

## The Violence of Memories

Local narratives of the past after ethnic cleansing in Croatia

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### Contextualizing 'suppressed' memory

When comparing media and academic coverage of the recent violence in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo with approaches to other wars, it is striking how in the post-Yugoslav case history was frequently put forward as a more or less independent variable, and attributed a central causal role in the wars of the 1990s. The crudest expressions of this line of thought could be found in the Orientalist references to 'ancient Balkan hatreds' in many foreign media reports, but historicism was also prevalent in many other approaches, including social scientific ones. In such analyses, particular reference was made to the traumas experienced in rural areas of the Nazi-puppet Independent State of Croatia during World War II (Bowman 1994; Denich 1994; Hayden 1994; Simić 2000). Memories of wartime atrocities, it should be noted, constituted a central element in the strategies of the post-Yugoslav nationalist regimes that inserted them into reinterpretations of Yugoslav history that rewrote multicultural co-existence as a litany of national victimization. In her study of the role of memory in Ukrainian nationalism, Wanner (1998) argues that nationalist rewritings of history were successful because they overlapped, far more so than official Soviet versions of history, with the experiences and memories of ordinary people. Similarly, Denich (1994) and Hayden (1994) highlighted the compatibility of nationalist narratives of the past with suppressed memories of local World War II events in predominantly Serbian-inhabited villages in Croatia.

However, the material to be presented in this text suggests that such 'memory-centred' explanations of the recent nationalisms need to be nuanced (see also Jansen 1999). Without wanting to deny the importance of historic traumas, this article warns against the danger of attributing a straightforward causal role to recollections of past events. Explaining the local anatomy of conflict with reference to such traumas would imply a risk of unintentionally ratifying or even canonizing their legitimacy and significance by retrospectively embedding them in 'social memory' (Connerton 1989: 18–19). 'Social memory' is then reified and proclaimed significant with hindsight by declaring it 'subaltern memory', in opposition to official versions of the past. Ironically, this reflects what actually happened at the start of the post-Yugoslav

wars, when the very first incidents were freighted with references to what was called suppressed memory. The various nationalisms presented themselves exactly in those terms, arguing that they were finally liberating ‘the people’s memory’ from communist oppression. However, as a result, the new narratives of the past that were proclaimed official violently pushed other memories into marginality.

This text explores how Serbian and Croatian villagers who had lived in the same location for most of their lives remembered local history in radically different ways. Through vagueness, amnesia and selective remembering, they (re)constructed largely nationally exclusive memories in relation to several sets of events. In such a context, narratives of the past played a central role in the positioning of self;<sup>1</sup> for, as Tonkin argues, ‘individuals may be supported or threatened by public representations of pastness that seem either to guarantee their identity or to deny its significance’ (1992: 10). The villagers who appear in this study faced a dramatic tension between discontinuity and/or continuity, remembering and/or forgetting, amnesia and/or nostalgia. They inscribed their current experiences into the violence of 1991–5 and that of World War II, and related them to different versions of the distant past and of forty-five years of Yugoslav co-existence.

### **Heartland: villages after ethnic cleansing**

As an activist in a local non-governmental organization project, I had the opportunity to gain insight into the stories of people in five villages in Croatia, located between a main transit road and the new state border with Bosnia-Herzegovina, which I have called Bijelo, Crno, Plavo, Sivo and Zeleno.<sup>2</sup> This area suffered two bouts of ethnic cleansing in the post-Yugoslav wars, the first in 1991 when Croats were expelled and the second in 1995 when Serbs were, in their turn, violently ejected. It is a particularly thorny matter to try to paint a more or less clear picture of ‘the situation’ in these villages, because such issues were at the heart of discursive clashes in the post-Yugoslav conflicts. The trouble begins with geographical semantics: were these villages located in ‘Krajina’, as the region was historically known and as the self-proclaimed Serb Republic established there in 1991 styled itself; or in the ‘Formerly Occupied Territories of the Republic of Croatia’ as the area has been designated since 1995? Even more disagreement existed about the national composition of the regional population: though all agreed it had been mixed, diametrically opposed views claimed either a historical Serbian or a Croatian majority, depending on the geographical parameters chosen and the assumed year zero.

