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REMEMBERING ETHNIC CLEANSING IN REPUBLIKA SRPSKA

An Ethnography of Memory in the City of Bijeljina

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Abstract

This thesis provides a case-study of the relationship between public memory and lived experience in the process of transformation of national identity in the aftermath of 'ethnic cleansing'. Once a multiethnic town with a Muslim majority, since the 1992-1995 Bosnian war the town of Bijeljina has been subjected to dynamics that resulted in the imposition of a narrow interpretation of Serb national identity in the public space. In this liminal process, Bijeljina has been transformed into a 'Serb' town, where Muslims are now tolerated but marginalised.

'Ethnic cleansing', the ultimate liminal experience, was central to the transformation of Bijeljina, and it figures prominently in the recollections of the local population, but is virtually absent from official memory, which is submitted to the demands of the nationalist agenda of the local authorities. An ethnographic approach allowed me to go beyond public representations, to explore private aspects of social memory and how these interact with official memory, as people try to find meaning for their wartime experience. I combined my observation of everyday life through immersion in the community during one year of fieldwork with in-depth interviews focusing on the respondents' recollections of life before the war, their wartime experience, how they reorganised their lives once the war was over, how they see the present and imagine a future for themselves and their families.

The thesis argues for a more subtle understanding of the relationship of mutual implication between memory and identity, by focusing on the construction of collective memory in a context where identity is uncertain, to analyse the dynamics interplay between different mnemonic communities built on the basis of lived experience, and between these communities and the representations of the past sponsored or favoured by the political class.

The thesis will fill a gap in the Memory Studies literature dealing with the experience of war; post-conflict; Transitional Justice; and post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, by going beyond the dominant trend focusing on public aspects of ccollective memory, such as commemorations and memorials, to place the population's lived experience and meaning making processes at the centre.

Declaration

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I declare that my thesis consists of 95.712 words.

I can confirm that my thesis was copy edited for conventions of language, spelling and grammar by Quintin Hoare and Peter Lipmann, who also verified the accuracy of the translations.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The 1992-1995 war in Bosnia-Herzegovina resulted in an unprecedented historical shift, with deep repercussions in the lives of its population, and in their sense of belonging and identity. This transformation involved the strategic use of an extreme level of violence specifically directed against civilian populations; of a pre-war population of 4.3 million, about 100.000 died as a direct result of the war, and about 2.2 million were forcefully displaced. Previously a multi-ethnic society where the population generally lived well-integrated, and effective social and political mechanisms existed to regulate and accommodate ethnic diversity, the war transformed Bosnia-Herzegovina into a conglomeration of mostly ethnically segregated territories where narrow interpretations of national identity according to nationalist perspectives are dominant, and space for alternative expressions of identity limited.

This thesis will focus on the case of Republika Srpska, to explore how people remember the wartime violence, and how those memories relate to the process(es) of reconstruction of national identity taking place there. In the context of the disintegration of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), Bosnian Serb leaders opposed the idea of an independent Bosnia organised as a unitary state. Instead, they favoured the idea of a union with Serbia as part of a rump Yugoslavia; once this possibility was excluded, they launched a rebellion to secede and create their own state, based on the principle of 'separation of peoples'. The massive forced population displacement during the war owe much to the pursuit of this principle, defined by the Serb leadership as a strategic goal. Using an ethnographic approach, I will analyse the relationship between public representations of the past and privately articulated memories based on lived experience, focusing especially on the meanings attached to the experience of persecution and forced displacement, and its impact on the population's sense of belonging, to highlight the relationship of mutual implication between collective memory and national identity.

a) The research problem:

The fundamental transformation of the territory brought about by the war, and the overwhelming absence, in the populations' everyday lives, of the 'constitutive others' which resulted from ethnic cleansing and post-war segregation, were crucial elements of the transformation of ethnic identity in Bosnia-Herzegovina, ethnicity being, as Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2002:12) highlights, "essentially an aspect of a relationship, not a property of a group". After three and a half years of war, the Dayton Peace Agreement resulted in the division of the country into two highly autonomous 'entities', whose boundary corresponded to a slightly modified version of the frontlines as they stood at the time of the cease-fire. Designed as a temporary solution to end the war (Bennet 2016: 85), Dayton imposed a consocional power-sharing arrangement that made rigid ethno-national identities the primary forms of political identification, and embedded discrimination against all who did not fit into such categories (Bojičić-Dželilović 2015). Thus, the system empowered the nationalist ruling class that emerged from the war, which actively demanded individuals' allegiance as a condition for inclusion in the political community corresponding to one's ethnic group.

But Dayton included also a series of provisions with the potential to reverse, at least in part, the effects of ethnic cleansing and forced displacement more generally[1], and thus restore a certain degree of ethnic diversity (Toal and Dahlman 2011). The Peace Agreement, and the international peace-building efforts that followed towards its implementation, reflected a mix − not always consistent − of pragmatism and idealism, institutionalising, on the one hand, the 'territorialisation of ethnicity', while, on the other hand, enforcing liberal policies and imposing Human Rights protection mechanisms (Bieber 2006; Bennet 2016). The post-war stage opened up new possibilities to reshape Bosnia-Herzegovina beyond the will of its ruling class, which for the most part remained committed to ethnic homogenisation.

This led to an array of processes that developed both from the top-down and from

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1   These were the provisions for return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their pre-war homes (Annex 7); return of real property (annex 7); and the preservation and restoration of national monuments (Annex 8), many of which had been damaged or destroyed as part of wider processes of ethnic cleansing (Riedlmeyer 2002; Walasek 2015)

the bottom-up, eventually converging towards the normalisation of inter-ethnic relations at the level of everyday life. Regarding top-down processes, we should highlight the efforts undertaken by international actors towards the creation of a stable security situation, the establishment of freedom of movement and the reinforcement of the state-level institutions (Bennet 2016). Measures enforcing the right to return of property, and the right of internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their pre-war homes, but also decisions with immediate practical implications, such as establishing vehicle licence plates that did not display the vehicle's place of registration, and restoring bus lines between the two entities, had a massive impact, making it easier for people to reorganise their lives. Such measures contributed to the development of botom-up normalisation processes, but were themselves influenced by an intense grassroots mobilisation, as in the case of the return movement to areas where individuals would constitute part of the minority in terms of ethnicity, usually referred to as 'minority return' (Belloni 2006; Sivac-Bryant 2016).

These converging processes did not challenge the dominant nationalist order, but they succeeded in pushing for some level of accommodation, which made life more bearable, and allowed, crucially, for a significant level of refugee return and resettlement of displaced persons. In a climate still fraught with tension, most people preferred to live in areas where their ethnic group formed a majority, but there was also a significant level of 'minority return'. Whatever the case, people usually found the places they were to live in transformed as a consequence of the war, but they would also become, through their very presence, part of this, still ongoing, transformation. The radical political changes, the violence, and the massive movements of populations, disrupted people's sense of identity and especially their sense of attachment and belonging to a community.

It was against this backdrop that, in the post-war period, the parallel processes of reconstruction of national identity which originated in the pre-war period, continued to develop among the three 'constituent peoples' of Bosnia-Herzegovina, now that the umbrella of a larger multi-national state was no longer. In a country now divided along ethnic lines, the overwhelming − but not complete − absence of each ethnic group's 'significant other' in the realm of everyday life was replaced by their conspicuous presence as political opponents in abstract, if not enemies, with divergent interests, threatening the survival of the in-group.

In Republika Srpska, this reconstruction of national identity has been paralleled by an ongoing process of institution-building (ICG 2009), facilitated by a consensus towards the protection and reinforcement of the entity's political autonomy. Since 2006, Republika Srpska's strongman, current President Milorad Dodik (Prime-Minister between 2006 and 2010), has regularly threatened to organise an independence referendum (Toal 2013; Majstorović 2013), and repeatedly declared that Bosnia is a "failed idea" (*propala ideja*) with "no chance to survive" (BLIN 2013; see also Azinović, Bassuener and Weber 2011:37-40). In the meantime, the authorities of RS have been efficiently "building the institutions they would need for independence, although they are also useful within Bosnia" (ICG 2009:8), whilst frequently obstructing the operation of the state institutions (Bennet 2016), thus exposing the fragility of the Dayton order, exploring the fear of a new war, and inducing a sense of uncertainty over the future.

But the incessant repetition of the desire for independence, as well as the saturation of the landscape with symbols of statehood, such as flags at virtually every junction; '*Welcome to the Republic of Srpska*' billboards on the borders and on the roads in places corresponding to the Inter-Entity Boundary Line (IEBL); the attempts to add the adjective 'srpski' to the name of a number of towns, and to erase the adjective 'bosanski'[2]; etc, also translate a necessity to constantly assert Serb identity, or rather 'Srpska' identity, that can be interpreted as a sign of to be interpreted as a sign of insecurity, or as Ivan Lovrenović (2001) has pointed out, as a"symptom of foreignness, or rootlessness".

The extent and depth of the transformation of the territory and of the population's lives brought with it a certain level of uncertainty over identity, which nationalists seek to counter through the construction of an officially-sponsored public memory based on "a narrative of the war that supports the claim of the legitimacy of Republika Srpska's existence as a separate politically organised community"(Correia 2013:329). The construction of an government-sponsored public memory of the Bosnian war, officially called the "Defensive-Fatherland War"(*odbrambeno-otadžbinski rat'*)representing Republika Srpska as a 'community of sacrifice' (Hutchinson 2009) is an important element of the

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2   For instance Bosanska Kostajnica (Srpska Kostajnica) and Bosanski Brod (Srpski Brod). A decision of the Constitutional Court, however, forced the Republika Srpska authorities to drop the 'Srpska' prefix. For more on this issue see Correia (2013, pp. 334-335)

nationalist project of construction of nationhood.

The question of how to deal with historical events of violence involved in the foundation of political communities is a critical problem facing national identity projects. This difficulty has been eloquently highlighted by Ernest Renan (1992[1882]) in his famous lecture 'What is a Nation?', who suggested that forgetting and historical error were a "a crucial factor in the creation of the nation". Forgetting, however, is difficult, if not impossible, at least while such historical events are still part of living memory, if for nothing else, because the surviving victims of such acts, and those who oppose the identity project at stake will mobilise themselves in ways that will function as reminders of that which, following Renan, should be the object of oblivion and historical error.

How the legacy of ethnic cleansing and genocide is framed and dealt with is indeed the key question regarding the dynamics of social remembering and the construction of collective memory in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. This question stands the heart of nation building efforts as much as it stands at the centre of transitional justice and reconciliation initiatives. In research carried out in 2010, I analysed the politics of memory enforced in Republika Srpska by its leadership and traced the evolution of the official approach to the memory of the war in the context of evolving international and domestic constrains and internal power-struggles among the Bosnian Serb political elite (Correia 2013). Other scholars have focused on the relationship between this politics of memory and those sponsored by Bosniak and Bosnian Croat political elites and 'memory entrepreneurs', which both reflect and reinforce the existing ethnic divisions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and undermine efforts towards reconciliation (Miller 2006; Moll 2013).

The top-down approach of these pieces of research (see also Musi 2015), left unexplored, however, the role of lived experience in the construction of collective memory, by excluding from their research design an engagement with personal memories(e.g. Musi 2015:262). On the other hand, anthropologists like Hariz Halilovich(2013) and Sebina Sivac-Bryant (2016), who adopted a bottom-up approach, left the interaction between different mnemonic communities largely unexplored (see, however Eastmond and Mannergren Selimović (2012), who explore the role of silence in these interactions at local level).

In their respective analysis of monuments, memorials and commemorations in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina (Halilovich 2013:Ch.3); and of the frustrated effort towards memorialisation of the the Omarska concentration camp by the victims of ethnic cleansing in Prijedor in Republika Srpska (Sivac-Bryant 2016:Ch5), Halilovich and Sivac-Bryant point out to the crucial problem involved in any memorialisation effort in Republika Srpska, with regards to ethnic cleansing: the opposition between the experience of the victims and the will of the political class to ignore that same experience. Whilst there is a clear political dimension, this is not, however, a problem that can be adequately explored by framing it as a struggle between hegemonic memory and counter-memory − to evoke the foucauldian model (Misztal 2003:62). This would represent an over-simplification, stressing ethnic divisions and equating the official memory promoted by the authorities with the personal memories of the Serb population; many of whom struggle to give meaning to their pre-war attachments, their wartime experience, and their emotional attachment and political support towards Republika Srspka, as Ioannis Armakolas' (2007) ethnographic study of Sarajevo Serbs who resettled in Pale, the ski resort which became the wartime capital of Republika Srpska, suggests.

Political events in general, and war and mass violence in particular, are always experienced collectively, regardless of each individual's positionally, as shared experiences, although they were experienced differently by different categories of the population, depending on a number factors, among which ethnicity, gender and age stand out. Such experiences provide the base for an array of mnemonic communities within a given society, who in the course of their interaction influence each other, and the dominant representations, as well as being influenced by them. Without ignoring it, but instead recognising the pervasiveness of its presence, we need to go beyond public memory, and shift our attention from memory entrepreneurs and political actors, towards ordinary people, to explore how their wartime experience influences their everyday lives and their sense of belonging, and the difficulties that arise from the contrast between individuals's lived experience and what and how they are told to remember.

We need to provide adequate context, since remembering always happens in a given place and in a given time, and, with a particular focus on recollections that are kept as private memories, we need to combine a top-down analysis of official memory with a bottom up perspective of the dynamics of remembering, to better understand the

relationship between memory and identity in the aftermath of war and ethnic cleansing.

The Research Questions

The overall question that has guided this research is thus: how are memories that stem from the experience of mass violence given meaning, and thus influence the dynamics of identification processes, when they are produced in a political context characterised by political uncertainty; deep divisions created or enhanced by conflict; and the dominance of nationalistic public representations?

This question implies the following sub-questions:

• Given the diversity of war-time experiences and political perspectives of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, how do social memories produced by different 'communities of experience' interplay within the post-war process of reconstruction of identity?

• How do memories of earlier historical experiences of violence, but also the memories of peaceful coexistence and 'life in common' (zajednički *život*) and among ethnic groups before 1992, influence the way people remember the recent war and find meaning to the changes it brought about?

• Given the public prominence of nationalist representations of the past, how is the division between public and private dimensions of social memories operated, maintained and challenged?

b) Research design:

Research for this thesis followed the interpretative tradition of the social sciences, grounded on the ontological and epistemological foundations of phenomenology, with its engagement with lived experience, and its processual approach to the production of meaning as it takes place in the lifeworld (*lebenswelt*) of individuals (Schutz 1967; Yanow

2006; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). I have adopted an abductive logic of inquiry, aimed at producing explanations of puzzling or surprising observations through a process involving an iterative-recursive relation between theoretical literature and empirical data, (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 27-34; Bajc 2012; Timmermans and Tavory 2012).

An abductive approach allowed me to mobilise my prior knowledge, both in terms of experience in the field and study of the literature, without nevertheless being bound by it, and to search for theoretical insights as research developed during and beyond fieldwork. Adopting an abductive approach kept me focused on an effort to remain open to different analytical possibilities, since, as Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012:34) highlight, "the abductive logic of inquiry (…) rests on the idea that researchers will learn more about their research question in the process of conducting their research". It is, for that reason, particularly appropriate for ethnographic research, in which immersion in the community opens up the possibility of observing the unexpected, in spontaneous, naturally occurring interactions.

Methodology:

Ethnography is the methodology I chose to explore the meaning making processes centred around the experience of war and ethnicised violence. Involving one year of fieldwork in the city of Bijeljina, the second largest of the 'entity' o Republika Srpska, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, an ethnographic approach allowed me to go beyond public representations, to explore private aspects of social memory and how these interact with official memory, as people try to find meaning for their wartime experience. I combined my observation of everyday life through immersion in the community during one year of fieldwork with in-depth interviews focusing on the respondents' recollections of life before the war, their wartime experience, how they reorganised their lives once the war was over, how they see the present and imagine a future for themselves and their families.

To explain why I chose ethnography, rather than other, less time-consuming, forms of qualitative research, I need to clarify how I arrived at the research problem that defines this research. The very choice of the case-study of Republika Srpska is intertwined with

this question. My interest in the dynamics of memory, and more specifically on the ways people remember transformative political events was what motivated me in the first place to pursue postgraduate studies. For my Master's dissertation, I chose to focus on Serbia as a case-study of the relation between historical memories and the construction of national identity; this was a choice done for purely pragmatic reasons, as a suitable case to develop my theoretical interests; I did not have any prior connection to the region of the former Yugoslavia, but once I made this choice, it opened up a world of possibilities, research-wise, and I became particularly interested in the issue of genocide denial.

Before joining the LSE to pursue my doctoral studies, I was fortunate to live in Bosnia-Herzegovina for a period of fifteen months (June 2010-September 2011), during which I gained fluency in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, and travelled extensively throughout the country. I was also able to attend two annual cycles of commemorations of wartime atrocities, in the towns of Višegrad (June), Srebrenica (July) and Prijedor (May, July, August), and participated, as a volunteer, in the exhumations that took place in the Lake Peručac, in the River Drina, in September-October 2010.

On the basis of my experiences then, I came to the conclusion that research based solely on the observation of commemorations, without further engagement with the communities where they are performed lacks depth, and risks distorting the complexity of community life.I understood then that the scholarly focus on commemorations, and, more generally, on public representations, leaves aside less obvious, more difficult to access, aspects of the dynamics of social remembering. This leads to the dominance of the paradigm of 'divided memories' (e.g. Moll 2013), with commemorations and counter-commemorations often presented as a a war of memories and a competition towards claims of victimhood (e.g. Miller 2006). The result is a tendency to flatten lived experience, and ignore interactions in ethnically divided communities, which may assume forms other than confrontation.

Some of the limitations of approaches solely based on formal interviews or surveys lie in the very nature of the phenomenon of memory. As I argue in more detail in this thesis's theoretical chapter (Ch. 2), memory's scope goes much beyond representations, and it is crucial to go beyond explicit narratives in order to understand its dynamics, even if it is also crucial to engage with those narratives. I also felt that research strategies based on

surveys and semi-structured interviews would not adequately capture the meaning-making process inherent to social remembering, because, on the one hand, potential respondents were exposed, sometimes almost to the point of saturation, to the normative approach of Transitional Justice practitioners, and, on the other hand, I noticed a 'respondent fatigue' that many people, including 'memory entrepreneurs', ie, activists engaged in the process of memorialisation, seemed to share, due to sheer volume of journalists, scholars, students, etc, that visited the country in the post-war period. The combined result, as I observed it during my time in Bosnia in 2010/2011, was the emergence of conventionalised narratives, largely submitted to dominant public representations. There were clear gaps in the understanding of social remembering, which led to the research problem driving this research.

How and where to look for answers? The study of the relationship between collective memory and the construction of nationhood requires an in-depth approach through immersion in everyday life. Ethnography, with a prolonged presence in a single location, appeared as the best way to generate data with enough depth so as to go beyond the model of 'divided memories'. As a style of research and as a methodology, ethnography allows the researcher to gain insights into a particular problem in a society by engaging with the perspectives of its members, their beliefs, practises and expectations, ideally through spontaneous or naturally occurring interactions, which immersion in the community facilitates. This makes ethnography particularly suitable to 'how' questions and a focus on informality.

My research strategy, ahead of fieldwork, consisted in remaining in the field for a period of one year, so as to allow for some degree of immersion in the community. During fieldwork, I was to attend commemorations and other events related to memories of war and ethnicised violence; perfor a sufficient number of formal interviews with people willing to share their wartime experiences and reflect on their memories; and, most importantly, seek for opportunities to observe and participate in spontaneous interactions and in 'deep hanging out'. I was aware that the goal was ambitious, and the time limited, but I did underestimate the scale of difficulty involved, given, I believe, the sensitivity of my research theme, and, most importantly, a certain environment that seemed not to foster freedom of speech in my field location, or at least that was how I perceived it at the time. The next chapter provides a detailed description of the fieldwork experience in terms of data

collection and data generation. In the next section, I justify the choice of the location for this case-study.

Selection of the research site

In her comprehensive review of the literature on the wars of Yugoslav succession, Catherine Baker (2015) notes that "there is still no book length history of organised crime in Bosnia-Herzegovina, let alone for the war as a whole"(2015:59). The same goes for the analysis of the establishment of Republika Srpska, with Robert Donia's (2015) biography of Radovan Karadžić; Adis Maksić analysis of the creation and development of the SDS between 1990 and 1992; and Nina Caspersen's comparative study of the relationship between the Milošević regime, the Serbian Democratic Party in Croatia and its sister party in Bosnia-Herzegovina, among the few English language monographs specifically focusing on the creation of Republika Srpska (see also Kostovicova 2004). Despite the volume of research focusing on post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, there is an obvious gap in scholarly literature produced in foreign languages regarding Republika Srpska. To make things worse, there is a tendency to disregard the specificity of Bosnian Serb identity, as Ioannis Armakolas (2007), and Marko Attila Hoare (2007; 2010) highlight.

Since my focus on lived experience required, for the sake of depth, fieldwork to be performed in a single location, I needed a setting that could be small enough to make ethnographic engagement possible, but large enough to encompass some degree of diversity. How to pass through 'gatekeepers' and get access to potential informants was also an important concern. My initial plan was to do research in the town of Prijedor, in northwest Bosnia, a region where I had already done some exploratory fieldwork (see Correia 2010). I changed my mind when I became aware of the research being carried out by Sebina Sivac-Bryant (2016), and by Hariz Halilovich (2011), since I felt I would better contribute to the advancement of knowledge about the legacies of the war by focusing on a location as yet unexplored. The city of Bijeljina appeared, then, almost as a 'natural' choice, given that this is the second largest city of Republika Srpska; the main power-base, since 2006, of the Serbian Democratic Party; and a city that experienced substantial return of non-Serb population who was forcefully displaced during the war. Bijeljina thus offered

good conditions for an original empirical contribution to scholarship. It had also the advantage of being a place that I had not visited before.

With regard to the research questions, Bijeljina did not represent a typical case of 'ethnic cleansing', representing, instead, a case of protracted ethnic cleansing, which was completed only sightly before the end of the war. The fact that Bijeljina is, to some extent, a deviant case, is not, in itself, a problem, because the goal of this thesis is to produce contextualised knowledge, rather than to make wide generalisations. Still, the case of Bijeljina holds the potential to shed light into the wider dynamics of ethnic cleansing, that is useful to understand other cases, in which the whole process of expulsion of non-Serbs happened much faster, because although the pace and the scale of the violence employed were different, these different variants converged, by the end of the war, to the same result, an ethnically homogenous, 'Serb' territory.

c) Organisation of the thesis:

As the thesis explores the transformation of Bijeljina from a multi-ethnic town regulated by principle of 'life in common', the macro-structure of the thesis is inspired by the framework of rites of passage, while the internal structure of each chapter is intended to highlight the interactions in the remembering processes (public and private).

Chapter 1 provides a detailed description of fieldwork conducted for this thesis, and a reflexive analysis of the ethnographic methods used for data generation, with a focus on the questions of positionality – mine and that of my informants – and ethics.

Chapter 2 provides a discussion of the theoretical framework and key concepts used in this thesis, namely, the concepts of memory; ethnic cleansing; and liminality.

Chapter 3 presents the historical background relevant for this thesis,. The chapter offers a brief historical overview, centred around the development of Bijeljina through time, and its strategic importance as a border town. The chapter specifically focuses on the political context in which ethnic cleansing developed, with emphasis on the creation of Republika Srpska, and the ideal of 'separation of peoples'.

The four empirical chapters that follow are framed according to the different stages in the liminal process of transformation that Bijeljina experienced since the end of

communist rule.

Chapter 4 is set on the context of the stage of separation within the stage of liminality itself, and it provides an analysis of the spatial dimension of the process of construction of an official memory in what was to become Republika Srpska. It focuses on how the physical space changed in Bijeljina during and in the immediate aftermath of the Bosnian war, through a dual process of erasure and reinscription of public memory.

There is of course some degree or arbitrariness when defining when liminality starts, as Yugoslavia lived through a decade of growing uncertainty since the death of Tito to the beginning of disintegration and war. But here the relevant criterium is the moment when the point of no-return is reached, and that was when the war began. I see the beginning of the war, between April and August 1992 as the stage of separation that enforced a point of no-return; in August 1992, after a general mobilisation is declared, and the basic institutions of the Serb statelet became in place, and with the launch of the International Conference for Bosnia-Herzegovina, we enter the period of liminality proper, a period of great uncertainty following the dismantlement of the previously existing structures, when the lack of new structures opens up possibilities, in this case the possibility of shaping Republika Srpska. This period of liminality did not end with Dayton, which introduced a number of constraints but also opened up new possibilities. It ended when the new structures began to show signs of consolidation, which in RS was connected to intra-Serb power struggles. In Bijeljina too there were important changes in leadership, which introduced a new stage, which I have called the process of normalisation. This corresponds to the stage of reintegration or reaggregation in liminality theory, after new structures have emerged. It represents the closure of a period of uncertainty, thus providing a new stability, but also closing the realm of possibilities. The question in the end is whether Bosnia is still living in liminality, or whether it has reached a new stability. This stability is clearly precarious due to the flaws of the political system, and to the interest of ruling elites to maintain an environment of uncertainty over the future and latent conflictuality, but at the level of everyday life I will claim that on the level of everyday life a new normality has been established, regardless of this normality being considered morally problematic by the citizens. But this normality informs the way people remember and how they perceive their choices and constraints.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on private aspects of social and collective memory, to explore how people reacted to and coped with violence, and in particular with the profound transformations defined by the strategic goal of 'separation of peoples' that was the cornerstone of the Bosnian Serb nationalist project. Together, the two chapters function as counterpoints to the instrumentalist approach to collective memory. The chapters are located in the context of the period of liminality proper, and in both chapters I essentially explore the population's lived experience, as reflected in personal recollections through my interviews and informal conversations, but also as perceived through my observation of everyday life.

Chapter 5 focuses on the non-Serbs' (mostly Bosniaks, previously known as Muslims) experience of persecution, and how it is remembered through privately shared memories. It explores coping mechanisms, the flow of information, and cases of support beyond the ethnic divide. Chapter 6 focuses on the resettlement of Serbs displaced from other regions of Bosnia. Their experience is represented in official memory in such a way that it instrumentalises this experience for the sake of nation-building, of which resettled Serbs become hostages, whilst perceiving the position they are assigned as a second-rate status. The chapter explores the contradictions and dilemmas that people feel, trapped as they are by hegemonic narratives framing their suffering as a sacrifice for the nation.

In a way, the persecution of non-serbs is part of the process of erasure, and the resettlement of displaced Serbs is part of the process of reinscription, but the results are not straightforward. Bijeljina's Bosnian Muslims have in one way or another accommodated themselves with the reality of the existence of RS, either by remaining in exile, resettling in the Federation, or returning to the municipality, and reintegrating themselves within the constraints the political system imposed. Bosnian Serbs, on the other hand, seem to be caught in a state of permanent liminality, as they face obstacles to integration, and battle with the idea that they were sacrificed without any reward other than the very existence of Republika Srpska.

Chapter 7 closes the circle, with the idea of normalisation, bringing the thesis to the present time, and exploring an array of rituals of reaggregation and a few acts of redress after ethnic cleansing. Here I explore the process of return of Bosniaks (and also Roma); the reconstruction of the mosques; initiatives towards 'reconciliation' including the failure

of the local Truth and Reconciliation commission; and the continuation of the process of erasure and reinscription, fulfilling, in this period, a different function, not one of separation, but one of reagreggration.

Chapter 1

The craft of ethnography:

Fieldwork in Bijeljina

I conducted fieldwork in Bijeljina between the middle of March 2014 and the middle of February 2015, with an additional visit to the field in August-September 2015, which lasted six weeks. I was not familiar with Bijeljina before fieldwork. I had previously travelled extensively throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina (2007; 2008; 2010-2011), mostly in Republika Srpska, but I had never been in Bijeljina before. The opportunity to immerse myself in an environment to which I was alien was an added motivation for my choice of Bijeljina as the location for my fieldwork. Indeed, my position as an outsider allowed me to see Bijeljina with fresh eyes, without the sense of familiarity that renders invisible certain features of the local environment and 'naturalises' the locally-established routines and rituals and takes for granted the rhythms of everyday life.

Once settled, I sought to immerse myself in the local society, so as to create opportunities for observation of everyday life and for spontaneous interactions with the population in general, and to open up the possibility to engage in 'deep hanging out' in a few particular settings. I also attended an array of war-related public commemorations, covering not only the 1992-1995 war but also the First and Second World Wars – it was a fortunate coincidence that my fieldwork coincided with the 100th anniversary of the

Sarajevo assassination of the Archduke Franz-Ferdinand and the beginning of the First World War. During fieldwork I conducted in-depth interviews with 34 respondents, mostly, but not exclusively, focusing on the respondents wartime experience and their perspectives over Bijeljina's transformation. I established close relations with eight other local residents, whom I did not formally interview, but whose experiences and reflections in different ways inform this thesis.The bulk of the data that informs this thesis was, thus, co-generated with informants and interview respondents; in 'deep hanging out' as well in as serendipitous encounters; and in interaction with the city itself.

In order to triangulate information and ground this study in the adequate historical context, I also took the opportunity to collect primary and secondary sources of data, only available locally, such as official documents local newspaper articles, and locally-produced books researching the history of Semberija as well as the wartime experience. These added to other documents available remotely, such as ICTY documents and other court proceedings; reports from ngo's and international organisations, media articles and secondary literature.

My presence in the field was marked by two important contingencies: the eruption, in February 2014, of violent protests in several towns in the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (the majority Muslim and Croat 'entity', henceforth the Federation); and the catastrophic floods that, in May 2014 devastated large areas of the country, including the region of Semberija where Bijeljina is located. The 100th anniversary of the Sarajevo assassination and the beginning of the First World War; the general elections in October 2014; and the 'refugee crisis' in the Summer of 2015, were the other major events with a relevant impact on fieldwork.

1.1 Entering the field:

My first point of contact with Bijeljina, during the research design stage, and in anticipation of fieldwork, was the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Republika Srpska (*Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Republici Srpskoj*), a locally based independent organisation dedicated to monitoring Human Rights, and more broadly the political

situation in Republika Srpska and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Committee was also involved in Transitional Justice approaches to the war legacies, providing expertise, training as well as education programmes targeting the youth. During fieldwork for my Master dissertation, I had worked with its sister organisation in Serbia, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia; its chairperson, Sonja Biserko, put me in touch with the HORS and provided a recommendation. When I arrived from Sarajevo in March 2014, I had members of staff waiting for me; they helped me settle down, find a place to live and childcare for my daughter, then twenty months old; Branko Todorović, the President of the Helsinki Committee in Republika Srpska, offered me a desk in their office, the possibility to use one of their rooms to conduct interviews, and the opportunity to attend events they organised.

My earlier experience of fieldwork in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Serbia had taught me the importance of adequate recommendations in getting access to potential informants and interview respondents. During the time I spent in Sarajevo ahead of fieldwork in Bijeljina, I mobilised a few of my acquaintances there in the search for new points of contact that might allow me to broaden my access. I identified a few individuals whom I would like to speak to in Bijeljina, and informally approached people who might vouch for me and put us in touch. The most fruitful outcome of this initial effort was that it allowed me to gain access to a local women's organisation, the Lara Foundation (*Fondacija Lara*), after a Sarajevo-based journalist accepted to put me in touch with its director, Radmila Žigić. *Lara* dealt primarily with violence against women and human trafficking, but was also engaged broader activities, including the organisation of 'Women's Courts' initiatives (O'Reilly 2016: 427) and Transitional Justice workshops. *Lara* activists were also engaged in correcting the gender imbalance in the public representations of the past, which rendered women's agency invisible (see Lazić 2012; Nezavisne novine 2014). Once in Bijeljina, I was able to visit their office regularly, speak with their activists and staff, and attend their events.

Taken together, these organisations – Lara and the Helsinki Committee – offered me an entry point into the field, and helped me recruit some of my interview respondents. In the context of my research, however, they were neither 'gatekeepers' conditioning my access to the field, nor 'fixers' of whose portfolio of contacts I felt entitled to, and I wasn't specifically researching their activities and respective impacts. I was more interested in the opportunity to be around and 'hang out', and learn about how they were involved in, and

contributed to, the public discourse about the presence of the past in Republika Srpska and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The first month of fieldwork went on very fast, and I was busy organising my routines, exploring the cityscape and attending a few public events, including the commemorations of the military take-over by Serb forces in 1992. I was able to attend a few training sessions and involving the Committee's youth group and and a workshop about Transitional Justice in a local secondary school. But soon I began feeling I was not in control of my research, merely following the stream, rather than navigating it. I struggled especially to recruit respondents for formal interviews. I didn't receive outright rejections at this stage (I did later on), but it was simply that everyone I contacted seemed unavailable, and I was sometimes asked to "call again next week", only to hear the same the following week, until I would feel embarrassed of insisting. After more than twenty years under intense scrutiny, many people in Bosnia, both at elite and popular level, had grown tired of outsiders' attention. I was well aware of this form of 'respondent fatigue', as this was often commented upon by friends and acquaintances involved in civic activism in other parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina. I noticed this also in the initial attitude of the Helsinki Committee staff, always friendly but detached.

It was also that the timing was not in my favour. Having arrived in Bosnia-Herzegovina on 30 January 2014, I had planned to remain in Sarajevo for a couple of weeks, and then move to Bijeljina, but one week after I arrived, there was a wave of violent protests throughout the Federation; I directly witnessed the eruption of violence in Sarajevo on 7 February (see Correia 2014). The protests led to an experiment in direct democracy, with the creation of plenary assemblies in Sarajevo and other cities of the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina[3]. I could not resist seizing the opportunity to follow this process, thus delaying by a few weeks entry in the field. I left in the middle of March, as the Sarajevo 'plenum' was dying out, and just in time to settle down before the commemorative cycle began in Bijeljina, with the anniversary of the military take over of Bijeljina in April 1992. As I was just beginning to develop my efforts to recruit respondents for interviews, the Easter holiday (20 April, with Catholic and Orthodox easter coinciding) brought Bijeljina to a standstill. The same happened one week later, around International Workers' Day, on 1

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3   The Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina is, along with Republika Srpska, one of the 'entities' in which Bosnia-Herzegovina is divided.

May − a remnant from the communist era which became a celebration of Spring. The city suddenly seemed empty, and while everybody seemed to be having a good time enjoying Spring in the countryside, I felt I was stuck, alone with my daughter, still a toddler, with nothing to do and nowhere to go. I became overwhelmed by feelings of discomfort, loneliness and anxiety. In hindsight, I understand this is a common experience among ethnographers, somehow necessary as it brings with it a more realistic grasp of the challenges involved in our effort towards immersion in the community in an urban setting.

On a deeper level, I was struggling to define how to present myself, how to justify my presence in Bijeljina, and how much to disclose about my research − given that the topic of collective memory was generally perceived as sensitive −and how to approach potential informants. This began to change in early May, when, at the Helsinki Committee's office, I finally expressed my frustration, when one of the workers asked me how my research was going. "*I cannot go knocking on people's doors and ask them how they remember the war*", I said. "*Sara, you don't need to knock on anyone's doors. Look around, all of us here* [five to six young women sharing an open-plan office] *none of us were born in Bijeljina*". The others assented; I felt welcome in a way that I hadn't before. My presence seemed to have become normal. This exchange marked the beginning of 'hanging out'.

On the same day, however, as I was on my way home after leaving the office, I had an unpleasant encounter with the local police. A patrol car stopped me in the street, for no apparent reason. They searched my bag and checked my identification; it confused them that I was a foreign citizen, but could speak their language well, and even more that in my worn-out rucksack was an expensive laptop computer and what in their eyes looked like a professional camera. I had registered my stay in the country (*boravak*), not in Bijeljina, but in Sarajevo, and that seemed to be a problem. As we were very close to the HORS office, I had the presence of mind to tell them they would confirm who I was and what I was doing in Bijeljina. My colleagues vouched for me and the policemen let me go. My babysitter, Ana, was furious about this incident. "*They thought you were a gipsy*", she said. "*I'm sure! They think they can do whatever they want. They are peasants, that's what they are*" She went on to tell me how policemen feel entitled to harass young people, especially those with looks that somehow defy conventions. The 'gypsy' ascription remained with me throughout my fieldwork, and somehow influenced my positionality. With time I learned how to handle such perceptions, but at that particular moment, the police incident added to already

existing feelings of anxiety, which became overwhelming. I found it hard to cope with what I felt was a personal failure rather than a difficult fieldwork setting, and only my wounded pride seemed to sustain me at this point.

I temporarily withdrew from the field. The Helsinki Committee was organising a one-week long 'Peace School' in the town of Prijedor, for secondary school students from the Bosnian Krajina region in the north-west of the country. I was invited to join, and once the police incident happened, I decided to anticipate my trip by a few days. Friends in a village outside Prijedor received me and I was able to rest. One week later, in the last day of the 'Peace School', floods devastated much of Bosnia. The floods had a particularly strong impact in Semberija, a plain located in the confluence of two rivers, the Sava and the Drina. The roads were cut, and part of Bijeljina itself was under water. I was forced to postpone my return, and secretly glad to do so. My time in the Krajina region, surrounded by friendly people in the field location that I had decided not to choose, allowed me to regain my confidence as a researcher. The contrast with the sense of familiarity I had already with the town of Prijedor and the surrounding villages gave meaning to the estrangement I felt in Bijeljina. It also validated my choice of Bijeljina as my fieldwork location, regardless of the difficulties. Throughout my fieldwork and beyond, however, the knowledge acquired in previous fieldwork in the Prijedor region remained in my mind, and helped me made sense of my data.

The estrangement I felt when entering the field was a necessary part of the ethnographic process, in terms of laying the ground for later data generation, as a stage during which my mind focused on uncovering the unwritten rules of social interaction in everyday life and learning about the city rhythm. That I had no access to 'local knowledge' before entering the field, and no 'privileged informants' receiving me, was crucial in terms also of avoiding bias.

2.2 Everyday life, positionally. and immersion in the community:

Some of the most valuable insights during fieldwork were generated in the context of my interactions with the local population in everyday life. When I returned to Bijeljina after my stay in Prijedor, the old problems were waiting for me, that had earlier afflicted me were – isolation and difficulties in gaining access to informants and interview respondents. Everybody seemed to be absorbed by the impact of the floods. The soil was so saturated that water sprang in basements, affecting even the homes which water overflown from the rivers had not reached. I soon noticed, however, that once the water receded and people cleared their basements, it became easier to approach potential informants, as if the impact of the floods had opened people up to more easily engage.

Indeed, the floods themselves provided an initial talking point. The floods had blatantly exposed the failures of the central governments, both at state and entity level, but had also triggered a level of solidarity among ordinary people that defied, for a moment, the dominant narratives about social and ethnic divisions. Asking people how they were coping, and whether they were getting any aid, and how they had handled the situation was not controversial, and opened up the possibility of conversation. Such conversations revealed a lot, not only about my interlocutors present situation, but also about their past experiences. For instance, families resettled in Bijeljina after displacement from other areas of Bosnia during the war were more harshly hit by the floods, due, in many cases, to their homes being located in flooding-prone areas (see also Toal and Dahlman 2011: 266). Whilst not directly focusing on people's memories of the war, these conversations very often lead there, as my interlocutors expressed their grievances, and compared life in Bijeljina with the lives they had before, in their native regions.

For my neighbours, and people who had noticed my two weeks' absence, realising that I had returned also offered an opportunity to engage, whereas my presence before had been largely ignored or at least unacknowledged. Thus, once I allowed myself to open to contingency, and to serendipitously explore the city, things began to change, and meaningful interactions began occurring. It all seems to have started when a woman I had never seen approached me at the bakery saying "Neighbour (*komšinica*), why do you keep your daughter naked in the balcony?". Whilst this felt invasive, it was at least a form of

interaction, which confronted me with the fact that I was observed, much more than I was observing, and that, although I felt so isolated, I was the focus of some curiosity in my neighbourhood. I explained to the woman that my flat was unbearably hot (the floods had been followed by a heat wave – it was 35º C inside the flat during the day). Questions followed about where I was from, why I spoke 'the language' so well and, finally, what I was doing in Bijeljina. Much as the expression 'immersion in the community' sounds appealing, the reality of fieldwork in an urban environment is very different. To reduce my isolation, I had to let go of my privacy, but this allowed me to reach out to people in ways that were unexpected.

Becoming aware of my positionally, as this foreign woman alone with a child in Bijeljina, and who stood out with her peculiar parenting style, allowed me to rescue my research which had previously seemed hopelessly doomed. That I was there with a small child somehow seemed to suggest how committed I was to my research, to the point of sacrificing in comfort and family support. I came to understand that the contrast with the way middle-class Bosnian mothers were stereotypically perceived favoured me, as it showed commitment both to my work and to my child, and people generally saw me as a strong, even courageous woman, for leaving the comfort of my home behind to pursue my research. Thus I began engaging in spontaneous conversations, mostly with women, ranging different generations, from early twenties to late eighties, about children at first, then about life in general, and finally about life in Bijeljina. I spent many hours during Spring and the Summer, when the days are long, sitting with mothers, grandmothers and childminders at the playground close to home, chatting while the women smoked, while the children played. I did find easier to relate to these more modest women that I met at the run-down playground in the back of the Orthodox Church in the neighbourhood of Ledince, where I lived, that with the more sophisticated, middle-class parents whose children went to nursery with my daughter – a quite expensive nursery school by local standards. But whilst with then interactions were generally more superficial, occasionally they also resulted in more meaningful, deeper interactions.

I was often asked where I was from (*Odakle ste?*). My response "From Portugal, but I live in England" puzzled people, and lead to the assumption was that I was married to someone connected to local families now living in the diaspora, which would account for my knowledge of the local language. I usually explained that I was "doing some work at the

Helsinki Committee for Human Rights", without detailing. I especially avoided identifying myself as a 'researcher', given the connotation with 'investigator' (*istraživateljica*), and I was too old to credibly say I was a student. The fact that I was affiliated with the Committee nevertheless vouched for me, since the committee's president, Branko Todorović was well-known and well-respected in Bijeljina. I always kept a low-profile, which often fed people's curiosity, but allowed me to manage my presence so as not to be perceived as invasive. With time, everybody in my neighbourhood seemed to know me, and know that I was working on a PhD, and I knew more and more people, and was able to create some closeness with a few.

Taking ownership of my positionality, not only as a foreign woman and a single mother, but especially as a scholar was a necessary step towards fruitful immersion. At the beginning, I felt constrained to say I was researching social memory, since this might be seen as too political, so I said I was learning about how much Bijeljina had changed since the disintegration of Yugoslavia. With time, as I felt more confident, and as some level of trust emerged from everyday interactions, I was able to be more open about my interest for social memories. In any case, what most interested me in these interactions was to understand how people perceived and framed the changes that the war had brought both to the city and to their own lives. Memories often arose spontaneously, in glimpses and fragments, but sometimes also in more structured personal narratives. These interactions provided a great deal of insight into the body of shared knowledge about the past. They also allowed me to somehow explore the boundaries between public and private memories, from the way people related to dominant narratives, the erasure and reinscription of public space and official commemorations. They opened my mind to issues that I was then able to more fully explore with a few privileged informants and with my interview respondents.

Eventually, when people asked me "Where are you from?", I began asking back the same question "And you, where are you from?". Despite my initial fears, the question was always well-received, prompting responses that allowed me to obtain insights into the connection people had to the city, and – in the case of people who resettled in Bijeljina during or after the war – into their feelings towards the places they had left behind.

At a certain point, I realised that some of the women I was in touch with, market

vendors and shop keepers, mothers, grandmothers and childminders at the park believed I was an ethnic Roma. Many people seemed to assume I was a gypsy woman from Macedonia, which I believed was due to my skin complexion and type of hair; my 'attachment parenting' style; and my strange accent and grammar mistakes – I happened to make declination mistakes common among Macedonian speakers when they speak in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian. The assumption was so generalised that even real Roma persons seemed to share it, as was the case with a couple I formally interviewed, who, after two hours of in-depth interview, openly asked me if I was "one of them" – they were not totally convinced by my denial[4]. Unlike in my encounter with the police (assuming that Ana, my babysitter, was right) in this case such ascription of identity ended up working in my favour. It made me somehow closer, not a complete stranger, but someone individuals could categorise, and identified as sharing a regional identity and some cultural traits. By the time the misunderstanding was cleared (when it was at all), rapport had already been established. Regardless of prevalent prejudices against the Roma, such a perception did play in my favour, if for nothing else, because it providing a talking point allowing people to express their curiosity – rather than suspicion – about me.

'Hanging out':

Whilst initially I spent much time at the Helsinki Committee, over time, I was able to diversify the set of specific places where I 'hanged out'. I have already mentioned the women's organisation 'Lara'. I also regularly spent time at the city library; unfortunately the staff was not forthcoming when I requested to consult the archive of the local newspaper

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4   Fieldnotes, December 2014. This experience, of people assuming I was of Roma ethnicity, happened a number of times in other places in Bosnia-Herzegovina not only during my fieldwork time, but also during previous visits to the country. This was not unreasonable, given my physical appearance. Among these occurrences, one that stands out happened in Kozarac (on Kozarac see Sivac-Bryant 2016), where I stayed while the bus lines between the north-west and the north-east of Republika Srpska were suspended during the floods. I had been there before a few times, and was staying with a local family; I was sitting in the cafe with my hostess when I saw a woman whom I had interviewed in 2011, and, with my daughter in my arms, I went to greet her. The woman did not recognise me, nor did I expect her to, but what I did not expect was the way she turned her face away as I approached her. I realised then she assumed I was a beggar. A couple of days later, when she saw me at the local community centre, she became aware of her behaviour, and finally greeted me, but pretended this hadn't happened, by feigning surprise that I was in town and did not come to visit her (fieldnotes, May 2014) When I returned to Bijeljina, I changed my hair style and bought new clothes, in an effort to at least avoid exposing myself to a similar situation.

Semberske novine. I was told that with the basement where such archives were located had sustained damages during the floods and that, thus, the archive was no longer accessible. I was fortunate, in the meantime, to learn that the local museum also held a complete collection. Between October 2014 and the end of January 2015 I visited the museum almost every day to go through the newspaper collection. I got to know much of the staff there, from the caretakers to the curators. When the weather turned cold, and given that the museum did not have central heating, I was offered to use a desk in an office shared by members of staff. I learned a lot with them, as they were always ready to clarify any doubts and offer context to specific articles. More broadly, it was also an opportunity to sense the environment in one of Bijeljina's cultural institutions, and as everywhere else, the past was always looming, and as I gained trust, it emerged often in conversations, usually brief, and often leaving much unsaid but implied. This was a common pattern in my informal exchanges in Bijeljina, pushing me to read through the silences and evasive suggestions. With time, my relationship with a few key informants allowed me to explore these things that were suggested but left largely unsaid, and seek clarification and validation to my intuitions.

During the fieldwork period, I lived in the neighbourhood of Ledince, in the Srpska dobrovoljačka garda (Serbian Volunteer Guard) Street. I lived alone with my daughter in a small flat. I was strongly anchored in the neighbourhood, although I regularly circulated throughout much of the city,. I did most of my shopping there, sat at cafes, my daughter went to nursery there, and we and spent time everyday in the small park around the Orthodox church (saborna crkva), where children gathered to play.

The Catholic church was also located there. I attended Mass at the local Catholic church every Sunday while on fieldwork. After the mass, which was usually attended by 20-30 people, the parish priest invited his flock for coffee at the parish house. Going to church on Sunday was one of the few things that allowed me to anchor myself during fieldwork, since at least during Mass I was not an outsider, but a member of the (religious) community on my own right. Coffee at the parish house was a treat, since otherwise I would probably spend the rest of the day alone with my daughter. I felt, however, greatly constrained in engaging with the other persons who attended mass. It was all very tempting, as I could see the wealth of ethnographic detail waiting to be picked, but I feared others would doubt the motives of my presence there, and perhaps question the sincerity of my beliefs. Only

around Christmas, not long before leaving the field did I realise my concerns were exaggerated, when one of the older ladies I usually spoke with invited me to have lunch and spend the day in her house, and openly discussed the recent and distant past with me. Her attitude reassured me that my presence was welcome and my role in Bijeljina clear enough. Indeed, before leaving the field I was warmly greeted by the regular church goers.

When I returned for my field visit in the Summer of 2015, I lived in two different neighbourhoods: Tombak, the city's poorest neighbourhood, where much of the Roma community is concentrated, and where many resettled Serbs built their homes. I was a guest at the home of a Bosniak woman I had become close to during fieldwork; she introduced me to her Serb neighbours, some of whom I happened to already have met, thanks to my prolonged fieldwork. I was forced, however, to cut short my stay in Tombak, as relations with my hostess deteriorated and she became abusive. I then moved to the neighbourhood of Bukreš, in the other side of town, not far from Ledince. I rented a small flat, which was attached to the landlady's house. I had a friend who lived in the neighbourhood; it was her who arranged for me to move there, and her mother-in-law introduced me to some of the neighbours. Whilst Ledince had a very urban character, and Tombak felt very suburban – there was a strong stigma attached to it in Bijeljina – Bukreš had a village-like atmosphere. This diversity of urban experiences allowed me to more fully understand the dynamics of everyday life as well as some of the social divisions in Bijeljina.

I also made a few visits to the village of Janja – effectively a Bosniak enclave, and a locality with a distinctive identity, albeit closely connected to Bijeljina. I conducted some of my interviews there in January 2015, during which my daughter attended the Islamic cultural centre's nursery school.

1.3 Observation of public events:

I sought to attend as many public events as possible, especially if they had a connection with memorialisation. I always adopted a very low profile in such events, observing without seeking to engage with other participants. I wanted to avoid unwelcome attention, least anyone question the motivations and legitimacy of my presence – the negative experience I had with the police remained always in the back of my mind, but more consciously I worried about being seen as hostile or jeopardising access to potential respondents. I attended mainly three types of public events: commemorations; cultural events generally open to the public and religious celebrations; and public events more specifically targeting particular audiences, such as 'public debates' (javne tribine), talks or lectures. As for commemorations, these usually focused on war legacies and the construction of statehood, inevitably consisting in the deposition of flower wreaths in particular monuments, and sometimes followed by speeches or cultural events, such as exhibitions. Cultural events and 'public debates' had a more diverse nature, and were usually organised by local associations, the library and the museum. I eventually learned how local associations' access to public spaces was strictly controlled, in more or less subtle ways, and how the deep political divisions in Republika Srpska, namely intra-Serb divisions played a role in these forms of control. I was interested mainly in events that somehow related to my research questions, thus events connected to wartime legacies and enduring divisions, but sought to attend as many events as possible, even when the subject was more remotely connected. More broadly, I sought to follow the rhythm of the city, and to be present in all major gatherings.

My observation activities included also a set of events closed to the public, specifically workshops and training sessions organised by the Helsinki Committee and by *Lara*. The Committee events that I attended specifically targeted the youth, and were usually attended by secondary school and university students, involving projects related to peace, inter-ethnic relations, and 'facing the past'. Since I had excluded individuals under 21 years old from my interview sampling (see *infra*), such events offered me the possibility to listen to, and to some extent interact with, the generation of young adults and teenagers, the first generation without a direct experience of the 1992-1995 war.

1.4 Doing interviews:

During fieldwork, I conducted formal interviews with 34 respondents, with most of whom I was able to establish relationships that went beyond a single interview, but evolved towards more informal interactions. I also established relations marked by some degree of trust and closeness with eight other individuals, whom I never formally interviewed, but with whom I had a series of informal conversations over time which generated insights very similar to those of formal interviews. Albeit with different levels of closeness, these eight persons became key informants, as happened also to four of my interview respondents.

The goal of the interviews was to collect narratives locating individuals' experiences in the context of the transformation of Bijeljina from a multiethnic town marked by the principle of 'life in common' (*zajednički život*) to a town dominated by a narrow, and broadly exclusive, interpretation of Serb national identity in the public space. Through the recollections my respondents chose to share with me, I sought to explore different versions of the historical events that occurred since the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the different meanings attached to their experiences. The interviews were crucial in order to understand how the boundaries between public and private dimensions of social memories were negotiated, and how social memories produced by different mnemonic communities interplayed.

The interviewing process

The interviews occurred in a diversity of places, but mostly in the office of the Helsinki Committee or in the homes or work places of my respondents. In a few cases, when I felt that special measures to protect the respondent's privacy were necessary, the interview occurred in my own home, and in a few cases it took place in public, usually in cafes chosen by the respondent. Interviews were always preceded by coffee, which in most cases I prepared myself. This created a small lag between the respondent's arrival and the interview proper, during which we were able to relax, adjust to the environment, and talk for a moment. In anticipation of the interview, I gave respondents a sheet of paper with my

name, contacts and institutional affiliation as well as a small text in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian where I succinctly presented myself and my research project and broadly defined the scope of the interview (Annex A). Once I felt it was appropriate, I started by discussing how to record the interview, asking whether they would allow me to use a voice recorder, and offering the alternative of taking written notes. Then, for the record, presented myself again and quickly described my specific interest to speak with the particular respondent sitting in front of me. I then started the interview by asking the respondent to present himself and whether he lived in Bijeljina before the war.

Most of the interviews were happy to have it recorded on tape, so I usually used a voice recorder; my interview with Idris Hujdurović was recorded on video, because I had forgotten the voice recorder at home, and instead proposed using the video function in my computer. In a few cases respondents preferred not to have their voice recorded, and took notes, which I promptly transcribed. In one case, in which the interview occurred in a public space, I was unable to take simultaneous notes, so as not to draw attention to us, and instead had to rely on my memory; as soon as the interview was over, I wrote my notes with as much detail as I could recall. The interviews usually lasted between one hour and a half and two hours. Whenever the interview seemed to go beyond two hours I interrupted it, and suggested that we continue another day, and in all cases a follow up interview did occur. All interviews happened in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, with one exception in which the respondent insisted in speaking in English.

Respondent recruitment occurred throughout the fieldwork period. Most interviews took place in the last six months months of fieldwork, and my activities peaked during the last two months, when gaining access to new respondents became more straightforward, whilst I was also engaged in meeting again previously interviewed respondents, as I prepared to leave the field. Whilst it was much harder to recruit respondents when I was new in the field, and it became easier as time went by, there seems to have been also an element of seasonality at stake. Respondents seemed more available, and more motivated to take the time during the winter period, when there was less going on.

In the six week period of my following field visit, which occurred six months after I had left the field, I was able to perform four interviews with new respondents. By then,

however, my focus had shifted, as I felt more confident in the quality of the data generated in the original period of fieldwork, and my priority was to meet again some of my old respondents and informants, and to expose myself to spontaneous interactions.

Types of interviews

I conducted two different types of formal interviews. With fourteen of my respondents, the primary goal of the interview was to learn about their public engagement with the war legacies and their memorialisation. In this sense, these interviews were closer to the 'expert interview' format than they were to ethnographic interviews. Sampling for this type of interview followed a purposive logic. Respondents for this type of interview were individuals involved in civic activism; politics; and local structures of the Islamic Community and the Serbian Orthodox Church. I was interested in four specific topics:

- the question of the military take-over of Bijeljina by Serbian special forces;

- the destruction of the city mosques and the efforts towards their reconstruction after the war;

- public initiatives towards under the banner of 'reconciliation' and in particular the creation of a local Commission for Truth and Reconciliation and its subsequent collapse;

- the efforts by local women to push for a more balanced representation of Bijeljina's past in the public space in terms of gender.

These interviews were loosely structured, to focus on their activism in general, and on the particular topic that motivated the interview, contextualised by their perspectives about the country's political dynamics, and the city's position within, rather than focusing on their personal experiences and memories. In five cases, however, the dynamics of the interview was such that it ended up focusing also in the respondent's personal experiences and memories. Three of these respondents would become important informants, who over time established with me a more informal relationship.

The second type of interview focused eminently on the respondents personal experiences, inspired by the 'life histories' interview model. These were unstructured interviews, because I was primarily seeking for memories that emerged spontaneously, rather than directly triggered by my questions. After introducing myself and explaining what my research was about, I began my interviews by asking the respondents to tell me a bit about their lives before the war, and whether they lived in Bijeljina then. This established a chronological progression to the interview and signalled my interest in learning about the respondents' relation to the city. I used questions only to steered the respondent's narrative forward, rather than immediately seek for clarifications, or to further explore any particular topic. Only once the bulk of the interview was done, with the respondent seeming to conclude his narrative, did I ask follow up questions or sought clarifications. When a particular topic I was interested in, such as, for instance, the destruction of the city mosques, failed to be mentioned spontaneously, I usually asked about it, always framing the question as "Do you remember how it was when [a certain event happened]?".

1.5 Interview sampling:

Having conducted two distinctive types of interviews, I also applied two distinctive sampling approaches: purposeful, or judgemental (Brewer 2000: 79; 81) for the 'expert interviews'; and snowballing for the 'life stories' interviews. The term 'sampling', as Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012:87) highlight, "originates in the probability requirements of inferential statistical science". Adopting, for the purposes of qualitative research, a type of language modelled by quantitative research creates undue expectations of representativeness that qualitative, small-n research cannot deliver, and should not seek to deliver, entailing the risk of undermining the authority, credibility, and value of qualitative research as providing in-depth analysis about phenomena that quantitative analysis cannot adequately capture (see Small 2009). Schwartz-Shea and Yanow thus prefer to speak of "mapping for exposure and intertextuality"(2012:87), and making choices accordingly. This way of framing the decisions of who and what to include, "focuses more on the dynamic, processual character of research", as Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012:88) convincingly

argue. The term 'sample', however, does retain its essential meaning in the present thesis, as a set of research participants that are a small part of a much larger universe.

The types of sampling adopted for this research were non-probabilistic, theoretically driven by the thesis' research questions, and seeking to capture a diversity of experiences and perspectives, which were to some extent influenced by the specific positionality of the research participants. In this sense, even if sampling was not expected to be proportional to the local demographic structures, it was crucial that the sample included a range of categories of Bijeljina's population. Researching a diversity of social memories stemming from different mnemonic communities involved recruiting research participants including, namely, individuals identified as 'Serbs' and 'Bosniaks', or 'Bosnian Muslims'; displaced persons who resettled in Bijeljina; returnees (individuals forcefully displaced from Bijeljina during the war who subsequently returned to live there); and members of the domicile population.

Recruitment for the 'expert interviews' followed the logic of judgemental sampling (Brewer 2000: 79; 81). I identified a number of individuals with a substantial degree of public involvement with these topics, and sought to find ways to get in touch and request an interview. All my attempts to directly contact the potential respondents I had identified were fruitless. Instead, I had to resort to recommendations. I was able to gain access to some of these respondents through the Helsinki Committee and Lara; others I gained access to through the recommendation of persons I knew from Sarajevo. I would have conducted more of this type of interview, had I obtained access to other individuals who played a role in the processes at stake. There was also an element of 'snowballing' present in the recruitment efforts, insofar as I gained access to some respondents in this category of interview because I was introduced to them by other respondents already interviewed on the same topic, or by individuals who previously knew me from outside of the field. Where it differs from a traditional snowballing recruitment technique is that I already specifically knew which individuals I wanted to speak with, rather than having their names suggested to me. In a few cases, respondents did suggest names I was not already aware of, but unfortunately in all cases the persons they suggested were unavailable or unwilling to speak to me.

Recruitment for the 'life histories' type of interview mostly happened through

'snowballing', in close connection to this thesis' research questions. In order to control for selection bias, I sought to diversify the origin of the 'snowball'. Some of my 'life histories' respondents were recruited through the Helsinki Committee and the women's organisation *Lara*; others were suggested by individuals I knew before entering the field, and who had connections to Bijeljina, and who were able to recommend me and vouch for me. At the end of each interview, I asked respondents whether they knew, and might consider recommending me to, individuals willing to share their personal stories. Ten of my 'expert interview' respondents thus helped me obtain 'life stories' interviews. It is well-known that the 'snowballing' recruitment method does entail a considerable risk of bias, given the likelihood that the original informants will bring into the sample individuals who shared their perspectives, experiences, and characteristics such as age, class, and ethnicity. I was mindful of this risk, as I sought for a a diverse sample. Interestingly, and in itself telling of the social dynamics between the circle of activists and publicly engaged persons in Bijeljina, some of my informants' recommendations brough into my sample individuals very different to themselves, from different ethnicities and different, even opposing, ideological leanings. My 'life histories' respondents, however, were very reluctant to assist me in this endeavour, most likely due to privacy concerns. I never received outright refusals, but I never insisted either. Snowballing stemming from 'life histories' respondents occurred only in three cases (involving five new recruitments); in three other cases my respondents did develop efforts towards recruiment, but were unsuccessful.

Besides snowballing, there was also a component of convenience recruitment for my 'life histories' interviews, which occurred in a few situations when I had the intuition a particular person whom I knew thanks to 'hanging out', might be open to engage with me in a formal interview setting. This happened only in three cases, given that I was not willing to take the risk to alienate, with my proposal, a relationship that functioned well in a context of informality. In these three cases, my informants felt it would be useful for me and interesting for them to generate a more focused and comprehensive narrative about their experience, rather than transmitting it through fragments as had been the case until the point I proposed to interview them.

There were also three cases of 'accidental sampling', in which recruitment happened thanks to fortunate coincidences. In one of the cases, I was interviewing an 'expert' respondent in a public place, when another person approached us to greet my

respondent, who introduced us. This was I promptly seized the opportunity, as I had heard this person speak in a public event, but had not yet found anyone who might recommend me. Because there was no prior connection between me and this person, I had nothing to lose in suggesting an interview, and my offer was accepted. In the other two cases, an 'accidental respondents' joined in when I was interviewing a family member, and the interview evolved to fully include the second person — in one of the cases my initial respondent was being interviewed for the second time; in the other case they were a couple.

Sampling inclusion criteria:

Whilst I engaged in judgemental sampling in what regarded my 'expert interviews', I cast the net widely when it came to recruiting respondents for 'life histories' interviews. The first basic criterion determining inclusion in my sample was that the respondent had a lived experience of the wartime period and the immediate post-war. This automatically excluded individuals bellow a certain age threshold, which I defined at the time as 23 years old (who would be four years old in 1995, and thus conceivably had early personal memories).

This exclusion was motivated, on the one hand, to keep my research focused on lived experience, rather than transmission and vicarious memories, and, on the other hand, by self-imposed limitations based on ethical concerns. The following *vignette* offers an illustration of the ethical pitfalls of engaging with this generation. This is an observation that took place in a workshop for students aged 18 to 22. This was a training session in the context of an initiative about 'Facing the Past' (*suočavanje sa prošlošću*) to prepare a student-led research project in Oral History, in which the students were to interview survivors of wartime violence:

> The teacher conducting the workshop asked the students: "What about family narratives?". A moment of silence, then Rade [one of the students pseudonym] says: "At home, people only speak when they drink." The teacher comments on alcohol... "And what do people speak about?" The student awsers. There is some tension in the air, and the teacher keeps asking questions, and says: "And you, do you feel the need to

drink?". Nobody anwsers. Another student intervenes, offers a compassionate approach: "We have to give them [their parents] time, so they realise we are no longer children, that it is important for us to know"[5]

My ethical concerns related to issues of informed consent, privacy and intrusion in the realm of their family life, but, most fundamentally, I believe that whilst children and younger people have their own perceptions about the past, and to some extent the right to learn about their families' place on it, a young person, let alone a child, has not yet had the time to comprehensively reflect on these issues, to make informed decisions on how to navigate the boundaries between privately-kept social memories and public representations, and how much should be open to outsiders' scrutiny; and that such a process should happen as freely and spontaneously as possible, without outsiders triggering it, tempting as it may be for many scholars to explore their memories, as resources useful, for instance, to understand the dynamics of memory transmission.

Excluding under 23 years old individuals from my interview sample did not mean overlooking this particular category of the population. Instead, it meant that my data about them was generated in other, less intrusive ways. Indeed, I was able to observe and interact with young people and children, and to become aware of some of the ways in which they remembered and framed the recent past as well as the country's historical legacies, thanks to other research activities, such as 'hanging out' and observation of workshops and other events, as well as in spontaneous interactions in everyday life. I was thus able to have informal conversations with young people, and, in a few cases, I had university and secondary school students soliciting me for advice on studying abroad. Our conversations were always focused on the present, and I particularly sought to understand their perception of the the political and economic situation in the country, and the impact in their lives of enduring social divisions brought about by the war – not only or necessarily ethnic divisions, but also intra-ethnic and trans-ethnic, such as the divisions between those belonging to domicile families, and those forcibly displaced and then resettled in Bijeljina (*raseljene lice*). Whenever the past was brought into the conversations, which happened often, it was through the initiative of my interlocutors.

The other basic criterion was that the respondent should be a permanent resident in Bijeljina both at the time of the interview and somewhere between the period of 1991

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5   Fieldnotes, October 2014

and 2004, corresponding to the time that immediately preceded the war and the initial post-war period, when refugee return and resettlement of displaced persons was fully in motion. This excluded both individuals who left or were expelled from Bijeljina and did not return on a permanent basis, as well as later arrivals to the area, usually primarily for economic reasons, as Bijeljina had offered better employment opportunities than most places in Republika Srpska. Whilst the ways those now living in the diaspora, either because they left as refugees during the war, or later as economic migrants; and the economic attraction Bijeljina exercises to the populations of other, less developed areas of Republika Srpska, such as the Drina Valley (podrinje) are in themselves important research topics, I ought to remain focused on my specific research questions.

In the following section, I provide some details about my respondents and key informants. I present this data according to three categories: 'expert respondents', 'life histories' respondents, and key informants not formally interviewed. The division into these categories does not signal a hierarchy of importance, but merely the type of interaction. The reality of fieldwork was, however, much more fluid than this categorisation may convey; I spoke regularly with ten of the fourteen 'expert respondents', and the dynamics between myself and five of them ' was very similar to that I had with my 'life histories' respondents. Of these five, three became also key informants. Among the 'life histories' interviews, three also became key informants, perhaps the most important among all my research participants. I remained in regular contact with half of my 'life histories' respondents, including, in some cases, after leaving the field. With five of the 'life histories' respondents my contact was restricted to the interview, and, in some of these cases, I soon noticed that when present in the same event, or if they saw me on the street by chance, they avoided me, most likely due to privacy concerns. This was not, in any way, a sign of hostility, and whenever possible, they discreetly acknowledged my presence with a quick glance. With one of my key informants (not formally interviewed), relations broke down, sadly. This occurred during my field visit in the Summer of 2015. I cannot unlearn the things I learned with my informant, and so I am, precisely, informed by what I learned with her and from her. I have decided to exclude most of the data co-generated in interaction with her, because I am not entirely sure her tacit and explicit consent remains valid – I believe it does, because later on she tried to 'befriend' me on social media, although she never sought to write me or call me ever again. I did include as part of my data, however,

situations and interactions in which she was present, but not primarily involved.

