Twenty Years After : Was Ethnic War Just a Myth ?

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During the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, and up to the present day, a gap has emerged between public opinion leaning toward interpreting these wars in ethnic terms, and academic circles rejecting such an interpretation. A good illustration of this state of affair is the quasi-ritualistic way academics denounce « *Balkan Ghosts* » – an essay by Robert Kaplan that was widely reported on in the media[1] – and explain the flaws in US policy towards former Yugoslavia by the fact that Bill Clinton was one of its readers. I don't know how realistic it is to explain the foreign policy of the American superpower by reference to a book, however bad it may be, but I would like to emphasize the fact that Yugoslav wars have indeed an ethnic or ethno-national dimension, among others. The main stake of the Yugoslav wars remains the building of nation-states on the ruins of the Yugoslav plurinational state, and these wars can not be properly understood without taking into account ethno-nationalist mobilization of various kinds and intensities. More generally, local societies in former Yugoslavia are characterized by complex interethnic relations that various nationalist actors have tried to manipulate, reshape or destroy. In this paper, I will address these three intertwined aspects of the Yugoslav wars – nation-state building, ethno-nationalist mobilization and everyday interethnic relations. In order to do so, I have chosen to refer back to the book « *Bosnie, anatomie d'un conflit* »[2] I published in 1996, a few weeks after the end of the Bosnian war, and to discuss the ways it has been used or criticized by some authors. I will also refer to other books or papers published since then that enrich our thinking on the Yugoslav wars.

The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina : A « New War » ?

In my book « *Bosnie, anatomie d'un conflit* », I distinguished between regular armies made of professional officers and mobilized soldiers, criminal militias led by political extremists or ordinary thugs, and local militias created for the defense of a village or a neighborhood. I showed how these various military formations interacted within the context of a violent political reshaping of the Yugoslav space : whereas the Yugoslav People's Army was providing weapons to Serb militias, the Croat and Bosnian armies developed in part through the merging of various criminal and local militias. In the longer term, the course of the war depended on the capacity of each nascent nation-state to restore its monopoly on legitimate violence and to incorporate into its own army the militias it had contributed to creating. Therefore, state-building was at the core of the Yugoslav wars. At the same time, I showed that the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina spawned a specific war economy that can be divided into two different spheres : a survival economy on which the main share of the population relied (humanitarian aid, agriculture, etc.), and a predatory economy controlled by a minority of « war profiteers ». Predation was linked either to ethnic cleansing (looting and racketeering of expelled population) or to black market around besieged territories, such as the city of

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[1] Robert KAPLAN, *Balkan Ghosts : A Journey through History*, New York : St Martin's Press, 1993.
[2] Xavier BOUGAREL, *Bosnie : anatomie d'un conflit*, Paris : La Découverte, 1996.

Sarajevo investigated by Peter Andreas in his book « *Blue Helmets and Black Markets* »[3]. In the longer term, this specific war economy transformed the local shape of the war and endangered the cohesion of each ethno-national community ; against this background, the course of the war depended once again on the capacity of each state to collect taxes and to restart industrial production.

In her book « *New and Old Wars* »[4], Mary Kaldor has used this analysis of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina to portray it as one of the « new wars » of the late twentieth century. In her opinion, these « new wars » differ from earlier inter-state wars and are characterized by a high proportion of civilian victims, the importance of non-state military formations, and the flourishing of a transnational criminal economy. However, such an interpretation of my work ignores the fact that, in 1996, I defined the state as the main stake of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Since then, new data have challenged the definition of this war as a « new war » in the sense given by Mary Kaldor. First of all, statistics from Mirsad Tokača's Research and Documentation Center show that a majority of war victims were soldiers (59,2 %)[5]. Moreover, a large majority of Bosnian adult males have fought as mobilized soldiers in one of the three warring armies, whereas volunteers fighting in criminal militias represented only a small minority. The war experience of a majority of the adult male population was therefore closer to the experience of the First World War, centered on trench warfare, than to a post-modern war dominated by militias plundering and murdering on their own behalf. This reality, to which I will return further on, is often neglected in the literature on former Yugoslavia, and books dealing with soldiers and veterans are rare ; to the best of my knowledge, there are only two of them, one written by Natalija Basic[6] and the other by Benjamin Bieber[7].

