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The Vernacular Discourses of Historical Victimage of Kosovo Serbs and Albanians

This essay uses ideological criticism to examine how and why victimage, identity and nationalism are produced through everyday discursive practices of Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. Wander¹ contends that the ideological turn in criticism confronts and studies what is professed and obscure, and Greene² argues that part of this criticism involves unmasking forms of domination. Examining cultural or rhetorical narratives is part of ideological criticism.³ The narratives in this study can be regarded as competing vernacular memories⁴ representative of Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. The participants invoke personal and collective memories with official national histories to explain contemporary victimization as a continuance of historical victimage. This use of the past can serve to legitimize their national and political claims, as well as to justify violence against the other group, since historical victimage provides a rationale for hating the other group and perpetuating a vicious cycle of violence.

It is imperative to look at how personal and collective memories interact with official national histories as mutually reinforced and entangled to produce coherent victimization narratives. Through constant reproduction of historical victimage in vernacular discourse, participants re-affirm their

¹ Philip Wander, "The ideological turn in modern criticism", *Central States Speech Journal* 34, no. 2 (1983), 1-18.

² Ronald W. Greene, "The aesthetic turn and the rhetorical perspective on argumentation", *Argumentation & Advocacy* 35, no. 1 (1998), 19-29.

³ Celeste Condit, "Democracy and civil rights: The universalizing influence of public argumentation", *Communication Monographs* 54, no. 1 (1987), 1-18.

⁴ Gerard A. Hauser, *Vernacular voices: The rhetorics of publics and public spheres* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1999); Gerard A. Hauser, "Vernacular dialogue and the rhetoricality of public opinion", *Communication Monograph* 65, no. 2 (1998), 83-108.

respective identities, realities, claims, and righteousness. Some researchers have documented the positive aspects of victimage narratives and identity,⁵ but unfortunately the narratives that are examined here foster hatred toward the Other. However, this extreme feeling does not arise out of primordial tendencies, but out of fear from the Other⁶ and a desire to eliminate the perceived threat.

While one purpose of this essay is to explore victimage narratives, another goal is to critique objectivist approaches to the study of history and collective memory. This relationship between history and collective memory has been a heated and on-going interdisciplinary dispute.⁷ Ideological criticism can be considered part of this debate.⁸ Considering collective memory to be mythical, while history is objective, posits a dichotomous view, which is especially dangerous when history and collective memory are invoked to support or disprove victimage.

Traditionally, work on Kosovo and the former Yugoslavia has tended to follow this kind of reasoning, dwelling on the notions of factual truth, objective history and victimage, and how these get distorted and used for political purposes. Therein, collective memories of the groups within Kosovo and former Yugoslavia are contrasted with objective history, and “true victims” are clearly distinguished from “proven villains”. I will elaborate on this further in the essay. Many authors write about the “destructive” power of collective memories in Kosovo and the rest of former Yugoslavia, and how activating some of them has been cause for war. For example, some authors have argued for a monolithic Serbian culture that is somehow pathological.⁹

However, most of the studies on Kosovo and former Yugoslavia have looked only at official discourses, such as elite political speeches, media cov-

⁵ Marita Sturken, “The remembering of forgetting: Recovered memory and the question of experience”, *Social Text* 57 (1998), 103-125; Barbie Zelizer, “Finding aids to the past: Bearing personal witness to traumatic public events”, *Media, Culture & Society* 24 (2002), 697-714.

⁶ Veljko Vujacic, “Historical legacies, nationalist mobilization, and political outcomes in Russia and Serbia: A Weberian view”, *Theory and Society* 25, no. 6 (1996), 763-801.

⁷ Marita Sturken, *Tangled memories: The Vietnam war, the AIDS epidemic, and the politics of remembering* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

⁸ Marouf Hasian Jr., “Vernacular legal discourse: Revisiting the public acceptance of the ‘Right to Privacy’ in the 1960s”, *Political Communication* 18 (1997), 89-105.

⁹ Branimir Anzulovic, *Heavenly Serbia* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan ghosts: A journey through history* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993); Matthew McAllister, *Beyond the Mountains of the Damned: The war inside Kosovo* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Michael Sells, *The bridge betrayed: Religion and genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

erage and history books, and have used these as representative of all groups and voices. To my knowledge there have been few studies of Kosovo,¹⁰ and the former Yugoslavia, which focus on the analysis of daily discursive practices through which ideologies of historical victimage are reproduced. Even less attention has been devoted to how personal and collective memories interact and amalgamate with official historical narratives in vernacular rhetoric to create the historical victim identity. Several scholars in the field of communication have recognized the prevalent focus on “powerful” discourse with “historical” significance, and the corresponding neglect of vernacular communities.¹¹ They have called for more studies that give voice to previously silenced discourses¹² and have acknowledged the illuminating insight¹³ that arises out of taking vernacular discourse seriously.

From an ideological perspective the issues outlined above are problematic, because they not only silence and delegitimize certain voices, while ratifying others, but also provide for simplistic understandings of how vernacular memories interact with official histories to produce conflict-sustaining narratives. This leads to ineffective conflict resolution, of the kind we are witnessing in Kosovo and Bosnia,¹⁴ and helps perpetuate the cycle of violence.

Therefore, this critical study analyzes vernacular discursive practices of historical victimage instead of focusing on privileged and dominant discourses. Rather than judge the truth value of the participants’ narratives, it aims to illustrate how their claims are constructed in discourse and the pragmatic aspect of the historical victim identity, in terms of affording sym-

¹⁰ See Julie A. Mertus, *Kosovo: How myths and truths started a war* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

¹¹ See amongst others, Bernadette M. Calafell and Fernando P. Delgado, “Reading Latina/o images: Interrogating Americanos”, *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21, no. 1 (2004); Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, “The critique of vernacular discourse”, *Communication Monographs* 62, no. 1 (1995), 19-46.

¹² In *Vernacular voices* Hauser suggests that there is a need to conceptualize discourse in ways that account for rhetorical processes by those without official status – actual members of publics – communicate to one another.

¹³ Allen Feldman, “Political terror and the technologies of memory: Excuse, sacrifice, commodification, and actual moralities”, *Radical History Review* 85 (2003), 58-73; L. A. Wood and H. Rennie, “Formulating rape: The discursive construction of victims and villains”, *Discourse and Society* 5, no. 1 (1994), 125-148.

¹⁴ See Noam Chomsky, *A new generation draws the line: Kosovo, East Timor and the standards of the West* (New York: Verso, 2000); C. Clermont, “How not to solve a conflict: The Kosovo question”, *Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution* 2, no. 4 (1999); Lenard J. Cohen, “Kosovo: Nobody’s country”, *Current History* 99 (March 2000).

bolic, emotional and political resources on a personal, collective and national level.

This ideological essay is divided into several sections. The first segment engages the debate over the relationship of history and memory, as it relates to victimage. The next part analyzes the Serb and Albanian vernacular rhetoric in terms of discursive strategies used in creating the historical victim identity. The third section explores the functions of these historical victimage narratives, and attempts to demonstrate why examining them is important in understanding not only the intractable conflict in Kosovo, but also other conflicts around the world. By the end of this essay I hope to demonstrate the importance of problematizing explanations that posit singular, preferential, and “objective” victimage in relation to conflict intervention and resolution.

The relationship of history and collective memory to victimage

History and collective memory are often thought of as being in opposition to each other in terms of objectivity/subjectivity, and present/past orientation and concern. Such a view follows Halbwachs, who, in the first work on collective memory, differentiates profoundly between history and collective memory.¹⁵ He sees history as an objective process, which seeks to record the past, to know it and understand it. Collective memory, on the other hand, Halbwachs explains, is not comprised of objective facts, but of tradition. Following Halbwachs, many theorists make a clear distinction between history as objective, systematic and scientific, and collective memory as mythical, constructed and distorted.¹⁶ In contrast to history, it is particularistic and time-bound, concerned with experience and feeling instead of cognition and knowledge. Markovits and Reich say that it “is most definitely a phenomenon of the present”, while “history is a matter of the past”.¹⁷ While history records the past, collective memory re-interprets it for presentist goals.¹⁸

¹⁵ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

¹⁶ See, among others, Hauser, *Vernacular voices*; Andreas Huyssen, “Monument and memory in a post-modern eye”, *Yale Journal of Criticism* 6, no. 2 (1993); Andrei Markovits and Simon Reich, “The contemporary power of memory: The dilemmas for German Foreign Policy”, *The Communication Review* 2, no. 1 (1997), 89-119.

¹⁷ Markovits and Reich, “Power of memory”, 95.

