

## **National Numbers in Context: Maps and Stats in Representations of the Post-Yugoslav Wars**

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*This article critically examines and contextualises the role of nationality statistics and maps in representations of the post-Yugoslav wars. Approaching these wars, a conflict involving competing nationalisms centred upon modern technologies of power/knowledge, I deploy the term “national numbers” to refer to the discursive node where numerical data about the nationality of the population and territorial mappings converge. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork since 1996, this article explores how the reliance on national numbers and their territorialisation functions as the lynchpin of a dominant “mosaic” mode of representation of the post-Yugoslav wars. Examining their workings within local and international governance, in experiences of “ethnic cleansing” in the post-Yugoslav states and in discourses aiming to know, understand, explain, and represent the violence, it then makes a case for a healthy dose of critical distance with regard to the deployment of national numbers. In particular, we need to contextualise them in relation to the role of national categories and other lines of differentiation in Yugoslavia. Anthropologists and other social scientists, who take pride in providing strongly contextualised understandings of social phenomena, seem to be particularly well placed to do so.*

*Key Words:* nationality, representation, nationalism, Yugoslavia, war, identity, territory

In response to the exoticising depictions of the post-Yugoslav wars as expressions of ingrained Balkan hatred, most observers from within the social sciences have forcefully argued that they involved competing nationalisms centred upon “very modern” (Sorabji 1995) technologies of power/knowledge. Such approaches reflect classic anti-primordialist studies of nationalism, which have demonstrated how its discursive framework is inextricably linked to modern modes of representation,<sup>1</sup> including maps and numerical data about the nationality of the population. In this article, I refer to the discursive node where such maps and statistics converge with the term “national numbers.” Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork since 1996,<sup>2</sup> I explore how the reliance on national numbers functions as the lynchpin of a dominant mode of

representation with regard to the post-Yugoslav wars. Examining their workings within local and international governance, in everyday life practice in the post-Yugoslav states, and in discourses aiming to know, understand, explain, and represent the violence, I then make a case for a healthy dose of critical distance with regard to the deployment of national numbers. Anthropologists and other social scientists, who take pride in providing strongly contextualised understandings of social phenomena, seem to be particularly well placed to make maximum use of them without reducing subsequent explanations to uncritical reflections of their peculiar modes of representation.

### **War-mongering by numbers and “ethnic cleansing”**

There is little doubt that territorial haggling with land and people characterised the negotiating process by which the violence in Bosnia–Herzegovina (in this article: “Bosnia”) stuttered to a halt. Arguably, a similar preoccupation with national numbers accompanied the descent into violence, when nationalist campaigns invoked competing statistics of perceived discrimination. In the late 1980s, Serbian nationalist petitions decried the allegedly genocidal programme of Kosovo Albanian “politically motivated” high fertility rates, rape, and the purchase of Serbian-owned real estate (Blagojević 1996). Soon after, in a morbid retrospective exercise, Croatian and Serbian nationalist ideologues sought to monopolise the moral high ground of victimisation with competing estimates of the national distribution of the World War II death toll (Hayden 1994). Resentment of Serbian/Montenegrin overrepresentation in the military and in the police grew (Gow 1991: 302), as did discontent with economic imbalances (Vojnić 1995). It was partly on the basis of such grievances that the first post-Yugoslav round of multiparty elections resulted in resounding nationalist victories in all republics.<sup>3</sup>

Even before the first bullet was fired, then, it was clear that disputes about national numbers would be crucial to post-Yugoslav politics, whatever shape they might take. They took, we know now, the shape of war. The collapse of the Yugoslav federation was embodied in a series of violent endeavours to enforce national order upon a complex reality of terrain and population, and national numbers were crucial to their implementation and legitimisation. Although calculation was not equally prominent in the decision-making of the various regimes, they all came to share, whether by design or by default, a belief in the paramount importance of national numbers. Most importantly, the point where nationality statistics and territory met was the key to the infamous strategy of “ethnic cleansing,” often involving brutal violence (Hayden 1996).

Whatever guise it assumes, the practice of “ethnic cleansing” is premised on a claim to knowledge in terms of nationality: “ethnic cleansers” need to know who is what. Despite the ambiguity of visible or audible markers of national difference in many Yugoslav contexts, the presumption of a clear understanding of, and a relative consensus about, the lines between national groups was a precondition for those involved in wartime decision-making. Only within such a framework can we understand the narratives about the outbreak of war that I collected during my fieldwork. For example, informants in Lika (Croatia) recalled that, in 1991, Serbian and Croatian paramilitary groups prepared “their” respective populations for war. In this context, those blurring the lines constituted a problem. The initial local wave of “ethnic cleansing” (carried out by Serbian paramilitaries and the Yugoslav People’s Army) affected the entire Croatian population of the “mixed” village where I worked, but the very first family to be expelled consisted of persons who identified themselves as Yugoslavs—a wife with a Croatian background and a husband with a Serbian one.

Hence, one important technology of power/knowledge in these endeavours involved the mapping of nationality onto territory and it is, therefore, not a coincidence that most academic work on the conflicts includes pre-war census data on nationality, usually per republic, reflected in the ubiquitous 1991 “maps of ethnic distribution in Yugoslavia.” While they functioned as weapons in the hands of the engineers of “ethnic cleansing,” critical observers deploy these maps with the opposite aim: their vivid splatter of colours evokes the complexity of the pre-war situation and the contrast with the much “neater” post-war maps testifies to the bloody processes by which territories were homogenised nationally. Having said that, in this article I argue that the uncontextualised use of these pre-war maps and the image of a mosaic of “ethnic” territories they convey also entails dangers of misrepresentation.

