"We will cry a little but then we will forget"

Narratives of trauma and victory in post-war Yugoslavia

Antic, Ana

Published in:
Trauma, Experience and Narrative in Europe after World War II

DOI:
10.1007/978-3-030-84663-3_7

Publication date:
2022

Document version
Early version, also known as pre-print

Citation for published version (APA):
Antic, A. (2022). "We will cry a little but then we will forget": Narratives of trauma and victory in post-war Yugoslavia. In V. Kivimaki, & P. Leese (Eds.), Trauma, Experience and Narrative in Europe after World War II (pp. 177-205). Palgrave Macmillan. Palgrave Studies in the History of Experience https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84663-3_7
Ana Antic

“We will cry a little, but then we will forget”: Narratives of Loss and Victory in Postwar Yugoslavia

Ratovi su strasni tek onda kad se zavrse /
Wars are only awful once they are over.
(Delije, 1968)

Introduction

In her seminal article on the notions of psychological trauma and shell-shock in twentieth-century Russia, Catherine Merridale has argued that the Stalinist policy (and ideology) of stoicism, and its intolerance of psychological damage and weakness, resulted in fundamentally different attitudes to and discourses of psychological traumatisation in the Soviet Union. While individual pain and victimhood were certainly experienced by exceptionally large numbers of Soviet citizens throughout the 1930s and 1940s, in particular, there existed no public cultural or political framework in which such suffering could be expressed or discussed – and survivors, both civilians and military veterans, were unlikely to benefit in any way from insisting on their own victimhood narratives. According to Merridale, the end of World War II saw a politically orchestrated emergence of “a myth of endurance and stoicism which did not allow for victimhood or personal weakness.” This myth in turn radically shaped the collective as well as personal memory of the war violence, and profoundly affected Soviet citizens’ experiences and discourses of hardship, suffering and survival.¹ In her innovative analysis of children’s experiences of the Leningrad siege, Lisa Kirschenbaum suggested that it might be useful to replace the dominant framework of trauma with the concept of (psychological) resilience when discussing experiences and memories of Soviet child survivors of the Leningrad siege and the Great Patriotic War. This approach, Kirschenbaum argues, can shed more light on those children’s own

understandings and memories of their wartime experiences and hardships and can provide a productive analytical framework for interpreting Soviet discourses of heroism, strength and endurance. Rather than dismissing survivors’ narratives of endurance, strength and resilience as inauthentic products of a coercive regime’s political propaganda, both Merridale and Kirschenbaum argue, we might need to explore how such official discursive denials of traumatisation affected individual expressions and experiences of extreme pain, loss and suffering.

The absence of the language of traumatisation, weakness and suffering from the Soviet postwar narratives of the war raises further questions about possible meanings and limitations of the framework of psychological trauma outside the modern Western world. While a significant number of researchers have recently explored psychological legacies and effects of World War II, most of these works have been focused on Western Europe and the US. In particular, there has been almost no research into different cultural, political and psychiatric conceptualisations of psychological trauma in Eastern and Central Europe beyond the Soviet Union. This chapter aims to address this gap, asking whether narratives of collective endurance and resilience were more widespread across the region, and to what extent the socialist ideology and socialist regimes in Eastern Europe affected the conceptualisations of psychological suffering and healing. Focusing on socialist Yugoslavia, the chapter argues that, given the absence of developed postwar psychiatric and political discourses of trauma and wartime suffering, we need to explore how narratives of psychological loss and pain were articulated indirectly – in broader cultural and public spheres. If psychological trauma was not the dominant paradigm used to understand and describe psychological suffering in socialist Yugoslavia, how were the effects of extreme

---


3 I refrain from using ‘trauma’ as an analytical framework for the chapter – instead, I only refer to the concepts (or narratives) of psychological trauma and traumatisation as parts of medical, psychiatric or broader cultural discourses, and I don’t employ those notions as general terms to describe the reality of psychological suffering. I believe the concept of trauma to be historically, politically and culturally specific, and agree with scholars such as Didier Fassin and Derek Summerfield, who think critically about its transhistorical and transcultural/transnational applicability. As a result, I don’t assume that ‘trauma’ would necessarily be the most appropriate framework for understanding and describing the Second World War’s psychological consequences in Yugoslavia (or Eastern Europe) – the chapter thus makes a distinction between experiences of psychological suffering and trauma as an interpretive framework. The latter is arguably one of many paradigms that could be employed to analyse the psychological aftermath of war and violence.
wartime violence and loss addressed, discussed and represented in postwar artistic productions? How did psychiatrists, writers, artists and film-makers understand the concept of a damaged psyche and how did they envision its recovery? Were the psychological experiences of war and violence seen as potentially undermining the efforts at postwar reconstruction?

In the aftermath of WWII, Yugoslavia was a ravaged country: its human and material losses at the end of the war were higher than in any of the warring countries except for Poland and the USSR. Years of brutal occupation and an even more brutal civil war, fought on ethnic and ideological grounds, left the economy in ruins, so that the immediate postwar period was marred by a scarcity of basic foods, materials and housing options. Even more devastating than material destruction was the tremendous psychological impact of the war: there was hardly a family untouched by the mass murder and incarceration of civilians, and, well into the postwar years, many were still waiting for information on their loved ones. Tens of thousands witnessed unprecedented crimes and cruelty. And yet, the country’s flourishing psychiatric – and psychoanalytic – profession had very little to say about possible long-term psychological effects of such extreme violence, personal loss and dislocation. At the first postwar Yugoslav neuropsychiatric congress in 1946, leading Croatian psychiatrist Bosko Niketic briefly acknowledged the immense psychological suffering (“much sadness, worry, uncertainty and fear”) to which the country’s population had been exposed, and enumerated the unspeakable atrocities many had witnessed – “mass shootings, hangings, slaughters… loss of almost all family members, and waging a resistance war in the most difficult circumstances imaginable.” Nevertheless, Niketic concluded his discussion of such harmful psychological disturbances and their possible consequences in the very next sentence, stating that, fortunately, the Yugoslav peoples had “persevered in their struggle” despite this, and that all their mental anguish had been “crowned” – and presumably cured

---

4 Jozo Tomasevich, War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945: Occupation and Collaboration (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 744. Although figures remain contested, total human losses are taken to exceed 1.5 million in the entire country (Bogoljub Kocovic, Zrtve Drugog svetskog rata u Jugoslaviji [London, 1985], 172–80). The Yugoslav Reparations Commission estimated material losses at over 9 billion US dollars, which included over 20% of residential housing destroyed or heavily damaged, around 60% of livestock killed or plundered and over 19 million tons of grain and other crops taken out of the country between 1941 and 1945 (Tomasevich [2001], 715).
– by the ultimate triumph of the anti-fascist forces. Niketic and the other congress speakers then proceeded to discuss Yugoslavia’s peacetime psychiatry and its future tasks.