¹⁸ Bruce E. Gronbeck, “The rhetorics of the past: History, argument, and collective memory”, in *Doing rhetorical history: Concepts and cases*, ed. Kathleen J. Turner (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998); Pierre Nora, *Realms of memory: Rethinking the French past*, Volume I: *Conflicts and divisions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

How collective memory is viewed within this position is not contested, but its oppositional relationship to history as objective is problematic. This view sets up a false dichotomy, wherein vernacular memories, narratives and experiences are measured against a truth standard. This provides for “objective” differentiations between the truly oppressed and the genuine tyrants. However, we must not forget that victims and perpetrators are self-ascribed and shifting categories. As Feldman¹⁹ remarks, “rarely does a pure victim face off with a pure aggressor on the world historical stage. The dyad aggressor/victim merely signifies two forms of victimage or victims turned aggressors, confronting each other in symbiotic gradations of a generic subject position”.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that reasoning of the type outlined above has led not only to black-and-white explanations of the conflict in Kosovo and the former Yugoslavia, but has had significant implications in international diplomacy, NATO intervention and conflict resolution efforts in the region. It has helped solidify and legitimize certain narratives of victimization, while silencing and delegitimizing others. As Montalbano-Phelps²⁰ explains, narratives of victimization are judged according to societal standards of who can be the victim and what victimization is like; narratives and victims that do not conform to the norm are discarded as being fabricated and fake. A clear example, if we look at both media coverage and academic interest concerning Kosovo, is the prolific and widespread writing about the victimization of Albanians at the hands of the Serbs, in stark contrast to the scant and unpopular, even contested, writing about the victimization of Serbs at the hands of the Albanians.

Traditional scholarship on Kosovo and the former Yugoslavia,²¹ tends to pay significant attention to the power of collective memories, and

¹⁹ Feldman, “Political terror”, 69.

²⁰ Lori Montalbano-Phelps, “Discourse of survival: Building families free of unhealthy relationships”, *The Journal of Family Communication* 3, no. 3 (2003), 149-177.

²¹ See among others, John B. Allcock, *Explaining Yugoslavia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Payam Akhavan and Robert Howse, eds., *Yugoslavia, the former and future: Reflections by scholars from the region* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1995); Ivo Banac, “Foreword”, in Sabrina Ramet, *Balkan Babel: The disintegration of Yugoslavia from the death of Tito to the fall of Milosevic* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002); Victoria Clark, *Why angels fall: A journey through Orthodox Europe from Byzantium to Kosovo* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000); Bogdan Denitch, “Dismembering Yugoslavia: Nationalist ideologies and the symbolic revival of genocide”, *American Ethnologist* 21 (1994), 367-390; Andre Gerolymatos, *The Balkan wars: Conquest, revolution, and retribution from the Ottoman era to the twentieth century and beyond* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Misha Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, war and the Great Powers 1804-1999* (New York: Viking, 1999); P. Gowan, *The twisted road to Kosovo* (Oxford: Labour Fo-

activating them for political purposes. Yet, in a general attempt to disprove certain versions and legitimize others, they point out the validity/invalidity of claims and narratives in relation to an “objective” and “unbiased” history. Former Yugoslav historians have been accused of playing a significant role in the wars, because their writings engaged them, and their respective nationalist political elites, in power struggles over renditions of history.²² As

cus on Eastern Europe, 1999); Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual war: Kosovo and beyond* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000); Charles Jelavich and Barbara Jelavich, *The Balkans* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965); Tim Judah, *The Serbs. History, myth and the destruction of Yugoslavia* (London: Yale University Press, 1997); Tim Judah, *Kosovo. War and revenge* (London: Yale University Press, 2000); Karl Kaser and Joel M. Halpern, “Historical myth and the invention of political folklore in contemporary Serbia”, *The Anthropology of Eastern Europe Review* 16 (1998); Branka Magas, *The destruction of Yugoslavia: Tracking the break-up 1980-92* (New York: Verso, 1993); Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo. A short history* (London: Macmillan, 1998); Viktor Meier, *Yugoslavia: A history of its demise* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Paul Mojzes, *Yugoslavian inferno: Ethnoreligious warfare in the Balkans* (New York: Continuum, 1994); D. Norris, *In the wake of the Balkan myth. Questions about identity and modernity* (London: Macmillan, 2000); James Pettifer, *Albania & Kosovo* (New York: WW Norton, 2001); Sabrina Ramet, *Balkan Babel: The disintegration of Yugoslavia from the death of Tito to the fall of Milosevic* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002); Laslo Sekelj, *Yugoslavia: The process of disintegration* (Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs, 1993); Laura Silber and Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (New York: TV Books/Penguin, USA, 1995); Jasminka Udovicki and James Ridgeway, *Burn this house: The making and unmaking of Yugoslavia* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000); Miranda Vickers, *Between Serb and Albanian: A history of Kosovo* (London: Hurst, 1998); Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians: A modern history* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1995); Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan tragedy: Chaos and dissolution after the Cold War* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1995).

²² Dušan T. Bataković, *Kosovo i Metohija u srpsko-arbanaskim odnosima* [Kosovo and Metohija in Serb-Albanian relations], (Gornji Milanovac-Pristina: Dečje Novine-Jedinstvo, 1992); Dušan T. Bataković, *The Kosovo chronicles* (Belgrade: Plato, 1992b); Dušan T. Bataković, *La spirale de la haine* [The spiral of hatred], (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1993); Dušan T. Bataković, *Kosovo i Metohija: Istorija i ideologija* [Kosovo and Metohija: History and ideology], (Belgrade: Biblioteka Svecanik Hrišćanska Misao, 1998); Dimitrije Bogdanović, *Knjiga o Kosovu* [Book about Kosovo], (Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1985); Veselin Djuretić, *Razaranje srpstva u XX veku: Ideološka upotreba istorije* [The destruction of Serbianity in the 20th century: The ideological use of history], (Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, Balkanološki institut, 1992); Alex N. Dragnich and Slavko Todorovich, *The saga of Kosovo. Focus on Serbian-Albanian relations* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1984); Branislav Krstić, *Kosovo: Izmedju istorijskog i etničkog prava* [Kosovo: Between historical and ethnic rights], (Belgrade: Kuća Vid, 1994); Andrej Mitrović, *The Serbs and the Albanians in the 20th century* (Belgrade: SANU, 1992); Radovan Samardžić, *Kosovo-Metohija dans l'histoire serbe* [Kosovo and Metohija in Serbian history], (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1990); Radovan Samardžić et al., *Kosovo i Metohija u srpskoj istoriji* [Kosovo and Meto-

history is vital to the existence of a nation,²³ disproving the Other's history is tantamount to denying the Other's national identity.²⁴ Yet, most of the writing by "outsiders" (primarily Western authors) on former Yugoslavia has been plagued by the same contestations over who is telling the truth and who is not.

The connection between collective memory and official national histories has been examined in a top-down manner exclusively, looking at official political discourses, media coverage and history books as representative.²⁵ The assertion is that political elites were the ones who tailored the

chia in Serbian history], (Belgrade: SKZ, 1989); Vladimir Stojančević, *Srbi i Arbanasi* [Serbs and Arbanas], (Novi Sad: Prometej, 1994); Atanasije Urošević, *Etnički procesi na Kosovu tokom turske vladavine* [Ethnic processes in Kosovo under Turkish rule], (Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1987).

²³ Benedict Anderson. *Imagined communities: Reflections of the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Florian Bieber, "Nationalist mobilization and stories of Serb suffering: The Kosovo myth from 600th anniversary to the present", *Rethinking History* 6, no. 1 (2002), 95-110; Stephen H. Browne, "Reading, rhetoric and the texture of public memory", *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 2 (1995); John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public memory, commemoration, and patriotism in the twentieth century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992); Edward C. Clark and Raymie E. McKerrrow, "The rhetorical construction of history", in Kathleen J. Turner, ed., *Doing rhetorical history: Concepts and cases* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998); Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1952); Patrick Finney, "On memory, identity and war", *Rethinking history* 6, no. 1 (2002), 1-13; Brian S. Osborne, "Landscapes, memory, monuments, and commemoration: Putting identity in its place", *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 33, no. 3 (2001).

²⁴ Herbert C. Kelman, "The interdependence of Israeli and Palestinian national identities: The role of the Other in existential conflicts," *Journal of Social Issues* 55, no. 3 (1999).