The five villages in question, part of one municipality, constituted a particularly appropriate context in which to approach the issues at stake here

for at least three reasons. First, this area witnessed some of the most extreme violence both in World War II and in the post-Yugoslav wars. Second, it is in this region, which used to house a large number of people with a Serbian background, that many scholars and journalists have located the most powerful World War II traumas (for example, Glenny 1992; Bowman 1994; Denich 1994; Hayden 1994; Silber and Little 1995). Third, the fact that most informants were elderly people allows us to work from testimonies involving personal memories of both wars.

### **Narratives of distant pasts**

Let us first have a look at references to the distant past. By embedding those in authoritative discourses of nationalism, people exerted control over their version of history and thereby over their own personal narrative. Importantly, this also allowed them to comment on the present, as illustrated by Branko when we asked him about the possibility of future co-existence. Rather than simply saying that he didn't want Serbs to return,<sup>3</sup> Branko, a Croat from Plavo, referred to a historical contract which stated that Serbs were out of place in this area:

We accepted them long ago. We accepted them on the basis of a contract that they would stay until the Turks would leave. But they stayed on after that. And not only that, they wanted to be the rulers.

Ante, a displaced person living in Crno whose father was killed in front of his own eyes by partisans in World War II, deployed a similar narrative. When asked about life in former Yugoslavia and about the prospect of Serbs returning, the answer was a reformulation of history as one long Croatian struggle for national freedom against Serbs. Ante argued that Croats had always been second-class citizens, that they had never been allowed to study. In Yugoslavia, he said, they 'couldn't plant their flag'; they weren't allowed to sing their own songs; they weren't allowed to speak Croatian, and the language 'imagine, was called Serbo-Croatian!' 'For a thousand years', Ante shouted, 'we lived under the Serbs. And then we decided it was enough. Time to stand up for our freedom'. The first time the Croats tried this, according to Ante, was in 1941 as allies of Germany. Although 'everybody thought that they were going to win, because Germany seemed invincible', when the Nazis fell, the regime of wartime Croat leader Ante Pavelić fell as well. However, this was not the end of it. The Croats, Ante argued, then lived under the Serbs for another fifty years – 'this time they were communists'. Again, the Croats prepared a revolt. Now, finally, for once and forever, they had settled the score: 'we have liberated ourselves. Forever'.

The reference to ‘a thousand years’ is a line taken directly from Croatian president Franjo Tuđman’s well-known idea of the thousand-year dream of the Croatian people to have their own state. Ante, however, speaks of a thousand years ‘under the Serbs’; even though the area that is now Croatia was historically controlled by Austrian and Hungarian rulers and only the last seventy-five years of these ten centuries were ‘Yugoslav’ years (Grandits and Promitzer 2000: 126–32).<sup>4</sup> In this manner, people can borrow certain experiences of which they have no individual recollection, and incorporate them into their personal narratives (Hazan 1980: 89–97; Myerhoff 1986: 274; Ganguly 1992: 29–31). For Ante, his narrative of the past worked, it was symbolically effective (Ganguly 1992: 42). However, his account was diametrically opposed to the dominant narrative amongst Serbian villagers who had made the decision to return to Croatia after 1995 and resisted such discourses, which were in conflict with their everyday lives. Often, they evoked another larger discourse: that of a strong regional identity, based on an age-old Serbian presence in the area and on similarities between them and local Croats.<sup>5</sup> As one man put it: ‘If we aren’t at home here after five hundred years, then when will we be?’ Possible links with Serbia were then downplayed and the meaning of one’s Serbian identity was relativized, sometimes by re-evaluating secularized religious markers as a substitute for national categories. Although locally religion was relatively more important amongst (Catholic) Croats than amongst Serbs, the latter would often say that they were ‘Orthodox by nationality’.<sup>6</sup> Hence, when referring to the distant past, two fairly homogenous versions were dominant, both excelling in partiality: whereas the ‘Serbian’ line recalled similarity and peaceful co-existence, the ‘Croatian’ story was one of difference and oppression. In both cases, I would argue, the key factor was what they left out.

