

**GENERATION BOMBING - RENARRATING MYTHS: THE
IMPORTANCE OF THE 1999 NATO BOMBING ON
ATTITUDES TOWARDS KOSOVO AS A SYMBOLIC CONCEPT**

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ABSTRACT

The 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia played an important part in the socialization process for the generation born during the 1990s. It revived a myth of honor and sacrifice and exposed this generation to a century long conflict through this traumatic event. This thesis explores how the fundamental national myth of Kosovo helped this generation comprehend the 1999 military intervention, as well as how this generations' experience of the bombing contributed to their renarration of the myth. By focusing on this event, the thesis contributes to the wider debates related to the symbolic potential that the myth of Kosovo carries for this generation and its impact on collective memory in regards to the 1990s in Serbia. Theoretical framework of the dissertation is based on conceptual discussion in four subject areas: collective memory, sociological generations, cultural trauma and national myths. Empirical data is collected by an online survey (N=175) of respondents from the age cohort born between 1990-1997. Attitudes and memories of the respondents about the bombing were subsequently categorized in order to create a typology of distinct remembering groups. These groups differ in the ways in which internal and external factors influenced their memory formation processes and in how they view the importance of Kosovo for the Serbian national identity today. The evidence shows that young adults used national common stories to make sense of their personal experience while at the same time including this personal experience into the national story.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my mother, thank you for supporting my interest in the last topic you thought I would ever want to deal with.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a significant event that every younger generation in Serbia grows up with. It is a tale of sacrifice, heroism and honor in the face of a great enemy and his mighty upper hand. The event is the Battle of Kosovo, an unfair battle waged for days and nights and seemingly never ending. It is not quite clear who won, but it is usually assumed that our ancestors lost. I also learned this story since I was in elementary school— it is the story of the Battle of Kosovo. But sometimes I am not sure which battle it refers to— the one in 1389 or the one in 1999?

This first post 1990s conflict generation in Serbia was also the first digital generation.¹ It is the generation born throughout the 1990s, which meant that they essentially had no primary experience of the Yugoslav conflicts that took place during the decade, but were indirectly socialized within these conflicts through their surroundings. Today the members of this generation are in their mid to late 20s and a number of them are questioning their own *national identity* through their contemporary agora— social media. This fact also means that the generation is getting politically socialized within a new digital environment. The aim of this research is to determine how this generation is embracing and understanding the narratives related to Kosovo and how they are creating a conversation around it in their social groups. One key question that arises is what importance does Kosovo hold as a symbolic concept in their understanding of social life, if any? In order to analyze this phenomenon, the focus is placed on one specific event— the

¹ I use the term *digital generation* here as a broad signifier for the generation of young people that were growing up around the time when the Internet increasingly became a household commodity. So, their experience of socialization was in some ways mediated through it. There are ongoing debates about which generation is the ‘digital generation’ but I will not engage with this. I am only referencing the term loosely referring to the global emergence of the digital environment at the time, but am later discussing and accepting Goran Bolin’s concept of *media generations* instead. For more on the debate around ‘digital generations’ see Tapscott 1998; Prensky 2001; Edmunds and Turner 2005; Buckingham and Willett 2006.

NATO military intervention on the territory of Serbia, which was part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at the time that took place during the broader Kosovo conflict in 1999.

The research question is twofold and aims to approach the narrative of Kosovo from two distinct angles in search for complementary answers. Firstly, I enquire how did the myth of Kosovo help this generation comprehend the 1999 bombing, and secondly, how did this generations' experience of the bombing contribute to their renarration of the national myth of Kosovo? The first hypothesis is that since the intervention was a response to the conflict that was taking place in Kosovo at the time, it allowed this generation to connect more to the dominant Serbian national narrative, through considering the country's role in the conflict. The second hypothesis pertaining to the latter part of the research question is that these experiences of the bombing helped solidify the national myth in terms relevant for the new generation, utilizing the 'young' perspective in order to revive the narrative of Kosovo.

This thesis aims to explain how the NATO bombing became one of the most significant events of the decade and how the memory of this event became a staple in the Serbian narrative for the generation that has come of age in the 2010s. By focusing on this event, it will contribute to the wider debates related to the symbolic potential that the myth of Kosovo carries for this generation as well as its impact on collective memory in regards to the 1990s in Serbia.

The first chapter will be dedicated to the analysis of the most important theoretical approaches within the subject areas this thesis deals with. This will form a theoretical framework with major conceptual tools based on collective memory, trauma, generations and national myths. These theories and concepts will be contextualized within the key event– the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia– but also connected to the discussion on the creation and significance of myths. i.e. on how and why national myths are relevant and sustained today. The second chapter will present a

brief historical overview of the conditions in Serbia in the 1990s. It will center on Serbia-Kosovo relations and the stage of the ongoing conflict at the time, as well as indicate the significance of the bombing and its legacy in contemporary Serbian society. The third chapter will deal with Kosovo as a complex place, simultaneously signifying the myth of origin and a place of trauma as well as a cornerstone of the Serbian victimhood narrative. The final chapter will present the research findings of the original survey conducted online with members of this generation. It will open with an explanation of the methodology and the data gathering processes, followed by an analysis of the major empirical findings. The chapter will close with classification of different types of *remembering groups* among the members within the generation. Further discussion about the research results will provide evidence to answer the research questions and lead to the concluding section of the dissertation. The major goal of the combined empirical investigation and interpretation presented in this thesis is to describe and explain dominant memory practices about traumatic collective event of national significance of a particular generation with loose personal experiences to it.

This has both social and academic relevance of a mapping and exploratory study. The main group of interest in this research is the generation of people born from 1990 to 1997, nicknamed the *generation of the 1990s* for the purposes of convenience. Their mnemonic tools and memories open a whole new window in the investigation of questions of remembering and national identity, especially when it comes to traumatic childhood events. An initial assessment prior to the research was that there was a significant gap in the literature regarding this generation in Serbia and their memories about the 1999 bombing. Therefore, it was assumed that this generation would be willing to share their experiences and thoughts about the issue, since the question of Kosovo is still very prominent in the current socio-political discourse of Serbia. This assumption turned out

to be correct, and the engagement with the survey was very positive. However, it should be noted that given the limited time frame and length of the thesis, the scope of this research is not without its limitations. First, the respondents were all (or are currently) university students, since the survey was mostly circulated through online university groups. For the purpose of this specific research, this does not present a detrimental limitation, but in future research there should definitely be an effort to expand and diversify the participant pool.

I would like to point out the occasional difficulties in conducting impartial analysis while doing this research. Since I myself am a member of the generation in question, I have also lived through the bombing and have experienced both the accompanying trauma and memories. They have been a part of my growing up in Serbia and making sense of them, using analytical tools rather than personal mementos is one of the main reasons for choosing this research topic.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical framework for this dissertation rests on crossroads of approaches to collective memory, myth making, cultural trauma and studies of generations. These four conceptual corners provide a frame to problematize a generational memory of an important historical event and its contribution to the national narrative about it. Review of selected literature regarding each of these subject areas will narrow down relevant knowledge necessary to conceptualize, analyze and further discuss data collected through empirical research. The focus of the research is a particular event connected to a specific generational cohort, which has not been systematically studied so far. The dissertation is therefore exploratory inquiry into a study object which is limited to a certain time and context. But the aim of the research is also to interpret the results in a way to generate insights into broader and more general processes connecting myths, memory and culturally traumatic national events with personal narratives of remembering.

Collective Memory

The obvious starting point of discussion in the field of collective memory is the foundational work by Maurice Halbwachs. Through his insights and research, he has shaped what is today a significant part of collective memory studies. Most notably, Halbwachs (1980) argued that all memory, be it individual or collective, is framed within an individual's social milieu, thus emphasizing the importance of analyzing the ties between these two strains of remembering. This means that memory should neither be regarded as exclusively personal nor collective, and that collective memory itself is a construct that we would not be able to function without in our world. The author also points to the distinction between individual and collective memory citing that "the individual memory, in order to corroborate and make precise and even to cover the gaps in its remembrances, relies upon, relocates itself within, momentarily merges with, the collective

memory. [...] It evolves according to its own laws, and any individual remembrances that may penetrate are transformed within a totality having no personal consciousnesses”.² From this we derive that collective memory is separate from individual memory in a specific way— for the most part, collective memory is impersonal. It is a collage of memories derived from the dynamics of social groups such as families, friend groups and religious groups that serve as a catalyzer for shared experiences and that can be used for strengthening the national identity. This is especially the case for memories that are considered to be shared by a whole nation for instance, memories that are mirrored on significant events which took place at some point in the nation’s history and have been chosen to represent the nations success, bravery and perseverance. Halbwachs writes that “these events have deeply influenced national thought, not only because they have altered institutions but also because their tradition endures, very much alive, in region, province, political party, occupation, class, even certain families or persons who experienced them firsthand”.³ Not all of the members of the nation need to remember these events personally; they are shared as a common stock of nationhood among members, especially the younger generations, where these memories are used as tools for social integration. This can be done through state sponsored celebrations and commemorations, national art and literature and even propaganda-like media reporting and programming. Therefore, in Halbwachs’ view the nature of a group’s experience shapes its collective memories.

The commemoration or re-evocation of these memories creates what Eviatar Zerubavel (2011) refers to as ‘traditions of remembering’.⁴ This notion “...underscores the normative dimension of memory which is by and large ignored by cognitive science. Remembering, after all,

² Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row Colophon Books, 1980), 51.

³ Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 51.

⁴ Eviatar Zerubavel, Social Memories: Steps Towards a Sociology of the Past. in: Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi & Daniel Levy (eds.). *The Collective Memory Reader*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 222.

is more than just a spontaneous personal act. It is also regulated by unmistakably social *rules of remembrance* that tell us quite specifically what we should remember and what we must forget”.⁵ Those regulatory interventions than guide latter understandings of memorable “history” and significance of singular events within it.

For example, the way that the tale of the Battle of Kosovo is retold has been historically disputed many times, but the version in which the Serbs were the weaker force and still managed to emerge victorious has become a canon, even though it is mostly fictional. Most notably, President Milošević evoked the story of the battle of Kosovo in his 1989 Gazimestan address to depict the unjust position of the Serbian people in Kosovo, but also in Yugoslavia, from his perspective. Many have argued that Milošević’s speech starkly foreshadowed the events of the 1990s in Serbia and the region, precisely because it relied on narratives of battle and war. With the beginning of the NATO bombing campaign in 1999, the tale of the Battle of Kosovo was again retold in order to justify the battle that the Serbian people had to lead to protect their sovereignty and the territory of Kosovo. Zerubavel argues that “such *sociobiological memory* also accounts for the sense of pride, pain or shame we sometimes experience with regard to events that had happened to groups and communities to which we belong long before we joined them”.⁶ This explains the continuation of strong bonds felt by the generation that has come of age through the conflicts of the 1990s in Yugoslavia. The narratives that were shared with them when they were at a very young age influenced their views of Serbia itself, but also of its geo-political position in the changing and uncertain world during that time. Halbwachs attributes these bonds to the passing of

⁵ Zerubavel, 222.

⁶ Eviatar Zerubavel, History, Memory and Identity. *The Collective Memory Reader*. Olick, Jeffrey K. Vinitzky-Seroussi, Vered. Levy, Daniel. (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 224.

memories from older to younger generations by arguing that “what becomes fixed in his [the child’s] memory are not just facts, but attitudes and ways of thinking from the past”.⁷

The bombing is also such distinct and decisive singular even that can be considered as a sort of *lieux de memoire*. Conceptualized by Pierre Nora (1989) as any material or non-material entity that carries significance in popular collective memory, these sites are simultaneously symbolic, material and functional. They are sites where memory is constructed as a result of social interaction and is artificially maintained, creating in return the same site which becomes popularized through commemoration. This entity could be anything from a museum, flag, symbol, event or cultural landmark with a place in the context of national history connected to the state or the nation. In this case, the bombing represents an event in history where Serbian people demonstrated heroism and strength against their enemies. By its symbolic geography it connects this tragic event to the epic tale of the Battle of Kosovo, which is already a landmark Serbian memory site. Nora’s *lieux de memoire* acquired interpreted in the digital sphere, where it still carries the same connotations, but now exists as an intangible entity open for everyone to witness and participate in. The commemorative posts motivate members to share and engage more rather than if they would have to physically go and attend a commemoration event in the city or at an actual location. But the spatial dimension of the commemoration is still present since the visual identity of the posts is highly tied to the affected areas within the cities, especially Belgrade. This brings an interesting aspect to the analysis, since most of the bombing targets have been removed or are in the process of being repurposed or torn down completely. In the analogue world this would only leave the oral memory of those who lived through the event as a space where they will continue to exist. But the digital world opens up a new virtual/digital sphere, where both private

⁷ Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 64.

and public images and testimonies will keep them alive for generations to come, even after all of their tangible traces are removed from the cities. So far, even 20 year after the bombing, those material ruins still stand unrepaired and unchanged from the moment they were hit. They continue to the common visual symbolism which is connected to the military intervention featuring some of the main targets that were destroyed in the attacks, such as the building of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, the main building of the national television station Radio-Television of Serbia and the Army Headquarters building, in the center of Belgrade.

In her article *Memories of the 1999 NATO bombing in Belgrade, Serbia*, Orli Fridman (2016) analyzes the memories of people who were living in Belgrade at the time. This article was among the first to academically deal with mnemonic processes related to the intervention in the country and aimed to present a new perspective on ordinary people's memories about the event. Through in-depth interviews with people that lived through the bombing and come from various ends of the social spectrum, Fridman argues that the collective memories surrounding the event have significantly impacted perceptions of the Serbia-Kosovo relations as well as of the Kosovo war in a post-Milošević Serbia. The paper was a valuable contribution to the literature about social memory and mnemonic practices in Serbia, by successfully avoiding the dichotomization of memories about the event and pointing out the gray area in which most of these memories are situated. As Fridman puts it, "...in a city where the relics of bombed buildings still stand, there is nonetheless silence about the nuances of these memories, side by side with those voices framing the bombing as the ultimate symbol of victimhood".⁸ Her analysis proved a very insightful point

⁸ Orli Fridman, *Memories of the 1999 NATO Bombing in Belgrade, Serbia* in: *Memories and Narratives of the 1999 NATO Bombing in Serbia*, Sabine Rutar, Ger Duijzings & Wim Van Meurs (eds.) *Südosteuropa Journal of Politics and Society* 64 (4), 2016, 458.

into the contradiction between striking visibility and silence about the bombing, setting the memory site as already contested and conflicting zone for the future generations.

From various perspectives all of the presented memory studies strongly indicate the contested, long lasting and constructive nature of memory.

Social Generations

In his 1928/1952 seminal essay *The Problem of Generations* Karl Mannheim defines a generation as a group of individuals around the same age that have a shared memory of a historical event that they have all experienced in a certain period of time. This historical event for them is considered formative, since it defines the generation in relation to previous ones and is widely recognized among them as significant. Mannheim states that “the fact that people are born at the same time, or that their youth, adulthood, and old age coincide, does not in itself involve similarity of location; what does create a similar location is that they are in a position to experience the same events and data and especially that these experiences impinge upon a similarly “stratified” consciousness”.⁹ The reason then why I choose to analyze respondents born within this age range, between 1990 and 1997, is because the experience of this age group is particular in the sense that their memories of the bombing are formative and very strong although their direct experience of it is very rudimentary. Their experience of the trauma that is connected to the event, and that could allow them to interpret it as a significant historical marker, originates from a very early childhood, as opposed to older members of the community that were already in their early adolescence or older at the time of the NATO intervention.

⁹ Karl Mannheim, *The Problem of Generations* in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 176.

In *Generations and Collective Memories* Schuman and Scott (1989) analyzed a group of Americans of all ages in an effort to identify and determine the impact of the most important memories in the past half a century in US history. The researchers tried to determine whether and how generations of people could be categorized by their dominant memories of historic events. Schuman and Scott hypothesized that generations could be divided by the political and social memories that are marked as the most important events occurring during their lifetime. In their research, the authors refer to a generation and cohort with similar implications, mapping out groups of individuals and classifying them predominantly by age, but also taking into account predictions such as gender, race and education. In their research, Schuman and Scott concluded that events experienced during adolescence and young adulthood are almost always the central memories for respondents and are always reliant on personal experience, as opposed to significant events that have either been experienced prior to this period in life or before the persons birth. In this instance, the events tend to be placed in a more political and impersonal context. As they point out “subsequent interest in the generational concept has been motivated largely by a belief in its potential explanatory power for understanding individual and collective political behavior [...] the generational character created by the events a cohort experiences during its youth is assumed to exert an important, even decisive influence on the later attitudes and actions of its members”.¹⁰

In *How Generations Remember*, Monika Palmberger (2016) claims that the memories that are transferred from one generation to the other are given meaning by the individuals that are processing the memories and giving them context in the present.¹¹ As Palmberger points out, many scholars when dealing with memory and remembering are mostly interested in the political

¹⁰ Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott, *Generations and Collective Memories*, *American Sociological Review*, 54 (3), 1989, 360.

¹¹ Monika Palmberger, *How Generations Remember: Conflicting Histories and Shared Memories in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina* (London: Pallgrave Macmillan, 2016), 8.

dimensions of the process. It could be argued that this is especially true in places that have been defined by their turbulent and conflict-ridden pasts such as the Balkans or post-Soviet countries. But there is much more to be said about the memories of generations that have lived through these conflicts and continue to grapple with them today. It is important not to subject their memories only to data that serves to prove or disprove a scientific hypothesis. What this research aims to do in turn is to delve more deeply into these memories and try to explain how a generation of people has been affected by an event that they were subjected to in their early childhood and still affects them to this day. Surpassing their national identity, the research is interested in the human aspect of an event, a place and a time. Palmberger writes that “compared to the attention that public, national discourses have received, however, little research has been conducted on local-level responses, on the way ‘ordinary’ people deal with disruptions and war, and how they reflect upon their lives and consider the significant political ruptures that have taken place during their lifetimes”.¹² This research has revealed precisely that even though there is a sense of a collective memory connected to the events of 1999 in Serbia, there is still a divide in the way that members of this generation process and deal with their memories of the bombing.

In his book *Media Generations* Göran Bolin researches the role that media plays in the socialization of generations. It determines how generations form their sense of identity as well as how they position themselves in relation to other generations as a result of their different mediatized historical process. Bolin’s argument for the study of the generational perspective is that “adopting a generational perspective on the study of media, culture and society is justified because it helps explain societal change by bridging objectivist and subjectivist analytical positions - a way

¹² Palmberger, *How Generations Remember*, 16.

of solving the structure/agency problematic in the social and human sciences”.¹³ I argue that for this generation, the importance of the bombing is much greater than those before or after them. The initial assumption is that these generations aim to present themselves as part of the ‘Serbian’ community and want to engage with its history and its ‘myth of origin’ through participating in the narrative of the NATO bombing. Here I would like to point out that, even though the bombing itself should not be necessarily constructed as the myth of origin, it was a pivotal event that occurred between two milestones in contemporary Serbian history- the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Kumanovo Treaty that ended the Kosovo war.¹⁴ And since these generations were born between these two events, for majority of them the bombing came as the first ‘historical event’ of this long process which they were old enough to personally memorize. Therefore, the generational perspective brings a frame for personal memories which is collective (social cohorts cut across all demographics) but also specific enough to stand out.

Cultural Trauma

The bombing is an important part of the Serbian national past, but is also a significant event in the country’s right-wing political discourse. However, there is a disparity between the “official” and “unofficial” commemorative practices when it comes to the event. According to Brian Loader young people are keener on participating in political life through unofficial and non-traditional social structures. Loader defines this as the *cultural displacement* perspective, which allows young generations to have “a number of competing identities”.¹⁵ This would explain why these young

¹³ Goran Brolin, *Media Generations: Experience, Identity and Mediatized Social Change* (New York: Routledge, 2017) 4.

