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Remembering Crimes –
Proposal and Reactions

This paper is an attempt to point towards a synchronized and mutually related, rather than separate process of facing crimes committed by Serbs, Croats and Bosnians in the 1991-95 war. Mass crimes committed in ex-Yugoslavia are interconnected in many ways, facilitated and justified in a similar manner by more or less artificially constructed blazing historical memory. As the crimes and their memory are entangled beyond disentanglement, we should overcome the onesidedness of the existing processes of facing the past: first of all, the exclusive hegemonous official conservative-nationalistic emphasis on the authentic and incomparable crimes committed by other nations and the sacrosanct victims of one's own nation, followed by another, albeit not so widespread, but also one-sided emphasis on crimes of one's own nation only, apparent in the work of some nongovernmental organizations.

Keywords: crime, trauma, the critical culture of remembering

It appears that the process of facing the recent past of the new Balkan states has acquired new tones since 2007, thanks to the verdict of the International Hague Tribunal issued on February 27, 2007. The verdict concluded that Bosnian Serb forces committed genocide in Srebrenica in July 1995, but that Serbia was not directly responsible for the war crimes committed in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The debate between the new states regarding war crimes became even sharper. Croats vehemently defend the dignity of the Homeland war, Bosniacs are attempting to politicize Srebrenica to the maximum and show that the Republic of Srpska is a product of genocide, while Serbs try to diminish the unparalleled Srebrenica genocide by pointing to the crimes of other nations. The armed civil war has been replaced by a civil war of memories. How can we find our bearings in these highly politicized and emotionalized debates? How can ordinary people react?*

I

It should be underlined from the outset that the contemporary civil war of memories is waged among exclusively through ethnocentric images of the past. Every ethnocentric history is indebted to its origin, and thus supplies the past with meanings of that origin and most often its violent continuity. "Our civilization" and "our victims" are at the heart of its ideas, while the others, less civilized and negative, remain at the outskirts of memory. Not only is ethnocentric history devoid of the natural-legal premise "although different, we are basically the same", it finds additional differences among nations from the past that turn out to be unequal both culturally and democratically. The past has been used as a weapon in the artificial and violent confrontations between Catholic and Byzantine, Orthodoxy and Islam, culture and barbarism, democracy and totalitarianism. It became almost orthodox to portray conflicts as destined, diminishing the crimes of one's own nation or interpreting them as a self-understood defensive reaction. In other words, on all sides, politicians and intellectuals almost equally de-traumatize the misdeeds of their own people: during the 1990s Tuđman reduced the numbers of victims murdered in Jasenovac, while Serbian revisionists speak of war crime in Srebrenica not genocide, some even speak of the liberation of Srebrenica. While the Center for the Investigation of Crimes

Committed against the Serbian Population claims that around 5000 Serbs were killed in Sarajevo during the 1990s while Bosniacs only admit to 768 (<http://forum.bgdcave.com/lofiversion/index.php/t19074-750.html>). We should not be surprised by the fact that normalized nationalism in politics de-traumatizes genocide everywhere. It is more important to underline how, on all sides, the creative social and scientific intelligentsia played a leading role in these endeavors. To that end, trivial martyrdom trails of lasting national suffering are constructed (in Croatia, the hegemonous continuity of the suppression of Croatism from the times of Pašić to Milošević; in Serbia, the destruction of Serbism from the times of the Turks until Tito). Incidentally, the fact that a more complex understanding of historical processes does not exist is not surprising, as there is no developed theory of history that could compress the Balkan experience into an inside paradox, which is, for example, expressed in such concepts as authoritarian modernization, liberating political culture and charisma of reason. Besides, there is no self-reflection, the ability of historians to perceive themselves critically. We are still far from any awareness that what needs to be done first is to contemplate (not conceptualize) and critically face one's own image of the past and the pattern of one's own interpretation. An attempt to perceive the past from the viewpoint of others is even less present. This is fully understandable, given the fact that no war, including the current civil war of memory, leaves space for methodologically rationalized self-reflection or empathy. Not only commissions for reconciliation, but intellectuals on all sides as well, need exactly this sort of self-criticism nowadays.