An initial, relatively minor, problem relates to the practice of representation of nationality embodied in these maps. Many fail to mention the fact that the coloured fields represent “majority” territories. In fact, when an area is labelled “X,” this means that census agents ticked the box “X” for the “nationality” question with regard to more than half of the individuals living in that particular territory, that is, anything between fifty and one hundred percent. Many maps are not even based on absolute majorities and—particularly in Bosnia—areas coloured in as “X” contain much less than fifty percent individuals identified as such.<sup>4</sup> On some maps, areas with no absolute majorities of any nationality are left blank, which could be considered an improvement but creates “a misleading sense that homogeneity is the norm

and that any areas that have to be represented as heterogeneous are atypical" (Black 1997: 57).

In any case, I do not suggest we should ignore nationality statistics, nor do I believe we should simply strive for greater statistical precision in "maps of ethnic distribution." Instead, I argue that, in order for them to have explanatory value with regard to the recent violence, they should be contextualised within an understanding of (post-) Yugoslav realities—before, during, and after the wars. Cartography cannot be seen in isolation from struggles for power/knowledge: mapmakers make choices about what to show or not and they select a certain overlap between statistics and territory (Harley 2001). The uncontextualised use of "maps of ethnic distribution" thus entails the danger of appearing to subscribe to the modes of representation embraced by those who built their power on them and who, themselves, probably had framed copies of them on their office walls while planning their military campaigns.

While the importance of national numbers in the military-demographic strategies of "ethnic cleansing" is well documented, there has been much less analysis of how they functioned within the survival strategies of the persons subjected to it. Unsurprisingly, my research points out that a fairly clear-cut logic prevailed around the interchangeable dualisms of majority/minority and security/insecurity. When given the opportunity, many people looked for safety in national numbers and fled to a territory that was considered safer precisely because of the national composition of its population, i.e., "majority" areas or third countries. Some were expelled with military violence and some were otherwise "encouraged" to escape, often being forced to pay their entire savings to the very people that terrorised them for the transport that the latter so generously provided. It is important to note that the functioning of this logic was not limited to expulsion or escape during what is usually seen as the war period.<sup>5</sup> The axis majority/security provided a crucial element in a much wider set of practices of war-related displacement, return, and relocation. For example, many moved pre-emptively to a "majority area" before the first concrete acts of physical violence in their place of residence. Others participated in (self-)evacuation as part of the population-engineering efforts co-ordinated by their own presumed leaders, both before and after the military campaigns. Still others engaged in what became known as the "strategic" purchase or sale of real estate, reinforcing a nationality bias in the housing market and, therefore, in patterns of residence. And when it came to post-war decisions, few of the displaced actually returned to their pre-war homes in areas controlled by a majority of national Others (so-called "minority returns" (Phuong 2000: 174)).

Hence, war-related displacements were either violent impositions of national order on territory or semi-voluntary escapes aimed at achieving security through minimising potential exposure to violence and to the risks associated with living in national co-existence as a numerical minority. Both relied on power/knowledge organised around national numbers.

### **National numbers in post-war Bosnia**

A 2001 survey found that British people believed that twenty-four percent of their country's population belonged to an "ethnic minority." The actual official figure was 7.1 percent.<sup>6</sup> Such survey findings indicate that lay knowledge about the composition of populations tends to reflect moral panics and political scaremongering rather than census statistics. This contrasts sharply with my own experiences during the same period among Bosnian refugees. There was a startling precision in the knowledge that the latter displayed of the national numbers pertaining to the areas they had been forced to flee. When informants told me about their plight, this would frequently entail an unsolicited run through the pre-war national statistics of their hometown—explicitly setting the scene for the rest of their story. This was usually done in a sentence along the lines: "Before I go on to tell you about it, Stef, you should know that, before the war, we had X percent Bosniacs/Muslims, Y percent Serbs, and Z percent Croats." People referred to pre-war figures only, as the post-war situation needed no spelling out for someone who knew the basics of Bosnian violence. Such frequent reference to national statistics demonstrates that, if nationalist politicians had charted their ruthless course on the basis of maps and stats, most people involved in and subjected to their activities found it difficult to make sense of their plight without similar resort to national numbers.

With many people of various national backgrounds keen to point out previous nationality statistics in order to underpin their particular war story, I expected controversy about these numbers. Surprisingly, notwithstanding the occasional blatant falsehoods, this was hardly an issue. Since a copy of the 1991 census statistics has become standard equipment for anthropologists in the region (who, regardless of their own position, see themselves forced to engage with the dominant mode of representation), I checked and found that people's information was very often exact, sometimes up to the decimals. Still, there were clearly problems related to these frequent references to pre-war national numbers. I now look briefly at two of these.

Firstly, people rarely disputed the statistics of others directly; rather, it seemed possible for most to find a territorial scale on which

the pre-war national numbers worked *for them*. Many demarcated a piece of territory on the grounds that it had contained a relative or absolute majority declaring “their” nationality prior to the war. This was then advanced as a basis for defending currently “held” territory and/or for incorporating “lost” lands. Hence, when legitimising a majority claim, reference could be made to an arbitrary scale: Yugoslavia, a republic, a region, a municipality, a town, its surrounding area, a village, or a hamlet. In this way, the rather precise knowledge of pre-war statistics was marred by the same selectivity as the maps used by the engineers of “ethnic cleansing”: local narratives of the past included diverging majorities and minorities, configured simply by adjusting one’s “zoom” on the territory.