### **World War II and Yugoslavia: remembering differently**

A cruel numeric parallel runs through the region’s history: in 1941 and 1945 the area in question saw some of the worst violence of World War II, and in 1991 and 1995 it was the scene of ethnic cleansing campaigns by competing sides in the post-Yugoslav wars. World War II, a key moment in virtually all versions of village history, was condensed into short, powerful and mutually exclusive summaries. Usually, it was simply called ‘that war’ as opposed to ‘this war’ (1991–5). Most local narratives of the past were not half as striking in their explicit content as in their systematic gaps and silences. This was especially the case with memories of violence, of ‘this war’ as well as of ‘that war’, with an ominous parallel of self-victimization. With regard to the events of fifty years ago, two homogenous narratives took shape along national

lines, focusing on one key moment each and virtually always ignoring all other events. The dominant Croatian narrative of World War II said that, and only that, in 1945 partisans including local Serbs massacred a large part of the Croatian population.<sup>7</sup> The Serbian dominant account reversed the exclusive key moment to 1941 when collaborationist Ustaša paramilitary units, including Plavo Croats, massacred local Serbs.

In any event, those massacres and starvation had left almost no families intact and the demographic and political legacy of World War II went on to play a central role in post-war Yugoslav power struggles. Of the five villages in question, Bijelo had been the main centre in former Yugoslav times with a mixed population and a Serbian majority. Reflecting extensive participation in the partisan army, there had been a high degree of communist party membership there, as in the smaller and predominantly Serbian-inhabited villages of Sivo, Zeleno and Crno. During the late 1990s, a representational struggle took place about the past status relations between these previously Serbian-dominated villages and Plavo, known as a hard-core 'Ustaša village' and therefore deprived of state privileges under communism.<sup>8</sup> A common strategy of Croatian villagers was the representation of Yugoslav history as a history only of discrimination against Croats by Serbs. Ante's account above was a vivid, but extreme example. Generally, the charge of discrimination was not explained, as in 1990s Croatia this was simply understood as the dominant version of history. However, a widely used example to support this argument upon probing said that only 12 per cent of the people working in a nearby state firm had been Croats. This single fact was brought up by very many Plavo Croats, but it was presented sort of nonchalantly as if it was only one example out of a long list – an example that through its style evoked a general, vague sense of injustice and discrimination on all levels. People also referred to the fact that streets in Plavo were only partly paved and that there had never been a phone connection. The fact that this was still the case in 1998, although the village was now almost exclusively Croatian-inhabited and although the hard-line mayor of the municipality was in fact from this very village, was waved away with the argument that 'the state will take care of that, but we can't have it over night'.

Relations between Serbs and Croats in the villages before the recent war were not always described in purely negative terms. Many Croats distinguished between peaceful co-existence on the interpersonal level and institutional discrimination. However, the former was often mentioned in order to add an edge to later accusations: 'we were friends, and then they betrayed us'. The large majority of Serbian villagers, conversely, were keen to remember 'good neighbourship' which formed part of their portrayal of life in former Yugoslavia as close to perfect. They generally avoided mentioning national issues of that time, and limited themselves to evoking former high

living standards and peaceful comfortable lives, without going into any details about the ways in which those were organized or facilitated.

The dominant Croatian narrative of the past made a major effort to suppress evidence of previous social complexity that might unsettle the present strictly national dichotomy. The region had to be established as essentially and historically Croatian and *only* Croatian and traces of a history of co-existence had to be explained away. Thus, Branko had to invoke a grand contract in order to acknowledge and account for the fact of the historical presence of Serbs in the region. Similarly, he apologized for using ‘so many Serbian words’; this was, he argued, because ‘we have lived with them in this mixed area for such a long time, so we use a lot of their words’. This was a reflection of a central dogma of the dominant Croatian nationalist discourse, which holds that Serbian and Croatian are two entirely different discretely separable languages. In this controversial view, there is no place for a local variant shared by Serbs and Croats. Similarly, dominant Croatian narratives of the past ignored the numerous political ambiguities that cut across the retrospectively applied national dichotomy. In reality, not all Serbian villagers had been members of the communist party and not all Croats had been critical of it (in fact, some had been members themselves). However, in order to make sense of the recent past, the new Croatian nationalism relied on the simple formula ‘communist party members = Serbs = privileged’.

This resonates with Ganguly’s finding that drastic change often precipitates a disambiguation of the past in order to understand a ruptured present (1992: 31). Such patterns of disambiguation were not limited to instances of violence, but they were extended to all issues potentially related to national questions. In a context where the Tippet of national correctness was abundantly applied in order to rewrite national history, it was also common practice to re-interpret local history through selective amnesia. Nearly all local Serbs recalled and identified a number of mixed marriages in the villages, whereas Croats rarely mentioned them spontaneously and in response to probing questions initially negated and later downplayed their existence. Similarly, in a retrospective effort to cleanse their own identities of ambiguities, many engaged in the re-interpretation of their own biographies. In this way, Dubravka, a Croatian woman in Bijelo, fiercely resisted questions about a certain period in her life. Later it transpired that she had lived in Serbia during that time.

