Towards an Anthropology of Defeat: Serbia Trapped in the Binary Narratives of Perpetrators and Victims

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Abstract

This thesis explores the formation, development, and officialization of a Serbian *memory regime* (Bernhard and Kubik 2014) centered on resistance to moral obligations to recognize war crimes and deal with the troubled past, typically associated with transitional justice. It investigates how a society that perpetrated numerous war crimes reconfigures its historical narratives and creates memory politics around its victims, thereby challenging the prevailing discourse shaped by transitional justice mechanisms. The thesis shows how the victims on the side of the perpetrator as "impure victims" become alternative witnesses of the troubled past that aim to counterbalance the prevailing image of Serbia as a perpetrator in the Yugoslav wars. As the transitional justice often downplays the significance of "impure victims," assigning lesser value to their voice within its moral economy of victimhood, the thesis analyses how, within the Serbian memory landscape, these marginalized victims adopt unconventional forms to mark their presence. Throughout the chapters, the thesis examines how, instead of being recognized as witnesses in traditional legal proceedings, these victims are voiced through different disembodied forms, from ephemeral monuments to wax figures and diverse artistic expressions. These alternative embodiments testify to an increasingly counter-liberal form of memory that challenges both the rigid dichotomy between victim and perpetrator and the particular liberal archetype of the embodied victim serving as the ideal witness in the regime of transitional justice. The thesis shows how contemporary Serbian memory politics strategically utilize the concept of victimhood, not only to legitimize Serbia's role domestically, but also as a response to the broader liberal order. The analysis presented in this thesis shows how transitional justice, driven by the notion of "coming to terms with the past," gives rise to a memory regime that diverges from the liberal conception of reconciliation. Rather than facilitating a presupposed reckoning with historical injustices, the thesis shows how transitional justice might lead to the neglect and a reevaluation of war crimes, resulting in silencing and denial.

By showing how Serbia formed a counter-liberal memory regime, the thesis highlights one broader process. In contrast to the transitional justice mechanisms, this thesis implicitily reveals how the traditional concept of the state—centered on governing structures and centralized power—resists globalization, seeking instead to assert more conventional forms of sovereignty and control.

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1. Introduction

On July 23, 2021, a mural paying tribute to General Ratko Mladić, who served as the leader of the Bosnian Serb Army during the 1992-1995 Yugoslav war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, emerged on Njegoševa Street in the center of Serbia's capital, Belgrade. The mural depicted General Mladić in a military salute, accompanied by the words "General, let your mother be thanked" (*Đenerale, nek je tvojoj majci hvala*), signed by Partizan sports club's football supporters. It appeared shortly after the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (further in the text: ICTY and The Tribunal) confirmed Ratko Mladić's life sentence for war crimes, including two counts of genocide and five counts of crimes against humanity. General Mladić eluded capture until 2011, when he was arrested in Serbia. His long fugitive status drew criticism from the international community, which hindered Serbia's EU accession process. During this period Mladić became venerated among far-right groups, football fans, and hooligans who made him the symbol of Serbian nationalism and resistance against the *West*[2]. Even though liberal portion of Serbian society celebrated the 2011 arrest as a significant step in the collective addressing the troubled past, Mladić's veneration has grown among the general population, culminating in the Njegoševa Street mural.

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[2] Far-right groups also use Mladić as the figurehead of hatred towards Muslims. This has been evident in sporting events, where flags bearing Mladić's visage and slogans such as "knife, wire, Srebrenica" (*nož, žica, Srebrenica*) were a common sight. The hateful slogan "knife, wire, Srebrenica" glorifies the Srebrenica *genocide* - organized killing of around 8000 Bosniak men from Srebrenica town in Eastern Bosnia by Bosnian Serb Army and paramilitary organizations from Serbia. The massacre took place in mid-July 1995 and represents the largest mass killing during the Yugoslav wars. The exact origin of the "knife, wire, Srebrenica" slogan is not clear, but the term "wire" likely refers to forensic evidence showing that the arms of the Srebrenica victims were bound with wire behind their backs which indicated the preparation of victims for execution, one of the confirmations that the killings in Srebrenica were planned and organized. Whether this organized mass-murder was a genocide or not is a matter of global dispute among various parties involved in discussing war in Bosnia or more generally international justice. Symbolic struggles around naming of this war-crime continue to present days.

From the moment the mural appeared, it became an open arena for the ongoing contestation of Serbia's role in the 1990s Yugoslav wars, revealing deep-seated societal fractures and the nation's struggles with the involvement in severe war crimes and the collective memory thereof. The day after the mural emerged, an anonymous individual splattered it with red paint, symbolizing the blood many believe is on Ratko Mladić's hands (Figure 1). However, this act of dissent was short-lived as the fervent supporters swiftly intervened, restoring the mural to its original form within a few hours. Throughout August 2021, the mural faced multiple countering interventions, yet someone would promptly return it to its initial condition each time.

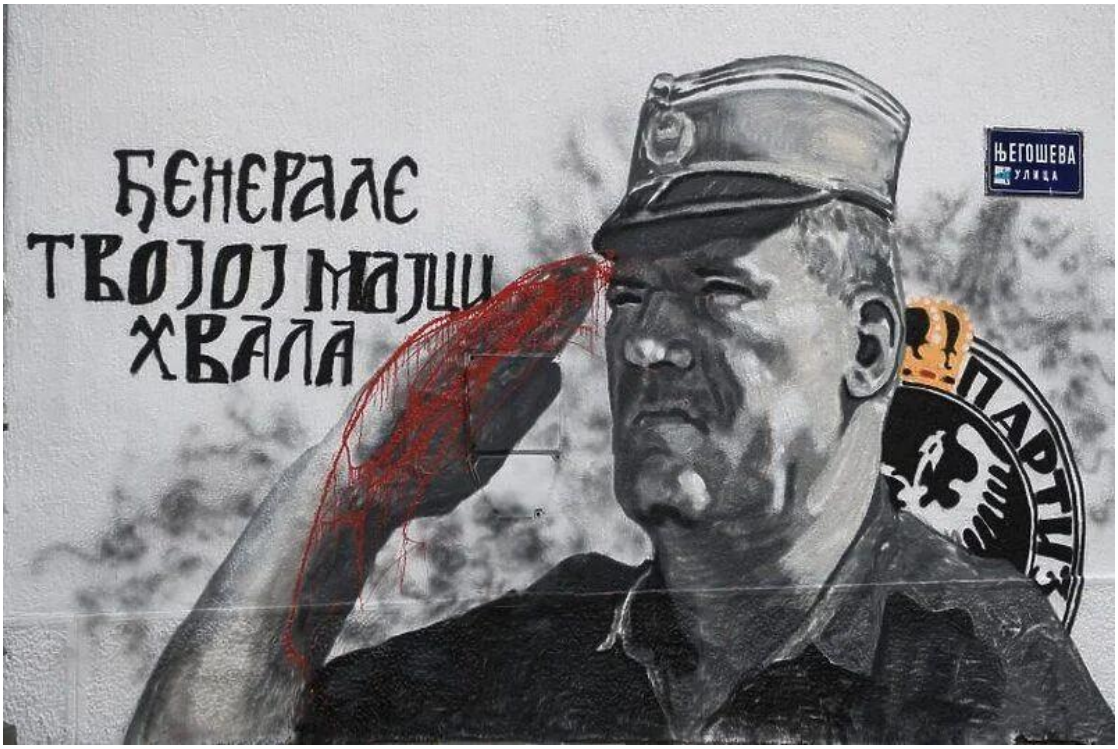

Figure 1 - The Ratko Mladic mural with the first counter-intervention
June 24, 2021, photo by Radio Free Europe

The tenants of the building, uneasy with the disputed mural on their doorstep, reached out to municipal authorities, pleading for its removal. Apart from being concerned about its message, they mostly feared potential escalation as different groups started to gather around and "protect" the mural. The municipality, caught between public pressures and legal

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responsibility, issued an official order demanding the removal by the tenants themselves. The tenants, however, could not find someone willing to take the job. Several contractor companies repeatedly declined, revealing a hesitancy or fear surrounding the politically charged artwork. The tenants then decided to reach out to the Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR), a prominent liberal NGO in Serbia that deals with issues related to the memorialization of the Yugoslav wars (Stojanović 2021b). As the whole situation already stepped late into October 2021, YIHR announced plans to organize a public gathering on November 9, International Day Against Fascism and Antisemitism, aiming to mobilize like-minded individuals for the removal of the mural. The Interior Ministry prohibited the event, citing concerns over potential conflicts and public disorder (Stojanović 2021a). YIHR decided to cancel the removal gathering; still, they announced an intention to pursue legal action against the Ministry (Stojanović 2021b).

Despite the Ministry's order, many groups, both supporters and opponents of the mural, spontaneously gathered around it on November 9. The palpable tension intensified when two activists threw eggs at it. Plainclothes police arrested the activists, which was widely shared on social media[3], while police in uniforms prevented further escalations. On November 13, 2021, a protest called "Mural Must Fall" occurred, and the police again prevented violent confrontations. The protesters accused the police of guarding an unofficial monument of the proven war criminal, while the Ministry of Interior stated that their only interest is to maintain public peace and order. Throughout November 2021, the police remained stationed near the site. Still, parallelly, more and more well-known far-right activists and football supporters took it upon themselves to guard the mural, bragging about their presence on social media.

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[3] The viral video of the arrest https://www.facebook.com/www.danas.rs/videos/435715641223203/ (all internet links in the thesis accessed on September 30, 2023)

Serbian President waded into the debate, attempting to normalize the mural by drawing parallels with similar instances in neighboring nations. He stated that countless graffiti portrays of war generals from all sides of the 1990s wars can be found in their respective countries, and that he did not consider it a significant issue. On December 9, 2021, a month after the situation around the mural escalated for the first time, the municipality of Vračar painted over the wall with white paint, explaining that the tenants of the building failed to comply with the inspectorate's order, leading the municipality to take action. After they repainted the mural, several young men came with water bottles and washed away the white paint by simply splashing the wall, once again restoring the mural to its original form.[4] As it turned out, the mural had been coated with a specialized material that allowed for easy removal of any counter-interventions.

A year after the mural's appearance, YIHR urged Belgrade's Mayor, Aleksandar Šapić, to remove it, as well as similar graffiti that had mushroomed around the capital throughout the year (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2022). Mayor Šapić's response was marked by ambiguity, concentrating on critiquing the ICTY as an anti-Serb institution while subtly supporting the mural's defenders (Online Danas 2022). Two and a half years after it emerged, at the moment of the submission of this thesis, the mural still stands intact, with occasional small-scale clashes or interventions that quickly get annulled.

During the hottest days of this controversy in November 2021, the National Radio and Television Broadcast Company (RTS) aired a TV debate titled "Mural or Moral."[5] The program featured three guests: a right-wing journalist, a human rights lawyer, and a historian.

[4] A video of the mural being washed available at https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/beograd/3429657-prekrecen-mural-ratku-mladicu-u-njegosevoj

[5] TV Debate "Oko" (*Eye*) from November 10, 2021. Available in Serbian at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E94yh2Mltf8&abchannel=RTSOko-Zvani%C4%8Dnikanal

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The guests were invited to present their opinions on the mural and to discuss what Ratko Mladić represents for Serbian society. While the journalist and lawyer engaged in a heated debate, the historian struggled to make a significant contribution, entirely overshadowed by the intensity of the other two participants. The guests clashed around their divergent interpretations of the notion of responsibility, arbitration of the wars, and historical truth about the recent past. Whereas the liberal lawyer considered ICTY as an arbiter of truth with the authority to determine who is responsible for war crimes, the journalist could not accept the Tribunal as a worthy source for establishing historical truth and deciding upon guilt. He presented a sovereignist attitude in saying that ICTY is an imperialist, corrupt, and illegitimate institution, a political court used to impose culpability upon Serbian people rather than accused individuals. The exact positions were then opposed again through the prism of recognizing Srebrenica as a *genocide*, for which Ratko Mladić was found guilty. The human rights lawyer focused on the established facts from the Tribunal that prove Mladić's participation in the events at Srebrenica. On the other hand, the right-wing journalist did not engage with the topic of Mladić's involvement directly but instead questioned the authority and legal basis of the Tribunal to make determinations regarding genocide. The conflict between these two guests ultimately relegated the issue of the mural and their status of war heroes or criminals to the background, with the primary focus of the debate shifting to the question of who has the legitimacy to establish historical truth after wars.

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The contentious debate around the mural epitomizes the bifurcation of *memory regimes* (Bernhard and Kubik 2014) in Serbia, rooted in opposing interpretations of Serbia's role in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s and opposing stances on ICTY's authority to judge these wars. On the one hand, the liberal segment of Serbian society upholds a vision of a European, democratic Serbia that consciously condemns its involvement in the recent violent past, firmly embracing

liberal values as the rule of international criminal law, accountability for the individuals responsible for war crimes, protection of human rights, deterrence and prevention. This part of the society, represented by liberal NGOs, several political parties, and many supporting individuals, emphasizes that international justice, or more precisely, *transitional justice,* can act as a deterrent to future crimes and contribute to the prevention of future atrocities, ultimately fostering peace and reconciliation. They anchor their politics on the credibility of the ICTY and regard the evidence it has compiled against war crimes perpetrators as indisputable. Their ideological and political stances assert that the foundations of social values and the construction of societal memory should be predicated upon these evidentiary foundations.

On the other hand, while not strictly confined to right-wing or illiberal ideologies, the contrasting faction within Serbian society centers its politics regarding the 1990s Yugoslav wars on interpreting the ICTY as a neo-imperial, *Western*-imposed institution that acts against Serbian interests. This portion of the society, which gathers various right-wing and left-wing organizations, political parties, and many individuals, diverges the debate about the recent past, from the Serbian involvement in war crimes to the challenging of the legitimacy of ICTY as the primary arbiter of the wars. The spectrum of beliefs within this ideological and political stance is broad. The most radical part of this portion of society, mainly far-right organizations and activists, denies the existence of war crimes and presents them as fabrication of The Tribunal and the *West*. The more moderate advocates of this view do not necessarily deny the existence of war crimes. Still, they perceive the ICTY as neo-imperial isntitution, with a bias against Serbia that aims to frame Serbia as the primary culprit in the wars and fails to acknowledge the responsibility of other sides involved in the conflict, including the *West.* Additionally, they argue that the ICTY does not adequately account for Serbian victims in proportion to the victims from other sides of the war. While arguing against the ICTY, the

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journalist in the "Mural or Moral" TV show used the acquittal of Croatian and Bosniak military leaders and warlords as an example to argue his point. These leaders and warlords, despite having committed well-documented crimes against Serbs, were not ultimately convicted by the Tribunal. The journalist suggested that the ICTY displayed a bias by primarily prosecuting crimes committed by Serbian side, while failing to similarly punish those responsible for crimes against Serbian population. This perceived selective justice is presented as the key argument against the Tribunal within ideological groups that share the journalist's perspective. Using this argument and general anti-imperialist critique of international justice, *mnemonic actors* (Bernhard and Kubik 2014) that interpret Serbian history through such a prism frame Serbian society as a collective victim entangled in a broader *Western* conspiracy against Serbia, perpetuated by the international *transitional* justice system.

This thesis explores the formation, development, and officialization of a Serbian *memory regime* (Bernhard and Kubik 2014) centered on resistance to moral obligations typically associated with transitional justice. Transitional justice is a socio-juridical system that often emphasizes acknowledging historical crimes as a way for societies to *come to terms with the past*, especially those where their own members have been perpetrators in conflicts. The thesis explores the memory regime in Serbia that challenges and resists this approach.

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1.1. Moral Economy of Transitional Justice

Coming to terms with the past, or *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, is a concept related to the post-Second World War endeavors in (West) Germany to acknowledge and confront atrocities committed during the Nazi era, primarily the Holocaust. This process, however, did not immediately represent the dominant model of remembering in West Germany even though the attempts to grapple with culpability and responsibility in the early post-war years did exist,

exemplified mainly by the efforts of "Group 47," which included authors like Heinrich Böll, Günter Grass, and Siegfried Lenz (Lawrence 1998; Moeller 1996). Dealing with the past through the prism of war atrocities, primarily the Holocaust, became the dominant memory regime in West Germany only in the 1980s (Langenbacher 2003; Neumann 2000). *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, in that sense, was imagined as a moral duty to recognize and accept previous moral shortcomings and to integrate these failures into a shared self-perception through collective commemoration of the past (Schulz 2022). Parallel to the 1980s attempts in Germany to place the Holocaust in the center of memory politics, numerous authoritarian regimes in South America and Africa collapsed. This led to increased advocacy among human rights activists, scholars, and new governments in these countries to address past wrongdoings, hold authoritarian leaders accountable for their crimes, and provide compensation to victims (Arthur 2009; Bell 2009; Teitel 2002; Weinstein 2007). These efforts to deal with troubled pasts led to the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of transitional justice.

The moral foundation of transitional justice (in further text - TJ) lies in its commitment to the concept of "coming to terms with the past," with the goal of addressing human rights violations, and atrocities by implementing mechanisms such as truth commissions, prosecutions, reparations, and memorialization. These efforts aimed to promote reconciliation, fight against impunity, and prevent recurrence of violence. Jay Winter (2006) named this global historical momentum that gave prominence to the preservation of the memories of the atrocities "memory boom." The organizing principles of the "memory boom" are closely connected to the broader ideological and political values associated with liberalism that emerged *after* the Cold War. TJ and "memory boom" developed as several 20th-century paradigms, such as Marxism-Leninism, modernization theory, and development, became discredited, while the end of the Cold War paved the way for the globalization of the liberal human rights regime

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(Hinton 2018:10). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which also emerged as the outcome of WWII became the integral element of the "memory boom" that paved the way for the development of the global human rights regime (Sodaro 2018). In this historical moment at the turn of the century, the duty to remember became a moral imperative, fostering an optimistic belief in the possibility of reconciling historical legacies through legal and cultural means. Through imposing TJ as the global mode of arbitration of the recent past, the *Western* liberal regime has seen the process of coming to terms with the past as indispensable for securing national legitimacy in perpetrator societies (Huyssen 2011; Rosenfeld 2023).

While neither juridical treatment of the past nor organization of collective memory represented novel social practices, what was specific for this late XX-century liberal regime was its focus on the victims. Jay Winter (2006) noticed that, within the "memory boom," juridical and commemorative gaze turned from participants of the wars - either heroes, as after the First World War, or perpetrators, as in the early Nazi trials - to the victims, who became global carriers of moral authority and the ultimate witnesses of the troubled past. Historically, the concept of victimhood has closely intertwined with the notion of innocence, depicting the pure victim as a passive individual free of responsibility and incapable of inflicting harm (Jensen and Ronsbo 2014). The existence of a pure victim necessitates its equally pure counterpart – the perpetrator. Consequently, by constructing an innocent, morally upright, vulnerable victim who has suffered unjust harm and seeks justice, the practices within the "memory boom" generated its constitutive perpetrator as the ultimate, yet punishable, evil (Holstein and Miller 1990; Jankowitz 2018). Protection and justice for the victims represent the foundation of various TJ mechanisms, including prosecutions, truth commissions, reparations, and commemoration (Lawther 2021). The moral authority of victims not only justifies the existence of TJ but also positions them as the ideal, embodied, witnesses to the

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past. Within this framework, culpability rests solely on the individualized perpetrator. This perpetrator-victim dichotomy became the core of this late XX-century liberal regime, formulating the basis of the moral economy of TJ (McEvoy and McConnachie 2012). Within such moral matrix, Serbian involvement in the 1990s Yugoslav wars fell on the perpetrator's side.

Perpetrators of the Yugoslav wars became primarily classified through ICTY, which became the principal arbiter that held legitimacy to define accountability, determine culpability, and prosecute individuals for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. The United Nations Security Council established The Tribunal in the Hague in 1993 while the war in former Yugoslavia was still ongoing. It was the first war crimes court and the first international war crimes tribunal founded after the Nuremberg and Tokyo tribunals.[6] The legal aims of this Tribunal were to prosecute the individuals responsible for war crimes committed during the 1991/95 wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia and later in Kosovo during the 1998/99 insurgency. The Tribunal also pursued broader social objectives, in line with the "coming to terms with the past" principle. As stated on their webpage, these objectives included deterring future crimes and delivering justice to thousands of victims and their families, thereby contributing to lasting peace in the former Yugoslavia.[7]

Transitional justice, and the ICTY as its first major court, is predominantly based on *Western* legal traditions, more precisely on international criminal law and Universal declaration of human rights. Furthermore, TJ foundations lie in the progressivist *Western*, teleological pre-conception of societies in transition seeking to emancipate from authoritarian past through a

[6] As stated on the "about" section at the ICTY web-presentation https://www.icty.org/en/about#:~:text=By%20bringing%20perpetrators%20to%20trial,peace%20in%20the%20former%20Yugoslavia.
[7] Ibid.

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combination of legal and cultural practices, with an ultimate goal of transitioning to liberal democracy (Arthur 2009; Bell 2009; Hinton 2018; Teitel 2002). Although the ICTY and other practitioners emphasize that there is no singular approach to achieving the goals of TJ[8] and that the mechanisms employed can vary across different societies, the central driving force behind TJ remains belief in a liberal democratic future. This underlying assumption is one of the most debated and criticized aspects of TJ.

Ethnographic studies of TJ processes reveal that local realities frequently fall short of TJ promises. Alexander Laban Hinton, the leading figure of the nascent *anthropology of transitional justice*, conducted extensive ethnographic research on TJ processes in Cambodia. His work shows how the globalizing and universalizing mechanisms of TJ tend to cover the intricate local complexities, resulting in a superficial *transitional justice imaginary*, while the society continues to grapple with internal conflicts (Hinton 2018). Elizabeth Drexler (2010) identified that TJ tends to horizontalize conflicts, showing how, in East Timor and Indonesia, conflicts became represented as the clashes between different ideological groups within society rather than between the state and its citizens. Paige Arthur (2009) traced the roots of the challenges that TJ upholds in the teleological conceptualization of *transition* from the 1970s and 80s. During this period, political scientists and practitioners viewed transition predominantly as a political process rather than a broader social dimension. This limited perspective, according to Arthur, was subsequently incorporated into the mechanisms of TJ, implying that TJ was originally designed with a focus that was too narrow, emphasizing

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[8] According to an ICTJ pamphlet: "[T]ransitional justice is not a special form of justice but justice adapted to societies transforming themselves after a period of pervasive human rights abuse". Document available at https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Global-Transitional-Justice-2009-English.pdf#:~:text=Transitional%20justice%20is%20a%20response%20to%20systematic%20or,others%2C%20they%20may%20take%20place%20over%20many%20decades

political aspects while potentially overlooking wider social and cultural factors that are crucial in transitional periods.

As TJ developed globally, another critique emerged, exposing TJ as a new manifestation of *Western* imperialism. In the editorial of the first volume of the International Journal of Transitional Justice, Harvey Weinstein (2007) asserts that the conflicts under the scope of TJ take place mainly in the "developing countries"[9] while the TJ itself comes from "the North." Weinstein asserts that such geographical distribution is at the core of the criticism that frames TJ as "a new form of imperialism where the developed countries impose their own standards on those less developed and where indigenous forms of justice or local innovations are deemed unacceptable or irrelevant" (Weinstein 2007:3). This critique is closely connected to the notion of *victor's justice*, a critical term that emerged during the Nuremberg trial to emphasize the selective focus on Nazi perpetrators despite the evidence of similar crimes by the founders of the court (Schabas 2012). The critique persists in the context of contemporary international criminal law and contemporary wars, where the TJ legal practice is observed as biased in favor of *Western* states (Graubart and Varadarajan 2013). This concept endures on the evidence of contemporary war tribunals that prosecute non-*Western* actors, while war crimes committed by *Western* armies rarely result in trials.

Another highly criticized aspect integral to TJ is the *principle of selectivity*. This principle refers to the practice of selectively choosing individuals or cases for prosecution. It transcends strictly legal procedures, being often influenced by extra-legal institutions such as political and financial bodies, administration, and media. Using the case of the ICTY, Bedoya

[9] For the relationship between TJ and development see: Rama Mani, "Dilemmas of Expanding Transitional Justice, or Forging the Nexus between Transitional Justice and Development (2008)

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Sanchez (2016) showed that these extra-legal institutions are not merely peripheral to the court's functioning but are actively shaping how cases are selected. *Individual responsibility* for war crimes, as part of the *principle of selectivity,* aims at putting individuals or organized groups responsible for war crimes on trial with an important aim of avoiding the production of collective guilt. In the "ideological critique" of international justice, Krever (2013) argues, using the case of ICTY, that by insisting on individual responsibility, international criminal justice obscures the background context of crimes, including poverty, discrimination, marginalization, and social exclusion, while also fails to recognize the responsibility and the influence of the international financial and political bodies on the local contexts. While Krever's critique does not denounce the efficacy of international law in holding individual perpetrators accountable, he argues that overly relying on the regime of individual criminal responsibility might overlook how broader systemic political and economic forces, as well as international interventions, contribute to conflict and violence.

To understand a development of a memory regime that counters TJ moral obligations to commemorate war crimes, it is important to examine the limitations in how TJ categorizes individuals into binary roles of victims and perpetrators. Critics argue that the moral rigidity of TJ fails in accounting for complex realities of conflict, especially in cases when individuals may simultaneously embody both perpetrator and victim roles (Bergholz 2016; McEvoy and McConnachie 2012). Such actors may be victims who have some degree of association with the perpetrator side, grappling with the dual burdens of affiliation with the transgressive group and their own experiences as victims. Their voices often struggle to find a place within the memory environment shaped by TJ processes, which tend to prioritize wartime atrocities and victims of major war crimes while overlooking the unique experiences of those who exist outside the conventional victim-perpetrator dichotomy. Jennie E. Burnet (2012) describes this

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limited space for *liminal victimhood* as "amplified silence," a process of suppressing experiences outside the dominant narratives.

The array of critique presented in this introduction forms a foundation for the anti-TJ sentiment among various actors in Serbia who oppose liberal demands for acknowledging and commemorating crimes committed by Serbs. The predominant argument among the criticizers is that the TJ framework renders Serbian victims invisible. The TJ opponents believe that while the legal framework emphasizes accountability for Serbian-perpetrated crimes, it simultaneously fails to adequately recognize or give due attention to the suffering and victimization experienced by Serbs themselves during the same conflicts. Victims on the perpetrator's side represent a challenge that both TJ mechanisms and societies after war struggle to address or acknowledge. These individuals defy easy categorization, and their unique status and experiences create difficulties in their inclusion into the justice and reconciliation processes. In an ethnographic study, Jelena Golubović (2019) explored the everyday lives of ethnic Serb women who survived the entire duration of the Siege of Sarajevo, which was held by the Bosnian Serb Army against dominantly Muslim-populated Sarajevo from 1992 until 1995. She revealed how, in an ethnicized conflict, belonging to the ethnic group associated with the perpetrator while simultaneously being their victim creates a complex dual identity that withstands reduction to either category. Today, Serbian women who endured an entire siege under the control of the Serbian army face difficulty claiming a victim identity because, in a society where the perpetrator-victim binary is framed within the context of ethnicity – where Serbs are perceived as perpetrators and Bosniaks as victims – ethnic belonging marks these women as the perpetrators. Golubović's poignant ethnography sheds light on these largely silenced experiences and warns about the potential consequences of this dual-binding position. Her research pointed out how individuals who cannot articulate their

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victim status instead align with their ethnic compatriots, even when it contradicts their personal experiences, which may lead to a form of radicalization. Some of the ethnic Serb women, whose wartime experiences were excluded from the official memory politics that accorded moral authority to ethnic Muslims as pure victims, align with certain radical factions that even go as far as denying the siege. Despite their personal experiences, the amplified silence that Serbian women experience pushes them into alignment with perpetrators whose cruelty they initially experienced on their own skin.

While in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as in Golubović's (2019) case, Serbian victims experience "amplified silence" in an ethnicized memory landscape dominated by Bosniak victims, the situation differs for victims in Serbia. The amplification of silence in Serbia occurred due to a memory landscape that is expected to primarily revolve around the perpetrators, addressing historical injustices through examination of past crimes, even though ethnic Serbs witnessed numerous suffering. At the beginning of the war in Croatia in 1991, the Serbian ethnic minority, which constituted the majority in the Krajina region, established a de-facto state, the "Republic of Serbian Krajina" (RSK). Serbia was the only country to recognize RSK and provided it with military and financial support (Kolstø and Paukovic 2014). The RSK existed from 1991 to 1995, engaging in the conflict with Croatia until Croatian forces launched "Operation Storm" in 1995, leading to the territorial takeover of the RSK. During the operation, Croatian forces expelled the entire Serbian population from the RSK, leading to the displacement of over 200,000 people. Human Rights Watch estimated that approximately 700 people were killed and twenty-two thousand Serbian houses were burned during this military action (Subotić 2009:84). The ICTY conducted trials of three Croatian generals for their involvement in a collective criminal endeavor with the intent of committing crimes against

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humanity against Croatian Serbs during Operation Storm.[10] The crimes encompassed the deliberate acts of plotting, coordinating, or engaging in acts of homicide, persecution, forced displacement, and property devastation with the objective of permanently eradicating the Serb community from the Krajina region. ICTY convicted generals Ante Gotovina and Ivan Čermak, while Mladen Markač was declared not guilty. In November 2012, during the appeals process, the Tribunal acquitted the previously charged generals, which ignited exuberance in Croatia, where Operation Storm is celebrated as a pivotal moment in achieving independence (Stojanović and Vladisavljević 2020). However, in Serbia, this verdict was met with outrage. Political and social elites from across the ideological spectrum, including some previously fervent supporters of the ICTY, publicly expressed their dissatisfaction, viewing these acquittals as the loss of the ICTY's legitimacy and its ultimate recognition of an agenda against Serbia (Radio Free Europe 2012).

Similarly, the Tribunal acquitted the Bosniak commander of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Srebrenica region, Naser Orić,[11] whose military units committed several crimes against Serbian civilians in Eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Tribunal initially found Orić guilty in 2006 and then acquitted him in 2008. This verdict sparked anger and indignation in Serbia. Many individuals, particularly those leaning towards right-wing perspectives, used this acquittal to advance the argument that the Serbian atrocities committed in Srebrenica were an act of revenge for the crimes committed by Naser Orić, not an organized genocide, as ICTY proclaimed. While this viewpoint has never been officialized in Serbia, it does exist within the broader landscape of debates surrounding Srebrenica, mainly coming from the right. The mural dedicated to Ratko Mladić effectively stems from this argument, as

[10] The case Gotovina et.al (IT/06/90) available at: https://www.icty.org/en/case/gotovina
[11] The Case Orić (IT-03-68) available at: https://www.icty.org/en/case/oric

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his supporters venerate him as the protector of Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina who was falsely accused, while individuals like Orić, who massacred innocent civilians, ended up unpunished. The right-wing journalist in the RTS's debate "Mural or Moral" alluded to these acquittals when denouncing the legitimacy of The Tribunal.

This thesis investigates how a society that is framed as a perpetrator reconfigures its historical narratives and creates memory politics around its victims, thereby challenging the prevailing discourse shaped by TJ. The thesis will show how the victims on the side of the perpetrator as "impure victims" in a liberal sense become alternative witnesses of the troubled past that aims to counterbalance the prevailing image of Serbia as a perpetrator in the Yugoslav wars. As the TJ often downplays the significance of "impure victims," assigning lesser value to their voice within its moral economy, the thesis will show how, within the Serbian memory landscape, these marginalized victims adopt unconventional forms to mark their presence. Throughout the chapters, the thesis will show how, instead of being recognized as witnesses in traditional legal proceedings, these victims are voiced through different disembodied forms, from ephemeral monuments to wax figures and diverse artistic expressions. These alternative embodiments testify to an increasingly anti-liberal form of memory that challenges both the rigid dichotomy between victim and perpetrator and the particular archetype of the embodied victim serving as the ideal witness in the liberal regime of TJ.

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1.2. Framing the Perpetrator – "Pathologization" of a Society and "organized innocence"

It is hard to pinpoint how the process of framing Serbia as the main perpetrator of the Yugoslav wars occurred. Despite the TJ principle of individual responsibility, which aims to prevent entire nations or ethnic groups from being seen as collectively on trial, many critics view the

trials as targeting entire communities. This framing of Serbia as the primary culprit is part of a larger multifaceted process shaped by an intricate web of factors. First of all, both academic discourses and journalism have had a tendency to portray the disintegration of Yugoslavia as the responsibility of Slobodan Milošević's nationalist politics and the general growth of nationalism in the former Yugoslavia, overlooking the complex political and social background that brought the state to disintegration (Allcock 2000; Dragović-Soso 2007; Jović 2001). High-profile military actions, such as the Siege of Sarajevo, which was practically broadcast live to *Western* audiences (Andreas 2011; Lowe and Morrison 2021), deepened the perception of Serbia as the main perpetrator of the conflicts. This perception was further reinforced by the Srebrenica *genocide*, often referred to as the first genocide after WWII. The high-profile legal proceedings against Serbian officials who conducted these war crimes, most of all the trials of Ratko Mladić and Slobodan Milošević, further added to the perception (Bedoya Sanchez 2016).

Nationalist political leaders exploited these trials, framing them as symbols of ICTY's attempt to create broader national or ethnic guilt. Media coverage often oversimplified complex legal proceedings by equating individual actions with the behavior of entire ethnic or national groups. At the same time, the legal challenge of proving how individual acts were part of broader strategies further blurred the distinction between individual and collective responsibility. Public perception was influenced by emotional and historical specificities, leading to the trials being viewed through the lens of ethnic or national identity. ICTY's often inadequate outreach, coupled with competing historical narratives in the former Yugoslav region, contributed further to the perception that entire communities, rather than specific individuals, were being accused. In this atmosphere, Serbia emerged as the main culprit for the breakup of Yugoslavia, war crimes, and the instability of the region.

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Media narratives, both within Yugoslavia and internationally, played a critical role, often oversimplifying the situation and reinforcing stereotypes of Serbs. This portrayal extended to popular culture, where films, literature, and other media tended to depict Serbs one-dimensionally, emphasizing their involvement in the conflict's brutal aspects without delving into the complex historical, cultural, and political context. Peter Handke, the Austrian writer and the 2019 Nobel Prize laureate for literature, found himself at the center of a political and literary maelstrom in 1996 for his defense of Serbia. Handke argued against the dominant narrative that portrayed Serbs as the main aggressors, attributing it to what he saw as "a conspiracy of lazy and mendacious journalists surfing from cliche to cliche" (Kinzer 1996). The backlash was immediate and intense; Leading intellectuals labeled his views as "absurd" and "outrageous," comparing his defense of Serbia to the act of concealing mass murder. His public stance had have long-term implications, rekindling debate and controversy upon his receipt of the Nobel Prize for literature (Marshall and Schuetze 2019).[12]

International politics, shaped by post-Cold War re-alignments and geopolitical interests, further influenced the portrayal of Serbia as the main perpetrator in the Yugoslav wars. Such framing can be viewed as part of a broader hegemonic process that takes place in post-conflict societies, which Caroline Hughes and Vanessa Pupavac (2005) call "pathologisation." They define "pathologisation" as the process of the "management of a population's subjectivity," which is part of *Western* politics that tends to flatten historical complexities regarding conflicts and transfers responsibility to simplified "rationality or irrationality of the individual agency." They argue:

> Conflict is represented as a series of individual experiences of violence. States are portrayed as failed service providers run amok, separate from victimized and oppressed populations, even while preying

[12] For contextualization of Handke's "pro-Serbian" politics in the wider framework of contemporary German debates see: Karoline von Oppen, "Imagining the Balkans, Imagining Germany: Intellectual Journeys to Former Yugoslavia in the 1990s." (2006)

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> upon them. Societies are viewed as formed of violated or violating individuals whose actions spring in a hopeless cycle of conflict from psychological processes rather than from political beliefs or economic needs. This excision of political processes from the depiction of problems of conflict, oppression, and poverty has opened the way for therapeutic approaches to intervention. (Hughes and Pupavac 2005:874)

Hughes and Pupavac argue that the process of "pathologisation" not only legitimizes interventionist politics by *Western* states but also absolves them of responsibility for their initial involvement in the conflicts.

Similarly, anthropologist Nandini Sundar sheds light on the production of asymmetrical *culpability* in international justice processes, focusing on how TJ often omits a critical examination of *Western* involvement. Sundar contends that despite claims that reparations, trials, and apologies contribute to a new international morality, these processes, in practice, carry a significant risk of legitimizing ongoing injustices (Sundar 2004:146–47). She critically examines how culpability has been construed through *Western* hegemonic lenses, especially in mechanisms like international criminal courts, truth commissions, reparations, and official apologies. Sundar's analysis suggests that the framing of culpability for war crimes and crimes against humanity in international justice relies heavily on a culturalist approach that tends to label certain groups and societies as inherently violent, disregarding the influential roles played by institutions, governments, politicians, media, and rumors. She argues that this simplification not only establishes hierarchies among societies but also unjustly empowers those higher on this scale to conduct military interventions (2004:151).

Treatment of culpability in ICTY produced many unintended consequences. As Jalušić (2007) discusses, during the trials, the convicted political leaders skillfully manipulated the narratives of "organized guilt" and "organized innocence" to protect themselves from individual accountability. In the context of dealing with German identity and the Nazi past, Hanna Arendt introduced the concept of "organized guilt," which involves deliberately

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attributing guilt or responsibility for crimes committed by a few individuals to an entire group or nation. Jalušić used the same logic to explain the organized innocence that was demonstrated by the individuals accused in front of the ICTY. These leaders strategically portrayed their own communities as "innocent victims," exploiting historical injustices and external pressures to shift the focus away from their own actions. By presenting their nation or ethnic group as oppressed and collectively victimized, they sought to evoke sympathy and solidarity among their supporters. Simultaneously, these same leaders deliberately attributed "organized guilt" to rival communities, insinuating that the crimes committed were representative of the entire group's actions. By blurring the lines between individual responsibility and collective identity, they aimed to shield themselves and their inner circle from culpability, creating a cycle of victimhood claims and divisive accusations. This manipulation of collective guilt not only hindered the pursuit of justice but also deepened animosities and complicated efforts to achieve reconciliation in the aftermath of the conflict.

"Organized victimhood" has been a prevalent phenomenon across the entire post-socialist world. While in countries like Romania, Poland, and the Czech Republic, victimhood narratives were constructed against socialism, in former Yugoslavia, the victimhood narrative took on an ethnic dimension (Verdery 1999). Many researchers argued that late-socialist politics in Serbia, under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević, championed "victimhood nationalism" (Lerner 2020). "Victimhood nationalism" is a type of identity narrative involving a politicized narration of collective trauma and the projection of grievances onto national or ethnic entities rather than specific perpetrators. Two particular historical narratives represented the pillars of "victimhood nationalism" - narratives of historical traumas like the loss of Kosovo to the Ottomans in the X century (Bieber 2002) and re-introducing ethnicity into previously class-based narratives about World War II (Stojanović 2016). "Victimhood nationalism" was

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a means to legitimize the 1990s violence by revisiting historical traumas and instrumentalizing collective memory against former compatriots - Bosnian Muslims, Croats, and Albanians. This thesis shows how contemporary Serbian memory politics strategically utilize the concept of victimhood, not only to legitimize Serbia's role domestically, but also as a response to the broader liberal order. By employing victimhood, Serbian memory politics seek to resist the universalizing tendencies of transitional justice, aiming to challenge dominant global narratives and structures imposed by the liberal regime.