A second problem with the reference to pre-war national numbers was the refusal to account for categories that did not rely on discrete national divisions of the same level, such as the widely employed “Bosnian” label or the previously officially available “Yugoslav” category. My informants would list the previous proportions of Bosniacs/Muslims, Serbs, and Croats, but rarely would there be a mentioning of the fourth most numerous census category in prewar Bosnia: Yugoslavs. At its height, in 1981, this census box contained 5.4 percent of the Yugoslav population, with 7.9 percent in Bosnia and local peaks of over 20 percent. In the Bosnian town of Tuzla, for example, the “Yugoslav” category was the second most popular one in 1991, chosen by more inhabitants than the “Serbian” and “Croatian” boxes. While this was highlighted and over-emphasised in the post-war narratives of those who felt less comfortable with the dominance of nationalism (Jansen 2005b), the deletion of the Yugoslav category in the various competing nationalist representations of the past seems to reflect a retrospective imposition of the current context, in which this label had been discredited, onto the pre-war situation.<sup>7</sup>

If national numbers were central to most people’s understandings of the wars and their predicaments in them, their paramount importance was equally visible in policies and diplomatic discourse with regard to the post-Yugoslav context. Campbell analyses public statements about the Bosnian war by local and international politicians, journalists and academics, concluding that, despite their radically opposed views in some respects, their representations of Bosnia implicitly relied on the shared postulate that “the political possibilities [had] been limited by the alignment of territory and identity, state and nation, all under the sign of “ethnicity,” supported by a particular account of history” (1998: 80). Hence, while the foreign intervention was ostensibly dismissive of the various local nationalisms, on the whole it problematised Bosnian events through a similar prism. As a

result, most Bosnian peace deals proposed by foreign mediators were based on the above approach to territory/identity. This was partly pragmatic: in the effort to stop the violence and save lives, negotiators dealt with nationalist politicians and military commanders and acknowledged their “terms.” However, the consensus on such a “national order of things” (Malkki 1995) led to a paradoxical situation<sup>8</sup> in the *de facto* protectorate established by the Dayton Agreements and to considerable frustration among many local and foreign practitioners involved in post-war reconstruction. Many of these people wished to see their efforts precisely as antidotes to “ethnic cleansing,” but they found themselves continually reinforcing the imposition of maps and statistics upon the post-Yugoslav terrain by dealing with issues that were almost invariably problematised in terms of nationality and territory. While this is a well-documented phenomenon (see, e.g., Albert 1997; Cox 1999; Phuong 2000), I now quickly provide three illustrations emerging from my own research in Bosnia.

Firstly, many local and foreign personnel involved in reconstruction felt that the likelihood of their project proposals to be awarded funding was ultimately dependent on the national composition of its beneficiary group. Hence, funders’ anxiety to be fair and non-nationalist had the unintended consequence of highlighting the importance of nationality and the distribution of stats upon maps, so crucial to the wars. There was a particular preference for “minority returnees,” which, on a basic level, simply reflected a laudable desire to redress the ravages of war. But sometimes there was a plain tendency to what I would call minority fetishism, which in turn encouraged the rhetorical inflation of such return statistics by the organisations whose aim it was to bring them about. Because of the logic described before, maps and statistics of refugee returns became a measure of success for reconstruction projects and for the foreign presence in Bosnia as a whole.<sup>9</sup> The question “how many returned where?” meant really “how many people of which nationality returned to territory controlled by people of which nationality?” In tandem with minority fetishism, returnee national numbers thus functioned as trophies in the efforts to evaluate and justify the *de facto* protectorate.

A second illustration was provided by the scrupulous policies of equal opportunities that most foreign organisations deployed in order to balance the national composition of their local personnel. While aimed at fairness, the weight attached to the nationality of job candidates indicated once more the importance of national numbers. While some foreign workers expressed unease with this state of affairs, an implicit consensus existed on their significance: they became central to the way in which things functioned and ignoring them was considered insensitive and simply *not done*.

In a third illustration, I juxtapose the separate rows surrounding two political representatives in 2001: Ivica Osim and Ibrahim Mujić. After the Dayton Agreements, the legal framework imposed and enforced by the foreign presence in Bosnia stipulated that the mayor and the two deputy mayors of Sarajevo should represent different constituent national groups. In practice, this meant that one deputy seat was reserved for a Croat. In 2001, Ivica Osim, then the manager of football team Sturm Graz in Austria, was elected for this post. In response, the *Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica* (HDZ), by far the largest party among Bosnian Croats, issued a press release stating that:

Osim does not feel Croatian. He has repeatedly declared that he is a Bosnian and has also said that Croats live in Croatia. The question emerges whether such a person can occupy a place which should go to the Croats according to the Statute [ . . . ] It is distasteful that a well-known professional in the world of sport allows himself to be used as a tool in alien [*tudim*] hands. [ . . . ] Yet again, it is confirmed that the only people who qualify to be representatives of the Croatian people are those who have no Croatian roots, those who renounce their Croatian-ness, and thereby insult its legitimate and legal representatives (*Oslobodjenje* 2001).

In Bosnian common sense, Osim's name suggested a Croatian national background, but he consistently identified as a *Sarajlija* (Sarajevan) and a *Bosanac* (Bosnian), categories unacceptable to the various nationalisms. Now let us juxtapose this to the HDZ reaction against the election of Ibrahim Mujić as a Croatian representative in the most northwestern Cantonal Parliament of Bosnia.<sup>10</sup> When a journalist referred to his easily recognisable Bosniac/Muslim name, Mujić said he had always felt Croatian and that he was, therefore, perfectly capable of representing the Croats (Lovrenović 2001: 24). Unsurprisingly, HDZ protest was just as vocal this time. Such outcry was part of a much wider campaign by the HDZ's Staffs for the Protection of Identity and Croatian National Interests, attacking individuals occupying the reserved "Croatian" seats in official organs as unreformed communists, traitors, failed politicians, pets of the "international community," and Janissaries (men who served as Ottoman soldiers during Turkish times).