Such instances demonstrate that the realization that memories were contradictory and internally inconsistent did not stop people from believing and enacting them (Myerhoff 1986: 264–5, 284). Following István Rév, who looked at the politics of collective and individual amnesia in post-communist states, these narratives can be seen as strategies to erase traces of everyday

collaboration and accommodation (quoted in Einhorn 1993: 8; see also Holy 1996: 16). In particular, by narrating the past in unambiguous national terms reflecting official discourses, Croatian villagers could construct themselves as innocent 'by right of birth' since their very national identity testified to their past victimization. The memories of most Serbian villagers, on the other hand, retold the past as harmonious and egalitarian thereby coupling it to their present desire to live in their houses in Croatia. This simultaneously allowed them to position themselves favourably in relation to discourses of multiculturalism and tolerance. These were virtually useless in their dealings with the Croatian state, but could be effective in order to occupy the moral high ground when approached by, say, humanitarian agencies and journalists. Most Serbian stories thus swept previous patterns of discrimination and conflict under the carpet of a nostalgically reconstructed Yugoslav paradise.

### **Contested narrations of recent violence**

The narratives of the recent violence reflected an uncannily similar structure to those of World War II. In the 1990s, the villages in question experienced in microcosm many of the larger processes that shook Croatia. In the beginning of that decade, the wave of nationalism set in motion by the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević met its counterpart in Croatia where the electoral victory of the HDZ (Croatian Democratic Community) of Franjo Tuđman caused an outburst of national euphoria, manifested locally in Plavo. On the Serbian side, local and 'imported' hardliners raised the stakes and a polarized climate took shape in this strongly mixed area. Paramilitary groups killed civilians on both sides. After a referendum in 1991, and in the face of Belgrade-instigated Serbian revolts against a purported 're-run of World War II fascism', Croatia was proclaimed an independent state. Soon, the 'Serbian Republic of Krajina' seceded from Croatia and was violently cleansed of almost all its Croatian inhabitants by the collective efforts of militant local Serbs, the (by then so-called) Yugoslav Army, the Milošević regime and irregular volunteers from Serbia.

When asked about the start of the war on the ground, the villagers' answers were diametrically opposed to each other, but they all excelled in vagueness. Even though it is well known that previously simmering personal power struggles often played an important role in the early days of the conflict (Bax 2000), this was never mentioned. Again, there were two dominant stories, partially challenged by dissident ones. The dominant Croatian account referred to unspecified secret Serbian meetings, Yugoslav Army involvement, a surprise attack on the defenceless village of Plavo, which was burned to the ground, and the murder of the few elderly people who did not

flee. This narrative blamed local Serbs, although rarely individuals, for taking part in it but even more for not warning their neighbours of what they had presumably known beforehand. The 1991 events formed the key moment in the dominant Croatian narrative of the recent war in the village, and the only two actors that were distinguished in this drama were collective: *the* Serbs ('them') and *the* Croats ('us').

Life in the other mainly Serbian-inhabited villages went on, as most Serbs stayed in their houses and farmed and fought their way through the lifespan of the war republic of Krajina. In August 1995, however, Croatian government forces launched an offensive in Operation *Oluja* (Storm) and 'Krajina fell' or, from another perspective, 'the occupied territories of the Republic of Croatia were liberated'. Serbian inhabitants fled en masse and the almost empty region now became the focus of a Croatian looting, burning and mining spree. In the dominant local Serbian account of the war, 1995 was therefore the key moment and, as in its counterpart Croatian narrative, events unrelated to that were simply ignored, as were patterns that could not be expressed through national dichotomy. Most striking amongst the Serbian returnees was that there was not really a story of the Krajina republic. They referred only vaguely if at all to the events of 1991 and, as in the Croatian case, no context was provided. Hardly anyone mentioned personal involvement or family or friends in relation to the events of 1991–5. Three years after its death, Krajina seemed a ghost. If any crime by Serbs was mentioned at all, responsibility was put squarely on the shoulders of 'people from outside', militant Serbs from Serbia and from other parts of Croatia. Reflecting the life-saving strategy of keeping a low profile, as well as war-weariness, the dominant attitude of the elderly Serbian returnees was 'saw nothing, heard nothing, said nothing'.

