

Klaus Roth and Asker Kartarı (eds.)

Cultures of Crisis in Southeast Europe
Part 2

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Cultures of Crisis in Southeast Europe

Part 2
Crises Related to
Natural Disasters, to Places and Spaces,
and to Identities

edited by

Klaus Roth and Asker Kartarı

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Evacuating people from the village of Rast, district Dolj (on the Danube), Romania, during the flood of April 2006. Photo taken by the State Inspectorate for Emergencies (ISU) (cf. Ștefan Dorondel's article p. 11-32).

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**“These Days, when a Belgrader Asked: ‘How Are You Doing?’,
the Answer Is: ‘I’m Waiting’.”
Everyday Life During the 1999 NATO Bombing**

Elisa Satjukow, Leipzig¹

Abstract

On the evening of the 24th of March, 1999, the first air strikes hit multiple targets in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The “Operation Allied Force” had begun. The air raids lasted for 78 days. During this time, everyday life in the Serbian capital was reshaped by the bombardment. This not only affected the infrastructure of the city, but turned its inhabitants’ days and nights upside down. People were helplessly waiting for the war to end. But simply waiting cannot fill a day – waiting for the next alert, for the electricity to come back on, for the bombs to stop falling – was not enough to fill the long days. Suddenly the normally busy urbanites found themselves confronted with new tasks and had to create new routines. The Milošević regime was aware of these needs. It used the “state of exception” (Agamben 2004) to further and deepen its own propagandistic imperatives of national unity and to advertise the necessity of the “war of defence” within the nation. The state started to offer a wide range of events that not only entertained its citizens but also created forums for them to meet and to “unite” against the enemy. Beyond the state-prescribed cultural events, numerous efforts sprang up throughout the city to maintain a social and cultural life. This paper will tell of the diverse ways in which the people of Belgrade spent their time between and during the air raids.

Following the failure of all diplomatic negotiations to come to a peaceful solution concerning Kosovo, NATO commenced the military operation codenamed “Allied Force” against the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on the 24th of March 1999. The bombing lasted for 78 days. In Belgrade, people were not only confronted by daily NATO air raids and their immediate consequences – supply shortages, restrictions of travel and health hazards – they also experienced a renewed radical nationalisation encroaching on their everyday lives. On the first day of the bombing, Serbian citizens could read in their morning papers: “Sinoć u 20 časova NATO započeo zlikovačku agresiju protiv naše zemlje. Savezna vlada proglasila ratno stanje” (“Yesterday at 8 pm NATO initiated their vicious aggression against our country. The government is declaring a state of war”, Poli-

¹ Many thanks to Klara Wehrle for the translation.

tika, March 25, 1999), the war was from then on christened as “NATO agresija” (“NATO aggression”).

With the “Ordinance by the government declaring a state of war” the defence of the country was made the task of every single Serbian citizen by the ruling authorities. On this basis conscripts could be mobilized for the “resistance and defence against the enemy attack” (Politika, March 25, 1999), while the general public was encouraged to support their country’s war effort through other means. This especially applied to those who worked in the defence industry and in sectors of manufacture, which were essential for the military. For many people in the capital, normal life came to a halt. With few exceptions, Kindergartens, schools, universities, and other public institutions remained closed. From one day to the next, everyday life was determined by the blaring of the sirens, the running for shelter in cellars, bunkers or homes, and the eventual sounding of the all-clear. Daily errands became a challenge – not only because there was fuel shortage, which made travelling difficult and time consuming, but also because of deficiencies of the war economy. The inhabitants of Belgrade were forced to invent new norms in all areas of life in order to cope with the crisis. They had to structure their lives according to the air strikes and sirens, but they also found themselves confronted with long hours of empty time as the bombardment wiped out the usually bustling life of the Serbian capital. “These days, when a Belgrader asked: ‘How are you doing?’, the answer is: ‘I’m waiting’” (Ćirić 1999).

Waiting for the war to stop came to be a central matter of fact. But simply waiting – for the next alert, for the electricity to come back on, for the bombs to stop falling – cannot fill up the long hours of a day. Suddenly the normally busy urbanites were meant to fill everyday with new tasks, to create new routines. Everyone longed to return to a sort of ‘normality’ they were used to before the attacks. The Milošević regime was aware of these needs. It used the “state of exception” (Agamben 2004) to further and deepen its own propagandistic imperatives of national unity and to advertise the necessity of the “war of defence” within the nation. The state began to offer a wide range of events that did not only entertain, but also created forums to meet and to ‘unite’ against the enemy. Beyond the state-prescribed cultural events, numerous private efforts sprouted throughout the city to maintain a social and cultural life.

