

Original scientific paper

Received: 10 October 2014 / Accepted: 16 September 2015

UDC: 327\$97.11+497.13\$“19“

341.485

Genocide Narratives as Narratives-in-Dialogue¹

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Abstract: This article aims to expand narrative analysis in International Relations (IR) by exploring narratives in mutual dialogue. The purpose is to move narrative analysis away from mostly static approaches that focus on speech or other performative acts, toward a more dynamic approach that focuses on narrative interaction and dialogue. While the logic of what narratives actually *do* in politics builds on existing work within the IR linguistic turn, I emphasize the process by which the content and rearrangement of narratives depends on their mutual dialogue, which makes narratives co-constitutive of each other. Examples of political narratives – specifically the competing narratives of *genocide* – in the former Yugoslavia and its successor states illustrate these dynamics. The Yugoslav space offers a great laboratory to examine narratives in dialogue as this is where competing state autobiographies bounced against each other, adapted, and transformed into powerful tales that justified (if not directly produced) state partition and mass atrocity.

Keywords: narrative, dialogue, genocide, memory, Serbia, Croatia

Introduction

Consider these political narratives on responsibility for the wars of Yugoslav succession in the 1990s:

In Croatia:

“Croatia led a just and legitimate, defensive and liberating, and not aggressive nor occupying war against any one; instead it defended its territory from Greater Serbian aggression within internationally recognized borders.”²

1 Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 28-31, 2014 in Washington, DC and at the Belgrade Security Forum, September 30 – October 2, 2014, both times to great benefit. I thank participants at both conferences, especially Filip Ejdus, Aida Hozić, Daniel Nexon and Ayse Zarakol, as well as anonymous reviewers and editors of the journal, for extremely helpful comments and suggestions.

2 Declaration on the Homeland War, Croatian Parliament 2000.

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In Serbia:

“Serbia has never in its history been the instigator of any wars... Serbia was always on the side of light and freedom and never on the wrong side.”³

Or another paired narrative, on the Croatian military Operation Storm in 1995, which liberated Croatian territory from Serb rebels’ control, but in the process contributed to the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Serb civilians:

In Croatia:

“[Because of Operation Storm] our nation realized its historic right to freedom and the Republic of Croatia realized fundamental preconditions for peaceful reintegration of the remaining occupied territories, therefore achieving its territorial unity and full sovereignty.”⁴

In Serbia:

“Operation Storm was the biggest war crime after the Second World War.”⁵

My purpose in this article is not to deconstruct these narratives or adjudicate their respective veracity. In fact, I do not care much if either narrative is observably “true” in the positivist sense. Instead, I want to explore how these narratives came to influence one another and how without one, the other has no counterpart to build on. Moreover, I am interested in how these narratives themselves are agents of change, how they become social facts, which then influence policy. My approach moves narrative analysis in International Relations (IR) forward by taking narratives themselves as objects of study, and providing a dynamic, dialogical element to our understanding of what, exactly, narratives do in the political sphere. Instead of understanding narratives as simply stories that influence political action, I conceptualize narratives as being mutually constitutive in a communicative dialogue. This refocusing on dialogue then helps us take a broader view of both narrative construction and narrative diffusion across political space and time.

The article proceeds as follows. I first discuss the political nature of narratives and reconceptualize them as narratives in dialogue. I then illustrate the dynamics of narratives-in-dialogue through brief examples of mutually reinforcing hegemonic political narratives, especially the competing *genocide* narratives, in the former Yugoslavia. The Yugoslav space offers a great laboratory to examine the narratives-in-dialogue approach, as this is where competing state autobiographies bounced against each other, adapted, and transformed into powerful tales that justified (if not directly produced) state partition

3 Serbian Labor Minister, quoted in Ristić 2014.

4 Declaration on Operation Storm, Croatian Parliament 2006.

5 Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dačić, quoted in Ristić 2012.

and mass atrocity. Constantly in mutual discursive dialogue, these genocide narratives constituted each other and became powerful instruments of social action.

Narratives in Dialogue

The welcome “narrative turn” in the social sciences has begun, albeit slowly and somewhat shyly, to make inroads into the field of International Relations.⁶ Most of this research starts from the assumption that narratives are, fundamentally, stories with characters, plot lines, and events. Narratives make the past real, and shape our understanding of both our past and our future.⁷ It is through narratives that we make sense of the world and create our own identities.⁸ Narratives, however, are not just representations of our identities. They are actively reconfiguring social ties, drawing new boundaries of identity and political action.⁹ State narratives, therefore, are critical for state identity construction because they redefine how historical events are represented and fix their meaning in place. That meaning then shapes the parameters and scope of the present, defines a menu of choices states can select from, determines a state’s understanding of its place and purpose in the international system, and provides cognitive models for decisions that are appropriate and those that are not.¹⁰

Narratives can serve many different political purposes.¹¹ They can justify oppression and marginalization,¹² but can also help fuel resistance to domination and hegemony.¹³ Since they are often built on a clear designation of responsibility for past historical events that are perceived as unjust, narratives often contain proposals for how this injustice can be rectified.¹⁴ Narratives can also be used as a tool of great power politics,¹⁵ as political actors use narratives to align their political objectives with broader social understanding of international threats that need addressing.¹⁶

And while this excellent research has greatly enriched our understanding of what narratives actually do, politically, it continues to understand narratives as mostly static: once constructed, they perform a variety of political functions as described above. My

6 Roberts 2006.

7 White 1984.

8 Somers 1994, 606.

9 Tilly 2002.

10 Berenskoetter 2014.

11 For a much more thorough review of this literature, see Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle forthcoming, ch. 1.

