscope charts, “evidence” of Serb superiority and to espouse all manner of conspiracy theories. As the reality made less and less sense to most people, conspiracy theories came to dominate the public discourse. A typical narrative had the Vatican and Bonn siding with the Croats, against the Serbs (“the Jews of the Balkans”) in an effort to prop up another pro-Nazi regime in Zagreb; the Americans, meanwhile, wanted a war in the Balkans so that they could have a place to dump their nuclear waste, or sell their outdated weaponry, or gain access to the Mediterranean – depending on the narrator’s proclivities; Turkey

u An alternate scenario, which was given as much publicity at that time, had the Serbs living on the banks of the Danube some 6,000 years BC, making them one of the oldest known European tribes. Unwilling to give up on the Serbs also being the oldest Asians, proponents of this theory explained that from the banks of the Danube, the Serbs migrated to India, before heading back east to Europe, via Mesopotamia.

v Bosnian Muslims, descendants of Slavs who converted to Islam during the five centuries of Ottoman rule, were seen as traitors, chaff of the Serbian nation.

was seeking to establish a “Green Transverse” from the Middle East to the heart of Europe (i.e., Bosnia), while the Albanians were strategically, rapidly, “breeding” so as to biologically overwhelm the Serbs in Kosovo, and ultimately secede from Serbia and join Albania.

Over just a few years, hundreds of thousands of erstwhile Communists, secular pan-Slavs, Tito’s unwavering followers, former believers in the brotherhood and unity of all ethnic groups within Yugoslavia, embraced a narrow Serbian identity and rejected the ideology and the morality of the old regime. Many embraced Christian Orthodoxy, a salient mark of “Serbdom,” and prepared to kill and die for their newly-discovered ethnic brothers.

By the time that the tanks and heavy artillery of the Serb-dominated Yugoslav People’s Army started pummeling cities and towns in Croatia and Bosnia, in 1991 and 1992 respectively, the population of Serbia was by and large convinced that their mission was noble: to hold Yugoslavia together and protect the Serbian diaspora. Of those who disagreed, tens of thousands fled the country. Others were intimidated into silence. All were placed under enormous psychological strain, as the regime generated an endless stream of crises.

6.2. Tactics of Political Propaganda

Several years after the war ended, Renaud de la Brosse, an expert on media and political propaganda, was asked to testify for the prosecution in the case against Milošević before the

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x _Srpsstvo_ (Serbdom) came to denote during the most fervent period of national revival as much as ethnic and religious belonging and a pride in the culture, as it did the vehement rejection of others’ identities, traditions and beliefs.

y Many Serbs identified as such during Tito’s Yugoslavia, as well, but their ranks swelled as others shed their Yugoslav identity and begun to think of themselves as Serbs.
International War Crimes Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). De la Brosse stated that in Serbia, “the use of media for nationalist ends and objectives formed part of a well thought out plan – itself part of a strategy on conquest and affirmation of identity. […] With the media acting as a go-between, nationalist political propaganda prepared and conditioned public opinion for war – so fostering the worst atrocities perpetrated in furtherance of the ethnic policies.” (de la Brosse, 2003: 4)

He identified a number of basic principles of political propaganda which were used in Serbia “by the print media, radio, television, images, cinema and staged spectacles” (18):

- **Keep it simple.** Find short, clear, catchy phrases, slogans (which sound more like war cries).
- **Use symbols which have magical or mystical connotations** that condense a program or doctrine in a way that is easy for the masses to remember.
- **Stigmatize the enemy** using the most derogatory terms possible. “Propaganda is the enemy of nuance and always seeks to exaggerate the trait to make an impression on people’s minds” (20). Negative traits are ascribed to all members of the opposing group.
- **Project your own faults on your enemy, or accuse him of preparing to commit acts which you yourself are on the verge of perpetrating.** The Serbian regime swore that it did not want war, that it was doing everything possible to avert it, and that the opposing camp was solely

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2 Political propaganda refers to activities designed to shape opinion so that people share certain political and social ideas or support a policy, government or representative. While all governments do this to some extent, propaganda becomes harmful and reprehensible then it is used to promote political objectives flying in the face of human rights and international law. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, of which Yugoslavia was a signatory, prohibits “any propaganda for war” and stipulates that “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.” (Art. 20)
responsible for it. The use of this deceptive logic created conditions where attack could be presented to the domestic public as the only possible form of defense.

- **Use the news to your advantage** by exaggerating the importance or significance of a reported fact by remaining silent on the subject when it contradicts the official version of events. The regime-controlled media exaggerated alleged abuses by enemy soldiers, but it did not broadcast news from besieged Sarajevo, or about the prosecutions of Croats and Muslims in Serbia. Only the Serbian dead were counted.

- **Repeat your message systematically and recurrently** so that it becomes ingrained in people’s minds. While it is helpful to slightly alter the message to suit a particular audience, the essence should not change and it should constantly be reaffirmed with new “evidence” and “revelations.” Muslims were Islamic fascists, “jihadists,” and religious fanatics, determined to turn Bosnia into a “jamahyria”\(^\text{aa}\).

- **Rely on myths and history.** To be fully effective, propaganda must be grounded in mythology or exploit conscious or unconscious feelings (historic prejudices and hatreds) in the national psyche. Propaganda always nurtures preconceived ideas, prejudices and preconceptions and it is all the more effective as it reassures the masses of the validity of their beliefs and opinions.

- **Create a national consensus.** Intellectuals, artists, sportsmen and media stars were often held up as examples of “good Serbs.” Their loyalty to what was presented as general opinion (or the common cause) and the prestige they enjoyed were used to create a consensus on what a

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\(^{\text{aa}}\) In this context, Jamahiriya was a pejorative term for a Muslim state. Once part of the official name of Libya under col. Qadhafi, “Jamahiriya” actually means a “state of the masses”, or “peopledom”.
good Serb should think and do. Serbian television often interviewed athletes and celebrities who volunteered to fight in Croatia and Bosnia.

7. Positioning Serbs and Others

7.1. Narratives, Positions, Rights and Duties

As discussed earlier, positioning takes place within narratives. The regime-directed meta-narrative in Serbia was that Serbs had to live within a single state to avoid annihilation. The dissolution of Yugoslavia was leaving large Serbian communities outside of the borders of Serbia, so the only way to ensure that they all remained in one country was to annex to Serbia the territories where they lived.