To my knowledge, only two trauma-related issues were discussed for a brief period after the end of the war. Dr Nikola Nikolic, a survivor of the infamous Ustasha concentration camp Jasenovac, published a book on the psychological and medical aspects of camp experiences based on his observations of his fellow inmates and coined the term “horrorosis” (hororoze) to indicate that a completely new diagnosis was needed to describe and understand the effects of such brutal torture and incarceration. Nikolic’s concept of unique Yugoslav psychoses and neuroses did not catch on, and its discussion largely remained limited to his manuscript. On the other hand, another specifically Yugoslav illness did receive more sustained public, political and psychiatric attention, because it affected the military. “Partisan hysteria,” a form of war neurosis only diagnosed in Yugoslav anti-fascist guerrilla soldiers (partisans), was defined as a unique psychological disorder, unknown in the rest of the world and fundamentally different from the battle fatigue or shell-shock noted in Western armies. But the case of “partisan hysteria” demonstrated just how politically sensitive such discussions could be, especially at a time when the victorious partisans were becoming the bearers of the new state’s foundational narrative of resistance. While partisan neurosis caused quite a stir in the immediate postwar years, primarily because of its theatrical and disruptive character, a leading Yugoslav psychiatrist pronounced it completely cured soon after, and there was no further political or psychiatric discussion of this problem after the mid-1950s.

But if references to trauma dropped out of psychiatric discussions, this did not necessarily mean that war-related psychological distress disappeared from the emotional worlds of Yugoslav (and other East European) citizens. In his article for this volume, Robert Dale has demonstrated that narratives of psychological traumatisation were by no means absent from Soviet psychiatrists’ daily practice and considerations, nor from former Red Army

6 Nikola Nikolic, Jasenovacki logor smrti (Zagreb: Nakladni Zavod Hrvatske, 1948).
soldiers’ own ‘vernacular languages’ of suffering after the Second World War. In a similar vein, Ville Kivimäki has argued that ‘traumatic memories’ persisted in Finnish soldiers’ dreams, and permeated their experiences and recollections of wartime violence long before Finnish psychiatric discourses integrated such concepts. To some extent, similar trends marked Yugoslavia’s postwar period. At the Third Congress of Yugoslav medical doctors in 1971, Slovene psychiatrist Janko Kostnapfel made a passing reference to the lingering psychological effects of World War II among his patients: “Memories of the horrors of the last war are still very fresh. From our patients of younger and middle generations we often hear horrible stories about the war every day.” Kostnapfel concluded that this was not at all surprising, given that Yugoslavia lost about 10% of its prewar population, or about 1,7 million people: “Just that number tells us about the emotional difficulties of their surviving family members.”8 Kostnapfel’s intervention offered an important (and unprecedented) insight into the workings of Yugoslavia’s postwar psychiatric clinics: they were reportedly inundated with traumatic narratives of World War II, and by patients who were still experiencing severe war-related psychological distress. It was not unexpected, then, that such narratives, expelled from medical or political forums, would find their way into socialist Yugoslavia’s artistic and literary production.

This chapter, thus, explores how the theme of damaged psyche and individual psychological pain was explored outside psychiatric and official political discourses. Due to space restrictions within one chapter, the analysis will be largely limited to Yugoslav film production in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, with occasional reference to important literary works that developed the topic of wartime suffering and its postwar psychological consequences. The chapter argues that it was Yugoslavia’s renowned “Black Wave” cinema which broached this subject most systematically and consistently. It will, therefore, offer the first analysis of the role that some of the most significant Black Wave films played in exploring the psychological consequences of World War II, and in demonstrating how Yugoslav citizens’ immense (publicly unacknowledged) pain and suffering shaped postwar reconstruction. The Black Wave in Yugoslav cinematography primarily marked the 1960s, the period of political, economic and cultural liberalisation in the country, and received

significant international esteem and attention. Researchers have extensively analysed these films’ complex, innovative and multi-layered critique of the socialist regime, but they have never explored their powerful engagement with the notion of war trauma and with the war’s emotional and psychological effects on all individuals and groups within society. In fact, a significant aspect of the films’ political critical edge was their undogmatic, poignant and often controversial portrayal of the multiple clashes between individuals scarred by the war and postwar revolutionary realities. These films’ themes, as well as their reception, can shed much needed light on the complex processes through which individual pain and suffering were translated into the public cultural and political discourses of a socialist country.

Broken soldiers on film

In 1945, the Yugoslav People’s Army was plagued by a virtual epidemic of war neurosis, which affected thousands of partisan soldiers. The end of the war seemed to only exacerbate the spread of the illness. This was a disorder that bore no resemblance to the war traumas in the other nations that had participated in the conflict: it did not manifest itself in the form of an urge to withdraw from the frontlines, as was the case in the British and US armies, where battle exhaustion, anxiety and demoralisation emerged as the most popular diagnoses by 1944. Rather, Yugoslav war neurotics demonstrated a heightened willingness to fight, as their new disorder consisted of violent and potentially harmful epileptiform seizures which simulated wartime battles and attacks. The seizures could occur at any moment and under any circumstances, usually when there was an audience -- in the middle of a conversation, at lectures or meetings, while driving or riding in a car, in front of superiors, for example. According to Dr. Hugo Klajn, Vienna-educated Belgrade psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who treated a number of the partisan patients in the

---


immediate aftermath of the war, these involuntary seizures started when soldiers fell into a state of trance of sorts, during which they subjectively re-experienced intense feelings related to fighting.

Even more importantly, only certain ranks of partisan soldiers seemed to be affected by the illness. By 1945, the partisan neurotic appeared to be a precisely defined type from a very distinct (low) socio-economic position, the serious psychiatric repercussions of which seemed to clearly demonstrate the dark side and subversive potential of increased social mobility. The Yugoslav form of war neurosis apparently most frequently affected the uneducated, socially immature and emotionally less sophisticated – in some reports even “primitive” – members of the partisan troops, who were given important political responsibilities but experienced severe trauma and anxiety due to their own inadequacy and unpreparedness. Partisan neurosis was virtually only diagnosed in extremely young, uneducated (frequently illiterate) and immature soldiers, whose limited intellectual capacities frequently clashed with the highly responsible assignments that they had been given (or to which they aspired) towards the end of the war.

Yugoslav psychiatrists, therefore, explained “partisan neurosis” almost exclusively in terms of ambition, social mobility and intellectual inadequacy rather than that of psychological suffering. According to this interpretation, the spectre of military ranks, awards and hierarchies explained the mysterious outbreak of hysteria at the very end of the war: the decision to dispense with guerrilla formations and build a traditional military organisation in 1943 was the reason why virtually no partisan neuroses had been recorded before that year. The distribution of officer ranks, distinctions and status rewards within the victorious army in the spring of 1943 was held to be responsible for the hysterical seizures experienced by many of the “incompetent” and overly ambitious partisans who found themselves in lowly positions within the hierarchy: these changes “incited envy and awoke ambition and desire for rewards among the partisans, especially in uneducated, young and psychologically immature soldiers.” When advancement was denied or jeopardized, “the wish emerged in immature and vain partisans to vent their anger and receive what they thought was a
deserved award.” In fact, Klaın highlighted the “wish for being recognised” as the single most important psychological factor in the development of partisan neurosis. While this wish could easily be satisfied during the war in battles (through self-sacrifice and consequent admiration by comrades, commanders, and the local population), the circumstances after the end of the war offered fewer opportunities for immediate acquisition of rewards and praise while at the same time made such acquisition ever more important in the context of a newly hierarchical army. Consequently, “neurosis represented a promissory note for that type of recognition, seizures --a dramatic display of one's claims, of one's (under-appreciated and unrewarded) achievements and sacrifices, much more effective than mere talking about them would have been.”