12 Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking 2013.

13 Steele 2010.

14 Langenbacher 2010, 19.

15 Mattern 2005.

16 Bentley 2013.

purpose in this article is to move narrative analysis away from this mostly static view that focuses on speech or other performative acts, toward a more dynamic approach that focuses on narrative interaction and dialogue. While the logic of what narratives actually *do* in politics builds on existing work within the IR linguistic turn, I emphasize the process by which the content and rearrangement of narratives depends on their mutual dialogue, which makes narratives co-constitutive of each other.

Critical to my argument is to view narratives as *relational* – as created in the process of discursive exchange and not existing independently, outside of it. Narratives are not static, nor do they simply get transported from one actor to the other. Instead, they disperse among multiple actors, none of whom may have monopoly or control over any particular narrative at any given time. As they diffuse across time and space, narratives create new relationships and identities among actors. Narratives, as examples of discursive practices, then “produce social identities and capacities as they give meaning to them.”¹⁷

It is exactly because of these features that conceptualizing narratives in dialogue can be analytically useful. Thinking of them as examples of discursive dialogue, we can follow the process by which narratives – as stories with a plot, a set of characters and events – diffuse through time and space through an interaction, a *dialogue*, with counter-narratives with the opposing plot, characters, and events. The story then spins out of clear institutional and structural political control, but instead becomes dispersed – stronger with time, feeding itself from opposing narratives, and finding life in various nooks and crannies of social life – in art, history, popular culture, or education.

Borrowing loosely from Guillaume,¹⁸ who himself builds on Bakhtin,¹⁹ I apply a dialogical understanding of narratives as discursive exchanges. I conceptualize narratives as constantly in dialogue with one another, creating intersubjective meaning, and co-constituting themselves, as well as the social actors who produce them. Therefore, while Bakhtinian dialogism has been used extensively to discuss various possibilities of inter-state dialogue,²⁰ I am not primarily interested in how states as actors engage in dialogue with one another, but how state *narratives* engage in dialogue with one another, and what comes out of this exchange.

A dialogical approach is built on the self/other dichotomy. The “other” is necessary for the subject to understand itself, because the meaning of self is produced through a discursive exchange between self and other.²¹ Narratives, then, also do not exist without opposing, “other” narratives. Narratives create each other; they are built on each other and are sustained through interaction with one other. They need to refute one another, to build

17 Barnett and Duvall 2005, 56.

18 Guillaume 2002.

19 Bakhtin 1986.

20 Nykänen 2011; Pace 2005; Hadfield 2006; Bilgin 2014.

21 Neumann 1999.

on denial of the other, to succeed. Narratives here act as practices of boundary making, a process that reinforces circles of mutually constitutive identity construction. Narratives gain meaning through this practice of discursive interweaving.²² This is how narratives communicate, in dialogue.

In the next section, I illustrate these preliminary thoughts with examples of competing political narratives in the former Yugoslavia. Specifically, I discuss the *genocide* narratives in dialogue – the ways in which the stories of past horrors – who committed genocide, who were the perpetrators and who were the victims, and how the trauma of the past should be avenged – formed the discursive foundation for political acts during the wars of Yugoslav secession in the 1990s, as well as in their aftermath.

***Genocide* Narratives in Dialogue in the Former Yugoslavia**

Any story of genocide, that crime of all crimes, is always likely to produce powerful emotions, contested narratives, and conflicted political memories. Genocide is the ultimate, totalizing crime. It captures the public imagination like no other mass atrocity. The fact that its legal definition is very narrow²³ with a steep burden of proof does not matter. *Genocide*, in the public sphere, means many different things to many different groups. The power of the term does not lie in its legal precision, but in its imaginable horror and existential insecurity. And it is precisely because the term is popularly used to describe a variety of traumatic events that it has so much political purchase.

The attractiveness of the genocide narrative for states is also rooted in its modern origin. The term *genocide* is itself a product of the 20th century,²⁴ and it appeals to notions of social order and appropriateness unique to the modern era. This is why states are particularly interested in activating the genocide narrative if they feel they are subjected to an international gaze – if they are presenting themselves to the international audience.²⁵

The genocide narrative is constantly communicating with its counter-narrative “other” – for every story of genocide there is a story of genocide denial and the trauma that this denial perpetuates. The bigger the atrocity, the more significant is the attempt to refute it. Further, any national discourse of victimization – which then mobilizes a genocide narrative – needs a certain vision of the perpetrator in order to reproduce itself. This is why the genocide narrative serves as a good illustration of the concept of narrative in dialogue. The genocide narrative is a social actor itself. It sets parameters of political action – it

22 Guillaume 2002.

23 The 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide defines it as an act intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group. United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, New York, 9 December 1948, available at: <http://www.un.org/millennium/law/iv-1.htm>.

