

On Idealists and Realists

A Memory of Fear, Silence and the 1990s Yugoslav Wars

MAJA PETROVIĆ-ŠTEGER

In contemporary Serbia, human and other remains of the 1990s wars, besides being understood as mythological, religious and political, are acquiring a new quality. Post-conflict forensic intervention into the landscapes of the Yugoslav mass graves had offered a new, DNA-based evaluation of dead bodies and other remnants. It is no longer possible to sustain the claim that traditional private (and public) treatment of the remains represents an index of backwardness, political propaganda and atavism, as was maintained in the early 1990s. On the contrary, foreign agencies today see the active involvement of locals in questions of the remains and their commemoration as progressive, liberal and moral.

But how do Serbs see morality and the memories of the 1990s wars, and how do they experience post-conflict time? In an anthropological monograph, provisionally entitled *Human Remains, Postconflict Spirits: An Anthropology of Redress in Contemporary Serbia and Tasmania*, I attempt to fathom and answer these questions.¹ While focusing on specific political practices around the dead body, the book draws particular attention to an increasingly important supranational language and code of practice in claiming to right past wrongs, as rectification takes human remains as its assumed evidence and their management as its central mode.

What follows is an excerpt from a fieldwork interview from 2003. It is a portrait of an ex-soldier talking about fear, silence and memories of the war.

Srđan's Story

After a number of afternoons spent with Mrs Krušić in her apartment and her office, she asked me one day if I would like to meet her cousin, the husband of her late sister's daughter. In her words, he was a young, silent man, who "foolishly spends all his time in practicing martial arts and Capoeira", but as he had some war experience, she thought he might prove interesting to me.

When I met Srđan, I was immediately struck by his extremely erect posture, which turned out to match the linearity of the story he told. Unlike most of my respondents, who would jump around in their recollections much as they would restlessly get up and walk about the room, Srđan inclined on a wooden chair whilst offering me his confidences. His tale began

in 1991 when, in order to do his obligatory military service, he spent nine months in the battlefields on the borders of Serbia and Croatia. He was only 20 years old at the time, a young and successful freeclimber and speleologist. In his memory, it was a snowless but very long and cold winter. The fields cracked under the thick mist and ice and the weight of people and cattle running away, trying to find shelter.

The story is very simple. There is no mystery about it whatsoever. I started as a Yugoslav army soldier but very soon became a member of a paramilitary unit, part of its diversion squad. [...] When we were away from the frontline, we used to live in a motel. The people, I mean the locals, accepted us quickly. The food was fine as there were plenty of potatoes and vagrant cattle that nobody had wanted to take along. [...] We were a small division of just 12 people, but on manoeuvres, we would move only in groups of four. That was the best number. The most efficient, for sure. There we would often bump into the old hunters, people who just rambled around, or into the army units, which did not know who they were meant to fight and who they were meant to protect. It was a mess. A real mess, I'm telling you. [...] Although I had trained at shooting as a sport even before the war, it took me a while to get used to 65 percent of the weaponry used. And I had no time to lose. I had to be sober and quick in working out and anticipating what would happen, if I was to survive. I had to move. You had to move. To keep moving all the time. If you stopped moving, you would die. [...] Nobody died in my unit though. We were very organised, and protected each other at all times. The rule was that either all of us would fall or none. One couldn't carry on, alive or dead, once others had died. That was the ultimate rule.

When I asked what he would have done had somebody died, and whether he had seen any burials whilst in the war, he answered:

Whenever we came across the dead, they would be transported into the back-ground. The villagers usually did the burying of the locals. Professional soldiers were transported back to their homes through army channels. The same system that provided us with food was used as a channel for transporting the dead. The army worked very well. But that is not the important thing... since nobody died in my squad.