In this thesis, I explore the emergence of counter-liberal memory politics in Serbia as a response to the "pathologisation" and construction of "culpability" within the liberal TJ global regime. Numerous scholars coming from diverse disciplines demonstrated how TJ mechanisms continuously produce hostilities rather than reconciliation in the former Yugoslav region (Dimitrijević 2008; Graubart and Varadarajan 2013; Hodžić 2010; Klarin 2009; Ljubojević 2012; Milanović 2016; Perrin 2016; Saxon 2005; Subotić 2009; Trbovc and Petrović 2017; Wagner 2011). Researchers showed that while the ICTY aimed to avoid mutual blaming and collective guilt by addressing war crimes as individual acts and delivering verdicts without attaching national prefixes, people in the region still feel as if entire nations have been stigmatized. Furthermore, numerous controversial rulings and unforeseen acquittals have eroded the court's credibility in the eyes of a significant portion of the former Yugoslav population. Many individuals in the region harbor deep suspicions regarding ICTY, seeing it as influenced by political motivations or ethnic biases. While the Tribunal aimed to institutionalize facts and establish a unified narrative about the wars, numerous studies on the attitudes of citizens in the former Yugoslavia reveal that the court achieved to unify the region solely through mutual mistrust of the court itself (Trbovc and Petrović 2017). Building on the knowledge produced by the scholars who wrote about ICTY's unintended consequences, this

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thesis aims to show the socio-cultural processes that are shaped in response to the TJ mechanisms. This thesis delves into the interplay between external attributions of guilt and the internal cultural narratives organized around victimhood that evolve as a counter-response to the (unintended) labeling of society as a perpetrator.

1.3. Official Memory Politics and Counter-Liberal Memory Regime

The "memory boom" as a social practice was paralleled by a similar "boom" in the social sciences (Berliner 2005), forming a multi-disciplinary field of memory studies. In the beginning, this field was mainly divided between individualist and collectivist approaches to the social forms of memory (Olick 1999). Methodological incorporation of oral history played an important role in understanding how individual memories are shaped by and connected to broader cultural and political processes, allowing a deeper exploration of memory's societal implications (Green 2004). The foundations for understanding the collective forms of memory were laid by Benedict Anderson in his seminal work *Imagined Communities* and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in *The Invention of Tradition*, both published in 1983. These two books explored how the interpretation of history contributed to the creation of social unity, legitimization of authority, and the formation of a shared cultural identity. Anderson, Hobsbawm and Ranger enabled an understanding of how tradition as a constructed narrative influences the image of nation-states and national identity as cohesive units. They showed that these processes occurred primarily through the commemoration of wars. Even though the critics of these works raised objections against their overly emphasized top-down perspectives, these works create a critical foundation for analyzing collective memory and its political dimension.

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Asphalt, Dawson, and Roper (2000) made significant contributions to the field of memory studies by recognizing and addressing the limitations of the previous approaches. They argued that the narrow focus on either individual memory or top-down perspectives overlooks the intricate interplay between personal experiences, civil society dynamics, and state-level politics within the context of war memory and commemoration. In alignment with their comprehensive framework, this thesis aims to show how the dynamic interplay among these three scales shapes the official memory of recent wars in Serbia, offering a nuanced understanding of the interrelated processes involved in the formation of memory politics. The first part of the thesis will focus on the competition between two contrasting interpretations of Serbia's past that take place across scales: one centered on the memory of crimes and the other on the memory of victims. The subsequent two parts of the thesis will show how the latter has gradually evolved into the official memory politics in Serbia.

Memory politics can be broadly defined as the manipulation of historical narratives in the present by individuals or groups seeking to assert power or influence. A substantial body of work in social sciences has been dedicated to the study of memory politics, showing various ways in which memory interacts with politics, identity, history, and power. This body of literature has covered diverse topics, including democratization, memory laws, TJ, memory regimes and practices, accountability, the relationship between memory and trauma, and many others (cf. Mälksoo 2023). It has also examined memory politics in different regions and its impact on international relations, security, and conflict resolution. In this thesis, I observe the politics of memory as the way the political elites, non-governmental organizations, and individuals use recent history. I demonstrate how these *mnemonic actors* generate diverse *memory regimes* (Bernhard and Kubik 2014) that always relate to the liberal framework of TJ. I argue in this thesis that TJ and the *Western* gaze on Serbia are the primary reference points

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around which these memory regimes take shape. Bernhard and Kubik defined *memory regimes* as a set of cultural and institutional practices for commemorating or remembering specific historical events or processes. Memory regimes are not static. They follow shifts in political power, changes in the priority of memory issues over time, and interpretations of the past by various actors. Once the state officializes a certain historical narrative, the regime that promotes it attains official status.

By examining the case of Serbian memory politics, this thesis will talk about a *fractured memory regime* that is populated by *mnemonic warriors*. In the typology of memory regimes provided by Bernhard and Kubik, fractured memory regimes are characterized by the sharp division between those who claim to uphold the "true" version of the past and those who are seen as perpetuating "falsehoods" or distortions of history. These regimes comprise intense conflicts and debates over historical narratives, often resulting in a polarized and contested memory landscape. Mnemonic warriors within fractured memory regimes play a central role in shaping and defending their preferred interpretations of history, viewing historical truth as non-negotiable and essential for the foundation of social and political life. The concept of a fractured memory regime, as defined by Bernhard and Kubik, resonates strongly with the Serbian context, where various actors passionately engage in shaping the collective memory of recent conflicts. Mnemonic warriors in Serbia, including political elites, civil society organizations, and individuals, often position themselves as guardians of the "historical truth" and the only "proper" version of the country's past. By delving into the dynamics of mnemonic warriors and their influence on the memory regime, this thesis sheds light on the complexities of memory politics in a post-conflict society and its broader implications for the global TJ and reconciliation efforts.

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The conflicts and debates over historical narratives in Serbia, as exemplified in the "Mural or Moral" TV debate, ordinate around support and critique of the TJ's liberal values and expectations. With strengthening of neo-conservatism (Fomina 2019), populism (Moffitt 2016), and overall illiberal tendencies that have arisen over the last two decades (Laruelle 2021), there has been a noticeable shift in political landscapes globally. These ideological transformations represent reactions to a widespread disenchantment with the principles and outcomes of liberalism. As a result, the dynamics of collective memory within these societies are undergoing significant changes. Frequently, these changes are characterized by a deviation from the liberal values that traditionally guided the interpretation and commemoration of history. Memory studies have recently started to insight into this shift, recognizing that these societies tend to embrace alternative narratives and historical interpretations that resonate with these rising political tendencies and their objectives. Rosenfeld (2023) characterized this type of memory politics as *illiberal memory*, using the term that Andrea Pető (2017, 2022) coined for the first time in 2017 to show the changes within official memory politics in Hungary connected to the illiberal regime of Victor Orbán. Illiberal memory can be understood as a counter-reaction to the global memory boom steeped in the principles of post-Cold War liberalism. It is a form of a reaction against the liberal imperative of "coming to terms with the past" that represented "an internationally accepted condition for national legitimacy" (Rosenfeld 2023:4).

The political climate in Serbia, characterized by a shift towards alternative political models, is part of the global trend and the erosion of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, often titled as *illiberalism*. The notion was first popularized by Fareed Zakaria (1997) to depict democratic electoral systems with a flawed state of civil liberties. More recently, illiberalism was associated with the backsliding of democracy in Central-Eastern European states such as

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Hungary and Poland. Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán fully embraced the term in 2014, saying that he was building an illiberal state rooted in national values where liberal democracy was not the central pillar of the political system. A comprehensive understanding of illiberalism can be described as a political culture accompanied by institutional reforms, including challenges to an independent judiciary and wider societal shifts, such as diminishing confidence in liberal democratic institutions (Laruelle 2021). Illiberalism has been on the rise in Serbia since 2012, when the political elites from the 1990s returned to the leading positions of the state. Parallelly, non-*Western* actors, primarily Russia, China, Turkey, and Persian Gulf states, strengthened their influence in Serbia in the same period. These non-*Western* actors used both historical/religious ties and contemporary economic cooperation to disrupt democratic processes and undermine liberal *Western* frameworks not only in Serbia but the entire former Yugoslav region and the neighboring countries. Cooperation with these states is often characterized by a lack of transparency and corruption (Bassuener 2019). Russian state-owned oil company bought the controlling package of Serbian NIS company in 2008. In 2012, the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre emerged in Niš, which is suspected of serving as a military intelligence post (Đurđić 2017). Russian media such as Sputnik, RT, and Russia 24 continue to operate freely in Serbia despite the EU sanctions against them due to the aggression on Ukraine (Radio Free Europe 2023). China dominates large infrastructural projects in Serbia and has engaged in brownfield acquisitions and buying outdated industrial systems, such as the Smederevo steel mill and the Smelting and Mining Combine Bor (Vladisavljev 2023).

Despite the illiberal tendencies and alignment with the non-*Western* regimes in Serbian politics, characterizing official memory politics as solely illiberal would be an overly simplistic assessment of the intricate dynamics involved. This thesis will show how the liberal TJ insistence to commemorate crimes in the perpetrator society marginalized Serbian, "impure,"

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victims, from the commemorative narratives, which gave maneuvering space to illiberal politicians that returned to power after 2012 to use these victims as a capital for representing themselves as holders of the historical truth on the one hand, and on the other hand, to condemn the *West* and liberalism as a threat to Serbia. This process, however, as the thesis will show, is not only a political matter but exists on various scales in society. Its officialization became a matter of politics with the illiberal turn in the Serbian political landscape. Still, many actors recognized the problem of incapacity to commemorate "impure victims" within the liberal TJ regime before the return of the 1990s elites to the leading state positions. These actors were not necessarily actors from the right. Many left-wing and anti-globalist actors also condemn the work of ICTY and its treatment of Serbia, seeing it as a neo-imperialist striving of the *West*. Due to the multifaceted ideological background of this critique, I will not call the memory politics that center Serbian victims "illiberal" but "counter-liberal." Through the analysis presented in this thesis, I aim to show how TJ, driven by the notion of "coming to terms with the past," can give rise to a memory regime that diverges from the liberal conception of reconciliation. Rather than facilitating a genuine reckoning with historical injustices, I will show how TJ can lead to the neglect and a reevaluation of war crimes ultimately leading to a denial of their historical significance.

1.4. Methodology and Distribution of the Chapters

By showing how Serbia formed a counter-liberal memory regime, I aim to highlight one broader process. By positioning the state against the mechanisms of TJ, I aim to show how the traditional concept of the state as an institution of power centralized in governing structures tries to resist globalization. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2001) argued, there is a growing consensus among analysts that globalization diminishes the significance of the state, not only in terms of its economic role but also in its "capacity to serve as a social and cultural container."

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Organizations such as international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the World Bank, global corporations, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are regarded as indicative of the diminishing influence of the state. The shifting of the centrality of Serbian memory politics from the role of perpetrator to victim is the case of the struggle between globalizing actors embodied in the TJ institutions and those who aim to preserve the more traditional shape of the state. The research is based on the year-and-a-half-long fieldwork in Serbia, where I followed commemorative practices in the period between March 2018 and September 2019 on three scales – state-organized events, NGO-organized events, and private initiatives. Analyzing the commemoration of the wars across scales, I will show how the dynamics revealed around the question of the Serbian role in the Yugoslav wars, which is one of the main pillars of the post-war national identity.

Prior to the fieldwork in Serbia, I undertook desk research and archival research on the official commemoration practices that took place before the beginning of my fieldwork. I surveyed the literature done by other researchers who followed the commemoration of Yugoslav wars in the region, and I researched the archival material of the largest printed media in Serbia that reported about the commemorations after 2000. I also consulted video archives of the TV reporting. During the fieldwork, I participated in the state-sanctioned commemorations in three cities in Serbia – the capital, Belgrade, where I mostly observed how collective memory is embodied in the public space through state-sanctioned monuments and exhibitions, Niš – where the central commemoration of the 20th anniversary of NATO bombing in 2019 took place and Valjevo, the city where the local government and local population have been commemorating a local hero of the NATO bombing - pilot Milenko Pavlovic, who lost his life in the skies above the city. The participant observation in these three cities allowed me

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to see how the state actors officialize the desired narratives and materialize them either in concrete structures or events.

Further, I followed two NGOs that are prominent in commemorative practices. I attended commemorative events organized by the Humanitarian Law Center (HLC), one of the first human rights NGOs in Serbia focused on issues related to the 1990s wars. Founded in 1992 by sociologist Nataša Kandić, HLC has been monitoring and documenting war crimes from the start of the conflicts. This organization has actively participated in the TJ processes as a promoter of the TJ values and supporter of TJ processes as it participated in collecting the evidence and witnesses. While it dedicated significant part of its work to Serbian victims of the wars, the public image of the organization is mostly that of a promoter of the Serbian perpetrator role. The other NGO I followed is "Belgrade Forum for the World of Equals – Beoforum," led by a former minister of foreign affairs in the government of Slobodan Milošević. This organization, contrary to HLC, has been denying the legality of the ICTY. Some of the members and friends of the organization were themselves accused in front of the ICTY. Beoforum advocates for the commemoration of Serbian victims and promotes the view that Serbia is the victim of the United States' globalizing ambitions. Finally, I have also shortly followed a group of war veterans that occupied a city park across the national assembly from November 2019 until the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic, with the demands for recognition of their social role. This group did not belong to the official veterans' organizations but protested as a group of individuals trapped somewhere between the state and non-governmental sectors.

Thematically, the thesis is divided into three parts, each consisting of two chapters. The first part shows how narratives about Serbia's role in the Yugoslav wars developed from the

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fall of Milošević on October 5, 2000, until the beginning of the fieldwork in March 2018. The chapter will provide the findings of the desk and archival research about the commemorations until 2018 and will show how memory politics materialize in the public space of the capital of Serbia. The first chapter will present the challenges of acknowledging victims within a group that simultaneously perpetrated numerous war crimes, showing how they were treated by the state and by different private initiatives. Chapter Two will take the reader into the fragmented memory regime in Serbia, where liberal and counter-liberal NGOs clash their narratives about the Serbian role in the wars of the 1990s. The chapter will provide the findings of the participant observation from the commemorations of the NATO bombing organized by the HLC and Beoforum in March 2018 and 2019. This chapter will help the reader to understand how the issues of war crimes and ICTY as the arbiter of the conflict divide Serbian society. Understanding this division is important for understanding the re-centering of the official memory regime from perpetrators to victims that will be analyzed in the following two parts of the thesis.

The second part will show how the state run by the elites from the 1990s created memory politics based on "impure victims." Chapter three will continue to explain how the narrative of Serbia as the victim of the *West* is constructed by analyzing the public treatment of depleted uranium, an agent of the war employed by NATO during the 1999 bombing. This chapter will take the reader outside of the cultural field of collective memory and memory politics and show how medicine and physics intertwine with national identity and collective memory. This chapter will trace how necro-political strategies of the state construct collective sickness, or more precisely, victims of the sickness. Chapter four will provide a thick description of the ceremony of the 20th anniversary of the NATO bombing that took place in

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the city of Niš. The chapter will show which language and symbols were utilized to produce a victimizing narrative and to silence the perpetration aspect.

Finally, the third part of the thesis analyzes the presence and absence of the figure of a soldier in Serbian memory politics. While the soldiers are the main actors in the wars, the veterans of the 1990s wars are conspicuously invisible in Serbia due to their image as perpetrators. Chapter Six will focus on the commemoration of the pilot of the Serbian army who lost his life above the city of Valjevo during the NATO bombing. This chapter will show how a soldier of an army accused of war crimes can be framed as both a hero and a victim in the discourses of the local state and the local population. Finally, Chapter Seven will juxtapose an official state-sponsored exhibition about the NATO bombing that celebrates the Serbian army against the protest of the veterans who ask for more recognition from the state. This chapter will show a desired image of soldiers that the state aims to represent, sanitized of any involvement in breach of human rights and rights of war, and the image of veterans who fought that same war, who are socially marginalized and in their own words "lack dignity." The final discussion in the conclusion places the issues of perpetrators and victims in the larger context of contemporary wars, with a special outlook on the current war in Ukraine.

In this thesis, I explore four themes related to memory politics in post-war society that are not addressed in separate chapters but run as threads throughout the entire thesis. The one is the continuity of the struggle between the hegemony of *Western* values driven by liberal values and the alternative regimes that seemingly vanished with the end of the Cold War. In that sense, this thesis follows Heonik Kwon's (2010) argument that critiques the fixed understanding of the Cold War as the historical period that ended with the destruction of the Berlin Wall. Kwon calls for a more fluid, dynamic understanding that acknowledges the Cold

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War's ongoing influences and implications. He understands the Cold War as a decomposing process that continuously unfolds and actively shapes different regions. Observing contemporary Serbia as a frontier where the Cold War decomposes through the clashes around liberal values also challenges the entrenched narrative that Socialist Yugoslavia was isolated and neutral during the Cold War. Contemporary Serbia, which is under the influence of both *Western* powers and Russia and China, became what Kwon calls the "extended horizon of 'what is not yet,' a field of time-space that is open to creative political acting and moral imagining" (Kwon 2010:8). This thesis will show how these moral imaginings reveal themselves in the process of struggles around memory politics in Serbia, and how perpetrators and victims are portrayed within the rationalities of different mnemonic actors influenced ether by the liberal or counter-liberal values.

The second theme that this thesis examines is the nature of evidence in the counter-liberal memory regime. TJ, through ICTY and other mechanisms, created a body of evidence and an archive that testifies to numerous crimes in the Yugoslav wars. This body of evidence is based mainly on forensic analysis and testimonies of the witnesses. Memory actors who place Serbian victims at the forefront of official memory politics diligently work on to create evidence of Serbian victimhood. Since the victims on the side of the perpetrators do not hold the same moral capital as the "pure victims," the thesis will show throughout chapters how testimonies of Serbian victimhood come from disembodied forms mostly articulated through the arts. Instead of having the embodied witnesses who testify about crimes over Serbian people, the thesis will show an array of "impure victims" voices articulated through performing arts, soundscape, photography, wax figures, cancer tissues, and public-space interventions to pronounce the silenced testimonies and form the counter-liberal memory regime.

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The third recurring theme that runs through the entire thesis is the affective dimension of memory politics. Throughout the chapters, the thesis explores how different memory actors employ highly emotional aspects of recent history to construct and manipulate collective memory. This includes the portrayal of innocent victims, particularly children and animals, the representation of Serbia as an underdog in the struggle against the *West*, the destruction of essential infrastructure, and concerns related to the consequences of the wars, including health issues like cancer. The thesis will show how emotional narratives are utilized to shape collective remembering, even in cases where the actual experiences do not align with that affective dimension that memory actors pursue.

The final, fourth theme addressed throughout the chapters is temporality of TJ. This thesis represents a critique of the practice of transitional justice that pushes the states after the conflicts to deal with the past practically immediately. Experiences from the great wars and the conflicts from the Cold War showed that a certain amount of time had to pass in order for the *perpetrator states* to consolidate memory politics. In the seminal piece *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Jenny Edkins wrote:

> In the aftermath of genocide, when a state has turned on people who considered themselves its citizens, the dead have no names and no burial place because their families are killed, too. Memorialisation is difficult if not impossible. It can be many years before memory surfaces in the public arena or indeed before there is a willingness to listen to survivors' testimony. States are implicated more thoroughly than in the case of war, both the state in which the genocide occurred and those that stood by while it happened. Nevertheless, eventually, after a lapse of time or a change in the political landscape, a narrative takes shape. Events are named, memorials and museums set up, and the identity of at least some of the victims established. (Edkins 2003:2)

I argue that after the Cold War nominally ended, with the proliferation of the liberal TJ regime throughout the former dictatorships in South America, Eastern Bloc, and the former colonial world, time accelerated, and the presupposed temporality that enabled construction of narratives about the troubled past is no longer a *luxury* of the perpetrator states. The TJ mechanisms push the states into instantaneous dealing with the past, as the evidence of past

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wrongdoings is immediately accessible. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the siege of Sarajevo was televised, and the most famous world photographers traveled throughout the war zones and reported in real-time about the whereabouts of the warlords, war crimes, and camps (Campbell 2002; Petrović 2015). Renowned film director Pawel Pawlikowski created a documentary film, "Serbian Epics" in 1992 about the army of Bosnian Serbs and the siege of Sarajevo that they held. The film featured gruesome images of sniper attacks on civilians, including a controversial scene of Russian dissident-writer-turned-national-Bolshevik-political-leader Eduard Limonov shooting from a hill at the besieged city. The documentary included apologetic explanations from Serbian leaders regarding the reasons and objectives of the war (Pawlikowski 1992). The UN founded ICTY already in 1993 and issued warrants for the main warlords practically immediately. After the wars ended, TJ mechanisms pushed the states into commemoration as part of the reconciliation projects, even though the warlords continued to hold high positions in the states. In such an atmosphere, every side aimed to represent itself as a legitimate actor of the war and as the victim of their enemies. Multiple explanations of the events distanced the societies from reconciliation and transferred the hostilities from the battlefields into everyday life. With the critical lens on the *acceleration of time* in the TJ regime, this thesis shows how a society labeled as a perpetrator deals with that image and resists it, ultimately transforming the narrative into one of the victims.

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PART 1: HISTORY OF MEMORY AND SOCIAL DIVISIONS IN SERBIA

Chapter 1: Official Memory Politics and Serbian Victims in Three Political Times

The first part of the thesis will investigate the formation of memory politics in Serbia and the diverse narratives concerning its involvement in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. In the following chapter, I will explore the evolution of official memory politics after the end of the 1990s Yugoslav wars. I will analyze how official memory politics and interpretation of Serbia's role in these conflicts developed within three *political times* (Spencer 2007) – "the time of Milošević" during the 1990s, the "time of the Democrats" (2000-2014), and the beginning of the "time of the Serbian Progressive Party" (from 2014)[13]. This chapter will demonstrate that, contrary to the prevailing belief of an ideological break following the fall of Milošević's government in 2000, there was a notable continuity in portraying Serbs as victims. The chapter will show that, while not immediately apparent, the victimizing narrative existed from "the time of Milošević" throughout the "time of the Democrats," which facilitated the development of counter-liberal official memory politics in the "time of the Progressives." Ultimately, this chapter will show how Serbian, or "impure victims," traveled through scales, from private commemorative initiatives to the central position of official memory politics.

[13] The return of the 1990s politicians gathered in a new Serbian Progressive Party took place at the elections in 2012. However, overt interventions on memory politics started from 2014, therefore, I take this year as the beginning of the official memory politics of the new/old elites, following researchers that agreed upon this periodization (see: Mandić 2016; Satjukow 2022).

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To understand how the state and politics interact with memory narratives, this chapter will begin with a theoretical discussion of the concept of the state in a post-war/post-socialist society. For the beginning of the discussion, I will borrow Philip Abrams's definition from the 1977 famous discussion "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State," in which he argued:

> The state, then, is not an object akin to the human ear. Nor is it even an object akin to human marriage. It is a third-order object, an ideological project. It is first and foremost an exercise in legitimation - and what it being legitimated is, we may assume, something which if seen directly and as itself would be illegitimate, an unacceptable domination. Why else all the legitimation-work? The state, in sum, is a bid to elicit support for or tolerance of the insupportable and intolerable by presenting them as something other than themselves, namely, legitimate, disinterested domination. The study of the state, seen thus, would begin with the cardinal activity involved in the serious presentation of the state: the legitimating of the illegitimate (Abrams 1988:76).

Bearing in mind later critiques and debates that Abrams's work provoked (Bodirsky 2016), I begin with this definition as it emphasizes the *legitimating role of the state.* Understanding the state as an *exercise* transforms it from a static entity into a platform for various agents to legitimize their ideological projects, opening it for a relational analysis. I argue that Abram's perspective is particularly significant for societies labeled as "post-conflict." The states that recently exited armed conflicts are vulnerable as their institutions are burdened by economic, demographic, and sometimes geographical wounds. Furthermore, parallel to the changes in these configurations, the symbolic building blocks of the states after the war most often change as well. Serbian case shows how, in less than twenty years, the state underwent countless changes in geography, demography, and symbolism.

After the dissolution of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) in 1992, Serbia remained in a federation with Montenegro under the name Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). In the early years, FRY experienced one of the largest global hyperinflations, accompanied by an international embargo that devastated the local economy. In 2003, FRY transformed, changing its name to Serbia and Montenegro, promoting a looser state union between the two republics. Montenegro voted for independence in 2006 when

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Serbia became the Republic of Serbia with two autonomous regions: Kosovo and Vojvodina. In 2008, Kosovo unilaterally proclaimed its independence from Serbia, generating a "frozen" conflict marked by the absence of active military conflict but an enduring lack of diplomatic and political resolution. Numerous institutional changes, political confrontations, and violence accompanied the fluctuations of the states. Alterations of anthems, flags, constitutions, borders, governments, and ideologies set the stage for historical revisionisms that occurred on the academic, political, and popular levels.

In post-conflict/post-socialist Serbia, several processes actively characterized state-making: navigating the aftermaths of wars, transitional dynamics such as implementing privatization and restructuring socialist institutions and moving towards de-secularization. Despite many agents involved in these processes, including new economic, cultural, and religious elites, it was the political elites who emerged as the primary leaders, steering the direction of state reconstruction. The other participants remained mainly in the shadows of the politicians, either complementing or contesting their decisions. In this thesis, I argue that the concurrent events of the Yugoslav wars and the global decline of socialism after the Cold War significantly weakened state institutions in Serbia. This weakening rendered these institutions vulnerable to political manipulation by the elites who ascended to power during this tumultuous period. State institutions in the new post-socialist environment did not build capacities for autonomous functioning. With every change of government, the state gained different management and structure that mirrored the political and ideological patterns of the parties in power. The state institutions became tools for the ruling elites, molded to serve their personal interests or those of their political parties. This process led to a form of state capture, where public resources and institutions were exploited for private or partisan gain (cf. Karklins 2002).

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In cases like Serbia, observing the state as a fluid construct continuously molded by shifting political forces is essential. Drawing inspiration from Jonathan Spencer's notion of "political time," I argue that in the post-conflict/post-socialist *transitions,* what we perceive as the state is, in fact, a series of temporally framed constructs shaped by specific political eras. Based on ethnographic research in Sri Lanka, Jonathan Spencer introduced the notion of "political time" to analyze the shaping of the individual experiences of the state. The concept refers to the segmentation of time into distinct periods, which are influenced and defined by changes in political leadership and significant political events. Spencer's analysis suggests that the chronology of the state is intrinsically linked to political power dynamics and events. Such a framework allows an understanding of how political changes shape collective memory and individual biographies and exposes the state as suspectable to political manipulation. "Political time" can be defined as the categorization and comprehension of history concerning significant political events, figures, or regimes, highlighting how political transitions and occurrences become central markers in understanding historical progression and individual experiences. Spenser's interlocutors in Sri Lanka talk about history through political markers, such as during the "British time" and during the "UNP time" (Spencer 2007:125).

Similarly, in Serbia, political developments strongly shape the perception of history. Characterizations such as "during Tito" (*za vreme Tita*), "during Milošević" (*za vreme Miloševića*), "during the bombing" (*za vreme bombardovanja*), "in the time of the Democrats" (*za vreme demokrata*), and "in the time of the Progressives" (*za vreme naprednjaka*) are denominators that each reflect the agendas, ideologies, and legacies of ruling elites since the WWII or the *legitimizing projects* in Abram's terms. The political impact of different leaders and their agendas on the state was so significant that living in different political times resembled residing in foreign countries without changing a home address. Each epoch not only

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introduced a new political vision but reshaped the very fabric of the state—its institutions, policies, symbols, and even the collective identity.

By using Spencer's concept of "political time" to understand the temporality of the state, I argue that a post-conflict/post-socialist state lacks autonomy and that political elites can intervene in state foundations. I will show this process on the case of the collective memory of Serbia's role in the 1990s Yugoslav wars. To understand more closely the capacity of the political actors to shape the core foundations of the state, I will be using the concept of the "state effect" introduced by Timothy Mitchell. According to Mitchell (2006), the state is not an inherent, pre-existing entity but an "effect" produced by various practices, institutions, discourses, and processes. In other words, the state resembles a coherent entity due to specific practices and discourses that give the impression of its solidity and cohesiveness. Mitchell critiques the general scholarly practice of framing the state as a stable institution. He suggests, instead, that the researchers should examine the state through the processes and practices that make it appear as a coherent, embodied entity in the first place. By shifting from the analysis of the state itself to examining the "state effect," Mitchell invites scholars to investigate how various practices, bureaucratic operations, technologies, and other processes collectively imbue the state with an appearance of genuine coherence and stability, even in situations where it may, in fact, be fragmented.

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Following Mitchell's invitation, I argue that in post-conflict/post-socialist Serbia, political elites and their parties play a pivotal role in shaping the state's character and function. After the end of the Yugoslav wars, Serbia's perceived solidity was consistently molded and redefined by the practices, policies, and discourses of the ruling political elites. Each change of the political parties in power brought with it a transformation in state priorities, objectives,

and even the very nature of state institutions. This dynamic illustrates the state's contingent and malleable nature, constantly evolving as a reflection of the political landscape. I argue that in such contexts, where the wars and abrupt changes of ideological governing weaken the institutions, the politics *effect the state.* Therefore, observing the processes of political effecting of the state reveals how, within the framework of two parallel *posts*, political actors have the capacity to manipulate the state in ways contrary to the common transitional expectations that anticipate the establishment of liberal-democratic institutions. Recognizing the state as being refracted through "political time" and *effected* by politics, allows us to move beyond static definitions and capture its dynamic nature, wherein political elites not only govern but actively construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct its very essence. This chapter will zoom into these processes by observing how political elites shaped collective memory within three "political times" in Serbia.

1.1. Time of Milošević – wars and victimization

The beginning of the political leadership of Slobodan Milošević coincided with the turbulences in the Yugoslav Communist Party and the resulting Yugoslav Wars. Socialist Yugoslavia comprised six republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia (with two autonomous provinces Kosovo and Vojvodina), Montenegro, and Macedonia governed by The League of Communists and its lifelong president, Josip Broz Tito. However, following Tito's death in 1980, a deep ideological crisis ensued as the federal constitution did not provide for the position of president.[14] This power vacuum gave rise to heightened political tensions among the republics, each harboring distinct visions for the federation's future. Tensions

[14] The constitution assumed collective presidency after Tito's death, known as the Presidency of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The body consisted of representatives from each of the six republics and two autonomous provinces.

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revolved predominantly around two contrasting perspectives: the statist approach promoted by the Serbian communist party led by Slobodan Milošević, which advocated for a strong centralized state, and the anti-statist approach, which called for greater autonomy and power for individual republics, promoted by Croatia and Slovenia (Jović 2009). The internal conflicts within the League of Communists enabled previously suppressed tensions and aspirations for independence to erupt into widespread violence and strife starting in Slovenia in 1991, continuing between 1992 and 1995 in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and ending in Kosovo in 1998 and 1999. The wars were characterized by intense battles and heinous atrocities, with Serbia assuming a decisive role in these military campaigns.

Once SFRY ceased to exist, Serbia and Montenegro claimed continuity with the socialist state and institutions under the new name - the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). Milošević's regime formed the Army of Yugoslavia (*Vojska Jugoslavije*) after purging the Yugoslav People's Army of the pro-Yugoslav leadership. The new Army of Yugoslavia actively participated in wars in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, even though the armed conflicts did not take place within Serbian borders until 1998 (Bieber 2008). Serbia was also controversially implicated in the wars through infamous paramilitary groups that controlled certain areas and perpetrated some of the most severe war crimes (Vukušić 2023). The paramilitary group, "Scorpions," participated in the Srebrenica genocide, which was documented on a private videotape that was later played as court evidence during Milošević trial at the ICTY (Petrović 2014; Vukušić 2018). Even though the Serbian armies in Croatia and Bosnia were not formally recognized as part of the official Army of Yugoslavia, they maintained a deep and inseparable connection with Yugoslavia in terms of both manpower and resources. How deeply Serbia was implicated in the wars testifies, if nothing else, the signing of the Dayton agreement that was

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not signed by the leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Radovan Karadžić but by Slobodan Milošević as the guarantee of stability and the "factor of peace" in the region (Glaurdić 2009).

Memory politics played a significant role in Milošević's regime, especially in the war propaganda. First, the regime strategically nationalized socialist ideals (Đureinović 2019; Stojanović 2016) by altering the WWII resistance narratives to emphasize Serbia as the primary anti-fascist force, effectively marginalizing the contributions of other Yugoslav peoples. Furthermore, the nationalization of the WWII narratives reinterpreted other contributors to the resistance as enemies, a shift that became starkly evident with the 1992 establishment of The Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Genocide in WWII. It simultaneously commemorated the Holocaust as the global epitome of WWII suffering and the breach of the Jasenovac concentration camp, operated by Ustasha - Croatian collaborationist forces during WWII, reflecting the local experience of genocide. In the war milieu of the 1990s, the significance of this date was co-opted by the war government to convey a narrative of *longue durée* hatred between Croats and Serbs (Dragović-Soso 2007; Jović 2001). Thus, the Day of Remembrance transcended mere commemoration; it became a tool in rationalizing the Yugoslav wars, suggesting a historical foundation for the hostilities.

Secondly, official memory politics during the time of Milošević constituted the Kosovo myth as the foundational myth of the Serbian people. This myth, revolving around the Serbian defeat in the Battle of Kosovo against the Ottoman Empire in 1389, evoked themes of heroic sacrifice martyrdom and portrayed Serbs as the "heavenly people" (*nebeski narod*). The loss of the Battle of Kosovo in this myth is depicted not only as a territorial defeat but as a notable sacrifice and exceptional heroism that assured a place in the Kingdom of Heaven to the Serbs (Čolović 2016). Most of all, the myth claimed Kosovo was the Serbian holy land where the

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Serbian kings were buried (cf. Verdery 1999). This narrative stood in stark contrast to the realities of the 1980s in Kosovo, where despite being classified as a minority in Yugoslavia, Albanians formed the ethnic majority and consistently protested throughout the decade for greater autonomy, control over Kosovo province, and eventual independence. Thus, the Serbian portrayal of Kosovo as the holy land directly opposed the Albanian aspirations, intensifying the ethnopolitical tensions in the region. Centralization of the Kosovo myth as the foundational narrative of the Serbian nation after Yugoslavia not only resounded with the ethnonationalism that had been bursting since the late 1980s, but also served as another tool to galvanize support for the wars (Jović 2009; Vučetić 2021).

The defeat at the medieval Battle of Kosovo and the suffering of Serbs under the Ustasha collaborationist government were the motor of the "victimhood nationalism" (Lerner 2020), one of the main tools for political and social mobilization during the time of Milošević. The narrative of past sufferings was a significant factor in the formation of Serbian post-socialist identity. It created continuity in the narrative of Serbian victimhood, which in the later political times extended from medieval times, through WWII, to the wars of the 1990s.

In 1998, armed conflicts broke out within Serbian borders in the southern autonomous province of Kosovo, initiating clashes between Serbian police and military forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), an ethnic Albanian paramilitary organization. The conflict was not unexpected, but rather a long-anticipated outcome stemming from nearly two decades of repression against Albanians in Kosovo. In 1991, the Albanian population in Kosovo held a referendum for independence, with 99.8% of Albanians voting in favor, while the Serbian population boycotted the referendum. Subsequently, elections for the Kosovo government took place in 1992. As Kosovo was administratively a province of Serbia, both the referendum and

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elections were deemed illegal, and the elected government was unable to assume power. Instead, positions of authority were occupied by ethnic Albanians loyal to Slobodan Milošević (Judah 2008). Ibrahim Rugova, who emerged as the winner in the unrecognized elections, chose a path of peaceful resistance to oppression, driven by concerns over the ethnic cleansing witnessed in Croatia and Bosnia (Lombardi 1996). Although open clashes were rare throughout the 1990s, repression against Albanians was common, often manifested through frequent raids on Albanian households. As early as 1991, schools were forced to adopt a new curriculum imposed by Serbia. Albanian teachers' refusal to comply resulted in twenty-one thousand dismissals from schools (Judah 2008). Consequently, Albanians established a parallel system of education in private households, further dividing the Serbian and Albanian populations. This situation led to the emergence of a new generation of young Albanians who did not learn Serbian and became increasingly detached from Serbian culture, while young Serbs attended ethnically homogeneous schools without exposure to Albanian culture.

The Kosovo Liberation Army emerged despite Ibrahim Rugova's strategy of peaceful resistance. KLA launched a guerrilla warfare against Serbian forces that rapidly escalated into a full-scale war. Recognizing the need for a peaceful resolution, the United States, Russia, France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom formed The Contact Group, aiming to facilitate negotiations between the ethnic Albanian delegation representing the KLA's demands and the Yugoslav delegation representing the interests of Serbia and ethnic Serbs in the province. The negotiations took place at the Chateau de Rambouillet near Paris in February and March 1999. However, despite these efforts, the Rambouillet negotiations ultimately failed to produce an agreement. The Serbian delegation rejected the proposed peace plan, which entailed granting Kosovo substantial autonomy within Yugoslavia while having NATO peacekeepers

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stationed in the region. Consequently, the failure of the negotiations led to a NATO bombing campaign against Yugoslavia that began on March 24, 1999, and lasted for 78 days.

NATO's decision to launch the bombing of FR Yugoslavia sparked considerable controversy, primarily because it lacked approval from the United Nations Security Council, the body entrusted with the authority to authorize the use of force. During this period, the Security Council was deliberating a resolution that would have sanctioned the use of force in Kosovo under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. However, the resolution faced opposition from Russia and China, both holding veto power within the Security Council. In contrast, NATO leaders believed that the situation in Kosovo demanded urgent action and that the Security Council's inaction posed a significant risk to innocent civilians. They argued that NATO had a responsibility to intervene in order to prevent further violence and human rights abuses. NATO made the decision to proceed with military action without the UN's approval, referring to it as a "humanitarian intervention." This decision generated intense debate, with some countries and individuals asserting that it violated international law and established a dangerous precedent. Others argued that while the intervention may have been "technically illegal," it was "morally justified" (Roberts 2008). It ignited a protracted and ongoing discussion within the realm of international law regarding the legitimacy and legality of the principle of interventionism.

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The bombing campaign ended on June 9, when the peace agreement was signed in the city of Kumanovo in today's North Macedonia. Known as the Kumanovo Agreement, it stipulated that the Yugoslav government must withdraw its military and police forces from Kosovo, permitting the deployment of an international peacekeeping force under the supervision of the United Nations. Additionally, the agreement mandated the disarmament of the KLA and its transformation into a civilian organization. Finally, the agreement laid the

groundwork for the founding of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the Kosovo Force (KFOR). These entities were entrusted with the responsibility of preserving peace and stability in the region.

The wars of the first half of the 1990s did not have any commemorative space in the official memory politics in Serbia until 2000, when Milošević's government built the "Eternal Flame" monument at the confluence of the river Sava into the Danube. The memorial was dedicated to NATO bombing, initially envisioned as a 78-meter-tall representation of each day of the Bombing; however, it stood at 28 meters due to resource constraints (Lavrence 2007). Its aesthetics mirrored Stalinist-style heroic memorials (Prodanović 2002), adorned with inscriptions that extolled Serbian resistance. The inscription written by Milošević's wife, Mirjana Marković, emphasized the nation's "heroic resistance" during the NATO bombing:

> This eternal flame burns as a reminder of the war the 19 countries led against Serbia from March 24 to June 10, 1999. Let the flame burn as a reminder of the heroic Serbian resistance in which the entire nation participated. To be free, the world must find within itself the bravery and strength that we did as we fought and defended ourselves in the spring and summer of 1999.

This commemoration of the bombing, portrayed as an act of resistance by the Serbian people against a *Western* aggressor, framed this event as an isolated anti-Serbian atrocity. This narrative disconnected the bombing from the broader context of the 1990s Yugoslav wars and the Kosovo conflict as its final stage. As Satjukow (2022) observed, the first commemoration organized by Milošević's government appeared to be a strategic use of trauma to retain public support ahead of the September 2000 elections. However, the traumatic experience of the bombing backfired, ultimately leading to Milošević's defeat in those very elections. About half a year after the first commemoration of the NATO bombing in Serbia, Milošević was overthrown with the new *democratic* political era starting in Serbia.