24 The term was first coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1944 in his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*.

25 I thank Ayse Zarakol for reminding me of this point.

makes certain action possible, other unimaginable. It sets boundaries for political actors – some lines they cannot cross, some deeply embedded collective memories they cannot challenge. It constitutes actors' identities – creates identities of genocide victims and genocide perpetrators, which impact how social actors view the world and what political decisions they make, acting from these identities. The genocide narrative lurks in the dark, it comes up when it is needed, and then disappears again only to resurface when it once more becomes politically useful.

The genocide narratives in the former Yugoslavia have had, and continue to have, tremendous political purchase. Much of the brutality of the wars of the 1990s has been justified by political elites as response to existential threat of a new cycle of genocide. At the level of discourse, the rhetorical use of the term *genocide* was very important. It was a powerful symbol, a discursive trigger, a political cue that conveyed not only imminent existential threat, but also the necessity of a swift, and subsequently, violent response if the group is to survive.

In analyzing the genocide narratives in the former Yugoslavia, there is much to choose from, and the search for an ultimate beginning of this cycle is somewhat of a fool's errand. At times of various crises throughout the 20th century, the genocide narrative was invoked to discursively justify the genocide in Srebrenica as Serbian revenge against Muslim conquest of the Serbs 600 years ago,²⁶ to justify oppression of Kosovo Albanians as response to Albanian high birth rates as “demographic genocide” of Serbs,²⁷ to invoke NATO intervention in 1999 as prevention of imminent Serbian genocide of Albanians in Kosovo,²⁸ to accuse NATO of “committing its own genocide in the name of genocide prevention,”²⁹ to warn of new Albanian genocide against Serbs in the aftermath of Kosovo's independence,³⁰ or for the Bosniac elites to argue for the unification of Bosnia and abolishment of the Bosnian Serb political entity, as a “genocidal creation.”³¹

Genocide in the former Yugoslavia clearly means very different things to different actors and has infinite political uses. But since much of the destruction of the former Yugoslavia and the unleashing of violence and mass atrocity stems from the competing Serbian and Croatian 20th century nationalisms, the historical memory and political activation of the fascist genocide against non-Croat minorities (mostly Jews, Serbs, and Roma) during World War II in Croatia is as promising a starting point as any.

26 Subotić 2013b.

27 O'Neill 2002, 21.

28 B92 2014.

29 Mitropolit Amfilohije, high ranking bishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church, quoted in Beta 2014.

30 Serbian president Tomislav Nikolić, quoted in Borger 2012.

31 Moll 2013, 915.

WWII Genocide Narratives in Serbia and Croatia

Under Nazi occupation (1941–1945), Croatia established an independent state (NDH),³² a fascist puppet statelet that carried out horrific atrocities against Serbs and Roma, including a systematic slaughter of Croatian Jews.³³ While the exterminations and expulsions of non-Croat minorities by Croatian fascist militia known as the Ustasha were widespread across Croatia, the most notorious symbol of this homegrown Croatian fascism was the concentration camp at Jasenovac. Over the years, the story of Serb victimization at Jasenovac became the central trope of the Serbian WWII genocide narrative, while the Croatian WWII narrative was built in large part around the story of Croat victimization at Bleiburg in 1945. I briefly sketch both narratives in turn.

The Story of Jasenovac

The estimates of the number of victims who perished in the several interconnected camps in and near Jasenovac, Croatia between 1941 and 1945 vary from the minimal number offered by Croatian nationalists (40,000) to the vastly exaggerated number circulated by most Serbian historians (700,000). Most serious scholarly analyses, however, put the probable number of victims at somewhere between 70,000 and 100,000.³⁴ The reason why this tremendous discrepancy in accounting for the victims persisted fifty years after the end of the war was the ideological commitment of the Yugoslav communist leadership to ethnic co-existence as the foundation of the Yugoslav federation and a deep reluctance to address any ethnic grievances from the past.³⁵ This lack of historical accounting of the past then created a large space for widespread political manipulation of the actual events in Croatia during WWII and allowed both Croatian and Serbian political elites to put the memory of the Jasenovac camp, as the symbol of the Croat-perpetrated genocide, to many different political uses.³⁶

The construction of the genocide narrative in popular culture was critical here. For example, a moment of tremendous narrative power for the persistence of the genocide trope in the Serbian popular imagination was the 1978 film *Occupation in 26 Pictures* by Lordan Zafranović. While Serbian anti-Croatian nationalism did not reach its heights for another ten years, this film with its graphic, almost “atrocities pornographic,” depictions of Ustasha violence was one of the most popular movies about the war. Similarly, the bestsellers *Knife* (1982) and *Prayer* (1983) by popular Serbian writer, later turned politician, Vuk Drašković were novels about horrific violence against the Serbs carried out by Croats and Muslims during WWII, again with incredibly graphic and gruesome images of bestial

32 Nezavisna država Hrvatska.

33 Goldstein and Goldstein 2001; Levy 2009; Korb 2010.

34 Graovac and Cvetković 2005.

35 Bogosavljević 2000.

36 Kolsto 2011.

violence.³⁷ These popular products then fixed a particular story about the war in place, designated character traits to its protagonists, and carried out a specific, unchallenged plotline about past events that could be activated quickly, and without much alteration, for political purposes.