This paper aims to illuminate the different facets of how the civilian population of Belgrade spent their time during the war. It is part of a wider research project in which I enquired the complex experiences of Belgrade’s inhabitants during the NATO bombing campaign. The main sources on which my research is based were qualitative interviews with eyewitnesses from Belgrade and ego-documents from the time of the bombing which comprise such varieties of texts as autobiographies, letters and diaries. I also completed historiographical re-

search by studying Serbian and Western print media from spring 1999 as well as reports and statistical data. I spent several months in Belgrade for ethnographic and archival fieldwork in 2012 and 2013. During this time I conducted around ten in-depth interviews with people from different ages and social backgrounds and gained further empirical sources from numerous informal conversations.

Two questions were decisive during my research. On the one hand I wanted to find out how the people coped with the challenges caused by the air raids on a day to day basis; on the other hand I examined the psychological and social effects that this state of exception had on the population of Belgrade. I take the term “state of exception” to have two distinct meanings: On the one hand, it refers to a suspension of the so-called normal condition², and on the other hand, based on Giorgio Agamben’s paradigm, it refers to a practise of government. Agamben demonstrates that measures taken in states of exception steadily transform into a common technique and persistent practise of government, radically threatening to alter the structure and intention of constitutional states of emergency. “In this regard the state of exception turns out to be a threshold at which democracy and absolutism blur” (Agamben 2004: 9). My paper argues that not only did Slobodan Milošević take advantage of extraordinary circumstances as a paradigmatic instrument of political power – until the extraordinary circumstances caught up with him in form of the October 2000 revolution – but the bombing itself created a grey area within which the citizens of Belgrade acted in exceptional ways. This paper engages in two scientific debates: It widens our historical understanding of the 1999 NATO bombing and it also contributes to the research of how people cope with different forms of crisis.

“The War Comes Home”

Wednesday, the 24th of March 1999: The people of Serbia were getting ready for a seemingly ordinary working day. The Belgrade weather forecast promised moderately overcast conditions. The city streets were busy as usual. According to a *NIN* news magazine poll, 78 percent of all Serbs had no expectations of military actions against their country despite previous threats and sanctions (Luković 1999). One of those 78 percent was Dušan: “Nobody from my circle of friends or myself did believe that this can happen. Really. [...] We all thought that, you know, they are going to threaten a little and Milošević gonna agree on

² “Basic Concepts in History: A Historical Dictionary of Political and Social Language in Germany” defines “state of exception” as a situation non-conformant with usual circumstances, a counter-response as it were to a naturally assumed state of normalcy that corresponds to the system of law in a constitutional state (Koselleck 1972: 343–376).

some deal or something” (Interview with the author, March 23, 2013). Many personal stories attest to the disbelief that the bombardment would really happen. A defiant attitude prevailed throughout the city. Despite all the warnings, Dušan attended his lectures at the Law Faculty of Belgrade University, and Slaven set out across the river where to his basketball practice. Radmila, who was preparing roast lamb, as she had done every other year on her husband’s birthday, said: “I don’t know, what is going to happen and how this is going to look like – but I need to prepare the lamb for my husband’s birthday. Whatever happens, we are going to celebrate before the bombing” (Interview with the author, March 20, 2013).

On the evening of the 24th of March, 1999, the first air strikes hit multiple targets in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The “Operation Allied Force” had begun. In one fell swoop chaos and fear came to rule life in the Serbian capital. After a moment of bewilderment, the reality of the situation struck, and panic and helplessness took hold of the people. As Dušan remembers: “Everybody had an idea of Second World War, that they’re gonna just come and destroy everything, [...] that they are going to flatten the whole Belgrade.” People gathered in supposedly safe places, everyone pulled together: Neighbours congregated in cellars and ground floor flats, families huddled up in front of their TVs, telephone lines were running hot, shops were overrun with panic buyers. Many fled the city, some even the country.

“Now, [Belgrade] has a direct feel for war, and the shock is overwhelming for its two million inhabitants”, journalist Petar Luković reported from Belgrade during the first days of hostilities in his article “The War Comes Home” (Luković 1999). The end of the war in Bosnia lay only four years in the past. Now, the war had returned, and after the initial panic, people in Belgrade quickly understood what kind of danger the conflict had created. They now realised that the fighter jets, such as the American F-117, were not bombarding the city randomly, but that they had targeted specific *military objectives*. Those objectives mainly included military bases, industrial complexes that produced goods to support the war machine, as well as transport infrastructure used for military operations (railroads, streets, bridges, tunnels, and canals). According to NATO rulings, communication facilities, such as radio and TV stations and telephone networks, were legitimate targets as well (ICTY 2000). Civilians³ and civil infrastructure and transport, protected by the Geneva Convention, were strictly excluded from the air strikes. The specific approved targets, however, were often situated in the middle of the city, directly beside hospitals, residential build-

³ According to the Geneva Convention from the 12th of August, 1949, this also includes non-combatants in the armed forces.

ings, schools, and theatres, where people were living their lives. Despite this, NATO stressed: “We are not targeting the Serb people, as we have repeatedly stated, nor are we targeting President Milosevic personally” (ICTY 2000). Nevertheless, people were directly affected. According to NATO-spokesman Jamie Shea, “collateral damage” was supposed to be prevented wherever possible but could not be completely avoided, as he explained during one of his daily updates from the Brussels headquarters.

