

Disciplining Civil War: Serbian and U.S. Press Coverage of the 1990s Conflicts in Yugoslavia

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Abstract

This essay explores Serbian and US print media coverage of a number of war crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia. Utilizing Deleuze and Guattari work on fascism, the paper examines the theoretical concepts of *overcoding*, *micropolitics* and the *rhizome* in order to argue that both U.S. and Serbian print media coverage of the conflicts failed to provide adequate picture of the wars. The study focuses on newspaper articles in *Borba* (Struggle), a major Belgrade pro-government newspaper, and in *Nasa Borba* (Our Struggle), a leading opposition daily from Novi Sad/Serbia, during the Srebrenica crisis (July, 1995) and the fall of the breakaway Serb Republic in Croatia, (Republic of Serbian Krajina, RSK) (August, 1995). These newspapers' portrayal of the incidents are, then, compared and contrasted to the coverage offered by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* for the same period. The paper also studies the pro-government *Borba* coverage of the conflict in Kosovo (1998-1999).

The first part presents the collapse of Yugoslavia and the violence which accompanied it, arguing that the understanding of the tragedy necessitates attention at the *micropolitical* level. On the basis of Deleuze and Guattari theoretical concepts I contend that *molar* explanations should

co-exist with *molecular* analysis of sentiments and desires that invite for a new explication of the mobilization of war-like behavior in former Yugoslavia.

The second part of the paper highlights how the newspapers mentioned utilize *overcoding* as a strategic device to present the complexity of the civil wars. The analysis calls for a novel view to understand conflict, namely through a social practice of *molecular* and open discussion beneficial for a larger audience in global times.

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Mass Media and the Yugoslav Conflicts

The inability to rationalize war and create a coherent story out of a mosaic of complex fractures and awkward developments is one of media's major problems, in general. The coverage of the ongoing war in Iraq illustrates this difficulty. Up to this day, it remains unclear who the insurgents really are, as broad and vague descriptions continue to create ambiguous image. For example, the *New York Times* characterizes the rebels as "a nasty stew" (Oppel, 2007). In addition, journalists as well as US soldiers, fail to understand the tactics and motivations of the guerrillas. War correspondent Richard Oppel describes the "astonishment" of American forces operating on the main road in western Baquba after a night in which "over the course of an hour and 15 minutes, they gunned down four teams of guerrillas trying one after the other to plant a bomb in the same spot" (2007). The fighting itself is also hard to characterize. John Burnett, a war correspondent for the National Public Radio, struggles to place in context a situation in a rural community south of Baghdad. There, a Sunni group was fighting another Sunni group when

the Americans entered the village. Burnett described the perplexing standoff as “the enemy of my enemy is my enemy” (Burnett, 2007).

This paper focuses on similar complexities experienced by the media when attempting to rationalize the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the violence which accompanied it. The tragedies during the breakup (1991-1999) attracted significant attention mainly because of Yugoslavia’s location in Europe and the controversial notion of the Balkans. Similarly to the coverage of the war in Iraq, the representations of the violence were irreducible to common sense. The horror of the war crimes was unimaginable and the developments on the ground were unintelligible. For these reasons the media struggled to reduce them to common sense. Complicated historical and political developments became a challenge for the ethical attitudes underpinning media’s presentations of the conflicts. Between 1993 and 1995 the Muslim Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia united with the Bosnian Serbs to fight the central government of Alija Izetbegovic which they perceived as Islamist (Cohen, 1993). In 2002, in what was described as fratricide, the leader of the autonomous province, Fikret Abdic was found responsible for the deaths of more than 100 Muslim civilians in the Bihac area (“Bosnian Candidate Jailed,” 2002). The unity between Muslims and Serbs and the “fratricide” (Cohen, 1993) between Muslims in North Bosnia was perplexing for the Western media, because it distorted the traditional and deeply embedded “good” versus “evil” narrative.

I argue that the vast majority of the press accounts of the collapse of Yugoslavia fall into oversimplified narratives that do not reflect the complexity of the conflicts. Most of the stories reduce the depiction of these multifaceted civil wars by assigning immutable roles of victim to one side (non-Serbs) and perpetrator to another (Serbs) while disregarding a perpetually changing environment. The media in Yugoslavia and Serbia in particular is treated as

undifferentiated entity which gets the blame for inciting all of the violence and hatred. Erroneously labeled as “state-controlled” or “nationalist” the Yugoslav media was treated as a unified whole, not including opposition voices, such as the one of the mainstream newspaper examined in this study.