¹⁴ The Kumanovo Treaty effectively put an end to the Kosovo War and granted international presence in the territory of the autonomous province and was ultimately recognized as a preliminary step to Kosovo’s declaration of independence from Serbia in 2008.

¹⁵ Brian Loader (ed.) *Young Citizens and the Digital Age: Political Engagement, Young People and New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 2-6.

generations do not necessarily ascribe to any political parties or support the government regime, but they find the bombing to be a staple of their national identity. They do not have to believe that the bombing was a symbolic attempt to destroy the Serbian national corpus or that the Battle of Kosovo was recreated in modern times with the help of the NATO alliance, but they do recognize the importance of the bombing itself as a formative event that took place in their childhood. This is in line with Loader's point that their 'civic engagement' and attitudes are in fact influenced by their previous offline socialization.¹⁶ This helps us understand that these generations would in fact more or less reproduce what they were already taught or remember about the event itself, but would interpret it devoid of ideological ideas.

Another important concept to note when discussing the impact of trauma on collective memory is that of cultural trauma. Ron Eyerman writes about the effects of cultural trauma on social identity and collective memory. He describes cultural trauma as "a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people who have achieved some degree of cohesion".¹⁷ The author differentiates cultural trauma from physical and psychological on the basis of its intangibility and reach. It reflects on times of social crisis, which can open a window for creating new interpretations of national identities of the parties affected by the said trauma. Eyerman explains that:

"In this sense, the trauma need not necessarily be felt by everyone in a group or have been directly experienced by any or all. While it may be necessary to establish some event or occurrence as the significant 'cause', its traumatic meaning must be established and broadly accepted by the group, a process that requires time, as well as mediation and representation. A cultural trauma must be understood, explained, and made coherent through public reflection and discourse".¹⁸

¹⁶ Loader, *Young Citizens and the Digital Age*, 12.

¹⁷ Ron Eyerman, *Memory, Trauma, and Identity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 23.

¹⁸ Eyerman, *Memory, Trauma, and Identity*, 23.

The wide reach and popularization of cultural traumas in societies makes it easier to manipulate their meaning and the context in which the social crisis that brought them on is open to reinterpretation by those who aim to dictate official collective memories. This could be done by politicians, religious leaders as well as various interest groups with power. Eyerman explains that a requisite of cultural trauma is the existence of one or more groups whose role is to represent the trauma. He demonstrates this claim by examining the cultural trauma surrounding the Vietnam War from the three respective sides that participated in the conflict— the American, the South Vietnamese and the North Vietnamese side. Even though the same carrier groups exist on all three sides (soldiers, decision-makers and witnesses), their renditions and memories of the conflict significantly differ. Through these differences it is understandable that for all of the carrier groups involved “a central aspect of the cultural trauma process is the collective attempt to locate the causes of suffering, to place blame, and to point to remedies”.¹⁹ Eyerman’s analysis points to today’s situation in Vietnam as a positive example of addressing cultural trauma through generations. The society has decided to look to the future rather than the past, and has allowed itself to heal and distance from the conflict as well as the trauma. But what about those groups and societies that cannot find a way to come to terms with the trauma and the conflict? It would appear as though in Serbia, the focus is still very much on placing blame, rather than on trying to identify remedies or even locate the causes of suffering. There is only a more or less consensus on who is to blame. However, the very essence of the story of the NATO bombing is in line with the discourse put forth in Serbia, now and six hundred years ago— Serbs are the martyrs that have suffered at the hands of the stronger enemy, but their sacrifice is what makes them persevere and always will.

¹⁹ Ibid, 161.

As Eyerman notes, these types of trauma “demand a re-narration of the myths and beliefs that ground that collective”.²⁰

Therefore, the concept of cultural trauma brings a useful perspective to this research by providing a bridge between individual sense (or absence of) of traumatization and possible cultural displacement in variety of competing identities. It offers insight into why and how the common and sudden rupture of the *social fabric* can result in a dramatic loss of collective meaning and pose challenge for identity narratives to different generations.

National Myths

What is a myth? How do we differentiate a myth from a story that is told through generations? What is the significance of a myth for national identity? How relevant are myths in our contemporary societies? These are some of the questions that only a handful of scholars researching topics on the crossroads of myth and nationalism studies have grappled with recently, starting with Anthony D Smith. Smith’s groundbreaking work on ethno-symbolism and the role of myths in nations has paved the way for intersectional work on this topic. Smith notes that in the creation of genealogical or ideological myths “what counts are not blood ties, real or alleged, but a spiritual kinship, proclaimed in ideals that are allegedly derived from some ancient exemplars in remote eras. The aim is to recreate the heroic spirit (and the heroes) that animated ‘our ancestors’ in some past golden age”.²¹ Myths were used to strengthen the nation as a vessel of shared experience and ties to an origin story, in order to mobilize people to feel a connection with their homeland. These myths helped create an ethnic identity that “may in turn be seen as the product of shared memories of collective experiences and activities of successive generations of a group

²⁰ Ibid 103.

²¹ Anthony Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 58.

claiming a common origin and ancestry”.²² Smith talks about the golden age as a central determinant of nationalism and mythmaking; all myths circle back to this age when the motherland was in its full glory and the aim of the nationalists and the mythmakers is to retain what the country was at this age. This trope is commonly accentuated with heroes and power of the state, which makes them that more appealing to these groups. By incorporating and recontextualizing these myths it becomes harder to differentiate memories from them, especially if these events took place earlier in history. This is what Florian Bieber describes as “contemporizing the past or historicizing the present”.²³ By choosing to neglect the temporal aspects of myths, it becomes easier to compare leaders and events from history with contemporary counterparts. The myths are thus shaped by their current political use so there is little to no discussion about their factual accuracy or legitimacy. All other aspects of a nation’s history pale in comparison with a story of success and heroism and this is what makes myths a powerful tool when evoked by nationalist and religious leaders.

This could also be applied to the modern attempts to intertwine myths and collective memories especially when they are invoked in times of conflict or crisis. Smith’s work is used as a stepping-stone in national myth research and theory as is seen in Gérard Bouchard’s *National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Pasts*. The book offers an array of theoretical frameworks for approaching the topic of national myths in the contemporary context of post-conflict states as well as democratic and non-democratic states. All the authors present a solid and plausible framework when it comes to analyzing national myths, be it by passed on stories of nation-states or even in pan-national contexts such as the European Union. In one of the book’s chapters,

²² Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, 262.

²³ Florian Bieber, Nationalist Mobilization and Stories of Serb Suffering: The Kosovo Myth from 600th Anniversary to Present. *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 6 (1), 2002, 98.

Fernando Castaños presents a case study of national myths in Mexico in which he develops an interdisciplinary framework for analyzing national myths as a category of practice. He argues that the present understanding of myths could be seen in one of three ways: as (1) non-factual discourses (2) signs of important meanings or (3) narrative structures.²⁴ In his research he focuses on the second understanding- a myth as a sign of important meaning. He identifies three postulates and two generalizations for researches to refer to when conducting their research on the theory of national myths. In order to find out how the national myth in question functions, we must first understand how the myth relates to the members of the community in which it exists. The second postulate states that it is important to determine how the given myth relates to other national myths in the community- do these myths function together within a larger frame, or are they mutually exclusive on certain grounds? The author argues it is impossible for them to exist individually because they serve the larger frame of national memory and identity. As for the generalizations, it is argued that the myths follow a narrative pattern (1) and they also facilitate a ‘master model’ within the community’s members (2). By master model he refers to the claim that all the members have to abide by general ‘particular traits’ related to the ‘master model’ of the myth.²⁵ Castaños’s research model proved to be very informative for the research conducted in this thesis as well. Analyzing the recontextualization of the Kosovo myth during the 1990s and the NATO bombing specifically, the importance of the framing and the community in which it was presented. As Tim Judah writes:

“In all of European history it is impossible to find any comparison with the effect of Kosovo on the Serbian national psyche. The battle changed the course of Serbian history, but its immediate, strategic impact was far less than many subsequently came to believe. Its real, lasting legacy lay in the myths and legends which came to

²⁴ Fernando Castaños, Understanding Mexico’s Master Myth. in: Gérard Bouchard (ed.) *National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Pasts* (New York: Routledge, 2013) 77.

²⁵ Castaños *Understanding Mexico’s Master Myth*, 80.

be woven around it, enabling it to shape the nation's historical and national consciousness".²⁶

Judah notes that although the importance of the myth is striking, not much of it is actually grounded in historical facts. This is deeply problematic, since then its recontextualization poses another dimension of fabrication through propaganda and misinformation.

"Today Kosovo is written and talked about as *the* great Serbian defeat, the end of empire and the beginning of centuries of Ottoman bondage. Yet not of this is strictly true. First, many of the initial reports from Kosovo, far from lamenting a great Christian catastrophe, celebrated a triumph over the Turks. Secondly, as we have seen, the Serbian Empire had begun to collapse as far back as 1355 after the death of Dušan. Thirdly, after the battle, a form of Serbian state, the so-called despotate, survived, on and off, for another seventy years".²⁷

Jasna Dragovic Soso notes that the importance of myths is directly connected to the importance of memory. She argues that when it comes to dealing with the past and overcoming collective tragedies, it is necessary to reflect on the myths and ideologies that contributed to those tragedies in the first place. She writes that "like the relationship between memory and identity, that between memory and myth is dynamic and mutually supportive; myths define the ways in which the past is collectively remembered, while memory provides the basis on which myths are created".²⁸ It is exactly this dynamic cultural exchange that will be analyzed here through the experience of one generation and their memory regarding a traumatic and important national event. Their mnemonic practices will be discussed as a contribution to renarration of a major national myth combining a variety of personal and common generational contexts for remembering.

²⁶ Tim Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth & the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (London: Yale University Press, 1997) 31.

²⁷ Judah, *The Serbs*, 31.

²⁸ Jasna Dragovic Soso, Conflict Memory, Accountability: What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean? in: Wolfgang Petritsch and Vedran Dzihic (eds.) *Conflict and Memory: Bridging Past and Future in (South East) Europe*. (3) Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2010, 24-46, p. 33.

FROM YUGOSLAVIA TO SERBIA

The 1990s were among the most tumultuous decades in Serbian history. The beginning of the previous decade was marked by the death of President Josip Broz Tito in 1980 that consequentially led to ten years of growing tensions between the federal republics that formed the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). By the mid-1990s the region was already three wars in and had gained four new successor states. Ultimately, the decade that was marked by multiple wars, war crimes, political oppression, human rights violations, inflation, misinformation and continuous fragmentation of the common state and formations of new states, ended with the bombing of the new Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). By then the country consisted only of Serbia and Montenegro with still ongoing conflict in Kosovo which eventually provoked international military intervention by the NATO Alliance against FRY.

A year after the intervention and military defeat, Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic lost the elections held on September 24th 2000 to the democratic opposition candidate Vojislav Kostunica. But in an attempt to avoid election defeat the regime did not acknowledge the results. The opposition claimed that Milošević had rigged the vote in order to push for the second round. This triggered mass anti-government demonstrations in the streets of Belgrade, causing Slobodan Milosevic to resign and the fall of the authoritarian regime on October 5th 2000. After a decade of electoral fraud, corruption, political assassinations, media censorship and police brutality, Slobodan Milošević finally accepted defeat and handed the presidency to Vojislav Koštunica, the candidate of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS), an alliance of parties formed with the intent of overthrowing Milošević and the Socialist Party. Change of power led to democratization of the political conditions and foreign policy of the country. Slobodan Milošević was arrested on

charges for war crimes and extradited to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague in 2001.

Milošević's years in power left a hard legacy on the politics and society in Serbia which still lingers thirty years later. A stark communist, he rose to power at a time when Yugoslavia was becoming increasingly divided and torn by ethnic conflicts. Milošević saw an opportunity to centralize and control the Yugoslav government by Serbia and appointing likeminded followers to positions of power in neighboring provinces and republics, starting with Kosovo and Vojvodina. Tensions between Albanians and Serbs were already mounting in the ethnically mixed Kosovo, allowing Milošević to capitalize on the fear and frustration of Kosovar Serbs who felt neglected by the Serbian government and left to their own defenses. In his book *Balkan Holocausts*, David Bruce MacDonald explains how Milošević “embraced nationalism with opportunistic fervor, correctly sensing that a ‘turning point’ was about to begin”.²⁹ By 1990, both Kosovo and Vojvodina lost their status as autonomous provinces and were subjugated to Serbian power, which triggered secessionist movements in Slovenia and Croatia who disagreed with Milošević's nationalist plans for Yugoslavia. This series of events later paved the way for Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina's secessions and the wars that followed. Following the 1992 breakup of SFRY, the remaining republics of Serbia and Montenegro formed what came to be known as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In 2003 the country transitioned into the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, a loose confederacy better known simply as Serbia and Montenegro. In 2006 Montenegro held a referendum and proclaimed independence from Serbia.

²⁹ David Bruce MacDonald, *Balkan Holocausts: Serbian and Croatian Victim-Centered Propaganda and the War in Yugoslavia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 65.

The Serbia-Kosovo Relations from 1989

In 1989, Milošević held a speech in front of hundreds of thousands of Serbian people at Gazimestan celebrating the 600th anniversary of the historic Battle of Kosovo. By choosing to hold the rally on the Kosovo Field (Kosovo Polje), the exact place where the battle took place six centuries ago, Milošević sent a clear message about his plans for Serbian domination, claiming to “protect the Serbian minority in Kosovo” already struggling with their Albanian neighbors, but preparing the same for ethnic Serbs leaving across Yugoslavia. The rally would become the defining moment of Slobodan Milošević as a Serbian leader, inadvertently comparing the president of Serbia to the leader of historic Battle of Kosovo, Prince Lazar. As MacDonald writes:

“On the plain of Gazimestan, a vast crowd of pilgrims officially estimated at between one and two million gathered for the celebrations. This was to be Milošević’s shining moment, as Serbs from around the world gathered to commemorate the renewal of Serbian culture, religion and nationalism. It was at this stage that Milošević was able to transform himself into a nationalist demagogue, as he emerged triumphant from a helicopter amid cheering crowds”.³⁰

This comparison would stay throughout the next decade and especially during the 1999 NATO bombing of the country. Other national, ethnic and religious groups saw Milošević as “both a political and spiritual leader of the Serbian nationalist movement”, especially those that were marginalized and under attack, within the country or in the region.³¹ The reliance on Kosovo was what made and defined Milošević’s political career, but as it turns out he was not the only president who used the region for gaining political acclaim. Kosovo has been repurposed as a key point in irredentist narratives throughout Serbian history. However, this was not only the case on the Serbian side. The mid 1990s saw the official formation of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), whose primary interest was to separate Kosovo from Serbia and the Federal Republic of

³⁰ MacDonald, *Balkan Holocausts*, 71.

³¹ Ibid, 72.

Yugoslavia. The separatist militia was made up of ethnic Albanian fighters that advocated for violence over negotiations, pledging for an ultimate creation of a Greater Albania after the liberation of Kosovo. Hashim Thaçi and Ramush Haradinaj, both former members of the KLA rose to prominent positions in the government of Kosovo after its declaration of independence, with Thaçi still as the acting president while Haradinaj left his second-time post as Prime Minister in February 2020.³² The fighting between the KLA and the Yugoslav People's Army (YPA) and Serbian police in Kosovo only grew more intense as the decade progressed, as civilians were also becoming targets. As the international community grew engaged in the conflict, calls for a ceasefire became more frequent. Casualties were mounting on both sides and the fighting culminated with the Račak massacre, in which Serbian security forces rounded up and murdered ethnically Albanian Kosovar civilians in the village of Račak. The Serbian authorities denied their role in the massacre, but the event was a turning point in the years of fighting. News of the massacre was highly publicized in the press and prompted a US-led push for NATO to further intervention efforts in the conflict through negotiations, citing the authorization of airstrikes on the territory of FRY if an agreement was not reached.³³ The Rambouillet agreement called for Kosovo to be recognized as an autonomous province as it was pre-1990 by the FRY, as well as the deployment of NATO troops on the territory of Yugoslavia, which would enjoy full immunity in regards to Yugoslav law (Annex B).³⁴

“With the Yugoslav government refusing to sign an agreement at Rambouillet that would cede Kosovo to NATO, and ultimately the KLA, Washington prepared for

³² Haradinaj was first elected Prime Minister of the United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo (UMNIK) or UN-administered Kosovo, which was established as a provision under Resolution 1244, signed on June 10, 1999 and stipulated a withdrawal of Yugoslav troops from Kosovo and allowed for international presence and security in Kosovo, as well as the establishment of local self-governing organs on the territory. The mission ended in 2012 following Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008.

³³ Statement by the North Atlantic Council on Kosovo. NATO press release (99) 12. 30 January 1999. <https://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1999/p99-012e.htm>

³⁴ Rambouillet Agreement— Interim Agreement for Peace and Self-Government in Kosovo. US Department of State. March 1999. https://1997-2001.state.gov/www/regions/eur/ksvo_rambouillet_text.html

war. The first goal of NATO air strikes was to destroy Yugoslavia's integrated air defense system, followed by attacks on Serbian military targets. The Clinton administration refused to concede that the United States would be acting as an air force of the KLA. However, it was clear whose side NATO was on—at least to the KLA”.³⁵

As Bakić-Hayden writes, “to dismiss the ‘fictiveness’ of the Kosovo theme as something reserved solely for ‘representation’ (epic, myth), and isolated from ‘fact’ (history) is to undermine the power of its popular understanding in which resides its mobilizing potential”.³⁶ The relationship between Serbia and Kosovo has long been complicated even since Kosovo was an autonomous region in Serbia back within Yugoslavia. In relation to Serbian national identity, it is not hard to recognize that when it comes to public opinion about Kosovo, the society is highly polarized. This situation also creates confusion in the public perception of the relationship between the actors raising questions such as - is Kosovo independent? Should Serbia officially recognize its independence? What is bound to happen if it does not? A lot of these questions have ultimately led many, and especially younger generations, to reevaluate the terms of this social and geopolitical conflict. What is particularly interesting is that when it comes to younger generations, these questions begin to gain more prominence again. In order to make sense of these questions, it is important to understand at least the relatively recent history of the conflict concerning the territory of Kosovo and Metohija. The event that has come to signify the proverbial first step towards the region's one-sided declaration of independence almost a decade later was the NATO bombing in 1999.

³⁵ Danielle Sremac, *War of Words: Washington Tackles the Yugoslav Conflict* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1999), 230.

³⁶ Milica Bakić-Hayden, *National Memory as Narrative Memory: The Case of Kosovo* in: Maria Todorova (ed.) *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 25.

The Bombing as a Key Event

Like with any conflict, propaganda was an integral part of the events that took place in Serbia in 1999. It was also an integral part in the processes of remembering these events in later years in Serbia. The bombing became a very convenient event from which to measure nationalism among the Serbian society and beyond. Heroes and traitors were decided according to their attitudes towards the NATO intervention. The best way to ensure the success of this propaganda was to find a way to create a web of key points that nationalists would be able to evoke when remembering and talking about the bombing. If we were to apply Eyerman's formula here, as mentioned earlier, the process of placing blame and locating causes of suffering are still central when it comes to dealing with the cultural trauma of this NATO military action. Many stories of it emerged in an almost mythical-like manner and can be regarded as topoi of the memory of the bombing. In the context of Nora's lieux de memoire, some of these topoi will be analyzed here in an attempt to understand how they came to be so significant in defining the to the event and the memory of it.