To protect the narrative, countless other storylines were developed, within which the ingroup and the outgroup(s) were positioned as polar opposites, their needs and goals irreconcilable. Such positioning precluded any possibility of compromise and left war as the only option. Here are a few of those storylines:

7.1.1. Serbs positioned as peace loving people

The peace-loving Serbs were trying to preserve Yugoslavia and avoid war, while Croats and Muslims were positioned as enemies of Yugoslavia. Furthermore, the Serbs were being forced to fight to protect their defenseless brethren outside of Serbia’s borders. Within that narrative, the invasions of Croatia and Bosnia were interpreted not as aggression - a land grab - but as noble acts of liberation and self-sacrifice. This positioned the ethnic Serbs in Bosnia,
Croatia and Kosovo as vulnerable and the Milošević’s regime and the Yugoslav Army which he commanded as their protectors. Significantly, it also positioned non-Serbs as instigators of the war so that their future suffering could one day be dismissed with a “They asked for it.”

A close Milošević collaborator, Marxist philosopher Mihajlo Marković, wrote a few months before the war in Croatia began that “the tragedy of the Croatian Serbs has still not ended – it is ongoing and in the near future could reach tragic proportions […] Systematic denial and underrating [by the Croatian government] of the genocide committed against Serbs during WW II make it precarious for Serb people to live in Croatia. The denial of responsibility for the crime clears the way for its repetition.”

A Croatian Serb politician went further, announcing that, “In self-defense, Serbian people will turn Vienna into Hiroshima.”

Positions are reinforced through storytelling, and here the media again played an essential role: accounts of past atrocities and allegations (and outright fabrications) of new ones were constantly retold. The Serbian public was daily assaulted with images and reports of alleged atrocities in which all victims were invariably Serbian civilians. Gruesome and entirely unsubstantiated, even quite transparently fictional stories - about Muslims’ alleged fondness for making necklaces out of Serbian women’s fingers, of a Croat commander keeping a bowl of Serbian children’s eyeballs on his desk, or of Albanians’ unfortunate habit of raping Serbian nuns - were discussed at length on television and in newspaper articles until they took on an aura of news.

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bb *Duga* magazine, July 1990 special edition (de la Brosse: 21)
cc Vojo Kuprešanin, president of SAO Bosnaska Krajina, *Večernje Novosti*, 10/27/91 (de la Brosse: 21)
Stigmatization of opponents was relentless and served several purposes: to create a sense of dread, denigrate and stigmatize the “other” and reinforce a belief in the moral superiority of the ingroup. Such a “threat” demanded unity, but also created a sense of certainty and empowerment: we are being attacked, but we are in it together and will defend each other. The result was a euphoric sense of unity, which was manifested outwardly with portraits of Milošević, paintings of Orthodox saints and replica frescos from Orthodox monasteries in every shop window, in every public space and many a living room. Traditional Serbian music and turbo folk, its electronic modern derivative, blared out of every public bus.

Opposing this collective mindset was futile as well as dangerous. Anyone who dared to do so was often physically or verbally assaulted, or at the very least ridiculed and marginalized. How can anyone question the regime when the other side is making necklaces out of our womenfolk’s fingers?! Lines in front of foreign consulates stretched around city blocks as people who were unwilling to surrender to this collective psychosis looked for ways out.

7.1.2. Foreign nations positioned as anti-Serb

The Milošević-controlled media constructed a number of sub-narratives designed to strengthen the main storyline. In one, the United States, Western Europe, the Vatican and the Free Masons were cast as supporters of the Serbs’ ethnic foes and the puppet masters behind the breakup of Yugoslavia.

Serbs were positioned as victims of “vengeful politics” and the “German-Catholic alliance.”
“The Serbs are not being killed just by the enemy in Bosnia. The great powers are holding the sledge hammers.”

“Sweden is a leader in the hordes of Serbian enemies.”

7.1.3. International humanitarian agencies positioned as spies and smugglers.

The Serbian media also was used to discredit international humanitarian and human rights organizations whose personnel and reports documented war crimes committed by Serbian forces.

“Instead of disarming the Muslims around Srebrenica, the Canadian soldiers are spying on the Serbs,” said one newspaper report on U.N. efforts to protect thousands of Bosnian Muslims besieged for three years in the eastern town of Srebrenica.

Another article denounced the U.N. peace-keeping force in Croatia and Bosnia, declaring it “a smuggling operation. We may never find out how much money they made on this war business and how the profit was divided between the planners, drivers, commanders and guards.” They have “a fine business sense.”

7.1.4. Serbs positioned as victims of an international conspiracy

A constant stream of fabrications and false accusations created another narrative within the master narrative: the Serbs were innocent victims of foreign conspiracies which sought to blame them for besieging cities and destroying monuments.

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dd Radio Belgrade, Radovan Karadžić interview, 3/22/93 (in Govor mržnje - GM: 64)
ec Radio Belgrade, report from Sweden: 3/22/93 (GM: 64)
ff Večernje Novosti, 4/23/93 (GM: 42)
gg Duga, 5/1/93 (GM: 73)
This narrative again reinforced the position of Serbs as victims, wrongfully accused and entirely innocent. Foreigners were positioned as perfidious anti-Serbs. The Serbian identity was reinforced, and a wedge was driven between “innocent Serbs” and “nefarious foreigners” and “domestic traitors”.

When the medieval Croatian city of Dubrovnik was being shelled by the Serb-dominated Yugoslav Army in the fall of 1991, the Serbian media accused Western reporters who filmed the burning citadel of staging the scene by setting a burning tire in front of their cameras.

The Serbs-as-victims frame was broader yet: an oft-repeated assertion was that the Serbs’ historical destiny is to always be bullied by Western powers, yet to remain proud and strong. This served to defuse any criticism of Serbian policies by Western politicians – they are always against us, and we must never give in to bullying!

7.1.5. Croats and Muslims positioned as perfidious, feeding the international anti-Serb conspiracy

The Serbian media for months avoided acknowledging that their side was keeping the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo under siege. The Serbian public was shown pictures and footage of the city taken before the war, thus dispelling any rumors that it was under bombardment. When they could no longer deny that the city was besieged, responsibility was shifted to the other side: “The Muslim authorities are keeping Sarajevo under siege from within,” and “Serbs are defending their ancestral hilltops around Sarajevo.”\(^{hh}\) After 4,000 Muslims were expelled from

\(^{hh}\) Both quotes are from the TV Belgrade evening news, Dnevnik, on 12/25/92 (GM: 28)
Trebinje, a small Serb-controlled town in eastern Bosnia, the Serb mayor explained: “[Bosnian President] Alija [Izetbegović] told them to leave.***

7.1.6. **Muslims and Croats positioned as morally inferior, deceitful, and corrupt**

In another sub-narrative, the Serbian media portrayed other ethnic groups as inferior and unmanly when compared to Serbs.

