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‘WHY DO THEY HATE US?’ EVERYDAY SERBIAN NATIONALIST KNOWLEDGE OF MUSLIM HATRED

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Based on ethnographic research amongst displaced women and men in and from Bosnia-Herzegovina, this article explores forms of knowledge that underlie Serbian nationalism. This nationalist discourse to which I refer as ‘Serbian Knowledge’ contains a reservoir of ‘truths’ presumed to be accessible to all ‘good and real’ Serbs. It is also presumed to be the product, not of intellectual analysis, but of shared history of national suffering. Here, I focus on one particular aspect of Serbian Knowledge: the knowledge and fear of the hatred that Muslims allegedly feel for Serbs. Rather than simply highlighting the inconsistencies and prejudices of this discourse, I deploy my encounter with one Serbian man to explore how it may provide disenfranchised people with a set of symbolic resources that explain war and post-war experiences, and that allow them to carve out a sense of worth while reinforcing national-moral boundaries.

‘Serbian Knowledge’ and emotionally charged anthropology

Mirroring the abundant reference to history in elite representations of Serbian nationalism, my ethnographic research amongst refugees and displaced persons (DPs) in and from Bosnia-Herzegovina¹ who identified as ‘Serbian’ uncovered many similar historical framings of experience on the everyday level. This was not mere rhetoric but rather part of a form of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 1996) that relied on its own national form of knowledge, seen as the empathetic product of shared historical fate.² In this text I deploy the notion of ‘Serbian Knowledge’ as an analytical shortcut label to denote such forms of knowledge. I explore a specific ultranationalist version of ‘Serbian Knowledge’ with regard to one of its particular objects: the hatred that Bosnian Muslims allegedly feel for Serbs, hereafter ‘Muslim hatred’. For the sake of argument I will trace my encounter with one individual, whom I call Matija. I met Matija in the Northeast Bosnian town of Bijeljina in 2001, where he, his wife Dušica and their teenage daughter occupied a flat owned by an expelled Muslim family. Dušica had an administrative job in a local firm, while Matija produced Serbian Orthodox religious imagery, some of which he sold but much of which adorned the flat. Both were in their early forties.

I was introduced to Matija by an acquaintance of his who I had interviewed about her experiences of displacement. Himself a victim of ethnic cleansing and a leading militant in the demonstrations against possible evictions of Serbian DP's, she said, he would be a key informant. A self-proclaimed admirer of fugitive war-time leaders Mladić and Karadžić, Matija now sang the praises of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) led by Vojislav Šešelj. Widely considered an extremist party by non-Serbs and Serbs alike, the SRS commanded the electoral support of a very sizeable minority of the population in both Serbia and the Serbian-controlled part of Bosnia. Hence, I rely on Matija's story here in order to crystallise a number of patterns that I found amongst a set of self-identified Serbian victims of ethnic cleansing who could be called 'ultranationalists'. Apart from sharing the above political allegiances, these women and men displayed at least those common attitudes, embedded in a wider reservoir of beliefs: (a) they read the post-Yugoslav wars in terms of *exclusive* blame on national Others, with Serbs only capable of isolated defensive mistakes; (b) they emphasised the ontological unity of the Serbian nation over the differences within it; (c) they considered the whole or most of Bosnia to be unalienable Serbian national territory; and (d) they said that return to their pre-war place of residence as part of a minority there was impossible.

A more correct term would thus be 'ultranationalist Serbian beliefs' but I deploy the notion of 'Serbian Knowledge' in order to convey the fact that, to 'ultranationalists', these were self-evident truths that enjoyed unchallenged authority. Obviously, such types of national knowledge did not flourish only amongst Serbs nor did all Serbs adhere to them—to argue that would be similar to claiming that Donald Rumsfeld's worldview is *the* American worldview. However, the term 'Serbian Knowledge' with capital K indicates the fact that, parallel to Rumsfeld's neoconservative position, Serbian ultranationalism is based precisely on the idea that its 'knowledge' is held by *all* 'good and real' Serbs and *only* by them. Therefore, as in all work pertaining to issues of nationality, this text runs the risk of reinforcing the near-hegemonic identificational logic that essentialises and reduces human experience to its 'fit' into national categories (see Fairclough 1994). However, since the symbolic violence of national essentialism is at the heart of the issues explored in this article, I employ the labels 'Serbs' and 'Muslims' in a self-consciously strategic manner to refer to all people considered as such in the particular ultranationalist discourse under scrutiny.

The use of such labels is problematic, since some women and men thus categorised as Serbs or Muslims actually self-identified as Yugoslavs or Bosnians. Moreover, the census category 'Muslim' was itself the product

of contested history and, during my fieldwork, the Muslim nationalist elite tended to privilege the term 'Bosniac'. In a broader sense, of course, such nationality labels obscure a reality of multi-layered senses of belonging, including non-national ones.³ In addition, the label 'Muslim' fails to convey the ambiguity of the reference to Islam, which was at once an indispensable and a negligible element. In fact, many Bosnians would argue, it was precisely its irrelevance that was essential. According to a popular joke amongst self-identifying Muslims/Bosniacs to be a proper Muslim in the Bosnian sense, one needed to have forgotten everything about one's Islamic heritage (see also Gellner 1983: 71–72). 'Serbian Knowledge' of Muslim hatred was constructed in direct opposition to such a statement.

