Stereotypes in the Yugoslav Civil War

The war in former Yugoslavia is not only the first war on European soil in 45 years, but it is one that will certainly be remembered for its almost unimaginable degree of violence between the fighting parties. In this article two stereotypes about the war in the former Yugoslavia will be examined. Firstly, it will examine the roots of the present Yugoslav conflict. Is this war a consequence of centuries of animosity between the peoples that once constituted the Yugoslav state, who label it a 'historical' and 'ethnic' conflict? Secondly, the nature of the violence displayed in the present war will be examined. Confronted with the extensive violence that characterizes the Yugoslav war, world public opinion seems to have accepted the explanation that violence is something characteristic of the Balkans, where people traditionally hate each other. Even if the brutality and cruelty of the present war suggest that only deep-rooted animosity between different peoples can produce such bloodshed, it will be argued that the conflicting interests of the political elites initiated the present polarization and the first confrontations.

Historical conflict

When the war in Yugoslavia started in June 1991 and the hundreds of foreign politicians, diplomats and journalists rushed to Yugoslavia to see what was happening and what could be done to stop the war, many of them had yet to learn the basic facts about this complex country. One thing they learned very fast was that every time they asked a simple question, the answers they got were very complex. Every answer started with an explanation of the history of the conflict 'from the birth of Christ to this day'.[1] Seemingly, there is widespread acceptance among ex-Yugoslavs, as well as among foreign diplomats and journalists, that the core of the problem lies in the historical roots of the irreconcilability of Serbs and Croats.

If we accept the assumption that the Yugoslav conflict is a 'historical conflict', the next question is: 'Who defines history'? Official history writing in Yugoslavia has for decades been controlled by communist ideologues and, for ideological reasons, history has been regularly reduced to a couple of selected myths which 'a good communist' is supposed to believe uncritically. The same happened when the nationalists came to power. The political mobilization of the masses on the grounds of historical awareness does not at all mean that every citizen possesses a solid knowledge of the past. Quite the contrary, it is ignorance about basic historical facts that opens doors to all kinds of

manipulations. History is something vast and complex and every ideology can select-ively seek 'historical evidence' to endorse its points.

The history of the whole of Europe has been a bloody one, and the Serbo-Croatian conflicts cannot be compared in their intensity with the conflicts and wars that the major European powers have experienced. The century-long Franco-German-English rivalry ended up in an economic and eventually political union. But for an understand-ing of the monetary crisis in France that happened in the summer of 1993, nobody will look to the times of the Franco-Prussian wars and declare that the inflation is the result of the Franco-Prussian animosity that has its roots in history. However, for every pro-blem in post-communist Yugoslavia, it was history that got all the blame.

The historical facts about Yugoslavia and its peoples are yet to be established. In the last 45 years, the communists dictated the historiography in which the partisan move-ment and its leader Tito became another myth of bravery and justice. Every new politi-cal elite that gains power tries to destroy the heritage of the previous one. The com-munists did that, and the post-communist nationalists are doing the same. Since the fall of communism, in all ex-Yugoslav republics, the schoolbooks have been adapted to the political changes. The communist ideological paradigm has been replaced by the nationalist paradigm, where the interpretation of historical facts has been fitted into a new ideological framework.

The Croatian post-communist ideologues consider the state concept of Yugoslavia to be 'ahistorical' and stress the century-long efforts of Croats to establish their own state. This approach, however, does not take into account the historical context in which Yug-oslavia was founded. The Croatian struggle for a national state took place during the centuries of Hungarian and Austrian political dominance. The first political and cultur-al awakening of Croatian nationalism was the Illyrian movement (1835-1848), which saw its major enemy in foreign influences and proposed a political unity of 'brotherly South Slavic' people. The widely supported analysis in post-communist Croatia con-cerning the Yugoslav state concept, however, contends that the greatest problem was Serbia, because 'Yugoslavism' was only a disguise for Serbian hegemonism. This was certainly true for the First Yugoslavia (1918-1941), but the oppression in the Second Yugoslavia (1945-1991) was not happening along the same lines. The communist nomenclature was responsible for the oppression, and its members came from all national groups. The Serbs did not invent communism to use it as an effective means of oppression in order to establish their hegemony. Within the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY), there were attempts by Serbian communists to assume control, but they never succeeded. Only after Tito's death, was the Serbian coup within the LCY staged. Kosovo and Vojvodina were annexed but they remained represented in the Pres-idium. This meant that four (from Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Vojvodina) of the Presidium's eight members were to represent Serbian policy on the federal level. But the coup in the Presidium stumbled upon resentment amongst the others and only acce-lerated the process of disintegration of Yugoslavia.