To a certain degree, this pattern was replicated in the activities of the other nationalist parties, each of which ruled more or less in their own nationally homogenised fiefdoms. While such rows were clearly part of nationalist attempts to preserve the politico-economic empires built during the war, they also were tightly interwoven with the policies of the foreign intervention in Bosnia. In one way at least, these protests were correct: the "international community" did favour "moderates"



as national representatives. These three illustrations thus point to a paradoxical pattern of the Dayton framework: aimed at a peaceful, fair, and balanced reversal of “ethnic cleansing,” it revolved, in effect, entirely around the *national* representation of Bosniacs/Muslims, Serbs, and Croats, the collectivities in whose name the war was fought. The resulting balancing act set the three national categories in concrete, leaving little room for alternative options and largely ignoring other, non-national dimensions of identification, inequality, and struggle.

### **Nationality and statistics in the former state**

The centrality of national numbers in the post-war context, both on the level of geopolitical discourse and everyday understandings of recent experiences, can be understood in various ways. Some anthropologists have interpreted the importance accorded to them as a straightforward vindication of their view that primordial national sentiments were always the most, if not the only, relevant ones in the former state. According to this perspective, the current predominance of national numbers simply follows from an acknowledgement of the failures of Yugoslav–Titoist suppression and misrepresentation. A condensed illustration can be found in an article by Andrei Simić (2000), who presents his approach as a reconciliation of constructivist and primordialist understandings of nationalism. It seems fair, however, to place the analysis squarely on the primordialist side of Anthony D. Smith, who frames his well-known work on nationalism (e.g., 1991) within the same reconciliatory endeavour. Simić starts off by criticising the mistaken beliefs of certain Western observers in “the myth of tolerance and coexistence in Bosnia,” but he soon resorts to dismissing the former state itself as an “artificial creation” (2000: 105). While this could be a welcome expression of a critical approach to state-building in general, such an interpretation is soon proven wrong, for the “Yugoslav” census label is not only disqualified as “fiction” (2000: 114) but also a “means of masking true ethnic identity” (2000: 106). Simić finds proof for these assertions in the census statistics, arguing, for example, that less than one percent declared as “Yugoslav” in rural Serbia and Macedonia because “in these areas there was no need to hide one’s ethnicity” (2000: 107). For Simić, then, national numbers *do* seem to provide sufficient explanation for the post-Yugoslav wars: following the example of the Serbs in Croatia, the Bosnian Serbs (less numerous than the relative majority of Bosniacs/Muslims) “inevitably rebelled because they were unwilling to live under the domination of those they perceived to be their former enemies who had committed genocide against them during WWII” (2000: 107).

Simić is undoubtedly right to question approaches that idealise the former Yugoslav state as a melting pot in which national numbers had been irrelevant. The region has been characterised by a long history of national communitarianism, shaped to a large extent by various forms of imperial domination and by the Ottoman millet-system in particular. Moreover, it has been well documented that, far from erasing the importance of national numbers, the Titoist system represented their institutionalisation in a differential configuration.<sup>11</sup> In 1945, the communist government installed a Yugoslav federation under the plurinational banner of “Brotherhood and Unity.” Based on the founding moment of the Partisan anti-fascist victory, the regime institutionalised a multi-layered model of national rights, which included a combination of suppression, competition, and compromise. Particularly, toward the end of the federation, ever more deals were deployed between the republican elites in order to secure a Yugoslav status quo. Official nationality quotas were implemented and, far beyond that, a set of unspoken rules governed such precarious questions as jobs, flats, and favours. In this climate, not unfamiliar to me (I grew up in Belgium), accusations of an “imbalance between nationalities” could be met with counter-accusations of “nationalism.” For example, when in competition for a particular job, it might sometimes have been more effective to draw the attention to the allegedly inappropriate nationality of competitors for the overall balance than it was to address their (in)competence. Paradoxically, then, while underwriting the cause of multinational co-existence, in certain matters socialist Yugoslav policies made it very attractive to imagine a community along national lines and to rely on national numbers in order to further individual and collective ambitions.

The statistics on which this nationality policy hinged were collected every ten years in a population census, which included national categories and the label “Yugoslav, nationally undetermined.” Note that, in terms of the census, the “Yugoslav” option on the forms was also a “category,” a contradictory attempt to allow for ambiguity while at the same time wanting to contain it in a neatly demarcated box.<sup>12</sup> Anderson refers to this tendency as

the census-makers’ passion for completeness and unambiguity. Hence their intolerance of multiple, politically ‘transvestite,’ blurred, or changing identifications. Hence the weird subcategory [...] of ‘Others’—who, nonetheless, are absolutely not to be confused with *other* ‘Others.’ The fiction of the census is that everyone is in it, and that everyone has one—and only one—extremely clear place. No fractions (1991: 166).