Contrary to this, our attention is drawn by intellectuals who present their own nation, not only as a victim of prosecution, but also as the victim of unfounded stigmatization. Hence, they send messages with the following connotation: "You suffered in Jasenovac (or Srebrenica), now we are suffering because of your accusations, thus we are even". Nonetheless, the question is whether a final line should be drawn and the past forgotten, only because it is a burden and gives birth to new conflicts? If we are reminded of our guilt every day, do we not become, in some way, victims and a prosecuted community? In other words - conservatives are reminding us - we cannot become a normal nation, nor join the EU, because our infamous past, remembered by others, does not want to go away. *Normality* is an obsession, for the most part, of conservatives and nationalists, alleged patriots from all nations. However, in order to profit from and carry out Brussels' orders, even conservatives sometimes agree to pay lip service to facing the past. Besides, they complain: "We are standing at the door of the EU, and now some hotheads are warning us that without remembering Jasenovac, Oluja (Storm) or Srebrenica at all times, there will be no moral. We do not need this burden, on the contrary, we need to be cleansed from 'negative memories', 'moral sticks', we need the continuous glory of our national past. However, if facing the crimes of the past is an indisputable EU directive, then let us do it now, and afterwards draw the final line, and become a normal nation". This is approximately what "democratic" and "good" nationalists on all sides say.

The least that can be said is that this effort leads us onto the wrong path; without beating around the bush, glorious history does not represent normality, nor is normality an attempt at normalization for therapeutic national self-appeasement, which turns out to be normal only when it points to its own victims and a handful of executioners from its own ranks. It appears that the current forced normalization in the form of numerous media discussions concerning crimes is actually a means to preclude normality. Conservatives on all sides are disturbed by the fact that glorious history does not guarantee a moral foundation for normality anymore, which is why they obstinately interpret the violence of their own nation as self-explanatory revenge: "The Storm" was a natural reaction to the Republic of Serbian Krajina, Srebrenica was an understandable revenge for Kravice, and so on. However, it needs to be fully understood that the "Storm" cannot be separated from Jasenovac, or Srebrenica from the Chetnik movement. In the same way, the activity of Green Berets cannot be separated from mujahideen Islamization, moreover, an unbreakable connection exists between the Serbian shelling of Sarajevo and Bosniac ethnic cleansing in the city. It is pretty conspicuous that every nation interprets its own crimes as incident and the crimes committed by others as structures. However, in reality, structures were easily and successfully activated for combat everywhere.

It is not enough to simply suppress the history of events through structural history; however, the banal war-centric narrative also needs to be challenged. In the Balkans war is more easily remembered than peace, not because of some easier rhythmic epic record of glorious victories, but because the glorious past is more

exploitable. In other words, the results of war transformed into myth are always a pretext for unconstrained authoritarian governments. It is no chance that in current official historiography the past has always been centered on wars, not periods of peaceful development. The history of the 20th century is mostly written *sub speciaie* wars, although in the West Balkans only 15 years of the 20th century were war years. Wars are turning points, but also points of regression, but they are always at the center of monumental historiography. They are imposing symbols of the culture of memory for regimes, since they mark the inseparable connection between national and social liberation. Moreover, war is a symbol of the glorious past: “glorious war”, a borderline, divides memories into public friends and enemies more clearly than “losers’ peace” does. Widely accepted slogans testify to this: “Serbs were winners in war, but losers in peace” or “Yugoslavia was a dungeon for Croatia”. It turns out that war is viewed as a divine moment, while peace is seen as compromised decay. Today, the apotheosis of the “Homeland war” in Croatia and the “Ten day war” in Slovenia are more prominent than the memory of the last war in Serbia, because these two wars were victories which marked the zero hour of state independence. Is war-centric narrative normal in the 21st century? It is easier to remark, with defeatism, that it is impossible to destroy values shaped over hundreds of years through the liberation and shifting borders in the minds of small Balkan nations. Even if this is partially true, it is far from impossible to change this. It is not enough to repeat that each war marks a failure for politics, and it is even less useful to moralistically condemn war as a shame. We must challenge the chauvinistic core of ethnocentric and war-centric history, whereby crimes committed by one’s own nation are transformed into patriotism.