Through examining print media coverage of the conflicts I will bring to the fore the failure to understand the violence perpetrated by the paramilitaries in Yugoslavia. Thus I will argue that the extreme violence perpetrated by paramilitary units across the former Yugoslavia was not just the result of political developments on a grand scale, but it was also an expression of collective hatred which found its outlet not in the presidents of the republics (Milosevic, Tudjman, Izetbegovic), but in local warlords, such as Zelko Raznatovic—Arkan, Voislav Seselj, Ante Gotovina and Naser Oric. Accordingly, I will contend that locating a center or an entity to be blamed for the whole crisis (i.e. “the media,” Slobodan Milosevic, the IMF, “the Balkans”, etc.) omits *micropolitical* developments such as the social investment of hate and desire for annihilation at the grassroots level.

The first part analyzes the violence in Yugoslavia on a *micropolitical* level while the second part focuses on newspaper articles in *Borba* (Struggle), a major Belgrade pro-government newspaper, and in *Nasa Borba* (Our Struggle), a leading opposition daily from Novi Sad/Serbia, during the Srebrenica crisis (July, 1995) and the fall of the breakaway Serb Republic in Croatia, (Republic of Serbian Krajina, RSK) (August, 1995). These newspapers’ portrayal of the incidents are, then, compared and contrasted to the coverage offered by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* for the same period. The paper also studies the pro-Milosevic *Borba* coverage of the conflict in Kosovo (1998-1999). Utilizing Deleuze and Guattari work on fascism, the essay examines the theoretical concepts of *overcoding*, *micropolitics* and the

rhizome in order to argue that both U.S. and Serbian print media coverage of the conflicts failed to provide adequate picture of the wars.

Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and the concepts of the *Rhizome* and *Microfascism*

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) claim that everything is political, but all politics are simultaneously *macropolitics* and *micropolitics*. Social classes, parties, gender and ethnicity are examples of molar aggregates through which we interpret the world. However, there are *micropolitics* of perception, affection, conversation and so forth, which are inseparable from the great binary aggregates. These theorists also distinguish two systems—arboreal and rhizomatic. The arboreal is the centralized system of the tree—a deep root, a single trunk. It is a system which implies a hierarchical, one-way organization. The rhizome on the other hand, has a subterranean stem and it is absolutely different from roots and radicles. It is the decentralized system of the grass which assumes very diverse forms.

Civil war and asymmetrical warfare are rhizomatic and as such they resist being captured and arborified either by the media or the State. But during and after the Yugoslav wars journalists and academics attempted to do this by making “a portion of the signified [the war] to correspond to a sign or group of signs for which that signified has been deemed suitable, thus making it knowable” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.114). Since the outbreak of the Yugoslav wars in 1991, there has been an “unprecedented outpouring” of both scholarly and journalistic writing on the causes of the breakup. Reviewing this literature, Gale Stokes and his colleagues discuss more than forty possible causes (Allock, 2000). Sabrina Ramet’s (2005) review of the literature on the collapse of Yugoslavia also strives to tackle “a potentially confusing avalanche of work” on the issue with “dramatically different interpretations of what happened” (Ramet, 2005, p.ix). But what all interpretations and speculations share is the fact that they are so broad and general that

they cannot be wrong. Each line of thinking seeks to locate a single source or center which “caused” the collapse and often sink into what Guattari refers to “reductionist, neo-behaviorist and systemist perspectives typical of the Anglo-Saxon tradition” (Genosko, 1996, p.70).

What remains unclear is why all of a sudden neighbors turned against each other after coexisting peacefully for many years. In the complex ethnic mixture of the former Yugoslavia, “ethnic unmixing” (Duijzings, 2000, p.17) took place not only on the city, town, village and house to house level but also on the level of perceptions and affects. Such radical change in the collective behavior of the Yugoslav people calls for attention to sentiments and attitudes at the grassroots level. Deleuze and Guattari argue that “groups and individuals contain microfascisms just waiting to crystallize” (1987, p.213). It is important to note that when these theorists discuss fascism they talk about fascism with a lowercase “f,” as for them fascism assumes the social desires of repression and death and as such it can proliferate in every soul. Hence Deleuze and Guattari describe it as emotionally unstable regime propagated by the grassroots that is distinct from the rigidity of the Stalinist totalitarian states. Thus the well known French far-right politician, Jean-Marie Le Pen is described by Felix Guattari as a “collective passion looking for an outlet, a hateful pleasure machine that fascinates even those that it nauseates” (Guattari, 1995, p.15).

Deluze and Guattari argue that eventually *microfascisms* can crystallize and form a State which is suicidal. Following Paul Virilio, they claim that self-destruction of the nation is the goal and outcome of fascism. The suicide is facilitated by a war machine that turns the means of production into means of pure destruction (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). However, Deleuze and Guattari’s theory needs to be modified in respect to its relation to the Yugoslav state. *Microfascisms* can proliferate in non-Western societies, and Guattari discusses the term in

relation to Iran under Khomeini. In Yugoslavia the mobilization of *microfascisms* was instrumental in changing the collective subjectivity of the peoples inhabiting its territory. But, the notion that they merge to form a suicidal Nation State is related to Western European Fascisms in particular. Yugoslavia was a loose federation with republics in which socially, the Communist Party was much more important than the State or the ethnic identity of its citizens. For this reason, the fragmentation of Yugoslavia cannot be analyzed as a process of self-destruction because of the establishment of some sort of a fascist regime on a molar level. In fact, it was a process of ethnic unmixing which was often peaceful.