During my research with displaced women and men in throughout the post-Yugoslav states, I had grown accustomed to a tendency amongst some informants to cast themselves and others only or predominantly as representatives of their nations. My encounter with Matija represented the boiling point of such reductionism in my research trajectory. As usual, I had initially laid out to him my interest in the variety of experiences of 'ordinary people' in post-war Bosnia and invited him to tell me about his life and his views on the current situation. On his own initiative and notwithstanding my explicit probing, Matija exclusively cast himself as the representative of the Serbian nation and phrased his statements mainly in the form of a lecture addressed at me in my capacity as a researcher, a young man and a Westerner.⁴

After our meeting, which lasted from early afternoon until late in the evening, I looked back on it as a failed exercise. I felt I had learned very little and, moreover, the encounter left me exhausted, sad and furious—mainly, as we shall see, due to Matija's vehement denials of the pain of national Others. This is therefore a piece of emotionally charged anthropology: sensitive to the limits of cultural relativism, I believe that some of my informant's statements were blatantly false and that his reductionist depictions of his Serbian and non-Serbian co-citizens were deeply problematic. During my encounter with Matija, I encouraged him to talk about his own experiences, partly by speaking in ever more personal terms myself. This, however, only made him assume and attribute national representative status even more adamantly, as if to assert that what he was telling me *was* his story. It was only much later that I realised that this was the key point of what I had learned that day. This article, therefore, does not aim to evaluate the truthfulness of Serbian Knowledge. Instead of simply highlighting the inconsistencies in Matija's views, I deploy my version of our encounter in order to explore the conditions under which 'Serbian Knowledge' of Muslim hatred may come to function as a major source of meaning in everyday life.

‘Serbian Knowledge’ and a history of suffering

Matija started off by sketching a broad historical background which served at once as the precondition, the source, and the object of ‘Serbian Knowledge’. This included the unrecognised civilisational superiority of the medieval Serbian empire, the Turkish-Islamic yoke, the demographic conspiracies of Kosovo Albanians, the unacknowledged status of 19th century Serbia as the cradle of democracy, the European ungratefulness that followed Serbian sacrifices in WWII, and the anti-Serbian schemes of Tito, the Comintern, the Vatican and the CIA. In effect, Matija reeled off almost the entire list of Serbian nationalist corrections to historiography that I had heard in scattered conversations over the previous five years in the region. Not only had many invoked a similar set of items, but there also seemed to be a common reservoir of anecdotes to underline them. An example that all post-Yugoslavs will recognise talks of the wonder that passing crusaders expressed at the golden cutlery used at the Serbian court. Even though this vignette conveys pride and superiority, it was invariably framed in a wider discourse that reflected a *leitmotif* of Serbian Knowledge: the notion that Serbs had historically been victimised by the hatred directed at them by various national Others. And, to provide the icing on the cake of that continual suffering, their fate was systematically and maliciously misrepresented throughout the world (see Jansen 2000).⁵ This emphasis on the double whammy of victimisation and misrepresentation was also an important dynamic in the post-Yugoslav conflicts themselves: the perception that one’s pain was deemed illegitimate by those who had inflicted it.

Having established this *leitmotif* of twin sorrows, Matija introduced the actors in the drama: Serbs, of course, and, as the most prominent national Other in his war experience, Muslims.⁶ When situating Bosnian Muslims in Balkan history, he relied on a paradoxical bifurcated discourse of identification. On the one hand he argued that they were the descendants of Asian immigrants, imported by the Ottomans to suppress autochthon Serbs, nth generation colonial settlers referred to as ‘Turks’. But alongside this claim of blood descent there was the competing assertion that they were *not really Turks* but Serbs who had converted from Christianity and betrayed their primordial national loyalty for private gain. To Matija and other ‘ultranationalists’, this contradictory ‘Serbian Knowledge’ allowed for double stigmatisation: it apportioned blame to Muslims for Ottoman oppression (as Serb-hating descendants of Turks) *and* for Serbian weakness (as self-hating descendants of Serbian traitors-converts). The attribution of victimised descent to Serbs and guilty descent to Muslims then made it possible to explain the recent war as a contemporary expression of the ontological

hatred that had always characterised Muslim attitudes towards Serbs. Thus, Matija evoked a core element of ‘Serbian Knowledge’ about Bosnia: a nationalised history of victimisation focusing on Muslim hatred and Serbian fear of that hatred. In this way ‘Serbian Knowledge’ of Muslim hatred was inextricably related to fear: it was *knowledge through fear* and *fear through knowledge*.

Fear of hatred and pre-emptive violence

Christians generally occupied inferior socio-economic and status positions in Bosnia until WWI (Malcolm 1994; Donia & Fine 1994). In Ottoman times, almost all *kmets* (landless serfs) were Christians, whereas almost all land owners were Muslims. Only in the 20th century, when far-going land reforms curtailed the dominance of the Muslim propertied classes, did Serbs come to occupy a politically central position in the first Yugoslav state. Muslims were made to pay for this, as some socio-economic inequalities inherited from Ottoman times were being addressed (Duijzings 2002: 43–46). In response, many Croats and Muslims sided with the Nazi forces in WWII and subjected Serbs to violence that amounted to genocidal proportions (Ibid.: 47–69). Some of the latter countered this by joining the *Četnici*, royalist Serbian nationalist forces, whereas Serbs also formed the backbone of the eventually victorious communist-led Partisans. As a result, Serbs laid claim to many positions of influence and the moral high ground in Titoist Yugoslavia, but this did not prevent Serbian nationalist figures from arguing that Serbs, as a nation, were discriminated against (Ibid.: 71–100). Particularly towards the end of the 1980s a well-documented⁷ frenzy of victimology culminated in a representation of the Serbs as targets of yet another genocide (see Popov 1996 for a critical analysis by Serbian scholars).

While I don’t wish to discard the legitimate anxieties of many Bosnian Serbs in those days or to diminish WWII traumas, the hysterical nature of this campaign is illustrated by the following examples (see Duijzings 2002). Even before the war media reports accused Muslims of conspiring to massacre Serbs on the basis of specially prepared lists, to rape Serbian women in order to impregnate them with Muslim sperm, to increase the Muslim birth-rate in order to affect the population structure, to circumcise all Serbian boys, to abduct Serbian women and assign them to harems in order to breed Janissaries, to establish a ‘Green Transversal’ (a Muslim zone cutting Christian Europe in half) . . . Matija, like many others who framed their experience in Serbian ultranationalism, mentioned almost all of these

elements as reasons why they had had to defend themselves. However, it was not only fear that ruled those pre-war days, as nationalist euphoria marked the end of Yugoslav socialism with politico-religious rallies, flag waving, *Četnik* songs and anti-Muslim provocations (Bougarel 1996; Duijzings 2002). Based on such a platform of aggressive euphoria and defensive fear of hatred,⁸ nationalist politicians gained majority electoral support amongst Bosnian Serbs in the 1990 multi-party elections. Combined with nationalist victories amongst Muslims and Croats this led to a disintegration of the republic's institutional and social life along national lines. On the Serbian side, media and politicians in Beograd and in Bosnia itself, whipped up a seemingly unstoppable whirlwind of fear of Muslim hatred, with violent incidents increasingly common and barricades dotting Bosnian roads.