The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina was characterized by a wide range of local situations. In Cazinska Krajina, for example, Muslim supporters of Fikret Abdić fought against those of Alija Izetbegović, and entered into an alliance with Serb forces. In Central Bosnia, the HVO of the Croat enclaves also cooperated with the Serb army, and in Tuzla, the social-democrat municipality exerted a strong influence on the Second Corps of the Bosnian army. However, these various local situations influenced the course of the war only insofar as they participated in wider processes of collapse and restoration of the state. In September 1993, the secession of Fikret Abdić revealed the deep crisis experienced by the Muslim community, but also encouraged Sarajevo authorities to restore a state apparatus that had vanished after April 1992. The achievements of the government led by Haris Silajdžić explain, at least in part, the fact that, during the next two years of the war, the Muslim side became increasingly stronger at the political and military levels. In contrast, the Croat and the Serb sides were unable to reverse their political collapse and their economic exhaustion and, for this very reason, had to accept the compromises represented by the Washinton agreement in March 1994 and the Dayton agreement in December 1995.

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[3] Peter ANDREAS, *Blue Helmets and Black Markets. The Business of Survival in the Siege of Sarajevo*, Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2008.

[4] Mary KALDOR, *New and Old Wars. Organized Violence in a Global Era*, Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1999.

[5] Voir *Ljudski gubici u Bosni i Hercegovini 91-95*, Sarajevo : Istraživačko-dokumentacioni centar, 2007.

[6] Natalija BASIC, *Krieg als Abenteuer. Feindbilder und Gewalt aus der Perspektive ex-jugoslawischer Soldaten 1991-1995*, Giessen : Psychosozial-Verlag, 2004.

[7] Benjamin BIEBER, *Die Hypothek des Krieges : eine soziologische Studie zu den sozialen Effekten von Kriegen und zur Reintegration von Veteranen, Kriegsinvaliden und Hinterbliebenen in Bosnien-Herzegowina*, Hamburg : Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2006.

Similarly, the international dimension of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina cannot be properly understood without taking states into account. The Croat-Muslim Federation created by the Washinton agreement is to a large extent a product of US diplomacy and, more generally, the new US diplomatic and military commitment at the end of 1993 represented a major, if not the major turning point in the war. Other states such as France, Great Britain, Russsia or Iran also played an important role, directly or through international organizations such as the UN or NATO. Moreover, many « non-governmental » actors have been financed by states, beginning with the NGOs in charge of transporting and distributing humanitarian aid. The only true transnational actors in the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina have been Western intellectuals and mujahedeens from the Muslim world, but their influence has remained rather marginal.

Whereas war has led to the creation of more or less homogenous nation-states in most parts of former Yugoslavia, the state set up by the Dayton agreement in Bosnia-Herzegovina is a plurinational state based on consociational institutions and ethno-national territorial units. This specificity is not due to the absence of nationalist projects in Bosnia-Herzegovina but, on the contrary, to their violent clashes and internal contradictions. The projects of « Greater Serbia » and « Greater Croatia » have exhausted themselves in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as they have resulted in the creation of scattered ethnic territories, deprived of a large part of their population and devoid of any economic viability. In a position of weakness in the first years of the war, Muslim nationalist leaders have wavered between the creation of a small and vulnerable Muslim nation-state and the defense of a plurinational Bosnia-Herzegovina, an option that has been relentlessly promoted by non-nationalist parties. For their part, international actors have been tempted to end the war by endorsing an ethno-national partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina, but backed down in the face of the human cost such a scenario implied, and the threat it represented for their own political and moral credibility. Thus, the outcome of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina reveals the contradictions of nationalist ideologies in former Yugoslavia, but does not question their centrality in the events of the 1990s, as shown by a closer examination of the ethno-nationalist mobilizations of that period.

Ethno-nationalist Mobilization in the Former Yugoslavia : Myth or Reality ?

In his book « *The Myth of Ethnic War* »[8], V. P. Gagnon rejects the idea that Yugoslav wars are the result of ethno-nationalist mobilization, and contends that elites in power in Serbia and in Croatia have used war to demobilize their own population and to prevent any democratic movement. V. P. Gagnon's analysis of some concrete instances of demobilization sheds a new light on important realities and temporalities of the 1990s but, in my opinion, he is going too far in his deconstruction of ethno-nationalist mobilization. First of all, it is difficult to deny that such mobilization took place, at least in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In his book on « *Serbia's Antibureaucratic Revolution* »[9], Nebojša Vladisavljević shows for example that the mobilization of Kosovo Serbs at the end of the 1980s can not be reduced to a mere manipulation by elites in power, and describes how a mobilization focused on material claims can turn into a nationalist one. A similar observation could apply to Serbia as a whole and to Slovenia, and would reveal that, in the former Yugoslavia as in Central and Eastern Europe in general, political mobilization in the late 1980s was often democratic and nationalist at the