Although Serbia celebrates the dissolution of Yugoslavia the least of all, it still shares some important traits of warrior culture with the new states. It is sufficient to observe how war crimes are easily transformed into acts of patriotism all round. To speak about the crimes of one’s own nation sounds like treason in any normalized nationalism. Because, if you protected your own nation, much can be forgiven, especially since we cannot agree who started the war in the first place. When interpretations of the last civil war in Yugoslavia are concerned, the relation between original and reactive violence is still undefined. However, though it may sound opportunistic, it is still not easy to draw a clear line between the protection of one’s own nation in civil war and actual crime. The climate of public opinion is not favorable at present for such a discussion, let alone actual institutions. In the current civil war of memories criteria are politicized and zealous. Even the simple question – are the spoils of war unearned, has been risky for a long time. Contrary to this, it has always been self-explanatory, even beyond the Balkans, that liberators had legitimate pretensions either to stay in power for life, based on proven results, or to the spoils of war which had to be legalized. In this context, crimes are justified as defense or as collateral damage. The general “spirit of Thessalonica” in neutralizing crime is still easily emotionalized in the warning: “Do not touch our heroes”. “Our” is the crucial attribute in this phrase.

Even if it can be understood, to some extent, that ruling groups always instrumentalize the past, and that, in this regard, nothing changes as fast as the past, the question that remains to be answered is whether ordinary people will ever accept the truth about war crimes committed by those closest to them. What are the chances for the necessary demythologization of war heroes (Mladić, Gotovina, Orić) and of a deconstruction of the myths under which generations of young Balkan people were socialized over the last fifteen years? Is it utopian to expect children here to ask their fathers questions like “Whom did you kill” or “How could that happen”? At least for the time being, as long as nationalism is normalized, forgetting crimes is more probable.

Others have already faced this problem and learned the lesson that forgetting crimes is counterproductive. It became clear long ago that planned amnesia regarding the shadows of the past creates a black hole of irresponsibility. When the crimes are discovered later on, an additional price is paid for that silence. Criminals most often claim they were only following orders, thus being themselves the victims of politics. When the sons of Wehrmacht soldiers started asking their fathers “Where have you been, what have you done, whom did you kill”, a conflict of generations occurred in Germany in 1968. What followed was a rather brutal process of facing the nation with the concentration camps and the war front crimes of fascism. It is the merit of the children of 1968 that a call was issued to review the silenced past and express solidarity with the victims of fascism. In Yugoslavia, family and ideological heroic antifascist role models were effective during the same period. While those growing up in Germany lacked a father role model, in Tito’s regime fathers who had

been soldiers were highly respected. Different patterns of identification with parents formed different generational profiles: anti-patricentric and patricentric antifascism.

However, facing the crimes of those closest is not a static process. Thirty years later, research showed that the grandchildren of Nazis were unable to accept their grandfathers' past. "My grandpa wasn't a Nazi" was the reaction of twenty year olds at the beginning of the 21st century in Germany (Welzer, 2002). Reversed genealogic identification is in action, while the children of 1968 called their fathers to attention, "revisionist grandchildren" defended their grandfathers. It is hard to say today whether these vacillations and suspicions in ancestors will infect the descendants of Balkan criminals, since children here do not yet question the past of their fathers. "Fathers have eaten sour grapes, and their children's teeth are set on edge" is an old saying. What turning point is necessary to spark off a shock from the repressed genocidal behavior of our closest ones, and what protection will be put in place against this shock? Judging by the readers' reactions below, this will not happen in Serbia for some time. One would have to be blind not to see that there are no organized attempts in act to work on critical memory. Thus, reconciliation will come late, too. The official image of our victims and foreign executioners has to be deconstructed everywhere, and the history of this relationship needs to be persistently moralized. War crimes prosecutors cannot replace this work on critical memory, which is both painful and moralizing. Responsibility should not be determined for revenge, but for historical justice and morality. The apologies of politicians are not sufficient. If conflicts about fathers' pasts arise in the families of "patriotic" fighters throughout the West Balkans, it will not be a sign of crisis, but of maturity.