“Collateral damage’ is a term that I had to look up in the dictionary”, theatre director Biljana Srbljanović noted in her diary at the beginning of the bombardment. “I saw the death of innocent people hit by stray bullets. But what I heard was the cynical expression ‘collateral damage’.”⁴ In order to protect civilians, the bombs fell mainly at night. “The sirens would normally go off at around 8 pm. And then, in the morning, they would stop. Around 99 percent of the bombings were night bombings”, Slaven remembers (Interview with the author, March 20th, 2013). Although the projectiles of the NATO bombers did not cause many deaths directly within the general population, shrapnel and detonations destroyed civil buildings due to their proximity to the intended targets and also injured and killed passers-by. Overall, the fighter jets of the NATO air force flew around 40000 missions and hit over 900 targets, many of them multiple times (Daalder, O’Hanlon 2000: 4). What was intended to be a short-term military action to force Milošević to withdraw Serbian troops from Kosovo turned into 78 days of air raids, which were executed without a mandate from the UN. According to the *Humanitarian Law Center*, 758 individuals lost their lives in the NATO bombing: 453 were civilian victims (220 Albanians, 205 Serbs, and 28 Roma and members of other ethnic groups) and 305 were members of the armed forces (Humanitarian Law Center 2012).

Prescribed culture

“Has Belgrade changed since the first days of war? In the pedestrian zone of Knez Mihajlova, young women in ultra-short miniskirts lounge around in the sun, and pensioners and businessmen sip Turkish coffee in the small street cafés. Alongside them, street vendors sell their wares: books, war postcards of collapsed bridges and houses, hundreds of bootlegged CDs of international artists,

⁴ All quotes from Biljana Srbljanović were originally printed in German in the German journal *Der Spiegel* in April 1999. For this article, they have been translated by the author.

and, of course, an ever growing line-up of war souvenirs. There is hardly an object that does not sport the ‘TARGET’ sign” (Flottau 1999).⁵

The stylised “TARGET” became a symbol of Serbian society during the conflict. Milošević’s familiar interpretation of Serbian people as a “victimized nation”⁶ went through a verbal and visual rebirth as the symbol of war. The central narratives of Milošević’s propaganda apparatus were publicised by the media and instilled in people’s minds via symbols and political rituals. The regime came up with numerous ideas, from free guided tours and the designation of important places of cultural heritage (such as the *Kalemegdan* fortress) to daily concerts in the Republic Square. The concerts were initialized by the municipality, but after three days the government took over the organization (Diefenbach 2000). The main goal of these events was the propagation of the Serbian people as a national community. Meanwhile, the abandoned buildings of the American cultural centre, the British consulate, and the German Goethe Institute had their windows smashed, and the French First World War Memorial was shrouded in a black flag. The principal concern of the Serbian political elite was the transformation of the resistance into a collective experience. “Courage, patriotism, and the love of the fatherland” (Politika, April 29th, 1999) were supposed to be not only demonstrated but also directly experienced in those days. The state provided the framework and content, thus offering direction to the confused people. Betrayed by the West and isolated by the allied bombs, many welcomed these events, at least in the beginning.

The daily anti-war concerts took place at the Trg Republike between noon and 3 pm. Their motto was “Pesma nas je održala” (“The Song Has Kept Us”). Organised by the political elite under the auspices of First Lady and leader of the Yugoslav left, Mirjana Marković, tens of thousands gathered each day – at least during the first days after the bombing started – “despite rain or alerts” (Politika, March 30th, 1999). Serbian pop stars such as *Ceca* and *Lepa Brena* and rock bands *Van Gogh* and *Riblja Čorba* entertained the audience for free. Politicians, too, as well as celebrities, foreign guests, and delegations contributed to the programme. However, certainly not all who graced the large stage

⁵ All quotes by Renate Flottau were originally printed in German in the journal *Der Spiegel* between March and June 1999. For this article, they have been translated by the author.

⁶ With Slobodan Milošević’s political rise in the middle of the 1980s, a radical change of policy was implemented in Yugoslavia. As “saviour of the Serbs”, he promised to not only bring the propagated genocide of the Serbian people in Kosovo to an end but also to re-establish Serbia’s former strength within Yugoslavia. This campaign to nationalise the people culminated in the famous Gazimestan speech at the 600th anniversary of the “Battle of Kosovo” on the 28th of June, 1989. The battles evoked in the speech soon became reality in the disintegration wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo.