²⁵ See L. J. Cohen, *The socialist pyramid, elite and power in Yugoslavia* (Ontario: Tri-service Press, 1989); Christiane Eilders and Albrecht Luter, "Germany at war: Competing framing strategies in German public discourse", *European Journal of Communication* 15, no. 3 (2000), 415-430; Reiner Grundmann, Dennis Smith, and Sue Wright, "National elites and transnational discourses in the Balkan War", *European Journal of Communication* 15, no. 3 (2000), 299-320; G. C. Herring, "Analogies at war: the United States, the conflict in Kosovo, and the uses of history", in Albrecht Schnabel & Ramesh Thakur, eds., *Kosovo and the challenge of humanitarian intervention* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2000); Philip Hammond and Edward S. Herman, eds., *Degraded capability: The media and the Kosovo crisis* (London: Pluto, 2000); Roland Paris, "Kosovo and the metaphor war", *Political Science Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (2002), 423-450; Piers Robinson, "Research note: The news media and intervention: Triggering the use of air power during humanitarian crises", *European Journal of Communication* 15, no. 3 (2000), 405-414; Rossella Savarese, " 'Infosuasion' in European newspapers: A case study on the war in Kosovo", *European Journal of Communication* 15, no. 3 (2000), 363-381; Gordon Stables,

nationalist historical discourse, which people bought into. This presents collective memory as static, and denies agency to the people who create, reproduce, negotiate and contest official discourses through narratives of vernacular memories. Few studies have analyzed vernacular discourses in Kosovo and former Yugoslavia, wherein personal and collective memory fuse with official historical discourses.

The importance of such an analysis is crucial, because, as Judah points out, in Kosovo “history is war by other means”.²⁶ History is not a subject that is confined to books, the classroom, and academic debates – it is a live, and wild creature, that is both shaped according to present realities and influences their interpretations. While the boundary between collective memory and history is blurred, both Serbs and Albanians make a distinction, which reflects their acceptance of history as objective and memory as fabricated, and their preoccupation with denying validity to the Other’s history, nation and identity. When referring to their own version of events, participants call it history, while when explaining the Other’s side, they term it memory, emphasizing its constructed, and therefore false, aspect. This exemplifies the point that the very notion of what constitutes history and what comprises collective memory is determined politically, that it is indicative of power struggles in society²⁷ and that it has significant political implications.²⁸ As Conway²⁹ remarks, the battle over the validity of memory is actually a struggle for the legitimacy of identity.

Because of the problems arising out of the false dichotomy between history and collective memory and its relation to conflict and victimage, I rather agree with Sturken who proposes that memory and history should be

“Justifying Kosovo: Representations of gendered violence and US military intervention”, *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 20, no. 1 (2003), 92-115; Daya K. Thussu, “Legitimizing ‘humanitarian’ intervention?” *European Journal of Communication* 15, no. 3 (2000), 345-361; Richard C. Vincent, “A narrative analysis of US press coverage of Slobodan Milosevic and the Serbs in Kosovo”, *European Journal of Communication* 15, no. 3 (2000), 321-344.

²⁶ Judah, *Kosovo*, 9.

²⁷ Victoria J. Gallagher, “Remembering together: Rhetorical integration and the case of Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial”, *The Southern Communication Journal* 60 (1995), 109-119.

²⁸ One of the key factors in such power struggles in Kosovo has been the destruction of Orthodox heritage, as a means of disputing the Serbian claim to the land.

²⁹ Brian Conway, “Active remembering, selective forgetting, and collective identity: The case of Bloody Sunday”, *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research* 3, no. 4 (2003), 305-323.

regarded as *entangled*.³⁰ As Katriel demonstrates, “the analytical categories of ‘history’ and ‘memory’ can be viewed as dialectically related: a historical orientation both builds on and transcends individual memory, and a memory orientation both incorporates and refashions historical knowledge in making it part of an encompassing, commemorative project”.³¹ Thus, memory and history exist in relation to and not apart from each other. History and memory are both highly selective, impartial and constructed. They are social, rhetorical constructs, changeable in relation to time and place, which make the past coherent and usable in the present.³²

Moving away from epistemology

Instead of examining official narratives and ascertaining the truth value of collective memories and national histories, this ideological study looks at vernacular discourse as a site where historical victimage is created and reproduced. It rejects the notion that objectivity is the property of history, whereas collective memory is laden with mythical, fabricated and distorted elements. It aims to demonstrate how truth and meaning are accomplished in vernacular rhetoric, and what kind of truth the participants want to be associated with.³³ As Sturken acknowledges, “the debate over truth and falsity is irresolvable”;³⁴ instead of ascribing falsehood, narratives should be examined for the fears and desires they express.

The following excerpts of Serb and Albanian vernacular narratives are taken from a larger corpus of 100 ethnographic interviews that I collected in Kosovo, from June to August 2002. They are a purposive sample, chosen for the brevity and coherence of the narratives, and because they are representative of the vernacular rhetoric of Kosovo Serbs and Albanians in the larger corpus. While this ideological criticism uses selected passages, these may be considered characteristic fragments of larger historical victimage narratives in Kosovo.³⁵ I view these selections as representative because the

³⁰ Sturken, *Tangled memories*, 5 (emphasis in original).

³¹ Tamar Katriel, “Sites of memory: Discourses of the past in Israeli pioneering settlement museums”, *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80, no. 1 (1994), 1-20, 1-2.

³² Clark and McKerrow, “Rhetorical construction of history”; Gronbeck, “Rhetorics of the past”; Sturken, *Tangled memories*.

³³ Laine Berman, “Surviving on the streets of Java: homeless children’s narratives of violence”, *Discourse & Society* 11, no. 2 (2000), 149-174.

³⁴ Sturken, “Remembering of forgetting”, 104.

³⁵ I realize that this claim invites criticisms of ignoring multiple voices, perspectives, identifications, and the existence of various vernacular memories, but in the interest of space and brevity I could not include them.

participants identified themselves and spoke as members of their respective ethnic and national groups, expressing official national history and Kosovo's collective memory.

I suggest that the narratives in the following section arise out of a daily repetition or rehearsal of "our version of events". This is a crucial discursive practice, "because the habitus has to be painstakingly reinforced in the face of life-worlds that are frequently in flux",³⁶ and quite literary so in an area like Kosovo. The everyday discourse about suffering can thus be regarded as a commemoration ritual, or as Burke³⁷ has termed it a "victimage ritual", which serves not only to express and release trauma, but to crystallize, reconfirm and solidify it. This vernacular discourse is imperative because it becomes the place, or as Kenny³⁸ suggests milieu, where victimization is repositied – the place where telling about victimization not only makes it vivid, present and meaningful, but also where it becomes larger than life; indeed it becomes historical. Burke's concept of victimage rhetoric posits that such narratives are necessarily melodramatic. They serve to instil hatred and fear of the Other, justify violent actions, because the desire that arises out of the narratives ultimately aims, as Blain says, "to destroy the destroyer",³⁹ either physically or symbolically. The melodramatic aspect of the victimage rhetoric in these narratives is exemplified in the claim to the absolute historical victim status and the use of great national tragedies to support this. The national tragedies are incredibly complex ideological configurations, and are very often associated with the notion of moral victory.

The narratives of suffering exemplify the amalgamation of personal and collective memories with official national histories. Personal memory becomes collectivized and collective memory is instantiated through autobiographical recollection, which is further reinforced through official discourses.⁴⁰ The polysemic nature of memorializing works additively, bringing together both particular and universal memories. Thus, the participants mirror to a certain extent the official history, but do not reproduce it exactly; rather they appropriate and embellish it, making it contemporary and personal. Accordingly, the victimage rhetoric of these narratives is not mono-

³⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 55.

³⁷ Kenneth Burke, *A rhetoric of motives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969).

³⁸ M.G. Kenny, "A place for memory: The interface between individual and collective history", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 3 (1999), 420-437.

³⁹ M. Blain, "Rhetorical practice in an anti-nuclear weapons campaign", *Peace & Change* 16, no. 4 (1991), 355-379, 356.

⁴⁰ Kenny, "Place for memory", 420.

lithic, but can be viewed as combining three different levels: the personal or familial, the regional or Kosovar, and the national, i.e. Serb and Albanian.

It is important to explain here the significance of regional collective memories, because the vernacular narratives in this study make use of collective memories specific to Kosovo, which Serbs and Albanians from other regions do not necessarily know or share in. The variation is not only due to divergent historical experiences, but also because collective memories, as notably narratives of who we are and who we were, are not just about ourselves, but necessarily include the “Other”. These memories are thus regionally different, because the Other is not necessarily the same for the entire national group. The flow of history forms and re-forms groups and brings them into contact with a shifting range of significant Others. Thus regional, as well as other,⁴¹ variations are significant.⁴²

In Kosovo, as Valtchinova⁴³ and Kostovicova⁴⁴ suggest, the Albanian national identity was, and is, clearly delineated in opposition to the Serbs as the ethnic Other. On the other hand, for Albanians living in the southern part of Albania, the others are both the Greeks and the northern Albanian Ghegs.⁴⁵ Likewise, for Serbs living in Bosnia, the others are Croats and Bosnian Muslims – Bosniaks,⁴⁶ while the Serbs living in Kosovo have constituted their identity in opposition to the Albanians. As there is no unitary, national identity that is identical and variationless across groups, so there

⁴¹ For example, for the urban Belgrade class the Others during the Bosnian war were not the Bosnian Muslims or the Croats, but rather the Bosnian Serb refugees, in relation to whom the Belgrade population differentiated themselves. Before that, the people of Belgrade constructed their identity in opposition to the rural population. This is just one example, but there are many, since identifications are multiple and fluid, and the Other anchoring them is likewise variable.