In this way, the Titoist regime itself represented a typical project of modernity, a “quest for order” (Bauman 1991: 1–17). This is not to say

that nationality existed merely as a governmental imposition of categorisation onto everyday life. Nationality clearly was an acknowledged and salient factor in former Yugoslav politics and in mundane practice on a variety of levels, such as electoral preference, marriage, and, to a certain extent, residence. Having said that, its importance in everyday life varied greatly, depending on the precise context in which it was played out. This qualification is valid even with regard to the not-so-everyday practice of voting, often invoked in support of representing nationality as an independent variable: the national numbers themselves would then explain voting behaviour. It is undoubtedly true that electoral patterns in the Yugoslav area have historically largely followed national lines (Banac 1984; Cohen 1995), but it is also true that the vote has been marked by regional differences within national groups (Allcock 2002: 116–119). Moreover, an over-reliance on national numbers may sometimes obscure conflicts over socio-economic resources and political influence and the ways in which they were strengthened or destabilised by a range of other interrelated factors, such as education, occupation, and rural/urban residence. Some important studies have demonstrated that much of these inequalities should be understood as part of a contested and uneven process of modernisation (Allcock 2000; Bougarel 1996, 1999; Popov 1996).

Simić blames the naïve belief of foreign observers in the “myth of harmony” largely on “their association with urban Sarajevo intellectuals and cosmopolitans” (2000: 106). He also declares the 1981 figure of 1.2 million declared Yugoslavs “misleading” because the “greatest numbers of those who declared themselves “Yugoslavs” were in urban centres and ethnically mixed regions” (2000: 107). Such statements are indicative of a wider tendency in representations of life in Yugoslavia to accord urbanity and “mixing” a status of artificiality and lesser validity, in contrast to the historical truthfulness of the rural areas, where such promiscuity was less prevalent and national numbers more straightforward. This not only evokes a preoccupation of some post-Yugoslav nationalist discourses themselves (see Bougarel 1999; Čolović 1994a, 1994b); it also reminds us of the preference for rural studies in the ethnography of the region (Halpern and Hammel 1969). Reflecting the more general focus of conventional anthropological fieldwork on relatively isolated and bounded locality (Gupta and Ferguson 1997), the best-known English-language studies in the Yugoslav context have been carried out in villages (e.g., Bringa 1995; Halpern and Kerewksy-Halpern 1972; Lockwood 1975) or among relatively recent rural “newcomers” in an urban context (Simić 1973).

Far from wishing to question the importance of this work, it seems fair to avoid the downplaying of the importance of urban experiences,

since a majority of Yugoslav citizens lived in urban agglomerations at the outbreak of the wars.<sup>13</sup> Focusing on the experiences of rural Bosniac/Muslim women in a Central Bosnian village, Bringa shows the relevance of real and imagined links with the city, as well as the contextual significance of national numbers (see also Bax 2000). Indeed, as Bougarel points out (1996: 144), prior to the war nine out of ten Bosnians lived in a municipality with at least twenty percent persons who declared a nationality different from theirs. Of course, this is no indication of the intensity of their national belonging. Rather, it suggests that national difference was part-and-parcel of everyday life and, therefore, contextualisation of the numbers put forward as its representation seems imperative. From this perspective, the above rural studies provide invaluable information on how national numbers were played out in certain rural areas, but their findings cannot necessarily be generalised to all other contexts.<sup>14</sup>

Much ethnographic work focusing on urban experiences has been carried out after the wars and is, therefore, retrospective with regard to life in Yugoslavia. These studies treat national numbers as dependent variables and investigate their remembered significance (e.g., Maček 2000: 172–185) and the effects of the wars (Maček 2000: 209–236). Importantly, they also draw attention to other lines of division within (post-)Yugoslav social realities, such as precisely the perceived differences between urban and rural lives themselves. This is not to replace, as some seem to suggest, national divisions with urban/rural ones (Ramet 1996). Rather, it is to highlight research findings that point to the latter's status not only as a constitutive part of the ways in which at least some (post-)Yugoslav citizens have been found to make sense of their predicament (Brown 2001; Gordy 1999; Jansen 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2004; Maček 2000), but also as a central feature in the socio-economic factors that contributed to the wars (Allcock 2000, 2002; Bougarel 1996: 121–138; Vojnić 1995).

### **Yugoslav national numbers in context**

Building on the writings mentioned before, my own ethnographic work<sup>15</sup> found wide variety in the ways that citizens of the Yugoslav successor states remembered the role of national numbers in pre-war mundane practice. All agreed on their importance on the political level, but with regard to daily life there seemed to be a continuum, reflecting the different findings uncovered by earlier anthropological work. While some recalled national numbers as an ever-present, well-defined, important aspect of everyday life, this contrasted with assurances by others that they “hadn't known who was what” [typically:

*'nije se znalo (t)ko je šta'*]. The vast majority of people, however, did remember a sense of nationality that had been lived, acknowledged, and reproduced. It was not its existence, but the relative significance of the numbers presumably representing it that was contested: some stated they were crucial, but others claimed that, in a wide range of pre-war everyday contexts, such data had not constituted factors of importance for them. And even most of those who remembered nationality as a defining factor in their everyday lives argued that national lines of differentiation had not always and everywhere been the most important ones.<sup>16</sup>

From the narratives of Yugoslav life that I collected over the years, it transpires that people did not always simply and straightforwardly inhabit the categories of the census. Yes, the label that was picked from the census list could function as an expression of a deep-rooted sense of national self-identification. But it could also be a mere answer to an administrative question, a reflection of a sense of territorial belonging, a claim to a national tradition, an ideological stance, a strategic move, or perhaps nothing more than a joke. Of course, it could also evoke a combination of two or more of these possibilities. The same is true with regard to the "Yugoslav" box. My findings fail to confirm its wholesale disqualification as a fictional mask to hide one's "true ethnic identity." For some, this might have been the case and for some all things Yugoslav had indeed been the object of hostility and mistrust, but for other informants it had reflected a lived reality. More importantly, even if one was allowed to tick one option only, a variety of informants pointed out that a sense of Yugoslav-ness had not necessarily been incompatible with a simultaneous sense of, for example, Croatian-ness or Serbian-ness and a whole range of other positionings (see Godina 1998; Spasić 2003).