I decided to refrain from using the official name that NATO assigned to the airstrike's operation against FRY in 1999. The official title of the operation was 'Noble Anvil', although this is not the name associated with the operation in Serbia. For most, the operation is remembered by the name 'Merciful Angel'. It is still unclear if this name is a result of Serbian propaganda or a simple misunderstanding. A 2009 article from Radio Television Serbia's website cites a number of possible reasons for the name change.³⁷ It seems that the most plausible explanation is that the name was an effort of the Yugoslav government to further villainize the NATO alliance in the minds of its citizens. As Lyombe Eko noted "the NATO Yugoslav war of 1999 was perhaps the

³⁷ 'Poreklo Imena 'Milosrdni Anđeo''. *RTS*. 26 March 2009.

<https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/Srbija/52258/Poreklo+imena+%22Milosrdni+an%C4%91eo%22.html>

first true international war of the multi-communication age of the Internet. It was a war in which conflicting versions of the ‘truth’ were foisted on the world by all parties to the conflict”.³⁸ In the article, Bojan Dimitrijević, a historian at the Institute for Contemporary History argues that this name has made its way into elementary textbooks in Serbia and that this is not the first time that propaganda surrounding the conflicts of the 1990s has been presented as facts, entering both official education and the common usage. The name is still used by government officials in commemoration speeches as well as by religious leaders. The revisionist effort connected to the name of the military operation that was already traumatic in itself, was to point to the underlying cynicism of the other side in the conflict in choosing such a ruthless name. In the survey conducted for this thesis, the name ‘Merciful Angel’ was mentioned a couple of times, confirming that the propagandic efforts surrounding this issue proved successful.

Another very important strategy of the Yugoslav government was to highlight the martyrdom of the Serbian people. This effort was divided between the members of the protective services of the military, the police and the civilians. Almost any commemorative speech reflecting on the NATO bombing in Serbia never fails to mention the death of Milica Rakić. Milica Rakić was a three-year old girl that was killed by a cluster bombs during the air strikes in Batajnica, Belgrade on April 17, 1999. Her home was situated close to the Batajnica Air Base that was one of NATO’s military targets. The attack was the first use of cluster bombs by NATO on the territory of Serbia since the beginning of the bombing. Her death was highly reported on in Serbian media and the tragic event has become one of the most memorable events of the whole period. In 2004 a monastery in Trebinje unveiled a fresco of Milica in which she is described as a neomartyr that

³⁸ Lyombe Eko, *Bombs and Bombast in the NATO/Yugoslav War of 1999: The Attack on Radio Television Serbia and the Laws of War*, Communications & Law 24 (3), 2002, 16.

was killed by NATO.³⁹ The Serbian Orthodox Church was considering canonizing the little girl if her cult gained a large enough following, but the initiative was never realized.⁴⁰ A monument dedicated to the children that have lost their lives during the air strikes in the center of Belgrade features a bronze sculpture of “little Milica” with the inscription “We Were Just Children”. Beside the monument, parks, fountains, football tournaments have also been erected and carry Milica’s name in Belgrade. Movies and television shows have been made about the girl’s short life and her death, as well as a number of songs, some played a fiddle-type instrument (gusle), which has been used in the Balkans mostly for reciting epic poetry. Even without being canonized, Milica has become one of the pillars of the story of the 1999 military intervention. Many participants in the survey mentioned her name, especially when asked about their associations to the bombing. The continuing exploitation of the death this little girl by Serbian officials and nationalist groups contributes to the maintaining of a victim narrative with slogans such as “We will never forgive you for Milica”, “Killed on the potty”, “Child murderers” etc. Milica Rakić became the undisputed symbol of Serbian suffering during the NATO bombing.

Contrary to the victimization of civilians, the police and military forces were glorified as heroes fighting on the first lines of defense for their country. The ‘Košare Heroes’ have transcended into a story of bravery and defiance in the face of the enemy. But unlike the story of Milica Rakić, this is a relatively new addition to the epic story that has come to surround the 1999 bombing. Last year ethnologist Ivan Čolović, who has written extensively on the Kosovo myth and its importance for Serbian national history, analyzed the newfound fame of the story of the

³⁹ The title of neomartyr in the Eastern Orthodox Church is usually given to those martyrs who have died while opposing tyrannical and other non-Christian regimes and rulers. See:

https://orthodoxwiki.org/index.php?title=New_Martyrs

⁴⁰ P Pašić, ‘Mala Milica Rakić Novi Srpski Svetac’. *Glas Javnosti*. 1 December 2004. <http://arhiva.glas-javnosti.rs/arhiva/2004/12/01/srpski/D04113003.shtml>

young soldiers that defended the borders of Serbia with their lives back in 1999. Čolović notes that “the memory of the soldiers from Serbia that lost their lives in the spring of 1999 during the conflict with the KLA on the territory of the Košare border guard post has become exceptionally important in the last few years, if not the most important aspect of the politics of remembrance that is practiced by the highest Serbian authorities when it comes to the war in Kosovo”.⁴¹ Documentary films and series, a whole new selection of epic songs of the battle have been produced in an attempt to resuscitate the almost forgotten story of the Košare battle that was taking place on the ground while the country was battling NATO in the air. Čolović contributes the silence about these heroes until now to an effort of the Yugoslav, and later Serbian government to avoid responsibility for the deaths of soldiers that were incompetently sent to fight with almost no military training or backup. Today, the tale of this battle has been likened even to ‘the second battle of Kosovo’ and has gained in popularity, as the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo becomes increasingly tense. Describing last year’s commemoration of the Košare Battle (the first official one) Čolović writes that:

“However, so far the most important moment of the dedication of the Battle of Košare as a key event of the war in Kosovo was the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the end of that war. On June 14 this year [2019], a ceremonial academy was organized at the Sava Center in Belgrade. However, as could be expected - it was limited to evoking only one episode of the war, to Košare, to a battle in which our army— as it was recently discovered— behaved in an exemplary heroic, patriotic, so to speak Spartan way. In accordance with that, this academy was held under the name ‘The Academy on the Occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the Battle of Košare’. And the main speaker— as expected— was President Vučić. He reiterated the idea of Serbian Thermopylae and the second battle of Kosovo, but this time it was a very extensive presentation, partly unrelated, but with a clear goal to use the dramatic account of the defense of the watchtower in Košare and the death of its young defenders as a metonymic picture of the whole war in Kosovo, which was - doesn’t the example of Košara already show that? – a heroic defense of Serbia from “Albanian terrorists” and “NATO aggressors”.⁴²

⁴¹ Ivan Čolović, ‘Vila sa Košara’. *Peščanik*. 23 October 2019. <https://pescanik.net/vila-sa-kosara/>.

⁴² Ibid.

This suggests that the narrative shift from victim to hero (or martyr) is the objective of the Serbian officials with regards to the Kosovo war, through methods of propaganda and recontextualization of certain events. Many of the participants reflected on the Košare Battle as one of the key events and successes of the Serbian military during the NATO air campaign in 1999.

Another event that was mentioned more or less frequently by the respondents was the shoot down of the US F-117 Nighthawk stealth fighter aircraft just three days into the bombing. The shoot down was celebrated throughout the military campaign in Serbia and is still brought up today with great pride as a win for the Serbian side, often with comments such as “Sorry, we didn’t know it was invisible”, which was written on Yugoslav propaganda posters that were accompanied with illustrations of the F-117. The event was a big morale boost for the Yugoslav army and for the whole country, seeing as compared to the US military program; the capabilities of the Yugoslav program were subpar at best. The shoot down of the US aircraft was another point used in an effort to demonize NATO and deflect from any Serbian crimes that were being committed at the time.

The Legacy of the Bombing

As the instrumentalization of the Košare Battle has already been discussed in the previous section, here I would like to draw attention to some of the legacies of the bombing that are still present in the Serbian society. Among the most obvious are the ruins of the bombed buildings that are still visible in the center of Belgrade. They include the Yugoslav Ministry of Defense building, the Army Headquarters building and the Radio-Television of Serbia. The Central Committee building that was situated at the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers was also an important monument of the times, but it was reconstructed and repurposed in 2003 and is now a business

center known as Ušće Tower. There have been talks for reconstructing the Generalštab and its repurposing, but to date nothing has been done. These buildings serve as unofficial sites of memory and represent a strong reminder of 1999. Many participants noted that these buildings remind them of the bombing and in fact regard them as sites where these memories are stored. Some of the official government commemorations have taken place in front of the Generalštab building, and families of the workers killed in the RTS attack gather at the ruin site every year to remember the victims, and have even erected a monument next to it. The monument has the inscription ‘Why?’ and speaks to the Yugoslav and Serbian officials’ reluctance to identify and punish those that failed to facilitate an evacuation plan for the workers. This makes the site of the RTS ruin a much less desirable space for strengthening either the narrative of victimization or heroism, since its responsibility almost equally lies on the Serbian state as well as NATO.

This is however, far from the only monument dedicated to the events of 1999 in Serbia. According to a 2019 study, there are 301 monuments in Serbia dedicated to the wars of the 1990s and to the NATO bombing. The analysis concluded that most of the erected monuments show that “the process of memorialization in Serbia is characterized by silencing, disinterest, mythologization, emphasis of Serbian victims, denial for crimes committed and especially, denying the role of government agencies in the crimes”.⁴³ In 2012 a monument to ‘The Victims of the Wars and the Defenders of the Motherland from 1990 to 1999’ was unveiled in Belgrade. The monument provoked lot of dissatisfaction as “too vague and without clearly referencing anything”. By prevailing opinion, it was a quick fix and a cover up for the fact that no alternative monument was erected prior to it to commemorate the events of the decade.

⁴³ Danas Online. ‘U Srbiji 301 spomenik posvećen ratovima devedesetih i NATO bombardovanju’. *Danas*. 15 April 2019. <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/u-srbiji-301-spomenik-posvecen-ratovima-devedesetih/>

Another important legacy is the narrative about the health concerns surrounding the elevated levels of depleted uranium that were a side effect of the bombing campaign. In 2018, a Commission for Investigating the Consequences of the NATO Bombing of 1999 was formed in order to determine the long-term influence on the environment and public health, with a special emphasis on the use of military weapons with depleted uranium. The connection between depleted uranium and the increase of malignant diseases in the country has been disputed multiple times by doctors and health institutes, but it does not seem to make a difference. Many in Serbia have denounced the commission and the government's formation of it as an attempt to easily gain political clout and support. Despite this, a large number of participants reflected on depleted uranium as one of the more important points when discussing their attitudes towards NATO and the bombing.

KOSOVO IN CONTEXT

The Mythological Importance of Kosovo

The myth of Kosovo was ‘born’ in 1389, when the remaining Serbian principalities left after the decline of the Serbian Empire sought to fight off the invading army of the Ottoman Empire that was led by Sultan Murad. The Serb army, which was led by Prince Lazar Hrebljanović, was largely outnumbered and suffered tremendous losses and both army leaders were killed in combat. After the battle, the Serbian principalities quickly fell under Ottoman reign, becoming vassals. Although there are not many accurate historical accounts of the battle itself, the myth of the battle evolved from the epic poetry describing the battle written in the 19th century in Serbia. As Smith notes of these genealogical myths:

“What counts here are not blood ties, real or alleged, but a spiritual kinship, proclaimed in ideals that are allegedly derived from some ancient exemplars in remote eras. The aim is to recreate the heroic spirit (and the heroes) that animated ‘our ancestors’ in some past golden age; and descent is traced not through family pedigrees, but through the persistence of certain kinds of ‘virtue’ or other distinctive cultural qualities, be it of language, customs, religion, institutions, or more general attributes”.⁴⁴

According to the myth, on the eve of the battle Prince Lazar was given a choice between defeating the Ottomans in the field and reclaiming the Serbian Empire or a heavenly kingdom for the Serbian people, which meant a defeat by the Ottoman army the next day. Lazar decided to sacrifice himself and the Serbian people in the earthly realm, but in doing so, he had secured for them the eternal kingdom of heaven. The essence of the myth is founded in the struggle for freedom, which is demonstrated through the claim to a former greater empire and the defense of Christianity in return for a holier life (Heavenly Kingdom). The main elements of the myth are

⁴⁴ Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, 58.

martyrdom and sacrifice for freedom, vengeance against those that took that freedom away, glory to those who fight for it and betrayal as a reminder of how freedom is lost in the first place.⁴⁵

The symbolism of Kosovo in the national history of Serbia is long and undisputed. Since 1389, the struggle of the Serbian people has been emotionally and territorially linked to KOSMET or the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija. Florian Bieber points out three dimensions through which the myth of Kosovo is integrated into Serbian nationalism: first (1) the myth is part of the Serbian national calendar and is thus commemorated yearly. The Battle of Kosovo took place on the 28th of June, which marks Vidovdan (St Vitus's Day), a national and religious holiday and a feast day for many. The date is of reoccurring importance in Serbian history, since it was also the day when Gavrilo Princip assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, initiating World War I and the day that Slobodan Milošević was extradited to the ICTY in 2001. Second (2) the myth allows for irredentist claims to Kosovo by calling upon its then importance for the Serbian kingdom and essentially mirroring it in the current context. And third (3) the myth facilitates a continuity between the medieval Serbs and the contemporary Serb nation, suggesting a perennial nation.⁴⁶ These three dimensions create a strong framework for the myths survival and allow it to be evoked despite the passage of time. The Serbian Orthodox Church had a major role in reviving the Kosovo myth in Milošević's Serbia at the time of rising tensions with Albanians over the question of Kosovo's autonomy. Bieber writes that:

“Although relations between the church and the leadership of the Serb republic before the ascent of Milošević remained cool, this common cause contributed to the emergence of a new nationalist atmosphere in Serbia where the supposed and real persecution of Serbs in Kosovo was construed as part of a long history of national suffering, beginning in 1389”.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See: Ljubinka Trgovčević, The Kosovo Myth in the First World War. *Projekat Rastko Gracanica*, Project Rastko-Kosovo and Metohija: E-Library of Kosovo and Metohija Culture, 1996.
http://www.rastko.rs/kosovo/istorija/sanu/KOS_MIT.html.

⁴⁶ Bieber, 96.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 100.

The myth of Kosovo is integrated in the foundation of the Serb-Albanian conflict, and its political power proved to be dangerous, as it propagates ethnic and racial supremacy, fatalism and sacrifice for a ‘higher cause’. The conflict between Christians and Muslims has been recontextualized for purposes of warfare and propaganda many times over since the 14th century. Only in the 1990s, it was utilized twice—first during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina to portray the Bosniaks as infidels and impure and a second time, more prominently against Albanians throughout the decade, where the analogy of protecting the ‘sacred land’ was more direct as the conflict broke out precisely regarding the territory of Kosovo.

Serbia’s Victim Complex

Commemoration of the bombing was crucial in the Serbian administration’s attempt to transform the role of the Serbian people from aggressors to the role of the victim. Serbia participated in all the conflicts of the 1990s more or less unambiguously perceived as an aggressor and major perpetrator of war crimes. But, as Eko points out “the theme of Serbian victimhood permeated all the propaganda transmitted by Slobodan Milošević and his surrogates during the Balkan conflicts”.⁴⁸ It is also interesting to see why Serbian national myths (still) center on the victim/hero complex and how closely it relates to the myth of the Battle of Kosovo, as well as if this connection is conscious or unconscious. This is not to downplay their importance in the historical context, but this event is the only one that creates a clear situation in which the members of the community can identify as victims of injustice and call for sympathy and compassion. The commemoration practices in turn also provide a way for the Serbian government to evade responsibility for their part in the 1990s conflicts, since they tend to self-identify as the victims that have suffered from the attacks by NATO, neighboring counties and the international

⁴⁸ Eko, *Bombs and Bombast*, 18.

community more broadly. On the other hand, they portray themselves as the moral heroes for even standing up to the enemy, despite the enemy being stronger and having more support. This could explain why the commemorative practices largely focus on the beginning of the bombing (March 24) rather than on the end (June 10). It could be then argued that the end of the bombing and the signing of the Kumanovo Treaty present another loss for Serbia. This ties in with the idea that Kosovo is seen as a destabilizing factor for Serbia by some Serbs, and its independence demonstrates Serbia as a politically weak country, not only in the region but also within Europe more broadly. It takes away its sense of ‘sovereignty’ and control of its own future because of (1) the loss of territory and (2) the EU’s interference in the situation, especially in 2007/8. The interference of other world powers (or the international community) is a reoccurring phenomenon in the narrative of Serbian national history (Ottoman Empire, NATO, EU). This again subjects Serbia to victim status, rather than being the hero and reinstates the myth of the Battle of Kosovo. Because of the unfavorable political situation and predominantly right-centrist leaning government, victimization has always been seen as a legitimate argument and political strategy in Serbia’s official public discourse, maybe most importantly seen through the myth of the Battle of Kosovo. When discussing the commemorative practices connected to the NATO bombing, Marija Mandić differentiates between the two strains that have been visible in Serbia since 2000:

“NATO’s bombing of Serbia has, of course had ambivalent semantics in Serbian commemorative discourses. On the one hand, there have been the leading Serbian politicians who were in power during the bombing, people like Milošević, Dačić and Vučić. These have employed a strategy of victimization, oscillating between the semantics of innocent, passive victimhood (equating Serbs with the Jews during the Second World War) and honoring the heroic fallen (Serbs as fighters defending their country). On the other hand, some have attempted to establish an alternative narrative. In this differing perspective, held especially by oppositional, anti-Milošević politicians and movements, the bombing has been evaluated as a defeat and a tragedy. The clearest example of this alternative stance is represented by Zoran Đinđić, who tried to marginalize commemorations of the bombings during

his time in power, and families of the RTS victims, who have blamed the Serbian state and its officials for the civilian deaths just as much as they condemn NATO”.⁴⁹

Similar situations can be seen in the way that Hungarian officials talk about the Treaty of Trianon (Trianon Syndrome) or how the relationship between Greece and North Macedonia relies on the evocation of national belonging and historical rights. It is no surprise then that even more contemporary conspiracy theories in Serbia often involve some of these key actors. Opposition parties are associated with George Soros, who was known for funding many non-government organizations around Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s and accused of pushing a ‘pro-European liberal’ agenda. The current president Aleksandar Vučić has on multiple occasions cited that Serbia would never join the NATO alliance, most recently last year at the commemoration ceremony for the 20th anniversary of the 1999 military intervention, which validated the anti-NATO protest that also took place the same day.⁵⁰ Montenegro was highly criticized for joining the Alliance in 2017, and this was considered a bigger betrayal than after the country succeeded from the union in 2006. Critical journalists and media houses are continuously labeled ‘American’ by party and state officials in attempt to highlight their disloyalty to the homeland and their pushing of a ‘foreign agenda’. This ambiguity also surfaces regularly in commemorative practices and reveals a strategy to keep the meaning of the bombing and the conflicts over the dissolution of Yugoslavia deliberately fluid and adaptable to changing contexts of interpretation. With these fluid meanings it easily connects to the Kosovo myth in a historical time of national mythology.

⁴⁹ Marija Mandić, Official Commemoration of the NATO Bombing of Serbia: A Case Study of the Fifteenth Anniversary in: Sabine Rutar, Ger Duijzings & Wim Van Meurs (eds.) *Memories and Narratives of the 1999 NATO Bombing in Serbia*, Südosteuropa Journal of Politics and Society 64 (4), 2016, 476.

⁵⁰ Filip Rudic, ‘Serbia Marks NATO Bombing Anniversary as Nationalists Protest’. *BalkanInsight*. 25 March 2019 <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/03/25/serbia-marks-nato-bombing-anniversary-as-nationalists-protest/> (accessed June 1, 2020)

METHODOLOGY

The research design was focused on a bottom-up approach consisting of an online survey with generation members to determine their attitudes regarding the 1999 NATO military intervention as well as their attitudes about the actors and narratives related to the event. The survey was anonymous and respondents were only asked to share their year of birth and some additional demographic information relevant for the makeup of the participant group. However, this information did not in any way jeopardize their anonymity in the study. Given the length of the thesis and time constraints for its completion, it was unrealistic to assume that the survey would be able to work with a representative sample of the whole generation. One immediate limitation of the study was that the cohort was mostly made up of university students, current or previous, since this turned out to be the most responsive demographic in the survey. Although this could be regarded as a limitation, I would argue that it is a good pilot study for future research in the field, especially regarding this generation. The survey was circulated in various university groups online, as well as through personal friends' accounts to create a snowball effect and be able to reach as many respondents as possible. The total number of respondents was 175 with the response rate very high in the first week of the posting of the survey. This was a good indication that the topic is of interest to the generation and their answers also demonstrated their involvement and willingness to participate in conversations about this subject.