However, the way it looks today, and judging by (1) official versions of the past, (2) works of contemporary historians, and (3) the opinion of ordinary people, maturity of this sort is far away. In July 1995, the Serbian army killed several thousand Bosniacs in Srebrenica (there is no consensus as to the exact number of victims), and a month later, in the "Storm", the Croatian army killed around 800 people, mostly old Serbian women and men, and burned down around 10,000 Serbian houses. According to the account of Srđan Vrcan, a recently deceased sociologist from Split, genocidal politics in Croatia was justified by the thesis that a nation defending itself cannot commit genocide (Vrcan, 2007: 45-46). Similarly, on May 17, 2005, the 10th anniversary of "the liberation" of Srebrenica was marked by a public debate held at the Faculty of Law in Belgrade; it turned out that defensive eradication of an allegedly genocidal nation was not genocide. It is easy to notice how the crimes of others are interpreted as genocide while one's own genocide is nothing but a simple crime. The other pattern of de-traumatization of genocide happens when it is attributed to individuals and interpreted as their excessive behavior. This alleviates the collective dimension of responsibility for crimes, which nonetheless did exist in some way. The fact that the governing parties and elites policy existed and that such a responsibility cannot be entirely individualized, is being blurred. The incorrect assumption that no collective responsibility for mass crimes can exist, that responsibility is only individual, has to be rejected. Even when collective guilt and responsibility of the entire nation do not exist, a collective responsibility of a wider circle of creators and mediators of genocidal politics does. In addition to the direct executioners and those who gave them orders, a wider circle of instigators and helpers is also responsible. Thus, not all collective responsibility is fiction, despite the fact that it cannot always be defined in a criminal-legal sense. If, in addition to what has already been said, we also bear in mind the fact that there is a moral collective and political responsibility of chauvinist intelligence, which, on all sides, conceptualized nationalism (Jakšić, 2005: 29-30) ending in genocide, then it is even harder to reject the notion of collective responsibility.

All in all, a lot of things point to the conclusion that the past is still active, and that the attitude towards the crimes committed by one's own nation testifies, rather reliably, to the degree of nationalism. It is easy to understand that, the less self-criticism there is, the more normal nationalism becomes. Instead of drawing attention to national responsibility and nurturing the memory of one's own traumatic crimes, the ideologies that are dominant in the Balkans today de-traumatize the crimes of their own nations. De-traumatization is a process of making crime a daily issue, which leads to its trivialization.

De-traumatization, which conceptualizes incomprehensible crimes as necessary defense, at the same time relativises, trivializes and slowly sends these crimes to oblivion. If this is true, can Auschwitz, Jasenovac and Srebrenica be saved from historical fiddling, which deprives them of their traumatic character, only in a mythic manner? Certainly not, since in a mythical context, where crimes are agents of irrational forces of evil (evil destiny, innate character traits of the Other, geopolitics, etc.), trauma lasts and thrives in a secluded area, which cannot be clarified in an exact way. However seemingly absurd as they might appear, traumatic crimes

have a realistic interest structure. Auschwitz cannot be isolated from the context of German racist capitalism and the exploitation of concentration camp labor force, Jasenovac is an inseparable segment of Croatian fascist chauvinism, while Srebrenica is the tip of the iceberg of the Greater Serbian genocidal hegemony. Therefore, trauma is not an incomprehensible intrusion of irrational, or excessive behavior, but an extreme expression of a deeper structural current. Thus, crime appears to be an absurd, unexplainable and senseless act only at the first glance. In reality, however, it is a constitutive part of the interests of smaller or wider social groups. Racist SS pedantry is a structural segment of the German reaction to Enlightenment, a phase in the process of the destruction of the mind, Srebrenica is a genocidal segment of the Chetnik movement, while the Ustashi movement is a fascist continuation of Croatian chauvinism. On the whole, these crimes are a part of lasting structures, not excessive behavior.

II

It is easy to understand why such an approach is alien to hegemonic thought about society, why it is ignored in revisionist historiography and skillfully blurred in the official order of memories. One of the important causes is the relativisation of antifascism and the strengthening of anti-antifascism. The Yugoslav civil war of the 1990s is inexplicable without the accompanying civil war of memories. “Revolution from the right” was, almost everywhere, led by ex-leftists – converts. In Serbia, Ravna Gora was officially enthroned as the location of the first Serbian antifascist uprising, whereas the taking of Belgrade in 1944 and the Srem front are nowadays places of communist crime more than sites of liberation. Quislings are turning into victims, while July 7, 1941 was transformed from the Day of the Uprising into a day when one Serb stood against another. After 2000, these intentions were built into an official order of memories: the Republic was left without the Day of the Republic, passive Chetniks were proclaimed antifascists, Quislings were proclaimed reasonable politicians, antifascist street names were changed, while days of “slava”¹ and other saint’s days dominate the holiday calendar. The fact is that by stating arbitrary numbers of victims of communist violence, a new history of socialism is being written “with a pocket calculator”, an important pretext for the restorative turnaround in the culture of memories.