Hence, Matija evoked 'Serbian Knowledge' of Muslim hatred in order to explain the reluctance of Bosnian Serbs to engage in the 1992 referendum on independence. This fear, he argued, had also legitimised the distribution of arms amongst Serbian civilians by the now *de facto* Serbian Yugoslav People's Army. With war already raging in Croatia, and unable to prevent independence by parliamentary means, the Bosnian Serb leadership had decided to use military force. Within months, 70% of Bosnia was military controlled by Serbian forces, and most of the non-Serbian population had been expelled. Meanwhile Serbs from other parts of Bosnia fled to Serbian-controlled territory. Matija and his family, for example, had lived in his birthplace, a town in Central Bosnia with a mixed population and a slight Muslim majority. In 1992, in an operation of preventive evacuation—with 'much appreciated' coach transport organised by Croatian forces—the family escaped the local Muslim threat. Now displaced in a Sarajevo suburb under Serbian control, Matija was mobilised into the Bosnian Serb Army, but, so he said, did not engage in frontline violence. He narrated his family's displacement exclusively through the victimological prism of 'Serbian Knowledge', straightforwardly stating that they had escaped because 'they knew the Muslims were out to massacre them'. The Serbian cause in the Bosnian war was thus represented simply as a need to save one's family and defend the nation.⁹ This need was rooted in turn in fear of hatred. From this perspective, the Serbian military violence at the outset of the war could be described as a gigantic pre-emptive strike *avant-la-lettre*. The cruel irony was not lost on many observers in Bosnia itself, leading one Bosnian Serb during my fieldwork to recall this bitter joke in order to shed a light on the war activities:¹⁰ 'A journalist sees a Serb attacking a Muslim. He asks "Why did you beat him?" Says the Serb: "Because he beat me back!"'

Making Muslim hatred modern: the spectre of Islamic fundamentalism

When explaining his fate, Matija evoked shared ‘Serbian Knowledge’ about a general, known phenomenon: the historical suffering of the Serbian nation at the hands of national Others, who hate Serbs. Amongst ‘ultranationalists’, this knowledge didn’t need to be substantiated: it was self-evident and current conditions could not possibly be understood without it. The antagonistic space of ‘Serb-haters’ provided by this discourse could be embodied by various nations or agencies, depending on the context (see Jansen 2000, 2001b). During my fieldwork among Bosnian Serbs displaced from now Muslim-controlled areas, the filling of the discursive space of the ‘Hater’ alternated mainly, and seemingly effortlessly, between ‘Muslims’ and ‘the West’—an equivalence that would surely cause unease from the dominant Western perspective of capitalist liberal democracy. Here, I focus on the former dimension.

Serbian Knowledge of Muslim hatred clearly displays characteristics of orientalism, inscribing recent victimisation into a Calvary involving essentialised ‘Serbs/Christians’ and ‘Muslims’. But the very act of analysing this discourse as orientalism (as in: *boy, these Serbs are orientalists!*) runs the risk of replicating an orientalist framework, whereby the essentialised categories are, say, ‘anthropologists/Westerners’ and ‘Serbs/Easterners’ (Brown & Theodossopoulos 2004). This Balkan exoticism is current amongst many Western commentators as well as amongst Serbian nationalist spokespeople themselves (see Todorova 1997; Jansen 2001c). My analysis counters charges of orientalism in at least three ways: firstly by detaching ultranationalism from Serbs as a collective; secondly by trying to understand the role of ‘Serbian Knowledge’ in the mundane practice of its proponents (see Herzfeld 1996); and thirdly by contextualising the fear of Muslim hatred in its historical moment. Ultimately, this does of course imply a triple act of symbolic violence on my part, for each of these factors challenges the status of ‘Serbian Knowledge’, namely its assumptions of universal acceptance amongst Serbs, the unassailable and non-instrumental authority of its contents and the timelessness of Muslim hatred.¹¹

While the former two run throughout this text, the key to the latter lies in a particular period: the 1990s. With the end of the Cold War, the perceived onslaught of Islamic fundamentalism had become increasingly central to Western-dominated geopolitical practice and ‘Serbian Knowledge’ was quick to lay claim to such modern frameworks of understanding in order to establish its legitimacy. Whether as part of high-brow intellectual discourse (with plentiful reference to Huntington’s idea of a ‘clash of civilisations’) or

expressed through more visceral evocations of Muslim barbarity (such as Matija's), the situation became increasingly phrased in terms of the spectre of a global Islamic fundamentalist threat. For example, it was not uncommon for displaced Serbian women to rely on the 'Serbian Knowledge' that, had they not escaped, the Muslims would have imposed *Shari'a* on them. And, as in Western Islamophobia, a key object of their horror and fascination was the veil. Hence, the most recent expression of what was seen as age-old Muslim hatred of Serbs was also packaged in geopolitically appealing allegations of an impending Islamic fundamentalist attack on a Western world based on Christian values (Cigar 1994).