Although I had not expected an emotional account of his wartime experience, I felt slightly uncomfortable listening to Srđan's detailed spatial and technical rendition. His calm, practically forensic characterisations of the scene brought to my mind texts of military literature in which the narratives are fully ordered and defined, bulked out with the imagery of knights-errant. The only thing betraying his nervousness was the odour of the sweat in the dim room full of children's toys and sports equipment. While talking to me, Srđan would stand up only to fetch

food or tea for Tara, his two-year-old daughter. Although they agreed that she should stay with her grandmother in the other room, the girl kept coming in for a hug or a cuddle with her father. Their fragility and tenderness contrasted strongly with the ambience otherwise and with the room's walls being completely covered in medals, escutcheons, bows, spears, pistols and paintings of forests.

Srdan confessed he was unsettled on his return to Belgrade. Everybody expected he would be happy to be home, but he felt nervous, tense and unfocused, and was unable to gather his resources for a long time.

In the squad, I was active, and my instincts were on full alert. I was alive even though I was surrounded with the dead. But back home, in Belgrade, I became a dead person. Although this [Belgrade] is a super-fast environment, really charged with life, I felt really disturbed... distracted so to speak. There were too many sounds, too much light, too many people and too much information all of a sudden... I felt hugely uncomfortable. I simply could not pull myself together. I felt as if I was under attack. Certainly much more so than I felt while on the battlefields. It sounds stupid, I know. I craved for the silence and the sound of the wind. Back there, I felt oddly calm and somehow natural. I felt as if I was developing new senses and instincts in the forest. But here, in town... it was just too much.

"It should have been easy", he said, "to go out and find people to talk about it, as many wanted to compete with their fictitious warfare achievements or to moralise about the cruelties of war, even though they did not get off their backsides and leave Mummy's warm home". But he could not talk to anyone. The only person with whom he was at peace was his grandfather. I asked if he could tell more about what he said to him. Instead of answering me, he turned his head away. His voice became slightly more upset and almost imperceptibly angrier than before.

I never wanted to say anything back then. You know, it was very popular for a while to talk about your war experiences. And then, just as it had been popular, it became very unpopular all of a sudden. People started to treat me as a criminal, as an abnormal person, as somebody who obviously suffered from 'Vietnam Syndrome' or something like that. This entire story about Vietnam Syndrome is fundamentally idiotic anyway because if we follow that logic, then all the people who live in the Balkans are completely crazy. Everybody here was in the war or at least has someone that fought at some time in the past. Just count the wars: the revolutions against the Turks, the First World War, the Thesaloniki war, the Second World War, the Partisans' and the Četniks' war... we fought so much that we must then all be mad.

He went on:

The story about the war is so dependent on politics, so exploited by it, full of it, that it really irritates me. And the story that's doing the rounds now, the story of truth, accountability and reconciliation, well, that's just the most insulting story I've heard for a long time. It's just being used as a political front and nothing else. I don't know anyone who's really been reconciled through this programme. This is why I don't want to discuss it. Our politicians want to appear democratic all of a sudden, and this stuff just furthers their ambitions. These bastards aren't any better than the war profiteers were. They are peace profiteers [*mirnodopski profiter*], nothing else. [...] Come on, we live in Serbia. We can't be citizens of the world and Europeans all of a sudden. I can't stand these stories. This is also why I never go to Croatia, to the seaside, although we have a house there. I'd go to Slovenia, Greece, to Montenegro, wherever, but I couldn't go to Croatia anymore... Because I know, I know there are going to be more problems in the future. Things can't be resolved or forgotten so quickly. In my family, we used to say, if you put rotten meat into a fridge, you see how much it stinks only when it begins to melt! And this is what is happening today.

Stroking his daughter's head in his lap, he concluded: "I cannot let myself be scarred again. I simply can't".