The Croatian post-communist nationalists rejected the idea of the Yugoslav state, identifying it with Serbian hegemonism or communist totalitarianism. However, this left them with the problem of how to treat the history of the Second World War and the anti-fascist component of the communist partisan movement that led to the Second Yugoslavia. Even the governing party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), fell apart

along Ustasa partisan lines. The right-wing politicians of the HDZ see themselves as the continuation of the Croatian nationalist ideology that propagated the Croatian ethnic national state; they consider the pro-fascist Ustasa state (NDH-Independent State of Croatia, 1941-1945) to be an important historical achievement of Ante Pavelic and his movement. The left-wing of the HDZ that formed its own party, the HND (Croatian Independent Democrats), is against any kind of political rehabilitation of the Ustasa movement and is in favor of the historical acknowledgement of the anti-fascist heritage of the Croatian communists. They and the left-wing parties in Croatia consider the anti-fascist orientation of the communist movement in Croatia to be the basis for the legitimacy of the existence of post-war Croatia and as the only way for the Croatian people to escape collective blame.

The importance of history in the present conflict is not in its repetition of the violent conflicts among the different ethnic groups of the Balkans, but in the repetition of different ideological concepts about the formation of the new states in the Balkans after the disintegration of the great Ottoman and Habsburg empires in the 19th and the 20th centuries. The historical roots of integrationist concepts (a common South Slavic state) versus nationalist concepts for separate national states go back only to the end of the 19th century. If one looks at the history of violent confrontations between the peoples that once constituted Yugoslavia, it is evident that it started only during the 20th century.

The two largest ethnic groups, the Serbs and the Croats, which among others, formed the common Yugoslav state in 1918, became the dominant political forces. They had the most developed nationalist ideologies, claiming their right to their own national state on the heritage of the Serbian and the Croatian medieval states. During the First World War, Serbia fought on the side of the Entente. Croatia as well as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Vojvodina fought as a part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, on the side of the Central Powers. It was not a direct confrontation between Serbs and Croats, as Croats were serving as soldiers drafted to fight for the imperialistic goals of Germany and the Habsburg empire. The first traces of violence as a consequence of a direct confrontation between the Croatian and Serbian political concepts are found after the formation of the First Yugoslavia. During the Interbellum, two major political assassinations took place: in 1928 the Croatian political leader Stjepan Radic was shot in the Yugoslav parliament by a Serbian nationalist, and, in 1934, the Yugoslav King Aleksandar Karadjordjevic (from a Serbian dynasty) was killed in Marseille by a Ustasa terrorist. The First Yugoslavia as a multi-national state was a great disappointment to the non-Serbian peoples, because of Serbian political dominance.

On the eve of the Second World War, political changes were announced in the Agreement (*Sporazum*) of 1939, according to which the decentralization of the Yugoslav monarchy would take place. It never materialized and the outbreak of the Second World War led to the abandonment of the integrationist concept. Nationalist ideologies took over.

The sceptics about the chances of survival for communist-ruled Yugoslavia after the death of Tito based their predictions largely on the experience of the cruel civil war that followed the occupation of the First Yugoslavia by the Axis forces in 1941. The disintegration of the Second Yugoslavia that started in 1991 once again led to bloodshed. The extent of the violence displayed since then is in many ways a replica of the violence of

the years 1941-1945, and it is accompanied by similar ideological polarization, but in reversed fashion. During the Second World War, the communist movement (which was simultaneously an anti-fascist movement) was fighting against the nationalist movements (fascist-supported movements like the Serbian state of Milan Nedic and the Croatian state of Ante Pavelic). The communists won and the Second Yugoslavia came into being.

Nationalism, however, remained latently present. It manifested itself occasionally, as for example, in the Serbian centralism of the early sixties that ended up with the fall of the Yugoslav Minister of the Interior, Alexandar Rankovic – the most powerful exponent of Serbian centralism within the LCY. In the early seventies there was a period of Croatian nationalism which started out as a movement for economic and political liberalization and ended up in a broad popular movement of Croatian nationalism. After the collapse of communism in Yugoslavia in 1990, nationalist ideologies won and the fight for the establishment of national states started, followed by war.

Memories of the horrors of the Second World War were revived and the old fear of a repetition of violence between the different nationalities started to play an important role for the political actors involved in the conflict. Yet, defining the war in Yugoslavia as an 'ethnic conflict deeply rooted in history' has a very important impact on how it is to be dealt with. How could the foreign diplomats help to solve a conflict that comes from such an ancient past and has carried on through history for such a long time? How does one solve an ethnic and historical conflict anyway?

