'It Was Like Fighting a War with Our Own People': Anti-War Activism in Serbia during the 1990's

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This article discusses anti-war and anti-nationalism activism that took place in Serbia and, particularly, in Belgrade during the 1990s. It analyzes anti-war activism as aiming to combat collective states of denial. Based on fieldwork research conducted in 2004–05, and particularly on an analysis of interviews conducted with anti-war activists in Belgrade, this text closely analyzes the nuanced voices and approaches to activism against war among Serbia’s civil society in the 1990s. The article highlights the difference between anti-war and anti-regime activism, as well as the generation gap when considering the wars of the 1990s and their legacy. Finally, this text emphasizes the role of Women in Black as the leading anti-war group in Serbia, and examines their feminist street activism which introduced new practices of protest and political engagement in Belgrade’s public sphere.

Keywords: anti-war activism; Serbia; Women in Black; denial

We are still far from understanding that there exist a whole range of layers of responsibility for the crimes committed: for remaining silent, for forgetting, for hatred, for media propaganda. The Responsibility for remaining silent includes both agreement and awareness of repression – but also admits shades of doubt. (Papic 135; italics added)

Introduction

Serbian society in the 1990s went through an extreme process of destruction of all social, political and cultural alternatives (Gordy). Under the Milosević regime, the country was hurled about on a roller coaster of war, nationalist euphoria and socioeconomic disaster (Jansen, “The Streets of Beograd” 36). In this context, while wars were taking place in neighboring Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and eventually Kosovo, in Serbia proper, those opposing nationalism and warmongering were striving to have their voices not only heard, but matter. Civil opposition to war in Serbia went through different phases in its struggle as various forms of activism evolved throughout more than a decade of political turmoil in the country.

This article analyzes the civil activism against both war and nationalism that took place in Serbia during the 1990s. It examines the alternative voices of activists in Serbia who rejected nationalism and militarism as they were combating denial and apathy in their society. The data analyzed here aims to capture these dynamic voices of dissent. It was compiled during a year of fieldwork conducted in 2004–05 in Serbia. Analyzing in-depth interviews with activists from various groups in Serbia’s civil society and
independent media, I focus in particular on the activists in Women in Black — and those from Belgrade’s civil society who joined them along the way — and the contribution made by their feminist street-activism in combating denial in Serbia during the 1990s.¹

My interest in studying anti-war activism in Serbia had its roots in my engagement in political education in Israel, as well as my academic engagement in studying the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Well aware of the differences between studying Serbian society in the context of the post-Yugoslav spaces and Jewish-Israeli society in the Middle Eastern space, my aim was to understand the processes occurring within Serbian society at the time when wars were waged in the neighboring countries, and horrific atrocities and war crimes were perpetrated in a systematic manner, but not in Serbia proper. In that sense, I chose to focus on voices of dissent to war and violence and in particular, on those who early on asserted: “Not in my Name.”

In March 2004, when I arrived in Belgrade for my fieldwork, exactly one year after the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić and only a few years after the October 2000 events that ousted Milosević from power, it was obvious that those groups and organizations that were active against the wars in the 1990s still had a lot of work to do and major tasks ahead of them. It was then the time for additional struggles: the struggle to create and shape collective memories of the wars of the 1990s, the struggle to include debates on the post-Yugoslav conflicts and war crimes in the public sphere in Serbia. There were also other issues directly related to the legacies of the 1990s, such as the Orthodox church and its role in Serbian politics and everyday lives, the struggle for visibility of forms of otherness in identities in Serbia, etc. If earlier, coalitions were formed based on broad anti-Milosević sentiments, on what people were against, after 2000, what activists would fight for had to be negotiated. The struggle against nationalism was therefore hardly over, and was in fact compounded by new challenges. In order to understand anti-war and anti-nationalist activism in the 2000s, I found that I first needed to understand the nuances of anti-war activism in Serbia in the 1990s (“Alternative Voices in Public Urban Space”; “Anti-War Activism at Times of ‘Peace’”).

Conflict, silence and denial
In many societies in conflict, the fatigue of everyday life and the intensity of events result in resignation from the public sphere and in the tendency of the general public to make the choice not to know — what the sociologist Stanley Cohen refers to as the creation of ‘cultures of denial’ (Cohen). In States of Denial, Cohen thoroughly explores denial as a social phenomenon. He analyzes the shifts from the psychology of ‘turning a blind eye’ to the politics of such an act and focuses on the instance when denial is not an individual matter but is built into the ideological façade of the state or is incorporated as a collective social norm. Such forms of denial may be initiated by the state, but then acquire lives of their own as they develop into collective modes of denial (Cohen 7–9).

In studying the internal dynamics of societies in conflict, I am interested in studying individuals and groups who combat denial in their own society. Denial seems crucial for understanding the public reaction, or lack of reaction, to war, to the perpetration of atrocities and war crimes, and to the loss of compassion towards “the other.” The creation of collective cultures of denial as a social and political phenomenon reveals an interesting link between silence, knowledge and action; a link that hints at the existence of a tacit understanding among members of the society who “know what not to know.”