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1.2. Time of the Democrats – continuities and discontinuities with the time of Milošević

A decade of wars, hyperinflation, and political oppression during the time of Milošević galvanized the society, leading to the emergence of the civic movement known as "Resistance" (Otpor)[15] and the democratic, anti-Milošević coalition called Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS). "Resistance" played a pivotal role in mobilizing the population and gathering significant support for DOS at the September 2000 elections, ultimately contributing to the successful dethronement of Slobodan Milošević on October 5, 2000, during the mass protest known as the "Bulldozer Revolution" or "October 5 Revolution." The revolution symbolically marked the end of the war politics of the 1990s and pivoted Serbia to the European integration and reconciliation processes within the region. New elites built their political legitimacy on the opposition to Milošević's war ideology and regime, driven by the ambition of transforming Serbia into a modern European nation. Addressing the haunting specter of the recent past became a paramount task. However, the democrats faced difficulties in the creation of a coherent narrative about the Yugoslav wars. The main obstacle they faced was a lack of public consensus as well as the consensus within DOS regarding the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the role Serbia played in it. Given the diverse nature of the coalition that ousted Milošević—ranging from smaller conservative and right-wing parties to the dominant liberal, pro-*Western* Democratic Party—a consensus on the recent past remained elusive. The new elites also held varying perspectives on Serbia's relations with NATO and ICTY, resulting in a lack of a unified politics of memory.

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[15] Numerous anti-war and anti-government protests were prevalent throughout the entire decade of the 1990s. However, it was only with the emergence and consolidation of the "Resistance" movement that the ousting of Milosevic from power was successfully achieved. For more about the 1990s resistance in Serbia see: Stef Jansen, "The Streets of Beograd. Urban Space and Protest Identities in Serbia." (2001); Special issue of the Serbian journal *Sociology. Journal of Sociology, Social Psychology and Social Anthropology* 39 (1997) no.1; Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, "Humor & Nonviolent Struggle in Serbia" (2015); Orli Fridman, "It was like fighting a war with our own people': Anti-war activism in Serbia during the 1990s" (2011).

Since Milošević's regime denied the court's legitimacy and refused to collaborate and deliver the accused, the expectations of the democratic elites to show commitment and cooperate were, therefore, even higher. Serbia's first democratic leaders, however, hesitated. The issue of how to treat Milošević and the question of his potential extradition to the tribunal[16] ideologically divided the new government (Pešić 2014) as well as the anti-Milošević intelligentsia, since not all members held liberal positions (Dragović-Soso 2014). Vojislav Koštunica, the first president after Milošević, a conservative politician who campaigned on a platform of "non-revanchism," was a vocal critic of the tribunal, which he believed exhibited an anti-Serb bias. On October 6, 2000, a day after the overthrow of Milošević, he declared in the daily "Politika" that the new government would not perform revanchism against political rivals: "I refuse the possibility that the citizens of the FRY could be extradited to the Hague Tribunal, which is a means for achieving the influence and presence of NATO in the Balkans" (Pešić 2014). The new government's indecisive attitude prompted major *Western* powers to adopt *politics of conditionality* to coerce Serbia into ICTY compliance (Spoerri 2011). They linked cooperation with the tribunal to vital incentives such as foreign aid and EU accession negotiations. In 2001, the US State Department made the financial aid to Serbia contingent upon full cooperation with the ICTY tribunal. The new Serbian government was required to arrest Milošević and extradite at least one additional accused, pass a new law for collaboration with the ICTY, and grant the court's prosecutors complete access to all state archives. In return, the US promised to release $100 million in non-humanitarian financial aid and encourage the World Bank and IMF to allow loans. The principle of conditionality successfully brought Milošević in front of the face of transitional justice on June 28, 2001.

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[16] ICTY initially indicted Milošević for the crimes Serbian forces committed in the Kosovo war in May 1999. In 2011 they added nn indictment for the crimes in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. A Case information sheet about Milošević's trials at the ICTY available at https://www.icty.org/x/cases/slobodan_Milošević/cis/en/cis_Milošević_slobodan_en.pdf

Politics of conditionality coerced all former Yugoslav countries to collaborate with the tribunal. While being successful in bringing the accused in front of the face of justice, it also created many unintended consequences. Instead of pursuing what Spoerri calls "transitional justice's non-judicial ambitions," such as writing common history and reconciliation, politics of conditionality contributed to further destabilization of the region and resistance against processes of transitional justice. They enabled local politicians to *hijack justice* (Subotić 2009) and turn the conditioning into the currency for their own political goals. The causal link created between the deliverance of the accused individuals and economic prosperity further enabled the production of popular narratives that diminished the legitimacy of international criminal justice. Many actors in the region harbored deep suspicions regarding ICTY decisions, viewing them as influenced by political motivations or ethnic biases. Such mistrust hindered the Tribunal's broader impact on the acknowledgment of past atrocities.

On the juridical level, the new democratic government collaborated with the ICTY, and in 2003, they established the local National Prosecutors' Office for war crimes in Belgrade. Still, on the social level, the new elites did not find a way to systematically articulate the memory of the 1990s wars and create an official state narrative on the recent past at the state level. Serbian intellectuals have publicly advocated commemoration of the recent past, though without consensus on the Serbian role in the wars (Dragović-Soso 2014). Again, this divergence was largely attributed to the fact that opposition to Milošević spanned the entire political spectrum, encompassing a wide array of sentiments, political stances, and forms of activism. Liberal non-governmental organizations that evolved from the anti-war and anti-nationalist movements of the 1990s[17] joined the non-juridical TJ activities through *memory*

[17] For the analysis of the anti-war and anti-nationalist activism in Serbia and Croatia during the 1990s, see Stef Jansen, "Anti-Nationalism: Post-Yugoslav Resistance and Narratives of Self and Society." PhD Thesis, University of Hull, Hull, UK (2000). For version in Serbian Stef Jansen, Antinacionalizam: Etnografija otpora u Beogradu i Zagrebu, Beograd, Bibliote XX Vek (2005).

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activism (Fridman 2022) that aimed to face Serbian society with the dark aspects of the recent history.

Although the official state-level relationship with the recent past remained mostly unarticulated, with the new government failing to establish any official commemorations dedicated to the 1990s Yugoslav wars (Mandić 2016), the re-interpretation of the past was an important item on the new elites' agenda. One of the first steps towards this objective was the revision of the official holiday calendar. Official calendars, as Eviatar Zerubavel (2003) underscored, comprise holidays that commemorate key societal events, reflecting the dominant narratives that communities of memory craft from their own history. Therefore, by analyzing the events honored through official holidays, what can be seen is the mainstream historical consciousness and sense of identity that the state seeks to promote. The inclusion or exclusion of certain commemorations is telling of the dominant narratives and the political dynamics at play. Intuitively, it would be expected from the democratic elites to take a completely new course against the memory politics from the time of Milošević that was characterized by a strong focus on nationalist narratives of Kosovo and Jasenovac. However, in the analysis of the creation of the new official calendar after October 5, 2000, Lea David (2014a) showed how the post-Milošević democratic elites actually perpetuated nationalist narratives based on "victimhood nationalism."

David claims that this process had a twofold purpose. On the one hand, the new elites aimed to represent Serbian history in continuity with "European/democratic values," putting a strong emphasis on the XIX century anti-Ottoman struggle and heroism and victimhood in the First and Second World Wars, with altogether 19 out of 21 holidays relating to this period

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(David 2014a:477). However, the holidays that the authorities chose at the same time continued interpretations of history in a nationalist key. Such an example is continuing to celebrate The Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Genocide in WWII. David argues that the new elites embraced this holiday to align with the cosmopolitan aspirations of the EU without dispelling it from the deeply ingrained animosity towards Croats, thus fortifying the local nationalist sentiments.

World War II, rather than the 1990s wars, was the primary focus in the time of the Democrats. Jelena Đureinović (2019) illuminated it through an in-depth analysis of the Chetnik movement's reevaluation in the post-Milošević era[18]. During the time of Milošević, the collective memory strategy aimed to maintain continuity with the socialist holidays, reinterpreted to emphasize the Serbian role in the anti-fascist, communist-led Partisan struggle. On the contrary, in the time of the Democrats, the Partisan struggle was significantly downplayed. This adjustment aimed to elevate the Chetniks—a distinctly Serbian movement—to a historical prominence comparable to, or even surpassing, Partisan's central portrayal during socialism. Whereas the Partisan resistance symbolized a pan-Yugoslav, communist-driven struggle comprising fighters from the entire Yugoslav space, *from the peak Triglav to the river Vardar*[19]*,* the Chetniks epitomized nationalistic Serbian ideals, contrasting with the international ethos upheld by the Partisans. Therefore, instead of countering the principle of historical manipulation rooted in the nationalism of the Milošević era, the new democratic elites merely facilitated a different version of nationalism.

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[18] "The Chetniks, officially the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland, were the royalist armed forces led by Dragoljub Mihailović. They had Allied support until 1943 but they also engaged in collaboration. They were defeated by the Partisans and considered war criminals and collaborators in socialist Yugoslavia." (Đureinović 2019:1)

[19] A common symbolic geographical portray of socialist Yugoslavia – from the peak Triglav in Slovenia, the northernmost state, to the river Vardar in Macedonia, the southernmost state.

The new official calendar recognized Yugoslav wars with a single national holiday, March 24, commemorating the beginning of the NATO bombing, albeit without an official commemorative ceremony. March 24 was another holiday established by Milošević's government in 2000, commemorated by the establishment of the Eternal Flame monument. Treatment of this monument, in a way, portrays the official politics of memory during the time of the Democrats. The new government extinguished the monument's flame after discovering that the previous government erected it without proper authorization (Mučibabić 2010). It is difficult to avoid the irony of a situation in which the monument intended to honor Serbian resilience and heroism was effectively illegal. The memorial site was vandalized several times after 2000, while the lack of a building permit made it unclear who would be responsible for its upkeep (Bădescu 2016; Lavrence 2007). Instead of burning an eternal flame, the new elites left the monument to decay in the dark.

While the state was neglectful towards the Yugoslav wars, and the liberal NGO sector complied with the liberal TJ paradigm, advocating for the commemoration of past crimes as a moral obligation to incorporate these transgressions into a collective self-awareness through remembrance, Serbian victims found little space for acknowledgment in this narrative framework. Their commemoration was mostly relegated to the private sphere and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Veterans' organizations built small monuments and memorial fountains across Serbia in memory of fallen soldiers. The church was the only instance that commemorated Operation Storm - the 1995 exodus of the Serbian population from the Republic of Srpska Krajina[20] (Đerić 2008). The Yugoslav (and subsequently Serbian) Army erected several monuments within its military facilities throughout the 2000s to honor those impacted by the Bombing. State representatives did attend these commemorations, yet they did

[20] Area populated by Serbian ethnic minority within Croatia.

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not carry an official endorsement, further highlighting the state's reluctance to maintain a definitive narrative on the recent past (Mandić 2016).

The Serbian newspaper "Večernje novosti" (Evening News) commissioned a monument in Belgrade's Tašmajdan Park to commemorate the children who tragically perished during the 1999 airstrikes. The monument features a marble butterfly with a bronze girl who holds a plush teddy bear, with the poignant inscription "We were just children" (*Bili smo samo deca*) engraved in both Serbian and English (Figure 2). Though not explicitly indicated, the bronze girl in this memorial could be representative of "Little Milica" (Mala Milica), an iconic symbol of the suffering endured by the Serbian people during the NATO strikes. "Little Milica" refers to three-year-old Milica Rakić, who lost her life on April 17, 1999, when her home in the Belgrade suburb of Batajnica was struck by a stray cluster bomb. This area faced heavy bombardment in 1999 due to its proximity to military facilities, including a military airport. The tragic fate of "Little Milica" became a potent metaphor highlighting the imbalanced power dynamics between NATO and Serbia. Amplified by Milošević's regime during the bombings, this narrative persisted post-2000 as emblematic of the anguish the Serbian people faced in 1999. Often invoked as a symbol of NATO's cruelty, "Little Milica" has garnered veneration from some actors within the Serbian Orthodox Church, with several monasteries already creating painted icons in her honor.

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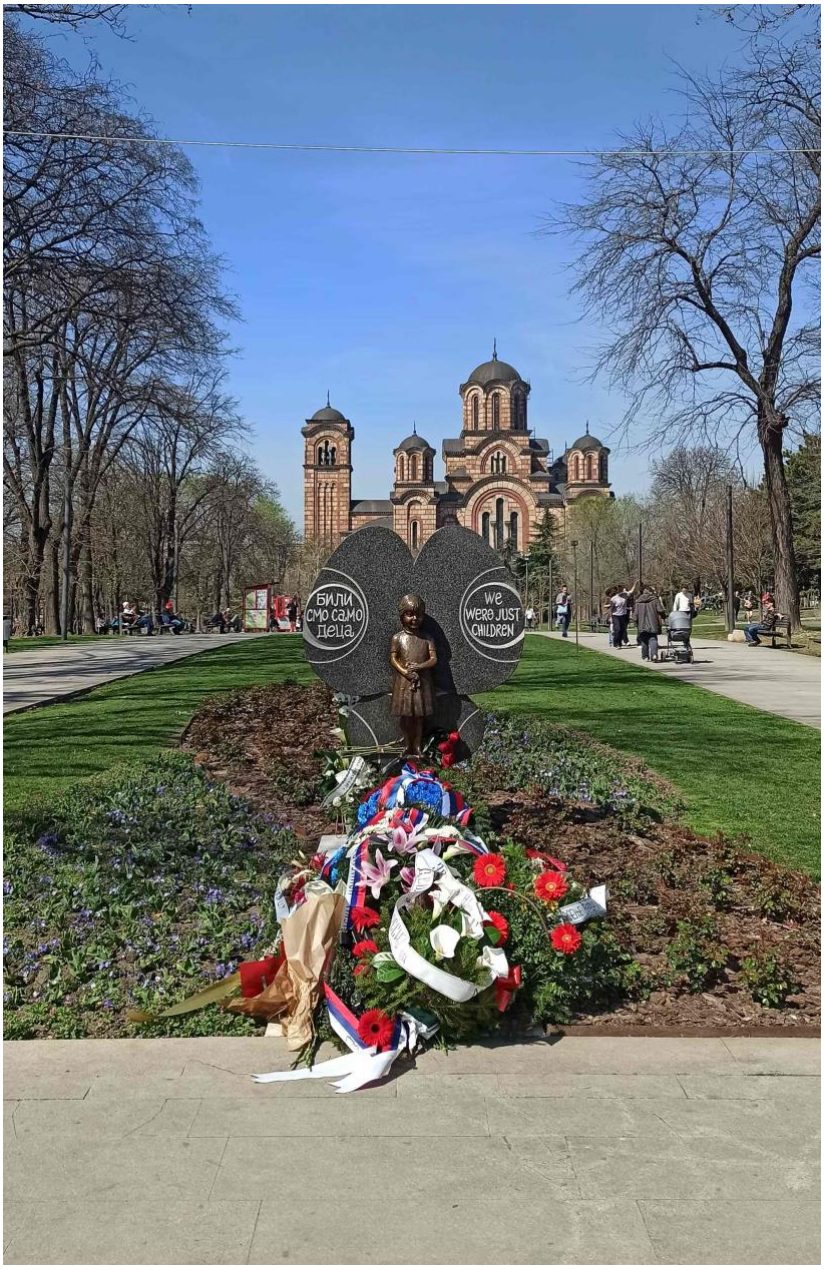

Figure 2 - "We were just children" monument
photo by the author

Another private initiative of substantial symbolic impact commemorates the death of 16 employees in the NATO airstrike on the National Radio and Television Broadcast Company (RTS) in Belgrade, which occurred on April 23, 1999. NATO defended this controversial attack by asserting that the media can serve as a tool in warfare, accusing RTS specifically of disseminating nationalist propaganda. Many international organizations criticized the attack and labeled it as a war crime, yet it did not lead to any investigation or trial. The tragedy

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deepened upon revelations that the RTS director had evacuated most of the building earlier that day but left the technical staff in the targeted location. Believing that the employees were deliberately sacrificed on orders from senior officials, the families of the deceased have been tirelessly seeking justice. They erected the "Why?" Monument (*Zašto*), inscribed with the victims' names as a poignant reminder of their loss. The families gather at the monument each year to express their sorrow and demand accountability from the responsible officials.

Figure 3 - The "Why?" Monument with names of the killed technical staff of the RTS
Photo by the author

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The “Why?” Monument also stands in Tašmajdan Park, close to the “We Were Just Kids” monument, on a small hill overlooking the ruin of the destroyed RTS building (Figure 4). Families of the killed employees initiated a transformation of this ruin into a memorial landmark. Their bottom-up initiative eventually prompted the City of Belgrade’s Investment and Housing Agency to organize a competition in 2013 for the reconstruction of the site into a memorial (Bădescu 2016; Staničić 2021). The winning design submitted by an architectural studio, “Neoarhitekti,” focused on using the ruin as the central element, representing the moment of destruction and creating a space for memory and mourning (Bădescu 2016). As the critics of the design notice, the winning project did not address the wider context of the NATO bombings, nor did it engage with the complexities of the past in Serbia, going hand in hand with the general ambiguity in the official memory politics towards the recent past. However, the project was never pursued, and the destroyed RTS building still stands as a deteriorating relic of the past. This building is one of the numerous ruins that had been persistently standing throughout the country during the time of the Democrats, acting as unofficial, somber monuments (Bădescu 2019).

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Figure 4 - Ruin of the RTS building in Abardareva Street – March 2023
View from the "Why?" monument, Photo by the author

During the "long period of ambiguity," as Satjukow (2022) termed the relationship with the 1990s by the post-Milošević elites, no state-sponsored monuments that would account for the recent past emerged. One noteworthy attempt, however, serves as a striking example of that ambiguity, ultimately culminating in a disastrous outcome. After ten years and three failed open design competitions, the City Council of Belgrade unveiled the monument "To the victims of

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the war and defenders of the fatherland from 1990-1999" on March 24, 2012. The ten-year-long process of competition was shrouded in controversy. The main issue that persistently hindered the finalization of the monument's design centered on determining who should be included in the commemorative narrative of the monument and how to distinguish between victims and perpetrators. The monument was also a bottom-up initiative that had started from numerous veterans' organizations that sent letters to the Mayor of Belgrade. The Mayor initiated the project, and in 2002, the first open competition was announced with a call by "The Committee for Building the Monument to the Victims of the Wars from 1990 to 1999 in the Former Yugoslav Territories." While the committee was named after a monument for the victims, the competition's full name was: "Open Competition For the Sculptural Solution of The Monument Dedicated to the Fallen Fighters and the Victims of the Wars from 1990 to 1999 in the Former Yugoslav Territories" (David 2014b). It was unclear and left to interpretation whether the monument was supposed to commemorate victims, whose victims, and/or veterans. Furthermore, the decision to dedicate the monument to the whole decade of the 1990s added to the confusion, as it encompassed several wars, each with distinctly different victims and veterans. The Committee for Building the Monument gathered numerous mnemonic actors, who, as it turned out, held conflicting views on the recent past and the purpose of the memorial and obstructed the process of selection.

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In the analysis of the decade-long process of building this monument, Lea David noticed that the ruling elite went through three stages of memory-politics orientation and that decisions regarding memorialization were always influenced by the Europeanization processes:

> The first two open competitions (2002–2004) reflected the enthusiasm in Serbia toward, as well as the trust in, the Europeanization process just after the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in 2000. They reveal the agenda for the "easy fix": to acknowledge civil victims from all sides, expressing sympathy across the ethnic lines while not taking any responsibility for Serbia's part in the wars. In the second phase, the ruling political elite equated civil victims with "defenders of the homeland." In the third phase,

> when it finally became clear that accepting Serbia into the EU might take another 10–15 years, the feelings of estrangement from the EU were directly translated into the memory agenda: the category of "victim" was expanded to include all Serbs, including the war veterans, further blurring responsibilities with sympathies. (David 2014b:657)

Ultimately, when the monument was opened in 2012, no one was satisfied. The veterans thought that the design was too abstract, missing Orthodox symbolism and names of the fallen (Figure 5). Activists from the liberal civil society protested that this solution blurs the borders between victims and perpetrators, thus equating them. Some of the mnemonic actors argued that it stands in a disrespectful place, as the square on which the monument was erected was famous for the pornographic cinema "Partizan," sex shops, and prostitution. A counter group that was found to oppose the project, "The Monument Group" (*Grupa Spomenik*),[21] challenged every step of the way by urging the city officials to contextualize deeper and delineate victims and defenders to whom the monument was dedicated.

Figure 5 - Monument to "The victims of the war and defenders of the fatherland from 1990-1999" author unknown, source: https://beogradskevesti.info/spomenik-zrtvama-rata-i-braniocima-otadzbine-od-1990-do-1999-u-beogradu/

[21] https://grupaspomenik.wordpress.com/

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The design of the monument belongs to a contemporary style of invisible memorials that blend with the surroundings without obvious emotional impact on the viewer. The abstract nature of this monument intended to leave the passer-by to ponder upon its minimalistic inscription "To the victims of the war and defenders of the fatherland from 1990-1999." This wording, however, not only raises questions but also introduces historical inaccuracies in the whole picture of this problematic memorial. First of all, the inscription *to the victims of the war* gives a misleading impression that only one war existed between 1990 and 1999. The term "fatherland" further complicates matters with its ambiguity, given the shifting geo-political landscapes of the times. The first fights in 1991 in Slovenia were fought to preserve socialist Yugoslavia, while later, several *fatherlands* were in question – Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. The mnemonic groups who awaited the monument for a decade were ultimately presented with a construction that ambiguously commemorated all, yet specifically none. Lea David argued that, in the project's early stages, officials saw an opportunity to craft a narrative honoring all 1990s war victims, spanning various ethnicities. This approach was supposed to cast Serbia favorably while sidestepping a direct admission of the country's roles in the wars. David aptly described it as a "low-cost solution for a high-cost problem," which, once the monument was inaugurated, turned out to be true.

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The acceleration of time that took place in the TJ liberal regime took its toll during the time of the Democrats. Politics of conditionality pushed Serbia to collaborate with ICTY and commemorate recent crimes without taking into account that the war wounds were still fresh and that the society was still deeply divided across the lines of Serbia's role in the wars. One portion of the society made pressures to step towards dealing with the past, emphasizing the wrongdoings Serbia performed during the 1990s. Right-wing groups, on the other hand,

celebrated the wars and turned Ratko Mladić, who was a fugitive until 2011, into a hero who resisted the *Western* strivings over Serbia. The new democratic elites did not find a way to navigate the deeply divided society. They failed to establish a coherent narrative or an official ceremonial approach to commemorating the Yugoslav wars. The most significant effort by the state was its alignment with private initiatives from groups such as RTS families, war veterans, and organizations for the missing people in projects to create memorials; however, the state's ambiguous stance and the futile attempts to manipulate and simplify the recent history ultimately undermined these private initiatives. The new elites that succeeded the Democrats between 2012-2015 inherited a virtually empty space to re-imagine the collective memory of the Yugoslav wars.

1.3. Time of the Progressives – New/old elites and a new form of victimization

The political landscape in Serbia significantly changed between 2012 and 2015. Throughout several elections in this period, pro-*Western*, liberal democratic parties experienced a significant decline in their political influence and presence in the government. Consequently, power was transferred to the newly formed Serbian Progressive Party, changing the governance of Serbia and shifting the domestic and foreign policy priorities. Membership of the Serbian Progressive Party consisted of many influential 1990s politicians. The founders of the party, Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić, held major roles between 1998 and 2000: Nikolić was deputy to the Prime ministers of Serbia and Yugoslavia, while Vučić served as Serbia's Minister of Information. Both had been high-ranking officials in the right-wing Serbian Radical Party led by Vojislav Šešelj, who faced charges at the ICTY for crimes against humanity in one of the Tribunal's most notable trials. With Šešelj in The Hague, Nikolić and Vučić steered the Radical Party, marking their leadership with conspicuous nationalist actions, such as the 2007

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incident when Vučić covered the street sign for "Zoran Đinđić Boulevard," dedicated to the first democratic Prime Minister after Milošević (who was assassinated in 2003), with a sign "Ratko Mladić Boulevard." Soon after the performance, the Radical Party split, and Nikolić and Vučić founded the Serbian Progressive Party, which aimed to advocate a more moderate form of nationalism compared to their previous affiliation. The Serbian Progressive Party strategically repositioned itself towards policies that might be more acceptable or aligned with European standards or expectations, aiming to balance nationalist sentiments with a pro-European orientation.

After the first successful elections, the Serbian Progressive Party formed an alliance with the Serbian Socialist Party, formerly led by Slobodan Milošević, marking the return of the political figures and elites from the 1990s to prominent positions of power within the state. The change of the government suggested a substantial shift in the political dynamics within Serbia, indicating a possible resurgence of the ideologies from the time of Milošević. The first years in the time of the Progressives, however, did not see much intervention on the official memory politics. In the first years of the new/old elites' reign, the state officials limited their commemorative activities to paying visits and giving speeches at private, church, and military commemorations.

In 2014, on the fifteenth anniversary of the NATO bombing, the state did not organize a commemorative ceremony; instead, state officials attended various smaller commemorative events (Mandić 2016). Despite this, Mandić (2016) and Satjukow (2022) contended that 2014 marked the beginning of a "nationalist shift" characterized by a narrative that highlighted the victimization of Serbs during the 1990s conflicts. While the Serbian Progressive Party did later increasingly focus on victimhood in their narratives of recent history, the full centralization of

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this victimizing narrative had not yet crystallized in the early years of their governance. Also, the presupposed "nationalist shift" suggests a departure from previous policies, while a closer analysis of official memory politics during the two preceding political periods reveals a continuity of victimization rather than a stark shift. Therefore, it is more precise to argue that the Serbian Progressive Party maintained the victimizing trend in memory politics that commenced in the time of Milošević and continued, albeit in a subtler form, during the times of the Democrats. It was not until around the twentieth anniversary of the NATO bombing that the Serbian Progressive Party succeeded in positioning Serbian victims at the forefront of the official historical narratives, a development in the focus of the second and third parts of this thesis.

The new/old elites, who had previously been associated with radical right-wing ideologies and Milošević's regime, did not immediately prioritize memory politics upon their return to power. One possible reason for this could be their past affiliation with nationalism, while they sought to align with European values and distance themselves from their right-wing past. The portrayal of Serbs as victims in the narratives of the 1990s wars has consistently conflicted with liberal TJ commemorative practices, which tend to exclude victims associated with the perpetrator's side. Therefore, it is plausible that the lack of a clear initial agenda in memory politics was partly due to a reluctance to engage with narratives that could reinforce the anti-liberal stances.

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However, there was a particular unofficial monument that emerged in the summer of 2015 in front of the Serbian parliament that I interpret as the invisible voice of the *new* state – a voice addressing historical events primarily through the lens of Serbian victims while silencing any acknowledgment of its own wartime transgressions. This unofficial monument,

colloquially referred to as the "Serbian wailing wall" (*Srpsi zid plača*), was erected outside the National Assembly by Simo Spasić, the head of "The Association of Families of Kidnapped and Killed in Kosovo and Metohija." On July 8, 2015, Serbian dailies reported that Spasić, along with his associates, showcased a banner (Figure 6) outside the Assembly, advocating for an official state monument dedicated to the victims of KLA and NATO. While initially suggesting that the banner in the form of a makeshift monument would remain in front of the Assembly only until July 15 that year, its presence extended until July 11, 2019.

Figure 6 - The first Wailing Wall, July 8, 2015
Photo by TANJUG, Zoran Žestić, source: N1info.rs

The monument functioned as a mobile installation, journeying through several locations in Belgrade. Tracing its path provides insights into the evolution of Serbia's relationship with its victims, particularly following the re-emergence of the 1990s elites. Initially, in August 2014, a large banner displaying images of Serbian victims from the Kosovo war was attached to a private fence opposite the Special Court for War Crimes in Belgrade. A representative of the "Association of Families of Kidnapped and Killed in Kosovo and Metohija" (in the further text The Association) conveyed that this "Wailing Wall" was part of a campaign called "Seeking Justice for Serbian Victims - Denied the right to live, give us the

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right to truth and justice." This initiative aimed to spotlight the elusive quest for justice for over 2,500 Serbs kidnapped and killed over the preceding 16 years (News Agency Srna 2014). This banner-cum-monument stood in opposition to the state court that, among its various responsibilities, addressed war crimes perpetrated by Serbian soldiers during the Yugoslav wars. The Association perceived this institution as one that foregrounded Serbian perpetrators, thereby overshadowing Serbian victims in the face of justice. Nonetheless, the geographical placement of both the court and the monument, situated away from the city's heart, meant their dialogue was largely insulated from the broader populace. As discussed in the introduction, in the global molar economy of victimhood, the commemoration of the victims in society who have been labeled perpetrators by the wider international community becomes a challenging endeavor. Victims frequently find themselves marginalized within official narratives, relegated to the private sphere and individual commemorative practices. The choice to position the initial "Wailing Wall" on a private fence directly opposite a state institution exemplifies this dynamic.

With the relocation of the Wailing Wall from its initial peripheral position to the city center, a noticeable shift in the treatment of victims became apparent. In its early stages, the banners of the "Wailing Wall" across the court primarily used the Serbian language, calling the responsible ones within the society to recognize Serbian victims. Over time, the monument moved to the city center, and the inscriptions gradually transitioned to English, bearing messages such as "US, NATO – Why do you protect war criminals?", "Albanian KLA are terrorists," and "Srebrenica was not a genocide," among other statements (Figure 7). Initially, the banners merely displayed portraits of the victims. However, subsequent versions began to incorporate more graphic content, showcasing disturbing imagery of dismembered bodies, mutilated remains, and other visceral representations of violence and devastation.

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Figure 7 - The Wailing Wall in English, spring 2018
Photo by: Stefan Stojanović, source mondo.rs

In the process of translating the messages on this temporary private memorial, I see an important switch of roles in the dialogue between The Association and the Serbian State. Originally erected with Serbian-language banners, the memorial's focus was on the internal dialogue and urging the state, or the court across which it was hanging, to acknowledge the suffering of Serbian victims. However, as time passed and the monument gained prominence in the city center, the language of the banners shifted to English, resonating with the broader international community. This transformation signified a decision to take the monument's message beyond domestic borders and communicate directly with the international audience. By using English, a wider range of stakeholders could receive the message, including foreign tourists, diplomats, and international observers. But an important question arises from this linguistic transformation: who voices the sentiments of the "Wailing Wall?" Who is the voice behind it?

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At first glance, the spatial orientation of the "Wailing Wall" does not appear to communicate with the state but rather to articulate the messages on its behalf. While the first wall was positioned across the Special Court and was spatially in dialogue with the building across, its incarnation in the center of the city stood with its back turned to the National Assembly as if it is addressing the public on behalf of the parliament. The transition from the portrait/ID photos of the victims to the explicit imagery of mutilated bodies and severed limbs served to engage a stronger emotional response and provide visual evidence of Serbian suffering.

I refer to this alternative monument as the "state's acousmetre," drawing from sound theorist Michel Chion's concept of the *acousmetre*, a voice in films without an apparent source. But why would the Serbian State in 2015 require such an acousmetre? Addressing Serbian victims of the Yugoslav wars has been both sensitive and often overshadowed by the international focus on Serbian perpetrators and their internationally recognized war crimes. The re-emergent elites recognized political capital in highlighting Serbian victims, a trope that predominantly emanated from unofficial commemorative practices. This neglected narrative of Serbian victims presented a ripe platform upon which state officials could immediately establish their memory politics. Yet, their 1990s nationalist legacy made it challenging to turn their backs on the liberal TJ regime and singularly address the victims. Importantly, they remained committed to the EU accession, which necessitated collaboration with the ICTY.

The "Serbian Wailing Wall" assumed the role of the state's acousmetre, using English and visceral imagery to indirectly echo the state's sentiments, framing the narrative to resonate with the international community. The "state's acousmetre" can be interpreted as a broader political maneuver to curate memory politics and public sentiment. It further allowed the State

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to invisibly control the discourse surrounding the issues of the Serbian victims, presenting a carefully crafted message to both domestic and international audiences. It facilitated a spotlight on Serbian victimhood while subtly obfuscating its perpetrator role in the past. Additionally, the use of the acousmetre allowed the State to shift the responsibility for conveying specific messages to an independent and seemingly grassroots initiative. Finally, the monument's informality, manifested through its cheap appearance and temporary nature, further contributes to the State's ability to disassociate itself from the monument's demands. The frequent replacement of content and vulnerability of the elements reinforced the appearance of an independent grassroots effort rather than a state-endorsed initiative. It enabled the State to avoid direct engagement with sensitive issues while still advancing its interests and concerns through the monument.

Chion argued that, in the movies, once the acousmetre shows its bodily existence, it loses its power and ubiquity: "Embodying the voice is a sort of symbolic act, dooming the acousmetre to the fate of ordinary mortals" (Chion 1999:27). However, contrasting this cinematic premise with the events in Serbia, the *de-acousmatization* tells a different tale. In 2017, the Wailing Wall faced vandalism during an anti-government demonstration. Subsequently, Simo Spasić, in an interview with the right-wing portal "Srbin.info," divulged that the State financed its restoration (SRBIN info 2017). Contrary to Chion's theory, in the Serbian context, the unveiling of the true entity behind the "Wailing Wall's" voice — the State — didn't signify a loss of power. On the contrary, it seemed indicative of the State's growing confidence and strength, allowing it to overshadow the controversial roles of its 1990s elites, announcing the centralization of Serbian victims in official memory politics.

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1.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented three political times and showed continuities and discontinuities of memory tropes within them. The chapter aimed to show how the foundation for the shift towards a counter-liberal memory regime occurred in public discourses. Building on the introductory discussion about victims on the side of the perpetrator, this chapter examined how victimhood was treated in three different political periods in Serbia. The chapter showed how, following the fall of Milošević, the subsequent democratic government found itself torn between the alignment with the imperatives of the liberal TJ regime that sought to condemn crimes and promote a reconciliatory narrative and the internal demands to recognize Serbian victims that did not easily fit the liberal TJ paradigm. While being unable to address Serbian victims openly, the democratic government covertly nurtured local nationalism through the official calendar and rehabilitation of the Chetnik movement from the Second World War, while tolerating and sometimes endorsing private initiatives that promoted Serbian victims of the 1990s.

While official cooperation with the ICTY persisted, the state relegated commemoration of the 1990s wars to the peripheries of private endeavors. Even though the liberal non-governmental sector worked on the commemoration of the Serbian war crimes, the state covertly sided with the victimizing narrative, continuing an agenda that started already during the time of Milošević. The chapter showed how, due to the incapacity of the new democratic government to form a coherent memory narrative about both Serbian crimes and Serbian victims, private commemorative initiatives became visible, creating the state effect (Mitchell 2006). The state tolerated these practices, which blurred the boundary between the two. This chapter showed how these private initiatives worked parallelly with a less perceivable process

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of change of the Serbian official calendar, which together served as the ground for the development of a memory regime in the time of the Progressives that concentrated exclusively on Serbian victims. Hence, I conclude that the ascendency of 1990s elites in 2012, contrary to some scholarly assertions, was not so much a jolt toward nationalist memory politics, as it represented an amplification of an ongoing narrative – one that spotlighted Serbian victimhood as the focal point of memory politics. While it was first masked by the *unofficial* monument "Serbian Wailing Wall," it was soon revealed that the returned 1990s elites would pursue Serbian victims as the dominant trope of memory politics.

In a broader sense, this chapter shed light on the complexities faced by states navigating their identity within the moral economy of victimhood, especially when such states are perceived as perpetrators in the liberal TJ regime. Crafting a commemorative space for victims embedded within a perpetrator's milieu is fraught with challenges. The Serbian narrative showcases the consequences of navigating these constrained terrains; when global memory paradigms, structured by transitional justice hierarchies, offer limited scope, it inadvertently propels a radicalization of memory politics. The nuances outside of the duality of perpetrator and victim division become lost in this limited space. Within the confines of this liberal order, the rigid dichotomy fails to accommodate the multifaceted realities of societies bearing both imprints. As the liberal order cannot easily fit the victims on the perpetrator's side, their voice must obtain counter-liberal embodiment in order to position them in the hierarchy of victimhood. "Serbian wailing wall" represents such an embodiment that speaks in an alternative language and provides alternative evidence of victimhood. The next chapter will show how the rigid dichotomy of perpetrators and victims cuts through society, dividing it into two ideologically unreconcilable fragments.

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Chapter 2: Memory of Two Serbias – March 24 in a divided society

This chapter continues to delve into the problem of commemoration of the victims on the side of the perpetrator in a larger context of the global human rights regime. In the first chapter, I showed how a state, trapped between *Western* expectations to align with the liberal TJ regime and local nationalist pressures, struggled to address its victims. To navigate this impasse, private initiatives took the leading role in creating memorial narratives about Serbian victims. In this chapter, I will move the observation from the interplay of the state and the individual initiatives to the level of civil society, where the tensions between contrasting perspectives of nationalism and TJ become particularly visible. This chapter will show how the two prevailing rationalities concerning the Serbian role in the Yugoslav wars form a social division that cuts through Serbian society.

Alongside the international TJ efforts addressing the 1990s wars, a new non-governmental field supporting these processes emerged in Serbia. The carriers of this field were liberal-oriented organizations that focused on dealing with the war atrocities within the paradigm of "coming to terms with the past." The field developed on the legacy of the 1990s anti-nationalist movement (Jansen 2000) that sought to establish new narratives and reconciliatory procedures to counter the raging hostilities and wars in the region. During the 1990s, the regime-controlled media demonized the liberal organizations, labeling them "foreign mercenaries" and "traitors to national interests." After the change of government in 2000, these organizations engaged in *memory activism* (Fridman 2022), partaking in alternative commemorative practices and crafting a new unofficial calendar that memorialized Serbian

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crimes and the victims thereof that were silenced alongside the general silencing of the Yugoslav wars. Despite the change of the government in 2000, these organizations continued to be targets of the right-wing discourses. The main argument from the right part of the political spectrum claims that liberal NGOs, rather than being genuine grassroots movements, are manipulated by proponents of liberalism, with George Soros being pinpointed as their primary influencer.

Conspiracy theories about George Soros, inspired by - but not limited to - antisemitism, have gained widespread traction on a global scale, permeating various regions across the world and gradually becoming a unifying political resource that demonizes liberalism (Byford and Billig 2001; Plenta 2020; Santini, Salles, and Barros 2022). In Serbia, the conspiratorial voice in official politics became integral to Milošević's elites' strategic repertoire during the 1990s. Employed to underscore supposed anti-Serbian *Western* intentions, these narratives flourished during the NATO bombing, with pro-government media outlets as their main disseminators (Byford and Billig 2001). Academics with regime ties further augmented these conspiracy theories, linking them to broader global conspiratorial agendas like the "New World Order" (cf. Spark 2000). With the "democratic revolution" in 2000, the conspiracy theories did not disappear, but the new enthusiasm for democracy and EU accession marginalized them to right-wing outlets. With the return of the 1990s elites to power in 2012, conspiratorial narratives were gradually re-set as a political resource. Furthermore, the global spreading of the post-truth regime, particularly after Donald Trump's election, which legitimized narratives like "Q-Anon" (Bleakley 2023), provided these conspiracy theories with a renewed platform in Serbia. This resurgence further undermined liberal attempts to promote "coming to term with the past."

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Serbian liberal NGOs articulated narratives about perpetrators and victims of the Yugoslav wars primarily within the TJ paradigm. Having the liberal order and dealing with the troubled past as the lens for zooming Yugoslav wars in and out, the NGOs used ICTY as the main authority to establish a truth regime about the conflict. In this sense, law, more precisely humanitarian and international criminal law, represented the core of translating the 1990s violence into the non-governmental field. They framed the legal field as the system beyond politics that facilitates unequivocal judicial decision-making based on the presupposed universal laws. However, as numerous examples from various regions where the international justice system landed have shown, translation of international, mainly meaning *Western*, legal principles into the local conflicts can often lead to unintended effects of the justice processes (Hinton 2010). ICTY, in that sense, was not an exception, as many researchers have pointed out (Milanović 2016; Selimovic 2010; Trbovc and Petrović 2017). Far from mitigating impunity and fostering reconciliation in the region, the long trials often relativized crimes in the eyes of the public. At the same time, the verdicts inadvertently turned the accused into local heroes, thereby perpetuating the hostilities from the wars.