“[The Croats] are cowards. Cowardice is in their genes. […] by virtue of our genetic makeup, the Serbian people are always ready for warfare. Every Serb is a born soldier, and Europe knows that well.” jj

“The Croats are a rotten nation. I have never met a decent Croat,” kk asserted a prominent politician, affiliated with Milošević.

Muslims have been shelling their own civilians in Srebrenica to force the NATO alliance to intervene in Bosnia, but once the Canadian peacekeepers arrived in Srebrenica “the Muslims are quiet as lambs.” ll

7.1.7. **Muslims, Croats and Albanians positioned as genetically inferior**

Biljana Plavšić, one of the war-time leaders of Bosnian Serbs, opined that Serbs in Bosnia are genetically superior not just to Muslims, but to Serbs from Serbia, too. “Bosnian Serbs, particularly those who live along the border, have developed and perfected an ability to sense danger to the nation and develop defense mechanisms […] Remember, this defense

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**ii** Denvnik, TV Belgrade, 2/10/93 (GM: 28)
**jj** President of the Serbian Radical Party, Vojislav Seselj, interview in ON magazine, 7/4/91 (GM: 23)
**kk** Vojislav Seselj, in an interview with Der Spiegel, 8/6/91 (GM: 23)
**ll** Vecernje Novosti, 1999. (GM: 49)
mechanism is not developed over night; it takes decades, centuries. I am a biologist, and I know that the best adaptive abilities and survival strategies are developed in species that live close to other, predatory species.”

Asked to comment in another interview on whether Bosnian Muslims were Serbs whose ancestors converted to Islam, Plavšić concurred, and elaborated: “[I]t is the genetically defective material that converted to Islam. And now, from generation to generation, those genes are condensing. [People who carry such genes] are becoming ever worse; they express themselves in simple terms, with a correspondingly simple ways of thinking and acting. That is already written in their genes.”

A Bosnian Serb state official declared in an interview: “We have not forgotten our cultural tradition, or perhaps the genetic instinct for enlightenment even at the most difficult, darkest times. The Bosnian balija -- a Turkish word meaning a miscreant, so we are not offending -- is of Serb origin – oh, woe is us! – and he is ashamed of the ancestral sin, carries it in his subconscious, and that is why he wants to obscure his roots and his murky, shameful memories.”

Positioning non-Serbs as genetically inferior harkened back to the anti-Semitic discourse of Nazi propaganda. By singling out alleged genetic differences, members of an outgroup were degraded, made less than human, which meant that the prohibition of murder of a fellow human being no longer fully applied to them.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{mm}}\text{Borba, 7/28/92, in GM: 14-15.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{nn} Svet, 9/6/93, in GM: 18.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{o} Radoslav Unković, director of State Office for the Protection of historic and cultural heritage of the Serbian Republic, interview in Zapadna Srbija, 8/93, in GM: 16.}\]

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7.1.8. Muslims positioned as religious fanatics, Croats as uncompromising extremists

In this narrative, Serbia was positioned as a bulwark against the Islamic invasion of Europe and the Serbs as misunderstood and maligned defenders of Western civilization. The media exploited growing international concerns about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism by routinely portraying Bosnian Muslim soldiers as “Islamic fundamentalists” or “jihadists” bent on establishing a “Jamahiriyan regime” in Bosnia. Croats were labeled Ustaše and both ethnic groups were constantly described as being “blinded by hatred.”

One Serbian reporter contended, without proof, that 114 Serbs were “massacred, in the name of Allah”. pp

“For us Serbs, for the Serbian army, this is strictly a defensive war, and for them it is a religious war. It is jihad, a realization of religious fanaticism. The more they kill, the more they gain, according to the Quran […] We, the Orthodox, have never had religious fanaticism.”qq

7.1.9. But God is on our side

In another sub-narrative, the Serbian media positioned the Serbs as the instruments of the divine. In interview after interview, various writers, painters and nationalist ideologues repeated the refrain: “Serbs are a celestial nation.”

“No force or power can prevent us from creating a Serb state … only God may, but God shall not do it, because God is on our side.”rr

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pp Dnevnik TV Belgrade, 7/31/92 (GM: 29)
qq Duga, 2/12-2/26/93.: Interview with a Serbian priest.
rr Radovan Karadžić, leader of Bosnian Serbs, on Radio Belgrade, 3/1/93 (GM:35)
7.1.10. Enemy soldiers positioned as monsters and Serbian soldiers as disciplined and noble

In a variation on the theme of the enemy as inferior and cowardly, the Serbian media sometimes portrayed their ethnic foes as barbarians while painting a Serbian fighter as the epitome of the valiant and merciful soldier.

“A horde of butchers from [Croatian President Franjo] Tudjman’s Black Legion is headed towards Banija. The horde of mercenaries and murderers thirsty for Serbian blood who have barricaded themselves in Kostajnica seem to realize that they have been written off.”

Croatian and Muslim soldiers were often described as being “dirty, cowardly and drugged up.”

A Serbian priest who was a trained lawyer recalled the capture and trial of 70 “Ustašas.” “Since I am a lawyer, I acted as an investigative judge. I questioned every single one of them. Once we were satisfied that they had not committed any crimes, we released them all.” However, this religious leader/military prosecutor also asserted: “Muslims do not behave like that toward captured Serbian soldiers and the wounded […] Whatever the Muslims promise, they go back on. A man cannot make a deal with them.”

When an ancient mosque was blown up in the Serbian stronghold of Banja Luka in northern Bosnia, the Radio Belgrade reporter conveyed the local authorities’ sentiment that they “condemn the Croatian soldiers who did this, because never in history have Serbian soldiers destroyed cultural monuments.”

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**ss** Dnevnik, TV Belgrade, 7/27/91 (*GM*: 42)

**tt** Nikodin Ćavić in *Duga* (495) 2/12-2/26/93

**uu** *GM*: 36.
7.1.11. Opponents of the Milošević regime positioned as traitors, bad Serbs or spies

Serbia’s opposition parties were often referred to as the “demon-cratic opposition.”

A Radio Belgrade journalist said of a colleague from an independent radio station: “His genetic code contains a traitor gene.”

“Those who are against their own people are traitors,” declared a prominent intellectual in a magazine article.

“Belgrade is unfortunately a veritable city of fifth-columnists. It is full of rogues, cowards, false pacifists, backers of the other side, but Serbia cannot shoulder the burden of that menagerie forever,” wrote a prominent writer.

Anti-war demonstrators who took to the streets of Belgrade on April 3, 1993, were denounced as “Alija [Izetbegović’s] followers.”

