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Memories and Narratives of the 1999 NATO Bombing in Serbia

Introduction

This special issue of *Südosteuropa* brings together five innovative articles based on empirical research that focus on the memories, narratives, and histories of the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia (at the time still part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, FRY). It offers a selection of papers presented at a workshop held in Belgrade at the Center for Comparative Conflict Studies (CFCCS) at the Faculty of Media and Communications (FMK) at Singidunum University in February 2015. This workshop followed CFCCS's participation in 'On the Receiving End: Towards More Critical and Inclusive Perspectives on International Intervention', a research project funded by the British Academy in cooperation with the Centre for International Intervention (cii) at the University of Surrey.¹

In the vast literature about the post-Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, the 1999 NATO airstrikes have received little scholarly attention. Top-down accounts of the bombing campaign from the perspective of those who led NATO's war were available not long after the events,² but when we began our inquiry there were few accounts offering local perceptions of the intervention 'from the receiving end', detailing experiences and memories of the seventy-eight-day campaign as a prime topic of investigation and analysis. Therefore, in this special issue, we have aimed to expand the literature about the post-Yugoslav wars by taking

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¹ We wish to thank Marie Breen Smyth who initiated and led the project, and advocated approaching the analysis of international interventions from the receiving end.

² Cf. Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War. Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat*, New York 2001.

a bottom-up view that focuses on analysis of the events and experiences related to the bombing from perspectives that have emerged in the sixteen years since the campaign.³ By choosing this angle, we have sought not only to enrich the literature and the scholarly debates on the Southeast European region, but also to engage in the analysis of societies that have emerged from violent conflicts, placing a special focus on the relationship between society and remembering. Our interdisciplinary approach makes use of and combines the theoretical frameworks and methodologies provided by fields such as social memory studies, conflict transformation, urban studies, media discourse analysis, and oral history.

Soon after we started our inquiry, the richness of the experiences and the narratives about the bombing began to emerge, and the corresponding need for empirical research that would allow for the variety and complexity of several mnemonic communities to be documented and explored. In that sense, theoretically, the texts presented here approach the question of the memories of the NATO airstrikes in Serbia from the framework of social memory studies, and analyse collective memories as they are being constructed in present-day Serbia. While much of the literature addressing events of the recent past in the Western Balkans have focused on these issues through an analytical framework of transitional justice and dealing with the past, we attempt here to offer a more complex framework and interdisciplinary analysis. This special issue engages more profoundly with the memories and the narratives of the bombing to analyse not only the politics of memory, but also the broader context of the social construction of collective remembering during and after the conflict(s). Grounding our analyses in the literature on social memory can therefore enrich our perspectives and understandings of the complex processes of social remembering and forgetting, peace-building and reconciliation (or, rather, the weakness of these processes in relations between Kosovo and Serbia). In this sense, the insights of social memory studies allow us to analyse and to better understand the social organisation of memory, and the modes in which entire communities (and not only individuals) preserve, remember, and forget the past: commemorate, deny, or obliterate it. In addition, oral history, ethnomusicology, urban studies, and discourse and narrative analysis, which some of the texts utilise, shed light on the perception and framing of the events in Serbia during the months of the bombing as well as during its aftermath under the Milošević regime, and in the present.

While state-sponsored events commemorating the NATO bombing in Serbia have begun only recently to take shape and will deserve full-scale ethnographic

³ All research was conducted and completed in 2015, prior to the sixteenth anniversary of the NATO bombing.

research and analysis in the future,⁴ hegemonic memories already place the bombing campaign above other violent events of the wars of the 1990s. The texts presented here suggest that in order to map the current narratives and memories of the recent wars, and especially of the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia, one needs to look at the fragmentation of memories in the country and at the variety of mnemonic communities that distinguish themselves in many ways—for example, by region (Belgrade vs. other cities), ethnicity (the uniqueness of the memories of Hungarians in Vojvodina), generational belonging (the memories of those who experienced the airstrikes as adults differ from those who experienced them as teenagers, or those who carry no firsthand memories of the campaign), political engagement (memories of those who were part of antiwar circles in Serbia, as opposed to those who were not), and other aspects. Thus, side by side with efforts to create hegemonic ways of remembering the bombing in Serbia, there are alternative memories and a multitude of mnemonic communities that paint a more complex picture of ordinary people's lives during this period, and of their narratives and memories as they emerged (or were silenced) in the years that followed. The texts in this special issue attest to such complexity and nuance.