Thus through narration and non-narration, local memories were disambiguated, fixed and given an authoritative stamp, which was particularly important in a context where dominant political discourses relied heavily on the authority of certain versions of the past. They were constructed into solid, credible and stable starting points to make sense of the present and in this way people 'remade the past in terms that are accessible to the present' (Ganguly 1992: 45). The dominant Serbian and Croatian narratives were considered mutually exclusive, but sadly, there was ample historical evidence that could be used to corroborate them both.

Apart from the resistance to broad contextualization that produced nationally one-sided stories, there was a more general pervasive vagueness. Interestingly, people with dissident views were much less vague though everybody avoided going into details. It was virtually impossible to find a concrete account of any of the war events that related different episodes in a more or less chronological order. Not being too precise was considered



wise: since vagueness allowed for generalized accusations, it protected the speaker from potentially nasty probing questions about individual responsibility and knowledge and it prevented speaking up about issues bringing one into a socially sensitive position. Vagueness, therefore, was a crucial instrument of self-protection. This avoidance behaviour was reflected even in grammatical patterns. It was very common to use verbs in the passive tense and in the neutral gender. People would say 'there was shooting' [*pucalo se*] or 'there was killing' [*ubilo se*]. Also, villagers almost always talked in general categories referring to 'their [people]' and 'our [people]'. Such styles of speech were at once results of a decade of violent national homogenizing and instruments with which to enact the new nationally homogenized reality. With subjects cleansed from many narratives, and with only the general terms 'them' and 'us' left, this led to the obliteration of detailed information.

### **Silenced memories, alternative narratives**

As a rule in the post-Yugoslav conflicts, any kind of ambiguity in relation to the nationalist project was sanctioned severely and transgressing the local pattern of segregation produced negative reactions. Again, silences were crucial in the creation of nationally homogenous 'fronts' relying on discursive black holes that, far from being innocent and impartial, marginalized dissident representations. Through a bitter ironic twist of local history, the first and arguably the greatest victims of the nationalist conflicts in the villages in question were people who lived in mixed marriages. In the 1970s, Bosnian-born Serb Zoran had moved to Plavo as a teacher and married a local Croatian woman, Vesna, 'Brotherhood and Unity in bed', as he put it.<sup>9</sup> In many ways Zoran had fulfilled a bridging function and despite being a Serb and a communist party member he had been a popular figure in Croatian-dominated Plavo who was known for insisting impartially on the correct implementation of nationality quotas in official affairs. In 1991, before the first bullets in the village were fired, Vesna, Zoran and their two children were the first ones to be discreetly informed that it would be wise to leave. Although they were about to move into their newly built house, they fled and ended up in what later became a Serbian-controlled part of Bosnia. After a five-year odyssey, Zoran and Vesna returned to Plavo, where they found . . . nothing.

Some other villagers – although unambiguously located as regards nationality – could not retrospectively be placed solidly in one of the presumably self-evident camps of the Yugoslav era (partisan/Serbs vs. Ustaša/Croats) or in the recent war (Krajina/Serbs vs. Croatia/Croats). Rada was a middle-aged

unmarried economist, a Serb, who had worked in Zagreb for more than twenty years. She returned to Zeleno in 1991 and stayed there during the Krajina period, but soon earned the reputation of being critical of her fellow Serbs. In the 1995 *Oluja* offensive, she was taken captive, and later she sought refuge in Bosnia and in Zagreb (read: not in Serbia). Since 1996, Rada had lived with her brother in extremely dire material conditions in Zeleno, shunned by Croats and Serbs alike.

On one occasion, Rada was visibly upset. Sitting on the only chair available, near to the wood stove, I sipped coffee and watched her storming around the little room furiously. She had just returned from a relatively long walk to the nearest post office, which meant she had to pass the police station where she had been subjected to some verbal harassment.<sup>10</sup> Rada said this was not the first time and she was sick of always being tarred with the same brush as all Serbs. She argued that some people had indeed been privileged before, but that this had been on the basis of party membership. And, although most party members had been Serbs, her family had never had any links with the party. Rada deeply resented the fact that this was now considered a meaningless detail by the Croatian villagers. But for them, she argued, the logic was simple: if you are a Serb, you must have been privileged and you must have been in favour of Krajina. As mentioned above, and as confirmed by other Serbs in the village, Rada had actually been very critical of the state of affairs in that Serbian war republic. Still, she was subjected to the same abuse as other Serbian returnees.