Again, once critics of the regime were positioned as “bad Serbs”, the “good Serbs” were implicitly given the right to meet out punishment as they saw fit within the new moral order framed by the narrative of “protecting Serbia and Serbdom.”

In a more extreme sub-narrative, an editorial criticized the government for lacking the will to “clean out the anti-Serbian parasites that have multiplied in the key [government and media] institutions […] They are used to living as parasites on the backs of the Serbian people, and through the brute force of their parasitic instincts they wish the Serbian people ill, and they

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vv Quoted in Vreme, 9/20/93 (GM: 19)
ww Ljubmir Tadic, Duga (482) 5/7-29/7/9
xx Momo Kapor, Borba, 7-8/3/92
yy GM: 47
do them harm, hoping, [as can be seen] through their thoughts, words and actions, for another enslavement of the Serbs.**zz**

### 7.2. Identity and the Local Moral Order

Over just a few years, the Serbian identity shifted repeatedly. “We” initially meant “Yugoslavs”. Then it meant “Yugoslavs who identified with the Serbian regime and wanted Belgrade to remain the economic and political center of the country.” Soon it came to mean Serbs and Montenegrins, but only those loyal to Miloševićaaa. Eventually, the Montenegrins were excluded from the pronoun, as often too were the Serbian refugees from Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo (positioned as less urbane, less sophisticated and somehow inferior to the mainland Serbs.)

The Serbs always took great pride in their history of resistance to occupiers – particularly the Ottomans and the Nazis. Indeed, throughout their history, Serbs never acquiesced to occupation for long and fought courageously against far mightier opponents. Most recently, Serbs were the majority in the guerilla movement, the *partisans*, which fought the Nazis under Tito’s command. Once the Yugoslav identity was rejected in favor of the ethnic identity, the pro-Yugoslav partisans were positioned as traitors of the Serbian national ideal. The royalist Četniks were ex post facto elevated to the position of national heroes, their history of episodic collaboration with the Nazis and massacres of non-Serb civilians notwithstanding. With many

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**zz* Duga*, 494, 1/30-2/12/93 (*GM*: 51)

aaa “Serbia and Montenegro are like two eyes in the same head” was an oft-repeated refrain - until relations soured and Montenegro ultimately seceded.
former partisans still living, and generations raised celebrating their struggle, the abrupt shift of loyalty profoundly undermined the group’s identity.

These shifts were significant, as they stood in contrast to each other, and each entailed a loss of a part of “our” group. With each conversion, the relationships that defined and nourished people, the web of trust among individuals that made and sustained communities, frayed further, leaving people insecure and anxious. The result was ever greater demand for unity within what remained of the ingroup and a suppression of individuality. The Serbian society was becoming increasingly intolerant of dissent.

Identity is always relational; it defines who is included, but also who remains outside (Woodward, 1997). Therefore, the processes of group identity creation, maintenance and change are necessarily accompanied by processes of marginalization, stigmatization and exclusion. When identity is defined through positioning, by the media in the service of a belligerent regime, it has to foster unity and identification within the ingroup while simultaneously emphasizing differences and distancing “us” from “them”.

Moral philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen coined the term the logic of generic attribution to refer to the tendency to reduce every individual to a faceless member of a group, and to attribute to each one of them the responsibility for all wrongs, real or imagined, that ever befell “our” group, even in remote history. When the logic of generic attribution prevails, a murder of a Bosnian Muslim child in 1993 may be justified by reference to harms allegedly suffered by Serbs in the hands of Muslims in centuries past (Vetlesen, 2005: 158). But, for it to prevail, particularly in societies like Yugoslavia, where people lived peacefully side by side for generations, future
perpetrators must be exposed to systematic propaganda. The historical past must be
mythologized and the individuals reduced to stereotypes.

Stereotyping of “the other” - the use of impersonal and derisive images to narrow a
concept - was employed by the media to undermine the unique experience and personal
judgment of the listener. Simplistic and generalized labels were applied to define the outgroup.
Positioning members of the outgroup as inferior relieved the members of the ingroup of the
responsibility to treat them as equals. Once the enemy is reduced to something less than human,
to an amorphous, threatening mass, murder becomes justifiable.

Describing how a regime prepares the population for war and genocide, Vetlesen wrote:

“A war of words precedes a war of bodies… An atmosphere pervaded by fear, hatred,
distrust, contempt and the like, of the groups singled out for destruction [must be created]
in so many articles, books, speeches, and conventions. The drumming up of such an
atmosphere is a sine qua non for the atrocities to follow” (Vetlesen, 2005: 169-170).

Positioning other nations that once comprised Yugoslavia as a threatening, foreign,
inferior “other” made war possible. Positioning Europe and the United States as enemies had
profound and lasting effects on the Serbian society, for it discredited Western liberal values of
democracy, individual liberty, respect for minority rights, for hard work and education. This
made the people believe that there are no better alternatives to the political and social system
which they lived in, depriving them of hope and positive models to strive to emulate.
Milošević’s media used a particularly insidious tactic of altering the moral value of key words. Many words which social norms had earlier viewed as positive (brotherhood, unity, understanding, solidarity) became negative, and vice versa. Proponents of humanistic ideals, those who continued to believe in the sanctity of life and the need to protect human and political rights, were ridiculed as weak and naïve, if not subversive. Intolerance and a lack of compassion were marketed as virtues; empathy was equated with stupidity or lack of loyalty.

Milošević nurtured a symbiotic relationship between his regime and organized crime. Criminals were permitted to amass enormous wealth through UN-sanctions busting and other illegitimate businesses and through the evasion of domestic taxes and custom duties, in return for financially underwriting the regime. Criminal gangs were enlisted as paramilitary militias that acted as storm troopers in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. They conducted the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of non-Serbs and committed gross human rights abuses, including mass murder, rape and torture. In return, they were allowed to further their ill-gotten wealth through wholesale looting. The impoverished citizens could see that crime pays and commands respect. Honest work was devalued; theft and improbity rewarded. Violence became established as the efficient, masculine way of resolving disputes.

In a relatively short time, the social and moral norms that once held behavior in check had collapsed. People were left in an ideological and moral vacuum and norms of decency that govern behavior were discredited. In positioning theory terms, the local moral order underwent a profound change. The rights and duties embedded in prior positions no longer held meanings.

The duty to treat others civilly, as well as the prohibition of the taking of a human life, of theft, rape and other forms of violence was no longer in effect. The right to expect to be treated with dignity and respect was also annulled. The effects of these changes in identity and moral norms on the Serbian society were profoundly traumatic.