With such variety in the remembered pre-war experience of nationality and the national numbers deployed to represent it, I believe that there are good reasons for critically analysing depictions of Yugoslavia as an artificial mismatch of primordial national communities under the Titoist yoke. This image of the former state as "the prison of the nations" is the dominant representation among nationalist politicians and their hard-line followers. Concomitant explanations of the war in terms of long-suppressed primordial nationality and the numerical inevitability of national uprisings conveniently divert attention from the ambition and greed of local and global war profiteers and other interested parties. Pre-war national differences are then quantified and misrepresented in a mosaic model as always being discrete and natural. Of course, this reflects the understandings of many involved, but ethnographic research is well placed to point out that such an

exercise erases patterns of complexity and contingency that *also* characterised Yugoslav reality. The meaning of national numbers has always been relative and the current clarity of the lines between them has also required recent forcible boundary-drawings. While “maps of ethnic distribution in Yugoslavia” can help us to understand one level of the previous reality, their uncontextualised use alone cannot dream to represent it adequately.

Having said that, let us also be wary of those who now depict the former context as an exemplary non-national one. Even during Titoist times, due to its paradigmatic in-between position in the Cold War, foreign scholars sometimes tended to simply legitimise rather than critically study Yugoslav politics (see Allcock 1993). More recently, a mythical version of pre-war Sarajevo became the object of a passionate love affair in certain Western intellectual and artistic circles.<sup>17</sup> These smug, ill-informed representations of the former country as one in which national differences did not exist at all or blended into a feel-good Yugoslav melting pot fail to throw any critical light on the situation. Instead of the counterproductive downplaying of differences within Yugoslavia, we need to understand that much of the tension but also of the flavour of life in the former state was characterised precisely by the very existence of national differences within. Thus, rather than taking national numbers at face value, we need to understand them in their context, including the wider geopolitical one (Woodward 1995). Avoiding both the melting pot and the nationalist traps requires that we address nationality as a central but nevertheless context-specific variable. The volume edited by Popov (1996) contains some excellent illustrations of this exercise with regard to the Serbian context. Allcock (2000, 2002) engages in a similar project for the whole of former Yugoslavia and the work of Bougarel (1996) and Duijzings (2002) focus on Bosnia–Herzegovina. In his detailed anatomy of local conflict in the Srebrenica area, the latter shows that the initial stages of the war were not only marked by national tensions, but also by conflicts, all too rarely documented, between two coalitions: those associated with the Communist Party on the one hand and those engaged in the various emergent nationalist formations on the other. Duijzings’ conclusion emphasises the importance of the political and economic crisis of 1980s, as well as the role of propaganda and paramilitary violence, and states: “History does not explain much. History is only important inasmuch as it is transmitted, explained and made relevant within a contemporary context” (2002: 194). The author then refutes references to the “inevitable rebellion” of the Bosnian Serbs due to WWII experiences as “a somewhat too simplistic way of thought used by Serbian nationalists to try and defend on historical grounds the

ethnic cleansing of the Muslim population that they planned and executed” (Duijzings 2002: 195).

Such an anti-essentialist perspective contextualises the everyday relevance of national numbers in former Yugoslavia and highlights the importance of recent political processes for understanding their current status. Hence, while maps and statistics were central to people’s fate, to their survival strategies, and to their understandings of these, the detailed knowledge of census data and their towering significance in the post-war context does not necessarily imply that such statistics had been well known or considered important by all citizens of Yugoslavia prior to the conflict. Some people had no doubt possessed and valued such information, but there were, in fact, indications that the campaigns of “ethnic cleansing” themselves included an acknowledgment that this could not be assumed to be the case for the whole population. While nationalist programmes had from the outset resonated with existing resentments among citizens of Yugoslavia on one level, their implementation had also implied a sustained effort on another level to decisively break with previous experiences. In Sorabji’s words:

The violence is central to an effort to alter local understandings of the abstract, and modern, category of ‘nation’. Brutality is aimed at humiliating, terrorizing and killing the ‘enemy’ population in order to remove it from the territory, but also at transforming the assumptions held by both victims and perpetrators about the very nature of identity groups and boundaries in order to prevent any future return of the exiled population (1995: 81).

As the pre- and post-war work of Bringa (1995; Bringa and Loizos 2001), for example, has pointed out, this brutality was frighteningly successful. After the wars, national numbers provided the basis for the dominant discourse of historicity in representing the conflicts. Explanations of events and situations relied on making them national and numbered, with regard not just to the current context, but also to the previous one. As a result, the reasons for the violence were retrospectively and unambiguously located in pre-war national numbers, through the establishment of normative links between minority/insecurity and majority/security. The post-Yugoslav campaigns of “ethnic cleansing” were aimed precisely at establishing for once and for all such undisputed and undivided primacy of nationality over *all other* possible lines of differentiation (Bougarel 1996: 58; Duijzings 2002: 195; Sorabji 1995). Removing the complexities and ambiguities previously surrounding nationality (to various degrees for various people in

various contexts), they sought to install nationality as the *only* legitimate organising factor of social reality. For some of my informants, this undoubtedly represented the crowning moment of national liberation, but for others it signalled the end of a life worth living.