Respondents profile:

All my interviewees and informants were permanently residing in Semberija, most of them in the city of Bijeljina. I conducted four interviews in the village of Janja, two of which were primarily 'expert interviews', but due to the intersubjective dynamics of the interview process, delved into the respondents personal experiences and memories, which granted them with a greater depth, more akin to the 'life histories' model. Three of my other respondents lived in other villages in Semberija, but worked everyday in the city.

With one important exception, my respondents and key informants seemed to take their ethnic identity as a given, rather than in any way problematic, including in two cases of respondents whose respective parents belonged to different ethnic groups. They usually assumed I was aware of their ethnicity, and spoke of themselves as part of an ethnic group, even in those cases where they did not agree that ethnicity should have primacy over other dimensions of personal identity. In some cases, they even mobilised their ethnic identity to highlight the specificity of their personal perspective, as was the case, for instance, of former Primary School Headteacher Lazar Manojlović, who openly presented himself as a Serb, to explain why his detractors – whom he sarcastically labelled 'Great Serbs' (veliki srbi) treated him as a 'traitor' to be marginalised, if not excluded, from the ethnic community. The exceptional was Saša Pazarac, who presented himself primarily as a socially engaged citizen, a social-democrat, and an atheist, albeit one that respects other people's beliefs and traditions. For the sake of context during our (first) interview, he then let me know he was the son of a mixed marriage, with a Catholic mother and a Muslim father. He explained how the ascription of ethnic identity to him determined his persecution by Serb nationalists. In a way, and in contrast to most other respondents, Pazarac sought to preserve the fluidity over identification that was prevalent during his formative years in socialist Yugoslavia. Although he did not openly identify himself as Bosniak, he did not seek to separate himself from the Bosniak community in Bijeljina, and implicitly placed himself as part of it.

Of the 35 formal interviews, 17 were with Serbs, 15 with Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims; bearing in mind his experience of persecution, I include) and three with members of minority groups, namely a Roma couple and a woman from the German minority. Among the key informants not formally interviewed, six were Serbs and two Bosniaks.

Ethnicity by type of informant				
	'Expert' interviews	'Life histories'	Other key informants*	Total
Serbs	10	7	6	23
Bosniaks	4	11	2	17
Others	0	3	0	3
Total	14	21	8	43

Table 1: Ethnicity by type of informant

The thesis explores both the wartime experience of persecution of non-Serbs (Ch. 4) and the process of resettlement in Bijeljina of Serbs forcibly displaced from other areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina (Ch.5).

Residence status by ethnicity							
	Serbs		Bosniaks		Others (*ostali*)		Total
	Domicile	Resettled	Remained	Returnees	Remained	Returnees	
'Expert'	5	5	1	3	0	0	14
'Life histories'	4	3	6	5	2	1	21
'Key informants'	1	5	2	0	0	0	8
Total	23		17		3		43

Table 2: Residence by ethnicity

Table 2 provides detailed information about which category my respondents and key informants belonged to, in relation to whether they belong to families already established in Bijeljina before the war, were expelled during the war and subsequently returned; or resettled in Bijeljina during the war or in the immediate post-war period.

In terms of class and occupation, two respondents, both Bosniaks, belonged to prestigious, old families (*ugledne porodice*), descending from the local aristocracy from Ottoman times. Four respondents can be categorised as somehow belonging to the local elite, and nine, seven of whom in the 'expert interview' type, were involved in civic activism. The other informants had a diversity of occupations, some more stable others more precarious, and different positions in the social scale, with only three informants unemployed. Only two respondents were close to poverty, but the overwhelming majority lived somehow modesty, even when clearly belonging to the middle class, and only three seemed to be wealthy by local standards. Eighteen of the 43 informants analysed in this section had high education degrees, and seven worked, or had worked in the past, as teachers.

In terms of age, the interview sample comprises respondents aged between 25 and 90 years old at the time of the interviews (see table 1). Respondents aged between 50 and 70 form the majority of the sample. They were already mature adults, many with young children. I was particularly interested in subset of this age interval that formed the generation (broadly defined), whom some authors call "the last Yugoslavs" (e.g. Palmberger 2016; Spasovska 2017), who lived the last days of the communist regime already as adults. This does not mean, however, that I particularly targeted this generation. It was, instead, fortunate that more of them seemed to be willing and available to engage with me. By contrast, the generation that I found the hardest to recruit was my own (I was 39 at the time): those who were either teenagers or in their early twenties during the war. The lack of respondents in this generation, despite my best efforts, stands out as a limitation in this thesis, and one that I hope to eventually compensate for in the future, when I return to Bijeljina for further research. I did have, however, a good deal of interactions in everyday life with individuals of this generation, which allowed me for some level of insight. My youngest 'life histories' respondent was 25, a young man from Janja, who had among his earliest recollections the Muslims' massive expulsion from the village in the Summer of 1994. As stated, I limited my interview sample to individuals over 23.

Age distribution, by type of informant				
	'Expert' interviews	'Life histories'	Other key informants	Total
90 +	0	1	0	1
80-89	0	1	0	1
70-79	0	3	0	3
60-69	3	8	0	11
50-59	7	3	3	13
40-49	3	1	0	4
30-39	1	3	2	6
23-29	0	1	3	4
Total	14	21	8	43

Table 3: Age distribution by type of informant

Men figure disproportionately in the sample of respondents (26 men to 17 women), mostly due to the fact that eleven of the fourteen 'expert interviews' happened to be men. Among the key informants not formally interviewed there was an equal number of men and women, and two of these informants were a couple. Beyond the 43 individuals listed as respondents and key informants, most of the interactions and informal conversations I relied on for my thesis happened with women.

Gender by ethnicity								
	Serbs men/women		Bosniaks men/women		Others men/women		Total men/women	
'Expert'	7	3	4	0	0	0	11	3
'Life histories'	4	3	6	5	1	2	11	10
'Key informants'	3	3	1	1	0	0	4	4
Subtotal	14	9	11	6	1	2	26	17
Total	23		17		3		43	

Table 4: Gender by ethnicity

The sample also reflects a diversity of political opinions and ideologies, and I engaged both with highly nationalistic individuals and with individuals with a cosmopolitan outlook; genocide deniers and activists towards reconciliation; etc. Five of my respondents were politically active, all of them in different parties. Among the remaining informants, there was a full spectrum of political engagement, most of them being somehow alienated from politics. Among those under 50, regardless of ethnicity, gender or class, there was a strong desire to leave the country, and a few were making effective plans to emigrate.

1.6 Research ethics:

As an ethnographer, I saw it as my ethic duty to show commitment to my research, appreciation for the society I was seeking to immerse myself in, and respect towards my respondents and informants, regardless of whether I was comfortable with their political views, for taking the time to engage with me and sharing with me memories, insights and opinions. I always tried to be as well prepared as possible when interviewing, as a matter of professionalism, respect towards the respondents, and also to come up in their eyes as knowledgeable, and thus be credible as an interlocutor. Some of my respondents were keen to test how much I remained myself, and how much I was embodying the persona of the 'neutral' researcher, by asking for my opinion about controversial issues. I always kept a low profile, but when solicited I was as sincere as possible in my responses.

Anonymity was negotiated on a case-by-case basis. Most interviews and informal conversations used in this thesis were anonymised, either at the request of the respondent, or to preserve his or her privacy. Anonymising is much more than changing names, and the debate on how far it should go has a long history in ethnographic research. Whilst anonymising, we often have to sacrifice so much in terms of context, that an interview risks losing its meaning. In other cases, anonymising is the only ethically acceptable way of making use of interview material. But anonymity and confidentiality also impact on the transparency of the research, and thus in its trustworthiness. Although anonymity is the default option in the social sciences, it does not necessarily have to be so – Oral History, for instance, often presents respondents with their own names and context details. In some cases, anonymity may even, paradoxically, result in a higher degree of exposure of the person(s) whose privacy anonymity is supposed to protect (see Farrimond 2013: 131), for

instance when quoting verbatim (as such quotes may be traced back to the respondent, for instance through the use of internet search engines), and when enough contextual details remained that allow those familiar with the research setting to recognise the informant's profile.

On a more fundamental level, I feel that anonymity may give cover for extractive behaviour on the part of the researcher, which objectifies and disempowers the informants. I felt this in my own skin when another researcher sought to recruit me as a research participant, after I published a text on my blog describing my participation in an event in Eastern Bosnia, called 'the march for peace' (*marš mira*) (see Correia 2011). I felt she was trying to appropriate my experience and my stories, without even giving me credit.

For the sake of preserving the richness of context, I chose, with the explicit consent of the persons involved, to use the real names of some of my informants/respondents. The criterion was the fact that they have, to some extent, a public profile in Bijeljina, and have previously been object of media reports and interviews. In doing so, I refrained from disclosing more intimate thoughts and experiences, but focused instead on their participation in the public space, and in their reflections and insights. Thus I did not anonimise the materials stemming from 'expert interviews' – and I never promised them anonimity in the first place, since the rationale for those interviews was the first hand knowledge of and active participation in politically and socially significant processes. As for my life histories interviews, I use my respondents' real names in the case of Idris Hujdurović, Lazar Manojlović, Saša Pazarac, and Sead Vidinlić. All of them were well-known figures in Bijeljina, and aspects of their life stories have previously been published in the media, including autobiographic references. I was mindful, at all times, to nevertheless protect their privacy with regards to aspects that are not publicly known.

I offered my respondents guarantees that the data generated, in the form of voice and video records, transcripts and notes, would remain in my possession, to be used only by myself, and in the context of this research project. I was always careful to explain the purpose and the focus of my research before beginning an interview, and in those cases when the interview was recorded in audio this explanation is usually audible at the beginning of the record. I did not seek, however, for written informed consent statements because I felt that in that particular context they not only were not necessary, given the

value of the spoken word once trust has been established, but they might also distort the dynamics of the relationship between interviewee and interviewer.

The issue of informed consent becomes trickier when it comes to informal conversations and spontaneous interaction, which, much more than formal interviews, form the bulk of ethnographic data (Duizings 2018:4). Whether I might deceit or induce people in error was a concern that to some extent constrained me during fieldwork, and often faced dilemmas about the legitimacy of my observations. The case of my regular attendance of Sunday mass offers an illustration. Were the church goers tacitly consenting to be observed, when we had coffee together at the parish house after mass? Could I separate myself from what brought me to Bijeljina in the first place – my research interests – when I had upon me a wealth of ethnographic detail? What about the woman who rejected my request to interview her, but was happy to go with me for coffee and cake? Was that a form of 'hanging out'? And what about the persons who invited me to their homes for coffee or a meal? Were they aware enough of why I was doing fieldwork in Bijeljina to tacitly consent on being observed? How I dealt with these dilemmas evolved throughout fieldwork, as I gained confidence and built trust. Later on, during the writing stage, such dilemmas came once again to the forefront. In case of doubt, I decided not to include a particular interaction, or to explicitly seek for consent, as in the case of Jelena, whom I describe in Chapter 6.

1.7 Data analysis and the writing-up process

Once out of the field, I chose not to use data analysis software, but I spent a lot of time analysing my materials, reading my notes and transcripts, looking at my photographs, and reflecting about how different stories intersected, about shared experiences and contrasting perspectives. Even though processing my data was a long, time-consuming process, the overall structure of this thesis emerged relatively swiftly. Between February 2015, when I first left the field, and August 2015, when I returned for a shorter visit, I worked on a conference paper that was to become the backbone of this thesis. By the time I went back to Bijeljina, the thesis' macro-structure was pretty much defined, although the idea of using the concept of liminality and the framework of rites of passage (see Ch. 1)

only came to me one year later. Choosing the particular life histories that I would like to use was also relatively straightforward. Adopting the concept of liminality and the framework of rites of passage as heuristic devices to channel the narrative flow of the thesis allowed for the leap from description to analysis to happen, by framing each chapter as focusing on a particular process within the wider process of liminal transformation of identity. This framework renewed my engagement with the empirical data, allowing me to further elaborate on the nature of ethnic cleansing, the dynamics of remembering, and the moving boundaries between public and private aspects of social and collective memory.

But the leap from description to analysis was hampered for a long time by my emotional proximity to the data. When I returned home after my Summer 2015 field visit, for instance, I was feeling so overwhelmed that I was unable to significantly engage with the thesis for at least three months. The field visit was crucial to this research, as it made me aware of how much I had, by the end of my fieldwork, become sensitised to the environment in Bijeljina, so much that I had began to take certain things as natural. Whilst prolonged immersion involved a certain level of accomodation from my side, of which I was not fully conscious, the field visit offered me a more blunt vision, in which the things that were pleasant about everyday life paled in comparison with the burdens that afflicted many of my informants, and the alienation some of them felt. The duty to portray individuals and society more generally, in a manner that was fair and nuanced clashed with the pervasive negativity I felt in that field trip, which occurred during the peak of the 2015 so-called 'refugee crisis', with thousands of people coming mostly from places like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan were using the 'Balkan route' to reach Germany. Whilst after my initial fieldwork I was able to immediately dive into the writing process, after my field visit it took me at least three months before I was able to engage with my data, and more broadly with my experience. Throughout the data analysis and writing up process, I often felt daunted by the negativity of the theme and the bleak political situation in the country, to the point of becoming overwhelmed with stress. I did not return to the field again until I completed the thesis, although I did remain in regular contact with some of my key informants, and closely followed the news about Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bijeljina.

Chapter 2

Memory, violence, liminality:
framing 'ethnic cleansing'

The present chapter will provide a theoretical frame to the thesis, through an exploration of three key concepts engaged in this research, memory, liminality and ethnic cleansing. I conceptualise memory as a multidimensional human capacity, stretching in a continuum between individual, social and collective memories; a capacity always exercised intersubjectively, through which past experiences are rendered meaningful in the light of both the present circumstances and the expectations and hopes for the future. This thesis conceives memory and identity as engaged in a dynamic relationship of mutual constitution, rather than in a causal relationship, and frames experience as the source of both memory and identity. Based both on living and historical experience, and exercised through a dual process of remembering and forgetting, memory tends to give particular salience to transformative events, which often define the boundary between different stages in the life of individuals and communities, introducing a sense of 'before and after' though which people acknowledge that their identity has been affected. Amidst transformative events, those that are marked by violence assume specific traits as people remember them, assessing their impact in both their livelihoods and sense of community, and seeking to render them meaningful. Such events generate an array of memories, which may become the object of public memory, providing a community with a master narrative of the past; but memory is more than mere representations and publicly articulated recollections.

Perhaps most of what we remember will remain private, shared only within a narrow 'community of experience', and often protected from the gaze of outsiders. This chapter will thus introduce the concept of 'difficult memories' to explore the relation between dominant public representations and memories that somehow contradict the narratives such representations convey. The memory of 'ethnic cleansing' offers a compelling example of an experience that generates 'difficult memories' withholding the potential to disrupt the very identities such acts sought to 'purify'.

The thesis explores the concept of liminality and the sequential scheme of rites of passage first proposed by Arnold van Gennep (1981[1909]) and later developed by Victor Turner (1967;1969;1974) as a heuristic device framing transformative events, which it applies to the experience of ethnic cleansing. Rather than dismissing the term as an euphemism, we engage with the meanings the word 'cleansing' conveys, to discuss the use of violence in the quest for categorical purity in a context of deep uncertainty over identity.

2.1 Conceptualising memory as intersubjective and multi-dimensional

The increasing presence of memory in popular and political discourse has been accompanied by the spectacular development of the field of memory studies over the last three decades. And yet, there is no consensus about how to define the concept of collective memory and its scope of application (Olick 2007; Misztal 2003; Kansteiner 2002). Critics have denounced its use in a metaphoric sense and the over-extension of the notion of collective memory in ways "leading to the entanglement between culture and memory" (Berliner 2005:198), to the point of becoming "'almost indistinguishable' from the concept of culture itself" (Berliner 2005:203).The problem of conceptualisation is to a certain extent due to the non-paradigmatic and inter-disciplinary character of memory studies, but above all to the polysemous character of the notion of memory (Lavabre 2000). Memory is at once a human ability, a social process, a medium, and a product or an object. Acknowledging this polysemy is essential to understand memory in its complexity, but it also reveals the difficulties involving its study as a research object.

Jay Winter, one of the most prominent scholars of war memory, points to the limitations of the concepts of memory and history, and proposes the idea of historical remembrance as a discursive field, in order to "avoid the pitfalls of referring to memory as some vague cloud that exists without agency, and to history as an objective story that exists outside of the peoples it describes" (2006:11). Another solution would be to narrow down the concept to its dimension of representation, as in Barbara Misztal´s definition of collective memory as "the representation of the past, both that shared by a group and that which is collectively commemorated, that enacts and gives substance to the group's identity, its present conditions and its vision of the future" (2003:7). However, discursive approaches such as these excessively limit the concept, as they equate recalling with remembering, under the assumption that "while remembering we deliberately and consciously recover the past" (Misztal 2003:10). By reducing memory to the dimension of representation, one leaves unanswered the question of the status of those aspects of the past that are not included in a given set of representations. Are they hidden under a veil of silence, or have they been forgotten? And if so, can they be retrieved? The narrowing down of the concept of memory to the dimension of representation leaves aside other, more elusive aspects, such as tacit knowledge, or 'what goes without saying', and the role of silence (Passerini 2003; Eastmond and Mannergren Selimovic: 2012).

But 'collective memory' is a useful analytical concept, wider than representation, and distinct from remembrance. Given the need for clarity, and despite the limitations inherent to spelling out a complex concept like memory in operational terms, in this thesis I will define memory – as a general concept – as the capacity to store and retrieve information about past events, ideas and experiences. Memory is, above all, a human ability; it is embodied in the individual as well as emplaced externally, and it develops mostly, although not exclusively, in interaction with others and with the environment. Remembering and forgetting are the processes through which this capacity is exercised, and memories, in the plural, are the product these two processes combined. One could say that remembering is what gives people the feeling of knowing the past, while recalling is just one of many mnemonic modes (Casey 2000[1987]), consisting in the act of consciously bringing the past to the present, an act always performed in a discrete social and political context, in a particular moment and a particular place. Maurice Bloch, a leading

proponent of a cognitive approach to the anthropological study of memory, highlights the importance of the distinction between remembering and recalling. Based on his ethnographic study of memory in Madagascar, Bloch notes that "individuals may not be aware of what they remember" but have nevertheless the "ability to recall an extraordinarily rich variety of memories" (1998:119). Bloch therefore confers great significance to the distinction between recalling and remembering, "since it means that the presence of the past in the present is much more complex, much less explicit but perhaps much more powerful than the presence of explicit narratives would ever have us believe" (1998:118-119).

Memory and intersubjectivity

For Maurice Halbwachs (1925; 1950) individual memories are always socially framed, and "it is to the extent that our individual thoughts are placed in those frames and and participate in this memory, that our mind is able to remember" (2002[1925]:6). Halbwachs, considered to be the founder of the sociological study of collective memory, has rightly been criticised for devaluing individual agency due to his Durkheimean approach (Misztal 2007:32), to the point of believing that "memories that are not shared are soon forgotten" (cit. Bloch 1998:117).

The idea that memories are socially framed is, nevertheless, the basis upon which the concept of collective memory stands, but the existence of a collective dimension to memory has been contested (e.g. Klein 2000; Gedi and Elam:1996), under the argument that since remembering is essentially a cognitive process, only individuals can remember. The application of the concept of intersubjectivity to the study of memory challenges such argument, by offering a solution to the conceptual problem of how to define the relationship between the collective and the individual. Resulting from the experience of the other, intersubjectivity can be broadly defined as

> "the variety of relations between perspectives. Those perspectives can belong to
> individuals, groups, or traditions and discourses, and they can manifest as both implicit
> (or taken for granted) and explicit (or reflected upon)." (Gillespie and Cornish 2009:19).

The concept of intersubjectivity deals with the problem of the orientation of subjects towards others. It refers to shared meanings, but also to shared or partially shared divergences of meaning, as a form of mutual awareness between different subjects. Memory is exercised intersubjectively because, as Barbara Misztal highlights, "while it is an individual who remembers, his or her memory exists, and is shaped by, their relations with what has been shared with others and that it is, moreover, always memory of an intersubjective past" (Misztal 2003:6). Applying the concept of intersubjectivity to the study of collective memory resolves what Olick (2007) has called the problem of "choosing between individualistic and collectivistic procedures". Such a problem, Olick argues, is due to the clash between two opposing approaches to culture, "one that sees culture as a subjective category of meanings contained in people's minds versus one that sees culture as patterns of publicly available symbols objectified in society"(2007:21).

The idea of the intersubjective character of memory is consistent both with phenomenological perspectives and with findings from cognitive science (Sutton, Harris, and Barnier 2010), which also point to cognition itself as intersubjective (Allen and Williams 2011). Thus the main objection to the use of the concept of collective memory should be dismissed, in the light of the contribution of cognitive science. Developments in research over the past three decades have contributed towards a constructive dialogue between cognitive and phenomenological approaches to knowledge (Depraz and Gallagher: 2002), as cognitive science sought to overcome its traditional individualistic bias (Michaelian and Sutton: 2013), and phenomenologists sought a stronger empirical base regarding the study of collective memory (Depraz and Gallagher: 2002), thus transcending what was, as Maurice Bloch(1998:100-113) contends, an excessive reliance on the primacy of narratives in accounting for the experience of time and space, under the influence of hermeneutics. As the phenomenologist Edward Casey (2004) has highlighted, the person is "the always unique rememberer", but "however idiosyncratic and personal a given act of remembering may be (…) still each such act has certain formal dimensions that exceed any individual's contribution"(2004:20).

Remembering beyond the mind

It is important to insist on how memory is, as the phenomenologist Edward Casey has stressed in his seminal study *Remembering* (2000[1987]:85) "more than a mater of mind alone". Casey analysed three mnemonic modes – reminding; reminiscing; and recognising – "situated midway between mind and the environing world"(2000:144) and triggered or facilitated by things that are external to the mind, to argue that memory occupies a stance "on the borderline of self and other"(2000:144). Moving away from what he called the "mentalist bias"(e.g.2000:144) that led to the "[presumption] that the paradigm for all remembering is recollecting"(200:144), Casey focused also on three dimensions of memory clearly beyond the realm of the mind: body memory; place memory; and commemoration.

The concept of body memory draws from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception,* through the notion of 'operative intentionality'(Casey 2000:145): "Body memory alludes to memory that is intrinsic to the body, to its own ways of remembering: how we remember *in* and *by* and *through* the body"(Casey 2000:145;emphasis added). Body memory is immediately connected with lived experience, resulting in the ability to revisit a given situation "and feeling it through our body"(2000:147). Body memory is also intimately connected to place memory: it is through body memory that "we find ourselves to be familiar with a particular place in which we are located"(Casey 2000:190).

With his analysis of place memory and commemoration, "both of which bring us still more radically into the very heart of world emplacement"(2000:145) Casey took the phenomenology of memory one step further. Casey insists on the "insufficiency of recollection" as opposed to remembrance, since remembering is always emplaced, but in recollecting, place becomes "at best a mere setting for the object or episode that is being remembered"(2000:213). For Casey, "place serves to situate one's memorial life, to give it a name and a local habitation"(2000:184). Memory and place hold a close relationship; it is "the stabilising of place as a container of experiences that contributes so powerfully to its intrinsic memorability"(2000:188).

Whilst situating memories, place performs a containing function in the process of remembering, providing memory with a spatiality:

> "On the one hand, place is *selective for memories*: that is to say, a given place will invite certain memories while discouraging others. (…) Place is always definite, and regarding a given place only some memories, indeed only certain *kinds* of memory, will be pertinent. (…)
>
> On the other hand, *memories are selective for place:* they seek out particular places as their natural habitats. Why this propensity? Partly because places furnish convenient points of attachment for memories; but also because places provide situations in which remembered actions can deploy themselves. Or more precisely, places are *congealed scenes* for remembered contents; and as such they serve to situate what we remember." (Casey 2000: 188; italics in the original)

As for commemorating, Casey highlights its communal nature: "Commemorating is an essentially *inter*personal action. It is undertaken not only in relation *to* others and *for* them, but also *with* them in a common action of communalising"(2000:225; emphasis in the original). Casey evokes Arnold van Gennep's(1909) 'Rites of Passage', and Victor Turner's(1967) analysis of the intermediate stage in rites of passage – the liminal stage – as generating a sense of *communitas* among initiands, an insight which Casey applies to rituals of commemoration. Commemorations are enacted in public rituals solemnly honouring the past, and aiming towards the perdurance of that which they memorialise, by connecting past (that which the commemoration pays tribute to), present (the moment the commemoration is enacted) and future (through the commemoration's regular recurrence, but also through the exhortation to remember). Casey defines participation as "the functional essence of commemoration" (2000:247): "Commemorating, by its very structure, encourages and enhances participation on the part of those who engage in it"(2000:247). Participation is also a crucial element for a commemoration's efficacious enactment; without it, it would amount to no more than a representation of the past. Although commemorations indeed represent the past, they go much beyond it; they have the potential to "create new forms of sociality, new modes of interconnection: between past and present, self and other, one group and another, one form of thinking or acting or speaking and another, one sex and another, one art form and another"(Casey 2000:251).

Individual, social, collective, and public memory

Casey's outstanding contribution to our understanding of the characteristics and dynamics of remembering has inspired this thesis; for operational purposes, I have adopted his typology of the three different formal levels that memory comprises, beyond the individual: social memory; collective memory and public memory (Casey 2004). The distinction between social and collective is crucial for this thesis' conceptual framework.

Casey defines social memory as:

> "the memory held in common by those who are affiliated by kinship ties, the geographical proximity in neighbourhoods, cities and other regions, or by engagement in a common project. In other words, it is memory shared by those who are already related to each other, whether by way of family or friendship or civic acquaintance or 'just an alliance between people for a specific purpose' "(2004:21).

Social memory is, in this definition, based on shared experience and co-reminiscing is its main mnemonic mode, which does not necessarily imply remembering the same way, but instead means "remembering something that others in one's kin or place-based group are also remembering at the same time or could do so" (2004:22). An important feature of social memories is that they are often private, known only to the group, and "prized as such" (2004:22), as they may provide an element of proximity and bounding that contribute to the preservation of the group.

Collective memory is distinct from social memory because the element of proximity is absent or otherwise irrelevant. Memory becomes collective in "the circumstance in which different persons, not necessarily known to each other at all, nevertheless recall the same event – again, each in her own way"(2004:23). In collective memory, Casey argues, "all that matters is commonality of content"(2004:23). We remember collectively when we remember the same event: "not the experience, but the focus (…) is what is shared in collective memory"(2004:23). In contrast with social memory, in collective memory people remember together but remain "comparatively anonymous in their very plurality, their

extended severalness, their manyness in the midst of their oneness of attention"(2000:24). As is the case with social memories, albeit for different reasons, collective memories are not necessarily public either; they may be repressed, silenced, rendered invisible, or they may simply escape articulation, without being, nevertheless, forgotten.

Together, individual, social and collective memories contribute to the formation of public memory, the set of representations that find their expression in the public realm, and are recognised by the public as somehow resonant with their own personal, social or collective memories. Casey defines individual and social memory as "the two inner circles of public memory", while collective memory marks the limits of public memory, its "outer perimeter" (2004:25). Public memory is characterised by a particular form of temporality, which further distinguishes it from the other levels of memory. Public memory is Janus faced, "both attached to a past (typically an originating event of some sort) and [acting] to ensure a future of further remembering of that same event" (2004:17). This forward looking temporal dimension implies a mnemonic intention that goes beyond the attempt to shape the way the past will be remembered in the future. This mnemonic intention also targets the sense of identity of those who, in the future, will remember that which is the object of memorialisation, as memory can confer identity with a sense of continuity over time.

The construction of public memory develops through time, connecting past, present and future. It takes shape in interaction with existing mnemonic traditions, which provide templates that help shape new memories; as well as with available representations of earlier memories. Earlier memories often become palimpsests where the memories of more recent events are inscribed, resulting in the "retroactive interference" (Sivan and Winter 2000:34) of later events in the memory of earlier ones; while, more recent memories offer the potential to reframe the memories of earlier events, as Michael Rothberg (2009) has convincingly argued with his idea of 'multidirectional memory', which he developed through the case-study of the 'intersections' between the memory of the Holocaust and the memory of colonial oppression.

Representations emerging from these processes are further subjected to interpretation, as they are exposed to audiences, that feedback their reactions, which can be of recognition, familiarity, discomfort, estrangement, indifference, etc, depending on how

those representations relate with the audiences' lived experience and beliefs, but also their perceived needs in the present and goals for the future. Public memory is thus constructed through communicative processes, developed intersubjectively, and path-dependent (Olick 2007:56-57). Present circumstances fundamentally influence the way we recall the past, but memory's access to the past offers the possibility of remembering in different ways under different circumstances. As Bloch (1998:126) highlights: "what is not expressed need not be forgotten and have social significance thereby since it is a stored resource for future social representations".

Mnemonic communities of experience, connection and identification

The possibility of remembering in different ways under different circumstances, in turn, raises the question of how the boundaries between what enters the realm of public memory and what remains within the realm of private memories are formed and maintained. To tackle this crucial issue for the present thesis, I have adopted the typology developed by the historian Mary Fulbrook (2013), which distinguished between three basic types of mnemonic communities – communities of experience, connection and identification. Fulbrook is critical of the way many scholars leave personal memories under-explored when focusing "on public rituals and topographies of remembrance, cultural and political representations of the past", and advocating for the need to combine such an approach "with a more thorough exploration of the ways in which different groups variously interacted with, sustained, and were affected by dominant narratives" (2013:51); her typology represents an important analytical tool to facilitate such exploration. Fulbrook(2013:34) defines these mnemonic communities in the following terms:

"The term 'communities of experience' designates those who lived through a particular significant historical event or period and shared certain experiences – even if what they shared were common challenges rather than individual responses, as they faced divergent twists and turns of faith"(2013:34). Communities of connection' "are made up of those people who did not themselves consciously experience this 'salient past', but who nevertheless, and not necessarily by choice, were in some way linked to the people who did. (…). Choice is, however, a greater component of the

final category – though with qualifications, since the availability and desirability of particular forms of identification depend on the social, political and cultural context of 'choosing'. 'Communities of identification are those who by identifying or empathising with the fate of others, find a particular past to be one of heightened personal significance"(2013:34).

Difficult memories':

On the basis of Casey's typology of social, collective and public memory, and Fulbrook's concept of communities of experience, connection and identification, my research has identified a particular type of recollections, which I have defined as 'difficult memories'. These were memories which a given community of experience sought to preserve from the gaze of outsiders, and keep within the intimacy of the group, not so much because recalling them was emotionally demanding, if not painful – which it often was, since these were memories associated with the experience of ethnicised violence, political persecution and forced displacement – but because they did not fit easily into a larger public narrative that the rememberers, to some extent shared, and which they did not wish to undermine. To better understand the phenomenon of 'difficult memories', and before exploring it the thesis' empirical chapters, we need now to turn our attention to the relationship between memory and identity, and, in particular between social and collective memories and national identity.

The mutual implication of memory and identity

I have stated that, as a capacity, memory is not solely embodied, but also embedded in an external environment. Whether in its individual, social or collective dimensions, memory is influenced by a set of resources located in this environment, and formed by tangible and intangible elements. Archives and libraries, where information is stored and organised, but also physical environments like buildings and landscapes, which connect memory with the experience of place, are examples of tangible elements that provide content to acts of remembrance. Intangible elements such as traditions and myths work as cultural vehicles

for the expression of memories, providing templates for mnemonic practices, while shared beliefs influence the meaning to be assigned to whatever is to be remembered. This set of resources, which correspond broadly to Pierre Nora's (1989) *"lieux de mémoire"*(see also Schwartz 2010:49) and Yosef Yerushalmi (1989) "vehicles of memory", is in permanent transformation. Resources are constructed, preserved, maintained, transformed and transmitted throughout time; they are subjected to decay, prone to damage or destruction, appropriated, changed upon the impact of new events, ideas and experiences. The way this set of resources is organised and managed in the dual process of remembering and forgetting reveals what Maurice Bloch(1998, pp. 67-84) has called "different ways of being in History", and depends largely upon the mnemonic traditions specific to each culture, as well as upon how a mnemonic community can access these resources.

Thinking specifically about the boundaries between public and private aspects of memory, and if we consider that public memory depends on a composite set of resources, then the question that follows is who has the capacity to control and mobilise them? Borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu(1977[1972]), we can think of these resources as a forming a symbolic capital, whose successful mobilisation may contribute to reshape collective identities and social relations and inspire political action. It is in this potential that the political value of collective memory lies, as a source of symbolic power.

The nature of the relationship between memory and identity is treated in academic literature in mainly two, contrasting ways. The approach prevalent in the field of memory studies is to inquire how identity influences the construction of collective memory, which assumes that identity precedes memory. This stems from the centrality of memory as a research theme, and follows, to a great extent, Halbwaschs' model, which assumes the pre-existence of the group and presents memory as a basic mechanism of preserving its identity: "the group, when facing its past, feels it has remained the same and gains awareness of its identity through time" (Halbwaschs 1950:50). This assumption reveals the limitations of Halbwaschs' approach, which, as Megill (2007:47) highlights, focuses primarily on the construction of memory by an identity that is already well-established. This stands in contrast with a constructivist approach to identity that, while assuming identity's dynamic nature, takes a largely instrumentalist perspective over memory. This is

prevalent in the literature on nationalism and national identity, concerned, as Olick stresses, with "what memory can do for identity"(2007, p.87). Both approaches assume a relationship of causality between memory and identity, an assumption that works as an heuristic device for focusing in one of the processes, be that the construction of memory or the construction of identity, but introduces a somehow static element to what are two dynamic processes involved in a relationship of mutual implication. Such research strategies work reasonably well in top-down approaches focusing on the politics of memory, or in cases in which identity is rather stable, but are harder to apply in cases where a major shift in identity has taken place, and the new forms of identity are not yet clear.

Memory is an active element in the dynamic process of construction of identity, but memory's actual level of involvement in the process of identification can vary greatly. Memory's role tends to become more visible in times of crisis, which expose the inherently fragile character of collective identity. By offering the possibility to access the past, memory contributes to responding to the problem of how to sustain identity through time, bearing in mind "the difficulty of being able to deal with changes" which, is, following Paul Ricoeur, "one reason why identity is so fragile"(1999:8). Memory can grant identity with the sense of continuity through time, conferring a sense of stability to what is essentially a dynamic process; but memory can also provide an understanding to shifts in identity, by offering the possibility to revisit the events in the past that disrupted it, and retrospectively render them meaningful in the light of their consequences as well as the present circumstances.

Hence memory can render identity more fluid and able to accommodate change. This does not mean, however, that memory causes identity. Rather than a relationship of causality, the relationship between memory and identity is one of mutual implication. Memory, as a capacity, is engaged in the process of identification, but memory cannot, by itself, generate identity. The process of construction of identity is triggered by action and based on experience, rather than on memory. Whilst experience can result in the production of identity, for that identity to persist it needs to be sustained through time. Memory is the capacity that allows the founding and formative experiences to be revisited, and that can happen both in ways that reproduce identity and in ways that undermine it. In the process of remembering, experience is given meaning, based on the assessment, both on the level of cognition and the level of affect, of the significance of that experience in the

light of subsequent developments. Moreover, the content of our memories and the way we remember are certainly influenced by the cultural frames that also inform our sense of identity.

As the historian Allan Megill has stressed, the public relevance of memory seems to be directly connected with "an insecurity about identity" (Megill: 2007, p.43), one of the traits of late modernity, which may be the reason why collective memory tends to be considered so important in contemporary societies. Indeed, public memory is often mobilised to support claims over identity, thus playing a role in the legitimation or otherwise contestation of the *statu quo*, and in the justification of programmes of action proposed by ideological identity projects. But the subordination of memory to identity projects require significant effort which is likely to be met with resistance.

Remembering violence between public and private memory

Memories of violence and war figure prominently in the public realm and there is a widespread idea, both in political and popular discourse, that individuals and societies are bound by a 'duty of memory' towards past experiences of suffering, oppression and injustice. And yet societies often have a tense relationship with the past, with certain historical experiences either absent or assigned a marginal presence in the public memory. In his lecture 'What is a Nation', Ernest Renan(1882) famously elaborated around the tendency to exclude inconvenient historical experiences from public memory, when, evoking the place of the Saint-Barthélemy massacre in French memory he claimed that*"Forgetting, I would go on as far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of the nation"*. Noting the fact that Renan's speech carried the assumption that his audience need no explanation about the facts surrounding the massacre, Benedict Anderson (1991:200) pointed out that "*In effect, Renan's readers were being told to 'have already forgotten' what Renan's own words assumed that they naturally remembered!*"

Anderson contends that the way these memories of 'forgotten' tragedies are retrieved, often but not exclusively, by the state itself through the education system, reflect a "deep reshaping of the imagination" in society in what he considers to be a "characteristic

device in the later construction of national genealogies"(1991:201). This device is, according to Anderson, triggered only once those memories have become distant enough to have become "reassuring fratricides", when "to serve the narrative purpose" that informs the 'biography of nations', "these violent deaths must be remembered as 'our own'"(1991:206). The problem with Anderson's otherwise insightful remark about Renan's assumptions over forgotten memories is that he interprets the paradox he identified on Renan's lecture through a largely top-down approach, with the state as the main agent in the retrieval of these 'difficult memories' once they are deemed to no longer threaten the identity of the nation. Once again what we have is an already well-established identity constructing a suitable past.

But what kind of dynamics is at play when, rather than "reassuring fratricides" that took place somewhere in a more or less distant past, memories of violence are produced in a political environment still marked by a great deal of uncertainty over identity? To investigate such a question, we need, first of all, to explore the connection between this violence that is the object of remembrance, and the climate of uncertainty in which such memories are produced, to understand their "reassuring", or otherwise subversive potential, which we will do through the framework of liminality.

2.2 Understanding violence through the lens of liminality

The concept of liminality, created by Arnold van Gennep(1981[1909]), and developed by Victor Turner (1967;1969), provides a useful heuristic device to explore this relationship between violence and uncertainty over identity in periods of political transformation, allowing for a processual approach aimed at capturing its dynamics, whilst avoiding teleological assumptions. Literally referring to 'threshold' situations in the transition between different states, "liminality captures in-between situations and conditions characterised by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes"(Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra 2015:2).

Based on the recognition of "an ordering principle inherent in the various rites

accompanying the individual life cycle or the periodicity of seasons"(Szakolczai 2014:33), van Gennep(1981[1909]:20) identified "a scheme of ceremonial sequences involved in the passage from one situation to another and from one (cosmic or social) world to another". The scheme consist in rites of separation; margin; and aggregation, each corresponding to a specific stage in a transition process:

- the preliminary stage "comprises symbolic behaviours signifying the detachment of the individual or group from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions"(Turner 1967:94);

- the liminal stage, located in the threshold between the old and the new, the subject, already deprived of its former status, is subjected to particular challenges, whose successful performance has a transformative effect in the subject's identity and future social position;

- and finally the postliminal stage, through which, having gone through a fundamental transformation, the subject acquires a new identity, and is integrated in the corresponding social position.

In some cases, van Gennep highlights, "the scheme is duplicated: this happens when the margin is developed enough to constitute an autonomous stage"(1981[1909]:20), in which case the liminal stage will comprise its own set of rites of separation, margin and aggregation.

It was through the work of Victor Turner that the idea of liminality gained currency. Turner analysed the middle stage of rites of passage, to explore its paradoxical character: "Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but is in some sense the source of them all, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise"(1967:97). The liminal experience, Turner argued, was marked by ambiguity; neutrality; and structural invisibility(1967:99). The initiands' ambiguous character stemmed from the fact that, because they are undergoing a transformation, they "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space"(1969:94); their neutrality resulted from being dispossessed of status, rights, and property, pushing the liminal beings to adopt a "passive and humble" behaviour (1969:94). As for structural invisibility, it was imposed on

them because they were perceived as polluting by those outside their liminal realm, given their position "betwixt and between, no longer classified and not yet classified"(1967:98). Turner cites Mary Douglas'(1966) *Purity and Danger*, on the concept of pollution as "a reaction to protect cherished principles and categories from contradiction", since "the unclear is the unclean"(Turner 1967:99 cit. Douglas) to highlight how the liminal beings' ambiguous and paradoxical character made them ritually polluting, and therefore dangerous in the eyes of others.

Turner points also to the positive aspects of liminality, highlighting how the experience of liminality is generative of identity. In relation to the outside world the liminal beings are dispossessed, vulnerable, and therefore contrived to submit and accept the suffering liminal rituals often involve; hence they submit to their fate, obeying to the 'master of ceremonies', who previously went through the same transformative rituals, and who provides them with some form of guidance for performing the rituals they are subjected to. Within the group, however, this dispossession generates a situation of complete equality, and enables a degree of freedom unknown in normal circumstances, since, Turner notes, "people can 'be themselves', it is frequently said, when they are not acting institutionalised roles"(1967:101). These positive aspects give rise to a particular sense of community – Turner (1969) would call it *communita*s – among the initiands, which would transcend the liminal period, and last beyond their reintegration.

Although Turner "repeatedly identified parallels with non-tribal or 'modern' societies"(Thomassen 2009:14), he rejected extending the scope of the concept beyond traditional or small scale societies, other than as a metaphor(Turner 1974:62), and, Thomassen(2009:15) notes, "his work remained largely a-political in character". Perhaps for that reason, the concept of liminality has been neglected as an analytical tool to understand situations of break of order and radical political change, even though Turner's insights on liminality – along with his concept of 'social drama' – found a wide scope of application within and beyond Turner's own discipline, Anthropology.

Thomassen (2009:16) proposes the application of the concept of liminality "far beyond that which Turner himself had suggested". He highlights the diversity of liminal experiences, affecting a range of subjects, from single individuals and social groups to whole societies; varying in temporal scope, from short moments to more or less prolonged

periods, and possibly to epochs. Liminality has also a spatial dimension, varying in scope, from specific places, to particular areas, such as borders, aeroports, prisons, but also theme parks and holiday resorts (providing what Turner(1974) defined as liminoid experiences), to whole countries or larger regions marked by their in-betweenness. The combination of these different dimensions results in different degrees of liminality, depending "on the extent to which the liminal experience can be weighted against persisting structures" (Thomassen2009:18). Thus the concept of liminality holds a great potential, to offer, as Arpad Szakolczai stresses "a novel, non-evolutionary, and non-dualistic understanding of the relationship between social order and change, introducing the vital third term 'in-between'" (2014:33).

Authors such as Arpad Szakolczai (2009; 2014); Bjorn Thomassen (2008; 2009; 2015); Agnes Horvath (2008: 2015); Harald Wydra(2015); Maria Malksoo(2012), and others converging around the journal *International Political Anthropology* have been proposing the extension of the concept to the analysis of large-scale social and political events, highlighting how it may shed light to the role of agency as well as the structuring, long-term effects of what are fundamentally unstructured experiences: "During liminal periods, characterised by a wholesale collapse of order and a loss of background structure, agency is pushed to the forefront and reorientations in modes of conduct and thought are produced within larger societies"(Thomassen2009:20); once liminality comes to an end "the ideas and practices that have become established therein will tend to take on the quality of structure"(Thomassen2009:20).

One crucial aspect to bear in mind whilst applying the 'lens' of liminality to the study of political change is that, "if a society, a culture or a civilisation enters a major period of transition, a crisis that implies the collapse of the previously taken for granted order of things, nothing assures in advance the outcome" (Szakolczai 2014:34). Liminality avoids the teleological trap; highlighting how uncertainty is key, offering various, and often contended ways of imagining the future through an expanded sense of possibility, with danger as its reverse. A second aspect is that, unlike in rites of passage, and since liminality engulfs the whole of society in a unique historical experience, there is nobody to guide through this process, no 'master of ceremonies' who is 'outside liminality', having already gone through the same type of transition. Political leaders are themselves in a stage of liminality; their liminal condition endows them to exercise their fuelled imagination,

seeking for a desirable outcome, but their power is contested, and although they may appear as invested with charisma, they are navigating uncharted waters. Liminality is, in the context of such processes, a stage of unbounded possibility and extreme danger. Liminality involves the destruction of pre-existing structures, thus boosting creativity, but entails the risk that this creative surge will fail to deliver new structures which are solid enough to sustain a new order, leaving societies stuck in a prolonged liminal stage, which, Szakolczai (2009; 2014) contends, may indeed become permanent.

War represents a quintessential liminal experience, and a case in which the risk of liminality becoming permanent is striking. We need only to think, for instance, of the failure of international intervention in countries like Afghanistan or Iraq, while in cases such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, the success in ending mass violence was not followed by a successful post-liminal reaggregation, but instead by a precarious stability, which some label as a 'frozen conflict' (e.g. Perry 2009); an 'unfinished war'(e.g. Lovrenović and Jergović 2010); or a 'paralysed peace' (Bennet2016). But liminality is more than merely a label to describe situations of political transition. Advocating for the application of the concept of liminality to the study of war, Maria Malksoo (2012:490) criticised "the tendency in most International Relations theoretical traditions to reduce war to terms of analysis derived from peacetime society"(see also Shaw(1988) for a sociological critique of this tendency), while "understanding war through the lens of liminality underscores its unique nature among other social activities"(Malksoo2012:490).

Political liminality leaves an enduring legacy, in the form of the structures which it shaped, and in the way it affected peoples lives. Memory retrospectively gives meaning to the liminal experience, in such a way that the sacrifices made and the price individuals had to pay when going through the liminal stage, is measured against how the new structures that emerged enabled, or otherwise constrained them to recover. The sense of future and the sense of the past come together in such exercises, in which the question of whether it was worth it is pervasive, whether publicly articulated or only tacitly present. This is even more so, when violence is the strongest defining feature of the liminal experience, as in the present case-study, of how people remember ethnic cleansing in the context of the Bosnian war and the creation of Republika Srpska.

We will now turn to the particular case of ethnic cleansing, the memories of which are the core object of this thesis, and analyse the concept as a category of practice in the context of liminality.

2.3 What is ethnic cleansing?

This thesis adopts, for operational purposes, the basic definition provided by the Final Report of the Commission of Experts established by the UN Security Council(UNSC Res. 780/1992) to investigate allegations that serious breaches of International Humanitarian Law were taking place in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. As defined by the Report (henceforth referred to as the Bassiouni Report, after the Commission's chairman), "'ethnic cleansing' means rendering an area ethnically homogenous by using force or intimidation to remove from a given area persons from another ethnic or religious group" (UNSG 1994:33, par.129). The work of the Commission was the basis for the UN Security Council's decision, in May 1993, to create the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia(UNSC Res. 827/93).

It seems consensual that ethnic cleansing is associated with modern state practices, and in particular with the model of the nation-state (Nairmak 2001; Carmichael 2002; Mann 2005; Ther 2014);. In his general theory of ethnic cleansing, Michael Mann(2005) goes as far as calling it "the dark side of democracy", likely to occur where the *demos* is confused with the *ethnos*, giving rise to organic conceptions of the nation (Mann 2004:3). The term gained currency during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, when journalists and diplomats following the wars introduced it to the English language, literally translating from the Serbo-Croatian '*etničko čišćenje*' to describe acts of violence against civilian populations resulting in their forced displacement (Shaw 2007:49). In fact, the term 'cleansing', and the equivalent term 'purification' have long been used in Europe to refer to the expulsion of unwanted populations, with documents recording it as far back as the 19th Century (Ther 2014:4); the 'ethnic' prefix began appearing only much more recently, but, Ther(2014:4) notes, "it was without saying that, in the context of discourses on nation, the term 'cleansing' referred to national minorities".

Ethnic cleansing and genocide

Ethnic cleansing is closely related to the concept of genocide. The term genocide is a sociological and juridical term, coined by the lawyer Raphael Lemkin. 'Ethnic cleansing', by contrast is "a term borrowed from the language of the perpetrators and their mentors", as Philipp Ther(2014:4) put it, devoid of intrinsic juridical meaning, albeit encompassing an array of acts contrary to International Humanitarian Law(UNSG1994:33, par.130). While the term genocide refers to a category of analysis, 'ethnic cleansing' refers essentially to a category of practice, even if many scholars use it "as a point od departure for analysis"(Toal and Dahlman 2011:xii). The use of the term 'ethnic cleansing' in scholarly literature is controversial, with some scholars arguing against its use (e.g. Shaw 2007:48-62; Bećirević 2014:ix; Donia 2015:18; Gordy 2013:9), on the grounds that it consists in a euphemism that obfuscates the ugly reality of mass atrocity; on the other hand, given the juridical dimension of the concept of genocide, some scholars also seem wary of employing the term for cases where a judicial decision classifying an act of violence as genocide does not exist (e.g. Donia 2015), in which case the term ethnic cleansing appears as an alternative, in part because, Shaw (2007:48) notes, the concept of genocide "has been narrowed down to Nazi-like extermination policies".

The debate about what precisely distinguishes ethnic cleansing from genocide, and how far they coincide in content, or whether they refer, instead, to different phenomena, has proved divisive within the scholarly community(see Hoare 2014). The debate is connected to a broader problem of how to define the scope of genocide, with authors who favour a broader approach to genocide (e.g. Shaw 2007; Hoare 2014) more critical of the term ethnic cleansing. The controversies around how to classify mass atrocity spill over from the realm of academia, into public discourse and popular culture, exposing and perhaps deepening divising perspectives over a common past of violence. The case of the Armenian genocide offers a particularly insightful illustration of how enduring such divisions can be (Suny2009), and how they often correlate with ethnicity, ideology, and states' ontological insecurity (Zarakol 2010), with important lessons for the Bosnian case. The question of whether mass violence against Bosnian Muslims constitutes genocide, and

whether the term should be restricted to the particular case of the Massacre of Srebrenica, or whether it should qualify the wider strategy of the Bosnian Serb leadership (see Hoare 2014) is certainly contentious political issue in Bosnia-Herzegovina (see Karćić 2015). This thesis takes note of these controversies; due to space constraints, however, we are unable to fully explore them, other than in relation to the specific case-study of Bijeljina.

What matters, in the context of this research, is that the term 'ethnic cleansing' is widely used in Bosnia-Herzegovina to describe wartime violence, including by many of its victims. My focus, therefore is not on the term as a category of analysis, but as a category of practice. In the context of the ethnographic approach adopted in this thesis, we aim to explore the meanings attached both to the idea of ethnic cleansing in abstract and to its experience in concrete. Understanding ethnic cleansing as a category of practice requires a processual approach, focusing on agency, but correlating it with the overall dynamics of a country's political and military situation and its impact locally. For that purpose, the thesis frames ethnic cleansing as a liminal process, enabled by the radical opening of new possibilities for reordering the environment brought about by war – as in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina – but also, more generally, by substantial changes in the international system and in domestic politics.

Ethnic cleansing and categorical purity

Rather than dismissing the 'ethnic cleansing' term as euphemistic, this thesis explores the meanings the term itself encompasses. The idea of 'cleansing' directly evokes the presence of a polluting element and a source of contamination(Shaw 2007:49). Whilst the connection is obvious and consensually acknowledged, among scholars studying ethnic cleansing from a political perspective the idea of pollution to which the term cleansing alludes has hardly been explored. In Mann's(2004) general theory of ethnic cleansing, for instance, the word pollution appears only three times, always in reference to perpetrators' racial prejudices. The term purity appears more often, also in relation to perpetrators beliefs, but its meanings are never explored, merely assumed. But several anthropologists, most notably by Liisa Malkki (1995) on her study of Hutu refugees from Burundi exiled in Tanzania, and Arjun Appadurai (1998), have made the idea of purity and pollution

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central to their analysis of ethnic violence, relying on Mary Douglas' seminal work *Purity and Danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*(1966).

Defining dirt essentially as "matter out of place" implying "a set of ordered relations and a contravention to that order"(1966:36), Douglas argued that notions of pollution are "the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements"(1966:35). The concepts of power and danger are key in Douglas' framing of pollution and purification. Forms of pollution pose danger to the social order, but, far from representing "a negative movement"(p.2) driven by anxiety (1966:40), acts of cleansing or purification consist in "a creative movement" and "a positive effort to organise the environment"(1966:2). Douglas highlights the opening of possibilities brought about by disorder:

> Granted that disorder spoils pattern, it also provides the material of pattern. Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power. (Douglas 1966: 95)

In his analysis of liminality, Victor Turner (1964:97-98) explored Douglas' connection between pollution and categorical confusion, to take Douglas analytical framework one step further, highlighting the need to distinguish between static situations, in which notions of pollution relate to structural contradictions, and dynamic processes, in which pollution derives from the unstructured nature of transitions.

Malkki (1995) applied Douglas and Turner's theoretical insights about purity and categorical confusion to analyse the impact of the experience of extreme ethnic violence in the construction of national identity, to highlight the contingency of the very idea of categorical purity, constructed in the interaction between living conditions in the present and the memories of the violent past. Relying on Malkki's theoretical and empirical contribution, and focusing in the particular case of atrocities committed between people

who were socially intimate, Arjun Appadurai also explores idea of categorical purity and the role it plays in ethnic violence, correlating it with the notion of uncertainty. The analysis of ethnic violence, Appadurai(1998:231) argues, reveals "cosmologies in flux, categories under stress, and ideas striving for the logic of self-evidence". For Appadurai, "ethnocidal violence is not simply a matter of eliminating the ethnic other"(1998: 233), but of "establish[ing] the parameters of this otherness", so as to counter the 'categorical uncertainty' about the self. Whilst ignoring Turner's framework of liminality, Appadurai nevertheless suggests that acts of ethnic violence "arise in circumstances where the lived experience of large labels becomes unstable, indeterminate, and socially volatile, so that violent action can become one means of satisfying one's sense of one's categorical self", stressing however, that such violence "is never truly cathartic, satisfying, or final"(244).

In situations of political liminality – such as that experienced in Bosnia-Herzegovina with the dissolution of Yugoslavia – the collapse of the old order opens new realms of possibilities. Violence becomes instrumental in channeling the creative potential in ways that converge with and reinforce the model of social organisation and the ideals of national identity favoured by those who possessed the means of violence, and assign for themselves the role of 'masters of ceremonies' steering the liminal process. For them, the liminal period represents a creative moment towards the re-ordering of the environment according to new principles. But the expansion of their sense of possibility entails its curtailment, and an increased danger, for those subjected to that violence. For those targeted or threatened by violence, survival becomes their primary goal, followed by an effort to preserve their dignity in such adverse conditions.

From this perspective, 'cleansing' as in 'ethnic cleansing' appears not so much as an euphemism, but as an analogy for the elimination of the elements that are not consistent with the envisioned order to be created, in the search for categorical purity. In his analysis of population exchange and ethnic cleansing in nazi-allied Romania during the Second World War, the historian Vladimir Solinari (2010) highlights this point, stressing how the expressions "ethnic cleansing", and "ethnic purification" were candidly employed by the Antonescu regime, whose leadership saw the nazi invasion of the Soviet Union as opening an "historical moment"(p.149) to restore Greater Romania and purify the Romanian nation, "both ideologically and racially, or 'biologically'"(p.150). The same spirit can be said to have animated the mind of the leaders of the Second World War Chetnik Movement in

Yugoslavia, who engaged in so-called "cleansing actions" against Muslim populations in Bosnia and Sandjak (Tomasevitch 1975: 258; Bećirević 2014: 22).

Due to the growing importance of the idea of Human Rights after the Second World War, when the term 'ethnic cleansing' emerged in public discourse, in the context of the wars of Yugoslav succession, its use was no longer as a statement of intention on the part of perpetrators, who seem to have lost the candour displayed before the dawn of international criminal justice. In public discourse, the expression 'ethnic cleansing' has now been appropriated as a term of accusation backing claims of victimhood. The expression was used in this sense as early as the 1980s, when Serbian intellectuals denounced the emigration of Serbs from Kosovo as the result of "a policy of 'ethnic cleansing'" pursued by Albanian nationalists (Dragović-Soso 2002:130, cit. Bogdanović 1985). Croatian officials used the term in a similar way in 1991, when denouncing the violence perpetrated against Croatian civilians by Serb paramilitaries and the JNA (Toal and Dahlman 2011:1); since then the expression has been used countless times as a term of accusation, most recently by the UN in denunciation of the mass atrocities committed in Myanmar against the Rohingya people (UN News 2018).

The Bassiouni Report played a crucial role in this shift from "from a rationalising euphemism into an incriminating metaphor"(Hagan and Haug 2011:180), by framing ethnic cleansing as "a purposeful policy", "contrary to International Law", since its implementation involved "violent and terror-inspiring means" against civilian populations, "to a large extent, (...) carried out in the name of misguided nationalism, historic grievances and a powerful driving sense of revenge."(UNSC 1994:33) Somehow subverting the spirit of the Bassiouni Report, however, the term 'ethnic cleansing' was since widely adopted by diplomats and political leaders as a way to avoid framing as genocide the crimes ethnic cleansing involves, since the 1948 International Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide imposed on states a legal duty to act (Gratz 2011:410-411; see also Power 2002).

These shifts in the use of the term 'ethnic cleansing' nevertheless preserve the essential connection with the idea of pollution and purity, which locates the violence against the ethnic 'other' in a wider process of regeneration of the ethnic 'self', with 'cleansing' as a dehumanising metaphor through the evocation of pollution.

Having presented this thesis' key concepts, we will now turn our attention to the particular case of the process of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and more specifically to ethnic cleansing as a strategy employed by the Bosnian Serb leadership to create an ethnically homogenous territory that could sustain a viable new state, Republika Srpska.

Chapter 3

Historical background:

Framing the creation of Republika Srpska

The present chapter will begin by framing the empirical research within the historical context of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the creation of Republika Srpska, with a particular focus on the idea of 'separation of peoples' which was to become the main strategic goal of the Bosnian Serb leadership. The chapter sets this idea in contrast with the principles that previously regulated ethnic relations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, to highlight the role of agency in seizing upon a moment of crisis to open up a liminal space to fundamentally transform Bosnian and Serb identity.

In the second part of the chapter, I provide an historical overview of the development of Bijeljina and the surrounding region of Semberija, focusing, on the one hand, on its strategic position, and, on the other hand, on the impact different periods of state breakdown and war had in its population. The chapter ends with a description of the military take-over of Bijeljina in April 1992, and how an official narrative about it emerged.

3.1 Ethnic cleansing and the creation of Republika Srpska

Given the historical precedents of extreme violence in the Balkans since the 19th Century (Carmichael 2002), including the Ustasha genocide against Serbs in the territory of the fascist puppet state of NDH and the Chetnik genocide against Muslims during the Second World War – events still within living memory, which were the focus of intense debate in the period preceding the disintegration of the SFRY (Bogosavljević 2000) – it was tempting, back in the 1990s, to accept the flawed 'ancient hatreds' thesis (e.g. Kaplan 1993), which tapped into the stereotype of the Balkans as the 'powder keg' of Europe, (see Bakić-Hayden 1995; Todorova 1997). Such theses have been consistently rejected by the scholarly community, but alternative theses presenting inter-ethnic relations in Bosnia as fundamentally harmonious (e.g Donia and Fine 1994; Sells 1996) and framing Bosnian Serb nationalism as a 'betrayal' of enduring traditions of tolerance and peaceful coexistence have also been criticised as somehow flattening the complexity of historical experiences and communal relations (see Baker 2015:58-59), marked by the coexistence of integrative and fragmenting dynamics (Hoare 2007:416).

Inter-ethnic relations in pre-war Bosnia-Herzegovina

Ethnic relations in Bosnia-Herzegovina under communist rule rested on a delicate balance, in which historical legacies, politics, and everyday life experiences all played a role. In his study of communal violence in the municipality of Kulen Vakuf in Northwest Bosnia, where in 1941 a series of massacres occurred, Max Bergholz (2016) identified "three main mental schemas that structured people's thinking"(2016: 273) during the communist period, in what regarded interethnic relations, which the author directly correlates with the legacies of wartime violence dating back to the Second World War: the first, labeled "harmony", was based on "deep feelings of admiration and gratitude" for individuals who risked their lives to save their neighbours, which proved in the eyes of those rescued that "a person's character and behaviour (...)mattered most, not his or her ethnicity"(2016:273).

The second was "state-enforced 'Brotherhood and Unity'. The concept of Brotherhood and Unity (*bratstvo I jedinstvo*), was, Dejan Jović (2009:54) notes, a "constitutive concept regarding the main questions of coexistence between Yugoslav nations", resulting in the organisation of the Yugoslav state as a federation of equal nations through the establishment of republics. A basic concept for the organisation of the state, Brotherhood and Unity entailed, in practice, "a dialectical balancing act between separate national and supranational cultures" (Wachtel 1998:134) pushing for the creation of a supranational cultural space, a space which was to exist in parallel with the different national cultures. Brotherhood and Unity had a particular meaning in the context of Bosnia-Herzegovina, as the homeland of three different nations, Serbs, Croats and Muslims (once they were recognised as a national group), and with its experience of the civil war and genocide during the Second World War. The 'state enforcement' of Brotherhood and Unity, Bergholz notes, involved a calendar of events celebrating the communist regime, which provided "citizens considered to be of different ethnicities with common holidays"(2016:274); commemorations selectively remembering the war dead in non-ethnic ways; and 'work actions' (*radne akcije*) building infrastructure, which were designed to encourage people "to work together toward common objectives"(2016:274). The surveillance of inter-communal relations through active monitoring was also central. Forms of behaviour contrary to 'Brotherhood and Unity', and in particular expressions of what the authorities considered to be 'chauvinism' were sanctioned and repressed, both through social censorship and through judicial means (2016:275-277), which, Bergholz argues, "may have paradoxically increased the salience of ethnic categories"(2016:276).

Bergholz presents the third mental scheme as "discord", referring to cases of antagonism between individuals, when erupting in situations of confrontation, involved the evocation of the lived experience of wartime violence, and were thus easily be labeled as "ethnically based", resulting in what the author calls the eruption of "sudden nationhood"(2016:281), in which ethnicity gained salience, which individuals mobilised, to seek support within the community for their respective positions. While the 'Brotherhood and Unity' mental scheme stemmed from the regime's policy, the first and third mental schemes, "harmony", and "discord" stemmed from the local historical experience, still within living memory, which in turn fed back into how 'Brotherhood and Unity' was policed and enforced on the ground. Bergholz's case-study sheds some light into the

complexity of the relationship between living memory and political identity, and how a top-down effort to manage the legacies of violence entailed the risk of unintended consequences that perpetuated those legacies. It represents, thus, a compelling critique of the communist regime politics of memory that avoids groupist assumptions.

But state policies and legacies of violence were far from the only factors determining communal relations. Highlighting the lack of salience of ethnic identity in everyday life in Bosnia-Herzegovina – and in particular in urban areas – in the period that immediately preceded the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Adis Maksić (2017) points both to the pervasiveness of feelings of belonging to Yugoslavia, in which 'Brotherhood and Unity' were more than a slogan, but a generative factor of an inclusive, non-ethnic Yugoslav identity (*jugosloventstvo*); and to the importance of the Bosnian tradition of life in common (*zajednički život*), "in which personal relations and everyday lived experiences routinely transgressed, reinscribed, and blurred ethnic boundaries"(2017:1). On the basis of an array of sociological surveys and demographic data, Gagnon (2004) has also pointed to the lack of salience of ethnic identity in everyday, invoking, for instance, the significant number of marriages between persons belonging to different ethnicities (usually referred to as 'mixed marriages), and children born from parents who did not share the same ethnic background, to stress that in surveys of 'ethnic distance' Bosnia had one of the lowest levels in all Yugoslavia (Gagnon 2004:40; see also Hodson, Sekulić and Massey 1994).

Noting how, in Yugoslavia, everyday life in multi-ethnic areas was marked by low levels of ethnic distance and high levels of tolerance and trust, Gagnon (2004) rejected the 'ethnic conflict' label usually employed to characterise the wars of Yugoslav succession, calling it a "myth" created by "conservative elites in Serbia and Croatia", who triggered a spiral of violence as part of a broader "strategy to silence, marginalise, and demobilise challengers and their supporters in order to create political homogeneity at home"[6]. Converging with Gagnon in dismissing the label of 'ethnic conflict', Maksić nevertheless rejects the demobilisation thesis. Instead, Maksić uses discourse analysis to explore the processes of 'politicisation of ethnicity' through which Bosnian Serb nationalists succeeded in mobilising the Serb masses to support their political goals. Maksić characterises the

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6   It must be noted that *The Myth of Ethnic War*, Gagnon's book, did not specifically focus on Bosnia-Herzegovina, but had the former Yugoslavia as its unit of analysis, focusing on elites in Serbia and Croatia, disregarding, thus, the agency of Bosnian Serb and Croatian Serb leaderships (see Caspersen (2010), and Glaurdić (2009) for analysis of the relation between the Milošević regime and the Bosnian Serb leaderships).

Bosnian war as an 'ethnicised conflict', exposing "the role of nationalist agency in the politicisation of ethnicity and the homogenisation of people around an ethnic axis of collective identification"(2017:4) through a radical 'othering' process in a moment of deep uncertainty about the future.