More broadly, the murky understanding of what, exactly, happened in Croatia during WWII, who was the fascist violence directed against, on whose orders, and with whose support, seamlessly transitioned into a new narrative in Serbia since the late 1980s about a timeless ethnic struggle between Croats and Serbs, about Croatian “genocidal character” that was worse than that of the Nazis, and about Serbs being the principal victims of the WWII genocide. For example, a Serbian third grade history textbook, published in 1993, specifically lists Serbs as victims of genocide throughout history, and suggests the following homework assignments: “1. Read articles about the genocide against the Serbs and other nations. 2. There are movies about this, we should watch them and discuss.”³⁸ The assignment is accompanied by graphic images of wartime atrocities, including incredibly gruesome photographs of piles of corpses in the Jasenovac camp. The purpose of this level of graphic detail for third-graders, obviously, is to construct the image of Serbia as a “victim-nation,”³⁹ and, consequently, to construct each Serb as a historical victim of genocide. This then helps shape a specific national worldview from an early age, but also puts contemporary war atrocities (this textbook was published in 1993 in the midst of both the Croatian and Bosnian wars) in a very different context – one of Serbian self-defense from the existential threat of genocide.⁴⁰

While the extensive descriptions of graphic violence have been somewhat toned down in contemporary Serbian history textbooks, the Croatian atrocities against Serbs during WWII continue to be discussed at length under the headings of “genocide,” where primarily Serbian victimization at the hands of worse-than-Nazis Croatian fascists persists at the expense of a proportionate discussion of Croatian crimes against other non-Croat minorities, mostly the Jews.⁴¹

That the WWII genocide narratives in Serbia and Croatia were in direct dialogue with each other is evident by even a cursory analysis of Croatian history textbooks. Throughout the 1990s, these textbooks justified Ustasha WWII crimes as by-products of the war, while any mention of Ustasha terror emphasized primarily Croatian victims, as well as “political opponents” and “other antifascists,” a discursive move that turned ethnic crimes into more justifiable political ones.⁴² For example, the Croatian 8th grade history textbook

37 Živković 2011.

38 Quoted in Stojanović 2001, 41.

39 Stojanović 2001.

40 On broader issues of history education and security community building in the Balkans, see Lakić 2013.

41 Pavasović Trošt 2013, 29.

42 Pavasović Trošt 2013, 23.

from 1992 justifies Ustasha crimes as an appropriate response to “[the Serbs’] early hegemonistic politics and the appearance of chetniks⁴³ and their crimes in Croatia.”⁴⁴ The significance of this historical interpretation is to establish the Croatian WWII genocide narrative (justifiable crimes of self-defense) in direct opposition to the Serbian genocide narrative (Croatian genocidal intent to exterminate the Serbs). These narratives are in constant discursive exchange – they feed and build on one another, through dialogue.⁴⁵

The Story of Bleiburg

Beginning in the 1990s and continuing into the present, Croatia annually commemorates another traumatic World War II event at Bleiburg (in today’s Austria), the site of the communist execution of Ustasha militiamen in the waning days of WWII in 1945.⁴⁶ The truth about what happened at Bleiburg is unclear, but there is strong evidence that a few thousand remaining Ustasha forces, other Croatian soldiers, and many Croatian civilians were captured and then executed by the Yugoslav partisans at the very end of the war in May 1945, as they were retreating near the small Austrian town of Bleiburg. The number of victims has been under hot dispute over the years, and many Croatian nationalists inflated the number of victims to as many as half a million. However, most scholarly consensus sets the number of killed in the vicinity of 70,000.⁴⁷

During the communist period, the massacre at Bleiburg was never openly discussed, and the only commemorative ceremonies at the site were organized and attended by members of the Croatian diaspora. After the fall of communism and especially following the revival of Croatian nationalism in the 1990s, the ceremonies at Bleiburg became some of the principal sites of Croatian nationalist mobilization. The significance of Bleiburg memory to Croatian nationalist elites is based in large part on the fact that the communist regime suppressed any discussion of the massacre, and it therefore became the zone of myths, half-truths, and legends. The story of Bleiburg remained alive in the Croatian (often pro-Ustasha) diaspora, which over time constructed its own version of “Bleiburg” and actively promoted it in post-communist Croatia, with much direction and support from the Croatian Catholic Church.⁴⁸

43 Chetniks were Serbian armed militias, initially loyal to the Serbian royalist government, but by the end of the WWII working as quislings on behalf of Germans. Some of chetnik paramilitaries were responsible for massive atrocities against non-Serb civilians across Croatia, Bosnia, and Montenegro. See Hoare 2010.