8. Stress, Trauma and Consequences on Group Life

8.1. Cultural Trauma

The term trauma has passed from medicine to everyday language, and we often hear about individuals who have suffered physical or emotional traumas, but also of traumatized populations and about national or other collective traumas. The extension of the psychological concept of trauma from individuals to groups is controversial for at least two reasons. First of all, groups do not have collective psyches that respond to extreme stress in a similar way to individuals. Just as importantly, a collective trauma is more than the sum of its parts: when a community endures an extreme event, such as a revolution, occupation, war or genocide, not only are individuals directly impacted (and many of them psychologically traumatized), but their relationships and their sense of identity and belonging are usually profoundly altered. Therefore,

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For the purpose of this paper, individual trauma is understood to mean a “a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so violently and with such brutal force that one can not react to it effectively” (Erikson, 1976: 153). It is typically triggered by an event, or a sequence of events, that involve a close personal encounter with violence and death, and engender in the victim feelings of intense fear, helplessness, loss of control and threat of annihilation (Andereasen, 1985: 918, Herman, 1992: 33) Collective trauma is loosely defined as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (Erikson, 1976: 154).
a traumatized society is not just a composite of traumatized individuals, and it will not automatically heal when enough individuals overcome their emotional scars; rather, a traumatized society comprises traumatized individuals whose sense of identity and communal belonging has been challenged, whose social and familial bonds have been disrupted. Such a society has a chance of repairing itself only when a significant percentage of its members begin to heal emotionally, and if and when these people choose to reengage with one another, to establish new bonds of trust and reconstruct communities, while also gradually coming to terms with the past and crafting a new collective identity.

A group of academics recently set out to develop the concept of cultural trauma from a sociological, and distinctly non-medical, perspective. They used it to describe situations “when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves inedible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander 2004: 1).

Within that study, prominent Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka expanded the concept of cultural trauma, suggesting that it is a necessary and natural product of a normal process of social change (Sztompka 2004, 155-195). He noted that people value security, predictability, continuity, routines and rituals in their lives and that every major social change disrupts this equilibrium and is inherently traumatic. In other words, he asserted that any social change that is “sudden, comprehensive, fundamental, and unexpected”, even if it is overall beneficial and progressive, is potentially traumatogenic if it challenges the collective identity (Sztompka, 2004: 159).
Sztompka focused his analysis on post-Communist societies in East-Central Europe, and Poland in particular, where the transition to democracy and a free market economy after 1989 was undoubtedly a major historic step forward. Even so, it also caused profound cultural disorganization and disorientation, the effects of which are still felt more than two decades after the fall of Communism. Sztompka noted that Poland had a relatively easier -- less traumatic -- transition from totalitarianism to democracy than some of its neighbors, due to its strong national identity, deeply rooted Christian values and strong pro-Western attitudes (Sztompka 2004: 176).

By any of these measurements, Serbia would have been at the opposite end of the spectrum when communism collapsed: uncertain about its national identity after five decades of Titoism, which suppressed ethnic identities in favor of the Yugoslav meta-identity, Serbia had also long lost touch with traditions and values enshrined in Orthodox Christianity and was entirely uncertain about whether its future lay with Europe or with Russia. While Poland and other countries gradually implemented economic and political reforms, Serbia slid back -- to tribalism, xenophobia, crime, ethical ambiguity, poverty and despair. In the process, as noted earlier, social bonds frayed and moral standards were devalued. Most tragically, under Milošević’s leadership, Serbia became a perpetrator society, responsible for four wars and worst mass crimes in Europe since the end of World War Two.

Putting aside for a moment the traumas and destruction that Serbia’s wars of aggression caused, we should note that mass crimes also affect perpetrators: there is the direct psychological trauma of individual participants in atrocities, as well as the cultural trauma to the perpetrator society, with its attendant losses of self-respect, identity, values and meaning, and a tearing in the
social fabric of a formerly cohesive group (Eyerman 2001: 1). The effects of these processes are still acutely felt in Serbia.

8.2. Stress

Night after night in the early 1990s, the military police rounded up young men in the streets of Belgrade, shipping them directly to the front lines. Parents lived in terror that their sons would be thus drafted and entire families lived under siege, keeping their young men indoors for months. As the economic crisis deepened -- because of the cost of wars, disappearing markets and the United Nations-imposed economic sanctions -- entire industries disappeared and people lost their jobs. They became dependent on humanitarian assistance and were forced to spend all of their time waiting for handouts, and then bartering whatever they received for what they actually needed -- flour for detergent, cooking oil for gasoline. Manu engaged in a “gray economy” -- the smuggling of gasoline, counterfeit cigarettes and cheap goods from Turkey and China.

State-owned banks collapsed, robbing people of their life savings. To drain the remaining hard currency from the increasingly frantic population, the regime printed money and dispatched a small army of street dealers to buy up hard currency at rates far exceeding the official exchange rate. The result, predictably, was hyperinflation, which during 1993 soared to an incredible $5.5 \times 10^{20}$ per cent. During the period of hyperinflation, the Federal Bank issued 33 new bank notes, so

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Mental health professionals, social scientists and peacebuilding practitioners have generated a diverse and extensive body of literature that focuses on experiences and needs of individual and group survivors of mass crimes. Meanwhile, very little attention has been paid to the trauma of perpetrators of those crimes. Among the few studies is Bernhard Geisen’s *Trauma of Perpetrators* (in Alexander et al., 2004), which examines the re-formulation of the German national identity after the Holocaust.
that people would not have to wheel bags full of cash to pay for ever fewer consumer goods available for purchase (Ţivković, 2011: 228). People had to wait for days in lines in banks to collect their salaries and pensions, and then rushed to spend them within minutes on whatever was available at the moment. Writing about that period, a Belgrade economist noted that, in 1993, “you needed two average monthly salaries to buy a simple electric plug, while a baby stroller cost 97 average monthly salaries […] An average pension could buy only a kilogram of carrots” (Dinkić, 1995: 243).

Generating further chaos, the regime propped up con artists who set up massive Ponzi schemes disguised as private banks. Encouraged by reports of untold riches acquired by early entrants, people sold their cars, flats and family jewelry; most lost everything they had. The collapse of the Ponzi schemes was accompanied by a wave of suicides.

As dissatisfaction grew into panic, internal opposition to Milošević strengthened. Opposition parties repeatedly organized massive rallies in the streets of Belgrade, and the regime used police in full riot gear, water cannons and live ammunition to dispel protestors. Many demonstrators were injured and some were killed in the streets of Belgrade. To project power and maintain order, tanks were brought out to the streets of the capital a number of times.