It is indeed very telling that the motive of social advancement came to dominate psychiatric discussions, especially since patient case files offered a wealth of evidence that numerous other extreme social and psychological factors and pressures might have had an exceptionally adverse effect on the partisans' mental health. Most “hysterics” hospitalised in Kovin had extremely tragic and violent life stories to share with Klaın and Betlheim. In their narratives, the sheer magnitude of wartime suffering, trauma and losses emerged with crystal clarity, and testified to the unprecedented catastrophe endured by the Yugoslav population. Many of these soldiers were barely teenagers when the war started, and most of those examined by postwar psychiatrists had lost some of their closest family members in the course of the war. Ivo C. only decided to join the partisans after the Ustasha slaughtered his father, mother and younger brother. His sister survived, but he did not have time to check on her after years of fighting when he passed through his village with his unit at the end of the war – and this is when he started having his first seizures. Conversely, Stevo T. found out that his entire family had been slaughtered by the Ustasha after he had already become a partisan soldier. Velizar P. admitted that he experienced the first symptoms of his mental illness at the very end of the war, in March 1945, after he “remembered that his sister had been shot, his father was in prison, and he himself had no education to speak of.”

---

12 Klaín (1995), 42.
13 Klaín (1995), 76.
Moreover, earlier in the war, Velizar had escaped from in front of a firing squad at a Hungarian concentration camp.\textsuperscript{15} Many partisan hysterics had experienced Croatian, German or Hungarian concentration and detention camps or prisons: Zivadin P. told Klajn that he had escaped a Croat camp “where he was beaten and tortured so brutally that he asked to be executed.” Following the escape, Zivadin decided to take revenge for his murdered father and brother, and took part in shootings of the partisans’ POWs, mostly Ustasha soldiers. In his seizures, Zivadin was likely plagued by the fact that he himself took other people’s lives and yelled: “I was tortured as well, they did deserve it!”\textsuperscript{16} Still, even in the face of such a mountain of evidence of the intensity of the partisans’ psychological traumatisation, Klajn was the only psychiatrist to acknowledge the importance of the wartime exertions and suffering of the “hystéric”\textsuperscript{s} to the development of their neurosis. But even within Klajn’s explanatory framework, this was at most a secondary factor: wartime horrors and hardships were not the main cause of the seizures, and could not, on their own, have provoked the Yugoslavs’ war neurosis.

In 1957, a group of Zagreb-based psychiatrists, led by Betlheim, conducted a follow-up study of wartime neurotic patients, aiming to inquire into their adaptation to civilian life in the course of ten or so years after the end of the war. After interviewing thirty-four former patients, who had all received treatment in military hospitals after the end of the war, the psychiatrists concluded that in the majority of cases the former partisans had suffered from “superficial neurosis” that did not harm deeper layers of their personality, and consequently they faced no larger problems reintegrating into postwar society. This was true particularly for those interviewees who were younger than eighteen at the time of their seizures: according to the study, they overcame their neurotic disorders very easily, since those appeared to be just a phase in the maturation and development of their personality.\textsuperscript{17} The authors recommended superficial psychotherapy, with particular attention to mental hygiene measures and prevention. In their conclusion, this group of eminent military psychiatrists argued that the outbreak of “partisan hysteria” did not seem to have left any deeper wounds in the Yugoslav society: the former neurotics apparently shed their neurotic

\textsuperscript{15} Klajn (1995), 69–70.
\textsuperscript{17} Stjepan Betlheim et al., “Adaptacija ratnih neurotika,” \textit{Vojno-sanitetski Pregled} 9 (1957), 508–9.
condition fairly quickly and were able to adapt to the peacetime circumstances without major disturbances. They were cured: they outgrew their “hysteria,” leaving it behind in the course of their personal development, education and perhaps also their social ascent.

Except for this final piece of psychiatric analysis, which confirmed the complete disappearance of Yugoslav soldiers’ war trauma from the socialist state, there were no further psychiatric, political or cultural references to “partisan hysteria” following the heated discussions of the immediate postwar months and years. The diagnosis itself seemed to have vanished from Yugoslavia’s public discourse, and the first (and only) time this complex neurosis re-appeared was in Mica Popovic’s highly controversial 1968 film Delije (“Heroes”). Even though this film refrained from any explicit criticism of the regime, its close examination of two young partisans’ difficult re-adjustment to peacetime circumstances in 1945 proved too subversive to the authorities, and Delije was withdrawn from cinema distribution before it ever had a chance to premiere. It remains (to my knowledge) the only piece of visual art which directly depicted bouts of partisan neurosis – in the form of a young partisan woman, whose unstable psychological state turns her into a truly tragic figure. Her two seizures followed the descriptions in Klajn’s and Betlheim’s psychiatric treatises – they were violent, gave expression to her own traumatic experiences in the war, and consisted of re-enactments of wartime situations and language; they were shown as highly public, as the woman had to be restrained by her comrades or random passers-by, but after each seizure, the woman was simply abandoned by everyone and left to her own devices, if occasionally pitied, even though it was clear that her psychological state was rapidly deteriorating (in a memorable scene, she tries to board a train together with her comrades but is a few seconds late and is therefore left behind, running desperately after them, crying and gradually losing any hope that she might be able to continue her return journey to her village). In contrast to the postwar psychiatrists’ interpretations, moreover, in Popovic’s film “partisan hysteria” is understood solely in the context of war-related psychological suffering – exposure to as well as perpetration of

20 After the young woman had a seizure in the street, one of the brothers, himself deeply damaged by the war, says dismissively “as if we don’t know what women’s nerves are, and what they are for!”
extreme violence. While in Klajn’s and Betlheim’s treatises and case histories such hysterical seizures often served as tools for the partisans’ self-promotion or as protest if they did not receive awards and recognitions, the young woman in Delije only relives her own unprocessed wartime distress and does not seem to have any ulterior careerist motives: “if only you knew how they shot at us...,” she screams.

But Popovic’s engagement with partisan neurosis was not limited to a minor character: more importantly, the two brothers themselves represent some of the most important emotional and psychological traits of the feared postwar partisan hysteric. Unfortunately, the brothers remained unable to overcome or grow out of their psychological predicament, and their hopeless, desperate and ultimately tragic attempts at reintegrating belied the idea that soldiers’ neurosis and traumatic memories could be left behind easily, or that the war only damaged superficial layers of their psyche.

The brothers, Gvozden and Isidor, fit the ill soldiers described on the pages of Klajn’s book a bit too neatly for this resemblance to have been a mere coincidence: they are deeply immature (both socially and sexually), extremely politically confused and uninformed and disturbingly unaware (and incapable) of any postwar revolutionary tasks. In addition, they are both peasants and barely literate, with no formal education and, coming from an extremely underdeveloped region, they would most certainly be described as “primitive” in the psychiatric and medical culture of postwar Yugoslavia.