44 Contemporary Croatian textbooks have largely eliminated this apologist language, but instead continue to mostly ignore the history at Jasenovac or mention it in a brief sentence, usually followed by a discussion of Croatian victims. See Pavasović Trošt 2013.

45 Pavasović Trošt 2013, 30.

46 The following discussion of Bleiburg borrows from Subotić 2015.

47 Kolsto 2010.

48 *Ibid.*

Since 1990, Bleiburg in the Croatian public consciousness began to be seen and commemorated as a Serb-led communist assault on the entire Croatian nation.⁴⁹ The media and attendees of the annual memorial ceremonies began to refer to the massacre as “The Way of the Cross,” a name that invokes clear Christian and martyrdom sentiments. At the 50th anniversary of the Bleiburg events in 1995, the speaker of the Croatian Parliament finally activated the genocide trope when here referred to Bleiburg as “the Holocaust of Croatian martyrs,”⁵⁰ and thanked the Croatian soldiers of the Homeland War (1991–1995) from preventing the Serb forces from committing “another Bleiburg.”⁵¹ This claim that Bleiburg was “the Holocaust of Croatian Catholics” has fully entered the Croatian public narrative and goes mostly unchallenged in the public sphere.⁵² The Croatian Parliament has also firmly institutionalized Bleiburg remembrance by establishing the date of the Bleiburg commemoration as a national holiday – the Day of Memory of Croatian Victims in the Struggle for Freedom and Independence. No longer was Bleiburg the site of a massacre of prisoners of war – it has now become officially legislated as the site of a totalizing crime against a victim-nation, the “greatest tragedy” to befall the Croatian nation.⁵³

The hegemonization of the genocide narrative as it relates to Bleiburg has also been evident in Croatian history textbooks. The 1992 textbook, for example, dedicates an entire chapter to “Crimes in Bleiburg and the ‘Way of the Cross’ of the Croatian people,” which is referred to as “an incurable and unforgotten wound,” which will “forever be a reminder of Croat martyrs.”⁵⁴ The contemporary textbooks use somewhat less emotional language, but preserve the narrative that the victims (who have long since stopped being referred to as Ustasha, or prisoners of war, but are now described as being, simply, “Croats”) were killed specifically because they were Croats.⁵⁵

In these competing genocide narratives, both the victims and the perpetrators become “nationalized,”⁵⁶ which was a necessary step if the narrative was to be used as a political weapon of nationalist mobilization. The Jasenovac/Bleiburg genocide narratives also clearly communicated with each other: they mirrored each other, fed on each other, mimicked each other, and even used startlingly similar language. For example, in the history textbooks used in Serbia and Croatia throughout the 1990s, descriptions of the Jasenovac camp in Serbian textbooks and the Bleiburg massacre in Croatian textbooks are almost identical. While the Serbian textbook describes Jasenovac victims as “slaughtered

49 *Ibid.*

50 Banjeglav 2012, 109.

51 Banjeglav 2013, 12.

52 Moll 2013, 920.

53 Pavlaković 2008, 16.

54 Pavasović Trošt 2013, 34.

55 *Ibid.*, 36.

56 *Ibid.*, 41.

with knives, killed with hatchets, axes, rammers, steel crowbars, shot and burned in crematoriums, boiled alive in cauldrons, hung and devoured with hunger, thirst and cold”, the Croatian textbook of the same era describes Bleiburg victims as being killed “with all types of weapons (guns, rifles, launchers, artillery, even with machinegun fire and bombing from war planes)” and being “exhausted with thirst, hunger, illness and fatigue.”⁵⁷ The narrative plot and descriptive apparatus are the same; all that has changed are the characters of the story.

Tracing the Genocide Narratives in Dialogue

Once firmly hegemonized, the genocide narratives were politically activated for a variety of contemporary political uses in both Serbia and Croatia: for nationalist mobilization through the construction of the victim/perpetrator identity matrix, for continuing genocide denial, and for disciplining dissent. They were also firmly institutionalized and legislated.

Construction of Victim Identity

In Serbia, the overt political use of the genocide narrative was especially direct in the late 1980s-early 1990s, as the Serbian political elites under Slobodan Milošević publicly conflated Croatian leadership under Franjo Tuđman in the 1990s with Croatian fascist leadership of the 1940s. Serbian media routinely referred to Croatian army as the “Ustasha” in the beginning of the 1990s war, and as the war raged on, as a signifier for all Croats. The Croatian media mirrored this ethnification of the enemy, by referring to Serbian troops as “Chetniks” and “Serbo-communists,” or, economically, “Serbo-Chetniks.”⁵⁸

This rhetorical ploy had obvious political uses: since the Ustasha and Chetniks were evil and genocidal, today’s Croats and Serbs displaying these same intentions required immediate national “self-defense” from their respective enemies. At stake was nothing short of the existential survival of the nation. Narrative entrepreneurs built a seamless story connecting the events of WWII to those of the war of the 1990s, making the recent war seem historically predetermined and inevitable. The past, therefore, swiftly became the present, the conflict an ahistorical constant, and the contemporary war simply the most recent iteration of a timeless national struggle for survival.⁵⁹ The story of genocide, and the incessant retelling of the story, each time in more gruesome and fantastical ways, then became an undisputed social fact that guided all political action. It absolved political actors from actual choices and presented them as simple bystanders of the already

57 Quoted in Pavasović Trošt 2013, 40.

58 Đurić and Zorić 2009.