Matija's 'Serbian Knowledge' postulated a near-complete overlap between Bosnian Muslims and Islamic fundamentalism. He made some fleeting reference to the doctrinal teachings of Islam (of which he knew very little) but never to its lived practice amongst Bosnian Muslims (with which he was quite familiar). Matija never talked about individuals he had known as neighbours or colleagues, but rather generalised about 'the Muslims' and about certain public figures. For example, he made much of the 1970 Islamic Declaration written by Muslim leader Alija Izetbegović, which he described as a fundamentalist conspiracy to let the Dragon of Islam rule over Bosnia. 'Serbian Knowledge' thus allowed Matija to tap into simple and sweeping explanations (i.e. the threat of an Islamic state) for complex and painful questions. As Žižek argues with regard to anti-Semitism:

'[The anti-Semite] constructs a new terrifying subject, a unique cause of Evil who "pulls the strings" behind the scene and is the sole precipitator of the series of evils: the Jew. The simple evocation of the "Jewish plot" *explains everything*: all of a sudden "things became clear", perplexity is replaced by a firm sense of orientation, all the diversity of earthly miseries is conceived as the manifestation of the "Jewish plot".' (Žižek 1991: 18)

Likewise, 'Serbian Knowledge' provided an impression of consistency and narrative coherence. Matija straightforwardly deployed religion as a historical-cultural marker of nationality and therefore of guilt.¹² The concept of Islamic fundamentalism functioned as a blanket term for the driving force behind the family's and the nation's misfortune. Retrospectively at least, Matija's experience of the 1990s war was based on the premise that *the* Muslims, this time in the shape of fundamentalists, had yet again wanted to commit genocide on *the* Serbs, who had therefore *only* (and emphatically *not* 'also') been defending themselves.

Muslim suffering and malicious self-infliction

As is the case with so many other nationalisms, the preoccupation of Serbian ultranationalism with the suffering of its own nation often prevented people from taking into account the pain of national Others. This doesn't mean sympathy was never expressed, but Matija's case illustrates that 'ultranationalists', even when they acknowledged suffering by Muslims, gave it a meaning compatible with Serbian Knowledge. An illustration is provided by the victimological litanies that informed many official statements of the Serbian Orthodox church.¹³ In a volume called *Spiritual Genocide*, with a foreword by Patriarch Pavle, it is argued that:

'Croatian churches and Muslim mosques have also suffered damage *in this last war*. However, Serbian Orthodox places demolished in the First and the Second World Wars are now being destroyed by the same people, Croatian nationalists and Muslim fundamentalists' (Mileusnić 1996: 11, my emphasis)

Thus, the pain of others was acknowledged, but Serbian pain was simply declared more important, more relevant, more legitimate, and, ultimately, more *painful*. This was because Serbian pain was historical pain: it was the expression of an age-old national fate rather than a negligible blip in an otherwise smooth and happy history of dominance (as was presumed to be the case with Muslim suffering *in this last war*). This ranking of national pain, with Serbian sorrow leading the pack, was a frequently invoked element of 'Serbian Knowledge' (Jansen 2000).

On other occasions, however, the suffering of Muslims was paradoxically incorporated into the body of proof for their hatred of Serbs. For example, in response to my probing, Matija acknowledged the scores of civilian Muslim victims of the war-time shellings of a youth gathering on Tuzla's central square and of a Sarajevo market place. But rather than being the result of attacks by the Bosnian Serb Army, Matija assured me, it was the Muslims themselves who had fired the shells. These two cases, where a recognised instance of suffering of Muslims is attributed to malicious self-infliction, reflect a more general idea within ultranationalist 'Serbian Knowledge' about the Bosnian war. Muslim forces, so it was argued, caused highly visible civilian suffering amongst 'their own' population in order to gain international sympathy and, specifically, in order to provoke a Western military action against the Serbs. This was treated as additional evidence of their hatred for Serbs.

Let me mention one final issue in this context: Matija flatly stated that the notion of the 1995 Srebrenica massacre of over 7,000 Muslim men was

a fictitious product of propaganda. However, this did not mean that he ignored Srebrenica. In fact, Serbian ultranationalism allowed the deployment of the issue in a two-fold manner. Firstly, the very existence of ‘lies’ about the massacre was incorporated as an example of Muslim hatred, with the same objectives as the self-inflicted attacks above. Secondly, Srebrenica was also central to ‘Serbian Knowledge’ of suffering, not for the widely reported massacre of Muslims, but for ‘many *real* massacres’ of Serbs in surrounding villages (see Duijzings 2002). The area was then often cast as the historical scene of periodical genocidal Muslim violence against its Serbian inhabitants and ‘Srebrenica’ was constructed as an object of knowledge that indisputably proved Serbian victimisation at the hands of Muslim hatred.

Matija’s statements on these issues resonate with what Sartre, in his work on anti-Semitism, calls the ‘synthetic spirit’ (1954: 40, 66). According to Sartre, the anti-Semite applies the presumed evil character of Jews onto *everything* Jewish:

‘The Jew, [the anti-Semite says], is entirely bad, entirely Jewish; his virtues, if he has any, are turned into vices because they are his, the work that is produced by his hands necessarily bears his marks: and if he constructs a bridge, this is a bad bridge, being a Jewish one, from the first arch to the last one.’ (Sartre 1954: 39—my translation)

As Salecl argues, nationalism is constructed around a fantasy of an enemy threat from otherness: ‘No matter what this other “does”, he threatens us with his *existence*’ (Salecl 1992: 52). Clearly, Matija had been affected in more negative ways by the acts of Muslims than Sartre’s average anti-Semite had been by those of Jews. However, he did take things very far in the synthetic spirit: even events that had become global symbols of Muslim suffering were turned into proof of Serbian victimisation by Muslim hatred. Moreover, his statements were embedded in a wider discourse on the insidious and ruthless barbarity of Muslims and on the fanatically sacrificial character of Islamic fundamentalism. As we have seen, this was rarely applied to concrete individuals that he knew; rather it was applied to *the* Muslims.

Displacement and deprivation in Bijeljina

After their initial displacement to the Sarajevo suburbs, where Matija and his family spent the war years, the Dayton agreements assigned these Serbian-controlled sectors to the Muslim-Croat Federation. Following the resulting Serbian exodus in 1996, they settled in Bijeljina, where they occupied a

flat belonging to a displaced Muslim household. This was common practice all over Bosnia and it can be seen both as a response to an immediate need for shelter and as part of demographic engineering by the various nationalist authorities. Maintaining a sharp contrast with his own forced escape, Matija always implied that displaced Bijeljina Muslims had left voluntarily. Their claim of having been expelled was just one more illustration of their insidious nature and of their hatred of Serbs. Matija frequently pointed to the example of remaining Muslims in town to prove the point that citizens of all nationalities could have stayed and lived in security.