It took many more interviews and detailed family histories for me to understand that his last sentence referred less to the physical wounds he got in the war than his profound fear of subsequent emotional injury. With time, I learned that Srđan's family, although ethnically Serbian, had been settled in Croatia for as long as they could remember. Both his mother and father came from villages that were geographically very close to the place where he spent the winter of 1991. As he assured me, he could not have known that he would be posted to the region at the time of his mobilisation into the army. His aunt, whom I met on a couple of occasions, explained to me that during 1943 and 1944, the greater part of their family was slaughtered by the Ustaša while the other part perished from tuberculosis.² Her father, Srđan's grandfather, was captured and imprisoned, but once the war was over, he returned to his native village, close to Slavonska Požega. She remembers that, as a child, Srđan used to spend all his summer vacations with his grandparents, playing in the woods, helping them look after cattle or manure the fields. After implying that I had heard bits and pieces of his grandfather's life, Srđan told me his grandfather, then a retired schoolteacher, had taught his grandson many things and had discussed the Second World War with him. Even as a small child, Srđan was able to distinguish indigenous inhabitants from newcomers in the village. Many ritual practices of village life were also impressed upon him. He remembers what flowers to plant by the family vault – sage was supposedly particularly good for the ancestors' spirits – and he still remembers how he was told off whenever he climbed the apple tree that grew by the tomb.

Although they had a huge, marble family vault in the village, old Ilija, my grandfather, decided to move to Serbia the moment the last war broke out, back in 1991. Within a couple of months, he managed to swap his household with a Croat who lived in Serbia and wanted to join his family in Croatia. They bartered the land and the house, and, as Ilija said, everything went through properly, in a neat and legal fashion. The Croatian guy was a very nice man, and both of them were happy with the deal. The man even helped him once, when he brought the remains of his wife and family to the new place. [...] You see, I remember all these details. I rarely dream, but if I do, I often dream about that apple tree. It's nothing special, I know, but I feel sort of impaired and somehow... cheated. I don't want to attach myself emotionally to the people there anymore because... that's just not good for me. I know I will lose them again. This is why I will not let my daughter be taken to the Croatian seaside. The experiences I lived through have altered my criteria. I want to distance myself. Not to feel hatred or contempt – I do not want to feel anything, actually... I just want to be free.

Srdan struck me as harsh in his assertions of the cyclical logic and the unbreakability of the historical hatreds of the former Yugoslavia. This wasn't so much because of the conventionality of his argument, which would be accepted by many (or at least would have been back in early 2000), but because of how comfortably he seemed able to state his position, which came over as less an attempt to rationalise his own experience and more as something imputed as a form of embodied knowledge to his family background. It wasn't so much that he sensed or feared that ethnic conflict might eventually flare up again as that he had gained access to the 'knowledge' that it would – if ever he failed to take sufficient care. He spoke of his war experiences not as a source of warrior pride or as a disease, but rather as the basis for a survival manual.

At this moment, Slađana, Srdan's wife, came back from work and broke into our discussion. I had met Slađana before, and I knew how devoted she was to her husband. I also knew that despite the depth of their relationship, she had found it hard for a long time to reconcile herself to the fact that he had been an actual combatant in the war. Frequently describing him as the most dignified, tender and chivalrous man she had ever met, she confided to me that it was still a problem to her to accept how deep the martial strain in his family ran. While he was still in the room, she said:

I had a different childhood, you know. My parents raised me and my brother in the spirit of Tito, of a united Yugoslavia. I believed that the Yugoslav army was supposed to protect all of us and not side with some against the others. My grandmother was a well-respected professor of Law and Socialism at the University. I was taught to love differences and to... eh... But what am I talking for? I don't know. Maybe he is right when he says Tara can't be taught in this way. He says she must learn to be a realist and not an empty idealist. [Slađana looked at Srdan

as she said this, somewhat questioningly.] He wants to take her to the villages to see how cattle are killed so she can know what she eats, where food comes from. And that frightens me. It really does. So much, actually. I don't want my child to become squeamish, but I fear for her.