The weak tradition of statism, in the Occidental sense of the word, did not permit for the crystallization of *microfascisms* into statesmen of the Hitler or Le Pen type. But on the *molecular* level, *microfascist* desires were invested in local warlords (*voivodi*) in which Bosnian Muslims, Croats, Serbs and later Kosovo Albanians found an outlet of their hatreds. This is the main difference between the European fascisms of the twentieth century and the fascist manifestations in former Yugoslavia.

Warlords in the Former Yugoslavia

More often than not, scholars and journalists look for evidence of hatred only in the Serbian media and Milosevic's speeches. However, the persisting grassroots support for the leaders of paramilitary volunteer squads such as Zelko Raznatovic—Arkan and Voislav Seslej continue to be ignored.

Zelko Raznatovic—Arkan and his gunmen are accused of some of the worst war crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina. According to Burg and Shoup (1999) his incursion into Bosnia from Serbia was a major factor in escalating the tensions in Bosnia. His volunteer army (Arkan's Tigers) consisted of thousands of well-trained fighters, many drawn from the notorious Red Star soccer

firm. His militias were associated with some of the most heinous crimes committed against civilians. Slavenka Drakulic describes Arkan as “notorious for his ‘war’ against the civilian population, of which no real officer can be proud” (Drakulic, 1996, p.88). Nevertheless, there was tremendous grassroots support for Arkan among the Serbs. After his assassination in 2000, thousands attended his funeral and he continues to enjoy the status of a national hero. Arkan is a subject of folk songs throughout Serbia and the tributes to him on YouTube and other similar websites continue to proliferate.

Voislav Seselj, indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity by the Hague Tribunal, is another popular warlord in Serbia. He was the leader of the White Eagles paramilitary, which also committed some of the worst crimes against civilians and POWs. There are many manifestations of the persisting grassroots support for him. According to the *Los Angeles Times* in December 2006, more than 30,000 people marched in the Serbian capital, Belgrade, in support of Seselj during his hunger strike in the Hague (“30,000 protest,” 2006). In Serbia’s capital, his picture appears on trees and telegraph polls, and his name is written in graffiti on the walls of student buildings (“Seselj still,” 2006). However, the support for him was best illustrated during the 2007 general election in Serbia. The Serbian Radical Party, whose leader remains Seselj, despite the fact that he is in jail, won the election. Almost 1,200,000 Serbs voted for a war criminal notorious for stating that he hates “the Croats so much that [he] would have liked to gouge their eyes out with a rusty spoon” (Karpat, 2007).

In the Serbian area of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic have avoided NATO’s troops for more than a decade because of the support of the local population. Despite the fact that they are accused in genocide and crimes against humanity they have gained the status of legends and are subjects of folk songs. Posters with the slogans “Don’t touch them” can

be spotted in Serb villages and towns. Bottles of Rakia, or local plum brandy, are sold with photos of them on the labels. Clocks with their visages and the inscriptions “Serbian heroes” are also manufactured. The support for them is so strong that it is believed that Serbia is resisting their arrest because the government fears alienation of right-wing voters if they hand the fugitives to the war crime tribunal.

Collective investments of desire for annihilation were concentrated in warlords across Yugoslavia and the Serbs were not the only ethnic group susceptible to this phenomenon. In Bosnia, a popular Bosnian Muslim warlord was Naser Oric. Oric spent three years in the Hague, for commanding troops that destroyed 50 Serbian villages around Srebrenica causing thousands of Bosnian Serbs to flee (“Bosnian Muslim,” 2006). Similarly to Arkan, Mladic and Karadzic, Oric is regarded as a hero and he is not only a subject of folk songs but of a whole “Naser Oric Song Contest.”¹

In Croatia, Ante Gotovina is a good example of a warlord with tremendous grassroots support. He led the Croatian Army in recapturing the breakaway Serb Republic of Krajina when hundreds of civilians died and more than 200,000 had to flee their homes. Gotovina spent much of the 1980s in Latin America where he trained right-wing paramilitaries. Similarly to Arkan he had previous convictions for extortions and robberies issued by Western European governments (“Profile,” 2006). After his arrest two popular Croatian musicians known for their right-wing views, recorded songs with lyrics implicitly praising the general and his flight. Both songs became huge hits, especially among younger fans. In December 2005, shortly after his arrest several rallies took place. Some of them attracted more than 40,000 protesters (Karpat, 2006).