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[8] V. P. GAGNON, *The Myth of Ethnic War. Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s*, Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2004.
[9] Nebojša VLADISAVLJEVIĆ, *Serbia's Antibureaucratic Revolution. Milošević, the Fall of Communism and Nationalist Mobilization*, Basingstoke : Palgrave, 2008.

same time. The specificity of the Yugoslav case is that it took place within a plurinational institutional framework, and prompted its collapse. The first free elections in 1990 were also an instance of massive ethno-nationalist mobilization : the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) in Serbia and the Croat Democratic Community (HDZ) in Croatia won a majority of the votes of the main ethno-national community, and this electoral mobilization enabled nationalist elites to gain control of the state. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the SDA, SDS and HDZ won 71,1 % of the votes, which confirms that the electoral campaign had led to a surge of ethnically based fears and cleavages. Later on, the collapse of ethno-nationalist mobilization in Serbia and Croatia was obvious, and the elites in power did resort to demobilization strategies, as Eric Gordy has shown in the case of Serbia[10]. In 2000, however, a new wave of mobilization in favor of the opposition parties resulted in the defeat of the SPS in Serbia and of the HDZ in Croatia. The collapse of ethno-nationalist mobilization happened belatedly in Bosnia-Herzegovina : the three main nationalist parties won 75,6 % of the votes in the first post-war elections in 1996, but were also defeated in 2000. Therefore, it seems more appropriate to describe the 1990s in terms of a progressive collapse of ethno-nationalist mobilization rather than in terms of a continuous repression of potential democratic mobilization. It is also unfortunate that V. P. Gagnon does not analyze the weakness of the antiwar movement in Serbia and Croatia, since this would probably reveal much about the state of Serbian and Croatian societies during the Yugoslav wars.

V. P. Gagnon wishes to confront the myth of « ethnic war », but he is investigating neither the war itself nor the mobilization (and demobilization) most closely related to it, that is the mobilization into warring armies. Throughout the 1990s, relatively few men volunteered to be in the army or in criminal militias. However, regular armies managed to incorporate the militias created on a local basis, and to mobilize a good share of the adult male population. The only failed mass mobilizisation took place in Serbia during the autumn of 1991, when half of the reservists did not answer the call, and thousands more deserted after a few days spent on the frontline. Can military mobilization be compared to political mobilization, considering that the former is compulsory ? My answer is yes. On the one hand, sanctions against deserters were mild, or even non-existent, and the real reason for answering the call was group pressure from the immediate social environment and the will to protect one's family and one's village or neighborhood. On the other hand, once men had been drafted into the army, they still had to be « mobilized » in the spatial sense of the word : armies had to make them capable and willing to move from one frontline to another, and to replace their concerns for family and locality by readiness to draw new state boundaries. From this point of view, military mobilization was the continuation of political mobilization, and resorted to the same nationalist idioms and myths. At the military level as well, each national community experienced different stages and degrees of mobilization. From 1993 onward, the Bosnian army managed to set up highly mobile units, frequently made of refugees and stressing the religious dimension of their fight, whereas the units of the Serb army and the Croat HVO were increasingly reluctant to leave their municipality of origin (a paralysis compounded in the Serb case by serious gasoline shortage). Furthermore, all warring armies were quite homogenous from an ethnic point of view, much more so than the military formations of the Second World War for example. Admittedly, there were still some Muslim officers in the Yugoslav People's Army when the war started in April 1992, and many Herzegovinian Muslims fought with the HVO before the outbreak of the Croat-Muslim fighting in 1993, but

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[10] Eric GORDY, *The Culture of Power in Serbia. Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*, University Park : The Pensylvania University Press.

homogeneization continued during the war, and in 1995, 94,5 % of soldiers in the ranks of the First Corps of the Bosnian Army based in Sarajevo were Muslims[11].

To conclude, a closer look at the political and military mobilization of the 1990s does not confirm the idea that « ethnic war » in former Yugoslavia was just a myth. It seems more appropriate to emphasize the changing nature and intensity of ethno-nationalist mobilization during this period of time, including periods of demobilization, either spontaneous or encouraged by the elites in power. The case of Kosovo is another example of this changing shape of ethno-nationalist mobilization. There, non-violent political mobilization led by the Democratic League of Kosovo subsided in the mid-1990s, and gave way in 1998-1999 to armed mobilization by the Kosovo Liberation Army. Instead of deconstructing « ethnic war » at all costs, I consider it more fruitful to investigate its numerous dimensions and transformations. The same holds true for everyday interethnic relations.