in front of the Serbian national museum attended out of patriotic conviction. "A singer or actor who valued their career had to put up an appearance at the square," commented Biljana Srbljanović in her column for the German magazine *Der Spiegel*. The aim was to demonstrate strength and unity, to mobilise the people against the enemy collectively. The events always began with a minute of silence for the fallen victims. Representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church stood side by side with politicians and celebrities, demonstrating their alliance. Together, they prayed and released white doves as a sign of peace. Part of this union between church and state was the Easter celebrations on the 10th of April, 1999, as well as Russian patriarch Alexius II's visit one week later, which was accompanied by grand "resistance parades" (*Politika*, April 21st, 1999). Simultaneously, hundreds of thousands Kosovar Albanians had to flee to neighbouring states, and Milošević's regime continued to mobilise the country for battle. "People met in the square and sang, but somewhere else, they were dying every day. And here they were, singing. That was just unbelievable!" (Interview with the author, March 21st, 2013) exclaimed Bojan, who was only 12 at the time. But not only the people on stage made themselves heard; members of the audience also verbalised their anger and frustration and accused their attackers. On home-made posters, slogans such as "NATO – here we are!" "Clinton = Hitler," and "We won't give up, Kosovo!" could be read in Serbian and English. Dragan Milenković collected these slogans in his "Book of Resistance" and published them while the bombing was still going on. It was also possible to buy a "well-designed booklet with shout-along slogans" for 20 dinars from street sellers who then cornered the market in war memorabilia (*Politika*, April 26th, 1999). As German journalist Renate Flottau recounts:

"The Belgraders tried to forget about the war and stroll down the Knez Mihajlova, which resembled a combination of a flea market and a Clinton Horror Show. WANTED posters with obscene texts and photomontages of the 'Führer Clinton' could be seen everywhere. The 'C' was written like a swastika. There was also an obituary on the posters: 'Died suddenly from brain-loss due to having been sucked-off incessantly'" (Flottau 1999).

By the end of April, newspapers reported that the prices of these war souvenirs had skyrocketed due to their tremendous popularity and a rising demand for them. While the "TARGET" badge was handed out for free in other cities, Belgrade seized the opportunity to establish a lucrative business out of the "resistance movement." Prices rose from three to ten dinar during the bombardment. The same held true for t-shirts, hats, and scarves, which were decorated with the word "TARGET" or the colours of the Serbian flag. "Get them while the prices are low" ran the slogan. Clinton skulls, passports with naked bodies of Ameri-



Fig.: Politika, March 30th, 1999.

can commanders, and a great variety of postcards with anti-NATO slogans were widely available (Politika, May 15th, 1999).

The regime was simultaneously in the midst of war and at the pinnacle of its power. Their propaganda campaign not only advanced and cemented their ideals in the minds of the people but also earned them a tidy profit. War had become a brand, a business. The state campaign even went further when, at the beginning of April, the call went out to the citizens to defend Belgrade's bridges. The regime took advantage of the widespread fear that NATO bombers would destroy them as military targets. An eyewitness even identified the possible destruction of the bridges as a "crucial panic" of the people. Once again, Mirjana Marković, the First Lady of Serbia, was the mastermind behind the propaganda project ("human shields") that involved gathering as many people as possible on the three main bridges of Belgrade. In an interview, Marković reminisced:

"It was something like a flash of genius. We were having a JUL board meeting, where we discussed how we could involve all the political parties and the peace movement that had been protesting from Rome to Sid-



Fig.: Politika, May 15th, 1999.

ney against NATO intervention in a free and sovereign state. It was an idea that matched my temperament, if you like. I viewed the people congregating on the bridges, who I assumed to be safe from the American bombs, more as the manifestations of the idea of civil community, sacrificing themselves for their own country, rather than as a provocation that would inspire media interest, although that was a useful side effect” (Zaccaria 2005: 137).

Despite the real danger of the bridges being bombed in the nightly air raids, concerts, speeches, and sporting events such as bike races and football matches continued to be organised every evening. The altruistic “protection” of Belgrade’s landmarks quickly became yet another propagandistic entertainment event for the “civil community”, as Marković called all Serbs. As Dušan remembers, “[The government] had such great ideas, such as wanting to defend the bridges. And then they were on the bridge, and celebrities came, too – singers and so on. And that was quite popular.”

The regime interpreted this initiative as a major success – none of the “protected” bridges in Belgrade was bombed by NATO. Unlike the reports of the censored media, which spoke of tens of thousands of “human shields,” not nearly as many people actually attended. In the middle of April, Renate Flottau only came upon a few hundred.

“I arrived just in time at the Brankov bridge [...], where citizens had been forming a ‘human shield’ against the NATO attacks for days. Beginning at 6 pm, all traffic had already been stopped. At 8.45 pm, the alert sounded again. The event on the bridge was in full swing. But the brave defenders were by no means as numerous as the latest TV reports might have suggested. There were perhaps 400 people there” (Flottau 1999).