The strengthening of anti-communism is inconceivable anywhere without repressing and ignoring antifascism. Nationalists beyond Serbia also reluctantly mention fascism (because they are aware of the kinship between fascism and nationalism), while they forcibly nationalize antifascism or portray it as Communist hokum. Everywhere, patriotism is focused on nationalism, treason on Yugoslavism, internationalism and mondialism. The order of memories in the West Balkans has been successfully narrowed and purified – nationalized. Official recognition of Chetnik antifascism in Serbia in 2004 was something the new vision of national Serbian state asked for, in much the same way that, ten years earlier, out of a similar need, in Slovenia and Croatia national Domobran antifascism and new monuments were demanded, instead of the supranational Partisan symbols. It is not enough to say that everywhere the needs of the ruling elites are the filter that lets only the useful past through. We should add, that the abovementioned processes are not only present in all the new Balkan states, they are inextricably connected, and thus cannot be explained isolatedly. The relationship towards antifascism has been changed on all sides, since nationalists do not need antifascism as an ideological support the way communists, for example, did, when they were in power; indeed, they are troubled by it. This is why, almost overnight, the official pendulum swung from the leftist communist decreed antifascism to the right, extremely anti-communist anti-antifascism. This turning point became official only after Milošević fell from power, since SPS had used antifascism in internal and foreign policy propaganda for a long time.

Although real antifascism is dying out, the antifascist phraseology is still in use. One does not have to be too critical to notice that antifascism has not been entirely abandoned, due to the process of harmonization with Europe. Instead, it is being nationalized, relativised, de-communized and decentralized. The process of making Chetnik and Domobran antifascism official should show, for internal use, that “our patriots” also, not only “communists, alienated from the people”, were on the right side in World War Two. Serbian “democratic nationalists” are trying to conceptualize a “good nationalism” by re-accentuating antifascism, while extreme

¹ A Serbian Orthodox custom whereby family patron saints are honored (translator’s note).

nationalist consider fascism as natural, a most consistent form of national feelings. Standing between these two opposites, the Serbian ruling elite managed in 2004 to use political trading in the Parliament to legalize national antifascism, thus becoming the last among the new Balkan states to do this. Almost everywhere national-liberation rhetoric suppressed the people-liberation rhetoric. Macedonians and Albanians are cleansing antifascism from communism, the pro-Serbian part of Montenegro wants to reconcile Chetniks and Partisans, while Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia legalized non-communist Chetnik and Domobran antifascism. Antifascism is often nationalized in a blunted way. Thus, for example, Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina nowadays need artificially constructed Chetnik antifascism as a historical grounding for their entity's sovereignty. Croats are renouncing Yugoslav antifascism for similar reasons. Jasenovac has long been ignored in the Croatian geography of memories because Bleiburg was enthroned as the high official sacrificial altar of the Croatian state. Though the Croatian Constitution blatantly states that antifascism is the basis of Croatian statehood (Constitution of the Republic of Croatia), this antifascism has been nationalized and cleansed of Serbs and the left. The fact that in this context Pavelić's daughters got back their residences in 2006 (Pavelić's daughters are getting their residences back, 2006) probably does not look unusual. On the other hand, in the Constitution of FRY, the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia and the Constitutional Charter of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, antifascism is not even mentioned (Constitutional documents). It is not mentioned in the Draft Constitution of the Kingdom of Serbia of 2001 (Nikolić, 2001), or in the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia of 2006 (Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, 2006) either. Did the Croatian elite in 1999 need antifascism in the Constitution only to blur the unofficial amnesty of the Ustashi Movement and the fascist past of the NDH? Is the lack of antifascism in Serbia on the highest legal level due to a widespread belief that there was no fascism ever in Serbia in the first place? In any case, the distinction between verbal antifascism and real antifascism needs to be made everywhere. The verbal harmonization of antifascism with the present and the future of the national state most certainly does not belong to structural antifascism, but rather to ethnocentric anti-antifascism. Why? Simply put, one who does not want to talk about nationalism would keep quite about antifascism.