What such forms of 'Serbian Knowledge' did not mention was that less than one percent of all Muslims had stayed put in Bijeljina throughout the war. Matija also failed to explain that, in 1992, Bijeljina had become known as the first Bosnian town to be subjected to 'ethnic cleansing', mainly by the paramilitary units of Željko Ražnjatovic Arkan.¹⁴ Nine years later, this still determined what many people, Serbs and non-Serbs, briefly referred to as *the situation*. Located near to the river Drina, the state border with Serbia, Bijeljina was a nationalist stronghold where the local authorities concentrated on flying the Serbian flag to justify their corrupt policies of nepotism and neglect. The town was dotted with kiosks, market stalls and make-shift warehouses, which gave substance to its reputation as one of the capitals of the post-Yugoslav black market, controlled by leading individuals of the ruling parties. It also contained a very large number of Serbian DPs. Poverty was rife, and Matija and his family, while not the worst off, had seen their living standards dive dramatically due to the war. Even more striking than outright poverty was the conspicuous social inequality: skinny, shabbily dressed DP women cigarette vendors shared the main street with gold-clad, Armani-suited, Mercedes-driving war profiteers. Both Serbian, mind you, and bitter irony has it that the latter creamed off the largest part of the profit created by the former.

As for the life opportunities of Muslim returnees in Bijeljina, the picture was even bleaker: the regular occurrence of violent incidents, the non-intervention of Serbian-dominated police (and their own role in the troubles) and the continuing presence of war criminals in high-up positions indicated that conditions were far from favourable. It was a telling sign that a main road into Bijeljina was named after Arkan's paramilitaries who 'liberated' the town. In 2001, very few Muslims had returned, although the authorities increasingly talked of co-existence and occasionally even announced the evictions of Serbian DP illegal occupants necessary to implement return. In reality these announcements were not worth the paper they were written on, as they were made under pressure from the Western functionaries in the

de facto Bosnian protectorate. In practice, local authorities, counting on the electoral support of the displaced Serbian population, blatantly obstructed return (Human Rights Watch 2000).

They could certainly count on Matija, who regularly marched through Bijeljina in protest against the possibility of evictions and return. But when describing the town to me, he simply didn't mention any of the problems experienced by Muslims. Some days before I met Matija I had visited a nearby household of Muslim returnees, where a mother and two daughters were living in extreme fear after a recent attack. An unknown man had broken down the front door and thrown in an explosive device which had wounded the father/husband, who was still being treated in hospital. It is very unlikely that Matija did not know about this, but rather than acknowledging it, he drew attention to the predicament of Serbs in other regions, revisiting war-time expulsions of Serbs from Muslim-held territory and particularly the destruction of churches and graveyards. Indignant, he argued that no Serb would ever destroy religious objects, ignoring the erasure of the numerous mosques from the landscape in the very town where he now lived. When I pointed this out to him, Matija would not be drawn into the discussion and referred to Bijeljina as an age-old Serbian town which had always only counted a very small minority of Muslims—a view in direct contradiction with all available pre-war statistics and data I collected from current and previous inhabitants of the town with various nationalities.

The impossibility of Serbian return

In a large-scale post-war survey McIntosh and Abele (1996) found that more than four out of five Bosnian Serbs stated that they were convinced that Muslims were still planning to establish an Islamic state by whatever means necessary.¹⁵ Muslims must have been surprised at this, since only 5% of them thought an Islamic state was the objective (*Ibid.*: 18). The authors conclude that one of the key variables to predict Bosnian Serb attitudes towards a multiethnic society was their perception of a threat, and particularly of a Muslim threat (*Ibid.*: 23). In fact, the majority of respondents on all sides were concerned that the fighting would start again in the next few years and thought that it would be national Others who would initiate it (*Ibid.*: 16). Unsurprisingly, such fear of renewed victimisation affected decision-making about return to one's pre-war place of residence. Matija argued that a Serbian return to Muslim-dominated areas was impossible and he persistently contrasted this fate with what he believed to be the secure and even privileged situation of Muslim returnees to Serbian-controlled

areas. He told me that, since 1992, he had never been back to his pre-war place of residence or to any other Muslim-dominated area.

Later it transpired that Dušica and he *had* been back. Their property had been destroyed and they had put in a request for reconstruction assistance (probably in order to sell the property). While this was common practice, and Matija knew that I knew about it, his denial condemned our conversations to hover around what Herzfeld has called *diseimia* (1996: 14): the tension between official nationalist discourse (declaring Serbian return an impossibility) and ‘what goes on in the privacy of collective introspection’ (applying for repossession). Rather than a variety of reasons for non-return (socio-economic conditions, social capital, health provisions, schools . . .), he evoked the one-dimensional spectre of Muslim hatred. He argued in increasingly hyperbolic terms how unthinkable it would be for Serbs to be seen anywhere in the Muslim-dominated part of Bosnia, in what was soon to be an Islamic state. Anyone venturing into those areas, he assured me, would be met with a genocidal fate. At that time I lived in a flat in the nearby Muslim-dominated town of Tuzla and I told Matija about my Serbian friends and neighbours there. Large numbers of Serbs had fled Tuzla during the war, but others had stayed on throughout and some had returned in recent years. Matija flatly denied the possibility that such people even existed.

Displaced Serbian ‘ultranationalists’ such as Matija rarely substantiated their claims of inevitable victimisation upon return. Upon my probing, and only then, people would argue that they expected to be met with *neprijatnosti*, a term that can be translated as the plural of ‘unpleasantness’. Some vague references were made to actual *neprijatnosti* they had encountered—for example, someone calling them Četnik or ‘aggressor’, someone stating that they didn’t belong there anymore, someone asking them where they had been in the war, and so on. At times people made references that were empirically falsifiable. When I asked Matija what he considered the most significant dangers facing Serbian inhabitants of Tuzla, the only concrete issue he brought up was the alleged absence of pork from the shops. I refrained from questioning whether this constituted a danger and, letting my anger get the better of me, described a pork-filled butcher’s display in a shop near my Tuzla flat. Matija ignored this.