The concerts at the Republic Square suffered a similar fate. The number of people who attended dwindled to a few hundred after the first month of the bombardment (Diefenbach 2000). The initially bold headlines and elaborate reports in the newspapers soon became footnotes that evoked the same motives and stories of a “heroic people” at the squares and bridges. This did not escape readers, such as Bojan: “In the news, there were photos, just stills, and you realised that you had seen those exact pictures before.” One reason that the events lost their appeal after a while was due to the growing challenges of everyday life under the threat of foreign bombs. People were tired of keeping up the resistance; they wanted to regain peace as quickly as possible. For others, the flagging quality of the events was the decisive factor in their decision to stay home. When the great Serbian stars stopped showing up and only “some guys that nobody had ever heard of” took the stage, Slaven stopped attending the concerts altogether:

“I didn’t go to those initial and biggest concerts at the main square. But then, in April and May, I would go to the concerts frequently. Some bands that I loved played there. I wanted to hear the bands. But after the first month, things became really ridiculous, and they began to lack inspiration. They were bringing some bands and some guys that nobody had ever heard of, and it became stupid. And fewer and fewer people would come towards the end of the bombing. It lost its focus in the end.”

The same fatigue manifested itself in the state programme on the bridges. “My son is currently at the front”, one man shouted. “Our sons as well”, others joined in. Nobody wanted to listen to the heroic feats of the Serbian people any longer. They only wanted to escape into music “without any patriotic undertones” (Flottau 1999).

When the concerts lost their appeal, the regime was quick to think of new solidarity campaigns. Under the theme “With drawings against bombs”, children designed a one-hundred-metre-long piece of artwork in the centre of the

city (Politika, April 5th, 1999); in the Union House, “books against the war” were presented (Politika, April 26th, 1999); there were cigarette collections in support of the soldiers (Politika, April 27th, 1999); and night clubs switched to “afternoon raves against the sirens” (Politika, May 10th, 1999). Last but not least, the motto of the annual Belgrade marathon in 1999 was “Stop the War – Run the World”.

Killing time on the streets

The enforced free time of waiting was made use of and interpreted in different ways. The persistence needed in such a situation became burdensome for many as boredom and idleness ruled people’s everyday lives after the initial panic. Some, especially the younger generation, viewed these days as ‘free time’ given to them, freeing them from their usual responsibilities and allowing them to indulge in hobbies and social activities. This attitude was intensified by the beautiful spring weather. As Slaven reminisced, “Everything stopped, but, you know, the bombing and everything continued. But the spring was coming, the spring was coming”. The weather during the air raids was “unusually sunny” – so unusual, in fact, that soon conspiracy theories made their rounds. Allegedly, the allied forces had driven the clouds out of the sky to gain a free view of their targets. As Nenad reports, “It almost always rains here in March and April. [...] So [they used] that Russian stuff and American, that cloud busting. Every day was a great day, sunny, with no wind, no anything. And that lasted for 70 days” (Interview with the author, May 20th, 2013). In May, it was already warm enough for the municipal swimming pools to open for the outdoor season during the bombing (Politika, May 21st, 1999).

“If you asked young people in Belgrade about the bombing, you know, everybody would say that the weather was beautiful. Everybody, you know,” Slaven, who is now 30 years old, reflects. His generation, in particular, experienced the bombing as a time of anarchy and freedom, a time to party and let loose. The fact that the schools remained closed during the bombing created the feeling of school holidays. Bojan, who was ten at the time, reports on the evenings, which he spent with his family underground: “We read books, played board games – most often chess. And on the computer. [...] And that was nice, that was good. In the mornings, there was no alarm, you could walk around as you liked. For us children, this was like a ‘school break’, an extended ‘school break’.”

During the sunny days, which were rarely punctuated by sirens, everyday life, especially for the younger people, moved to the streets. “I’m talking about the hood, the neighbourhood. [...] Basically, we were out on the streets all day, every day, playing basketball, hanging out”, Slaven continues. Younger kids like

Bojan spent the daylight hours playing and wandering around, whereas teenagers like Slaven loitered. Many things that had been deemed illegal before, such as gambling and marijuana, could now be tried out, even by the under-aged, without having to fear any consequences, for state sanctions were practically non-existent. Slaven knew this all too well: "I got stoned for the first time, and it was all new and interesting to me. [...] And I started to bet on football at the time because there were no laws in Serbia then."

For Slaven, killing time on the street can be interpreted as a rebellious act against his family, especially against his mother, who he described as being "really paranoid and anxious". The writer Jasmina Tešanović had a similar experience with her children:

"We became so bored that we could hardly put up with each other any longer. There was nothing to do. Our children were fighting with us for not letting them go out during the bombing and for having nothing to do when night time came. I would say, 'Let's talk, we've forgotten how to tell each other stories, to amuse each other as people used to'. But for them, sitting in the dark with their parents sounded like the end of the world. So they would cry or sulk, depending how old they were" (Tešanović 2000: 129).

The young, in particular, tried to ignore the limitations that the bombardment brought as best they could. Their memories are often skewed. Like most teenagers, they tell coming-of-age stories. Tales of their first loves, their cliques, and their neighbourhoods overshadow the realities of war.