Just as in the historical cases of partisan hysteria, Isidor and Gvozden were most unsettled at the prospect of demobilisation – they are both certain that the end of the war means the end of their lives. Gvozden takes the news of demobilisation with resigned calm: “I understand, we are not needed anymore, we had served our duty,” while their female comrade gives voice to their true feelings, screaming “I can’t live!” These reactions echoed those of many of Klajn’s patients, whose profound disorientation at the end of the war left them angry that their capabilities as soldiers were suddenly less important and seemingly underestimated. For instance, 20-year-old peasant Niko N., demonstrated this sentiment very clearly: as Klajn reported, Niko stated that he first started getting seizures because he was “‘unnerved that the war had ended,’ because now soldiers were facing tasks which he,
as an illiterate person, could not and would not accomplish. He wished the war was still going on.”21 Like Niko and Klajn’s other patients, Isidor and Gvozden were constantly reliving the war and war situations, which irretrievably transformed their lives and psyche; their dreams were exclusively of the war.

The sentence “it’s over” became a leitmotif of sorts throughout this film; repeated over and over again by various protagonists, mainly by Gvozden himself; it referred to the end of the war, the death of the brothers’ family, the tragic obliteration of their village by the Germans, but also to the end of any life possibilities for the two brothers in the aftermath of the war and the subsequent revolution. As Gvozden concludes upon their return to their destroyed village, “we fought for other people’s lives.” (or, as another one of Klajn’s patients, Nikola P. put it, “this was not what I fought for.”) While in wartime he had been “fierce, throwing bombs, shooting [...] yelling and breaking,” now Nikola complained of injustice, his own poverty and living conditions. In that sense, the postwar as a concept became impossible and inconceivable from Gvozden’s and Isidor’s perspectives: as their commander lectures about postwar, civilian battles awaiting them – “battles for a new man... continue in your homes, families, workplaces”-- they look extremely unsettled and clearly fail to take in the meaning of those important words. In contrast, the one moment when the brothers’ faces shine with happiness and renewed confidence is when they hear distant shots in their village and run in their direction hoping that the war has started again (“God willing,” whispers Gvozden as they approach) – unfortunately for them, they only encounter a hunting party, the members of which inevitably laugh at them, while the scowling head of a killed bear appears to mock their naiveté.22

But while in the psychiatric interpretations, the trauma of demobilisation was almost always tightly linked to soldiers’ concerns about their status and their inability to rise through the ranks, Isidor’s and Gvozden’s simple-mindedness and ingenuousness left no space for ambition or careerism: it was the wooden chests which they carried around with themselves

---


–a not so subtle metaphor for the heavy psychological and emotional baggage of their violent war-waging days – which made it impossible for them to move on. The chests were filled with weapons, and the brothers’ constant ominous references to them throughout the film indicated how deeply and irretrievably their personalities had been transformed by the orgy of violence which had surrounded them for four years.

The film depicts the volatility of the postwar situation, which was clearly described in Klajn’s patient case files; the brothers’ pent-up aggression remains a constant threat to the people (and children) whom they encounter on their way and who might inadvertently trigger their violent impulses and painful memories. Throughout the film, the brothers repeat how they are itching to use their rifles again, and how “sweet” it would be to fire them. Once they take their weapons out of the boxes, towards the end of the film, the spiralling of violence out of control seems inexorable: Isidor in particular behaves uncontrollably and cannot stop shooting, apparently oblivious to any external stimuli. The brothers’ death is indeed tragic precisely because it is inevitable. In fact, the entire final sequence of the film, when Isidor is chasing the one remaining German soldier in the village, could be read as a protracted seizure of a typical partisan hysteric. The “mad Kraut” (Iudi Svaba) reportedly lost his mind when his unit was ordered to kill and burn the entire village: he shot and murdered his comrades instead, and stayed on in the area hiding in the mountains and occasionally throwing small stones at passers-by. In the final scenes, Isidor slowly descends into a psychotic state and starts chasing the German in the barren, lunar landscape of his destroyed village, reliving, and relishing in, the wartime memories and experiences, which he and his brother pined for throughout the film. After he kills the German, Isidor runs and laughs uncontrollably, and continues shooting and singing – possible further references to the behavior of those suffering from “Kozara neurosis.”

Suffering and revolution

The brothers’ family had been obliterated – as was their house and the entire village – while death, loss and misery now permeate the postwar reality of their home region. Isidor’s and Gvozden’s reaction to this news was ambivalent and understated: even though they appeared indifferent throughout most of the film – singing, joking and laughing quite
frequently – their grief and incredulity in the face of a tragedy of such proportions occasionally came to the fore. Isidor in particular seemed to have a difficult time coping with the losses – asking over and over again “who killed Manojlo, I wish I knew” (in addition, the film repeatedly cuts to the shot with this sentence written on the wall, which then becomes one of the core motives throughout the story, even though we never learn who Manojlo was and why his death was troubling Isidor so much) – and trying, with heartbreaking urgency, to get an eyewitness to tell him more about the perishing of their family. In a crucial scene, Gvozden scolds his brother: “You can’t sing and not think. You can’t forget. It doesn’t work. No father, no mother. No house. It’s over.” Gvozden’s words point out, in a simple and straightforward manner, the painful paradox of Yugoslavia’s war victory and postwar reconstruction: in the midst of revolutionary celebrations and victorious enthusiasm for building a new and better society, the all-pervasive grief and mourning sat uncomfortably, incongruously, and masses of those whose lives were irretrievably scarred by the war’s tragedies did not always find easy ways to express their sorrow while responding to the state’s postwar expectations.

In the film, the brothers appear gloomy and awkward as they mingle with street celebrations and merriment, failing to take in the carnivalesque atmosphere of the very end of the war. They are as profoundly uncomfortable with such public parties as when they are themselves celebrated as postwar heroes or forced into any ordinary social contacts and relationships. The psychological wounds of the war are everywhere, marring the joyful surface of the postwar days: the brothers come across a variety of deeply tragic figures whose return to society seems impossible – men crying and cursing furiously on the railway tracks while waiting to board a train loaded with caskets carrying their dead family members; a mother crazed with grief and anxiety, begging them to help release her imprisoned daughter (the narrator’s voice tells us that the woman “was worn down [pohabala se] in one night” when her daughter was arrested by the new authorities, and that “she remembers that people used to say that she had laughed in the past.”) Gvozden’s “it’s over” certainly applies to all of them. Their pain and misery regularly act as an awkward, almost embarrassing reminder of the war’s long dark shadow.
The figure of a dark, psychologically troubled person against the background of public end-of-the-war festivities became a common one in Yugoslav films of the late 1950s and 1960s, and particularly in Black Wave cinema. In Branko Bauer’s *Tri Ane* (“Three girls named Ana”), the main protagonist is a retired tram driver whose young daughter disappeared after a Chetnik massacre during the war, but who is suddenly informed, years after 1945, that she might have survived.²³ The father’s grief and desperate determination to find his child still cause benevolent bemusement among his neighbours and friends who appear permanently astonished by Red Cross statistics indicating very high numbers of missing persons in postwar Yugoslavia, as if this information did not correspond to their own experiences and memories, as if the war had happened to someone else. Clad in black, the father pushes through crowds of jubilant people, in whose joy he could never partake. This motive is taken even farther in Purisa Djordjevic’s widely acclaimed 1967 film *Jutro* (“Morning”), which narrates, in a beautifully poetic as well as an often ironic manner, the very last day of the war in a small Serbian town.²⁴ *Jutro* juxtaposes the sheer joy of victory and survival and a deep, inspired commitment to the revolution with the unspeakable anguish of those who lost their loved ones in the previous four years (or might still lose them in the course of Communist reprisals). As one film critic noted, while *Jutro* symbolizes the dawn of the new era and the “gun fire has stopped, struggles still continue within ourselves. In the film, we see both blossoming fruits and dead people hanging from the trees. Flowers and corpses denote a moment in which the end of the war and the beginning of peace merge into one.”²⁵