The fact that the national numbering in my research was based on exact, if selective, statistics may thus disguise a more deep-seated problem: the data provided to help explain the conflicts were derived from a discursive framework that was partly a *result* of those conflicts. Most importantly, no context was provided in which to place the relative importance of these numbers. Therefore, what became most significant to me was not the occasional manipulation of nationality figures, but the very fact that national numbers were put forward as *the* constitutive element in the violence (compare Urla 1993: 820). Retrospectively, they were represented as social facts that *made* all reality, both for those who had always and everywhere experienced them as such and for those who had not.<sup>18</sup> This also implies a danger for our explanations of these wars. Namely, in order to understand the reasons for the violence, we turn to the pre-war situation. And, at least partly as a result of the centrality of nationality statistics during and after the wars, we tend to map that pre-war situation through national numbers. In the last section, I argue that, even though many informative insights may be drawn from them, we should retain a distance from the current process of retrospective national disambiguation that is turning nationality data into an unquestioned independent variable applicable with equal validity to all citizens of former Yugoslavia.

## National numbers and mosaic representations

This article has demonstrated that nationality statistics and maps play a central role not only among the main proponents of the various hegemonising post-Yugoslav nationalisms, but also in the technologies of power/knowledge deployed by ordinary people, the so-called “international community” and scholars. For local nationalist politicians, a consensus on the significance of national numbers was a necessary condition for the legitimisation of their war activities with reference to the right to sovereignty on a demarcated territory. Many critical observers rely on a similar underlying representation of the Yugoslav order of things, attributing a paramount and unambiguous role to national numbers in the social organisation of *all* local lives, both before and after the end of Yugoslavia.

While national numbers provide us with crucial information toward our understanding of Yugoslav realities as well as of the post-Yugoslav wars, this should not prevent us from applying to their use the same



critical perspective that has been deployed in other contexts.<sup>19</sup> Anderson's conceptualisation of "imagined communities" (1991) has inspired many critical analyses of nationalism, ranging from extreme *Blut und Boden* policies to more benign versions, but what I aim to highlight here is his insight that the effort to territorialise a nationally imagined community rests on the condition that the nation-concept *itself* is considered as a central building brick in the representation of the world *in the first place*. This is far from an anomaly isolated in Chechnya, Kashmir, or Bosnia. The idea of nations as discrete and countable bounded units is the bedrock of all dominant representations of the "international community" as a "family of nations" (Malkki 1994, 1995). This model is inextricably related to modern paradigms of humanity as an all-encompassing mosaic, naturally divided into clearly demarcated nations that can achieve harmony based on a historical march toward Reason.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the problem is not limited to discourses we would usually call "nationalist." In many ways, socialist internationalism and liberal multiculturalism draw on the "family of nations" model, with the difference that they place the emphasis on harmonious and peaceful relations within the family.

As we have seen, the mosaic representation, central to the various dominant post-Yugoslav nationalisms, is also reflected in most local understandings and in many of the foreign-imposed policies aimed at redressing "ethnic cleansing." In a similar manner, it pervades the less sophisticated analyses of the situation that criticise the post-Yugoslav horrors of war without acknowledging problematic aspects of other, say Western, nationalisms and, indeed, of the underlying mode of representation (Handler 1985). Put bluntly, in the post-Yugoslav context, "ethnic cleansing" of one form or other was the extreme but not illogical outcome of attempts to enforce a mosaic-like national order on a particular slab of territory. While many of the actual events were outrageous in their brutality, the underlying ideas were not out of line with the principle of national self-determination, enshrined in the United Nations charter. The defining characteristic of the mosaic representation discussed here is, thus, not xenophobia, but its presence of discreteness and all-inclusiveness. Hence, while I was occasionally targeted for having citizenship of a North Atlantic Treaty Organization member-state, the worst anger directed at me by an informant was not on that basis. Rather, his fury was due to my inability to answer his question about my ultimate national loyalty among the ones that my family background has genealogically thrust upon me (Belgian? Flemish? Dutch?). Furiously, he accused me of being a hypocrite, for "how could I love other nations if I didn't even love my own?" In the mosaic model, every person is part of a nation

and of one nation only. Even though people may exceptionally be allowed to feel a sense of being part of more than one nation, this goes only to reinforce the underlying idea that there are clear lines demarcating nations in the first place. In most cases, non-nationality, whether as a relative absence of a national sense of belonging or as a form of conscientious objection, is not an option.

Due to their role in pre-war Yugoslav social organisation, both on the level of governance and of the everyday experience of many, national numbers are important tools for our understandings of the 1990s wars, but they must be read themselves as part of the above mode of representation. The need to do so is sharpened by their implication in the violence itself, sometimes embedded in “a discourse of self-legitimation produced by the violence [they] appear to merely represent” (Campbell 1998: 86). Anthropology in particular carries with it a historically entrenched complicity with the mosaic model, whereby each culture is seen as rooted in its own land.<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that the strategic usefulness of certain anthropological insights, such as encyclopaedic knowledge of cultural differences and arguments of ecological adaptation, has not been lost on nationalist intellectuals in the post-Yugoslav context (as analysed by Allcock 2002; Bougarel 1999; Živković 1997). Some have taken what was originally the emancipatory discourse of cultural relativism and reterritorialised it as a legitimisation for “ethnic cleansing.” Now, of course it would be absurd to accuse every policy document or scholarly work on the post-Yugoslav wars that includes a “map of ethnic distribution” or a table of nationality statistics of complicity in “ethnic cleansing.” Nor do I suggest that anthropologists should remove all maps and statistics of nationality from their writings and bin them with previously discredited concepts such as “race.”