Milošević inherited the Tito-era tools of oppression – police, secret services and the judiciary -- as well as a well-developed network of party loyalists and secret police informants. They readily switched allegiances to the new order. Many infiltrated opposition parties and the

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eeec A kilogram is about two pounds.

ffe Significantly, the opposition never rejected nationalism, denounced the wars in Croatia and Bosnia as aggression, or offered an alternate ideology or a value system. For the most part, they challenged only Milošević’s economic policies and his use of repressive mechanisms at home and later blamed him for losing the wars.
nascent non-governmental organizations and citizens groups to undermine them from within and inform on the members. **“If you are not paranoid, you are not thinking,”** was a common lament, which underlined the widespread corrosion of relationships between friends, relatives, neighbors and colleagues -- the invisible web that holds a society together.

During many marathon parliamentary sessions that stretched deep into the night, people waited with baited breath to hear whether the government would fall, or whether it would declare a state of emergency. The regime finally did fall, in October 2000, after a 77-days-long NATO bombing campaign against military and industrial targets in Serbia. Of the long stream of dramatic events over the course of the decade, being bombarded by the world’s most powerful military force for two and a half months was probably the greatest shock to the already traumatized and bewildered nation.

Milošević was not toppled through revolution, as is widely believed in the West. Rather, some of the key members of his inner circle carried out a *coup d’etat* when they realized that continued loyalty to him was too costly in the face of the international community’s resolve to remove the man who never ceased to generate crisis. The darkest period in Serbia’s modern history had finally come to an end.

**8.3. Milošević’s Legacy**

Serbia’s former strongman was not the only villain in the Yugoslav tragedy of the 1990s. He was, however, the key player, the one who had the initiative until the very end, while all

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**ggg** Suspicions that Milošević was also ordering assassinations of his political rivals were widespread, but would not be confirmed until his fall from power.
others – including the leaders of powerful Western nations and their peace envoys – were merely responding to his moves.\textsuperscript{hhh} The legacy of his regime includes hundreds of thousands of direct victims of the wars – people killed, injured, imprisoned, tortured, raped, displaced, or otherwise traumatized, or those who remain unaccounted for\textsuperscript{iii} - as well as destroyed economies, infrastructures, homes, monuments and places of worship across four neighboring countries.

Although Serbia waged those wars outside of its borders, it ultimately paid an extremely high price: of the estimated 250,000 ethnic Serbs who fought in the wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, some 2,500 were killed or remain unaccounted for, and another 2,500 were maimed and wounded.\textsuperscript{iii} These veterans, many of them missing limbs and afflicted with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), encountered a dearth of economic opportunities and little social support when they returned from the front lines. Alcoholism, drug abuse, relationship

\textsuperscript{hhh} Srđa Popović, an astute analyst of Serbian society and politics, and one of former Yugoslavia’s most prominent human rights lawyers, likened Milošević to Shakespeare’s Iago: a malcontent sociopath, a sadist and a manipulator who harbors “a general grudge against life and society”; a self-destructive man, motivated not by ideology or even self-interest, but by a desire to deceive, control and ultimately destroy others (Popović, 2006: 50-51).

\textsuperscript{iii} Estimates of the numbers of people killed, wounded, displaced or remain unaccounted for vary widely. The dead in the four wars number in the tens of thousands (some 100,000 in Bosnia alone, according to reliable sources). In addition, hundreds are still missing; hundreds of thousands were injured, maimed, imprisoned, raped or otherwise traumatized and several million had been rendered homeless. It is fair to say that the lives of all 22 million citizens of the former Yugoslavia were profoundly altered by the wars.

problems, domestic violence, depression and suicides are common in this segment of the population, which remains marginalized to this day.\(^{kkk}\)

Serbian civilian deaths and casualties numbered in the tens of thousands. Nearly a million Serb civilians (mostly rural and poorly educated) were forced to flee their homes in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo and resettle in Serbia. They overwhelmed the already stressed educational and health care systems and competed for scarce jobs and resources with the citizens of Serbia. Their arrival, combined with the loss of tens of thousands of the country’s most promising young professionals through a brain drain that lasted throughout the 1990s, profoundly altered the country’s social structure.

Today, of Serbia’s 7.5 million citizens, only about 400,000 have college degrees. Half are functionally illiterate, and 20 percent have less than elementary school education.\(^{iii}\) About 800,000 live below the poverty line, with another million tethering on the brink.\(^{mmm}\) Militarily defeated and destitute, ordinary Serbs remain deeply convinced of their own victimhood. Serbia is seen as a victim of historic circumstance, of American colonial aspirations, of NATO aggression, and – in some interpretations – of Milošević. Having been told repeatedly that they are the oldest nation, the chosen people, the righteous ones, most ordinary Serbs now share a sense of national identity that combines narcissism with paranoia: people believe that they are different and important, that no one understands them and that they have been made to suffer


\(^{mmm}\) Serbian government data, available on line at: [http://www.inkluzija.gov.rs/](http://www.inkluzija.gov.rs/)
unjustly. This thinking naturally leads to a conclusion that there is a giant anti-Serb conspiracy (Popović, 2010: 440). Fear breeds hatred, which colors many people’s view of the outside world. No longer able to direct that hatred on members of other ethnic groups, people now unleash their anger on gays and lesbians, refugees, foreigners, political opponents, supporters of different soccer clubs, random strangers and members of their own families. Violence has become an accepted way of solving disputes. Gun violence and domestic abuse are prevalent.

The Serbian Orthodox Church remains among the most reactionary institutions in the country, as it was under Milošević when it promoted the most militant nationalism and justified murder and ethnic cleansing. All but 0.5 percent of Serbs today consider themselves Christians and ostentatious demonstrations of alleged piety are commonplace. However, few people abide by Christian norms – largely because few really know them, having been raised under socialism. No other value systems has had a chance to develop after socialism collapsed, leaving the society in a chronic state of anomie. Rampant consumerism, astrology and various superstitions rule in that void. Belligerent nationalism continues to influence politics and public discourse. Nationalist intellectuals, who articulated and legitimized aggression and murder, were never forced to recant and withdraw from public life. Along with large segments of the old elites, they were able to reposition themselves within the new power structures. Their continued ability to influence the public discourse and dictate policies allowed them to derail all attempts to open a discussion of responsibility for the wars and for war crimes.

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Mattijs van de Port explored the Serbian exceptionalism in “It Takes a Serb to Know a Serb”

Nota bene, 0.5 was the percentage of Christians in Tito’s secular state (Popović, 2010: 112)

Serbian nationalism is inherently racist and xenophobic. It connotes not pride in a political system or a culture, but in the nation, which in this case does not coincide with political boundaries and excludes minorities.
Responsibility for war crimes has been transferred to Milošević and individual paramilitaries, and the idea that all Serbs should share in the collective moral responsibility for the crimes committed ostensibly on their behalf in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Kosovo is rejected vehemently. Even those Serbs who did not vote for Milošević prefer silence, for they do not want to confront their lost moral integrity. The collective traumas of guilt and defeat are insurmountable; silence is the only option. The few liberal intellectuals who insist on the examination of cultural, political and moral responsibility are marginalized and ridiculed, and often threatened.