But Djordjevic’s film sought to demonstrate more than the mere co-existence of such contradictory emotions and psychological states: it emphasised the incongruousness of these two motives in often provocative ways, and partly because of this, *Jutro* caused major political controversies and debates among Yugoslavia’s cultural public.²⁶ One of the most colourful and provocative characters, partisan Mali, attracted particularly severe disapproval from more conservative sections of the audience, and in particular of those who

---

saw themselves as the guardians of the memory of the revolution. Mali was accused of disrespecting the victims of the war, when, at one of his comrades’ funerals, he announced that he was simply too elated to have survived to weep and feel true sorrow: “I can’t feel sorry for anyone anymore, ... I can’t lie anymore when everything in me rejoices that I managed to stay alive, my ears, eyes, feet.” Mali’s response, often dismissed as too cynical by contemporary critics and commentators, still captured very well the complex, apparently irresolvable contradictions of that liminal postwar moment: as the film zooms in on his dead friend’s obituary (“our beloved son and brother, shot in December 1944...”), Mali invites his female comrade to go dancing. In Djordjevic’s (and Mali’s) defence, film critic Zivko Milic argued that Mali was hardly a monster but an authentic representative of Yugoslavia’s postwar “morning of the victory,” which, despite the massacres, death and mass grieving, was marked by “outbursts of delight”: “on that day, in our streets as well as in the souls of our people, were there lights of joy, were there round dances everywhere, or did everything look like a funeral?”

But Djordjevic likely did aim to do more than simply describe the elated atmosphere of the immediate postwar: the very outrageousness of Mali’s words was meant to challenge and provoke, and it indicated that happiness, celebrations and enjoyment might have come at the expense of grieving, that they made the articulation and expression of sorrow and mourning impossible. As a young female partisan says to a Soviet officer who jokingly asks her what she would do if he dies during the upcoming battle for Berlin, “We will cry a little, but then we will forget.”

*Jutro* begins with a memorable sentence, uttered by one of its leading female characters: “peace resounded like a bomb,” which emphasised multiple psychological continuities between wartime and peacetime. The film’s cheerful and breezy tone is, however, often intercut with deeply disturbing scenes of grieving or dead people and with narratives of wartime brutalities. Juxtaposed with Mali’s *joie de vivre* are the drawn, haggard faces of elderly women and men who march around the town carrying photographs of their dead or missing family members, attempting to find out how they died. An arrested Chetnik soldier is walked through the town before his execution, chanting “I killed seventy-two of your comrades,” while a crowd of desperate locals follows him around, showing him their sons’.

daughters’, fathers’ or neighbours’ photographs as he explains with chilling calmness and indifference how and where he slaughtered each one of them.

The song which runs through the film further symbolizes the complex emotional moment of this extraordinary last day of war and first day of peace. The melody and the female singer’s voice are cheerful, light and buoyant, but this cheerfulness is undermined by the song’s unnerving lyrics, which narrate the seemingly endless list of names of all those who were killed or slaughtered in the course of the war, by the “Germans, Bulgarians, Hungarians.” As we watch the town prepare for a mass funeral, and family members and neighbours gather in sombre silence, the song warns that “the Germans have killed the face” of the town, and wonders how to tell all the mothers, sisters, girlfriends about so many deaths of their dearest, doubting whether they might be able to recover. “It is peace, but Jovan is dead,” laments the song further, asking what to do with all the pain and absences once the morning arrives and the war is finally and formally over. When the morning of the revolution dawns, will true peace be possible, or has, as the song cryptically concludes, this “new-born freedom shot peace in the heart?”

In 1961, Zivojin Pavlovic condemned Yugoslavia’s film industry as a whole, accusing it of no less than “falsifying” the history of World War II and the revolution. “Recalling memories burnt by the war, poring through authentic documents and photographs, and carrying the scars of heavy traumas which that time left on our childhoods,” the generations growing up and maturing in the aftermath of the war, concluded Pavlovic, had to notice that a true and complete artistic representation of this “bloody and fateful history” was completely missing from Yugoslav filmography, even though numerous WWII films had been produced. In these acclaimed war movies, the soldiers and activists who created the venerated legacy of the revolution seemingly “did not truly waste away in dungeons, did not die and did not kill.” Pavlovic protested vehemently against the Yugoslav film artists’ tendency to sanitize and beautify the enormous tragedies and psychological suffering of wartime and cover them with “idealised romanticism,” producing the “kitsch of the revolution instead of revolutionary art.” Juxtaposing a photograph of an actual partisan soldier – ragged,

emaciated but with a supremely determined look in his eyes – with a still from an early Yugoslav war film, depicting polished, made-up and well-dressed partisans, Pavlovic asked whether it was not “shameless for ‘art’ to give [real resistance soldiers] such doubles” as in the second picture. Instead of dealing honestly with “tragic deaths,” Yugoslav war films offered “dilettante performances.” In Pavlovic’s view, this sustained artistic “lie about the revolution” in fact offended those whose lives were permanently scarred by the tragedy of the German occupation, civil war and ideological infighting, denying them authentic (and poetic) representation and an opportunity to grapple with the difficult social and psychological legacies of the all-pervasive death and violence.30

Pavlovic’s angry article did not pass unnoticed. Unsurprisingly, it was Vjeko Afric, the director of the very first World War II film “Slavica” (also hailed as Yugoslavia’s first sound film), who took issue with Pavlovic’s (rather harsh) interpretations. In Afric’s response, it became clear that any artistic insistence on suffering, trauma and psychological pain experienced in the course of the war was seen as incompatible with narratives of struggle, proud resistance and victory: “does [Pavlovic] think that our fighters for freedom died tragically? That they suffered in silence? That they went down under the blows of fate? [...] Our fighters fought and died. Under the gallows they still fought. This is what the raised fist of Stevan Filipovic [a partisan about to be hanged] tells us, not about ‘tragic deaths.’”31 In this narrative, therefore, Pavlovic’s suggestion that World War II visited tragic deaths and individual suffering upon citizens of Yugoslavia (and its resistance soldiers in particular) worked to undermine the history of struggle, fighting and resistance: those who fought and felt no fear in the face of occupiers did not die tragically, and those who resisted could not have suffered, even though they might have experienced unspeakable hardships and torture. In this sense, for Afric, a former partisan himself and one of Yugoslavia’s foremost directors at the time, the very fact of revolutionary resistance and heroic anti-fascist struggle denied the possibility of suffering and tragedy; the latter were reserved for those who “took it in in silence.”32

30 Ibid., 17.
32 Ibid., 2.
Afric’s response was quite representative of the official take on this debate. Petar Volk, one of Yugoslavia’s most influential film and theatre critics, scholars and decision-makers, referred to Delije as a “strange and difficult film,” and dismissed its complex engagement with the war’s damning psychological legacies as an attempt to “make waging wars senseless and turn victory and freedom into sources of new misery and absurdity.”