In the issue's first article, Orli Fridman analyses the memories of Belgrade residents during the 1999 bombing as they remember and frame the events fifteen years later. Primarily using the literature and methodology of social memory studies and peace studies, Fridman focuses on Belgraders' perception of the Kosovo conflict in the aftermath of the NATO airstrikes on Serbia, as well as on their often mutually contradictory, fragmented, and deeply personal memories. Her analysis of the interviews conducted with people who experienced the bombing as adults as opposed to those who were teenagers at the time, as well as with participants who were antiwar activists in the 1990s and those who were not active politically during that period, place the events in the broader context of the conflicts of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia. Fridman convincingly shows how the collective and the individual, the public and the private, history and memory intersect and create a dynamic structure of social positions.

In her article, Marija Mandić investigates commemorative discourses and practices through a consideration of the media coverage of the NATO bombing in Serbia. After providing an overview of fourteen years of commemo-

⁴ Regarding the state-sponsored commemoration that took place in front of the ruins of the *Generalštab* building in Belgrade in 2015, cf. Ivana Nikolić, Serbia Mourns NATO Bombing Victims, *Balkan Insight*, 25 March 2015, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbia-won-t-forget-nato-victims>; for the 2016 commemoration that took place in Varvarin, cf. Ivana Nikolić, Serbia Remembers NATO Bombing Casualties, *Balkan Insight*, 24 March 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbia-remembers-nato-bombing-victims-03-24-2016>. All internet references were accessed on 12 December 2016.

rative events as they have been represented in Serbian print and electronic media, she turns her attention to the marking of the fifteenth anniversary of the air raids. Posing questions related to the relationship between triumph and heroism and between trauma and victimisation, she explores the directions in which social memory is being constructed via state politics, and also by the church, the army, and leaders of other institutions. The interpretation offered by Mandić identifies continuities and discontinuities, encompasses mainstream commemorative policy and alternative voices in Serbia's history as framed in the discourses she investigates, and also grapples with theoretical problems centring on how nations remember: what and who is commemorated? By whom, where, with which practices, and serving which interests? What and who is marginalised or left out altogether of public commemorations?

Srđan Atanosovski looks at another aspect of FRY state propaganda during the NATO air-raid campaign: the government-organised concerts. Using an innovative approach, Atanosovski analyses not only verbal and textual content but also soundscapes, understanding music and sound in general as important layers of meaning production in the 'war machinery' of the 'state apparatus'. Atanosovski explores the relationship of music and lyrics at these concerts, as well as the recitation of poems, the sound of sirens, the noise created by the explosions, and other 'banal' aural stimuli. He sees the body, in its mental and physical aspects, as the object on which propaganda attempted to inscribe its interpretation of the conflict and prescribe the ways that experience and remembering should take place. However, as he argues, the body is not reduced to a passive instrument that merely absorbs meanings; on the contrary, the body itself has the capacity to disrupt or redirect processes of meaning-making, which makes it an active agent of governing and remembering.

In 'Achieved without Ambiguity? Memorialising Victimhood in Belgrade after the 1999 NATO Bombing', Gruia Bădescu explores the spatial articulations of the Serbian narratives about the NATO bombings, examining how the meaning of collective victimhood and responsibility in the national memory narrative is inscribed in urban space. He analyses memorial sites, and in particular examines the ways of engaging with the past evident in the reconstruction of the ruined Serbian Radio Television building in Belgrade. Bădescu maps the complex dynamism of the positions occupied by the 'triad of memory agents': the urban space that encapsulates memory, the state that aims to monopolise the narratives of remembering, and the local-level 'city makers' who accept and transform the interpretations provided by state institutions. Through his case study, he demonstrates the opportunities and challenges of urban memorials in Serbia in relation to more general theoretical and practical debates surrounding memory and architecture: who are the objects, and who the subjects of remembering and forgetting.

In this issue's final article, Krisztina RÁCZ deals with the mnemonic practices and the memory narratives of a narrowly defined group of people gathered around the Hungarian-language journal *Symposion*, who have published their internal electronic communication from the time of the bombing. Conducting a discourse analysis of these e-mails and of the transcripts of interviews with some of their authors a decade after the events, RÁCZ explores the specificities of this particular mnemonic community: their sense of ethnic belonging, political orientation, gender, and the peculiarities related to the position of the community and its individuals. The author identifies and interprets narrative patterns typical of the group, such as those involving entertainment, humour, everyday rituals, time, speechlessness, and literature, and in doing so, like the other authors in this issue, goes beyond the community of her case study to raise more general questions about victimhood, trauma, the nature of remembering, the constitution of a community of memory, and national commemorative narratives and their junctures and ruptures.