As elaborated in the introduction, the ICTY has been at the center of criticism for perceived political instrumentalization. The spectrum of criticism is diverse: the left primarily views the ICTY as a manifestation of neo-imperialism (Graubart and Varadarajan 2013), whereas the right frames it as an embodiment of anti-Serbian *Western* propaganda, echoing and perpetuating the 1990s conspiracy theories about alleged *Western* plans to destroy Yugoslavia and Serbia. Given the almost negligible presence of the left in the Serbian political landscape, the weight of the criticism of the ICTY comes mainly from the right. The portrayal of The Tribunal as an anti-Serbian entity and part of a *Western* conspiracy against Serbia has been constantly entrenched in daily discourses. While during the time of the Democrats, it was

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relegated to minor media outlets, in the time of Progressives, major media heavily promoted this narrative. Individuals advocating this viewpoint obtained significant media exposure, especially on television and in tabloids. Social networks and right-wing influencers played an essential role in the dissemination of the anti-ICTY discourse. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how, on the one hand, the liberal promotion of TJ and, on the other, the anti-liberal discourse that proposes *Western* conspiracy against Serbia frame conflicting narratives about the perpetrators and victims, generating an environment where mutual understanding and consensus regarding the recent past remains elusive. These opposing narratives fracture the society, leading to internal conflicts and division between the "first" and "other/second" Serbia that split the nation into two distinct and irreconcilable camps.

The terms "first Serbia" and "other/second Serbia" refer to the internal ideological division that emerged during the 1990s dissolution of Yugoslavia. The labels "first" and "other/second" originated from the "Belgrade Circle," a group of liberal intellectuals who coined the term "other/second" (*druga*) Serbia to differentiate themselves from Milošević's ideological grouping around nationalism. The word *druga* in Serbia can mean both other and second, and with this name, the Belgrade Circle aimed to underscore the domination of the nationalist discourses promoted by Milošević's government. For them, the "First Serbia" epitomized the pro-nationalist rhetoric based on "victimhood nationalism" to garner support for wars. Conversely, the "other/second Serbia" embodied a liberal, anti-nationalist stance rooted in anti-war activism. Even though the boundary between these two ideologies is not always clear-cut, and many actors could partially fit either of the categories, this division is widely accepted in Serbian society as the epitome of the internal struggle over the interpretation of the Yugoslav wars (see: Russell-Omaljev 2016).

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In this chapter, I will juxtapose two commemorations of the NATO bombing, whose organizers epitomize the "first" and the "other/second" Serbias. I will observe the organizers of the commemorations with an "instrumentalist," actor-centered perspective on how historical memory forms, as proposed by Bernhard and Kubik (2014). Crucial in their methodology is the focus on mnemonic actors as they craft their versions of the past in support of power aspirations. I choose this framework as I understand the struggle between the "first" and "other/second" Serbia as inherently a power struggle for interpreting history and a broader positioning and alignment of the state. While the "other/second" Serbia aligns with the *Western* values embodied in the human rights regime, the "first" Serbia gravitates towards sovereignty that emphasizes resistance against perceived *Western* hegemony. This stance, historically associated with the loosely defined "Eastern bloc," has evolved, finding new manifestations and alignments, such as the economic consortium of the BRICS countries. Therefore, the division between the "first" and "other/second" Serbia that I will present in this chapter goes beyond their respective understanding of the recent past. Instead, the chapter will demonstrate that the perception of the past reflects the broader geopolitical ambitions of various political actors in Serbia, with memories serving as indicators of the ideologies they endorse.

The chapter continues the discussion about the "extended horizons of the Cold War" (Kwon 2010) from the introduction. It aims to show how the clashed rationalities behind the discourses of two Serbias reveal a continuity of the struggle between the hegemony of *Western* values driven by liberal capitalism and the alternative options that seemingly vanished with the end of the Cold War. The chapter promotes a nuanced understanding of the end of the Cold War. It suggests that, while it receded from the central geopolitical stage, its influence continues to permeate various social spheres, and its effects are still profoundly integrated in contemporary society. The chapter will show how the issues of victims and responsibility

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reflect clashing ideologies of the Cold War. Finally, it will show how these moral imaginings reveal themselves in the process of commemoration of the NATO bombing and how perpetrators and victims are portrayed within these two rationalities.

2.1. Evenings with the liberal civil society

On the evening of March 19, 2018, I attended the opening of "ICTY: The Kosovo Case," a commemorative exhibition organized by several liberal NGOs. The exhibition took place in The Center for Cultural Decontamination (*Centar za Kulturnu dekontaminaciju* – CZKD), a Belgrade venue known since its 1995 establishment as a hub for socially engaged events by the liberal civil society. The interactive exhibition showcased the process of the ICTY's investigation, reconstruction, and prosecution of the cases concerning the crimes committed during the 1998/99 war in Kosovo. The exhibition presented materials from the permanent exhibition in Prishtina hosted by the Kosovo Documentation Center. The displayed materials included selected videos and documentation that showcased the crimes committed by Serbian military and police forces, as well as some committed by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).[22] The organization of the exhibition was a collaborative effort of the "SENSE Agency," a news outlet focusing on transitional justice, along with two other NGOs: "Humanitarian Law Center" (HLC) – which operates in both Belgrade and Prishtina and the Croatian NGO "Documenta" – Centre for Dealing with the Past.

The HLC stands out as the oldest and most prominent regional NGO among these organizations. Founded in 1992 by sociologist Nataša Kandić, HLC has been monitoring and

[22] The entire narrative about ICTY and the Kosovo-related prosecutions is also available on a multimedia tri-lingual (Albanian, English, and Serbian) web platform under the same name https://kosovo.sensecentar.org/)

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documenting war crimes from the very start of the conflicts. Despite persistent targeting by right-wing groups and allegations of fostering anti-Serbian narratives, Kandić endured in advocacy for human rights. HLC created the "Kosovo Memory Book,"[23] the first comprehensive list of Kosovo War victims, aiming to counteract the manipulation of victim numbers by both sides involved in the conflict. Despite facing numerous challenges, including death threats and physical violence, Kandić has been recognized for her work with several awards, including the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award and the Civil Courage Prize. Kandić was also nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize twice.

During the opening evening, a public debate titled "What do we know about crimes committed in Kosovo?" centered on the ICTY's Šainović et al. case from the Kosovo war. This trial investigated six senior Serbian officials, including ex-Deputy Prime Minister Nikola Šainović, for the forced displacement of over 700,000 Kosovo Albanians between March and June 1999. The Chamber concluded that this exodus resulted from deliberate actions by Yugoslav and Serbian forces. In 2009, The Tribunal convicted five officials who received 15 to 22-year sentences.[24] The Tribunal sentenced Šainović initially to 22 years in prison but reduced the time to 18 in 2014. He was released in August 2015 after serving two-thirds of his term (Jovanović 2015; Ristić 2014).

The debate started with a walkthrough of the displayed materials and clarification of the criteria used for curation of the exhibited narratives. The critical element of the selection process was the ICTY's mandate, which only encompassed war crimes up to the end of the

[23] The memory book is available as a tri-lingual (Albanian, English, and Serbian) interactive online document and is the first attempt to name all the victims of the Kosovo war: http://www.kosovskaknjigapamcenja.org/
[24] Only the former president of Serbia, Milan Milutinović, was acquitted of all charges. Appeal Judgment summary from January 23, 2014 available at https://www.icty.org/x/cases/milutinovic/acjug/en/140123_summary.pdf

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NATO bombing. Consequently, most of the cases showcased at the exhibition presented Serbian crimes. The crimes committed by KLA over the Serbian population predominantly occurred after the withdrawal of Serbian forces in 1999 and were addressed by other special courts. The organizers underscored that the choice of the cases was not a result of an ideological leaning to represent Serbs as the only perpetrators but an inevitability due to the ICTY's temporal constraints.

Nonetheless, some attendees complained that the event focused primarily on Serbian crimes and unfairly portrayed Serbs negatively, sidelining Serbian victims. The speakers repeatedly explained the selection criteria, but despite these clarifications, the members of the audience who started this issue continued to voice concerns about what they saw as a pro-Albanian bias on the part of the organizers and ICTY. One visibly disturbed activist from the HLC responded to the pointed criticism by insisting, multiple times, that the HLC holds no biases and treats all victims equally, highlighting the effort to include victims of all ethnicities in the "Kosovo Memory Book." He pointed out that HLC is the only organization that provided a list of victims while both states, meaning Serbia and Kosovo, have been manipulating the numbers, rendering the victims nameless and their destinies unknown. Despite the persistent clarifications, the back and forth about biases and anti-Serbian agenda between the several attendees and the organizers continued throughout the evening.

On the second day of the exhibition, Bekim Blakaj, activist from the HLC Prishtina, delivered a lecture titled "KLA Crimes: Why the chief commanders of the KLA have not been convicted despite findings of crimes committed by the army?" Blakaj presented two crimes committed by the KLA during 1998-99 that ICTY prosecuted, but mostly focused on Camp Lapushnik. While KLA was held responsible for the crimes committed in the camp, the

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individual responsibility of the administrators could not be determined, leading to the acquittal of most of the accused. A significant proportion of victims in this camp were of Albanian ethnicity - individuals whom the KLA saw as internal enemies.

At this lecture, the audience was populated by a large group of mostly young people in their early twenties, in contrast to the opening night, when the audience mainly consisted of the well-known Serbian NGO activists and the few attendees who were accusing the organizers of the biases. Seeing this unexpected amount of young faces, while knowing how generally uninformed and uninterested Serbian youth is in the issues of the Yugoslav wars (see: Radoman 2020), I was worried that members of right-wing organizations might have come to cause a disturbance, given the speaker was an Albanian human rights activist. It would not be uncommon for an event in CZKD to face violence, as it is the space that right-wing groups frequently target and attack. The attacks regularly happen during contested events like Belgrade Pride or the Serbian-Albanian cultural festival "Mirëdita, dobar dan" when the police surrounding the area outnumber the event's participants.

Given my initial concerns about the unexpected turnout of young attendees, I was somewhat relieved to learn they were students from the History department of Belgrade University. During the Q&A session, students argued that the lecture leaned too heavily towards documenting crimes against Albanians and that it should have also addressed crimes committed against Serbs. Despite Blakaj's explanation that the event only focused on the Kosovo War cases at the ICTY, as it was the name of the event after all, it was difficult for the students to grasp this information, echoing the futile debate from the first evening. The students were unsatisfied with the choice of the cases at the exhibition and asked the organizers for a separate event to discuss Serbian victims. The atmosphere further heated when a student

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accused the Humanitarian Law Center of being "sponsored by Soros." A HLC representative angrily responded, emphasizing the organization's transparency and directing attendees to their website for a detailed breakdown of their funding sources, including the Open Society contributions. He voiced frustration over the prevalent narrative that overshadows HLC's efforts for Serbian victims, once again mentioning the "Kosovo Memory Book." As with the opening night, the discussion continued with a back-and-forth between the speakers and the audience.

After the lecture ended, I left the CZKD perplexed by the steadfast refusal of the audience on both evenings to accept the straightforward fact that ICTY did not have many crimes against Serbs at their disposal in the timeframe of their jurisdiction. Blakaj also pointed out the challenges faced by the court in finding evidence of crimes committed by the KLA, a guerilla army that left a limited paper trail, in contrast to the well-documented actions of the Serbian state-run police and military forces. This made the latter additionally more susceptible to investigation by the ICTY. Even though I found the debate ultimately futile, as it just reaffirmed already established liberal and anti-liberal positions, one comment from the audience stuck with me. A young man said: "I am not denying that Serbs committed crimes, and it is good that you are dealing with this. However, I do not understand why you don't talk about Serbian victims." The comment could be easily dismissed as one of the right-wing arguments that usually starts with "I know, but." However, what I heard in this young voice was precisely the problem of the victims on the perpetrator's side and the inability to articulate their existence within the TJ liberal regime. HLC, after all, did talk about Serbian victims in their so-many-times-mentioned "Kosovo Memory Book" and other projects they conducted. However, the logic behind the claim "we treat all victims the same" is misplaced in such a constellation, as the "pure victims" already hold the majority of the commemorative space and

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are globally visible through popular culture with, for example, many movies and books about Sarajevo Siege and Srebrenica. The logic behind the TJ liberal regime awarded these victims with piety that the "impure victims" could never meet. The way the "dealing with the troubled past" paradigm functions is imperative for a society to face its crimes, accept them, and work through them. Room for the victims on the side of the perpetrator is limited in this logic. The claim that all victims have been treated equally sends a humanitarian message that, however, does not communicate with the reality of the highly politicized contexts, which was evident in the audience's inability to accept the organizer's explanation about the choice of the material for the exhibition.

2.2. Mornings with the 1999 government

The morning after the exhibition opening in CZKD, I attended another commemorative event called "Nineteen years since the beginning of the NATO aggression: Aggression that continues," organized by the "Belgrade Forum for the World of Equals – Beoforum." The conference took place at the Central Military Club (*Dom Armije*), a grandiose historic building that has served as a cultural center for the Serbian Army since the 1930s. When I first began researching commemorations of the NATO bombing in Serbia, I was unaware of the organization called "Beoforum." Despite conducting thorough desk research about commemorations since 2000, I found neither reports about them in media archives nor references in the work of other researchers. Only after a colleague researching Yugoslav economic relationships with the Eastern Bloc mentioned the organization and its founder did I become aware of its existence.

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The founder, Živadin Jovanović, is a career diplomat who had previously represented socialist Yugoslavia in missions throughout Africa and Canada. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, he became a high-ranked party official in the Serbian Socialist Party, serving as the Minister of Foreign Affairs during the NATO bombing. I discovered that Beoforum has been organizing commemorations of the NATO bombing since the year 2000 in the form of conferences that invite high-ranking politicians involved in the events of 1999 and friends of the organization, such as representatives and diplomats of Russia, Belarus, China, Colombia, Iran, Palestine, and other states that politically stand in some sort of conflict with the *West*. Typical speakers and guests at these conferences are also activists from various international anti-imperialist and anti-NATO left-leaning organizations. In their commemorative practice, "Beoforum" marries the Serbian political anti-*Western* agenda from the 1990s, which often overlaps with nationalism and global left-wing anti-imperialism.

Learning about Beoforum, it was hard for me to place them within the state's hierarchy. Many former high-ranking politicians and members of the Socialist Party are members of the organization. While their ties to the past state apparatus are evident, they are no longer official state representatives. Still, categorizing this organization as an NGO felt completely inaccurate, considering that the NGO field in Serbia mainly identifies with liberal values. In my interview with Živadin Jovanović, I expressed my surprise at having never heard of the conferences that Beoforum organizes. He was not surprised and told me that the journalists are generally not interested in Beoforum's events, and that one editor of a major daily newspaper had once told him, when confronted about not covering his events, that they "always tell the same old story." So, what is that same old story that Beoforum has been telling for nineteen years that flew under my radar?

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Among the announced speakers for the conference were Nikola Šainović, whose ICTY trial was the subject of the CZKD exhibition opening, and Momir Bulatović, who had been the President of Montenegro during the 1990s and the Prime Minister of FR Yugoslavia during the Bombing, along with several generals in the army. Such high-profile individuals and the fact that I never heard of Beoforum despite the research gave me the impression that the event might be private. Entering the Central Military Club (CMC) on the morning of March 20, 2018, I felt like an intruder in a parallel universe. Numerous uniformed soldiers who attended the commemoration chatted with other attendees, predominantly male and around 70 years old. As I passed through a mass of these men, I did not recognize a single face. At the event in CZKD, I recognized many people from the NGO/activist Serbian scene, while the people in CMC were utterly unfamiliar to me.

I sat in the back corner of the audience, aiming not to stand out too much. I desperately wanted to act "natural" without having the slightest idea what "natural" might be in that setting. So much for the "anthropology at home." I pondered upon why I wasn't feeling as uncomfortable at the event in CZKD and realized that I had attended so many different cultural events unrelated to commemoration or activism in that venue. First of all, I knew how to navigate CZKD spatially, while this was the first time I entered CMC, a grandiose marble beauty that, from its architecture to its name, acts uninviting to civilians. Second, having researched the commemorative work of the NGO organizers at CZKD, I had been well prepared for the discourse there. Here, however, apart from Momir Bulatović and Nikola Šainović, I did not know who the other announced speakers were, and the available information about them online was scarce. Even Momir Bulatović and Nikola Šainović were not particularly present in the media since 2000. Šainović was first in the Hague and later in prison, while Bulatović was, as I heard from a fashion design student a few years before, a business

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and marketing professor at a private fashion academy in Belgrade. I recalled that encounter with the fashion student while trying to find Momir Bulatović with my gaze. The student, born in the early 1990s, had no idea that her professor of marketing, Momir Bulatović, was president of Yugoslavia during the Bombing and a very influential politician throughout the decade. As the student was confused with his political career, I was utterly perplexed that the same Momir Bulatović could have found a career in fashion. But I have never dug deeper into the matter.

As those thoughts rumbled in my head and I was writing them down in my notebook, the program officially started with gratitu2de for the "heroism of the army and the police during the aggression" and a minute of silence for the victims of the NATO bombing. The announcer greeted the guests in the audience, including the high-ranked military officials from Serbia, ambassadors of Belarus and Palestine, representative of the Embassy of the Russian Federation, and "other friendly countries," including Montenegro, the Republic of Srpska, Germany, and Macedonia. Also, the announcer greeted the Faculty of Diplomacy and Security students. When I heard that there were students in the audience, I looked around, unable to recognize any young people among all the older men and military hats. There was a stark difference with the second day of the "ICTY: The Kosovo Case" when the students dominated the audience.

Not only the audience, but also the speakers' narratives the starkly contrasted the exhibition opening of the night before. Momir Bulatović, introduced as the "war Prime minister," opened the conference, arguing that NATO fabricated the exodus of the Albanian population from Kosovo to justify "humanitarian intervention" against Serbia. "They invented our crimes," Bulatović claimed, a stance emblematic of the discourse that denies Serbian responsibility in the Kosovo war. Nikola Šainović's speech mainly dwelled on the political dynamics leading up to the bombing. He spoke about Rambouillet negotiations between the

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Serbian and Kosovar sides and argued that the Serbian side was ready to accept the proposition, but the KLA derailed the negotiations. Šainović concluded that the ICTY had ruled that the Yugoslav delegation was not responsible for the failure of the talks in Rambouillet and that "it was worth being in prison for that alone." The audience erupted in applause after this statement. The same issue was addressed in CZKD as well, but one of the speakers there said that ICTY never adjudicated on matters related to the Rambouillet negotiations, so the responsibility for their collapse is not defined, at least from the legal standpoint.

Other speakers continued to reaffirm the narrative of Serbian innocence. The last speech by the president of Beoforum, Živadin Jovanović, provided a lengthy argument explaining the broader geopolitical neo-imperial ambitions of NATO and the *West*. At the start of his speech, he set the tone for his presentation by declaring, "[T]o talk about NATO aggression is to talk about the victims and the consequences for the security of the entire Europe." For him, NATO's offense was not an attempt to halt the "humanitarian crisis" in Kosovo but served as a precedent for their actions in Afghanistan, calling the bombing "the beginning of the globalization of destabilization." In his framing of the 1999 bombing, NATO's agenda was solely expansion to the global East after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the interview I conducted with Živadin Jovanović later, he explained this argument further:

> They saw the aggression against Yugoslavia in 1999 as a justification for the extension of NATO's life, and not only that, but also for its development, further strengthening, and expansion. As we know, these were not just our assumptions that we were dealing with, but it soon turned out that, as soon as the aggression against our country was over, they established the enormous military base 'Bondsteel' in Kosovo, seemingly inexplicably, why the largest base in one province, in a backward part of Europe, as I would say. We said that this was the beginning of NATO's expansion to the East. At that time, we were talking to the Russians: Why don't you help us because it is better to defend Russia from the Balkans than from the Urals. They didn't understand us. That is to say, the Russia of that time, Yeltsin's Russia, was turned towards the West and America, etc. Then, they (NATO) also saw in it the opportunity for the realization of expansion to the East. Three new US military bases were built in Bulgaria after 'Bondsteel,' then three new US military bases in Romania, and we can't list how many in Poland, in Central and Eastern European countries, in the Baltic republics, etc... Including those famous anti-missile shields in Romania and Poland, which they justified by the need to suppress the danger from rogue states like North Korea, Iran, I don't know who else... Although it was obvious that these were offensive military bases, not for defense but for offense, not for conventional but for nuclear weapons carriers, etc. So, the expansion was going on, and we think that the beginning of NATO's expansion to the East was on March 24, 1999.

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The conference finished on March 24 with a wreath-laying ceremony at the monuments "Why," "We Were Just Children," and the "Eternal Flame." While the conference began with a minute of silence to honor the victims, it concluded with honoring them at these symbolic places that inscribed the memory of Serbian victims into the public space.

The language employed at the conference and the rationale underpinning the interpretation of recent history at the conference reflect the continuing influence of Cold War ideologies. The framing of NATO's attack on Serbia as the search for its purpose after the Cold War and the expansion to the East resonates with the narrative of *Eastern* resistance against *Western* expansionism—a central theme of the Cold War period. This discourse reflects a persistent dichotomy between the *East* and the *West*, suggesting that the ideological battles of the Cold War era continue to shape contemporary understandings of global politics and conflicts. The commemoration activities, particularly the laying of wreaths at monuments that symbolize Serbian victimhood, further reinforce this narrative, symbolically asserting a counter-narrative to the dominant TJ perspective of commemorating Serbian crimes. In this way, the conference not only commemorated the victims of the NATO bombing but also served as a platform for reasserting a specific counter-liberal ideological stance that harks back to the Cold War's polarized worldview. Thus, this commemoration showed that while the Cold War might have officially ended, its ideological legacies and the dichotomies it entrenched persist, influencing how recent historical events are remembered, interpreted, and utilized in ongoing political discourses.

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2.3. Naming the bombing in two Serbias – reproduction of the perpetrator/victim binary

The name of Beoforum's commemoration was "Nineteen years since the beginning of the NATO aggression – Aggression that continues." At the "ICTY: The Kosovo Case" exhibition, the speakers mostly used words like bombing (*bombardovanje),* intervention (*intervencija*), and campaign (*kampanja*) to name the NATO attack from 1999. The words *aggression* and *intervention* draw a strong demarcating line. By using different terms to refer to the Bombing, different actors are signaling their affiliations and allegiances, as well as their attitudes towards NATO. Using the term *intervention* inherently recognizes the need for external involvement in the conflict and, in doing so, at least partially justifies NATO's actions. This framing, which almost exclusively comes from the liberal civil society, reflects a broader political position that emphasizes cooperation and partnership with *Western* countries and, most of all, a belief in the importance of international human rights law and punishment for their violation.

Aggression, on the other hand, most often comes from the groups that are anti-NATO oriented or, in the present day, might have closer ties to the "Eastern bloc." By framing the Bombing as an act of aggression, they pinpoint NATO as the aggressor who used unjustified violence against Serbia. This framing reflects a broader political position that emphasizes national sovereignty and opposes outside interference in domestic affairs. It may also reflect a distrust or suspicion of *Western* countries and institutions and a belief that they are motivated by self-interest rather than concern for human rights or international law. Furthermore, while the term *intervention* implies the existence of previous wrongdoings that warranted outside involvement, the use of the term *aggression* allows the pre-history to be erased and reconfigures the roles of the parties involved. By framing the NATO bombing as an act of

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aggression, the focus shifts solely to the violence of the bombing itself between March 24 and June 9, 1999, erasing the events that preceded it.

As it was evident from the two commemorations, the organization that uses the word *intervention* places more emphasis on the crimes committed by the Serbian side, while the organization that promotes the word *aggression* reflects a desire to position NATO as the perpetrator and Serbia as the victim of external aggression. In the case of framing the events as *intervention,* Serbian victims become obscured as the emphasis is placed on Serbian crimes. Therefore, the choice of the name for the bombing reaffirms two mutually exclusive positions, both reinforcing the binary opposition between perpetrators and victims. While Beoforum attempts to counter the liberal TJ regime by centering the narrative of Serbian "impure victims," portraying NATO as the perpetrator, their approach essentially mirrors the same logic employed by the TJ regime. In the TJ liberal framework, "pure victims" are centralized, while the Serbian side in the war is labeled as perpetrators. Thus, Beoforum's strategy, although seemingly oppositional, replicates the underlying logic of the liberal TJ regime: it swaps the roles but maintains the same binary structure of pure victims and perpetrators, failing to challenge or expose the nature of the dichotomy that excludes any category that falls out of ideal types.

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2.4. Evidence of victimhood in two Serbias

The organizers and creators of the exhibition "ICTY: The Kosovo Case" ground their narrative in the archive collected by the ICTY. For them, the body of evidence amassed by the prosecutor's office serves as the foundation upon which they build their claims. The nature of the evidence relies upon traditional juridical elements such as witness testimonies, physical

exhibits, documentary proof, and expert opinions, all of which are essential for establishing the facts and determining the truth in legal procedures. At the 2019 commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the NATO bombing, Beoforum also hosted an exhibition called "Never Forget." The entrance panel of the exhibition carried a message: "You are visiting the exhibition on the suffering experienced by the Serbian people in the NATO aggression in 1999." The exhibition represented the narrative of the Bombing using a mix of text, maps, and documentary photography through sections named: "Aggression," "Defending motherland," "Victims of the aggression," and "NATO aggression is still ongoing." Unlike the aesthetics of the "ICTY: The Kosovo Case," which represents the entire narrative in black and white, without showing explicit images of murders (Figure 8), the exhibition "Never Forget" used numerous journalistic photos with gruesome images of violence. Some of the photos were aligned with the textual context (Figure 9), while the majority of photographs either do not give any context (Figure 10) or give partial information that alludes to ambiguous conclusions (Figure 11). In the case of Figure Eleven shown below, the panel with the photos of dead bodies from the penitentiary institution "Dubrava" in the Kosovo town Istok shows the carcasses of the prisoners with the inscription that one hundred of them lost their lives, without assigning any further context. NATO bombed this penitentiary institution twice. According to Human Rights Watch's report, around 20 people died due to the Bombing, while the Serbian police forces killed the rest (Human Rights Watch 2001). All of the victims were ethnic Albanians. In the context of the exhibition, however, where the focus is on Serbian victimhood, it could be wrongly concluded that the Istok victims were of Serbian ethnicity.

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Figure 8 - The refrigerator truck that surfaced on April 04, 1999, in the river Danube near the village Tekija in eastern Serbia. The refrigerator truck carried the bodies of 86 Albanians that were relocated to a mass grave at the police training center in Batajnica, near Belgrade. The photo is exhibited on the front page of the "ICTY: Kosovo Case" web presentation. Source: https://kosovo.sensecentar.org/

Figure 9 - Three panels from the section "Victims of the aggression" with explicit photos of wounded bodies of people and animals with the context of the photos written next to them. Photo by the author

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Figure 10 - Decontextualized photographs

Inscriptions at the panel: "Freedom-loving people will remember for a long time the civilian victims from Surduliuca, Aleksinac, Nis, Belgrade, Varvarin, Novi Pazar, Istok... victims from the shelled train on route from Athens to Belgrade while passing a bridge near Grdelica, and bombed busses near Pristina and Peć, victims in Murino in Montenegro, casualties in the refugee column of Albanians... These few cited "incidental" damages and "mistakes" only took the lives of more than 2.000 causalities, including many children, and some 6.000 wounded persons." Photo by the author

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Figure 11 - Potential misrepresentation
Inscription at the panel: "Istok: In the penitentiary institution, 100 prisoners lost their lives." Photo by the author

The exhibition organized by Beoforum in 2019 could be easily criticized in line with the debate on the indexical nature of photography. The post-structuralist critique of photographic indexicality argues that photographs are not objective representations of reality but are shaped

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by social, cultural, and political factors. However, I believe that this debate (Ray 2020) would not take us further than to the conclusion that Beoforum assembled a series of representations of victimhood in order to articulate a political claim. That, after all, is a universal function of the exhibiting practice and museology, especially prominent in the case of commemorative exhibitions (Sodaro 2018). While ideologically at odds, both Beoforum's exhibition and "ICTY: The Kosovo Case" employ photography as a tool to underpin their narratives. The main difference between the two exhibitions lies in the aesthetics that carry different messages and emotional responses. "ICTY: The Kosovo Case" offers a neat, monochrome narrative, using photos that only suggest brutality while leaving a lot of space for the viewer's imagination. In contrast, "Beoforum" assembled a hectic, graphic representation with strong colors that punctuate the highly emotional content of destruction and death.

However, I believe there is a deeper mechanism that must be noticed in this exhibition, which drives its graphic aesthetics and makes the exhibition an important event in the voicing of Serbian victims. We should think about this exhibition alongside the comment of the history student at CZKD: "I do not deny that Serbs committed crimes, and it is good that you are dealing with this. However, I do not understand why you don't talk about Serbian victims." For twenty years, while the Serbian state struggled to construct the narrative about the NATO bombing, Serbian victims were not only missing from the discourse, but the images of victimhood were practically completely absent. The destruction of infrastructure was visible in the public space (Bădescu 2019), but the human casualties stayed nameless, except in the several well-known cases that became epitomes of the Bombing like little Milica discussed in the first chapter. The absence of the images of the Serbian victims from the dominant mediated narratives created a social discord in which people felt like victims, but due to the silencing of that experience, they did not have the space and vocabulary to articulate that feeling on the

collective level. It could be argued, therefore, that Beoforum's exhibition with the graphic content represents a counterpoint to the empty space of Serbian victimhood.

The juxtaposition of these two exhibitions reveals that the "pure victims" in TJ liberal regime are recognized through a body of evidence based on forensic analysis and witness testimonies. Recognition of the "impure victims," on the other hand, diverges significantly, resorting to less conventional forms of evidence, predominantly articulated through some forms of artistic expression. Similar to the "Serbian Wailing Wall" analyzed in the first chapter, the absence of traditional, embodied witnesses narrating Serbian suffering has led to a reliance on alternative mediums such as, in this case, photography. These methods not only compensate for the lack of traditional evidence, but also significantly contribute to the affective dimension of memory politics, provoking strong emotional responses and shaping collective memory based on affect rather than evidence in the traditional legal sense.

2.5. Conclusion

For the twentieth anniversary of the NATO bombing, HLC, together with YIHR and "Women in Black," organized a street performance in the main pedestrian street in Belgrade, Knez Mihailo, to commemorate 20 years of the murder of Albanian civilians in Kosovo in 1999, who were victims of Serbian forces. These civilians were initially transported in a refrigerator truck to Serbia and subsequently buried in a mass grave in the Belgrade suburb of Batajnica. During the performance, titled "Batajnica 744: A Buried Truth," the activists laid down on the street a banner with the names of 744 victims and covered it with soil to symbolize the concealment of these individuals' remains in the mass grave. Following this act in Knez Mihailo Street,

participants walked toward the National Assembly, where they held the banner that read "Batajnica 744: A Buried Truth" facing the entrance (Figure 12).

Figure 12 - Performance "Batajnica 744: A Buried Truth"
Photo by Youth Initiative for Human Rights

This performance can be observed in comparison to the Serbian Wailing Wall analyzed in the first chapter. While I argued that the Wailing Wall functioned as an *acousmetre* of the state, the liberal NGO activists used the performance to confront the state directly. The performance continued the liberal NGOs' practice of facing society with Serbian crimes and responsibilities in the 1990s wars. Parallelly, at the twentieth anniversary organized by Beoforum, the Serbian Minister of Defense held over a fifteen-minutes-long opening speech at the ceremony, again in Central Military Club. In the speech, he emphasized the significant disparity in strength between NATO and Serbia, without mentioning the Kosovo War and the pre-history of the bombing. Apart from some military officials at the commemoration in 2018, no state representatives attended it. However, with the Minister of Defense opening the event in 2019,

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it was evident that there had been a shift in the state discourse towards the one that the Beoforum had advocated for 20 years.

In this chapter, I showed two divergent narratives and the prevailing power dynamics that influence the collective memory in Serbia embodied in two commemorations of NATO bombing from the non-governmental sector. While the "first" Serbia is characterized by a commitment to maintaining state sovereignty and resisting what it perceives as *Western* hegemony, the "other/second" Serbia legitimizes itself by embracing *Western* principles, particularly those embodied by the human rights framework. As the chapter showed, the ongoing struggle for control over the narrative about Serbia's role in the 1990s wars and the perpetrators and victims exemplifies the broader global dynamics, underscoring the continuing disintegration of the Cold War and its enduring impact on the contemporary geopolitical landscape.

The production of conflicting narratives in the Serbian non-governmental field is a vivid reflection of the broader ideological conflicts stemming from historical conflicts and varying interpretations thereof. The conflict between liberal NGOs and anti-liberal discourses has significant implications for both the memory landscape and the broader political alignments and aspirations of the state. In this chapter, I showed how these two distinctive rationalities define perpetrators and victims and how they aim to influence the state in the creation of official narratives. On March 24, 2023, I happened to be in Belgrade. I watched the central morning news show on National Television. The first segment in the morning news was a report from Beoforum's commemoration. I was astounded to see and hear Živadin Jovanović repeating the "same old story" that was once unattractive to journalists who avoided covering his events. By following Beoforum's narrative of the bombing and its rise from the obscurity of the CMC's

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marble walls to the central nationally broadcasted news, we can also see the reflection of the state's attitudes towards the recent history. This shift shows how the Serbian victims rose from the ambivalence from the time of the Democrats to the central position in the time of the Progressives. The treatment of the Serbian victims of the Yugoslav wars by the state during the time of the Progressives will be the topic of the following two chapters of the thesis.

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PART 2: THE STATE AND PURIFICATION OF "IMPURE VICTIMS"

Chapter 3: Social Half-Life of Depleted Uranium: The "Balkan Syndrome" Twenty Years After NATO bombing of Yugoslavia

In the second part of the thesis, throughout the following two chapters, I will narrow my focus to the time of the Progressives and the state-sanctioned commemorative practices. The analysis will show the institutionalization of the Serbian victims in official state narratives and the role of media in this process. This chapter will explore the construction of depleted uranium as the agent of purification of "impure victims" in Serbia. During the 1999 bombing, NATO's US troops employed controversial depleted uranium (DU) bullets within their ammunition arsenal. The DU bullets are large-caliber bullets designed to penetrate armored military vehicles. NATO officially claimed 112 attacks with DU bullets in 84 Kosovo and Southern Serbia localities and one in Montenegro. As per the official report by the Swiss Institute for Nuclear Biological and Chemical Protection (Schmid and Wirz 2000), NATO disseminated approximately ten metric tons of DU from 31,000 reported rounds of DU bullets. The use of depleted uranium (DU) in the military industry incited extensive debates regarding its health implications for both civilians and soldiers.

Since its first use in the 1991 Gulf War, the use of DU in military operations has been a matter of medical concern and subject to disputes. The concerns were amplified after US veterans reported unexplainable illnesses they attributed to exposure to various warfare agents,

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including DU. This issue became known as "Gulf War Syndrome" (Bolton and Foster 2002; McDiarmid et al. 2000; Shriver, Webb, and Adams 2002). About two decades later, the same issue re-emerged when the Italian government demanded an investigation after six soldiers from the Italian NATO mission in the Balkans fell ill and died from leukemia (CNN and Reuters 2001). International media widely covered this issue, naming it "Balkan syndrome" (Norton-Taylor 2001). International organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International raised concerns over DU's health risks (Amnesty International 2000; Human Rights Watch 2000), while the ICTY released a report in the same year evaluating DU as a potential health threat (ICTY 2000)[25]. In this chapter, I will trace the social evolution of this issue, from its medical concerns to its politicization during the time of Progressives in Serbia. Central to this transition is the portrayal of the use of DU as a testament to NATO's inhumanity and the evidence of Serbian victimhood.

I first became aware of the presence of DU in NATO's arsenal on March 21, 2018, at the Beoforum commemorative conference. The concluding presentation of that day was delivered by a medical doctor who served as the Chief of the Chemical, Biological, and Radiological Defense Service of the Army of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the NATO bombing. The talk focused on the use of DU during the bombing and its impact on public health. Starting the address, the doctor posed the question: "What did they bomb us with?" and promptly answered to himself: "Depleted uranium." Contrary to NATO's assurances that depleted uranium posed no environmental hazards, he underscored its toxicity during its half-life of four million years. In the speech that was very much marked by Cold War rhetoric that oscillated between conspiracy theories and facts, the doctor argued that DU is essentially nuclear waste. He claimed that "the Americans" had not found a solution to dispose

[25] (For the critique of this report see: Benvenuti 2001)

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of the waste, which had led them to develop weapons that contaminate the regions where they wage wars. To emphasize the magnitude of the impact, the doctor highlighted that NATO unleashed fifteen tons of DU on Serbia in 1999. He then spoke about rising cancer rates in Serbia and the health disaster that will be looming over Serbia for the next four million years. In his conclusion, the doctor stated that using radioactive ammunition is "genocidal" and constitutes a war crime and a violation of humanitarian law. The speech did not specify the exact components of NATO's arsenal containing DU, and coupled with the cold war rhetoric saturated with nuclear fear, left me with an uneasy feeling as I returned home. That day, I was consumed with thoughts of nuclear bombs, escalating radiation levels, and the mounting cancer rates in Serbia. I pondered: How was I unaware of this crucial information?

Intrigued and concerned, I delved into an online search. To my surprise, I discovered a brief wave of anxiety over DU in the aftermath of the bombings in Yugoslavia. In 2001, after the Italian soldiers gained publicity, "Balkan syndrome" got more attention both in Serbia and abroad, but the issue seemed to wane. Then, in 2015, Professor Slobodan Čikarić from the Medical University in Belgrade made a startling announcement at a medical conference dedicated to cancer. He revealed that Serbia had the highest cancer mortality rate on the European average. Tanjug News Agency reported Professor Čikarić's findings, pointing out that while the statistics for 2014 were still under analysis, he expected the number of new diagnoses to be close to 40,000, approximately 2.8 times the global average per one million people. He described this situation as "a Serbian catastrophe" (TANJUG news agency 2015a), linking this alarming trend to the use of DU during the NATO bombings. However, the news about this conference and Professor Čikarić's claims seemed not to get further media attention. A few more headlines, and that was all I could have found. I felt a mix of confusion and fear.

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If the impact on health was as profound as Professor Čikarić claimed and the predictions were that grim, why has there not been a more widespread alarm about this issue?

On March 24, 2018, the day of the 19th anniversary of the NATO bombing, after going to the wreath laying ceremony with "Beoforum," I bought "Politika," the most widely circulated daily newspaper in Serbia, habitually read by people across the political spectrum. Not many newspapers at the stand had the anniversary of the bombing on their cover page. "Politika," however, commemorated the bombing that morning with the title "Another Spring in Serbian Hiroshima" (Todorović 2018). In the wording "Serbian Hiroshima," I read "depleted uranium." Again, I felt a mix of shock and shame at my ignorance, given its mention in the headline of the country's leading newspaper. After reading the article, my confusion grew anew. The text announced the official commemoration scheduled in Aleksinac, a city that faced heavy bombardment on April 5, 1999, despite lacking military targets. The article mentioned that NATO later labeled the attack as an incident, a "mistake," and referred to it as "collateral damage," a phrase met with the journalist's harsh and passionate criticism. Yet, there was no mention of DU. As it turned out, the metaphorical reference to Hiroshima alluded to the immense civilian suffering and the exertion of disproportionate power. There was no mention of nuclear bombs or any radioactive weaponry for that matter. Asking around, people did not seem overly concerned about it. This situation, which seemed utterly counterintuitive, prompted me to investigate further.