As Julie Ponto (2015) notes, an online survey “allows for a variety of methods to recruit participants, collect data, and utilize various methods of instrumentation. Survey research can use quantitative research strategies (e.g., using questionnaires with numerically related items), qualitative research strategies (e.g., using open-ended questions), or both strategies (i.e., mixed

methods)".⁵¹ This research focused on a mixed methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative questions in the online survey. This was judged as the best combination of creating a range of options for the participants in order to keep a broad frame of the study in focus and also gather a variety of information through their open answers. The open-ended questions were mostly focusing on short free-answers that were latter categorized and classified in order to create groups of respondents based on their attitudes.

The survey was divided into four sections: (1) demographic questions about participants' age, sex, religious belonging and education. Additional information gathered in this section was related to their whereabouts at the time of the military intervention as well as their hometown location. The participants were asked questions related to the current political situation in Serbia, their voting intentions regarding the upcoming general election elections (as of now scheduled for June 21st 2020) and how they would rate their political affiliation on a scale of 1 (left) to 5(right). The purpose of this section was to allow the respondents to self-identify in the political spectrum of Serbia and to gain an insight into how they view the political situation, as well as to understand if there is any correlation between their political affiliation and their attitudes towards the bombing. Religious affiliation was identified in a similar manner primarily because of the great religious significance of Kosovo in Serbian history and mythology. The second section (2) presented statements about the NATO military intervention. Participants were asked to rate the sentences on a 1 to 5 scale, 1 representing strong disagreement and 5 representing strong agreement. The respondents were then presented with open-ended questions and shared their descriptions of the bombing in up to one paragraph answers. The questions were related to specific elements of the event such as the identification of actors and characterization of the event. In section three (3), the

⁵¹ Julie Ponto, Understanding and Evaluating Survey Research, *Journal of the Advanced Practitioner in Oncology*, 2015, 168.

participants were asked about their memories of the key events. In the final section (4), the participants were asked about their associations and attitudes about the military intervention, as well as NATO, the EU and Kosovo, as well as the contemporary significance of Kosovo for the Serbian national identity. Finally, the respondents were asked how they would rate internal and external influences that might have had an impact on their memory formation processes, 1 being the least and 5 being the most influential.

The qualitative questions in the survey were used to map out the contents of memory; i.e., the most and least common factors that made up the participants' memories. The short answer questions served mostly to define the participants, which allowed for a creation of a 'photo robot' which would comprise the most common (frequent) answers given by the respondents. This was later instrumental in finding out if there were any specific determinants of memories related to the bombing. It also served as a tool to identify any patterns of memory that may exist in any sub-groups. The essay-type questions were used to show the participants' individual reflection about the memories— they reflect the active relationship towards their memories and the mnemonic activity used to engage with the bombing. Finally, respondents were asked about the meaning of Kosovo for the Serbian national identity. This question was also posed in the format of an open long answer where the respondents were allowed to elaborate up to a paragraph, which many did.

After analyzing the results, the qualitative answers in the survey were classified into categories based on three determining factors. This classification allowed to recognize and identify 'analytic types' and to map out the characteristics relevant for typology of respondents. The three criteria for classification were as follows: firstly, participants' answers were assessed by how factual they were. This refers to the relying on factual/affective elements in their interpretation of the events; secondly, answers were judged by how personalized/generalized they were i.e. were

the answers based predominantly on personal memories or did the participants tend to reflect more broadly on the memories about the state of the country at the time; and, thirdly, the final determining factor looked at the relationship between the events and the participants' current attitudes about Kosovo.

It should be noted that the issue of misinterpreting questions was observed in some of the participants' answers. Even though some respondents admitted that they did not understand some questions, they still provided answers that supplied useful information and were therefore not excluded as misleading or incomplete. This was credited to the various interpretations that participants are likely to have in regards to certain questions.

ANALYSIS

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The total number of surveyed participants was 175. Most of them were born between 1993 (10.9%) and 1996 (14.3%), with the majority born in 1995 (30.3%) and 1994 (18.3%). In the other age groups the distribution was as follows: 1990 (5.1%), 1991 (6.3%), 1992 (8%) and 1997 (6.9%). (see Graph 1) Most of them live in urban areas, primarily in Belgrade (59,4%), and there are more male (56%) than female (44%) among them. (see Graph 2)

A total of 96% of the participants have either recently graduated or are currently students in higher education facilities, undergraduate and graduate schools. (see Graph 3) When asked to specify their area of study 64.9% indicated social sciences, humanities and arts, while 35.1% science, engineering and medicine. Participants with an educational background in humanities were more likely to speak about their personal experiences when asked about the bombing than relying on facts or other impersonal accounts. The majority of respondents were in the country during the bombing (91.4%). The proportion of those who were out of the country is less than 10%, with 1,7% residing abroad before and after the bombing, while 6,9% left the country at some point and later returned. (see Graph 4).

The participants born in the later part of the decade who were younger at the time of the intervention tended to demonstrate stronger opinions and attitudes. When asked to place their political affiliation on a 1 to 5 scale, 1 being left and 5 being right, 14.3% declared themselves as left, 33.1% center left, 35.4% center, 14.3% center right and 2.9% right. (see Graph 6) For example, 53.3% of the participants who stated their political affiliation as center right or right, were born between 1995 and 1997, the youngest demographic in the study. None of the older respondents that were born in 1990 or 1991 fell into this group. They were all classified between

a 1 and a 3 on the scale. The 2.9% of participants that placed their political/ideological affiliation as right were more inclined to answer with impersonal accounts and inflammatory remarks when reflecting on the NATO military campaign.

Predominantly, respondents that declared themselves more left on the scale were in agreement that the significance of Kosovo for the Serbian national identity was not as important as it was regarded as a political tool for propaganda and distraction from more pressing issues in the country today. For other respondents with more moderate answers, Kosovo's significance was regarded as historical and cultural, but not detrimental to the Serbian national identity.

When the participants were asked if they would vote in an upcoming election 41.1% participants said yes, 52% said no and 6.2% were unsure, citing various concerns such as the fairness of the electoral process and candidate diversity. One participant declined to answer. Since all participants were of voting age, this indicated a very divided attitude towards the political situation in the country.

As for religious beliefs— 51% were not religious, while 45% claimed to be religious, 3% were undecided, saying both yes and no and 1% specifically declared themselves to be agnostic. (see Graph 5)

Statements and Descriptions of the Bombing

Participants were asked to assess how much they agree with several statements referring to various aspects of the bombing and its consequences. When asked if they think that Declaration 1244 managed to keep the territorial integrity of Serbia, only 3.4% strongly agreed. In turn, 43.4% strongly disagreed with this statement and 25.1% were neutral. (see Graph 12) On the other hand, 50.9% strongly agreed that the NATO military operation made Kosovo's 2008 declaration of

independence possible, while 6.9% disagreed. (see Graph 13) Only 4.6% strongly disagreed when asked if they think that the NATO military intervention demonstrated that the international community does not support the interest of the Serbian national community in Kosovo, while 53.1% strongly agreed, 22.3% agreed and 16% were neutral. (see Graph 14) Finally, when asked if they think that the NATO intervention was the international community's reaction to the crimes of the Yugoslav/Serbian army and police in Kosovo 43.4% strongly disagreed and 17.2% said that they agreed or strongly agreed. This statement was rated as neutral by 20.6% of the participants. (see Graph 15)

Following these statements participants were asked about their descriptions of the bombing. Their answers were decidedly negative and strongly worded, using words such as 'aggression' 'killing' 'rape' 'genocide' and 'terrorists' when describing NATO. These answers attracted the most attention, all participants eagerly and openly shared their views. Descriptions included elaborate explanations of the whole intervention, as well as a lot of detailed and strongly opinionated positions. There was widespread agreement on some points: Kosovo is mostly regarded as a territory that was stolen as a result of the intervention and expansionist wishes from the West, and the war is mentioned only in the context of the Serbian/Yugoslav armed forces defending themselves from Albanian and Kosovar terrorists. The false operation title 'Merciful Angel' is often mentioned as a sign of cynicism behind the international 'humanitarian intervention' and long-lasting devastating effects of the use of depleted uranium.

Some answers were more balanced in their views citing both sides as responsible for the conflict. They condemned NATO for the bombing, but also held the actions of the Serbian side, and Milošević more specifically, responsible. All those answers cited geopolitics as the main reason for the intervention. Some participants relied on short and factual answers. They weren't

too descriptive or invested in explaining any further than stating the obvious fact that the bombing took place. They were shorter in length and still impersonal, as was the case with participants in the first group. Some participants took a more personal approach to their answers, either citing what the period meant in their lives ('an abrupt end to the first grade' 'hiding in the underground sanctuaries and lots of toys') or not having any memories of the period. This was the smallest group of answers, only 4%. There were also one-word answers of respondents either not being able to articulate or declining to answer by saying that 'there is no explanation for such a thing' or labeling the military operation as a 'tragedy' or a 'cataclysm'.

When asked about the events that took place participants wrote that:

"In the beginning of the survey, consciously or unconsciously, a mistake was made and the NATO aggression against FRY was described as an 'intervention'. The events that took place between March 24th and June 10th need to be addressed as what they were: it was an illegal aggression against an internationally recognized country. The aggression was in direct opposition of section 7 of the Charter of the United Nations" (male, 2 years old at the time of the intervention)

"Sloba's [Milošević] crazy idea that he could fight against the NATO pact. On the other hand, NATO didn't have a legal basis for the attacks" (male, 4 years old at the time of the bombing)

"Slobodan Milošević thought he was the greatest hero of them all" (female, 9 years old at the time of the bombing)

"Humanitarian intervention" (male, 4 years old at the time of the bombing)

"Politician's game, like every war" (female, 8 years old at the time of the bombing)

'From the perspective of a little boy who lived through it I can't say too much about it since my parents tried not to bring any tension into the house. I will always remember the neighbors saying 'the bombs are falling'. Today I consider it an 'act of war' not only from the military side, but also from the media side. Even today we are suffering for the consequences of depleted uranium and the depleted opinions of then viewers of BBC and CNN...' (male, 5 years old at the time of the bombing)

"Air strikes under the cynical name merciful angel!?!? A shameful act and horror of the contemporary world in which a country was destroyed (poisoned by radiation) and

innocent people were slaughtered who knows why and in the name of what” (female, 4 years old at the time of the intervention)

“Aggression and terror. Thank God I don’t remember it” (female, 3 years old at the time of the bombing)

“We were bombed by the world’s largest military force and we didn’t have a chance to do anything about it because of the politics we were pursuing back then” (male, 6 years old at the time of the bombing)

“A hell for parent, especially with small children” (male, 4 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Genocide!” (female, 9 years old at the time of the bombing)

‘I tend to avoid explaining what happened, because of the ruined buildings that look the same to this day, I have a feeling the bombing is still going on, even though there are no physical bombs and the relations are normalized’ (female, 4 years old at the time of the bombing)

“International qualification: aggression (from the standpoint of pure legality). Was it necessary from the standpoint of legitimacy? I am still trying to find the answer” (male, 3 years old at the time of the bombing)

“NATO aggression aimed at the formal annexation of Kosovo. Certainly, it came after many years of completely failed war-hunting policy, but I believe that both Milošević’s regime and NATO acted criminally because NATO destroyed civilian facilities in Serbia and terrorized the people, and Milošević did the same with his failed policy. So, I see both sides as aggressors against the ordinary people in Serbia who have suffered.” (female, 6 years old at the time of the bombing)

“I don’t know much about it, I have never dealt with it more appropriately, which is why I am kind of embarrassed while reading these questions, but for me it was a terrorist attack that was presented to the world as something necessary and right” (female, 4 years old at the time of the bombing)

“An unjust thing. The people suffered because of Sloba’s politics” (female, 7 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Unnecessary imperialist aggression that was caused by the politics of the domestic tyrannical regime” (male, 4 years old at the time of the bombing)

“If we look at historical data, the most disproportionate struggle in the history of mankind took place. 19 strongmen on 1 boy, literally like that” (female, 2 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Every day fear, running to the shelters and socializing in an effort to overcome the fear” (female, 5 years old at the time of the bombing)

“The death of international law occurred due to the aggression of the NATO alliance against a sovereign state. Criminal bombing without UN Security Council approval. With this criminal gesture, NATO was alienated from its original purpose because it was founded in 1949 as an alliance of a defensive nature with the aim of protecting its members from the Soviet expansion. By attacking a country that didn’t endanger any NATO member, the North Atlantic Alliance exposed its aggressive and criminal character.” (male, 3 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Terrorism and the rape of a small country by the nineteen most powerful countries in the world contrary to international law” (male, 4 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Against every law, both written and ethical, the civilians of the Republic of Serbia were killed, civilian objects were bombed, and an infection was thrown at us that will disintegrate practically forever (Uranium). Why? As a consequence of the Cold War, every socialist country was to disintegrate, and turn into a capitalist country in the west. Everything that had the potential not to fit into the capitalist mold, and to continue to be successful, had to be destroyed, primarily economically. Russia is on its feet, the USSR has disintegrated, the opportunity for the West has been ideal. Yugoslavia was going through an economic crisis, and it was easy to incite civilians by invoking nationalism and hatred. Where there is resentment, there is also a search for the culprit in other people. Especially, unfortunately, in nations of other nationalities and religions. The West, which has so many times interfered in the internal affairs of many countries, knew this, and skillfully staged the events that led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Far from Milosevic being a saint, of course he is not, he is a villain and a war profiteer, although I must emphasize, the last patriot among politicians, strange as it may sound, but his figure of the 90s could be replaced by anyone - by war still came, because if one side wants him, he will be. To cut a long story short, the events culminate in Kosovo, with a staged event in Rack. Far from it that there were no crimes on both the Serbian and Albanian sides, but the fact is that the Serbian army was at war with Albanian TERRORISTS! The staged events in Rack gave rise to the NATO pact to achieve its goal, which it planned two years later— bombing. They torturously bombed civilians to cause panic. We will agree that 19 on 1 is very easy to equate with survival. I'm not going to do that; I'd rather equate it with advertising weapons that were supposed to be sold somewhere else. Also, a whole new consumer market needed to be opened. To enslave our economy as well, to bring big companies to reap the benefits of cheap labor, the subsidies provided to them by puppet governments and traitors, instead of strengthening their economy. The excuse of the NATO bombing pact is the famous agreement in which Serbia was offered to become an occupied territory? Interesting. Basically, the biggest injustice in the history of our people happened in the 99's, but karma is a miracle :) Thank you to the Greek brothers who proved to be our true friends in that situation.” (male, 6 years old at the time of the bombing)

When asked about their opinion on the main causes of the bombing, some participants cited ‘Western imperialism’ as the root cause. Other respondents were less decided about their answers and weren’t able to determine a specific cause. Respondents wrote that it was:

‘A mixture of American interests and anti-Serb biased (they considered the Serbs as a disobedient and wild, bestial people who didn’t deserve to rule Kosovo), which are only part of wider, anti-Catholic preconceptions.’ (male, 8 years old at the time of the bombing)

‘An ecological experiment on the effects of depleted uranium on the environment and population, a takeover (privatization) of mining and other natural resources in Kosovo, etc.’ (male, 5 years old during the bombing)

‘I’m still not sure what to think, was the official reason legitimate, or was the Serbian side of the story legitimate, since both sides have a tendency for propaganda’ (male, 4 years old during the bombing)

“I think there was a number of factors that contributed to the bombing. An explanation that relies only on one cause seems incomplete... So: 1. Interest and actions of Kosovar Albanians that wished to have their own state + 2. The opposite interest of Serbia and actions to prohibit Kosovar Albanians from getting their own state + 3. Later a chance for America (primarily) and NATO to expand their influence in a part of the world where they didn’t have it before. I think that given the circumstances 1 2 and 3 were rational actions for the parties concerned... and then all of that together led to the intervention” (male, 6 years old during the bombing)

“To make Kosovo what it is today— a quasi-mafia state” (male 6 years old during the bombing)

“Kosovo and profit” (female, 4 years old during the bombing)

“I don’t even think that the actors of the event know that” (female, 4 years old during the bombing)

“There is not one main reason, but several:

1. bad foreign policy of FR Yugoslavia;
2. geopolitics (the collapse of the USSR, the weakness of Russia, the desire of Western countries led by the United States to establish its dominance in SE Europe);
3. the internal problems of the USA and, in particular, Clinton, from which the attention of the American public should have been drawn (sexual scandal). Nobody mentions this, because it sounds banal and it is not "worthy" to explain something so great. Big explanations sometimes do not exist.” (male, 5 years old during the bombing)

“Failure of the Rambouillet negotiations, not accepting blackmail” (female, 3 years old during the bombing)

When participants were asked to name the main actors in the conflict, NATO was identified 55.4% of the time, sometimes alongside the US, which was identified 38.2% of the time and other members of the NATO alliance that were only mentioned a number of times such as the UK, Germany and France. Serbia was identified 21.1% of the time, some specified Serbia within FRY while others only named Yugoslavia. Kosovar Albanians, Šiptari (a pejorative term for Albanians in Serbian), the KLA or ‘Albanian terrorists’ were identified in 30.2% of the answers as key actors. Some participants opted for naming personal actors; some of the figures that were repeatedly identified include the then acting President of the US Bill Clinton, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the Secretary General of NATO Javier Solana and Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević.

Memory of Key Events

When describing what they remember as key events from the military intervention, some singled out particular events, but a lot of them also indicated the entire bombing as one horrific event.