In ethnic conflict 'the others' are identified as an obstacle (as the Serbs in Croatia present an obstacle to the Croats to establishing their ethnic-national state and vice-versa, or as the Bosnian-Muslims present an obstacle for the extension of Serbian and Croatian ethnic-national states). Then, the only way to solve it is to win. The war, 'ethnic cleansing', and violence become functional, but the political establishments present them as a result of the spontaneous eruption of violence between ethnic groups that are unable to live together. The political elites will tend to seek a 'final solution', regardless of the price that has to be paid. This can be reached only when there is a complete victory of one ethnic group over the other(s). However, 'ethnic-cleansing' as one of the methods for achieving the final solution cannot be achieved in absolute terms. The winning ethnic group will still have to embrace 'the others' in its newly formed state and thus will have to impose itself as a 'ruling people'.

The nationalist political elites give the impression to their people that once the goal of the ethnic-national state has been achieved, the violence will stop and democracy will flourish. And as long as nothing has changed for the better, 'the others' can be blamed. All promises for a better future can be continually postponed. The communist ideologues did the same: their morally, economically and politically degraded and bankrupted system was therefore defined as a 'transition period from capitalism to communism'. The 'purity' of the Croatian and Serbian national states has the same utopian value as communist society had. The core of the problem is that the nationalists refuse to acknowledge that the others exist and will continue to exist in their neighborhood, and that no military victory will change this.

Settling a conflict by political compromise with the other side is considered by the nationalist politicians to be a sign of weakness. So, if the Croats and the Serbs accept a compromise concerning territory, they will probably try to interpret it in the eyes of

their people as only 'a postponement' and leave it as an 'ideological heritage' for the next generations to fight for. And as a self-fulfilling prophecy the 'conflict of the ancient past' will become the conflict of the future. If one of the parties wins the conflict by military means and presents it as a glorious victory of its people, it will by no means automatically guarantee the political stability of the newly formed state. The incorporation of new territories and new population will require a strong police apparatus and authoritarian rule. The Serbian leadership in particular should be aware of this problem, because of the example of its policy towards Kosovo (which Serbia annexed in 1989). Five years later no political improvement has been achieved. The Serbian side can keep the status quo in Kosovo only through repression in a strong police state.

It is arguable whether violent clashes dominated the history of relations between Serbs and Croats. The historian Drago Roksandic (a Serb from Croatia), who has been studying Serbo-Croatian relations in Croatia for years, is one of those scholars who put a different emphasis on the history of Serbo-Croatian relations. Roksandic writes that in the 19th and 20th centuries any policy that ignored the national interests of either community led to a conflict with negative consequences for both sides and for Croatian society as a whole.

This same history also demonstrates that the periods in which the fundamental national interests of both communities were reconciled were also periods in which Croatian society moved forward, modernised, and in which Croatian as well as Serbian national identity were preserved and developed. An example for this was the Illyrian movement of 1835-1848, which was an important phase in the national integration of the Croats, but also of the Serbs in Croatia and Slovenia. Other instances were the period of the revolutionary upheaval in 1848-49, the period of renewed constitutionalism from 1860 to 1868, as well as the period of the Serbian-Croatian coalition from 1905-1918.[2]

The war in former Yugoslavia is a multi-dimensional conflict where history, ethnicity, religion, ideological polarization, social and economic differences are simultaneously playing an important role. Yugoslav society could be described in terms of a 'plural or divided society', defined as 'a distinctive type of society, communally fragmented societies, multi-ethnic societies or multiple societies, composite societies, segmented societies and internally colonized societies'. A plural society does not simply mean the presence of a diversity of racial, ethnic and/or religious groups, but it is usually used to describe societies with persistent and pervasive cleavages between these sections'.[3] Communist Yugoslavia was a state where several lines of polarization were latently present, varying from economic differences beween various regions to sharp ideological polarization which manifested itself in the power struggle between the communists and nationalists. Therefore, the Yugoslav conflict is a political conflict, because it is a conflict about power and about control between different political elites.

Conflict of Ideologies

The power struggle in communist Yugoslavia started within the LCY in the eighties as a struggle between republican communist elites.