Instead, I would argue that cutting the reification of national belonging in maps and statistics down to its size is a necessary step in order to address the differences, inequalities, and struggles that are often obscured by it, whether explicitly (as in the case of the post-Yugoslav nationalist regimes) or implicitly (as in the case of many critics of the latter). While acknowledging that national numbers are and were experienced by many inhabitants of the (post-)Yugoslav state(s) as an unambiguous and pre-given factor, I believe that their status on an analytical level should be that of a dependent variable rather than an independent one (see Rouse 1995). In other words, our studies do more justice to the lived experience of national belonging if they highlight the relative significance of national differences while never losing sight of their genesis, their contingency, and their contextual meaning among a variety of socio-economical and political factors.<sup>22</sup>

The best work on the (post-)Yugoslav region, in my view, investigates *how* and *under which circumstances* and *to which extent* certain forms of identification have gained or lost significance. This clearly requires attention to inequality and power, as well as openness to the possibility that, despite appearances, national identification does *not* always, everywhere, and for everyone contain the most relevant explanatory factors or represent the most glaring inequalities—not even in the Balkans. Exploring factors such as gender, urban/rural residence, occupation, wealth and income, literacy level, cultural capital, regional belonging, party affiliation, and religiosity (or the lack thereof) and including those dimensions of (post-)Yugoslav life in the analysis not only allows us to understand issues that are considered crucial in local nondominant understandings of the conflicts,<sup>23</sup> but also provides us with a context in which to understand the meaning of national identification itself.

## Notes

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1. See, e.g., Anderson (1991), Gellner (1983), and Hobsbawm 1990. For a discussion, see also Jansen 1999.
2. Fieldwork periods in Serbia (1996–1997), in Croatia (1997–1998), and Bosnia–Herzegovina (2000–2001). Also amongst displaced Bosnians in Serbia, Australia, and the Netherlands (2001, with Andy Dawson, financed by the Toyota Foundation and the Leverhulme Trust) and in Kosovo (2002, financed by the Nuffield Foundation and Hull University). An earlier version of this article was presented at the *Rencontres de l'Association française d'études sur les Balkans* (Paris, December 2002). Translations from Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian and from Dutch are mine.
3. Milošević's rise to power in Serbia involved a rhetorical mix of Serbian nationalism and Yugoslav multiculturalism.
4. A related problem: the data were collected on the household address and it seems reasonable to assume that, in many cases, a father/husband dealt with the census agent, supposedly representing all members of the household.
5. Clearly, the lines between expulsion, escape, and other forms of war-related displacement are thin and morally tricky. Jansen (2005a) explores the role of considerations of territory and nationality in strategies of displacement both before and after the military violence.
6. Twenty-four percent was the median answer. *The Observer*, 25 November 2001.

7. Likewise, in my fieldwork in Lika, disputes about whether or not “mixed” marriages had previously existed locally were structured by opposing post-war nationalist discourses (Jansen 2002, 2004). Note that the term “mixed” itself already imposes discreteness: it implies adherence to different nationalities by the two partners.
8. This paradox worked on many levels. For example, foreign soldiers policed the display of national symbolry in Bosnia and Kosovo. However, this policy was only applied to locals. With the military presence mostly organised in national units, United Nations troops consistently flew their own national flags on vehicles, check-points, bases, and uniforms. Moreover, the governments involved had their own particular take on where to draw the line with principles of national sovereignty (think, for example, of the U.K., Spain, India, or Belgium).
9. See, for example, the web site of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees mission to Bosnia, [www.unhcr.ba/](http://www.unhcr.ba/)
10. Unsko-Sanski Kanton has a long border with Croatia. To complicate matters, Mujić had both Bosnian and Croatian state citizenship as a result of the regional war-time policy of the Croatian Tuđman regime.
11. See, for example, Bougarel (1996: 25–52, 81–100), Cohen (1995), Duijzings (2000: 132–156), Garde (1992: 113–125), Ramet (1992), Jansen (2001a).
12. From a statistical perspective, these census data suffer from several other problems, especially when used in longitudinal studies; e.g., the set of categories changed over the years (see also Cohn 1987: 224–253).
13. In 1991, 53.5 percent (Vujović Bolčić 1995: 112). Since then, this number has risen dramatically as a result of the violence and socio-economic deterioration of the 1990s.
14. As illustrated by Magid’s 1983 collection of Beograd life histories (published in 1991).
15. In addition to the above urban-based work, see also Jansen 2002, 2003, and 2004.
16. Anti-nationalist practice in the 1990s struggled precisely to retain or re-establish this ambiguous status of nationality as a largely unarticulated moment in everyday life (Jansen 1998a, 1998b, 2001a).
17. For example, Rushdie (1994); for a critique, see Žižek (1992) and Ballinger (2003: 245–265).
18. See Rabinow (1986). This had serious implications for my work with victims and/or perpetrators of ethnic cleansing, since it involved a tendency to disambiguate all humanity into a theatre with nationally discrete actors: historically all-encompassing nations (Jansen 2003).
19. Within Europe, see, for example, Urla (1993) on the Basque country and Herzfeld (e.g., 1996, 1998) on Greece.
20. For a critique from a political philosophy angle, see Connolly (1991).
21. Recent work has questioned the notion of the bounded, homogeneous cultural unit that was so central to classical anthropological fieldwork. See, e.g., Gupta and Ferguson (1997) and Oliver et al. (2000).
22. A useful and contextualised way of including national numbers in social analysis is provided by Fatmir Alispahić’s book *Tuzland* (2000: 196–197). Not bound by the dominant conventions of academic writing, this publication by the Tuzla Tourist Board acknowledges the relevance of national belonging or background to understanding life in this Bosnian town by providing some nationality statistics. However, the same list also includes a range of other figures that are and were relevant to those who live(d) there: gender, religiosity (and the absence thereof), number of households, displacement status, etc.
23. See Jansen 1998a, 1998b, 2000, 2001a, and 2001b.

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