The nationalist principle of 'separation of peoples'

The acts of ethnic cleansing perpetrated by Serb forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina were a corollary of the principle of 'separation of peoples' proposed by the leadership of the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) and eventually validated by the Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia-Herzegovina (later the Assembly of Republika Srpska). The idea of 'separation of peoples' did not correspond to a perceived need of the bulk of the Bosnian Serb population, but instead emerged from a background of deep resentment among Serb nationalists against what they saw as an unfair balance of power among national groups in the framework of socialist Yugoslavia. First openly articulated by intellectuals and Orthodox clerics in Serbia in the early 1980s, this resentment was expressed in an increasingly loud tone throughout the decade (Dragović-Soso 2002; Wachtel 1998:197-230), as an enduring economic crisis intensified the sense of uncertainty created by the death of Tito in 1980. This resentment appeared as a reaction against the decentralisation of power in favour of the republics and autonomous regions, with the Constitution of 1974 usually pointed at as particularly detrimental to the interests of the Serb people (Dimitrijević 2000: 414). Indeed, during the first two decades after the Second World War, and thanks, to some extent, to the disproportionate Serb participation in the partisans, Serbs occupied most of the dominant positions in the political structures of socialist Yugoslavia, both at federal level, and in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Hoare 2014:523, 525). From the late 1960s onwards, the balance of power shifted, with a higher participation of members of other national groups, and decisions such as the recognition of Bosnian Muslims as a national, rather than merely religious, group; the move of the Orthodox Church in Macedonia towards autocefaly; and the expansion of Kosovo and Vojvodina's political autonomy within Serbia. The 1974 Constitution appeared as the culmination of this shift.

Slobodan Milošević seized upon this resentment, to present himself as the right man to push for the necessary correction to the 'unjust' position of the Serb people, through a project of recentralisation of power away from the republics towards the federal structures, which would ensure Serbian dominance under his leadership (Dimitrijević 2000: 414). Recentralisation was, however, resolutely opposed by the republican leaderships of Slovenia and Croatia, who themselves sought further decentralisation and devolution of power to the republics (Ramet 2006:338) The conflict between clashing visions for the future of Yugoslavia, at a time when communist regimes were crumbling in Eastern Europe, and after ten years of economic crisis and delayed political reforms, opened up a period of liminality calling into question the institutional and ideological structures that had sustained the communist regime. The political confrontation between the representatives of Slovenia and Croatia and Milošević resulted in the collapse of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in January 1990 (Silber and Little 1995:84), and opened the way for multi-party elections at the level of the republics, and eventually, to the very dissolution of SFRY.

Once Milošević's attempt to dominate within the framework of socialist Yugoslavia failed, and with growing popular support for independence in Slovenia and Croatia, the question of whether the right to self-determination should belong to ethnic groups, rather than to territorial units came to dominate the concerns of Serb nationalists (Burg and Shoup 1999: 86). Events were unfolding fast, adding urgency to such concerns. In July 1990, Slovenia and Croatia organised multi-party elections, after which the two republics' new leaderships announced their respective bids for independence. In the Summer of 1990 Croatian Serbs organised around the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), and with the support of Milošević regime and the JNA, launched a rebellion that, within one year, escalated into a war of secession from Croatia, which Croatian Serb nationalists legitimised by invoking their own right to self-determination in the context of Croatia's bid for independence, and the wish of the Serb population not to have borders separating them from Serbia, but instead to remain as part of Yugoslavia.

Whilst Slovenia and Croatia sought independence, the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina was different. The introduction of a multi-party system gave rise to the

creation of nationalist parties invested above all in defeating the communists in the ballots and replacing them. The biggest parties, the Muslim nationalist 'Party for Democratic Action (SDA); the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), sister party to the new ruling party in Croatia, led by Franjo Tuđman; and the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), sister party to the Croatian namesake, went on to win the elections, in which voting largely mirrored the demographic weight of Bosnia's three constituent peoples, Bosnian Muslims, Croats and Serbs. The three 'national' parties, SDA, HDZ and SDS, came to power, quickly taking over the republican institutions and dividing among themselves all key positions (Anđelić 2003:192). In the meantime, the prospect of Yugoslavia's dissolution was becoming increasingly likely, with the Serbian leadership, and that of Croatia and Slovenia articulating exclusive visions of Yugoslavia's future. The leader of the SDA and President of the Bosnian collective presidency, Alija Izetbegović proposed, along with his Macedonian counterpart Kiro Gligorov, a compromise in the form of an 'asymmetrical confederation', which would include also Slovenia and Croatia (Burg and Shoup 1999:70; Silber and Little 1995:162). The determination of both Slovenian and Croatian leaderships in seeking for independence, and Serbia's recentralisation goals, however, made this compromise unfeasible. Both republics moved to declare independence in July 1991, backed by the results of referenda which determined the support of the overwhelming majority of the population. This placed Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia in a difficult situation, due to fears of Serbian hegemony over a rump Yugoslavia.

The SDS's electoral platform ahead of the 1990 elections was not the 'separation of peoples' (see Anđelić 2002: 170; Hoare 2007:343). In the Serbian national imaginary, Bosnia-Herzegovina was traditionally viewed as a Serb land (Hajdarpašić 2015; Stojančević 2007), so that such a goal of keeping Bosnia-Herzegovina as a political unit in a common state with Serbia was consistent with the party's "organic vision of the Serb nation" (Maksić 2017:127, see also 171-175). Keeping Bosnia-Herzegovina in a common state with Serbia entailed, as Adis Maksić (2017:95) points out, "a reactive strategy". Since Bosnia-Herzegovina was at the time part of Yugoslavia, the party's goal was to preserve the *statu quo*. In fact, none of the three major nationalist parties, SDS, SDA and HDZ campaigned for the disintegration of Yugoslavia or the partition of Bosnia-HerzegovinaHoare 2007: 344). Instead, they presented themselves to voters as allies, seeking to rule the country in coalition. The three parties often sent representatives to each

other's political events, and organised joint political rallies (Hoare 2007: 343-4; Maksić 2017:204)

In his study of the process of ethnic mobilisation of Bosnian Serbs around the SDS, Maksi reveals how the party presented itself as moderate, only radicalising its discourse after it came to power:

> "much of the SDS's discourse during the election campaign was structured to diffuse the fear that the three ethno-national parties would produce ethnic conflict [...] SDS's self-frame included the claim that the party was the harbinger of genuine peace, in opposition to the fake and artificial peace of the communist era" (2017:203)

Always presenting itself as a moderate party, the SDS engaged, from its onset, in a process of 'othering', seeking to ethnicise social relations, and politicise ethnicity, in order to mobilise Serbs and generate loyalty, by exploiting uncertainty in a fast-changing environment (Maksić 2017: 76-78; 180). This othering process adapted to the Bosnian context the pattern already developed by nationalists in Serbia. With regard to Croats, the main othering tactics was the equation of the new HDZ government under the leadership of Franjo Tuđman, with the Second World War Independent State of Croatia, and the evocation of the traumatic memory of persecution and genocide against the Serb people by the ustasha regime. As the Serb rebellion in parts of Croatia grew into war, and with the JNA using Bosnian territory to launch attacks against Croatian territory, the 'othering' of Bosnian Croats by Bosnian Serb nationalists would become increasingy radical. Regarding the 'othering' of Bosnian Muslims, for years already, nationalist intelectuals and Belgrade-based media had been veiculating "broad claims of generalised processes and obscure essentialist traits" insinuating the existence of an 'Islamic threat' (Maksić 2017:78). Against this backdrop, and with the SDA advocating for the preservation of Yugoslavia and opposing the independence of Slovenia and Croatia, SDS leaders began by portraying the Muslim people as "good natured and benign" (Maksić 2017:180), thus asserting the party's moderation and the coherence of their electoral platform. As Maksić highlights,"the Muslim national essence quickly changed from good natured to malicious"(2017:181), as the SDA's position evolved, from supporting a reformed Yugoslavia towards seeking independence, in the context of the dissolution of the SFRY.

Adopting a 'nation as discourse' approach to ethnic mobilisation among Bosnian Serbs, Maksić identifies the moment when "the Islamic threat frame suddenly emerged as one of the principal themes"(2017: 211) in SDS discourse. Following Alija Izetbegović's proposal to transform Yugoslavia into a confederal state, in February 1991 the SDA submitted to the Bosnian Assembly a proposal for the declaration of sovereignty, to which the SDS objected, leading the SDA to withdraw it. SDS activists nevertheless framed the proposal as amounting to "the formation of an Islamic republic"(Maksić 2017:215). From this moment on, the 'othering' of Bosnian Muslims became increasingly radical, fostering the "suspicion that behind all SDA policies was a Muslim desire for domination"(Maksić 2017:216). The past and the future were mobilised in this process, with the evocation of Islamic domination under Ottoman rule, Muslim collaboration with the Ustasha regime on the one hand, and predictions of Muslim demographic growth due to higher birthrates (Maksić 2017: 216) as evidence of the vulnerability of the Serb people in Bosnia.

Very soon after the general elections, the SDS began advocating for the 'cantonisation' of Bosnia-Herzegovina within Yugoslavia, pointing to Switzerland as the model to emulate (Gow 1997:81). The expression 'separation of peoples' seems to have been publicly articulated only when it became clear that the dissolution of Yugoslavia was inexorable, with the independence of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a probable outcome, forcing, Glaurdić (2009) argues, a shift from the initial "maximalist" goal of the President of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević, to dominate the whole of Bosnia – as happened already with Montenegro, Kosovo and Vojvodina – to more "reduced demands" implying the partition of the territory (Glaurdić 2009:93). The case of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina thus confirms Michael Mann's thesis that "murderous cleansing[7] is rarely the initial intent of the perpetrators", but "typically emerges as a kind of Plan C"(2005:7), after the failure of Plan A triggered a spiral of radicalisation, leading to an escalation that may involve decisions logically stemming from the ideology of the perpetrators, but also decisions contingent to the dynamics meanwhile set in motion. It is also the case, however, that the contours of this Plan C began to be unveiled much before the collapse of Plan A, as a form of pressure towards compliance. Thus to understand ethnic cleansing, we must place it in the evolving historical context from which it stemmed.

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7   Mann(2005) conceptualises ethnic cleansing as a spectrum of activities and processes, ranging from peaceful to violent, including assimilation on one end of the spectrum and genocide on the other end. His category of 'murderous cleansing' broadly corresponds to the narrower conceptualisation of ethnic cleansing, as defined, for instance, in the Bassiouni Report.

With Yugoslavia disintegrating, a sense of deep uncertainty became pervasive, setting the conditions for the liminal transformation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. With the SDA and the Bosnian HDZ leaning towards independence, a political conflict developed over the future of Bosnia-Herzegovina, in which the Bosnian Serb political leadership, which opposed the establishment of borders 'dividing' the Serb people, mobilised the population, not by openly instilling ethnic hatred, but through a highly successful appeal to affect (Maksić 2017). The tension between the coalition partners provided material for the reinterpretation of the past, which an efficient propaganda machine mobilised to instil fear, with Bosnian Serb leaders actively questioning the communist ideal of 'brotherhood and unity', and systematically but insidiously casting doubt over the behaviour and intentions of their political opponents and respective supporters. Such mobilisation, Maksić (2017) convincingly argues, undermined the principle of 'life in common' (*zajednički život*) that regulated everyday life in Bosnia-Herzegovina, instilling mistrust and damaging the bonds of solidarity between individuals across ethnic boundaries.

It was in this context, amidst growing tensions, with war raging in Croatia, and the prospects of Yugoslavia's survival weakening, that the 'separation of peoples' began to take shape. On the ground, the principle was implemented through ethno-territorial demarcation and the creation of paralel, exclusively Serb political structures. Regionalisation was the first step towards ethno-territorial demarcation. It consisted on the creation of associations of municipalities, bringing together municipalities where the SDS had won the local elections, which were later upgraded into Serbian Autonomous regions (*Srpski autonomski oblast*, SAO), the first of which, the SAO Romanija, was created in September 1991(Maksić 2017:225). Radovan Karadžić justified the initiative on the grounds that "At this moment, BiH is divided in the cultural, spiritual and economic sense, and this needs to assume territorial contours"(Maksić 2017:225).

The increasingly strained relations between the SDS and the SDA and HDZ reached a critical point in 15 October 1991, when the Bosnian Parliament finally approved the 'Memorandum on Sovereignty', opening up the possibility of a move towards independence, against the will of the SDS, with its leader, Radovan Karadžić warning, in a dramatic speech, that independence would ignite a civil war, and "*lead Bosnia and*

Herzegovina into hell and the Muslim nation perhaps to extinction" (Maksić 2017:226, citing TV footage). The SDS deputies walked out but were unable to prevent the declaration's approval. On 24 October, the SDS launched the Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia-Herzegovina, open to the participation of deputies of Serb nationality from other political parties, and which was to function in parallel with the Bosnian Parliament. Eventually, the SAOs would constitute the basis for the creation of the Serbian Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina (*Srpska republika Bosna I Hercegovina*), proclaimed by the Serb Assembly on 9 January 1992. At this point, partition on an ethnic basis had become the SDS's goal, for which it already created favourable 'facts on the ground'.

Fig. 1: The Serbian Autonomous Regions (map by 'Panonian', Wikimedia Commons)

Despite the early proposals for cantonisation, it is not clear precisely when the SDS's goal shifted from bringing the whole of Bosnia-Herzegovina into a state union with Serbia to

partition. Josip Glaurdić(2009; 2011) argues that until late in 1991 Slobodan Milošević and his Bosnian Serb allies "worked to secure the whole of BiH for the new Serbian state"(Glaurdić 2009: 93), using threats to co-opt the SDA leadership. It seems that the 'separation of peoples' first developed as a plan B, whose implementation was meant to secure the success of plan A. The framing of the plebescite on Bosnia's status, organised by the SDS and held in 9-10 November 1991, supports this hypothesis (Maksić 2017:228-230).

Two goals thus coexisted for a while: on the one hand the SDS advocated the preservation of Yugoslavia as a common state, regardless of Croatia and Slovenia's move for independence; and on the other hand, the party threatened, both in discourse and through the creation of parallel structures on the ground, to move towards secession, should their claims be left unanswered. The former goal implied a fundamentally reactive strategy, keeping what was already there, even though the *statu quo* was obviously untenable, whilst the latter involved an proactive strategy with the mobilisation of organisational and logistical resources on the ground.

The organisation, on 8-9 November 1991, of a plebiscite about the future of Bosnia-Herzegovina reveals how the two goals were brought together despite their contradictory implications. A tribute to the SDS's logistical capacity, the plebiscite took place in most of the Bosnian territory. In municipalities ruled by the SDS, the local authorities were in charge of organising it, while in the remaining territory it was held in private premises like restaurants and even militants' homes (Maksić 2017:228). Serbs received a blue ballot asking:

> "*Do you agree with the decision of the Assembly of the Serb People from October 24th that the Serb people should remain in the common state of Yugoslavia with Serbia, Montenegro, SAO Krajina, SAO Slavonia, Baranja and Western Smyrnium[both in Croatia, then occupied by Serb forces and run by the Croatian SDS], and others who declared the same?*"(Maksić 2017:228)

The idea behind the plebescite, and effort to organise it also where Serbs did not form a majority, was that wherever Serbs lived should be seen as a Serb territory, but the question itself implied that the implementation of the plebescite's decision might follow the precedent of the Croatian SAOs, at the time already in a war of secession against Croatia. Significantly, non-Serbs were ostensibly invited to participate in the plebescite, but asked to answer a different question. For non-Serbs, the ballot was yellow, and asked:

"Do you agree that Bosnia-Herzegovina remain in the joint state of Yugoslavia as an equal republic, with all others who choose so?"(Maksić 2017:228)

Regardless of the plebescite, the failure of the SDS 'reactive strategy' seeking to keep Bosnia-Herzegovina in Yugoslavia became evident when on 29 November 1991 the International Arbitration Commission led by Joseph Badinter(henceforth the Badinter Commussion) determined that Yugoslavia was in process of dissolution (Glaurdić 2011:260). According to Glaurdić, the Badinter Commission legal opinion was "a terrible surprise for Milošević and for many in the International Community"(2011:260), and represented a significant defeat for Serb nationalists.

Ethnic partition became thus the primary goal, mimetising the dynamics already in place in Croatia, where the Serb rebellion began in the Summer of 1990 had already escalated into full-blown war. Partitioning the country, however, required departing from the traditional nationalist view of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a Serb land, and abandoning part of the territory to the other constituent nations, the Croats and the Muslims (Hoare 2007: 27). Reaping the fruits of a radical 'othering' process (Maksić 2017:211.), 'separation' was presented by the SDS leadership as a basic premise for the establishment of peaceful interethnic relations, and set in contrast with the 'false coexistence' encompassed by the principle of 'life in common' (*zajednički život*). Speaking at the Assembly of the Serb People in December 1991, Nikola Koljević, at the time one of the members of Bosnia-Herzegovina's collegial Presidency, elaborated on the idea:

> "Peace requires secure foundations. Peace can be built through continuing pacification and separation, and not through a false coexistence (*lažno zajedništvo*). That is precisely what we, as your representatives have been advocating with the idea of a tripartite Bosnia and Herzegovina from the very start" (Donia, 2012: 49, citing Nikola Koljević at the 4th session of the Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 21 Dec 1991)

'Separation' stemmed from the conviction shared by SDS ideologues that in the past Serbs had generously but naively sacrificed their own national interest in supporting a multi-ethnic society(Hoare 2007:354), and was presented as a necessity imposed on the Serb people due to the treacherous character of the Croat and Muslim peoples(Maksić 2017: 231).The 'separation of peoples', it was becoming increasingly clear – as the Bosnian

government, backed by the SDA and HDZ, moved towards independence – should result in the creation of a homogenous ethnic state for the Bosnian Serbs. In 9 January 1992, eight weeks before the Bosnian independence referendum, the Serb Assembly declared the creation of the *Republic of the Serb People in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, thus pushing for the ethnic partition of the territory, albeit restraining from expressing the wish for secession.

The move would soon pay dividends. In January 1992 the Badinter Commission determined that Croatian and Bosnian Serbs did not have the right to self-determination in terms of a right to secession from their home republics (Opinion #2) and that republican borders were frontiers in terms of International Public Law (Opinion #3) (Check original document) (Glaurdić 2011: 287). This denied the possibility of international recognition to any attempt to unify with Serbia any areas under Serb control in Croatia and Bosnia. Declaring the SFRY in the process of dissolution, the Commission stipulated the conditions for international recognition of independence of the Yugoslav republics, recommending the realisation of an independence referendum in Bosnia-Herzegovina. With the Bosnian Serb leadership opposing such a move, one week before the referendum was to take place the international negotiators leading the diplomatic efforts to avoid war in Bosnia, Lord Carrington and the Ambassador José Cutileiro, presented their draft plan for Bosnia's constitutional reform. The plan accepted the ethnic principle for the reorganisation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, proposing the creation of three constituent units defined by the principle of ethnicity (Gow 1997:80), effectively adopting the 'cantonisation' model proposed by the SDS as a basis for negotiation. Evoking the idea of 'appeasement', Gow argues that "admitting the principle of ethnically determined territorial units was a cardinal mistakesince it bestowed approval on Serbian ambition and was in effect a charter for 'ethnic cleansing'."(1997:81).

Amidst ongoing international negotiations, the Bosnian referendum took place in 29 February and 1 march 1992, with a 64.4% participation rate, resulting in a 99.7 % support for Independence. The bulk of the Serb population boycotted it, under the instructions of the SDS. (Gow 1997:84). It took no more than five weeks until Bosnia-Herzegovina descended into war, in early April 1992.

With the war already ongoing, Radovan Karadžić announced in the Serb Assembly

the 'Six Strategic Goals for the Serb people in Bosnia-Herzegovina'. Presented as a requisite for statehood, 'separation of peoples' appeared as the fundamental goal, with the following five goals defined to give territorial expression to the homogenous Serb state[8].

> "The first such goal is separation from the other two national communities – separation of states. Separation from those who are our enemies and who have used every opportunity, especially in this century, to attack us, and who would continue with such practices if we were to stay together in the same state" (Radovan Karadžić, 16th Session of the Assembly of the Serb people in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 12 May 1992, page 11).

It is important to highlight that the goals of the Bosnian Serb leadership were not as clear cut and consensual at the time as they appear retrospectively (see also Malešević and Ó Dochartaigh 2018:311). The exchange, in the same session, between deputies and the President of the Assembly, Momčilo Krajšnik, provides an illustration to this point. Krajšnik implicitly acknowledged that this represented a departure from their earlier goal of keeping Bosnia-Herzegovina as a whole in a common state with Serbia, and urged deputies to put national interest above their own personal sense of belonging to particular places. With their sense of possibility heightened by their military superiority and initial success, deputies had to be brought back to the reality of constraints and costs involved in the creation of a Serb state in Bosnia-Herzegovina:

> "Have we finally decided to separate from the two remaining national communities? We can part from them if Bosnia-Herzegovina is to be torn into three parts. (…) That is why it would be good, dear gentlemen, to take care to leave enough space for division. (...) We just don't seem to be able to make a partition [in the sense of being unwilling to restrain their territorial claims]. Therefore, if we want to have a partition, Tuzla cannot end up as ours (…) We

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8   Announced in the 16th Session of the Assembly of the Serb people of 12 May 1992, the "Six Strategic Goals of the Serb People in Bosnia-Herzegovina" were published in the official gazette only in November 1993. They consisted in 1) "the state delineation from the other two national communities"; 2) " corridor between Semberija and Krajina"; 3) "establishment of a corridor in the area of the River Drina, relative to the elimination of the Drina as a border between the two Serb states"; 4) "establishment of a border in the rivers Una and Neretva; 5) "division of the city of Sarajevo into Serb and Muslim sectors and establishment in each sector of an effective state government"; and, 6) "access of Republika Srpska to the sea" (*Službeni glasnik Republike Srpske*, No 22, p. 866, 26/11/1993)

cannot get Zenica. Allow me, please. Why did we not discuss this earlier? Saying that whenever there were Serbs, it was Serbian territory, that represented the mobilisation of the entire Serbian people. We shall, in an organised manner, provide our people with a roof over their heads. Resettle them if need be, we shall not put them in a genocidal position" (Momčilo Krajšnik, 16th Session of the Assembly of the Serb people in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 12 May 1992, page 50).[9]

The proclamation of the Six Strategic Goals of the Serb people corresponded to the official validation of what was already taking place on the ground: ethnic cleansing on a massive scale, not as a by-product of fighting, but, as an essential element of the strategy towards the 'separation of peoples' and the creation of an ethnically homogenous territory contiguous to Serbia. At this time, the town of Zvornik, and many other settlements in the Drina Valley, were already being emptied of their Muslim populations, with thousands killed, and the ethnic cleansing of the municipality of Prijedor was about to begin[10].

Ethnic cleansing as policy and strategy:

In his study of the conduct of war by Serb forces, James Gow(2003) argues that "the committing of war crimes was the essence of the Serbian strategy in the war"(2003:3), with ethnic cleansing at the core of this strategy, given "the political aim [of] complete control over territory", which required the "use of largely unrestrained coercive violence to eliminate any potentially hostile population"(2003:118). Consistent with the findings of the Bassiouni Report, Gow's thesis has since been validated by numerous convictions at the ICTY, including those of the entire Republika Srpska leadership team: Radovan Karadžić,

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9   The transcript does not include the comments by deputies who interrupted Krajšnik, but it is fair to infer from his intervention as well as others in the same session, that there was considerable resistance from those who had to give up claims to their own home regions. Krajšnik set himself as an example, highlighting that his own home in the suburbs of Sarajevo would probably become part of "Muslimania", and added: "But I have no regrets. We must not put our individual goals before this goal"(RS Assembly 1992a:50).

10   In what regards the other strategic goals, fighting was already ongoing towards the creation of a corridor linking Semberija and the Bosnian Krajina, most of the Drina valley was already under control of Serb forces, and Sarajevo was already under siege.

President of Republika Srpska, Ratko Mladić, Commandant of the VRS, Momčilo Krajšnik, Assembly Speaker, and Biljana Plavšić, Vice-President. We should highlight, however, that whilst Gow made no clear distinction between the leadership of the Milošević regime and the Yugoslav Army, on the one hand, and the leadership of the Bosnian Serb party-state, the SDS, and the Army of Republika Srpska, assuming there was a unified strategy, the ICTY has failed to convict any officials from Serbia or the Yugoslav Army. As Ioannis Armakolas (2007:79) has noted, "most analysts have viewed *Republika Srpska* merely as a tool of territorial expansion and mask for the nationalist project to build a Greater Serbia, thereby failing to capture the constitutive effects of this statelet in the identities of the population residing there". Ten years on, the situation has hardly changed, in what regards academic research.

James Gow (2003) nevertheless offers a useful typification of the implementation of ethnic cleansing on the ground, which reveals the consistency of patterns in the distinct cases of Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Gow identifies four distinct phases through which the process of ethnic cleansing typically developed during the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia (2003:118):

- preparation and provocation;
- take-over and the use of force;
- establishment of concentration camps;
- and elimination through expulsion and execution.

Framing ethnic cleansing as "a function of state-building and state-consolidation policies", Emir Suljagić (2009:16) converges with Gow's typification, with two additional elements (or phases):

- the systematic concealment and/or contamination of evidence(2009:107);
- and the *post-facto* justification of criminal actions (2009:142-144)[11].

All the six elements were present in the case of Bijeljina, the location chosen for the present study. Before we go on to describe how this pattern applied in Bijeljina's particular

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11 Both Gow(2003) and Suljagić(2009) offer a thematic analysis of ethnic cleansing by Serb forces in the whole of the former Yugoslavia, involving three distinct wars, in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. Their focus is on Milošević regime, and they make no clear distinction between the direct actions of the Serbian regime and that of the Croatia and Bosnian SDS in the Croatian Serb and Bosnian Serb secessionist rebellions.

case, we need to provide the wider picture, correlating the process of ethnic cleansing with the development of the structures of Republika Srpska and the prospects for resolution of the armed conflict.

Within the pattern described by Gow (2003) and Suljagić (2009). there seems to have been some degree of variation in each particular location, resulting from a specific combination of three factors:

- the ideological zeal towards the implementation of the political goal of 'separation of peoples';

- strategic imperatives determining the elimination of imagined, potential or actual resistance (Gow 2003; Kostić and Dulić 2010);

- and the opening up of possibilities for the "fundamental reorganisation of a local political economy"(Toal and Dahlman 2011:116) through the disposession of the undesired population and the appropriation and redistribution of their assets (see also Akçam and Kurt 2015: Ch.7).

Before being expelled by Serb forces, victims were always plundered of their wealth and livelihoods. Their assets were used to fund the war effort, as much as to enrich the new ruling elite, but ordinary people were sometimes allowed to plunder whatever remained, so that ethnic cleansing also fostered a web of complicity between the autorities who planned and executed it and the larger in-group, a phenomenon that Slavenka Drakulić mentions as the 'tv set syndrome"(2004:26). But plunder was only one aspect of the wider process of disposession. Although the bulk of expulsions occurred in the earler stage of the war, the protracted presence of a subdued non-Serb population in some parts of the territory controled by Serb forces allowed for their prolonged exploitation, not only through plunder, but also as human resources coerced into contributing with their work to the Serb war effort (see Ch. 4). Given Republika Srpska's acute lack of human resources, a more prolonged presence of non-Serbs fulfilled important gaps, either through the continuation of their economic activities, subject to evidence of loyalty; through forced labour in the form of 'work duties'; and even through conscription in the Army of Republika Srpska. Thus ideological and strategic factors pushing towards mass expulsions were sometimes countered by the opportunity for a more prolonged exploitation of non-Serbs.

Ethnic cleansing developed across time in three different stages. Although it is difficult, and somehow arbitrarious to state exactly when one stage ended and another began, there are nevertheless specific connections with the wider political and military context in each stage. The first stage of ethnic cleansing corresponded with the initial military assault to the areas not yet under control of the SDS, and was particularly intense in areas with a Muslim majority that were deemed of special strategic value, specifically in eastern Bosnia along the River Drina (Podrinje region), in the Posavina region in the north (Bećirević 2014; Boltzmann 1994); and in municipality of Prijedor in the Bosnian Krajina, in the northwest (UNSC 1994: Annex IV; Wesselingh and Vaulerin 2005). At this stage, achieving a solid demographic majority was crucial in order to claim a territory as 'Serb', but eliminating potentially or effectively hostile populations was also a crucial concern. Serb forces responded with overwelming brutality to any form of resistance on the ground, as was the case after the take-over of the municipality Prijedor[12]. Even where the local population showed no resistance and instead offered their alliegence, as was the case in the village of Kozluk, in Zvornik municipality, the proximity to front lines was enough of a motive to justify the total removal of non-Serbs(Toal and Dahlman 2011:116).

The second stage began once the basic state structures were in place, and corresponded with the beginning of diplomatic negotiations towards a peace settlement, with initial International Conference for the Former Yugoslavia, with took place in London on 26 August 1992. This stage was essentially about consolidating already established Serb majorities in the territory, and involved both the expulsion of non-Serbs and the resettlement of Serbs displaced from areas beyond the control of the Army of Republika Srpska (Helsinki Watch 1993; Humanitarian law Fund 1993; 1993a;1994; Amnesty 1994).

It was during the last stage of the process of ethnic cleansing that the Army of Republika Srpska took over of the enclaves of Srebrenica and Žepa in the Podrinje region, which had been, since March 1993, under the protection of the UNPROFOR peacekeeping mission, after the UN Security Council declared them 'safe areas'. After the take over of Srebrenica, Bosnian Serb forced killed than eight thousand men and boys, in the worst episode of mass atrocity during the war, and the only one which has been

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12 This is not to say that the ethnic cleansing of the Prijedor municipality was a response or a retaliation to the episodes of armed resistance by non-Serbs. According to the *Prijedor Report* (UNSG 1994a: Annex IV) the plans towards the take-over of the municipality by Serb forces and subsequent mass imprisonment and expulsion of the non-Serb population were drawn at least six months in advance.

recognised as an instance of genocide by international courts.

The conquest of the enclaves of Srebrenica and Žepa stand out as exceptional victories in a stage of that war corresponding to the reversal of fortunes of the Bosnian Serb Army. Serb forces became the target of NATO air strikes, and suffered significant territorial losses against the combined forces of the Bosnian government (ARBiH), the Bosnian Croat army (HVO) and the Croatian army (Burg and Shoup 1999:350; Hoare 2014:527; Sivac-Bryant 2016:51). This reversal of fortunes would be a crucial factor pushing the Serbian leadership of Slobodan Milošević, fearing for new international sanctions and the collapse of the Army of Republika Srpska, to negotiate, in the name of the Bosnian Serb leadership, a peace settlement, which was eventually reached in November 1995 after negotiations helf in in a US military base in Dayton, Ohio (Burg and Shoup 1999:407; Holbrook 1998; Silber and Little 1996).

The beginning of the war marked the point of no return to the old structures and the old social order, but the new order was, at best, embryonic. Along with the consolidation of territorial gains, the absolute priority was to create the basic structures to support the bid for statehood. Besides the Assembly itself, the only state institution already established at this point was the Ministry of Interior (MUP), formed on 1 April (or 31 March?) 1992, the same day of the take-over of Bijeljina by Arkan's forces. The Army of the Serb People in Bosnia-Herzegovina was officially created on 12 May, in the same Assembly Session analysed above, and the basic legislation and government structures would soon follow. Over the following months, until the end of Summer, the SDS leadership would develop the matrix and the essential structures of what was to become Republika Srpska.

There was a great sense of urgency, induced by the conviction that the war might be short due to the weakness of the Bosnian government (Burg and Shoup 1999:130), and that the international environment was favourable to the partition of Bosnia, with international peace negotiators accepting the principle of division of the territory on an ethnic basis (Glaurdić 2011:290; Burg and Shoup 1999:108). The transcripts of the Assembly of the Serbian People in Bosnia-Herzegovina over this period offer us some level of insight into the mood of the Bosnian Serb nationalist elite (see Donia 2012). Their

agency was crucial in bringing about the liminal condition in which the whole of Bosnia-Herzegovina was now immersed. The tone of the discussions and the direction of the decisions taken suggests how the the dynamics of liminality affected also the SDS leadership. The uncertainty that characterises moments of radical transformation fostered, among deputies, a heightened sense of possibility fuelled by early success, military as well as diplomatic, while the danger that violent conflict always entails seemed, in this early stage of the war, almost like an afterthought, given the overwhelming asymmetry of military might between Serb forces and their opponents.

By August 1992 all the essential structures for state-building were in place, and the Bosnian Serb Army controlled close to 70% of the Bosnian territory. But this apparent success was countered by the realisation that the war might drag on, due to the persisting difficulty in achieving the six strategic goals:

- The attempt to divide Sarajevo in early May had failed;
- in Mostar, the JNA/VRS, which had besieged and shelled the city since the beginning of the war, was forced to withdraw in mid-June 1992, after intense resistance by local Muslims an Croats, organised around the Croatian Defence Council (HVO: Hrvatsko vijeće odbrane) (CIA 2002, Vol. I, p.154), jeopardising the trategic goal of creating a border on the River Neretva, that crosses the city;
- the goal of establishing a defensible corridor linking Semberija in the north-east to the Bosnian Krajina in the north-west of Bosnia, was successful, but required a sustained effort, and this theatre remained a potential choking point;

- and in the region of the Drina valley three Muslim enclaves, Srebrenica, Žepa, and Goražde resisted the onslaught of the Serb forces.

Already in July, the Serb leadership was forced to declare the general mobilisation of men of military age, a measure that they were aware to be unpopular and likely to be met with resistance. In the meantime, the Bosnian Serb authorities began making moves to transfer the parallel structures created by the SDS before the war into the new state apparatus, which included bringing paramilitary groups under unified control under the new army, in a move to centralise power and (Nielsen 2011:110).

It was at this point that the Serb Assembly moved to change the name of their para-

state, in a session dedicated to the definition of state symbols, including also the anthem, coat of arms, and official language. The urgency in defining the symbolic dimension of statehood seems to have been justified by the beginning of the International Conference for the Former Yugoslavia, in London two weeks later (26 August 1992). Deputies proposed and discussed half a dozen names, reaching a consensus when one of the deputies proposed to simply drop the name Bosnia-Herzegovina from the existing name of 'Serb Republic in Bosnia-Herzegovina', a proposal ostensibly justified with the argument that "*Bosnia is now another country*" (RS Assembly 1992b:34). I should stress the importance of this decision. The introduction of the name 'Republika Srpska' signalled the definitive shift from the goal of defending the Serb people in Bosnia-Herzegovina from the threat of 'extremists', to the creation of a new homeland for the Bosnian Serbs. The creation of Republika Srpska as the homeland of Bosnian Serbs required to an important extent the abandonment of previous forms of attachment, sense of belonging to place, and regional identities. The adoption of the name 'Republika Srpska' marked the definitive departure from the traditional view of Bosnia-Herzegovina as the homeland of Bosnian Serbs (Garde 2004:218).

Embittered – despite controlling 70% of Bosnia's territory (Klemenčić 1994:46) – by the resistance Serb forces were facing on the ground (Hoare 2004:70-73), and with the reputation of their cause in international public opinion damaged by the discovery by foreign journalists of concentration camps with conditions reminiscent of the Second World War Nazi camps (Gutman1993; Campbell 1999), from then on Bosnian Serb leaders referred to Bosnia-Herzegovina only as 'former Bosnia' (*bivša Bosna*) or 'so-called Bosnia' (*takozvana Bosna*), as if Bosnia no longer existed. This was a statement against the shared past, which corresponded to the culmination of the 'othering process' that had begun two years earlier with the portrayal of Muslims as good neighbours and essentially 'good natured' (Maksić 2017:181). Whilst on the ground cultural heritage pertaining to Islam and Catholicism, and to the historical presence of Muslims and Croats was being destroyed (Riedlemeyer 2002; Walasek 2015), Bosnian Serb leaders systematically degraded Bosnian Muslim identity in public statements, rejecting the idea that they formed a proper nation. Karadžić and Mladić began referring to them as 'Turks' (Maksić 2017: 246), thus as alien usurpers and oppressors; and Vice-President Biljana Plavšić mobilised her authority as a geneticist and biology professor, to add an eugenistic overtone to the widespread belief,

among Serb nationalists, that Muslims were in fact the descendants of Serbs who converted into Islam, reportedly insinuating that "it was genetically deformed material that embraced Islam"(*Svet*, 6/09/1993, cited by Inić1997; see also Subotić 2012).

It was also around this time, with the expulsion of non-Serbs from the Drina Valley and the Prijedor area largely concluded, that the idea that Republika Srpska should include no more than five percent of non-Serbs began to be publicly articulated (Donia 2012:39). In the earlier phase, between April and August 1992, the question of non-Serbs living in majority Serb areas safely under SDS control since the 1990 elections, had been left open, to be tackled by the local SDS structures. The importance of the local expression of ideological factors in determining the particular ways this question was dealt with is clear. On the one hand, in places like the Romanija region, a rural area dotted with small towns, local SDS activists saw the expulsion of non-Serbs, overwhelmingly Muslim, as a priority (Vuksanović 2004). On the other hand, significant numbers of non-Serbs continued to live in urban centres like Trebinje (Helsinki Watch 1994, Bijeljina (Humanitarian Law Fund 1993; 1993a; Amnesty 1994; HR W2000) and Banja Luka (Galijaš 2009; Humanitarian Law Fund 1993). In this liminal stage of transformation of Serb identity, they became a source of pollution threatening the purity of Serb identity, but remained useful as human resources to be exploited as part of the war effort (see Ch.5). Their fate was eventually determined by the prospect of a peace settlement, which motivated the SDS party-state to create 'facts on the ground' so as to make it as hard as possible to reverse in peacetime what had been achieved during the war; the ethnic homogeneisation of the territory of Republika Srpska.

3.2 The city of Bijeljina: historical development and ethnic relations

Strategically located on the border with Serbia, along the corridor linking to northwest Bosnia and the 'Republic of the Serbian Krajina' – the Serb held territories in Croatia – the city of Bijeljina was the first to be militarily taken over by Serb forces, on 1 April 1992. It was also the stage of the first episode of mass atrocity on Bosnian territory after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. So as to provide a contextual background for the following chapters, in this section I will briefly describe Bijeljina's historical development until the eve

of the war, and its urban environment, as conveyed to me by some of my informants, before proceding to describe the massacre of Bijeljina on 1-3 April 1992.

Bijeljina through History

Now the second largest city in Republika Srpska, and the fifth in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bijeljina's historical development was mostly determined by two factors: its strategic position as a border town; and the quality of the land in the plain of Semberija. The two factors, which throughout history influenced successive waves of migration, were also decisive in shaping the process of ethnic cleansing in 1992-1995.

References to Bijeljina date as far back as the 15[13]th century; in 1521, Bijeljina came under Ottoman rule, and was Islamised over the following three decades. The first mosque, named after the ruling Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent opened in 1566, and in 1580 Bijeljina gained the status of 'kasaba', which under Ottomon law defined it as an urban settlement. A long period of peace followed, but as the Ottoman Empire began reciding, in 1688 the town was occupied by the Austrian Empire, until 1699. A second period of occupation occurred between 1716 and 1739, when it returned to Ottoman rule. In 1716, the Austrian offensive resulted in the destruction of Bijeljina, which the Austrians began rebuilding a few years later. It was at this time, according to the historian Mustafa Grabčanović (2006:35), that the first Orthodox Christian families began settling in town, where some Muslim families who had survived the 1716 destruction still lived. After Bijeljina returned once again to Ottoman rule, several Muslim families also ressetled there, coming from Hungary (Grabčanović (2006:36). Thanks to the fertility of the land, Grabčanović (2006:37) notes, "the town progressively became known as one of the strongest centres of the feudal aristocracy in Bosnia".

The dawn of the Serbian state in the 19th century had a strong impact in Semberija. The emerging model of the nation-state influenced the crystallisation of difference as based on ethnicity or nationality, where before they were based on religion, under the Ottoman millet system, and on class (see Hoare 2007: 50-76; Bieber 2000). In Semberija, the

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13   This historical background is based mostly on the historian Mustafa Grabčanović (2006) posthumous
        book, *Bijeljina I bijeljinci*. The author died in 1990.

overwhelming majority of peasants were Orthodox Christians, while Muslims comprised the bulk of the urban population, including wealthy land owners, but also craftsmen. During the Serbian Uprisings of 1804-1813, and 1815-1817, a number of local villagers became engaged on the Serbian side, while Ottoman forces used Bijeljina as a bridgehead to fight the uprising, mobilising also local Muslims (Grabčanović 2006:43). The same trend occurred during the 1875-1878 Bosnian Uprising, which resulted in the occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary, following the 1878 Congress of Berlin.

The 19th Century witnessed significant population movements in Semberija. Even before the Austrian occupation, the development of the town began attracting Christians and Muslims from other regions of Bosnia, Serbia, and Montenegro (Grabčanović 1986) and, from the mid-century onwards, also Sefardic Jews, arriving via Skopje and Sarajevo (Lukić 2012:98). Most significant in terms of numbers was the mass resettlement in Semberija of Muslims from Serbia, mostly in two waves, the first in 1833, and the second in 1868. They resettled mostly in the village of Janja, which thus grew exponentially (Nurkić 2010:30-32; Grabčanović 2006:41), and developed as a separate community, with its own administration. With Austrian rule, there was a significant exodus of Bosnian Muslims towards Anatolia, offset by the arrival of Germans, Slovaks, Hungarians and Askenazi Jews, adding to Bijeljina's diversity, both in ethnic terms and in social-economic terms (Grabčanović 2006:46). The proportion of Serbs in town also grew, benefiting from the expansion of education, with the opening of new schools, and the employment opportunities it opened up. Urbanism greatly developed during Austrian rule, with Bijeljina's population expanding, and the construction of modern infrastructure; schools; churches catering for the different Christian confessions, Orthodoxes, Catholics, Lutherans, and Baptists; a sinagogue and new mosques (Grabčanović 2006). There was also an explosion of cultural activism, with the foundation of cultural societies, usually on the basis of ethnicity (Trbić 2015). Thus Bijeljina gained a somehow cosmopolitan character, while the population developed a sense of ethnicity on the basis of religious distinction (Bieber 2000:21). But much of the ethnic and religious diversity that characterised Bijeljina since the ninetheen century was destroyed in the Second World War, during which Bijeljina's Jews were arrested and sent to extermination camps (Grabčanović 2006), and the German community of Franz Josefsfeld (now called Novo Selo) was forcefully transferred by the Nazis to colonise their eastern 'lebensraum' in occupied Poland; most of the few Germans

that remained were executed by the partisans in 1945 after the liberation (Komisija za očuvanje nacionalnih spomenika 2014:12).

Among Muslims, the emergence of ethnicity as a factor of identity created a dilemma as, on the one hand, Muslim identity was traditionally based on the feeling of belonging to a universal community of believers, the *umma*; and on the other hand Bosnian Muslims shared with the other confessions a sense of belonging to Bosnia-Herzegovina as a discrete territory. Nineteenth century Serbian and Croatian nationalists were keen to 'recruit' the Bosnian Muslims into their respective nations (Hajdarpašić 2015:121), while the Austrian occupiers developed a nationhood policy towards the development of an all-encompassing notion of Bosnian national identity known as 'Bošnjaštvo' (*Bosnianism*[14]). Based a common sense of belonging, the idea of 'Bošnjaštvo' sought to transcend religious differences, but it was abandoned around 1909, some twenty years after it first emerged, and one year after Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina (see Imamović 1997:373-383; Bougarel 2008: 4).

The political circumstances introduced an element of liminality into Bosnian Muslim identity. In his study of nationalism in 19th century Bosnia, Edin Hajdarpašić (2015:16) describes the Serb nationalist perspective over Bosnian Muslims as that of a "*(br)other*", "neither brother nor other", capturing with this game of words the incongruence of a perspective which simultaneously portrayed Muslims in 'othering' terms, and recognised a certain closeness, an intimacy based on largely shared lived experiences. Many Bosnian Muslims responded to the loss of their priviledged position by emigrating to Anatolia, but after some initial resistance, the Bosnian Muslim elite accepted Austrian rule, and accommodated themselves to it, thus seeking shelter in a large multinational empire against the pressure of the nation-state model. The collapse of the Austrian-Hungarian empire in the end of the First World War, and the creation of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes led, according to Xavier Bougarel (2003:102) to strong pressures towards the assimilation of Bosnian Muslims either to the Serbian or to the Croatian nation. This coincided with an identity crisis among the Muslim elite, deepened a few years later with the abolition of the Caliphate, in 1924 (see Karić 2002). Among secularised

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14 As translated by Xavier Bougarel (2003:103).

Muslims, this pressure resulted in a division between pro-Serb and pro-Croat factions (Bougarel 2003:102), but the Bosnian Muslim elite nevertheless found in the idea of Yugoslavism a way of countering this dual pressure. The approach of its main political party, the Yugoslav Muslim Organisation (JMO: *Jugoslovenska muslimanska organizacija*), towards the national question was marked, Bougarel (2003:103) argues, by "tactical Yugoslavism and a lack of national determination as two complementary ways of "preserving a Bosnian Muslim identity". Its political strategy was thus one of "accomodation with the new order" (Hoare 2007:107) given their vulnerable position, so as to preserve some level of autonomy for Bosnia-Herzegovina.

A crucial aspect in the Muslims' vulnerability was the pressure from Serb peasants towards agrarian reform. This pressure was keenly felt in Bijeljina, where the first Serb forces entering town after the collapse of the Austrian-Hungarian army "were received as liberators", Grabčanović(2006:50) notes, "but only by the Orthodox population". The prospect of agrarian reform led to great unrest in Semberija, with many episodes of violence in Semberija, where the peasants now refused to pay their landlords, and often attacked them and their property, spreading fear among Muslims (Užičanin 2012:180), both among wealthy landowners and modest farmers. The agrarian reform resulted, Hoare argues (2007:108) "in a massive transfer of economic power away from the Muslims and in favour of the Serbs". Grabčanović notes, however, that in Semberija the expectations of prosperity of the Serb peasants quickly turned into disappointment (2006:52-53). The difficult economic conditions of the inter-war period severely affected Semberija's peasantry, while Bijeljina prospered as a commercial centre, dealing with agricultural produce, above all cereals. This led to the disinfranchisement of the peasantry from the regime, and, Grabčanović argues, was an important factor in the sucess of the Communist party in the region, and in the mobilisation towards the partisan movement in the Second World War. It wasn't only the peasant masses that became alienated from the interwar regime. The Bosnian Muslim elite abandoned the tactical commitment to Yugoslavism in 1939, when the Cvetković-Maček Agreement[15] handed parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina to the newly created Croatian *banovina*. Leaving behind pro-Serb or pro-Croat leanings, the Muslim elite went on to found the Movement for the Autonomy of Bosnia-Herzegovina;

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15 Named after the Prime-Minister of Yugoslavia Dragiša Cvetković and the leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, Vlado Maček, the Agreement created a Croatian autonomous territory, named banovina, which was to include part of Bosnia-Herzegovina (Hoare 2007:131)

Bougarel(2003:104) marks this initiative as "the first organised manifestation of a nascent Muslim nationalism".

During the Second World War, after Bosnia-Herzegovina became part of the fascist 'Independent State of Croatia', the Ustasha regime sought to coopt Bosnian Muslims, whilst engaging in a genocidal persecution of Serbs, Jews and Roma. In Bijeljina, "all notable Serbs, especially priests and well-known patriots were arrested and deported", (Grabčanović 2006:58), which pushed many people to join the Uprising of 27th July 1941, which marked the beginning of the partisan movement. The Ustasha regime and the German occupiers, meanwhile, were able to mobilise part of the Muslim elite to collaborate. The most notorious aspect of this collaboration, which became imprinted in the collective memory of the Second World War in Bosnia, was the creation, in 1943, of the 13th SS Volunteer Bosnian-Herzegovinian Division (Croatia), known as 'Handžar' division (lit. sabre) (see Hoare 2013:53-54). The Handžar division was deployed in the operation to take back Bijeljina, in April 1944, after the partisans first liberated the city in 25 September 1943 (Grabčanović 2006:67).

While during the interwar period, Bijeljina's Muslims seemed to lean towards Serb identity[16], the local elite collaborated with the Ustasha in the administration. Collaboration was motivated, Hoare (2013) argues, by the autonomist stance of the Bosnian Muslim elite. The will to preserve Bosnia's autonomy was explicit in the Bijeljina Resolution of 2 December 1941, in which, following similar initiatives in other cities[17], an assembly of seventy five local Muslim notables, including the leader of the council, Muratbeg Pašić, and the local Imams, approved and undersigned a document demanding the Ustasha regime to stop the persecution and bloodshed against Serbs (Grabčanović 1989; Hoare 2013:44-45), which was then sent to the leader of the Independent State of Croatia, Ante Pavelić. The persecution of Serbs by the Ustasha had started immediately after the occupation, with the arrest and deportation of "all respected (viđeni) Serbs, especially priests and notable patriots (rodoljubi)" (Grabčanović 2006:58). Grabčanović notes the timing of the Resolution, describing it as a reaction to the Chetnik massacre of the Muslim inhabitants of the village of Koraj, in the Mount Majevica, and in opposition to possible

16 As inferred by the creation, in 1905 of a local section of the Muslim cultural society *Gajret*(Trbić 2015), which Bougarel (2003:103) and Hoare (2013: 41 refer to be pro-Serb; the pro-Croat counterpart *Narodna uzaladnica*, was not present in Bijeljina, where Croat presence was not significant.
17 These were Prijedor (23/09/1941); Sarajevo(12/10/1941), Mostar(21/10/1941), Banja Luka(12/11/1941), and Tuzla(11/12/1941).

reprisals against the Serb population by Ustasha forces; indeed, Grabčanović adds, Pavelić's commisioner for Bosnia-Herzegovina, the pro-Croat Muslim politician Hakija Hadžić was pushing for such reprisals, proposing the execution of ten Serbs for each Muslim killed (Grabčanović 2006: 65; see also Hoare 2013: 43). Grabčanović attributes the fact that the local Orthodox church was spared destruction to Muslim notables' opposition; the Sinagogue, however, was razed to the ground. Muslim notables were particularly successful in protecting the community of nominally Muslim Roma, known at the time as 'white gipsies', which the Ustasha regime had targetted for extermination (Hoare 2013:45). Thanks to it Bijeljina retained a significant Roma population, considered to be one of the largest in Yugoslavia; but the small Jewish community was completely wiped out, and very little trace of them was left.

The Partisans had a solid base in the region, attracting to its ranks not only Serb peasants, but also Muslims, mostly but not exclusively from the working class. The history of the Partisan movement in Semberija was marked by the attempts, led by Rodoljub Čolaković and Dr. Vojislav Kecmanović 'Đedo' to bring together Chetniks and partisans (Hoare 2006: 113; Grabčanović 2006:230). The two movements initially cooperated, to more effectively fight the Ustasha (Grabčanović 2006:59), but this came to an abrupt end when Chetnik forces attacked the First Majevička partisan division in Mount Majevica, on 20 February 1942, in which two of the most prominent local partisan leaders, Fadil Jahić 'Španac' and Ivan Marković 'Irac' were killed (Grabčanović 2006:59). The partisans and the Chetniks fought each other in an intense civil war, whose legacy many of my informants during fieldwork described as enduring up until the present day (see also Ch. 3). After the partisans liberated the city in 1943, local Chetnik forces actively collaborated with the German Army to take the city back. Bijeljina was finally liberated in 25 September 1944; Čolaković became the first prime-minister of the newly-created People's Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kecmanović 'Đedo' the first President of the Bosnian Presidency (Hoare 2007:317).

Post-war Bijeljina quickly recovered its prosperity, and the city grew, in line with the wider urbanisation process taking place in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The region greatly developed, due, on the one hand, to advances in agriculture towards greater productivity,

and the introduction of new species of vegetables; and, on the other hand, to industrialisation (see Grabčanović 2006:77-130). As the urbanisation process gained pace, the proportion of Serbs from the surrounding villages moving to Bijeljina increased further; the influx of rural population also included Muslims from other regions, especially the Drina valley, as many villages were flooded due to the construction of a large dam further south. Bijeljina's prosperity also attracted a number of Albanians from Kosovo, who immigrated to the region.

The general sense of optimism that characterised the post-war stimulated the flourishing of a distinctively urban environment, marked by easy access to culture. The relative proximity with the cities of Belgrade and Novi Sad in Serbia countered a certain provinciality, while the integration between rural Semberija and urban Bijeljina gave its residents a confortable quality of life. Many families retained some connection with the surrounding villages, and industrialisation, which generated thousands of jobs, brought to town workers from the villages every day, thus reinforcing the complementarity between rural and urban life.

My informants remember a town where, before 1992, it was pleasant to live, and where ethnicity was not a salient factor of identity. While such memories are tinged with a certain level of nostalgia, this portrayal appears to be consensual, and is in line with the wider characterisation of life in Bosnian cities during communist rule (see Gagnon 2004).

Marriage between persons pertaining to different religions and ethnic groups – so called mixed marriages – were common, as secularisation reduced the significance of religion based differences. Among my informants four who were in mixed marriages. One was a young couple, one a couple already in their early seventies, and two were in their fifties. While the young couple paid a heavy price for their relationship, when they became a couple a few years ago – they were largely ostracised by their respective families – nothing of the sort happened to any of the other couples when they married decades ago.

Regardless of the secular character of the communist regime, religion maintained an important role in the Bosnian traditions of 'life in common'. The commemorative calendars of each confession offered an opportunity for expressions of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Thus, one of my informants noted, the feast of the Orthodox saint Pantelejmon – Pantelino, on 9 August was the occasion of Bijeljina's annual feast, even

though the town had a Muslim majority[18]:

> "*It is important that I tell you – S*anela, another of my informants in a mixed marriage, told me – *that even before the war Bijeljina had its slava, Pantelino, on 9 August. It was our tradition, it didn't matter that the majority of the inhabitants were Muslims; we all went out, without any distinction. People got together, they mixed, and there were lots of mixed couples; we acted as kumovi to each other, members of one group and the other. And the youth got together. In the korzo you couldn't feel any tension, national, etc*"[19]

Another important occasion was the celebration of Christmas according to the Catholic calendar. The Catholic community in Bijeljina was small, perhaps no more than one thousand people, but ethnically diverse, with Croats, Albanians, a few Hungarians and Germans and there was only one church, built in the 19th century by Hungarians. But Christmas was nevertheless an important ritual in the tradition of 'life in common':

> "It was a big event – Saša Pazarac told me – I told you my mother was a catholic. The church was full, and the courtyard, and the street outside. And in the front row, there was the Imams and the Orthodox priests. Many non-Catholics, including atheists, attended the *ponoćka* (the Midnight Mass on 25th December)"[20]

The relative proximity to Belgrade generated a great deal of attraction. Political events in Serbian territory never failed to engage local people in Semberija, from the Serbian uprisings in the 19th century to the rise and fall of Milošević in the late 20th century. The dynamism of social and cultural life was a magnet to the most educated throughout the generations. But despite this attraction, Semberians retained a distinctive sense of regional identity, beyond ethnicity, often describing themselves as 'mild people' (*blagi*). The perception of the possibility of a good life there contributed to a particular sense of attachment, even when, since the early 1980s, the effects of economic crisis and, later,

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18 This was in line with a tradition of syncretism in Bosnian Islam, which incorporated many elements of the people's pre-Islamic heritage. certain Christian holidays were traditionally celebrated by rural Muslim communities, since the Islamic calendar is unsuitable to mark the passage of the seasons, given that it is a lunar, rather than solar calendar (Lockwood 1975; Hadžijahić 1978; Bringa 1995:189-195)

19 Interviewed in June 2014

20 Interviewed in September 2014

political turmoil, became harder to ignore.

Bijeljina after communism, 1990-1992

In 1990, when Bosnia abandoned the single party system, the Serb Democratic Party (Srpska Demokratska Stranka:SDS) won the elections and came to dominate Semberija, where Serbs comprised an absolute majority. The party was strongly implanted in Semberija, where local Serbs had previously founded their own party, the Party for Democratic Unity in May 1990 (Simić 2013:1), two months before the creation of the SDS. The party was then absorbed by the SDS, but local politicians retained their sense of autonomy, aware as they were of representing an important asset to the Serb nationalist cause in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

My informants recalled how they noticed that the dynamics was changing, with regard to inter-ethnic relations, in the eve of the 1990 elections, while previously individuals' ethnic identity was not an important issue in social relations. Ethnicity seems to have suddenly become salient, as the main political parties, the SDA and the SDS (Croats being in very small number, the HDZ played no role in Semberija) sucessfully mobilised a politicised sense of ethnicity (see Maksić 2017). Avoiding confrontations, the two parties presented themselves as like-minded in the goal of 'destroying communism' (srušiti komunizam). When the elections gave the SDS absolute control over local government, the party gave SDA members a few posts in the local administration (Simić 2013:2), as part of an understanding between both parties to work together. As the general environment deteriorated in Bosnia-Herzegovina, tensions began to arise in Bijeljina. SDS activists blame the SDA, and Muslims more generally for this, evoking the case of the strike at the metal factory Mensur Mujkić (renamed Elvako), and the fact that once the war in Croatia started, many Muslims refused the JNA mobilisation orders, or later abandoned their units (see the Witness statements of Cvijetin Simić (2013) and Svetozar Mihajlović (2013) at the ICTY trial of Radovan Karadžić, which both attended as defence witnesses).

The newspaper 'Semberske novine', which during this period maintained an independent editorial line, offers a few glimpses of how the environment was changing. An issue that seems to have caused great concern was that of 'regionalisation' (e.g. Vučković

1991) as the SDS moved to create a 'community of municipalities' bringing together Bijeljina, Ugljevik and Lopare, and which corresponded to the party's tactic of creating paralel structures on the ground (see Maksić 2017:139). On 19 September 1991 this community of municipalities became the Serbian Autonomous Region (SAO: *Srpski autonomski oblast*) of Northeast Bosnia (later renamed SAO Semberija and Majevica), stretching southwards from the plains of Semberija along the river Drina and to the west towards the Majevica mountain range. The SDA, in turn, reacted by demanding a referendum to create a separate municipality (*opština*) covering the town of Bijeljina and Janja, where Muslims formed a majority (Nikolić 1991b). Both political parties, thus, were fully invested in the ethnicisation of the territory, at a time when the war in Croatia was already in full swing.

In formal interviews, I always asked when was it that they first felt the environment was changing, and when did they realise, if they ever did, that there was going to be a war. Usually, my respondents were unable to pinpoint one particular moment, noting instead that people were changing, that ethnicity had become salient and that mistrust was insidiously setting in.

As for whether there was going to be a war, a few of my respondents stated that they clearly saw what was coming, and decided to leave the country, or to send their sons away, bearing in mind that since the beginning of the war in Croatia the JNA and the local autorities were drafting men of military age to join the war effort. This was the case with Branko Todorović, the President of the Helsinki Committee:

> "I could see it coming, and I started telling people about my fears – he worked
> as a teacher then – and nobody seemed to take me seriously"

Todorović left Bosnia before the war. He was engaged in civic activism throughout the war years, and returned to Bijeljina in 1996 to establish, along with Duško Kondor and Saša Pazarac – neither of whom had participated in the military – the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Republika Srpska.

Most, however, reported how they were caught in a state of denial and refused to consider such a possibility. Saša Pazarac was particularly emphatic:

> "*We could hear the explosions in Vukovar, and feel the earth trembling when JNA bombed* [the

Croatian town of Vukovar, located 80 km North of Bijeljina, was practically razed to the ground as the besieging JNA bombed it; its destruction was retrospectively seen as a warning of things to come in Bosnia]. *And still, we refused to believe*"

Me: "*When did you think there was going to be a war?*"

Saša: "*Never. I could see things we're not going well, but I never thought there was going to be a war*"

Eventually, rumours began to spread in Bijeljina about armed militias being formed, adding to the tensions. Such rumours found their way into the Serbian media, some of my informants pointed out, referring in specific to the case of the Belgrade newspaper *Politika ekspres*, which, they said, published an article claiming that a new 'Handžar division' of Islamic fundamentalists was being formed in Semberija[21]. Idris Hujdurović, a partisan veteran whose father had been executed by the Ustasha regime, described to me how he brought the subject to discussion in a meeting of the local SUBNOR[22], the veterans' association:

"I stood up and said: 'we are hearing these rumours about a new Handžar division. As veterans of the NOB, is is our duty to investigate these rumours. I would like to propose that the SUBNOR creates a commission to investigate this'. But the Serb veterans remained in silence."

Hujdurović thus realised then how far nationalism had already penetrated[23]. Once the local media outlets, the newspaper 'Semberske novine' and Radio Bijeljina, were brought into the control of the SDS in February 1992, similar rumours gained much wider resonance. The new director, Pero Simić, is said to have twice interviewed the Serbian warlord Željko Ražnatović, known as 'Arkan', who became notorious for the involvement of his paramilitary unit, the 'Serbian Volunteer Guard' (*Srpska dobrovoljačka garda*) in the war in Croatia (see ICTY 2016:233-5; Čolović 2000; Thomas 1999:94-95). Arkan's visits to Bijeljina, some informants said, caused apprehension even among those who refused to believe anything bad could happen.

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21 As referred in interviews and informal conversations.
22 SUBNOR is the acronym of Savez udruženja boraca Narodnooslobodilačkog rata, literally the Council of Fighters of the People's Liberation War.
23 Interview, November 2014

The military takeover, April 1992

Bijeljina was the first town to be taken over by Serb military forces, on the 1st of April 1992, one week before the events in Sarajevo that came to define the beginning of the Bosnian war. Bijeljina then became a bridgehead to military expansion towards southeast Bosnia through the Drina Valley, as well as to the attack against the town of Brcko and the 'Operation corridor', which connected Semberija and eastern Bosnia to Serb-controlled territory in the Bosnian Krajina region, in the northwest of Bosnia (CIA 2002:140; 145). Relatively far from the front lines, and just a few kilometres from Serbia, Bijeljina became the major centre of Republika Srpska's wartime economy, a safe haven to Serb refugees displaced from other areas, and an important supplier of personnel for the army.

The take-over of Bijeljina represented the prelude to the Bosnian war. Action was triggered by an incident that occurred in the town's centre on the 31st of March, between activists of the SDA and members of the Chetnik Movement, the paramilitary force of the Serb Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka*: SRS). I have heard the story from different sources with very little variation, and some of its participants have told it themselves at the trials of Slobodan Milošević Vojislav Šešelj, and Radovan Karadžić, among others, at the ICTY. On Tito's Street (now Karadjordje street), near the central bus station, there were two cafés (*kafane*) within fifty meters of each other. The café 'Srbija'(Serbia) was owned by Mirko Blagojević, an ex-boxer who had become the local leader of the Serbian Radical Party (Srpska radikalna stranka: SRS) of Vojislav Šešelj. Blagojević was also the commandant of the local branch of the SRS's para-military force, the 'Chetniks', which claimed direct continuity with the Second World War movement. The café was a gathering point for members and sympathisers of the party, and it was common to see armed men in camouflage uniforms there. The other café, called 'Istanbul', was frequented by Muslims, and had become a gathering point for sympathisers of the SDA. In the late afternoon, Alija Gušalić, a Muslim man, set off on a horse from the Café Istanbul to the café Serbia with the intention to throw a hand grenade there. Mirko Blagojević shot at Gušalić, wounding him on the leg. A confrontation followed between the two groups but nobody else was reportedly wounded. Amidst the confusion, Gušalić was taken to hospital, where he remained interned (see ICTY 2016:232; Simić 2013; Mihajlović 2013).

The timing of this particular incident was such that it provided the perfect trigger for the military takeover. Bosniaks attach great significance to the coincidence of the take-over with the first day of Bajram (Eid), the most important religious festival in the Muslim calendar, but, regardless of the importance of the date's symbolism, there was another coincidence with greater practical implications. A similar incident had happened some days earlier, when a Serb man, Aleksandar Zekić, threw a grenade against the Café Istanbul. The police had dealt with it adequately, arresting the man, then sending him to detention in Tuzla, following the normal judicial procedures (Simić 2013; ICTY 2016:232). The incident that triggered the take-over, however, happened on the very day when the creation of a Bosnian Serb Ministry of Internal Affairs was announced (Nielsen 2011:3) − an important step towards the Serb rebellion that would soon engulf Bosnia in war. The local police immediately severed its contact with the Security Service Centre of Tuzla, to which it had been subordinate (Nielsen 2011:62-63). The police seems not to have intervened in the incident involving Gušalić and Blagojević.

In the morning following the incident, just before dawn, the 'Serbian Volunteer Guard', better known as 'Arkan's men' (*arkanovci*), or 'Arkan's Tigers', were taking over the town of Bijeljina, having earlier crossed the River Drina from Serbia. Working with the *arkanovci* were also the local Chetniks of Mirko Blagojević, and the Territorial Defence unit, let by the SDS member Ljubiša Savić, who was to become known as Major Mauzer. JNA units surrounded the town, but did not play an active role in the takeover (see ICTY 2016:232-234).

Radio Bijeljina, already under control of the SDS, broadcasted that the town was under attack by Islamic extremists, creating a wave of panic. Many people, regardless of ethnicity, immediately fled to the surrounding villages, whilst others hid in basements. Some residents erected barricades blocking access to their neighbourhoods, which were later shown as evidence of the Muslim extremists' alleged plot. In our interview, Cvijetin Simić, President of the Municipal Assembly at the time, placed great emphasis on this point: "*I came from Velika Obarska* [a village in the outskirts of Bijeljina to the north] *early in the morning, and there was a barricade*". "Were they Muslims or Serbs?", I asked. "*Muslims*". He went on to enumerate other locations where Muslims had erected barricades.

There were indeed barricades in Bijeljina, other informants confirm, "*but they were improvised, with rubbish bins, things like that, because people didn't know what was going on, and they were scared*", told me Siniša[24], who, by virtue of his job, was able to gain a deeper level of insight about what was going on in town than most people. "A*nd there were both Serbs and Muslims in those barricades, because they shared the same fears*". It is not clear how much or how little resistance those behind the barricades offered.

Broadcasting live, Radio Bijeljina described intense fighting between the *arkanovci* and the 'Islamic extremists'; the reports' credibility was reinforced by the sound of shooting and explosions in the streets. "*It was all a lie, a pure lie* (čista laž)", said one my respondents, Lazar Manojlović. One of my informants, Saša Pazarac, lived on the eight floor of one of the 'skyscrapers' (neboderi) in front of the main square. "*I heard Pero Simić* [the director of Radio Bijeljina, who was broadcasting live] *describing violent combats on the square, but I could see the 'arkanovci' from my window, sunbathing on the terrace of the department store* (robna kuća)". Siniša was similarly graphic, appealing to my sense of observation: "*When you go around Bosnia, you see buildings damaged by combat, bomb shells, bullet holes. In Bijeljina, you see none of it, because not even a window glass was broken, because there were no combats*".