⁴² Some examples are discussed in V. Y. Mudimbe, *Nations, identities and cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

⁴³ Galia Valtchinova, “Ismail Kadare’s *The H-File* and the making of the Homeric verse: Variations on the works and lives of Milman Parry and Albert Lord”, in Stephanie Schwadner-Sievers and Bernd J. Fischer, eds., *Albanian identities: Myth and history* (London: Hurst & Company, 2002).

⁴⁴ Denisa Kostovicova, “*Shkolla Shqipe*’ and nationhood: Albanians in pursuit of education in the native language in interwar (1918–41) and post-autonomy (1989–98) Kosovo”, in Stephanie Schwadner-Sievers and Bernd J. Fischer, eds., *Albanian identities: Myth and history*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2002).

⁴⁵ Gilles de Rapper, “Culture and the reinvention of myths in a border area”, in Stephanie Schwadner-Sievers and Bernd J. Fischer, eds., *Albanian identities: Myth and history* (London: Hurst & Company, 2002).

⁴⁶ Tone Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian way* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

is no single Other. And as identifications and their anchoring Others are diverse, so are collective memories. Therefore, the narratives in this study are not representative of Serb and Albanian arguments in general, but of the Kosovo Serb and Albanian claims.

Fears and desires in competing narratives of historical victimage

In the following excerpts participants express their fear of the Other and a desire for symbolic or physical annihilation through constructing competing and oppositional narratives of historical victimage. All the, sometimes real and sometimes imagined, injustices and troubles are blamed on the Other. Duijzings⁴⁷ remarks that the Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, as other groups in former Yugoslavia and elsewhere in the world, each have their own catalogue of victims, atrocities, destruction and endured injustices, although not capacity to admit and grieve for the hurts of others. And Silber and Little explain:

To work in former Yugoslavia is to enter a world of parallel truths. Wherever you go, you encounter the same resolute conviction that everything that had befallen the region is always someone else's fault, except one's own side ... Each nation has embraced a separate orthodoxy in which it is uniquely the victim and never the perpetrator.⁴⁸

The narratives in this study embody this rigidity, as they are accounts of total and absolute historical oppression.

Because this ideological study looks at vernacular memory, it is not concerned with determining the veracity of claims, or reproducing previous work on the former Yugoslavia. I will not try to give an "objective" historical account for the reader, but will allow for the multivocality of Kosovo Serb and Albanian voices in the following analysis.

In the first subsection of this second segment I present the narrative of an Albanian interviewee, and in the second subsection a dialogue between two Serb speakers. I have not included their names, not only for confidentiality purposes, but also because the participants are speaking here not only as individuals, but as members of their respective ethnic groups. They are therefore identified as such.

Victimization of the Albanians as an historical injustice

In the following excerpt the speaker summarizes, using very strong language, the main points of the general and official Albanian argument of

⁴⁷ Ger Duijzings, *Religion and the politics of identity in Kosovo* (London: Hurst, 2000).

⁴⁸ Silber and Little, *Death of a nation*, 390-1.

centuries-long oppression.⁴⁹ He emphasizes that there are two sources from which he draws his claims, and those are personal experience and what he calls history. Albanian history for him is the officially ratified version of events, which connotes and implies legitimacy and authenticity.

Albanian speaker:

The Albanians have always been humiliated, oppressed, victimized and discriminated against. I mean everyone has direct experience with that. And then there's history. Our history teaches us that, too. The Serbs have always been our enemies. They are aggressive, and you can't trust them. They always, throughout the centuries, they always hated us. They colonized Kosovo, and they oppressed us. They have been oppressing us for centuries. I know that for a fact. I know it both from my experience and from our history.

In support of his claim, the speaker then continues to give specific examples. He refers to the victimization of Albanians as common knowledge, when he says "we all know, everyone knows".

We know what the *četniks*⁵⁰ did to us during World War II, and before that. They killed and burned and looted. Nothing was left. And then after the war, we all know, everyone knows what Rankovic did. His policy was to kill as many Albanians as he can, and more than that.

⁴⁹ See I. Berisha, *Serbian colonization and ethnic cleansing of Kosova: Documents and evidence* (Pristina, 1993); Isa Blumi, "The role of education in the formation of Albanian identity and its myths", in Stephanie Schwadner-Sievers and Bernd J. Fischer, eds., *Albanian identities: Myth and history* (London: Hurst & Company, 2002); Nicolas J. Costa, *Albania: A European enigma* (Boulder, CO: Eastern European Monographs, 1995); Kristo Frasher, *The history of Albania: A brief survey* (Tirana, 1964); Hasan Kaleši, "Kosovo pod turskom vlašcu" [Kosovo under Turkish rule], in M. Maletić, ed., *Kosovo nekad i sad (Kosova dikur e sot)* [Kosovo once and now], (Belgrade: Plato, 1973); M. Krasniqi, "The role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in anti-Albanian policies in Kosova", in J. Bajraktari, ed., *The Kosova issue – A historic and current problem* (Tirana, 1996); Anton Logoreci, "A clash between two nationalisms in Kosova", in Arshi Pipa & Sami Repishti, eds., *Studies on Kosova* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1984); Shkelzen Maliqi, *Kosova: Separate worlds, reflections and analyses 1989-1998* (Pristina, 1998); Sami Repishti, "The evolution of Kosova's autonomy within the Yugoslav constitutional framework", in Arshi Pipa & Sami Repishti, eds., *Studies on Kosova* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1984); Stavro Skendi, *Albania* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1956); Stavro Skendi, *The Albanian national awakening, 1878-1912* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967).

⁵⁰ These were monarchists who were loyal to the exiled King Peter, and who fought against the Nazi occupiers. Because the Albanians joined the Nazis in World War II, these troops fought against them. It is derived from *çeta*, a term used for the guerilla groups who fought against the Turkish empire in the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

The selective memories that he is invoking are not very detailed, and are considered to be tacit knowledge, in no need of further explication. Yet, they are the most politically volatile. The name *četniks*, even though it is not of recent origin, was used during the 1990s Yugoslav wars, both by radical Serbs to characterize themselves in a heroic light, as the keepers of the Serbian nationalist tradition, and by other groups to label their brutal and primitive behaviour. Therefore, while for the Serbs, the word *četnik* is positive, because it reminds of Serbian opposition to Nazism, for other ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia it is very negative, and has strong connotations of irrational, aggressive and even genocidal behaviour. Similarly, the Albanian speaker mentions Ranković, the hated head of UDB (the secret police), interior minister (until 1963) and vice-president, until 1966, accusing him of conducting a campaign of extermination.⁵¹ He is cast as a Hitler-like figure, and he comes to embody the Serb people and their intentions throughout the centuries.

The speaker then continues to maintain that the Albanians were not victimized only during the Milošević period, and asserts that Serbs and Albanians had never lived together peacefully and had never liked each other. He gives a brief disclaimer though, saying that there were some individual exemptions, although he points out that they were not very common. Such narratives tap into what both Serb and Albanian official histories say, but they also acknowledge the polysemic vernacular memories. Most of the participants in the larger study, Serb and Albanian, avow that while group relations were never amicable or peaceful, there were individual interactions that were.⁵² However, they are careful to stress that these are exceptions.

I mean, so it's not just the Milošević period. No, no. Before that, long before that. For a long time, a very long time. I mean, I think I can say that the only golden years for the Albanians in Kosovo were maybe between 74 and 80. Maybe. That's when the local Serbs supposedly felt that the Albanians got more rights and more privileges, but everything else, I mean people feel and remember only bad

⁵¹ However, Ranković imprisoned people and conducted secret investigations to prevent 'counter-revolutionaries' and 'Albanian irredentists' from operating in Yugoslavia, as Albania at that time was strictly aligned with the Soviet bloc. Ranković's measures were as much directed against and felt by Serbs and other groups in Yugoslavia, as the Albanians. The years after the war in Yugoslavia were marked by frequent and brutal purges within the Communist Party and its leadership, so that all groups were equally the victims of a paranoid and dictatorial regime, which aimed to pacify all its subjects. The speaker's claim is representative of the collective memory of Albanians, who claim that after Tito fired Ranković they started getting their freedom (Judah, *Kosovo*).