Of course the fear of Muslim hatred was based on the perception of a threat, and the arguments to substantiate this were usually not of the falsifiable kind. Instead they referred to less empirically defined factors to do with atmosphere and surroundings. For example, when I asked Milica, a Tuzla refugee and SRS activist in Serbia who had made a return visit to initiate

the restitution of her property, what she planned to do with her property, she said:

‘I would sell it immediately. I wouldn’t even think about it. I would never return there, because I am not prepared to look at what I have seen there: men with those beards, women with veils . . . Have you seen how many mosques they’ve built? Have you seen what they wrote on the monument? And I would have to look at that and read how the *Četnici* murdered them!’

The latter remark referred to the plaque commemorating the previously mentioned 1995 shelling of Tuzla’s central square, which Milica, like Matija, denounced as a self-inflicted act of propaganda.

Let me make clear that I don’t wish to downplay the real dangers that potential Serbian returnees faced.¹⁶ Nor do I suggest that fear and ‘lighter’ forms of harassment are somehow less legitimate grounds for a reluctance to return. I believe that the perception of relative security and opportunity is a key factor in post-Yugoslav patterns of displacement and return; one bearded man or one veiled woman could thus confirm the very grounds upon which fear is built. In fact, not one of my ultranationalist informants reported to have experienced any concrete incidents beyond verbal harassment during return visits. However, the slightest case of *neprijatnost*, whether through personal experience or through hearsay, could be incorporated into ‘Serbian Knowledge’ as a *symptom*. It was not the narrated event itself that was significant, but its role as a marker in a more transcendental historical diagnosis of Serbian victimisation at the hands of Muslims. As such, it reinforced Serbian fear of Muslim hatred.

Why do they hate us?

Let me now juxtapose ‘Serbian Knowledge’ of Muslim hatred with a recent much-mediated phenomenon. In September 2001, during the last weeks of my fieldwork period amongst displaced Bosnians, one event dominated the entire mediascape: the crashing of passenger planes into the World Trade Centre (WTC) and the Pentagon. At the time, I was struck by a pattern of similarity between my Bosnian research findings and the neoconservative American discourse that reached me through the media: they both involved attempts to make sense of victimisation within the framework of ‘national knowledge’ and both relied on a constructed Islamic fundamentalist Other to do so. Paralleling Matija, neoconservative figureheads relied on ‘American Knowledge’, which was represented as an implicit reservoir of knowledge that all ‘good and real’ Americans were assumed to have in common.¹⁷

This American Knowledge seemed to include the stated fact that, in an insecure world populated by all sorts of people, Americans were brave, good, altruistic and definitely not deserving of hatred. The WTC and Pentagon attacks were then represented as a wake-up call that some people outside the USA hated America and wished to do it harm. The prime examples of such ‘evildoers’ were Islamic fundamentalists.

While fundamentalist hatred was partly explained with some thin reference to Islamic doctrine, this could not clarify why the US were the specific target of it. American Knowledge struggled with this problem since, as Sardar and Wyn Davies (2002: 9) argue, ‘a vast majority [of US citizens] simply do not believe that America has done, or can do, anything wrong’.¹⁸ From that vantage point, it was thought that Islamic fundamentalists hated America, not because it was *so bad*, but because it was *so good*—because it represented freedom and democracy—which led influential media figures to simply state that the hatred was down to ‘pure envy’ (*Ibid.*: 19–20). In this Manichean cosmology, the ‘bad’ is always threatening the ‘good’, and the latter is always vulnerable precisely because of its tolerance and sincerity. George Bush Jr, who summarised the whole *situation* into the supremely comforting ‘they hate us because they hate us’ (Hage 2003: 142), professed variations on the same theme shortly after the attacks, and later in the build-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003:¹⁹

‘America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world’ (first televised address after the WTC/Pentagon attacks)

‘Americans are asking, why do they hate us? [...] They hate our freedoms, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other’ (address to a joint session of Congress)

‘[The Iraqi regime] has a deep hatred of America and our friends [...]. The US and other nations did nothing to deserve or invite this threat, but we will do everything to defeat it.’ (televised address at the outset of the invasion of Iraq, 17/03/03)

The neoconservative US discourse of Muslim hatred appears to represent a globalised version of the reasonings researched in this text, even if the American equivalent of ‘Serbian Knowledge’ takes US hegemony as its starting position. As a result, the fear factor, while ultimately still key to this position, is less prominent than in the Serbian case; it is usually overtaken by a belief in America’s inherent goodness. The resulting discourse of righteousness was deployed by the US regime to legitimise ‘pre-emptive’ attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq.

I have explained above how, in 1992, Serbian nationalist leaders deployed their dominance in military terms and pre-emptively struck to establish their control over 70% of Bosnia. Internal and external opposition was crushed and the operation was presented as the only possible way to prevent the establishment of an Islamic fundamentalist state. Many other similarities come to mind (think, for example, of the relentless US casting of Iraqi/Afghani suffering as self-inflicted), but here I will focus on one aspect only. Like US neoconservatism, Serbian ultranationalism claimed to protect the victims of hatred: hatred that others, here also Muslims, felt towards them. And as in the US situation, the responses I encountered often contained frustrated exclamations of bewilderment: ‘They have so much hatred. Why? Why do they hate us?’ This was clearly a rhetorical question, and implicit in it was always the belief that there was no reasonable *why*, that the hatred at issue was completely groundless. Surely, Muslims had no real reason to hate Serbs!? On the contrary, it was often argued, they had all the reasons in the world to have positive feelings about them.