59 Subotić 2013b.

predetermined set of events.⁶⁰ It recreated their identity as a purely national one, and in so doing limited and guided their political choices.

In both Serbia and Croatia, the WWII genocide narrative has established as a social fact the idea that Serbs and Croats, as *peoples*, were victims of genocide, and never its perpetrators. This claim that victims of genocide cannot possibly also be its perpetrators was directly put to use on numerous occasions in Serbian official denials of the genocide of Bosniac men by Serbian forces at Srebrenica in 1995.⁶¹ The denial of Serb-committed genocide also continues to be politically important for Bosnian Serb elites in their fight to keep the Republika Srpska (RS) entity in Bosnia autonomous, and not integrated with the rest of the Bosnian federation. RS Prime Minister Milorad Dodik, for example, has on numerous occasions activated the Jasenovac trope in arguing how RS needs to survive as a safe haven for the Serbian people so that atrocities like those at Jasenovac are not repeated. At the same time Dodik argued that since Serbs fought on the side of the allies, and not the Nazis and Ustasha in WWII, they could not be “genocidal people” guilty of genocide in Srebrenica.⁶² This exact same reasoning – that victims of genocide cannot be its perpetrators – is present in the broadly accepted judgment by the Croatian Supreme Court judge (and the Court’s former president) Milan Vuković who declared authoritatively, “no war crime could be committed in a defensive war,”⁶³ as a way to dismiss any charges of Croatian war crimes committed during the war in Croatia (1991–1995).

Similarly, the underlying theme of history education in Croatia is that Croats were never the aggressors, but always the victims of wars.⁶⁴ This theme is also evident in the historical interpretation of Croatia’s “Homeland War” of the 1990s, which is presented exclusively as Serbian aggression and terrorism, without any broader context of Yugoslav succession. Most textbooks spend a lot of time discussing Serbian crimes against Croatian civilians, but only one textbook even mentions, in passing, that thousands of Serbs were forced to leave Croatia in 1995.⁶⁵

60 Jusić 2009.

61 Moll 2013. Srebrenica is, to date, the only crime of the wars of Yugoslav secession to be clearly designated genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the case against Bosnian Serb general Radoslav Krstić who was in charge of the operation. ICTY, Prosecutor vs. Radoslav Krstić, Judgment, 19 April 2004, available at <http://www.icty.org/x/cases/krstic/acjug/en/krs-aj040419e.pdf>. In the case against another Bosnian Serb general Zdravko Tolimir, the ICTY determined that the “Bosnian Muslims of Žepa were, along with the Muslims of Srebrenica and Eastern BiH, the victims of genocide,” however it convicted Tolimir only of genocide in Srebrenica. ICTY, Prosecutor vs. Zdravko Tolimir, Appeals Chamber Judgment, 8 April 2015, press release available at <http://www.icty.org/sid/11643>.

62 Moll 2013, 918.

63 Banjeglav 2013, 20.

64 Agičić and Najbar-Agičić 2007.

65 *Ibid.*

The WWII genocide narrative, especially the story of Croatian martyrdom at Bleiburg, has also served to strategically divert attention in contemporary Croatia from serious addressing of mass crimes committed by the NDH during WWII.⁶⁶ Ironically, the former Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader used the Holocaust commemoration event at Jasenovac in 2005 to make quite a remarkable claim of equivalency between Croatian victimization during the Homeland War of the 1990s and the Holocaust: “We should not forget the aggression that Croatia endured because we too were victims of a terrible madness of Nazism and fascism, and we, Croatian citizens, Croats, know the best what it is like to suffer from aggression.”⁶⁷ What the Prime Minister obviously ignored was the fact that the memorial site at Jasenovac is itself a commemoration of Croatian fascist movement and not of Croatian victimization.⁶⁸ Sanader then repeated this speech during his visit to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem in 2005, firmly affixing the memory of the Holocaust to Croatia’s Homeland War.⁶⁹ The history of WWII in Croatia, therefore, has been retold as a history of Croat suffering, which excluded any stories of Croats perpetrating atrocities. Non-Croat victims have been trivialized or ignored, as if their suffering does not belong to the official Croatian past.⁷⁰

The establishment of proper victimhood identity was also the product of genocide narratives in dialogue with each other. For example, in 1992, at the height of the Croatian war, Serbian government established the Museum of Genocide, a “museum of victims of crimes against the Serbian people committed in the NDH” to inform the public of the “unprecedented suffering of the Serbian people in the state of the Croatian Nazis – the NDH.”⁷¹ The political use of the genocide narratives in the 1990s, therefore, had two additional purposes: to rev up public sentiment against the Croats at the time of the Croatian war, but also to portray the Serbs as the principal victims of the genocide, thus conveniently absolving them from their own complicity in the Holocaust of Serbian Jews in the early years of the German occupation during WWII.