“The bombing of the bridges, RTS and the killing of civilians; the moment when the Serbian army has the power in their hands, but they are told to step down; Serbs dancing to “Yugoslavia is Dancing to Rock’n’Roll”; all of this paints a picture of the people at that time and the state of consciousness” (female, 4 years old at the time of the intervention)

“The biggest event is the defense of our Northern borders, in the battles around Paštrik where the NATO powers were deterred from any further ground offensive” (male, 5 years old at the time of the intervention)

“Every day of the bombing. I think its ok to point out a certain battle, like Košare, but people were surviving bombs falling on their heads every day” (female, 4 years old at the time of the intervention)

“As a child from Krunska [a street in the center of Belgrade] I remember the night that RTS and Generalštab were hit, everything was shaking like I’ve never felt it and a shelf almost fell on my head, so that” (female, 4 years old at the time of the intervention)

“A very personal memory. My aunt waiting for hours for the army troops to return from the battleground and the fact that she waited for hours in fear, since from the beginning of the bombing we didn’t know where my uncle was. The other is the fact that the building in which the basement where we were hiding was across the street from a television station on one side, on the other was the Ibar bridge, and on the third side was the army barracks— constant fear. Also watching *The Meeting Point* (1989 Yugoslav film) in the basement” (female, 7 years old at the time of the intervention)

“The downing of the NATO pact’s ‘invisible’ F-117 plane that was regarded as an embarrassment (for NATO) after which NATO planes no longer saw a difference between army barracks, hospitals or schools” (male, 4 years old during the intervention)

“The death of a neighbor in Zastava [arms factory]. Cassandra [soap opera], and then down to the basement” (male, 3 years old at the time of the intervention)

“A heroic defense of the country that was demonstrated by the members of the Yugoslav Army in Kosovo and Metohija (battle at Košare, battle at Paštrik)” (male, 5 years old during the intervention)

“Burnings, banishments, killings, kidnappings in the North” (female, 7 years old at the time of the intervention)

“The bombing of RTS and other non-military bases, the death of little Milica” (female, 4 years old at the time of the intervention)

“The decision to defend something. And that statement from Slobodan [Milošević] where he didn’t mention how many civilians were killed” (male, 5 years old during the intervention)

“Large general-folk protests that seemed like they could become the foundations of a future political unity for the opposition and a resistance of imperialism. Of course, they ended tragically, by giving support to the nationalist regime of Slobodan Milošević” (male, 4 years old at the time of the bombing)

“The fact that my dad was only wounded when he could have lost his life” (female, 9 years old at the time of the bombing)

From these answers, there was a distinction between personalized and more general statements. Only 8.5% of the participants gave extremely personal accounts of their memories,

while 20.5% did not have a clear answer and mostly stated that they either did not remember enough to have an opinion or that they did not see any particular events as standing out throughout the whole period. Some respondents were very visual in their answers, describing their sensory memories while others focused more on non-emotional answers pertaining to the act of the bombing and its devastation. There was a lot of anger and sadness in the respondents' answers. Many mentioned themes like 'death' 'destruction' and 'fear', answers like 'injustice' 'evil' and 'aggression' were mostly brought up in relation to NATO, the US and overall, the enemy. A lot of respondents reflected on some of their childhood memories, sometimes positive, such as watching cartoons and spending more time with family. The participants were then asked about their associations to the 1999 bombing:

“Injustice” (male, 9 years old during the bombing)

“The night when the beginning of the bombing was announced, the utter confusion of a six-year-old me, the propaganda songs my friends and I were singing the whole time since we were constantly exposed to them” (female, 6 years old during the bombing)

“Somehow Belgrade, spring, empty streets, how the air in the basement beneath the building was damp and mumble... I don't know” (male, 6 years old during the bombing)

“Trauma” (male, 5 years old during the bombing)

“Nothing specific I just get filled with anger” (male, 3 years old during the bombing)

“Mixed emotions and attitudes towards the bombing, i.e. at the same time condemning the ethnic cleansing of Albanians and the destruction of Yugoslav economy and sovereignty” (male, 6 years old during the bombing)

“Depleted uranium” (male, 8 years old during the bombing)

“Air raid sirens, Holbrooke, the smell of a stolen April and May, freeing and tensile at the same time” (female, 4 years old during the bombing)

“We will get our revenge sooner or later” (male, 6 years old during the bombing)

“Potatoes in a crate in the basement in which I would lie and of my father whom I missed” (male, 3 years old during the bombing)

“The Kalashnikov rifle barrel into which I was staring while my mother and I fled to Montenegro and shrapnel that was flying over my head when the barracks in Peć were targeted” (male, 6 years old during the bombing)

“Air raid sirens, cartoons with the danger from the air sign, kids theater shows on Tašmajdan and Kalemegdan [parks in Belgrade], filling bottles, pots and bathtubs full of water, the smell of candles, my birthday, the sound of planes and bombs” (female, 7 years old during the bombing)

“Lines of refugees” (female, 2 years old during the bombing)

“NATO, air raid sirens and death” (male, 9 years old during the bombing)

“I think of my basement and the air raid sirens, and then about how the whole world looks at us like villains from the Balkans” (female, 4 years old during the bombing)

“Fear, fire and sadness” (female, 4 years old during the bombing)

“There is still a moment of disbelief— did this really happen. Basement. Sanctuary. Duct tape on the windows. Concerts on the bridges. Fair weather. Barbeque.” (female, 4 years old during the bombing)

“The atrocity of NATO fascism” (male, 5 years old during the bombing)

“Air raid sirens and red smoke, reflections from the bombs they were throwing. Avram Israel’s famous danger from the air announcement. The little airplane sign that designated a danger from the air” (female, 5 years old during the bombing)

“Sleeping mattresses and serving lunch all in the hallway of our apartment since we had large glass windows in our dining room and bedrooms” (male, 4 years old during the bombing)

“Air raid sirens, the sanctuary, the movie “Sky Hook” (1999 Serbian Film) and the warmth of togetherness and childhood” (male, 5 years old during the bombing)

“Fried bread and the sanctuary” (male, 4 years old during the bombing)

“My childhood” (male, 6 years old during the bombing)

“Death” (female, 2 years old during the bombing)

“The countryside and chickens ran away from because I was scared of them (and still am)” (female, 3 years old during the bombing)

“Milica” (male, 9 years old during the bombing)

“A people that is to this day equally narrow-minded” (male, 3 years old during the bombing)

“Unity (of people in the fight against the aggressor)” (male, 3 years old during the bombing)

“My birthday when I got a kilo of chocolate” (female, 6 years old during the bombing)

“My childish perception of the war. The countryside and a time when all the adults looked at me with special attention and care” (female, 5 years old during the bombing)

“Anger” (male, 3 years old during the bombing)

“Air raid sirens [also meaning mermaids in Serbian], for which I thought were some mythical creatures, Disney characters to be more precise, on the streetlights, coming to warn us of the incoming danger” (female, 4 years old during the bombing)

“Milošević f*** off” (male, 4 years old during the bombing)

Associations, Attitudes and Influences on Memory

The most common association to the bombing was the air raid siren (Šizela) that announced the beginning of air strikes every day, as indicated by 28.5% of respondents. The shelters and basements in which people hid were the first association for 13.1%, while physical damage including the bombing and ruins of RTS, Generalštab and the Central Committee building and various bridges and hospitals and the sound of bombs and planes and images of fire and smoke were mentioned by 12% of the participants. Some participants personified the event by citing Slobodan Milošević, Milica Rakić, the Košare Heroes, Bill Clinton or more broadly NATO in 17.1% of the answers. Death and civilian suffering were mentioned by 12% of the respondents, while fear was brought up by 11.4%. In regards to their associations to NATO respondents answered:

“The Third Reich, in the case of NATO, the fourth” (male, 3 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Necessary evil” (male, 9 years old at the time of the bombing)

“About the fact that Serbia will never be part of that alliance. I also think about the tons of depleted uranium we are breathing in to this day” (female, 5 years old at the time of the bombing)

“All the worst. A large and evil machinery that steals children and sends them into war against alleged enemies of democracy and universal human rights but only if they are not America’s business partners” (female, 5 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Against the Eastern bloc” (female, 7 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Italy, Germany, France, USA, England; criminals” (female, 3 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Imperialism” (female, 9 years old during the bombing)

“Hate” (female, 2 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Hopefully they will burn in the last circle of hell” (6 years old at the time of the bombing)

“America” (female, 9 years old at the time of the bombing)

“If I want to be objective – a useless international organization
Subjective – idiots and cowards” (male, 3 years old at the time of the bombing)

“American interests, although I will never know how objective I am in those conclusions precisely because of the bombing” (male, 4 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Black” (male, 3 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Contemporary [Nazi style] SS unit on an international level. A world policeman without police responsibility” (male, 2 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Honestly, I always try to get rid of negative thoughts and feelings” (female, 4 years old at the time of the bombing)

“The bombing, and how good relations with NATO are maintained, while suppressing what happened, as if it should be forgotten just like that” (female, 4 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Good planes” (male, 3 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Our enemies” (male, 6 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Air raid siren” (male, 7 years old at the time of the bombing)

“Fear” (female, 2 years old at the time of the bombing)

The overall opinion of NATO and the bombing is negative, regardless of any demographic factors. Such consensus is not so widely shared about the EU, which attracts mixed feelings. According to 39.42% of participants, the EU is regarded as theoretically good idea, normatively attractive and in many respects a positive organization, but practically off-putting with a lot of bureaucratic and organizational problems. These respondents explained it as:

“A structure in deep crisis, but with a good idea, the union and cooperation of all European nations. I believe that it is the only right path for Serbia, but I am also sure that the European Union has to fundamentally change in order to fulfil its purpose” (female, born 1993, left)

“Friends from school working in Germany for a better pay” (male, 1996, center)

“A fallen angel. Just kidding, but actually kind of. Closeness and openness in every sense. Visas. Travel. Ideal. Hypocrisy. Gambled chance. Bureaucracy. Capitalism.” (female, 1995, center left)

“Well packaged shit” (female, 1995, center left)

“A useless international organization that feeds its own bureaucracy and has no purpose (I would differentiate the EU from the ideas of European integration— I support the four freedoms of the EU— freedom of movement of goods, people, services and capital over borders)” (male, 1996, center right)

“The West” (female, 1992, center right)

“The West” (female, 1996, center left)

Overall, 20% of participants have more positive attitudes towards the EU. They describe it as:

“Not the same [as NATO], because of personal reasons. A chance to finally leave here” (female, 1994, center left)

“They have it easy, they live in their organized universe and don’t have a need for these kinds of surveys” (female, 1992, center)

“A united Europe without conflict” (male, 1997, 2)

“A better life standard, a happier life” (male, 1991, center)

“Almost 70 years of peace on this continent” (male, 1991, center left)

“Our future” (male, 1992, center left)

The other 37.7% had a more negative attitude:

“A gathering of gay lobbyists and Satanists” (male, 1993, center)

“The Great Reich” (male, 1992, center)

“Neocolonial bureaucratic apparatus in the service of high capital and tightly bound to NATO” (male, 1994, center)

“A girl that used to turn heads and everybody longed for her embrace, but is today ugly inside and out, a source of disappointment” (male, 1996, center right)

“If they were so good, the UK wouldn’t have run away from them” (male, 1997, center right)

“The same as NATO” (female, 1996, center left)

The final two questions focused on the respondents’ attitudes towards Kosovo. In the first question, the respondents were asked about their attitudes about Kosovo in the same manner as the previous two questions about NATO and the EU. Out of the 175 participants, 57.2% had negative attitudes regarding Kosovo’s status as an independent republic and described the territory as the ‘cradle of Serbian identity’ that must not be ‘lost’. Another group of respondents had a more cynical approach, stating its overuse in politics and nationalist rhetoric (25.7%) while 16% mentioned emotions such as sorrow grief and the hardships of life in the territory:

“The Kosovo myth” (female, 1990, left)

“The most important territory in the composition of the Republic of Serbia” (male, 1994, right)

“Love” (female, 1994, center right)

“For me there are 2 versions of Kosovo, one is history, ideals and sanctity.
The other is just scattered associations that describe what it is today.
Throat, tongue, liver, brain cancer...
Drugs, misery, poverty, military convoys, mutual hatred...
One valley of depleted uranium and poor people with a depleted consciousness for better times” (male, 1994, center)

“I don’t have any” (male, 1994, center)

“Let’s forget and try to live in the present” (male, 1996, left)

“Nationalist exploitation of all the events that happened in that geographic territory” (female, 1992, left)

“Battle of Kosovo” (male, 1995, center)

“Field, pain, sanctity, churches, discord, unrest, nothing, myth, nationalism” (male, 1994, center left)

“Footnote” (male, 1994, center left)

“Šiptari and our monasteries” (female, 1996, center left)

“Lost friends” (male, 1991, left)

“Betrayal. Sale. Robbery. Destroyed churches and monasteries. Organ trade.” (male, 1992, center)

“I think it will always be a part of Serbia, times change” (female, 1994, center)

“Ours” (female, 1995, center)

“Province of the Republic of Serbia under temporary occupation” (male, 1994, center)

“1974 Constitution, monasteries, sorrow, politics that don’t allow Serbs and Albanians who live there to live a normal life” (female, 1995, center)

“Košare Fairy, my grandfather's demolished house and yard, twenty-year-old soldiers with a few months of experience in handling weapons, on some border in the south, unscathed, tired and dead.” (male, 1996, center)

“Serbia, Kosovo is Serbia” (female, 1995, center)

“Sorrow for our people that live there and the monasteries, but as a piece of land it doesn’t mean much to me” (female, 1997, center)

“1. The Serb people that are endangered there, as well as the Serb shrines surrounded by Albanians who are just waiting to destroy/appropriate them

2. An attempted state run by criminals” (male, 1994, center right)

“USA” (female, 1995, center)

“The heart of Serbia” (male, 1991, center)

“The Battle of Kosovo, monasteries, our people living down there” (male, 1994, center right)

“Our Lady of Ljeviš [Serbian Orthodox church in Prizren]” (female, 1992, center right)

“The cradle of Serbian national identity” (male, 1995, center right)

“Grief for my birthplace” (female, 1997, center)

“Monasteries and Gazimestan” (male, 1995, right)

“Vandalization of our Churches, Monasteries, oppression of human rights of the Serbian population in Kosovo, our holy Mothers and Fathers. We have sold our Holy Land!” (female, 1994, center)

“Cursed” territory” (female, 1993, center)

“The Battle of Kosovo and collecting points in election campaigns” (male, 1991, center)

“My grandfather. My house which I will never see again” (male, 1993, center)

“Serbia, monasteries, our legally recognized territory, the cradle of us all and part of our country that has to be kept by any means necessary.” (female, 1996, center left)

“Gordian knot” (male, 1996, center left)

“Afflicted people of Serbian nationality, deceived people of Albanian nationality” (male, 1995, center left)

“We have to understand that we need to give up” (male, 1995, center left)

“War, war, war and only war. Aggression. Horror. Violence. Rape. Ethnic cleansing. Although lately, thanks to business contacts with people of different nationalities in Kosovo, I have other associations: youth, openness, coexistence and cooperation.” (female, 1995, center left)

“Centuries of coexistence and apartheid” (male, 1995, left)

“Nothing in particular to be honest. I imagine some territory and I have some pictures in my head of Bujanovac ... I don't know. I think of the internally displaced Roma from Kosovo, and I wonder where they are and what they have done wrong.” (male, 1991, center left)

“Serbian nationalist” (male, 1996, left)

“The Independent Republic of Kosovo, cheap cigarettes” (female, 1993, center left)

When asked about their opinion on the meaning of Kosovo today for the Serbian national identity there was a trifecta of answers. The largest group of respondents (50.9%) emphasized it as one of (if not the) most important aspect of Serbian national identity, even comparing Kosovo to Jerusalem a number of times. The second group of the respondents highlighted the historic importance of Kosovo as the most important, and basically only connection to the present-day national identity (33.1%). The third group reflected on its negative effect on the people affected by the conflict, Serbs and Albanians as well as all the people living in the territory and on the overall country's politics (12%). The remaining 4% of respondents answered by stating it has no importance or that they were not sure.

“A kind of mythical stronghold and escapism, for the preservation of memory and national, cultural and religious identity. Much like Jerusalem to the Jews.” (female, 1994, center left)

“Immeasurable as he always was. It is our starting point and cradle without which we do not exist (as a people and as a culture - the state as such does not interest me). This does not mean that we should run down and drive away the Albanians (that would be stupid and uncivilized), but it does mean that we must take care of this national issue in the future. Btw - not Kosovo but Kosmet, Kosovo is only a part of the territory of the autonomous province of Kosovo and Metohija. Unless you want to give importance to a quasi-state with that name - but that's fair too if you want to :)” (male, 1996, center right)

“Huge. In addition to their media violence and brainwashing, at least 80% of citizens are absolutely against the recognition of the so-called Kosovo. No state in modern history has voluntarily renounced part of the territory, so I do not see why we should renounce, especially the territory that is so rooted in our national and religious identity.” (male, 1995, right)

“There is, but how can I judge the national identity if RTS a few days ago showed a picture of the map of Serbia without the territory of Kosovo. This means that even though Kosovo is a Serbian national identity, the government is trying to make it disappear completely, and they present themselves as if they are grieving over it. It is great that we have other problems, so I think that the answer to this question will change for many after the pandemic. Today there is, and for tomorrow we will see what happens to us and how they will manipulate the people.” (female, 1995, center left)

“I am not interested in Emperor / Prince Lazar and the mythological meaning of Kosovo. The significance of Kosovo is that the eventual recognition of secession would mean the defeat of the state. No serious state will ever recognize the right to secede from a part / province / region. If it were otherwise, there would be an instrument of international law that would regulate who, when and under what conditions has the right to external self-determination. So, it will be a test of whether we are a nation at all, that is. the people who have the state or the past (we have already failed the test).” (male, 1994, center right)

“Of key importance, unfortunately” (male, 1992, left)

“Honestly, it [Kosovo] should be abandoned. I am not particularly connected to any ‘national identity’, especially if we look at what Serbia is and what it is like today, although I appreciate the richness of Serbian history. On the one hand, I think that Serbia is much more than what is tied to Kosovo. Again, I find it shameful how we behave today, so adopting a “national identity” is also a failure if we don’t improve collectively.” (male, 1996, center)

“Honestly, if we give up on Kosovo, we are giving up on ourselves as a people” (male, 1996, center right)

“While our people are down there, it is our land!” (female, 1995, center right)

“Demagogic. Practically and historically unfounded” (male, 1995, center left)

“It is actively used for political points and the radical right. If anyone has ever been to Kosovo, they should know that apart from the monasteries, there are no Serbs there. Therefore, we should think about the myth of Serbian identity on all fronts” (female, 1990, center left)

“Ok” (female, 1997, center left)

“I think that we lost Kosovo a long time ago and thus our identity.” (female, 1994, center left)

“It is very important. The Serbian national identity was built on the myth of the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, and the NATO bombing and, a decade later, the independence of Kosovo significantly contributed to the awakening of the role of the Serbian people in public political discourse in Serbia, but also among the majority. Today, if an individual supports Kosovo's independence, he / she is a "traitor to the Serbian people" - and I think that speaks volumes about the importance of Kosovo for Serbian national identity.” (female, 1995, center left)

“It is important to ethno-nationalists who use Kosovo as the core of Serbian national identity. Regardless of the fact that Kosovo has been a part of the Serbian state many times throughout history, as well as the fact that there are many monuments of Serbian medieval culture, I believe that Kosovo today should not be relevant to Serbian national identity because it is not part of Serbia. nor is the ethnic structure of the population there predominantly Serb.” (female, 1990, left)

“It is important for sustaining the mythology based on the events of Kosovo starting from 1389 onwards” (male, 1990, center)

“Kosovo is our holy land. That may be a cliché answer, but since the Middle Ages it has been a country where all our monasteries are, where our people are. The battle in Kosovo has taken place and no Western intervention can change what Kosovo represents to the Serb people. A crime was committed against the Serb people in 1999 for which no one will ever be held accountable. Our people are not and will never forget these crimes. My father leaving and my mother crying because we don't know where she is for three weeks, who is hiding so I can have a carefree children's day in the basement sleeping at the door. An aunt who does not see the flow in the column after two hours of waiting and who falls into a trance and loses consciousness and that is Kosovo for me. People on the bridge, people in RTS, passenger train 393, Milica and many other Milica, Jelena and Dusana are all Kosovo. Kosovo is Our Lady of Ljeviš, Pec Patriarchate, Gracanica. Personally, I am not a religious person, but our churches are our tradition. The people in the Serbian enclaves today are Kosovo. Kosovo is a yellow house, Kosovo for slaughtered Serb families,

expelled. Those families that still suffer persecution today, people who are surrounded by wire. Kosovo is first and foremost Kosovo and Metohija, not "Kosovo"." (female, 1992, center right)

"Kosovo is the heart of Serbia!" (female, 1990, left)

"Kosovo is the heart of Serbia" (female, 1996, left)

"Significance is added that is not very important from the 19th century until today. The Serbian people are equated with the feudal lords of the Middle Ages." (male, 1995, left)

"Kosovo and the faith that we will someday, somehow regain it is the only thread that maintains any illusion of Serbian national identity" (male, 1993, right)

"It shows that we are nostalgic" (female, 1995, center left)

"Kosovo and Metohija are the source of the Serbian nation. We can discuss whether the nation is an obsolete term, but since it is not de facto, the significance of Kosovo and Metohija is huge, given the cultural heritage and the period in which our ancestors inhabited that territory." (male, 1993, center)

"I assume that it is a combination of the myth of the origin of the community, the view of the Serbian Orthodox Church as a historical continuity of the corps of the Serbian people, the symbolism of Sisyphus resistance and suffering before greater powers, the assertion of agency and power, and the existence of a timeless, stable and mystical collective goal." (male, 1993, left)

"National identity very, practically nothing. One more torment" (male, 1997, center)

"God willing, next year in Prizren" (male, 1991, center)

"For the Serbian national identity, Kosovo is the same as Jerusalem for the Jews. The endowments of the first Serbian internationally recognized ruling dynasty, the Kosovo myth and the Pec Patriarchate are just parts of history that inextricably link Kosovo to Serbia. Although I am not personally religious, nor are most people of similar age, I can clearly see the role that religion, and thus Kosovo, has played in preserving the Serbian national identity to this day." (male, 1995, center right)

"Like excess fat, it can protect us from the flu, but we will feel easier if we take it off" (male, 1992, center left)

A part of the survey referred to the participants' memory formation and various influences that have shaped their proces of remembering. Personal research on the topic was rated as the

highest influence on memories by 38.3%. Only 5.7% of the participants said that personal research had the least influence on their memories and attitudes about the bombing. (see Graph 11) Most of these respondents cited personal experiences and their families as their main influences. (see Graphs 7 and 8) The younger participants were at the time of the bombing, the more personal research became an impactful factor on their memories. Out of the respondents that were born in 1996 and 1997 41.6% stated that personal research had the highest impact on their memories, more so than their family or conversations with friends and peers. School was the least impactful factor overall, with only 2.8% rating it a 5 (strongly impactful) and 80% of them being born in 1990 or 1993, so of elementary school age in 1999. (see Graph 9)

DISCUSSION

Collected narratives about the past and their memories thereof offer a rich material for analysis and further discussion. They are not always linear, and in many respects these statements, arguments and descriptions are even contradictory. In order to identify and distinguish crucial differences relevant for memory formation, three major criteria were used in reading the responses:

- (1) Participants' answers were assessed by how factual they were, considering how much they rely on factual/affective elements in their interpretation of the events;
- (2) Answers were judged by how personalized/generalized they were i.e. were the answers based predominantly on personal memories or did the participants reflected more broadly on the memories about the state of the country at the time; and,
- (3) The relationship between the events and the participants' current attitudes about Kosovo.