In the era of the internet and satellite television, however, it is impossible even for the most ardent nationalists to ignore the preponderance of evidence that the aims, the means and the circumstances of the wars which Serbia had waged were criminal. Writing about perpetrator groups in general, Bernhard Giesen noted that when a community has to acknowledge that its members, instead of being heroes, were offenders “who violated the cultural premises of their own identity, the reference to the past is indeed traumatic. The community can cope with the

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\[\text{\textsuperscript{q}}\text{\textsuperscript{3} In a December 1989 referendum, 86\% of Serbs expressed confidence in Milošević’s presidency. Serbia embraced Milošević and the majority of citizens repeatedly voted for his regime. Only a fraction of Serbia’s citizens were liberal, anti-nationalist and ideologically opposed to Milošević.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{r}}\text{\textsuperscript{3} Israeli psychologist Daniel Bar-On investigated the impact of the Holocaust on survivors’ and perpetrators’ children. He found that the fathers, former members of the SS, did not want to talk about their participation in the murder of Jews, but also that their children, helpfully, did not want to know about it (Bar-On, 1989: 27)}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{s}}\text{\textsuperscript{s} Popović notes that there have been no memoirs of the war by decorated heroes, no movies that depict ‘our heroic struggle’, no commemorations of grand battles fought and won. The reason for this, he observes, is that the hallmark of the wars was professionals training their guns on unarmed civilians. The veterans are treated with pity, indifference or disdain because they are living reminders and witnesses of this shameful history (Popović, S., 2011: 111)}\]
fundamental contradiction between identity claims and recognition only by a collective schizophrenia, by denial, by decoupling, or withdrawal” (Giesen, 2004: 114).

8.4. Prolonged Stress and its Implications for Group Life

Psychiatrist and trauma expert Sandra Bloom discovered parallels between an individual human’s response to threat and the behavior of stressed or traumatized groups\textsuperscript{iii} (Bloom, 2009: 143-168). The subjects of her study were the Americans and the American society after the 2001 terrorist attacks, but her observations and conclusions are equally applicable to Serbia.

When an individual feels threatened, his attention becomes focused on the source of the threat, while his capacity for reasoning and judgment is diminished.\textsuperscript{iii} Because there is no time to obtain all the necessary information and consider all possible outcomes, the decisions that we make under extreme duress tend to be “inflexible, oversimplified, extremist, directed toward action and often poorly constructed” (147). When a group feels threatened (as Serbs were made to feel in the lead-up to the wars and for many years thereafter), individuals bind together, close ranks, and prepare to defend the group. They become territorial, intolerant of dissent and tend to manifest a greater than usual desire for retaliation for real or imagined grievances (148). Bloom observed that the tendency of human groups to become less democratic and more authoritarian and hierarchical under stress, ensures that decisions can be made quickly and efficiently (147).

\textsuperscript{iii} By a “traumatized group” she means a group whose members feel that their individual and group survival is under threat.

\textsuperscript{iii} Essentially, the body diverts resources away from the time-consuming mental efforts of defining and analyzing a problem, and directs them instead toward physical actions – fleeing, fighting or freezing in anticipation.
These strategies were essential for the survival of early human hunters and warriors, but in modern times they conspire to create dysfunctional societies. Because people are physiologically primed to favor action over analysis in times of acute stress, they will prefer leaders who drive the group to action, no matter how ill-considered that action may be, over thoughtful, cautious leaders. As (perceived) threat grows, the leader will be expected to make quick decisions, through a process that will tend toward extremist thinking and oversimplified, binary choices. In Serbia, people were ready to follow charismatic leaders who offered war against external enemies, or confrontations with the police at home; those who counseled dialogue and peaceful resolution of disputes were not even heard.

As everyone pulls together and dissenters are silenced, an intoxicating feeling of oneness develops; the resolute leader, now seen as an irreplaceable protector, assumes mythical proportions in the imagination of ordinary people. In the early years of Milošević’s rule, when one crisis followed another, a cult of personality developed around him so that any challenge of his leadership was seen as treason. Great national pride was mixed with fear and anxiety.

When such leaders need to shore up their support, they may foster group cohesion by escalating conflict with the designated external enemy, while more strenuously suppressing dissent internally. According to Bloom (156) this cycle may lead to a state of chronic repetitive conflict externally and escalating repressive measures internally. Indeed, Milošević started four wars in a row, while using ever more violent measures against challengers at home.

When a group is stuck in an endless stream of crisis, with no chance for recuperation between them (as has been the case in Serbia for much of the past two decades), tensions increase. People become irritable, tempers flare, and violence becomes an acceptable mean of
resolving disputes. Interpersonal conflicts that were suppressed during the initial crisis return, but conflict resolution mechanisms, if they ever existed, deteriorate further under chronic stress. A group stuck in such a pattern will continue to repeat the old problem-solving and decision-making strategies, without recognizing that they have long ago lost their effectiveness. Healthier individuals are discarded or flee from the group; the remaining members increasingly appear, feel and act angry, depressed and anxious, but feel helpless to affect any change. There is an increased incidence of illness, addiction and antisocial acts. The group eventually adapts by changing group norms: behaviors that were once anathema, are now considered acceptable. Conditions that would have been considered intolerable, become acceptable. Again, all of those developments have been observed and documented in Serbia.

Helplessness – which human beings deplore – is a hallmark characteristic of traumatic experiences. Exposed to chronic helplessness, people will adapt, a phenomenon called “learned helplessness”. They cease struggling to escape their situation, thus conserving vital resources and buffering the nervous system against the negative impact of overstimulation (151). They alter their notion of normal. Later, when change may become possible, they may not recognize the opportunity, used as they are to buckling down and coping.

This may be the most significant point to keep in mind when considering Serbia: the people are traumatized, anxious and exhausted after twenty years of endless crisis. They are uncertain about their identity, having been re-positioned repeatedly in relationships to others, with each position cancelling out the earlier ones. The local moral order has been upended, yet no new norms have been established. They are accustomed to the lack of freedom -- the
abnormal has become normal -- and they continue to look up to resolute leaders who promise them certainty and security.