⁵² Milan Šušljaj, *Srbi i Arbanasi: njihova simbioza u srednjem vijeku* [Serbs and Arbanas: Their symbiosis in the Middle Ages], (Sarajevo: Književna zajednica Kultura, 1990).

things, only bad memories. There are some people who talk about friendships and mixed marriages, but it wasn't like in Bosnia, or other republics. Here, no, I mean the distance was always very big, very big, because there was always so much injustice. Always. For centuries the Serbs oppressed us as the colonizers, as the occupiers of Kosovo. They even changed our names and tried to convert us. I mean, that's how it was. The Serbs weren't the oppressed *raya*⁵³ in the Turkish empire. Don't believe that. Don't believe anything they say, because Serbian history is a big lie. Our folk poetry says that the Serbs occupied Kosovo, that they were always the aggressors, the evil people. Kosovo is Albanian land. I mean, Albania was recognized only in 1912 as an independent state, but Kosovo always had a majority Albanian population. Always. And the Serbs always oppressed them, subjugated and exploited them. We remember everything the Serbs did to us, through the centuries, in this century, in this recent period. Everything.

The speaker contends, as he did before, that the Serbs always hated the Albanians. On the other hand, he does not say that the Albanians hated the Serbs, but simply that there was a very big distance, for which the cause was the "injustice" done to the Albanians. He then progresses further along the timeline, going back centuries and repeating his main argument about Serbian colonizers and occupiers of Kosovo, which he derives from Albanian history books.

The speaker counters the standard Serb claim of victimization by the Ottomans and the Albanians, and accuses Serbian history of being "a big lie". He thus tells a polarizing and totalizing victimage narrative, without the possibility of even partial truth or validity to Serbian claims of victimization. He is implicitly disputing not only Serbian historiography, but general historiography about the Ottoman empire and the conditions of Christians within it.⁵⁴ He allows only for singular suffering, wherein he relies, as he says, on national history, folk poetry, and both collective and personal memories. He says "people feel and remember only bad things, only bad memories", which is exemplary of what Nietzsche⁵⁵ has pointed out as one of the primary characteristics of victimage.

⁵³ Turkish word signifying ordinary people. The *raya* were a specific class in the Ottoman empire, which was Christian and had to work for the wealthy Muslim landowners, *spahis*.

⁵⁴ For examples see Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: A short history* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000). Georgije Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine state* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991); Leften S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453* (New York: New York University Press, 1958).

⁵⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Invoking the Other's history in order to refute it is a strategy that almost all participants in the larger study use. It is meant to point out inconsistencies and falsities in the Other's history and argument. Participants thus engage the Other in an imagined dialogue, and directly dispute the opposing version of events. Bakhtin⁵⁶ calls this the dialogizing of another's discourse, wherein the speaker dialogues between his own position and the position of others.

The Albanian speaker in this excerpt invokes collective memory in the form of folk poetry to corroborate his accusation against Serbian victimage, and refers to the memory of the people several times. He portrays it as the memory of constant, perpetual and centuries-long oppression, as well as of the denial, by the Serbs, of their tyranny. It is exemplary as being an invented tradition,⁵⁷ which is part of the enduring memory that I mentioned earlier.

To provide a solid historical basis for his assertions, the speaker goes further back in time, to give the story of origin, as it is postulated by official Albanian historiography. The myth of origin and primordial claims to territorial possession are vital to all nations and their endeavours, but in Kosovo they are especially relevant, contested and explosive, because both groups claim to be the first settlers and therefore the rightful owners of the land. The questions "who came first" and "who is the guest of whom" figure quite prominently in both official and vernacular discourse. As Ramet points out, the Kosovo debate is much like the Israeli-Palestinian issue: "Two ethnic communities with distinct languages and religious traditions lay claims to the same territory with competing historical arguments as evidence."⁵⁸

Burke's notion of the melodramatic is especially exemplified in the Albanian speaker's claim that the history of the Albanian people has been one of constant struggle for freedom and liberty. In the next excerpt, he says "you see, from the very early history of our people, we have always been under attack". This notion of being attacked and under threat exemplifies the fear that motivates historical victimage narratives, and is intimately tied to the innocence of the victim who suffers unjustly. It invokes martyrdom and noble sacrifice for the nation.

The Albanians are the oldest people in the Balkans. That's the truth.
Our ancestors are the Illyrians, and we are older even than the
Greeks. I mean, some famous people, like Aristotle, weren't Greek at

⁵⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

⁵⁷ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁵⁸ Ramet, *Balkan Babel*, 174.

all. They were Albanian. Then the Romans came and colonized us. Then the Slavs attacked us and they colonized us. You see, from the very early history of our people, we have always been under attack. All this was once ours, the whole region. Albania, Kosovo, parts of Greece, Macedonia, Montenegro, and also some parts of Bulgaria. I mean, the whole Balkan region was Albanian before all these others came and conquered us. We have archaeological sites to prove it, and our language is living proof. Our language is the oldest. It's ancient. So we have all the rights to Kosovo, as Illyrians and as the majority that has always been oppressed.

The speaker argues that Albanians have rights to the land because they are the first to inhabit it, and also because they have been the victims for so many centuries. The Serbs are not only cast as ancient villains, but are also charged with 'stealing' the Albanian territory. There is a lot of repetition in the speaker's narrative; "always" is repeated thirteen times in his narrative. It emphasizes the constancy of the victim/villain dichotomy and serves to firmly establish the veracity of the speaker's claims.⁵⁹

The Albanian speaker's narrative presents an internally coherent and persuasive argument about the unjust historical victimization of the Albanian people. It is constructed through powerful and selective stories of oppression, derived from personal and collective memory, and reinforced through appealing to official national history. It is important to note however that while official national history provides facts and legitimacy to the personal and the collective, the relationship is reflexive. The speaker's narrative is a testimony to the veracity of the national history and the dominant narrative, and how it figures in vernacular rhetoric.

"History is repeating itself for the Serbs"

In this subsection, the two Serb dialogue partners, relate their immediate suffering to such instances in the past, and claim that historically it has always been this way for Serbs in Kosovo. They expound on their current oppression in detail, but I have decided not to include that part of their dialogue here for the purposes of brevity; the excerpt chosen speaks directly about historical victimage, which is the focus of this ideological study. In the larger study, all Serb participants invariably follow the same line of argumentation, describing in detail their present situation and then linking it to a larger historical context of Serb-Albanian relations. Therein they compress several centuries into the claim that the Serbs have continually been oppressed, thus elevating their status to eternal victims as opposed to the perpetual Albanian aggressors. The speakers in this dialogue maintain that

⁵⁹ Teun A. Van Dijk, *Ideology* (London: Sage Publications, 2000).

“history is repeating itself” in terms of the oppressor-oppressed relationship and the Serbs’ contemporary predicament. The past is used not only to make sense of the present, but also to reinforce victimization claims.

Serb speaker 1:

You know, it has always been this way. During the Turks, they [Albanians] killed our men and raped our women, then the same happened when the Germans and Italians came, in both world wars, and even during Tito, there were so many incidents of kidnapping, killing, and raping, just like today. But everything got covered up, just like now. You know, they always hated Serbs. Always wanted just to kill us all.

The speaker summarizes the main points of the Serb argument, which maintains that the Albanians have always been the villains, while the Serbs have always been the victims. He repeats the same claim that the Albanian makes, namely that of the Other always hating the in-group. He then uses a personal, or rather familial memory to back up his claim.

Speaker 1:

You know, for instance, they killed my great grandfather while he was working in his field. The Shiptars⁶⁰ [Albanians] slaughtered him. And then, later, you know a Shiptar came to take weapons and food and money from my grandfather one day, but my grandfather wouldn’t give him anything and he threw him out. But then his brothers, who knew what this Shiptar was capable of doing, they ran after him and gave him what he wanted and pleaded with him to spare my grandfather because of his wife and children. They pleaded with him for a long time, and they barely saved him. But we remember all that. We know who our great grandfathers and grandfathers were, what it was like then, what they did and how they suffered. We know all that.

The speaker’s choice of words, such as “slaughtered”, in contrast to “pleaded” paints a vivid image of the aggressor/innocence dichotomy. Speaking

⁶⁰ *Shiptars* is a word that Serbs use to refer to Albanians. It is now a pejorative term, derived from the Albanian name for themselves *Shqiptars*. This term was widely used before 1974, and did not have negative connotations. After 1974 though, when the Serbs in Kosovo started feeling threatened, the term acquired derogatory and negative connotations. The Albanians associate the term and its usage with the rise of Serbian nationalism and subsequent violence, considering it a mark of disrespect and denigration. However, I interviewed several Albanians, mostly those living in Serbia proper, who did not like being called Albanian, but requested to be called *Shiptars*. One interviewee said: “I am not Albanian. Pu, pu, pu [spitting]. No way. Albanians are from Albania. I am from Kosovo – I am Shiptar.” Likewise, there are some Serbs who do not use the term with negative or derogatory intentions, but use it out of habit. As one Serb interviewee in Kosovo said: “They [Albanians] are Shiptars for us, and they will always be Shiptars for us. Albanians are in Albania. Shiptars are ours.”

about his great grandfather and grandfather as victims of Albanian terror is likewise most powerful because in Kosovo, as in the rest of the Balkans and many other areas around the world, grandfathers are revered elders and patriarchs. They are considered the embodiments and containers of national wisdom, courage and honour. They are the guardians of the national spirit and its memories. Therefore, metaphorically, by killing elders, such as the speaker's great grandfather and grandfather, the Albanians are thought to be killing the Serbian identity and collective memory. However, the speaker demonstrates how memories are kept alive, despite such attempts; he says "but we remember all that", asserting that collective memory is alive and well and does not forget such injustice. He is not specific in what it is that people remember, because it is implied that every Serb in Kosovo has similar family stories, and shares the same memories. This suggests that the ideas Serb speaker 1 espouses are not idiosyncratic, but are much more complex ideological configurations. His partner in dialogue uses this "exemplary" incident to paint a wider historical picture and emphasize the pattern of victimization. The speakers together construct, what is for them, a strong, coherent and logical argument. They amplify and confirm each other's arguments.