Meanwhile, the parents' generation struggled with power outages and supply shortages. Again and again, NATO attacked transformer stations and transmission lines, resulting in many periods of no water and electricity blackouts. As the temperature in May rose to thirty degrees, the cooling of food became one of the greatest challenges during war time. People had to improvise and help each other, as Jasmina Tešanović noted down in her diary: "I was constantly running from one flat to another with my computer, my meatballs, and the laundry, chasing after electricity" (Tešanović 2000: 107). Jasmina's statement can be taken literally: Because of the bombing, public transport operated only during day time and with a reduced timetable. Most people tried to avoid crossing the Sava River, even if the propagandistic campaign of the "human shields" aimed to paint a different picture. "It was too risky to go over the bridges. I don't think I ever crossed a bridge during the entire bombing", Slaven emphasises. Those who had family on the other side had no other choice than to take the risk, as was the case with my informant Radmila. She remembers very vividly how every journey felt like an act of heroism:

“Every time the bus passed over the bridge, people applauded – every time! The bus driver turned onto the bridge and, [...] because there was no gasoline, [...] the traffic was very mild. So you could cross the bridge in three minutes. The bus driver stopped and then hit the gas, and ‘HUI!’ we went, over the bridge. Everybody was quiet and looked all around, and when the bus passed the bridge, then ‘YEAH!’ So it was absolutely crazy, especially because of the case of Novi Sad, where all the bridges were bombed.”

Overcoming the dangers of the bombing was an everyday challenge in Belgrade. This became especially apparent when running for shelter during an air raid. On a walk through the streets of her hometown, Tešanović said to herself, “I wonder how many people in Belgrade go to the shelters anymore”. A few were sitting in front of a shelter door, smoking and drinking, but she was not sure “whether they went there to socialise or to find safety” (Tešanović 2000: 101). The idleness of the day was mostly followed by restless evenings and nights. Life during the bombing not only freed everyone’s time for those who did not have to work, but it also flipped their schedules on their heads. Sleep with blaring sirens became virtually impossible. Like Radmila, many spent their nights tossing and turning: “Day and night changed places, and it was somehow as if you were living somebody else’s life.”

As the air raids continued, many people in Belgrade stopped seeking shelter. Instead, they waited out the attacks at home and tried to distract themselves as well as possible. The films shown on TV were a welcome diversion: “What I remember is that we had a marvellous film program during the night.” Notably, the TV channel *RTS Politika* showed illegal copies of the latest Hollywood blockbusters every night. *Shakespeare in Love* was broadcast shortly after its Oscar premiere, and *The Matrix* was even shown in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia two weeks before its official opening night. The responsible head of programming at *RTS* was Aleksandar Tijanić. Radmila recounts that “he explained that he was Robin Hood stealing new films and giving them to the people of Serbia, who were bombed during the nights. So he gave us absolutely new, wonderful films, and that’s how I forgot that anything serious was going on around me.” Radmila recognises that showing American blockbusters on TV while American bombs dropped from the sky was a strange paradox: “I mean, this is one of those contradictions: You are bombed by Americans, and you hate Americans, and on the other hand, you are very much into American pop culture.” Radmila reveals two major phenomena of the bombardment: the ambivalent feelings of the Serbian people towards the Western powers and their culture, and the excess of time: “I used to look at the films all night until 4 or 5 in the morning. Then, I slept until 2 or 4 in the afternoon.”

Beyond this, the nightly sleeplessness created an important forum for communication, especially as watching TV, listening to the radio, and playing computer games were impossible due to the blackouts. Thus, traditional occupations to pass the time experienced a renaissance, as evidenced in Jasmina Tešanović's plea to her children: "Let's talk! Let's talk with each other, let's tell each other stories, and let's amuse each other as people used to do", she demanded. Although Jasmina's kids thought that their mother's idea was "boring" at the time, many, like Dušan, view this time spent together in hindsight as having been an enriching experience: "To some extent, the bombing was positive in the sense that people had more time to spend with each other. So they became closer."

Waiting for the sirens, the shared experience of the strikes, and the relief of another night survived brought people closer together. Nenad describes this experience as follows: "Every night at 8 o'clock, there were sirens for bombing, and then there was the bombing. Then, at 9 or 10, it was over, and we went to party, you know. We had some club near our house. It was a small place for maybe 40 people. And every night, there were about 500 people, 500 people on the street – listening to the music and everything. It was a local miracle for us."

Some speak of a "local miracle", while others, like Radmila, remember legendary parties and a hippie lifestyle: "Those parties were famous. You didn't know what to do during the nights. You couldn't sleep, and you didn't want to go anywhere on this earth, so parties were organised. [...] It was like a whole hippie life going on. And this is one of the reasons why people have that feeling of nostalgia today."

Radmila faced the ever-present death and destruction around her with a hedonistic attitude. Life was celebrated at a time when it was most threatened. Somehow, the strain and dangers during the bombardment became superseded by feelings of nostalgia in the memory of many Belgraders, especially when these memories could be connected to a celebratory mood within the city. The ecstatic feeling and the event of the bombing constitute a central narrative in my interviews, especially in individuals' hindsight.