Silence, according to Eviatar Zerubavel who analyzes the sociology rather than the psychology of denial, is the most public form of denial (Zerubavel 4). I borrow here the
following definition for the term silence: “silence is a socially constructed space in which and about which subjects and words normally used in everyday life are not spoken” (Winter 3–12). This suggests the image of a circle around this space, along with a group of people who at one point in time deem it appropriate that there is a difference between the sayable and the unsayable, or the spoken and the unspoken, and contend that such a distinction can and should be maintained and observed over time. In such circumstances, people codify and enforce norms that reinforce the injunction against breaking into the inner space of the circle of silence (Winter). In the context of war and violence that I am interested in here, socially constructed silence is part of the framing of public understandings of events.

Combating denial and apathy, as well as breaking the silence seems to be a central challenge for many anti-war groups, not only in Serbia.² In such a reality in which the entire society may slip into collective modes of denial, members of the society can then arrive at an unwritten agreement about what may be publicly discussed, acknowledged and remembered, and what may not. In that sense, anti-war groups have an important role in opposing such trends in their society, and in creating spaces for alternative voices and their message for change to be heard. I here define “alternative voices” to be those voices of individuals and groups who choose to address issues of morality and responsibility against war and violence in their society and to speak about them out loud as they force alternative attitudes into the public sphere.

Cohen refers to groups such as the Israeli Women in Black, the Black Sash in South Africa and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina as “anti-denial” movements; as “consciousness-raising” groups that combat the numbing effects of the language and culture of denial (Cohen 95). Such anti-denial groups, when functioning in their own societies, may pay a price for standing up against the consensus, very often being ostracized, isolated and even stigmatized as traitors. They are not raising awareness to something that is far away or unfamiliar, with foreign names in unknown places, but to events that sometimes occur within driving distance of their own towns or are even occurring against their own families or neighbors. In breaking states of denial, the actual act of breaking conspiracies of silence transforms the unspoken into public discourses. Others have referred to those combating denial as “silence breakers” as they reveal open ‘secrets’ of which people are aware, yet unwilling to publicly acknowledge (Zerubavel 61–72); or as “memory activists”: those who break the silence and change the boundaries between what can and cannot be said (Winter 12).

**Alternative voices in Serbia**

As mentioned above, Serbian society in the 1990s went through a decade of turmoil characterized by warmongering, nationalist euphoria and socioeconomic disaster. Eric Gordy’s thesis about the destruction of all alternatives in Serbia is essential for understanding the reality in Serbia during the early 1990s – in particular the difficulties faced by the anti-war circles – as it captures the culture in Serbia that had turned into a culture of denial. By analyzing the destruction of all alternatives (political, informational, musical and social) he highlights the way the Serbian regime endeavored to maintain its power by making alternatives unavailable to people in their everyday lives. Account of the destruction of alternatives in Serbia is therefore most of all a narrative of the production of habituation, resignation and apathy (Gordy 7). What contributed in major part to this apathy was the dominant discourse of the regime: a discourse of national euphoria, fear and victimization. The ability of the regime to strengthen and spread its discourse and
interpretation of the wars and sanctions was almost complete. The state-controlled media silenced information about the wars, and the only media source available throughout the country was the state-run television and radio network. Both independent broadcast media and, to a somewhat lesser extent, independent print media were limited to the city of Belgrade and its immediate environs (Gordy 61–101). As Gordy highlights, even more unbearable than the lack of access to information was the destruction of the sense of normality of everyday life. As the situation in Serbia transcended the boundaries of mere crisis, it became impossible to meet everyday needs – a condition that fostered a sense of defeat and resignation among many. And yet, in this atmosphere that permeated the 1990s in Serbia, a marginal yet vibrant alternative scene existed and survived. In light of the weakness of those political parties that opposed Milošević, the emergence of civil opposition and independent media in the early 1990s in Serbia played a significant role as an alternative voice to war and nationalism. Aside from the struggle against the wars, breaking through the apathy that had enveloped Serbian society was the main challenge faced by these groups.

Among scholars studying the breakup of Yugoslavia and the wars in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, not enough attention was given to anti-war activism during and immediately following the wars. While some treated the existence of alternative voices to war and violence as taken for granted and therefore not interesting or important enough to be investigated, others ignored these voices and their actions, or left them as a small footnote in history. What was written about the Serbian alternative scene in the 1990s, framing it as anti-war activism, did indicate its simultaneous marginality and importance (Torov; Šušak).

Independent media and anti-war groups from Serbia indeed did not attract the attention of the world, the international media or policymakers. Only at late stages of the struggle, when the American administration decided to promote its interest in ousting the Milošević regime, was international attention drawn to the anti-regime groups, in particular to Otpor (Resistance), a group of innovative and enthusiastic young men and women whose agenda was to get rid of Slobodan Milošević, who they saw as a dictator.

But prior to that, over a period of almost 10 years, a small and marginalized, though at times quite active and vibrant, civil opposition in Serbia was going through various phases of existence. While some, even today, regard them as anti-war profiteers, as anti-Serbs and traitors, others saw them as the only voice of conscience and reason at a time of complete collapse of the value system, when no other voices than nationalistic and warmongering ones were heard in the public scene. Serbia’s civil society that was created in such an atmosphere was composed of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), alternative media, and cultural centers.