The bombing attained significant media coverage over the next two and a half months. In early May, the Serbian Parliament announced the establishment of a Committee for Research on the Consequences of NATO Bombing (*Komisija za istragu posledica NATO bombardovanja*). The announcement of the committee garnered significant attention. From that

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point onward, DU began to resonate more loudly within Serbian media. Within a year, DU got so much attention that on the twentieth anniversary of the NATO bombing, March 24, 2019, "Politika" featured a cartoon on the cover page, showing a Serbian farmer in a folk costume under a plum tree who, instead of plums, harvests warning symbols for ionizing radiation (Figure 13). Plums hold significant cultural and economic importance in Serbia. They are one of the country's most abundant fruits and a fundamental part of its agriculture. Serbia is one of the largest producers of plums in the world, and the fruit is used in the production of various food products, including the famous Serbian plum brandy, "šljivovica," which is a national drink and a proud traditional export. The fruit symbolizes the agricultural richness of the country and is a part of many cultural practices and family traditions. The cartoon explicitly implied the destruction of Serbian (agri)cultural heritage and potential long-term environmental, cultural, and economic consequences.

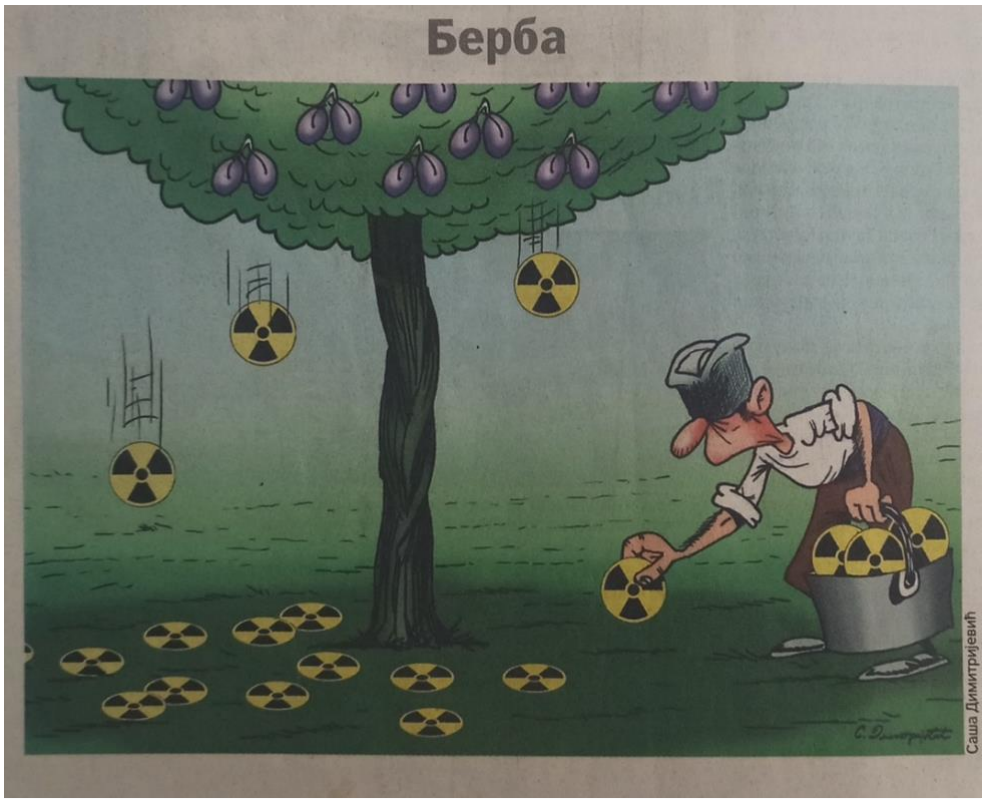

Figure 13 - The cartoon on the daily "Politika" cover, March 24, 2019.
Author: Saša Dimitrijević name of the cartoon: "The Harvest" (Berba)

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Somewhere in late April 2019, I had a revealing conversation with Tatjana, a pregnant woman in her late thirties. While this interaction was incidental to my fieldwork, it significantly impacted it. Tatjana was expecting her second child, and the day we spoke, she anxiously awaited the results of a routine test. Her anxiety puzzled me, given that her first pregnancy went perfectly well. I attempted to reassure her, highlighting her familiarity with the process and the successful outcome of her first pregnancy. However, she caught me off guard when she expressed her concerns about the potential effects of DU, saying, "I am so afraid that something might go wrong because of everything that it does." Her fear, expressed through the words "everything that it does," revealed to me how strongly DU started to resonate in society.

This chapter examines the discursive construction of the connection between DU and cancer. It explores how, initially coming from the medical professionals and then propagated by media and political elites, the causal link between cancer and DU evolved into a taken-for-granted belief, or *doxa,* in Pierre Bourdieu's terms (1977). As argued by Bourdieu, doxa plays a pivotal role in upholding societal hierarchies and the balance of power. Bourdieu argued that *doxa,* as a taken-for-granted knowledge, gives meaning to reality and aims to become a pillar of common sense. The understanding of how *doxa* is formed offers a profound insight into how societies construct and sustain their realities and how power dynamics shape collective knowledge. The following analysis aims to comprehend what type of reality actors in Serbia create through DU-cancer *doxa*. However, doxa doesn't exist unchallenged and isolated in society. It is an integral part of the social structure that Bourdieu calls field (*champ*), which represents "a relatively autonomous domain of activity that responds to rules of functioning and institutions that are specific to it and which define the relations among the agents" (Hilgers and Mangez 2015:5). Mapping DU throughout different fields (scientific, journalistic, political, medical) and understanding the power dynamics among the actors that participate in DU

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discourses helps in understanding how DU-cancer *doxa* was produced and how this *doxa* can organize an atmosphere of fear in society. I argue in this chapter that the state uses this *doxa* to purify the "impure victims" by representing the Serbian population as a victim of nuclear weapons.

The discovery of radioactivity has been a source of societal anxiety for more than a century. The evolution of nuclear anxieties since the Cold War era (Cirincione 2007; c.f. Masco 2012; Weart 1988) provides a broader context that frames the concerns in Serbia regarding the nexus between DU and cancer. Furthermore, the health outcomes of nuclear disasters, such as the one of the Chernobyl Power Plant (Petryna 2002), predisposed Serbian society to accept and internalize fear associated with radioactivity. Joseph Masco showed how the United States government discursively used the atomic bomb during the Cold War as a mechanism for "scripting a disaster" to install a new normative reality (Masco 2012:255). The contemporary fear of cancer in Serbia, related to the use of DU bullets, implies an enduring resonance of Cold War politics of fear. Masco's (2014) research illustrates the continuous thread between the anxieties of the atomic age and those of today's war on terror. His argument posits that these deep-seated fears, originating from nuclear threats, still persist, manifesting in diverse existential dangers even though they morphed over time. The framing of national security and existential dread, developed in the era of the Cold War, still holds relevance today. Fear of cancer from DU bullets in Serbia is not an outlier but falls squarely within this Cold War logic, underscoring the continuity of these anxieties.

To understand how the DU-cancer *doxa* formed, this chapter observes its discursive development within two *critical events* (Das 1995) - the debate about the "Balkan syndrome" in 2001, after the Italian government's statement about dead soldiers, and Professor Čikarić's

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public announcement about cancer incidence in Serbia in 2015. Veena Das defined critical events as moments in history after which "new modes of action came into being" (1995:7). Looking into depleted uranium through these two critical events in 2001 and 2015 will enable an understanding of how the connection between cancer and DU was formed and the political and social implications that this *doxa* carries in Serbian society. The chapter examines international media (the New York Times, BBC, CNN, Guardian, and NPR) and the outlets in Serbia with the highest circulation (Politika, Večernje Novosti, Kurir, Vreme, Danas) and TV talk shows from the national television RTS (Uptinik, Da Možda Ne) in order to map the building blocks in the construction of the DU-cancer *doxa*. Additionally, the chapter investigates how international organizations like the United Nations and World Health Organization and nuclear energy experts in Serbia were addressing possible health consequences of DU. The content analysis of these media and expert instances aims to show the elements that shaped DU-cancer *doxa* through time.

Another important element that frames DU-cancer *doxa* is the economic restructuring of the Serbian healthcare system after 2000. The chapter will show how the gradual deterioration of the socialist healthcare system provided a background for the creation of the causal relationship between DU and cancer. It will illustrate the direct impact of politics on the realm of public health as a mean to cover poor condition in public health. The analysis will show how the health disaster portrayed through the DU-cancer *doxa* interacts with the pauperization of the health care system in Serbia. Within the purview of the state, this *doxa* covers socio-economic processes, sidelining genuine discourse on nuclear hazards.

DU has been studied in different disciplines, from natural and life sciences, focusing on its physical properties and health implications, to the social sciences and humanities,

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elaborating its socio-discursive dimensions. This chapter will solely deal with DU as a social phenomenon, eschewing debates on its potential impact on cancer rates. While the exploration of DU ammunition's social ramifications is still nascent among social scientists, current literature often becomes entangled in the debate over DU's potential role as a health hazard. Such attempts are present in the Serbian academic community and deal with the local issues with DU (e.g., Roković, Dimitrijević, and Rakonjac 2020) as well as in the US, with the focus on global warfare (e.g., Logan 2018). Besides the fact that social sciences do not possess the knowledge, means, and methodology to fathom physical and medical laws, even the natural sciences community remains divided on the health outcomes of DU used in the 1999 NATO campaign. Serbian sociologist Nada Sekulić's analysis of two distinct reports, one by the US Department of Defense and another by the International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons, showed how these organizations, driven by divergent political agendas, frame identical data completely different to fit their distinct objectives (Sekulić 2018). The focus of this chapter is solely on the discursive development of the relationship between DU and cancer and its political ramifications, without any ambitions to take sides in the debates and claim anything about DU's physical properties or its potential health impact.

3.1. 2001 – The "Balkan Syndrome" controversy - International response to depleted uranium

In January 2001, Italian government initiated an investigation into the leukemia-related deaths of six soldiers who had participated in NATO missions in the Balkans. This announcement prompted a cascade of media responses in NATO member states. Notably, on January 5, 2001, the American National Public Radio (NPR) broadcasted a report from Italy detailing these developments:

> European countries are expressing alarm over reports of cancer deaths among the Italian soldiers who served as peace-keepers in the former Yugoslavia. European countries are calling on NATO to

> investigate what is being called "The Balkan Syndrome." They want to know whether the cases of leukemia are linked to depleted uranium ammunition used by NATO in Bosnia and Kosovo. (NPR 2001)

NPR further detailed that the "Balkan syndrome" dominated the front pages across Italian media and that Portugal, Spain, Belgium, Greece, the Czech Republic, and Turkey announced the intention to medically screen their soldiers who had served in the Balkans (also BBC News 2001a). In addition, the New York Times and Guardian published a series of articles that dealt with DU, the response in Yugoslavia, and the possible further steps by NATO (Brown, Norton-Taylor, and Capella 2001; Capella 2001; Higgins 2001; Norton-Taylor and Carroll 2001; Simons 2001b, 2001a, 2001c; Steele 2001). Both the BBC and CNN covered the issue extensively, bringing global attention to this topic (BBC News 2001b, 2001a; CNN and Reuters 2001).

Soon after the media, in late January 2001, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a report that stated:

> The radiological toxicity of depleted uranium is primarily confined to body cells that are susceptible to the effects of alpha and beta radiation. It is therefore thought that inhaled depleted uranium particles may lead to damage of lung cells and might increase the possibility of lung cancer. (…) As barely two years have elapsed since the conflict in Kosovo, it is not biologically plausible to expect any increase in cancers at this stage, even if there were high doses of radiation (World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe 2001).

The report advised continuous monitoring and reserved judgment pending a comprehensive analysis. A report from the UN Environment Program echoed these sentiments:

> During the field mission to Kosovo, from 5 – 19 November 2000, soil, water and other samples were collected from eleven sites where DU had reportedly been used during the conflict. Five separate laboratories then analysed these samples. When the laboratory phase was finalised in early March, the analyses of the samples showed only low levels of radioactivity. Furthermore, the results suggested that there was no immediate cause for concern regarding toxicity. However, major scientific uncertainties persist over the long-term environmental impacts of DU, especially regarding groundwater. Due to these scientific uncertainties, UNEP calls for precaution. There is a very clear need for action to be undertaken on the clean-up and decontamination of the polluted sites; for awareness-raising aimed at the local population; and for future monitoring (United Nations Environment Programme 2001:4)

In response, Italy, Germany, Norway, and Greece demanded a ban on DU ordnance. However, as the New York Times reported on January 11, 2001, NATO refrained from discontinuing its use until a definitive causal relationship between DU and cancer in veterans was confirmed

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(Simons 2001c). In the next two decades, the number of Italian soldiers attributing their illnesses to DU exposure surpassed 7 500, with over 300 fatalities. These affected soldiers and their families mobilized to seek reparations from the Italian government, a struggle that persisted for two decades (Toè 2016). In 2003, the International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons was founded. Calls to regulate DU were renewed in early 2020 following announcements of DU bullet usage by the US military in Syria (Sze Hong 2020). In late 2020, the UN adopted a regulation to continue discussing the possibility of the DU ban (Buchholz and Mohr 2021).

3.1.1. Scientific field's response to DU concerns in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Before the international alert about the "Balkan Syndrome," Serbian media only sporadically mentioned DU. Lack of information regarding the exact locations and types of ammunition enabled speculative and uninformed media content. An illustrative example comes from a July 29, 1999, article in the Serbian weekly magazine NIN, which proclaimed that "bombs with tons of uranium were scattered all around Serbia" (Vrzić 1999). Responding to the increasing interest and concerns, the Association of the Chemical Engineers of Serbia organized a seminar, "Depleted Uranium – truths and misconceptions," on June 21, 2001. The seminar discussants were physicists, chemical engineers, ecologists, and other experts from related disciplines. In addition, the association published an edited volume in a specialized journal, *Chemical Industry* (vol 55. no. 7-8)[26] , which today serves as evidence of the discourse from 2001.

A speculative tone permeates all the collected contributions in the special issue. The contributions show that in 2001, it was still not clear which of the military arsenal used during

[26] Complete edited volume available in Serbian on http://scindeks.ceon.rs/issue.aspx?issue=6192

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the bombing contained DU. While everybody agreed on the use of API 30mm DU bullets and one article detailed its technical properties (Petković, Zarić, and Dević 2001), there was divergence regarding other NATO ordnance. Milan Orlić, a physicist affiliated with the Laboratory for Molecular Biology and Endocrinology from the Institute for Nuclear Sciences "Vinča" in Belgrade, hypothesized that cruise missiles' counterweights and penetrators could also contain DU (Orlić 2001). Yet, a team from the same laboratory countered this assertion in another contribution, emphasizing the unverified nature of such claims (Pavlović et al. 2001). This team also reported that radiation level assessments across Serbia by Vinča's Laboratory for the Protection from Radiation did not detect increased radioactivity anywhere except in the zone where NATO admitted using DU.[27] The authors noticed that some localities were radiologically irregular due to damage to the lightning rods, ionization smoke alarms, and other radiation sources. The engineers from Vinča Institute fixed those localities and stored the sources in the institute's depot (Pavlović et al. 2001:311). Finally, some contributors speculated about the impact of DU on health and the ecosystem (Rajković 2001). Among them, Pavlović et al. (2001) claimed that DU did not enter the food chain or water system, suggesting that timely terrain decontamination could still be effective, which was the opinion of several other contributors.

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[27] Excluding Kosovo where the engineers did not have access, which was also confirmed to me in an interview with a nuclear engineer from Vinča institute who was working on the measuring in 1999.

3.2. DU in the period between 2001 and 2015

During the "time of the Democrats," DU did not obtain much public prominence. In May 2002, the weekly magazine "Vreme" published a series of five articles with a suggestive title, "Depleted Uranium - XXI century A-bomb," aiming to summarize the debate around the "Balkan syndrome." This series was a rare effort to address the consequences of NATO bombing in the early 2000s. However, it contributed to the ongoing ambiguity about the specific applications of DU, especially the uncertainty surrounding whether it was incorporated into munitions beyond API bullets. In the first article in the series titled "How much we were not hit or The Balkan Syndrome," journalist Aleksandar Ćirić discussed DU ammunition (*municija),* but in the following four articles, he suddenly started to talk about DU grenades (*granata*). This shift in terminology illustrates the prevalent confusion in 2002 regarding which munitions contained DU. Furthermore, Ćirić cited a statement from the director of the "Scientific Center of the Clinical-Hospital Centre Bežanijska Kosa," who hypothesized that in 10-15 years, regions of South Serbian and Kosovo might expect a rise in the number of solid tumors that capture thyroid gland, ovaries, and breasts (Ćirić 2002). Even though these articles attempted to unravel the DU mystery, they perpetuated speculations by using confusing terminology and missing relevant data.

While the speculations circulated, experts from the Vinča Institute were engaged in developing a concrete plan to decontaminate terrain polluted with DU. Between 2002 and 2007, the institute cleaned the terrain[28] in Southern Serbia - Pljačkovica, Borovac, Bratoselce, and

[28] Decontamination of the only locality in Montenegro, Cape Arza on the Adriatic Sea, started already in February 2001 and ended in December 2002. The project was partly financed by Montenegrin government and partly by the Yugoslav government (more details available in Montenegrin https://mne.ceti.me/?portfolio=dekontaminacija-rta-arza-od-osiromasenog-urana-du#tab-id-1)

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Reljan with the help of the Yugoslav Army. They stored the radioactive material in the institute's depo and continued with regular monitoring of the terrain (Sarap et al. 2014). Coverage of the Vinča Institute's decontamination efforts was sparse in the media. One such report emerged from a presentation at a Local Environmental Action Plans (LEAP) meeting in Vranje, a south-Serbian city close to the localities where DU was used and subsequently cleared. The meeting focused on the ongoing decontamination processes and future strategies. Mira Vlajković from the eco-toxicological institute "Batut" proposed at this meeting future decontamination using phytoremediation – a method involving the planting of specific plants to cleanse deeper-lying radioactive particles. Her insights into the cleaning of the terrain by the Vinča Institute, reported by "Politika" in 2007 (Davinić 2007), were a rare instance where such initiatives were brought to public attention. However, this detailed discussion of decontamination methods and the Institute's involvement received little subsequent media focus in the discourse about DU.

3.3. 2015 – "Cancer epidemic" and construction of DU-cancer doxa

The year 2015 marked a significant shift in the construction of the narrative linking DU to cancer. Until this point, the issue of DU occasionally surfaced in media reports, yet details regarding the specific ammunition that contained it and the full extent of its consequences remained vague. The decontamination project received minimal media attention, contributing to a sporadic and somewhat ghostly presence of the topic in public discourse. However, in March 2015, TANJUG news agency (2015b) reported on the "Recent Developments in Oncology" conference, where professor Milan Čikarić attributed the increase in cancer cases and mortality rates to the consequence of NATO bombing and the use of DU. Printed media widely circulated this agency news. Although Milan Čikarić had previously advocated the

connection between DU and cancer, the media exposure of this conference was pivotal in solidifying it as a widely accepted belief in Serbia, introducing what would later be termed the "cancer epidemic." Many actors who started to advocate the DU-cancer connection, coming from different professional backgrounds ranging from medical doctors to military personnel, lawyers, politicians, and journalists, used Professor Čikarić's findings from 2015 in their argumentation, naming him the authority for this issue. One of the most prominent actors in the development of this *doxa* and promoter of Professor Čikarić's discourse is Dr. Danica Grujičić, a neuro-oncologist who became one of the foremost advocates of the issue. Building on Professor Čikarić's claims, she frequently points out to the destruction of the chemical and heavy industry during the bombing, highlighting the resulting environmental pollution as a significant factor in cancer and other diseases incidence (Večernje Novosti 2017). Dr. Grujičić has consistently called on the state to establish a national laboratory equipped with the necessary licenses to conduct research that would uncover the full extent of the NATO bombing consequences.

The "cancer epidemic" notion encountered small but vocal opposition within public discourse, led chiefly by Professor Zoran Radovanović, an epidemiologist and the president of the Serbian Medical Society's Ethical Board. He passionately disputes the characterization of Serbia's cancer rates as an "epidemic," contending that the reported figures are consistent with the European average (Radovanović 2016). He attributes the high cancer mortality rate to factors like "late reporting to the doctor and the suboptimal treatment" (Vasić 2018) rather than an "epidemic." Countering the DU-cancer causality, he points out that the lack of preventive healthcare coupled with excessive tobacco consumption contribute to cancer statistics on a much higher level than DU exposure. He advocates for a shift toward preventive measures, with tobacco control as a pivotal strategy for reducing mortality rates. Professor Radovanović

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sees DU more as a political than a health issue. He maintains that political influence over healthcare resource allocation and hospital management significantly affects cancer prevention. Moreover, Radovanović asserts that the medical community must be vocal about the dire state of healthcare and resist attributing cancer prevalence primarily to DU. In an interview, Dr. Radovanović argued that anyone challenging this *doxa* faces criticism for being "unpatriotic" (Blic 2018). One of his arguments is that the increase in cancer-related deaths in Serbia should be attributed more to the aging population rather than to DU exposure, as the decline in population size simultaneously increases the percentage of older, more at-risk individuals[29]. An additional opposing argument states that DU has low radioactivity and that phosphate fertilizers used in Serbia release more uranium in a single year than what was dispersed in the 1999 bombing (Rudić 2018).

Opposing voices like Professor Radovanović's are relatively rare, with low media exposure. Although primarily featured in liberal media, Professor Radovanović's international recognition as an expert in epidemiology and his experience monitoring the situation in Iraq in 1991 earned him appearances on prime-time TV shows. In an interview I conducted with him, we discussed his unique position as one of the few vocal opponents of the DU-cancer *doxa*. He expressed that he represents the voice of a large group of medical workers who consider this narrative false but noted that younger doctors often hesitate to speak publicly and disagree due to the politicization of the medical field. Being retired, he feels that he has "nothing to lose" and considers it his duty to the medical profession and the public to challenge what he believes are "fabrications." He also mentioned that many of his colleagues provided him with information, enabling him to present evidence in these discussions.

[29] From a public lecture by Professor Zoran Radovanović in Niš, Serbia, February 2020.

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3.4. The state and depleted uranium in the "time of the Progressives"

On October 17, 2017, RTS dedicated an episode of a political talk show, "Question Mark" (*Upitnik*), to the issue of DU under the title "NATO Bombing - A Crime Without an Expiration Date."[30] In this episode, the guests were Professor Radovanović, Dr. Grujičić, and Goran Trivan, Minister of Environmental Protection. During the show, Dr. Grujičić presented an initiative to establish a national laboratory equipped to conduct comprehensive research on the link between the NATO bombing and the prevalent health issues in Serbia. The initiative was a result of a meeting held in February 2017 that discussed the consequences of the NATO bombing, a gathering that, according to Dr. Grujičić, included "a hundred experts from different fields." Minister Trivan confirmed that the government received this initiative, and that the president of Serbia endorsed it. While Professor Radovanović and Dr. Grujičić expressed divergent views, Minister Trivan announced that the state decided to enter the debate in the role of a mediator, furnishing technical support for research that would ultimately discern "the truth" about the consequences of NATO bombing and its most controversial aspect, use of DU.

In May 2018, the Serbian Parliament founded a Committee for Research of the Consequences of NATO Bombing (*Komisija za istragu posledica NATO bombardovanja*). On a morning talk show broadcast by a pro-government private television, "Happy," the Speaker of the Parliament, Maja Gojković, discussed the committee's initiative. She confirmed Minister Trivan's claims about the responsibility to provide "the truth." Alongside her was Srđan Aleksić, a lawyer leading a private legal team reportedly preparing to sue the nineteen NATO member states "on behalf of all citizens." Aleksić, in collaboration with Sreto Nogo, a professor

[30] available in Serbian: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APWib3rHlH0

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of criminal law, had been advocating for this lawsuit prior to the guest appearing with the Parliament Speaker. Previously, in June 2017, Aleksić was a guest on the episode of the "Question Mark" talk show titled "Lawsuit against NATO countries: Serbia pays tribute to uranium?" There, he pompously argued that the legal team he conducts would root their legal strategy in the fact that NATO's use of DU was "absolutely forbidden by all international conventions, resolutions, and protocols," even though DU deployment remains unregulated by international conventions.[31] Aleksić and Nogo are two of numerous actors who have also joined the discourse on DU and extended the reach of the narrative into various sectors of society beyond the scientific fields. They are associated with the Serbian Royal Academy of Scientists and Artists (*Srpska kraljevska akademija naučnika i umetnika – SKANU*), a private organization that claims to continue the legacy of a XIX century academy dissolved at the outset of the WWII. Despite its grandiose name, which echoes the official Serbian Academy of Arts and Science, SKANU is, in fact, a private entity with no formal ties to the state. This misleading semblance of the name carries implications of authority and gravity, giving the impression of an initiative with official backing. However, if in 2017 the SKANU's gravitas was an illusion, it was to a certain extent validated when Aleksić appeared alongside the Parliament Speaker. Sharing the platform at the morning TV show landed a reciprocal legitimacy to both SKANU's initiative and the state's efforts, despite SKANU's lack of formal ties to the government.

Soon after, several ministries joined to institute another official body similar to the Parliament's committee in June 2018, under the name Coordinated Body for Establishing the Consequences of NATO Bombing (*Zajedničko telo za utvrđivanje posledica NATO*

[31] Available in Serbian: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJ-j9_XUbmM&ab_channel=RTSUpitnik-Zvani%C4%8Dnikanal

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bombardovanja). In March 2019, the Committee for Research of the Consequences of NATO Bombing presented a study that reported a rise in cancer risk among children aged five to nine, while the Coordinated Body released its research agenda and formally commenced its execution in February 2020 (FoNet 2020). However, since the global COVID-19 pandemic started, these governmental institutions have not issued any further statements and results. In the meantime, Dr. Danica Grujičić's advocacy became even more prominent in the public sphere, and in 2022, she became Minister of Healthcare. Prior to the inauguration, she joined the Serbian Progressive Party.

3.5. Silencing

Professor Čikarić, Dr. Grujičić, Professor Radovanović, lawyers Aleksić and Nogo, Minister Trivan, and MP Dr. Laketić are the most notable figures in DU discourses in Serbia. While they constantly debate over the link between DU and cancer, their public speeches almost never mention the terrain cleaning undertaken between 2002-2007. A May 2018 episode of the RTS TV talk show "Yes Maybe No," which addressed DU and the rise of cancer rates in Serbia, featured many of these key actors. Additionally, among the guests were retired army general Slobodan Petković and nuclear physicist Duško Košutić, who had been involved in the decontamination process in the early 2000s. This episode presented a rare opportunity to publicize the decontamination project. However, the intense debate completely marginalized Košutić's contributions. Physicists, in general, have been conspicuously absent from the debate, even though uranium, depletion processes, and radioactivity are primarily part of their expertise. Despite this, nuclear institutions in Serbia have consistently monitored the situation on the ground. The latest report, titled "Study on the Environmental Contamination by Depleted Uranium in Serbia, 20 Years Later," presented at the 30th Symposium by the Yugoslav

Radiation Protection Association (YRPA), revealed that the recent measurements have not detected any radiological anomalies (Radenković et al. 2019:139). Lastly, even though the debate surrounding DU was catalyzed by Italian soldiers, they are seldom referenced in Serbian public debates. In the report from the Committee for Research of the Consequences of NATO Bombing, Darko Laketić mentioned that the committee collaborated with the Italian Parliament, which provided documentation on their soldiers alleging health problems post-service in the Balkans (RTS, TANJUG 2019). Yet, discussions in Serbia scarcely delve into the approaches adopted by the Italian government to discern any potential linkage between these health issues and exposure to DU.

Finally, Kosovo, where NATO deployed the most significant amount of DU, is conspicuously absent from these discussions. Mainstream advocates of the DU-cancer *doxa* tend to frame the "cancer epidemic" as a predominantly Serbian issue. Even occasional media reports that allude to Kosovo resort to speculative narratives, continuing to provide incomplete or incorrect information about the type of ammunition containing DU or the places where there is a danger of radiation, as in the following example from "Politika":

> It is difficult to say exactly how many bombs with depleted uranium fell on Serbia. There are speculations that Pčinja County has been contaminated with around five tons of radioactive dust, while Kosovo and Metohija with around ten. These five tons from Southern Serbia have been stockpiled in Vinča, meaning that the consequences have been relatively dealt with. However, in the case of an earthquake or similar natural disasters, there is a danger of a bigger catastrophe, considering its proximity to Belgrade (Stevanović 2017).

These grand assertions concerning radiation tend to overshadow discussions on the damage to the chemical industry, which had more tangible consequences. Dr. Grujičić, in this context, often asserts that DU represents "merely the tip of the iceberg" concerning Serbia's ecosystem devastation, but this topic was not covered further.

3.6. Public health and victimhood

In discussions on public health, it is crucial to contextualize the discourse surrounding DU and NATO bombing within the broader trajectory of the healthcare transition. Serbian welfare restructuring has not differed much from the rest of the post-socialist world and the global tendencies alike (Vlahovic and Radojkovic 2010). Socialist Yugoslavia based the organization of welfare on the principle of reciprocity and solidarity. After the collapse in 1991, Serbia (and Montenegro) retained this principle (Stambolieva and Dehnert 2011). Vuković and Perišić (2011) argue that the war and the crisis from the beginning of the nineties only revealed the long-standing challenges endemic to socialist healthcare. The payment of mandatory healthcare contributions continued throughout the nineties, but the crisis and the large-scale deindustrialization followed by massive unemployment and the simultaneous influx of refugees could not compensate for the system's demands. As a result, the healthcare system hit rock bottom, providing the private sector with an opportunity to develop.

The Post-Milošević government established a commission to reform the healthcare system in July 2001 (Dickov 2012). In 2004 and 2005, the government introduced two new laws and dozens of strategies (Vuković and Perišić 2011). The expected consolidation in the health sector was rising steadily until the World Economic Crisis of 2008. As an anti-crisis measure, the government introduced a 15% expenditure cut while the World Bank suggested further austerity measures (Perišić and Vidojević 2015:188). The crisis deepened the public health challenges, while a significant portion of the decline can be additionally attributed to the aging welfare states grappling with reciprocity imbalances (Thijssen 2016). The aging society with a high level of unemployment and a high rate of employers who pay minimal-wage taxes while handing the rest of the salaries in cash to their employees does not provide sufficient

funds to enable a functioning healthcare system. Even though the state planned a private-public partnership, the private health sector stayed, apart from licensing, completely detached from the state, meaning that the patients must fully pay for all private sector services. World Health Organization's report from 2010 showed that patients bore around 25% of total healthcare costs (World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe 2010), while Perišić and Vidojević (2015:189) reported that, according to the National Health Account in Serbia, the figure exceeds 35%. Due to the health sector's deteriorating situation, medical workers migrate to Western Europe in large numbers, contributing further to the system's decay. At the same time, this tendency hinders the necessary transfer of knowledge to the younger generations of medical workers (Krstić and Ljubičić 2016).

When DU-cancer *doxa* was developing, Serbia's healthcare challenges were stark, ranking fourth in mortality rates on the global scale, with a staggering 79% mortality rate among diagnosed patients (Ilić and Ilić 2018). Radiology equipment has been deficient, and waitlists have stretched from 3 to 6 months. In 2018, there were 70 CAT scanners in public health institutions and 30 in private. The price at a private clinic was between 40 and 70 EUR. More MRIs are still in the private sector – 30, while only 25 are in the public sector, and the price in private hospitals is between 100 and 150 EUR. There are only two functioning PET scanners in the whole state, both in public healthcare institutions, and the waiting list can stretch for over half a year.[32] It is against these structural conditions that the state found two political bodies to deal with the consequences of the NATO bombing.

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[32] Interview with an owner of a private diagnostic centre - November 2018. During 2021 reconstruction of the largest public hospital "Clinical Center" started and the National PET Center announced that until the end of 2021 another PET scanner will be bought as a part of the PET Center's equipment. (Davidov-Kesar 2019)

Masco argued that the Cold War narratives "colonized everyday life as well as the future while fundamentally missing the actual disaster" (Masco 2012:254). While the material relationship between DU and illnesses remains undecided among scientists, the discursive relationship produced in the public space, backed by sensationalist newspaper titles like "Dramatic Warning! Cancer Epidemic Threatens Serbia in 2019!" (Informer 2016), "World Experts: NATO Destroyed the Genetic Material of Serbs with Depleted Uranium" (Stanojević 2019) and "Balkan Syndrome killed between 10.000 and 18.000 People in Serbia" (Petrović 2019) allows scripting of an unmanageable disaster. Looking into the trajectory of the healthcare system in Serbia, it can be argued that its downfall enabled DU to become the agent of victimhood, while on the other hand, it also became a suitable mask of the state's incapacity to provide care. The DU narratives subtly shift the discourse from domestic healthcare deficiencies to international grievances, portraying Serbian citizens as prospective cancer victims due to external factors. Thus, in this narrative, cancer attributed to DU transcends individual biology or genetics, evolving into a concern connected with national belonging. Looking into the statistics about cancer through the *doxa* that connects it to DU, NATO becomes the responsible side, sidelining the domestic governance that fails to restructure the healthcare system and provide necessary care.

3.7. Conclusion

This chapter delved into the interwoven narratives, actors, and practices that establish a causal relationship between the use of depleted uranium (DU) during the 1999 NATO bombing and the surge in cancer cases in Serbia. Central to this exploration was the pervasive belief that the NATO bombing and the subsequent DU exposure significantly contributed to the rise in cancer cases. This chapter critically examined the actors and institutions instrumental in crafting and

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perpetuating this *doxa*. Furthermore, it sought to understand the potential interests of the state in positioning itself as an arbiter in the discourse surrounding DU juxtaposed against the backdrop of the declining healthcare system. It showed how media-driven and state-sponsored narratives tie cancer rates to external forces, notably NATO's involvement, not only to externalize blame but also to entrench a collective sense of victimhood.

State intervention in the debates about the DU-cancer relationship as the arbiter that promises to deliver the "truth" to its citizens represents one of the practices during the time of the Progressives in the broader context of purifying Serbian victims and recentering official memory politics to Serbian victims. The chapter showed that the processes concerning collective memory do not take place only in the cultural and political fields but permeate equally science and health. The narrative about the "genocidal nature of uranium weapons" that Dr. Petković promoted at the Beoforum 2018 commemoration when I learned about the use of DU for the first time counterbalances the narratives of genocide committed by Serbs and thus attempts to equate Serbian victims with the "pure victims" created by the liberal TJ regime. In this way, potentially sick Serbian bodies dying from cancer serve as evidence of the victimization that Serbs experienced during the wars of the 1990s. The duration of the DU's half-life of four million years makes this victimhood eternal and encompasses the entire nation, which makes the scale of NATO's crime immeasurable. With this *doxa,* the state counters the liberal TJ regime that predominantly portrays Serbia as the larger perpetrator of war crimes and the culprit for the Yugoslav wars.

Considering that this chapter was partly written during the global COVID-19 pandemic, it is suitable to close the discussion by looking at how the global pandemic influenced narratives about DU. The twenty-first anniversary of the NATO bombing, March 24, 2020, coincided with the very beginning of the COVID-19 measures in Serbia, so all commemorative

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events had to be canceled. News about the new virus flooded the media, and the existential fears overwhelmed everyday life. In late March 2020, there seemed to be no other topic but the global pandemic. In this atmosphere, DU lost its prominence as the biggest social fear. While for the period before COVID-19, DU-cancer *doxa* successfully assisted in covering the economic downfall of the healthcare system, the new virus made the lack of medical staff and equipment evident within the first days of the pandemic. In that sense, it would be fair to ask whether this narrative has future potency to script disaster after an actual disaster occurred and took its toll, especially after titles in newspaper like the one from September 27, 2020, in the daily newspaper Blic (2020) "Cancer Epidemic in Serbia: The coronavirus has influenced the increase in the number of sick and deceased from cancer."

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Chapter 4: LIGHTS OUT: Cloning of the past, Birth of an experience

In this chapter, I will provide a thick description of the official state-organized twentieth commemoration of the NATO bombing in the city of Niš, which was live broadcast on the Serbian national public service Radio Television Serbia (RTS). In a thorough analysis of symbols and dramaturgy of the event, I will show how Serbian victims have become the central motif in Serbia's official memory politics. Organization of the state-sponsored commemorative ceremonies in Serbia is the responsibility of the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans, and Social Policy. In 2018, the Ministry issued a public tender seeking proposals for the concept and production of the 20th-anniversary commemoration of the bombing. I learned about this public competition through Vera, the head of a production company from Belgrade, who stumbled upon the call as she said, "accidentally." Upon some research, Vera found that the ministry has been issuing these public calls for different commemorations for several years. However, because they did not advertise it widely, the same actors consistently secured the contracts. Determined to break the cycle, Vera won the tender for the 20th-anniversary commemoration of the 1999 NATO bombing in Niš by creating, in her words, "an innovative and financially optimal script that stood out from the submissions in the previous years."

Learning that there are public calls for organizing national ceremonies gave me the impression of an open and inclusive process. However, as Vera pointed out, this was somewhat misleading. While the calls appeared to invite original ideas, the state had set strict guidelines and essential elements that any proposal had to incorporate, ensuring a significant degree of control over the event. Vera taught me that this type of ceremony typically unfolds in three

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acts, centered around speeches from a Serbian Orthodox Church leader, either the president or the prime minister of Serbia, and the president of the Republic of Srpska — a region in Bosnia and Herzegovina predominantly inhabited by ethnic Serbs. Yet, the commemoration of the 20th anniversary in Niš deviated slightly from the traditional format. The call included an additional speaker: an army pyrotechnician who had been injured during explosive ordnance disposal, a figure whom Vera referred to as the "witness." By the time Vera began her involvement, the Ministry had already arranged the live broadcast on the RTS and determined the title of the ceremony: "We will forgive, if we can, forget, only when we cease to exist!" The TV broadcast director, who also had a significant role in shaping the event's overall content, provided the name for the commemoration. The commemoration was scheduled to take place at 7:45 PM, the exact time when the first bombs fell back on March 24, 1999. This live coverage occupied the prime-time slot of the RTS's central news — the highest-reach TV program in Serbia.

Vera imagined the scenario for the Niš commemoration as a four-act theatre play centered on the fate of children during the bombing. Following the given protocol, she introduced three vignettes between official speeches, with a fourth vignette as the resolution, giving the commemoration a classical four-act structure. Vera anchored the narrative on the fates of civilian victims, symbolized by a little girl and a pregnant woman who were the main characters of the play. When I saw the girl on stage in Niš, I immediately associated her with little Milica, a child victim from Batajnica, commemorated by the "We Were Just Children" monument discussed in Chapter One. The girl's presence powerfully evoked this archetype, leading me to believe that anyone viewing the performance would make the same connection to Little Milica. Vera's explanation of the script-writing process confirmed that:

> When we were writing the script, we had in mind little Milica and her parents and "the pregnant woman," who is specific for Niš. (…) We could have made a play with a hundred people on the stage, a bomb falls and kills fifty of them. But there is no emotional immersion in that. You need a concrete situation, a concrete character like little Milica. Those are the archetypes, the legendary types to whom you return.

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Indeed, the other character in the theatre vignettes is a "Pregnant woman from Niš" (*trudnica iz Niša*), another archetype that stands for Serbian suffering and the scale of NATO's inhumanity. The "Pregnant woman from Niš" was a 26-year-old Ljiljana Ilić, who, like Little Milica, was killed by a strayed bomblet from a cluster bomb during NATO's attack on Niš on May 7 at 11:20 AM. Ljiljana visited a market with her mother-in-law to purchase cherries that morning. That particular strike resulted in the deaths of sixteen civilians, Ljiljana included. Widely publicized, her story is a potent symbol of anguish and loss. As with Little Milica, upon seeing a pregnant woman on stage, I knew I was looking into the "Pregnant woman from Niš."