The reports highlighted a particularly fierce fight around the town's hospital, where allegedly a pocket of resistance took a few days to defeat. "My husband was a doctor at the hospital, and he was working on that day − one of my informants told me − I can guarantee you, there were no combats whatsoever". Jusuf Trbić, the former director of Radio Semberija and the newspaper Semberske novine, passed in front of the hospital on the way to the centre in the first day of the take-over. Mirko Blagojević, commandant of the local Chetnik paramilitary group, had arrested him in his house, and was taking him to the Crisis Staff. He saw no signs of confrontation, but in front of the hospital, on the opposite side of the road, Trbić saw the dead bodies of the butcher Redjep Šabanović and his wife Tifa, who appear in one of the most well known photographs of the Bosnian war, taken by the american photographer Ron Haviv. [25].

The ICTY, however, accepted that some level of fighting may have taken place. It is

24 Interviewed in January 2015
25 Most of my interview respondents who were present in Bijeljina in this period took shelter in safe places, and thus saw very little of what was going on.

unlikely, however, that they posed much resistance to Arkan's forces, since nobody from their ranks was reported wonded or killed. On the contrary, the overwhelming majority of the fatalities were old people and women, as Bosniak activists from Bijeljina, such as Jusuf Trbić and Emir Musli, who have researched the events are keen to highlight. The ICTY concurred with this assertion, noting that the wounds did not indicate they were killed in an exchange of fire (ICTY 2016: 238, par. 622).

The man Serb nationalists accuse of being the leader of the alledged Islamic plot, Hasan Tirić, soon turned up in Tuzla, where he pleaded for other Semberians to join him in an effort to liberate Bijeljina; he went on to found a Special Unit within the Patriotic League, the 'Black Swans' (Crni labudovi), which was eventually integrated in the Army of the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina(ARBiH) as the 120th Liberation Brigade 'Black Swans' (CIA 2002; Hoare 2004: 107). After the takeover, the Public Security Centre of Bijeljina, part of Republika Srpska's Interior Ministry, investigated the events of 1-3 April 1992. Their report focused mostly on the combats that alledgedly took place in the barricade set in the access to the city's hospital, on the road towards Janja. The report mentioned 31 individuals as killed in combat in that barricade, and presented Tirić as the mastermind behind the Muslim plot (RS MUP 1995). This report was submitted to the ICTY as evidence by the legal defence team of Radovan Karadžić; in their veridict, the judges dismissed the report as lacking credibility. Since "most of the dead had been shot in the chest, mouth, temple, or back of the head, some at close range andthat the victims included women and children and were not wearing uniform", the Chamber concluded that "that these individuals were not killed during armed clashes" (ICTY 2016: 238, par. 622).

The process of ethnic cleansing in Bijeljina corresponds to the typification presented earlier in this chapter, based on Gow (2003:18) and Suljagić (2009:107; 142-4) (see *supra*). As for the first step, "preparation and provocation" the takeover was preceded by an escalation in ethnic tensions and the distribution of weapons to the population (including, according to the ICTY Karadžić verdict (2016: 229:606), to Muslims), and an array of logistical preparations on the part of the SDS and Bijeljina's delegation of the Ministry of Interior, with support from Serbia (2016: 230:607. Following the takeover, a

number of detention sites were established, including a large concentration camp in the village of Batković (ICTY 2016: 247-258). In what regards "elimination through expulsion and execution"(Gow 2002:18), this was, as I have previously stated a protracted process, which the thesis analises in Chapter 5. The 'Criminal Report against Hasan Tirić et.al'(RS MUP 1995) is part of what Suljagić (2009:107) has typified as the systematic concealment and/or contamination of evidence. The report contributed also to "the *post-facto* justification of criminal actions" (Suljagić 2009:142-144). by presenting the official narrative of Arkan's takeover of Bijeljina as an act of liberation. This narrative was first articulated live by Pero Simić, the new director of Semberske novine and Radio Bijeljina, and elaborated in graphic detail in the first edition of Semberske novine, meanwhile renamed 'SIM novine' (SIM being the acronym of Semberija i Majevica). The hegemony of this narrative was reinforced with a photographic exhibition in the Museum of Semberija in August 1992, with the title "Three days of war in Bijeljina"(Lazić 2010:8).

Concluding remarks:

Ethnic cleansing was more than a strategy – or a policy – rationally employed towards a discrete goal, ie, the creation of an ethnically homogenous territory. As an instrument for the transformation of identity, ethnic cleansing was an element in a wider process of regeneration of Serb identity according to the interpretation of SDS leadership and its closest allies. This regeneration of identity entailed the 'purification' of society as a whole during the liminal period through the exclusion of the 'polluting' elements.

In the case of Republika Srpska, while ethnic cleansing targetted non-Serbs, other purification processes aiming at the regeneration of identity during the liminal stage of political transformation were directed towards Serbs themselves, who were prescribed the new codes of behaviour to follow in order to become 'proper' Serbs. In Chapter 3 we describe one of such processes, the erasure and reinscription of the urban landscape; the definition of Republika Srpska's official language provides another example of this quest for purity. Looking towards Serbia as the model to emulate, and rejecting the Bosnian component of their own identity, the Bosnian Serb leadership abandoned the ijekavian dialect spoken in Bosnia, to adopt the ekavian variant spoken in Serbia proper. Soon after

the beginning of the war, all official documents, media reports and political speeches were using the ekavian variant. Speaking in the ekavian dialect was thus imposed as a patriotic duty and as a marker of compliance, to which individuals were to submit. The quest for purify Serb identity can also be inferred from the decision, taken by the Assembly, to abandon the term 'Serbo-Croatian' and officially call the language 'Serbian'. Here, for the sake of purity, the Assembly accepted to diverge from Serbia, where the Milošević regime ostensibly preserved some of the symbolism of the SFRY, including its flag and anthem, and where 'Serbo-Croatian' remained the official name[26].

The Serbian Orthodox Church was a key actor in this endeavour for purity, especially in the assignment of new codes of behaviour people should follow in order to become 'proper' Serbs, as part of its engagement in the regeneration of Serb identity. An article on the local newspaper *SIM novine* offers a powerful illustration of how purification was a crucial concern. Entitled "Guardians of Semberija and Majevica"[27], the article covers a public ceremony that took place in May 1992, in which Semberija's Territorial Defense unit, renamed 'Serbian National Guard' (*Srpska nacionalna garda*) took the oath of allegiance to what was then the Serb Republic in Bosnia-Herzegovina. As part of the ceremony, the *proto* Nedeljko Pajić, Bijeljina's parish priest, not only blessed the unit, but also its members who had not yet undergone the Holy Sacrament. Relieved of its 'original sin', the unit symbolically rejected its previous identity connecting it with the communist regime, and embraced its new identity as a Serb force guided by traditional Christian values. The unit's commandant, Major Ljubiša Savić 'Mauzer', who the propaganda machine glorified as having god-like qualities of extraordinary courage, vision and self-righteousness, was the soldiers' godfather (*kum*), and the model to emulate.

In the minds of nationalists, thus, Bosnian Serbs were at the forefront of the regeneration of Serb identity after communism and multiethnic coexistence, with Bosnia-Herzegovina as a laboratory where their ideals would gain concrete shape, in the form of the creation of Republika Srpska. In this sense, ethnic cleansing was but one of the elements in wider process of purification through the removal of 'poluting' elements during the liminal stage, as a necessary pre-condition for regeneration.

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26 Stenographs of the 12th Session of the Assembly of the Serbian People in Bosnia-Herzegovina Pale 24/03/1992, English translation, p. 3-7 (check ICTY reference)
27 *SIM novine*: "Čuvari Semberije I Majevice", 15/05/92, p. 17

Chapter 4

The making of a 'Serb' town:
Erasure and Reinscription in Bijeljina's Urban Landscape

The war brought deep changes to Bijeljina. What used to be a Muslim-majority town with a strong tradition of common life (*zajednički život) now fundamentally appears as a 'Serb' town in which non-Serbs are tolerated but assigned a position of marginality.* This transformation operated at three different levels: changes in the shared space; persecution of the Muslim population, leading eventually to mass expulsions; and the resettlement of a significant number of Serbs displaced from areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina beyond the control of Serb forces.

This chapter will offer an analysis of the spatial dimension of the process of construction of an official memory in what was to become Republika Srpska. It focuses on how the physical space changed in Bijeljina during and in the immediate aftermath of the Bosnian war, through a dual process of erasure and reinscription of public memory, in which almost all mnemonic elements in the urban landscape referring to the town's multiethnic past were replaced by references that exclusively relate to the history and culture of the Serb people. This was a top-down process, set in motion, immediately after the military take-over of Bijeljina, by the municipal authorities, through the adoption of a new policy with regard to toponymy and monuments. Most street names and public monuments now commemorate what appears as a series of episodes in a long struggle towards national liberation of the Serb people, with tributes to their respective heroes. Through this dual process of erasure and reinscription of the urban landscape, for which the local authorities were directly responsible, Bijeljina acquired the appearance of a 'Serb' town, with a significant impact in the population's experience of place.

Regime changes, whether through revolution, war, or peaceful transition, usually bring about changes in official memory, which in turn result on the erasure and reinscription of mnemonic elements in the landscape. The past against which the regime change was made is revised, while the episode of change itself becomes object of memory. Extensive research has been dedicated to this issue, with different studies consensually identifying the urban landscape as an obvious stage for the assertion of power by the new ruling classes as part of a political transition(Rose-Redwood, Alderman and Azaryahu 2010). Changes in the urban landscape may be imposed or negotiated, and may have different functions within a process of political transition. Interventions in the urban landscape may carry different intentions, and provoke different effects, whether intended or unintended. They may, for instance, enforce divisions (e.g. Palmberger 2012) or on the contrary promote reconciliation (e.g. Duminy 2014). How power is asserted varies greatly, and thus the analysis of its expressions in the landscape may provide important insights into the nature of a political regime as well as the constraints it faces in the exercise of power (e.g. Palonen 2008; Azaryahu 2011). Research into the policies and processes behind the transformation of public space will thus shed light into the balance of power between different sectors of society, by revealing how much are the ruling classes in position to project into public space their own vision of both local and national identity, and how far are they willing to compromise in order to accommodate divergent perspectives and traditions.

I will explore how, once the Bosnian war began, Serb nationalists sought to give physical expression to the new identity they wished to ascribe to Bijeljina. This new identity should be consistent with their vision for the newly-created Republika Srpska, characterised by the drive to make it the exclusive homeland of Bosnian Serbs; by the rejection of Bosnian identity and its traditions of *zajednički život* (common life) beyond ethnic boundaries; and by the retraditionalisation of society, under the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The dynamics analysed in this chapter was a crucial element in the liminal transformation of Bijeljina triggered by the creation of Republika Srpska. By analysing erasure and reinscription as a top-down process aimed at embedding in the landscape one particular version of Serb national identity, we are setting the stage for a deeper understanding of how the population experienced the shift from *zajednički život* (life in common) to exclusive nationalism, by focusing on *where* they experienced this shift,

before focusing, in the following chapters, on *how* the shift was experienced. By applying the theoretical framework of liminality (van Gennep 1908; Turner 1967; Thomassen 2009; Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra 2015), to locate the dual process of erasure and reinscription in the context of a wider, liminal transformation of society, we seek to bring together the top down approach inherent to the analysis of politics of memory with the bottom up approach focusing on changes in the experience of place, through an emphasis of the role of erasure and reinscription as rites of passage steering the transformation of identity. Whilst acts of erasure necessarily foster uncertainty, the process of reinscription aims at curbing that same uncertainty by offering a new set of references which would provide guidance for society to navigate through a process of transition.

The chapter begins with an exploration of the process of erasure, defined as part of the stage of separation through which society entered a condition of liminality, in which the old order that had guided society no longer existed, but a new normality was yet to be established. If liminality represents, in the context of rites of passage (van Gennep 1909; Turner 1967), a period of great uncertainty, that is even more so in the case of political change and war in particular, in which uncertainty brings with it great danger (Thomassen 2009: 22; Malksoo 2012: 490). During the stage of liminality, the social order is suspended. The normality that existed before is no longer, and the new order is yet to be defined. This is a period 'betwixt and between'(Turner 1967), in which the liminal subjects are deprived of their habitual references, which in turn opens up a realm of possibilities to imagine the future. The process of erasure is aimed precisely against that familiar set of references, which needs to be disrupted and dislodged to make room for a new imaginary. In Bijeljina, the erasure of mnemonic references from the urban landscape completed the stage of separation which began, as we suggested in the first chapter, with the decision to organise multi-party elections, thus putting an end to Communist, one-party rule, and opening up the space for the emergence of nationalist political parties. As a set of rituals, the essential function of the process of erasure was to symbolically mark the point of no return. The chapter describes how the process of erasure evolved, and how it initially targeted only the Partisan legacy, one of the pillars of legitimacy upon which the Communist regime had stood, to eventually make the multi-ethnic fabric of society and its traditions of *zajednički život* the main target.

Once the break with the past was asserted beyond this point of no return, it opened up new possibilities to imagine the future. In Bijeljina, the essential function of the process of reinscription was to subordinate these possibilities to the particular aspects favoured by the ideology of those who had the power to reinscribe, in this case, the SDS. I explore this imaginary through the analysis of the process of reinscription, focusing in particular on how the Chetnik legacy was rehabilitated to replace the space left void by the erasure of mnemonic references to the Partisan legacy, and on the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in replacing the experience of zajednički *život* in a multi-ethnic society with the model of an idealised Serb tradition.

The dual process of erasure and reinscription transformed the urban landscape, which crucially contributed, this chapter argues, to the transformation of Bijeljina's identity. The 'Monument to Fallen Soldiers and Civilian Victims of Semberija in the Defensive-Fatherland War' paradigmatically represents that change. While appearance *per se* is not enough to define a place's identity, but merely reveals an ascriptive intention, it nevertheless conveys a strong message, one that creates constraints on how individuals perceive their community and their own place within. Ascription therefore has generative potential, especially when contestation is highly constrained, as was the case in Bijeljina. But this ascription may as well foster a new sense of belonging, or, on the contrary, a feeling of alienation. The chapter concludes with a reflexion about the effects of erasure and reinscription in the sense of attachment the population nurtured towards Bijeljina as their hometown (*domovina*).

4.1: Erasure

The process of erasure and reinscription of official memory in the urban landscape began immediately after the military take-over, with changes in Bijeljina's toponymy. On the 10th of April 1992, the President of the Municipal Assembly, Cvijetin Simić, signed the decision assigning new names to forty two streets in the town of Bijeljina and in the villages of Janja and Dvorovi (Službeni glasnik Opštine Bijeljina 1992). This corresponded to around one fifth of the total number of streets in Bijeljina, including all main streets.

The timing of the decision is revealing of the importance the local authorities assigned to the symbolic value of toponymy. The decision was taken ten days after the take-over of Bijeljina, and four days after the international recognition of the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina as an independent state. In the meantime, military and paramilitary forces had moved from Bijeljina southwards along the River Drina and were engaged in taking over the town of Zvornik. The war was now well under way. The establishment of Republika Srpska, however, was still in its early stage. . Once municipal authorities severed ties with the government in Sarajevo and the institutions of the Bosnian state[28], they were, for a while, on their own, in charge of tasks that would otherwise be the responsibility of the central state. Cvijetin Simić himself highlighted this point, when I interviewed him. He spoke of the pioneering role of the local administration in the beginning of the war[29]:

> Me: *How were the relations between the local structures of the SDS and the party leadership [at that time]? Because I believe I read that the local SDS sought to preserve its local autonomy...*
>
> Simić: "*Well, in that first period, Republika Srpska was not functional. There was nothing. We, in Bijeljina, we wrote the first [legislative] acts, about health; pensions; schooling; the police; customs... The Presidency of the municipality wrote those decisions, and organised those services, etc. There was no organisation at republic level. Later, when the Republika Srpska was created, and then when it became functional, then they took over these [legal] competences (nadležnosti) from the local community. But the local community (zajednica), at a certain moment [previously] took over those state competences, because there was nothing. Our phone lines had been cut off, electricity supplies from Tuzla had been cut off... We were the first in Republika Srpska to organise these things, and then when the institutions in Pale* [the wartime capital of RS] *became functional, the central government took over these competences, and others more* [in a centralising effort]. *It was then that those conflicts [between local and central SDS structures] began, and later the central leadership abused (zloupotrebali) their power* [Simić went on to give a few examples of abuse of power], *and Bijeljina did not even defend itself as strongly as it needed.*"

The priority assigned to renaming streets is therefore significant, as it took precedence over other urgent tasks. It is also significant that, while Serb nationalists were in control of Bijeljina's municipality since the November 1990 elections that gave a victory to the SDS (Serbian Democratic Party), only once the war began did they decide to change the toponymy. The timing reveals the intention to mark a clear break with the past, conveying

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28 About this, see SIM Novine (1992f): "Odluka Predsestniva SO Bijeljina: Porezi I doprinosi ostaju u Semberiji"15/05/1992, p.22
29 Interview, January 2015

the message that Bosnia-Herzegovina had reached a point of no return.

The decision to rename Bijeljina's streets was a statement against the past, but it also revealed a great deal of uncertainty about what that break with the past meant in what regarded inter-ethnic relations. Despite the violence already exercised against non-Serbs, and Bosnian Muslims in particular, the local authorities were, at first, cautious about their own position towards Bosnia's multiethnic character. In the initial phase after the take-over, the SDS wanted above all to assert its identity against the communist regime, in a way consistent with their electoral platform (Andjelić 2003:169). During the 1990 campaign, nationalist parties collaborated closely, even as they fomented ethnic divisions and rousing tensions. They were then united in the goal of defeating the former communists and other multiethnic parties, and in the tactics of "paying lip-service to mutual tolerance and coexistence" (Hoare 2007:343). Although Bosnia-Herzegovina was already at war when the changes in the toponymy were decided, it was not immediately that in Bijeljina the local authorities openly rejected the town's multiethnic matrix.

The erasure of the partisan legacy

The priority, as inferred by the changes made on 10 April 1992, was to eliminate from the toponymy all references to the partisan legacy and to Tito's regime. Thus Bijeljina's main street, called Marshal Tito Street, became *Karadjordje* Street, after the leader of the First Serbian Uprising against the Ottomans in 1804; Edvard Kardelj Street, named after the regime's ideologue and Tito's right hand, became *Jevrejska ulica* (Jewish Street), ostensibly in tribute to the vanished Jewish community, exterminated in the Holocaust; *Narodne Revolucije* Street (People's Revolution) was renamed after Nikola Tesla, the famous inventor, who was an ethnic Serb born in the Croatian region of Lika, at the time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; *Omladinska* Street (literally 'youth', the word *omladinska* had a distinct communist connotation) became Vuk Karadžić Street, after the 19th Century linguist and reformer of the Serbian language; *Majevičke brigade* Street, named after the Second World War partisan brigade recruited from the Mount Majevica bordering Semberija, became simply Majevička Street.

The decision also eliminated references to partisan figures that were native to Semberija. It was the case, most notably, of the 'people's heroes' (*narodni heroji*) Fadil Jahić 'Španac', a veteran of the Spanish civil war, killed in 1942 in Vukosavci, in the Mount Majevica, in the first military confrontation between the partisans and the Chetniks in the Second World War (Kovačević 1990:74); Radojka Lakić, executed in Sarajevo in 1941 by the Ustasha regime (Narodni Heroji Jugoslavije 1975: Vol. 1, 445); Dimitrije Lopandić, killed in 1941 in combat in Vojvodina (Jelić1986: 280); Vojin Bobar, who survived the war to become a prominent member of the communist establishment; and Rodoljub Čolaković, one of the most influential Bosnian communist leaders during the Second World War and subsequently, whose street became Gavrilo Princip Street, after the assassin of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria.

Eventually all references to the Communists and the Partisan legacy disappeared from Bijeljina's toponymy, with one notable exception, the *Street of the Victims of Fascistic Terror* (Ulica žrtve fašističkog terora*). This denomination encompassed the civilians killed by the German and Italian armies as well as by factions the communist regime labelled 'domestic traitors' (*domaći izdajnici*), including for instance Chetniks and Ustasha (Bergholz 2010:427, n.3). Despite the ideological/non-ethnic designation typical of communist regimes' politics of memory, the denomination remained meaningful, as it made implicit reference to the genocide against Serbs perpetrated by the Croatian Ustasha during the Second World War, and had, therefore, an implied national connotation[30]. The preservation of this historical reference in the toponymy thus reinforced the claims of equivalence, pervasive in nationalistic propaganda, between the genocidal persecution of Bosnian and Croatian Serbs by the fascist regime of the Independent State of Croatia during the Second World War and the existential threat Serbs allegedly faced with the disintegration of Yugoslavia. I should add, however, that while the toponymic reference was preserved, the location of the reference changed. This street, located between the city park and the Atik neighbourhood, was renamed as Street of the Victims of Fascistic Terror once the old *Square of the Victims of Fascistic Terror* was renamed *Square General Draža Mihajlović*, after the leader of the Chetnik movement (see *infra*).

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30 See Byford (2007) for a similar point. In other towns under control of the SDS the 'Victims of Fascistic Terror' denomination was replaced by toponymic references that openly referred to Serb victims. Maksić (2017:214) refers the case of Bugojno, where the SDS replaced an inscription in a monument from 'Victims of Fascistic Terror' to 'Serbs, Jews and the Roma people', and in the village of Drakulić a street was renamed as 'victims of genocide against Serbs'. In the two cases, the changes took place in 1991

In the early phase following the take-over, the SDS sought to send a message of reassurance to the Muslim population, consistent with the statements it had made in the wake of the take-over, that non-Serbs had nothing to fear[31]. They were careful, therefore, when eliminating specific references to the partisan struggle that were identified with the Bosnian Muslim nationality, that these were replaced by names similarly connected to the Muslims. Thus, Fadil Jahić 'Španac' Street was renamed after Muhamed Mehmedbašić, one of Gavrilo Princip's companions in the Sarajevo Assassination plot; the Muslim Brigades Street (*Muslimanskih brigada*) became simply 'Muslimanska'; Hamza Hamzić street became Mehmed Spaho street, after the inter-war leader of the Yugoslav Muslim Organisation(JMO); and the street named after Alija Alijagić, member of the communist terrorist organisation 'Red Justice'(*crvena pravda*)[32] became Meša Selimović Street.

References to the Croatian nationality were dealt differently, in a way that contradicted the message of accommodation to non-Serbs. The war in Croatia had an important impact in Bijeljina, and many of its inhabitants experienced some degree of involvement there, be that as JNA's conscripted soldiers; objectors from conscription, usually non-Serbs; or volunteer fighters in paramilitary units. The new toponymy included two notorious references to the Croatian war; Vojin Bobar street became Vukovarska Street, in reference to the city of Vukovar, which the JNA conquered in November 1991, after intense fighting that virtually turned the city into rubble; and the 18th Croatian Brigade Street, referring to a Partisan unit, was renamed after the Major Milan Tepić, a member of the JNA who during the Croatian war in July 1991, during the siege of the barracks of Bijelovar by the Croatian National Guard, triggered the explosion of one of the barrack's ammunition storage depots, therefore preventing the ammunitions to fall into Croatian hands. Killed in the explosion alongside eleven Croatian soldiers, Tepić was posthumously awarded the title of '*Narodni heroj*', the last person to receive this distinction, and became immediately the object of popular cult, promoted by Serb nationalist propaganda.

The message of accommodation to non-Serbs was contradicted also by the decision

31 A striking example was an article published on *SIM novine* (15/06/1992,p.22) entitled "There are no restraints on freedom of religion" ('Nema Sputavanja Vijerskih sloboda').
32 About Alijagić and the organisation Red Justice, see *infra*.

to grant the name of 'Serbian Volunteer Guard' (*Srpske dobrovoljačke garde*) to the access road that connects Bijeljina to the eastwards village of Popovi, through which the special unit led by the notorious warlord Zeljko Ražnatović 'Arkan' entered Bijeljina, to take military control over the town, where it committed the first of many wartime massacres against the civilian Bosnian Muslim population. The new liberators of Bijeljina symbolically displaced the Partisan liberators; the street was previously named 'Vojvodina Brigades' Street (*Vojvodjanskih brigada*), in tribute to the Partisan brigades which in August 1943 liberated Bijeljina from the Axis forces.

The climax of the process of erasure of the partisan legacy was the seizure of the House-Museum 'Red Justice' (*Spomen kuća Crvene pravde*). This was part of a wider effort, not only to erase the partisan legacy from public memory, but also towards to bring all cultural institutions firmly under the grip of the new regime, and to eliminate any space with enough autonomy to provide a forum for criticism and dissent. This resulted also in the destruction of the amateur theatre group 'Scena'. Highly regarded during the apogee of the Communist regime, the group had already been severely affected by the regime's decadence and the prolonged economic crisis in the late period of Communist rule. Displaced from the theatre, a temporary wooden construction in the centre of Bijeljina, the group disintegrated, never again to reassemble. Where the theatre used to stand there is now a five floors apartment block, with a bank agency on the ground floor. Most importantly, this effort resulted in the control over the Museum of Semberija, which, along with *Radio Bijeljina* and the *Semberske novine* newspaper (renamed *S*IM novine: List SAO Semberije I Majevice), would become one of the pillars of the nationalist propaganda machine.

The House-Museum 'Red Justice' was the family home of Rodoljub Čolaković; descending from a wealthy family of traders, Čolaković was a prominent Communist and close associate of Tito throughout his life. One of the most important Bosnian Partisan leaders during the Second World War (Hoare 2007:337), he became the first Prime-Minister (officially 'President of the Government') of the People's Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina after the liberation(Hoare 2007:311). Čolaković later moved to Belgrade, where he occupied different posts in the federal institutions, but he remained strongly

connected to his native town, which he visited often. Also a writer, Čolaković greatly valued culture, and was, along his nephew, the ethnologist Dimitrije Čolaković, the main driving force behind the creation of the Museum of Semberija(Lazić 2010:3). Upon his death, he donated his personal library to the local public library Filip Višnjić, and his family home to the Museum of Semberija, to become a house-museum (Lazić 2010:3; Nezavisne novine 2013).

The house-museum, which contained Čolaković's personal archive, was dedicated to the terrorist group 'Red Justice' (*crvena pravda*), of which Čolaković had been a member, along with Dimitrije Lopandić and Alija Alijagić, also natives of Bijeljina. The group was formed in 1921 to retaliate against the decision of the government of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes to ban the Communist Party. Acting on their own, without the party's support, the group prepared an attempt on the life of Prince Regent Aleksandar Karadjordjević; the regent escaped the attempt, but the Minister of the Interior, Milorad Drašković, was killed. Alija Alijagić, the assassin, was sentenced to death and executed, and Čolaković was condemned to 12 years in prison, during which time he met other prominent members of the Communist Party, provided education to other political prisoners, and translated, with Moša Pijade, Karl Marx's *The Capital*. He continued to work for the Communist Party upon his release, and eventually contributed to organise the partisan uprising against the Axis forces (Narodni heroji Jugoslavije 1975: 154-156).

Fig. 1: The premises of the veterans' organisation BORS, previously the house-museum 'Red Justice'

The house was at once a museum, an archive, and a venue for cultural activities. Located near the city park in the neighbourhood of Galac, the house museum was part of the Museum of Semberija. Shortly after the take-over of Bijeljina, the house was confiscated from the Museum; the place was initially assigned to the 'Society Knez Ivo of Semberija' (*Udruženje Knez Ive od Semberije*), then reassigned to the Fighters' Organisation of Republika Srpska (*Boračka organizacija Republike Srpske*: BORS), which has occupied the premises since. The archive was transferred to the Museum's depot in the main building, but most of the remaining content of the Museum was lost.

A self-ascribed Bosnian Serb, Čolaković had a crucial role in persuading the Communist leadership to grant statehood status to Bosnia-Herzegovina, and was considered a strong defender of its multiethnic character (Hoare 2007:285); he was also a highly regarded figure in Bijeljina. Attacking his memory was an efficient way to assert the political identity of the new regime: anti-communist and anti-Bosnian. But communism had already collapsed, and once its most visible traces were removed, it was the attachment by Bosnian Serbs to Bosnia as a multicultural country with its own identity, which Čolaković embodied, that required elimination, and that later became the main focus of the process of erasure and reinscription of the urban landscape.

The erasure of Muslim heritage

Eventually, any pretence of accommodation of ethnic diversity and tolerance towards the Muslim population was abandoned. While during the take-over 'Islamic extremists' were the enemy, by the Summer 1992, the enemy was clearly identified as the Bosnian government led by Alija Izetbegović, and by extension, the Muslim people as a whole. This shift followed the consolidation of the SDS's political project and its transformation in a party-state. In the period leading to the war and its initial phase the party's stated goal was the defence of the Serbian people in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Emboldened by their early victories, and no longer able to claim the goal of 'remaining in Yugoslavia', the goal shifted to the creation of their own state, which entailed also the destruction of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The shift is visible in the change of name through the adoption, in August 1992, of the name 'Republika Srpska'. Since then, its leaders as well as the propaganda

machine referred to the territory under control of the Bosnian government as 'so-called Bosnia-Herzegovina', or 'former Bosnia-Herzegovina'.

In August 1992, the Municipal Assembly issued a second decision introducing new changes to Bijeljina's toponymy (Službeni glasnik Opštine Bijeljina, No 6, 25/09/1992), which eliminated mentions to notable Bosnian Muslims. The only exception was the Meša Selimović Street, which paid tribute to the great Bosnian writer of Muslim origin. This was, in all likelihood, because Selimović had chosen to declare himself a 'Serb' by nationality, and to establish himself in Belgrade, even though Bosnia remained the focus of his literary production. Selimović's ethnic self-ascription resonated with the now dominant Serb nationalist narrative, which denied that Muslims were genuinely a nation, and presented them instead as the descendants of Serbs who converted to Islam during the period of Ottoman rule.

The denial of Bosnian Muslim identity as a national group stemmed at the root of a form of erasure with much deeper implications that the mere change of toponymic inscriptions. The systematic erasure of undesired elements of public memory in Serb-controlled territory involved also the physical destruction of cultural heritage pertaining to religions other than the Orthodox Serb Church, as well as libraries, archives and other mnemonic resources relevant to nationalities other than the Serbs, as well as for those that nurtured feelings of attachment towards the idea as well as the historical reality of multiethnic Bosnia. The erasure of all traces of Islamic and Catholic heritage from the public space (Riedmayer: 2002; Walasek: 2015) was part of a process that the ethnologist Ivan Čolović called the "ethnic cleansing of time", in pursuit of "the most homogeneous and exclusive possible space, but also homogeneous and exclusive ethnic time" (2002, p.130).

The logistics involved in the destruction of cultural and religious property have not been adequately researched so far, but the pattern of destruction and the technical means involved, particularly in what regards demolitions, suggests that the erasure of Islamic and Catholic heritage from the public space was carried out systematically(UNSC 1994: Annexes, p.17; Annex IV, p. 28; Riedlemayer 2007; Walasek 2015:23-24), although the local authorities did have some degree of leverage over the process[33]. The outcome of this

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33 For instance, in the area of Prijedor, all mosques were demolished in the early stage of the war, but the town's Catholic church was only demolished much later, in July 1995 (fieldnotes, May 2014: informal

endeavour was such that by the end of the war there was only one Mosque known to be standing in all the territory of Republika Srpska[34].

In Bijeljina the demolition of the city mosques began in the morning of 13th March 1993; in the afternoon of the following day the job was concluded. All of Bijeljina's five mosques were destroyed, and two in the nearby village of Janja. Property belonging to the Islamic community had been confiscated in the beginning of the war, so other buildings were spared as they had already been reassigned to other uses. The houses where Bijeljina's Imams lived were confiscated to house displaced Serbs from other areas, and the main office of the Islamic community became the local office of the Association of Chetnik Veterans of the Second World War. Some of the documents that the Chetnik veterans threw away when they moved in were rescued by members of the Museum of Semberija, located nearby. Some important documents were preserved thanks to the foresight of the main Imam, who placed them in safety just before the beginning of the war. Many of the archives, however, documenting centuries of Muslim presence in Bijeljina were lost.[35] As for the interior of the mosques, they had already been emptied of anything deemed valuable. More than twenty years later, many in Bijeljina still wonder where the rich tapestries that covered the prayer rooms ended up.

A few days later, a television crew from the British ITV broadcasting network managed to get to Bijeljina, and filmed the diggers clearing the debris where the Atik Mosque, located in the central square, had stood. They interviewed the President of the Municipal Council (*načelnik opštine*), Jovan Vojnović, who stated that he had tried to prevent it from happening, and expressed his sadness for the destruction of the mosques. Regardless of the sincerity of his words, the local media outlets, Radio Bijeljina and the magazine *SIM novine* promptly articulated a justification.

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conversation with Bijeljina's Catholic parish priest). In Bijeljina, the Catholic Church was spared.

34 This was a mosque in the village of Balvinje, near Mrkonjić grad, where local Serbs protected their Muslim neighbours (Arnautović 2010).

35 Interview with Emir Musli, Secretary of the Islamic Community in Bijeljina, November 2014. Musli was providing me with details about the reconstruction of the mosques after the war. We were sitting in his office and the Medzlis, going through document after document, when I asked him, wih regard to an old document: " How did the Islamic Community managed to preserve these documents?". "The Islamic Community is a proper organisation (*ozbiljna*) [in the sense of effective]. Our Imams placed them in safety. However, we were not able to save all documents.Many remained in this office (…). We don't knowwhat happened to those documents. But it is interesting, when we returned to the office – I told you this was the Association of Chetnik Veterans – part of the documents, which was kept at the Museum of Semberija, when we returned, the Museum gave us back those documents, so we have all records of births and obits since 1910, but not before that date"

In the magazine, Pero Simić, director of both outlets, justified the destruction by stating that the mosques had ceased to be religious objects because, he falsely alleged, they had been used in April 1992 as weapons depots and the minarets as snipers positions from which a number of innocent civilians, had been shot and killed, after which they were closed down. He stated also that the perpetrators of the demolition were unknown, and denied that the local authorities might be in any way involved, asserting, on the contrary, that they were committed to uncovering who were the perpetrators. Most importantly, Simić felt the need to portray the expression of outrage people may have felt about the demolition of the mosques as unpatriotic, while accusing the Bosnian President, Alija Izetbegović, of misusing this incident to accuse the Bosnian Serbs of ethnic cleansing in order to strengthen its negotiating position, eventually causing the break-down of ongoing conversations:

> "*It is no secret at all that the demolition of the mosques provoked significant unrest among the Muslims of Semberija, after which rumour spread about ethnic cleansing and mass displacement. All those stories, that have no connection with the truth, made the position of the Serb delegation in the conversations in New York harder*(Simić 1993)."

The Roman Catholic Church escaped demolition, one of the very few in Republika Srpska that was spared from destruction. Why it was spared remains unclear. The church was more associated with the Hungarian minority that had built it in the 19th Century, than with the Croat nationality, and that was what some people believe may have saved the building[36] [37]. The parish priest, Father Marko Jukić, was last heard of in town in June 1992, when he gave *SIM novine* an interview reassuring the public that freedom of confession remained intact in Bijeljina (SIM novine 1992). Shortly afterwards he left town. Versions vary on whether he fled or was expelled, with a popular account stating he was hijacked from the Parish house still in his pyjamas. The church was subsequently looted

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36 Why the church was spared was a question I asked most of the informants that I formally interviewed who were present in Bijeljina at the time and old enough for the question to be pertinent.

37 Practising Catholics were less than a thousand before the war, but the Catholic community of Bijeljina was ethnically diverse. Semberija has never had a significant Croat presence, and in the 1991 census only 600 individuals had declared themselves as Croats, mostly families established in the region during communism. Among the catholics there were Albanians from Kosovo; some ethnic Hungarians and a few descendants of ethnic Germans who escaped deportation in 1944, when the Nazis decided to transfer the whole village of Novo Selo in the outskirts of Bijeljina to Eastern Europe to colonise areas where the Jewish population had been exterminated. After the Second World War these few families converted from Evangelical protestantism into Catholicism. Source: Interview with a Catholic woman of German descent, January 2015; See also Musli (2012).

and vandalised. One of my informants, himself a Catholic, later found a statue of the Virgin Mary and other saints in a rubbish dump close to the Catholic cemetery[38]. He did not dare rescue them, and the statues were eventually lost.

Resistance to the erasure process:

The acts that formed part of the process of erasure of mnemonic references to the Communist regime, the partisan legacy, Muslim culture and zajednički *život* from the urban landscape were not negotiated or subject to any debate. They were imposed as accomplished facts, which, in a moment of great uncertainty about the future, few would dare openly challenge. Fear was, my informants told me, pervasive, especially but not exclusively among non-Serbs, while Serb nationalists were emboldened by their early success, albeit prudent about how far they should go. It is, however, difficult to assess, more than twenty two years later, how much opposition the erasure process faced, given that the only local newspaper, SIM novine, was at the time a propaganda tool at the service of SDS and the nationalist cause.

There was, however, one situation in which resistance to erasure was effective, in relation to the decision to remove the busts of partisan heroes from the streets of Bijeljina. Throughout Bijeljina's streets there were, before the war, 19 busts of partisan heroes and communist leaders , including that of Tito, Rodoljub Čolaković, and nine 'heroes of the people' (*narodni heroji*) who were were native to or residents of Semberija. Most of the busts were, according to my informants, removed between April and May 1992, but four remained in their places. These were the busts of Dr. Vojislav Kecmanović 'Đedo'; Dimitrije Lopandić; Veselin Gavrić; and Radojka Lakić. Each represents a particular case, and together they reveal the potential as well as the limits to civic mobilisation in wartime Bijeljina.

A medical doctor, Vojislav Kecmanović fought on the Serbian side in the Balkan wars (1912-1913), for which he was arrested by the Austrian authorities in Bosnia and condemned to five years in prison for treason. He remained in prison until the end of the

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38 Informal conversation in January 2015

First World War, after which he established himself in Bijeljina (Grabčanović 2006:232). When the popular uprising against the Axis occupation began in 1941, Kecmanović mobilised his moral authority in the eyes of the local population and tried to bring Partisans and Chetniks together (Grabčanović 2006:230). After the initial cooperation between the two movements broke down, Kecmanović joined the Partisan movement. He was the President of the Country Anti-fascist Council for the People's Liberation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (*Zemaljsko antifašističko vijeće narodnog oslobođenja Bosne i Hercegovine*, ZAVNOBiH), the highest governing body of the anti-fascist movement. After the liberation, he became President of the National Assembly of the Popular Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina (Hoare 2007:288). But he was never a communist, and in 1946 withdrew from politics. There was no attempt to remove his bust.

Dimitrije Lopandić, whose bust remains in the city park (*gradski park*), was a member of the communist party since 1919, and one of Čolaković's companions in the terrorist organisation 'Red Justice'. He was arrested in Bijeljina by Ustasha forces in June 1941 and detained in Kerestinec, near Zagreb, a concentration camp for political opponents. In July, after the Ustasha regime began executing communists there, a riot broke out and the prisoners escaped. The breakthrough was poorly organised, and Ustasha forces went on to capture and execute most of the detainees. Lopandić was killed in combat at the nearby village of Obrež (Jelić 1986). Being known as a victim of the Ustasha regime who many mistakenly believed to have died in the infamous concentration camp of Jasenovac, seems to have been the reason why his bust remained in place, or at least that was how at the time people in Bijeljina gave meaning to the exception made to him by the local authorities, according to some of my informants. The theme of the genocide perpetrated by the Ustasha regime of the Independent State of Croatia against the Serb people was central to arguments justifying the Serb rebellion in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Jasenovac was the main *lieu de mémoire* (Nora 1989) associated with it.

The case of Veselin Gavrić, whose bust stood among others in the Square of the Victims of Fascistic Terror (*Trg žrtve fašističkog terora*) was different. Still a student, he joined the Communist Party in 1939, and was among the organisers in Semberija of the popular uprising against the Axis occupation in July 1941. In February 1942, on a mission as a courier, he was captured by Chetnik forces, subjected to torture and killed (Mićanović 1983). According to my informants, when the authorities began removing the Partisan

busts from the square, family members pulled their connections to lobby the local authorities, and succeeded in preventing the removal. The other busts were removed, and his has, since then, stood alone in the square, which in the meantime was renamed as Square General Draža Mihajlović, after the leader of the Chetnik movement.

The cases of Dr. Kecmanović, Lopandić and Gavrić suggest that the local authorities were keen to avoid an openly adverse reaction to their endeavour to erase the communist past and the Partisan legacy from public space, and thus willing to accommodate some level of resistance, when this was exercised discretely or expressed tacitly. Accommodation was possible as long as it wasn't seen as weakening the new nationalist order. The case of the bust of Radojka Lakić, located in the school bearing her name, stands out in contrast, as a case of open and active resistance to nationalism, and for such a challenge there was a price to be paid.

Lazar Manojlović was the director of the Primary School Radojka Lakić, which in April 1992 was renamed 'Saint Sava'. After the war began, Nedeljko Pajić, the parish priest of St. George's Church, just across the road, was the first to order that the bust be removed from the schoolyard, but Manojlović considered his moral duty to oppose its removal, as it would amount to an act of violence against the memory of Radojka Lakić and a bad example for his pupils. He remained firm in his resolution, taken as a matter of allegiance to the partisan legacy, and as part of his struggle to preserve his autonomy as headteacher, but most of all, as part of his effort to remain honourable (*pošten*).

A Serb from a poor peasant family from the village of Velika Obarska, north of Bijeljina, Lazar Manojlović made most of his career as a school teacher in the city of Tuzla. He returned to Bijeljina in 1991, to become the director of the Primary School Radojka Lakič. He was perceived by the local authorities as a loyal Serb, after his nomination was vetted by Ljubiša Savić[39]. A social worker by profession, and a founding member of the SDS in Bijeljina, Ljubiša Savić, also known as 'Mauzer', would emerge as one of the most powerful individuals in Semberija. After the 1990 elections, he became President of the Municipal Commission for Recruitment and Nominations (*predsjednik opštinske komisije za izbor i imenovanje*)(Nikolić 1991), a strategic position, at a time when the

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39 Interview with Lazar Manojlović, October 2014. Manojlović described how his nomination was vetted by 'Mauzer'.

SDS was replacing all cadres for their own people[40].

Mauzer's endorsement granted Manojlović his job, but not his loyalty. He soon became a nuisance to the local authorities, as he found himself in conflict with the Serbian Orthodox Church. His confrontation with Nedeljko Pajić, who had become responsible for mandatory religious instruction in the school, soon escalated to the higher echelons of the Church, bringing him into direct conflict also with the Bishop of Zvornik-Tuzla, Vasilije Kačavenda, one of the most powerful men in Bijeljina and indeed in Republika Srpska. Besides opposing the removal of the bust of Radojka Lakić, Manojlović also refused to dismiss Muslim workers, and ensured that the Muslim children who remained there were not discriminated against by staff or students.

Manojlović stands out as an exceptional example of opposition to power in Bijeljina. Besides his role as headteacher, and private acts of assistance to non-Serbs facing duress of persecution, he also took the initiative to write to the Patriarchate of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade, denouncing the abuses taking place in Bijeljina (Manojlović 2009: 29;32), which may have influenced the Patriarchate's decision forbidding the conversion of Muslims to Orthodox Christianity (see. Ch.3). He also collaborated with the Belgrade independent newspaper 'Republika', which would be the first to report the destruction of the local mosques, and he spoke *on the record* to foreign journalists visiting town (Manojlović 2009), including the above mentioned ITV crew.

The case of Lazar Manojlović, while important for its own sake, is also revealing of the level of constraint anyone opposing nationalism in everyday life faced. He received numerous threats and had to deal with the insubordination of some of his staff; as he refused to submit or to resign, he was sacked from his post in 1994, when he turned 60 years old. He was forced to leave the school premises at gunpoint, and deprived of a pension. Manojlović remained, until his death in 2016, an outspoken critic of the Serb Orthodox Church, the SDS and Serb nationalism, and one of a few Serbs who always spoke openly about the persecution of Bosniaks.

The bust of Radojka Lakić remained in its place in the school yard, until it was

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40 During the take-over of Bijeljina, Ljubiša Savić, also known as Major 'Mauzer' appeared as the Commandant of the Territorial Defence (*Teritorijalna odbrana*, TO) of the SAO of Semberija and Majevica, and leader of the the local 'Crisis Staff' (SIM novine 1992b). The TO forces would soon morph into this own para-military unit, the Serbian National Guard (*Srpska nacionalna garda*), itself later integrated in the newly-formed Army of Republika Srpska as an elite infantry unit (Simić 1992a)

stolen in August 2011, possibly by metal thieves (Lazić 2012:140).

4.2: Reinscription

Reinscription was a prolonged process, which started simultaneously with the process of erasure, but endured for much longer, and continues to take place in the present. A matrix was nevertheless established relatively quickly, and preserved since, which made Serb national identity and Orthodox Christianity the central themes of official representations. To say that Bijeljina's urban landscape now solely reflects the history and culture of the Serb people, however, is merely the starting point to the analysis of the identity statement that official memory conveys.

Most of the name-places make reference to war-related episodes and (male)figures, and the military feats they commemorate are associated with a long history of struggles of the Serb people for their liberation. The main access roads to Bijeljina all bear names with military significance. To the East, besides the already mentioned Serbian Volunteer Guard street, there is also, parallel to it, the Street Knez Ivo of Semberija, a native of the village of Popovi, where the road leads, and who was one of the leaders of the First Serbian Uprising, which he joined in 1806; to the south towards the village of Janja and the town of Zvornik lies the Serb Army street (Ulica Srpske *vojske*), previously the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) street; to the West towards Tuzla is the 27th of March Street, that commemorates the coup d'état of 1941 against the Yugoslav government's decision to join the Tripartite Pact between Germany, Italy and Japan; and Northwards towards the village of Velika Obarska now lies the Bajo Banjičić street, named after the Second World War Chetnik commander in Semberija. Throughout Bijeljina and in the villages of Semberija, many other references to Serb heroism and military feats exist, either in the toponymy, in monuments or other forms of public memory.

Given the zeal with which mnemonic references to the Partisan legacy were erased, it is ironic that, in what regards their efforts towards the construction of a new official

memory, Bijeljina's local authorities adopted the template previously established by the Communist regime. The Communists' own politics of memory was based on the evocation of the partisan struggle against fascism during the Second World War, known as the NOB (*narodnooslobodilačka borba* − People's Liberation Struggle). The Partisan Struggle was officially represented as the regime's founding act, and systematically evoked to reassert the regime's political legitimacy (Perica 2002: 96). For that reason, as the regime's legitimacy appeared to be in erosion in the 1970s and 1980s, acts of inscription in the landscape intensified, resulting in the construction of monuments throughout Yugoslavia (Karge 2009), many of which in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Musi 2015: 126). Whilst different in content, the parallels in form are striking. While the communist regime framed the NOB as a popular struggle against fascism, the new regime framed the present war as a war of national liberation, itself the culmination of a much longer history of struggles against foreign oppression. The content changed, as all name-places evoking the NOB were replaced, but the template, characterised by the glorification of war as a collective endeavour, and the cult of individual heroism, remained.

In Bijeljina, official memory, essentially formed during the war and in the immediate post-war period, contained a statement of rupture with the past encompassed in the process of erasure, at the same time that it sought to offer the population a sense of stability, based on the assumption of permanence of the new inscriptions.

But erasure is seldom complete; instead, the public space, with the superposition of the new inscriptions on the old ones, usually resembles a palimpsest, where the traces of what was there before remain present even if not clearly visible, and from which the erased inscriptions may eventually be retrieved. Most importantly, the acts of erasure may become itself object of remembrance, and thus the assumption of permanence in which the new official memory is based is inherently fragile.

Conversely, the new inscriptions may also become object of erasure. The desire to influence how the future of remembering should take shape is a common feature in any mnemonic intervention in the public space (Casey 2004). This same desire seems to have been shared by the different political forces that since the 19th century ruled over Semberija, so that throughout time the erasure and reinscription of mnemonic references in the public

space became a ritual that all new regimes performed. But each new performance was in itself a reminder of how transient the regimes of the past were as much as a warning that those doing the erasing and reinscribing might become themselves, in the future, object of erasure. Indeed, by its very nature as part of "the symbolic infrastructure of power and authority"(Azaryahu1996:317) elements of official memory inscribed in the landscape are inherently vulnerable to political change.

A good example of the transient character of official memory is the case of the monument to King Petar I Karadjordjević 'the Liberator', an equestrian statue that represents the King about to behead a three-headed human figure that symbolises the Emperor of Austrian-Hungary, the German Kaiser and the Ottoman Sultan, in allusion to the enemies of the First World War. The statue was installed in the main square in 1929, but in April 1941, when Bijeljina came under occupation of the Independent State of Croatia, it was removed and destroyed (Lukić 2012:172). The base of the statue remained in place, though, and in 1945 the Communists built a small plint with a five-pointed star on the top. In April 1992, during the take-over of Bijeljina, the star was removed. Along with the decision to rename Bijeljina's streets, the Municipal Assembly decided also to have the statue rebuilt, and the sculptor Zoran Jezdimirović immediately began to work on a replica[41].

On 8 November 1993, coinciding with the religious holiday of 'Mitrovdan', the day BORS, the Fighter's Association adopted as their *krsna slava*, the statue was reinstated to the original place, in a high-profile ceremony attended, among others, by the President of Republika Srpska, Radovan Karadžić and the leader of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Pavle[42]. On the base of the statue, in one of the sides was written 'The thankful Serbs of Semberija' (*Zahvalni Srbi Semberije*). In the other, a longer inscription was added to the original model, stating that "the conditions for the renewal of he monument were achieved through the victory of SDS in the 1990 multi-party elections". By reinstating the monument to King Petar I Karadjordjević, the initiators unintentionally revealed how public memory can always be retrieved after erasure, if the political conditions so allow it.

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41 *SIM novine*, 15/05/1992, p. 22. A public subscription towards the construction of the statue had been initiated in October 1991.
42 *SIM novine*, n. 20, December 1993, p. 1 (cover).

Fig. 2: The statue of King Petar I Karadjordjević, in front of the Town Hall (Opština)

Some of my informants, Serbs who were critical of the local ruling class, referred to the dual process of erasure and reinscription that took place in Bijeljina as a sign of the new rulers' self-aggrandisement, which betrayed a lack of confidence on their own identity project. For that reason, my informants claimed, those in power needed to dismiss the common past as if they were not themselves a product of that very same past. The underlying statement was, in the words of my informants, that 'from us History begins' (*od nas počinje istorija*). The likely awareness of the limits of the instrumental approach to collective memory did not deter those in power in Bijeljina, as elsewhere in Republika Srpska, from insisting in manipulating memory at the service of their identity project. On the contrary, the awareness of the fragility of official memory, and of the possibility of retrieval of the past may have pushed the wartime Bosnian Serb leadership towards more brutal forms of erasure, in which the term gained literal meaning, rather than metaphorical, as was the case with the demolition of Bijeljina's mosques, and the destruction of cultural heritage more generally.

After the mosques' demolitions, the spaces where they had once stood were given new uses. In the main square, the Atik Mosque gave way to an amusement park, with a

carrousel and other devices; the Salihbegova Mosque became a flea market, where, among other things traded, goods stolen in other areas, mainly Brčko, were sold; the site of the mosque near the hospital became a car park; and the Dašnica Mosque was replaced by a hardware shop, whose owner has since become known as 'Pero Džamija'. The jokeful tone of the nickname, which has endured even after the hardware shop had to move to a new location in the post-war period, demeans the owner, as it associates him with war profiteering, but it is also revealing of the changes in the atmosphere in Bijeljina. The refinement that the mosques offered to the urban environment was replaced by the noise and chaos of improvised market places. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the idea of urban culture is closely associated with politeness and elegance, so that in the eyes of many residents, the new uses assigned to the pieces of land where the mosques used to stand degraded the city, and translated a fundamental hostility to urban culture.

The rehabilitation of the Chetnik legacy

One aspect that stands out in the analysis of Bijeljina's official memory, as inscribed in the urban space, is how prominently it pays tribute to the Chetnik tradition. The Chetniks were a Serb nationalist movement formed in the wake of the German invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941, initially by members of the Yugoslav army who refused to surrender when the army collapsed. Led by Colonel Dragoljub 'Draža' Mihajlović, the Chetnik movement was endorsed by the government in exile; the movement was officially named 'Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland', and Mihajlović promoted to general. The Chetniks quickly evolved from a resistance movement to a collaborationist force. Convinced "that outright resistance to the Germans was futile prior to a virtual Axis defeat", Mihajlović sought "a modus vivendi with the Germans, while concentrating his efforts on destroying the *internal enemies* of his Great Serbian goals: the Ustashas, the Muslims of Sandjak and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and ultimately the Communists"(Hoare 2006:94). The communists, who launched a popular uprising in June 1941 in the wake of Operation Barbarossa, posed a major threat to the Chetniks ambitions for the post-war order, and thus Chetniks and partisans became enemies, and fought a civil war against each other (Tomasevich 1975; Hoare 2006).

Chetnik literally means 'member of an armed band' or *četa*. The Chetnik movement

stemmed from a popular tradition of armed resistance by Orthodox Christians against the Ottomans in the 19th century, itself drawing from the older 'Hajduk' tradition of social banditry (Tomasevich 1975: 115; Žanić 2007:448). Chetnik fighters consciously drew upon such traditions by adopting an iconic appearance. The active involvement of armed bands of Serbian volunteers in the 1912-1913 Balkan Wars and during the First World War elevated the Chetniks to cult figures during the interwar period , a cult actively promoted by Serbian political parties, namely the Democratic Party and the Radical Party(Tomasevich 1975: 118), through the establishment of Veterans' Associations with local branches throughout Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Hoare 2007:116). During the Second World War, Chetniks once again tapped into the Hajduk iconography, thus establishing a connection with the mass of peasants that would constitute their base of recruitment. Many of its leaders, including Mihajlović, decided to grow long beards, traditionally associated with mourning, and often dressed in a particularly recognisable style, in a peasant dress, old fashioned even by the standards of the time (Carmichael 2002: 44). Chetniks were recorded in collective memory for their brutality, an image that they established during the Balkan Wars and reinforced during the Second World War by perpetrating a number of genocidal attacks against non-Serb populations(Carmichael 2002: 46). In Bosnia, such massacres were, on the one hand, motivated by the will for retribution after Ustasha massacres of Serb populations, and, on the other hand, by their own exclusive nationalist ideology, which sought for a Greater Serbia as a state covering all territories with Serb populations, and in which Serbs would be the dominant ethnic group. In contrast, the partisan movement was anti-nationalist and multiethnic, engaged in active resistance and guerrilla warfare against the occupying forces, and aimed at establishing a federal political system in Yugoslavia, through which the country's national question should be solved. (Hoare 2006: 95)

The experience of the Second World War resulted in the establishment of two opposing legacies with an enduring influence in Serb national identity. The ideological contrast between both legacies is striking, but they also have much in common in terms of political imaginary (Castoriadis 1987; Taylor 2004). First of all, both traditions drew from the older 'Hajduk' tradition of social banditry of ottoman times (Žanić 2007:449). In addition, while Chetniks were almost exclusively Serb, and the Partisans were a multi-ethnic movement, the majority of its rank and file were Serbs as well. Joining the Chetniks

or the partisans wasn't always a decision ideologically motivated, but depended also on particular circumstances in each local setting, in which resisting Ustasha persecution might mean joining whatever armed groups were available(Hoare 2006:3). Armed groups often changed allegiances, so that Chetnik forces would sometimes defect to the Partisans and vice-versa. Thus, Marko Attila Hoare suggests, "the boundary between the Chetnik and the Partisan movements remained at all times fluid; they resembled not the contrasting black and white so much as the yin and yang- opposites that nevertheless flow into and to some extent resemble one another"(2006:10). The Partisan leadership eventually established a policy seeking to attract and absorb Chetnik fighters into its own ranks (Hoare 2006:352), so that by the end of the war, there was a significant number of partisans who had come originally from Chetnik ranks, and who reaped the benefits of shifting sides. Hoare (2007: 318) cites Rodoljub Čolaković to highlight how communist leaders offered an alternative articulation of Serb national identity. On a pamphlet entitled *On False and True Serbdom*[43], Čolaković "counterposed what he portrayed as the true Serbdom of the Partisans and the true unity of the Serb people arising from the NOP, with the false Serbdom of the Nedićites [supporters of the quisling wartime regime in Serbia, led by Milan Nedić] and Chetniks, based on chauvinism towards other Yugoslavs and collaboration with the occupiers", thus seeking to "claim for the Partisans the mantle of the Serb patriotic tradition" (Hoare 2007:318). Thanks to their massive participation in the NOB, in Bosnia-Herzegovina Serbs became over-represented in the ruling class and in administration during the first two post-war decades (Shoup1968:121; Hoare2007:318,328). Thus after defeating the exclusive nationalist vision promoted by the Chetnik movement, the communists established a regime that, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, did confer a certain level of privilege to Serbs as an ethnic group, especially in the first two decades (Pešić 1996:12).

The communist regime sought to overcome ethnic divisions and simultaneously assert its own legitimacy by promoting the ideal of 'Brotherhood and Unity' (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*), and cultivating the memory of the Partisans' heroic struggle against fascism during the NOB. The ideal of 'Brotherhood and Unity' implied the acceptance of the

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43   Rodoljub Čolaković (1945) *O lažnom i pravom srpstvu* Sarajevo: Svjetlost, cited by Hoare (2007:318)

specific character of each national group (*narod*) and nationality (*narodnost*), as well as the development of a supra-national, Yugoslav culture, which aimed to add a new layer to individuals' social identity without nevertheless seeking to compete with any existing attachment to their ethnic identities (Wachtel 1998:134). The communists actively sought to make ethnic identity less salient, and their approach to the wartime legacy reflected this commitment, with the war being framed as a struggle against fascism (Dragojević and Pavlaković 2016: 72; Bergholz 2016: 270). After the war, the communist regime arrested the leader of the Chetniks, Draža Mihajlović, who was put on trial, convicted for war crimes and executed (Dulić 2012: 626). The massacres against non-Serbs, however, were not object of further judicial investigation, and the ethnicity of the victims was symbolically erased, under the generic label of 'victims of fascistic terror'(Bergholz 2010).

The NOB became the regime's founding myth, designed in such a way as "to unify the multiethnic population" (Bergholz 2013: 686), but its cult preserved also the memory of the war as an ethnic conflict rather than simply ideological, as the division of warring sides between fascists and anti-fascists seemed to imply (Bergholz 2010). While fallen partisan fighters were commemorated in memorials containing comprehensive lists of names, which allowed for their ethnicity to be recognised, victims were often commemorated anonymously, and selectively, depending on who had killed them. Those killed in massacres perpetrated by Serb groups who later joined the partisans were often not commemorated at all; instead, a veil of silence was placed over the circumstances of their deaths (Bergholz 2010; Duizings 2007), the investigation of which risked tainting the aura of the partisan fighter; thus the magnitude of Chetnik crimes was diminished. On the other hand, the figure of the Chetnik fighter, representing the opposite of what the partisans stood for, was an important element in the memorialisation of the Second World War in communist Yugoslavia. Cathie Carmichael(2002:44) refers, for instance, to the role of partisan war movies in crystallising the iconic image of the Chetnik fighter – the quintessential 'bad guy' – and transmitting it to the new generations, who had no lived experience of the war.

Under communism, any display of Chetnik identity was strongly repressed, as were also any public accusations that particular individuals, let alone entire communities, were 'Chetnik', accusations that could land the accuser in court for libel under laws forbidding expressions of chauvinism (Bergholz, 2013:688). Repression, thus, did play a role in curtailing ethnically motivated animosity, but a more important factor was that, up until a

certain moment, the regime managed to improve life conditions, contributing to a certain degree of satisfaction on the part of the population, which in turn fostered a sense of loyalty to the regime. In everyday life, ethnicity was not salient in urban settings, and the regime largely succeeded in creating a sense of attachment to Yugoslavia as a common homeland (Maksić 2017: ix; Gagnon 2004:41). In such circumstances, the ideal of *Brotherhood and Unity* and the cult of the NOB, did seem to provide a frame for overcoming past experiences of interethnic violence.

In the late 1970s and 1980, with the regime increasingly unable to stem economic decay, the evocation of the partisan founding myth acquired a quasi-religious tone . But since the regime could no longer foster an optimistic sense of future based on lived experience, the appeal to the past through the intensification of commemorative initiatives – including a new wave of construction of memorials, such as the Vraca memorial park in Sarajevo in 1980 (Musi 2015: 126), or the 'Revolution' monument at the Vukosavci partisan cemetery in the Mount Majevica in 1986 (Semberske novine 1986: 1; 2) – could not compensate for the solutions that the regime increasingly failed to provide. While some people continued to adhere to the cult of the memory of the NOB, among others, particularly younger people, it seemed to foster cynicism and detachment[44]. Eventually, the official memory of the NOB began to be contested (Gagnon 2004: 95), by intellectuals, by the religious organisations, and by individuals throughout the country who remembered mass killings perpetrated by Partisans themselves or by Chetnik groups that were eventually incorporated in the Partisan movement (Hayden 1994; Bergholz 2016). The quasi-religious character of official memory did not allow for a critical, distant questioning of the past, but did facilitate the emergence of alternative perspectives, themselves immune to critical questioning

With Yugoslavia in process of dissolution, these alternative perspectives fully emerged, promoted by different political forces. Nationalists consciously evoked different traditions, and the social imaginary of the Chetniks and Ustashas was resurrected (Žanić 2007[1998]; Carmichael 2002), while the Partisan social imaginary acquired a new, "ethnicised" meaning (Maksić 2017: 200; see also Žanić 2007[1998]). In Serbia, the new regime of Slobodan Milošević claimed to be a continuation of Tito's Yugoslavia, and

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44 Informal conversations during fieldwork in 2014 and 2015; see also Spasovska 2017:88, on the commemorations of Youth Day (marking the birthday of Marshall Tito), and Spasovska 2017a on wider feelings of disillusion among the 'last yugoslavs'.

ostensibly retained an allegiance to the Partisan legacy, but nationalised it, so that the Partisans were now treated essentially as a Serb movement, on the basis of the fact that most Partisan fighters were Serb, and regardless of their anti-nationalist ideology and multi-ethnic leadership and membership. The nationalist and anti-communist opposition, on the other hand, rejected the Partisan legacy and, in the case of parties such as the Serbian Radical Party of Vojislav Šešelj, or the Serbian Renewal Party of Vuk Drašković, drew heavily on the Chetnik tradition (Thomas 1999:53). Both parties created sections in Bosnia-Herzegovina and run for the 1990 elections there, but with poor results (Arnautović 1996: 55).

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the SDS, which would win the bulk of the Serb votes, had very close links with Milošević regime, but it fundamentally differed from Milošević's own party in what regarded the relationship with the communist past. The SDS presented itself as a traditionalist, national party; it rejected the communist regime, its policies of multi-ethnic coexistence, and its modernising approach; and accused the communists of discriminating against Serbs and repressing their national traditions (Maksić 2017:201). Its leadership seemed close to the Chetnik legacy, and Radovan Karadžić himself came from a Chetnik family from Montenegro (Donia 2015:24). Initially, however, the party's leadership threaded carefully in what regarded the Chetnik-Partisan divide, aware as it was of the emotional connection to the Partisan tradition among significant sections of the Bosnian Serb population. In forming its electoral strategy, the Bosnian SDS benefited from the hindsight of the experience of their sister party in Croatia, where elections had taken place in May 1990 (Maksić 2017:201). The Croatian SDS had failed to attract the votes of the majority of the Croatian Serbs, who instead chose to vote for the Social Democratic Party, the reformed successor of the communist party (Gagnon 2004:139). In Bosnia-Herzegovina, too, the Communists were the SDSs main rival, with whom they needed to compete for votes (Maksić 2017: 199-204). The SDS electoral campaign was marked by systematic appeals for Serb unity and renewal (Toal and Maksić: 2014, 272-273). Appeals to unity aimed to overcome the Chetnik-Partisan divide without alienating potential voters close to each tradition. This was done by reclaiming the Partisan struggle as a Serb struggle, and accusing the communists of betraying their own partisan fighters and humiliating the Serb people by equating Serb national traditions with the Chetnik tradition (Maksić 2017:201). Having had their national identity repressed by the communist regime,

SDS leaders claimed, Serbs now needed to engage in a movement of 'national awakening' (Maksić 2017:176). The call for unity and renewal marked the beginning of the rehabilitation of the Chetnik legacy, but at this time the party also presented itself as tolerant to other ethnic groups and supportive and in favour of multi-ethnic coexistence, a claim that the ostensibly good relations with the other main national parties, the croat HDZ and the Muslim SDA, gave credit to (Maksić 2017:204).

In Bijeljina, once the communist regime became open to challenge, the division between those displaying an attachment to the partisan legacy and those claiming allegiance to the retrieved Chetnik legacy became visible, and still remains so. The plains of Semberija and the Mount Majevica had staged a series of military confrontations between both forces. Some villages became strongholds for either of the two forces, and remained popularly known as either 'Chetnik villages' or 'partisan villages'. With the creation of national parties in 1990, Chetnik iconography began to be visibly displayed as an ideological statement, and local Chetnik traditions were retrieved (Trbić 1991), a tendency that increased once the war in Croatia started in 1991, with some local Serbs actively involved in fighting not far from Semberija in Eastern Slavonia, either as volunteers or as conscripts in the JNA (Nikolić 1991a).

Still, once the Serbian Democratic Party won the elections, and gained control over Bijeljina's municipality, the new local authorities were initially cautious in what regarded the Chetnik legacy, an attitude in which they converged with the SDS central leadership. Thus as we previously saw, while the Partisan legacy was now unambiguously rejected, no longer associated with the Serb people but only with the Communist regime, the initial reinscription of the toponymy did not include names that referred to the Second World War Chetniks. How much was this a calculated move, or one that reflected a natural evolution within the local ruling class remains unclear. Initially, in Bijeljina, the Chetnik legacy was openly claimed only, among political parties, by the members and supporters of the Serbian Radical Party. The Radicals established a local branch, and its own local paramilitary force, both led by Mirko Blagojević, who in 1993 was granted by Vojislav Šešelj, the leader of the Serbian Radical Party, the title of *Vojvoda*, traditionally assigned to Chetnik leaders. In contrast, the paramilitary force locally affiliated with the SDS, the

'Panthers', led by Ljubiša Savić 'Mauzer' never displayed any particular attachment to the Chetnik legacy, as assessed by their iconography[45].