Srdan shook his head and went to the kitchen. It was more than obvious that he wanted to change the subject. Looking at the sports medals that hung on the walls, I asked him if he kept up his conditioning for anything but freeclimbing. "Yes, I was a passionate speleologist and studied geology. I always dreamt of travelling to Africa and the East. I wanted to go to the border of Chad and Libya and draw geo-charts there. But that doesn't make sense anymore. I have a private business now and work with satellite communications". In a very business-like, technical manner, he turned to the laptop, wanting to show me his webpage and portfolio, but at that very moment, the electricity switched off. When we realised that all other windows in the block were brightly lit but ours, Slađana started yelling at Srdan. I finished the interview, excused myself and left. But on the way home, Slađana's screamed reproaches kept coming back to me:

Couldn't you pay the bills for God's sake?! I put out the money and the bill. Do you always have to forget such essential things? It's always the same with you. Always. Don't you ever dare accuse me again of being an idealist. You think you are a realist or what? If it weren't for me, I don't know how we would manage this house at all! It is you who can't even get on top of the simplest thing like bills!

Postscriptum

The narrative I have illustrated above, one of very many collected in the book, runs a gamut of emotions associated with experiences of fear, loss and personal insecurity in the former Yugoslavia. The account is neither self-contained nor self-evident as to its import. The people I spoke with have chosen to tell me stories about the relations they were willing to expose, objects they found important, or activities, dreams and memories that continued to haunt their everyday lives. The stories show the tellers riveted and undone by these very relations, by the objects and memories that still exercise them. Although many accounts had a firm narrative dimension, the stories were not always chronologically ordered: often they began with their end, or sought to shed light on what was their temporal middle, moving back and forth in time to describe the respondents' childhood or to outline their possible futures. In analysing their narratives, I have appropriated this storytelling rhythm as a method in itself. By mimicking their narrational movements, my parsing has also gone backwards and forwards in trying to understand the burden of their words. In so doing, I was interested in the manner in which these interrelated stories, beliefs and activities help maintain, regulate and transmit sentiments out of which ideas about past conflict and human remains are constituted. Cautioned that "the situation of discourse is not the same as what is said or, indeed, what is sayable" (Butler, 2004: 139), I treated the narrative not only as

rhetoric but as enunciation, linking people with their imagined and experienced histories, and structuring their future expectations.

My intention in recalling these ethnographic moments is to point to the various ways in which history, war and ideas about the future may be constituted. These are produced, maintained and transmitted not only in stories but also in objects, in people's activities, or in their reluctance to perform them, in their opinions (about reconciliation, and NGOs, for example), in their experiences of travelling and of places. In their fears. They thus form the techniques and technologies of accounting for time, change, affliction and emotions in post-conflict Serbia.

In exploring the ongoing promotion of images of and practices relating to human and other remains, the rehearsed stories of a conflictual past and of shattered families were constructive also in permitting the enumeration and organisation of my respondents' family histories. As Slađana said to me on one occasion:

I have never thought as much and as deeply of my family as I did in the last couple of years. I have such a deep urge now to learn everything, to write down every single memory from our family history, and to talk about it with my daughter when she grows up. [...] The problem is, I still have to decide which history I will tell her. Mine or my husband's.

Notes

1. In its comparative analysis of the trajectories taken by dead bodies in the post-conflict scenarios of Serbia and Tasmania, *Human Remains, Postconflict Spirit* (forthcoming) investigates the treatment of human remains, and the conceptualisation, evaluation and numbering of dead bodies by legal and technoscientific apparatuses as they imaginatively project body parts into novel configurations of what it is to be human. The book asks in what ways does DNA identification of missing persons' body parts inform collective political, legal and moral understandings of justice and reconciliation? What counts as, and what gauges the value of, a dead body in a post-conflict society? How many pieces of human remains constitute a person worth claiming for repatriation in a time of bioscientific and technological advances?
2. During the later part of the Second World War, in which Yugoslavia fought against German occupation, along with the war atrocities, mass slaughters also occurred among Yugoslavs themselves. More than a million Yugoslavs died in the war, mostly at the hands of other Yugoslavs. Committed by numerous groups, and on all sides (the perpetrators being Partisans against those perceived as fascists; Croatian fascists, known as Ustaša, against Serbs, Jews and Gypsies; Serbian royalists, known as Četniks, against Partisans, Muslims and other Croats, etc.), these multiple massacres, mention of which was silenced and suppressed during Tito's regime, became the object of revisionist histories, usually political and nationalistic, in the late 1980s.

Reference

- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2004, London/ New York).