Peacebuilding efforts in such a society should focus on teaching and instituting alternative dispute mechanisms; on reforming the system so that it respects and protects individual rights; generating a shared sense of social responsibility and on helping the society gradually discover and articulate anew a system of ethical norms, which the state will reinforce through laws and practice. The European Union now has a chance of gradually bringing Serbia into the community of Western democracies by mandating legal, educational and other reforms which will reflect these priorities.

9. Concluding Comments

In the aftermath of massive human rights violations, including war and genocide, most outsiders are moved by instinct and reason to feel empathy toward those who have suffered the most, and to try to help them rebuild their lives. Frequently, the targeted group is left decimated, their economy shattered and infrastructure degraded; survivors may be traumatized and in desperate need of various forms of assistance, from fresh water and emergency shelter to permanent resettlement and long-term mental health services. Increasingly, whenever it is politically and logistically feasible, the international community – governments, international institutions, humanitarian and non-governmental organizations, religious and citizens’ groups – mobilize to deliver aid and to assist in recovery.
Perpetrators, be they nation-states or ethnic or religious groups, are typically offered much less, if any, assistance in rebuilding and restoring their communities after violent conflict, although they are usually also struggling with concurrent humanitarian, economic and socio-political crisis. Having perhaps been defeated through international military intervention, forced to accept punitive terms of peace, or to hand over their political and military leaders to international courts for prosecution, the perpetrator groups are usually also impoverished by the conflict, and are likely to be traumatized, disoriented and humiliated.

It is understandable why victims would be given priority access to limited resources. Indeed, it may be fair and just to withhold assistance from those who have breached moral and legal norms and caused havoc and suffering. Some may even feel that we have no business trying to explain what motivated the perpetrators. In this view, trying to understand what transformed ordinary people into murderers reduces the enormity of their crimes and is insulting to their victims. However, the failure to consider the motives and traumas of perpetrators – both historic traumas that may have fueled violent conflict and those that resulted from it – can leave them nursing their real or imagined historic injuries and stubbornly refusing responsibility for crimes committed by members of their group and on their behalf. Because their national narratives are so at odds with the way they are perceived by the rest of the world, they can remain outside the international community for decades, feeling victimized, misunderstood.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{V\textdegree V\textdegree}}\] “There is an absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding [why Jews were murdered in the Holocaust]” stated Claude Lanzmann, the director of the nine-and-a-half hour documentary, Shoah (1985), about the mass murder of Jews in Nazi death camps. Lanzmann is adamant that no amount of analysis can connect the individual or collective traumas of the Nazis with their participation in the campaign that led to the death of six million Jews (Carouth, 1995: 204).
unjustly punished and desirous of revenge. Their neighbors will distrust them, and indeed, they may continue to generate crisis.

Furthermore, while refusing to understand the experience of perpetrators may be morally justified, that those among us who believe that responsibility to protect should become a norm in international law are obliged to study the genesis of genocides past, in order to better be able to recognize convergence of forces that may unleash another bout of mass violence.

While psychologists and philosophers will continue to grapple with the question of what makes it possible for one individual, or a whole group of human beings, to shed the natural inhibition against murder, positioning theory provides one useful framework of analysis. The example of Serbia suggests that a moral order which condones murder can be engineered, even in a relatively short time span, by those who control the public discourse if they are able to create a positioning theory triad of narrative, positions, and action/acts. The first step in this process is to cut off the targeted community from others and then proceed to manipulate the discourse.

Indeed, the dynamic between the Milošević regime and its subjects resembled a classic abusive domestic relationship. Like an abusive partner would do to their victim, the government first blamed the nation for their own problems. Then it symbolically positioned them as alone and abandoned by anyone else: foreign governments, foreign media, international humanitarian institutions, the Catholic Church, even the Free Masons were against them. Any Serb who maintained contact with foreigners or questioned the official narrative was immediately positioned as a traitor and accused of being a spy – very dangerous labels in an environment where violence was legitimized as a way of resolving disputes. Finally, the abuser presented
himself as the victim’s only friend and benefactor: only Milošević knew what the people needed, and only his regime was working to protect them and their interests.

This analogy helps us understand the power of Milošević’s media. Poor, bewildered, afraid, and isolated, the people were ready to believe someone who offered unity, dignity and security. Questioning that authority became tantamount to betraying your only friend. The state-run media obligingly provided a veritable panoply of foes against whom the people could blame and vent their frustrations and anger.

In positioning theory terms, once the main narrative was established and alternate ones discredited, the regime had effectively created a new moral order. Within this new system of rights and duties, the Serbs, positioned as innocent victims/righteous warriors/chosen by God were given the right to wage war, and not chose the means to obtain their goals. They were absolved of the duty to treat the enemy, positioned as morally and genetically inferior, with any consideration. Instances of shocking brutality toward the enemy became patriotic acts.

Serbia is a classic example of an aggressor state that has been militarily subdued through concerted international action, yet the ideology that justified and fueled its aggressive policies has not been discredited in the eyes of most Serbs. The Serbian regime’s disingenuous claims that it waged wars to right various historic injustices were never debunked, legitimate collective historic traumas of the Serbian people were not adequately addressed, even as several layers of new traumas had been visited on the collective psyche through ten years of wars. The result is a disoriented, traumatized, angry populace and an unstable state that is just barely able to inch toward democracy, rule of law and international integration. The people who participated or at least tacitly condoned a series of four wars of aggression, which included the worst human rights
violations on European soil since the end of World War Two, do not easily elicit our sympathy. Still, failing to understand why they supported or tolerated the regime that caused such devastation, ignoring their individual and collective traumas, risks leaving them susceptible to demagoguery, which could again lead to violence.

The answer is certainly not in appeasement of perpetrators. Rather, peacemakers and peacebuilders need to be mindful of the real and imagined grievances of perpetrators and may need to address, as far as possible, their legitimate needs after the conflict, in order to help break the cycle of violence.

In pre-conflict settings, it is even more important to recognize which social changes can be sufficiently traumatic and disorienting for groups to make them willing to follow even those leaders who offer war as an answer.

Another important lesson from the Balkan tragedy is that the world should take notice when an authoritarian regime isolates its population and begins to use the media to position them as victims. It is only a short step from there to repositioning them as liberators, heroes or holly warriors.

www An analogous argument applies to national criminal justice systems: there is ample evidence that a society thatpunishes and then effectively excludes former offenders will likely see higher rate of recidivism than the one that invests in community building, crime prevention, social and other support services for at-risk population, vocational training in prisons, job opportunities and social support services for former inmates, etc. Unless a society is willing to permanently exclude offenders, they must be given opportunities to reintegrate and become benign, even useful, members of their communities. This can be achieved through targeted social interventions, designed with an understanding of what caused the perpetrators to offend in the first place.
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