Serb speaker 2:

In every war they went about creating a Greater Albania. When the Turk came, they accepted Islam, so the Serbs were the subjugated *raya*. Under the *zulum*⁶¹ of their mercenaries and *zulumčari*⁶² Serbs were forced either to suffer or to leave. Then in 1912 when we took back Kosovo we accepted all those mercenaries and *zulumčari*, and we didn't treat them like second-class citizens, but wanted to help them, because we knew what pain, misery and suffering were like. But because they never felt those things, they never knew torture and suffering, they didn't know how to appreciate that, just like today they don't know how to appreciate everything that Yugoslavia has given them. They constantly think that they have to torture someone.

He argues that the Albanians have always sided with the conquerors, and have always taken advantage of their privileged position to destroy Serbs and their claims to the land. On the other hand, like the Albanian speaker before him, and many other participants in the larger study, he does not mention some of the reciprocity in this process, but contends that after Kosovo was won back in 1912 the Serbs were merciful toward the Albanians, because they understood what being victimized means. The dichotomy is between the compassionate Serbs and the ruthless Albanians, who "constantly think

⁶¹ This is a Turkish word, which signifies intense, unbridled, unrestrained violence and brutality; it has similar connotations as today 'ethnic cleansing' does.

⁶² These are the men that perpetrated the *zulum*.

that they have to torture someone". The speaker gives specific historical instances when this was especially prominent further on.

Speaker 2:

During the First World War when Serbia was attacked by Austro-Hungarians, Germans and Bulgarians, they used our weak state to kill more of us and chase us away from our homes. The same during the Second World War. They created Greater Albania, they had their SS unit, *Skanderbeg*, and they killed so many of us, and expelled everyone. And then the worst enemy of the Serbs, Tito, didn't allow people to come back.

The speaker selectively invokes memories, including and leaving out memories according to their usefulness in constructing a coherent and positive argument about his group. This does not allow for the inclusion of competing or divergent memories, such as those that come from the historiography or the collective memory of the Other. The process of glossing over memories that speak negatively of the in-group, and supplanting them with positive ones, is exemplary of the process, inherent to creating histories and collective memories, of selective remembering and forgetting.⁶³

Obviously, this is not typical only in the Balkans. Bruner⁶⁴ shows how in Russia and Quebec national identities were (re)created through selective erasure. In West Germany though, the strategy did not call only for a "simple" erasure of National Socialist perpetrators from public memory, but also needed West Germans to identify themselves as victims of National Socialism. Dealing with the same issue, Hughes explains that such a construction was not a matter of "simply ignoring vast stretches of the past", because that would "leave an unsustainable vacuum", while "resorting to obvious untruths [would open] one's claims to easy refutation".⁶⁵ Instead inconvenient facts were silently passed over, while useful truths and half-truths were highlighted.

Zerubavel regards such a dynamic as a conscious and deliberate suppression of unfavourable stories about the past;⁶⁶ White explains it as "rep-

⁶³ R. S. Esbenshade, "Remembering to forget: Memory, history, national identity in postwar East-Central Europe", *Representations* 49 (1995), 72-96; Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* [What is a nation?], in *Oeuvres Complètes* [Complete Works], (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1947-61), 887-906.

⁶⁴ Michael L. Bruner, *Strategies of Remembrance: The Rhetorical Dimensions of National Identity Construction* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2002).

⁶⁵ Michael L. Hughes, "Through no fault of their own': West Germans remember their war losses", *German History* 18, no. 2 (2000), 193.

⁶⁶ Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered roots: Collective memory and the making of Israeli national tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

resentation” and “repression”,⁶⁷ while Hasian and Frank view it as a matter of debate, recirculation and renegotiation.⁶⁸ An example that illustrates this dynamic is Milošević’s rise to power. Milošević “tapped into” and raised to the official level, previously repressed collective memories of the Kosovo Serbs and their latent antagonism and resentment toward the Albanians.⁶⁹ In former Yugoslavia, especially under Tito’s rule, vernacular memories of ethnic hatred and strife were not allowed to circulate, because under the official banner of communist Yugoslavia, “brotherhood and unity” prevailed over ethnic discord. This did not mean that vernacular memories were forgotten. Ratifying some memories as official, Milosevic acquired a solid electoral support for claiming power. This move on his part is most often cited as the most powerful impetus to the subsequent Yugoslav wars.

One of the memories that had previously been repressed, but has since the 1990s been recirculated and renegotiated is that of the prohibition Tito put on Kosovo Serbs, who were exiled during World War II, to return to their land. This is an event that is specific to Kosovo. Therefore, while many other Serbs might agree with the speaker in his characterization of Tito as the “the worst enemy of the Serbs”, they might not share the same vernacular memories that are the basis for this speaker claiming so. The Serbs in Kosovo always resented Tito for giving the Albanians too much power and too many privileges,⁷⁰ so that this regional memory arises out of a different experience than the one other Serbs in former Yugoslavia have.

However, the Serbian speakers also evoke the official historical version of World War II, one that has been legitimized by the rest of the world, by remembering the Albanian-Italian-German alliance, and the atrocities the Albanians committed as Nazi fighters. The Albanians are thus placed on a par with the Nazis, which is the most vivid and powerful image of a villain. This is a common and rhetorically effective⁷¹ strategy for creating authoritative victimage narratives, not only in the discourse of Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, but many others around the world. Moeller suggests that various

⁶⁷ H. V. White, “Foucault decoded: Notes from underground”, *History and Theory* 12 (1973), 23-54, 32.

⁶⁸ Marouf Hasian, Jr., and Robert E. Frank, “Rhetoric, history, and collective memory: Decoding the Goldhagen debates”, *Western Journal of Communication* 63, no. 1 (1999), 95-115.

⁶⁹ Carl-Ulrich Schierup, “The post-communist enigma: Ethnic mobilization in Yugoslavia”, *New Community* 18, no. 1 (1991).

⁷⁰ Bogdanović, *Knjiga o Kosovu*; Krstić, *Kosovo*.

⁷¹ Janice H. Rushing and Thomas S. Frenzt, “The Gods must be crazy: The denial of descent in academic scholarship”, *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85, no. 3 (1999), 229-246.

groups use the Jewish experience to construct their own victim identities;⁷² it is very functional, because, as Doerr explains, the “Jewish genocide provides metaphorical language and a framework to express absolute domination, victimization, and unbearable suffering”.⁷³

Thus, Holocaust imagery figures prominently in the vernacular discourse of both Serbs and Albanians. We have seen how the Albanian compares Rankovic to Hitler, and portrays scenes of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Likewise, the Serbs use the same tactic, because it is one of the most effective ways of immediately delineating between the victims and the villains. Building on the momentum, the first speaker immediately reinforces this image of the suffering Serb nation. He exemplifies Burke’s melodramatic aspect of victimage, by using the word *stradalnici*, which translates literally as “universal historical sufferers”. It connotes suffering of historic and heroic proportions, and is only used in an epic context. The word merges martyrdom with innocence and injustice in historically transcendent suffering.

Speaker 1:

In each war, and we’ve had too many of them, we were the greatest *stradalnici* and the most ardent fighters for freedom. In every war the Serbs suffered the most. In World War II, every third Serb was killed. Houses, families destroyed, the intelligentsia murdered, the *raya* was left only to work. Serbia is small, but she has given the most lives and victims for the freedom of Yugoslavia, and the rest of the world. I don’t know of another nation that has suffered so much and forgiven so much. After 1389 and the Kosovo Battle, the Serbs have continually been suffering, forced to abandon their ethnic space, where the first royal thrones were, at Prizren and Novo Brdo, where their spiritual and cultural heart started beating. I mean, since that battle, we have just been going downhill.