¹ To contest can be viewed at: <<http://youtube.com/watch?v=7e2QuYVI66g>>

The New York Times, the Washington Post and the Fall of Srebrenica

The extreme violence perpetrated by armed groups headed by local strongmen resisted explanation. In the West the media responded to this difficulty by *overcoding* the news. The French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, define a code as a device of power. They define a machine of *overcoding* as an entity which organizes the codes by fixing their position and rigidifying them. *Overcoding* differs from framing because it does not imply just a top-down process where the media outlet defines the boundaries of a certain topic. Deleuze's and Guattari's concept also acknowledges other forces, such as common people's desires that feed into a machine of *overcoding*. Thus the audience search for a imaginable and common sense reporting affected the news coverage of the complex Yugoslav conflicts. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* served as machines of *overcoding* because they rigidified the codes or the information flow from the civil war. They followed three rigid lines of reporting, all of them bereft of a coherent political analysis. The most popular was the story of the Balkans as a cradle of "ancient hatreds" and ethnic violence. The second technique was to report exclusively of the atrocities committed by the Serbs as if they had a monopoly on the violence. Third, Serbia and Milosevic were compared to Nazi Germany and Hitler which rendered any serious analysis of the violence needless.

The problem of comprehending the tragedies was best revealed after the fall of the town of Srebrenica in Eastern Bosnia. On July 11 1995, Bosnian Serb forces took over the UN-protected "safe area" and in less than a week of terror in what came to be referred as "Europe's worst massacre since World War II", more than 7,000 Muslim men and boys perished in and around the town. An article in the *New York Times* entitled *Bosnian War Bewilders a Midwestern*

Town, portrayed the struggle of the American public to understand the conflict. For example, the Father of the local church in this Midwestern town stated:

If I condone the bombing of the Serbs, or the arming of the Bosnians, am I not saying ‘It’s O.K.’ to violence? If nothing is done, am I not being passive to genocide? I don’t have the answers. It’s painful.

Another citizen claimed:

I try to follow the war in Bosnia, but it’s so confusing. It’s been going on for 300 or 400 years, I know there are atrocities going on. I understand Serbs are raping Muslim women, and kidnapping their sons (Rimer, 1995).

The newspapers’ response to this bewilderment was to *overcode* the information, through the three rigid lines of reporting described earlier. The *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* reported the atrocity but it seemed that they did not regard it as unique, but rather as yet another unpleasant event in Bosnia. On July 18, *Washington Post* journalist Mary McGory reported rather casually in her article *Dog Days for the News* that: “In the season that is meant for better things, for picnics and pleasure, Srebrenica brought all the summer sorrow we would need” (1995). Despite the fact that more and more information about the atrocity emerged, Srebrenica was still not a popular story and it almost disappeared from the pages of the US newspapers in late July and the months of August and September. Intentionally or not, the US obtained satellite photos of mass graves in Srebrenica in October just before the signing of the Dayton Peace treaty. It was then but not July that the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* exploded with news of the atrocity.

Borba (“Struggle”) and the Fall of Srebrenica

Similarly to the US newspapers the pro-government Serbian newspaper *Borba* overcoded the news. During the Bosnian war, Belgrade severed its relations with the defiant Bosnian Serb leadership. *Borba* followed the government’s decision by avoiding as much as possible the news from Bosnia. When Srebrenica came under attack the newspaper tried to block the information. In the seven days during which the massacre took place *Borba* did not report it on its front page. Instead three head titles addressed the annual harvest and four Slobodan Milosevic. Nevertheless, it could not ignore the tragedy completely. *Borba* followed a rigid line of reporting in terms of insisting that the Serbs were the only victims of the war. However, when the Bosnian Serb forces invaded the UN protected enclave inhabited by approximately 30,000 Bosnian Muslims, the Serbs unmistakably were the aggressors. *Borba* responded by representing the attack as an act of self-defense and claimed that the Muslims used the UN “safe area” as a military base. It reported that the Muslims confiscated UN weapons and conquered UN observation posts in order to attack the Serbs (“Jihad springs,” 1995). *Borba*’s allegations of the abuse of the “safe area” were not entirely false. Between 1992 and 1995, 50 predominantly Serb villages and hamlets in the Srebrenica area were burnt and plundered by Muslim armed units. As a result thousands of Serbs had to flee the area. In addition, in 2006 the Hague Tribunal found the former Bosnian Muslim Commander of Srebrenica Naser Oric “guilty of failing to prevent men under his command killing and mistreating Bosnian Serb prisoners” (“The trial,” 2006). However, *Borba*’s argument that the Bosnian Serbs “liberated” Srebrenica from the “mujahedins” was not enough to counter the emerging news of atrocities committed by them. On July 27, *Borba* published a response to a UN report which accused the Bosnian Serbs of

committing “barbaric acts” against the Muslims in Srebrenica. A journalist criticized Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the UN special rapporteur for human rights and accused him in being: the specialist in accusing the Serbs in human rights violations against Croats, Muslims, Albanians, Hungarians and all the other nationalities on the territory of former Yugoslavia from Vardar to Triglav! If he is dispatched to Tibet, Greenland or Rwanda, he will find evidence of Serbian barbarities there as well. Soon he would probably blame the Serbs for the disappearance of the dinosaurs (Gavric, 1995).