One Beograd human rights activist whom I interviewed in 1997, exasperated with the attitudes of her own nationalist countrymen and –women, called this the syndrome of the ‘abandoned lovers’. On top of the positive self-image of Serbs as pitiable victims, righteous underdogs and likeable rebels (see Jansen 2000), she pointed out to me that there was a belief in a deeply ingrained and historically proven record of Serbian altruism. The parallels with US neoconservatism will be obvious. How did the non-Serbian Yugoslav nations finally shake off the yoke of empire after WWI? How were all Yugoslavs heroically liberated with a resounding defeat of fascism in WWII? And how did Yugoslavs achieve remarkable progress leading to egalitarian prosperity and modernity in Titoist Yugoslavia? You guessed it: it was all due to the selfless sacrifice of the Serbs, the largest national group in the region. Given this historical record, ‘Serbian Knowledge’ both postulated Muslim hatred as a central explanatory factor and expressed bewilderment at it. Serbian nationalism, so the human rights activist argued, provided a self-image of Serbs as abandoned lovers: not only had they done nothing to deserve being hated, but actually they had only intended to help others, who had shamelessly walked out on them. Therefore, the Muslim hatred they experienced was more than just unfair, unreasonable and groundless, it was cruelly ungrateful. Hence, ‘Serbian Knowledge’ was caught in the same vicious circle as US neoconservatism: while it partly explained this hatred with reference to the inherent characteristics of Islam, the question of the specific choice of its target (i.e. Serbs) only seemed to be met with repetitions of the rhetorical refrain: ‘Why do they hate us? Because they do!’

On Muslim hatred and not being a loser

The research material in this text indicates that ‘Serbian Knowledge’ of Muslim hatred provided Serbs who framed their experience of war and displacement within ultranationalism, with sweeping, if incomplete, explanations for their predicament. Firstly, we have seen how this discourse provided Matija with some resources to retrospectively make sense of the war and of his family’s loss and displacement. He rarely mourned the loss of friends, family and networks, jobs or property; instead he bemoaned the loss of *the Serbian lands*. This referred to virtually all of the former Yugoslav territory, most of which, so Matija argued, had once been ‘pure Serbian’. Secondly, in the post-war situation, the same discourse allowed him to understand the lack of prospects for return, the (ultimate) danger of eviction, the generalised uncertainty of life in displacement and the socio-economic deprivation. Matija reproduced the regime rhetoric of national unity and was adamant that Serbs would never again be forced to live under ‘them’ (i.e. Muslims). Note that to live *under them* had simply become the same as to live *with them* if *they* were a majority. The ample attention that Matija paid to the national homogeneity of the local population (cast as a benefit following from the war) stood in sharp contrast with his avoidance to mention the meagre living conditions of his family in Bosnia’s ‘predatory economy’ (Bougarel 1996: 121–138). Of course, this deprivation was sometimes incorporated into the nationalist discourse anyway and blamed on *them*, who now didn’t live amongst *us* anymore and never would again—except in insignificant, ‘safe’ numbers, and even then only because of the insistence of Western politicians.

Elaborating on Bourdieu’s insights, Hage emphasises the importance of hope and recognition in people’s everyday lives (2003: 15–8). Addressing the appeal of xenophobic and nationalist-populist discourses amongst white majority Australians, he argues that life opportunities are distributed increasingly unevenly, so that many experience a sense of entrapment that goes well beyond socio-economic considerations. The need to give meaning to one’s life, Hage states, then sometimes leads one to turn away from a painfully empty present in order to find a sense of worth in a timeless parallel universe of national history. The author explains how people then desperately cling on to the idea that their very national belonging itself will be the factor that will provide hope (*Ibid.*: 72). However, most people are probably well aware that their national identity will *not* be sufficient to escape the entrapment, which provides a fertile ground for an anxious (in Hage’s terms: ‘paranoid’) form of nationalism (*Ibid.*: 21).

This article has explored a similar phenomenon in a very different context, investigating Bosnian evocations of ultranationalist discourse in order to cope with a post-war sense of entrapment. Matija had suffered terrible losses and he seemed painfully aware of the insignificance of his fate on the larger scale of things. Even though he was unable to provide for the everyday survival of his family (it was Dušica's income that kept them going), at least 'Serbian Knowledge' of Muslim hatred afforded him a key role in the survival of the 'larger family', his nation. He thus reduced his narration of self to the extent to which he represented the historical essence of the Serbian nation: a national warrior, and, more specifically, a national martyr, victimised by Muslim hatred.

This self-presentation was embedded in ultranationalist knowledge that was not even primarily about Muslims, nor about their hatred of Serbs, but about *Serbs being the victim of that hatred*. On the one hand, the fact that the presumed haters were Muslims enhanced the symbolic capital of this discourse, due to its overlap with the intensified Western fear of Muslim fundamentalism since the end of the Cold War. On the other hand, this was *Serbian Knowledge*, and its reservoir was presumed to be accessible to all Serbs as the product not of intellectual analysis but of a solidarity-generating shared history of national suffering. Thus, it allowed making sense of war and post-war experiences while reinforcing national-moral boundaries, resulting in a reductionist onslaught on heterogeneity, not only amongst Muslims but also amongst Serbs. In a format similar to what Liisa Malkki found amongst Hutus in a Tanzanian refugee camp, Matija relied predominantly on a mythico-historical mode of narration, which highlighted his didactic intentions and his concern 'with the reconstitution of a moral order of the world' (1995: 55–56). Within such a framework, my questions for clarification were beside the point: just another example of the incapability of Westerners to grasp the historical reality of the Serbian nation as the victim of hatred (see van de Port 1999). Paradoxically, Matija's reduction of himself to a good Serbian man, a representative of his nation on its historical march to destiny, allowed him to exercise a certain degree of power and to carve out a sense of worth for his existence in a situation of overwhelming powerlessness.²⁰ The subject position provided by 'Serbian Knowledge' made it possible to give war and post-war experiences a meaning that removed the shadow of inadequacy from his life. Clearly, this was a deeply gendered process, particularly with regard to his ability to fulfil certain patriarchal role expectations, and it should also be understood within a geopolitical context of power imbalances. After all, Matija's self-presentation here was borne out of interaction with me—not only a man, but a 'Westerner' to boot.