The neglect of any discussion of Serbian involvement in the Holocaust of Serbian Jews continues to be one of the more shocking features of contemporary history education in Serbia.⁷² In fact, the Holocaust memory has been instrumentalized to fit with the narrative of Serbian suffering as well as Serbian compassion for other peoples, such as the Jews. The understanding that Serbia has no history of anti-Semitism and that everyday Serbs were quick to help their Jewish neighbors during World War II is so heavily embedded

66 Cvijic 2008.

67 Banjeglav 2012, 115.

68 Subotić 2013a.

69 Banjeglav 2013, 12.

70 Jović 2012, 62.

71 Quoted in Byford 2007, 56.

72 The discussion of Holocaust remembrance in Serbia borrows from Subotić 2013b.

in Serbian national consciousness that it has become a social fact.⁷³ For example, the authors of one contemporary Serbian history textbook publicly argued against spending “too much attention to the suffering of Jews in relation to the suffering of other Balkan nations” during German occupation, as “it is well documented” that “Jews died mainly in Central Europe, not in the Balkans.”⁷⁴ This instrumentalized memory of the Holocaust in Serbia, therefore, has become a form of “screen memory” that filters out and obfuscates any serious addressing of Serbian responsibility for mass atrocity in more recent wars.⁷⁵

The Serbian-Croatian genocide narrative dialogue, however, served another disciplining function. Since the genocide narrative asserts a genocidal intent to exterminate all members of the nation, this includes even those members of the nation who were against nationalism, war, or those opposed to the regime. But since genocide is a totalizing project, even these opposing voices are drowned into the national story. They cannot be excluded from the body politic because the struggle, even if they are unwilling participants in it, includes them too. The genocide narrative therefore automatically disciplines dissenting voices, because the conflict no longer revolves around politics or resources, but is about the existential security of every member of the nation. Exit from this totalizing interpretation of the existential threat is hard and rare, which explains why the opposition to nationalism at the time was on the far margins of the polity in both Serbia and Croatia.⁷⁶

Construction of the Discursive Social Order: Narrative Storm Over “the Storm”

In Croatia, the Homeland War has become a new cornerstone of Croatia’s state narrative, the official story that “organizes war memory.”⁷⁷ Understood as the foundation of contemporary Croatia, this war is the event that made independent Croatia possible. The Homeland War narrative, therefore, emphasizes the dual aspect of Croatian national identity – as a victim of Serbian aggression, but also a heroic nation that liberated itself and achieved independence.⁷⁸

73 Byford 2006.

74 Quoted in Byford 2007, 53. The inconvenient truth for Serbian historiographers, however, is that under the collaborationist government of Prime Minister Milan Nedić (1941–1944), Serbia was declared *Judenrein* already in 1942 (with Belgrade being the first city in Europe with that horrific designation), following a full-scale extermination of Serbian Jews in the early days of the German occupation, carried out under orders and with great enthusiasm by the Serbian militia and, more damningly, with the widespread apathy of Serbian bystanders (Byford 2011). The political rehabilitation of the WWII Serbian anticommunist leadership has become a full scale effort in post-Milošević Serbia since 2000 (Subotić 2015), with the most recent effort to fully rehabilitate prime minister Nedić from responsibility for atrocities carried out under German occupation currently adjudicated in the Serbian courts (Andrić 2014).

75 David 2013.

76 Šušak 2000, Dević 1997.

77 Banjeglav 2013, 7.

78 *Ibid.*, 11.

The Croatian Parliament has on numerous occasions concretely legislated Croatian war remembrance and interpretation.⁷⁹ Different Members of Parliament have put forward various proposals for how to appropriately commemorate the war, including multiple parliament declarations, and even outright criticisms of Croatian contemporary artists for “failing to create works of art worthy of this magnificent event.”⁸⁰ In 2000, the Parliament adopted the *Declaration on the Homeland War* which requires of “all officials and official organs of the Republic of Croatia to protect the fundamental values and dignity of the Homeland War,”⁸¹ effectively discouraging any mention of Croatian war crimes. The Declaration explicitly states that Croatia “led a just and legitimate, defensive and liberating, and not aggressive nor occupying war against any one; instead it defended its territory from Greater Serbian aggression within internationally recognized borders.”⁸² Further, it requires unchallenged interpretation of the past, as it declares, “the fundamental values of the Homeland War are unambiguously accepted by the entire Croatian people and all Croatian citizens.”⁸³ The narrative, again, disciplines its subjects by creating a specific identity out of which they are to act in the social world.