Moreover, in Volk’s interpretation, the film’s overbearing cynicism denied the very meaning of life. Popovic’s exploration of the emotional turmoil and internal struggles faced by those who lost everything in the war was thus deemed subversive in and of itself, as it might undermine the Yugoslav audience’s confidence in the overall meaning of the revolution and anti-fascist resistance. As Volk noted in relation to another one of Popovic’s controversial films, such close examinations of people’s descent into destructiveness and criminality might “kill faith in man” and “threaten our humanity.”

It is striking that in Yugoslavia, whose population suffered one of the most brutal occupation systems in WWII Europe and witnessed (and took part in) a merciless civil war, discussing the tragic nature of the 1940s and their possible psychological legacies proved to be controversial. In his contribution to the public debate about Jutro (Morning, 1967), film critic Zivko Milic felt it appropriate to remind his colloquitors that “war is an awful human tragedy and the fact that our revolution had a progressive role did not mean that it was not a war as well, that it did not have its sinister side of horrors.” Here, Milic seemed to object to the idea that revolution and suffering were incompatible, and that narratives of tragic wartime losses and psychological sacrifices somehow undermined the achievements, legacies and progress of the revolution. Moreover, Milic continued, “hating the war does not mean hating the revolution, it does not even mean hating those who took part in the war, its flags, its victories.” In other words, an honest appraisal and remembrance of war-related psychological wounds and war’s emotional toll did not tarnish the heroic memory of

---

34 Volk followed the Party line: subsequent to the release of Delije, the Yugoslav Communist Party’s Commission for Culture condemned the film’s attempt to “soil the revolution and all its legacies, putting a question mark over everything that was good and positive in that revolution.” Quoted in: Radina Vucetic, Monopol na istinu: Partija, kultura i cenzura u Srbiji seadesetih i sedamdesetih godina XX veka (Belgrade: Clio, 2016), 274.
35 Volk (1975), 144.
resistance, anti-fascism and socialist victory. However, Milic’s article might also offer a glimpse into why postwar discussions of “war traumas” were so difficult and controversial: writing of the war’s horrors, he urged the public to understand and accept the film director’s decision to show even those “individuals who, as victims of war psychosis, behaved in ways which might be unexpected in a civilisation aspiring to be humanistic.” It would appear that Milic’s understanding of “war psychosis” and its victims only extended to those members of the victorious army who acted in objectionable and inhumane ways, who might have compromised the revolution and the purity of the Communist Party’s victory through their troubled and unreasonable actions. Importantly, this narrow reading of war trauma seemingly excludes all other (military and civilian) victims who may have struggled to cope with their unspeakable wartime experiences, and makes it easier to understand why Yugoslav officials, leaders of veteran organisations and more traditional film makers might have wanted to avoid any detailed discussions of the issue.

Given Pavlovic’s strong opinions about cinematic representations of the war in Yugoslavia, it is unsurprising that his 1969 film Zaseda (Ambush) proved to be so politically (and even artistically) controversial. Pavlovic himself described the film as a product of his own childhood trauma, and his troubled memories of the immediate postwar violence and disappointments: “something stormed out of me there – my experience, my spasm over history, which included my childhood and youth, my spasm over divisions, dilemmas, differences... over the fate of a community which was created then and whose roots dated to that time.” The film follows yet another complex lead character, Vrana, whose tragic wartime losses only seem to increase his pure faith in the revolution and in building a better world. But the events and trends he witnesses in a small town in the immediate aftermath of the war cause him increasing distress, and his enthusiasm steadily turns into depression, anxiety and bitterness. Just as in Milic’s observation, the deceitful and intolerant behavior of some of Vrana’s comrades seems to be linked to traumatic experiences: for instance, following the show trial of one of the town’s distinguished figures, a group of young

---

37 For some of their very critical responses to the “black-wave” cinema, see also Dusan Miljanic, “Velika laz o jednom vremenu,” Borba, November 14, 1967; Radoje Radojevic, “Poricanje smisla revolucionarne borbe,” Borba, November 7, 1967.
39 Tirmanic (2008), 94.
Communists proceeds to vandalize his house in a bout of aggression and zealously which indicates their unstable psychological state. As one film critic complained when the film was released, it was the partisans’ “instincts” – political, sexual, psychological – which were portrayed as pathological, irretrievably perverting the revolutionary dream. In addition, the film depicts the psychological and emotional price of multiple conflicts and divisions – social, political, ideological – which played out in the postwar months and years. In the heady days of Yugoslav Stalinism, according to Pavlovic, the revolution showed its brutal face, drawing the population in while playing on their psychological or moral weaknesses.

Avdo Humo, a prominent member of the Communist Party’s Commission for Culture, condemned Zaseda’s narrative line, which, in his opinion, portrayed the partisans literally “losing their minds” after years of fighting and infighting. Pavlovic’s film was additionally politically disruptive in its portrayal of Vrana as the only true, honest revolutionary, whose death at the Communists’ own hands signified that, already in 1945, such ideals were dead as well.

In Zaseda, more than in any other film focusing on psychological trauma, the political disruptiveness of narratives about the personal suffering of war participants came to the fore, while Pavlovic linked his harsh critique of the foundations of the Yugoslav regime with an exploration of dire psychological effects of the immediate postwar era. As one critic of the film exclaimed, “where are the joys and passions, where is the laughter and exaltation, the brightness and self-confidence, where is the life of a revolution!” Unlike some of the most popular war films of the time, Zaseda did nothing to maintain the “revolutionary enthusiasm” of the Yugoslav population, digging instead into the origins of the communist state and shedding unforgiving light on the wounds which the revolution inflicted upon its own most valuable heroes. A jury member of Yugoslavia’s most prestigious film festival in Pula, Croatia, noted that Zaseda should be given a prize because it “distressed viewers the most,” while another believed that the film was “a great truth.”

---

40 “Ostaje nam da cutimo i da patimo,” Knjizevne novine, August 16, 1969 (minutes of the special jury meeting of the Fifteenth Yugoslav Film Festival in Pula, 26 July–2 August 1969).
42 Quoted in Vucetic (2012), 288.
43 For a more detailed account of the regime’s harsh criticism of the film, see Vucetic (2016), 285–9.
number of jury votes, *Zaseda* was not honoured with any of the most important awards, having been deemed too ideologically and politically “flawed” and an “angry negation of history.”

Perpetrators

While these cinematic narratives directly addressed the complex consequences of witnessing or experiencing extreme violence, one of the core themes of Black Wave war films was the trauma of perpetrating violence, of becoming a murderer. This was clearly an issue that would have affected large numbers of Yugoslavs who lived through the war: soldiers from the Yugoslav lands who fought on all sides were a primary concern, but another important and common trope developed in relation to civilians who might have engaged in different forms of violent collaboration while the country experienced an exceptionally brutal occupation system. This was far from a uniquely Yugoslav phenomenon: in Britain as well, for instance, postwar authorities and “psy” professionals grew increasingly anxious about the volatility of violent, destructive impulses which might have been triggered by the external violence of World War II. Some of the most important Black Wave films (as well as pieces of literature) expressed this anxiety about the future of a society which now consisted of possibly experienced perpetrators, whose impulses, reactions and psychological structures might have been irretrievably altered through their involvement in murders and executions. Frequently, the same people would be both – victims and perpetrators of violence – which further complicated postwar challenges and dangers.