In this chapter, I will show how symbols and archetypes are employed in creating a state-sponsored narrative of victimhood at the official twentieth anniversary of the 1999 NATO bombing. I will analyze the theatre performance and unpack its 4-act structure to understand how it positions victims at the core of the collective memory of the bombing. As Peter Burke argued, no society is a monolithic group, thus, performing the past becomes a mechanism to forge a consensus about history while also contesting for dominance in the present (Burke 2010:108). In the case at hand, the role of theatre is crucial, as it acts as a medium to re-enact experiences and, when intertwined with political speeches, induce desired meaning. After describing the commemoration, I will delve deeper into the implications of re-enacting traumatic events in the public sphere, drawing on the work of Rebeca Schneider (2011). One of Schneider's key ideas, the concept of "cloning history" (2001), refers to the process of recreating historical events in the present and represents a helpful lens through which to understand the construction and production of history in a performative setting. Understanding the theatrical narrative about NATO bombing as a cloning of history can help grasp how the theatre vignettes in the Niš commemoration serve as a tool for crafting a desired understanding and emotional engagement with the recent past.

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The chapter further explores the nature of evidence in a counter-liberal memory regime. Recognition of war victims in the liberal TJ regime is structured around a model based on forensic evidence and juridical practice. Resting outside of this model, the victims of the NATO bombing did not receive the same treatment either from the TJ system or the Serbian state. NATO has never been held accountable for the deaths of civilians, while Serbia has never officially tallied its victims, leaving the total number unclear and unsettled. In all three political times, number of victims have been the subject of speculation. The chapter will show how performing arts are employed to create evidence through affective engagement with the reenactment of the experience of bombing.

4.1. Prologue – Serbia is Burning

On March 24, 2019, 20 000 citizens gathered at the Niš's main square to commemorate the tragic events of two decades ago. State officials led by the president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, and the highest state and church officials stood in the front rows, separated by a line of security personnel from the people behind. Precisely at 7:45 PM, the lights went out, just like in a theatre, sinking the whole area into the darkness. From the audience, it seemed like the entire city had been blacked out. A piercing sound cut through the dark—the sound of the air-raid siren, immediately followed by an even louder sound of an explosion. As the detonation reverberated, several screens across the square illuminated, displaying images of fighter jets taking off. I caught the face of a woman beside me, staring at the screen, her mouth wide open.

A bomber ship releases a missile; cut; thousands of missiles illuminate the sky. Cut. In a wide establishing shot, dozens of missiles fall on an urban area. Cut. Now, they are falling in closer framing. Cut after cut, they hit bridges, buildings, and electrical power lines. In a fast montage sequence, we watch devastating images of destruction. Fires. Serbia is burning in the dark. The mass is petrified and motionless; the video projection rivets our gaze like a master of hypnosis.

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The sequence changes to the daylight. People on the screen clean the debris. Cut. A group of people is crossing a wide river on a raft; the bridge that was destroyed a few frames ago is next to them. Those people are standing helpless, packed on a piece of wood that transfers them across the big water. They look small. Cut. From the exterior, we move into an interior. A pregnant, injured woman cries in a hospital bed. She speaks incoherently. Then, a fast-cut sequence of dead bodies. Army and medical staff help people. Cut. More dead bodies. Cut. A closeup detail of female rubber shoes traditionally worn for agricultural work in the street. In front of the shoes, scattered radish. The cheerful pink vegetable is an antithesis to the images of death—a matter out of place.

From the images of death, the sequence moves to a sunny day, a procession of children led by a girl with an herbal wreath in her hair, a symbol of Lazarus Saturday - the sacred day of joy and youth. The girl holds an icon of the Virgin Mary. Her face is sad and worried; she moves in slow motion —another counterpoint of heavy emotions out of place for the youthful innocence.

The introductory sequence of the ceremony showcased the most notable acts of NATO's destruction and the most iconic images of Serbian suffering. Media frequently circulated these images as reminders of the NATO cruelty since 1999. Vera explained that the opening sequence was produced by RTS using their archival material. Edited in a sequence twenty years later, the images conveyed a bird's eye view of what happened. But whose eye, I wondered, as the images in front of me changed? As in any war, during the bombing in 1999, Serbian citizens persisted with their daily lives despite the bombs. People went in and out of shelters or waited at home for the attacks to stop so they could continue some sort of business as usual. Some people went to work, and some stayed at home, managing domestic chores and watching TV when there was electricity. The images from the edited sequence were constantly mediatized in 1999, and in that way, they *vicariously* (Pillemer et al. 2015) became a collective experience of the bombing, even though, luckily, most people did not witness the large-scale destructions. RTS played a central role in creating these *prosthetic memories* (Landsberg 2004). As a national broadcaster and public service, RTS has been in the hands of the state's political leaders since the "time of Milošević," playing a pivotal role in the war propaganda of 1991-95 (Ivanov 2021). NATO considered RTS the extended hand of Milošević's government

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and bombed it in 1999, which resulted in the death of sixteen technical staff members, analyzed in Chapter One. During the "October 5 revolution," anti-Milošević protestors attacked the RTS building, and the subsequent government changed the editorial policy. With the return of the 1990s elites, RTS got again under the new government's control (Burazer 2021). Therefore, the beginning of the commemoration did not represent just a selected, shortened, condensed, and edited reprise of the bombing but an eerie reprise of the complete machinery that starts with political imagination and ends with an RTS broadcast.

4.2. Act 1 – The Unity of the Church and the State

After the video sequence ended, the main square in Niš remained shrouded in the dark. People in the audience started to light yellow wax church candles that are traditionally lit for the souls of the living and the dead. In Orthodox tradition, lighting a candle is a multifaceted ritual that can take place in the church, in the graveyard, or even at home. The candle is a potent symbol of Orthodox Christianity, signifying both love and sacrifice to God and love and hope for those in whose honor it is lit. As the audience ignited their candles, the choir from the stage began intoning "Hallelujah" from the Orthodox liturgy. The video screens projected lit candles that illuminated the audience. A lot of people in the audience cried. From the deafening battlefield, the square transformed into a place of mourning. The atmosphere almost instantly resembled the church: a darkened space with the soft yellowish glow of candlelight, the scent of burning wick and melting wax, and the choir that piously chants Hallelujah.

The candles not only warmly illuminated the area and filled the air with their distinct aroma, but they also had a profound impact on the live broadcast. A drone filmed the audience lighting the candles and illuminating the darkened space (Figure 14). As the choir was singing Hallelujah, the cameras panned across the audience, from focusing on the people's faces aglow

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from the candlelight, over tears glistening in many eyes, to the details of the flames poetically moving on the light wind, coloring the sequence into warm orange after the predominantly gray violent introducing video. While in Niš, the synergy of Hallelujah and candles turned the square into a church, the broadcast changed the tone and color of the commemoration, delineating the boundary between the violent cold-gray introductory sequence and the warm orange space of collective mourning. I was amazed by the organization of the occurrence with candles, the synchronized lighting, and the number of candles on the spot. I did not see anyone selling the candles, still a significant portion of the audience had them. Vera later explained to me that this episode was the brainchild of the RTS director, who wanted it primarily for the TV effect but consequently produced a fantastic atmosphere in Niš as well. The president's cabinet, which managed the operational logistics for the commemoration, organized and distributed the candles. Vera told me that she was afraid that her organization would not be able to distribute such amount candles to unknown people, but as she understood, a substantial segment of the audience was mobilized from public companies and factories in Niš, allowing for the flawless execution of this poignant candlelit scene.

Figure 1414 - Screenshot from the drone in the live broadcast - the audience illuminated by the candlelight. Source: Youtube.com, RTS official channel

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As the choir's final notes faded, the host announced the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Irinej. The Patriarch's speech first called for peace and an end to all conflicts worldwide. He began with a pacifying tone, but as his speech progressed, it became more and more political, alluding to the unresolved issue of Kosovo. Irinej's speech insisted that the bombing was neither Serbian responsibility nor the result of the conflicts with the Kosovo Albanians but part of a larger *Western* conspiracy to destroy Serbia. His speech reinforced the anti-liberal narratives: "The plans that they wanted to realize originated from the centers for power in the world, with a single goal – to destroy and decimate a peaceful people and country in order to realize their goals and targets." He further underscored the innocence of Serbian people, dismissing accounts of Serbian atrocities against the Albanian population as "*Western* fabrications." After honoring the victims of the bombing, the Patriarch concluded his speech with a somewhat militaristic tone:

> We cannot not simply hand over this holy land to anyone. We must defend it with all legal means, and God forbid we be forced to use other means. We do not want that, and we pray to God that we don't have to!

After the Patriarch's address, the choir sang the national anthem. The anthem incorporated the state's presence into the profoundly religious first act and resonated like the approving crescendo after the speech that jiggled with religious, secular, and militaristic motives, from "love thy neighbor" to warmongering. Having in mind that the national anthem of Serbia is essentially a plea to God, the first act of the commemoration confirmed the unity of the church and the state:

God of Justice; Thou who saved us
When in deepest bondage cast,
Hear Thy Serbian children's voices,
Be our help as in the past.

With Thy mighty hand sustain us,
Still our rugged pathway trace;
God, our hope, protect and cherish,
Serbian lands and Serbian race.

4.3. Act 2 – The "Witnesses" – Bodily evidence of victimhood

Once the anthem concluded, the host stated: "Exactly 20 years ago, the first bombs fell, and with them, the first victim fell as well." The loudspeakers emitted the voice that warned the citizens of imminent aerial threats in 1999: "Attention, attention, air danger. Head immediately to your shelters. Open windows, lower blinds, turn off electricity, shut off the gas, and take the prepared items with you." The unmistakable cry of the air raid siren that signaled the commencement of the air strikes followed the voice. During the bombing in 1999, the siren was colloquially called "šizela." The term comes from the verb *šizeti*, loosely translated as "to rage," "to go mad," "to be furious," or "to be angry." "Šizela" also bears a linguistic connection to the word schizophrenia (*šizofrenija*), implying a state of mental distress.

The archival sounds of "šizela" and the voice that announced the raids were turned into a soundscape of a theatre play. Once the siren stopped, the sound of children playing in the streets set the stage for the first theater vignette. The lights on the stage lit. Four figures came into view: a family of three– a mother, a father, and their daughter - Little Milica, along with the pregnant woman – Ljiljana. They stood on a large target (Figure 15). The father played with Little Milica, pretending she was an airplane, while the mother was assembling part of the TARGET space to look like a bed. The pregnant woman addressed the audience:

> We didn't hide in the shelters. At night, we gathered in our street. I remember everything. That day, I was at the doctor, and everything went well. I couldn't stop walking through the city and observing all those people and their faces, which were in a good mood despite the danger coming from above. I was proud that my child would be born here because we are courageous and determined to fight and not give in to fear.

As she finished, the father and the mother repeated, but addressing Little Milica: "Fight and not give in to fear." A loud, low-level bombing run interrupted their proud voices. The characters on the stage shook in fear and crouched down, marking the end of the first vignette.

Figure 15 - Screenshot from the Niš commemoration
source: youtube.com, official RTS channel

Although the target might come across as a cliché or a superficial symbol, its significance is rooted deeply in the contextual history. On the third day of the bombing, the Yugoslav Army downed the technologically advanced "Invisible" F117-A airplane. On March 28, 1999, the government organized protests against the bombing concert in central squares throughout Serbia, which were at the same time a celebration of the downing of the F-117A. The concerts continued to be held regularly every day until the end of the bombing. The concert performers and the audience adorned themselves with target symbols on clothing and banners (Figure 16). The symbol was visually simple, outlined in black and white, sometimes with a question mark in the center, and written in Cyrillic and Alphabet caps lock scripts. It quickly became the trademark of the Serbian resistance against NATO bombing. The symbol was prominent during the protests; people wore it as pins, or they waved TARGET flags. Various TARGET merchandise, such as t-shirts, mugs, and postcards, were sold on the streets. Yugoslav Post issued a domestic stamp, meaning that even the letters across Serbia and

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Montenegro traveled with a little TARGET on them. News anchors at RTS also wore the TARGET sign, giving it an official dimension, while some of the TV stations incorporated the TARGET sign next to their channel logos. A CD with the *greatest hits* of the concerts was released under an ad-hoc label, "TARGET records," and sold on the streets alongside other merchandise (Atanasovski 2016).

The audience at the protest concert.
Source: Daily newspaper: Glas Javnosti, March 28, 1999.

Folk singer Era Ojdanić with a target sign.
Source: Weekly magazine Sabor, April 12, 1999.

Figure 16 - TARGET symbol at the protest concerts

After the first theatrical vignette, Sladjan Vučković, a retired First-Class Warrant Officer who formerly served as an army pyrotechnician, stepped out onto the stage. He gave a poignant speech about the loss of his hands while handling an unexploded bomb. While the first theatre vignette depicted civilians threatened by NATO bombs, his highly emotional speech offered firsthand testimony of the NATO cruelty from the perspective of a man tasked with clearing the *war waste* (Henig 2012), an assignment that profoundly changed his life:

> A month after the bombing campaign started on April 25, 1999, it was a chilly Sunday afternoon in Kopaonik, where I was removing cluster bombs from the area. On that particular day, I destroyed 106. The 107th, the last for the day, was the one that changed my life forever. I remember the explosion and the smoke. I lie on the ground, trying to find my eyeglasses. Through the mist, I see that my right hand is missing. I don't remember anything about the left one, which was amputated in the hospital later. Blood is dripping down my face, but I can see my colleagues running towards me. I don't feel any physical pain, only pain in my soul. A month before, I had been walking with my children, holding their

> hands, teaching them how to cross the street. And now, I would never be able to caress them or teach them how to write, draw, and play basketball. My wife and parents knew what my job was – soldier, pyrotechnician. But the children were still young. How am I to explain to them that their daddy is now different since he was doing his job cleaning the area from bombs so that all children could play there safely? How am I to explain to them that their daddy was destroying bombs that other children's daddies were throwing at us? (…) I never forgave the NATO aggressor, and I never forgot what they did to me. How many families did they destroy in Serbia!?

To fully understand the state-sanctioned representation of the bombing experience, it is crucial to consider the choice of this specific witness. What role did this pyrotechnician witness play, and how does his testimony fit into the narrative arch of the commemoration? Unexploded cluster bombs pose a significant threat to both civilians and military personnel worldwide. Often, the dangers they present are labeled as "accidental," but critical scholars argue that this terminology minimizes their ongoing and deadly presence as active agents of warfare, even after hostilities officially cease (Henig 2019). These remnants not only linger following the conclusion of conflicts but also exert a form of control by continuously menacing affected populations (Henig 2012; Kim 2016; Zani 2019). Consequently, unexploded ordnance acts as an enduring agent of war, prolonging the conflict's impact well beyond its official end. Sladjan Vučković, in this sense, is not only a witness of the cruelties from 1999; he symbolizes the ongoing legacy and human cost of NATO bombing embodied in the lingering threats of unexploded ordnance. His story thus becomes a powerful tool in the state's narrative, exemplifying the continued victimization long after the cessation of active conflict.

For those gathered in Niš, Sladjan's speech and his tears while saying that he will never be able to caress his grandchildren evoked a strong emotional response. People cried. However, for the viewers at home, the live broadcast offered another dimension to the speech. As the pyrotechnician delivered his harrowing testimony, the TV director cut the image to the president of Serbia, who appeared visibly affected, almost short of breath, emphasizing the profound impact of the witness's words on the nation's leadership.

Following Vučković's speech, the second theatrical vignette began. On the rhythmic sound of a clock ticking, Little Milica stood up and started to mimic an airplane flight. First, the father and then her mother accepted the game. They ran around the TARGET while the pregnant woman stood at the center, acting as if the baby was kicking inside her womb. She embraced her belly, speaking:

> Hey, fear not. Oh, my little child. Up in the skies, there are good pilots, too. Up there are our people who watch over us. It will soon be all over, and then, then you and I will fly towards the sea in a different airplane. Mama loves you.

As the scene progressed, Milica's parents gently placed her into the makeshift bed within their TARGET shelter. Her father sang a lullaby, bringing a calming ambiance to the scene. The pregnant woman then continued:

> On April 17, at 9 o'clock in the evening, another air raid could be heard. It was a sleeping time at home for the children.

The mention of this date cast a shadow over the scene. It was the night of Little Milica's tragic fate. However, this vignette ended with Milica's family settling down to sleep, unaware of the looming tragedy that was about to strike their daughter. The second act ended with this vignette. In this act, the "witness" and the scenes from everyday life showcased the destiny and the future of ordinary people. Opening the next act was Milorad Dodik, leader of the Bosnian Serbs and Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

4.4. Act 3 – Serbs vs. NATO

Milorad Dodik is a Bosnian Serb politician who has been the president of Republika Srpska (RS) since 2010. Founded in 1992, following the disintegration of Yugoslavia, RS is an entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina with substantial autonomy from the central government, where ethnic Serbs constitute the majority of the population. Dodik is well-known for his nationalist and separatist views, and he has been critiqued for his efforts to undermine Bosnia

and Herzegovina's central authority. A number of individuals and organizations, including human rights organizations and media outlets, but also EU and US officials, have accused Dodik of corruption and abuse of power, misappropriation of the state, and suppression of political opposition and independent media. Notwithstanding these allegations, Dodik remains a frequent guest at various state official ceremonies and has an influential role in Serbian domestic politics, even though, technically, he is a representative of a foreign country.

In his address during the ceremony, Dodik recalled the NATO bombing of Serbian forces during the Bosnian war in 1995, emphasizing that the Bosnian Serbs endured the same fate as their counterparts in Serbia in 1999. He, however, failed to mention the context of NATO's involvement in the Bosnian war, specifically the prolonged siege of Sarajevo, which lasted nearly four years and was conducted by these Serbian forces. Given the general absence of the 1991-95 wars in public discourse, there is a tendency to reinterpret the events surrounding the Sarajevo siege, facilitating narratives that can diverge significantly from historical accounts, as illustrated by Dodik's rendition. Similar to the Patriarch, he alluded to a conspiracy against Serbs, especially addressing the ICTY for portraying Serbs as perpetrators, which he described as a "Western fabrication to deflect attention from the war crimes that NATO committed." At the end of the speech, he emphasized that with the current president of Serbia, the memory of the bombing is finally cherished and that it must continue to be so as not to forget what NATO did to the Serbs. Finally, he concluded his speech with a fervent anti-NATO stance, declaring that he would oppose Bosnia and Herzegovina's entry into NATO, believing such a move would further estrange Republika Srpska from Serbia. Dodik finished the speech by stating that the forthcoming years should be years of national unity, a statement that might be interpreted as having irredentist undertones.

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Following Dodik's highly charged nationalist speech, the next, third theatre vignette transported the audience back to the tragic night of April 17, capturing the moments leading up to Little Milica's death. The characters of Milica and Ljiljana, previously referenced in both Sladjan Vučković's and Dodik's speeches, took on a heightened sense of realism and tragedy as they interacted on stage, enclosed by the claustrophobic atmosphere of a bomb shelter.

As the sound of bombs falling was approaching, Little Milica and Ljiljana spoke:

Little Milica: "Is your baby scared?"
Ljiljana (cries): No.
Little Milica: "Why?"
Ljiljana: Because I keep her safe.
Little Milica: Can I keep her safe as well?

But after this question, Ljiljana has no more words. She cries while little Milica continues to ask questions childishly:

> Are we going to go to the seaside now? By plane? It won't be an evil plane? I am not afraid because I am little, and bombs will not fall on me.

The sound of detonations silenced Little Milica. As she stood looking around, her parents crouched in fear. A music-box sound of a lullaby that the father sung in the first vignette echoed from the loudspeakers. The parents then approached a doll resting on the ground, symbolizing the lifeless body of Little Milica. The child that stood on the scene turned into what it was the first time I saw her on the stage - the metaphor, the symbol. From a playful child, she became a ghost, an uncanny reminder of cruelty and the scale of NATO's inhumanity.

Ljiljana faced the audience and began to speak in despair:

> The shrapnel was all over the bathroom; they went through the wall and through the window. Even the entrance door to the apartment was broken. The ricochet bounced off the tiles and down through the door. They thought it was from a detonation. They couldn't even guess that it was from a bomb.

Ljiljana started to yell in anger:

> Shrapnel was all along Šumatovac Street. Shrapnel was everywhere. All over us. All over mothers, all over children, brothers, and sisters.

When Ljiljana finished, Milica went to her parents and kissed their heads bent over the doll that represented her lifeless body. She then returned to Ljiljana and held her hand, united in some other, maybe better, world. Standing together, they embodied the profound weight of suffering and victimhood. As they were leaving the stage, the spotlight remained on the mother and the father, who stayed alone, childless, in this world, as another symbol of suffering. They packed their things, left the TARGET space, and exited the stage.

4.5. Intermezzo – Arise Serbia!

The lights illuminated the choir that started to sing Arise Serbia (*Vostani Serbie*), an early XIX century patriotic song written by Dositej Obradović, the first minister of education and the crucial figure of the Serbian Enlightenment period. As Milorad Dodik's speech heated the nationalist sentiments, the song confirmed them with an exalted patriotic tone:

Arise, Serbia! Arise, empress!
And let your children see your face.
Make them turn their hearts and eyes on you,
and let them hear your sweet voice.

Arise, Serbia!
You fell asleep long ago,
And have lain in the dark.
Now wake up!

After the choir finished, the host entered the stage and simply announced: "The president of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić." The song that heightened the prevailing sentiments set the stage for the president of Serbia, who, as captured by the livestream director, passionately sang along with the choir.

4.6. Act 4 – Long Live Serbia!

In the traditional dramatic structure, the final act typically offers a resolution, signifying either the triumph or defeat of the main character. The last image in the concluding act intends to

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showcase a transformation —either of the main character or of the prevailing circumstances. The classical structure also teaches us that by the end of the third act, the main character usually experiences an epiphany that guides them toward resolution and catalyzes subsequent actions. The intermezzo between Act 3 and Act 4 could be seen as a sort of epiphany after the three speeches introduced the challenges Serbian people experienced – death of children, conspiracy against the Serbs that resulted in economic hardship and loss of Kosovo, and continuation of the aggression through war waste. The epiphany comes with the high sopranos and authoritative basses looming: "Arise, Serbia! / You fell asleep long ago, / And have lain in the dark. / Now wake up!" followed by the simple announcement of the speaker: "The president of the Republic of Serbia." Arranged in this way, the structure of the event enthrones the president as the main character of the ceremony and the character who has the capability to confront the challenges portrayed in the previous three acts.

In the twenty-minute-long speech, President Vučić underscored the narrative of Serbian victimhood while further downplaying the context leading up to the NATO bombing and Serbia's involvement in the wars of the 1990s. He criticized the previous governments for failing to commemorate the NATO bombing, framing this event as indicative of "a new, distinct Serbia—the Serbia of the future." The future-oriented perspective was also the backbone of Vučić's 2017 presidential campaign, "Faster, Better, Stronger," in which he introduced himself as a future-oriented peacemaker. This tone pervaded the entire speech, shifting between the trope of remembering victims and the need to forget the past in pursuit of a brighter future. He echoed the earlier speakers' concerns about the *Western* conspiracy against the Serbian people and the *Western* agenda to take Kosovo from Serbia. He argued that NATO violated the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM),[33] an international accord that

[33] https://www.clusterconvention.org/

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prohibits the use, transfer, and storage of cluster bombs due to their indiscriminate effect and the long-term risks they pose to civilians. However, this assertion presented an anachronism, as the CCM was adopted in 2008 and entered into force in August 2010, well after the NATO bombing of FRY. Moreover, the president omitted to mention that Serbia has never signed this convention.

In a brief, fleeting remark, while talking about how open Serbia is for discussion, the president vaguely mentioned that there were some "bad politics" in the past that nearly led to the loss of Kosovo:

> We can discuss everything today except forgetting. And Kosovo that you took away from us through bombs and bad politics, both yours and ours.

While the other speakers avoided referencing the events leading up to the bombing, President Vučić brought up the "bad politics" later in his address once again. However, he notably omitted referencing his personal involvement during this time — particularly his role as the Minister of Information in 1999 and his association with the Radical Party, a vocal proponent of the wars:

> We don't think we are without sin; we know very well that we have done bad things, but knowing how much it depends on us, we are open to any dialogue, and we embrace any opportunity that presents itself to us. We want to extend a hand to everyone, listen, and come to an agreement. Because peace is most needed for us, but clearly, the others do not want this. They are not willing to extend an olive branch. They want our heads bowed.

Although the president briefly acknowledged Serbian misdeeds on two occasions, his rhetorical strategy ultimately steered the speech towards portraying Serbs as victims in both instances. He concluded his address by depicting the current plight of the Serbs who still live in Kosovo as a continuation of victimhood that began with the NATO bombing, thereby creating an unbroken narrative of ongoing suffering:

> Serbs living in Kosovo and Metohija are the most unjustly treated ethnic group on European soil. UNMIK, EULEX, and KFOR should take care of their rights and security, at least formally, per Resolution 12/44. I rightfully ask why, today, those who, allegedly in the name of protecting the rights of Albanians, have destroyed our country are not interested in ensuring the security of Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija. The heinous crimes committed against Serbs have not been investigated or prosecuted.

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> Dick Marty's Report on the removal of organs of kidnapped Serbs in the so-called "Yellow House" is persistently ignored by international legal institutions.

In the concluding remarks and expressions of gratitude to the audience and the participants, the president started to cry while mentioning Sladjan Vučković and his faith. After the president exited the stage, a child's voice echoed from the speakers saying:

> Mom, look up, I'm here, And I'm not alone. Mom, I'm sorry I didn't get to grow up. Mom, don't worry, I'm not alone. There are dozens of us. Mom, don't cry; I'm sorry that I didn't get to be born, but Mom, what could I have done?

After the child's voice faded, Ljiljana, dressed in white, accompanied by Milica and dozens of other children, climbed on the stage. Each child held a white rose in their hand. As the children appeared, the names of those who lost their lives in the bombing, read by children, reverberated from the speakers. The majority of the names were Albanian, and Vera told me that she insisted on acknowledging every victim, regardless of ethnicity:

> We found a list of children's names, among which many more children from Kosovo were the ones most affected by the bombing. Many Albanians perished there, which is not mentioned at all. (...) Children represent the new youth, the foundation of society, and that was destroyed. That's why I persisted in specifying the names of these children. Even though there were many Albanian names and there were suggestions like, "Oh, there are so many of these Albanian names, can you shorten it a bit," we didn't make any changes. We just played it in a loop. We recorded as many names as there were children and played them all.

Ljiljana closed the last scene with the words: "Today I would have been a mother," after which the children cast their white roses to the ground, and the choir started to sing "This is Serbia," a stirring patriotic song with the chorus: "This is Serbia, say the graves of the warriors from the glorious times." Finally, the ceremony was closed with the steady sound of the siren that signals the end of the air strike, the one that was colloquially named "smirela," derived from the verb *simiriti* – to calm down.

Vera emphasized the particular significance of the last image, noting its cathartic effect:

> I think it was essential to name every victim exactly. That's the core of the core. I mean, we went to the limits, and it was emotionally moving... when I think back... emotionally moving, like some kind of group catharsis, it wasn't just a performance, there were 20,000 people on that square, the sound of the planes coming in… when you hear it on those loudspeakers, it sounds like planes are coming in at that

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> moment, like bombs are falling now. So we went all the way in that... how do I call it... it wasn't an event, it was... I don't know what to call it... there's no exact... It's like participating in the original event anew, in a replay, I don't know... But in an artistic way, cleansed, enlightened, healing, in that sense. I think that's the only way to commemorate something like that.

Then Vera paused for a moment and then summarized the essence of the final image: "You see that they are all pure and in a better place," she said. "It offers you a form of solace. After an evening filled with the depiction of suffering, the sight of these children, these innocent victims all in white, without blood, pretty and happy, it provides closure, it settles the ghosts, and you can move forward."

4.7. Ghosts of war in Serbia

When reflecting on the Niš commemoration, Vera highlighted two key elements that warrant closer analysis for a better understanding of how narratives shift between portraying perpetrators and victims and how victims are portrayed in a society typically viewed as the perpetrator. First, Vera characterized the commemoration as "participating in the original event anew." Then, she emphasized the healing aspect of the commemoration, naming it "settling the ghosts." Her encapsulation of the event's emotional dimension opens two important questions: among the plethora of bombing events that could have been brought to life again, which specific "original event" was chosen for representation, and which ghosts have to be settled?

First, Vera's idea of *participating in the original event again, in a replay with healing purposes*, corresponds with the concept of historical reenactment, a performative genre that revives an event on stage in a participatory theatrical manner. Theatrical reenactment can be anything from replays of historical battles to artistic practices such as re-makes of theater plays, performances, or even films. Rebeca Schneider noticed that reenactment, or as she defines it, "the practice of replaying or re-doing a precedent event, artwork, or act" (2011:2), has

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increasingly found its place in performance-based art. This rise, Schneider argues, accompanies the expansion of historical reenactment and "living history experiences" in history museums, theme parks, and preservation societies. She further noticed that reenactment became "the popular and practice-based wing" of the *memory boom*. In her analysis of the reenactment of the Civil War in the US, Rebeca Schneider (2011) provides a framework for understanding the various functions and implications of reenactment in the context of performance and history. For her, reenactment is not just a medium or a genre that repeats a historical event but a remediation that brings to the fore the complex interplay between the past and present. Schneider argues that historical reenactment can challenge the conventional understanding of presence through critically engaging with or contesting dominant historical narratives. By employing the method, this commemoration sought to confront the conventional portrayal of Serbs solely as perpetrators, casting light on NATO's misdeeds while repositioning Serbs as victims. In doing so, it directly counters the dominant narratives established by the liberal TJ framework, which typically focuses on the culpability of Serbian forces.

Even though the commemoration in Niš was not entirely a reenactment, it undeniably bore elements of the genre. Vera herself described the event as "a replay," while the atmosphere, shaped by the sound and lighting design, simulated facets of the bombing: the sirens, blackouts, sound of bomber aircraft, and public announcements urging safety precautions. Furthermore, these documentary/sensory components blurred the line between theatrical representation and authentic experience, transporting the audience back into their personal experiences from 1999 through sensory stimulation. If nothing else, the movement of the audience when the sound of the bomber aircraft loomed said it all. Nearly everyone around me, including myself, instinctively crouched under the sound. While we were completely aware that the sound emanated from the speakers, its authenticity, combined with the blacked-out

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city, transported us directly into 1999, while the *embodied memory* (Connerton 1989) made us react physically. Marvin Carlson (2001:7) calls this theatrical effect *ghosting*, a phenomenon when something known/experienced haunts the experience of watching a theatre performance. Victor Turner, in his seminal work From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play" (1982), posited that theatre, being a form of entertainment, inherently possesses dual significance. To him, entertainment encompassed passive engagement (being amused or distracted) and active reflection (contemplation or consideration of deeper meanings). He believed theater "allows the spectator his human dignity, his right to treat all he sees in an as-if, subjunctive way" (Turner 1982:121). Yet, while Turner anticipated an audience that actively engages and contemplates, the Niš commemoration seemed determined to channel the collective experience exclusively towards the memory of suffering, sidelining other potential recollections.

In that sense, I observe the commemoration in Niš as a *cloning of history* (Schneider 2001) that aims to represent the episodes of civilian suffering as the entire narrative of the bombing, making it the synecdoche of the Yugoslav wars, part of a picture that the new elites aimed to impose as a whole. Memories and the experiences of the bombing are not ubiquitous. While there were undoubtedly horrifying moments, I heard numerous times during the fieldwork about how beautiful the spring of 1999 was, how people spent a lot of time outside and came together during the hardship, and how there was more socializing than ever. Also, the TARGET concerts represent an aspect of the bombing that people often mention in the context of "Serbian spite" and the resilience of the Serbian people against *Western* domination. Of course, fears and traumas that the bombing left always interplead these stories. Therefore, the experiences during the bombing span a broad spectrum, ranging from moments of socializing, singing, and dancing to the stark reality of fear, death, and destruction. Yet, one set

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of feelings and experiences does not negate the other; instead, they coalesce to form a comprehensive picture of what is referred to as the 1999 NATO bombing. Still, during the commemoration, the audience's feelings were directed and streamlined exclusively to the traumatic aspects of that experience. Rebeca Schneider used the concept of *cloning history* to understand the tensions between original events and their subsequent reproductions, highlighting the fluidity and repeatability of historical narratives within performance. While a clone grows from an identical embryo, it achieves social life on its own, which blurs the boundary between the original and the replica, as the clone is grounded in the essence of the original yet adapting to new contexts. At the same time, it stays the original in its material, but it also morphs into an authentic being due to circumstances. Through the process of cloning in this commemorative event, history is purified of Serbian "bad politics," while victimhood is enthroned as the predominant narrative of the past.

In the moral economy of victimhood, examined in the first part of the thesis, Serbia lost its dignity by being associated with crimes against humanity such as the Srebrenica genocide, the siege of Sarajevo, and numerous crimes against ethnic Albanians in the Kosovo war. Serbia often found little or no space to acknowledge its victims within the international human rights regime. Moreover, after two decades of inconsistent memory politics surrounding the 1990s wars, the state failed to offer a platform for its citizens to reconcile with their wartime roles. This void generated many conflicting narratives, creating a fragmented collective memory. Rather than facilitating dealing with the past, this multifaceted landscape of memory only created interpretations that oscillated between condemnation and celebration of the Serbian role in the wars but did not find a way to reconcile them. The elites in power at the time of the twentieth commemoration of the NATO bombing exploited this pluralized and unarticulated terrain to frame victimhood as the dominant narrative of the Serbian wartime experience.

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However, even though the narrative was highly politicized and streamlined in the commemoration, it still created a cathartic moment when, symbolically, to be a victim was finally allowed to Serbian citizens, offering a release for long-suppressed emotions.

So, when Vera said: "It gives you some condolences. After the whole evening of watching suffering, you settle the ghosts by seeing these kids, these innocent victims without blood, pretty and happy, and you can go further," she emphasized the healing dimension of the commemoration. But what are the wounds that were supposed to be healed, and which ghosts settled? Actors in the vignettes evoked ghost-like embodiments of the shared anxieties and grief, even for those who had not directly lost loved ones. Yet, beneath the images of suffering lies an unsettling and largely unspoken reality that continues to haunt the narrative of the 1999 NATO bombing: the question of why Serbia found itself under bombardment in the first place.

4.8. Conclusion

This chapter showed the potential of performing arts to narrate history and create evidence of a dimension of war that cannot easily fit the liberal model of remembering. The re-enacting elements in the twentieth commemoration of the NATO bombing represented a sort of portal to transport citizens back to the times of the bombing, transforming an artistic representation into a documentary, aiming to stand for a collectively lived experience. This content, shaped by the already-known stories of figures like Little Milica and the pregnant Ljiljana, combined with the introductory video, theatrical vignettes, and documentary elements, tapped into deep-seated, embodied memories. Assembled inside the 4-act structure of classical drama, the commemoration's didactic narrative achieved Aristotelian unity of plot, time, and space, representing itself as a faithful reflection of actual historical events. This theatrical construct, though designed for the stage, aimed to mirror the cohesion and continuity of real-life historical

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experiences. The live broadcast on national television enabled the spectacle to reach every household in Serbia. Moreover, its streaming on the RTS's YouTube channel immortalized it as a permanent record. Although the televised rendition could not replicate the immersive experience of being present at the location, specific elements, like the president's visible emotion and highly affective scenes, such as the drone image of the candlelit, heightened the emotional resonance.

By unpacking the content of the 20th commemoration of the NATO bombing in Niš commemoration, I argued that the state represented the experience of victimhood as unique, which covers its role as the perpetrator in the events leading up to the bombing and the war in Kosovo that preceded it. I showed how this commemoration cloned history, victimizing society while silencing the political background of the bombing. I argued that the state represented the entirety of the wars through victimhood, reducing broader experiences and sentiments of the bombing.

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PART III – SEEING THE INVISIBLE: SOLDIERS AND VETERANS OF THE YUGOSLAV WARS

Chapter 5: Hero of our Times: Colonel Milenko Pavlović Between Hero and Victim

In the previous chapters, I portrayed the memory landscape in Serbia through three political times that generated two dominant conflicting memory discourses. One discourse aligns with the liberal segment of the society and supports the TJ regime that promotes the concept of "coming to terms with the past" and insists on the commemoration of Serbian crimes in order for the society to deal with the dark side of its history. In contrast, the countering narrative sees this paradigm as an imposition of *Western* hegemony and seeks an alternative commemorative framework to honor Serbian victims that, in the liberal regime, fall out of the desired memory narratives. While researching the commemoration of the Yugoslav wars in Serbia and my research lens was fine-tuned to the processes that highlighted Serbian victims, an uncanny absence permeated my fieldwork: the absence of Serbian veterans from commemorative practices. The Serbian Army was a part of the majority of the commemorations I visited, but it always looked like a passive actor with a ceremonial purpose, disconnected from its wartime past. When it was absent, like in the Niš commemoration, the narrative was framed in such a manner that this absence did not seem unusual. The Serbian Army commemorated Yugoslav wars during the time of the Democrats independently from the state. They built monuments within the military spaces and held commemorative ceremonies. These commemorations were

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of an internal nature, and even when state officials attended, they were not widely publicized in the media (Mandić 2016).

Estimations suggest that the number of soldiers who participated in Yugoslav wars could be anything between 400,000 and 800,000 (Dokić 2017). Still, those people are entirely absent from any public discourses. Throughout all of its political times, the state did not regulate veteran status (Dokić 2017), so the veterans have taken it upon themselves to organize at the municipal and city levels, advocating for their rights before the state. Analyzing the case when the war veterans organized to sue the state in the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg for the war per diems, Lea David (2015) showed that various Serbian governments, regardless of their political leanings, have strategically employed a tactic of selectively awarding benefits to different groups of war veterans which effectively fragmented the war veteran community, inhibiting their collective political engagement. Such treatment rendered this large group of citizens practically invisible.

Thus far, my analysis has demonstrated how the focus on the Serbian victims of the NATO bombing within the official memory politics effectively marginalizes the narrative of the war that preceded it. The third part of this thesis will focus specifically on commemorative practices centered on the soldiers of the Yugoslav wars. The following two chapters will explore how the state navigates the portrayal of the Serbian Army against the liberal TJ framework in which it falls on the side of the perpetrator. This section will explore the dynamics of inclusions and exclusions of soldiers within the realm of official memory politics that highlights Serbian victimhood. The following chapter delves into the commemoration of Colonel Milenko Pavlović, a Serbian Army pilot who met a tragic end over the city of Valjevo in western Serbia on May 4, 1999, in a battle against NATO planes that were about to bomb the city. Since 2000,

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Valjevo has commemorated Colonel Pavlović as a significant local symbol of heroism and protector of the city.

Valjevo was particularly vulnerable during the NATO bombing as it is the home to Krušik, the largest defense industry center both in socialist Yugoslavia and in Serbia. Given the strategic significance of the factory, Valjevo was subject to frequent and intensive bombing. The first NATO attacks on Valjevo started on April 14, 1999. Until the end of the bombing, June 9, Krušik was bombed 32 times with 215 projectiles weighing about 1T of explosives, according to a monograph *Suffering of Valjevo During the NATO Aggression,* published by the local administration. The same source estimates that Krušik was hit hardest among all commercial targets in Serbia (Stojić 1999). The factory is deeply rooted in the community; it is the largest employer, with around fifteen thousand residents on its payroll. In numerous cases, it employs two to three generations from a single Valjevo family. Consequently, its devastation during the bombing extended beyond immediate destruction, touching the very livelihoods and survival prospects of countless citizens.

I discovered the story of Milenko Pavlović through desk research and visited the commemoration for the first on May 4, 2018. It was organized, as every year, by the city council. The focus of the ceremonial speeches was on the heroism of Milenko Pavlović and the city's gratitude for his attempt to save it. I spent only a day in Valjevo, leaving my options open about pursuing this story and including it in my research. However, as my fieldwork progressed, I noticed a rising tendency to elevate the Serbian Army's valor into mainstream memory politics, especially as the twentieth anniversary of the NATO bombing was approaching. While during the time of the Democrats, the army was silenced alongside the state's general ambiguity towards the Yugoslav wars, it seemed to me that in the time of the

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Progressives, the army's status was acquiring a more positive connotation, which went hand in hand with the formation of the counter-liberal memory politics. During the time of the Progressives, several ICTY convicts completed their sentences and returned to Serbia. Many received state honors upon their return, and some even became members of the Serbian Progressive Party (Strupinskienė 2023).