Being killed on the street

While the streets of Belgrade became a place of idleness for some people, for others, they turned into a place of danger. This is shown by the significant number of civilian casualties caused by the NATO air strikes. On April 17th, 1999, three-year-old Milica Rakić was killed by flying shrapnel in her parent's apartment in the Batajnica district. She became an overnight epitome of what was called "collateral damage". "And, you know, we heard about a girl, you know, a little girl who was killed in Batajnica when she was in the bathroom", Slaven re-

ПРЕДЛОГ НОВОГ МИРИЈЕВА ДА ЈЕДНА УЛИЦА ПОНЕСЕ ИМЕ ДЕВОЈЧИЦЕ ИЗ БАТАЈНИЦЕ НАСТРАДАЛЕ ОД ЗЛОЧИНАЧКОГ ГЕЛЕРА

Милица – синоним за све невинне жртве НАТО агресије

Грађани највеће месне заједнице у Југославији, потресени несрећом, упутили предлог да улица у Миријеву добије име убијене трогодишње Милице Ракић

Име трогодишње девојчице из Батајнице, која је пре три ноћи убијена шрапнелом касетне бомбе НАТО агресора, могла би да понесе једна улица у МЗ „Ново Миријево“. Грађани највеће месне заједнице у Југославији, потресени несрећом која је погодила породицу Ракић, упутили су предлог да одговарајућа улица у Миријеву добије име убијене Милице Ракић.

„У знак сећања на једно сурово прекинуто детињство предлажемо да се једна улица у нашем насељу назове именом Милице Ракић“, каже се у иницијативи грађана МЗ „Ново Миријево“. Како се даље наводи, то ће бити синоним за све невинне жртве НАТО агресије на нашу земљу.

Према речима др Вучете Мандића, председника СО Звездара, општина ће подржати предлог грађана Миријева. „Извршни одбор и Скупштина општине размотриће овај предлог чим он стигне до нас. Пронаћи ћемо улицу

која је погодна за промену имена и упутити такву иницијативу градској Комисији за промену назива улица и тргова“, истиче др Мандић, напомињући да коначно



Милица Ракић: НАТО бомба сурово прекинула једно детињство

предлог треба да усвоји Скупштина града.

Комисија за промену назива улица и тргова града раз-

мотриће ову иницијативу са пуно пажње, јер је трагедија која је задесила породицу

Милица Ракић – симбол геноцида над српским народом

Председник Градског одбора Српске радикалне странке Стево Драгић изјавио је у Београду да је убиство трогодишње Милице Ракић, које се догодило пре три ноћи у Батајници, једно у низу злочиначких убистава које НАТО агресор бездушно сеје.

На редовној конференцији за новинаре Градског одбора СРС Драгић је нагласио да безочно сејање бомби односи цивилне жртве, као што се догодило у случају воза погођеног у Грделичкој клисури, колоне албанских избеглица, у Алексинцу, Ћуприји и показују праве геноцидне амбиције агресора уништавање целог српског народа.

Упркос агресије на нашу земљу међу грађанима нема панике и они, посебно припадници снага безбедности, показују висок морал, нагласио је Драгић, додајући да такво наше понашање злочинне НАТО алијансе доводи до беса у којем не могу рационално да размисљају. (Ташт)

Ракић потресла све грађане, каже Иван Ковачевић, председник Комисије. Како је пе-

members. Local and national media made Milica a “sinonim za sve nevine žrtve NATO agresije” (“symbol for all the innocent victims of the so-called ‘NATO aggression’”) (Politika, April 20th, 1999).

The final NATO report on “Operation Allied Force” did not mention the death of Milica Rakić, not even under the category of “special incidents”. But the report did mention six other incidents that had created a high number of civilian casualties, two of which had occurred in Belgrade: On April 23rd, 1999, Serbian TV and radio network RTS was bombed by NATO, and 16 people died; on May 7th, 1999, three Chinese journalists fell victim to the bombing of the Chinese embassy (International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia 2000).

The threat came not only from above (from the numerous air raids against the Serbian capital) but also from the core of the country’s political apparatus. With the beginning of the bombing, oppositional work became nearly impossible. Again, being a part of the opposition in Serbia could potentially cost you your life (Dragović-Soso 2000). The suspension of all laws introduced by the state of exception enabled Milošević and his political cadres to eradicate independent media and to rid themselves of unpleasant critics of the system, such as journalist Slavko Ćuruvija, who was shot dead on Easter Sunday in broad daylight on a Belgrade street (Committee to Protect Journalists 2000). The perpetrators of the assassination have yet to be prosecuted. In oppositional circles, as Radmila explained, Ćuruvija’s death was perceived as “a very, very strong message by the regime and (...) was much more horrible than the bombing itself”.