The suggested typology reflects differences in attitudes and approaches to the narratives surrounding Kosovo and the 1999 NATO military campaign reflecting both the common, social memory frame and individual responses to those events. Typology means social grouping, and formation of idealized common types flexible enough for variety of individual positions and in this case divides the generation into following *remembering groups*:

- (1) **The angry group**— this group is defined by anger filled and opinionated answers. The group is prejudiced against the other actors in the conflict, especially the Albanians and Americans. Even their answers related to personal experiences mostly rely on recycling propaganda, official information and misinformation that was spread by the Yugoslav/Serbian government such as stories about depleted uranium and the false title of the 1999 operation. These respondents were more likely to rate themselves as center right or right on the political affiliation scale. Their current views on NATO and the EU are decidedly negative and founded on beliefs that both organizations are working against the interests of Serbia. Participants in

this group are also more likely to be religious and have been in the country during the bombing. Their views on Kosovo mostly ignore its declaration of independence and still refer to it as a part of Serbia and emphasize its importance for the Serbian national identity.

(2) **The objective group**— participants in this group hold both sides responsible for the conflict citing geopolitical reasons and poor leadership as its major causes. There are opinions that the intervention could have been avoided if both sides had taken more moderate and reasonable actions. Their position builds on a common sense understanding that there are always two sides to the conflict without elaborating on separate facts. Much like their views on the conflict itself, their assessment of key events during the bombing are critical of both sides and tend to focus on the shortcomings of both NATO and the Yugoslav/Serbian army and government. They emphasize the key events during the conflict, especially those with civilian casualties, rather than discussing their private memories. Their associations to the bombing are mostly those of the air raid siren and the carnage that was left behind. In regards to their attitudes towards the EU they are skeptical of its benefits with many claiming that they were disenchanted by the union while still pointing out its benefits, particularly for them personally, but also for the country.

(3) **The indifferent group**— participants in this category attempted to maintain a detached approach to the narratives they were questioned about. Their answers are based on factual renditions of the events of 1999 citing peace talks, treaties and resolutions. Their position is built on factographic readings of the conflict, and their answers are short and unemotional. Similar to the previous group, there are equally critical towards all of the actors of the conflict

and generally look at the events as a game of profit and eventual loss. They mostly reflect on the bad living conditions during the time of the bombing as well as some of the key military events, such as downing the US F11 plane. Their attitudes towards NATO and the EU are also more neutral than those of the other groups and their opinion on the importance of Kosovo today is in line with this. They point out its historic significance, as well as cite the presence of important monasteries and churches on the territory, but without a deeper engagement.

- (4) **The emotional group**— respondents in this group mostly reflected on personal memories through all of the questions. Their answers are emotional and review the events of 1999 through a personal lens rather than a political event or as a conspiracy. Their interpretation is firmly based upon emotional and experiential readings of the events. They were most open about sharing their memories and experiences when asked about the bombing. A lot of them cited feeling fear and sadness and some kind of uncertainty, and reflected on some direct events they experienced during the time of the military operation. They also were the most visual group, describing specific images that they remember from their memory, along with some mention of smell and touch of various things. They described the movies and TV shows they watched and how certain elements seemed to them as children at the time. This group was mostly likely to claim they have changed their opinion of the bombing since the intervention, claiming to have learned more through their education and socialization. Their opinions of Kosovo's importance today are mostly expressed through sadness for the conditions in which people are living there and disagreement with the way in which the territory is politicized and exploited.

(5) **The nonrespondent group**— answers of the respondents that fell into this category were reserved. They did not seem interested in engaging with the survey in a complete manner. Nonrespondents gave incomplete answers that could not be classified in any of the above-mentioned groups. Some answers seemed to border on jokes or ironic comments. Most of the answers were undecided and did not present much content for analysis.

CONCLUSION

Important historical events shape the lives of generations to come but before that they irreversibly influence the lives of contemporaries, sometimes even more than they are aware of. This research provided me with one of those rare and rich types of insights into an ongoing memory process about one such event. Memory of the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia during the final stage of the Kosovo conflict is, generally, a very particular memory construct. For Serbian citizens the bombing was a highly traumatic event. What makes it even more traumatic is that it cannot really be shared or sympathized with, since the bombing was conducted by a large international alliance in an attempt to stop the Kosovo conflict. Therefore, the experience was both traumatic and pushed in a lockdown, many times even without any reflection about it. This was particularly difficult for today's young adults who were in their young childhood at the time.

The generational memory is always an outcome of the common social endeavor of the whole age cohort, but is also a collection of individual attitudes, reflections and emotions. This makes it a complex and often contested construct. In times of major historical events as sudden ruptures, it faces additional challenges due to a dramatic loss of meaning and a need to renarrate the major identity narratives.

So many of these contradictions were visible when I started this research. They persisted in the material gathered through the survey and in subsequent discussions with peers and members of this generation more broadly. Many of them willingly shared their opinions and suggestions revealing layers of these same contradictions within their memories. Using analytical rather than emotional tools to go through these personal narratives and factographic answers I have tried to make sense of them and answer the two research questions:

- 1) How did the myth of Kosovo help this generation comprehend the 1999 bombing?
- 2) How did this generations' experience of the bombing contribute to their renarration of the national myth of Kosovo?

Following the two initial hypotheses, I have come to several conclusions. The bombing was a key event in the socialization and memories of this generation. The typology that was presented provides a rudimentary assessment of the ways in which the connection between individual memories and perceptions of national self can be examined within this particular generation. The willingness of the participants to discuss these traumatic events only reinforced the notion I had when deciding to pursue this topic— there is still so much to be said and reflected about these experiences. Each experience is individual and different but number of factors can contribute to their remembering, leading to their later recontextualized through specific memory formation practices and discovering one's national self or shying away from it. It also indicates the dangers and long-term effects of propaganda and state sponsored misinformation, especially when the cycle is not broken, but only starts spinning the other way. However, this study showed that there are a number of young people open to analyzing and engaging with the opinions and attitudes of their social environment. They are less susceptible to official narratives and learned versions of events that are later repackaged in an effort to mobilize blind patriotism and try to create a harmful type of national identity. This critical thinking develops against the pressure to conform to the dominant narrative and renarration is their main strategy.

There is a clear connection between the myth of Kosovo and the NATO bombing since almost all of the participants made this connection as the primary one in regards to the conflict and events of 1999. The conflict in Kosovo did create an environment in which nationalist mobilization was not only easy, but it was also very aggressive. This resulted in a whole generation being

inextricably connected to a territory not only geographically, but also symbolically. It fostered a relationship that revokes a centuries long tradition in order to preserve it for the future. On the other hand, a couple of interesting new perspectives on the symbolic importance of Kosovo were identified. Aside from those groups that still associate Kosovo with the epic battles and wars for independence, this generations' experience did help in shaping the perception of Kosovo in a new capacity. For some members of this generation, Kosovo is now seen more as a historic event that should be left in the past. Without discrediting its importance in Serbian history, some feel that this battle is costing too much. They would rather focus on the future than keep looking back. Once again, this does not mean the complete detachment of Kosovo from Serbian national history or identity, but simply putting it to rest there where it belongs. A part of this generation seems to be prepared to move on and enjoy open borders instead of continuously fighting over a historically contested filed.

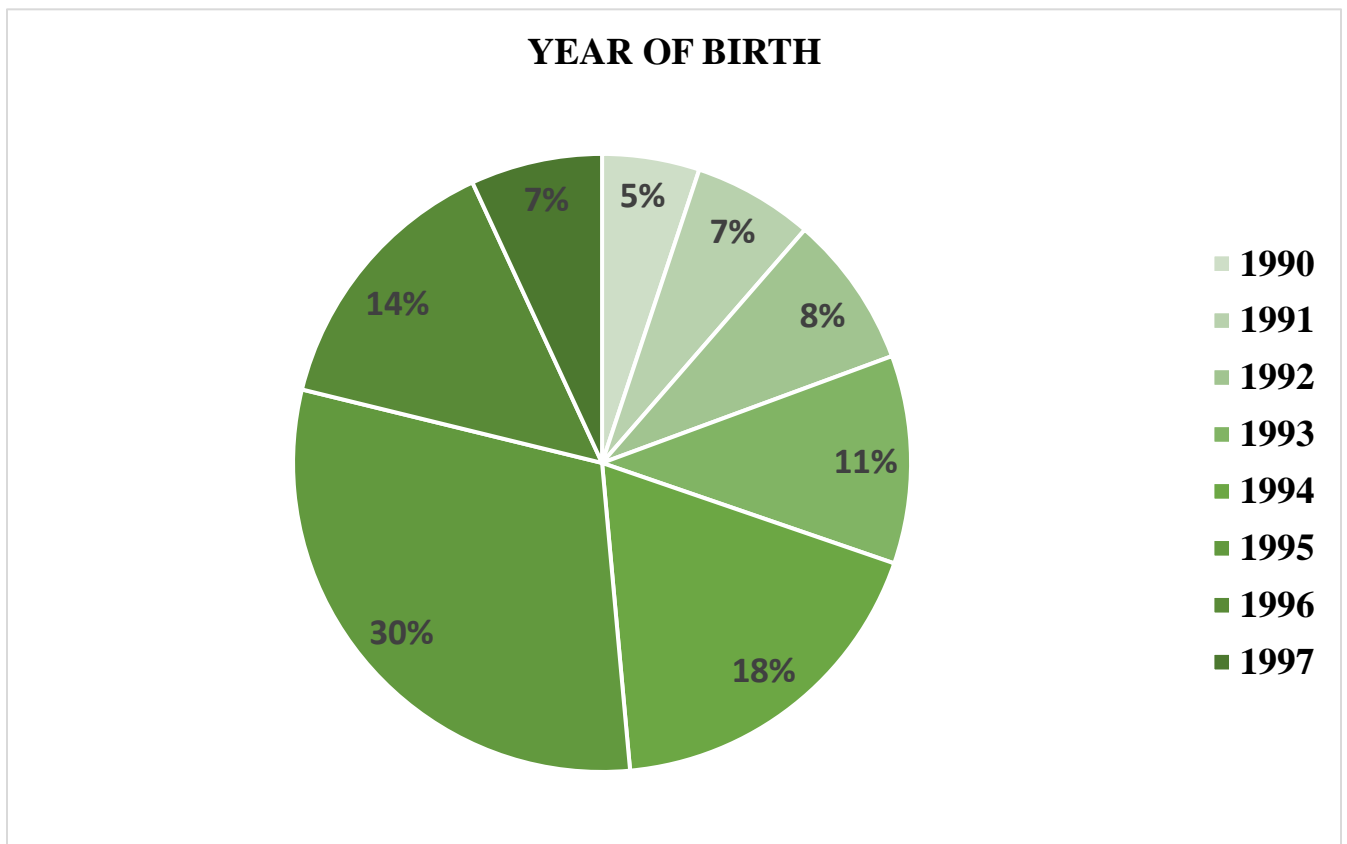
One exciting takeaway from this research is the growing significance of social media and the Internet in the remembering process of young generations. It can confidently be assumed that this trend will continue to grow with, which is why it is crucial to delve deeper into it. Studies on the relationship between past events and their commemoration online seem like a logical next step in the research of collective memory for young generations. Studying how they digitally learn, form and reform their memories and interact with people who share the same experiences will reveal more about collaborative memory formation practices. In this particular case, it would be interesting to see how the NATO bombing is commemorated on social media platforms and how this generation of digital natives brings the historical narratives into new platforms. As Burkey (2019) notes 'what may prove most worthy of remembering is not necessarily the digital content

itself but rather how involved user interaction is with that content'.⁵² This dissertation indicated that memory practice within different *remembering groups* also include different forms of interaction and participation over shared experiences.

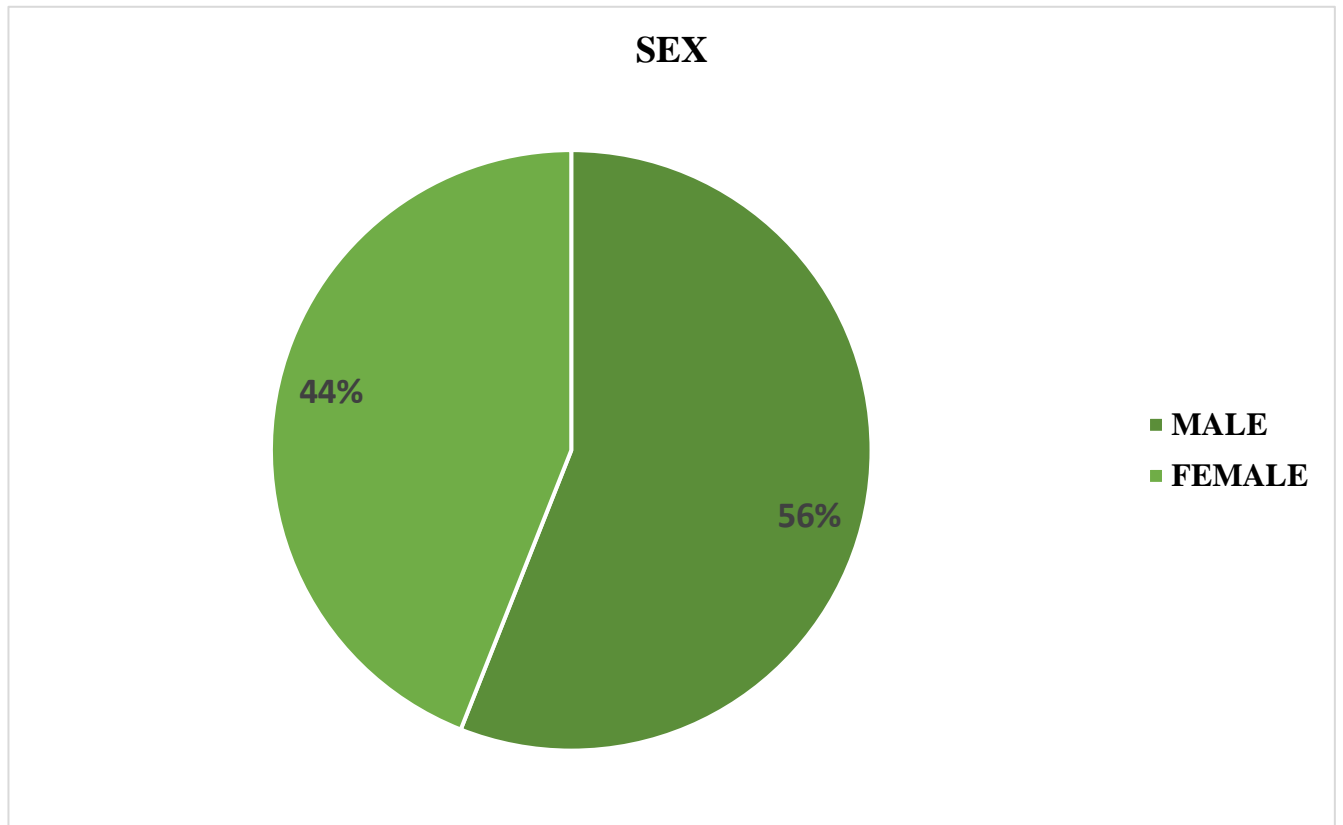
It is safe to conclude that perseverance of the national myth of origin helped make sense of the bombing for the coming generations. It also provided a contested frame as it seems that there is an intensive discursive struggle within it. Those with less personal memories of the event, born later in the decade and with the least personal experience are more susceptible to post-fact intervention, which points to a possible general retraditionalization of the younger part of the Serbian population. Those members of the generation who have more personal memories of the event seem to be more affective and critical to that influence. It seems that renarrating myths is a social practice that continues and that the bombing has already been symbolically associated with the major national myth. Both leading hypotheses seem to be verified: young adults used national common stories to make sense of their personal experience while at the same time included this exceptional experience into the national story. The amount of individualized, skeptical and even cynical opinions and detachment from the grand national narrative, along with personal memories are also reshaping the frame of collective memories. It is the memory of a generation that I also belong to and it offered me a unique platform to share and reflect upon my own memories.

⁵² Brant Burkey, "Repertoires of Remembering: A Conceptual Approach for Studying Memory Practices in the Digital Ecosystem", *Journal of Communication Inquiry*. 44 (2) (2019): SAGE Publications. 178-197. p.189.