Mazowiecki was labeled “Serbophobe who represents the clearest example of the double standards of the West.” The author’s tone was angry: “If the Serbs did not exist he would have had to work for some Catholic weekly in Poland” (1995). It was clear that *Borba* was not comfortable with the issue. It continued to avoid the atrocity and it never included the specifics of Mazowiecki’s accusations. Between July 16 and July 31, Srebrenica was never mentioned. On July 31, the newspaper published a report on the Serbian civilian return to the town. It claimed that the Muslims left the town plundered, filthy and devastated. The journalist, Miodrag Negovanovic, reported that they kept their livestock in the church and as a result its floor was littered with goat and sheep excrement. The report presented a very grim picture of the Muslims’ behavior and praised the Bosnian Serbs:

These days in the hospital in Bratunac, several Muslim women gave birth. The [Serbian] doctors following their medical ethic and humanity provided them with help—help which does not recognize religion or nationality. However, this was not the case in Srebrenica. During the Muslims’ retreat from the town, they massacred Ivanka Gordic, a seventy-year-old [Serb] resident. [She] was slaughtered in her own home (Negovanovic, 1995).

Nasa Borba (“Our Struggle”) and the Fall of Srebrenica

The opposition newspaper *Nasa Borba* also followed a rigid line of reporting in terms of blaming only one party for the violence. However, it was fundamentally different from both the US newspapers and the pro-government *Borba* because in many aspects it also followed a supple line of news coverage.

Nasa Borba’s history is very interesting. In 1994, 126 of 171 journalists of *Borba* (“Struggle”), the pro-government newspaper examined in this study, left it to create an opposition one—*Nasa Borba* (“Our Struggle”). They worked in very difficult conditions and in October 1995 the journalists went on strike against their private owner. Between January and September 1995 this major opposition newspaper was published in a space of 150 square meters, using borrowed equipment, three telephones and no photo-lab. In addition, typewriters were brought from home and the journalists’ salaries were irregular (Matic, 1995). Their struggle against both the state and later against a private enterprise makes *Nasa Borba*’s history unique.

Unlike *Borba*, *Nasa Borba* followed the developments in Bosnia and published the statements and actions of the Bosnian Serb leadership. What is more, in contrast to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* which did not discuss the massacre in detail until October, *Nasa Borba* reported on the atrocities in Srebrenica from the beginning. After July 7, the event became a major topic of the newspaper. On July 14, *Nasa Borba*’s front page announced: “Ethnic cleansing on a voluntary basis.” On the next day, the newspaper declared the attack on Srebrenica “the most barbaric act during the war in Bosnia so far” and added that “serious violations of the Geneva Convention and crimes against humanity took place” (“New additions,” 1995). On July 18, it reported that Dutch peacekeepers witnessed severe war crimes around Srebrenica and three days later it published an appeal by the Muslim Humanitarian Union,

“Merhamet-Sandjak,” in which the organization pleaded to the international community to prevent the “genocide” in Srebrenica (“The failure,” 1995). On the same page *Nasa Borba* included *Doctors Without Borders* claim that its workers witnessed the “murders of thousands of Muslims in Srebrenica” (“The government,” 1995).

The newspaper’s supple line of reporting consisted of an array of opinions, ranging from those of the perpetrators, such as Mladic, General Gvero and Karadzic, to the ones of organizations opposed to the invasion, such as the Serbian Civilian Council. The council demanded an immediate end of the war and “the useless dying for the foolish idea of an ethnically pure Serbian state within the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina” (“Serbian sons,” 1995). In addition, *Nasa Borba* constructed its narrative by assembling information from a medley of Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian and international information sources such as UN reports, *Radio Sarajevo* (Bosnian Muslim medium), SRNA (The Bosnian Serb News Agency), *Beta Belgrade*, *FoNet Croatia*, *AFP* and various government and non-government organizations. But most important of all was the fact that *Nasa Borba* did not hesitate to cover the suffering of the Bosnian Muslims.