Salecl warns that the appeal of political discourse is not based on images with which to identify directly, but rather on the construction of ‘a symbolic space in which we can appear likeable to ourselves’, a discourse organised ‘in such a way that it leaves space open to be filled by images of our ideal ego’ (1992: 57). In this way, Matija’s dogged insistence that ‘it’s all because the Muslims hate us’ can be read as a desperate ‘hey, I am not a loser!’ ‘Serbian Knowledge’ allowed him to construct a self-image as an innocent victim of Muslim hatred and therefore as an honourable historical representative of the Serbian nation. Rather than address the predicament of his family as the result of a military/political process involving a variety of responsible actors, he presented his ‘worries’ as detached from everyday reality (see Hage 2003: 8-9). It was more attractive to him to see his despair as a symptom of historical Serbian victimisation by Muslim genocidal projects *and* of a wider civilisational conflict between Christianity and Islam. To Matija this made more sense than acknowledging despair itself, the despair of being an emasculated father and husband; a stranger in Bijeljina, forcibly displaced from his far-away home; a creative artist who had surrendered to the sort of anti-Muslim bigotry that contradicted his experience of many years of co-existence; a war victim disdained by the very Serbian fellow-nationals for whom he made his sacrifice; a poverty-stricken but always faithful activist, left to his own devices by his beloved war-profiteering leaders, who built their power and fortune on his misery; a pariah, whose house had been destroyed, but who was illegally occupying a flat in an ‘ethnically cleansed’ and bankrupt Balkan backwater. When despair is *that* close to home, being a Serbian martyr at the hands of a transcendental Muslim hatred may seem like a viable alternative . . .

Notes

1. The material is drawn from wider research involving women and men with various national backgrounds and diverging political orientations, part of a joint fifteen months (2000–1) ethnographic project with Andy Dawson on the experience of ‘home’ amongst displaced Bosnians in Bosnia, Serbia, Australia and the Netherlands. Financial support was provided by the Toyota Foundation and the Leverhulme Trust. I also refer to my research on antinationalism in Serbia (1996–1997) and Croatia (1997–1998). I use the term ‘Bosnian’ to refer to anything or anyone relating to the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina, regardless of nationality.
2. See for example Popov 1994, 1996; Duijzings 2002. Based on earlier ethnographic research in war-affected villages in Croatia, I have attempted to understand a similar frequency of mundane evocations of history as a dominant ‘mode of narration’ (Jansen 2002a, 2004a).

3. This is in fact a major topic in my research. See Jansen 1998, 2001a/c, 2002b; see also Bringa 1995.
4. I am currently exploring the anthropologist-informant dynamics of this ethnographic encounter, including issues of gender and geopolitics, in more detail elsewhere.
5. Except, partly, by Greeks (and sometimes by Russians), Orthodox brothers whose willingness and capacity to understand was often attributed to their empathetic experiential knowledge of Muslim hatred.
6. No nation could claim an absolute majority in Bosnia or in the entire Yugoslav Federation. In relative numbers, Serbs were most numerous in Yugoslavia, whereas Muslims were the largest group in Bosnia. Matija also paid attention to other national Others; in order of declining importance, 'Westerners', Croats, and Albanians.
7. Popov 1994; journalistic coverage by Silber & Little 1995: 29–86; Cohen 1998; Gutman 1993.
8. Yanai (2002) found a similarly paradoxical interplay of fear and hatred amongst Jewish orthodox-religious middle-class girls in Israel. While expressing extremely negative views of Palestinians the girls aimed to overturn the implications of such assertions by representing themselves as victims of a timeless Arab hatred (which Yanai calls 'narcissistic anxiety').
9. Note that many Serbs, who at the time were sceptical towards such ultranationalist positions, also opted to reduce potential insecurity and left, thereby intensifying national homogenisation (see Jansen 2004b/c).
10. I came across numerous similar (semi-)quotes. For example, when asked by a journalist why they had violently taken control of the town of Prijedor, the local Serbian police chief allegedly answered: 'Because they intended to do it to us' (Pašalić 1995: 211).
11. I opt for this lesser orientalism because I see no other way to create space in our understanding for the many women and men in the post-Yugoslav states whose sense of belonging, and, ultimately, right to exist, is denied by ultranationalism (Jansen 2001a).
12. Religion was a factor in the Bosnian war only to the extent that it was a national one. 'If the Jew didn't exist, the anti-Semite would invent him', said Sartre (1954: 14, see also 62–63) and Hayden rightly highlights a similar relative irrelevance of the Muslim factor in the Bosnian war (2000: 124). However, his assertion that it wouldn't have been very different if the people in question had been 'Buddhists, Baptists or Bogomils' (*Ibid.*) seems to take the structuralist argument a little too far out of context: it was Islam that they were imputed with and, due to the geopolitics of the 1990s, that was not an unimportant element in terms of the Serbian nationalist struggle for legitimacy, both domestically and internationally.
13. See for example the 1997 *Declaration against Genocide on the Serbian people* and the blessing of the *Declaration demanding that the Hague Tribunal criminal charges brought against Dr. Radovan Karadžić, President of Republika Srpska be repealed*. See also Radić 1996.

14. Duijzings 2002: 139–141; Silber & Little 1995: 247–248; Human Rights Watch 2000; Wubs 1998; my own interviews with *Bijeljinci* of various nationalities.
15. See Žunec 1997 for similar results.
16. In fact, I became fairly well acquainted with the reality of these dangers as an activist in NGO projects involving assistance to Serbian returnees. Since 1996, I have lived, worked in NGOs and carried out ethnographic research on four different sides of the post-Yugoslav frontlines—in Serbia, in Croatia, in the two ‘entities’ of Bosnia-Herzegovina and their officious equivalents in Kosovo/a. I have personally witnessed verbal abuse, stone throwing and arson and I have heard first-hand testimony of grenade attacks and of rape, all directed at returnees—including Serbian ones.
17. The unquestioned use of the term ‘American’ rather than ‘USA’ reflects its grandiose proportions.
18. For an analysis of a frighteningly similar discourse, see Hofstadter’s 1966 study of what he terms ‘the paranoid style’ in the right-wing US political sphere. With reference to the WTC/Pentagon attacks, a poll amongst world ‘opinion leaders’ commissioned by the *International Herald Tribune* in December 2001 showed that only 18% of US respondents thought foreign resentment and anger against the US were to blame on US government policies (versus 58% of non-US respondents). Rather, 90% of US respondents said the chief reason was US wealth and power (Sardar & Wyn Davies 2002: 9–10).
19. All Bush quotes are taken from the archives of www.cnn.com.
20. See also Jansen 2002a, 2003b.

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