The major political debate among the communists was about the restructuring of the Yugoslav federation. They all agreed that the Yugoslav federation based on the Consti-

tution of 1974 should be transformed. Confrontation between the communist elites grew according to the individual republic's economic and political interests. Slovenia and Croatia were in favor of a confederated state with high autonomy for every constituent unit, while Serbia favored a more centralized federation. The Serbian leadership, led by Slobodan Milosevic, opted for a federation because Serbian policy was concentrated on solving the Serbian 'national question' – one third of the Serbian population lived outside of the Serbian republican borders. The main concern of the Slovenian and Croatian communists was a solution for a profound economic crisis, for which a minimum of cooperation between all Yugoslav republics was needed.

The struggle between 'federalists' and 'confederalists' culminated during the last Congress of the LCY in January 1990, when the Slovenian and Croatian delegations left the Congress deeply disappointed by Serbia's rejection of the necessary reforms. The end of the communist ideology became official when the first pluralistic elections in Slovenia and Croatia were announced in April and May 1990. In both republics the elections were won by the opposition; in Slovenia by the anti-communist DEMOS and in Croatia by the Croation Democratic Union (HDZ), the Croatian nationalist party. The ideological confrontation 'communism versus nationalism' started already during the eighties. Slobodan Milosevic was the first politician in communist Yugoslavia to mobilize nationalism. He gained enormous popularity among the Serbs in Kosovo and Croatia, announcing the campaign for their 'salvation' from the Kosovo-Albanians and the Croats. However, he did not intend to replace communist ideology by a nationalist ideology. He intended to combine them. A communist himself, Milosevic managed to avoid popular condemnation for the complete collapse of socialism by giving his political function as the Party President of Serbia a strong national identity. One of the major achievements of this approach was that Milosevic succeeded in transforming the existing communist institutions to suit his own political purposes.

In Slovenia and Croatia the ideological polarization 'nationalism versus communism' dominated the election campaign in 1990. New political elites came to power denouncing communist ideology and the concept of the Yugoslav state: a sharp contrast to the rhetoric of Slobodan Milosevic who officially embraced both. His political actions were completely inconsistent with his political proclamations; to him and his followers, Yugoslavia was only another name for a 'Greater Serbia'. Success was guaranteed – the Serbs in Kosovo and Croatia welcomed him as a 'savior', and so did his fellow communists in Serbia, who saw their chance to remain in power. They blamed the Kosovo-Albanians and the Croats for all the mistakes and misfortunes of the past. To the dissatisfied Serbs they gave the false hope that once the Serbs realized their goal to live together in the newly designed Serbian state, everything would change for the better.

After the death of communist ideology in 1991, a new ideological polarization in Yugoslavia took place; 'nationalism versus nationalism'. Once introduced as state policies, Croatian and Serbian nationalist ideologies inevitably clashed. Their concepts of national states collided first in Croatia, in the regions where the Serbs form a majority. However, the most severe clash happened in Bosnia-Herzegovina where both ideologies claim their own share of territory. The clash in Bosnia-Herzegovina became more intense because of the third party involved, the Bosnian Muslims. They would have preferred a Yugoslav federation to a formation of Serbian and Croatian national states

that jeopardize the existence of Bosnia-Herzegovina. According to Serbian and Cro-
atian nationalist ideologies, Bosnian Muslims are in fact Croats or Serbs who accepted
the Islam under Turkish rule. The Bosnian Muslims could only agree to the formation
of the Serbian and Croatian national states providing they leave Bosnia-Herzegovina
out of their territorial games, so that it remained a sovereign state with three constituent
peoples: Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims. Out of the six constituent peoples of the
former Yugoslavia only the Slovenians could form their own separate national state
without clashing with the others. The independent Slovenian national state was estab-
lished without serious problems, except for the '10 day war' between the JNA (Yugoslav
Federal Army) troops and the Slovenian Territorial Defense. The main reason for this
relatively peaceful transition in Slovenia was its ethnic homogeneity (more than 90% of
its population is Slovenian), and the absence of any kind of demands from the side of
the Slovenian nationalist movement for the augmentation of its territory.[4]

The nationalist elites gave the impression that once the ethnic-national state had been
realized, a period of prosperity would begin. But, in the newly formed Croatian state, it
seemed as if the political power struggle has just commenced. The cohesive fundament
for the post-communist Croatian state rests on ethnicity and the right of the Croatian
people to self-determination. But once achieved, independence is not enough for the
further building of a state. The nationalist parties are not a 'fact of life', but they are a
political choice. The existence of non-nationalist parties demonstrates that nationalism
is not the natural choice of every Croat but simply one of a number of political options.
In the last two years, two regional parties, the Dalmatian Action and the Istrian Demo-
cratic Council, have been sending warning signs to Zagreb. Their main protest is the
economic negligence of what they see as the Zagreb-centered policy of the governing
party, the HDZ. Nobody is talking about the secession of Dalmatia or Istria yet, but in
economic terms, it is not unthinkable that in the future Istria will gravitate more to Slo-
venia and Italy.