Although it provided multiple perspectives on the conflict, its line of reporting was also rigid because it aimed at utilizing every chance to blame Milosevic. However, the important point is that during the Srebrenica tragedy, mainstream Serbian media covering and condemning the Bosnian Serbs’ crimes existed. This newspaper exposes the inaccuracy of almost all accounts on the Serbian media which treated it as a singular, homogenous entity, such as a “brainwashing” or a “propaganda” machine. What is more, *Nasa Borba* reacted faster and more adequately than the majority of the Western media outlets.

The New York Times, the Washington Post and the Fall of Krajina

Less than a month after what was widely described as “Europe’s worst massacre since World War II” another crisis took place which yet again proved the rhizomaticity of the civil war. In 1991 Croatia declared its independence from Yugoslavia, but the Serbs in the Krajina region of Croatia rebelled. They established a new state—the Serbian Republic of Krajina (RSK)—which existed as an autonomous entity until its fall in August 1995. On August 5 1995, forced by the invading Croatian Army, more than 200,000 Serbs from the Krajina area in Croatia fled their homes in long columns of cars and tractors laden with their possessions. Hundreds of Serb civilians were shot, stabbed or burned during the offensive. The crisis is regarded as “Europe’s largest refugee exodus since World War II” (“Long road,” 2005).

The Krajina exodus was an ephemeral event for the US newspapers. It was *overcoded* by either being treated cynically or altogether ignored. The disaster was often described as a “window of opportunity” or a “triumph that has altered the Balkan balance of power” (Bonner, 1995). In the rare moments when the disaster was acknowledged, the US journalists tried to dampen its gravity. Statements such as “*only* two peacekeepers were killed during the fighting” and the “capital was not *severely* bombed” were abundant. In their attempt to lessen the seriousness of the situation some reports sounded schizophrenic. For example, Raymond Bonner of the *New York Times* reported: “For one thing, the hospital was not shelled, as had been reported. Only one shell hit the modern hospital building” (1995).

More often than not, the event was simply ignored because as an editor once told to Martin Bell, a BBC war correspondent: “In a war in which the Serbs had been the aggressors, stories of murder of hapless Serbs were ‘too emotionally confusing to be good for the public’” (Seaton,

1999). Nevertheless, the crisis could not be completely *overcoded*. Charles Krauthammer of the *Washington Post* wrote:

Why no anguish over the fall of Krajina, a region the Serbs have inhabited for 500 years, longer than we have inhabited North America? Ethnic cleansing will be tolerated if it might help end the war. There is either one moral standard regarding ethnic cleansing or none (1995).

***Nasa Borba* (“Our Struggle”) and *Borba* (“Struggle”) during the Fall of Krajina**

Of the newspapers examined, the Serbian opposition newspaper *Nasa Borba* was affected the most by the crisis. On August 6, Sunday a special edition of the newspaper came out to announce the fall of Krajina. “World”, “Economy”, “Culture”, “Sports” and “Entertainment” sections disappeared to be replaced by reports from the refugee column. Unlike the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, *Nasa Borba* presented the situation in Krajina as critical. It did not report of “only two peacekeepers” being killed but instead it announced that two Czech and a Danish UN soldiers were “murdered by the Croat Army for refusing to leave their observation posts” (2,000 grenades,” 1995). Also it did not report of “only one shell” falling on the hospital in Knin, but stated that a Croatian plane crashed over a medical convoy which was evacuating injured civilians out of the burning hospital in Glina (“Knin fell,” 1995).

Similarly to the Srebrenica crisis, *Nasa Borba* used diverse sources to describe the extremely dangerous situation of the refugees. However, the interviews with them were the real reason why *Nasa Borba*’s coverage of the crisis seemed intense and detailed. For example, one refugee claimed that grenades fell constantly over the column and one hit a car close to his own. Two women and a child trapped inside burned to death in front of his eyes. Other interviewees recounted how the Croatian soldiers indulged into a rampage of killing, looting and burning as

soon as they entered Serbian towns and villages. A young girl described how her parents and sister had been slaughtered before she managed to run away (Buniac, 1995).

The interviews with the refugees did not only reveal the humanitarian crisis but also their anger at Milosevic. They accused him in betrayal because he did not send the Yugoslav Army (JNA) to help them repel the Croatian invasion. They also accused him in using them as a demographic weapon. Many claimed that they would be resettled in Kosovo to boost the dwindling Serb population there. One refugee protested: “I have been punished enough with five years of war in Krajina. I would rather go back there than go to Kosovo and fight there as well” (“The police,” 1995).