Komšiluk : an ethnically neutral place or a crucial aspect of interethnic relations ?

Out of all the chapters of my book « *Bosnie, anatomie d'un conflit* », the most frequently referred to is the one called « Good neighborlliness and intimate crime ». In this chapter, I focused on *komšiluk*, a term used to describe neighborly relations in general but which, in my opinion, particularly applies to good neighborly relations among members of different ethno-national communities. This good neighborliness is maintained through various forms of mutual help (during harvest, house-building and repair, etc.), and through participation in the main religious holidays and family events. I believe *komšiluk* constitutes a system of coexistence ensuring, day after day, the peaceful nature of interethnic relations. It is a legacy of an Ottoman political order resting on non-territorial and non-sovereign religious communities, and is potentially at odds with the notion of citizenship, based on sovereign and territorialized political community. Ethno-nationalist mobilizations and attempts to create homogenous nation-states inevitably lead to a crisis of *komšiluk* that is often deliberately stirred up by nationalist actors coming from the outside. In such circumstances, the search for security through mutual respect and help gives way to the search for security through violence, and good neighborliness turns into intimate crime. This dimension of interethnic violence explains its specific features in Bosnia-Herzegovina such as the willing or unwilling participation of neighbors in ethnic cleansing campaigns and the frequent occurrence of intimate violence such as rape and house destruction. The shift from good neighborliness to intimate crime becomes thus irreversible and, in post-war Bosnian society, *komšiluk* as a form of interethnic relations becomes marginal.

Some authors have quoted my work on *komšiluk* in order to prove the strength of the idea of citizenship in Bosnian society or to underscore the permanency of interethnic cleavages, whereas my intention was in fact to show the ambivalent and changing nature of interethnic relations in Bosnia-Herzegovina. More seriously, several anthropologists have criticized me for attributing an ethnic dimension to *komšiluk* which it does not have in reality. Cornelia Sorabji, in particular, considers that ethnicization of *komšiluk* is a case of « ethnic coding bias » and « groupism »[12], and that I am confusing the primary meaning of *komšiluk* with its metaphorical meaning. According to her, *komšiluk* mainly refers to « a physical

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[11] Nedžad AJNADŽIĆ, *Odbrana Sarajeva*, Sarajevo : Sedam, 2002, p. 91.
[12] Cornelija Sorabji borrows these terms from Rogers BRUBAKER, « Ethnicity without Groups », *Archives européennes de sociologie*, vol. XLIII, n° 2, November 2002, pp. 163-189.

neighborhood and the relations within it » and is devoid of any ethnic dimension[13]. David Henig, for his part, defines *komšiluk* as an « ethnically indifferent regime of morality and social exchange »[14] ; he agrees with Cornelia Sorabji's distinction between a primary and a metaphorical meaning of *komšiluk*, and criticizes the « dominant perspective » (including myself) which presents it as « a social mechanism producing long-lasting differences between ethnoreligious groups that might at times result in inter-group hatred »[15]. Finally, in a different register, Bojan Baškar considers that « Bougarel seems to go too far when stating that the peace and stability of *komšiluk* disappear when the state withdraws its control. For him, the absence of the state and the active instigation of interethnic violence by the state lead to the same result. In fact, he is underestimating the effort of the *komšiluk* to maintain peace and stability by itself and to oppose attempts to destroy intercommunal ties »[16].

Among these critiques, I consider that some are accurate and others are unfounded. In particular, David Henig apparently knows my work only through Robert Hayden's writings, and I never defined *komšiluk* as a social mechanism producing long-lasting differences between ethnoreligious groups that might at times result in inter-group hatred, but rather as a social mechanism <u>domesticating</u> long-lasting differences between ethnoreligious groups that might at times result in inter-group <u>fears</u>, which is not exactly the same. I readily admit that my chapter on *komšiluk* is not based on anthropological fieldwork, but on a detailed reading of the Bosnian press and on interviews with Muslim refugees in 1992-1993. But Cornelia Sorabji's and David Henig's perception of *komšiluk* may also be biased by the fact that they did their fieldwork in ethnically homogenous places : a neighborhood of old Sarajevo in the first case, and a Muslim village of Central Bosnia in the other. Anthropologists working in mixed settlements seem to have a slightly different approach to *komšiluk*. In her book about besieged Sarajevo, Ivan Maček writes for example that « *komšiluk* as an institution effectively denied the primacy of national bonds »[17], which is not the same as an ethnically indifferent regime of morality and social exchange. In her book about the village of Dolina, Tone Bringa notes that « hospitality and related social exchange (such as women's coffee visiting and men's work parties) was the basis for neighborliness between [Muslims and Catholics]. These activities involved the two communities and in emphasizing a shared (and therefore nonreligious) identity acknowledged the existence of a village community beyond the ethnoreligious one »[18]. Tone Bringa also selects the sentence « *We Are All Neighbours !* » as the title of her film about war escalation in Dolina[19], the implicit meaning of this sentence being obviously that « we, both Muslims and Croats, are neighbors ».