The melodramatic is further strengthened through the speakers “poetic” words about Kosovo and the ancient royal thrones of Serbian kings, as the places where the Serbian “spiritual and cultural heart started beating”. The speaker refers to the pivotal element of Serbian victimage, memorialized through Serbian historiography, epic poetry, and national collective memory – the famous Battle of Kosovo (1389). This battle is engraved into what Durkheim calls the “*conscience collective*”, in this case of the Serbian people, like the Jewish Masada, and is considered a “turning point”, because five

⁷² Robert G. Moeller, *War stories: The search for a usable past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁷³ K. Doerr, “Memories of history: Women and the Holocaust in autobiographical and fictional memoirs”, *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 18, no. 3 (2000), 49–64, 53.

centuries of subjugation under Ottoman rule follow it. The battle is the foundational nationalist claim, and its political, symbolic and emotional significance has been analyzed or at the very least mentioned in, to my knowledge, almost every work that has been written about the Serbs.⁷⁴

For reasons of space I will not go into detail about this battle, but it is important to note that it embodies and symbolizes the Serbian spirit of fighting for Christianity against the “Turkish infidels”, dying for freedom and spilling their blood for their sacred land. Therefore, the appeal to this battle not only uses official Serbian historiography, but it calls on the vast repository of national collective memory to create the contrast between the heroic Serbs and their sad history, with that of the Albanians, who “never stood up to anyone”. The disparity here is not simply between the victim and the villain, but between a people who fight for their freedom and principles, and a people who don’t have morals and who prefer the easy way out, as Serb speaker 1 elaborates further.

Speaker 1:

In each war they never stood up to anyone. They always sided with the strongest and most ruthless – the Turks, Italians, Nazis. History is the same, only the victor changes. When the Turks ruled, they were with the Turks, then the Austro-Hungarians, the Italians, the Germans, now the Americans, and when they leave, they’ll find someone else.

Speaker 2:

No change whatsoever – everything that was happening then, is happening now. Everything that was before is going on today. That is really a quagmire. I often read a letter that Father Sava sent to the Berlin Congress in 1878. The same thing is happening today. The things that were going on then ... Father Sava was the official representative of the Serbian people in Kosovo, and he wrote a letter to the ambassadors of the Great Powers at the Berlin Congress. Then, and now, there is no difference for us Serbs – we are being killed, kidnapped, molested, our churches and monasteries destroyed, there is no life here, as there was none then.

⁷⁴ Lynda E. Boose, “Crossing the river Drina: Bosnian rape camps, Turkish impalement, and Serb cultural memory”, *Signs* 28, no. 1 (2002), 71–96; Thomas A. Emmert, “Kosovo: Development and impact of a national ethic”, in Ivo Banac, John G. Ackerman and Roman Szporluk, eds., *Nation and ideology: Essays in honor of Wayne S. Vucinich* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1981); Thomas A. Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo 1389* (New York: New York University Press, 1991); Robert G. D. Laffan, *The Serbs: The guardians of the gate* (New York: Dorset Press, 1989); Olga Zirojevic, “Kosovo in the collective memory”, in Nebojsa Popov, ed., *The road to war in Serbia: Trauma and catharsis* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000).

The speakers here refer to, and cite as proof of oppression, the letter to the Congress of Berlin (1878), which is another vernacular memory specific to Kosovo. The letter has been reprinted and I have seen it circulated through and read in the remaining Serb houses in Kosovo.

Speaker 1:

When you read that letter then you really understand that everything is the same, the powers at play, the events, everything is the same. Some of the actors have changed, but the stage is the same, and the plot is the same. Everything is the same. Even though Kosovo is ours, we have to suffer.

The dominant notion that history is repeating itself is most clearly expressed by Serb speaker 1, who says “history is the same, only the victor changes”, and then later, “some of the actors have changed, but the stage is the same, and the plot is the same”.

The vernacular discourses in this section illustrate how the rhetoric of victimage as melodramatic is accomplished by integrating personal and collective memories with officially ratified history, wherein each is invoked and used in support of the other. There is true interdependence of these parts, and the boundaries between them are not clear-cut, but overlap and intermix, in creating for these participants coherent, well-supported and rational arguments about the historical victimage of their respective group.

While the preceding analysis has been mostly descriptive in illustrating how victimage narratives are constructed through vernacular discourse, the next segment deals with the significance and the functions of claiming historical victimage for the Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo.

The significance and the functions of historical victimage narratives in Kosovo

It would be a mistake to think that the process of constructing and validating one's victim identity, and hence the Other's villain identity, is specific only to war zones, because stories of victimization are vital for creating cohesive national communities. Amato explains that victimage is at the core of national, social or indeed individual identity, saying that “if we have no sufferings or sacrifices to call our own, we have no story to tell, and with no story to tell, we are no people at all”.⁷⁵ Anderson emphasizes the crucial need for victimization to create a nationally cohesive history when he says that “the nation's biography snatches, against the going mortality rate, exemplary suicides, poignant martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars, and

⁷⁵ Joseph A. Amato, *Victims and values: A history and a theory of suffering* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 210.

holocausts. But, to serve the narrative purpose, these violent deaths must be remembered/forgotten as ‘our own’.”⁷⁶ Similarly, Osborne says that

for reasons which seem obscure to us, collective memory on a national level loves to dwell on negative experiences. In particular, the notion of victim, victimhood and victimization plays a crucial role in the collective memory of virtually every country. Stronger in some than in others, differing in its intensity according to time and space, every country seems to have had at least one trauma in its past which continues to haunt its collective memory.⁷⁷

However, I disagree with Osborne’s claim that the reasons for why victim identity is so endemic to every society are always obscure, because my research seems to indicate that they are in certain cases transparent, and can be instrumental for several purposes. After reviewing the above narratives one can content that claiming historical suffering provides moral high ground, garners sympathy and can serve as justification and exculpation, while being cast as the perpetrator invokes guilt, culpability and most importantly, punishment. The primary means through which this is achieved is through invoking collective memories and histories, as these are a key attribute of identity and are ideologically constrained by the Us as victims versus Them as villains opposition.

In order to unpack some of the functions of the competing historical victimage narratives, it is necessary to move beyond mere discovery, and theorize about the practical and pragmatic aspects of this vernacular rhetoric. The three functions that will be examined in this section are: using the past to make sense of the present, denying the Other, and justifying violence.

First function of historical victimage: Making sense of the present

As Zelizer says “the past compels us for what it tells us about the present”.⁷⁸ The participants construct symbolically their victim identity through using the past to make sense of their contemporary situation. They situate their personal and collective trauma within a broader context, and do not see it as novel, but as a repetition and continuance of the pattern of the nation’s victimization. They also do not see the conflict as new, but view it as the perpetuation of “age-old hatreds”, and therefore intractable. The Other then becomes the perpetual villain and perpetrator, mired as the “ancient enemy”. The participants not only relate to the centuries-long national suffering at the hand of various Others, but locate themselves within it, as witnesses and

⁷⁶ Anderson, *Imagined communities*, 206.

⁷⁷ Osborne, “Landscapes”, 3.

⁷⁸ Zelizer, “Aids to the past”, 697.

participants. They seek meaning and confirmation to their present victimization in historical victimage, and their personal and vernacular testimony provides another building block in the construction of the historical victim identity. This rhetoric is powerful, because it helps confirm self-perceptions and identity, but it also legitimizes national historiography. Since the national histories of the Serbs and Albanians are incompatible and conflicted, this leads to the second functions of historical victimage.

Second function of historical victimage: Denying the Other

As the above narratives illustrate, histories and memories of the Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo are in complete contrast and opposition to each other. Thus, claiming that one's version of events is truthful inherently implies that the Other's is not. The Albanian speaker directly asserts this, when he says "don't believe anything they say, because Serbian history is a big lie", but even without such open statements, this sentiment is implied throughout the narratives. Because history is vital to the existence of a nation or a community disputing the Other's history means denying the very identity of the Other. Therefore, as participants strive to validate their historical victim status, and simultaneously and inherently the Other's perpetual villain status, they are also struggling over the legitimacy of identity, memories, and even their very nation.

The NATO intervention and UN governance of Kosovo, which gave de facto independence to the Kosovo Albanians, seriously challenged the Serb nation and its perception of historical victim, while ratifying the Albanian claims to this status. However, in the Serbian case, because NATO was cast as the villain,⁷⁹ and because the KFOR troops did not protect the Serbian population from Albanian violence after the intervention,⁸⁰ it also simultaneously confirmed and reinforced the victimage master narrative.⁸¹ In the Albanian case, NATO's endorsement of their historical victimage

⁷⁹ Stef Jansen, "Victims, underdogs and rebels: Discursive practices of resistance in Serbian protest", *Critique of Anthropology* 20, no. 4 (2000), 393–419.