While the erasure of references to the Partisans and the communist regime marked a point of no return, it was the inscription of the Chetnik legacy in Bijeljina's toponymy that truly defined the nature of the new regime. This took place in the context of a crucial stage for Republika Srpska's state-building process, the creation of the Army of Republika Srpska, in May 1992, followed, in July, by the general mobilisation of men of military age. Once this shift occurred, the local propaganda machine quickly began to promote the Chetnik legacy. The newspaper *SIM novine* gave ample coverage to initiatives in local villages, to replace the busts of partisan heroes by those, in similar style, of local Second World War Chetnik fighters(e.g. SIM novine Aug.1994); the newspaper also published a series of articles(*feljton;* fifteen, published between July 1994 and August 1995) about the history of the Chetnik movement in Semberija and the Majevica, authored by the historian Mirko Babić, director of the Museum of Semberija.

The Chetnik legacy soon made its way into Bijeljina's official memory. Just as Semberija's notable partisans had been erased from Bijeljina's toponymy, local Chetnik figures, now elevated to the status of legends, were commemorated with street names. One section of the Miloš Obilić Street, previously *Narodni heroj* Radojka Lakić street, was again renamed, after Baja Banjičić, Bijeljina's Chetnik commander and later commander of the Second Chetnik Semberija Brigade(Babić 1994b); streets were named also after Leke Damjanović, Commander of the Majevički Četnik Korpus (Babić 1994a); and Professor Bakaljić, a school teacher in Bijeljina's gymnasium, who had a crucial role in the indoctrination of local Chetnik leaders (Babić 1995). Other streets were named after individuals commemorated in the Chetnik tradition, such as military leaders of the Balkan wars and First World War. Most importantly, the Square of the Victims of Fascistic Terror, in the neighbourhood of Ledince, where the Meša Selimović Street and the Serbian Volunteer Guard street meet, received the name of Square General Draža Mihajlović, in tribute to the historical leader of the Chetnik movement. The geographical continuity between Draža Mihajlović Square and Serbian Volunteer Guard street suggested a sense of

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45 Both forces were eventually integrated in the Army of Republika Srpska. After the war, 'Mauzer' left the SDS and founded his own party, the Democratic Party, much closer ideologically to the 'nationalised' partisan legacy. He became an important ally to Biljana Plavšić and Milorad Dodik in the struggle with the SDS for political supremacy in post-Dayton Srpska, and was killed in 2000 by a car bomb. Blagojević became a lawyer and continues to live and work in Bijeljina.

historical continuity between the Second World War Chetniks and the 1992 'liberators' of Bijeljina.

The role of the Orthodox Church in the nationalist reinscription of space

The Church played a crucial role in creating an emotional environment conductive to the emergence of nationalism, through the evocation of the founding myth of the Battle of Kosovo and the exploitation of the traumatic memories of the Second World War (Perica 2002:145-158) . It was through the Serbian Orthodox Church that nationalistic claims were first publicly articulated, in 1982, when a group of clergymen, including a few highly-regarded theologians, wrote a petition denouncing the persecution of Serbs in Kosovo, who, the petitioners claimed, were facing extinction as a result of a premeditated genocide that was being carried out against them (Dragović-Soso 2003:125; Perica 2002:123-132). The Church had a crucial role in connecting the issue of Serb persecution in Kosovo to what it presented as a wider historical trend towards Serb victimisation at the hands of other ethnic groups. The question of the Serbs in Kosovo became the key issue around which contestation to the communist regime was articulated in Serbia, in which the Church was joined by a number of intellectuals, gathered around cultural organisations like the Association of Writers of Serbia and the Serbian Academy for Science and Arts (SANU) (Gojković 2000; Dragović-Soso 2003). The issue of Serb victimisation in Kosovo eventually became the trigger of Slobodan Milošević's ascent to power (Silber and Little 1995:36; Cohen 2002:43), and the Church seized the opportunity opened up by Milošević's nationalistic agenda to firmly occupy a prominent role in public affairs, of which it had previously been deprived by the communist regime (Aleksov 2010; Radić 2000).

On *Vidovdan* 1988 (St. Vitus Day: 28 of July in the Gregorian calendar), the anniversary of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo polje, the remains the saint-martyr Prince Lazar, who had been killed in the battle, were taken on a journey across Serbia, to bring the Saint's relics back to the the Monastery of Ravanica, in Kosovo, where his body had been between 1390 and 1690. The journey started in the Patriarchate of Belgrade, where the relics were brought to in 1942, and had its initial stop in the monastery Nova Ravanica, in Vrdnik, Vojvodina, where the relics had remained since they were brought from Kosovo in

1690, until 1942, when fears that the Ustasha regime of the Independent State of Croatia might desecrate them led to their removal to Belgrade. From Vrdnik, in September 1988 the procession travelled to the Monastery of St. Nikola in Ozren, near Doboj in Bosnia-Herzegovina, before returning to Serbia via Zvornik, and then slowly proceeding southwards to Kosovo, finally arriving to the Monastery of Ravanica on 9 September 1989, more than one year after the procession began(Srpski pravoslavni manastir Ravanica: n.d.). The procession of Lazar's relics marked the Church's new public role, seizing upon its newly acquired position to enforce a decision its *Sabor* (the highest organ of the Church, literally, Assembly) took, back in 1954, to return the relics to Ravanica.

The procession replicated in opposite direction the "First Great Migration" of 1690, when, in the wake of the Austro-Turkish war of 1683-1699, the Patriarch of Peć, Arsenije III Čarnojević, led a column of tens of thousands of families out of Kosovo and into territory newly conquered by Austria, which was to become Vojvodina. With him the Patriarch had brought the remains of Prince Lazar remains from the Monastery of Ravanica (Zirojević 2000:190). Olga Zirojević (2000: 209, n.1) notes the parallels between the narrative of the First Great Migration, with the biblical narrative of the exodus of the Israeli people across the Sinai desert, to highlight the importance of the idea of 'chosen people' in the context of the myth of Kosovo.

Sociologists of religion identify the procession of Lazar's relics as an indicator of the commitment of the Church towards nationalism, as well as an element that contributed to mobilise the population accordingly (e.g. Radić 2000:254; Perica 2002:128; Velikonja 2003:242). The impact seems to have been significative; according to Radmila Radić (2000:254), "everywhere they passed, the remains were solemnly welcomed by masses of people". The political context during which the procession took place was one of deep transformation in Serbia, as the 'anti-bureaucratic revolution', or 'happenings of the people', a series of mass protests against the communist establishment and in support of Slobodan Milošević was under way, and which contributed to strengthen his grip on power and resulted in his control of the autonomous regions of Vojvodina and Kosovo (Thomas 1999: 44-51; Silber and Little: 60-73; Vladisavljević 2008). In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the communist authorities prevented similar rallies from taking place (Andjelić 2003:71), but the 'anti-bureaucratic revolution' was nevertheless closely followed there, particularly in Semberija, where, due to its location on the border with Serbia, people easily circulated

between both republics, and where Belgrade and Novi Sad, the major urban centres closest to the region, exercised a great deal of attraction [46].

It is highly significant that the procession of Lazar's relics visited the North-East of Bosnia, covering in its path much of the territory of the Episcopate of Zvornik-Tuzla, to which Semberija belongs. The funeral procession entered Bosnia from Vrdnik inVojvodina and crossed Semberija to the monastery of Ozren near Doboj, where in September 1988 the remains of the Saint were exposed, before the procession returned to Serbia via Zvornik(Srpski pravoslavni manastir Ravanica: n.d.). It is difficult to assess how much impact the procession of Prince Lazar's remains had in Semberija, as the local media, then still dominated by the communist party, did not report on it, and none of my interviewees mentioned having personally engaged with it, but its political implications are nevertheless significant.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, thus, the procession covered only the episcopate of Zvornik-Tuzla[47], whose Bishop, the Vladika Vasilije Kačavenda, would soon become one of the most prominent figures of Bosnian Serb nationalism, and a close associate with the Serbian Democratic Party from its creation in July 1990. Ordinated bishop in 1978, aged 40, he led what would later become known as the Bosnian lobby within the Church (Buchenan 2014 :71; Đorđević 2010), and was close to the conservative faction of the Church, who would become the driving force behind the Church's move towards a more prominent role in public affairs and the main instigators of exclusive nationalism within its ranks(Dragović-Soso 2002:125; Aleksov 2010:12; Maksić 2017:129). The passage of Prince Lazar's funeral procession through Kačavenda's episcopate of Zvornik-Tuzla was both a

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46 According to some of my interviewees, as seen from Bijeljina, the nationalistic element in the 'anti-bureaucratic revolution' was not always evident, so that among disillusioned communists who resented the so-called 'foteljaši'(armchair politicians), there was some enthusiasm for it, including among Muslims. As my informants recalled it, it was only after the 600th anniversary commemorations of the battle of Kosovo polje that the nationalistic element became obvious. The events were openly discussed among friends, with Milošević dividing opinions (interview in January 2015

47 In her widely cited *Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, Katherine Verdery(1999) states that Prince Lazar's procession of Prince Lazar "carried through monasteries in all regions Serbs claim for their new state, including parts of Bosnia and Croatia" (p.18). This factually incorrect. Lazar's relics were not taken to Croatia at all, and in Bosnia-Herzegovina they only visited the Monastery of Ozren. In *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States* Vjekoslav Perica(2002:128), makes only a brief mention to Lazar's procession, undoubtedly due to lack of reliable data. Still, Perica crucially provides a wider context, placing the procession as part of a "dynamic program of pilgrimages, jubilees, and church-national festivals" stretching from 1983 until 1990.

consequence of his influence within the Church and a booster to his power in Bosnian politics. The procession was followed eventually by the exhumation of mass graves dating from the Second World War in the Majevica area (Radić 2000:260), which locally played an important role in the rehabilitation of the Chetnik legacy.

As signs that Yugoslavia could disintegrate emerged, the Church increasingly presented the Serb people as a people under existential threat, not only in Kosovo, but also in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Radić 2000: 260-261). The Church was particularly involved in the controversies around the genocidal persecution of Serbs during the Second World War by the Ustasha regime of the Independent State of Croatia (Radić 2000:255), following new publications that revised upwards the officially accepted figure of victims (Dragović-Soso 2003:100-114). The evocation by the Church of the historical experience of victimisation during the Second World War was soon connected to the political changes in both republics, in a way that would eventually offer legitimation to the Serb rebellions in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, by accepting the necessity of Serbs to defend themselves (Perica 2002:147). In 1990, mass graves began to be reopened in Bosnia-Herzegovina to exhume victims of the Ustasha regime, a process in which the Serbian Orthodox Church was instrumental (Radić 2000:259). The following year, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Second World War in funerals, these bodies were reburied in accordance with the rituals of the Church. The exhumations and reburials, which coincided also with the beginning of the war in Croatia, contributed to create a sensation of 'time compression' (Verdery 2000:115) that conveyed the idea that the present war was a continuation, or a re-enactment of the Second World War[48].

By this time, the Church was openly advocating for the Greater Serbia idea. In a letter to Lord Carrington, President of the international Conference for Yugoslavia, the Patriarch Pavle head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, defended the necessity of keeping all Serbs in one single state, stating that 'the time has come to recognise that the victims of

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48 To some extent, the Serbian Orthodox Church anticipated the military conflict in Croatia, by engaging in a prolonged conflict with the Catholic Church over the role of the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia during the Second World War, namely its relationship with the Ustasha regime of the Independent State of Croatia and its position regarding the genocidal persecution of the Serb people by the Ustasha. The conflict, opened after the Catholic diocese of Zagreb submitted to the Vatican, in 1981, a candidacy for martyrdom of Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac (Perica 2002:178), whom had been condemned by the communists for collaboration with the Ustasha regime, eventually dying under house arrest of a disease contracted in prison. The deterioration of the relation between both churches eventually led to the collapse of interfaith dialogue, which occurred in 1990, just as the war in Croatia was looming (Perica 2002:155).

genocide cannot live together with their past and perhaps future executioners' (Radić 2000:362). The Serbian Orthodox Church quickly established close links with the Bosnian Serb nationalists gathered around the SDS (Radić 2000: 266); as Adis Maksić(2017:128) highlights, "the relationship between SDS's agenda of 'national awakening' and that of the Serbian Orthodox Church was structurally that of mutual reinforcement". Cooperation with Milošević regime was limited by the regime's claims of continuity with the communist regime and the Church's anti-communism, as well as by Milošević's interest to "mobilise religious resources and symbolism only to serve his political purposes"(Aleksov 2010:181). With the Bosnian Serb nationalists, by contrast, the Church was able to establish a relationship of symbiosis. The Serbian Orthodox Church claimed for itself the role of protector of the Serb minorities outside Serbia, and the SDS's leadership embraced as key ideological features the themes of unity and renewal, so dear to the Church. As Maksić (2017:128) notes, "the Serbian orthodox Church representatives frequently sat in the first rows of SDS meetings in religious garb. Conversely, SDS officials attended religious ceremonies, spoke at commemorations and held meetings in church premises"(see also Anđelić 2002: 170).

The Serbian Orthodox Church became the main driver in the retraditionalisation of society in the territories under control of Serb nationalists, defined by the SDS leadership as the renewal of the Serb traditions which had been repressed and undermined during communism. In a moment of great uncertainty, the Church was the only stable institution left that could provide any clear guidance and emotional comfort to the population, and it eagerly took up its role.

Kačavenda and the SDS became close allies, and the bishop was not shy to use his pulpit to exploit the anxiety of the Orthodox population and instil fear (Manojlović 2009: 35). In the beginning of the war, on 15 May 1992, after the 'Tuzlanska kolona' incident, in which a JNA military convoy was attacked by forces loyal to the Bosnian government (see Ch.4), Kačavenda immediately abandoned his see in Tuzla and moved to Bijeljina, prompting a sizeable proportion of the Serb population there to follow him. He became one of the most powerful figures in Bijeljina, and an important actor in the reinscription of the urban space.

The first concrete measure involving the Serbian Orthodox Church towards the

reinscription of the urban space in Bijeljina targeted the field of education, with the renaming of two schools in tribute to two medieval saints whose cult had deep political connotations. Primary school 'Lazo Stojanović Lazić' became 'Stefan Nemanja', in tribute to the medieval ruler considered to be the founder of the medieval kingdom of Serbia; and the primary school 'Radojka Lakić' became 'Sveti Sava' (Saint Sava), in tribute to Nemanja's son, who was the first Archbishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church and thus considered to be its founder as an autocephalous church. Compulsory religious education was soon introduced, and orthodox priests became a normal presence in schools, much beyond their newly-acquired role as religion teachers. Many streets were also renamed after saints and historical figures of the Orthodox Church, and eventually all aspects of public life became permeated by Orthodox iconography, as politicians were keen to be associated with the Church. It was the case, for instance, of Bijeljina's new coat of arms, in which the cross figures prominently.
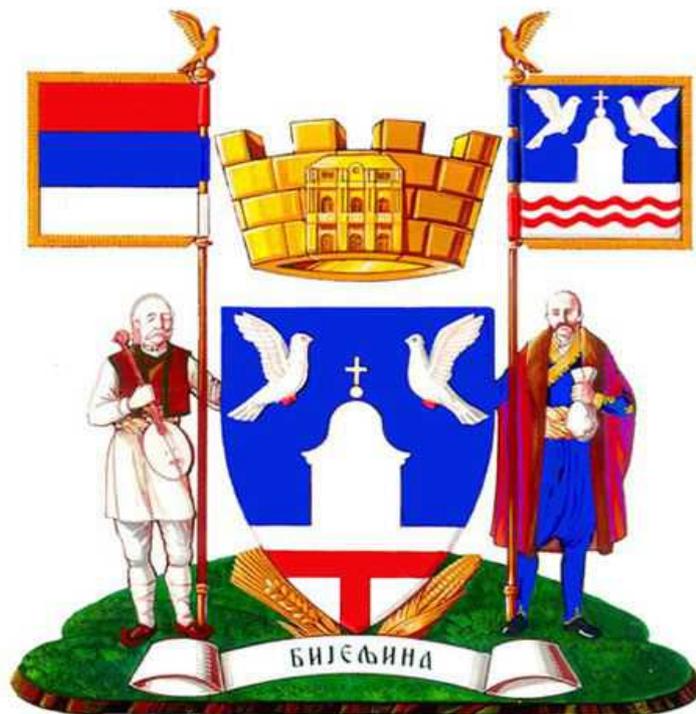
Fig 3. Bijeljina's coat of arms, originally adopted in 1994[49]

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[49] Image retrieved from the official website of the Municipality of Bijeljina, at https://www.gradbijeljina.org/lat/1587.grb-i-zastava-grada-bijeljina.html (last access 01/05/2019). There are slight differences with the coat of arms originally adopted in 1994, consisting in the flag at the left, which was orginally the wartime flag of Republika Srpska. The coat of arms' design was amended to represent the current flag, in line with the Decision of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia Herzegovina of 2006 (Case U 4/04) (about this Decision see Correia 2013: 338).

The coat of arms deserves more detailed analysis. The Commission set up by the Municipal Assembly tdefine the criteria for its design included the Mayor (načelnik) Jovan Vojnović and a number of experts, including the Director of the Museum of Semberija, Mirko Babić. The design was then assigned to the Serbian Heraldic Society, responsible also for the design of the coat of arms of Republika Srpska and of many other municipalities. The coat of arms is an example of how local identities are mobilised so as to converge with centrally-defined policies, so that local elements reveal the regional diversity of Republika Srpska whilst affirming its (desired) ethnic homogeneity.

The characters represented in the coat of arms are Filip Višnjić, the epic poet and guslar native of Trnovo in Semberija, who chronicled the First Serbian Uprising of 1804, and, Knez Ivo of Semberija, the village leader of Popovi, near Bijeljina, who fought in the First Serbian Uprising. In an article in the local newspaper SIM Novine, Babić highlighted the originality and historical significance of such a choice, which he placed in contrast with the European tradition of using animals, which evoked a mythical past. The vitality of the Serb nation was asserted through the evocation of real people, who played a role it national liberation (Babić 1994). The origins of the municipality of Bijeljina were, thus, associated with the liberation of Serb lands of which the Uprising was the first episode; and with its rural communities, which produced not only the cereals that made Semberija wealthy, but also figures like Filip Višnjić and the Knez Ivo. Any mention to the town's Ottoman origins and Islamic presence were absent, and instead, a Church with a distinctively Orthodox dome figured prominently in the central shield. Thus officially, Bijeljina was represented as a Serb town in which Orthodox Christianity was an eminent feature.

The adoption by public institutions of a patron-saint, and the annual performance of the corresponding '*krsna slava*' was another important element towards retraditionalisation of the public space. An adaptation of the pagan cult of ancestors, the *slava* is a tradition particular of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which belonged fundamentally to the realm of the family. Each Serbian orthodox family has its own patron-saint, transmitted patrilinearly. The annual celebration of the patron-saint's day, called '*krsna slava*' is an important family event, in which the family gathers together in the house of its patriarch and perform the ritual of sharing of the *slavski kolač*, the liturgic bread, blessed by the parish priest, after which up to three days of feast may follow. In Bijeljina, as elsewhere in territories under Serb control, schools, hospitals, museums and libraries, fire

stations, professional and even recreational associations soon adopted their own patron-saints, as did also all political institutions, the police and the army. As each organisation started organising its own *slava*, it extended to the public realm a religious tradition that previously belonged to the realm of the family.

The process of retraditionalisation through the reinscription of the urban space proceeded after the war with the construction of new churches and monasteries in conservatively traditionalist style (Manić et al. 2016: 10)[50]. Until 1992, there were only two churches in Bijeljina. There are now five, built since 1998. There are also two monasteries in Bijeljina. The monastery of Saint Vasilije Ostroški, located in the centre, close to the city hall, was built between 1996 and 2001 to serve as episcopal palace, and the Saint Petka monastery, a female monastery built between 2005 and 2009 just outside town (see Djedović 2012:222-227). Built in Russian style, with golden domes, and a large park with artificial lakes, the Monastery of Saint Petka was also used by Kačavenda as his secondary residence. The timeline is revealing. The construction of the monasteries, assigned to Kačavenda's personal use, took precedence over the construction of churches, which catered for an expanded Orthodox population, as Bijeljina received thousands of displaced Serbs.

The monastery of Saint Vasilije Ostroški was built in land adjacent to the plot where the Atik mosque had once stood, so that its tower replaced the minaret in the skyline. To make room for the Monastery, a whole block of the Atik mahala was expropriated. Eleven houses in that block belonged to Muslim families, while the remaining four, belonged "to some of the most highly regarded families in Bijeljina"(Musli 2009), with important connections to the Communist regime. These included personalities such as Dimitrije Čolaković, the founder of the Museum of Semberija, and Boro Djurković, former President of the Municipal Council. Symbolically, thus, the expropriations represented, at once, an attack against the Partisan legacy which these families embodied, and Bijeljina's multiethnic fabric and tradition of *zajednički život*. The eviction of Muslim families was a systematic practice throughout the war, but this expropriation took place already in the post-war period, at a time when Muslims who had left or been deported from Bijeljina during the war were already trying to return, and filing legal processes to

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50 In their analysis of contemporary Serbian Orthodox Church architecture, Manić, Vasiljević-Tomić and Nikolić (2016: 10) provide a basic typology of post-1990 trends in religious architecture, classifying it into three main categories: conservatively traditionalist; radically modernising; and compromising.

claim their property back. Building this monastery was thus both a sign of defiance against the Dayton Peace Agreement and the international presence in the country, and an indicator of how powerful Bishop Kačavenda had become.

The monument to the Fallen Soldiers

Erasure and Reinscription are continuous processes that form part of the dynamics of urban development. Setting a cut-off moment may thus seem arbitrary, but is nevertheless useful for analytical purposes. The April 1992 decision by the Municipal Assembly to rename forty two streets was the first step towards the establishment of a new official memory, through a systematic intervention in the public space. The feature that completed the redefinition of Bijeljina's mnemonic matrix in the urban space was the monument for the 'Fallen Soldiers and Civilian Victims of Semberija in the Defensive-Fatherland War', which would become the main location of all official commemorations, related or unrelated to the recent war.

The construction of the monument represented an important step in the political career of Mićo Mićić, who would become Bijeljina's most powerful politician in the post-war period, and one of the most important leaders of the SDS. A physical education teacher, in 1996 Mićić became the head of the Department for Veteran Affairs (*načelnik odjeljenja za boračka i invalidska pitanja*) in the Municipal Council of Bijeljina. Mićić was not a war veteran himself. According to some of my informants, Mićić spent the war years working as a physical education teacher in the town of Vlasenica. Avoiding mobilisation would prove to be an important advantage in his political career. Although he could not share the veterans' experience, he was nevertheless able to build a relationship with the Fighters Association, BORS. This provided him with an important base of supporters, which he used to advance his political career. The intense power struggles between Serb parties in the aftermath of the Dayton Agreement, and within his own party, the SDS, opened up space for new leaders to emerge, which favoured those who, like himself, were clearly untainted by war crimes, and therefore less liable to the threat of dismissal from office that in this period hanged over Serb politicians. Mićić went on to become Minister for Refugees and Displaced persons (2000-2003), and Minister for Labour and Veteran

Affairs(2003-2005) in RS government, and returned to the municipality of Bijeljina again in 2004, now as Mayor in the aftermath of the local elections; he has since become Bijeljina's strongman, and one of the most important figures in the SDS.

In 1997, Mićo Mićić launched the process of creation of a monument for the fallen soldiers, a demand from the Fighters Organisation. The whole process developed smoothly. The monument was commissioned, after a competition with five other proposals, to the Belgrade-based sculptor Miodrag Živković (*Semberske novine* 1999). Mićo Mićić secured funding from the municipality budget as well as contributions from Bijeljina based companies to build the monument, and it was inaugurated in August 1999 on the occasion of the Municipality's *krsna slava, of Saint Pantejlimon – Pantelino.*

Fig. 4: The Monument to the Fallen Soldiers and Civilian Victims of Semberija
in the Defensive-Fatherland War

The monument explores the theme of death and rebirth, to express the intimate relationship between religion and national identity. A Holy Cross in bronze, six meters

high, from which a mass of male figures emerges, the monument evokes the sacrifice made in the liberation of the Serb people, a sacrifice whose sacred character the use of Christian iconography evokes. The monument commemorates the past but also celebrates the future, as male figures represent both the fallen soldiers and the new nation emerging from the destruction, a nation regenerated by holy sacrifice and ready to enjoy their newly acquired freedom.

The monument's features were not unique to Bijeljina. Miodrag Živković, the sculptor, repeated the same pattern in the other monuments he authored across Republika Srpska, in Brčko, Prijedor, and Modrica. The repetition creates a sense of the unity of the war experience across regions, as a war of liberation requiring the highest sacrifice, like the Crucifixion preceded the Resurrection

Miodrag Živković was a prestigious sculptor, with great experience in the conception of war-related memorials. During the communist period, he was the author of some of the most significant examples of memorial architecture and sculpture in Yugoslavia, such as the   Memorial Complex of Kadinjača, in Serbia, which commemorated the 'Republic of Užice' and the Battle of Kadinjača of 1941 between the partisans and German forces; the "Broken Wings" Monument in the Memorial Complex of Kragujevac, paying tribute to the schoolchildren murdered by German forces in retribution for partisan action; amongst many others. In Bosnia, Živković was the author of the Valley of Heroes, in Tjentište, not far from Foča, on the exact place where the Battle of the Sutjeska – one of the most important battles fought by the partisans during the Second World War, which the memorial complex commemorated – occurred.

The successful conversion of the socialist-era sculptor to the new conditions dictated by the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the dominance of nationalist politics both in Serbia and in Republika Srpska suggests that the boundaries between the aforementioned partisan and Chetnik legacies are more fluid than many would like to admit, and reveals the easiness with which many people shifted from their publicly displayed attachment to communist Yugoslavia to publicly embracing nationalism. The style of Živković's work in this new phase reveals very different aesthetic influences, with the sculptor leaving abstraction behind, to deliver forms of more accessible and immediate interpretation; but it also reveals much in common between both phases,. Indeed, the monuments in Bijeljina and in

Tjentište similarly explore the theme of death and rebirth, thus sharing a mnemonic intention in which the audience is induced a feeling of debt for the overwhelming scale of the sacrifice on which the foundations of the new state laid.

The monument to the fallen soldiers has become the main locus for all war-related commemorations. The commemorative season opens on 9th January, the anniversary of the creation of Republika Srpska in 1991; reaches its peak with the commemoration of the 'liberation of Bijeljina' on the 1st of April 1992; and closes on the 25th September, the day of the Municipality, marking the first liberation of Bijeljina from occupation by the Ustasha and the Nazi forces in 1943[51], a commemoration that had been abandoned in 1992, and which Mićo Mićić reintroduced in 2005. In between these three dates, other, minor commemorations, take place, most of them organised by BORS, the Fighters' Organisation, marking significant dates such as the creation of different military units or important battles those units were involved in. Commemorations related to the First World War were also held during my fieldwork, which marked the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the war. These were divided between the monument to the fallen soldiers as primary location, and the equestrian statue of King Petar Karadjordjević. None of these commemorations attract many people, but they are all widely reported by the local media, and often local television channels will organise special programmes dedicated to the dates these commemorations refer to.

Concluding remarks

Erasure and reinscription of the public space were, in practice, largely simultaneous top down processes. They had, however, different functions in the transformation of society. If we think of the wartime experience as a liminal experience, then the erasure of public space, symbolically rejecting the previously existing political order, marked the closing of the stage of separation. By erasing references to the partisan legacy and to the Muslim historical presence, Bijeljina's authorities erased references to a competing ideology, one that offered a vision for Bosnia-Herzegovina as the common homeland of different ethnic

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51 Bijeljina was again conquered by German forces in November 1943, to be finally liberated only in April 1945 (Lukić 2012:178)

groups. This vision offered an alternative to what it meant to be Serb in the Bosnian context.

Erasure vacated the space which the new order that was about to emerge would then occupy through acts of reinscription. This new order was, at the time, a goal or an aspiration rather than a reality. But the local authorities publicly expressed it through inscription in the public space, however, as if it was already a reality, simultaneously projecting itself into the future and into the past. In this sense, reinscription had a generative effect, and as such, was part of the stage of liminality proper, during which the new structures which would support that new order began to emerge.

The political impact of the dual process of erasure and reinscription cannot be dissociated from how the population experienced in everyday life. In Bijeljina, one of the immediate effects of the dual process of erasure and reinscription was to enforce a break with the past at the level of the everyday experience of space. This caused a disruption in the sense of belonging, provoked by the sudden loss of comfort and intimacy usually conveyed by familiarity with space. As geographer Maoz Azaryahu highlights, "a rude intervention in routinised practices and and traditional relations between ordinary people and their habitat effects a cognitive dissonance and mental and communication disarray"(1996:317).

Against this loss of comfort and intimacy, one form of passive resistance available in principle to the population would be simply to ignore the new official toponymy and carry on using the old names in everyday life (Light and Young 2014). This did happen to some extent, if not as an act of resistance, then at least out of habit. The problem, however, was that some streets had their names changed more than once, and some streets were renamed after personalities that had previously given their name to different streets, as was the case with Vuk Karadžić, Gavrilo Princip and Nikola Tesla. Using the old names reinforced the sense of confusion and disorientation, as it would be unclear whether they would be referring to the old or the new street.

This loss of intimacy was reinforced by the the profound changes in an important element in the experience of everyday life in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the experience of neighbourliness, or *komšiluk*. While good neighbourliness is an important element in the experience of everyday life in any community, in Bosnia-Herzegovina it was elevated to the

category of a social institution, a source of solidarity which people consciously cultivated, and which transcended ethnic boundaries. While the experience of *komšiluk* was not always positive (Sorabiji 2008), since it placed constraints on privacy, the negative sides were generally accepted as minor, in comparison with the sense of solidarity it fostered. With the emergence of nationalism, *komšiluk* was often idealised, either positively as a form of resistance to ethnic divisions, or in negative terms as undermining ethnic identity. Nikola Koljević, one of the main leaders of SDS, and later member of the collective presidency of Republika Srpska, demeaned the idea of *komšiluk* in these terms, in an interview with the Serbian magazine NIN in 1991: "there is no return to the 'neighbourly Bosnia' in which everyone kindly asks one another about one's health, but all work against each other behind their backs as much as they can" (cited by Maksić 2017: 225).

Serb nationalists, and the SDS, were particularly hostile to the value of *komšiluk*, which stood in the way of their strategic goal of 'separation of peoples'. This hostility was not without a reason. Indeed, the institution of *komšiluk* was crucial in protecting the population during Arkan's take-over, with many Serbs actively protecting their endangered Muslim '*komšije*' (neighbours) (see Ch.3). But as Muslim and other non-Serb families were evicted from their homes after the take-over, these were subsequently occupied by Serbs, either local Serbs with important connections to power, who occupied the best houses, or by people displaced from other regions. The forced displacement of neighbours reinforced the feeling of alienation induced by the changes in the toponymy, as people no longer knew who lived where, and who were their neighbours. The newly arrived inhabitants did not know the old names, and as they quickly became a sizeable proportion of the population, the old names and the old urban environment soon fell into oblivion. For its native residents, Bijeljina no longer felt like home.

In a wider sense, the persecution of the Muslim population was itself part of the process of erasure. Conversely, the resettlement of Bosnian Serbs displaced from areas outside the control of the Army of Republika Srpska was part of the process of reinscription through which Republika Srpska was to become a fatherland (*otadžbina*) to a homogenised Serb population. If the process of erasure succeeded in undermining the traditional sense of attachment its residents felt to Bijeljina, the process of reinscription aimed at fostering, among the Serb population, a sense of belonging to Bijeljina's new identity as a 'Serb' town. The following two chapters we will explore how the residents of

Bijeljina, old and new, lived through the liminal experiences of persecution of Muslims(ch. 3) and resettlement of displaced Serbs (ch.4), and how these experiences affected the sense of attachment to Bijeljina, and its very identity.

Chapter 5

Enforcing the 'separation of peoples': Bijeljina's experience of ethnic cleansing

The violence to which Bijeljina's Muslim population was subjected during the war was a crucial element in the transformation of Bijeljina. This violence was the main instrument for the enforcement of the nationalist principle of 'separation of peoples', the principle that most fundamentally characterised the vision of the SDS leadership for the future of the Serb people in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Donia 2015: 184)[52]. The Muslims, who before the war constituted the majority of Bijeljina's urban population, became the undesired 'others', standing in the way of the ideal of an exclusive ethnic nation for whom the creation of Republika Srpska would provide a homeland. Deprived of status, the undesired 'others' were first rendered − physically as well as symbolically− invisible; relentlessly exploited; induced by fear to flee; and finally massively expelled, in a protracted process of ethnic cleansing. Around 90% of Bijeljina's Muslim population was victim of forced displacement (Tableau 2009:741, Table 2M) − either forcefully expelled or coerced into leaving − and at least 224 persons of Muslim ethnic background were killed (Trbić 2007a:243-250)[53]. This chapter will offer an account of how people endured the violence that was imposed on them, and organised themselves to survive and preserve their dignity in such a hostile environment, with a particular focus on the development of coping strategies in the face of systematic discrimination and persecution.

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52 Chapter 2 elaborates on the idea of 'separation of peoples' as well as on the idea of 'life in common' in a multiethnic society.
53 Citing data from the Sarajevo-based Research and Documentation Centre (2007)

In order to understand how the 'separation of peoples' was enforced on the ground, in this chapter I move beyond official memory, as inscribed in space (see Ch.2), to focus on the lived experience of Bijeljina's population during the war, as reflected in the personal recollections of some of its residents. Many of the events described are part of an archive of shared knowledge, widely known beyond the mnemonic community of experience that the victims of ethnic cleansing encompass. Some were the subjects of news reports and Human Rights reports, and some were scrutinised by the ICTY and domestic courts, which provided useful sources of information for the present chapter. But the events related to the ethnic cleansing, ie, the persecution and expulstion of the Muslim population, are conspiculously absent from official memory and are rarely the object of public representations. They nevertheless figure prominently in privately-kept social and collective memories. Thanks to Ethnographic engagement, focusing on the particular ways individuals experienced, reacted to, and reflect about, the violence that surrounded them and/or targetted them, some of these memories usually protected from the gaze of outsiders, were to some extent open to me. Many of these private memories, shared in interviews and informal conversations, belong to the category of 'difficult memories' – memories that somehow contradict or at least add complexity to dominant public narratives, themselves heavily influenced by nationalism.

The way ethnic cleansing was conducted in Bijeljina makes this a particularly useful case-study, shedding light on the dynamics of ethnic cleansing as a liminal process and as a shared experience, involving both those who were directly victimised – primarily the Muslim population – and the remaining residents, from whom the Muslims were to be 'separated' so as to make Bijeljina a 'Serb' town. The bulk of the expulsions of non-Serbs in territories controlled by Serb forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina was completed in the early stage of the war. In a matter of a few months, most regions under the control of Serb forces had been emptied of most of its non-Serb population. Most of the cultural heritage indicating the historical presence of Muslims or Croats was also destroyed in this period (Walasek 2015: 23). This was not the case, however, in Bijeljina. In areas where before the war the Serb population did not constitute an absolute majority, or which were close to frontlines, the expulsion of the non-Serb population appears to have been, from the perspective of the Bosnian Serb leadership, a strategic imperative, just as much as a consequence of their

ideological vision for Republika Srpska. In regions like the Drina Valley (*Podrinje*) in Eastern Bosnia (Bečirević 2014; Bolzmann Institute1994) or Prijedor, in northwestern Bosnia (UNSC Prijedor Report 1994; Wesseling and Vaulerin 2005), there was a clear sense of urgency, and significant human and logistic resources were mobilised towards a rapid expulsion of the non-Serb population.

This sense of urgency was not equaly present everywhere, though. Indeed, in places like Bijeljina, Banja Luka (Galijaš 2009) or Trebinje (HW 1993: 382-390) – municipalities with a Serb majority and firmly under the control of the SDS since the 1990 elections – it was only much later, after the consolidation of the political structures of the newly created Republika Srpska, that the expulsion of non-Serbs would become a priority. As they deviate from the larger pattern in what was to become Republika Srpska, these cases contribute to a finer analysis of ethnic cleansing, focusing on the prolonged presence of non-Serbs, to reveal a spectrum of activities directed against them, ahead of their eventual expulsion, and the ways in which people sought to protect themselves and help protect others.

Focusing on the prolonged presence of non-Serbs, mostly Muslims, in Bijeljina during the war, this chapter will explore an aspect particularly neglected by existing literature about ethnic cleansing: the development of coping strategies – the practises many non-Serbs adopted, when in a position of disempowerment and vulnerability, to protect themselves by reducing exposure to danger; and to better endure the systematic discrimination they were faced with. To remain in what was to become a Serb territory, non-Serbs were coerced into downplaying their ethnic and religious affiliation. They were effectively disposessed not only of wealth, livelihoods and freedom, but also of their identity. Their 'polluting' physical presence required their symbolic absence. Making themselves symbolically if not physically invisible was one of three main coping mechanisms that I identified among non-Serbs, based on my interviews during fieldwork, complemented by secondary sources. The other two were the display of loyalty towards the new authorities, and reliance on support across ethnic boundaries. This chapter will explore each of these coping strategies and how they evolved, and correlate them with the evolution of the process of consolidation of Republika Srpska's political structures, to understand the dynamics of ethnic cleansing in wartime Bijeljina, and how it contributed to transform the town's very identity.

I begin by describing how the local authorities imposed a certain pattern of persecution against the non-Serb, largely Muslim population. This pattern comprised the imposition of a night curfew; arbitrary arrests and the creation of detention facilities; job dismissals; evictions; the imposition of work duties amounting to forced labour; and diverse forms of extortion and humiliation. The leniency on the part of the authorities towards the abuse of non-Serbs by ordinary citizens was also part of this pattern.

The chapter then analyses the different coping mechanisms adopted by non-Serbs, noting how they coincide with the behaviour adopted by the liminal personae in the liminal stage of rites of passage, as observed by Victor Turner (1967), in which they are stripped of their previous identity, and seen by the wider society from which they were marginalised as sources of pollution and contamination. The last section will focus on how the mass expulsion of the Muslim population was organised, executed and sometimes resisted, to highlight the role of agency in ethnic cleansing, and the relationship between the central leadership who set the goals and issued the guidelines, and their local executioners.

5.1: **Establishing a pattern of persecution**

The take-over of Bijeljina and the massacre then perpetrated left the population in a state of shock, and triggered an exodus, in which up to 2500 Muslims were estimated to have fled, of a pre-war population of approximately 19.000[54]. Much of the Roma population also fled in this period — some had already left earlier, in anticipation of an escalation of tensions — and only a few Roma families stayed behind[55]. The use of demonstrative violence to create panic so as to motivate the targeted population to leave is a typical mechanism of ethnic cleansing (Gow 2003: 118), which efficiently brings about a shift in the demographic balance between different groups. In the municipality of Bijeljina, however, Serbs already outnumbered Muslims at a ratio of two to one, even if in the town

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54 The figure of 2500 was provided originally by Ljubiša Savić 'Mauzer' in an interview with *SIM novine* (15/06/1992, pp. 2-5). In the guilty veredict against the wartime President of Republika Srpska, Radovan Karadžić, the ICTY(2016: par. 630) accepted this figure as a likely estimate (par.630), along with the figures provided in the procecution witness statement of Milorad Davidović, who testified that by August 1992 there were approximately 17.000 Muslims living in the town of Bijeljina, as well as 12.000 in the village of Janja (ICTY 2016: par. 670). The figures were, Davidović claimed provided to him by the local authorities.

55 Interview with members of the Roma community, January 2015.

itself the ratio was reversed, with Muslims as the majority. In the case of Bijeljina, thus, the ideological and strategic motivations to induce Muslims to leave were countered by the opportunity for exploitation and dispossession that their continued presence in Bijeljina would provide. After this initial exodus during the military take over of Bijeljina, non-Serbs faced great obstacles to leave Bijeljina. While many people did manage to leave though different channels, it was only in the Spring of 1993 that the first wave of mass expulsions occurred. Sucessive waves would follow, so that by the end of the war there was only a residual number of non-Serbs living there.

Remembering the environment of panic that set in after the take-over, Lazar Manojlović, at the time the Headteacher at the Radojka Lakić Primary School (renamed Saint Sava), described the state of fear and disbelief in which the population became immersed. Those trying to leave seemed to cling to the prospect of resuming a normal life elsewhere. Manojlović told me how many parents gathered at his school, trying to obtain documents allowing for their children to be transferred, so that they were able to resume their studies somewhere else as soon as possible and save the school year[56]. For these families, school bureaucracy would prove to be the smallest of their problems. As soon as they hit the road, those trying to leave were stopped at road blocks erected by Serb forces, who screened everyone, often making arrests or forcing people to go back.

While many tried to escape but were unable to, others did not really consider leaving. Saša Pazarac described the pervasive sense of disbelief that dominated among Bosnian Muslims in Bijeljina during the war years "*a particular state of mind: a person watches it all [happening], and thinks 'it won't happen to me'*"[57]. Pazarac to some extent shared this "particular state of mind"; he was amog those who could see, months ahead of the take-over, that "*things weren't going well*", but he could never imagine – or refused to believe – that the war would happen, let alone that it would happen in Bijeljina. Regardless of sharing this pervasive disbelief, Saša had also more practical constraints. He and his wife had elderly, widowed mothers, for whom leaving was out of question, and children who they did not want to expose to the risk of a dangerous journey. Evicted from his flat in a

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56 This concern with resuming a normal life as soon as possible is also described by Sebina Sivac-Bryant on her account of ethnic cleansing of the Prijedor municipality in Northwest Bosnia. The author, seventeen at the time and herself a native of Prijedor, describes how "still keen to get to university in Zagreb, I visited my old school to ask for a copy of my end of year certificate, but was confronted by one of my former teachers in uniform holding a belt-fed machine gun in the empty school building" (Sivac-Bryant 2016: 3).

57 Interview with Saša Pazarac, July 2014

skyscraper (*neboder*)[58] close to the centre by the '*arkanovci*' during the take-over, on the grounds that it had been used as a base for Muslim snipers (see Ch.1), Pazarac was also dismissed from his job as Serbo-Croatian language and literature teacher. He moved with his family into his mother's house in the outskirts of Bijeljina, and spent the war years there, sitting at home during the day, so as to minimise exposure to the random violence Muslims became subjected to, and spending the night in different places, so as to avoid being 'collected' (*pokupljen*) for forced labour or expulsion. His wife, a renowned seamstress who owned a boutique in the building where the family used to live, became the family's breadwinner. They would be among the few non-Serb families to remain in Bijeljina until the end of the war[59].

Those who remained in Bijeljina after the take-over were subjected to systematic discrimination, emotional and physical violence. Many people were arbitrarily detained for interrogation, where they were mistreated and often beaten. There were various detention facilities in Bijeljina, and several people disappeared after being detained, never to be seen alive again (Trbić 2007; 2007a; 2013a).

In June 1992, a detention camp was formally established in the village of Batković, 6 km north of Bijeljina, in the warehouses of the *Agrosemberija* company. The camp was under the jurisdiction of the Army of Republika Srpska, and remained open until early 1996 (ICTY 2016:256, par.664). The scale of violence in this camp was not at the level of places like Omarska and Keraterm in Prijedor, Luka in Brčko, or Sušica in Vlasenica[60], but the detainees were nevertheless systematically abused, deprived of food, clothing, hygiene, medical care and basic confort. Detainees routinely performed forced labour of various kinds. With conscription into the army, there was an acute shortage of labour in the region,

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58 The 'skyscrappers' were a block of building of between eight and twelve floors close to the northern side of the main square. Since most of Bijeljina at the time were two floors houses and a few buildings of no more than three or four floors, they stood out in the landscape, and offered a priviledged view over the town.

59 Interview, July 2015. See also Wilkinson (1998)

60 The authorities of Republika Srpska closed down the other camps mentioned a few months after the beginning of the war, under international pressure. By the time they were closed down, however, the camps had already fulfilled the goals for which they had been created, and there were very few Muslims or Croats left in the areas where they operated. Most of the detainees that survived the experience of detention were released in prisoners exchanges, or handed to the International Comittee of the Red Cross and sent to exile. Some, however, remained in detention, and were eventually transferred to Batković. Throughout the war, Bijeljina functioned as a safe place to keep detainees from other partts of Bosnia (see ICTY 2016:312; 397; 407;504;509; etc).

and local farmers often came to the camp and took detainees to work in the fields, especially during harvesting season. Detainees were also often taken by the army to the frontlines, to perform heavy and dangerous tasks, such as digging trenches, cutting wood, carrying ammunition, etc (ICTY 2016: 254, par. 657). Many men were killed while performing such tasks during the Bosnian war, including nineteen Croats from Bijeljina, whose bodies now lay to rest in the local Catholic Cemetery[61], and at least ten Muslims from Janja (Medžlis IZ 2015).

When my interview respondents mentioned Batković, a name that always came up spontaneously was that of Ferid Zečević. After the take-over of Bijeljina, Ferid Zečević participated in a radio broadcast with Arkan at Radio Bijeljina, after which he received Arkan in his home to celebrate the Muslim holiday of *Bajram* (Eid al-fitr), the three day feast that maked the end of the Holy month of Ramadan, (HRW 2000: 14), which in 1992 started on 4 April. This was a public gesture of reassurance towards the Muslim population, which converged with the initial approach the local authorities took, sending signs of accomodation to 'moderate' Muslims. But Arkan's exercize of public relations may have hidden other motivations. Zečević owned a pizzeria close to the army barracks, which he continued to operate after the take-over, giving rise to speculation that perhaps he had paid Arkan for protection.

A few weeks after Arkan left Bijeljina, Pero Simić, the new director of Radio Semberija and the newspaper *Semberske novine* (now renamed *SIM novine*), denounced Zečević on the air waves, accusing him of standing behind the Patriotic League (*Patriotska liga*)[62], which the SDS accused of leading the alledged attempt by 'Islamic extremists' to take-over Bijeljina. The Patriotic League, in turn, was presented as the contemporary version of the Second World War Handžar Division, about which rumours had been circulating for over one year (see Ch.2). In June 1992, Ferid Zečević was detained and taken to Batković, where, shortly after, he and Husein Ćurtić Hapaka, a goldsmith also from Bijeljina, were killed by guards (ICTY 2016: 254, par. 659).

According to my informants who spontaneously mentioned this case, news of Zečević's death quickly reached town, and were received with shock[63]. A secondary school

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61 According to information provided by the local Catholic parish and human rights activists.
62 A Bosnian Muslim political organisation affiliated with the SDA, with its own paramilitary forces, the Green berets.
63 Zečević's remains, however, were recovered only in 2005, from a mass grave (ICTY 2016:255, par. 659,

teacher by profession, Professor Ferid Zečević, as many in Bijeljina respectfully call him to this day, embodied a system of values and a way of life that now belonged to the past. An educated man, well-known and widely respected, he was fully engaged in the city's cultural life. Although he was not a powerful man, his public profile, and, probably, his relative wealth, attracted the wrong kind of attention. Using clubs (*batine*, or *motike*) as weapons, guards beat him to death. My respondents always mentioned the method and the weapons, as if to highlight a sadistic motivation in the descent to barbarism, which, some added, could not be separated from the general climate of ethnic hatred fostered by the authorities[64].

Beyond the threat of violence and severe restrictions to their freedom, including a night curfew (*policijiski čas*), the authorities took a set of measures that materially undermined and morally degraded the Muslim community. These were measures such as the job dismissal; evictions; obligation to accommodate displaced Serbs; and work duties.

The practise of dismissing Muslims from their jobs was first established in the aftermath of the 1990 elections, when the SDS sought to replace cadres with people of their confidence. At the time, Ljubiša Savić 'Mauzer' personally vetted all new nominations, in his role as President of the Municipal Commission for Recruitment and Nominations (*predsjednik opštinske komisije za izbor i imenovanje*)(Nikolić 1991:9). Later, during the Summer of 1991, many workers lost their jobs because they refused the call for conscription to the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), then fighting a war in Croatia. After the take-over, dismissals became increasingly frequent.

The systematic dismissals opened up vacancies that newly arrived displaced Serbs could fill, but in the short term the dismissals generated also an acute shortage of human resources locally, given that Muslims comprised the majority of the urban population at the start of the war. In some cases, that shortage protected non-Serbs, allowing them to continue in their jobs, subject to their 'loyalty' (see *infra*). It happened also, however, that

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note 2129.

64   Ferid Zečević was killed on 28 June 1992. In 2014 Gligor Begović, a guard at the Batković camp during the war, was arrested and put on trial at the Court of Bosnia-Herzegovina for crimes committed in Batković. He was condemned, among other things, for his participation in the beatings that resulted in the death of Ferid Zečević and Husein Ćurtić Hapaka, and sentenced initially to thirteen years, reduced to ten years on appeal in 2016 (Sud Bosne i Hercegovine 2016).

workers with particular technical skills, who could not be easily replaced were formally dismissed only to be immediately reassigned to their positions, but deprived of any rights, as part of their 'work duties' (e.g. Trbić 2007a: 189).

For people in 'socially owned' accomodation[65], losing one's job entailed also the eviction from one's home, since in such cases housing was provided by the employer as part of the workers' benefits package. Keeping with the narrative of an agression by Muslim extremists against the Serb people, in July 1992 Mauzer referred to job dismissals in the following terms:

> "The Presidency of the SAO of Semberija and Majevica has two days ago taken concrete decisions about the first reprisal measures to be taken in Bijeljina. Some of these measures have already been defined: first, to dismiss all Muslims from leadership roles. Should the genocide against the Serb people continue, the second measure will be to dismiss the Muslims from their jobs; the third is the least popular, emigration *(iseljavanje),* expulsion *(proterivanje)* or something similar "(SIM Novine 1992d)

The job dismissals had the effect of undermining the sustainability of the Muslim population by denying them the basic means of subsistence. The statement, which framed as reprisals measures that were already *de facto* in place, also reveals how the possibility of mass expulsions was considered from early on, and evoked as a threat.

Those self-employed were also affected, because as part of the war effort the civil and military authorities had the power to confiscate moveable goods, such as cars and machinery. This hit those working on agriculture particularly hard. In the village of Janja, the Muslim population had their lorries, cars, tractors, and equipment confiscated, ostensibly to fulfill the needs of the police and the military (Paravlić 2011: 248).

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65 In Yugoslavia, under the regime of self-management, workers were often housed by the companies they worked for, which were themselves socially owned by the workers. According to Antoine Christian Buyse (2007:167) "the tenants had specially protected tenancies also called 'occupancy rights' over the apartment in question. Under this system they could live in the apartment indefinitely, their rights could be terminated only in exceptional circumstances, and the right could be passed on to other household members when the occupancy right holder died. (...) Crucially, the Law on Housing Relations provided that occupancy rights could be cancelled if the inhabitant of an apartment was absent for more than six months without justified reasons."

The rate of evictions from socially-owned accomodation increased substantially with the massive arrival of internally displaced Serbs to Bijeljina, from mid-May 1992 onwards. Those who owned their own homes, as many did in Semberija, were not spared either. On the contrary, their property would become a magnet attracting more unwanted attention. Home owners were forced to accept displaced Serbs in their homes, according to the rule of 'surplus living space' (HRW 2000: 24-27). The rule, defined in the *Decree on the Allocation for Temporary Use of Housing Objects, Business and other Premises*[66], which entered into force in 1 August 1992, but which was already being applied in Bijeljina at least since June, defined the criteria of 'surplus living space' as any space beyond the ratio of two persons per room. Since houses in Bijeljina were usually big, the measure potentially affected the overwhelming majority of the population. However, according to research carried out by the organisation Human Rights Watch (2000), "the rule on surplus living space was applied in a discriminatory fashion", as "only minorities and those Bosnian Serbs who refused to take part in the war effort were forced to accommodate displaced Bosnian Serbs in their homes" (p. 27). As the Human Rights Watch report concludes, "this policy in practice turned into a mechanism allowing displaced Bosnian Serbs to harrass and abuse their Bosniak hosts, and ultimately drive them from their homes by making life unbearable, or simply throwing them out", and thus, "although the Bosnian Serb authorities indeed had difficulty accommodating Bosnian Serb displaced persons, the rule was also used as an instrument to force Bosniaks and other minorities to leave"(p.27)[67].

The introduction of work duties was another important aspect of this process of disposession and exploitation. The Muslims' loss of status was openly displayed. Older men from the most respected families (*najuglednije porodice*), were summoned to work for the public utility service (*komunalna služba*). They were made to sweep the streets, collect rubbish and perform other menial jobs, which some of my respondents characterised as a show of public humiliation aimed at demeaning them in their dignity.

Younger men had it even harder. The story of Sead Vidinlić[68] resonates with the

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66 Published on the Official Gazette of the Serbian People in Bosnia-Herzegovina n. 12/92, 31/07/92, cited by HRW (2000: 25, n.62)
67 The Report also acknowledges that there were cases in which Serb residents voluntarily hosted displaced people.
68 Interview, December 2014

experience of many others in Bijeljina. He was arrested for the first time in April 1992, in the street where he lived, on the third day after the takeover of Bijeljina.

"*I made a mistake... When I think about it now, I was so naïve, when I heard on Radio Bijeljina that it was safe to go out, I believed it.* "(For a moment, he sounded angry at his old self, before).

Sead was then severely beaten, and remained in detention in the basement of the electric distribution company for two days, then transferred to headquarters of the Crisis Staff, where a Serb neighbour, whom his mother had asked for help secured his release. It took him months to recover physically.

> "*I was all indigo when I got home. My mother looked after me, but for six months I couldn't leave the house*".

His physical condition seems to have been monitored, as during that time he was taken to the police station several times, for so-called 'informational interviews' (*informativni razgovori*).

> "*In those days* – Sead stressed – *Bijeljina was like a concentration camp* (Bijeljina je bila kao logor). *We were treated like dogs. I remember, at Beogradska street, I saw it, I was shocked, there was a house where it was written* 'Forbidden entry to dogs and Muslims' (*Zabranjen ulaz psima I muslimanima*)"

He was detained again one year after his first arrest, and sent to the Piper 'logor' (detention camp), to perform 'work duties'.

> "*I decided to stay home. I'm not guilty of anything, I didn't do anything, I have no reason to flee (biježiti). My wife, my partner of twenty years, couldn't take it, and she left* [Sead also felt responsible for his elderly parents, who were not in condition to flee; his wife left for exile, which determined the breakup of their relationship]. *In the meantime, I was collected (pokupjen) for the firsts time. A van (kombi) came one night, they had a list, then they took us to a military lorry, there at the street now called Miloš Obilić – we the old Bijeljinci call it Dašnica – I was taken to the Pipere logor (detention camp for forced labour). The whole way until the camp, they were beating us with wooden sticks. Then, June... July... [time went by]... what do I know? The Summer months... what do I know? One couldn't even keep count of time. The only thing that mattered was to get through another night, and to remain alive*".

Sead Vidinlić gave me details of the harsh regime of forced labour, physical and emotional abuse he was subjected to. For more than one year he remained in detention, deprived of proper food and shelter, digging trenches, carrying munition, cutting wood, and working in

farms during harvesting season. He was then released, only to be once again detained two weeks later.

Eventually, Sead Vidinlić decided he couldn't take it anymore, and began making plans to flee. After gaining the trust of an army officer, he was allocated to perform work duties in the town of Bijeljina. This allowed him to go back home every night, so that he was now able to organise himself. It was his sister, already living in Germany, who arranged everything. She paid 17.000 German Marks to human traffickers to bring Sead, his new wife and their baby daughter to Germany. They left in July 1995; soon after, his elderly parents were evicted from the family home, expelled from Bijeljina and abandoned in *no man's land* between frontlines in Mount Majevica.

Leaving Bijeljina was usually possible only after paying hefty fees. Two organisations operated openly under the umbrella of the Serb authorities. One was the 'Agencija Evropa', formed and staffed by members of the police and of the local branch of the Interior Ministry (MUP), but officially a private business (ICTY 2016: 262, par. 675). The agency's main task was to facilitate the obtention of legal documents allowing individuals who wished to leave the country to do so. In the process, applicants were usually required to sign documents relinquising their property, which should be transferred to the state. The agency would then take them across the border with Serbia, and then to Hungary. This was done in cooperation with the Serbian authorities, who were directly involved. The operations of the Agencija Evropa were directly coordinated by Pedrag Ješurić, chief of Bijeljina's Department of Internal Affairs (SUP: *Sekretariat unutrašnih poslova*), and Mile Puzović, head of the Department for Border Affairs and Foreigners of Serbia's Ministry of Internal Affairs (ICTY 2013: 278, par. 894).

The other organisation was the Commission for the Exchange of Civilian Population, headed by Vojkan Đurković, which was responsible for the transfer of populations within Bosnia, across the frontlines towards territory under the control of the Bosnian government. While the 'Agencija Evropa' dealt with individuals who applied to leave, Vojkan's commission primarily focused on enforcing the political decision, taken by Republika Srpska's central leadership, to reduce the non-Serb population to minimal levels.

There were also various groups operating clandestinely, smuggling people out of Semberija across the border to Serbia, and then to the border with Hungary, from where they would be able to reach Western Europe. Sead Vidinlić and his family exposed themselves to great risk, but they were fortunate to reach their destination. That was not the case of the Isić family, a family of six originally from Teslić, who tried to reach Germany, where some of its members lived already. In transit in Bijeljina, where they waited for permission to leave the country, they were approached by a young man who convinced them he was able to take them across the border. The family was murdered by a gang who lured them with the promise they would take them across the river Drina to Serbia. The gang was composed by twelve young men from villages in Semberija, members of the Army of Republika Srpska, who during periods of rest away from the frontlines engaged in criminal activity. They were arrested when they were caught robbing the house of a Serb man in the village of Suho polje. Once in custody, they confessed to a series of other crimes, including the murder of thirteen people in four separate incidents (Trbić 2013: 261).

The case was at the source of great tension in Bijeljina. In their September 1994 report about ethnic cleansing in Bijeljina the Humanitarian Law Center, a non governmental organisation from Belgrade, mentions an incident related to this case: a bomb placed in the building where the President of the Municipal Council (*opština*) lived. Their informants suggested that the attack "most likely targetted the President of the District Court because of the trial of twelve young Serbs accused of killing, in four separate incidents, (…) twelve Muslims (including three children) and throwing them in the river Drina"(HLC 1994). The report implies that the bomb was a form of pressure against the punishment of the accused. This kind of threat seems not to have been unique to this particular case. According to Trbić (2013:263) six of the members of this gang received prison sentences: fourteen years, later increased to twenty, to Branko Đurić Grbo; ten years, later increased to twelve, to Zoran Pantić 'Pinc', six years to Željko Lakić and Vukadin Karolić; four and a half years to Nikola Kovačević and three and a half years to Rade Nováković-

Some of my informants described what they saw as a sense of entitlement among Bosnian Serbs, fostered by a a certain climate of impunity, and the glorification of warlords like Arkan. This sense of entitlement amplified the risk of violence against non-Serbs.

Ordinary Serbs knew they could treat Muslims, Croats and Roma however they wanted with virtually no risk of punishment. This resulted in various forms of violence, from verbal abuse, to theft, beatings, and even murder, as in the case described above, which was not unique. he phenomenon of 'intimate violence', in which perpetrator(s) and victim(s) knew each other and often had previously had cordial relations was an important feature of the Bosnian War, with a long-term negative effect in community life (e.g. Sivac-Bryant 2016).

This sense of entitlement drove some people towards extortion. One of my informants, Samir[69], recalled on such case. An avid fisher, Samir had a cabin in the bank of the River Drina, where he kept his equipment.

"A friend told me [some months before the war] 'Don't go to the Drina!'. I cannot live without the Drina. I told him, 'Are you joking?' But I stopped going [as many local villagers had adopted a typical Chetnik iconography, and began to display aggressive behaviours, something that was not common in the city at the time]. The cabin was looted. I thought, 'Let them, let them have the fridge, let them have everything, I don't need it'. So I never went there again. What remained, remained. Later, they set the cabin on fire. And sadly I know who did it. He came to my house, and asked me to use my chainsaw, to cut some wood. My mother saw him, and told me 'Did you notice he wearing your jacket?' This was a specialised fishing jacket, just for export. A friend who was a director at Kurijak [a local garnment factory] gave it to me. Nobody had such type of jacket. It means he had been in my cabin. I told him 'I'm sorry, but Mirko A. [a Serb friend] has the chainsaw.'. So I told him, 'go to Mirko's and get it'. Then I called Mirko, and he said [sarcastically] 'let him come'. Mirko was ready for him. Out of vengeance, the man set my cabin on fire (…). I used to buy him a bear, and give him fish. Look how he paid back".

The extortion attempt Samir described was on the milder end of the spectrum of intimate violence. In his book *Majstori mraka* (The Masters of Darkness), Jusuf Trbić(2007; 2007a) provides several extreme examples of intimate violence, including that of Faruk Bilalić, 20 years old at the time, last seen alive when his former school mate and partner in basketball games, now a policeman, took him from his house for an 'informational

interview' (informativni razgovor)[70], reassuring his mother that this was a mere formality. His body was recovered in 2003 from an unidentified grave in Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia (Trbić 2007:229-230).

Intimate violence fulfilled an important role in relation to the strategic goal of 'separation of peoples'. Whether planned and perpetrated by those in power, or committed by individuals emboldened by the prevailing sense of impunity, in territories under the control of Serb forces, acts of intimate violence undermined community links, and simultaneously contributed to the implementation on the ground of the goal of 'separation of peoples' and to its justification by the ruling class as necessary for the establishment of durable peace. In striking contrast, people openly defending victims of violence would quickly get in trouble with the authorities.

The case of Snježana, a woman displaced from Tuzla, is particularly interesting in this context. A mother of two in her late twenties, she arrived in Bijeljina in May 1992, and and settled in the *mahala* of Tombak, Bijeljina's poorest neighbourhood, where her family was assigned accomodation.She still lived there, in a half-built house, the exterior still unclad.

I met Snježana through one of her friends, a, Mirzeta, Bosniak woman in whose home I lived for a couple of weeks during my field visit in the Summer of 2015 – I already knew her daughter and son-in-law, and she had heard a lot about me, thus creating a strange sense of familiarity. The two women visited each other for coffee every evening, and as we sat outside in my hostess' garden, I was able to witness and participate in some of their conversations. Usually these consisted mainly in small talk, gossip, and complaints about small problems of everyday life; but sometimes the chats evolved into something deeper, and the two friends reminisced about the old days during the war, when they first met. One one evening, the environment was much more sombre than usual. That afternoon, one of their neighbours had been killed by a car whilst crossing the street in the city centre. All the neighbourhood was in mourning. To highlight the good character of the deceased, my hostess recalled how this woman – a resettled Serb – had behaved correctly

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70 The expression "Informativni razgovor" is an euphemism widely used by police and security forces in Yugoslavia and its sucessor states, to justify detaining and interrogating individuals in the absence of concrete evidence against them, and often with the purpose of exercizing political pressure. An informational interview involved a spectrum of approaches towards the intimidation of the interviewee, from veiled threats presented as ostensibly friendly advise, to physical violence.

towards her during the war:

> " *Her brother was killed in combat* (ratišta)*, and I did not dare joining the mourners who gathered at her house* [because she was a Muslim herself]. *She sent for me, and later told me*, 'why didn't you come'? You are not guilty that my brother was killed. It wasn't you who killed him'".

This was a tacit acknowledgement that Muslims like herself were seen the enemy, the 'other side'. It thus seemed normal, in those days, for Muslims to expect retribution whenever something bad happened in the frontlines. Snjžana added, to highlight the good character of their deceased neighbour:

> "*It wasn't easy in those days. Everybody spoke about Muslims like this: 'balija this, balija that', when it wasn't worse* [balija is a derrogatory term for Muslims"].

There was a strong element of conscious performance in this conversation. The two friends were fully aware of the nature of my research, and Mirzeta was keen to impress her neighboors by presenting me as someone "who really gets it" (*skontati*). As I interpreted it, the two friends wanted, on the one hand, to highlight how transgressive their friendship was, and how 'their own' co-ethnics criticised them for it, and, on the other hand, to show how their deceised friend was strong and dignified, as inviting Mirzeta to join the other mourners would likely be frowned upon by her fellow Serbs.

> "It was like that in those days", Mirzeta added. "and among Bosniaks, it was '*Chetnik this, Chetnik that*'.

> "It wasn't the same thing", Snježana replied. "*I remember, your daughter went to school with my son. It wasn' easy for her*". Then, turning to me, she said "*But the war didn't change me, you know!*"

Not long after she settled in Tombak, Snježana befriended some of her Muslim neighbours, like Mirzeta. "*She defended us*", Mirzeta confirmed, and often quarreled (*svađala se*) with other displaced Serbs for the way they abused Muslims.

" *I was called to the police station many times, for an* 'informational interview' (i*nformativni razgovor)*", Snježana said. My hostess nodded. I asked why. They must have taken it for a rethorical question, because they did not reply. [71] Snježana's attitude, they implied, was

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71 Fieldnotes, August 2015 (adapted)

widely seen as subversive, and often censored for alledgedly fostering discord among Serbs.

The case of Snježana suggests that the climate of intolerance and discrimination against the ethnic 'others' also worked to produce compliant subjects. Calling Muslims '*balija*' – a derrogatory term – and abusing them reinforced the strategic goal of 'separation of peoples', but treating them in a dignified manner revealed the endurance of the traditions of 'life in common', thus posing a challenge to the newly established order. The fact that she was a displaced person and therefore poorly integrated into the local society made her vulnerable in a way that domicile Serbs who protected non-Serbs from harrasment and persecution were not, since they could mobilise their network of connections within the new nationalist ruling class, and operate discreetely, without openly challenging the system. It was this open challenge to the new order, rather than the support to its victims that needed to be repressed.