Though I do not intend to describe here the chronological events and actions as they unfolded during the 1990s, I should mention the most important developments relevant for analyzing the changes in activism during that decade in Serbia: from the earlier days of street activism and large anti-war demonstrations (1991–92) to later days when some of the activists transformed their centers into documentation centers (1992–94). Almost all the peace initiatives – named campaigns, forums, centers and movements – passed through these two stages from their emergence in 1991 until 1994. While the first stage was characterized by a variety of street demonstrations and cultural-artistic protests against warmongering, in the second stage the street protests disappeared and many of the anti-war groups transformed into a variety of NGOs in the form of documentation centers, engaged in collecting data on war crimes, on the violation of human rights, humanitarian aid, and counseling centers for refugees. This stage coincided with the steady
influx of financial support coming from NGOs and various peace and women’s groups in Western Europe.\(^5\) The next main two phases were the 1996–97 students’ demonstrations (Lazić; Jansen, “Victims, Underdogs and Rebels”, “The Streets of Beograd”) and to the months prior to October 2000 and the day of 5 October itself (Spasić and Subotić).

In spite of these different phases, I came to think of the different groups involved in anti-war and anti-nationalism activism as forming a net created from common threads that bound these efforts together. From street activism to documentation, legislative efforts, educational and cultural activities – these were all initiatives that created an alternative scene in Serbia, a *Druga Srbija* (other Serbia) that attempted to challenge forms of cultural denial that became most prevalent in their society.\(^6\)

But not all involved saw this scene as a cohesive movement; for some it was better characterized as a matter of sporadic efforts that at times created the space necessary for very close and intense collaboration, but at other times also led to tensions and disagreements. As long as Milošević was in power, it was easier to define what they were all fighting against; the challenge after 5 October and, in particular, after the assassination of Premier Zoran Đinđić, was to reach an agreement on what it was that they were then fighting for. In this sense, mapping the anti-war activism of the 1990s is key to understanding Serbian society and civil society in particular, not only in the 1990s but also in the 2000s.

**Main landmarks and actors**

**Independent alternative media**

The role of the media monopolies in the republics of the former Yugoslavia as instruments of their respective regimes and as catalysts for war has been documented in existing research (Thompson). Particularly in Serbia, each major phase in the development of the Milošević regime was accompanied by the takeover of some important media outlet. Both Milošević’s rise to power and the path to war were eased by the takeover of the newspaper *Politika*, the weekly magazine *NIN* and the state radio and television network RTS (RTS was the only television station with a signal reaching across the entire territory of Serbia). For the most part, the state-regime media either silenced information about the war or reported events as if they did not involve Serbia at all.\(^7\)

In general, journalists in Serbia found themselves roughly divided into two groups as wars approached. Many were swept into the service of the official propaganda machine, while some recognized early on the need to separate themselves from the regime by starting privately owned, independent, alternative media. Between 1989 and 1990, one major daily (*Borba*), one weekly (*Vreme*) and one biweekly journal (*Republika*) were launched in Belgrade as independent print media. As for broadcast media, the independent TV Studio B and Radio B92 both began broadcasting in 1989 (Torov 247).

Without the broad and up-to-date coverage provided by the Belgrade independent media, the anti-war movement would have been the best-kept secret even in Serbia (Torov 257). Understanding the position of the alternative media in Serbia as central to *Druga Srbija* sheds important light on their contribution to the production of alternative analysis and voices, as well as channels of knowing. Even though the journalists I interviewed did not see themselves primarily as activists, but rather highlighted their professional obligation to write and report at a time of war, I consider their contribution as silence breakers to be crucial to the formation of anti-war activism during those years.

Marginalized themselves, along with the anti-war activists, and struggling to finance their costs, some independent journalists served as uncomfortable witnesses. For
example, Borba (that later transformed into Naša Borba) supported the March 1991 demonstrators, and during the war in Croatia had resident correspondents in cities in Croatia and throughout Yugoslavia. When the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina began, Borba had correspondents in Sarajevo provided eyewitness reports from a city under assault.8

The weekly magazine Vreme evolved as a news and opinion magazine offering in-depth coverage of all aspects of the wars, as well as the political, economic and cultural life in Serbia. “The point was to lay bare the realities behind the scene and at the front, and to openly discuss the war crimes, the role played by the Yugoslav army in the war, and the human and material cost of the wars to the civilian population of all sides” (Torov 251–52). Despite its limited circulation, Vreme has become a major source of independent and unbiased information, not only domestically but internationally as well.

An additional critical outlet was Republika, devoted to political commentary and analysis rather than news, and to the active support of individuals and groups resisting the war. As early as spring 1991, the journal was the first to warn of the dangers of fascism in Serbia and Croatia. It was also the first to feature criticism of the Serbian regime and to promote anti-war ideas, groups and movements. From the start of the war in Croatia, the journal encouraged and supported draft resisters and war deserters (Torov 254).