⁸⁰ See Judah, *Kosovo*. Stephen Erlanger, "Serbs driven from Kosovo live bitterly in exile", *The New York Times*, 2 September 1999; R. Fisk, "Serbs murdered by the hundreds since 'liberation'", *Independent*, 24 November 1999; A. Gray, "Serbs live in fear in Kosovo's kidnap capital", *Reuters*, 15 September 1999; Jared Israel, "Why French troops stood by as Albanians burned a Serbian village to the ground", *Emperor's Clothes*, 21 March 2004, retrieved 22 March 2004 from <http://emperors-clothes.com>

⁸¹ James P. Gee, "Meaning: choosing, guessing and cultural models", in James P. Gee, ed., *Social linguistics and literacies*, 2nd ed. (London: Taylor & Francis, 1996); R. A. Hackett and Y. Zhao, "Challenging a master narrative: peace protest and opinion/editorial discourse in the US press during the Gulf War", *Discourse & Society* 5, no. 4 (1994).

provided a basis for justifying violence against the Serbs,⁸² which is the third function examined in this ideological study.

Third function of historical victimage: Justifying violence

Unfortunately, the rhetoric of victimage is used not only to satisfy the moral demands of a community, but is instrumental in justifying oppression, discrimination and violence against the Other. Hauser suggests that invoking collective memories of victimization is useful in collective mobilization, building ethnic cohesion and justifying policies and action, and thus he sees it as indispensable in ethnic conflict.⁸³ Writing about Bosnia, he says, “conflicting stories of victimization [provide] mutually exclusive justifications for policies and acts of mutual extermination”.⁸⁴ Nietzsche explains this aspect of victimhood as *ressentiment*, which Schwartzman calls the negative extreme of public memory – revenge.⁸⁵

Since revenge is the privilege of the victim, this becomes the most prized, and yet most dangerous identity to lay claims to. Mertus explains that this is because “once we see ourselves as victims, we can clearly identify an enemy. Steeped in our own victimhood, we no longer feel bound by moral considerations in becoming perpetrators”.⁸⁶ In Kosovo, “both sides now feel like victims; both sides now feel entitled to take some liberty in “taking back” what is rightfully theirs”.⁸⁷ Siber similarly argues that “the selective interpretations of history and experience always provide abundant “reasons” for rationalizing one’s own behaviour, and proof of guilt can always be found in history, if one looks hard enough”.⁸⁸ This dynamic leads not only to the inability to empathize with the Other, but to the further intractability of the conflict, through the perpetuation of a vicious cycle of violence.⁸⁹

The relatively frequent power shifts in the region provide the opportunity for the victim to take “revenge” on the villain.⁹⁰ In the course of the

⁸² Feldman, “Political terror”.

⁸³ Hauser, *Vernacular voices*, 142.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁸⁵ Richard Schwartzman, “Recovering the lost canon: Public memory and the Holocaust”, *Rhetoric & Public Address* 4, no. 3 (2001), 542–583.

⁸⁶ Mertus, *Kosovo*, 1.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁸ Ivan Siber, “Psychological approaches to ethnic conflict in the territories of former Yugoslavia”, in Dusan Janjic, ed., *Ethnic conflict management: The case of Yugoslavia* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1997), 106.

⁸⁹ T. Pick, “Eastern European militant nationalism: Some causes and measures to counteract it”, *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 34, no. 4 (1997), 383–393.

protracted conflict in Kosovo, the ethnic minority often becomes the majority, and vice versa, due to changes in state borders, political systems and demographic factors. In such circumstances the new majority always seeks to “even the score” for the discrimination to which its group had been previously subjected.⁹¹ This ideological position is an anchor for both groups’ identities and is useful in pursuing particular political goals and claims. It is especially functional in justifying acts of violence by the in-group as warranted retribution.

In my larger sample, when Serb participants are reminded of the policies of Slobodan Milošević, they respond by recalling the centuries of Serbian plight under Muslim Albanian terror and their dominance during the communist rule. Similarly, when confronted with the violent crimes perpetrated by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) against Serbs, and other minorities, as well their cultural and religious heritage, the Albanians invoke their suffering in the 1990s, under Milošević’s rule, and the long-standing oppression suffered at the hands of the Serbs.

Unfortunately, these tragic kinds of exclusionary victimage narratives are not only used to justify, but also to motivate and provoke violent action. This is not specific only to the Balkans, but is visible and problematic in other conflicts around the world. They are part of the reason why thousands of people die and their deaths are justified as revenge. However, it is important to note that participation and justification are not identical, and that justification does not necessarily lead to involvement. Even though there is a thin line, as Feldman contends, between violence and inaction, spectatorship and partaking, sharing in the vernacular rhetoric of historical victimage, and reproducing it through everyday discourse, does not guarantee that people will be propelled to action, as several authors writing about Kosovo and the former Yugoslavia have suggested.⁹²

Concluding remarks

This ideological study has attempted to problematize explanations that posit singular, preferential, and “objective” victimage in relation to conflict

⁹⁰ Donald G. Ellis, “Intercultural communication in intractable ethno-political conflict”, in William J. Starosta and G. M. Chen, eds., *Taking stock in intercultural communication: Where to now?* (International and intercultural communication annual, vol. XXVIII, 2005).

⁹¹ Vladimir Goati, “The impact of parliamentary democracy on ethnic relations in Yugoslavia, 1989-1995”, in Dusan Janjic, ed., *Ethnic conflict management: The case of Yugoslavia* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1997).

⁹² See Anzulovic, *Heavenly Serbia*; Kaplan, *Balkan ghosts*; Sells, *Bridge betrayed*.

intervention and resolution. It has questioned the interrelationship between claiming historical victimage and using national histories, personal and collective memories to substantiate it.

First, it has argued that looking at history as objective in contrast to collective memory as distorted and mythical, leads to selective sanctioning of victimage narratives and rigid definitions of victims and villains, which leads to ineffective conflict intervention and resolution, helping to perpetuate violence.

Second, looking at vernacular discourses of Kosovo Serbs and Albanians this ideological study illustrated how historical victimage is created and reproduced in everyday melodramatic “commemoration rituals”.⁹³ The analysis demonstrated how official historiographies amalgamate with personal and collective memories, both regional and national, to produce coherent and rational victimage narratives for the speakers.

Third, it has been pointed out that the historical victim status is desirable because it affords emotional,⁹⁴ symbolic and political resources,⁹⁵ while being the villain implies guilt and punishment. Narratives of historical victimage invoke to past to make sense of the present, serve to create harsh dichotomies of oppressor/oppressed, through which the Other is delegitimized and becomes the target of violence, justified as revenge.

Intractable conflict and the inherently hostile relationship toward the Other, become embedded in everyday life through vernacular narratives of historical victimage. Multi-generational trauma⁹⁶ is translated into a victim identity, which is given historical proportions.⁹⁷ The conflict becomes mired in fixed binary oppositions of victim versus villain. It is conceptualized and understood as a continuous struggle of the innocent sufferers against the tyranny of the Other. Such rationalizations sustain and perpetuate conflict, making it even more intractable and impervious to resolution; not only is there no room for empathy and implicature, but there is no room for divergent voices and inclusive discourses of victimage.

⁹³ Burke, *Rhetoric of motives*.

⁹⁴ Leonard Hawes, “Double binds as structures in dominance and of feelings: problematics of dialogue”, in Robert Anderson, Leslie A. Baxter and Kenneth N. Cissna, eds., *Dialogue: Theorizing difference in communication studies* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2004).

⁹⁵ Hauser, *Vernacular voices*.

⁹⁶ Daniel Bar-Tal, “The rocky road toward peace: Beliefs on conflict in Israeli textbooks”, *Journal of Peace Research* 35, no. 6 (1998), 723-742.

⁹⁷ Piro Misha, “Invention of a nationalism: Myth and amnesia”, in Stephanie Schwadner-Sievers and Brend J. Fischer, eds., *Albanian identities: Myth and history* (London: Hurst & Company, 2002).

Instead of looking solely at the surface – that is the official and elite rhetoric – examining the deep and underlying structures of vernacular discourses uncovers the interplay of multiple memories and rhetorical strategies in establishing the Other as the source of all tragedies. Lack of critical attention to the complexities of historical victimage rhetoric leads to claims of primordial hatred and antagonism, and fails to understand how these extreme emotions arise out of the vernacular discourse of the groups involved. This ideological study shows that the conflict in Kosovo is not propelled by such primordial instincts, but that hatred and violence are constructed as legitimate responses to centuries of oppression. By uncovering the complex rhetoric of historical victimage in Kosovo it aims to make a modest contribution to the understanding of intractable conflict dynamics, which revolve around historical victimage. The implications of this study can be applied in other conflicts, such as Bosnia, the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Spain, Chechnya, Cyprus, East Africa, East Timor, Turkey, Iraq, and various others. The goal is to move us away from simplistic rationalizations, remedies and perpetual cycles of violence in these areas.

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