The establishment of the new Croatian state thus far has not meant that the old eco-
nomic and social troubles from communist times disappeared. Inflation has reached
excessive heights, unemployment is still increasing, and economic protests are shaking
the fragile social system. Although the leading political elite can blame all economic
and social misfortunes on the war and on the unstable situation in Croatia, ('neither
peace nor war'), they are confronted with another sort of critique, their own behavior.
Corruption, personal benefits from their positions, and a number of scandals make the
HDZ politicians increasingly unpopular. Many of them privatized luxurious houses in
elite locations in the Croatian capital Zagreb, sometimes for unrealistically small
amounts of money.[5] This kind of behavior reminds people of the communist nomencla-
ture (or the communist aristocracy) from the generation of communists that started the
revolution in 1941. Under the motto 'we made it all happen' they were enjoying all the
privileges of the system. The nationalist political elites praise themselves for the
'historical achievement' of Croatian independence and consider Croatia to be their own
property.

Political Elites and Violence

The second stereotype about the war in former Yugoslavia concerns the extent of vio-

lence. Unable to comprehend the extent of the violence, world public opinion seems to have accepted the explanation of the bloody Balkan history where people traditionally hate each other and fight savage wars. Is the violence in former Yugoslavia a spontaneous outburst of a centuries of cultivation of hatred?

The terminology from the book *Genocide: its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* by the American scholar Leo Kuper is useful in surveying the nature of violence displayed in the Yugoslav war:

When the ruling elites decide that their continuation in power transcends all other economic and social values, at that point does the possibility, if not necessity, for genocide increase qualitatively. For this reason, genocide is a unique strategy for totalitarian regimes.[6]

Genocidal violence has been introduced here because of the nature of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina where the practice of 'ethnic cleansing' has been introduced, and because of the fact that genocidal violence is generally organized by governments or organized political groups. Kuper defines genocide as:

a crime against a collective, taking the form of massive slaughter, and carried out with explicit intent. As a crime against a collective, it sets aside the whole question of individual responsibility; it is denial of individuality. All members of the group are guilty solely by virtue of their membership in it ... The intent, as we have seen, is to destroy a group as such.[7]

In order to mobilize the masses for their political purposes the political elites start a process of dehumanization of their political enemies. Kuper defines dehumanization as the denial of a person's human status.

Indeed, the crime seems more horrifying when the extermination is carried out, not in blind hatred, but in pursuance of some further purpose, the victims being cast in a purely instrumental role. This is the ultimate point in the denial of human individuality and significance.[8]

If we apply these terms to the case of Yugoslavia, we see that post-communist political elites based their power on the nationalist ideologies which legitimate the creation of new national states; a Slovenian, a Croatian, and a Serbian ethnic-national state. These post-communist and post-Yugoslav ideological concepts that have been created in the political centers of the former Yugoslav republics have as a primary task to win, preserve, or extend the political power of these elites. The outbreak of war in former Yugoslavia was a direct consequence of a power struggle between political elites. The Serbian and Croatian post-communist ideologies were created after the collapse of the social and political state structure based on communist ideology. Serbian post-communist nationalist ideology started to develop its present shape with the appearance of the Memorandum SANU. Two important elements from the Memorandum were to be essential for the later development of Serbian nationalistic policy. First, it mobilized the feeling of collective fear of the 'others'. Secondly, it started the process of dehumanization of the others. The media were effectively used for political purposes: the history of the Second World War was evoked. To the Serbs, the Croats became 'Ustasas'; to the Croats the Serbs became 'Cetniks'. The Bosnian Muslims became 'Muslim funda-

mentalists'. The power struggle between various political adversaries in former Yugoslavia led eventually to war. Ideology played a very important role for the political elites. They created it and adopted it as a justification to act.

The practice of 'ethnic cleansing' and the mass rapes of Muslim women by the Serbians that shook the whole world in 1992, has already been characterized as an organized campaign against Bosnian Muslims by the UN commission for war crimes in former Yugoslavia.[9] What makes a war-crime a genocidal crime is the fact that there is a totalitarian ideology behind it, which contains in itself an intent to destroy the 'others'. So far, we see a clash between two nationalist ideologies (Serbian and Croatian) in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, where they fight for the augmentation of territory. When in the spring of 1993, the Croatian soldiers marched into the Muslim village Ahmici in Central Bosnia and killed the civilians and burned down their houses, it was by no means an outburst of hatred between people of different ethnic groups. Ahmici was simply a Muslim village on territory that had to be added to Croatia, according to the designs of the Croatian nationalist ideologues.