5.2: Surviving in wartime Bijeljina: Coping strategies among Muslims

In his study of the liminal stage of rites of passage, Victor Turner(1967; 1969) characterised the experience of the *liminal personae* as fundamentally marked by ambiguity, neutrality, and structural invisibility(1967:99), which constrain their possibilities for agency. Their ambiguous character stemmed from the fact that they "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space(1969: 94); neutrality results from their deprivation of status, pushing the liminal personae to a "passive and humble" behaviour (1969: 94). As for their structural invisibility, it was imposed on them because they were perceived as polluting by those outside their liminal realm, given their position in between and betwixt two different states(1967:98).

There are striking parallels between the characteristics of the liminal experience in rites of passage as identified by Turner, and these coping strategies developed by non-Serbs in wartime Bijeljina. Under the precarious and dangerous conditions of life in wartime Semberija, non-Serbs developed three types of coping strategies: reliance on support across the ethnic divide; display of loyalty; and structural invisibility. The possibility of support across ethnic boundaries, which in many cases offered some relief to their suffering,

stemmed from the ambiguity created by liminality; the display of loyalty stemmed from the acknowledgement of their particularly vulnerable condition, and initially assumed the form of neutrality. As for structural invisibility, the most fundamental characteristic of the *liminal personae*, it offered non-Serbs a way to reduce their exposure to danger, but it also offered the ruling class a mechanism to navigate the contradiction between the protracted presence of non-Serbs – and Muslims in particular – and the idea of an ethnically homogenous society.

We will now explore each of the three types of strategies, and how they evolved, and correlate them with the evolution of the process of consolidation of Republika Srpska's political structures, to offer a glimpse into the dynamics of ethnic cleansing in wartime Bijeljina.

Reliance on support across ethnic boundaries

In Bijeljina, acts of intimate violence paralleled with acts of support across ethnic boundaries, which reaffirmed the endurance of community links. During my fieldwork, I came across many examples of such acts, through the recollections of local residents. During the take-over, my respondents told me, support was initially mutual, between Muslims and Serbs. Neighbours erected barricades together, and took shelter together. Despite the barrage of propaganda broadcast by the local Radio Bijeljina and by Serbian television, which presented the events as an attack by Islamic extremists against the Serb population, it quickly became clear to many that Muslims were the real target. There are many stories of how some Serbs took action, moved by the need to protect the lives of Muslim friends.

That was how Jusuf Trbić, the former director of Radio Bijeljina and the newspaper *Semberske novine*, succeeded in escaping to exile. He was arrested on the second day of the take-over, and severely beaten at the municipal Department of Urbanism building, the headquarters of the Serb take-over operations, usually refered to as the Crisis Staff (*krizni štab*). He was subsquently taken to taken the studio of Radio Bijeljina, and coerced to exhort Muslims to abandon the fight. A friend, Đordje Krstić, secured his

release. This is a story Trbić has told many times: Krstić took Trbić and his wife to his brother's house, where he recovered from his wounds under their protection. When Trbić expressed his concern that they were putting their own lives at risk, Đordje Krstić replied: You will be our guest here, and If someone has to get killed in this house, first it will be my brother, and I and only then you"(Trbić 2014: 191). As soon as Trbić recovered, unnamed friends organised his escape. Jusuf Trbić obtained political asylum in Germany, where he remained until his return to Bijeljina in 2002. His books (e.g. Trbić 2007; 2013), where Trbić has documented hundreds of cases of killings, disappearances and other experiences of extreme violence, also reveal many cases of Serbs whose help to fellow citizens across the ethnic divide made the difference between life and death. As for Krstić, this was not his only intervention in favour of non-Serbs; he is known in Bijeljina for the extent of his efforts, although he himself avoids the limelight.

The story of Elvira offers an illustration of the difficulty in making inferences regarding the motivation behind acts of support across ethnic boundaries. A secondary school teacher of Marxism, Elvira lost her job soon after the November 1990 elections, when the course was abolished from the curriculum; unlike her colleagues of Serb nationality, she was not assigned any other course. She was forced into a precarious situation, and lived with her daughter in a rented room. They were alone when the violence erupted, and like many others, she decided to look for shelter at the local barracks, in the belief that the JNA would provide protection to the civilian population. When she got there, however, she was sent back, told that the place was full and had no capacity to accept anyone else. A former student, now member of a paramilitary unit, saw Elvira and her daughter, and took them to safety in his own family home, where she remained for a few days, until the situation was declared safe. A few weeks later, Elvira decided to leave Bijeljina, and join her brother who lived in Croatia. Aware that it was virtually impossible to leave, Elvira nevertheless arranged to visit a friend in Serbia. She took the bus as if she was going for a day trip, carrying only a small bag and a bunch of flowers. In Bosanska Rača, near the bridge over the River Sava that separates the Bosnian region of Semberija from the Serbian region of Vojvodina, all Muslims travelling on the bus were ordered to get out. A young man in military uniform, also a former student, told her to get back inside, and thus Elvira left Bosnia with her daugter, having paid only their bus tickets. They were the only Muslims on that bus who made it past the border. Elvira never saw the two men

again, and did not know whether they survived the war.

Twenty-two years later, when she told me this story, Elvira still couldn't quite explain why she had been so fortunate in those two encounters. These were, after all, volunteers in paramilitary units, rather than conscripted soldiers. She felt that her students had always liked her and that somehow that had made a difference, aware however of other stories in which the reversal of the power relation between teacher in student had a different outcome, one marked by violence. Regardless of whether those who provided assistance to Muslims trying to leave Bijeljina were acting motivated by the will to resist nationalism, or at least injustice, or whether they acted instinctively in a particular moment and in contradiction with their own involvement with the violence that people were fleeing, their acts revealed the endurance of community links. Reliance on support across ethnic boundaries would become a crucial coping strategy in the face of persecution.

But solidarity was never expressed publicly, and few dared voice any discontent, let alone opposition, to the way nationalists were transforming Bijeljina. Dissent was framed as betrayal, anti-patriotic and anti-Serb, and the price for disloyalty was high. The story of Siniša, a Serb man in his mid-forties when the war began, provides a powerful illustration of the fear many Serbs felt:

> *Q. So at the time people knew what was going on? For instance, the killings, the crimes?*
>
> *A. We all knew about it (…) but we were powerless (…) We were powerless, because we had children, we couldn't do anything! Well, we could, but that would put us in danger.*
>
> *Q. How?*
>
> *A. Well, they would kill us! To avoid getting killed, we must stay quiet because, look, because those who should have been our conscience, I mean, they were the creators and the executors of evil.*
>
> *I personally, on a personal plan – and that is my satisfaction – on a personal plan I helped many people (…) And now, I spoke with people, now one Meho Hujdurović – he is here a highly regarded agriculture specialist, etc, whose son was abducted– and now he asks me "are there any Serbs…" and then he reminds me of 1942, during the Second World War, here, when the muftis, members of the Islamic Community, and those wealthy Muslims, etc, when they signed a petition and sent it to Pavelić[72]. He says* "we protected the Serbs, the Orthodox, so that nobody touches

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72 Mujo Hujdurović, a farmer and landowner, was one of the signatories of Bijeljina's Resolution (Grabčanović 2006:64). He was arrested in 1994, and executed in Brčko by the Ustasha (Hujdurović 2010: 36). In 1992 his sons, the partisan veterans Idris and Meho Hujdurović, tried to encourage Serb

them (...)" *And then I say "Čika Meho, there are! There are many Serbs who would..." I tell him*"I am the first among them. But, look" *I say* "my signature on top is worthless, because nobody will follow me. And the ants will eat me. My signature is worth if it appears there, in twentyeth, thirthyeth, forthyeth place. And the first signature must be that of Vladika Vasilije [Kačavenda, the Bishop of Zvornik-Tuzla], and some authorities (…). He must be the first, then this one, then that one, then me" *because who am I? I am an ordinary man. But he [Kačavenda] was in fact the heart of darkness, not only him personally, but the whole church was the heart of darkness. So, we couldn't count on them, on the intellectuals, publicists, etc, and the people [populace] was headless. I, I and people like me, we didn't have, one must admit, we didn't have courage. But when all of those who could lead us, they were on the opposite side, they were all part of it, an important part of it.*

Describing what happened in Bijeljina, and in Republika Srpska more generally as "ethnic cleansing", Siniša went on to recall how the Bosnian Serb ruling elite, and Karadžić himself, whilst avoiding the term, openly embraced ethnic cleansing as an imperative for the enduring dominance of the Serb people in Republika Srpska:

> *I listened to Mr. Karadžić, and he says, look* [Siniša conveys his perception of how the Bosnian Serb leader approached the problem of Muslim presence in Republika Srpska by paraphrasing Karadžić] "we can grab the whole of Bosnia-Herzegovina, but we cannot destroy it all" . *And then comes the racist theory* " and they are such – the Muslims – they will for fourty years do the hardest jobs, walk with their heads doen, and make children. And one day they will again become a majority. That's why we need to build up our own territory, that is, to separate ourselves(...)". *And so the task here was to reach [to reduce the size of the Muslim population to], say, 6%, 8%...*

With such a message emanating from the top, many people felt free to openly express hostility against the Muslim population:

> *When the war started in Bijeljina (…) that people, ordinary people, Muslims, Serbs, they shared the same fears, they hid together in the basements, and protected one another. But, when it was all past, and when the Serbs won, that's when those divisions happened. Then people openly said "When will this..., when will that..." My neighnour was talking to me, and said "when will those*

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friends to reproduce the initiative of 1941 Bijeljina Declaration (see Ch.2). They proposed to Serb friends the idea of writing an open letter to the local authorities appealing for the persecution of the Muslim population to end, but received only negative replies.

balije" – that's a demeaning name for the Muslims; he wouldn't even say balije, but balijaši [the suffix indicates a diminutive form], *even more demeaning – then, he says* "when are they going?". *And I say* "Why should they go. Man, we came here from our villages and built our homes, and they were here already [Siniša was refering to the rural origins of many Serb residents, including himself, which he contrasted with the urban roots of Bijeljina's Muslims] so why, why should they go [rather than Serbs]?" *But people are indoctrinated, they don't reflect much...*

Expressions of ethnic hatred worked as statements of allegiance to the nationalist regime, revealing active endorsement as much as conformist compliance. In Siniša's perspective, ethnic hatred, directed against 'Muslims' in abstract, spread efficiently, thanks to the climate of fear in which people lived and the aggressive propaganda they were subjected to. There was, however, a certain level of inconsistency between the population's adherence to the nationalist order being created, and attachment to pre-existing community links, so that, as Siniša put it *"this was how people thought (...):* 'maybe I hate Muslims, as a collective, but when it comes to Enver, Muhamed – *specific individuals* – then I don't hate them', *because they went to school together, played toghether..."*. It was for that reason that – Siniša was keen to add – the worst acts of violence and ethnic cleansing were committed by "military formations from other regions"[73]. Or, as another informant, converging with Siniša, put it *"outsiders were needed for the dirtiest jobs"*[74].

This inconsistency between adherence to the nationalist order being created, and attachment to pre-existing community links allowed some Muslims to preserve their *veze* with, and obtain some level of protection from Serbs in a position of power. Literally

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73 It was the case for instance of Arkan's unit, which came from Serbia, as well as the Special Unit of the RS police nicknamed 'Patuljice', which is alledgedly implicated in the murder of twenty two members of the Sarajlić, Sejmenović and Magalić families on 25 September 1992 (see *infra*).

74 Conversely, there were Bijeljina residents heavily implicated in crimes committed in other areas. For example, the Bassiouni Report, refers to a paramilitary group from Bijeljina named the "weekenders" (vikendaši), who every weekend went to the neighbouring town of Brčko, "to plunder and vandalise"(UNSC 1994, Annex IIIA, p. 129). My own informants reffered many times to the plunder going on in Brčko, adding that the never imagined the town was so wealthy; and they often reminded me that Goran Jelišić, who the ICTY sentenced to life in prison for crimes against humanity, including murder, committed in Brčko, was from Bijeljina and lived there throughout the war. Dražen Erdemović, who at the ICTY confessed participating in the execution of hundreds of men captured after the fall of the enclave of Srebrenica, also lived in Bijeljina.

translated as connections, *veze* were a crucial element in the 'economy of favours' (Henig 2017:188) generated by, and ran in paralel with, the discriminatory and repressive practices in place against non-Serbs. In such a context, *veze* gave access to individuals with enough leverage (*štela*) to influence decisions to one's favour. Often associated with the idea of bribery, *veze* and *štela* encompass a wider class of phenomena. According to David Henig, "*Štela* embraces a moral view on the importance and acceptance of the use of various personal connections to obtain goods, services, jobs, or information in situations of shortage or impossibility of access". Solidly established during communism, if not earlier, *veze* remain a deeply rooted social institution in Bosnia-Herzegovina, to which the danger and uncertainty that marked the wartime experience lent additional strenght.

The liminal condition in which Muslims were immersed entailed their disempowerment, but, for some, *veze* were a crucial protection mechanism. This was particularly the case in relation to members of prestigious Muslim families. Their position in society functioned like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, due to their high status in local society, relative wealth and large houses that were highly coveted, they were particularly exposed to humiliation and danger. The dramatic reversal of their former status was publicly exposed by acts of humilation specifically targeting the most prestigious members of pre-war society, such as the already mentioned 'work duties', including cleaning the streets, collecting rubbish and other menial jobs. On the other hand, however, some had strong *veze* with prominent local Serbs now in a position of power, which they managed, to some extent, to preserve. In such a context, their *štela* (leverage) offered some degree of security.

In this context, *štela* often amounted to a form of protection racket. This is a typical case of 'difficult memories', clearly present but seldom articulated. I heard a few stories related to cases of *štela* as protection racket during my fieldwork, but never in the first person, and always whispered rather than clearly expressed. Whenever I tried to make further enquires my interlocutor would back off, in a protective attitude marking the limits of my access to other people's wartime experience. But it was not always the case that *štela* amounted to material advantage. The local ruling class did sometimes exercise discretion in favour of old local Muslim families, with whom they shared a common identity as 'Semberci', to the detriment of families from a rural background that had immigrated to Bijeljina in the previous decades (FHL 1993a:). In such cases, *štela* took the form of an

exercise of mercy, resulting in a display of might.

The veteran partisan Idris Hujdurović described to me how two prominent members of the SDS intervened on his behalf, after he was detained after the take-over, and falsely accused of being a member of the SDA. Outraged by the accusations, he told me, he lost any sense of fear, and confronted his interrogator, a man he used to know before the war: "*I saw he had a pistol, and I jumped forward. Remember, I was in an Ustasha court, I had so much fear back then, that I can no longer fear anything*". In 1943 he had been arrested in Bijeljina, along with his father Mujo, when Ustasha 'Home Guard' members discovered the secret shelter they had built, which served as hiding and place for people who feared persecution. They were sent to a prison in Brčko, where Mujo Hujdurović was executed the following day, while his son Idris was able to escape with the help of other prisoners, after which he joined the partisans. Hardened as he was by his experience, Idris Hujdurović's courage must have taken his interrogators by surprise. They sent him home, summoning him to present himself at the police station the following morning. This gave him and his brother Meho – who Siniša mentioned for his efforts to mobilise local Serbs into expressing their opposition to the discrimination and persecution against Bijeljina's Muslims – precious time to seek help.

"*If it wasn't for two members of the SDS* [Čika Idris names them], *if it wasn't for them being humane* (ljudi) – *look, even among them there were some who were humane* – *I would have been taken, like this man, here* [referring to Ferid Zečević, čika Idris points at the window, in the direction of Zečević's restaurant down the road], *who was accused of organising the Handžar division, even though that division never existed. I was meant to go to Batković that very night. If it wasn't for them, I would have finished in Batković*".

The next morning, Idris Hujdurović returned to the police station. He was left in the waiting room for many hours, until finally he was told he was free to go. The police nevertheless retained his passport and identity documents. Diminished in his position by the intervention of people more powerful than himself, his jailer couldn't resist one last threat. "We will meet again", he said, refusing to return the passport and identity card he had confiscated the day before.

Idris Hujdurović remained in Bijeljina until 1994, when an old school mate (he named him) managed to take him and his wife to Belgrade. He lived in exile in Hungary until 2003. His older brother Meho was evicted from his house in the centre of Bijeljina and expelled to *no man's land* in the Majevica frontline, after being forced to sign documents relinquishing his property. The man who arrested Idris Hujdurović, who he also named, was at the time of the interview, a political adviser to a high-ranking Serb politician.

Displaying loyalty: from neutrality to engagement in the war effort

After the military take-over of Bijeljina and the severance of all links with the Bosnian state institutions, its residents were compelled to display their political loyalty to the newly-created Republika Srpska. Among non-Serbs, this assumed two distinct forms, one passive, through a position of neutrality over political affairs, and the other active, through participation in the war effort. As a coping strategy, the display of loyalty was more a function of the duress in which non-Serbs were under, than a choice determined by their agency. The display of loyalty by non-Serbs provided a *modus vivendis* that, whilst offering individuals the promise of fair treatement and protection offered the authorities a way of managing the continued Muslim presence.

Neutrality consisted above all in acknowledging (*prihvatiti*) the reality of the political situation, and recognising one's own vulnerability by withdrawing to an apolitical position, encompassing the refusal to take sides in the war whilst acknowledging the right of the local authorities to rule in Semberija. The adoption of a position of neutrality reflected the awareness, based on the events during the take-over, that any resistance would be ruthlessly punished. It reflected also the fear of lawlessness, stemming from the rise in crime following the outbreak of the war (Nielsen 2011:77, par.258; 78, par.262), and some degree of expectation of fairness from the part of the authorities (e.g. SIM Novine 1992e). This expectation would quickly prove to be misplaced, but it was not unfounded. It was based on the statements of the authorities as well as on the tone of propaganda during and in the immediate aftermath of the military take-over of the region. The local autorities framed

the military take-over as a defensive measure against an alledged Islamic extremist plot, and drew a clear distinction between the enemy, identified as 'Islamic extremists', and 'respectable (*pošteni*) Muslims'.

An article signed by Milan Novaković (1992), published on the first edition of *SIM novine* to be issued after the take-over, offers a clear example of this type of message. A psychiatrist by profession, Novaković was the President of the local SDS, and deputy at the Assembly of the Serb People. After describing the nature of the conflict as *'jihad'* led by "*Islamic fanatics and ustashi terrorists [who] kill Serbs to conquer Serb lands and impose their rule*", Novaković stresses how, in Bijeljina, Serbs and Muslims wanted to continue living together, and expected politicians to find "*new state structures*". The onus was placed on the Muslim politicians. He refers to an exchange between a local Muslim man and Fikret Abdić, the Muslim member of the Bosnian collective Presidency who, along with Serb member Bijljana Plavšić visited Bijeljina in the wake of the take-over, on 4 April 1992:

> "The words of a Muslim resident in whose home Serb volunteers [meaning members of Arkan's unit] slept were engraved in our minds: *'I want to live with Serbs... that's it, I want this to become Serbia... but I want peace!!! And transmit this to Mr. A. Izetbegović and his provocateurs* (uškači (*sic*))"(Novaković 1992: 15)

The article by the local SDS chief propagandist, Pero Simić, describing the turn of events, offers a chilling example of how, regarding the Muslim population, praise and threats came together:

> "It is no secret at all that many Muslims should be grateful to Ražnjatović [Arkan]. Had this fighter (…) not come, undoubtedly there would have been more victims, more destruction (…). A great number of villagers from Semberija would have hurried into town, and that overwhelming mass of people would know what to do.This way, Semberija's peasants remained in their surroundings, waiting only for peace. The honourable (*pošteni*) Muslim people of Semberija did not want to identify themselves with extremists, did not wish for a fight" (Simić 1992: 7)

It was this ostensible distinction between 'Islamic extremists' and 'honourable(*pošteni*) Muslims' that allowed Muslims to resort to a position of neutrality., while the threats implicit in this type of message functioned as a strong inducement.

<u>The case of Janja</u>:

The village of Janja, six kilometers south of Bijeljina, represents a particular case in what regards the display of loyalty, connected to how the military take-over occurred. As soon as Arkan's forces entered Bijeljina, Janja was surrounded by a JNA tank battalion from the Novi Sad Corps (Paravlić 2011:229), ostensibly to protect the civilian population. Its commandant then presented the local leaders with an ultimatum to surrender all weapons. Negotiations ensued, also involving Arkan and Mauzer, which resulted in about one hundred and fifhy pieces of weaponry, mostly hunting rifles, surrended. Janja's local leaders declared their loyalty to the Serb authorities, and Arkan and Mauzer offered garantees of protection. Arkan then visited Muslim families to greet them for *Bajram* (the *Eid* Islamic festival). As one of the locals involved in the negotiations, Huso Zečkanović, president of Janja's *mjesno zajednica*[75] would later declare in an interview with the Bijeljina newspaper *SIM Novine*, "thanks to mutual understanding, the worst was avoided", so that the takeover occurred "without a singe bullet being fired"(SIM Novine 1992a).

One of the consequences of this 'peaceful' take-over was that the local *mjesna zajednica* remained in place, and officers of Muslim ethnicity continued to staff the local police station, providing some semblance of autonomy, in cooperation with Bijeljina's local authorities. It was to these Muslim policemen that fell the task of arresting and transferring to Bijeljina individuals singled out for 'informational conversations' (informativni razgovori) or suspected 'extremists', some of whom ended up dead (Paravlić 2011:242). The Serb authorities regularly tested the population's loyalty, urging people to make voluntary donations in money and in kind, so as to contribute to the war effort. Whatever was not voluntarily surrendered ended up being confiscated or stolen. The confiscation of equipment such as tractors, lorries and other machinery had an enduring negative impact in people's ability to economically sustain themselves, given agriculture was the main activity.

The *modus vivendi* between Janja's Muslim population and the local authorities became increasingly strained with the arrival of thousands of displaced Serbs, many of whom occupied houses in Janja, which they shared with the owners, giving rise to many

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75 Literally meaning 'local community', the *mjesno zajednica* is a neighbourhood-level organisation, providing
     a connection between lresidents and the municipal organs for issues of local relevance, a structure dating
     back to the communist period (Toal and Dahlman 2011:339, n.20).

conflicts and episodes of violence against the local Muslims (see Ch. 4 of this thesis). Still, throughout the war, and until the mass evacuation of July-September 1994, when Janja was emptied of its Muslim population (see *infra*) the authorities of Republika Srpska were keen to present the case of Janja as a model of peaceful inter-ethnic coexistence between Serbs and 'loyal' Muslims, often showcasing the village to foreign journalists and international observers (HRW 2000: 2).

The shift from neutrality to active engagement:

Neutrality became harder to sustain over time. This shift corresponded to the general mobilisation of men of military age. Following the creation in May of the Army of the Serb Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, later renamed Army of Republika Srpska (*Vojska Republike Srpske*, VRS), in June 1992 the Official Bulletin of the Serbian Republic in Bosnia-Herzegovina published the Decision declaring the general mobilisation of men of military age. As announced in the pages of *SIM novine* (15/09/1992, p.10), the sanctions for anyone refusing to fulfil their military duties (*vojne obaveze*) would be to lose the right to citizenship; health insurance and pensions; and housing (*stanarska pravda*). Any real estate such individuals owned would be used for the needs of the defence of the Serbian Republic in Bosnia-Herzegovina[76]. In principle, such measures did not discriminate between Serbs and non-Serbs, and they offer an idea of the type of pressure Bosnian Serb men were also under in order to comply, regardless of their enthusiasm for the nationalist cause[77]. But they were applied essentially against Muslims.

The Army of Republika Srpska suffered from a shortage of manpower from its onset (CIA 2002), and from its onset its commandant Ratko Mladić saw in the conscription

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76 Službeni glasnik Srpske Republike u Bosni I Herzegovini, No. 8, 08/06/1992, transcribed in *SIM Novine* 15/09/1992, p.11

77 Bosnian Serbs who fled to Serbia and Montenegro to avoid conscription were relentlessly chased, handed to the RS military and sent straight to the frontlines (Radončić 2005). Conscious objectors faced prison, or might be assigned dangerous work. In our interview (December 2014), Sead Vidinlić, who spent the greatest part of the war performing forced labour, recalled with sadness the case of a young conscious objector who was assigned work duties in support of the frontline in Mount Majevica. He was killed whilst coordinating a team of wood cutters, when a tree fell over him. Sead remembered him as a kind young men, and regretted that the prisoners who worked with him were not allowed to attend his burial (which took place on the spot).

of non-Serbs an opportunity and a necessity[78]. Given such important constraints, the Serb leadership was keen to retain the distinction between 'extremists' and "the mass of peaceful Muslims 'unwilling to fight against the Serbs and their state'" (Donia 2012:175, citing the 17th session of the RS Assembly, 24-26 Jul 1992), but would no longer allow a strict withdrawal into an apolitical position. Instead, loyalty should be actively displayed. Neutrality would no longer suffice. In August 1992, non-Serb men living in Bijeljina were summoned to sign a loyalty pledge. The pledge was presented in the form of a question: "*Do you accept to participate in the Serb Army until the final defeat of the enemy?*"[79]. Many of those who answered *Yes* were then conscripted into the Army of Republika Srpska. In Bijeljina, the authorities zealously enforced the above-mentioned sanctions against those who answered *No*. Going further, the Municipal Assembly aproved a Decision declaring that individuals bound to military duties who were not present in the municipality should return, otherwise "their families will be expelled from the municipality, and their property will be placed at the disposal [of the authorities] for defensive needs"(published at *SIM novine* 01/10/1992, cited by Trbić 2007: 18). This Decision would be used to legitimise the expulsions of 'disloyal' Muslims. Those who refused to sign the loyalty pledge were also often subjected to forced labour.

It is not known how many men thus joined the Army of Republika Srpska, but it was enough to form a unit overwhelmingly composed of Muslim men, the Third Semberija Brigade, commanded by Major Pašaga Halilović, himself also a Muslim[80]. The brigade was deployed to various combat situations, most notably in the neighbouring region of Posavina, as part of the 'Operation Corridor' which sought to widen the narrow strip of territory connecting Serbia via Semberija in the northeast with the Bosnian Krajina in the Northwest, and throught it also with the para-state of the Republic of Serb Krajina in Croatia.

An informant, a young man at the time, explained to me how signing the loyalty pledge was usually a decision taken collectively by the family, rather than simply by each individual. Already unemployed, and having been evicted from his home along with his mother at the beginning of the war, he refused to sign the pledge himself, and ended up

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78 As inferred from Mladić inaugural speech at the 18th session of the Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 12/05/1992
79 Interview with Saša Pazarac, July 2014.
80 He was previously the director of the local firm Duvan, and returned to his post after demobilisation.

performing digging trenches in the frontlines. His uncle, an experienced carpenter, did sign the pledge, and was able to rescue his nephew from forced labour, and have lighter work duties assigned to him. Probably due to his age, the oncle was not drafted, but instead had to provide the military with carpentry services as part of his work dutes, and was free to continue working for other clients as well, with my informant as his assistant, thanks to which they were able to provide for the family throughout the war years[81].

The memory of participation of local Muslim men in the war effort is one of the most 'difficult memories' surrounding the wartime experience that I came across with during my fieldwork, a memory zealously preserved from the gaze of outsiders, lest it expose a more murky side of that experience. I tried to interview non-Serb veterans of the VRS, but my atempts were always frustrated. When I asked an informant with whom I had a particularly good relationship, if he could put me in touch with a relative who he told me had been a member of the VRS, he simply replied "*He wouldn't speak sincerely* (iskreno) *to you*". A Roma woman who told me that her two children had been in the army, added: "*They joined, but not of their own free will* (dobrovoljno)" Her husband interrupted her: "*But does anyone go to war willingly? Nobody wants to go to war*". It was through Elvira[82] that I got the closest to understanding the impact of such an experience in community life. One of her brothers joined the Army of Republika Srpska, so as to preserve the family home. Her other brother, who lived in Croatia, was conscripted into the Croatian Army, so that Elvira had to endure the thought that their respective units might confront each other in the battlegrounds, and that one brother might kill the other.

Non-Serbs who remained in Bijeljina shared with the Serb population the permanent anxiety caused by the possibility of losing a loved one in the frontlines. But for non-Serbs, and Muslims in particular, that anxiety came on top of all the concerns stemming from their position of vulnerability, with the added weight that they might be killed by " our own people". Elvira's brother did succeed in preserving the family house, but in many other cases the protection that joining the army conferred to one's property proved illusory. As more and more displaced Serbs arrived in Bijeljina, such houses became incresingly coveted. Informants who themselves had refused to sign the loyalty pledge were keen to highlight how families of Muslim members of the VRS were often evicted, if not

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81 Interviewed in September 2014.
82 Interviewed in November 2014.

expelled from Bijeljina, while they were fighting in the frontlines, so that, coming home for a rest, many would find someone else living there. Somehow such happenings vindicated my informants own decision to refuse to fight, but it also revealed how divisive these memories were. Their motivation, sharing these with me, seemed to be, however, to highlight how loyalty was betrayed, and any expectation of fairness futile.

The display of loyalty may have allowed 'the worst' to be avoided, but the price to pay was the prolonged exploitation of the Muslim residents, who for a while compensated with their work for the acute lack of human resources in the region. But in the balance between the struggle for survival and the preservation of one's sense of dignity, the latter often had to be sacrificed in favour of the first. For that reason, these are 'difficult memories' which tend not to be openly articulated, but kept private instead, emerging only as fragments, second-hand stories, and hearsay.

Structural invisibility and the denial of identity

The instinct to hide is the most basic strategy to cope with imminent danger in liminal situations. Hiding was precisely what many of Bijeljina's residents did when Arkan arrived to take military control over the city. Those who were able to, took shelter with relatives or friends in the surrounding villages, while those unable to leave town gathered in basements and other places deemed safer than their own homes. Recalling those first few days, Saša Pazarac described how in the 'skyscraper' (*neboder*) where he lived, all the neighbours, "regardless of ethnicty" removed their surnames from door bells and letter boxes. After a team of three 'arkanovci' searched his flat on the pretext that there were snipers operating from the building, Saša was taken door to door at gunpoint, to identify his neighbours (it later turned out that the person they were looking for, a worker at the local electricity station, had managed to escape, never again to return). Hiding would remain, for the Muslim population, the primordial coping strategy. The need to hide revealed the perception of their extreme vulnerability, and their heightened liminal condition.

Borrowing from Victor Turner's (1964) analysis of the neophyte experience in the middle stage of rites of passage, I will use the term "structural invisibility" to describe how,

whilst physically present, Bijeljina's Muslims were excluded from the local society, thus occupying an intersticial, or liminal position, in a society that was itself engulfed in liminality. The protracted presence of a large number of non-Serbs in Bijeljina contradicted the ideal of ethnic homogeneization that the goal of 'separation of peoples' aspired to. Making the Muslim population "structurally invisible" resolved, albeit temporarily, that contradiction. This structural invisibility involved two variants: physical and symbolic invisibility.

To become physically invisible meant, first of all, not to be seen in public. As Saša Pazarac[83] explained me, Muslims avoided leaving their homes: "*Right from the beginning of the war, nobody went out easily* (niko nije lako izlazio) *! … because of the killings... because of plunder...*". But the greatest fear was that of being 'collected' (*pokupljen*) for forced labour or expulsion. Fear was pervasive since the beginning of the war, but it became even more intense following the general mobilisation and the summon to sign the loyalty pledge. As stressed in the previous section, an apolitical position of neutrality would no longer be tolerated, and loyalty had to be actively displayed. Men who refused to sign the loyalty pledge were therefore particularly at risk, and many felt compelled to go into hiding, moving from one place to another, often spending the night away from their families.

Beyond the everyday experience of violence, ranging from verbal assaults to disappearances and murders, two particular events were crucial in exposing the danger non-Serbs faced, thus fostering a sense of extreme vulnerability. These were the murder of twenty two members of the Sarajlić, Sejmenović and Magalić families, on 25 September 1992, and the demolition of the town's mosques on 13 March 1993.

On the night of 24 to 25 September 1992 a special unit of Republika Srpska police known as the "*Pahuljice*" (snowflakes) sealed off the neighbourhood of Bukreš, and entered the houses located on 154 to 160, Ivo of Semberija street, detaining all of the people present, twenty two in total, of whom thirteen members of the Sarajlić family, four members of the Sejmenović family, and five of the Magalić family. Among them were seven children and eight women. They boarded a lorry, which took them to the village of Balatun, in the bank of the river Drina, where they were all murdered in the same night.

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83 Interviewed in September 2014

The bodies were later thrown into the river, of which thirteen were exhumed in 2005 from unidentified graves at the cemetery of Sremska Mitrovica, a town in Serbia located on the bank of the river Sava. They were buried the same year in the Islamic Cemetery of Selimovići, in Bijeljina. The remaining bodies have not yet been recovered.

The murder of the Sarajlić, Sejmenović and Magalić families marked, in the most brutal manner, a shift in the local authorities' approach to the presence of Bosnian Muslims. According to Milorad Davidović, a procecution witness in different cases at the ICTY, in August 1992, the local authorities discussed and approved a plan for the expulsion of the Muslim population. A native of Semberija working as a police inspector in Serbia, Davidović had previously been the chief of Bijeljina's police station. He was sent from Belgrade to Bijeljina to help investigate and curb the wave of violence there, caused to some extent by paramilitary groups, which were "undermining the authority of the local institutions by forming their own parallel authorities and also attacking Bosnian Serbs"(ICTY 2016:242, par.633). The plan, Davidović stated (ICTY 2016: 270, par.671), consisted of "three phases", to be implemented simultaneously, so as to induce the Muslim population that still remained in Bijeljina to flee, or otherwise to coerce them into joining the Army of Republika Srpska. The three phases were:

1. the approval and enactment of a Municipal Assembly's decision whereby Muslims refusing conscription should be dismissed from their jobs, and have electricity, water and phone supplies cut off (check), and would be available for compulsory work duties[84];

2. the public humiliation of prominent Muslims through the assignment of menial tasks as work duties;

3. the division of the town of Bijeljina in two sectors, and the murder of a Muslim family in each of these sectors, in order to create panic.

The ICTY analysed Davidović's claims in the trials of Momčilo Krajšnik; Mićo Stanišić and Stojan Župljanin; and Radovan Karadžić, with the Tribunal (ICTY 2016:259, paragraph 671 [Karadžić veredict]) finding that:

"the three phase plan existed and was discussed by Bosnian Serb authorities in

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84   It is important to note that largely similar sanctions were in place also for Serbs refusing conscription, such as conscious objectors.

Bijeljina, and in accordance to this plan Duško Malović's special police unit, following the lead of Drago Vuković [the chief of the National Security Service (služba nacionalne bezbjednosti) of Republika Srpska, which was based in Bijeljina] who was a member of the Bijeljina Crisis Staff, instilled fear in the Bosnian Muslims who remained in Bijeljina by September 1992"

On a separate note, the veridict specifies the following:

"Fear was created by the killing of Bosnian Muslim families and looting of their homes (…). While the Chamber received specific evidence about killings carved out by Malović's group, given that these are not scheduled killing incidents, the Chamber will not make a finding in respect to those killings, but accepts this evidence for the purpose of concluding that an environment of fear was being created"(ICTY2016: 259, note 2166[Karadžić Veredict])

The crime had a devastating impact, and it occupies a prominent place in the collective memory of persecution and ethnic cleansing in wartime Bijeljina. The impact was felt not only among Muslims, but also among Serbs; one of my informants, for instance, highlighted how in Balatun, a Serb village, there was a reaction of convulsion ("*selo Balatun se pobunio zbog toga*")[85]. But the impact of this crime among Serbs – at least initially – is best inferred through the public reactions it generated.

By the end of the day, news of the disappearance of these families had already reached their relatives, even if the truth wasn't precisely known[86]. Rumours quickly spread, blaming the local Chetnik Movement led by Mirko Blagojević. It is not clear whether such rumours grew spontaneously; whether this was a premeditated effort by the SDS to discredit the Chetniks, at a time when paramilitary formations were being disbanded or integrated into the Army of RS; or whether shifting the blame to a minor political player, as the Chetnik Movement were, was a way of damage control, bearing in mind the widespread moral revulsion the crime, involving notably the murder of children as young as six, seems to have provoked among Serbs. Be that as it may, it was thanks to these rumours that the truth about the crime was disclosed. Two days after the crime, the Chetniks placed Radio Bijeljina under siege, and forced the director, Pero Simić, to read, in

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85 Interviewed in July 2014
86 Informal conversation with a relative of one of the families, August 2015

four different times, the following statement:

> "The Serb Chetniks of northeastern Bosnia [wish to] express the sharpest protest regarding the event that took place on the night between 24 and 25 September, 1992. That night, special forces of the Republika Srpska Ministry of the Interior, composed of people, not from Semberija who, during the police curvew, took away 14 members of the Sarajlić family and 8 members of the Sejmenović, and liquidated them. The Serb Chetniks of northeastern Bosnia, in response to this event, call for an investigation of the occurrence and that all perpetrators, as well as their commanders, be brought before justice. The Serb Chetniks will, in the ranks of the Army of the Republika Srpska, truly and honorably fight for the freedom of the Republika Srpska and for its international affirmation, but we will also be prepared to neutralise the actions of all criminals who may, at this moment, be coming and going in the region of Serb Semberija and Podmajevica" (cited by Trbić 2017)

The Ministry of Internal Affairs reacted publicly denying any responsibility, claiming that the *Pahuljice* were actually engaged in combat operations in the frontlines that night, but adding that "this event may be related to the massacre against Serbs committed the same day in Milići", thus implying that it might have been a reprisal. As for the Chetniks, the Ministry accused them of disloyalty:

> "Such an ill-considered act of one political party has caused great damage to the Serb state and Serb politics. In difficult times when war is being waged among the peoples, these and similar acts are of more use to our enemies than to the Serb people." (cited by Trbić 2017)

Among Bosnian Muslims, the meaning of this crime was clear. These families were not wealthy for the crime to be rationalised as motivated by plunder (*zbog pljačke*) or by old grudges. They appeared to have been randomly targeted, to convey the message that

nobody was safe. The goal of generating panic was achieved; feeling trapped and in great danger, many people tried to leave by whatever means possible, either with the help of friends; hiring human traffickers; or using the services provided by the 'Agencija Evropa'. In all cases the operation was financially costly, and often involved signing documents stating that they relinquished their real estate and other property, for the use of the state. This represented an efficient process of material disposession, in what a journalist called a model of "commercialised ethnic cleansing" (Hadžić 2003). Those staying behind were, increasinly, the poorest, and the oldest.

The demolition of Bijeljina and Janja's mosques six months later, in March 1993, represented another milestone, clearly conveying the message that there was no longer any future for Muslims in Bijeljina. That was how most of my informants framed their memory of this event. Despite all the Muslims had already endured in almost one year of war, the demolitions took many people by surprise. Saša Pazarac[87] described it in these words: "*Among Bosniaks, it was unbelievable, nobody expected it, there was fear! Then people decided to leave, but were unable to*"[88]. I asked him about reactions among the Serb population. Saša always tried to present me with a diversity of perspectives. "*Honestly, when the mosques were demolished, some cried, others supported it!*[89]". Those in favour, Saša added, said things like "*this is Srpska, we don't need mosques*", and "*we don't need balija*"[90]. Siniša[91] was among those shedding tears:

> "*It was very difficult for me. I cried. I cried at my neighbours' house, because I knew that for them this was a message that they must go. That's the first thing. Second thing, it was really hard for me because the people* (ljudi) *who did this were from my own people* (narod) *who did it.* (…) *I'm an atheist, I think of religion as theater* [he elaborates on his atheism], *but I cried regardless, because I knew they* [the Muslims] *had to go, that it was a point of no return, that we are the way we are* [meaning we, Serbs], *and finally, that it had all been organised*"

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87 Interviewed in July 2014
88 "K*od bosnjaka, to je bio nevjerovatno, niko nije to ocekivao, strah je bilo! Onda su ljudi htjeli izaci, a nisu mogli* "
89 *Iskreno, kad se rusili dzamije, neki (srbi) su osuzivali, neki su podrzavali".*
90 "to je Srpska, ne treba nam džamije", or "ne treba nam balije"
91 Interviewed in January 2015

Rumors quickly spread of impending "ethnic cleansing and mass expulsions"(Simić 1993). In his editorial at the *SIM novine* newspaper "Bijeljina without mosques"(*Bijeljina bez džamija*) the director Pero Simić (1993) acknowledged the persistence of such rumours and articulated a response to the unease some may have felt. He denied the rumours of impending mass expulsions, which, he argued referring to the peace talks taking place in the context of the Vance-Owen Peace Plan, while having "*no connection with the truth, made the position of the Serb delegation in the conversations in New York harder*[92]. But the rumours were not unfounded. The first wave of mass expulsions was to occur wihin weeks.

Before we describe how the process of mass expulsions unfolded, however, we should return to our analysis of invisibility as a coping strategy. Fully withdrawing from public space was not a possibility; in order to sustain themselves, non-Serbs needed to at least minimally expose themselves and engage with others. To reduce the risks associated with exposure, many adopted a strategy of symbolic invisibilty. This consisted in hiding or even ostensibly abandoning their ethnic and religious identity, to adopt a new 'Serb' identity. This happened primarily through the adoption of Serb-sounding names; acquisition of false documents or legal request to have one's name changed; as well as conversion to Orthodox Christianity, a practice that the Patriarchate eventually forbade, except for the case of so-called 'mixed marriages' (*mješani brakovi*). Their symbolic invisibility made their physical presence tolerable, but at the cost of denying one's identity. In an article entitled "Muslims try 'name cleansing' to survive in Serb-held Bosnia', *Washington Post* reporter John Pomfret(1993) told the story of a Muslim businessman who changed his name from Ferhat to Filip:

> His elbows resting on an intricate lace tablecloth with the crescent moon of Islam,
> Terzić, in a monologue, justified his decision: *"My name was Ferhat. What kind of
> name was that? Some Arabian name, maybe Algerian, Egyptian. I don't know why I'm named
> Ferhat. So I asked myself, why? You know, for forty years I had difficulty pronouncing it. Now
> that there's real democracy, I decided to drop it. Then I asked myself, 'If they're allowing me to*

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92 Nije nikakva tajna da je rušenje džamije izazvalo znatan nespokoj muslimana u Semberiji, nakon toga su se počele širiti I glasile o narodnom etničkom ćičšenju I masovnom useljavanju. Sve te priče, koje nemanju veze sa istinom, otežale su poziciju srpske pregovaračke ekipe u njujorku"

change my name, why not my whole family? So we all changed, and now we feel a lot better. Anyway, we've got to be loyal. And besides, every living being must do what it takes to live. Right?" (…) In town, the family owns two pie shops where they churn out dozens of cheese and meet delicacies daily, *"I worked for all this"*, Terzić said (…) *"With a new name, I can go to Serbia, right next door, and do business. I can buy stuff there and sell it here. With my old name, I'm stuck."* (Pomfret 1993)

While some may have embraced the opportunity to adopt a 'Serb' identity of their own initiative, workers who had somehow preserved their jobs were under great pressure to change their names. It was the case of Fatima S[93]. She was dismissed from her job in July 1992, but was exceptionally fortunate to find a new job in a private company set up by the husband of an old friend, which allowed her to financially support her family throughout the war years. Her new employer, however, registered her under a false name. She accepted it as a necessary fiction, but was keen to add she would never do it of her own initiative:

"And now, my boss calls me: 'Fatima! What Fatima? We have christened you' She laughs. I ask her: *"So they changed your name?"* *"Yes! I didn't [want it], but I could say nothing, just keep quiet."*

As with the case of men who fought in the Army of Republika Srpska, the issue of name changes and conversions is an unconfortable one in Bijeljina, especially among Bosniaks. Practically all of my informants referred to it, often spontaneosly, but only one, a woman in a so-called 'mixed marriage', ie, a woman of Muslim background married to a Serb man openly, assumed to have adopted a 'Serb' identity; she purchased false documents, for which she paid 800 German Marks. She was keen to add, however, that she never actually adopted the name in her personal relations, but instead used the documents to be able to circulate unhindered between Semberija and Serbia.

The practice of adopting a 'Serb' identity seems to have been widerspread. Pomfret (1993) mentions 380 cases sucessfully processed and one hundred further formal requests

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93 Interviewed in January 2015.

pending before the end of 1993[94]. It is likely that the purchase of false documents, and the informal adoption of a Serb-sounding name were much more common than the resort to a formal process. The auhorities and the Serb population more generally were obviously aware of it, which raises the question of how such a practise was framed at the time. It wouldn't be possible for non-Serbs to engage in such a coping strategy without at least some level of acquiescence or tacit consent. In his 1993 article, Pomfret claims that "i*n Bijeljina, the Terzić's name change belongs to a quiet but growing conspiracy among Serb townspeople to protect some of their Muslim neighbours from peasant Serb refugees and the gangsters who use them*" The essentialisation of displaced Serbs as peasants so as to fit into a narrative of a "*war here between the people from towns and those from the countryside*" is overblown and one-sided, representing the perspective of domicile Serbs interested in scapegoating the displaced population and avoiding questions about their own responsibilities (see Ch.4). But the claim also points to the importance of solidarity across ethnic boundaries, as well as the endurance of a transethnic local identity among Bijeljina's residents, and to the anxiety felt by many domicile Serbs with the dynamics introduced by the arrival of massive numbers of displaced Serbs to the transformation of Bijeljina. The effectiveness of such a coping strategy required that a lot of people turn a blind eye.

Symbolic invisibility was adopted generally under duress. As Fatima's experience suggests, this was something people tended to be actively induced, if not coerced, into. The *proto* Nedeljko Pajić, St. George's church parish priest, seems to have been particularly active in this regard, although he denied, in an article he wrote for *SIM Novine* in reaction to numerous reports in the international media, having ever engaged in forced conversions(Pajić 1994). Pajić acknowledged, nevertheless, that many Muslims were applying with the Ministry of Internal Affairs to have their name changed, a process from which he tried to distance himself. Interviewed by Pomfret, however, Pajić reportedly mentioned having turned away eleven families who came to him to get baptized, to add that "*they say they want to return to their roots*". Alluding to the 'mythico-historical' narrative (Mallki 1995) of Bosnian Muslims as the descendants of converted Serbs, Pajić therefore

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94 After the war, those who went through the legal process to have their name changed, had to repeat the same procedure to reclaim their original name, with significant financial costs. There is no data on how many people were affected, but I received anecdotical evidence of cases not yet settled, and individuals who gave up on getting their name back because of the bureaucracy and costs involved.

presented this phenomenon as the renewal of their true identity, a process thar paralleled with Serb nationalists' commitment towards the regeneration of Serb identity through retraditionalisation.

The two processes – retraditionalisation of Serb identity, and (imposed) renewal of the Serb 'roots' among Muslims – converged in the school system, where religious education had become compulsory. Muslim students were bound to attend Serb Orthodox religion classes, and to join in the daily rituals, such as praying at school, going to church, and even making the sign of the Cross when passing near churches or hearing church bells, and other occasions. Symbolically invisible in this way, the pupils joined their Serb class mates in learning how to be proper 'Serbs', a task in which the Serbian Orthodox Church in general, and Nedeljko Pajić in particular, were heavily invested. Forcing children to embrace a religion that is not theirs is a form of violence perpetrated against them. On the other hand, symbolic invisibility was the necessary condition alllowing the children to participate in the school life. My informants who were in school during the war years highlighted that generally the teachers made a great effort to leave the war out of the classroom, and provide the children with some resemblance of normality. It seems, thus, that the attitude of Primary School Headteacher Lazar Manojlović, who protected non-Serb students, teachers and other workers, on the grounds that in his school "there were only two nations: students and teachers" was not unique. Manojlović himself always maintained that most people did remain honorable (*pošteni*), but the pressure he had to sustain for publicly refusing to pander to nationalism must have had a deterrent effect among others, thus inducing compliance among those who did not convert to nationalism[95].

There was a significant a gender dimension with regard to the adoption of coping strategies. Regarding the display of loyalty, it was easier for women to withdraw into a position of neutrality, while men were forced to assert their loyalty, or refuse it. This inequality spilled over to determining how structural invisibility was implemented. Men were also more severely targeted by discriminatory measures, and more at risk of both random violence and detention. For that reason, they tended to withdraw into physical

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95 Interview with Lazar Manojlović, November 2014; Manojlović often repeated this point, in numerous interviews and media appearances.

invisibility, and it was on women's shoulders that, to a great extent, the burden of providing the family's subsistence fell. Embracing a strategy of symbolic invisibility, many women adopted Serb-sounding names as a way of hiding their real identity, which allowed them to more freely move around town, and engage in the activities of everyday survival. This is not to say that women were not at risk of violence. Although the issue of wartime sexual violence emerged only seldom in my interviews, such a risk was always in people's minds. Indeed, in Karadžić verdict, the ICTY refers to "an incident in June 1992 when paramilitaries raped two Bosnian Muslim women and paraded them naked hrough town before they took them away by car and raped them again"(ICTY 2016: 241-2, par. 631). As an act of demonstrative violence (Gow 2003:118), such a crime undoubtedly instilled fear.

Despite the fear, however, the ability to circulate that their symbolic invisibility conveyed them also allowed some women to engage in an activity that was crucial to survival in wartime Bijeljina: gathering information about evictions, arrests, disappearances and other crimes. Very early on during my fieldwork, the question of how information circulated became a puzzle. Phone lines were unreliable and were often out of order, and in any case many homes had their phones cut, or had no phone at all. But it seemed increasingly clear that information about what was going on in town, in particular about crimes, circulated fast. It emerged from the interviews that people knew about different incidents of violence relatively quickly. When inquired about the flow of information my respondents confirmed that yes, information about evictions, disappearances, and other acts of violence circulated widely, with some people adding that the flow of information, much of it in the form of rumours, contributed to spread fear and convince many to leave. But nobody seemed able to explain to me quite how this flow was generated, beyond hearsay or the usualy dynamics of rumours, and my question often seemed to my informants out of purpose, as most were more interested in sharing the substance of their own experience. It was Saša Pazarac who eventually disclosed to me one particular way through which information circulated in wartime Bijeljina, one which involved actively gathering and checking it, rather than merely reproducing it. I was about to leave the field when I openly asked him about the issue. That day, Saša had arranged for me to meet a man who was interested in sharing his story with me. His friend wanted to learn about my research first, before committing himself, and this offered an opportunity for me to seek validation regarding some of the themes that seemed to be emerging, after almost one year

of fieldwork. It was in this context that it occurred to me to ask them about the circulation of information. Saša said it was the Mossad. "I am not joking", he added, with a smile on his face. Mossad, he explained me, was the acronym of "*Mahalska obavještenja služba*" (neighbourhood information service):

> "Every morning a certain number of women went through town, from one neighbourhood to another, to obtain and share information about the activities that occurred the previous night, during the curfew, with regard to evictions, expulsions and disappearances. The women often used their bicycles, so that information circulated very fast, on the basis of eyewitness accounts. They would quicky learn about who was missing, and under which circunstances" (fieldnotes, 27 january 2015, on the basis of Saša Pazarac's description on an informal conversation)[96]

Visiting friends or relatives living in different *mahale* for a coffee (*ići na kafu*) was a morning routine many women in Bosnia-Herzegovina traditionally engaged in between domestic chores (see Bringa 1995; Sorabiji 2008; Henig 2012). This routine was an important part of the institution of *komšiluk*, through which communities were closely knit, and through which some level social control was also exercised, in a delicate balance. The women involved with the 'Mossad' used these coffee visiting routines as an important resource in the individual and collective efforts to endure and survive (*opstati*) in wartime Bijeljina, effectively becoming under cover Human Rights investigators[97]. The speed in which they gathered information was crucial in allowing for the prompt mobilisation of connections (*veze*) and networks of support across the ethnic divide.

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96 Fieldnotes, 27 January 2015, on the basis of Saša Pazarac's description on an informal conversation.
97 Wary of interrupting the flow of the conversation, I failed to ask how the name 'Mossad' came to designate these activities, and whether the name was used at the time or only retrospectively. The Israeli intelligence service *Mossad* has an almost mythical status in the Balkans, given the popularity of conspiracy theories about the 'new world order' in the region. Such conspiracy theories became particularly popular among Serb nationalists (Byford 2006), keen to place themselves in an imagined tradition of resistance against foreign oppression. I interpreted the acronym as a humourous, sophisticated critique of such mindset.

Although the coping strategies described above did grant individuals some relief in the face of extreme adversity, they could not counter the drive to make Bijeljina a 'Serb' town. The acceptance by international negotiators of the principle of territorial division on an ethnic basis as a necessary condition to bring the war to an end represented an early victory to the Bosnian Serb leadership (Glaurdić 2011: 290-291), which emboldened them in their pursuit for the ideal of an ethnically homogenous society. The continued presence of a large Muslim population in Bijeljina contradicted this ideal. Ultimately, as a group, Bijeljina's Muslims had no way of resisting the enforcement of the 'strategic goal' of 'separation of peoples'.

5.3: The process of mass expulsion

The forced displacement of Semberija's Muslim population occurred mainly through two methods, voluntary departure under coercion, and outright expulsion. There was no freedom of movement, and anyone wishing to leave had to seek permission, pay significant fees and alienate his property, which was to be placed at the disposal of the state. During the first year since the beginning of the war, the *Agencija Evropa* was the organisation primarily responsible for this process. The agency regularly organised busloads to the border between Hungary and Serbia, in cooperation with the Serbian authorities. As the relations between Belgrade and Pale soured due to the Bosnian Serb leadership rejection, against Slobodan Milošević's will, of the Vance-Owen and subsequent Peace Plans, this cooperation seems to have eventually come to halt (HLF 1993)[98]. Tuzla, the closest city under control of the Bosnian government, became then the main destination for the removal of the undesired population, who were abandoned in *no man's land* between frontlines in the Mount Majevica.

In an investigation carried out in 1993, the Fund for Humanitarian Law reported that "according to the Bijeljina officials, this decision stipulates that in the area of Bijeljina should remain only 5% of the total population of 22,000 Muslims" (FHL 1993a). If the decision of how many should stay was taken centrally, the decision of who should go was

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98 In their May 1993 report, the Humanitarian Law Fund stated that the Serbian government refused entry to individuals of Muslim ethnicity, and highlighted how the Serbian government had ceased to emit even transit visas for Muslims leaving areas under the control of Bosnian Serbs.

taken locally. According to information the Fund for Humanitarian Law obtained from local leaders, the local authorities compiled lists defining who should be removed in each operation, following three criteria (HLC 1993a), offering considerable leverage:

1. "Muslims who in the previous decades moved from Srebrenica, Vlasenica, Kalesija or from other places in the former Yugoslavia" − this referred primarily to the so-called 'muhazeri' inhabitants of villages in the Drina Valley that were dislocated due to the construction of dams in the river, and their descendants. They were widely seen by the domicile population as responsible for the ruralisation of Bijeljina in the 1960s and the growth of crime rates in the 1980s, with SDS members pointing out that it was from their ranks that the SDA recruited the 'extremists' from whom Bijeljina was 'liberated';

2. "Those who had any relation with the Muslim 'armed rebellion' in Bijeljina in the end of March and April 1992"

3. "Muslims who belong to the category of disloyal and politically suspicious, and figuring in the data bases an of the state organs responsible for such cases"

On the basis of lists of individuals provided by the local authorities, the expulsions were organised and carried out by the Commission for the Exchange of Civilian Population. A member of Arkan's Serbian Volunteer Guard[99], Major Vojkan Djurković 'Puškar', was the leader of the Commission, which had an official character, and its own paramilitary force, which operated independently of the local police (Amnesty 1994: 6). Vojkan and his force were also actively involved in the ressetlement of displaced Serbs in Bijeljina and Janja. They routinely evicted non-Serbs, reassigning their homes to Serb families, who usually paid for the right to occupy them.

'Vojkan's men' regularly visited the homes of non-Serbs, ostensibly to make a survey or an inventory of the house. Under such pressure, the individuals visited often signed up for 'voluntary' departure from Bijeljina, a service for which Vojkan's Commission charged about 150 German Marks per person, or up to 2.000 German Marks in the case of men in military age. During big expulsion operations their *modus operandi* was more extreme. A

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99 According to Cvijetin Simić, the President of the Municipal Assembly between 1990 and June 1992, Vojkan worked for Arkan, providing logistics, and remained connected to Arkan until the latter was murdered in 2000. Simić described Vojkan before the war as a "small criminal" (interview, January 2015)

black van (*crni kombi*)[100] would circulate around town at night, during the curfew, 'collecting' people from their homes whose names figured in the list, without prior warning. Once the *kombi* was full, it would drive to a central location – usually the Agricultural Technical School (*Poljoprivedna škola*) or the car park in front of the heaquarters of the Red Cross – unload and go 'collect' more people, until it filled a bus or a lorry. The individuals thus detained were then taken to a second location in the countryside, where Vojkan himself was often waiting for them. Those who had signed off for 'voluntary departure' were also brought there. Victims of forced displacement were then thouroughly searched and robbed of any money or valuables. Men of military age were separated, regardless of whether or not they had already paid to leave, and sent to Batković, or to detention camps near the frontlines, to perform forced labour, until their families were able to pay for their release. The others were eventually driven to the frontlines in Mount Majevica and left there. (Amnesty International 1994:5; HRW 2000:36 ; UNSG 1994: Annex IIIA, p. 137, par.359)

The first wave of mass expulsions occurred throughout the Summer of 1993, following a decision taken centrally by the Bosnian Serb leadership, to drastically reduce the presence of Bosnian Muslims still remaining in Republika Srpska. This wave of mass expulsions followed a similar process that took place in the other towns where there was still a significant presence of non-Serbs. It was the case of Trebinje in January 1993 (HW 1993; FHL 1993), and Banja Luka from March 1993 onwards (FHL 1993). The first wave targetted the Muslim population in the town of Bijeljina, and seems to have been designed to have an essentially demonstrative effect, pushing potential targets to sign up to 'voluntary' departure, or to leave clandestinely with the help of human traffikers. The second wave, in the Summer of 1994 consisted primarily in the evacuation of the village of Janja. Between July and September 1994 the quasi totality of the Muslim population of Janja, was expelled, in an operation requiring a significant logistic effort. In the process, the victims were not only forced to abandon their property, but often had all their personal documents confiscated and destroyed[101]. According to the local Association of Camp detainees, up to 700 hundred men of military age from Janja were detained in Batković,

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100 It is likely that there was more than one van operating, but the image of this particular black van circulating through the streets of Bijeljina at night remains nevertheless the symbol of the mass expulsions. Both the method and the memory find their parallel in Banja Luka's experience, with the colour of the van as the sole difference. In Banja Luka the van was red (Galijaš 2009: 256).

101 Interview with Mehmed Đezić, President of the Association of Camp detainees of Bijeljina and Janja (*Udruženje logoraša*), November 2014

and subjected to a regime of forced labour in agriculture and in the frontlines. Some remained there until the camp was closed in January 1996. Others were released and expelled to Tuzla after their families were able to pay for their liberation. Between both waves the Commission remained active albeit with a slower pace. By the end of Summer 1994 there were probably no more than two thousand Muslims left in Semberija, out of a pre-war population of around thirty thousand (Tableau 2009:741, Table 2M).

Sometimes, in their eagerness, Vojkan's men happened to 'collect' and expell the wrong people, individuals not on the list or on good terms with the local ruling elite. In such cases the authorities usually intervened to bring the individuals back, thus exposing their leverage in the process (HLC 1993a). In one such case, they went as far as pressing criminal charges against Vojkan, having him arrested, "after he expelled a Bosnian Muslim who was on good terms with SDS members who had established a military unit of Bosnian Muslims in the Army of Republika Srpska [the Third semberija Brigade]"(ICTY 2016: 263, par.676) Such 'mistakes' happened more and more often as the Muslim population dwindled. The few Muslims still remaining, and especially those who had suceeded in preserving their homes, became targets, as displaced Serbs screened the town in search for accomodation they could occupy.

Fatima S. was the victim of one such 'mistake'. A member of one of Bijeljina's oldest and most respected families, she was able, thanks to her ability to navigate through connections, to preserve the family house in the town centre. For years she sustained the pressure exercised by displaced Serbs, who coveted the house and regularly showed up to threaten the family, in an attempt to induce them to leave. Then, in the night of 12-13 July 1995, at 2.30 am, she woke up to the noise of someone trying to open the gate to the courtyard. Fatima recalled it in the most vivid way. An old property, the family home was composed of three separate houses around a courtyard. Fatima lived with her elderly mother in one of the houses. One of sisters lived in the second house, and in the third there was her brother and young niece. When Fatima got to the courtyard, there were two men there, who had jumped through the high walls. There were other men outside; they ordered her to open the gate.

"I recognize some of them, although they are wearing balaclavas, I can still see their eyes. I recognize them (…) It was a little weird. Despite everything, I never hid, I always moved around; these were people with whom I talked, with whom I sat for coffee, just the before… So I ask 'What's going on?' 'You are going to Tuzla' [someone replies]".

Fatima recalls the stream of thought in her mind as the incident unfoleded. Her extraordinary presence of mind would prove crucial for the outcome of this experience. Her sister had taken sedatives, and locked herself in her house, so that Vojkan's men had to tear the door down. She was in shock, but Fatima managed to get her dressed and out of the house. As for their mother, a woman in her late 70s, she refused to leave, defiantly saying she would rather get killed. "*Mamma, you don't know who you are dealing with, they will kill you!*". As the old woman resisted, one of the men punched her, while another showed Fatima his pistol. She managed eventually to dress her mother a coat on top of her night dress, and get her out. As they were leaving, the men noticed the third house, and asked who lived there. "*I came up with something, I said 'there is a man from Tuzla living there* [meaning a displaced Serb], *he is old, let him be – because my niece was there, a young, attractive girl, I didn't know what they might do to her, and I was afraid for her. So I said 'Come on, when the morning comes you'll deal with him'*" The operation seems to have taken no more than fifteen minutes. The infamous black *kombi* was waiting for them outside. They were driven to the outskirts of Bijeljina, where they were put in a military lorry, already so crowded that there was hardly any space left, and taken to a detention site in the countryside.

In the morning, as her niece was leaving for school, there were people already in the courtyard, ready to occupy the houses. After they told her that the women had been taken to Tuzla, she rushed to see her relatives in another part of town. In the meantime, her father was able to escape unnoticed and go into hiding. The family immediately sought help with their connections (*veze*) to bring the three women back. It was the intervention of Fatima's employer that prevented their expulsion. Around 4 pm, at the detention camp, Fatima was finally told they were to be taken back to Bijeljina. Before getting into the same lorry that had taken them there, they were throroughly searched and robbed. When they got home, they found it already occupied, but the police intervened to force the occupiers out the following morning. The family continued to regularly receive threats by people who

coveted their house well after the Dayton Peace Agreement came into force.

Fatima's experience was exceptional, as she highlighted herself. Bijeljina's remaining Muslims continued to be evicted, expelled, and in some cases murdered[102] until the eve of the peace negotiations at Dayton in October 1995. Despite the fortunate end to the family's wartime ordeals, the experience left indeleble marks. Fatima's sister never fully recovered from the shock she suffered. "*Since that night* – her sister told me – *I have never again been able to smile*". As for Fatima, in the end of our interview she told me how she tries to forget, but cannot, even though she managed to carry on with her life and preserve a positive attitude. She added that during the war she had kept a diary, which someone took away when they were 'collected', and after that she never went back to her writing, because she wanted to forget. The man she recognised in his balaclava, a displaced Serb from Central Bosnia, now lives in the United States, Fatima told me. He obtained political asylum on the grounds of the persecution he suffered in Central Bosnia, where he originally lived. She sees the others regularly in Bijeljina. They sometimes exchange greetings, as if nothing ever happened.

The sense that the crimes committed against non-Serbs during the war went unpunished is an outstanding feature of my informants' recollections of this period, with Vojkan as the most conspicuous of all the characters that integrate the narrative(s) that emerged from these recollections. One of my informants recalled Vojkan's candour and his sense of impunity, as she told me that he was known to tell his victims that "*it's better that people pay me to take them away rather than to end up in mass graves*", as if they should be grateful that he was saving their lives[103]. More than anyone else, Vojkan now personifies the terror Bijeljina's lived under during the war years, even though he is not connected to any of the murders that happened there. Arkan and Mauzer – undoubtely more powerful than Vojkan – were both murdered after the war, while Vojkan lives undisturbed in Bijeljina. A colourful character, who in an extensive interview for *SIM novine* in 1994 presented himself as a "humanist" (Simić 1994: 23), Vojkan somehow overshadows those who stood behind him, who emerge from my informants' recollections as a mass of unnamed individuals, who now

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102 The murder of five members of the Hadžić family, including one child, on 11 September 1995, was the last in a series of multiple murders that punctuated Bijeljina's wartime experience (Trbić 2013a: 276)
103 Informal conversation, January 2015

seem to pretend they had nothing to do with the mass expulsions. They haven't been forgotten, though. One of my informants offered me the following reflexion about the protracted process of ethnic cleansing that took place in Bijeljina[104]:

"And those who did not think that they were doing evil, they intentionally thought and did us harm. Because it was enough for one of them —how ugly that sounds, "one of them"! But, that is how it was—to say "tonight round up that street", and you know that it is your street. And what kind of feeling do you have when you come home, say, me personally, and they have taken your parents (...) So that, intentionally or not, they were fomenting terror (...). People were disappearing without a trace, from Bijeljina! We heard, "they disappeared, those disappeared, these disappeared..." And now, every night we hope, "maybe it won't be me tonight"! And every night that you survive, that is good. I remember, in the morning when I would get up, I had a secret knock, for my parents, because my house was next to theirs in the same courtyard, I had a special way to knock on the door. Imagine how it was for me every morning when I would find them, sitting with plastic bags, in their pajamas? They had not slept all night, sitting in their pajamas, waiting! And when I come, my mother says, "Oh, thank God, they didn't take us away last night". And then, you would live that way until the next night. It lasted this way for four years. It is amazing that we remained normal, that we didn't go crazy from fear!"

Concluding remarks:

Marginalised, if not ignored, by an official narrative which they largely contradict, most of the memories explored in this chapter nevertheless form part of an archive of knowledge shared across ethnic boundaries. Going beyond the conventional 'perpetrators-victims-bystanders' narrative, the exploration of these 'difficult memories' highlights the everyday experience of getting through (*doživjeti*) and surviving (*preživjeti*) in an environment marked by pervasive fear and uncertainty; and the role of agency and contingency in the particular context of liminality. What makes these memories 'difficult' is not only that these are memories painful to recall, of suffering and injustice, but, above all, that they are at

104 Interviewed in January 2015

odds with the official narrative of the wartime experience in Bijeljina, on the one hand, but also, on the other hand, that they dissent to some extent from the narratives about Bosniak victimhood during the Bosnian war favoured by Bosniak nationalists.