Independent TV Studio B began broadcasting in November 1990 and was labeled the “enemy channel” from its very start. In the early 1990s it covered protests and demonstrations (such as the one in March 1991), as well as provided reliable information and named war criminals (Torov 256). Radio B92 had an important role during the 1990s in providing an alternative voice through its daily shows, its alternative and at times even subversive political analysis, as well as an alternative cultural scene, manifested in the music it played. The station was closed a number of times by the regime for its provocations. For some, B92 was a window to the outside world in opposition to the dominant trend of seclusion in Serbia (Collin 21–26). Without B92, many said, life in Serbia would be nothing but an exercise in self-degradation (Torov 257).

According to many activists, the links between the civil opposition groups and the independent media were firm, and helped to create the sense of a network against not only war and nationalism, but also against denial.

Serbia’s alternative civil opposition – anti-war initiatives

Among some of the groups forming Serbia’s civil opposition in the 1990s were some major internal weaknesses caused by a lack of cooperation and poor communication that led at times to a duplication of initiatives and groups. As in numerous other cases in similar alternative scenes around the world, many of the organizations undermined one another, especially when competing for the same sources of funding.9 Such a dynamic only contributed to the further marginalization both of themselves and the issues they were trying to promote. And yet, in spite of the failure to create a broader movement, these groups promoted a rhetoric of peace that was unfamiliar to society, and represented a possible path toward the building of civil society in Serbia (Šušak 503–505). In this sense, by combating denial and silence, they challenged the boundaries of the existing discourse in Serbia, for which they paid the price of marginalization.

In 2004, when I began my fieldwork, civil society was already more established and recognized in Serbia’s social and political culture. Many of the anti-war activists with whom I spoke, reflecting on their activism in the 1990s, mentioned then the fact that they were still struggling for change in their society. The struggle was ongoing, but for some it then felt even harder than before. At least before, many of them said, there was
one common enemy for all groups – it was clear what and who they were all fighting against.

Some of the groups I refer to and met with were active from the early 1990s when the war in Croatia began, and some were created only later. Although it is impossible to refer to all groups, I here mention some of the dominant ones whose activists I interviewed.¹⁰

In what follows, I explore anti-war practices in Serbia in the 1990s, and analyze the reflections of anti-war activists on their work, a decade later, at which point many of them were still involved in various forms of political activism.

Anti-Milošević or anti-war?

Looking at the decade of the 1990s and the different developments from anti-war demonstrations to documentation centers and anti-regime demonstrations reveals the need to distinguish between the nuances of anti-war and anti-Milošević activism. In fact, this was an important distinction made by many of the activists with whom I spoke. For some, this difference was already apparent in the early stages of Milošević’s appearance on the Serbian political scene, in the sense of resisting the regime and the values it then promoted.

That basic principle, the nationalistic sentiment, was at the heart of what the alternative scene was denouncing from early on. But over the course of three wars, as horrific events were occurring, they never managed to form a critical mass with such a message that would denounce nationalism, militarism and war. That kind of a message could not mobilize the people in Serbia to demand change. Only in later stages of the struggle, when groups like Otpor appeared, did they manage to attract a large number of people and combat apathy (Ilić). Otpor based their message on the most common agenda that could bring people together: getting rid of Milošević. None of the controversial issues such as Kosovo, denial of war crimes or responsibility were on Otpor’s agenda; they simply chose not to address any of the sensitive or contentious questions. According to them, any particular question that they would potentially open would meet with public opposition. For them, Milošević was the question of all questions, and there was therefore an urgent need to get rid of him first. In order to remove Milošević, according to their philosophy, they had to leave everything else aside.

In an interview with one of the leaders and founders of Otpor, he explained their non-violent ideology: “It was our official religion in the movement, we would never use violence. We were against anyone who used violence, Milošević as well as NATO.” I continued pursuit of the topic, asking him if this meant that Otpor was an anti-war movement. “No,” he replied:

it had nothing to do with that …We decided to fight against Milošević by persuading the public, not that the Muslims are the poor victims of Serbian slaughtering, you cannot do that. It is false advertising and we did not believe in it. Our focus was not there. We deeply believed that the most patriotic thing in Serbia was to release the Serbian people from Milošević’s irresponsible and catastrophic career as the head of state. (Interview with the author, 25 July 2005)

Some anti-war activists, who stress an anti-nationalistic and, even more, an anti-militaristic position, mentioned with some regret their disappointment or discomfort with many Otpor activists who were, in fact, nationalists themselves who even employed nationalist rhetoric. According to them, Otpor had the momentum to bring about change on a larger scale in a real, genuine way. But they never spoke out against the perpetration of war crimes; some mentioned, as an example, how many of Otpor members looked down on Albanians and referred to them by the derogatory term Šiptari.
The reality was that it was not anti-war sentiment that brought out the masses to march in the streets for months, in 1996/97 and later in 2000. As Jansen explains: “We have to understand that the Winter Protest was strictly anti-regime in nature: the opponent was the Milošević regime, and not necessarily his nationalist policies, and certainly not his line in Kosovo” (“Victims, Underdogs and Rebels” 238). The wars (in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo) and their consequences were not what exhausted people in Serbia or woke them from their deep apathy. It was never the wars, but the standard of living that turned things around – people got tired of Milošević more than of the wars. As one university professor who supported the students demonstrations suggested: “Do not look at the big issues, life is something different, the big issues only come later.” Members of Otpor, according to her, had a particularly strong urge to remove Milošević “because they wanted to live in a normal country.” Her definition of what is a normal country was adopted by many young people in Serbia in their search for normality:

It is a country from which you can fly; it is a country in which airports are not closed so that when you need to travel you must go to Budapest. A normal country is a country in which you can receive mail, in which you are connected to the internet, all kind of small things. (Interview with the author, 26 March 2004)

Indeed, it was not the big issues or ideologies that brought an end to the Milošević regime. The wish to live in a normal country created an urgent need to get rid of the man who was seen as the one who brought this abnormal country upon his people. Neither the importance of Otpor’s activism nor the long months in the streets during the 1996–97 winter of anti-Milošević demonstrations were ever dismissed by any of the people in Serbia’s alternative scene. On the contrary, many of the anti-war activists I spoke to referred to the significance of these months, as they created a unique atmosphere in the streets that were all of a sudden packed with young people. Many people remember these days as days of wandering the streets, experiencing the sense of a very strong vibe and energy. For the Women in Black activists who had already been on the streets in previous years, these times created a somewhat more secure atmosphere for being out and protesting, particularly because of the presence of the masses in the streets.

Inspired by the Israeli Women in Black, the Women in Black in Serbia were formed in Belgrade in 1991. During the 1990s they reacted to the policies of the Milošević regime and to the population’s indifference, protesting against the aggression and wars in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and, later, Kosovo. During the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, they stood, every Wednesday, in the main square, in silent vigil against the war. After the Dayton agreement was signed, vigils were organized depending on the need and urgency of events.11

The difference between the Women in Black vigils and the students’ mass demonstrations was significant. The Women in Black positioned themselves with great emphasis on generating a message against war and militarism, on breaking the silence and denial in their society. In the larger demonstrations, even though people were marching against Milošević, this did not necessarily imply that they were marching against war. As one Woman in Black explained:

Women in Black for me had the meaning of anti-war, anti-militarization ... trying to send a message to people, informing them that crimes happened somewhere and that they were committed by Serbs ... some say that the students were politically active, yes they were – against Milošević, but their message was not an anti-militaristic or anti-war one. (Interview with the author, 30 August 2004)

For some, seeing so many people on the streets during these months was a great surprise, and they wondered where all these people had been before, when the war in
Bosnia-Herzegovina and the siege in Sarajevo were taking place. Appearing in the streets of Belgrade, joining the students’ demonstrations, the Women in Black spoke about adding a moral dimension as they were not only against the regime, but also against the wars and war crimes:

They did not mind us but we always had our own flags, standing with them – but apart. For example, we always had the rainbow flag with us, which is also the flag of the gay and lesbian movement. Some attacked us for that. We were all against Milošević, it was some sort of a melting pot but ... we in Women in Black were determined that we should have no trace of nationalism among us. Some of the people in the streets were not against the wars, we clearly were. So we were allies but not forever. (Interview with the author, 7 May 2004)

Later in 1999 when the Otpor campaign started, Milošević, having lost all wars, turned against the alternative groups in Serbia, sending the financial police to all the offices of the NGOs. As fear of persecution mounted amongst activists, Otpor was an important source of hope. At that time everyone was desperate to get rid of Milošević and his regime. In spite of the differences and disagreements, including the fact that Otpor had very few women involved, the Women in Black joined in support of Otpor and their campaign.

The generation gap

Many in Serbia, even today, say that they did not know what exactly was going on during the wars in Croatia and in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Many among those active in the alternative scene spoke about the process they have gone through to become aware of what was done – as they later recognized – in their name. Knowing was not the default mode, as one activist told me: “If you wanted, you could choose not to see a thing here, related to the wars. On TV you never saw the other side, only that Serbs were victims. If one wanted to see, he or she needed to better look.” Analysis of the distinction between the generations can contribute to our understanding of the differences in the choice to know or in the process of awareness-raising.

For many among the core group of founders of the Center for Anti-War Action (CAA) and, later, the organizations that were created from it, knowing was a choice they made very early on. Even before the wars, with the appearance of Milošević, some began to fear the possible disaster that would lead to armed conflict. This generation, who came of age in the 1960s in socialist Yugoslavia, and some of whom were active in the 1968 demonstrations, first had to face the dissolution of Yugoslavia and, later, the wars and the high degree of violence generated by them. Some came from communist families, others from dissident ones, but they all managed to recognize early on the propaganda and the danger it posed in leading Serbia and the entire region into war. What kept them alert was the discourse, the rhetoric and the language Milošević was using – the language of nationalism. This was, for many of them, an emotional process of seeing their country, their lives, their Yugoslav identities and geographical spaces collapsing. The state propaganda was aimed at reviving ethnonational sentiments and mobilizing people. As one activist put it:

The propaganda was so successful that they managed to condition the entire society in terms of losing empathy for others, and seeing ourselves as victims only. The choice to know and promote an alternative point of view created enemies and a great sense of isolation. (Interview with the author, 16 May 2004)

The choice to know created the main rift between Druga Srbija and the rest of society. A major difficulty among those within the alternative circles was in accepting the success of Milošević’s propaganda and the support he gained from the public – they emphasized
the ignorance this support created about the horrific events in places like Vukovar and later Sarajevo and others. As one prominent activist reflected:

The choice to know made me see the others, know what happened to them ... once you discover the truth and that the pictures shown on TV are different than what was happening in reality, it became important to check everything but also to say it in public; to give a chance to anyone who wanted to know, to know ... I thought about the choice to know the truth as of a very powerful weapon against a totalitarian regime, and politicians who wanted to cover up information. (Interview with the author, 15 April 2004)

The difficulty in understanding how it was possible that people did not want to see or to know the truth was shared by those who had already made the choice to know. There were others who needed more time to come to terms with everything that was going on around them; who needed time to articulate their voices and thoughts. According to some, there were those alternative voices present in the public space, but no one wanted to hear them at first. Partially, as some later suggested, it may have been because they had debates within close circles, they offered very sophisticated analyses of reality, but they failed to reach people.

Realizing what was happening in Bosnia and particularly in Sarajevo was difficult to accept – that is, facing the awareness that the unimaginable had occurred. The only way to become informed was through outside news agencies, listening to Radio Free Europe or Voice of America. Some characterized the early months of the war in Bosnia as a twilight zone between knowing and not knowing. Yet it was one thing to know what was going on as the events themselves unfolded, as the siege of Sarajevo continued, as war crimes were perpetrated; it was another thing altogether to discover all of this in retrospect.

For many of the younger activists, the process of knowing was a discovery that only occurred later. Many of them were still children during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, coming of age during the Kosovo crisis and the NATO bombing. Some of them became active in the alternative scene during that period or even after the bombing and the change of the regime. Many of the younger activists I spoke with had a vague memory of seeing some pictures on TV, but in fact knowing and understanding very little of what they saw.

Among the younger generation of activists, many spoke about their ignorance during those days. Politics as covered then on RTS (Radio Televizija Srbija) was narrowed down to daily politics only, covering Milošević and his regime. This encouraged citizens, and young people in particular, to become as apolitical as possible; as one young activist articulated it: “just not to be like my grandmother who supported Milošević and watched RTS all day long” (Interview with the author, 13 May 2004). Political activism for her, after she became a feminist activist in Women in Black, was already much more than talking politics or watching the news on TV. Street activism became an important channel through which she could express her political awareness.

For some among the younger generation of activists, the Belgrade Women’s Studies Center was the place they primarily credited with development of their political awareness. From the alternative program at the Women’s Studies Center, the road to political feminist activism with Women in Black was well marked. In both places, young activists learned what actually happened in the 1990s throughout the region, and they gained the tools to analyze recent history both theoretically and practically. As one young female activist of Women in Black said about the significance of the program:

When I applied to the Women’s Studies Center – that was when it all started for me. There I encountered a group of professors and intellectuals, excellent women who were good companions for important conversations. That was in 1997; I went there three times a week for half a day each. That was when I was introduced to Serbia’s alternative scene. (Interview with the author, 17 August 2004)
The question of guilt and responsibility was therefore dealt with differently among the younger and older generations of activists. The leading actors who created Serbia’s alternative scene were already approaching middle age when the wars began. Many of them spoke of themselves as belonging to the generation that failed to stop the wars and consequent catastrophe, and expressed a heavy feeling of responsibility because of this. For some, this was the main motivation for wanting to have a voice in the public sphere, and for becoming politically engaged. As one university professor explained: “I have a feeling that as a generation we simply failed. I even thought we should forbid anyone who is above 45 years old to do anything with politics in this country; I honestly think this can make a major difference” (Interview with the author, 11 April 2004).

But many among the younger generation of activists do not share this sense of responsibility as they were too young during the 1990s to even be allowed to vote. The dominant feeling was and still is of confusion as some ask: “How all these things just passed me, it was so close and huge and people were dying every day, and Sarajevo was like hell, and I didn’t know about it . . . and it was only a few hours away from me” (Interview with the author, 13 May 2004). For many, such questions are still left unanswered, but the process of coming to know and the choice thereafter to know more was what led them to activism.

Connecting with already existing organizations was an important step for younger activists in becoming aware and educated about the details of the events of the 1990s. In these circles, they were exposed to the clearest and best-articulated voices, which at times were also the more radical ones.

Breaking states of denial: Women in Black and anti-war street activism

Within the alternative circles, the most articulated anti-war message was the one generated by the Women in Black activists in their silent vigils. Appearing in the streets of their own city, standing in silent vigils against war, was important as an act of reclaiming the public space and transforming it, even if only for a short time.