Are the neighbors in Tone Bringa's title metaphorical neighbors ? Perhaps. But they matter nonetheless, and the metaphorical meaning of *komšiluk* has to be taken seriously. The

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[13] Cornelia SORABJI, « Bosnian Neighbourhood Revisited : Tolerance, Commitment and Komšiluk in Sarajevo », in Frances PINES / Joao DE PINA-CABRAL (eds.), On the Margins of Religion, New York : Berghahn, 2008, pp. 97-113.

[14] David HENIG, *The Embers of Allah. Cosmologies, Knowledge and Relations in the Mountains of Central Bosnia*, Doctoral thesis, Durham University, 2011, p. 120.

[15] David HENIG, « 'Knocking on My Neighbour's Door' : On Metamorphosis of Sociality in Rural Bosnia », *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. XXXII, n° 1, March 2012, pp. 3-19, ici p. 3.

[16] Bojan BAŠKAR, « S'occuper du sanctuaire du voisin en Bosnie-Herzégovine », in Dionigi ALBERA / Maria COUROUCLI (dir.), *Religions traversées. Lieux saints partagés entre chrétiens, musulmans et juifs en Méditerranée*, Arles : Actes Sud, pp. 85-112, ici p. 104.

[17] Ivana MAČEK, *Sarajevo Under Siege. Anthropology in Wartime*, Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009, p. 111.

[18] Tone BRINGA, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way. Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village*, Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 65-66.

[19] Tone BRINGA / Debbie CHRISTIE, *We Are All Neighbours*, Granada TV Production, 1993.

reference to *komšiluk* as a system of interethnic coexistence was pervasive in political discourses and everyday conversations of the 1990s. It reflected a communitarian political order opposed to and endangered by that of the nation-states. It is therefore not surprising that *komšiluk* was a target for all nationalists : during the war, the SDA newspaper « *Ljiljan* » gave its column on Serbs and Croats the title of « Neighbors or Criminals ? » (« *Komšije ili zločinci ?* »), and the Bosnian army distributed a brochure to its soldiers called « Neighbors » (« *Komšije* »). In this brochure, Mustafa Spahić stated that « Bosniaks-Muslims can no longer live with Serbs, Montenegrins and Croats on the basis of *komšiluk* », and that they should instead encourage « *komšiluk* among Bosniaks-Muslims » as the only way to ensure national existence[20]. Indeed, *komšiluk* as a system of ineterethnic coexistence in everyday life has ceased to be a central reality in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, although it probably plays a more important role than I expected in 1996. However, my main mistake is the one pointed out by Bojan Baškar. In my text, I considered the shift from good neighbourliness to intimate crime as being almost automatic. In the reality, crimes among neighbors have been rare ; the most frequent attitude was probably relative indifference or hidden sympathy, and instances of active compassion or solidarity have been comparatively frequent. Yet my error is not due to « ethnic groupism », but first of all to an understanding of my interviewees in 1992-1993 which was too literal, in the first place, and to an improper use of the prisoner's dilemma, a sociological model linked to methodological individualism.

Be it in relation to state-building, political mobilization or everyday life, my opinion is that the Yugoslav wars can not be properly understood without taking ethnicity into consideration. This does not mean, of course, that these wars are exclusively ethnic wars, or that ethnic identities are unchanging and pervasive in the former Yugoslavia. But some academic exercises in deconstruction of ethnicity have become futile and slightly tedious. All those who have conducted research in former Yugoslavia have heard people say that before the war, « we did not know who was what ». I understand this sentence in the following way : before the war, ethnicity did not matter in most of our everyday interactions. From this point of view, the situation in pre-war Yugoslavia probably bore some ressemblance to that described by Rogers Brubaker in the Romanian city of Cluj, where politicization of ethnicity goes together with ethnic indifference in everyday life[21]. The difference is that, in Yugoslavia, war has brought ethnicity into the heart of everyday life. Twenty years later, are we sure we know why, how, and for how long ?

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[20] Mustafa SPAHIĆ, *Komšije*, Sarajevo : Vojna biblioteka n° 7, 1994, pp. 30-31.
[21] Rogers BRUBAKER et alii, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*, Princeton : Princeton University Press.