Even though the image of the soldiers was absent during the time of the Democrats and the army only started to return to the mainstream discourses around the twentieth anniversary of the NATO bombing, the roots of the celebration of the army's heroism could be found in popular culture and vernacular collective memory since the time of Milošević. A defining event for shaping the heroic image of the Serbian army was the downing of the technologically advanced "invisible" F-117a aircraft on March 27, 1999, just three days into the offensive. Using early socialist-era anti-missile defense technology, the Yugoslav Army managed to detect and bring down this state-of-the-art aircraft. This achievement was a significant morale booster, which the Serbian war government capitalized on almost immediately. The plane crashed in Buđanovci village, where locals celebrated the event by dancing on the wreckage. The image of two elderly women dancing on a shattered wing became an iconic representation of Serbian resistance during the NATO bombing (Figure 17). The downing of the stealth aircraft swiftly transformed into a popular narrative used to question the *West*'s presumed military dominance, a sentiment still present today. It also reinforced the narrative framing the NATO bombing within a David vs. Goliath archetype, portraying technologically inferior but cunning Serbian forces inflicting damage on a more powerful adversary. In this archetypical story, the notions of "weaker" and "superior" are often metaphorically substituted with good and evil.

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Figure 17 - Celebration around the wreckage of the F-117 A airplane
source Blic.rs

This chapter will discuss the commemoration of Milenko Pavlović in Valjevo and the surrounding municipalities as the multifaceted portrayal of a soldier in an army implicated in war crimes. Following my initial 2018 visit to Valjevo and the emerging media discourse that included references to Milenko Pavlović, the narrative of his heroism appeared to be an unquestioned and well-established one. It seemed to be a narrative embraced by both the local municipality and its residents, aligning seamlessly with the official state narratives that tended to represent the army as professional and heroic, still somehow detached from the wars and without responsibilities. The crown of this commemorative tendency happened in June 2019 when the Ministry of Defense renamed the Batajnica airbase, where Milenko Pavlović had been in command, to Colonel Milenko Pavlović Airbase, while the street that leads to the airport was also named after him.

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In 2019, I spent a month in Valjevo when I attended seven days of commemorative activities that took place in the city, in the village Gornje Crniljevo where Milenko Pavlović was born, and in the small town of Osečina — the place where he attended school. Nestled within the same county, Kolubara, in approximately 40km radius, all these places held commemorations for the twentieth anniversary of Milenko Pavlović's heroic death. My immersion into the fieldwork in Valjevo revealed a more nuanced picture. Contrary to the superficial perceptions, I discovered a polysemy surrounding the heroic figure of Milenko Pavlović. Although the dominant narrative portrays him within the David vs. Goliath archetype as a hero and a simultaneous victim to a larger, more dominant military force, I found many voices within the community that challenge and nuance this portrayal. These dissenting perspectives diverge from the patriotic heroism prevalent in the official commemoration and utilize the narrative of Milenko Pavlović's death to critically re-examine the 1990s government policies.

This chapter follows how Milenko Pavlović travels across scales and obtains different meanings within different *communities of memory* (Booth 2006). Drawing on the insights of Sybille Scheipers, I argue that Milenko Pavlović represents a hero from the "post-heroic age" (Scheipers 2014), a period marked by a shift in the nature of war in which the complexities of modern society challenge the traditional understanding of heroism. The post-heroic age is characterized by questioning meta-narratives and the changing role of sacrifice in community cohesion. Scheipers argues that examining heroism through its ritualistic qualities provides a deeper and more insightful understanding of its influence on the interplay between the state, society, and the military. Even though the figure of a hero is challenged in contemporary contexts, that does not mean that it lost significance. As the case of the commemoration of Milenko Pavlović will show, his heroic portrayal bolsters patriotism and perpetuates

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established state narratives of victimhood and de-politicization. With figures such as his, the state manages to incorporate the figure of soldier in the commemorative narratives. However, in the dominant commemorative narrative the border between hero and victim is blurred, and in that sense, the state maintains to keep Serbian victims in the center of the official memory narratives, extending this identity to the army as well. This chapter will show how the city's unique wartime experience due to its close ties with the defense industry enabled the citizens to problematize this heroic image and to use Milenko Pavlović's figure to reintroduce politics into the discourse surrounding the bombing.

5.1. Milenko Pavlović and the Yugoslav Air Force during the NATO bombing

Milenko Pavlović held the rank of lieutenant[34] of the 204th Fighter Aviation Regiment in the Yugoslav Air Force, serving as a fighter pilot. There are many versions of the story about why and how Milenko Pavlović ended above Valjevo on May 4, 1999, to face solo a fleet of NATO planes. To a detached observer, or perhaps a casual player of the game Risk, the outcome of NATO's offense was no more than obvious: The world's strongest military alliance targeting a vastly inferior post-socialist country whose military resources were devastated by a decade of warfare. Yet, despite the glaring disparity in strength, the Yugoslav Army persisted sending their pilots to confront NATO planes since the first attack on March 24, 1999. One by one, NATO's missiles hit almost every Yugoslav military aircraft that took off. By May 4, two months into the bombing, five Yugoslav planes had been destroyed, leading to the death of two pilots, while five of them survived after catapulting from the falling planes. These were devastating numbers for an already hard-pressed army. After Colonel Milenko Pavlović's

[34] He was awarded the rank of colonel posthumously.

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death, no more pilots and aircraft were sent to fight the NATO fleet. The defense was strictly done from the ground by the Anti-Missile Defense.

The employment of fighter pilots during the NATO bombing and the political influences on the army remain a delicate and unresolved issue. While the military archives are inaccessible, an insight into defense tactics and the condition of the Yugoslav Air Force, especially given the stark power imbalance, can be gleaned from a series of documentary TV films produced between 2006 and 2010 by RTS in collaboration with the local "M" TV Station from the city of Paraćin. These films feature interviews with pilots who were actively involved in the 1999 operations, offering them a platform to recount their experiences and voice the critique of the military's strategies.

Two primary concerns emerged from these pilots' testimonies. First, the pilots claimed that The Yugoslav Air Force's leadership had consistently violated maintenance and overhaul protocols for their aircraft for several years leading up to 1999. The only aircraft in the Yugoslav fleet capable of contending with NATO's technologically advanced planes were the Soviet MIG 29s, acquired by the Yugoslav People's Army in 1987. Interviews in the documentary films reveal that the fleet was in a state of disrepair when the bombing began, with almost every plane facing radar and power supply malfunctions. The NATO bombing led to the loss of eleven MIG planes: five were destroyed in aerial combat, while six were decimated on the ground. General Spasoje Smiljanić, who served as the chief of the Yugoslav War Air Force until July 30, 2001, faced legal proceedings for neglecting the technical readiness of the fleet in the early 2000s, but was subsequently acquitted.

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The second concern highlighted by the pilots is the political interference in the decision-making process within the Yugoslav Air Force. The pilots cited directives from the higher-ups, who instructed them to "fly more and inflict more damage" to NATO's fleet. Pilots assert that the pressures from the government intensified after the downing of the F-117A plane to replicate such an achievement. However, each effort was met with failure.

Amidst a backdrop of technical, political, and institutional challenges, Milenko Pavlović climbed into the cockpit and departed for Valjevo around noon on May 4, 1999. One of the episodes of the documentary, called "*Deadly Flight*" provided a detailed account of the events leading up to his final flight. His colleagues recalled that the Air Force Command ordered the deployment of one MIG 29 to Valjevo on May 4, 1999. At that moment, Milenko Pavlović was away from the airbase in a neighboring town. His deputy called him and conveyed the command, and Milenko Pavlović ordered to prevent the young and inexperienced pilot who was supposed to take that flight from taking off. The young pilot however entered the plane, but the radio communication system did not function, so he had to switch planes. When he entered the second one Milenko Pavlović showed up, took the young pilot out of the cockpit, and said, "Damn you children, you won't be the ones to die, I will!" At 12:35 PM, he took off towards Valjevo. One of the pilots recollected looking at the tracking screen from the Batajnica Airbase, remarking:

> It was horrifying to see our target, marked in red, advancing towards a group of more than 100 planes. We watched him fly to his homeland because he was born near Valjevo. At some point, the operational center asked him if he had visual contact, to which he responded, "I see them, but they see me as well."

Twelve minutes later, his colleagues caught his last words over the radio: "They got me" (*imaju me*). The pilots claim that not long after Milenko Pavlović departed from Batajnica Airbase, his alternating current (a/c) generator broke, completely disabling his plane. According to an aircraft mechanic in the documentary, when Milenko Pavlović lost the a/c generator, his radar and navigation system broke, as well as the ability to shoot rockets. According to the mechanic,

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all that was left for him was the engine and power for a potential return to the airbase. That, however, did not happen. Colonel Milenko Pavlović was shot above Valjevo, and the parts of the plane fell in the villages surrounding the city.

5.2. Commemoration of Milenko Pavlović

The commemoration of Pilot Milenko Pavlović in Valjevo has been an annual event since 2000. That same year, the city council, in partnership with Krušik, commissioned a monument at the entrance to the factory. The architect of the monument, who had previously collaborated with the Yugoslav Army, used parts from a MIG-29 piloted by Milenko Pavlović to construct it (figure 18). Additionally, a separate monument was erected in 2000 in the village of Bujačić, the site where Milenko Pavlović's plane fell (figure 19).

Figure 18 - Nineteenth commemoration in front of the monument at the factory entrance May 4, 2018. Photo by the author

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Figure 19 - Milenko Pavlović's family in front of the monument in the village Bujačić
May 4, 2019. Photo by the author

The central commemoration organized by the city council in collaboration with the Serbian Army is held annually in front of the monument at the entrance to the Krušik factory. Every year, the official program commences at 12:04, marking the exact moment when Milenko Pavlović's plane was hit and begins with a reenactment of the MIG 29's fall. Following this, an Orthodox mass is conducted, accompanied by singing of the national anthem, speeches, cultural performances such as poetry readings and song recitals, and laying of wreaths. After this event, attendees proceed to Bujačić village to lay wreaths at the second memorial site. Milenko Pavlović's plane fell on private property, and the landowner gave up ownership of a small part of his arable land in favor of the memorial. During the commemoration, the landowner's family hosts a feast for visitors, while the local shops and food producers donate groceries for the occasion (figure 20).

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Figure 20 - Feast in the village Bujačić.
The pilot in the photo holds Milenko Pavlović's mother. May 4, 2018. Photo by the author

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The commemoration in Milenko Pavlović's home village of Gornje Crniljevo, situated about 40 kilometers from Valjevo, is less ceremonial and more intimate than the one in Valjevo. For the twentieth commemoration in 2019, an entire day was devoted to commemorative activities within the memorial complex constructed in his honor. At the entrance of the complex, a "Jastreb-class" plane stands sentinel (Figure 21), leading to a memorial fountain that pays tribute to Milenko Pavlović and Major Aleksandar Stefanović, another distinguished army figure from the village who lost his life in 1991 near Tovarnik in Croatia. Part of a wing

from the MIG-29 aircraft piloted by Pavlović is affixed to the fountain. Additionally, a memorial room within the complex houses a permanent exhibition dedicated to Milenko Pavlović, curated by the Osečina department of the Valjevo Museum. The entire memorial complex is located in the yard of the Church of the Renewal of St. George's Temple (*Đurđica*).

Figure 21 - Entrance to the memorial complex in Gornje Crniljevo
May 2019, photo by the author

The commemoration in 2019 began early in the morning with a commemorative cross country running; young athletes ran 9km up the hill from Osečina to the village. The steep road they traversed is in a notoriously poor condition, riddled with potholes. My drive up this road took nearly 40 minutes due to its state. Remarkably, the young man who won the race completed it in approximately 20 minutes. During the award ceremony, audience members

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laughed and shouted that he was faster than a Yugo[35]. The commemorative day featured numerous programs prepared by the primary school from Osečina, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the local community, and his fellow pilots who cooked a traditional stew for the locals.

During his life, Milenko Pavlović was well-respected in the community. One interlocutor from the village, who serves in the Serbian Army, shared with me the significance of becoming a pilot in such a small community. He reflected on Milenko's humility, remarking that "despite soaring the skies, he remained one of us" (*On je leteo, ali je bio jedan od nas*). A Serbian language teacher who had worked in Osečina recalled the various tales about Milenko Pavlović she had heard. One that particularly resonated with her was the village's acknowledgment of Milenko's unparalleled skill in carving roast pork. During significant local celebrations, such as weddings or Christmas, where a whole pig was traditionally prepared, Milenko was always the cherished guest entrusted with the carving duty. Many stories and memories among villagers and people from Osečina are preserved through several institutions that now bear Milenko's name. He was a passionate hunter, so his fellow hunters changed the name of the local hunting society "Braća Nedić" (Nedić Brothers)[36] into Milenko Pavlović. The village's football club also changed its name to Milenko Pavlović, as he was a dedicated footballer. As the people spoke at the commemoration, he was a passionate player, and whenever he visited the village, he would play with his friends. Every year, a memorial football match occurs between the local club and the pilots from the 204th Fighter Aviation Regiment. The local football stadium that is situated below the memorial complex is named after Milenko Pavlović as well.

[35] Yugo is a type of car produced in Socialist Yugoslavia. Even though it had been out of production for around 30 years it can still be seen on the streets, especially in the smaller cities and villages. While it was a symbol of socialist pride, it is often the subject of jokes about the socialist era, being viewed as a vehicle that was affordable yet not particularly reliable.

[36] The Nedić Brothers were rebels from the First Serbian Uprising (1804) from Osečina. All local institutions like primary school, the library, cultural center wear their name.

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On the twentieth anniversary, the municipality of Osečina named a street after Milenko Pavlović. The local primary school organized an exhibition of the children's thematic drawings in the local library, and a commemorative postmark dedicated to Milenko Pavlović was also promoted on this occasion. The military choir held a concerto as part of the program in Osečina, and a short documentary film about the bombing was screened afterward. The highlight was a surprise performance by Zorana Pavić, a pop star from the 1990s, who performed a popular patriotic song, "This is Serbia" (*Ovo je Srbija*), with the choir (Figure 22). Zorana was absent from the public during recent years, so I took the opportunity to approach her after the performance and ask about her appearance at the commemoration. Zorana confided her deep admiration for Milenko Pavlović and revealed her frequent collaborations with the military choir. She added that this particular performance held immense significance for her, especially on a day marking the naming of a street after Milenko Pavlović in what she called "practically his city." Later, she shared a selfie with Milenko Pavlović's mother on Instagram, captioning it with sentiments that celebrated her as the epitome of a "Serbian mother." [37]

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[37] @zouranaguevara https://www.instagram.com/p/B52-mY9pyGo/

Figure 22 - Zorana Pavić sings "This is Serbia" in the Cultural Center Osečina.
Photo by the author

As part of the official twentieth anniversary, several more events took place throughout the week in the region in and around Valjevo, like a memorial boxing championship organized by a newly-found boxing club "Milenko Pavlović - Pilot" and the re-printing of a monograph dedicated to his life and death. In the Cultural Center Valjevo, a twelve-minute musical, "They Got Me" (*Imaju me*), was featured during the central ceremony on May 4, 2019. It chronicled the life of Milenko Pavlović through a blend of classical and contemporary ballet vignettes. The name of the musical stands for Milenko Pavlović's last words, while the duration mirrors the time of his last flight. The musical was highly intense and emotional. It evoked a spectrum of emotions: as a young Milenko was depicted amidst pioneers in a socialist school setting, the audience responded with laughter (Figure 24). The concluding sequence, in which the dancer, representing an adult Milenko, had flown across the stage to symbolize his tragic end, left many

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in tears. The entire performance was carried out by young girls from the ballet studio "M" in Valjevo, and they got standing ovations from the audience in tears.

Figure 23 - "Little Milenko" in the musical "They Got Me"
Valjevo. May 4, 1999. Archive of the Ballet Studio "M"

5.3. Mythologization of Milenko Pavlović's Death and the Polysemy of his Heroism

The short battle in the sky and the fall of Milenko Pavlović's MIG 29 is the most narrated event in Valjevo related to the NATO bombing. Although the city houses a military enterprise, Valjevo remained untouched by the bombardment until April 14, nearly three weeks after NATO began its offense. The first bombs, as expected, fell on Krušik. Before this, the factory partially relocated its operations from the original site. Within a short period, the production activities continued at the locations scattered around the city. From April 14, the factory was targeted almost daily, and by the end of the bombing on June 9, 1999, the 140-hectare complex was practically destroyed.

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In the official narratives about Milenko Pavlović's last flight, a pervasive "David vs. Goliath" archetype emphasizes the stark power disparity during the bombing. The affective part of the story underlines that Milenko Pavlović died defending Valjevo, practically his hometown, a city where many of his friends lived and the administrative center of the region of his origin. In the movie "Deadly Flight," his colleague says, "We watched him as he flies towards his fatherland." Integral to this myth is Milenko Pavlović's determination to save the life of a young pilot and his last words before taking off: "Damn you children, you won't be the ones to die, I will!" Catherine Verdery accounted for the glorification of last words by saying:

> Dead bodies have another great advantage as symbols: they don't talk much on their own (though they did once). Words can be put into their mouths—often quite ambiguous words—or their own actual words can be ambiguated by quoting them out of context. It is thus easier to rewrite history with dead people than with other kinds of symbols that are speechless (Verdery 1999:29).

The official commemoration of Milenko Pavlović contours these last words within a depoliticized context. The larger political landscape leading up to the bombing remains obscured in this myth, mirroring a victimizing trend in official commemorative practices. In these narrations, while Pavlović is both hero and victim, his act remains confined to the moment of the bombing, never extending beyond the state's official version of events and encompassing the challenges the pilot in the documentary spoke about.

The first interview I conducted in Valjevo was with Mića Ilić, the mayor from 1999. He largely reproduced the prevailing heroic narrative, similar to his speech during the commemoration held on May 4, 2019:

> During history lessons, we often learned about the heroes of WWI, WWII, and the First and Second Serbian Uprising, but we never met these heroes personally. We didn't know them. Milenko is a hero of our times, of the generation born after 1945. We believed that our generation would never have its own war, but unfortunately, like any other generation of the Serbian people, it had its war in the spring of 1999. The hero of our war is the pilot, Colonel of the 204th Fighter Regiment, Milenko Pavlović.

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> During the NATO bombing, Valjevo was attacked 32 times by the NATO aggressors. Two hundred fifteen missiles fell on the city. The highest number of them fell near this monument. The most challenging days were in May: on May 2, 51 projectiles fell on Valjevo, 36 on Krušik, and 15 on the nearby neighborhood Workers' Colony and the hospital. On May 4, it was the first attack on Valjevo during daylight. Until then, all attacks happened during the night. On May 4, the attack occurred around noon; Milenko Pavlović took off from Batajnica airport. He knew that the enemy was by far technologically and numerically superior. But, in our history, the enemy has always been technologically and numerically superior. There was no other choice but to defend the state. There was no other choice on that day for Milenko Pavlovic either.
>
> This monument is the monument of Milenko Pavlović, but also the memorial of Zoran Radosavljević, his brother-in-arms who also died in the NATO aggression, a monument of all victims of the air force and anti-air force defense, which was hit the hardest by the NATO aggression. Glory to them, and thank you!

The bombing of May 4, 1999, is the best-remembered personal memory of the residents of Valjevo. From the diverse accounts I collected, it seems as if the whole city was watching the battle above their heads. During the interview with Mića Ilić that I conducted in his office in the center of the city, I learned for the first time how watching the short battle between Milenko Pavlović and the NATO planes looked like on that May 4, a story that I heard later on numerous occasions. Mića reminisced:

> I witnessed his death from this parking lot in front of the building. It was the first daytime bombing of Valjevo. Before May 4, they only bombed during the night. They devasted us on May 2 when they hit the Colony (…). First, somewhere around noon, the enemy's planes overflew the city. Colonel Pavlović, a lieutenant at that time, took off from Batajnica to confront them. According to some information, there were twelve enemy aircraft, and he was only one. I saw it from this parking lot; the plane was hit, cut in two, and started falling into the city. First, we were taught that the Anti-Missile Defense shot the enemy's aircraft, and the townspeople rejoiced! They began to run up the hills because we saw that it fell in one village, Bujačić, just above the city, to catch the pilot, to besiege him, to see what happened. However, in a short while, I got a call from the police that it was our plane, MIG29 and that Colonel Milenko Pavlović lost his life.

Narratives about the initial celebration and the dire news that came shortly after the fall were also in every story. The owner of the Boxing club "Milenko Pavlović – Pilot" told me how he remembers that day:

> I was sitting at home with my dogs, watching movies, and the euphoria started – "We've shot down a plane! A plane has been hit." I opened the window on the street and saw a plane flying; it was smoking. I saw it getting hit by some missile or whatever it was, some white smoke, and it started to spiral and fall. Then the celebration began because the enemy plane had been hit. I was happy, everyone was delighted. Next to my house, there was a cafe, so they immediately brought out a crate of beer to celebrate. And unfortunately, the news came after about 15 to 20 minutes that it was our pilot.

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While the city's vulnerability was amplified due to the presence of the factory, this vulnerability was most acutely felt by the factory workers themselves. I conducted an in-depth interview with Zoran and his wife Slavica (65), who spent their entire careers in the factory, and their daughter Jana, who was eighteen years old during the bombing. In the story of this family, the vulnerability of the workers was apparent, but more importantly, their experience introduced me for the first time to a narrative that problematizes the heroism of Milenko Pavlović. Reflecting on the events of May 4, Slavica conveyed the acute sense of fear she experienced that day. Her sector was displaced to another location in the city. When the air raid sirens began to wail, her anxiety reached such a height that she sought refuge under a table. After saying the "table," she stopped talking and looked at me as if her eyes wanted to convey something more. I, however, have not reacted to that pause. Recognizing that I did not grasp the full weight of what she was describing, she continued her story:

> On that table were, you know, bombs. The bombs that we made. I was horrified. Now that I remember, you have no idea. Then we figured out what we were working on and ran outside; I remember, underneath some cherry tree, a lot of us workers. It went on for some time; planes flew all around, and suddenly, one fell. From the direction of the green market, you could hear people rejoice, an immense applause, but I could not stand on my legs. One of the guys said: "Don't celebrate. It is our plane." I could not drive back home. One colleague drove my car, but I could not. I still don't know what happened on that day.

Slavica's experience resonates with many of her colleagues at Krušik. The workers who carried out their daily obligations, making bombs while the bombs were destroying their factory, were in a very particular position. Jana, however, struggled to comprehend how her parents could continue to work under such conditions. When she voiced her confusion, Zoran told her that she would never fully understand, and he broke down in tears. Struggling to contain his emotions, he said to me, "I am very emotional in general, but—," and then he began to sob openly. Through his tears, he continued, "That factory gave me everything: my house, the means to raise my family. It was my duty, and I would do it again."

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I felt as if I was intruding way too far into the private life of this family, and I offered to stop the interview. Zoran declined, saying that both him and Slavica often become emotional when discussing this subject. He also noted that while he remains deeply sad and emotional about the experience, many of his colleagues are filled with anger. "They're angry because things could have been different," he said, alluding to how the factory was managed during the bombing. At this point, tensions began to escalate among Zoran, Slavica, their daughter, and Vesna, who was my host in Valjevo and in whose living room this interview was conducted just days after the commemorative week. Zoran tried to draw a parallel between the anger of his colleagues and the story of Milenko Pavlović, stating that many mistakes had been made, from letting people make bombs to sending Milenko to death. He added:

> To send a man in a half-working plane, even with a perfectly working one! I doubt that he sat on the plane and came because of Valjevo. People say stupid things; in the army, there is a chain of command. Someone sent him. So, the question must be asked whether he is a hero or not.

Provoked by this statement, Zoran's wife and daughter clashed with him. A heated discussion ensued, with everyone talking over each other and interrupting one another's sentences:

> Slavica: But of course, he is a hero. What else would he be?
> Zoran: Wait a second, he has all my respect as a pilot. What I wanted to say is that it did not have to happen because those people from the top knew that we had zero chances. They should have saved what could have been saved!
> Jana: Would you be a hero if the bomb had fallen on Krušik while you were there?
> Zoran: But I am not, and I do not claim that I am. I went there exactly to save what could have been saved!!!!
> Slavica: Maybe he also came to save…
> Zoran: Don't get me wrong, I admire that man…
> Vesna: Slavica, he knew that he was going to the hornet's nest! As if I was allergic to bees but went directly into a hive!
> Jana: Dad went as well!
> Zoran: But I never did it to be called a hero. It was my second home.
> Jana started to yell: And the one who sent him, I would ...!!!!!! (*Ja bih njega...*)

She did not announce the verdict she had for that person. After they calmed down, I told them what his colleagues stated in the documentary film - that he chose to sit in that plane because he knew his death might deter the command from sending more pilots on suicidal missions. Upon hearing this, the cacophony of my interlocutors' clashing voices harmonized abruptly,

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declaring in unison, “If that is true, then my darling, he is a hero!” Slavica added, “more than a hero,” and Jana concluded, “To the marrow” (*do bola*).

Even though it was not the first time I encountered skepticism regarding Milenko Pavlović’s heroism, this interview for the first time clarified the underpinnings of such questioning. The main line of the critique of his heroism was that it represents a one-dimensional patriotic narrative that frames him as a savior of Valjevo. Those who questioned his heroism did so within a broader political context, informed by their own experiences working in the defense industry under the unbearable war conditions. This perspective allowed them to discern the complexities of the heroic narrative surrounding Milenko Pavlović. When Zoran says that his colleagues are “angry because things could have been different,” this observation extends beyond the bombing, tracing the roots of the tragedy back to perhaps as early as 1991, when the war in Slovenia began. These deeper insights lent profound nuance to the question, “Is he a hero?”

The most vocal critic of Milenko Pavlović’s heroism I encountered was Goran, a 65-year-old resident of a residential area adjacent to the Krušik factory walls known as the Workers’ Colony (Radnička kolonija). This area was demolished on May 2, 1999, an action that NATO later acknowledged as an error. Remarkably, no one lost their lives in this incident, although several people were injured. Due to the Colony’s proximity to the factory, many residents had evacuated before May 2 in anticipation of potential attacks. Sandra, who was in her mid-forties at the time of the bombing, shared with me that she felt a sense of relief that her mother, a Colony resident, had passed away a few months before the bombing. Given her mother’s advanced age and declining health, evacuating her would have been impossible.

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Sandra expressed that had her mother been there that night, she likely would have perished, resulting in immense trauma for the entire family.

Mića Ilić mentioned the bombing of the Worker's Colony in his speech and in the interview; however, he did not mention the story about the visit of the delegation of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) to Krušik on May 4, 1999. Allegedly, during their visit, NATO commenced an attack on Valjevo, the first attack during the daylight. In many local critical narratives about Milenko Pavlović, Valjevo residents frequently mention this SPS delegation, speculating that Milenko Pavlović was sent to deter NATO planes long enough for the politicians to evacuate. A significant portion of the community leverages this visit to reintroduce politics into the prevailing myth of Milenko Pavlović, critically examining the political underpinnings of the bombing. Goran, who is highly critical of the 1999 government and the official heroization of Milenko Pavlović provided the most detailed account of this counter-narrative among all my interviewees:

> Goran: On May 4, a high delegation of the SPS arrived at Krušik, led by Milomir Minić, who was the vice-president of the assembly or the president. Gorica Gajević, the general secretary of the SPS, was with him. They came to see what was destroyed in Krušik. You know, it's like when someone comes to see, for instance, the body of a person found maybe two months after death; there's nothing, just stretched-out bones. Everything in Krušik was destroyed. Literally, 98% of Krušik was ruined. What's there to see... However, it's what you say about how public opinion is shaped or staged for the people, to show that they care. But they don't care about anyone; they only care about themselves, that's a fact, and it's true. And they advertised it on Radio Valjevo for seven days.
>
> Astrea: That these people will come?
>
> Goran: Yes, that they'll come. It was total madness; they advertised it as if it was a Lepa Brena concert, and now someone will come to see… No one should even know they're coming if anyone is interested... there's nothing to see, nothing of interest. Maybe if the war was over, then perhaps to come to see how to rebuild, but during the war... That's nonsense! Of course, knowing they [NATO] were all listening, they absolutely listened to everything, we shouldn't talk about that, they knew exactly when they would come [SPS delegation], two [NATO] planes flew from Tuzla, and they mostly targeted us from Tuzla. They targeted Valjevo from Tuzla.
>
> (...)
>
> Milenko Pavlović, the commander, a colonel… they don't fly, they just command their squadrons… He gets the order to send up a pilot. It's absurd! It's a kamikaze mission! It's hopeless! He knows that whoever goes up is dead. They call a kid; imagine what kind of scoundrels they are! They designate a young pilot a lieutenant, and he fainted when he heard his name. Fainted! Milenko got enraged; he got up in his jeans, grabbed a helmet, attached the plane to a strap, pulled it to the runway, and took off. He had no radar, nothing; he went up blind. He went up to die. Now, he's not a hero because he wasn't defending the sky above Valjevo, as they say... he wasn't defending the sky above Valjevo. He wasn't defending Valjevo either. He was defending Milomir Minić! It has nothing to do with the sky; why didn't they take off on May 2? Defend the Colony!? Well, they didn't defend; not a single plane took off. Not a single plane took off!!! They let us die... They hit us however they could. And now Milomir Minić is being defended! There's a big difference.

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In one of the later interviews, Tatjana, who was 24 years old during the bombing, clearly stated these ideas:

> I believe that no one has a bad opinion of Milenko, although, after the bombing, people talked that he was sacrificed for nothing because on that day, a delegation of the Serbian Socialist Party was in Krušik. Since they knew that Krušik was the target, they supposedly needed Milenko, or a plane, for a diversion until they evacuated. I watched the documentary films where the pilots talk about that, and one of them; I forgot his name, literally said that they were all sacrificed. They were aware of it, and in the end, Milenko could not stand the pressure anymore because he knew if it were not him, it would be someone else. So, he sacrificed himself. But in my opinion, that is additional heroism because you are aware of the way they abuse you, you are not defending only the state from patriotic passions, but you are completely aware of the insane politics (*suluda politika*) that brought you to that, and you still go to death. You spoke to Petar. He probably told you…

Indeed, Petar, a war veteran from Bosnia who fought the wars from the first half of the nineties in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, explained to me his point of view from the perspective of a former soldier. For him, Milenko is a hero because he managed to curb the frenzied war machinery from sending any more pilots to death. Petar rounded it up, saying: "Milenko Pavlović is a hero because he put a full stop to something that should not happen in the first place."

The narratives from Tatjana and Petar underscore the nuanced discussions surrounding Milenko Pavlović and the NATO bombing. Tatjana's perspective suggests that Milenko Pavlović's actions were a form of conscious resistance against the "insane politics" that put him in his situation, adding an extra layer to his heroism. Petar, a war veteran, posits that Pavlović's heroism lay in the ability to halt the reckless endangerment of more pilots. These complexities lead to Scheipers' concept of post-heroism, which offers a framework for understanding the shifting ideas about heroism. The varied accounts from the interviews disrupt the straightforward, patriotic narratives of Pavlović as a straightforward hero employed by the state to support the victimizing narratives about the NATO bombing. Informed by the lived experiences of war, labor, and survival, these alternative viewpoints challenge the political and ethical structures that placed Milenko Pavlović—and others—in such precarious situations. Such narratives can be seen as manifestations of post-heroic discourse, enabling a deeper and

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more nuanced understanding of contemporary conflicts beyond the simplistic narratives often offered by mainstream or state-sponsored viewpoints.

5.4. Conclusion

The exploration of Milenko Pavlović's heroism through the lens of post-heroism has laid bare the intricate web of ethical, political, and social complexities inherent in modern conflicts. While the official narratives continue to uphold Pavlović as a symbol of national victimization and the David vs. Goliath narrative, this chapter revealed that local perceptions and remembrances offer a more nuanced view. Specifically, people in Valjevo use the memory of Pavlović not merely to celebrate his heroism but also to critique the political machinations of the 1990s Yugoslav regime that ultimately led to NATO bombing.

The dichotomy between the official and vernacular remembrances of Milenko Pavlović elucidates two contrasting realities. On the one hand, the state-sponsored narrative obscures the conflict's political dimensions, aligning closely with a traditional, nineteenth-century romantic notion of heroism aimed at fostering national unity. On the other hand, the local community, enriched by their lived experiences and shared memories, critically examines the layers of Pavlović's heroism, thereby returning the political element to the collective memory of the war. In this regard, Milenko Pavlović remains a hero, but one whose heroism resonates on different frequencies depending on the interpretive lens applied. This duality challenges the state's monopoly on the construction of heroism and memory, providing room for more detailed ethical and political examinations of modern conflicts.

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Returning to the moment when Colonel Milenko Pavlović took a young pilot out of the cockpit, declaring, “Damn you children, you won’t be the ones to die, I will!”—the chapter revealed that his curse might have been intended not for the young pilots but for those who orchestrated the dire circumstances that led him to climb into that cockpit. Here, his swear becomes a microcosm of the broader ethical and political quandaries that informed his actions, as well as the narratives that have subsequently emerged to interpret his legacy. Thus, in examining the memory of Milenko Pavlović, this chapter has endeavored to contribute to a more comprehensive and critically engaged discourse about war, heroism, and their roles in contemporary society.

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Chapter 6: Ghosts of War in Serbia

By the time of the twentieth anniversary of the NATO bombing, it had become evident that the state intended to integrate the image of the soldiers into the official commemorative narratives. Although the army was notably absent from the narrative at the central commemoration in Niš, the Serbian Ministry of Defense organized a large exhibition titled "Defense 78" (*Odbrana 78*), dedicated solely to the role of the military in the NATO bombing. I learned about the exhibition through social media while I was doing fieldwork connected to Milenko Pavlović in Valjevo. As his name and last name colonized my life in those days, both offline and online, the Instagram algorithm started to offer me photos from this exhibition where an entire section was dedicated to Milenko Pavlović. I learned about it through the hashtag #odbrana78. The viral images of wax figures of soldiers in a dimly lit environment, along with videos of oversized talking heads of politicians affixed to walls, circulated widely on social media. This content, alongside other engaging materials shared online, suggested that the exhibition would be a departure from the conventional displays of photographs and text seen at the Beoforum exhibition earlier in March.

I was looking forward to visiting the exhibition while the issue of veterans started to interest me more, as it gained more media space around the twentieth anniversary of the NATO bombing. The issue of veterans provoked my interest as it was completely counter-intuitive to me that the state could silence over half a million people after such mediatized wars. Even though the veterans sporadically appeared throughout my fieldwork, I wondered how to incorporate them in the wider portrayal of the processes that produce victimhood in Serbia. As the state abandoned this large group of people who participated in the wars, I often wondered

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if they were also victims of the wars in a particular way, but definitely not in the way desired by the state.

In late October 2019, after my fieldwork had officially ended, I encountered an intriguing sight in a park opposite the National Assembly in central Belgrade. During a non-research-related trip to the city, I noticed a tent that appeared to be associated with war veterans, owing to its military-style, olive-green color, and camouflage design. I passed by it several times, but as it was raining these days, no people were around, so I turned to news outlets to gather more information. I was surprised that the media coverage was disproportionally small to the relatively large size of the tent. Only several hints, mainly from the independent media, revealed that the war veterans started a protest on October 5, 2019. They demanded the withdrawal of the newly proposed law on veterans and disabled veterans' protection, the establishment of a Veterans Ministry, and a veterans subsidy (BETA News Agency 2019).

In January 2020, I returned to Belgrade and found that the same large, olive-colored tent had remained in place. This time, however, there were numerous smaller tents around it (Figure 34). A sign reading "Protest of the veterans of the 1991-1999 wars" marked the camp, enclosed by a rope. Near the park's entrance, a banner hanging from the World War I monument declared 'Defending the Homeland.' The day was sunny and warm, and several men sat outside the main tent. Seizing the opportunity, I went inside to learn more about what was happening.

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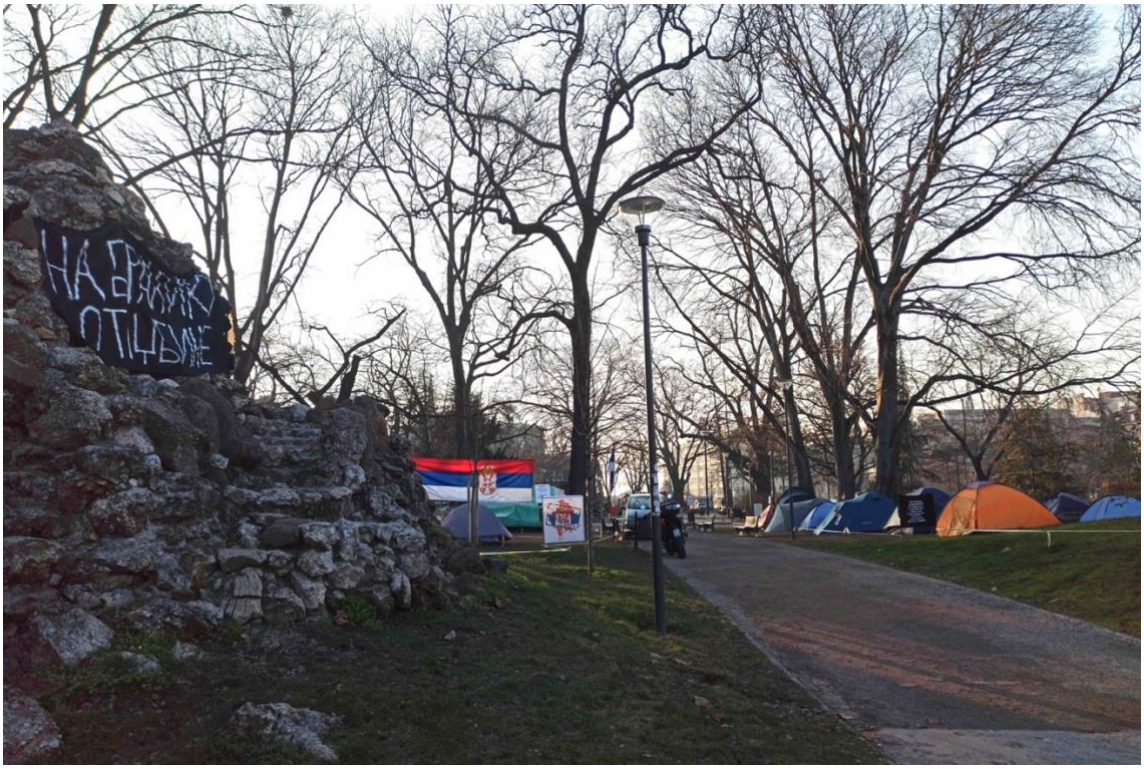

Figure 24 - Veteran's camp
January 2020, photo by the author

This chapter contrasts the veterans' protests, which called for increased acknowledgment and respect from the state, with an exhibition initiated by the Ministry of Defense for the twentieth anniversary of the bombing that commemorates the role of the Serbian army. The chapter juxtaposes the state's idealized representation of soldiers, devoid of any implications of human rights abuses or violations of the laws of war, against the protest of the veterans who fought in that same war yet describe themselves as "devoid of dignity."

6.1. At the exhibition "Defense 78"

The "Defense 78" exhibition opened on April 17, 2019, in the Museum of the City of Belgrade - an old, ruined building without a permanent collection that occasionally hosts major cultural events like Fashion Week, Design Week, yearly contemporary art showcase October Salon, and on this occasion, a commemorative exhibition. The dark, empty building with ruined walls

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was filled with military equipment, including anti-missile systems, firearms, mines, barricades, and replicas of bomb shelters and military headquarters. While the commemoration in Niš provided a classical theatrical demarcation between the audience and the stage, the exhibition "Defense 78" offered an immersive experience of the bombing. From room to room, the visitor walked through the horrifying scenes of the war in Kosovo and the bombing. The soundscape of the exhibition further immersed the visitors in the atmospheric sounds of the battlefields, bomb shelters, and army headquarters.