Serbs in Bijeljina feel a sustained pressure not to question, let alone contradict the official version of the wartime experience. That pressure is insidious, and somehow reminiscent of the pressure to conform they felt during the war, when chauvinism was tolerated, but expressions of compassion were acively if tacitly repressed, and gestures of solidarity were usually performed discreetly if not secretly. That such gestures did happen suggests that the process of radical othering that preceded the war and continued to develop throughout, did not totally destroy a pre-existing attachment to the principle of 'life in common' (zajednički život) based on a shared, trans-ethnic identity as Bosnians and as Semberians.

As for Bosniaks – the ethnic group previously named Bosnian Muslims – the ambiguity entailed by the coping strategies is at the source of a particular type of 'difficult memories'. The coping mechanisms sustained their prolonged presence, allowing them to survive in a period of great duress, but they also made it easier for the autorities to manage that very presence, and more efficiently exploit them. This ambiguity is absent from dominant narratives of victimhood, which tend to eliminate nuance and disregard agency in favour of the archetipal image of victims as passive, "innocent" and "morally pure" (Helms 2013: 4). Forced to interact with these dominant public representations, victims often feel compelled to silence the full extent of their experience in order to meet dominant expectations, and preserve the legitimacy of their claim to victimhood. In other words, as a survivor of the Srebrenica genocide once put it to me, "*we the victims are expected to behave almost like saints*", so as to deserve their status, and preempt accusations that they either 'brought it upon themselves', or have profited from their past victimhood. Hence the need to protect their 'difficult memories' from the gaze of outsiders reveals the sense of enduring vulnerability of the victims of ethnic cleansing, as a community of experience.

The liminal stage of transformation which engulfed society during wartime affected the whole of the population, but in different ways, such that we can say there were different

levels of liminality within the wider liminal process that the war represented. They were not all exposed to the same kind of dangers, and to the same levels of uncertainty. Marked as the undesired 'others', those with a Muslim ethnic background became the most vulnerable and disempowered. More than anyone else, they represented the rejected future – a unitary Bosnia-Herzegovina – against which the Serb 'defensive-liberation war' was fought; and they embodied the past of life in common (*zajednički život*) that needed to be abandoned, if not forgotten, to leave room for a renewed 'Serb' identity in the safety of an ethnically homogenous society.

On the ground in Bijeljina, the process of ethnic cleansing developed along specific lines, determined by the evolving balance between the ideological goal of ethnic homogeneisation through the 'separation of peoples', which was defined by the SDS central leadership, but was consensually shared by the local leaders; and the particular opportunities opened by the possibility to disposess and exploit the local non-Serbs. This balance resulted in the prolonged presence of Muslim residents, allowing for their exploitation both as labourers through the imposition of work duties to face the acute workforce shortages due to the war effort; and through racket, namely in exchange of the 'right' to voluntarily leave for exile. The contradiction between this prolonged presence and the ideal of 'separation of peoples' was temporarily managed by disposessing the Muslims of any markers of their national identity, from the (im)possibility to practice their religion to the pressure to adopt 'Serb' names. This dispossession of identity made them structuraly invisible, and thus made their presence tolerable, until the urgency of completing the task of separating peoples trumped any other calculations. As new political structures and social values emerged throughout the liminal stage and the consolidation of Republika Srpska gained pace, overcoming the contradiction between the physical presence of a large Muslim community and the ideal of an ethnically homogenous society required the enforcement of the 'separation of peoples' through their mass expulsion. The prospect of a peace treaty to end the war made that an urgent need. This would, in principle mean no stage of reintegration after liminality for Bijeljina's Muslims.

But in liminal situations the outcome is never garanteed, and so it was that the Dayton Peace Agreement which put an end to the war recognised the right to return of displaced people to their pre-war homes, and the right to property, entailing the legal nullity of evictons and expropriations. Dayton, thus, opened the possibility of return and

offered the potental to reverse ethnic cleansing, and with it the promise of reintegration, even though – people were aware – nothing would ever be the same. The liminality of peace building followed the liminality of war making, and again the equation of danger and possibility, which determined their vulnerability, would define the agency of the Muslim population in the face of the deep transformation of their hometown. This time, however, this equation followed a more balanced formula. The political system created by Dayton involved the fundamental contradiction between the acceptance of nationalist principles entailing the confirmation of a de facto territorial division along ethnic lines and an institutional architecture favouring ethnic politics; and the liberal values inherent to the right to return, the right to property, and the preservation of cultural and religious heritage. It imposed daunting constraints but it also fostered numerous possibilities. The process of 'normalisation' of inter-ethnic relations during the liminal stage of reaggregation, which we will discuss on Chapter 6, developed in the context of this fundamental contradiction. Before we get there, however, we should first focus our attention in the process that twinned the Muslims' persecution and expulsion, and which deeply shaped the transformation of Bijeljina, from a multi-ethnic town organised under the principle of zajednički život, to a 'Serb' town according to a nationalist vision. The following chapter will the resettlement of displaced Serbs in Bijeljina.

Chapter 6

Reinforcing the 'separation of peoples': Memories of displacement and resettlement among Bosnian Serbs

The resettlement of a massive number of Bosnian Serbs was one of the processes leading to the transformation of Bijeljina, pushing it away from its tradition of life in common (*zajednički život)* in a multiethnic setting, to turn it into a homogenised 'Serb' town. Located far from the front lines and close to the border with Serbia, during the war Bijeljina became an important destination for Serbs displaced from areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina beyond the control of the Army of Republika Srpska. More than twenty years after the war, many of those who resettled there do see Bijeljina as a 'Serb' town, but fail nevertheless to see it as 'theirs', and many harbour feelings of nostalgia for the lives they were compelled to leave behind. The 'difficult memories' of displacement and resettlement, as shared with me in formal interviews and informal conversations, suggest a dissonance between a strong allegiance to Republika Srpska and subtle but pervasive feelings of alienation stemming from the concrete experience of everyday life in Bijeljina. This chapter will explore this dissonance.

Up to 2.2 million people, of a pre-war population of 4.3 million, are estimated to have been victims of forced displacement during the war, of whom one million were

internally displaced (BiH Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees 2005:45). After the war, there was a significant movement of return of refugees to Bosnia-Herzegovina, but, despite the priority assigned to return to the pre-war homes by international stakeholders (Čapo 2015:22) only a minority of refugees and internally displaced persons returned to their pre-war homes (BiH Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees 2010). The strongest trend was, instead, that of resettlement in areas where one's national group constituted a majority (Valenta and Strabac 2013:129). This was especially the case with Bosnian Serbs, of whom, in 2000, only 16% wished to return to their pre-war homes, while 60% refused such a possibility, with 24% unsure (Petrović 2007:172). Indeed, a significant number of displaced Serbs left their homes only when the Dayton Peace Agreement was implemented, as was the case of thousands of residents in areas of Sarajevo which during the war were under the control of the Army of Republika Srpska, but which Dayton assigned, not to Republika Srpska, but to the other Bosnian 'entity', the 'Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina' (Hoare 2007:401; Donia 2006:338-9; see also *infra*).

The impact of the resettlement of displaced Serbs in Bijeljina cannot be overstated. According to the UNHCR(1998) in the immediate post-war period there were 37 thousand displaced persons living in the municipality; by 2005, the number of displaced persons registered had dropped to 7.318 (BiH Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees 2005:124) and is now residual. The decrease means that in the meantime much of the displaced population was able to solve their housing problems and acquire enough means of survival so as to no longer qualify for the legal status of 'displaced persons'.

Most of those who arrived in Bijeljina as displaced persons eventually resettled there, so that the municipality of Bijeljina has had the second highest population growth (after Banja Luka) since 1991, in what is now Republika Srpska, increasing from 97.796 in the 1991 Census to 107.715 inhabitants in the following Census, which took place in 2013 (BiH Agency for Statistics 2016) – even though the Muslim/Bosniak population went from approximately thirty five thousand to thirteen thousand in the same period(BiH Agency for Statistics 2016) Of Bijeljina's residents in 2013, 57% were not born in the municipality, and 46.9% were not born in a municipality located in the territory that is now Republika Srpska (BiH Agency for Statistics 2016). It is therefore safe to infer that individuals resettled in the municipality of Bijeljina and their descendants comprise a significant proportion of the local population.

The figures become more meaningful when we contrast them with with the negative population growth that affects Bosnia-Herzegovina overall, and which disproportionately affects the Serb population. Between 1991 and 2013, Bosnia's population decreased by 457 thousand, from 4.377 millions to 3.920 millions (BiH Agency for Statistics 2016). Regarding Bosnia's 'constituent peoples', Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats, it was among the Serbs that the population decreased the most, by about 280 thousand, from 1366.000 to 1085.000 (BiH Agency for Statistics 2016)[105]. This is due, to a great extent, to the massive level of forced displacement during the war; but also to emigration and a negative natural growth, with the number of deaths higher than the number of births.

Along with the process of ethnic cleansing, explored in the previous chapter, the displacement of Bosnian Serbs and their resettlement in what was to become Republika Srpska reveal the centrality of the political goal of 'separation of peoples'. Such a goal, which represented a departure from their leadership's earlier goal of keeping Bosnia-Herzegovina as a whole in a common state with Serbia, required sacrificing the traditional nationalist view of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a Serb land, and abandoning part of the territory to the other constituent nations, the Croats and the Muslims(Hoare 2007: 27). For the Bosnian Serb leadership, the resettlement of the Serb populations was a necessary consequence of the partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina, a sacrifice for the sake of an ethnically homogenous homeland. The leadership assumed the responsibility to provide for the Serb population residing in areas beyond the control of the Army of Republika Srpska. In the Assembly discussions following the presentation of the 'Six Strategic Goals of the Serb People', of which the 'separation of peoples' was the most primordial (see Ch.1), Momčilo Krajšnik, the Assembly speaker, was keen to convey clarity: "We *shall, in an organised manner, provide our people with a roof over their heads. Resettle them if need be, we shall not put them in a genocidal position*". , He urged deputies to put national interest above their own personal sense of belonging to particular places, highlighting that his own home in the suburbs of Sarajevo would probably become part of "Muslimania": "*But I have no regrets. We must not put*

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105 The number of individuals declaring themselves Croats diminished by 217 thousand, from 760.000 to 543.000; those declaring themselves Bosniaks diminished by 142 thousand, from 1902.000 to 1760.000; and those who declared themselves as 'Other'(the residual category for national minorities, comprising also those who refuse ethnic identification) diminished by 219.000 from 347.000 to 129.000 (BiH Agency for Statistics 2016)

our individual goals before this goal" (16th Session of the Assembly of the Serb people in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 12 May 1992, p.50).

Forced displacement has long been "a tool of state formation"(Walters 2002: 271). In Europe, the expulsion of the Jews and Muslims from the Iberian peninsula in the end of the 15th century, religious persecution after the Reformation, the slave trade, and land clearances during the agricultural revolution are but a few examples. Drawing from these earlier practises of forced displacement of discrete categories of people, policies favouring population exchanges and the permanent resettlement of populations in territories dominated by their co-nationals were a corollary of the emergence of the nation-state as the ideal model for the organisation of states.

Once resettled in a new location, forcefully displaced persons face many challenges. They have not only to cope with their feelings of loss for the lives and livelihoods they had to leave behind, but have also to adapt to new, often harsher, life conditions in places where they sometimes feel unwelcome by local populations. What makes the case of resettlement among one's ethnic kin particular lies in the challenges of integration. For refugees in general, integration is the hopeful outcome of a slow learning process through which the newcomers will become familiar with the language, culture, social organisation and political institutions of the host society (UNHCR 2013:13-15). They are not necessarily expected to integrate, and the status of the host country is unambiguously that of a land of exile. Indeed in many countries refugees are offered only temporary shelter, and effectively prevented from integrating, by being denied by the authorities of the host state the right to work and to obtain citizenship or permanent residency status.

Co-nationals, however, are assumed to already possess the knowledge necessary for successful integration, and are expected to assimilate into their new location. This requires their local identities to be played down in favour of their common national identity. On the level of everyday life, they were also expected to emulate the habits and manners of the domicile population, with marginalisation as the price to pay for a continual salience of local identities. These expectations create a sense of double loss among the resettled, who, having lost their homes and livelihoods, face also the pressure to abandon also their cultural habits and old attachments, so as to become equals, without as a reward experiencing the

benefits of equality, and often facing an enduring hostility on the part of the domicile population (Clark 2006; Čapo-Žmegač 2007[2002]; Petrović 2007).

Cases like the compulsory population transfers between Greece and Turkey in 1922; Poland and Germany in 1945; the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans from Czechoslovakia between 1945 and 1948; or the transfer of ethnic Italians from Yugoslavia to Italy in 1947 have much in common with each other and with the case of the resettled Serbs. Even if the historical circumstances of each case may be different, there are many similarities in the difficulty that populations permanently resettled as a result of conflict felt to overcome their feelings of loss and create a new sense of attachment. In cases such as Germany (Svašek:2002) or Italy (Ballinger:2003;Thomassen:2006) the presence of resettled co-nationals reminded the domicile population of a past that the nation's official memory did not celebrate. To be accepted by the domicile population in their new homeland, resettled citizens felt compelled to make the local dimension of their identity invisible to the eyes of the majority. Due to the historical circumstances of their displacement, in the aftermath of the Second World War, those who openly continued to cultivate their ties with their places of origin were often associated, rightly or wrongly, with fascism in the case of resettled Italians or Nazi sympathies in the case of resettled Germans, ideologies that society now overall rejected. Italian '*esuli*' (exiles)[106] − as they became known − and Sudete Germans, perceived their local and national identities as mutually reinforcing, so that abandoning their local identities implied the weakening of the national identity they shared with their ethnic kin. The pressure to downplay their local identities was the source of a deep sense of resentment against the domicile populations, which seemed not to appreciate their personal sacrifice or to share their sense of grief for the nation's loss of territory. On the other hand, in both cases the state was sufficiently well-established, and national identity was sufficiently stable to offer the possibility of assimilation, in contrast with Republika Srpska, where the very idea of assimilation became meaningless, given that its identity was still uncertain, and the changes triggered by the war and the 'separation of peoples' deeply disruptive both to the domicile and the resettled population.

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106 Italians from Yugoslavia who resettled in Italy after the Second World War are known as '*esuli*'. The term first appeared to differentiate them from the '*rimasti*', who chose to remain in Yugoslavia, for which they had to give up their Italian citizenship. The term continued to define them in Italy after resettlement (see Ballinger 2003; Thomassen 2006).

While many resettled Serbs share this feeling of grief that stems both from personal loss and from the loss of national territory, the impact of their displacement and resettlement in the politics of memory in Republika Srpska bears more similarities with the case of the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey as agreed in the 1992 Lausanne Treaty (Hirschon: 2003a). The displacement of about half a million Muslims from Greece and 1.5 million Greeks from Anatolia marked the rejection of a multiethnic model of social and political organisation and the definitive adoption of the nation-state model, perceived as dominated by one particular ethnic group, itself defined by religious affiliation. In both countries, official memories of the population exchange subordinated the lived experience of those who were 'exchanged' to the demands of the nationalist narrative of the Greco-Turkish war of 1919-1922 and the wider character of the historical relationship between Greeks and Turks.

In Turkey, where the newcomers represented a small proportion of the population, their suffering was minimised as an acceptable price to pay for what was overall a clear victory for the Turkish state in war (Hirschon 2003a), while in Greece what became known as the 'Asia Minor Catastrophe' became, in the words of Onur Yildirim, "the backbone of political rhetoric of the past, present and future of the Greek nation-state, not to mention Greek national identity" (Yildirim:2006,17-18). The experience of resettled Greeks mattered to official memory only insofar as it corresponded to stereotypes of Greek victimisation under Turkish rule. More than the personal losses of the Anatolian Greeks, what was mourned was the defeat of Greece's territorial ambitions in Asia Minor (Yildirim:2006,18). For a long time the traumatic experience of victims of forced displacement and resettlement found expression only in the realm of the family, where they were transmitted across generations (Clark: 2006), until in recent decades oral historians and anthropologists began to show interest in creating a record before the last generations of people who experienced it became extinct (e.g. Neyzi 2008).

The case of Bosnian Serbs' displacement and resettlement has much in common with the cases mentioned above, but there are also crucial differences. The character of the Bosnian war was such that their experience is commemorated, somehow paradoxically, both as territorial loss to be mourned and as an acceptable price to pay for territorial gain and the consolidation of a Serb ethnic majority. But, unlike Germany, Italy, Greece or Turkey, Republika Srpska did not exist at all before the conflict in which context the forced

displacement happened. Secondly, while in the above mentioned cases the resettled populations comprised only a small proportion of the total population of their kin states, in Republika Srpska the resettled population constituted a significant proportion of the total population; data from 2000, when the first census of the displaced population was conducted, indicates there were in Republika Srpska 556.214 displaced persons (Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees 2005:81), of whom only 15.5% declared the wish to return to their pre-war homes, while 58.3% did not want to return, with 26.2% unsure (Ministry 2005:119). It is to a great extent thanks to their presence that the political goal of ethnic homogenisation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serb dominance in Republika Srpska were achieved. The impact of this population becomes more meaningful if we bear in mind that the total population of Republika Srpska was, in 2013 of 1228.423 (BiH Agency for Statistics 2016).

This meant that, collectively, resettled Serbs had the potential to shape Republika Srpska's identity in ways that were beyond the possibilities of resettled populations in other cases. In this sense, Republika Srpska appeared as a promised land offering the possibility of a new beginning, with displaced Serbs benefiting from the support of the political institutions towards their incorporation in their new locations. This, however, made them an object of resentment and hostility for domicile populations themselves struggling to give meaning to the deep transformation their lives suffered since the dissolution of Yugoslavia; for their massive presence in their new locations was seen as the trigger for pervasive changes in the experience of place, which created a sense of displacement also among the domicile populations[107]. Regardless of their numbers, however, resettled Serbs were disempowered, dependent on the political class but lacking the established network of support that the domicile population could rely on, thus more vulnerable to manipulation (Petrović 2007; Jansen 2010)[108]. For many, the promises of a new beginning remained unfulfilled, if they were not betrayed. However, due to their numbers, resettled Serbs could not simply be ignored. Instead, by their very presence, they forced the local communities to somehow adapt to them, but they were part of a dynamics in which they had little power to

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107 Scholars of globalisation (e.g. Gupta and Fergusson 1992:10) have long highlighted how its dynamics disrupts the connection between place and culture, not only among migrants but also among the populations that remain in their home regions, creating the type of feeling of displacement that I have identified among the domicile population of Bijeljina, regardless of ethnicity.

108 Stef Jansen(2010) highlighted the powerlessness and potential for manipulation of refugees by exploring the metaphor of refugees as pawns in a chess game, a metaphor that he found in a poster produced in Sarajevo during the siege, whose title was 'refuchess'.

control (Jansen 2010), although they influenced it greatly.

Whilst there is a significant body of academic literature focusing on forced displacement and return to Bosnia (e.g. Halilovich 2013; Jansen 2007, 2010; Sivac-Bryant 2016; Steffanson 2006, 2007), scholars have systematically neglected the specific problems involved in the   resettlement of Serbs in Republika Srpska (see Armakolas 2007 for an exception). We are fortunate, however, that the case of Bijeljina constitutes an important exception to this neglect. In her 2007 comparative study of returnees and displaced persons in Bijeljina, sociologist Jagoda Petrović offers a comprehensive characterisation of the life conditions of both categories of the population. She highlights the difficulties displaced persons faced in the process of integration. Strikingly and counter-intuitively, "especially when viewed from the dominant perspective of ethnicised explanations of refugee solutions in the former Yugoslav space" (Čapo 2015: 24), Petrović claims that the Bosniaks returnees were better integrated, more satisfied and had a much more positive outlook than resettled Serbs. Based on a survey with a representative sample of both the returnee and resettled population, Petrović identified as the major problems displaced persons faced in Bijeljina were:

1. *Deficient access to adequate housing*: only 53% of resettled families surveyed owned their own home, in comparison with 95% in the case of returnees; beyond the issue of ownership, Petrović also identifies patterns of inadequacy, such as infrastructure, size and equipment (pp.194-197).

2. *Economic problems*, with two thirds of the sample living under the poverty line (p.247). Work prospects were low, and only 30% of those surveyed had any form of regular employment; lack of work prospects. Families were therefore heavily dependent on pensions and other subventions for their survival.

3. *Inadequate support from social networks*, as their original networks collapsed when they were displaced; extended families often resettled in different locations; and, among nuclear families, conflicts were frequent (p.248).

Petrović criticised both the international community for neglecting this category of the population due to their policies favouring return (in a similar vein see Čapo 2015), and

the authorities of Republika Srpska, both at entity level and locally, for the lack of sufficient support; coordination among agencies and, crucially, lack of consultation with the users of their services, adding that much of the activities of such agencies were consumed merely writing reports (p.257).

The study exposed the lack of integration of resettled Serbs in Bijeljina. As Petrović remarks, "the absence of significant support and understanding in the local environment, and sometimes hostility from the domicile population hinders the construction of social networks. Thus it is not surprising that resettled persons build new friendships mostly with people who were displaced together or resettled in the same place". They also revealed a great pessimism regarding the future, as "most [thought] that in the coming period nothing [would] significantly change or that they [would] be even worse" (p.249).

Regardless of their legal status and socio-economic condition in the present, two decades after they were displaced, my informants continued to define themselves as 'refugees' (*izbjeglice*), on the basis of their past experience, and regardless of the legal distinction between the category of internally displaced persons and refugees, which they were keenly aware of. While 'displaced person' represented for them no more than a legal term, there was a clear emotional value attached to the word *izbjeglica* (refugee), which is worth exploring. Unlike in English, in which the word 'refugee' is connected to the idea of receiving shelter, in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, the word stems from the act of fleeing. The 'refugee identity' was salient to the point of having already transcended the generation barrier, so that even children of families that experienced displacement, born many years after their resettlement in Bijeljina still defined themselves in such terms, as I could witness in a few occasions. The prolonged liminality which they experienced as displaced persons found expression in the self-identification as 'refugees'. They remain 'refugees', not necessarily because they don't feel they have resettled, but as members of a mnemonic community based on the liminal experience of displacement. That so many people continued to use the present tense when referring to their status as 'refugees' suggested the absence of closure in what regarded their experience of displacement. Even those who were able to rebuild their lives and overcome their condition as displaced persons seemed not to have yet fully recovered from some of its consequences, especially with regard to

their loss of status and connections (*veze*). This loss fostered a pervasive sense of vulnerability and dependence among this category of the population. This enduring sense of vulnerability, exploited by the political class to command loyalty and allegiance, in turn, made it harder to nurture new feelings of attachment which might help overcome this liminal condition.

Sadness, disillusion, dissatisfaction, and alienation were the dominant feelings expressed by my informants as they remembered their experience of forced displacement, resettlement and integration in Bijeljina. Emerging in the context of the intersubjective encounter with myself as a listener and as an observer, such memories were sometimes the object of conscious reflexion in the context of formal interviews and informal conversations; they emerged most often as spontaneous reminiscing, marked by nostalgia and to some extent escaping articulation, to silently find expression in the individuals' body language. There is a striking dissonance between the tone and content of their recollections and the dominant messages conveyed public representations promoted or endorsed by the authorities of Republika Srpska, which explore the theme of sacrifice for the nation, and exhort the resettled population not only to pledge their allegiance to Republika Srpska as their fatherland (*otadžbina*), but also, and most importantly, to see it as their *zavičaj*, the term that defines a person's place of birth or ancestral homeland, thus projecting the existence of Republika Srpska to the past.

This chapter explores the dissonance between public representations and privately expressed memories. In the following section we will describe the three commemorations that specifically focus on the displacement of the Bosnian Serb population, before engaging with my informants' personal memories.

6.1: The representation of Serb displacement in official memory

In the context of liminality, commemorations can function as rites of reaggregation marking the closing of the liminal stage and the beginning of a new period of normality. In recent years, the memory of Serb displacement during the war has become an important element in official memory, both at entity level in Republika Srpska, and locally

in Bijeljina. Official memory frames the Serbs' experience of displacement through a narrative of victimhood and sacrifice, in which Serbs are reminded of their past vulnerability and persecution, and exhorted to give meaning to the sacrifice they made by embracing Republika Srpska as their new homeland. In Bijeljina, official commemorations focus on two main events, the '*Tuzlanska kolona* (Tuzla convoy) massacre' on 15 May 1992, and the Serb 'exodus from Sarajevo' in January-March 1996.

When the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina obtained international recognition as an independent state in April 1992, the Yugoslav army (JNA) effectively became a foreign army under the control of Serbia and Montenegro, which meanwhile formed the 'Federal Republic of Yugoslavia'. Whilst ostensibly the JNA's intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina had the goal of interposition between the local warring parties, i.e., Serb rebels and Bosniak and Croat forces, it quickly became involved in fighting on the Serb side (Hoare 2004:32). Under international pressure, Belgrade decided to recall the military of Serbian and Montenegrin nationality and by the 20th May the JNA had formally withdrawn from Bosnia-Herzegovina. In reality, however, most of its units remained in the country, staffed by Bosnian Serbs, to become the backbone of the newly-created Army of Republika Srpska (Hoare 2004: 61).

Between the beginning of the Bosnian war and the formal withdrawal of the JNA, forces loyal to the Bosnian government besieged several of JNA's barracks (CIA 2002, Vol.1: 137; Hoare 2004:73). It was in this broader context that two serious incidents happened, in which forces loyal to the Bosnian government attacked JNA convoys leaving their premises, which resulted in the death of several soldiers and civilians. Both incidents, the Dobrovoljačka Street massacre in Sarajevo, and the the *Tuzlanska kolona* incident in Tuzla, have now become prominent in the official commemorative calendar of Republika Srpska. Whilst only the *Tuzlanska kolona* commemorations directly relate to the commemoration of Serb displacement, it is important to focus on both, as they are interconnected and bear important similarities. Along with the case of the decision at Dayton to unify the city of Sarajevo by assigning its totality to the Bosniak-Croat coalition, leading to the 1996 Serb 'exodus from Sarajevo', these incidents represented important defeats for the Bosnian Serb rebellion, which only in recent years began to be officially

commemorated.

The case of the Dobrovoljačka Street incident:

On the 2nd of May 1992, the JNA and Bosnian Serb paramilitary forces launched an offensive aimed at dividing Sarajevo in two sectors. The offensive was successfully resisted by a small number of forces loyal to the Bosnian government, not yet fully organised as an army (Andreas 2008:28). Serb forces, which already controlled all access to Sarajevo and the hills that surround the city, were nevertheless able to gain control of some neighbourhoods in the periphery, including Grbavica, Nedžarići and Mojmilo. In the following weeks, the newly-created Army of Republika Srpska completely besieged Sarajevo. This offensive set off a chain of events that included the arrest by the JNA of the Bosnian president, Alija Izetbegović, at the Sarajevo airport, when he was returning from negotiations held in Lisbon with the international mediators, and, subsequently, to the agreement to allow for the withdrawal of some of the JNA forces in exchange for the President. With the President already safely with UN peacekeeping forces, a serious incident occurred as a military convoy was leaving the headquarters of the JNA in the Bistrik area of Sarajevo. Forces loyal to the Bosnian government shot at the convoy; six soldiers and one civilian were killed and others wounded, in what became known as the Dobrovoljačka Street massacre (Silber and Little 1997: 231-243). Serb authorities, however, claim that the death toll was as high as forty two, using as evidence a list of names that includes the casualties the JNA incurred during the fighting that took place in the previous days during the frustrated attempt to divide the city (Radovanović 2012).

The War Crimes Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Serbia decided to investigate the Dobrovoljačka Street massacre and, in 2009 launched international arrest warrants agains a number of wartime Bosnian political and military leaders it accused of complicity with murder (Reuters 2009). This led to the arrest of one of the members of the wartime Bosnian collective Presidency, Ejup Ganić, in March 2010 in the United Kingdom (RFE 2010). One year later, the same international arrest warrant resulted in the arrest in Austria of retired General Jovan Divjak (Sense 2011). An ethnic Serb who chose to desert the JNA and offer his services to the Bosnian government, Divjak is much loved in

Sarajevo, where his arrest caused profound outrage (see Huseinović 2011). Divjak is, however, portrayed by Serb nationalists as a traitor to the Serb nation, and a 'sell-out', often referred to as one of 'Alija's Serbs'[109] (Judah 1997:195; Glas javnosti 2005; Klix 2017). Ganić and Divjak were eventually released upon legal appeal as the judicial authorities of the UK and Austria came to the conclusion that there was insufficient evidence, and, in the case of the UK, that the indictment was politically motivated (McElroy 2011).

Shortly after Ganić's arrest in 2010, the government of Republika Srpska organised a commemoration of the Dobrovoljačka Street massacre, including a procession to the location where it occurred, which created great anger among Sarajevans (Musi 2015:342-5) This commemoration was repeated every year until 2016, but suspended since, allegedly for lack of security reasons (BIRN 2018). The Dobrovoljačka commemoration followed the example set in 2009 by the first commemoration held to mark the anniversary of the 'Tuzlanska kolona' incident, on the 15th of May.

The 'Tuzlanska kolona' incident:

After the failed offensive in Sarajevo, and with international pressure mounting , Belgrade decided to formally withdraw the JNA from Bosnia-Herzegovina. In fact, however, this withdrawal corresponded in essence to a change of hat, as most of the JNA units stationed in the country became units of the newly-created Army of Republika Srpska (Hoare 2004). In Tuzla, the defence forces loyal to the Bosnian government reached an agreement with the JNA, whose barraks were besieged, to withdraw from the city. There is no consensus over what happened, but as the JNA convoy left the 'Husinska buna' barracks in Tuzla, it appeared to diverge from the established route for the withdrawal, and was promptly attacked. This resulted in a minimum of fifthly JNA soldiers killed, a figure that, as in the case of the Dobrovoljačka Street massacre, Serb sources consider to be an underestimation[110]. The attack generated a wave of panic that led thousands of Serbs to

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109 The expression Alija's Serbs, referring to the wartime President Alija Izetbegović, is applied by Serb nationalists to the Serbs that refused to support the rebellion led by the SDS and leave government-controlled territory. Jovan Divjak and Mirko Pejanović, who served as member of the Bosnian Presidency, are among the most prominent figures in this category (see Pejanović 2004).

110 Regarding the number of deaths, it is interesting to note that whilst the original indictment of Ilija Jurišić by the Serbian War Crimes Prosecutor in 2007 listed 92 members of the JNA killed, and 33 wounded

flee towards Bijeljina (Armakolas 2011:239; 2016:94).

In 2007, a member of the Bosnian Ministry of the Interior (MUP) who had been involved in the incident, Ilija Jurišić, was indicted and eventually arrested in Belgrade and put on trial for war crimes committed in the context of the attack to the JNA convoy; in September 2009 he was condemned to 12 years in prison. This generated a wave of outrage in Tuzla (see Fond. Istina, pravda, pomirenje 2009), where Jurišić, an ethnic Croat, was a well-respected figure, known for his commitment to 'life in common'(*zajednički život*)' (Nikolić 2010) and where the events of 15th May 1992, known locally as the 'Brčanska malta Battle', after the name of the neighbourhood where it happened, are officially commemorated as 'the defence of Tuzla' (see RTVTK 2017). In 2010, however, the sentence was quashed and the Court of Appeal ordered a retrial. Jurišić was released and received as a hero in Tuzla, only to be arrested again in 2013; the retrial resulted in a new 12 years conviction. Jurišić was finally absolved of all crimes by the Court of Appeal in 2015, which brought to an end the effort of the Serbian judiciary to pursue this case (Apelacioni sud u Beogradu 2015).

Jurišić's initial condemnation in 2009 provided an opportunity to open a new stage in Republika Srpska's official policy towards the memory of the war. Unlike in the earlier post-war years, the authorities no longer sought to open glorify of the achievements of the Army of Republika Srpska (Correia 2013), but chose instead to focus on sacrifice and victimhood. All major commemorations became the competence of a special government department, the Board for Preserving the Tradition of Liberation Wars (*Odbor Vlade Republike Srpske za njegovanje tradicije oslobodilačkih ratova*), part of the Ministry for Veterans' Affairs. The commemorations follow the usual template, consisting of one religious component, with a *parastos,* a Serbian Orthodox religious ceremony for the dead, and one political component, with laying of flower wreaths by official dignitaries, followed by speeches about the occasion, and sometimes cultural events.

The commemoration of the attack to the *Tuzlanska kolona* explores the themes of disloyalty and treachery, in the form of the violation of a withdrawal agreement, which is evoked so as to show that life in common became impossible for Tuzla Serbs, and that they had no choice but to leave to protect their lives. In Tuzla, by contrast, this commemoration

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(Tužilastvo za ratne zločine Rep. Srbija 2007:3), the Court of Appeal's final decision in 2015, which cleared Jurišić, listed 50 members of the JNA killed and 51 wounded (Apelacioni sud u Beogradu 2015:3)

is widely seen as an insult, and on the same day local activists commemorate 'the liberation of Tuzla', in which the attack to the convoy is remembered as an act of resistance that preserved Tuzla's territorial integrity and political identity (see Klix 2018). There is great resentment in Tuzla against the Serbs who left then, and their flight is seen by many as a political statement in favour of Greater Serb nationalism and the division of Bosnia, rather than a decision driven by fear in a difficult moment.

The '*Tuzlanska kolona' massacre* commemoration starts with a visit to the site of the incident in Tuzla by family members of the soldiers killed and representatives of the RS government, the municipality of Bijeljina, the Veterans' Association or Republika Srpska (BORS), associations of displaced Serbs, missing people and fallen soldiers' families, etc. There, they lay flowers and light candles in a brief but emotional ceremony, before returning to Bijeljina, where the second part of the commemoration takes place. This consists of a '*parastos'* in the Bijeljina cemetery – where twenty nine of the soldiers killed were laid to rest – followed by speeches by political leaders and activists. Direct participation in these commemorations is low, involving only politicians, activists and a few family members of those killed.

Every year, however, the commemoration is given ample coverage by all the media, with local television stations also broadcasting documentaries and organising live debates about the massacre and its significance for the Serb people. During my fieldwork in 2014, one of the most watched tv stations in Republika Srpska – BN, which is based in Bijeljina – broadcasted a live programme exclusively dedicated to the 'Tuzlanska kolona', with guests in studio and viewers' telephone calls. The programme had been scheduled to coincide with the anniversary, but was delayed for a few days because on the day of the anniversary Bijeljina suffered severe flooding, including the street where the station was located. That the programme went ahead three days later despite the fact that at that moment Bijeljina was so severely affected by floods and in state of emergency is indicative of the importance attributed to the subject by opinion makers.

The case of the *Tuzlanska kolona* is portrayed by politicians and the media in Republika Srpska as a case of double-standards by the international community, and, since Jurišić's acquittal, also as 'a crime for which nobody has yet answered' (*niko nije odgovarao*) (e.g. Mitrić 2017; Arena TV 2017). The phrase '*niko nije odgovarao*' – literally meaning

'nobody has answered' in the sense of being held criminally responsible – is systematically uttered in war-related commemorations in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Among Bosnian Serb activists and politicians, this phrase is often used to imply that a crime was committed even in cases where there are no grounds for believing that was the case, such as deaths in combat situations. The framing of military casualties as if these were civilian deaths or unlawful executions of military personnel outside combat situations was something that I also systematically noticed on television and newspaper reports during my fieldwork in Republika Srpska.

The 'exodus' from Sarajevo

In what regards the exploration of the plight of displaced Serbs, whilst the '*Tuzlanska kolona*' commemorations have a local focus around Bijeljina, the commemoration that has been given the highest degree of importance on a 'national' level, i.e. at the level of Republika Srpska as a whole, was the one organised in March 2016 to mark the 20th anniversary of the exodus of Serbs from Sarajevo at the end of the war. The division of Sarajevo into a Muslim sector and a Serb sector was one of the Serb leadership's 'strategic goals'. At the peace negotiations in Dayton, Ohio, Slobodan Milošević decided nevertheless to hand the neighbourhoods of Sarajevo which were under control of Serb forces to the Bosniak-Croat coalition, to become part of the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Just before the city was reunified in January-March 1996, the Serb authorities organised the evacuation of the areas concerned, including urban areas as well as villages and hamlets (Hoare 2007:401). Many people left willingly, refusing to live 'under Muslim rule' , but there was also a great degree of coercion. Those reluctant to leave were intimidated by gangs of thugs, the content of people's flats was often thrown out from the windows and many houses were even set on fire (Donia 2006:338-9). Many who left carried with them the coffins of their dead relatives, especially in the case of fallen soldiers (Elčić 2016).

The commemorative ceremony marking the 20th anniversary of the 'Exodus' took place in Bijeljina, in the presence of the highest members of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and of all the Serb political class, in a rare show of unity between bitterly divided political opponents (see Ch.5). The event, organised at Bijeljina's Cultural Centre as a

'*svečana akademija*' – i.e., as a cultural soirée – included the projection of a film, singing by choirs and artists, speeches by high-profile politicians and prestigious individuals, and was broadcasted live. During the ceremony, mourning the loss of what had been 'the second largest Serb city', by number of inhabitants, after Belgrade, never anyone mentioned that Serb forces had besieged Sarajevo, or the wartime goal of 'separation of peoples'. The commemoration described the 'exodus' as part of a long historical experience of injustice the Serb people has endured. The documentary film 'Sarajevski egzodus", by Dragan Elčić, evoked historical memories of persecution and displacement that went back to the 17th Century, when the Patriarch of the Serb Orthodox Church led a column of thousands out of Kosovo to escape persecution by the Ottomans; and continued with the evacuation to Corfu in the First World War; the persecution of the Serb people by the Croatian fascist state and the nazis; and the extermination of Serbs in the concentration camp of Jasenovac in Croatia during the Second World War; the evacuation of the Republika Srpska Krajina in August 1995; to end with the flight of thousands of Serbs from Kosovo in 1999, after the Kosovo war.

In the political speeches, displaced Serbs were exhorted to make Republika Srpska their new home. Significantly, the word used was not '*otadžbina*' (literally fatherland) but '*zavičaj*'. According to Hariz Halilovich (2013: xvi), the term *zavičaj* refers to the "emotional or intimate home, local homeland, place where we grew up, place of belonging, one's native region, local community". Lazar Manojlović, the head teacher who during and after the war confronted nationalism in Bijeljina, explained the concept to me in more primordial terms, as "the place where my mother changed my nappies" (*tamo gdje te majka zavila*), before adding that "one can have only one zavičaj". The connection to the birthplace, endowed with feelings of intimacy, corresponds to the generally accepted meaning of the words. The choice of '*zavičaj*' over *'otadžbina'* thus implied a tacit acknowledgement of the deep sense of loss displacement involves, but it also places an unrealistic burden on the shoulders of the resettled population, that of recreating that same emotional attachment in their new homes, as if the sense of protection that the mother's care could be reproduced. This primordial longing for comfort and safety that the native home represents was explored in this commemoration not only with words, but also with sounds and images. Placed in contrast with Bosnia-Herzegovina, portrayed as hostile to the Serb people, Republika Srpska appeared as a safe haven, but also as a possessive mother

towards whom her children's are compelled to display their love.

In official commemorations, resettled Serbs are praised for the sacrifice they made for the creation and consolidation of Republika Srpska, both through the contribution of their families as fighters in the Army of Republika Srpska, for the statement of loyalty they made by refusing to remain under the rule of the Federation, and for repopulating the territory of RS. But for resettled Serbs in Bijeljina, their new place of residence often seems to be felt as a land of exile. The traumatic experience of displacement is invoked and its context framed in such a way that this exile is one from which there is no possibility of return. But the exhortation to make RS their new homeland betrays an awareness of the alienation many resettled Serbs feel towards their new places of residence. The commemoration of the exodus from Sarajevo is not only a reminder that they have nowhere else to go, but also of the transiency of the state in this region. In the course of one hundred years, Bosnia was Ottoman, then Austrian, then it was the Kingdom of Serbs Croats and Slovenes, then the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia and now an independent country with two largely autonomous 'entities'. Bosnia-Herzegovina is in such a situation that its population live their everyday life in a climate of uncertainty about the future, and often in the expectation that sooner or later there may be another conflict. Such a climate serves the nationalist elites, as it maintains and reinforces the divisions created by the war. But such a climate also inhibits people from nurturing a sense of belonging, as it highlights their vulnerability, not only in the past, but also in the present.

6.2: Bijeljina as '*kasaba*': Nostalgia, alienation and spontaneous reminiscing

The dominant discourse of sacrifice and loyalty exercises significant constraints to the articulation of personal memories of displacement and resettlement. This is, nevertheless, an experience that remains very present in people's minds, since its effects are so enduring. Memories of displacement and resettlement often emerged spontaneously in my everyday interactions during fieldwork. The case of Jelena, who moved from Tuzla to Bijeljina in 1992, when she was 16, provides an illustration both of the pervasiveness of the presence

of such memories and of the elusiveness towards their articulation. In spontaneous reminiscing, the dominant tone was nostalgia, which was often associated with feelings of alienation towards Bijeljina and what the town represented, when compared with the places they had left behind.

The first time Jelena, 38 years old at the time, invited me over to her home for coffee, she served me 'refugee cake' (*izbjeglička torta*), left over from a family reunion the day before. Made with waffle biscuits and walnut-based spread covered with a thin layer of chocolate, its preparation making does not require the use of an oven. For that reason, it was one of the few desserts that her mother was able to prepare during the years the family lived in temporary accommodation, after they left Tuzla in 1992, and before they could afford to build their own house. Jelena's mother was an excellent cook; she prepared elaborate recipes in comparison to which 'refugee cake', albeit very tasty, contrasted for its modesty. And yet, this was her children's favourite cake, always present in important celebrations, such as Christmas, birthdays and the family's '*krsna slava*' (patron saint). On that day, over coffee, 'refugee cake' was for Jelena like Marcel Proust's madeleines, momentarily transporting her to the golden days. Unlike *In the Search for Lost Time*, Proust's novel, however, the memories spontaneously triggered by the 'refugee cake' were 'difficult memories', of hardship and uncertainty during the war, at a time when the family — Jelena, her parents and brother — shared one room in the outskirts of Bijeljina. There was no self-indulgence in this exercise of reminiscing, but recalling how much the family had had to endure also reminded her of their resilience, and of how much they had achieved in the meantime. She didn't spend much time in this exercise, and quickly moved back to the present, to discuss other things.

Jelena showed great interest in the 'culture of memory' (kultura sjećanja) theme, and in my research. She was a key person during my fieldwork, who helped me cope with the isolation that prolonged fieldwork always involves, and eventually became a voice I sought for validation, someone with whom I could share some of my impressions of everyday life in Bijeljina, and discuss political issues openly. We quickly came to a tacit agreement regarding my research, to discuss certain things in general terms only, so as to preserve both her privacy and my own autonomy as a researcher. For those reasons, I never sought to interview her formally, or anyone from her family, and we usually avoided entering into the realm of her family's particular experience of displacement and resettlement. Such

memories, however, often emerged spontaneously, and Jelena would usually let them flow, allowing herself to share them with me, but only for a moment.

Jelena and her family were prosperous by local standards, and owned their own home, where Jelena still lived, in a self-contained flat. Her father had a small business; her mother was a housewife; and Jelena had a good job, which she loved. Although she acknowledged living better than most, Jelena felt oppressed in Bijeljina, which she saw as parochial and hostile to people like herself, as someone with a cosmopolitan outlook. In Bijeljina, she felt constrained to keep a low profile. Her own family often reminded her that the right attitude was not to complain, but to 'shut up and bear it' (*šuti I trpi*), because that was what everyone else did anyway, and because and it was never a good idea to attract unwanted attention, especially since the family business relied to some extent on public contracts. Jelena wasn't entirely negative about Bijeljina, and she appreciated that it did offer a good quality of life for the middle class, but, she stressed, only "as long as people engaged superficially", so as to avoid seeing the "ugliness that was barely hidden", and which she connected with the enduring legacy of the war, and the system of values it imposed. She dreamed of leaving the country and starting a new life in elsewhere in Europe, where she expected she could finally be herself. She rejected nationalism with its narrow-minded conservatism and what she saw as a morbid exploitation of victimhood and sacrifice; and placed herself within the Partisan tradition, openly asserting her admiration for the achievements of the communist regime. Sixteen years old at the beginning of the war, she had found memories of her life in Tuzla, and made it a point of honour to state that her family, whilst comfortable with their own ethnic identity as Serbs, had always felt integrated in the multiethnic environment that Tuzla offered. That past, however, was beyond recovery, because the Tuzla she grew up in no longer existed.

Spontaneous reminiscing, as the exercise Jelena engaged in while we ate her mother's refugee cake, did not necessarily require much intimacy. The fact that I was foreigner but spoke Bosnian/Serbian well, and the presence of my daughter, two years old at the time, made me an object of other people's curiosity in the spaces where I circulated. My continuous presence in town progressively allowed me to be in a position in which spontaneous conversations happened, in which where we had come from, myself as well as

my interlocutors, was an unavoidable topic and often a trigger for reminiscing. I was observed much more than I could observe, and was often asked the classical question 'Where are you from?' (*odakle ste?*) – especially by women – in the shops, in the market, in the children's playground. This was usually followed by some explanation of where my interlocutor was from, which over time exposed me to a reasonably broad array of stories and experiences.

Nostalgia was the dominant tone of these memories, focused on details of everyday life, the natural beauty, or the cultural environment of displaced persons' native regions. These recollections were articulated avoiding politics or mentions of any details about the war, but they always conveyed a sense of loss and sacrifice. People who came from larger cities, especially Tuzla and Sarajevo, often engaged in brief moments of nostalgia for life in an urban, dynamic, and cosmopolitan environment. There seemed to be nothing positive about this passive nostalgia, that only reinforced a pervasive feeling of irretrievable loss, and rather than indulging themselves, my interlocutors only briefly allowed it to arise. I sometimes felt that people who expressed this sort of nostalgia experienced their life in Bijeljina as a form of exile from which there was no possible return.

Associated with this nostalgia for a cosmopolitan life were the memories of the shock they had felt when they arrived to Bijeljina. They perceived it as small and unbearably parochial; a '*kasaba*', as many called it. The term kasaba literally refers to a type of urban settlement in the Ottoman Empire, corresponding to a settlement with at least one mosque. Receiving the legal status of *kasaba* was, in those times, a recognition of the settlement's urban character, and encompassed important privileges which would reinforce the process of urbanisation. Bijeljina received such a status in the 16th Century, after the construction of the Atik Mosque (Grabčanović 2006:29). Metaphorically, however, labelling a town as a kasaba highlighted its backwardness, by contrast to modern cities. Implicitly, and perhaps unconsciously it referred to its Ottoman matrix, but in an ethnocentric perspective typical of Serbian imaginary of the ottoman period as a dark period. From the perspective of resettled Serbs, and in stark contrast with that of domicile residents, it was thanks to the influx of displaced Serbs that the city acquired a new potential and developed as an urban centre.

Jagoda F. , a medical doctor from Sarajevo who arrived in Bijeljina in mid 1993, after some months living in Belgrade, was more open than most in expressing the shock she felt when she arrived. Her tone and facial expression, more than the words themselves, revealed how at the time she saw Bijeljina as a town devoid of the dignity she expected from an urban centre.

> "*You can hardly imagine how it was. The main square, for instance, where the monument (spomenik) [to the fallen soldiers] now stands, was a car park, and in the Summer months there was a 'luna park' there [located where the Atik Mosque used to stand]. It was terrible* (užasno)!"

Having established a private practice after the war, Dr. F. quickly became widely respected for her competence, and thus acquired a social and financial position much above what most resettled Serbs could aspire to. She was, nevertheless, proud to state that her children, who grew up in Bijeljina, were now settled abroad, where they were building successful careers. It was as if they had retrieved the status that was rightfully theirs, and which their mother had lost due to her displacement from Sarajevo, and eventual resettlement in Bijeljina.

Memories of wartime Bijeljina, such as those described by Jagoda, and their appraisal of the town's provincial character, stand in stark contrast with the memories pre-war residents nurture of Bijeljina as a multicultural town with a strong urban character, where it was pleasant to live (see Ch.1). The divergence in the appraisal of the character of the town caused resentment among the domicile population, and immediately became a source of disagreement that contributed to keep domicile and resettled residents separated. That wartime Bijeljina had changed so much that it no longer felt like the town domicile residents cherished was a detail that seemed to be lost in the confrontation between opposing perspectives. The fundamental transformation in the experience of urban life that the war brought about happened very quickly, and the sudden influx of thousands of displaced Serbs was a contributing factor, but, as I described on Chapter 3, the transformation was already ongoing, a consequence of nationalistic policy of erasure and reinscription of the urban landscape.

Among the domicile population of Bijeljina, some people speak of ruralisation (*seljacizacija grada*). *Seljak* means literally peasant, but metaphorically it refers to people lacking in civility and manners, which are seen, conversely, as intrinsic virtues of the urban

culture. Now, as one informant explained to me, Bijeljina "is *a city only in name*" (*samo deklarativno)*. Another, whom I asked how different Bijeljina is now, said that "*only the streets have remained*". Informants belonging to local families pointed out to the fact that since 1990, Bijeljina has been ruled by people who mostly come from a rural background, and have in their villages their core of supporters, thus correlating nationalism with the village mentality. But they also tended to associate the influx of displaced people as a crucial factor in what they say as the loss of Bijeljina's urban character.

My informants who resettled in Bijeljina agree that the dominance of rural Semberija, which comprises the majority of the voters in the municipality, hinders the development of the city, and often criticised the ruling class as "peasants" (*seljaci)*, but they see their own presence as having added an element of urbanity that wasn't there before, and notice little difference between urban and rural Semberians. Indeed, as the urban centre of an agricultural region, Bijeljina and the surrounding villages have always been deeply integrated, and domicile families often have close ties to those villages, especially in the case of domicile Serbs. The war accelerated the urbanisation process, in which forced displacement and resettlement had a crucial role, but, most importantly, the recent urbanisation was marked by the push towards the retraditionalisation of Serb national identity, which reflected the 'renewal nationalism' of the SDS (see Ch. 2), in stark contrast with the modernising ideology of the communist regime. The issue of Bijeljina's urban character, and the 'peasant' label, which in Bosnia usually carries a demeaning sense, reflects the uneasiness with which this retraditionalisation is acknowledged.

More than merely reflecting the dominant values and the dominant taste of the ruling class (Bourdieu 1984), it was as if this '*seljacizacija*', had also the useful function of keeping those attracted by the cosmopolitan model isolated and thus marginalised. As Jelena once told me, when we were discussing this issue, "*in Bijeljina, there is a public for theatre, but there is no theatre*". She was not aware, however, that before the war there was a theatre and an amateur theatre company, called '*Scena*', that performed regularly both in Bijeljina and in festivals throughout Yugoslavia and abroad (Grabčanović 2006:274). The company entered a period of crisis after the 1990 elections, probably, an informant explained to me, because it lost financial support. During the war, the theatre – a temporary, prefabricated building located at Jovan Dučić Street (renamed Patriarch Pavle Street in 2008), that was never by a permanent construction – was demolished. In the place where it used to stand,

there is now a five-floor block of flats with a bank on the ground floor. The theatre company was never reactivated. Other cultural institutions in Bijeljina, namely, the Museum of Semberija, the Filip Visnjić library, and the Cultural Centre, are strictly controlled by political parties, while the 'Prosvjeta' cultural society, where the town's only cinema is located, and which publishes his own literary journal, Srpska vila, is close to the Serbian Orthodox Church. These institutions are managed in such a way that leaves little space for expressions of culture that dissent from Serb nationalism.

Throughout the countries that were once part of socialist Yugoslavia, shared memories of the communist regime have given rise to the phenomenon of 'yugonostalgia', the cultivation in popular culture of the socialist past. But while, as Mitja Velikonja(2009; 2013) has persuasively suggested, yugonostalgia may have an emancipatory character, the same is not the case with a particular type of nostalgia that I detected during my fieldwork, and which was for the most time expressed in spontaneous interactions.

Nostalgia for the cosmopolitan past of cities such as Tuzla or Sarajevo involved a sense of inexorable loss due to the perception, actively cultivated by the media and the political class, that the war has transformed these cities so much that their cosmopolitan character has been lost, and that as Serbs, their former residents would no longer find a place for themselves there. Should they wish to return, they would find those cities transformed beyond recognition.

6.3: 'Difficult memories' of forced displacement and resettlement in Bijeljina

Whilst spontaneous reminiscing – and the feeling of nostalgia that it produced – was pervasive, it proved very difficult to get access to individuals willing to speak to me about their personal experience of displacement and resettlement in formal interviews. There was an environment in Bijeljina that did not foster freedom of expression, even more so with regard to such a sensitive theme as *'kultura sjećanja'* (the culture of memory). Indeed, most of the individuals I formally interviewed, regardless of ethnicity, sought guarantees of confidentiality, made sure we met in a discreet place, and subsequently avoided showing they knew me if they happened to meet me in a public place. Constraints to freedom of

expression and mistrust of foreigners were not an exclusive concern of resettled Serbs, but affected the population more generally, and yet resettled Serbs were much more protective of their privacy. Among the different 'communities of experience' on whose memories I relied for my research, resettled Serbs were was the most elusive, when it came to openly speaking about their wartime experiences.

Among Serbs, reluctance to speak to foreigners seemed to be fostered by the widespread belief that foreigners tended to be biased against and have prejudiced views of 'the Serbs', if they weren't openly 'anti-Serb'. Expecting no sympathy, let alone redress for the personal sacrifices they were compelled to make, and used to have see their experiences filtered through the hierarchy of suffering that dominates the politics of memory in Bosnia-Herzegovina, including Republika Srpska, resettled Serbs seemed to feel they had little or nothing to gain from exposing their lives in such a way. In a few cases, prospective interviewees explicitly framed their refusal in such terms, as was the case, for instance, when Jelena tried to recruit respondents among her acquaintances. I had promised discretion and anonymity, but that was not the problem, she said. My presumed bias was the problem; one of her contacts went as far as stating that there was no point in speaking to me because "*she already knew the answers anyway*". I discussed with the staff at the Helsinki Committee how this presumption of bias was making it hard to recruit respondents; from their perspective such presumptions were not unreasonable. They often noticed that same bias, which they felt objectified 'the Serbs', and themselves 'good Serbs' providing an exception to the dominance of the discourse of denial about the nature of the war and the scale of war crimes perpetrated by Serb forces. They saw such bias as the reason behind what they felt was a general lack of interest for the cases in which Serbs were victimised.

Eventually, I managed to pass through the right gatekeepers, and found individuals who were comfortable enough to concede me an interview. What emerged was a set of 'difficult memories', recollections that are usually kept private, not so much because recalling them was emotionally demanding, if not painful, which it often was, but because they did not fit easily into the larger narrative that the remembering person to some extent shared, and which she did not wish to undermine. Through the life stories of Dragan, a 28 year old native of Tuzla, who came to Bijeljina as a child in 1992; and Djordje, a war veteran from Central Bosnia, and an activist for the rights of displaced persons, we will now analyse some of these 'difficult memories', with a specific focus on the experience of

displacement.

Memories of displacement

Immediately before the war and in its early stage, many people left their hometowns and villages, or took measures to send their children to safety elsewhere. One of my informants, Dragan, 28, who lived in Tuzla before the war, remembered how his father drove him to relatives in Serbia, ostensibly for a holiday, as the beginning of the war coincided with the Spring school closure. Dragan, who was six at the time, recalled that along with him went a Muslim boy, the son of family friends. Dragan was keen to highlight that, despite a common belief that only Serbs were leaving Muslim-majority areas in the phase just before the war started, Muslims too were taking similar measures. He eventually rejoined his parents, who, in the meantime, had come to Bijeljina, along with thousands more, following the attack to the JNA convoy leaving Tuzla, known as the *Tuzlanska kolona* incident.

Dragan's grandparents decided to remain in Tuzla; his grandfather, a communist, rejected the logic of ethnic conflict and separation of peoples, and refused to be moved by fear. The industrial city of Tuzla has been singled out by journalists and scholars as a city where, countering the nationalistic wave, the multicultural fabric and the attachment to the partisan legacy of Yugoslavia was preserved throughout the war and beyond (Armakolas 2011). This is a source of great pride for its population. Part of the Serb population did chose to remain in Tuzla, as was the case of Dragan's grandparents. According to Dragan, however, his grandfather soon regretted his decision, as he began to experience previously unknown prejudice and discrimination; by then, however, it was no longer possible to safely leave and cross the front lines in the Mount Majevica, that separated the Tuzla region from Semberija, and the family remained separated until the end of the war. After the war the family returned to Tuzla, but in a couple of years they sold their house there and resettled permanently in Bijeljina. The reason was, Dragan told me, the unbearable discrimination he suffered at school in Tuzla, where other children called him a Chetnik, and the teacher, himself a war veteran often humiliated him for being a Serb.

The story of Serb children suddenly missing school, and neighbours disappearing from their homes was one which I often heard, during the time I lived in Sarajevo in 2010. These stories form part of the dominant narrative among Bosniaks, framing the 1992-1995 as a war of aggression against Bosnia-Herzegovina by the Serbian government of Slobodan Milošević (Moll 2013). Such stories imply that the evacuation of the Serb population from areas where they were a minority was systematically organised by the SDS, and that "all Serbs knew what was going on" (Jansen2007: 201)[111]. Most importantly, the belief that "all Serbs knew what was going on" was matched by the resentment that whilst knowing what was going on, they remained silent instead of warning their friends of other ethnic background. It was to this widespread belief that Jelena's acquaintance alluded when he said that "*she[I] already knows the answers anyway*". But Jelena's parents did not leave because they wanted to – she stressed as she tried to explain to me what she felt was behind her friends' refusal to accept her suggestion to give me interviews – but because at that particular moment when they had to take a decision, they felt compelled to leave. In Tuzla, however, Selma, a Bosniak woman married to a Serb man, whom I visited while I was living in Bijeljina, was categorical in her opinion that Serbs who fled to Bijeljina left "*because they wanted to*", her own husband standing as an example that "they didn't have to"[112]. This judgemental gaze was something that Bijeljina's resettled Serbs were keenly aware of, and felt necessary to protect themselves from.

The question of whether the evacuation of areas that the Serb forces could not control was organised or spontaneous, seemed to be a taboo among displaced Serbs. They were aware that many non-Serbs considered that the fact that Serb forces organised the displacement of Serb residents meant that it was voluntary, rather than forced. This taboo functioned against the backdrop of a hierarchy of suffering that results from a nationalistic competition over victimhood (Miller 2006; Moll 2013), which downplays agency, and in

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111 Stef Jansen (2007) explores the resentment among Tuzla's population against those who decided to leave, illustrating it with a dialogue between three old friends who meet again for the first time after the war, in which one of them, a Serb, is confronted by a Bosniak, and compelled to justify why he left in early May 1992. The citation is taken from the transcript of that dialogue, and is part of the Serb man's refutation that he had any sort of privileged information.

112 Armakolas (2011) describes the pressure and discrimination non-Bosniaks faced in wartime Tuzla, and analyses the political struggle between Bosniak nationalists and anti-nationalists, and how the local authorities were eventually compelled to step up to defend the city's multicultural tradition and protect non-Bosniaks. See especially pp. 245-246 regarding the intimidation of Serbs and Croats by radical Bosniak nationalists.

which one could be truly a victim only if passive and defenceless. Whilst the Bosnian Serb leadership do seem happy to assume their role in organising and supporting the displacement of Serb populations to areas under Serb control – as we saw in the previous section with regard to the commemoration of the evacuation of Sarajevo – what made these 'difficult memories' was, above all, the awareness that these were framed by many non-Serbs, and especially by former neighbours who were left behind, as acts of abandonment and even betrayal.

Activists for the rights of displaced Serbs often present themselves publicly as victims of forced displacement, avoiding however to discuss whether their displacement resulted from acts of evacuation or expulsion. In December 2014 I attended an event at the Town Hall (*vijećnica*) that offered me a valuable insight of the performative dimension of such claims of victimhood. This was a '*javna tribina*'(public discussion) about reconciliation in Bijeljina, organised in the context of the publication of an academic study undertaken by a consortium of regional and European universities[113]. Based on a survey in thirteen cities and towns across Bosnia-Herzegovina, including Bijeljina, the study suggested that there was "[strong] support for reconciliation and trust-building across the population, and particularly amongst more religious citizens"(Wilkes et al 2013: 5). The Helsinki Committee organised the event, which was part of the project's dissemination activities. Among the guests to the event were representatives of many non-governmental organisations active in Bijeljina, including the Veterans' Association of Republika Srpska (BORS); associations of displaced Serbs; (non-Serb) returnees to Bijeljina; and former concentration camp detainees.

After the researchers presented their conclusions, the audience was invited to ask questions and offer comments. It was at that point that an activist stood up and spoke in a heated tone that translated some nervousness. For him, the greatest obstacle to reconciliation was the absence of public acknowledgement among non-Serbs of the persecution endured during the war by Serbs in areas outside the control of the Serb army.

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113 University of Edinburgh/Project on Religion and Ethics in the Making of War and Peace, and the
    Center for Empirical Research on Religion in Bosnia and Herzegovina: *Factors in Reconciliation: Religion,*
    Local Conditions, People and Trust. Results From A Survey Conducted in 13 Cities Across Bosnia and Herzegovina in
    May 2013

He spoke about how he had been expelled (*protjeran*) from Central Bosnia by the HVO[114], and how they had also burned down his home and destroyed the Orthodox church in his village, and that more than twenty years after he was expelled from his home, Serbs still lacked the conditions to return to Central Bosnia. Another man then took the word, to stress, in a conciliatory tone, that personally he had no problem to condemn the expulsion of Serbs and the destructions of their property and churches, and believed that most Bosniaks in Bijeljina thought likewise. A member of the local association of former detainees (*logoraši*) at the Batković concentration camp, the man added, however, that what mattered, in the context of Bijeljina, was to focus in what happened in Bijeljina proper, rather than elsewhere in Bosnia. The discussion moved on, but the coverage of the event in the locally-based television stations focused only on the first man's statements, which he repeated to the pool of journalists present, stressing that nobody had ever been held responsible (*niko nije odgovarao*) for the crimes committed against Serbs in Central Bosnia. His suggestion that the refusal to recognise Serb suffering was the greatest obstacle to reconciliation, was presented as if it stemmed from the research's findings, which resulted in the distortion of the study's conclusions as well as the discussion itself.

A couple of weeks later, I had the chance to interview this man, whom I will call Djordje. He did not remember me from the Town Hall event, but was happy to speak to me, after an Orthodox priest whom I had interviewed introduced us. My interviews were usually unstructured, so that once I explained what my research was about and why I was interested to speak to him, I simply let the conversation flow. I wanted to know especially about his personal experience of displacement and resettlement in Bijeljina as well as his activism in Bijeljina's public life; instead, our interview began with a long introduction about the History of Bosnia-Herzegovina, in which Djordje focused essentially on the ethnogenesis of the Bosniak nationality.

Djordje held strongly nationalistic views. He went far into the past to explain that Bosniaks were essentially Serbs whose ancestors converted to Islam, some under duress (*prisilno*), while others converted primarily as a way of accessing power or preserving their privileges. He believed that Serbs were the oldest nationality present in Bosnian lands, and conveyed the idea that the construction of the Bosniaks as a national group − rather than

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114 *Hrvatsko vijeće odbrane*: Croatian Defence Council, the Bosnian Croat army, controlled by Croatian nationalist party HDZ

strictly as a religious category – was based on the appropriation of the Serb people's historical heritage. Although he did not use the expression 'appropriation', he cited a number of examples to illustrate his point: King Tvrtko Kotromanić, the first king of the medieval kingdom of Bosnia –a statue of whom, Djordje pointed out, had recently been installed in the centre of Tuzla – was in fact a Serb. The fact that the Kotromanić dynasty was Roman Catholic, rather than Orthodox mattered less than the fact that he was not a Muslim; the lily flower, symbol of the the Kotromanić dynasty – which the Bosnian government adopted in 1992 for the flag of the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and which many Bosniaks to this day see as their national flag – was, "obviously a Christian symbol"; Bijeljina's Atik mosque was originally an Orthodox church, and the same was the case all over the Balkans after the Ottoman Empire took over. I had heard similar claims before. They are part of a common repertoire about Serb and Muslim identity among Bosnian Serbs ideologically inclined to nationalism, but which include beliefs more widely shared (Jansen 2003). For Djordje, Bosnia was essentially a Serb land, which Bosnian Serbs had renounce to, once Yugoslavia disintegrated, so as to preserve their political autonomy. What was striking about him was that although he was a vocal supporter of the creation of Republika Srpska, he clearly mourned the loss of Bosnia as the homeland of the Bosnian Serbs, as much as the loss of his own home and his native region, to which he remained emotionally attached.

Moving beyond grand narratives, Djordje revealed himself burdened by the sacrifices that the war imposed on people like himself, who abandoned their homes and fought on the front lines, only to find themselves impoverished and dependent, now "*third rate citizens*"(*gradjani 3.reda*). He made a direct correlation between the war and the dispossession of the population, and condemned the ruling class as a band of war profiteers. Presenting himself as a working class man, he defined the war, not as an ethnic war, but as a "*class war*", motivated by greed (*pohlepa*), so as to offer an opportunity for plunder (*pljačka*). While in public he had directed his criticisms towards the political class in the Federation, whom he had accused of failing to create the conditions for the return of displaced Serbs to their pre-war places of residence, in our interview and subsequent conversations he directed his anger specifically against the political class in Republika Srpska, and Bijeljina's branch of the SDS in particular. The contrast between the enrichment of the political class and the poverty in which he was forced to live was a cause

for deep resentment.