Due to restrictions of space, this text only makes occasional mention of alternative marginal narratives. This is not to deny their importance and I realize it results in a piece that may strike the reader as excessively generalizing, particularly in national terms. In fact, this text was written while carrying out research on *anti*-nationalism in Serbia and in Croatia, and I certainly do not wish to reinforce the problematic parallel relationship that some anthropological approaches have with nationalist discourses (for a discussion, see, for example, Handler 1985). If I cannot do without those essentializing concepts, this is because the 'nation', after all, is essentialized (or imagined as essential) or it is simply not. Through a wide range of small limited acts of essentialization on the part of their own and other people, 'the Serbs' and 'the Croats' were continually consolidated as nations. Moreover, I was working in a context where the labels 'Serbian' and 'Croatian' were not only dominant in local usage but they also were really the ones that had most impact on one's life. In other words, rather than simply endorsing those local essentialisms I hope to have made clear that refusing to recognize them would be ethnographically incorrect, theoretically uncritical (Herzfeld 1996: 26), and politically disrespectful to people of all nationalities who had been victimized because of those labels.<sup>11</sup>

### The day after: the villages in the late 1990s

As a result of the multi-faceted violence not one inhabitant stayed on in the villages during the whole 1991–5 war, and all houses were looted, burned and/or mined. The formerly predominantly Serbian-inhabited villages of Bijelo, Sivo and Zeleno were now inhabited by a mixture of people. First, Croatian policies of ethnic engineering favoured the settlement of Bosnian Croatian refugees (in these villages mainly from areas which were now Bosniac-controlled) here, granting them a temporary right to residence in the Serbian-owned houses they occupied. Second, there were Croatians who had escaped in 1991 but now returned and, third, a small first contingent of predominantly elderly Serbians who had fled in 1995 but had now come back. The picture was completed by a Macedonian, some people in mixed marriages, Croatian economic migrants and a large unit of Croatian policemen. Almost all inhabitants lived in dire material conditions, but by the late 1990s Serbian returnees were clearly worst off: many lived in poorly insulated sheds, some had been able to secure a pension or social help but others survived on subsistence agriculture only. The army base, now occupied by the Croatian army and the timber mill in Zeleno employed only Croats.

Crno had been almost exclusively Serbian-inhabited before the war, and all sixty or so houses had been destroyed in *Oluja*. Only two of them, partly renovated, were now inhabited – by Croats. The last village, Plavo, had been burned by Serbian forces in 1991 and all survivors had been displaced. After *Oluja*, most Croatian (but not Serbian) returnee households in Plavo were provided with a newly built house from the Croatian state and they had at least one person employed or retired with a pension. Nevertheless, many houses were still empty as people were reluctant to move to this isolated and climatologically and socially barren place. A Croatian flag dominated the central point of the village and segregation had of course intensified; of the numerous Serbs that used to live in one part of Plavo only one, married to a Croatian woman, had returned.

Thus, as a result of the post-Yugoslav wars the population of these villages was much smaller and on average much older than before. Most people hardly communicated with those of different nationality, especially not in public, and narratives of the past were the most common way to legitimize this. There were some provocations directed towards Serbian returnees: verbal harassment was particularly common but there were also several cases of rape and arson. Serbian returnees lived in fear and social isolation, arguing that no one wanted to talk to them and that ‘they were never asked over for coffee’, a central ritual of sociability in this part of Europe. In their narratives of the past, most of them distanced themselves from the militant Serbs who had proclaimed Krajina a separate Serbian republic and they saw their return

as sufficient proof of their willingness to live together with Croats. These returnees usually expressed the desire to talk, but not about the war or about 'politics' which was considered pointless because 'it wouldn't change anything anyway'.