In *Delije*, it was the extreme immersion in violence as perpetrators which made it impossible for the brothers to resume their peacetime social roles ever again. In a flashback, Isidor remembers how difficult it was for him to perpetrate his first wartime execution (of a German soldier): after the shooting, which he performed together with his brother, he froze and vomited, while Gvozden encouraged (or consoled) him – “you’ll get used to it.” The problem was, this film suggested, that Isidor and Gvozden did get used to shooting – and murder – as a normal, even necessary aspect of life, and were apparently hardly able to

---

control themselves once demobilised: their obsession with violence meant that they found no other way to release their fears, frustrations and psychological pain. Through their conversations about the existence of God and from flashbacks, it becomes clear that they were religious before the war but through their participation in numerous executions lost that faith. In Jutro, the lightness and carelessness of some of the postwar executions of civilians is shocking, and the partisans who perform them appear unable to feel any empathy for fellow human beings at those moments (even though those same partisans are by no means depicted as monsters): when, at a party, a local piano player, for instance, admits that he served as a German translator during the occupation, he is shot immediately, on the spot, without any prevarication or further inquiry.

One of the most deeply unsettling scenes in this respect comes from yet another film which offered an anguished personal (rather than heroic epic) narrative of the war from the point of view of a partisan soldier turned tragic hero. Stole Jankovic’s 1978 Tren (Moment), based on another war-veteran Antonije Isakovic’s acclaimed novel, follows Arsen’s internal ethical struggles throughout his challenging wartime experiences, but it is his arrival in his home village at the end of the war that deals the worst blow to the partisan’s psychological stability: upon his return, he finds his house destroyed and his entire family killed. But it is the realisation that his family was the only one targeted by the Nazis in this way that sets Arsen off on a quest to understand how this might have occurred. When it becomes clear that the entire village betrayed his family in order to save themselves, Arsen faces his neighbours in long and torturous conversations, in which the villagers are portrayed as, at the same time, victims of extreme violence, silent witnesses of suffering and complicit in murder and destruction. The villagers explain that, after the body of a German soldier appeared in the water, they were required by the occupation authorities to surrender a certain number of hostages from their midst to be shot in reprisals. They directed the Germans to Arsen’s family and told them he was in the Communist resistance.

When Arsen confronts the villagers, they gather in a circle around him: the dividing line between them could not be clearer, Arsen is completely alone, a moral hero of pure

---

conscience but carrying unbearable pain; he could never again be part of the village community, which held responsibility for the death of the innocent. The village elders seem to be undecided regarding the value of re-telling this difficult story, and of revealing the truth: they do want to commemorate the tragedy of Arsen’s family through formal rites and monuments, but reject any continuous reminders of the pain they helped inflict (as it transpires, they killed the family’s dog following the execution, because its barking and whimperers made it impossible to forget what had occurred, and also indicated the dog’s hope that someone – Arsen – might return and exact revenge). This scene still ultimately plays out like group therapy, in which the villagers relive their own complicity and other wartime experiences, recount what they did and ask for forgiveness. The villagers are themselves deeply ambivalent about their own role in the executions, however, and they never take full responsibility: “war is always dirty, it tumbles everything,” one of them says; another one adds that “people must defend themselves in war,” and the line between victims and perpetrators is blurred even further when the village elders start recounting their own suffering and extreme fear at the hands of multiple occupation armies which passed through their community in Arsen’s absence. The very participation in the betrayal of Arsen’s family seemed to have caused exceptional grief as well, and the village elder breaks down in tears remembering the moment when he was tasked with choosing ten hostages from the village: “counting the tribute in blood – it’s horrific business.”

The villagers recognise this war as fundamentally different from any other conflict in their memory, precisely because of its totality, which both targeted civilians and demanded their involvement in massacres and hostilities. “It was your war,” the village elder tells Arsen, in a strangely accusatory tone, “a different war, internal, without borders.” Arsen’s former neighbours do not believe in “his” wars and revolutions, but, as penance for their deeds, they are willing to obey his decisions: “we want to come with you, to your socialism. We will elect you as president, nobody else, the one and only authority, rule over us, we will endure.” From the point of view of postwar reconstruction and recovery of communities and individuals, this was perhaps the film’s most unsettling message: psychologically compromised and deeply morally damaged by their fateful and murderous choices in the war, the villagers are not capable of evolving into independent political citizens and full-fledged members of the new socialist society. They cannot contribute to the revolutionary
makeover in any meaningful way. At best, they can offer to be obedient, docile, and “endure” the socialist government in order to escape any fundamental moral reckoning. Moreover, both the village community and Arsen appear to be irretrievably broken by the roles which the war and the occupation forced them to take on, and the act of confession does not seem to ease the pain of either party in any way: Arsen leaves the village in disgust, having turned gray within only a few hours, and never recovers from his loss (and his own sense of responsibility and guilt), while the villagers strive to perform their repentance and move on, but remain anxious and worried that Arsen might curse them. The film as a whole, and this final scene in particular, raise the question of the war’s *long-duree* psychological and political effects, and offer a rather pessimistic interpretation of possible attempts to overcome such traumas through commemoration, political change or reconciliation.

**Personal and national traumas**

By the 1980s, the political situation had changed radically, and this had a decisive effect on the public presentation and discussions of the notions of trauma and violence. For the first time, a Yugoslav film adopted a broadly psychoanalytic approach to the issue of war-related psychological suffering: Aleksandar Fotez’s *Lazar* was made in 1984, and dealt with traumatic memory and repression by zooming in on a particularly troubled village family in postwar Serbia. The film follows a mother and her son – Lazar - who eke out a miserable existence about twenty years after the war. The mother is deeply and permanently mentally disabled, while Lazar, born during the war, is mute and appears developmentally stunted; their lives seem to be frozen in the tragic events of the war, from which they could never move on. During one day, the mother tells Lazar the full story of the experience which transformed their lives – a Chetnik attack at the very end of the war. The story of the war’s escalating tragedies takes up the entire film and Lazar undergoes immense pain, at times trying to force his mother to stop talking, but once everything is told and relived, he grows out of his mutism and infantilism, and the sinister, lurking presence of the war’s evil moves away from the house. It is necessary, the film seems to suggest, to relive and “work

---

through” the most difficult of memories in order to break the traumatic event’s hold on one’s psyche. Once the “original trauma” is remembered, retold and shared, its effects become manageable.

Despite its prevailingly dark and labored atmosphere, the film ends on a surprisingly optimistic note. But by the mid-1980s there was little reason for political optimism, especially in relation to commemorating the war’s most difficult events: in the public discourse, the issue of recovering “repressed” wartime memories came to the fore, but it was not personal memories that political elites were addressing – the discussion moved to the plane of “national trauma” and the collective suffering of individual ethnic communities in Yugoslavia. In fact, the 1980s in Yugoslavia witnessed what Jasna Dragovic-Soso referred to as an “outburst of history”: a period of intense reconsiderations of some of the most sensitive themes in Yugoslav communist historiography.48 These discussions escalated – and became extremely popular well outside academic and intellectual circles – in the decade following Tito’s death, when political, constitutional and economic crises were confounded by rising nationalist tensions in the multi-ethnic state. Unsurprisingly, they were dominated by nationalist revisionist reinterpretations of World War II and the establishment of socialist Yugoslavia. Such revisionist narratives were almost always couched in terms of repression: supposed political repression of particular national or opposition groups, as well as the repression of traumatic memories of wartime massacres and crimes in the official socialist historiography. While the Yugoslav historiography of World War II and the attendant civil war by no means suppressed the historical knowledge and memory of fascist and collaborationist violence against civilians, it often aimed to “de-ethnicize” it, de-emphasizing the national belonging of both perpetrators and victims, and subsuming them under the overarching narrative of the Yugoslav peoples’ common struggle against fascist occupation and bourgeois collaborators.