III

It would not be an overstatement to say that the weakening and re-accentuation of antifascism facilitates the interpretation of crime committed by one's own nation as incident. Had antifascism been incorporated into the process of facing crimes, it would be far clearer that they were not a matter of incident, but rather of highly inflammable nationalistic structures. In this paper, this inflammability is being highlighted, and a warning is being issued regarding the need to nurture the memory of crimes committed by one's own group. What is more, these memories should be nurtured as a trauma. Trauma is probably the most painful memory. It is the destruction of the meaning of historical experience and consciousness, something that cannot be explained through the existing experience or system of interpretation. For Germans it is the Holocaust, for Croats it is Jasenovac, and for Serbs it is Srebrenica. Only when historical thinking opens the traumatic segment of experience and faces it, will trauma become constructive, since it includes the past in the future. It should be perfectly clear that the past is filled with infamous shadows on all sides. This is not obvious today, since work on the past not only involves ideology, but profitable activity and pastime as well. In the current civil war of memories, the past is invented, re-invented and instrumentalized. This is a premeditated activity that weaves together commercialization, politization and pastime.

How to recognize an instrumentalized culture of memories? It has already been mentioned that, within this culture, the paramount criterion of objectivity is ethnocentric interest. The war-centric and monumental pattern of narration in the process of selecting the desirable past has also been mentioned. A confessional content can also be an important characteristic of this culture, especially perceivable in the re-clericalization of the holiday calendar, which makes the regulation of everyday life easier. Celebrating falsehoods, like, for example, the birth and the resurrection of Christ, encourages fatalistic, not critical thought. Besides the above, a number of engineered zero hours are being introduced into organized memory. In this regard, the reconstruction and invention of the past within the new Balkan states is conspicuous. New official memories are filled with usable content: glorious historical victories, missionary confessional roles, zero hours, homeland wars, liberations etc.

Uprisings and liberations are most common when founding dates are concerned. No one talks about conquering territories, everyone talks about liberation while the talk about genocide committed by others hides one's own genocide etc.

Contrary to the aforementioned approach, the critical culture of memories includes the shadows of the past into the basic stories of its own group. Only when the identity (self-perception) of the nation becomes ambivalent and when, for example, the Serbian and Croatian past is assessed as a collection of both glorious and inglorious moments, will it become possible to discern hidden conquests within euphoric liberations and discover restoration within alleged revolutions. As opposed to the monumental perception, this multilayered perception of the past would facilitate cooperation among nations. In order to reach this goal, elements of contingency, break up and discontinuity in historical experience should be emphasized instead of predestined monumental and sacrificial verticals. With the critical culture of memories, the past ceases to be destiny, history becomes more open to alternatives, and all this widens the prospects of the future and encourages more tolerant common living within the present. It would certainly be a mistake to believe that a non-ethnocentric image of the past is relative, only because it has multiple perspectives and is less conflicting.

In relation to this, we should also draw attention to the groundlessness of the ethnocentric fear that persistent but unanswered accusations can be counterproductive, because they allegedly create a humiliated community marked by shame. In other words, persistent reminders of our unprecedented crime from other countries could become a paralyzing complex for a stigmatized community, which seeks its origins in crime, regardless of whether it approves or condemns it. Consequently, Jasenovac should be deprived of its traumatic character and transformed into a place of a simple mass crime, just because it was instrumentalized by the Serbs in the 1990s. Should Srebrenica be de-traumatized in a similar way, just because it is dangerous to the sovereignty of the Republic of Srpska? Certainly not. Likewise, although they are significant sources of political conflict among the ex-Yugoslav republics today, other crimes should not be forgotten either. For these crimes to stand as a constructive warning for the future, a synchronous enlightened Serbian-Croatian-Bosniac effort on memories is necessary, devoid of any process of balancing the victims. The fact that Bosniacs suffered the largest number of victims in the last war, as well as the fact that Serbs were subjected to the worst persecution, should not be hidden. Therefore, crimes should not be compared, but the precondition for this is that each party nurtures not only the trauma of its victims, but also the trauma of crime committed by its own ethnic group. Long ago, Goethe remarked that true liberality cannot exist without confession. An important characteristic of the enlightened culture of memories is the culture of confessing; this does not happen with nationalism. If we seriously believe that the past is a weapon, then every nation must have its own room in a highly needed "West Balkans Museum of Shame".