Most Croats, on the other hand, relied on their own versions of the past and saw no reason to talk to 'those who only yesterday destroyed their houses' especially if 'they' now acted as if nothing had happened. Factors contributing to this unwillingness to communicate amongst Croats were social pressure by neighbours, the attitude of the travelling Catholic priest, local authorities and the police and dominant media messages. We should not forget that the nationalist discourse saw Croatia as the homeland of Croats and Croats only – all others were guests at best. In fact, one of the main public themes at the time was the very question of whether Serbs who 'voluntarily left the liberated areas of Croatia in 1995' should be allowed to return. The instinctive answer of many Croats, including those in dominant political circles, was simply 'never!', even if this was simultaneously acknowledged as unrealistic given international pressure. Villagers sometimes literally reproduced statements by the Croatian president. Ante, who lived in Crno, argued that the Serbs had better stay where they were. He claimed that the Croatian people had suffered enough because of them and that, after all, they had their own state as well. If they returned, he stated, 'they should accept that they can't be bosses [*šefovi*]' anymore'. He also reproduced the widespread narrative that the Serbs should not have left in the first place but that they should have come out peacefully, waving a white flag, and nobody would have touched them. However, so the story went, they left because 'they knew what they had done to us'. Some Croatian villagers, especially older ones, were more moderate about this and referred to what they saw as a general human need to return to one's birthplace. However, this did not necessarily mean they would ever talk to the returnees, although some did break the pattern of non-communication.

### **Memories of violence/the violence of memories**

This study shows how in a set of post-war Croatian villages largely nationally homogenous narratives of past and present relied on strategies of vagueness and selective amnesia. In a context of danger and poverty, such ways of coping allowed people not to be implicated in potentially threatening debates (see Čolović 1994: 57–62). However, villagers did not passively reproduce just any propaganda directed at them. When re-telling the past they evoked authoritative discourses that seemed compatible with their current situation. For example, in this reconstruction of our conversation, Ante, who had lost

close family members both in ‘this’ and in ‘that’ war, inscribed his individual life history into the grand narrative of Croatian national liberation:

Q: Is it better now then?

A: Yes, now we have freedom.

Q: Does that mean it is better?

A: Yes of course. Now we can plant our flag in our country.

Q: But was that worth the death of so many people?

A: Yes.

Q: The death of your wife’s brother?

A: Yes it was. [His wife is in tears now.] We had to make a choice. Either wait and sit with our arms crossed, and die – none of us would have survived – or we could fight for freedom. There was one great man, one very wise man: Franjo Tudjman. He made the difference.

Ante’s exposé evoked the dominant Croatian nationalist version of history and thereby attempted to assert control over his individual present. In Portelli’s words: ‘by saying that history was “good”, we claim that we have made something out of ourselves’ (1988: 53). In the specific spatio-temporal context of this study, the most striking form of relating one’s personal experience to the dominant versions of history was through the generous deployment of silence. Thus, Ante did not comment on his dramatic life conditions. He did not say that he currently lived in the ruins of a Serbian-owned house, from which he could be legally evicted. He did not mention that there was no water, nor electricity. By not narrating a whole range of ambiguous issues, and by reproducing the discursive black holes of the nationalist grand narratives, he reinforced nationally exclusive representations of past and present. Therefore we can turn Wanner’s assertion that ‘the present acquires meaning only in terms of a ruptured and tragic past’ (1998: 203) on its head, without losing any explanatory power. In many cases, the past acquires meaning only in terms of a ruptured and tragic present.

This brings me to an important point: the testimonies on which this text is based were gathered in 1997–8 in a now undisputed part of Croatian territory marked by the consequences of two recent campaigns of ethnic cleansing. If I argue that narratives of the past are contextually constructed, this timing is crucial to the findings presented. Rather than concluding that Serbs tend to be more ‘multicultural’ and Croats more ‘exclusivist’, I dare say that the narratives of the same Serbian villagers if interviewed in 1991 would have been extremely different, i.e. reflecting similar evocations of exclusive nationalism as those of local Croats in the post-war period. Rosendahl makes a similar point in her study of ideology and practice amongst Cubans:

if experiences are not compatible with the ideological messages they are hearing, they evaluate them [i.e. the messages] and when necessary reject them. . . .

Likewise, they accept and promote those ideological messages that are strengthened by their own experience.

(Rosendahl 1997: 157)

Importantly, I think, Rosendahl emphasizes experience rather than the ‘social memory’ prevalent in other studies. An interesting notion in this respect is Portelli’s ‘mode of narration’ (quoted in Tonkin 1992: 68). Like Portelli, I found people speaking in different modes, depending on their own position, the topic, the context, the addressee, and so on. We have seen how in the context of these villages in post-war Croatia reference to history was abundant and ubiquitous in many people’s narratives. I think it would be incorrect to immediately interpret this as a symptom of deeply embedded, collectively entrenched traumas. We do not know whether, for the speakers in question, such memories played a role in everyday narratives before the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Did they perceive them as an important element in their own lives, or did they take on their significance when brought up by others? One question seems particularly pressing: who were these others? Should it not make us sceptical if they were exactly those people who built their power and legitimacy on these memories?