The major change in the opposition newspaper was its shift in relations with the West and the US in particular. In its special Sunday edition which was printed specifically to announce the fall of Krajina, *Nasa Borba* reported that two American planes destroyed Serbian radar stations around the rebel republic capital Knin. When reports of shelling, burning and plundering appeared, the EU criticized Croatia. In response to the criticism Croatia’s Foreign Minister, Mate Granic, announced at a meeting in Geneva that the “USA advised Croatia how to accomplish a massive attack on the Serbs in Krajina and it approved the operation” (“War will,” 1995). U.S.’s involvement changed the line of reporting of the newspaper. Before the crisis *Nasa Borba* was full of criticism directed at Milosevic and never discussed the role of the U.S. or the EU. However, a week into the exodus, an article by the Editor-in-Chief, Gordana Logar, signaled a change. Logar condemned the U.S. not only for its support and approval of the attack, but also for ignoring the human rights violations committed by the Croatian Army: “Is an ethnic cleansing equal to the Holocaust when the Serbs do it, while justice when others do it?” (Logar, 1995). Criticism against Milosevic continued in many forms: through providing the bitter

opinion of Serb refugees; through the letters of readers who criticized him; through critical articles; statements of non-government organizations and many caricatures. But after the crisis, American politicians were portrayed as “ignorant” because they divided the people in former Yugoslavia between the “good” and the “bad” guys just like in a “cowboy film,” as Logar wrote. The pro-government *Borba* reported the fall of Krajina and recounted the armed attacks against the refugees. *Borba* claimed that “Croatia went from destroying antifascist monuments to shooting at refugees and ethnically cleansing its territory” (Lukic, 1995). It also condemned the US interference and praised the volunteer efforts and blood donations organized by Serbia. However, its reporting was not as detailed as the one provided by *Nasa Borba*. Unlike the opposition newspaper it did not include interviews with the refugees but only short summaries of what they supposedly said. There was a sense of uneasiness with the fall of Krajina and Serbia’s inaction.

Serb Pro-Government Coverage of the Crisis in Kosovo

The war in Bosnia ended with the signing of the Dayton Accords in October, 1995. However, the peace agreement was a disappointment for the Kosovo Albanians because it did not address the future of the province. One year later, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) launched a guerilla war against the Serbian forces in the region and Yugoslavia once again started to dominate the headlines. With the mounting threats by NATO to bomb Serbia, the opposition in the country found it difficult to counter the increasing support for Slobodan Milosevic. During the bombings in 1999 the dissenting voices almost completely disappeared (Pavlowitch, 2002). *Nasa Borba* was not spared and on October 15, 1998, amidst growing tension in Kosovo, under the “Decree on Special Measures,” the Serbian Ministry of Information closed the newspaper along with two other opposition publications.

The rest of the paper describes the pro-government *Borba* coverage of the Kosovo crisis. In contrast to its limited coverage of the Bosnian war, *Borba* dedicated most of its attention to Kosovo. The majority of its articles covered the attacks by the KLA against Serb police, army personnel and civilians.

Borba's reporting changed in two main aspects since the Bosnian war. In 1995, the newspaper often discussed the conflict in relation to a greater "Muslim problem" that threatened Europe in general. Thus it appeared that they accused the entire Bosnian Muslim population for the war. In contrast, during the Kosovo conflict, *Borba*'s accusations targeted the KLA specifically. The Belgrade publication aimed at demonstrating that even ethnic Albanians struggled with the KLA. For instance, in the beginning of August 1998, it included an article which reported that a fifty-year-old ethnic Albanian man killed his son because he was a member of the KLA and did not want to surrender to the police ("Killed his," 1998). The newspaper also argued that the Serbian authorities were naturally incapable of committing atrocities against civilians regardless of their ethnicity.

In addition to no longer identifying the enemy with an entire ethnic group, but rather with a terrorist organization, *Borba* also attempted to reach audiences outside of Serbia. Since 1998, a summary of the main news from the previous day appeared in English on page seven or eight of the newspaper.

Another change was the increase of anti-West and anti-U.S. rhetoric. Unlike the ongoing war in Iraq, the bombing of Serbia attracted broad support in the West. Even members of the Green Party in Germany, such as the German Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, advocated military intervention. In the U.S., Bill O'Reilly urged the U.S. government to destroy the entire Serbian infrastructure and insisted that "any target is OK" (Ackerman 2000, p.97). He was joined by

more “moderate” journalists, such as Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, who called for the bombing of “every water pipe” in Serbia (Ackerman 2000, p.106). *Borba* responded by increasing its critique of the U.S. and referred to the *New York Times* as “one of the extended arms of the US propaganda machine” (“Truth denies,” 1998). Front-page articles by the Editor-in-Chief, Zivorad Djordjevic, accused leaders in the West in “pedophilia, perversity and tendency to marry their secretaries” (“Psychological barbarism,” 1998). Opposition parties’ statements also started to be published because they condemned the US double standards and hostility against Serbia. For example, Vuk Draskovic, a long-term opponent of Milosevic, was often quoted in *Borba*. On August 12, 1998, *Borba* published his response to the German Defense Minister call for the bombing of Serbia:

On Monday Hezbollah killed one Israeli soldier. The entire Israeli Air Force responded with massive bombings of bases on the territory of a foreign country. In Serbia, Albanian terrorists killed four policemen and injured three just in a one attack and the German Defense Minister requested military revenge against Serbia because it resisted the terrorists. This is a criminal act against international law, the UN, and the sovereignty of our country (“The West,” 1998).