How realistic is this endeavor? Perhaps those who claim we are far from the aforementioned self-critical consciousness are correct, not only because the indisputable victims of one's own group are the centre of focus, but because, more and more often, we blame others simply because they blame us. Today, Croats cannot forgive Serbs for Jasenovac, in much the same way Serbs do not forgive Bosniacs for Srebrenica. Even conservatives will agree that there is nothing worse than a nation building its identity on the sentiment of its own guilt, especially when it concerns genocide. God forbid, this could cause young people to escape from their own nation into cosmopolitanism! This is precisely why blind patriots recommend their own version of reconciliation with crimes, based on disciplining victims, on the explanation that our crime is nothing but a simple retaliation for misdeeds committed by others. This, however, only encourages the other side to respond with the same "logic".

We are suggesting something completely different in this paper, to reduce, at least to some extent, the spiral of reciprocal exclusiveness, the culture of admitting needs to be contemplated more consistently (Petrović, 2005: 132-161; Kuljić, 2006: 273-328). A difference has to be made between the useful and the available past, as well as between productive memories and those that open non-progressive conflicts. Furthermore, we should not become slaves to the fear of forgetting, but rather remember the future, and not only worry about the future of the past. Even if this type of self-criticism cannot be expected from politicians, it can be expected from independent intellectuals and students. No matter how illusory it might be to believe that a politically useful memory of the ethnocentric trauma of one's own victims could stir the self-critical memory of the trauma of crimes committed by one's own group in the near future, it is still not reason enough for the critical culture of memories to abandon this principle. Besides, someone has to be first. The first responsive reaction would

probably be even malicious and triumphalistic, although the possibility of a similar self-critical reaction should not be ruled out. Perhaps, this suggested defense from the yearning for ancestry might weaken the radical right. Only the memory of the crimes committed by our own nation can protect us from seeing, in the pile of dead bodies belonging to the other nations, only our shame, and not our guilt as well. In places where shame testifies to the crimes, there is less willingness to overcome the past than in places where the feeling of guilt speaks of the crimes. Shame reveals incomplete responsibility. The ones who are ashamed of crimes are those who believe that national strategy was good, but that the tactic was wrong. Those who believe that the strategy was also catastrophic talk about the crimes of the nation as real guilt.

Creative humanist intelligence should encourage a new critical culture of memories. Without changes in the scientific culture, it is impossible to expect changes in the political culture. One's own innocence has most often been an alibi after each state and national defeat. The true alternative to innocent intelligence, which also represents itself as a victim, is responsible intelligence, which should critically face its own role, firstly in the normalization of nationalism. It is easy to understand how "innocents" and "victims" are not able to take responsibility, since they are asking for reparation. Since "innocent" is precisely the typical self-description of the contemporary "patriotic" intellectual, there is massive intellectual irresponsibility at work here. There is no self-reflection or acceptance of responsibility in warmongering, and these are precisely the features that should distinguish intellectual growth and maturity nowadays. Overcoming the mythical picture of a glorious national past should be the intellectual's contribution to the creation of a European consciousness. The hope that, in the future, we will not learn about the history of European countries by listening to tales of their glorious national myths, but by seeing how nations and states critically face their own myths, is not a meaningless utopia; it would be the deepest sense of enlightened memory. However, it is an illusion to think that modern globalized capitalism is interested in enlightened memory of this sort; although multinational capital needs a peaceful space, the belief that globalization and the market will spontaneously bring about reconciliation is nothing more than wishful thinking. It seems more likely that suppressing, or at least weakening the non-progressive civil war of memories requires non-profit intermediaries. Especially in the Balkans.

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* A part of this paper was published in Politika on March 15, 2007, under the title “Trauma sećanja” (*Trauma of memories*). Readers’ reactions followed, testifying to the fact that ordinary people do not accept this method of facing the past.

Dorćolac (), 15.03.2007, 17:26

There should be a Museum of Shame! But first of all in EUROPE, in every COLONIAL country! Therefore, let them start with themselves – let them give us an example! Because they want us to look up at them in everything we do... I believe that this mister professor is competent enough to remind them of that. Thus - he should send this text of his, a little modified, to the governments and media in England, France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy! Their GENOCIDE, which lasted for centuries against nations that were victims of their colonialism, should be posted in a visible place in the museum!