In a conversation with one of the members of the group, a feminist writer, I asked about the first time she stood on the street for a silent vigil. She explained:

It was a horrible feeling . . . when women in Serbia stand on the street it means they are prostitutes . . . this [attitude] was one of the reasons why we did that, to attract attention, we wanted to make a point, it was a new experience for us . . . it was embarrassing at first but then not so much, we knew what we were doing, our principle was to stand and not to speak, and not even to speak back . . . it was in a way like fighting a war with our own people, I felt like my enemies were here [in Serbia], not somewhere out there. (Interview with the author, 17 April 2004)

Seven years later, on 10 October 1998, when the tension in Kosovo was rising, she wrote the following in her diary, which was later published:

Yesterday night, I went with the Women in Black to demonstrate in the Republic Square. The police protected us from the crowd who were spitting on us and shouting, “whores, whores . . .” We’d all taken small rucksacks with ID, money, spare clothes etc., in case we got arrested and tied to the trees as NATO targets – which is what Šešelj, the vice president of the Serbian government promised us traitors. (Tešanović 62)

These months in 1998 before the NATO intervention were indeed very tense, as the activists of Women in Black recalled; Šešelj (the leader of the Serbian Radical Party) threatened that in case of a military intervention they would kill one Woman in Black for each NATO plane – jedan avion nato-a, jedna žena u crnom. The cofounder of the group reflected:

That was how he spoke in the parliament and everyone laughed. These were terrible moments not only for us; he also accused the Humanitarian Law Center, the Helsinki Committee, Belgrade Circle and others. He marked us as the biggest enemies of the state. In response,
we organized a public vigil; but later during the [NATO] bombing we weren’t on Republic Square, it was then already contaminated by nationalists and Serbian patriots. (Interview with the author, 17 April 2004)

During these years, especially during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the actual act of standing and demonstrating in the street was significant in the sense of creating a new culture of political activism in the country. In the early 1990s, there were a number of large anti-war demonstrations organized by the CAA. Later on, the only anti-war street activism was performed by the Women in Black. Participating in small, women-only vigils became important in the process of articulating the anti-war message they conveyed. They were then standing in the main city square, protesting against the wars, usually in very small numbers. As one activist explained:

After a while, it became clear to me that on Wednesdays I wake up and I dress up in black. That was the only thing then that gave me some meaning, it empowered me, and it was the only way I could express my disagreement – and I disagreed.

The actual act of going out from the safety of the ‘indoors’ conversations to standing in the street, explicitly exposing themselves and their anti-war politics, was a great challenge. It was one thing to join a large group of people marching in the street, but another thing to stand within a very small group of women-only demonstrators, completely exposing oneself, both physically and politically, to passersby. One young activist spoke about their first time standing in the street:

I joined the vigils for my political views. The first time I stood [in a silent vigil] was in 1997 in memory of Srebrenica. That was the first time I exposed myself in the street, which was a great difference from only knowing and recognizing that something happened . . . the decision to go out onto the street meant to try and send a message to others . . . even though it was not always pleasant to be out there in the streets. (Interview with the author, 8 August 2004)

The purpose of appearing publicly on the street was to send a message for people to recognize what was going on in places like Sarajevo or Srebrenica, so that they could no longer deny such events and claim that they had never occurred. Isolation and anger were common reactions toward those who chose to know and to express their criticism publicly. That was how the group’s main slogan came to be ‘Not in My Name.’ They spoke about Knowing and saying ‘I do not agree’ as a moral responsibility. In a social environment that generated collective cultures of denial, the role of such groups as Women in Black was therefore to combat the numbing effects of such cultures, and engage in anti-denial activism as a form of anti-war activism.

Aftermath

The struggle of Serbia’s civil opposition and alternative voices against the wars during the Milošević era was thought to be over after the October 2000 victory of the opposition forces. However, it soon became clear that what many in the alternative circles considered as essential for change was not what reality brought upon them. The regime change did not lead to the abolishment of the legacy of the Milošević regime, then entrenched in the institutions of the country and the people at the highest levels of those institutions. After a decade in which Serbia’s political scene languished under the excessive power of politicalized military and security apparatuses and in which organized criminal gangs flourished, the hope was that the newly elected government headed by Vojislav Koštunica would promptly complete its mission of removing these pillars of the former regime. But in reality, this did not occur at the pace or to the extent expected. Rather than the end, for Serbia’s anti-war circles, 5 October and the formation of a new government in Belgrade
marked the beginning of a new phase in their struggle for a democratic and more just society. Criticizing this lack of systematic change, demanding a genuine transformation that would allow Serbia to deal with its past in order to be able to move towards the future then became one of the main focuses of Serbia’s civil society and human rights groups in the post-Milosevic days.

In 2004, as I began my fieldwork in Belgrade, those who were already documenting war crimes and asserting the importance of the questions of responsibility during the wars then found themselves struggling for the inclusion of these questions in the public sphere, resisting nationalism, denial and obliteration of the past by their government and the public. Many activists with whom I spoke remembered the first few months after 5 October 5, as well as the Dindic government, as periods of hope, especially as they could see “their” people involved in the creation of a new government and instrumental in implementing reform. For some, getting rid of Milosevic and his corrupt regime, especially given the fact that it happened without bloodshed, signaled success. But others put more emphasis on the fact that following 5 October, 6 October never arrived – that is to say, real change did not take place. This became more apparent, they argue, after Dindic was assassinated. In 2004, in the streets of Belgrade one could still notice the posters that were asking: “where is October 6th?” layered with other political messages in the form of graffiti and banners, now torn or erased, or highlighted anew.