Djordje had brought some documents to give me, and started by showing me photos of houses destroyed in Central Bosnia and of the Orthodox church in his native village, severely damaged during the war and still waiting to be restored. There was also a map documenting the destruction of villages in the same area. Despite being used to speaking in public, Djordje did not have a clearly articulated narrative prepared, but rather allowed himself to speak freely, from the heart, shifting from one temporal dimension to another to draw parallels establishing the contrast between the experience of Serbs from Central Bosnia and Bosniaks from Semberija. While in his native region, he said, as much as two hundred Serb villages had been destroyed, in the village of Janja, the only predominantly Muslim settlement in Semberija outside Bijeljina, no more than two or three houses had been destroyed. "*Had we not left in 1992, it would have been, for us, worse than Srebrenica*", he stated, promptly adding, by the way, that the case of Srebrenica was actually "*a great manipulation*". Then, returning to the evacuation of his home region, he told me how he had personally organised its evacuation, implying that having done so had potentially avoided a "catastrophe", meaning a massacre. This came up in the context of his accusation that the current political class were all war profiteers, who during the war as in the present, were motivated only by greed. He didn't seem concerned that this statement contradicted the one made at the public event at the town hall a few weeks earlier, in which he had accused Bosnian Croat nationalists of expelling him. What mattered was that they had to leave, not who drove them out, but he had nevertheless felt the need to publicly protect Serb claims to victimhood.

A factory worker in Central Bosnia before the war, Djordje has been unemployed since he was demobilised from the Army of Republika Srpska. Now in his early fifties, he survived on his wife's modest salary, and the occasional sale of artwork he produced. Despite his deep attachment to his native region in Central Bosnia, for Djordje the idea of returning to live there was out of question. He had not yet been able to sell his land there, neither did he obtain any compensation for his destroyed property, as all efforts in that sense had been met with obstruction by the local authorities. Returning was not a possibility. Rather than assuming that he would not want to live as a minority returnee[115],

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115 In the Bosnian context, minority return means the return to pre-war homes in areas now dominated demographically as well as politically by another ethnic group.

but instead wanted to live under Serb rule, he justified the impossibility of return on the grounds of the lack of political conditions and guarantees of security. This he placed in contrast with the successful experience of return of Bosniaks to Bijeljina and other parts of Republika Srpska, in a way that implied the moral superiority of the Serb people. Leaving aside why and how Bosniaks had been displaced from Bijeljina, his rationale was that they had returned because Serbs chose to allow them to, and that stood as evidence of their character as a tolerant people.

He surely knew, but did not mention, that in fact there had been great resistance in Bijeljina against the implementation of the right to return, with displaced Serbs resettled in Bijeljina at the forefront of that resistance. The burnt-down houses in Janja which Djordje mentioned, for instance, were not set on fire during the war, but only when the original Bosniak population made clear their intention to return after the war. Janja, from which tnearly all of the non-Serb population had been expelled in the summer of 1994 (Amnesty 1994:11-15; HRW 2000:37), housed a significant proportion of the 37.000 displaced Serbs estimated by the UNHCR to be living in the municipality of Bijeljina in 1997 (HRW 2000: 37). When, escorted by NATO troops, a delegation of displaced Bosniaks came for the first time to visit their homes in the Summer of 2000, they were received with violence by the new residents, who attacked them with stones and Molotov cocktails, and in the process seriously damaged some houses (Jansen2010:146).

Post-war Bijeljina was one of the focal points of an intra-Serb struggle between those who accepted the Dayton Agreement and defended a pragmatic accommodation of the constraints it imposed, and those that wanted to actively resist it. The first six years after Dayton were marked by great tension, and violent protests −often orchestrated rather than spontaneous − against return as well as against the international presence were not uncommon in Bijeljina municipality (e.g. US Dep. of State 2000:6,16; 2001:4).

With the victory of the faction pragmatically accepting the reality of Dayton, the dynamics of nationalist politics in Bijeljina changed, leading to the adoption of a moderate tone (see Ch. 6), and Djordje found himself reduced to a marginal position. Having remained what he had always been, he had become 'too nationalistic', in comparison with a ruling elite which had reinvented themselves as 'moderates'. After giving so much for the creation of Republika Srpska − first as a founding member of the SDS in his home town,

then, as a soldier – he felt betrayed, but nevertheless continued to display his loyalty to Republika Srpska. Despite this loyalty, the association of displaced persons he had founded no longer received public funding, and now a competing organisation had been effectively elevated to the position of exclusive representative of displaced Serbs in Bijeljina. Because of his outspoken denunciation of the discrimination displaced Serbs suffer and of abuses of the political class, he had become an outcast, and now saw himself as a dissident. Well-known in Semberija and beyond for his artistic skills and his knowledge of folklore and cultural traditions of the Serbs from Central Bosnia, even the cultural activities he organised became object of obstruction, he claimed, through the refusal of sponsorship, as well as by the imposition of prohibitive fees when he tried to rent a venue for an event.

Unique in the way he used any opportunity to voice his dissent, Djordje's situation is nevertheless illustrative of a wider sense of disempowerment and disillusion, shared by many war veterans and displaced Serbs more generally. Questioning his own nationalist ideology would have been a step too far in a man's reckoning with the past, and he separated himself from the nationalist elite that came to rule by framing the war as a class war from which only war profiteers took benefit. Only his nationalistic political convictions could provide any sense of meaning to a life whose best years were consumed without reward, and so his personal recollections were publicly articulated so as not to challenge the officially-sanctioned narratives, or risk in any way undermining the strength of Serb claims for victimhood.

Memories of resettlement and integration

We now turn our focus to the 'difficult memories' more specifically associated with the experience of resettlement and integration in Bijeljina, through the stories of Sladjana, 35; Denis, 36; and Ana, 23 at the time of my fieldwork in 2014-2015. They reveal different facets of this experience, but converge in their conflicted feelings towards Bijeljina, stemming from their condition as young adults faced with poor prospects for the future.

As the case of Janja to which Djordje made allusion illustrates, the experience of resettlement is at the core of a particular set of 'difficult memories'. Once displaced, Serb

refugees often occupied the homes that belonged to non-Serbs, some of which had been left vacant when their occupiers fled or were deported, while in other cases the occupants were forced to cede part of their space to make room for the refugees (HRW 2000:24). The housing stock in Bijeljina and Janja provided accommodation for tens of thousands of displaced Serbs. Semberija being a prosperous region, the houses were usually big and solid, and they were in good condition, as the region did not experience any sort of property destruction during the war.

These are difficult memories because they are based on a shared experience with the legitimate owners of these homes, an experience in which displaced Serbs, willingly or out of necessity, benefited from the misfortune of non-Serbs. This puts displaced Serbs in a position in which they became entangled in a web of complicity with nationalist leaders and war profiteers. Whilst those with the best connections to the SDS or relevant functions within the war effort were assigned housing, in other cases displaced Serbs were at the mercy of local war profiteers, whom they had to pay for the 'right' to occupy those homes. The Dayton Agreement guaranteed the right to property owned before the war, and despite great obstruction during the first post-war years, this right was eventually enforced, which meant that resettled Serbs were eventually evicted from these homes. To avoid homelessness, displaced Serbs depended on local networks of patronage so as to receive assistance in the form of re-housing or plots of land for construction. Later on, many people managed to sell the properties they owned in what is now the Federation, with which they obtained enough money to solve their housing problem, but many others either had nothing to sell, or have been unable to find buyers and continue to live in very poor conditions, while domicile residents of Bijeljina, regardless of ethnicity, who owned land or houses in areas earmarked for development, benefited from the boom in construction triggered by the influx of displaced Serbs[116].

Sladjana's family settled in Janja in 1993, when she was eleven. They shared the house of a Muslim family for more than one year, until their hosts were deported to Tuzla in the summer of 1994. Sladjana was the only person among resettled Serbs to openly

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116 A common practice was to make a deal with a property developer towards the construction of building blocks, in which the owner of the land received 18% to 25% of the new housing or commercial units built. A number of modern four to five-floor buildings were built in Bijeljina following this scheme.

speak to me about this experience without avoiding the reality of the climate of fear in which Muslims lived. When I interviewed her, in February 2015, we had known each other for almost one year. Sladjana had studied in Belgrade, and our common passion for the city was the ground on which we built a relationship. Albeit critical of the local leadership, who she though had already spent too much time in power, she told me she enjoyed living in Bijeljina because "there was always something new going on", and she felt she was somehow part of the town's transformation.

Sladjana was glad that the displaced Bosniaks were able to return and thus restore to some extent the town's pre-war ethnic diversity. Unlike Djordje, she did not see that as evidence of the tolerant character of the Serb people, but saw their wartime persecution and expulsion as acts of injustice that required redress. She recognised her own family's plight in theirs, and refused to be drawn into the competition over victimhood that was the main trait of dominant public narratives. It saddened her, however, that the legitimate fears and the actual persecution Serbs also suffered during the war was something that the public in the Federation seemed generally unwilling to recognise. The interview was emotionally demanding for her, as she remembered what her family went through:

> "*Those were crazy times, I don't like to remember them, I make an effort to forget, I seldom speak about them... those were crazy times because things happened that I would never have said they could happen, that people could change so much*"

Until the beginning of the war, Sladjana's family lived in Visoko, a small town with a Muslim majority, located between the cities of Sarajevo and Zenica. In May 1992, with tensions mounting in her hometown, her mother left for Serbia with her and her sister, while her father stayed behind. They stayed with relatives, first in the countryside, then in Belgrade, but with money running short and the new school year approaching, Sladjana's mother decided to return to Bosnia with the children, having heard that across the river Drina in Zvornik there were homes available. They settled in the village of Kozluk, near Zvornik. Kozluk's original population had been expelled in April 1992, when Arkan took over. As in the case of Janja, the residents had decided not to resist the Serb take-over, but to negotiate their surrender. After the population was transferred across the front-lines to Tuzla, the houses were looted, but since there had been no combats or shelling, they were in sufficiently good condition to provide shelter for displaced Serbs. The experience of occupying such a house mirrored their previous experience of leaving their own home in

haste. Sladjana told me how among the things left behind, her mother found some photographs scattered in a rubbish dump, which she collected and stored in the hope that she might one day return them. Some months later, indeed, a woman came looking for things, and her mother gave her the photos. Years later, when Sladjana's family finally visited their home town after the war, they saw that their house too had been looted, and they found that some of their possessions, like her father's tools, now belonged to their former neighbours, who ostensibly had kept them to avoid them being stolen, but did not give them back.

Life in Kozluk was hard. The village was overcrowded with displaced Serbs, and there wasn't enough food. Due to its proximity to the front-lines, the area also had to be frequently evacuated. Every now and then, buses would arrive and take everybody away, for a few hours or a few days. School attendance was irregular, and the children were lagging behind, and for many months they had no way of knowing of their father's whereabouts, or even whether he was alive. It was he who found out where they were and joined them. In the meantime he had joined the Army of Republika Srpska, and was assigned a post with the border guard. Once reunited, the family pulled some connections with the Commission for Housing[117], and were assigned a house in Janja, where life was much safer than in Kozluk. There, they shared a house with the owner, a Muslim woman, and her two children, while the woman's husband had previously fled to Tuzla. Sladjana was keen to stress that they had a respectful relationship based on a mutual understanding of each family's situation:

> "*My father was a specific person, and my mother, they were specific persons, so that while we lived in Janja, never did he offended anyone, he always made an effort (trudio se), as much as he was able to, to respect people, regardless of how much evil there was around, and of the times he was living through, to remain humane (da budi čovjek).*"

According to Sladjana, the fact that her father was a border guard somehow protected her hosts. The Muslim family lived in great fear, and there were rumours that the family's eldest daughter, still a teenager, might have been sexually assaulted by men associated with Vojkan Djurković, the man who was in charge of the business of so-called 'voluntary transfer' of non-Serbs across the front-lines, and who eventually organised the

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117 The Commission was created following the *Decree on the Allocation for Temporary Use of Housing Objects, Business and other Premises,* which came into force on 1 August 1992 (published in the *Official Gazette of Serbian People in Bosnia-Hercegovina,* no. 12/92, July 31, 1992, cited in HRW 2000:25,n.62) (see also Ch.3)

mass deportation of Janja's Muslim population. Sladjana's father arranged for the Muslim family to be smuggled across the border to Serbia, from where they went to exile in Western Europe. Her family lived in that house until December 2002, when, as part of the international effort to enforce the right to return, all employees of public agencies received notice that they had to abandon the houses they occupied if they belonged to other displaced people. The legitimate owners had filed a process to recover their property, and Sladjana's family had to leave in short notice, but they had nowhere else to go, so her father spoke to the Muslim woman to ask her to stay a bit longer. "*Strange how people have short memory*", Sladjana commented with contained outrage, as she told me that the Muslim family seemed to have forgotten what her father had done for them during the war, as they refused his request, and thus forced them to leave in the middle of winter, with snow and extremely cold temperatures outside. After moving about five times since they left their home in 1992, the family eventually obtained a plot of land in another village close to Bijeljina, and in 2005 they finally moved into their own home.

Sladjana moved to Belgrade in 2000, to study at the university. Having arrived just one month before the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević, she was able to engage with the dynamics of the political change that was taking place. Those were exciting times, which she remembered fondly. The contrast between this set of memories and those difficult memories of displacement and resettlement was clear, and engaging with this period lightened up the interview to the satisfaction of both of us. Given her love for Belgrade, I was curious to know what brought her back to Bijeljina. She never imagined she would settle permanently in Bijeljina, but once she graduated, she was able to benefit from the economic boom that Bosnia-Herzegovina experienced in the early 2000s, and obtained a job through the local job centre (*Zavod za zapošljavanje*). She was proud to state that she did not need connections to find work, and praised her boss, who only employed people through the job centre. She seemed better integrated in Bijeljina than any other person in the 'resettled' category that I knew, thanks especially to her job and professional status.

When I met her again during my field visit in the Summer of 2015, however, Sladjana sounded rather unhappy with life in Bijeljina, and told me she was considering emigrating to the United States, where her sister already lived. She was taking English classes and researching online what kind of jobs she might apply to in the US, preparing to leave the country altogether. She didn't see a future for herself in her country, a feeling she

shared with much of the Bosnian youth, who in recent years have been massively leaving the country, constrained only by the immigration restrictions in the countries they aspire to leave to. Still single at 35, her sister was the only family she had, as both her parents had prematurely died a few years before. She hadn't mentioned this during the interview, in which she always used the present tense when she spoke about her parents. It was only some time afterwards that I found out through a common acquaintance, and we never talked about it, although she seemed to assume that I knew. I came to see Sladjana's interview as the fulfilment of a duty of memory towards her parents. She was motivated to speak to me as an act of generosity, to help me with my research, but, without being explicit about it, she also wanted to counter outsiders' prejudiced views about 'the Serbs', which she felt led to an unfair portrayal of the wartime experience in Bosnia-Herzegovina that devalued the suffering people like her parents had gone through, and ignored their efforts to remain moral.

Sladjana's wish to leave and build herself a new life abroad was shared by many. When I visited Bijeljina in the summer of 2015, almost everyone I met who was younger than 40, and some older than that, expressed a similar desire, if not a firm intention. It is hard to know whether this desire is stronger among those who share the 'refugee identity' than among the domicile population. What seemed to be particular to the resettled population was an enduring feeling of vulnerability, which I had observed before, but which emerged more clearly under the particular climate created by the convergence of a number of situations, such as the consequences of the catastrophic floods earlier in spring; the European 'refugee crisis'; and political tensions stemming from the twentieth anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre[118].

At one point during our interview some months earlier, Sladjana had observed how every time they moved they got closer to the border with Serbia. At the time, I inferred from her comment that this proximity to the border provided her, not only in the past, but also in the present, with some reassurance. When I analysed the interview in the light of

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118 These included the Russian veto to a British proposal of a UN Security Council condemning Srebrenica as genocide (BBC 2015), and an incident during the commemorations in the Memorial Cemetery in Potočari, where participants attacked the Serbian Prime-Minister Aleksandar Vučić with stones and other objects, forcing his security guards to remove him from the premises, thus putting an end to what had ostensibly been a gesture towards reconciliation on Vučić's part (BIRN 2015)

the new plans she was drawing for her life, however, it seemed instead that this observation betrayed a sense of enduring vulnerability, as it implied an admission of the possibility that she might not have settled for good. I came across with this same sense of enduring vulnerability in other interviews as well as in informal conversations. According to Jelena, with whom I eventually tried to make sense of it, this feeling was particularly pervasive among resettled Serbs.

Denis, 36[119], shared this feeling of vulnerability, and similarly expressed the relative sense of reassurance that the proximity to the border with Serbia provided. Born in Zavidovići, in Central Bosnia, his family was first displaced after the 1990 elections, when the SDS decided to create parallel political institutions in the areas where they failed to obtain a majority. The family moved to the area under the control of the newly formed parallel municipality, but when the war started, they were forced to flee that area, and in 1994 they settled in Novi Sad, Serbia, where they lived until 2004. When they were able to sell their property in Zavidovići, they decided to move to Bijeljina, where property was cheaper than in Novi Sad. Denis' first impressions of life in Bijeljina were very different from those of displaced Serbs who arrived during or in the immediate aftermath of the war. He had experienced discrimination in Novi Sad, where, he said "*the word refugee is a very harsh word*" and Bosnian Serbs were often unfairly blamed for all sorts of problems, from unemployment to petty crime. Permanently settling in Bijeljina was thus an improvement in his condition. At the time, he said, "*Bijeljina was the centre of the refugee community*", and the concentration of "*people from Central Bosnia, sharing the same mentality and traditions*" gave it a sense of homecoming. Like Sladjana, Denis appreciated the transformation that the overwhelming presence of resettled Serbs induced in Bijeljina. Unlike Sladjana, he had no desire to leave, but he was similarly conflicted between the sense of being part of that ongoing transformation and the lack of prospects for a sustainable future.

The problem, in his view, was that Republika Srpska faced security threats against which the privileged location of Bijeljina offered no reassurance. He mentioned in particular the participation of a significant number of Bosniaks in the war in Syria on the side of the so-called Islamic State, to elaborate on the possibility of an Islamic terrorist plot in Bijeljina, a possibility which, after the murder of a Serb policeman by a Bosniak returnee in the town of Zvornik in April 2015 (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2015), he argued,

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119 Interviewed in August 2015

could no longer be dismissed. Denis was a member of the Serbian Radical Party in Bijeljina, who believed that sooner or later there would be another war in Bosnia-Herzegovina; others, with more moderate political views, as was the case with Dragan, somehow shared the same fear, a fear that the media and the political class exploited, and which resonated also with the 1990s nationalistic propaganda against Bosnian Muslims.

For Denis, however, demography posed a bigger threat to the survival of Republika Srpska, since there were "*no conditions for young couples to get married and have children*". On the one hand, unemployment was high, and work conditions precarious and exploitative. Sitting next to his girlfriend, he pointed to his own case. Both still lived with their parents, and could not marry because he couldn't find steady work, surviving instead on small jobs in the informal economy, despite having a diploma in Economics. On the other hand, he asserted, the health system was so corrupt that "women who wanted children knew they would have to pay", alluding to the common belief that to receive adequate medical care, patients had to bribe the staff. His girlfriend nodded. These were the reasons why, he believed, 80% of the youth wished to leave.

Ana, a student at the local extension of the University of Eastern Sarajevo, grew up in Bijeljina, but was never able to overcome the division between the resettled and the domicile population. She summed it up to me in simple terms: "I grew up with my parents listening to Pink Floyd, not to popular (*narodna*) music". She witnessed and shared her parents sense of oppression. The major factor of division, though, were not the differences in cultural preferences, but the feeling of being disadvantaged in terms of access to resources. Ana worked for me as a child minder for a few months, until my daughter was old enough to go to nursery. I was worried, however, that the job might affect her studies. Rather than reassuring me, Ana dismissed my concerns by explaining that whatever effort she might put in her academic achievement would make little difference in her life, because because she was "a refugee" (*izbjeglica*), and that meant that her family didn't have the connections (*veze*) necessary to provide her access to jobs once she graduated. In the present, however, her mother was unemployed and the family needed the extra revenue even if that came at the cost of her academic performance. She eventually shared her childminding duties with her mother, so that things worked out for everyone, and she was

able to have enough time to study, but what was clear was that she felt the odds were against her, and had little faith in the future. As I was to find out, Ana was far from unique in her generation in how she felt alienated from the society in which she lived, and the way she identified herself as a "refugee". Other young adults presented themselves to me in a similar way, and similarly expressed the feeling that they were treated as second rate citizens, and discriminated against due to their condition as 'refugees' and lack of connections (*veze*), whilst watching the children of the locals grab the few jobs available.

Concluding remarks:

The endurance of this self-identification as 'refugees', which, twenty years after the experience of displacement, already transcended the generation barrier, revealed a category of the population still caught in a state of prolonged liminality. Having cut their connection to the places they used to belong to, they felt far from integrated in the society they now lived in, and still waiting to reap the benefits of the sacrifice they made, through their displacement and resettlement, to the existence and consolidation of Republika Srpska.

Whilst all my informants revealed a strong attachment to Republika Srpska, none of them seemed to feel fully integrated in Bijeljina, and some, like Denis, had in the prospect of a new war the only way they could imagine to come out of the political deadlock in which Bosnia-Herzegovina; this was, however, a solution that nobody wished for. With their focus on the sacrifices displaced Serbs made for Republika Srpska, and the praise they receive for their loyalty, the rituals of reaggregation marking the closing of a liminal stage, the commemorations of events such as the 'Tuzlanska kolona' massacre seemed to resonate amongst this population in a way that was probably not intended. In the name of the sacrifices made up to now, sacrifices continue to be demanded and accepted. The evocation of the traumatic past adds to the climate of concrete fear that many feel in RS, by elevating it into it a level of existential fear. But this climate of fear is also what alienates people, and undermines the potential for attachment to the new homeland, since it prevents them from positively imagining a shared future.

Chapter 7

Official memory at the stage of reaggregation

The second largest town in Republika Srpska, Bijeljina was known in the immediate post-war as a hotbed of violence, organised crime, and extreme nationalism. In more recent years, however, the town has been through a process of 'normalisation'. As violence was largely curbed, the discourse of hatred that was dominant in the 1990s has now been replaced by a resolutely moderate tone, in which tolerance appears as the highest value; and behaviour in the public realm is policed so as to strictly enforce the image of a more moderate, tolerant form of nationalism. The analysis of this 'normalisation' process provides us with a case-study of the transformation of Serb nationalism in Republika Srpska since the end of the war.

In the context of Bijeljina, 'normalisation' appears as a concept vague enough to comprise an array of meanings. In the strictest sense, the term refers primarily to the achievement of a situation in which social relations occur in a manner that is predictable and stable, thanks to the curbing of violence, and in particular of politically motivated violence against the Bosniak community. In the widest sense, 'normalisation' appears as an alternative to the idea of 'reconciliation', in which reconciliation itself appears as redundant, and unnecessary. Now a minority in a town where they used to form the majority of the population, Bosniaks are tolerated, but the urban landscape is saturated with references to Serb nationalism, national and religious identity. But 'normalisation' does not refer only to inter-ethnic relations. Its literal meaning of "returning something into a normal state" encompassed the definition and adoption of a set of social norms setting the

standards of social behaviour. The new, post-liminal normalality essentially consecrated the values imposed by the war, stemming from nationalism, albeit accomodating, not without uneasiness, the enduring presence of legacies pointing to different sets of values, such as the Partisan tradition, and the tradition of 'life in common' (*zajednički život*). Resilient enough to endure and modify the nationalist standards, these tradition were, in the process, also modified, in a way that highlighted the influence of ethnicity to the detriment of other forms of belonging.

Applying the framework of liminality, this chapter analyses the process of 'normalisation' as a post-liminal process of consolidation of the political and social-economic structures created by the war, through rituals "reaggregation", in which, after a period of great flux and deep uncertitude, more stable forms of identity are negotiated under a new set of norms, and projected into the future, reframing the different historical and cultural legacies brough over from the past.

This chapter explores some of the rituals marking passage from a liminal condition to the new normality (generated during the liminal stage), through the stage of reaggregation, during which a set of discrete processes converged into a wider process of "normalisation". The chapter starts by describing the official commemoration of the takeover of Bijeljina in 1992, before focusing on two particular processes which have functioned as rites of passage away from liminality and into a new normality, as reflected in inter-ethnic relations, so as to explore different meanings assigned to the idea of normalisation. These processes were the reconstruction of the Bijeljina's mosques, between 2002 and 2014; and the creation, activities and collapse of Bijeljina's local Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2008.

Reaggregation wider than mere normalisation, and requires also, in the case of a conflictual rupture with the past, forms of redress to bring people together and avoid a schism. The traditional set of mechanisms Transitional Justice advocates perscribe has failed to deliver. The failure of the TRC exposed the virtual absence of, and indeed the lack of political will towards redressive measures, as did the fact that very few judicial cases involving violent crimes committed in Bijeljina during the war have been fully investigating, procecuted, brought to trial and concluded, none of which in Bijeljina district court. As for

official commemorations and monuments, they exclude the experience of persecution lived by those classified as 'non-Serbs', Muslims/Bosniaks in particular, whilst placing emphasys on the need for 'Serbs' to offer themselves, as individuals, in sacrifice, in the past as in the present, for the sake of the collective, leading to the question of when, if ever, will the fruits of such sacrifices become available to enjoy.

But away from the limelight, small scale acts of redress have also been taking place, at a more grasstoots leve, through acts performed by ordinary citizens towards the restoration of trust across the ethnic divide, countering the salience of ethnic identification and involving alternative forms of solidarity beyond those offered by belonging to ethnic categories.I will thus balance the (mostly) top-down dynamics at play in the construction of the mosques and the creation of the TRC, with a few illustrative examples of grassroots forms of redress and organic reconciliation.

I will then conclude with a reflexion of how the new normality is experienced, and how that experience influences feelings of belonging or, otherwise, alienation, both to Bijeljina and to Republika Srpska.

Twenty years since the end of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the environment in which I immersed myself during one year of fieldwork in the town of Bijeljina (2014-2015) was an environment no longer marked by the everyday experience of violence, but a "normalised" environment marked, on the one hand, by an ostensible tolerance for the presence of non-Serbs, and, on the other hand, by the saturation of the physical space with visible references to Serb national identity. In a radical departure (or perhaps not so radical) from the dominant framing of the 'other' as a threat, the discourse of tolerance seems to have replaced the discourse of hatred that marked the war and immediate post-war years. The following session will describe how the enduring commitment to nationalism is reconciled with a more recently adopted discourse of tolerance.

7.1 The official narrative of Bijeljina's wartime experience

 The cornerstone of Bijeljina's official narrative concerning the wartime experience is the military take-over of Bijeljina by the Serbian Volunteer Guard (*Srpska dobrovoljačka garda*), a special unit from Serbia led by the notorious Zeljko Ražnatović 'Arkan'. Framed as an act of liberation againts Islamic extremists, this event implicitly justifies the subsequent persecution of Bosnian Muslims, the closure and demolition of the mosques, and the eventual deportation of the quasi totality of the Muslim population.

The narrative of the liberation of Bijeljina was forged by the local authorities through their propaganda machine, the local radio station, *Radio Bijeljina*, and the local newspaper *Semberske novine* (renamed *SIM novine* during the war).The main features of the narrative then crafted remain. Accordingly, Muslim extremists had allegedly launched a violent assault to take over power, erected barricades and installed snipers in the minarets and skyscrapers, and the Serbian Volunteer Guard intervened *in extremis* and intense fighting took place in the days following their arrival until they succeeded in completely controlling the town. Bijeljina then became a safe haven, attracting displaced Serbs from Eastern and Central Bosnia, and a bridgehead for the expansion of Serb-controlled territory southwards along the River Drina, and westwards towards the Posavina region. It also provided manpower and material resources for the war effort, which resulted in the ultimate sacrifice of thousands of fighters.

A significant difference between wartime and the post-war narratives lies, however, in the place assigned to individuals. During the war, the propaganda machine systematically portrayed Arkan, alongside the leader of the local paramilitary unit, the 'Panthers', Ljubiša Savić 'Mauzer', as heroes, but after the war they quickly ceased to be cult figures[120]. Arkan and Mauzer have now acquired a new role in the official narrative

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120 One of the challenges that the SDS central leadership faced once the war began was to assert its dominance by subduing or eliminating potential political rivals, who competed for the products of plunder and war-profiteering. This was done basically by forcing the integration of the different paramilitary units operating in Bosnia in the Army of Republika Srpska, but commanders like Mauzer retained a great level of power and autonomy, thanks to the loyalty of his subordinates and their quality as soldiers. After the war, Mauzer left the SDS and founded a new political party, the Democratic Party of Republika Srpska. He was deeply involved in the intra-Serb power struggle over the Dayton Peace Agreement. Whilst the SDS pursued a hardline approach advocating for resistance to its implementation, Mauzer allied himself with the rising pragmatic line, led by Biljana Plavsić and Milorad Dodik, and when Dodik became Prime-minister in 1998, Mauzer became the head of the Directorate for police of the Republika Srpska's Ministry of Interior (*nacelnik uprave policije MUP-a RS*) directly responsible for the

about the war. Instead of heroes, they became scapegoats for everything that was wrong with the Serb takeover and the Serb rule over Bijeljina. While insisting on the narrative that Serb forces liberated Bijeljina, in the face of an attempted takeover by Muslim extremists, Serb politicians whom I interviewed, who had been active during the take-over of Bijeljina in 1992[121], exclusively blamed Arkan's forces for the murders that occurred during and immediately after the take-over, thus omitting the role of local fighters, who guided Arkan's men through town, and participated in numerous detentions. Mauzer was held responsible for the climate of permanent fear that non-Serbs who remained in town felt, as well as for much of the racketeering that went on. Specific crimes whose perpetrators were known, and thus could not be assigned to Mauzer, were justified as exclusively motivated by the greed of the individuals involved, thus giving credit to an alternative, ostensibly non-nationalist, narrative of the war that presents it as a 'war of plunder' (*pljačkaški rat*).

As players whose actions escaped the control of the SDS, even if their actions converged towards the same goals, Arkan and Mauzer were, from the perspective of the SDS local leadership, rivals as much as they were allies. In Bijeljina, the civilian administration had to find forms of accommodation, while attending also to the constraints imposed by the SDS's central leadership. Paying tribute to people like Arkan and Mauzer as heroes would bring no benefit to the post-war ruling elite, which gained much more by dissociating themselves from such figures. Instead, the commemoration of the 'liberation of Bijeljina' focuses on 'fallen soldiers' in general, with the 'Serb Volunteer Guard' and the 'Panthers' respective veterans organisations represented alongside organisations of the families of missing soldiers and civilian victims, thus blending together the sacrifice of the fallen soldiers and the victimhood of civilians.

The shift from individual heroism to collective sacrifice, however, cannot be explained solely by the ruling elite's tactical interests, but also by the collectivist nature of nationalism, resulting in the submission of the individual to the nation. Rather than individual heroes, it is the nation itself that is object of commemoration, and this is clearly expressed in the features of Bijeljina's monument, with its faceless, anonymous mass of

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investigations of organised crime, which was then closely associated with the SDS. After surviving a first attempt against his life he was murdered in 2000 in Bijeljina, through the explosion of a bomb placed in his car. Arkan was also murdered in 2000 in Belgrade in an unrelated crime.
121 Mirko Blagojević from the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), interviewed in October 2014; and Cvijetin Simić from SDS, interviewed in January 2015.

male figures.

Fig. 5: The *parastos* in commemoration of the liberation of Bijeljina (31/03/2014)

A few days after my arrival for fieldwork in 2014, I attended the annual commemoration of the 'liberation of Bijeljina'. The commemoration, which took place in front of the Monument to the Fallen Soldiers and Civilian Victims, followed a template common to most war-related commemorations organised by Bosnian Serbs. The main element was a *parastos*, a Serbian Orthodox religious service for the dead, regardless of the fact that no Serb fighters were killed during the Serb take-over of Bijeljina and the surrounding region. The *parastos* was attended mostly by members of the local political institutions, activists from war veterans' and fallen soldiers' organisations, and a few family members of soldiers killed during the war, no more than a hundred people in total. It struck me, at the time, how few participants the commemoration attracted. The event had been advertised, and, for more than one hour before it started, loudspeakers played patriotic songs like '*Tamo daleko*' and '*Marš na Drinu*', but the population ignored the event, except for the stares of passers-by, who detained themselves only briefly to observe it, before carrying on.

After the *parastos*, local notables laid flower wreaths on the base of the monument, and then the participants were invited for the inauguration of an exhibition, in the nearby cultural centre. The exhibition consisted on a series of photographs displaying

the images of mutilated bodies and mass graves of Serb victims. These victims were not, however, related to any wartime events that took place locally, but depicted human remains found in other regions of Bosnia.In the anniversary of an event that directly led to the murder of dozens of Bijeljina's non-Serb citizens, a representative of the municipality, on behalf of the organising committee, justified the exclusive focus on Serb victims saying:

"All have the right to pay tribute to their victims, and we pay tribute to ours".

Non-Serb victims of wartime persecution in Bijeljina were excluded from official memory, and thus also symbolically excluded from full membership in the community. Since Bijeljina became a Serb town, only Serb victims were 'ours' to commemorate. Official representations of the past are acts of communication that carry an intentionality; while official representations may seek to raise questions and invite reflection[122], very often they seek to provide answers meant to reduce the population's uncertainties over identity, by offering a script that articulates the authorities's preferred interpretation of the past. The 'difficult memories' of ethnic cleansing are not represented in an official memory characterised, as often happens with war-related officially-sponsored representations, by the pervasiveness of the themes of victimhood, sacrifice and heroism of the dominant group. The pervasiveness of official memory places significant constraints on any expression of remembrance that diverges from the official script, but the 'difficult memories' of violence against non-Serbs, albeit absent from official representation, are nevertheless present in Bijeljina, as they stem from the shared experience of its inhabitants. It is to these 'difficult memories', constrained in their public expression but not entirely silenced, that we will now turn our attention.

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122 This is the case, for instance, of the memorial to the fallen soldiers of the Vietnam war in Washington DC, USA (Mosse 1990:224), and of the monument to the Holocaust Memorial to the Murdered jews of Europe, in Berlin (Knischewski and Spittler 2006).

7.2 The reconstruction of Bijeljina's Atik Mosque

The ostensive exclusion of the victims of the 1992 takeover contrasted with another event that took place in the same square a few months later, and which revealed the commitment of the local authorities to enforce tolerance and present Bijeljina as a moderate society: this was the public ceremony marking the official reopening of the Atik Mosque, which Serb forces had destroyed in March 1993 (see Ch 3; 4). The city mayor (gradonačelnik), Mićo Mićić was the guest of honour in the ceremony presided by the Reis-ul-ulema Husein Kavazović, leader of the Islamic Community of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In his speech, the Reis-ul-ulema K made the warmest reference to his role in securing a tolerant environment in Bijeljina, and Mićić himself declared that opening of the renovated mosque represented "*an example of democracy, respect for human rights and equality between all who live in Bijeljina*"[123] [124]. The following day, the local branch of SNSD, locally in opposition (but in government at entity level) denounced the Mayor's presence at the Mosque on the grounds that the organisers did not display a flag of Republika Srpska in the premises, but only a flag of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Mayor was criticised for being 'pro-bosnian', but the SNSD statement was careful to state that it nevertheless welcomed the Mosque's opening event, thus reinforcing the Mayor's point that its renovation stood as evidence of the tolerant character of the Serb people.

Some of my informants – activists involved with the Islamic community, but also ordinary individuals who attended the ceremony – reported on how acquaintances as well as strangers in the street, presumably Serbs, expressed their satisfaction for this achievement, stressing that the renewed presence of the mosque had brought a better 'spirit' (*'duh'*) to the square. The event occurred peacefully, albeit subject to security measures, allowing, for instance, to a prompt but discreet intervention to detail a man wearing a shirt with the photo of Ratko Mladič who tried to walk past the crowd of worshippers and guests, which spread beyond the walls of the mosque and into the square itself[125].

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123 Preporod Bijeljina: "Otvorena obnavljena Atik džamija u Bijeljini", 16/09/2014, at
http://preporodbn.com/otvorena-obnovljena-atik-dzamija-u-bijeljini/ (last accessed 13/06/2016)
124 Original: "primjer demokratije, poštivanja ljudskih prava i ravnopravnosti svih koji žive u Bijeljini"
125 Some months later, when an unknown person painted a graffiti on the wall of the local sports centre with

A few weeks later, on the official commemoration of the day of the municipality, 25 September, the Mayor reinforced his message of tolerance, inviting representatives of the Islamic Community to the commemorative event, and presenting them with a Declaration of Gratefulness for the IZ's active participation in aid and rescue efforts during the catastrophic floods that in May had engulfed Semberija and other parts of Bosnia. Whilst acknowledging the significance of such a gesture, one of the participants in the ceremony on behalf of the IZ, when describing it to me, was keen to highlight how the delegation were assigned places somewhere on the edge of the room, while representatives of the Serbian orthodox Church sat on the front row. Such a graphic image offered an allegory for the meaning of tolerance, reinforcing, one the one hand, the salience of ethnic difference, and, on the other hand, assigning a position of marginality to the ethnic other, praised but kept in its place. Another participant, present during this conversation, countered such a perspective, highlighting instead the importance of perserverance, and saying "what matters is that we are here, and that we are here means two things: first, that we are not afraid, and second, that we have no hatred".

The process of reconstruction of Bijeljina's mosques is, indeed a tale of perseverance. A few years after the end of the war, once the Islamic Community in Bijeljina reorganised, it declared to the local authorities and the international organisations present, their intention to rebuild the five mosques that had been demolished during the war. Behind this initiative were not only the religious authorities, but a small core of local residents and activists in favour of the return process. Their idea was that rebuilding the mosques would incentivise the return, offering to the forcefully displaced a message of hope and encouragement. They were met with opposition first and foremost from the local representative of the Office of the High-Representative of the international Community, who is said to have suggested that only one mosque be built, and that this should be located in the outskirts, as it might otherwise be seen as a provocation by Serb nationalists and lead to violent reactions.

racist, violent slurs against Bosnian Muslims, it was painted over on the same day, no more than two hours after it was discovered. On another occasion, a member of the fan club of the local football team, FC Radnik, as arrested when he was caught gluing posters in praise of General Ratko Mladic, on the eve of the anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre. The incidents, and they way they were dealt with are illustrative of the way the local authorities manage dissent, now that they have adopted a moderate line, but it also exposed the endurance of ethnic prejudice and hatred, regularly expressed through small incidents like this one, some of which remain unreported or unknown to the wider population.

Such fear was not without a basis. After the war Bijeljina became one of the centres of a power struggle among Republika Srpska's political class over how to react to the Dayton Peace Agreement and the international military presence in the country. Simultaneously, other important struggles were taking place. Bijeljina's population had doubled with the influx of Serbs displaced from other regions, most of whom were housed in the homes formerly occupied by non-Serbs, mostly Bosniaks. They had been dispossessed and in many cases deported, but were now returning and reclaiming their property, under the provisions of the Dayton Peace Accords. A number of violent incidents took place there in this period, including violent criminal activities for profit, and politically motivated violence, like mob attacks on NATO (SFOR) forces, bomb attacks to politicians, and ethnically-motivated crimes such as attacks to Bosniak returnees and their property.

The local authorities refused permission to the reconstruction of the mosques, which was granted only after a sucessful complaint to the Human Rights Commission, a state organ created by Dayton. Eventually forced to grant permission, the authorities resorted to different forms of administrative obstruction, including, according to the IZ, the erasure of the property registers from the cadastres. The Islamic Community persevered and eventually the reconstruction began. For Bosniaks, the reconstruction was a form of reasserting their presence, symbolic as well as physical, in Bijeljina and other areas of what became Republika Srspka. The reconstruction of the mosques was seen as a necessary step to ensure conditions for the community to return and thrive under the new circumstances.

As with the reconstruction of the mosques, the return of populations to areas where they would be minorities as a result of the war, was seen by the international agencies as a potential threat to the fragile peace, rather than something to promote and facilitate. Both processes were essentially self-driven; their relative success reveals the importance of collective agency and individual leadership, willing to explore the opportunities opened up by the peace settlement, in particular regarding the right to property and the right to return to one's pre-war home. It was only after these processes kickstarted that international agencies provided the support that they were in principle committed to.

The reconstruction of the main mosque, the Atik Mosque, began in 2002. One year earlier, a ceremony in Banja Luka marking the launching of the reconstruction of the Ferhadija Mosque was violently disrupted by Serb nationalists. The incident, probably orchestrated rather than spontaneous, resulted in one man dead. In Bijeljina nothing of the

kind happened, but the Islamic Community also chose to keep a low profile so as to avoid unwanted attention.

In terms of popular reactions to the launching of the reconstruction of Bijeljina's five mosques, two types of reaction stand in contrast. On the one hand, the construction sites were regularly targetted, usually under the dead of night, by individuals who painted racist and hateful words on the sites' walls; and once someone even placed a pig's head on the gate of one of the construction sites. Rather than reporting these incidents, the Islamic community simply removed the messages of hatred. Publicising these incidents might, the activists reasoned, discourage Bosniak return, while ignoring them would deny the authors any publicity that would reward their actions.

On the other hand, many Serbs offered donations, ranging from a few convertible marks to tens of thousands. Others privately expressed to the Bosniak activists their appreciation about the initiative, which they saw as restoring some of the town's old urban spirit. Such acts reveal the endurance locally of the urban traditions of peaceful coexistence of ethnic/religious groups, pointing out that it was common since the late 19th century for people of different faiths to contribute with money, materials or work, to the construction of other faiths' temples, and that tradition was often invoked by those now offering donations.

Importantly, though, these donations were performed as private acts. Rather than acts of resistance to the national order, the donations represented an attempt to accommodate these traditions of zajednički život to the new circumstances. Some of the donors, especially businessmen, had important ties to the nationalist regime operating in RS and/or to the local political class. Consistently with their donations, some also had a policy of providing employment for non-Serbs, in a town that was now highly segregated.

Hence, contering the grim prediction of some "internationals", rather than stirring the flames of ethnic hatred, the reconstruction of Bijeljina's mosques significantly contributed to a more positive environment with regard to inter-ethnic relations. Not long after the reconstruction began, a more moderate leadership emerged within the local ruling party, the SDS, which has ininterruptedly ruled Bijeljina since 1990 up to the present day. This was the result of the power struggles among Serb nationalists after Dayton (no time to delve on it here). This new leadership, with Mićo Mićić at the helm, abandoned the hardline nationalism that had characterised the SDS until them, to adopt a pragmatic

approach both in relation to the international actors in Bosnia and to the now small but not insignificant Bosniak community in Bijeljina. Mićić had began his political career after the war as the municipality official responsible for relations with the war veterans of the Army of Republika Srpska, and, as such, committed himself towards the creation of a monument to the fallen soldiers, which now stands in the central square, in front of the disctrict court, and within some 50 metres of the Atik Mosque. Counting on such a strong base of supporters, Mićić's skill was in the realisation that a more accomodating approach towards non-Serbs would not undermine its power basis, but, instead, expanded. He for the first time nominated a Bosniak vice-mayor (who had no effective power but merely the capacity to plead for the interests of the Bosniak community); began to engage in a dialogue with Bosniak activists and the Islamic community; sidelined more vocal Serb nationalists who operated in the ngo sector; and stopped tolerating acts of vandalism or open intimidation against Bosniaks, which resulted in an important improvement of their life conditions. Since then, he has counted on the political support of the SDA, crucial to tilt the balance in favour to the SDS led coalition and against its arch-rival the SNSD.

One thing I found striking, regardless of the positive vibe produced, was how the official reopening of the Atik Mosque, was framed by Serb politicians, the local media and subsquenly some of my informants of Serb nationality, highlighting the fact that the mosque is now renovated and open for cult as evidence of the tolerant character of the Serb people, sometimes contrasting this with the way damaged Serb orthodox churches remain abandoned in areas of from which Serbs fled during the war. Such observations completely bypassed the question of why was there the need to reconstruct the mosque in the first place. One woman I knew even commented with me, during a cigarette break outside her office overlooking the square, how the mosque looked much better now than it did twenty two years earlier, as if this was a banal refurbishment. Although such perspectives do not speak for the various ways the Serb population in Bijeljina experience the renewed presence of the city mosques, they do translate a certain level of acceptance of the dominant discourses about ethnic relations locally, marked by the absence of any significant public reflection about the experience of persecution by non-Serbs, especially Bosnian Muslims, during the war.

The creation, in 2008, by Bijeljina's municipal assembly, of a local Truth and

Reconciliation Commission held the potential to open up the space for such reflection, but its potential never materialised, and instead, the Commission itself collapsed after less than one year. We now turn our attention to it.

7.3 Bijeljina's Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

The proposal to create a Commission for Truth and Reconciliation was first made by Christian Schwarz-Schilling in December 2004 in his "Final Report to the BiH government" at the end of his ten-year mission as international mediator. At this time, Bijeljina was, along with a few other municipalities in Republika Srpska, subjected by the USA and other donor countries to a regime of political and economic sanctions, in response to the seriousness of violent incidents and the systematic resistance to the enforcement of the Dayton Peace Accords. That deprived Bijeljina from important sources of funding, such as projects sponsored by USAid and other american organisations. It was, effectively, a way to indirectly intervene on the power struggles that were taking place within the Bosnian Serbs political class, among political parties, but also within the SDS.

It was also in 2004 that the party was shaken by the Srebrenica Report, to which the President of Republika Srpska, Dragan Čavić, who was also the leader of the SDS, reacted in a Declaration broadcast live in which he stated that Srebrenica was a mass crime in which more than 7.000 men had been unlawfully killed by Serb forces, and apologised to the victims. Even though Čavić did no recognise the massacre of Srebrenica as an act of genocide, this Declaration created a shock in the party, already thorn by internal conflicts since the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords. Čavić led the reformist faction, but was eventually defeated, and in 2008 he left the party, to form a new, more moderate party. The internal conflict did allow, however, for a new generation of politicians to emerge, who were less tainted by the war, and more pragmatic in what regarded both dealing with the International Community and with the Bosnian Muslims. It was the case of Mićić, a former physical education teacher who rose in the party ranks after the war, to become entity Minister for Veterans's question, before being elected Mayor of Bijeljina in 2004. It was, thus, a recently enthroned Mayor who received Schwarz-Schilling's recommendations

Mićić was the first mayor to receive a delegation of return activists and representatives of the Bosniak community. To accommodate their demands he started by

nominating a Muslim vice-Mayor, a resident of Janja, a Muslim village close to Bijeljina, and then reinstated a few Muslims to jobs in the municipal administration, which they had been dismissed from in the beginning of the war. Albeit largely symbolic, such measures revealed a change of direction and the beginning of a change in the dynamics of ethnic relations. It was also around this time that the process of return of property occupied or confiscated during the war gained pace. The question of property return was an important source of conflict. During the war, the homes belonging to non-Serbs were used to rehouse displaced Serbs. Many of them were left vacant after their owners fled, but in many cases non-Serbs were evicted from their homes, or otherwise forced to share them with displaced Serbs, who often proved to be abusive. As the Dayton Peace Accords granted individuals the right to return to their pre-war homes, as well as the right to their property. Up to 15.000 Bosnian Muslims returned to the municipality of Bijeljina after the war, and many more filed processes to reclaim their pre-war property. These homes had become inhabited by Serbs – usually displaced, but also, in many cases, local Serbs who profited from the persecution of the Muslims – who in many cases resisted and contested eviction, through legal means, but often also through intimidation and violence. But once a number of cases were solved with the return of property to their legitimate owners, it became less and less a source of tension, which favoured Mićić moderate approach.

It took years, however, for the idea of creating a local Commission for Truth and Reconciliation to be put in practice. By 2007, the USA were sending messages that they might revise their decision over the imposition of sanctions in accordance with new circumstances. It was also in 2007 that the former international mediator, who had first proposed the idea, returned to Bosnia in a new role, now as High Representative of the International Community. Mićić seized the moment, launched the idea, and, in early 2008 Bijeljina's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was finally created.

In what concerns the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the municipal council (opstinsko vijece) decided that its composition should reflect the ethnic distribution of the pre-war population of the municipality, which was roughly two third Serbs, and one third Muslims, although in the city itself the proportion was inverted. The Municipal Assembly then appointed six Serbs, but decided to appoint only one Bosniak, Fatima Mustafić, a woman from Janja, nominated in her quality of member of the SDA (main Bosnian

Muslim nationalist party, and the only one with significant expression in Bijeljina). Such a decision revealed already a certain lack of commitment towards the success of the Commission. (Fatima Mustafić refused the nomination, and, under pressure, the Council decided to nominate two other Bosniaks as members, thus enforcing its own decision to have a membership proportional to the pre-war ethnic distribution of the population. One of the new members was Mehmed Đezić, also from Janja, and secretary of the Association of former detainees in the concentration camp of Batković (*udruženje logorasa*). The other was Emir Musli, from Bijeljina, a free-lance journalist actively involved in the return process, the reorganisation of the Islamic community and the reconstruction of Bijeljina's Atik mosque. Musli was one of the few Bosniaks who remained in Bijeljina throughout the whole war period.

The other members included Dušan Stevanović, a displaced Serb, in representation of the organisation of veterans of the Army of Republika Srpska (BORS); Smilja Mitrović head of the Association of disappeared persons from the municipality of Bijeljina, Djojo Pajic, in representation of the Association for detained soldiers and civilians. Two representatives of political parties, Dragoslav Perić, from the SNSD, and Cvijetin Ristanović, from the PDP, and two lawyers involved in humanitarian and charitable work, Blagoje Josipović, from the "Srpske narodne obnove"(Serbian national renewal) organisation, and Duško Tomić, from the Djećija Ambasada Medaši (Children's Embassy of Medaši). Tomić, a controversial individual, but also one of the few public figures who was able to build bridges between Serbs and Bosniaks, was also nominated President of the Commission.

Tomić immediately entered in conflict with Emir Musli, when the later expressed reservations about one of Tomić's ideas for a public event of reconciliation. Tomić wanted to organise a public event in which a perpetrator and a victim would come together and speak. Although there had been, up to that date, no trials or prosecutions focusing on crimes committed in Bijeljina during the war, as politically motivated crimes, the case of the murder of the Isić family was a rare case that resulted in a prison sentence although the tribunal considered that the crime was the product not of ethnic hatred, but simply of greed (see Ch. 4). The Isić family, composed of six members, was travelling in September 1992 from Teslić on their way to exile in Germany, where their father was already. They stopped in Bijeljina to arrange with the Red Cross to proceed, and were placed in a local

hotel waiting for the documents to be validated. While waiting, they were approached by a group of men who promised to take them across the border, but instead murdered the whole family.

Tomić wanted to bring Rahman Isić, who, the father and husband of the victims, from Germany for that event, in which one of the men condemned by the murder, Željko Lakić would publicly apologise. Emir Musli expressed his reservations, considering that the Commission should focus on truth first, and reconciliation later, and opposed the idea as insensible. Tomić reacted, accusing Musli of having a hidden agenda leading Musli to resigne with immediate effect. The Commission was reduced to two Bosniak members , only one of whom, Mehmed Đezić, would participate actively in the Commission. The other active members, besides Tomić, were Blagoje Josipović and Dušan Stevanović. The remaining four were either passive or obstructive. It was the case in particular of Smilja Mitrović and Đoko Pajić. Pajić had been a director of the concentration camp of Batković between 1993-1994, and in 2014 was procecuted, accused of responsibility for beatings and abuse of prisoners in Batković under his command, and in 2015 he was arrested within the same process (trial ongoing)[126].

Tomić also decided, controversially, to include in the work of the commission, the 'Tuzlanska kolona' incident, which had taken place in May 1992 in Tuzla, when the JNA military convoy withdrawing from the city came under attack by local forces, resulted in the dead of 52 soldiers who were travelling in the convoy. He justified his decision by the presence of a large number of Serbs displaced from Tuzla in Bijeljina. This decision, however went beyond the mandate of the Commission, which was meant to focus solely on events that took place in the municipality. This decision, combined with the conflict with Musli, largely alienated other Bosniak activists, most of whom distanced themselves. But Tomić also alienated Serbs, when he decided to cooperate with a Tuzla ngo, to investigate the event. *The Fondacija istina, pravda pomirenje,* was viewed with suspicion by displaced Serbs from Tuzla, who tended to believe it had been set up to whitewash the crime rather than to uncover the truth.

As for the reconciliation event, the victims' family declined to participate, so Mehmed Đezić accepted Tomić's proposal to take their place in the event. Đezić was willing to make significant efforts towards the success of the Commission, but found

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126 For this research, I was able to interview Emir Musli; Dušan Stevanović; Smilja Mitrović; and Mehmed Đezić

himself in a position that he felt was very uncomfortable, solely because he did not want to undermine it. The event had virtually no impact, because it took place, not in the city of Bijeljina, but in the village of Medaši, from which both Željko Lakić and Duško Tomić were natives and residents. The location was justified by the fact that the perpetrator was a local, the victims were murdered in the area, and their bodies thrown in the River Drina nearby. At the time, Tomić's intention was to organise further events throughout the region and in Bijeljina itself, but that was not to happen.

Instead, the Commission's work soon came to a halt, after the Assembly rejected its first report. Tomić eventually tendered his resignation in protest, but was never replaced. The Commission never met again, although it was never formally disbanded either. The materials collected by Tomić during his tenure, including interviews to victims and witnesses of crimes, was never made public, but instead became part of his personal archive, an important resource for his work as a lawyer, and since the collapse of the Commission he has been hired by a few victims' families to represent them and push for a formal investigation and a prosecution of their cases. His success has been limited so far, as none of the cases have reached trial stage.

By the time the Commission collapsed, however, the US had already decided to lift sanctions, the creation of the Commission having been one important element in the decision, as evidence of the will of the local administration to 'face the past' and promote reconciliation. The importance of the commission goes beyond the lifting of american sanctions. It allowed the local authorities to gain prestige among the representatives of the international community, without effectively committing the resources and providing the support necessary for such an endeavour On the contrary, the very choice of members, and the disruptive behaviour of some suggests that failure was the expected outcome.

Such a suggestion is reinforced if we bear in mind the decisions taken by another commission set up by the Municipal Assembly in the same period, the Commission for the revision of toponymy. There was only one Bosniak member in this commission, Jusuf Trbić, who was, at the time, a member of the Assembly. In consultation with other Bosniak activists, Trbić carefully drafted a proposal for new street names that in his view better reflected Bijeljina's multicultural history, including not only names that were meaningful to the Bosniak community, but also other names could foster a better sense of inclusion across the ethnic divide, most notably the name of Rodoljub Čolaković, a popular figure among

residents with an affiliation to the partisan tradition. All his proposals were rejected, and rather than mitigating the symbolic dominance of Serb nationalist names in the toponymy, the commission reinforced it, namely by conferring the name of Patriarch Pavle to one of the remaining streets in the city centre which had remained unchanged; the street in the old Atik mahala where the Orthodox Monastery of Saint Vasilije Ostroški was built, and which until 2014 served as the siege of the Zvornik-Tuzla episcopate until 2013.

The creation, activity and collapse of the Commission, a classic mechanism of transitional justice, can be interpreted, borrowing from van Gennep and Victor Turner's frame of analysis, as a ritual or reagregation, marking the end of a long period of liminality and the beginning of a new 'normality'. Emptied of its transformative potential, the Commission had nevertheless a useful role, marking the foreclosure of a unique opportunity for public reflexion over the question of the persecution of non-Serbs during the war. The odds were against its success, as much of the local ruling class had no interest in supporting it, and the general population was not motivated to participate, but instead showed alienation from, if not resistance to the process. The challenges were high, but the strategy to confront them was weak. Its failure was caused, in the first place, by the agency of its membership, and the inability of those more genuinely committed in its activities in capitalising on the external pressure exercised by the International community so as to somehow force the ostensibly moderate Serb nationalist forces to offer more support.

The Commission's collapse symbolically marked the end of a period of liminality in which, through the convergence of external pressures; intra-Serb power-struggles; and the agency of both Serb leaders and non-Serb, mostly Bosniak activists, much had been achieved, including the curbing of violence, the successful return of up to one third of the pre-war non-Serb population, and the process of reconstruction of the mosques (as well as the reorganisation of the small Roman Catholic community of believers). It conversely marked also the beginning of a new era of 'normality', in which the political structures, formal and informal, became entrenched, a new set of values was imposed, and new unwritten rules for social relations were clearly understood and usually adopted, and agency became much harder to exercise, unless it conformed to the order in force. Although the decade that preceded the creation of the Commission were marked by a level

of violence that have since been curbed, it was also a decade that was prodigal in possibilities for change. That sense of possibility was closed, and further progress in the improvement of ethnic relations was the result of trends that had been established precisely in that period.

The genuinely grassroots activism of some of the Bosniak informal leaders, gathered around the returnees association 'Povratak I opstanak', who were, as in the case of Salem Čorbo, strongly connected to Bijeljina's pre-war traditions of zajednički život, and committed towards the affirmation of other forms of belonging other than ethnicity, lost momentum, never to recover. The space left empty was taken over by the SDA, which already dominated the village of Janja, effectively a Bosniak ethnic enclave. Since then, the Opština is widely perceived as favouring the Bosniaks of Janja, especially in terms of access to public jobs, but also to jobs in the private sector, thus generating mistrust within an already fragmented Bosniak community, and fomenting a cynical view, among the wider population, of politics.

Comparing the two processes, the reconstruction of the mosques and the creation and subsquent collapse of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it is clear that in both there were three different factors in interaction:

- international pressures in the context of post-conflict intervention;
- intra-serb power struggles for the control of the municipality;
- and the agency of the Bosniak (formal and informal) leadership.

If the reconstruction of the mosques revealed the potential for reconciliation, the TLC exposed its limits, largely emptying of meaning any efforts to pursue it. In both cases the expectations of engaged international actors failed to materialise, suggesting the importance of local ownership of such processes. The creation of the TLC, in particular, had only detrimental effects, allowing the municipal leadership to wash their hands and disengage themselves, whilst benefiting from the credibility they acquired by 'ticking the TJ box'.

Concluding remarks

The adoption by the local SDS of a more pragmatic approach favouring moderation and tolerance, in which both processes played a role, proved to be an inteligent reading of the mood of the population. Indeed, I came up with a number of examples of spontaneous, grassroots acts of organic reconciliation and restoration of social trust beyond ethnic boundaries, and learned about who were some of the businessmen providing employment to non-Serbs, offering donations to the reconstruction of the mosques. That this kind of acts remain stricktly private, however, is revealing of the enduring dominance of nationalism.

The process of normalisation reinforced Bijeljina's powerholders by making their policies more acceptable among international actors, and capturing the support of the Bosniak nationalist party, but did not address most of the negative consequences of the war experience. Questions of justice, both criminal justice and social justice have been systematically sidelined.

Conclusions

An ethnography of memory, this thesis delved into the meaning making processes of the population of Bijeljina, as they remember their wartime experience, and make sense of the war's impact in their lives. The 1992-1992 war that ravaged Bosnia-Herzegovina left an enduring legacy, which Bosnians still struggle to cope with. This thesis offers an insight into that legacy, by studying how the war and nationalist politics have transformated the city of Bijeljina, from a multi-ethnic town with a Muslim majority, where social relations were organised under the principle of 'life in common' (zajednički život), into a 'Serb' town organised under the principle of 'separation of peoples', and where a narrow interpretation of Serb national identity dominates the public space.

Resorting to the idea of liminality as an heuristic device to frame the changes that took place in Bijeljina since the disintegration of Yugoslavia, this thesis has analysed four distinctive processes through which the transformation of Bijeljina occurred:

- the transformation of public space through a dual process of erasure and reinscription of the mnemonic elements present in the urbanscape;

- the wartime persecution of Muslims in a protracted process of ethnic cleansing, leading to the eventual expulsion of the quasi totality of the Muslim population;

- the resettlement of Serbs forcefully displaced from other regions of Bosnia;

- and finally a set of initiatives that converged towards the 'normalisation' of inter-ethnic relations, through which the aggressive rathorics that marked the war years and the immediate post-war gave way to an environment ostensibly tolerant, which promotes a more 'moderate' form of nationalism, but nevertheless relies on the primacy of ethnic identity.

Ethnic cleansing was central to this transformation. The thesis explores the diverse set of memories associated with wartime violence and forced displacement, to understand how individuals and categories of the population remember this historical transformation, how they frame their own experience, and how they relate to the (perceived) experience of others who did not share their own positions of power or otherwise vulnerability. Given that the wartime goal of ethnic homogeneisation was not fully achieved, thanks to the provisions of the Dayton Agreement, which allowed for freedom of movement and the return of property to their pre-war owners, how different experiences coexist, and how those who experienced them interact in a shared space was the puzzle that led to this research project. In a political context characterised by enduring uncertainty; deep divisions created or enhanced by conflict; and the dominance of nationalistic public representations, how are memories that stem from the experience of mass violence given meaning, and thus influence the dynamics of identification processes? This was my overall research question. I sought to explore in particular:

- how social memories produced by different 'communities of experience' interplay within the post-war process of reconstruction of identity;

- the role played by memories of earlier historical experiences of violence, but also the memories of 'life in common' (zajednički *život*) and peaceful coexistence among ethnic groups under communism; on how people remember the recent war

- and finally, I sought to understand how the boundaries between public and private dimensions of social memories are defined, maintained and challenged, given the public prominence of nationalist representations of the past

The four empirical chapters (ch. 4 to 7) that form the bulk of this thesis are framed according to the different stages in the liminal process of transformation that Bijeljina experienced since the end of communist rule. Chapter 4 is set on the context of the stage of separation within the stage of liminality itself, and it provides an analysis of the spatial dimension of the process of construction of an official memory in what was to become Republika Srpska. It focuses on how the physical space changed in Bijeljina during and in the immediate aftermath of the Bosnian war, through a dual process of erasure and

reinscription of public memory.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on private aspects of social and collective memory, to explore how people reacted to and coped with violence, and in particular with the profound transformations defined by the strategic goal of 'separation of peoples' that was the cornerstone of the Bosnian Serb nationalist project. The chapters are located in the context of the period of liminality proper, and in both chapters I essentially explore the population's lived experience, as reflected in personal recollections through my interviews and informal conversations, but also as perceived through my observation of everyday life.

Chapter 5 focuses on the non-Serbs' (mostly Bosniaks, previously known as Muslims) experience of persecution, and how it is remembered through privately shared memories. It explores coping mechanisms, the flow of information, and cases of support beyond the ethnic divide. Chapter 6 focuses on the resettlement of Serbs displaced from other regions of Bosnia. Their experience is represented in official memory in such a way that it instrumentalises this experience for the sake of nation-building, of which resettled Serbs become hostages, whilst perceiving the position they are assigned as a second-rate status. The chapter explores the contradictions and dilemmas that people feel, trapped as they are by hegemonic narratives framing their suffering as a sacrifice for the nation.

Chapter 7 closes the circle, with the idea of normalisation, bringing the thesis to the present time, and exploring an array of rituals of reaggregation and a few acts of redress after ethnic cleansing. Here I explore the process of return of Bosniaks (and also Roma); the reconstruction of the mosques; initiatives towards 'reconciliation' including the failure of the local Truth and Reconciliation commission; and the continuation of the process of erasure and reinscription, fulfilling, in this period, a different function, not one of separation, but one of reagreggration.

This thesis contributes to the production of knowledge at three different levels:

- At the empirical level, the thesis offers a yet unexplored case-study of how violence and forced displacement have contributed to radically transform society in Bosnia-Herzegovina; of the connections between the ideas of 'life in common', 'separation of peoples', and the experience of violence in the construction of national identity in Republika Srpska; and of the interactions in one shared space, between

individuals and categories of the population with divergent experiences, and how these interactions somehow shape the boundaries between their privately-kept memories and public representations;

- at the theoretical level, the thesis seeks to refine our understanding of the dynamics of social memory in post-conflict societies, and proposes the idea of 'difficult memories' as a conceptual tool;

- at the level of methodology, without seeking to inovate, this thesis has followed a rigorous ethnographic engagement, with a prolonged presence in the field, and a sustained effort to learn about how people remember through their own frames.

Difficult memories:

Thanks to one year of immersion in the community, and an ethnographic engagement that pushed me to transcend available representations of the past to focus also on what was left unsaid, tacit, and 'in the air', the key theoretical finding that emerged from my observations and interactions was a set of memories that I have called 'difficult memories'.

These were memories which a given community of experience seeks to preserve from the gaze of outsiders, and keep within the intimacy of the group, not so much because recalling them is emotionally demanding, if not painful – which it often was, since these were memories associated with the experience of ethnicised violence, political persecution and forced displacement – but because they did not fit easily into a larger public narrative that the rememberers, to some extent shared, and which they did not wish to undermine. These memories are 'difficult' because they contradict dominant representations under which umbrella these communities somehow find shelter in their quest to transcend the deep uncertainty over identity.

The idea of 'difficult memories' problematises the prevalent approaches in memory studies about societies divided by violent conflict, whether 'ethnic' or of otherwise defined. Usually

focused on official commemorations and other publicly available representations of the past, such studies broadly speak of 'divided memories', 'conflicting memories', 'memory wars', etc. Such approaches offer a static vision, in which societies that experienced conflict become prisoners of the past, and memory a continuation of war by other means; they also overlook the diversity of experiences and perspectives within each contending group. This approaches also place excessive value, and excessive expectations on the agency of 'memory entrepreneurs', somehow identified as having leadership abilities, cultural capital or charisma − recent trends seem to be focusing on the healing power of art as a vehicle towards reconciliation. Such approaches have had deep policy implications, notably in the field of Transitional Justice, of which the idea of 'facing the past' has been elevated to an essential pillar of post-conflict reconciliation, with a standardised approach being lectured, if not effectively imposed across the globe in societies experiencing transitions from war to peace, and autoritarianism to democracy, without too much concern for local context and the meaning-making strategies of those that are supposed to be reconciled.

Avenues for future research:

Whilst I am committed to further refine the idea of 'difficult memories', the thesis also identifies how the liberal discourse of reconciliation has been appropriated by nationalists seeking to reframe themselves as 'moderate' and 'tolerant', by accomodating some of the memories of subordinate groups and clashing historical legacies, to create a new sense of normality. This thesis argues for the necessity to go beyond representations and publicly available explicit narratives, and explore a wealth of memories that remain largely hidden from public scrutiny, if not unarticulated. This requires a long-term commitment to the research setting, which, in the particular case of this study, I hope to be able to preserve and further develop through a longitudinal approach.

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