Still one of the most difficult parts in defining the nature of the crimes in the Yugoslav war remains the question of who is to blame for it and how one can prove that the intent of Serbs was to 'destroy' members of Croatian and Bosnian Muslim ethnic groups. Despite the fact that the Serbs introduced the practice of 'ethnic cleansing', the Croatian and Bosnian Muslim sides have adopted it – the Croats with the same purpose as the Serbs, and the Bosnian Muslims followed it as the only way to keep their territory. An important distinction has been made between the genocidal massacre and the reaction to it. It is generally assumed that the Bosnian Muslims are using violence as a response to the genocidal violence committed by the Serbs and to a certain extent by the Croats. Violence by Bosnian Muslims has been seen as a counter-massacre. To what extent Serbian forces committed genocidal massacres in Croatia (the destruction of Vukovar, the cleansing of the Knin-Krajina and Eastern Slavonia of the non-Serb population) will be more difficult to establish, mostly because of aggressive Croatian policy in Bosnia-Herzegovina during 1993.

The Croatian campaign for recognition as an independent state in 1991 has been successful partly because it did not require border changes. Once it reached that goal, the Croatian nationalists moved forward and became engaged in the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Genocidal massacres have been regularly committed against Bosnian Muslims by Serbian nationalists and, to a lesser extent, by Croatian nationalists. The Croatian position has been moderately rehabilitated because of the agreement with the Muslims on the creation of a Croat-Muslim federation in Bosnia-Herzegovina during negotiations in Washington and Geneva.

Still, with the war going on, it is very difficult to make a definite judgment about the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys'. It seems that the final word has to be said after the war. After the Second World War, there was an ongoing discussion about the nature of the violence committed by the Ustasas and the Cetniks. Ustasa crimes were labelled as genocide because of the explicit intent to create a 'pure' Croatian state. The violence committed by the Cetniks was frequently described as a reaction to the Croatian genocidal violence. The Croatian historians, among them Franjo Tudjman, dispute this, and claim that Serbian nationalist ideology was already formulated in 1942 with the intent to create a Greater Serbia. At this point, the main concern of the international diploma-

tic community is how this war can be stopped. Whatever political agreement may be reached between the warring parties, it will have to be accompanied by a process of 'humanization' and a rebuilding of confidence between the various ethnic groups.

The Nature of the Violence

The fact that the political elites were responsible for the beginning of the war in former Yugoslavia does not mean that they held their power firmly during the war. War creates its own reality and produces its own elites (fighting 'elites' such as general Ratko Mladic, or Zeljko Raznatovic-Arkan, leader of the paramilitary group 'Tigers'). Next to the regular forces that are directly submitted to the control of the official governments, there are a lot of irregular paramilitary groups fighting in this war. Some of these irregulars are military organizations of the various political parties; some of them are criminal groups that use the war's existing anarchy for plundering and enriching themselves. The regular military forces and the various irregulars will cooperate as long as their military and political goals overlap. Therefore, a legitimate question concerning the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina is whether the political leadership of the parties involved has control over the various military groups. Even if they want to, can political authorities stop the war?

The characteristic of the violence committed by the regular armies is that they hardly engage in direct fighting against each other. The face of the war waged in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina is characterized by heavy long-distance shelling of the areas that are targeted to be conquered. Violence has been directed mostly against the civilian population. Military confrontations between the armies are almost carefully avoided. The Croatian city of Vukovar was completely destroyed before Serbian forces could occupy it. The same pattern has been followed in the sieges of Sarajevo and Gorazde. But so far, these cities have not been completely destroyed, due to pressure by UNPROFOR and NATO. The soldiers responsible for the shelling do not really fight; they are only pulling triggers from a safe distance. They do not see their victims.

The most appalling images of the war fought in the former Yugoslavia are those of the 'low-tech' murders, massacres and rapes directed against the civilian population that make us wonder what kind of people could ever do something like that. Does 'Homo Balkanicus', defined as an extraordinarily violent subspecies of Homo Sapiens, really exist?

We automatically think that such war crimes as those committed in former Yugoslavia can only be committed by psychologically disturbed people, or at least by people who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Before the war, most 'soldiers' were 'normal people'. They were living peacefully next to their neighbors who became their enemies overnight.