The most important and wide-ranging debates along these lines occurred in Serbia. From the early 1980s on, some of the most prominent Serbian intellectuals insisted that, in socialist Yugoslavia, Serbs, as the largest constitutive nation, suffered numerous injustices,

---

48 Jasna Dragovic-Soso, Saviours of the Nation: Serbia’s Intellectual Opposition and the Revival of Nationalism (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 64.
while their enormous victimisation at the hands of the Croatian Ustasha in the course of World War II remained a taboo. These historians, writers, poets saw the current political crisis as a result of the Serbian nation’s subordinated position, and its inability to mourn and get justice for its own wartime victims. In that sense, the Serbian people took the role of Lazar in the above-mentioned film – just like Lazar’s illness could not be cured until the full horror of his wartime experience was openly recounted and relived, the Serbs had to have their own suffering acknowledged and aired in public before their political community could heal and move on.49 It is striking that this motive of the repression of traumatic memories played such an important role in the deterioration of relations between different national groups in Yugoslavia in the 1980s: the narrative of a victimised and suppressed nation, whose wartime suffering was further exacerbated by postwar humiliation and political weakening, was central to the Serbian national mobilisation and the violent escalation of ethnic conflicts.50 Towards the end of Yugoslavia, when complex psychological effects of difficult and violent wartime (and postwar) experiences could finally be discussed more openly in the public sphere, the attention of Serbian public opinion shifted away from personal suffering to commemorating collective, national “traumas.”

These narratives of national injustice and victimisation were not largely developed in films, but primarily in literary works and theatre plays. Some of the most popular and widely read Yugoslav novels of the 1980s addressed the brutal crimes of the collaborationist Ustasha regime against Serbian and Jewish citizens of the wartime Independent State of Croatia; these novels abounded in gory details of the Ustasha violence, and often depicted socialist Yugoslavia as an artificial, forced political creation, built upon silence about the “genocide” against Serbs. Such works also sent a problematic message about the future of Yugoslavia’s multi-ethnic structures: they often described the lingering postwar tensions between different ethnic communities, primarily in Bosnia and Croatia, which stemmed from their inability to talk about their wartime conflicts (and the role of Croat and Muslim populations in crimes against Serb civilians). Such is Jovan Radulovic’s 1983 play Golubnjaca (Pigeon Pit),

which poignantly painted the hopelessness and misery of a mixed Serb and Croat village of the 1960s.\textsuperscript{51} The long shadow of the wartime massacre against Serbian villagers (whose bodies were thrown into a nearby ravine – the Pigeon Pit) made it impossible for either community to overcome such experiences, precisely because, according to the play, the socialist authorities prevented any serious discussion of those massacres, its victims and its perpetrators and their responsibility. The abyss which thus opened between the two communities could not be papered over in any way, and the play demonstrated that by showing how inter-ethnic hostility and lack of understanding were perpetuated in the behavior of the local children. The official ideology of communist “brotherhood and unity” was thus depicted as a hollow and at times cynical attempt to prevent entire families from seeking closure and justice for their unspeakable pain. The bleak reality of postwar multi-ethnic communities, filled with threats, fear and recriminations, could not be further from the communist aim of building a supranational state. The staging of the play was, unsurprisingly, very problematic, and it was repeatedly banned as it was deemed that “its treatment of relations between nations is unacceptable.”\textsuperscript{52} In spite of this, the narrative which the play promoted became the leitmotiv of the 1980s. These were the roots of the subsequent (and widely accepted) narrative of the 1990s’ wars as an eruption of stifled ethnic conflicts, which had been brewing under the surface of the seemingly harmonious socialist Yugoslavia.

According to 1980s’ Serbian public opinion, therefore, the fundamental conflict, which was at the core of Yugoslavia’s political crisis and undermined the very possibility of multi-ethnic solidarity, was one between personal or family war memories of Serbs, and the official (repressive) state memory. The revival of those personal memories, however, was not to serve the psychological healing and emancipation of affected individuals: it was used and orchestrated by a variety of elites to foment fear of future crimes and massacres. The existence of supposedly unacknowledged past genocides against Serbs, and of the communist state’s “conspiracy of silence,” which Serbian intellectuals argued protected perpetrators in the name of political stability, was used to suggest that such crimes might happen again. The narrative of repressed traumatic memories promoted the idea that the

\textsuperscript{51} Jovan Radulovic, \textit{Golubnjaca} (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1983).
\textsuperscript{52} Dragovic-Soso (2002), 106.
Serbian nation was in existential danger yet again; for instance, a leading Serbian historian attempted to prove that the Croatian elites harbored centuries-long “genocidal intentions” towards Croatian Serbs.

While the Serbian intellectual revisionist debates were the most wide-ranging and prominent, the late Yugoslav period saw a revival of a number of other painful historical memories, whose discussion was difficult and sensitive in the preceding decades. Alongside books and plays about Serbian victimhood, new memoirs and fictional works about inmates’ experiences at the Goli Otok camp – an exceptionally brutal prison where the Yugoslav regimes sent those suspected of pro-Stalinist sympathies following the 1948 break with the Soviet Union - flooded the Yugoslav market from the mid-1980s on. At the same time, right-wing Croatian intellectuals, mirroring the Serbian debates, sought to portray Croats as the greatest victims of World War II, and raised the issue of the victorious communist army’s reprisals against (collaborationist) Croat soldiers as well as large numbers of civilians in the final weeks of the war. Public commemorations of these victims in the Bleiburg Field (in Austria, near the Slovenian border, where thousands of retreating collaborationist military units, the Ustasha political leadership and many civilians surrendered to the British troops but were then sent back to Yugoslavia and captured by Tito’s forces) continued throughout most of the socialist period but were heavily monitored by the Yugoslav intelligence services. The Bleiburg tragedy functioned as the core symbol of the communist repression of the Croat nation, and it quickly took center stage in the cultural politics of the newly independent Croatian state. In that sense, the 1980s saw an exceptionally successful and widespread construction of mirroring narratives of repressed wartime traumas, violence and victimisation, which were all linked to intensifying demands for a radical reconsideration of the history of World War II. Moreover, the wars of the 1990s were directly related to experiences of World War II precisely through such narratives of repressed memory and unarticulated trauma. At the end of Yugoslavia, in stark contrast to its early period, discussions about wartime “trauma” dominated the public sphere and

54 Vjeran Pavlakovic and Davor Paukovic, eds, Framing the nation and collective identities: Political rituals and cultural memory of the twentieth-century traumas in Croatia (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).
political relations, but they served explicitly national(ist) rather than personal psychological aims.