Conclusion: Overcoding Civil War and Rigidifying Coverage

The difficulties of understanding the dissolution of Yugoslavia continue to proliferate. To this day the major media in the West refers to the conflicts as “Balkan Wars,” despite the fact that Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Albania and Romania were not at war in the 1990s. The debate over the breakup and the violence is not only not over, but in fact it has turned acrimonious. In *Thinking about Yugoslavia: Scholarly Debates about the Yugoslav Breakup and the Wars in Bosnia and Kosovo*, Sabrina Ramet describes scholars who argue that military intervention did not solve the problems as “moral relativists.” Ramet and others who hold this opinion claim that

arguments such as this one are essentially approvals of genocide. In 2007, Robert Hayden responded in kind in *Moralizing about Scholarship about Yugoslavia*. By quoting Tzvetan Todorov he describes Ramet's argument as a “‘moralizing discourse,’ in which an author who claims to distinguish good and evil subjects the work of others to her putative criteria, ‘putting [her]self on the right side of the fence’” (Hayden, 2007, p.184).

What we need to realize is that during every war information is constantly budding and *overcoding* its manifestations hinders the possibility to understand it. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* followed three rigid lines of reporting the war. When they were challenged by information which could not be completely *overcoded*, such as the enormous Serb refugee exodus from Croatia, the U.S. newspapers seemed uncomfortable and even paralyzed.

The local newspapers, *Borba* and *Nasa Borba*, also *overcoded* the information, but the consequences for them were more serious. The pro-government *Borba* accurately reported on many acts of violence against Serbs that were excluded by media in the West. However, its rigid line of coverage was challenged by news of fictional and real atrocities committed by Serb forces and similarly to the U.S. newspapers *Borba* was not always successful in *overcoding* them. Today *Borba* insists that the government no longer interferes in its affairs, and it is obvious that the newspaper is very different from the one printed in the 1990s.

Nasa Borba line of reporting was rigid in the sense that it aimed at blaming Milosevic for everything. In addition, the financial support that it received from entities such as the European Commission did not help its image in Serbia. After the fall of Milosevic, *Nasa Borba* Editor-in-Chief, Gordana Logar, stated that the newspaper used “newsprint donated by the European Union” and admitted that *Nasa Borba* would not have survived without the “generous help of the European Commission” (Kurspahic, 2003, p.125). With the increasing tough talk from the West,

five months before the destruction of Serbia's infrastructure, *Nasa Borba*'s line of reporting could not be sustained and was closed by the government.

However, *Nasa Borba* also followed a supple line of reporting. During the Srebrenica massacre and especially after the fall of Krajina, it presented the opinion of both victims and perpetrators. It used a wide range of sources to describe the tragedies in detail and also did not hesitate to criticize the West when its role seemed detrimental to the Serb people. To some extent *Nasa Borba* illustrates how a conflict can be treated as an open system where reporting is flexible and knowledge is gradually built but not predetermined.

In conclusion, *overcoding* of the news produces a static picture and creates certainty which conceals the complexity of a civil war. Media that construct rigid lines of reporting are always confronted by lines of information which cannot be accommodated. This causes visible discomfort in these media and, furthermore, it can discredit and even destroy them.

There is a degree of impossibility on the part of language to describe violence such as ethnic cleansing and mass executions. Deleuze and Guattari state that language "always seems to presuppose itself, if we cannot assign it a nonlinguistic point of departure, it is because language does not operate between something seen (or felt) and something said, but always goes from saying to saying" (1987, p.76). An illustration of this is the testimony of a survivor of the Virginia Tech shooting. He remained alive while the majority of his co-students in the classroom were shot dead. In the interview he stated that "one of the worst things a human being can smell is death" ("VT Massacre," 2007). This example shows how language goes from "saying to saying" and nothing in between. This missing part constitutes our inability to comprehend the event. Language can not bring us understanding of what exactly is the "smell of death" and why it affected the victim more than witnessing the shootings of fellow students.

However, the solution to this problem should not be the *overcoding* of the news. Instead war and violent conflict should be treated as an open system, where reporting is flexible and our understanding is gradually built and not predetermined. The hatreds, desires and genuine attitudes of the society should be taken into account, but not just the “leaders” and “major players” role in a conflict. Victims should be allowed to speak for themselves without a narrator. Every source must be treated as a valuable addition to the story. Religious narratives of good and evil should be avoided and the collective memory of the participants should not be abused.

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