Milenko (), 15.03.2007, 12:17

Should the esteemed professor be ready to hear the voices of Serbian victims, maybe he would draw different conclusions from the given premises. Whether he understands this or not, it is hard for Serbs to discuss any suggestions of catharsis and reconciliation as long as Serbian victims are being relativised. The verdict of the International Court of Justice has put an end to the fifteen years of song and dance about Serbs being the only criminals in the Balkan wars. However, Serbian victims are still crying out.

Prvoslav Filimonović (), 15.03.2007, 04:42

Mr. Professor, there’s no way I’m going to nurture a trauma and feel shame and guilt for crimes I didn’t commit. Perpetrators should be arrested and convicted. As far as you are concerned, you are free to feel whatever you want, but please, don’t burden this nation with traumas and guilt it does not deserve. It is already fed up with everything.

chicha (chiche_miche@yahoo.com), 15.03.2007, 01:26

I don’t understand why our professor is carrying out Europe’s directive to make a Museum of shame of the West Balkans. Why doesn’t much more cultured Europe make its own museum first, and a huge one too? Who, after Tito, went spreading hate in the media and encouraging it in republics and nations? who armed these inflamed people? who recognized illegal unilateral secessions, followed by the looting of everything that came into view? And now, no more and no less, the Serbs are the ones who should nurture the memory of crimes committed by their own group and agree to a shock therapy. This is too much, even from the professor! Bursać explained this magnificently, and now, instead of those lolling on yachts and jet sets, we should be the ones to be cured by electroshocks. Many really believe that the people are that crazy! Given the number of crimes that have been committed all over the world in the last hundred years alone, there would not be enough electricity! For many, the only important thing is that the Serbs get it, so they can appease their conscience.

Nikoletina Bursać (), 14.03.2007, 22:43

Can any of the new believers belonging to any faith, in any of the banana states in the Balkans, explain the meaning of this phrase: “He who *hits you* with a *stone*, *hit him* with *bread*” or “If someone strikes *you* on the right *cheek*, *turn* the *other* also”. A bad, evil man, a man without mercy, can be a formal member of a religion, but he is not a believer. Religion and different ethnic groups have been abused by people with dishonorable intentions to destroy lives in a region where interests of great powers collide. Crimes were committed, not in the name of nations and religions, but in the name of powerful men to whom the current situation brought benefits beyond the imagination of ordinary people. They have no trauma. Why attempt to impose trauma onto a majority of victims (members of nations, unprotected, mobilized, thrown into the trenches on both sides) for crimes committed by individuals or groups organized by so-called national political elites serving the interests of others. During the war, I never permitted the labeling of other nations as criminal in my presence, but I don’t accept that my nation is criminal, either. There were crimes, these crimes should not be hidden and their perpetrators and organizers should be brought to justice. But the biggest criminals are those who led us into the war by destroying SFRY. They committed a crime against peace, and the rest came only as consequences.

(<http://www.politika.co.yu/komentar.php?nid=22324>)

Note (TK): Although the reactions shown in this text are an insufficient basis for broader conclusions, a paradigmatic defensive reaction from an ordinary person, a reader of “Politika” in Serbia, can be discerned.

Attempts to de-center, historicize and balance the crimes of one's nation are visible. It is forewarned (1) that other Balkan, European and world crimes must be taken into consideration, and (2) that the nature of Serbian crimes is reactive. Any kind of collective national guilt is rejected, and there is a visible resistance to the relativisation of the victims of one's own nation. Attention is drawn to responsibility, primarily of the organizers (domestic and foreign elites), and only then of the individual perpetrators. The advice of a reader that trauma should be imposed on the powerful, and not the ordinary people, sounds interesting. Is that possible?

Hardly, the same way that it is improbable for an ordinary person to think coldly and reasonably about the past in a situation of crisis. An objective view of the past is most definitely socially conditioned. Can a poor and existentially threatened person have an independent view on the past and accept the complex, multilayered truth about it? Or is the past, imbued with hope and hate (romanticized and demonized), reduced to the easily acceptable Manichean scheme of executioner and victim much closer to him? American historian Henry Adams observed, not without reason, that history is the most aristocratic literary activity, since it obliges historians to be as rich as they are educated. In a relatively stable society, unburdened by the past, warm memories and cold history are more sharply separated than in crisis societies burdened by revanchism, where memories and history are intertwined, and in enduring crises, even merged to the point of being indistinguishable.

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