Based on research after the waves of ethnic cleansing that engulfed this region in Croatia, this study indicates that while references to the past were frequent, this was not necessarily because of their status as suppressed social memory. Villagers framed their narratives into a certain received and authoritative mode because, for a variety of reasons, different modes can be compelling at different times. In the context of post-war Croatia, many villagers evoked authoritative narratives of the past, relying strongly on their silences, in order to exert a minimum of control over their own version of history and thereby over their own everyday lives.

## Notes

- 1 See Ricoeur (1990: 167–93, 1991: 32–3), Ganguly (1992: 29–30) and Jansen (1998).
- 2 Between December 1997 and September 1998, our team conducted visits to almost all local households. A big *hvala lijepo* to colleague-activists, for their spirit, friendship and support. I will never forget their sense of humour, relativity and *rakija*, without which this work would have been impossible. This text is dedicated to them. Special *hvala* to Sanda Malbaša. Also thanks to Andy Dawson, Caroline Oliver, Ivana Spasić, Mark Johnson and Nerys Roberts for sceptical listening and constructive criticizing. All the names in this text have been changed. All translations are mine. This text is an academic by-product of a dialogue project, and it will never be more than that.
- 3 Having fled the 1995 Croatian *Oluja* offensive, which integrated the region into

the Croatian state, local Serbs were granted the right to return as part of the multi-lateral agreements that ended the post-Yugoslav wars. Although some, predominantly elderly, people did return during the late 1990s, their numbers were small. Returnees have been similarly limited in numbers across all the former Yugoslav states.

- 4 For a discussion of similar discursive strategies of retrospective victimization in Serbia, see Jansen (2000).
- 5 When Croats mentioned regional identity at all, this usually served an opposite purpose. They took pride in the image of the region as hard-core Croatian nationalist, in contrast to certain other areas.
- 6 The relatively recent rise of the labels ‘Serbs’ and ‘Croats’ on these local levels is an interesting point in itself (see Jambrešić 1993; Grandits and Promitzer 2000). The war rendered Yugoslav identification, previously very common amongst villagers with a Serbian or mixed background, obsolete.
- 7 The partisans constituted a multi-ethnic army under communist leadership, but in this region it recruited primarily from Serbs, who were victimized in the fascist Croatian Ustaša state.
- 8 The existence of a privileged Serbian-dominated ‘partisan’ village next to a black sheep Croatian-dominated ‘Ustaša village’ reflected a widespread pattern in this part of the Yugoslav Socialist Republic of Croatia. Unlike in larger places in former Yugoslavia, nationality had long been a political issue in these places. Nevertheless, differences between Serbs and Croats were not visible or audible. All villagers spoke an identical local variant of what was Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian and, if literate, they all used the Latinic script.
- 9 Paraphrasing the official Titoist Yugoslav motto of ‘Brotherhood and Unity’.
- 10 One of the off-duty policemen, sitting in front of the bar opposite the police station, had called her a ‘Četnikuša’, a term of abuse for a Serbian woman with a World War II etymology. ‘Četnik’ was a term used to connote a diverse range of ultra-nationalist and anti-communist Serbian irregular forces in Nazi-occupied Yugoslavia.
- 11 Against this background, let me simply point out that this text fails to reflect a series of deep ambiguities. In order to add some necessary confusion, I have to mention:
  - . . . that many Serbian villagers had relatives in other parts of Croatia or in Slovenia, in Western Europe, Australia and North America, and not (just) in Serbia or Bosnia;
  - . . . that, before 1991, many of the Serbs lived in other parts of Croatia, and some of the Croats lived in Serbia, but they came to the village in 1991 or 1995;
  - . . . that many locals had married Bosnians of different national backgrounds;
  - . . . that in World War II, some local Serbs did not join the partisans but the Yugoslav Royal Army or later on the anti-communist Četniks, and a small group of Croats didn’t join the Ustaša but the partisans or the Domobran, the Croatian regular army;
  - . . . that in the 1995 *Oluja* operation, the first army to arrive was the Bosniac-controlled Bosnian army and it was only subsequently that the Croatian army took over the abandoned villages.

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