APPENDIX: LIST OF GRAPHS

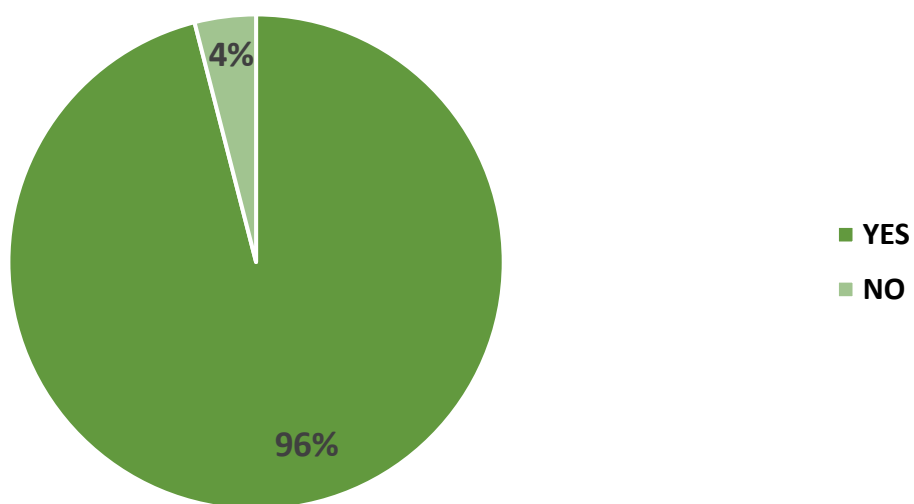


GRAPH 1: YEAR OR BIRTH



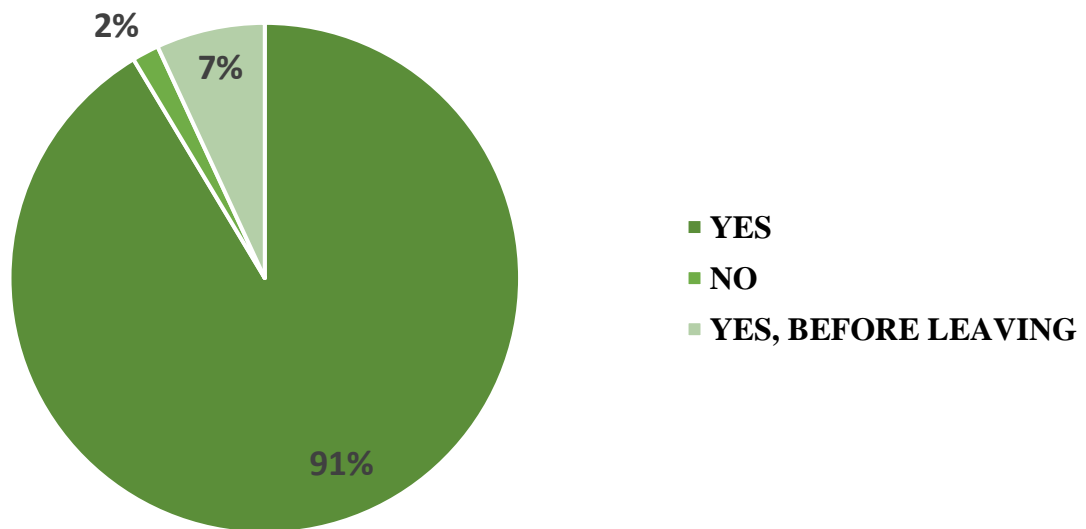
GRAPH 2: SEX

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN OR ARE YOU CURRENTLY A STUDENT?

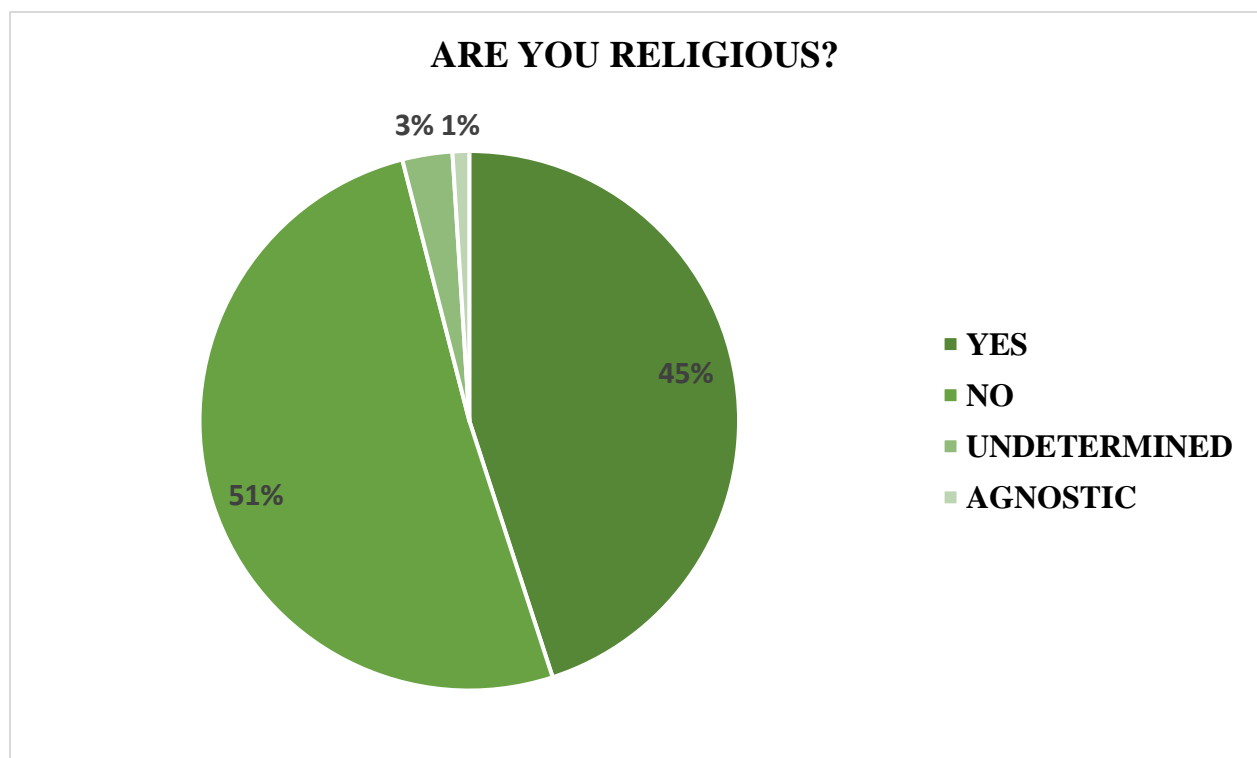


GRAPH 3: STUDENT STATUS

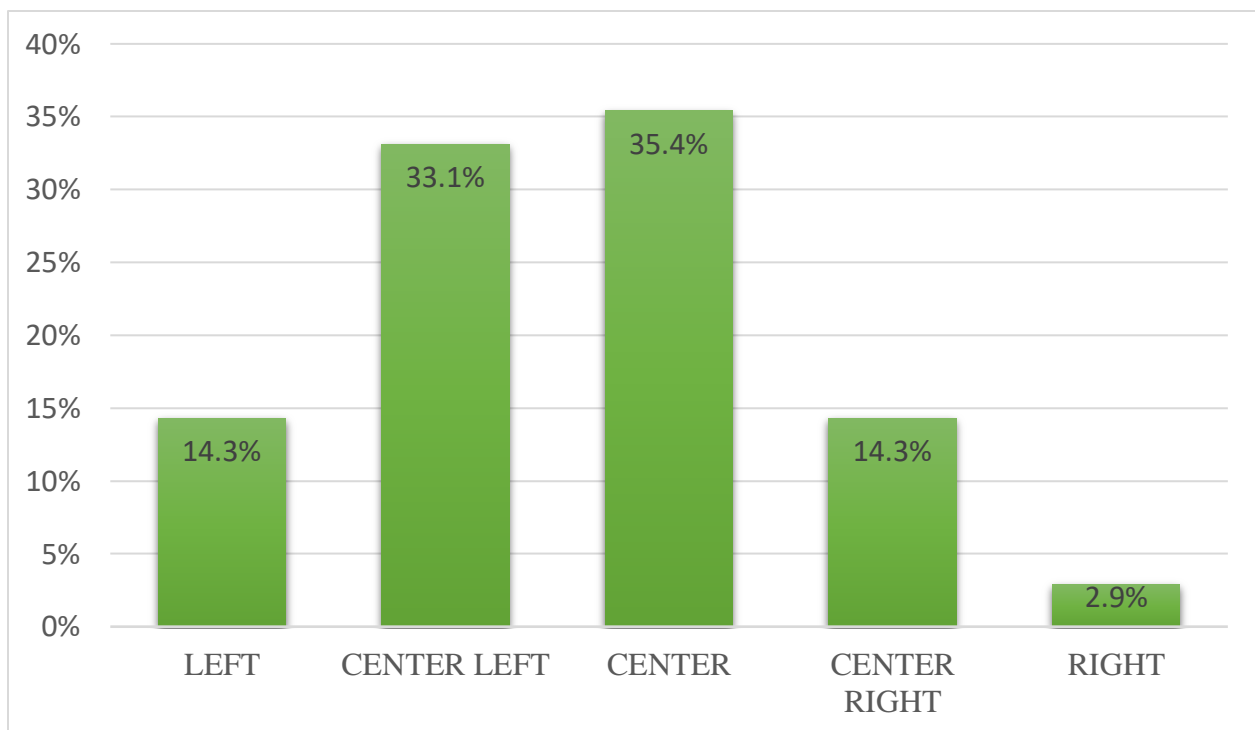
**WERE YOU IN THE COUNTRY DURING THE 1999
BOMBING?**



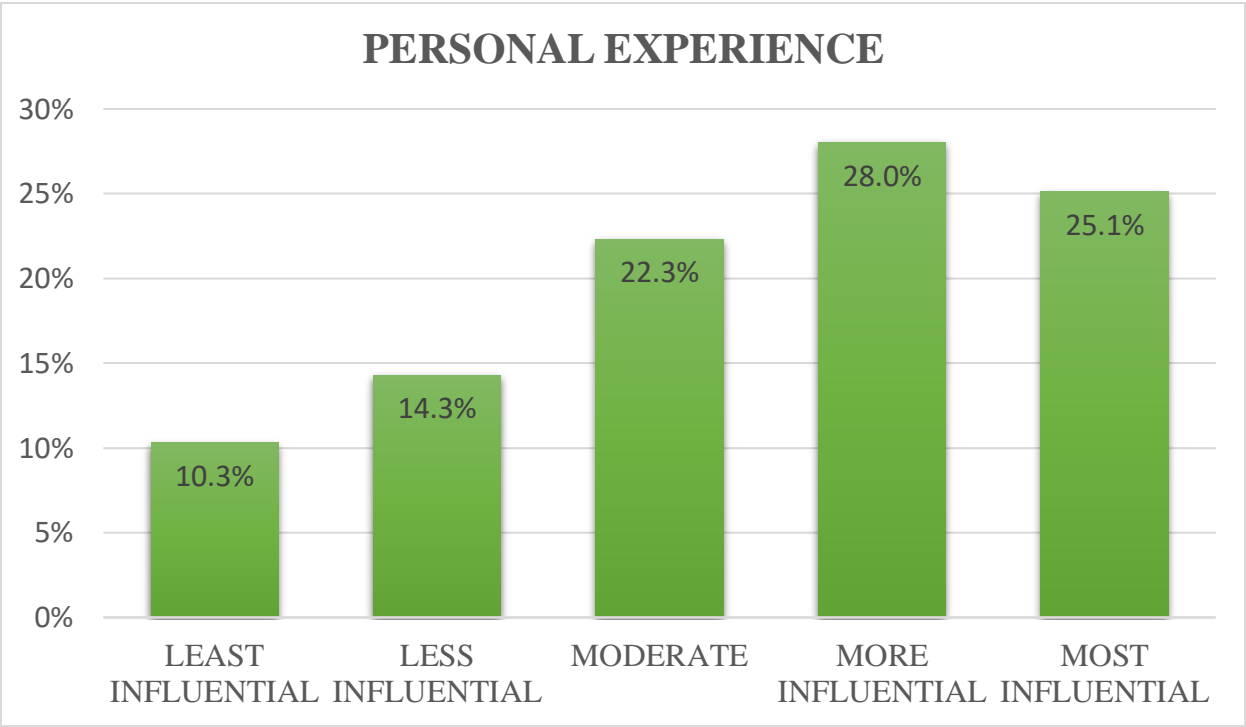
GRAPH 4: WHAREABOUTS DURING THE BOMBING



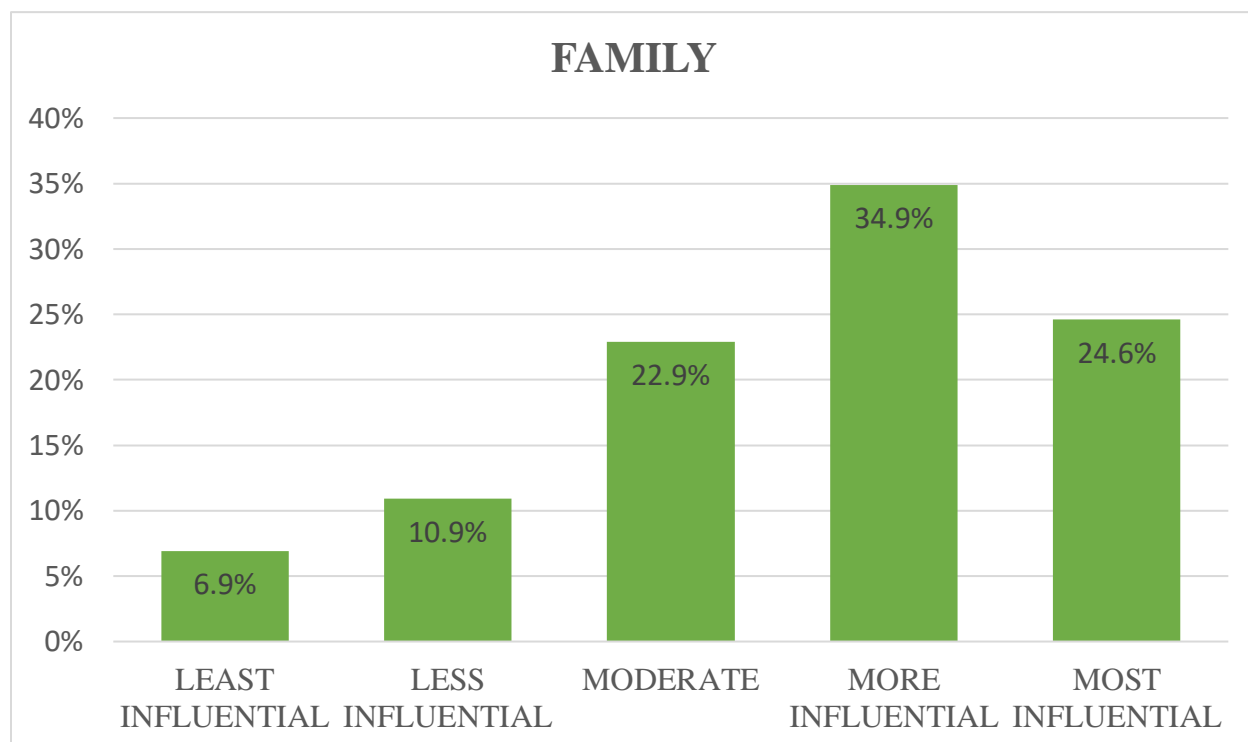
GRAPH 5: RELIGIOUS BELONGING



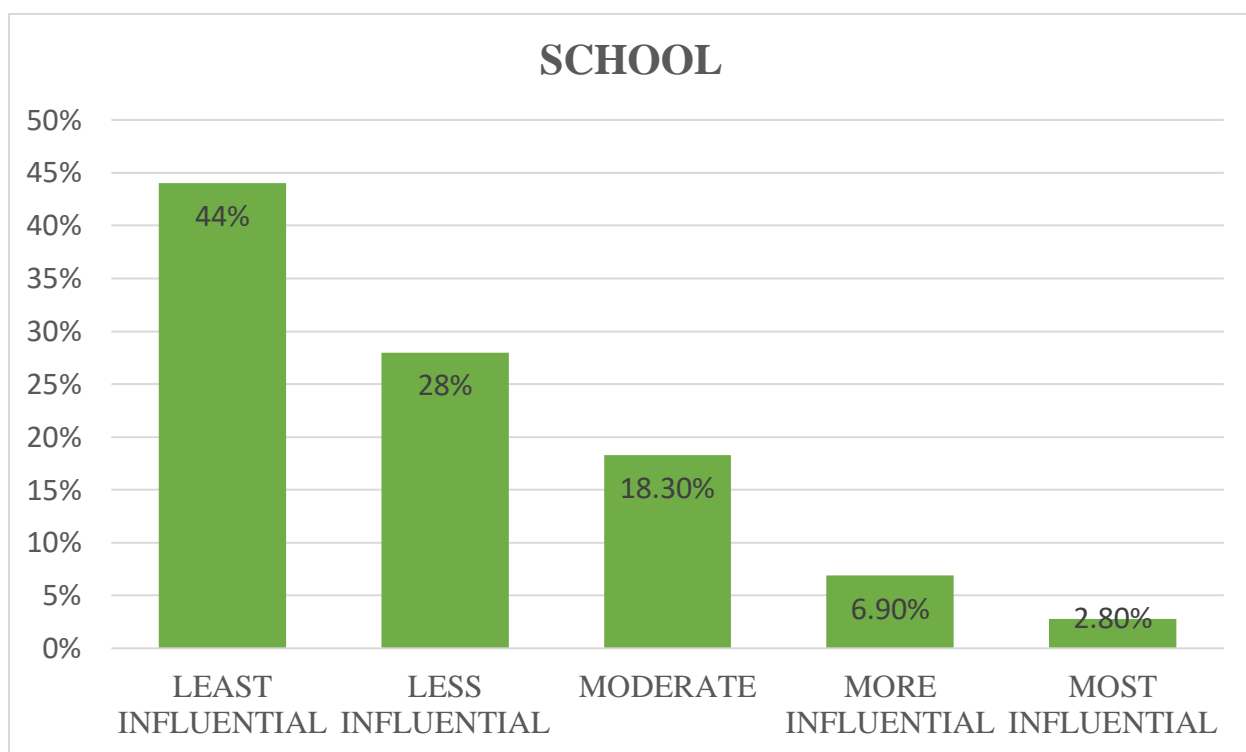
GRAPH 6: POLITICAL AFFILIATION SCALE



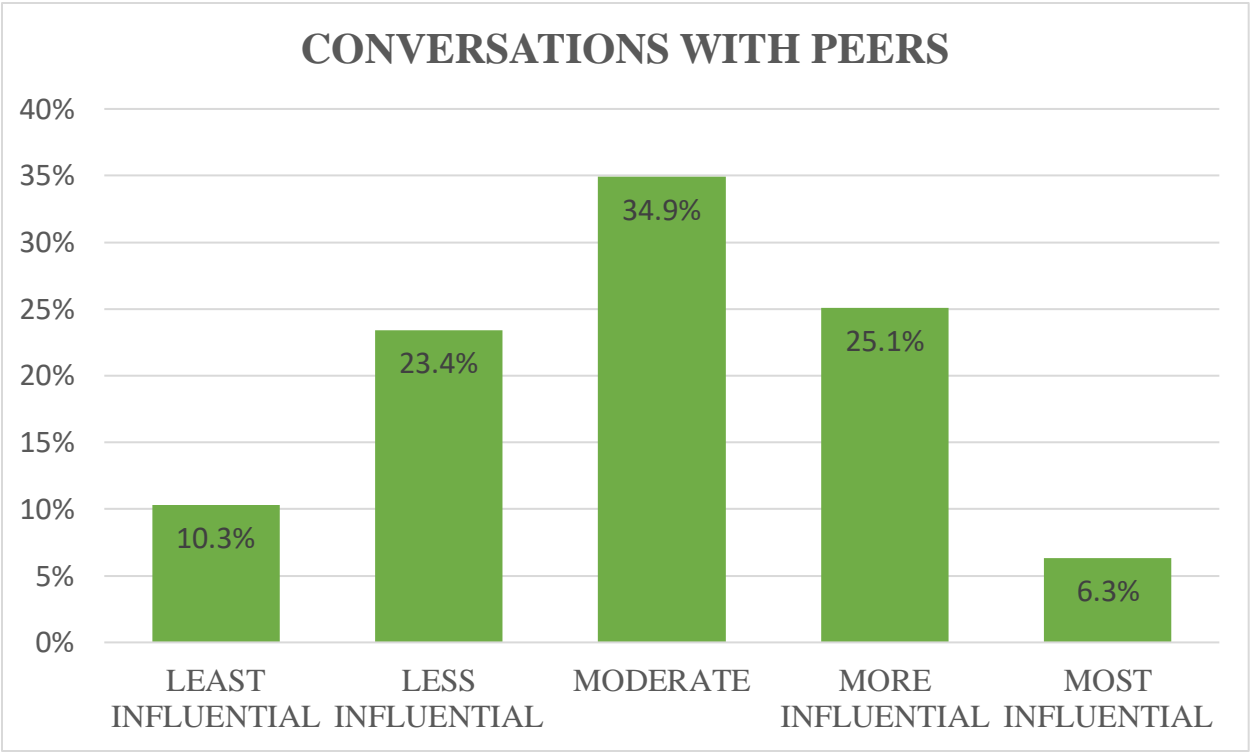
GRAPH 7: INFLUENCE OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCES ON MEMORIES ABOUT THE BOMBING