In 2006, the Croatian Parliament adopted another declaration, legislating the memory of Operation Storm. The *Declaration on Operation Storm* demands “the Croatian Parliament, Croatian scientific community, Croatian institutions of science and education, as well as the media, over time transform Operation Storm into a battle that will become part of Croatia’s ‘useful past’ for future generations.”⁸⁴ In this startlingly obvious example of direct state construction of collective memory, the interpretation of the past became official and is not subject to any further contestation and reinterpretation.

In 2012, the discursive battle over the public memory of Operation Storm erupted again in the wake of the ICTY decision to acquit two Croatian generals, Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markač, accused of crimes against humanity committed against Serb civilians in August 1995 in the aftermath of Croatian Army’s Operation Storm.⁸⁵ The generals’ successful appeal means that no Croat from Croatia has been convicted of crimes against Serb civilians by the ICTY. The ICTY acquittals were immediately interpreted across the region as the final judgment that Croatia had not carried out crimes against humanity during the prosecution of its Homeland War. This interpretation then started to feed two mutually exclusive narratives about the events of August 1995. In Croatia, it solidified the narrative that the flight of Croatian Serbs from the region was the result of a coordinated effort of Serbs to deport their own population, or was a voluntary departure of Serb

79 This section borrows from Subotić 2013a and Subotić 2013b.

80 Quoted in Koren 2011, 135.

81 Croatian Parliament 2000.

82 *Ibid.*

83 *Ibid.*

84 Croatian Parliament 2006.

85 This section borrows from Subotić 2014.

civilians who did not want to live in a new Croatian state. The ICTY verdict, therefore, decriminalized the establishment of the independent Croatia and reaffirmed Croatian state identity as a “good state.” As one of the participants in the annual commemoration of the Homeland War said, “[the day of the ICTY acquittal] is the day when the world finally recognized our innocence.”⁸⁶

By contrast, the public understanding of Operation Storm in Serbia has always been constructed as a case of ethnic cleansing, even genocide, of the entire Serbian population in Croatia and as one of the worst crimes committed in the course of the 1990s wars. That the ICTY has interpreted the Storm in a “pro-Croatian” manner was seen as a huge affront across the Serbian public sphere.⁸⁷ The mutually exclusive narratives then began to feed on each other and create further variations of state hegemonic stories that acquire a life of their own, and are increasingly difficult to change.

In Serbia, the events of August 1995 are publicly remembered as a mass deportation of the entire Croatian Serb minority (around 200,000 people), who fled for their lives as the Croatian army mercilessly shelled their cities. That the Croatian political and military leadership directly ordered this exodus is a broadly shared public belief, also officially promoted by the Serbian state. Operation Storm is understood in Serbia as an effort to eliminate the entire Croatian Serb minority and create an ethnically homogeneous Croatia. This particular memory of Operation Storm has been crucial for the Serbian postwar state narrative construction because it provides an alternative history of the 1990s war, one in which Serbs are victims and not perpetrators of war crimes. The ICTY indictment of Croatian Army leadership for “joint criminal enterprise” to commit crimes against humanity against Croatian Serbs in 1995 legitimized and institutionalized this narrative. It also allowed Serbian political actors to use the Gotovina case as an exercise in “genocide equality” – for every Srebrenica, there is also Operation Storm. This is why maintaining the narrative that Operation Storm was genocide against the Serbs was so important for continuing the denial of Serbian complicity in the Srebrenica genocide. The two narratives do not exist without one another. They need each other to survive.

Across the border, in Serbia, the memory of Operation Storm remains fixed in place. The particular narrative of Operation Storm as genocide of Serbs, however, occasionally pops up in different, often unexpected contexts. For example, a popular Serbian tabloid *Informer* ran a cover story on the day of Operation Storm commemoration in 2014, entitled: “National Idiocy: Fellow Serbs, What Is Wrong With Us? Croatia Continues to Celebrate the Genocide It Carried Out in ‘The Storm’ While Serbian Tourists Flock to the Croatian Seaside.” The tabloid columnist then helpfully explained that this Serbian historical forgetting is akin to “Jews partying in the nightclub at Auschwitz.”⁸⁸ This is the

86 Quoted in Banjevlav 2013, 17.

87 Ristić 2012.

88 *Informer*, 5 August 2014.

power of the genocide narrative: it hides, masks itself, lays dormant, and then pops up in the unlikeliest of places without losing its discursive punch.

Conclusion

My purpose in this essay was to enrich our understanding of narratives by reconceptualizing them as being in constant dialogue. Using the context and illustrations from the multiple ways in which narratives of genocide in the former Yugoslavia were intertwined, contradictory, but mutually necessary, I wanted to demonstrate how political narratives are not only representations of social order, but how they themselves are constructing the discursive social order. Narratives change and shape identities of social actors, give meaning to their actions, and create discursive space in which some social actions make sense, and other become unimaginable. Reconfigured as narratives-in-dialogue, we can trace ways in which narratives bounce around the social and political space, gaining momentum from competing narratives, fighting for their own discursive space, and ultimately shaping political choices actors make. A renewed focus on narratives in dialogue helps us identify the processes by which actors make the decisions they do in the absence of direct control, coercion, or institutional structure. The power of narratives, then, may be much more subtle, but it is no less real.

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