The exhibition's first part gave a narrative context of the NATO bombing. The first space visitors encountered featured panels with photographs from the 1998-99 Kosovo War and the timeline of the conflict. The accompanying text provided a historical narrative, focusing primarily on the unrest instigated by ethnic Albanians in Kosovo throughout the 1990s, framed as the assault on the Serbian constitution due to the Albanian separatist strivings. In the next room, shrouded in darkness, two enormous plaster heads were mounted high on the walls. The heads were animated by projections of the faces of various politicians who spoke in favor of the bombing. The projections were cast in 3D, which created the illusion that these oversized heads were actually speaking the words themselves (Figure 35). The images and speeches changed in a loop, imbuing the dark room with the ambiance of a horror movie scene.

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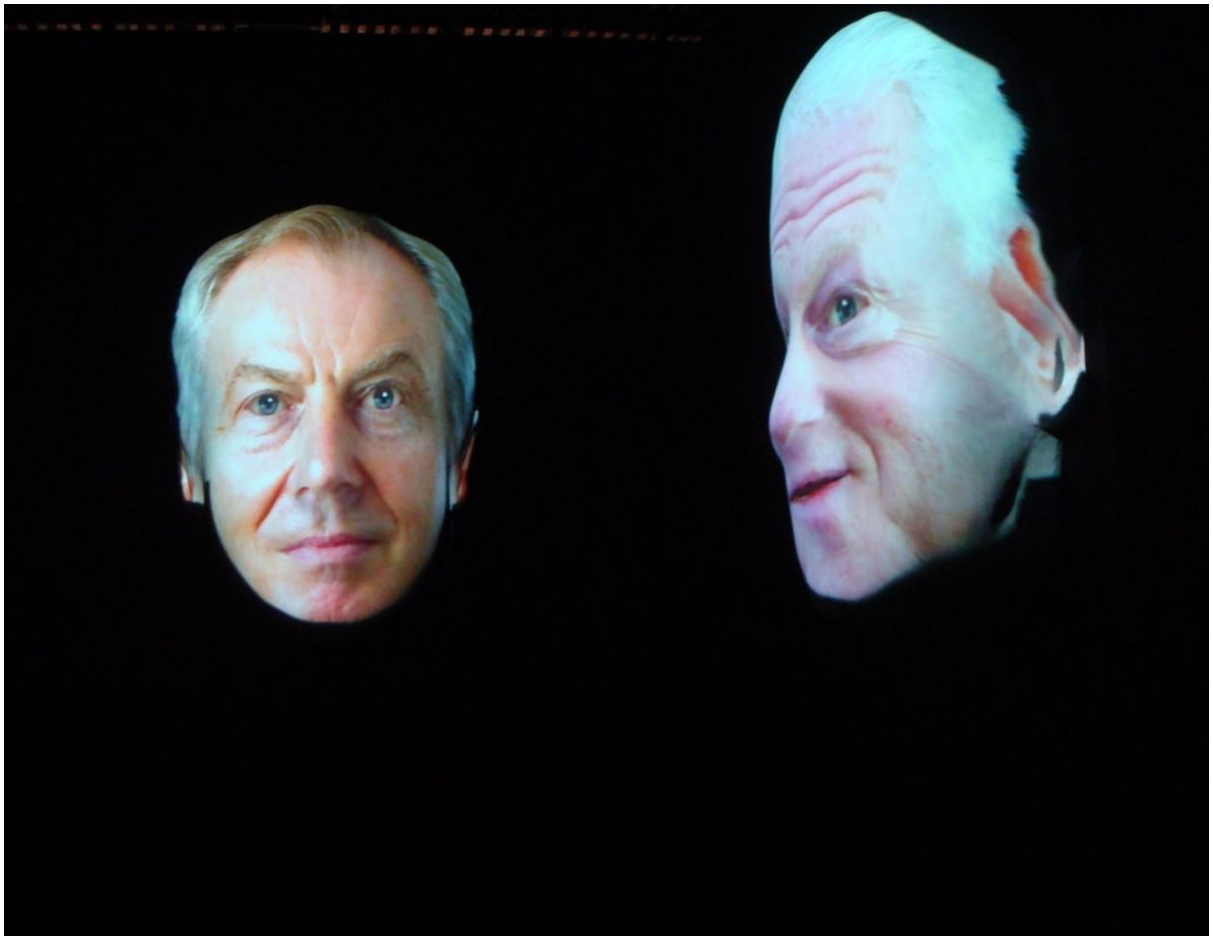

Figure 25 - Plaster heads attached to the walls
Photo by the author

The following space contained panels with large-size photographs of Serbian friends and enemies, along with their statements about the bombing; among them was Alexandr Lukashenko, represented as the friend and an *Eastern* anti-imperialist who criticized the bombing, and Madeleine Albright, represented as the enemy, a *Western* proponent of interventionism. The first three spaces aimed to root and orient the visitors historically and ideologically by distinguishing friends from enemies and the culprits from the innocent. They framed the ethnic Albanians from Kosovo as terrorists organized in the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), fighting for the anti-constitutional Kosovo independence, and NATO as their ally. Exiting the third space, the visitor comes across a ramp and a wax figure of a soldier guarding it (Figure 36). From this point on, an immersive experience into 78 days of NATO bombing begins, or as the name of the exhibition suggests, 78 days of defense.

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Figure 26 - A wax figure of a soldier guarding the ramp
photo by the author

All the narrative elements represented in the analysis of the commemorations in the thesis crystalized in the exhibition's immersive, hyper-realistic setting. One room featured wax figures of KLA fighters poised for attack, machine guns raised. Another displayed a wax figure of a young girl seated in a partially destroyed bomb shelter. Parts of the airplane MIG-29 and a whole part dedicated to Milenko Pavlović showed the tragedy of the Serbian pilots during the bombing. A worn, corroded anti-missile assembly and wax figures of a Serbian soldier who operated it testified to the Serbian army's technical backwardness but military excellence because that outdated piece of equipment managed to down the state-of-the-art F117A "invisible" airplane. In the next room, a radio-active bullet and a fax figure of a soldier with a Geiger counter served as a reminder of the scale of NATO's inhumanity and the consequences of the bombing that turned all Serbs into victims for another four million years (Figure 37).

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Figure 27 - DU bullets
Photo by the author

Towards the end of the exhibition, a tree with small screens hanging from the branches showed images of civilian victims, with children's shoes scattered below the tree and an oversized print of Little Milica on the wall next to the installation. The tree and the shoes unmistakably evoked images of commemorative installations found in Holocaust museums, where the pile of shoes left behind WWII deportations is a recurring motif. This installation created an implicit link, aligning the suffering of the Serbs in 1999 with the historical suffering of the Jews during the Holocaust.

The exhibition's final room featured a 3D projection of a burning cross, symbolizing endangered Orthodoxy and the *West*'s attack on Orthodox Christian values, a motif that represents an integral part of conspiracy theories in Serbia about the conflict between the *West*

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and the *East*, Catholicism, and Orthodoxy, and the NATO bombing as part of a plot to exterminate Serbs (Figure 38).

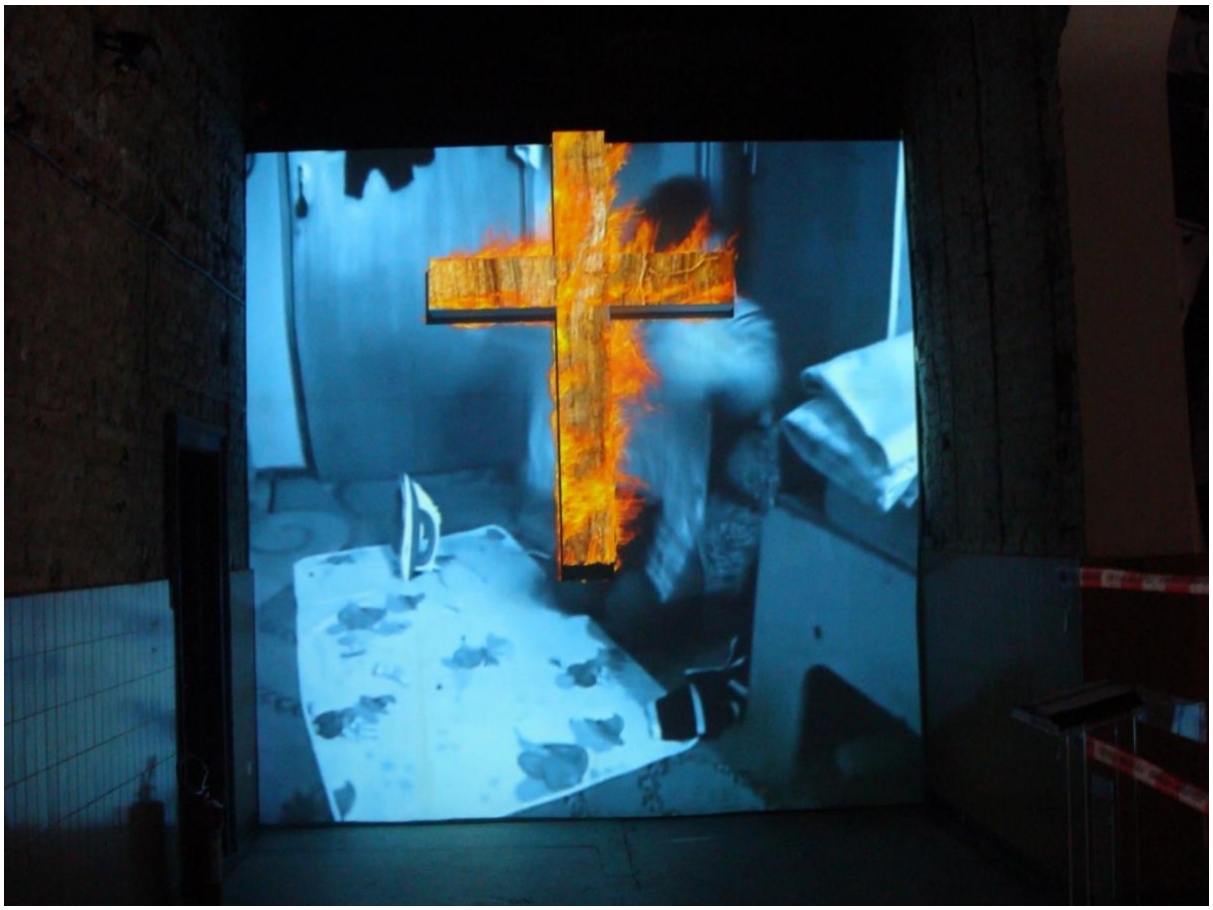

Figure 28 - The Burning Cross
Photo by the author

Most of the items displayed at the exhibition were documentary in nature, consisting of actual military equipment and photographs, videos, and audio recordings captured or produced during 1999. The treatment of these objects, however, was artistic. For example, the anti-aircraft system was not merely showcased as a documentary object with accompanying text, as one might expect in a historical exhibition. Instead, it was complemented by a wax figure of a Serbian soldier operating it (Figure 39). This blend of authentic material artifacts from the conflict and supplementary elements like wax figures, drawings, cardboard cutouts, sculptures, and 3D projections created a hyper-realistic space replete with reenacted scenes and situations. Rebeca Schneider claims that reenactments are not primarily artistic forms; instead, they

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belong to a "some nether-space between theatre, history museum, religious ritual, sport, hobby, craft fair, archeological dig, educational field trip, anthropological fieldwork, religion, and… yes, art installation" (Schneider 2011:13). This exhibition belonged exactly in a space between history and arts, but also history and politics. In the same fashion as the other commemorative events, this exhibition continued to silence Serbian responsibility for the 1990s wars and the NATO bombing, portraying the Serbian side as the innocent defender against Albanian terrorism and its NATO allies.

Figure 29 - Soldier (wax figure) operates anti-missile system
photo by the author

The manipulation of the light and sound design at the exhibition induced fear and effectively dictated the visitors' emotional response. Darkened spaces, accompanied by the haunting sounds of battlefields and the ominous echoes of bombs falling from the sky, created an immersive, visceral journey that followed the visitor through each room of the exhibition.

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On the day of my visit, I was the sole visitor to the museum. Being alone in the space heightened the already eerie atmosphere filled with weaponry, images and sounds of suffering and destruction. A young soldier followed me throughout the whole exhibition. His presence amplified the unsettling nature of the space. It was not merely the fact that he was following me that evoked fear; rather, his movements amidst the lifelike but static settings were reminiscent of an episode of the Twilight Zone, in which department store mannequins come to life.

At one point, being deeply invested in the scenery, standing next to a reenacted army headquarters (Figure 40), the soldier who was tailing me appeared next to three wax figures. I was genuinely frightened for a moment, momentarily forgetting my surroundings and the context. Dressed identically to the wax figures and of similar stature, he was almost indistinguishable from them. I expressed my discomfort directly to him, saying that I understand that it was his job to follow me due to the presence of military equipment on display and that it was his duty to protect the space from damage, but that I prefer him to walk together with me as his movement frightens me. Surprisingly, he admitted to accompanying me not because he has to, but because he himself found it disquieting and felt more comfortable walking alongside visitors than roaming alone. “I’m sorry, but I find this exhibition really creepy. It’s like a haunted house,” he confessed.

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Figure 30 - Serbian soldiers at a battlefield headquarters
Source: Serbian Ministry of Defense website

In Serbian language, the literal translation of the term haunted house is "the house of ghosts" (*kuća duhova*). The young soldier's remark accurately captured the atmosphere within the museum. It seemed that ghosts tended to haunt commemorations that I was visiting. My interlocutor Vera, the producer of the commemoration in Niš, commented that the sight of the children at the stage in Niš "all in white, without blood, pretty and happy, it provides closure, it settles the ghosts, and you can move forward." This led me to ponder who are the ghosts that haunt these stages and that need to be settled in Serbia. Here, in this "house of ghosts" among the wax soldiers defending the state from the Albanian terrorists and NATO, frozen in the reenacted moments of the battlefields, I wondered if the wax figures were the ghosts of this house or if there was something else haunting this exhibition.

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6.2. Hyperrealism vs. Realism – Spirits and the Ghosts of War

Placing history in museums and constructing *truth* through museological practice is, as Amy Sodaro (2018:2) shows, "part of the ever-growing trend of 'dark tourism'." This trend marks a significant shift in the late 20th century regarding how societies, nations, and groups remember past violence. Sodaro underscores that museums are not neutral spaces but are "deeply political institutions" that serve as "mechanisms of political legitimation" (Sodaro 2018:4). Sodaro further argues that the memorial museums "as new and unique cultural forms, work to engage and educate the public to be moral citizens through the use of experiential and affective strategies intended to encourage an emotional response, identification with the victims, and empathy" (Sodaro 2018:6). Sodaro argues that the memorial museums often aim to promote democratic values among their visitors and within broader societies. They do this by highlighting the dire consequences that can ensue in absence of such values. These institutions, therefore, act as tools for political validation while striving to impart important lessons from history. This form of commemoration is becoming increasingly widespread globally, suggesting, within the framework of the liberal TJ regime, that a more peaceful and democratic society can be achieved by critically engaging with the past. However, Sodaro points out that these museums often have specific political agendas that may undermine the declared liberal objectives of openly confronting and learning from the troubled past. Her research reveals that the motivations behind establishing these museums are more complex, often serving not just to confront the past but also to reflect the viewpoints and agendas of the contemporary regimes that create them.

Sodaro argues that memorial museums most often focus on "what is most painful in the past" (Sodaro 2018:10). Echoing this claim, it can be argued that a painful topic for Serbian

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society is the role of the Serbian Army in the Kosovo War. The numerous war crimes attributed to both the Serbian Army and special police forces continue to dominate the international narrative of the Kosovo War, serving as a primary justification for NATO's intervention, which often overshadows a large number of war crimes also committed by the KLA. Returning to the discussion from the second chapter about the commemorative exhibition "ICTY: Kosovo Case," when Bekim Blakaj presented several camps held by KLA, the debate at the exhibition highlighted a prevailing sentiment in Serbian society: that the burden of guilt and responsibility should not rest solely on the Serbian side. This issue returns the discussion once again to the moral economy of victimhood in the global TJ regime that purifies and cements the positions of perpetrators and victims for the regime to function.

However, as the exhibition "Defense 78" shows, the efforts to counter the perpetrator-victim binary inherent in liberal logic employ the exact mechanisms of "purification," albeit with reversed roles. In this exhibition, the Kosovo Liberation Army and NATO are portrayed as the perpetrators. At the same time, the Serbian Army is depicted as defending against two forms of terrorist attacks, first from the KLA and then from NATO. This framing absolves the Serbian side of any responsibility. Thus, while the counter-narrative advanced by the Ministry of Defense aims to diverge from the liberal paradigm, it still adheres to its underlying logic, solidifying fixed roles and thereby precluding opportunities for overcoming binary oppositions.

In efforts to purify the Serbian army from associations with war crimes, the wax figures of soldiers seem to portray a disciplined, professional military force serving its country. However, even though their ghost-like presence made the exhibition look like a "house of ghosts," they are not the haunting elements of this memorial exhibition. Aleida Assmann (2007) argued that in the analysis of the forms of remembering, a distinction must be made

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between spirits and ghosts: “Spirits are conjured up, they are called up; ghosts intrude, they come without bidding, they haunt us.” In the context of this exhibition, I argue that the wax soldiers function as spirits, a deliberate evocation of a sanitized, professionalized past rather than the elements that haunt the narrative. What haunts the exhibition and the memory politics in Serbia, in general, is the absence of hundreds of thousands of people who fought throughout the entire decade of the 1990s and are rendered invisible by the state. In the exhibition’s hyper-real space, the spirits’ presence reinforced the desired narrative about the army implicated in the Kosovo war and the NATO bombing. The ghosts, on the other hand, gathered, I believe, in a real space, in the park across the National Assembly on October 5, 2019, asking to become visible.

> Assmann (2007) argues that the ghosts:
>
> > represent something that returns from the past or the realm of the dead on its own will. This return is the symptom of a deep crisis; it is felt as a violent and threatening interruption of the present. Something that have been deemed overcome and gone reappears to announce some unfinished business that needs to be addressed.

The veterans started the protest in the park provoked by the draft law on veteran and disability protection. Yet, it was a broader dissatisfaction with their marginalized social status that fueled their prolonged occupation of the park, an effort that lasted for several months and was only interrupted by the outbreak of COVID-19. In my talk with the veterans, they expressed the grievances against the state that betrayed them and left them to fend for themselves. Several veterans who spoke with me pointed to the problem of the people who have been suffering from mental illnesses and who were abandoned by their families and cannot be recognized by the state and be attributed with some subsidies. This talk was provoked as one of the men inside the tent where we were sitting suddenly started to yell incoherently and walk around nervously. I probably appeared scared witnessing the scene, so the men who were talking with me at the table asked some of the veterans who were not in the dialogue with us to take him out. “You

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see him," one of my interlocutors said, "you will find dozens of cases like that only in this camp alone."

The overarching theme of our discussions was the quest for dignity. They were resolute in their demand for societal acknowledgment of their sacrifices: the sacrifice of their youth, health, and in some instances, their very lives for the state. *Dignity* was the keyword of our talk. While they introduced me to the bureaucratic challenges they face, the acknowledgment of their merits for Serbian society is what they kept first on the agenda of the protest. While talking about their role in the 1990s wars, the veterans placed themselves in the continuity with the struggle of the Partisans during IIWW. They expressed nostalgia for an era when soldiers were hailed as heroes and honored with medals, social benefits, and social status for their contributions. The way Socialist Yugoslavia treated soldiers from the WWII served as an example of how they wanted the state to see and award them. Contrary to these expectations, the state proposed a new law that would categorize them alongside any other individual who had gained disability status through illness or injury, making them feel betrayed and humiliated. One older veteran told me: "I don't want to draw comparisons with some of our former enemies, but they are recognized in their country to such an extent that no political decision can be made without them." Even without saying, he was referring to Croatia, where the 1990s war veterans indeed have a very important political role and are celebrated for securing the nation's independence. Finally, it was very important for my interlocutors that I understand that they are independent individuals protesting and not organized through veteran's associations. They expressed dissatisfaction with these organizations, claiming that they are all politically instrumentalized and corrupt and the main reason for their lack of social recognition and social benefits. Their claim goes in line with Lea David's findings about the fragmentation of the veteran community.

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I spoke with this group on January 22, 2020. They invited me to come to their protest organized on February 2, 2020, in front of the National Assembly. The protest was held on an unusually warm and sunny day for February. Around two to three hundred people gathered in front of the National Assembly. Veterans and some young men, probably their sons, stood in front of the assembly holding a banner with images of the veterans who died during the 1990s wars (Figure 41). They played patriotic songs, and several veterans gave speeches citing the protest demands and repeating the story about the lack of dignity I heard from my interlocutors in the camp.

Figure 31- Banners and the speakers at the Veterans' protest
Photo by the author

Following the conclusion of the speeches, the protestors initiated a march towards the premises of Radio Television Serbia. That route carries a symbolic significance within the context of any Belgrade protest that seeks to critique the existing governing structures, as RTS

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is perceived as a propaganda tool for any political regime in power. However, later in the evening, no news of the protest was neither on RTS or other more prominent media.

Heonik Kwon, in an ethnography of ghosts of the Vietnam-American war showed how ghosts of the people who died in the war in a manner not recognized by the state cannot be commemorated within the dominant memory paradigm. As a result, they come to haunt the everyday life of Vietnamese citizens. In Vietnam, ghosts belong to the cosmology of death, and people have the means to deal with ghosts and recognize their existence and reasons for their return. In the portrayal of the relationship of Vietnamese citizens with ghosts of war, Kwon (2008:19) argues:

> In order to understand how ghosts and humans become partners in social action, however, we need first to come to terms with the conceptual structure that separates the two in the first place. Ghosts in Vietnam are supposed to be attentive to the social affairs in the living world, just as the latter are fond of telling stories about their existence. This relationship of reciprocal attention assumes not only an existential proximity between the two groups of beings but also certain formal distance between their habitats. In this scheme, ghosts and humans are interested in each other because they are unlike (as well as like) each other.

In Serbia, the challenge of properly honoring veterans does not stem from the circumstances of their deaths but from the state's deliberate policy of their marginalization throughout their lifetimes. This marginalization has been taking place in both time of the Democrats and Progressives. The intentional sidelining ensures that the complex realities of the veterans' experiences are pushed into the shadows, effectively erasing their existence from the collective memory. This erasure creates an empty, haunted, space within the public's consciousness, the space that ought to be filled with the authentic stories and contributions of the veterans. Therefore, the state's summoning of the wax soldiers/spirits instead of the real-existing ghosts is yet another measure to erase the war history prior to the NATO bombing and obscure the image of the veterans.

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During my conversation with veterans in the protest tent, one individual admired my willingness to engage with them, noting the broader societal stigma they face. He told me that they are all aware that Serbian citizens are ashamed of them and that his biggest fear is that his son will be ashamed of his participation in the war. This man had been conscripted into the Kosovo war at the age of twenty, not as a result of ideological convictions but due to Serbia's system of mandatory military service. He expressed pride for not deserting but fighting to save Kosovo. After telling me that, he added, "how to expect to be understood and awarded by a ministry led by a minister who had avoided mandatory military service himself." Minister of Defense in 2019 was Aleksandar Vulin, who did not serve the mandatory military and while addressing him during the protest, the speakers did not mention his name but referred to him as "The Deserter."

The veterans were aware that the tarnished image of 1990s paramilitary groups, known for their pillaging across the former Yugoslavia (Ilić 2012; Vukušić 2023), negatively impacted their own public perception within Serbian society. As Goran Dokić, in a Ph.D. thesis about veteran organizations in Serbia, explains:

> Although most veterans of the post-Yugoslav wars had not been members of paramilitary units, these images resonated with the general public at home and abroad and greatly influenced the ways in which they were perceived after the war. When placed in the geopolitical context of Europe, their legitimacy was not at all comparable to that of the veterans from the Second World War. On the contrary, they were viewed as having waged a series of unjust, gruesome wars that were directly opposed to the ideals of freedom, tolerance, and multiculturalism – the basic principles that were also espoused by 'Europe' and the 'West.' This turned them into multiple losers, both in relation to the official ideals of their own 'democratising' and 'Europeanising' state (Mikuš 2011) and to the values of the 'international community.' (Dokić 2015:79)

Kwon shows that in Vietnam Buddhist cosmology which recognizes ghosts allows ways in which people can deal with these spectral presence by using traditional mechanisms for settling their wandering souls. In Serbia, however, the issue of veterans continues to haunt the collective memory of the wars. Veteran's grievances remain unaddressed while their existence

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stays invisible. The deeply divided society lacks the cultural rituals and societal mechanisms that might provide them with a semblance of peace or, as they would prefer, dignity.

6.3. Conclusion

In this final chapter, I have analyzed the portrayal of the Serbian Army during the 1990s wars, revealing the image that the state desires to project and, conversely, what it chooses to overlook. I showed how the purification of the categories of perpetrators and victims reflects the complexities surrounding the issue of veterans in Serbia. The argument of the chapter rounded the discussion about the liberal TJ regime through the case of the state's treatment of veterans. I juxtaposed the state-organized commemorative exhibition "Defense 78" against the protest of the war veterans in 2019-2020. In the broader landscape of Serbia's memory politics, the exhibition "Defense 78" revealed the state's incapacity to simultaneously acknowledge its own responsibilities, recognize Serbian victims, and portray the Serbian army in a nuanced light as both perpetrators of crimes and protectors of their own population. This inability to construct a comprehensive narrative reveals not only political constraints but, once again, highlights the limitations inherent in the dominant liberal human rights framework. By categorizing societies into fixed roles of perpetrators and victims, this TJ regime limits the ability of *post-conflict* societies to transcend these constraining classifications and actually undertake what it expect from them, to come to terms with their troubled past.

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Conclusion: Towards an Anthropology of Defeat

As I write the concluding remarks of this thesis, the war in Ukraine, which began with the Russian invasion in February 2022, continues to rage. This is Europe's second major conflict after World War II, following the wars in the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, the aftermath of which is partially discussed in this thesis. Despite the voluminous body of social sciences research generated by the Yugoslav conflict, it has become evident that such knowledge provides limited insights into the complexities of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Swiftly after the first attacks on Ukraine, the international community levied sanctions on Russia, disregarding the fact that similar punitive measures against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had little impact on ceasing hostilities. Likewise, Russian athletes and clubs are ostracized from international competitions and European leagues, echoing the treatment of Milošević's Yugoslavia but yielding no substantive political outcomes. Such measures have merely entrenched conspiracy theories centered around a perceived *Western* bias against Serbs (or Orthodoxy, or Slavs, or Russians), thereby reinforcing the politics of victimization discussed in this thesis. With the start of the war in Ukraine, debates concerning the extent to which Russian art and culture should be excised from public life emerged on the global stage, with some even advocating for bans on products and works as diverse as vodka, Dostoyevsky, and Tchaikovsky (Chan 2022). This conflation of all things Russian with the war policies of Vladimir Putin's regime risks vilifying an entire nation for the actions orchestrated by a select few.

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I argued in this thesis that the tendency to conflate an entire nation with the role of perpetrator originates from the underlying logic of the liberal human rights regime, which purifies categories of perpetrators and victims through the mechanisms of transitional justice. Such international politics produce collective guilt that devalues whole societies and totalizes their culture as violent, undermining the larger context and complexities of wars and the particularities of individual social positions. Today, all Russians are seen as perpetrators of an inhuman and unjust war against Ukrainians, echoing the image attributed to Serbs in the 1990s. The moral debate regarding whether entire societies must bear responsibility for crimes committed in their names has been a part of public and academic discourse since the end of World War II, most notably seen in the debates between Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers over "German guilt" (Arendt 1963; Jaspers 1965). This thesis did not have an ambition to engage in collective guilt and responsibility debates, as I am neither academically equipped nor inclined to do so. The thesis aimed to demonstrate the consequences of the pressures from the *West* in the shape of transitional justice that (unintendingly) labels nations as perpetrators.

Further, I showed how the attempts for emancipation from this identity give rise to a complex terrain of guilt, denial, and societal divisions. The thesis discussed the issue of commemorating victims on the perpetrator's side – a junction where paradoxes of this process materialize. The inability to find a moral dimension to frame these victims in the larger moral economy of victimhood of the liberal TJ regime leads to politics of silencing and denial which, as a result, prolongs hostilities and keeps the war and history in the present. More than 30 years since the Yugoslav wars began and more than 20 years after their conclusion, the region still struggles to achieve peace. Incidents that stem from wartime hostilities continue to be a part of the everyday lives of citizens. Examples of the presence of hatred generated during the conflicts are sometimes frightening, and, at other times, they resemble plots of absurd comedies. One

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such episode took place in Croatia, in the city of Dubrovnik in 2017, during the celebration of the Veterans' Day of the Homeland War.

The glory of Veterans' Day, filled with national pride and victory, was interrupted by an uninvited guest hidden within the goody bags that President Kolinda Grabar Kitarović was distributing in the city's kindergartens. This gesture, undoubtedly intended to warm hearts and spread joy, turned into an international scandal when a parent discovered a bar of chocolate called "Mony." "Mony," a humble candy bar priced at around 30 Eurocents, cast a shadow over the entire celebration when the angry parent realized that it was a chocolate treat produced nowhere else but in Serbia. While this chocolate bar can be found on the shelves of Croatian supermarkets alongside more famous Sneakers or Mars, in the context of the Homeland War Veterans' celebration, this bar of chocolate and its *national origin* suddenly transformed into a symbol of the Serbian enemy. It was as though this little candy carried with it the weight of the entire historical conflict, a responsibility far beyond its caloric content. The question remains, how a chocolate that is otherwise available and eaten all over the Croatian state can gather such a strong symbolic capital, that the president Grabar Kitarović had to apologize to Croatian citizens for distributing *Serbian chocolates* and promise that she will distribute a new set of goody bags with Croatian products only (Associated Press 2015).

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The "Mony" incident might have been remembered as a comical accident where random elements amalgamated to form a farcical plot, if not for the fact that Croatia had already been embroiled in another chocolate-related diplomatic scandal. Approximately a year earlier, the Croatian embassy in Slovenia sent a box of chocolates to the Slovenian Minister of Foreign Affairs as a Christmas gift. Innocuous enough, one might think, except the lid of the box featured a map of Croatia, boldly displaying the Croatian sea border with Slovenia in a disputed

region—a region still tangled in a legal arbitration process between the two nations (Knežević 2016). The Slovenian Minister of Foreign Affairs did not find this sweet gesture appetizing, interpreting the map as a threat rather than a treat. The gift was returned - an action that, within the symbolic language of the gift economy, could be seen as deeply insulting—perhaps even tantamount to a declaration of war (cf. Mauss 1990). These humorous episodes, laden with symbolism and fraught with historical and political significance, illustrate how even the most mundane objects can become flashpoints in the aftermaths of wars where "victimhood nationalism" prevailed as the dominant form of interpretation of the hostilities. The TJ mechanisms, with their pure categories of victims and perpetrators, did not manage to curb nationalism; instead, they gave it momentum to continue developing in peace, transferring from battlefields to mundane forms.

Without any wish to ascribe qualitative value to any of the political approaches discussed in the thesis, I showed the processes of emancipation from responsibility and commemoration of victims in a society that struggles with the troubled past and management of guilt. I argued in the thesis that the TJ *post-conflict* processes keep Serbia internally divided and locked in the struggles around the interpretation of the past. This enduring focus on wartime experiences not only sustains animosities within the memory actors but also permeates various public sectors, as exemplified by the state's use of depleted uranium as a smokescreen for welfare demise. In contrast to the post-World War II scenario, where the nascent form of transitional justice was facilitated by the unequivocal defeat of the National-Socialist regime in Germany, the post-Yugoslav context presents a different picture. Governments and individuals implicated in war crimes continued to wield power after the end of the wars, a pattern also observed in other post-conflict regions such as Rwanda, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka. I argued in the thesis that the inability to socially reconcile with the past wrongdoings comes

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from the *acceleration of time* within the TJ regime that does not allow time and space for the countries to process and address the complexities of their histories. The pressure coming from the TJ mechanisms to deal with the past impedes the development of a collective memory that is critical for healing and moving forward, ultimately hindering the establishment of a genuine and lasting peace.

In the case of Serbia, as this thesis showed, the political leadership that assumed power following the ouster of Milošević in October 2000 was ineffective in confronting the nation's troubled history. Serbian citizens were mostly left to individually grapple with the complex legacy of the preceding decade and their role in it. Calls from liberal civil society for official acknowledgment of Serbian war crimes and the establishment of memorials were largely ignored. The democratic political elite failed to draw a clear line between the past and present and to establish a moral and legal boundary between perpetrators and victims within Serbian society. Even though some of the political figures from the 1990s were sent to the ICTY, the Democrats never formally condemned the politics of the 1990s. Many actors from the time of Milošević continued to be active in Serbian politics, and by 2012, they had reconstituted their power. The unarticulated relationship with the past marginalized Serbian veterans from the Yugoslav wars had conflated them all into a group of unwanted citizens that induce shame within the wider population. The post-Milošević administration also failed to address adequately crimes against Serbian civilians which ultimately gave rise to the memory politics that frame all Serbian citizens as victims of an alleged broader *Western* conspiracy against Serbia. The ambiguity and "victimhood nationalism" effectively silenced any discourse on war crimes producing the counter-liberal memory framework in Serbia that only commemorates victims.

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The final question that this thesis raises is about the outcomes of the *new wars* (Kaldor 2013). Mary Kaldor argues that the new wars are set in the moment of "intensification of global interconnectedness" and are a consequence of "situations in which state revenues decline because of the decline of the economy as well as the spread of criminality, corruption, and inefficiency, violence is increasingly privatized both as a result of growing organized crime and the emergence of paramilitary groups, and political legitimacy is disappearing" (Kaldor 2013:4). New wars are characterized by a blurring of lines between war, organized crime, and human rights violations, and they often involve a variety of non-state actors such as paramilitary groups and warlords. This reconfiguration fundamentally alters traditional views on the outcomes of armed conflict. Within the context of these conflicts, the concepts of defeat and victory have become progressively less clear-cut, thereby enabling various parties to assert their own versions of triumph while portraying their opponents as the ones who have suffered defeat. During an interview I conducted with a retired Yugoslav Army general, when questioned about Serbia's perceived defeat following the NATO bombing, given the subsequent withdrawal from Kosovo and Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008, he articulated his perspective as follows:

> General K: Now, if we talk about defeat or victory in war, when a person wants to do something in life, anything, they set some goals that need to be achieved. If those goals are achieved, they say, "I have solved the problem." Similarly, the war began with mutually set objectives. Of course, our goals were to prevent something, while their goals were to conquer or to accomplish what they had planned. We can divide their goals into three groups: the first goal was the fragmentation of the former Yugoslavia, and it is clearly stated that this fragmentation would occur by separating Montenegro and Kosovo, separating Vojvodina, and dividing the southern part of Serbia – in quotation marks, a narrower region, you know for what reason – to divide it into multiple regions, and thus Serbia or Yugoslavia would cease to exist. That's one goal. The second goal was the removal of the state leadership, led by Milošević, obviously, as he was in power at the time. And the third goal was the disintegration – I emphasize, the disintegration of the Yugoslav Army. They said they would break up the Yugoslav Army within 78 hours and then do whatever they wanted.
>
> Astrea: Where were these goals prescribed?
>
> General K: These goals were prescribed in their documents before the start of the war. (…) "What of these goals was achieved? We are talking about the end of the war until the signing of the peace agreement. Firstly, Yugoslavia was not fragmented. So, that goal was not achieved. Secondly, Milošević was not removed. He was removed in the elections afterward (...) And thirdly, the army was not defeated. They withdrew. (...) But the fact is that this (*NATO's goal)* was not achieved. Therefore, the side that did not achieve its goals did not win. The opposing side was not defeated in that sense. Our goal was to preserve the army, to preserve the facilities that could be used militarily or with military-technical equipment... So, that's why I said the army was not defeated.

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And now comes the Kumanovo Agreement. The Kumanovo agreement! I emphasize the agreement; it was not an act of surrender; an agreement is something that is negotiated. Now, under what circumstances did we negotiate? When I say 'we,' I mean the state in general, even though the army was not in favor of the Kumanovo Agreement in the form in which it was signed. In what conditions did we negotiate? That's another matter. But the fact is that it was a signed agreement by mutual consent. Therefore, we did not sign a surrender like the Germans did in World War I or II, in Versailles or Berlin, so similarly, we did not sign a surrender. For these reasons, I assert that the army was not defeated!"

Listening to this general outlining his perspective on the outcome of the bombing, I realized that just like perpetrators and victims are not a simple binary opposition and ask for a more nuanced understanding, so are not the notions of victory and defeat, and that they also require a nuanced interpretation. However, when the general exclaimed, "The army was not defeated," it was clear that claiming outright victory was untenable. Both victory and defeat exist on a continuum of possible outcomes, each affecting different social strata in unique ways, thus challenging any reductive binary understanding.

In contemporary conflicts, the traditional notions of victory and defeat are increasingly ambiguous and, perhaps, irrelevant. *New wars* are fragmented, characterized by numerous localized triumphs and losses across the theatre of war, rather than a single, definitive outcome. Serbia, if we listen to General K, has not lost its wars, but certainly has not won them either. However, a closer examination of the wars' aftermath and Serbia's memory politics suggests that the actual defeat has transpired within the societal fabric itself, which has split into two discordant factions. The society has become so sharply divided that it has split into two unreconcilable factions, both of which are equally part of a shared history yet are incapable of mutual understanding or discussing their collective past. Sitting in the evenings at commemorations in the liberal NGO sector, and in the morning with former politicians from the 1990s, it seemed to me that the only link between these individuals is the structure of the language they utilize —la langue. While they can identify the words in use —parole, there is

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no consensus on their meaning, effectively rendering their communications as divergent as if they spoke distinct tongues.

These divergent views give rise to two antagonistic social factions: one follows the liberal TJ imperative to "come to terms with the past" by facing the troubled past on the expense of Serbian victims, while the other silences the troubled aspects of the past, giving prominence to the Serbian victims. Neither of them seems right or wrong. Their problem lies in their mutual exclusivity. As they stand irreconcilable, these divisions perpetuate and provoke hostilities, keeping the entire region trapped in the 1990s on an ideological, cultural, and political level, while hindering reconciliation processes. The political elites exploit these tensions, portraying themselves as protectors of the victimized nation, which prevents the opportunity for overcoming the past and building a future based on knowledge and acceptance of past mistakes. This regressive politics permeates everyday life, ethnicisizing it and banalizing nationalism, allowing the politics of the 1990s to continue to live in every pore of society. I argued in this thesis that this situation stems from the liberal human rights framework that oversimplifies the wars into pure perpetrators and pure victims, which cultivates a fertile ground for the constant reproduction of hostilities.

In a world increasingly characterized by persistent hostilities and a looming fear of imminent conflict, this thesis aimed to dissect the mechanisms that engender societal enmity and perpetuate a culture of fear. Eichmann's defense was based on the *cog theory*, in which he represented himself as a cog in an unstoppable machine led by Adolf Hitler. I strongly believe if we approach the machine critically and see how it functions, it can enable someone, somewhere, to plug the cog out, stop the mechanism, slow it down, or change its course. By examining the mechanisms that contribute to war and production of hostilities, we can

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collectively gain critical knowledge and potentially equip ourselves for future action. *Knowledge is power*, after all. As we witness the war in Ukraine unfolding, it seems to me that *historia* failed us once again as *magistra vitae* and is in the process of writing yet another textbook on a bloody war, dividing people into victims and perpetrators, pushing sides into victories and defeats. I wonder if it might be in the middle ground between sociology and anthropology, between victims and perpetrators, between victory and defeat where this thesis took us, that we could learn something for a better future.

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