Not least because of Ćuruvija’s murder, those who had taken to the streets two years before to protest a democratic Serbia completely withdrew into their private spheres. The ongoing threat posed by the Milošević regime as well as the hazards of the NATO bombardment brought the country’s oppositional potential to a standstill. Some even changed sides and turned to the national collective, thereby rendering the dilemma for those remaining almost intractable, as Radmila explained:

“Politically, this was the strangest thing I experienced: the final division among our friends and families. Because the first division [...] began when Milošević came to power, [...] and the bombing was the first round when we lost [...] our last friends, [...] people who were politically close to us. Because that was the moment when many people who had been anti-war oriented until 1999 somehow flipped and said, ‘Well, I’m against this bombing. This is too much. The Serbian side is not the only side responsible.’ [...] And that was the last critical moment.”

Confronted with a double threat, the remaining oppositional core saw no options for action and change. Like all other Belgraders, they just waited – waited for the war to end.

Conclusion

On the 9th of June, 1999, the cease-fire treaty of Kumanovo spelled the end of the fighting between Serbian armed forces and Kosovo-Albanian paramilitaries. It also meant the end of the NATO air strikes in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In his speech on the end of “NATO agresija”, Slobodan Milošević thanked the Serbian people, who, “from toddler to soldier”, had defended the “freedom and honour of the fatherland for 78 days.” As “heroes,” they could now rebuild their country and stride united towards a better future (Politika, June 11th, 1999). “But what would this future look like?” many wondered after the initial relief at the end of the bombardment. Behind them lay the remnants of eleven weeks of permanent danger. In fact, they did not feel like heroes, but rather more like victims – victims of the Western powers as well as of their own system.

Since the Serbs joined the war in Croatia in 1991, life in Belgrade had been taken over by a state of exception. Not even the Dayton peace treaty could bring about political rest. In the winter of 1996/97, hundreds of thousands took to the streets of the capital in an 88-day protest demanding a democratic Serbia. But the opposition turned out not to be strong enough to overturn the rigid structures of Milošević’s power apparatus. Eric Gordy states that the reason for the sovereign’s long-lasting grip on power rested not primarily in the support of the masses but in the consequent elimination of political alternatives (Gordy 1999: 2).

The renewed state of war opened opportunities for Milošević to suppress his political opponents and to strengthen his power. Within a few weeks, the government had used grey areas within the legal system to eradicate ranks of critics of the system. The independent media, which fell victim to censorship, was hit hardest. Thus, the danger for dissidents had become twofold – they were just as powerless to do anything about Milošević’s crimes against human rights as they were against NATO’s declaration of war. Only two years ago, they had waved US and European flags when walking through the streets of Belgrade (Blagojević 1999). Now, the West had turned against them as it was convinced that change in Serbia could only be effected from above – literally as well as metaphorically – through armed forces.

At first, however, the bombs had the reverse effect. “With this bombing, the whole country and its citizens became one with President Milosevic”, wrote Sonja Licht, head of the *Open Society Foundation*, referring to the people of

Serbia who gathered under the TARGET symbols and anti-Western posters (excerpts from a debate between Sonja Licht and Srdjan Dizdarević 1999). Many of them found themselves just as caught between the images of the West as their military enemy and their loyalty to the fatherland. The inner conflict of the Serbian people becomes apparent in a seemingly simple formula: “88 days of protesting against Milošević and for an opening of the country to the West. 78 days with Milošević against the Western ‘allies’ throwing bombs at Serbia”.

However, as I have shown above, a decision to support either side was difficult within this dichotomy. Faced on both sides with forces against which they were utterly helpless, many decided to take a third path. The strategies in dealing with time laid out in this paper illustrate this clearly. Although the propaganda was more than obvious at state-organised events, it was a small price to pay to see your favourite band. And no matter how frightening the air raids were, a certain amount of trust in the surgical exactness of the Western bombers remained. Besides, even if you cursed and damned the U.S., they were still producing the most entertaining movies and the most danceable pop music, and the nights in Belgrade were long. The patterns of interpretation and rituals prescribed by the regime as well as the messages of violence sent by the West were ‘used’ and processed by the inhabitants of Belgrade on their own terms, and they acted according to a strong “Eigen-Sinn” (“self-will,” Lüdtke 1994: 139–153).

In conclusion, the strategies the people of Belgrade developed in order to cope with the crisis were manifold, ranging from flight and emotional numbness to critical distance and escapist hedonism. I contend that Agamben’s reading of the “state of exception” as a mechanism to reassert and strengthen the sovereign’s power works as a one-way street and therefore falls too short. It needs to be extended in such a way that the suspension of law and the ordinary can also be seen as having opened up possibilities for people to act in exceptional ways. In this sense, the ‘culture of crisis’ discussed in this paper takes on a double meaning: On the one hand, it was an instrument of power used by Milošević and his regime, and on the other hand, it was a way to retain a certain amount of self-determination initiated by the citizens of Belgrade themselves.

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