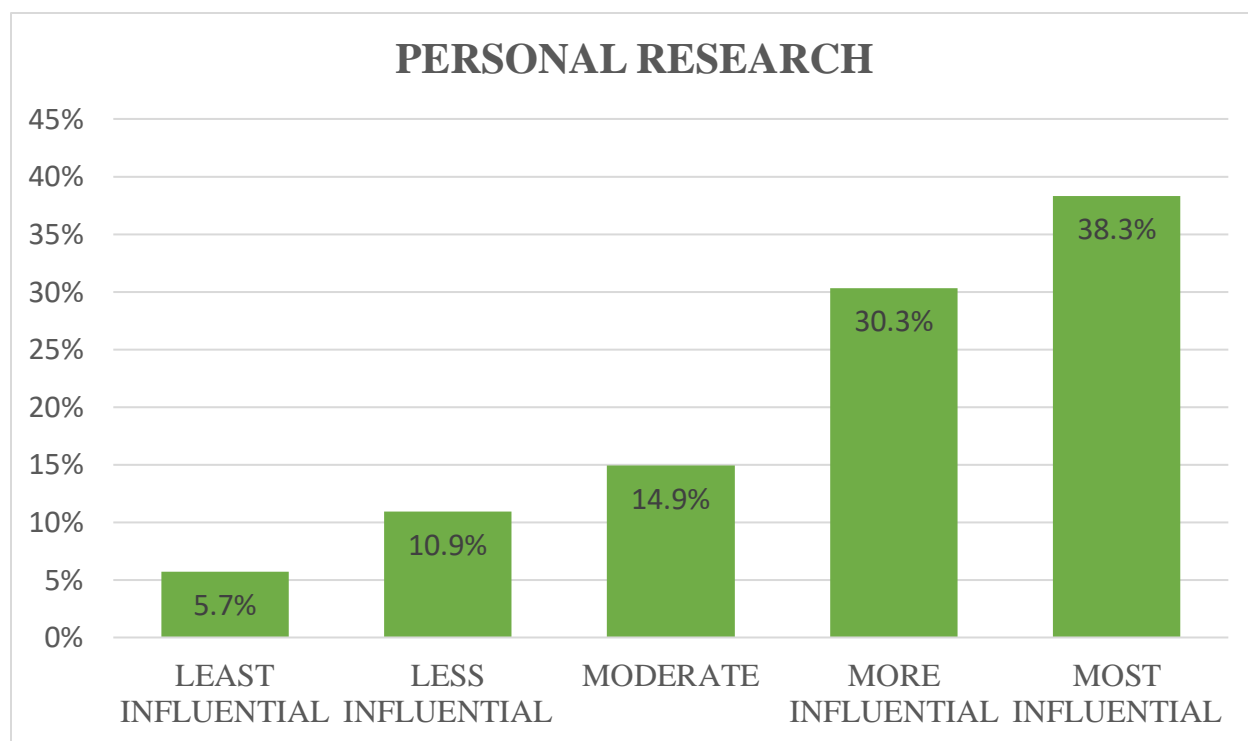
GRAPH 8: INFLUENCE OF FAMILY ON MEMORIES ABOUT THE BOMBING



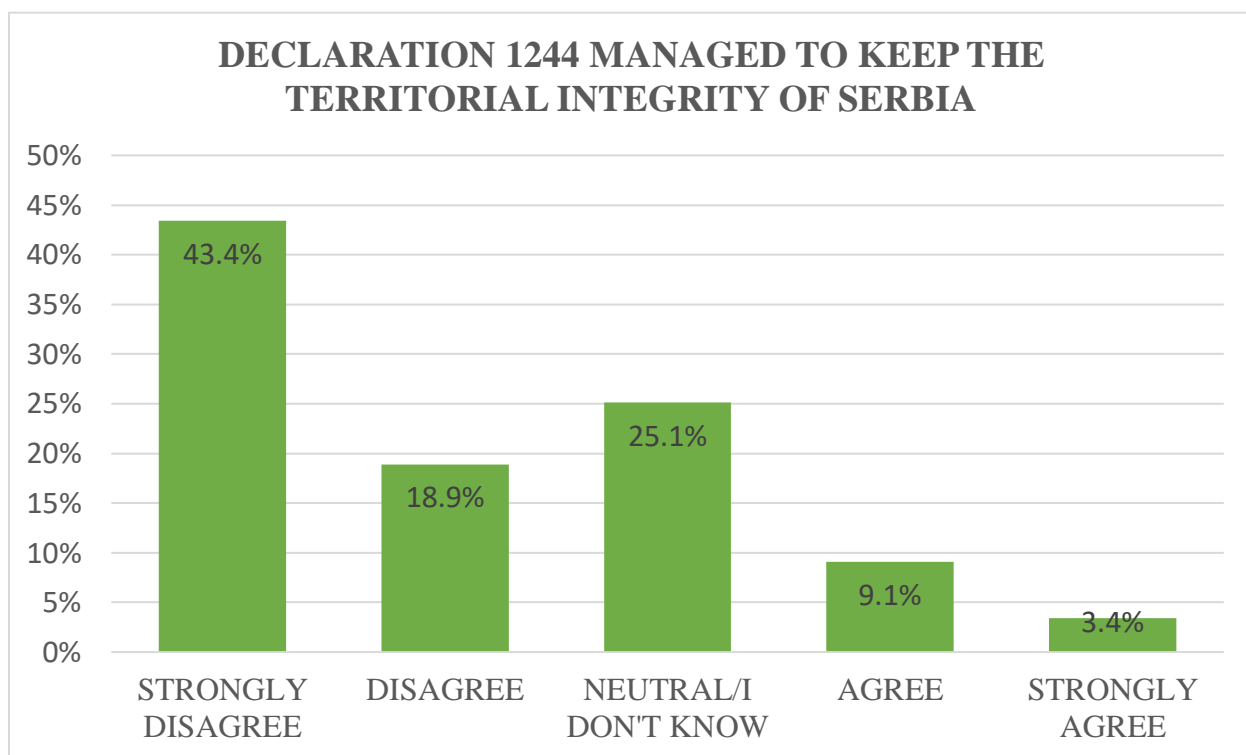
GRAPH 9: INFLUENCE OF SCHOOL ON MEMORIES ABOUT THE BOMBING



GRAPH 10: INFLUENCE OF CONVERSATIONS WITH PEERS ON MEMORIES ABOUT THE BOMBING

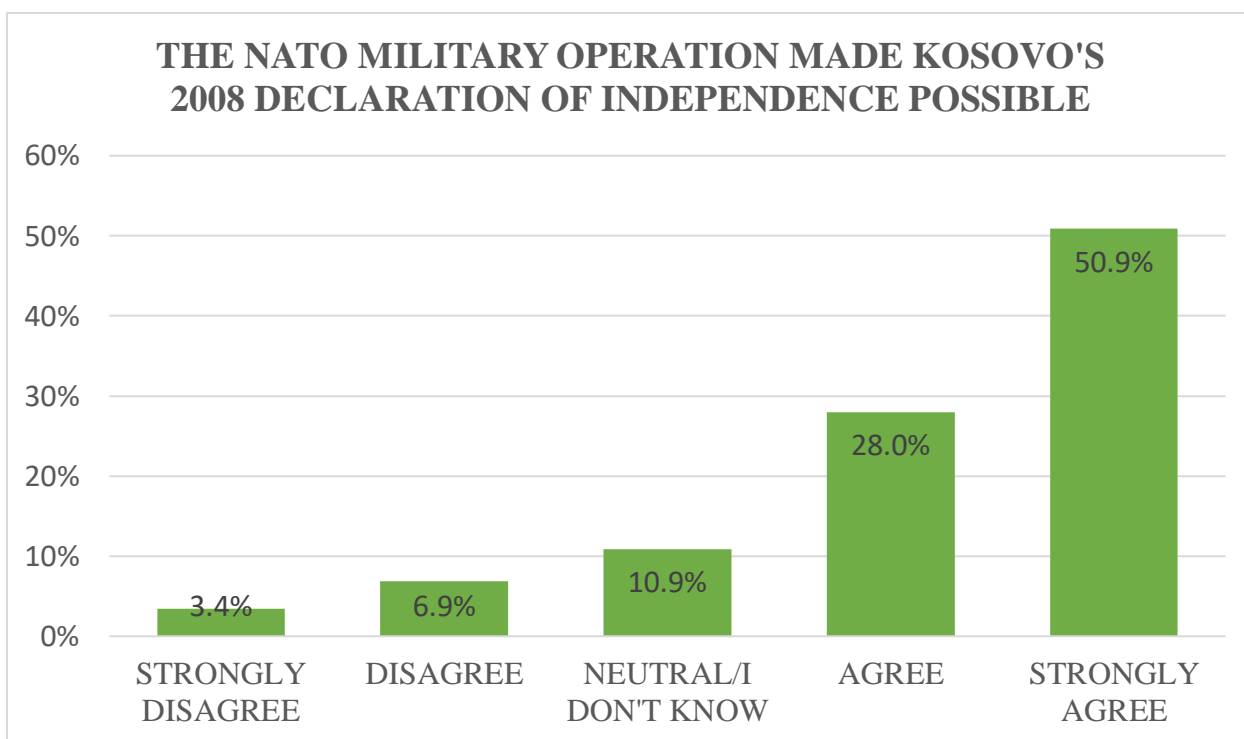


GRAPH 11: INFLUENCE OF PERSONAL RESEARCH ON MEMORIES ABOUT THE BOMBING



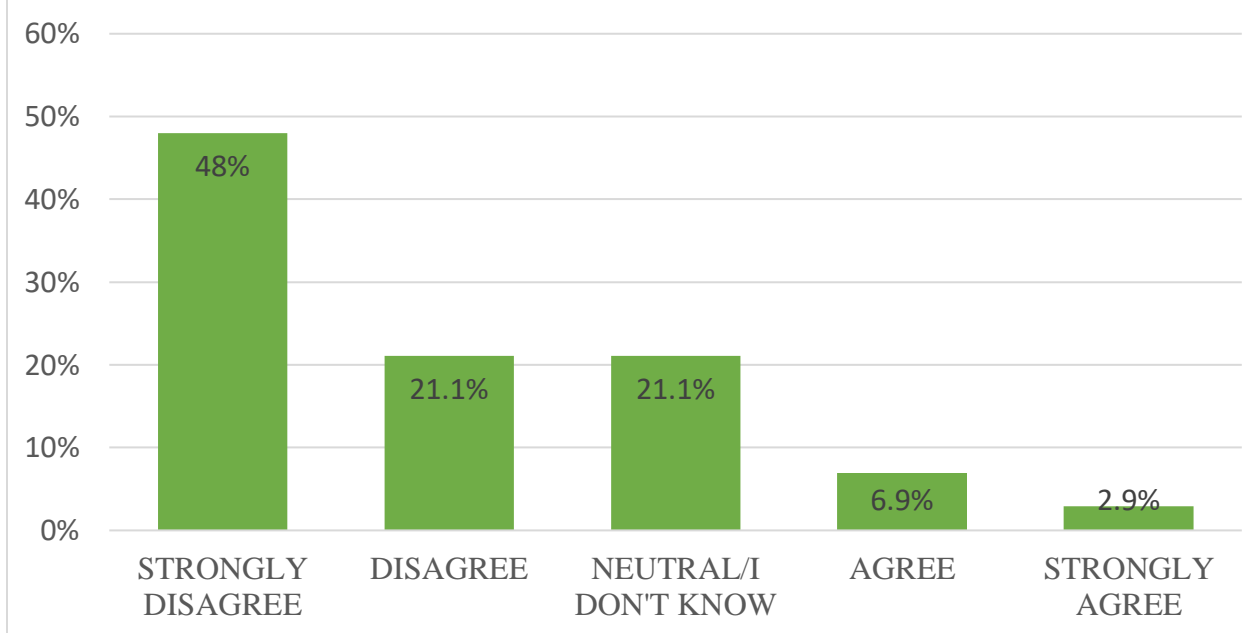
GRAPH 12: ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE STATEMENT “*DECLARATION 1244
MANAGED TO KEEP THE TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY OF SERBIA*”

**THE NATO MILITARY OPERATION MADE KOSOVO'S
2008 DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE POSSIBLE**

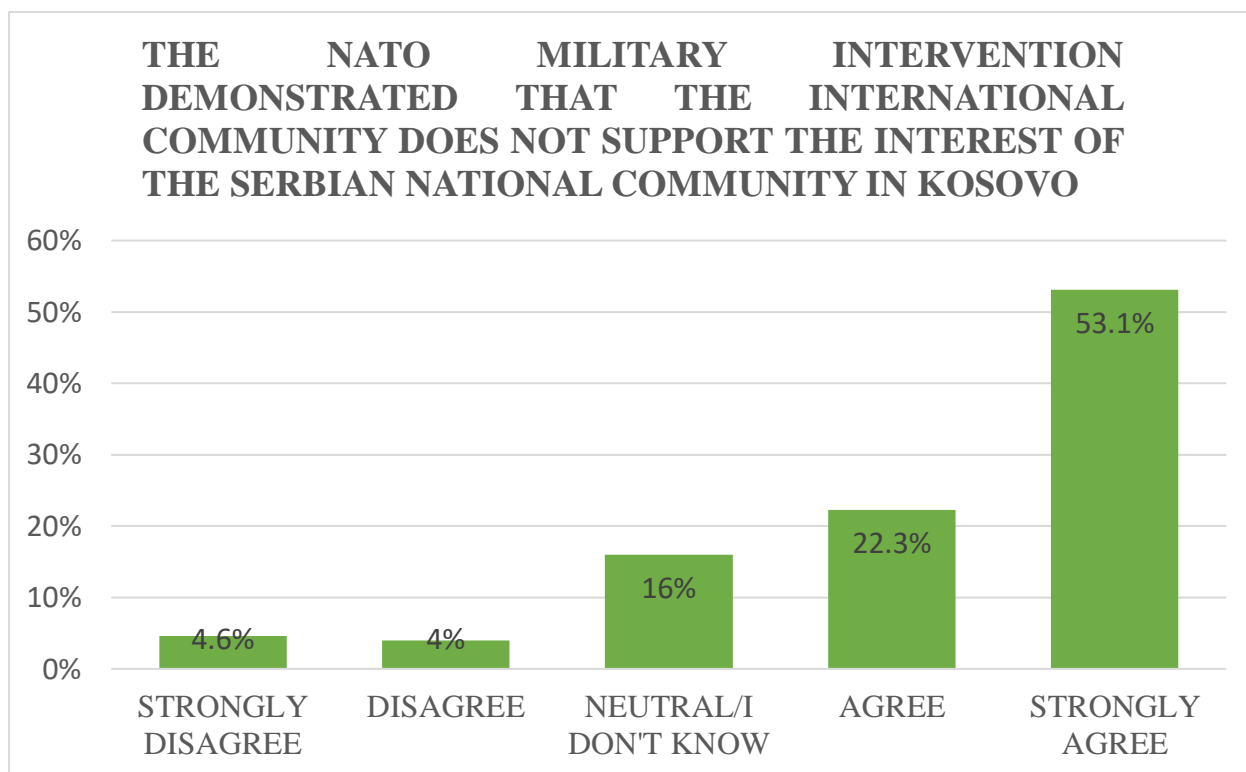


GRAPH 13: ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE STATEMENT “*THE NATO MILITARY OPERATION MADE KOSOVO'S 2008 DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE POSSIBLE*”

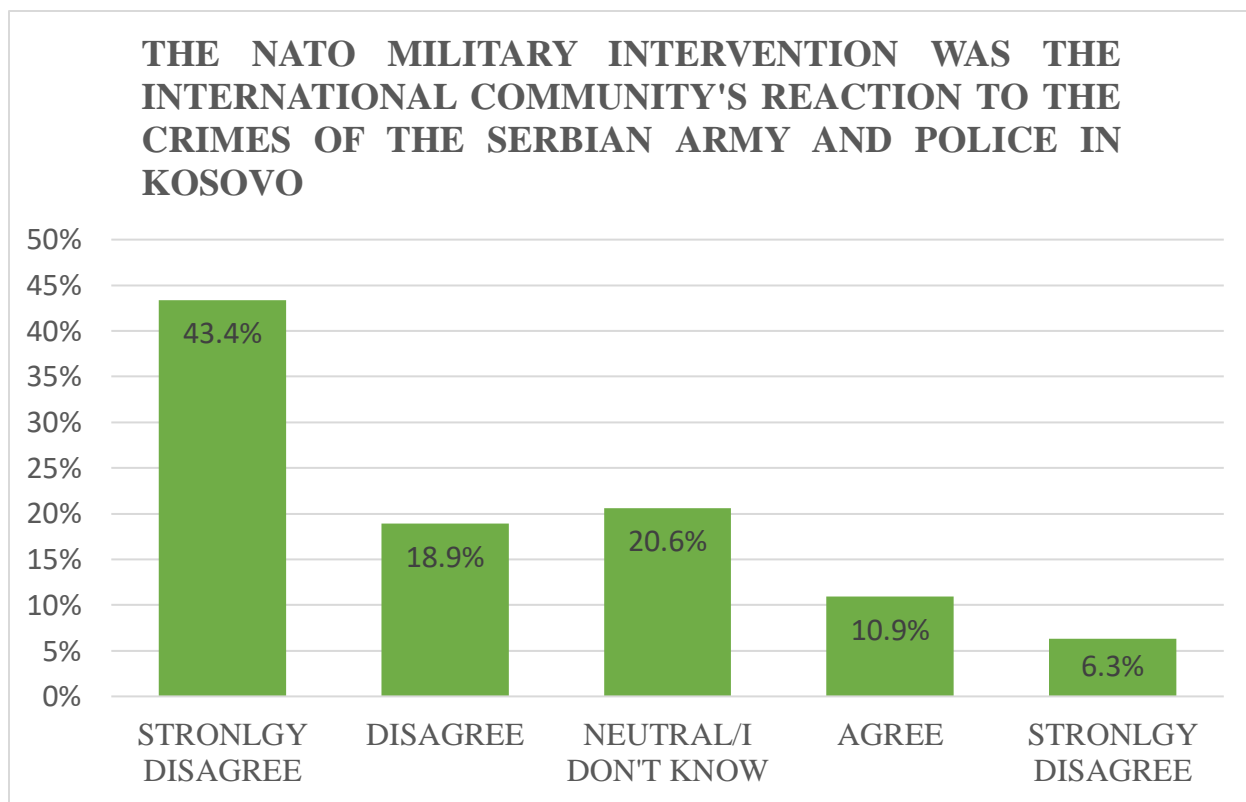
THE NATO MILITARY INTERVENTION FROZE THE KOSOVO CONFLICT



GRAPH 14: ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE STATEMENT “*THE NATO MILITARY INTERVENTION FROZE THE KOSOVO CONFLICT*”



GRAPH 15: ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE STATEMENT “*THE NATO MILITARY INTERVENTION DEMONSTRATED THAT THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY DOES NOT SUPPORT THE INTEREST OF THE SERBIAN NATIONAL COMMUNITY IN KOSOVO*”



GRAPH 16: ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE STATEMENT: “*THE NATO MILITARY INTERVENTION WAS THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY'S REACTION TO THE CRIMES OF THE SERBIAN ARMY AND POLICE IN KOSOVO*”

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