Slobodan P. is a Bosnian Serb. When the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina started, he was 22 years old. In the beginning of the war he was still working as a carpenter. One day, he was stopped by a group of uniformed men, his fellow Serbs (he calls them 'special soldiers' – specijalci). They told him that it was not right for him to drive around in his car while the war was going on. They brought him to the police station and gave him a uniform. In May 1992, he became a prison guard in the concentration camp Luka. In the beginning he never saw any murders, but he regularly heard screams and gunfire

coming from the barracks. One day, one of the 'special soldiers' ordered him to follow. He was brought to a room where other 'special soldiers' were already waiting. They brought in a girl and ordered him to rape her. He could not. They brought another one, and another one, and another one ... five altogether, between 12 and 25 years old. They had to lie down on the floor and the 'special soldiers' held them. Slobodan had to rape them. He could not but he pretended that he was doing so. After that he had to kill. Four men between 30 and 50 years old were brought in. Two 'special soldiers' held the first man at his shoulders and arms. Slobodan got a knife and the third special soldier took his hand with the knife in it and held it firmly. They cut the throat of the first victim. The next one Slobodan had to kill on his own. But he could not and he almost fainted. They helped him to stand up. He was shaking and the special soldiers decided that he might as well shoot the victims. The first time he got permission to go on leave to the city of Brcko, he fled. He was imprisoned by the Croatian forces and will probably be brought to court as a war criminal.[10]

This story is one that explains a lot about behavior during war. It is behavior ruled by terror and fear in which the whole system of norms from peaceful times has disappeared. The 'special soldiers' from Slobodan's story are those who introduce the new norms. Slobodan related that those men knew why they were fighting; to them, the war was an opportunity to enrich themselves, to gain power and become important. Slobodan was a carpenter and without the war he would have remained one. But they made him a soldier by forcing him to rape and kill. He became an accessory in their crimes. He fled, but not many could do that. Once they have killed, there is no way out. Thus the war becomes acceptable, because while it is going on, this behavior is 'normal'.[11]

Probably the most notorious story of an average person turned into a savage killer is the story of Borislav Herak. When the war started, he was 21 years old, a primary school graduate working in a Sarajevo textile factory. His father was a Serb, his mother a Croat. His sister was married to a Muslim, whom he held in high regard. And then the war started. He was drafted into the 'Serbian Volunteers'. Once, he was taken to a small farm outside Vogosca, where a 65-old-Serbian volunteer demonstrated to Herak and three other young Serbs how to wrestle pigs to the ground, hold their heads back with their ears and cut their throats. Only three days later, Herak would use this 'skill' to kill three captured Muslim men fighting for the Bosnian Army. Before the war he had had nothing but good relations with his Muslim neighbors. About his motivation to fight he said the following: 'From the Serbian radio and television, and in gatherings with other Serbian fighters, particulary the older generation steeped in Serbian folklore going back to medieval defeats by the Ottoman Turks, he said he learned that Muslims posed a threat to Serbs'. But besides that Herak said 'that he also had been motivated by the urge to have things he never had before the war, including women and items like television sets and videos and foreign currency'.[12]

How can the behavior of these two soldiers be explained? In both stories the process of alienation from the norms and values characteristic to life in a civil society have been replaced by other norms almost overnight. These norms are not only different, but even in complete contradiction with peace time norms. The soldiers accept these norms due to various reasons – fear, pressure from their surroundings, or simply the desire to survive. Except for this alienation from civil society, social control is used to play a very important role. In combat situations, soldiers fight together in closed ranks, and

their lives depend heavily on each other. Their behavior is visible and is judged by the others and they will do everything to comform. The next important element for fighting motivation of soldiers is discipline. The behavior of soldiers must be programmed as much as possible so that killing and raping become an instrumental act in which norms, values, and morals are no longer relevant. Individual crimes cease to exist. Everything happens according to a command by the appropriate authority so that individual responsibility has been dispensed.[13]

Ideology, defined as a more or less coherent set of attitudes and beliefs with a propensity to act, plays an important role as well. It is a motivation for enlistment into an army, but once the war has started not only 'genuine fanatics' fight and commit genocidal crimes.[14] It is questionable as to how much ideology meant as a motivation for soldiers like Slobodan and B. Herak. For Herak, ideology seems to provide a negative definition of 'the others' (Muslims in his case), meaning that they somehow represent a threat to the Serbs. He did not understand what Serbian nationalist ideology is all about. Even the 'special soldiers' from Slobodan's story are not motivated by ideology. They use it conveniently for their own purposes, which are enrichment and gaining power. War attracts many destructive types that want nothing else but to kill and to torture, or looters that are interested in the property of those killed. For them, ideology serves as justification for their crimes.[15] In the case of the fighters of Arkan's 'Tigers', it is obvious that asocial types, such as ordinary criminals, use the war's anarchy to continue doing what they have been doing in the criminal underworld – killing and stealing. The major difference is that now they wear the insignia and uniforms that identify them as 'patriots'. Their motives are anything but patriotic.