The distinction discussed here between anti-war and anti-Milosevic activism meant that, even after October 2000, many of those within the anti-war circles still played an essential role and saw themselves still in the midst of their struggle, as the ousting of Milosevic had not resolved all that they were struggling against. In the absence of any official effort in the search for truth about the past, Serbia’s leading human rights and anti-war groups now faced the task of resisting political amnesia and combating official denial, as well as new forms of nationalism and xenophobia. Hence, I argue, in post-Milosevic Serbia the same groups are still functioning as alternative voices in their society and are still engaged in the struggle over the creation of Serbia’s collective memory and future. As I heard repeatedly: “The main battle today is a battle of interpretation... for the definitions of the wars, of what happened. Our role was then, as it is today, to denounce the project.”

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Notes
1. As part of my research, I also spoke to and interviewed anti-war activists from other towns in Serbia, in particular, the anti-war groups in Pancevo.
2. For example, I understand work of Israeli activists against the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian people as first and foremost to be about combating apathy and denial within Jewish Israeli society (Fridman, “Breaking States of Denial”).
3. Milosevic benefited from the composition of the Serbian opposition as the biggest opposition parties were even more nationalistic than Milosevic and his party. The opposition was divided into a smaller liberal anti-war bloc and a larger nationalist pro-war bloc with some forces (such as Vuk Draskovic) wavering between the two. A number of studies are available on the topic of the opposition parties in the 1990s (Gordy Chapter 2; Thomas).
4. The process of the breakup of Yugoslavia and the rise of ethnonationalism coincided with the creation of civil society across the former Yugoslavia and in Serbia in particular. A discussion of the failure of civil society and citizenship in Yugoslavia is in the background of the creation of civil society in the Yugoslav successor states in the 1990s (Allcock).
5. This is based on Ana Dević’s distinction (Dević 120–22). For an additional discussion of the 1991–92 students’ demonstrations, see Erder; Spasić and Pavlićević.

6. The term Druga Srbija was already in use from the early 1990s (Čolović and Aljoša).

7. Gordy’s third chapter includes a long and profound discussion about the destruction of information alternatives. He analyzes both the messages and the strategies of the regime-controlled media and the marginalization of the independent media, with a particular focus on Belgrade in the years 1994 and 1995 (Gordy 61–101).

8. Torov refers in particular to a series of lengthy reports entitled “The Killing of Sarajevo” and “Sarajevo’s Collapse” (265).

9. During this period, various international organizations and foundations operated in Yugoslavia and in Serbia. The most consistent and persistent was the Fund for Open Society, which from 1991 until 1996 operated as the Soros Fund Yugoslavia. The Fund supported the foundation of civil society. After the 1997 civic protests, other large donors also became actively involved in Serbia. Many from Serbia who criticize the NGO scene, even today, blame these groups for collaboration with the West (and its money) or for being war profiteers. Still, the activity of international organizations and donors was at its height at the time of the 2000 election campaign (Čurgus Kazimir 34–35).

10. Other groups, whose members I spoke with or interviewed were: MOST, Belgrade Circle, The Center for Cultural Decontamination (CZKD), Belgrade Women Studies Center, Alternative Academic Network, Humanitarian Law Center (HLC), The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, The Lawyers Committee For Human Rights (YUCOM).

11. After the changes of regime in October 2000, they still appear in the street as part of Serbia’s civil society opposing nationalism and, in particular, reminding the public of the events of the recent wars of the 1990s. After 2000, they gathered in Belgrade’s main square to mark dates such as 8 March, Women’s International day, 6 April, the beginning of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 11 July, in memory of the victims of Srebrenica and other conflicts.

12. The Center for Anti-war Action (CAA) was founded in July 1991 in Belgrade as the first peace organization in Serbia. It was founded as a non-governmental, non-profit organization promoting the peaceful resolution of conflicts and regional cooperation, human rights, civil society and democratic institutions. During its first two years, the center organized a number of anti-war manifestations and protests, and provided legal aid to people who refused to take part in armed conflict. Early on, the CAA organized the Belgrade anti-war marathon, a series of open forums and demonstrations held between October 1991 and February 1992. Two of the leading anti-war manifestations organized by the CAA and joined by others were: nightly vigils with candles in solidarity with all the war victims from October 1991 until February 1992 (which was covered by Borba daily in pictures and words); and the big rock concert “Don’t Count on Us” on 22 April 1992 (in cooperation with B92), which provided an opportunity for young people to express their anti-war feelings through music. On 31 May 1992, after the bombing of Sarajevo began, several anti-war groups organized a march of Belgrade citizens who carried a 1,300-meter-long, black ribbon. The column stretched from the Albania building on Terazije Square to Slavija Square. It symbolized protest, solidarity and mourning for the victims of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to estimates, there were several tens of thousands of people who participated in the march. The last big anti-war demonstration during that period, jointly organized by several alternative groups, was the “Yellow Badge” protest against ethnic cleansing in July 1992. Other than street demonstrations, CAA also helped to organize the Peace Caravan, which visited Sarajevo when it was under siege in December 1992 (Čurgus Kazimir 383–85).

13. In my study I particularly focused on the memory of Srebrenica and the ongoing debates and activism within Serbian civil society. While the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has recognized the Srebrenica massacre as genocide, official Serbia has since denied the actual events and contested the alleged number of the victims. In March 2010, the Serbian parliament adopted a declaration condemning the crimes committed in Srebrenica, however refraining from the use of the term genocide. On official denial in Serbia, see Jelena Obradović-Wochnik.
References