But ideologies are important for shaping a dehumanized image of the victims. This image is, therefore, a significant part of any totalitarian ideology, and is deliberately created to make a distinction between 'them' and 'us'. Borislav Herak told a journalist of the *New York Times*:

that what he remembers most vividly about the sunny morning in late June when he and two companions gunned down 10 members of a Muslim family is the small girl, about 10 years old, who tried to hide behind her grandmother as the three Serbian nationalist soldiers opened fire from distance of about 10 paces.[16]

The very fact that he noticed a small girl and not 'one of them' confirms the process of dehumanization. The rest of the family was killed without him even noticing anybody. Later in the same article Herak says that 'we were told that we have to cleanse our whole population of Muslims ... That's what we have been told. That's why it has been necessary to do all this.'[17]

Conclusion

It is in the very nature of describing a stereotype to wonder what is that small bit of truth upon which it is based. Defending the thesis that the ethnic conflict in Yugoslavia was a construction by the political elites does not answer the question of why they succeeded in mobilizing the masses, using nationalism. Despite the fact that the history of the Serbo-Croat relationship is selectively described, there is no doubt that the political

goal of the Serbian and the Croatian nationalist politicians for the creation of their own ethnic-national states has a great appeal among the Serbs and the Croats. They believe in political freedom and economic progress within the state where they will be their own bosses. It appears to be a legitimate demand.

However, the problem is not whether new nation-states should be formed in Europe after the collapse of communism, but how they are formed (on the territory of former Yugoslavia). The nationalist elites have opted for a military solution to achieve their political goals. The creation of the new national states seems to have one big priority, namely the extension of the existing borders. That first stage of the formation of the new states proves to be the most difficult. It can therefore become a long war in which the further political, economic and social development of a future state are made dependent on the new borderline. Any new state created as a result of an uncompromising policy of its leaders and of severe violence against the civilian population of the 'other' side should be condemned.

Finally, whatever the causes of the war, the consequences will be felt for a long time. Since this war started, new historical facts of bloody confrontations on the Balkans have been created. The presence of the contemporary war in the media makes it probably the most severe war in the perception of history of the Balkan peoples. Television images bring the horror into our homes within only a few hours, and the memories of those directly hurt by the war are preserved and documented, making it more difficult to forget. This war is happening in front of millions of television-viewers all over the world and therefore, a local conflict has become a global event.

References

1. A description regularly heard and quoted.
2. Drago Roksandic, 'The Myth of 'Historical Conflict', *Labor Focus on Eastern Europe*, 1992, pp. 18-20; *Globus*, 17 July 1992; *Globus*, 22 April 1994.
3. Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century*. Harmondsworth, 1981, p. 57.
4. The border dispute between Slovenia and Croatia started soon after their independence. It is still unresolved; it concerns mostly the borderline in the Bay of Piran on the Adriatic Sea.
5. *Globus*, 17 July 1992, 22 April 1994.
6. Kuper, *Genocide*, p. 57.
7. Ibid., p. 86. The United Nations adopted the following definition of genocide: 'In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as 1) Killing members of the group; 2) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; 3) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; 4) Imposing measures to prevent birth within the group; 5) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. (p. 19)
8. Kuper, *Genocide*, p. 87.
9. see Tadeusz Mazowiecki, 'Situation of Human Rights in the Territory of Former

Yugoslavia', UN Economic and Social Council, document E/CN.4/1994/47, 17 November 1993.

10. *Globus*, 11 September 1992.

11. N. Tromp-Vrkic, *De Volkskrant*, 28 December 1992.

12. *New York Times*, 27 November 1992.

13. see H.W. Tromp, 'The Nature of War and the Nature of Militarism', in Robert Hinde (ed.), *War: a Cruel Necessity? – The Basis of Institutionalized Violence.* (forthcoming)

14. Kuper, *Genocide*, p. 84.

15. Ibid., p. 49.

16. *New York Times*, 27 November 1992.

17. Ibid.