NATO and the Kosovo War.
The 1999 Military Intervention from a Comparative Perspective

Elisa Satjukow*

The Making of 24 March. Commemorations of the 1999 NATO Bombing in Serbia, 1999–2019

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Abstract: The author takes the 20th anniversary of the NATO intervention as a starting point to reflect on the commemorations of 24 March 1999, distinguishing three phases of memory politics: First, the Making of 24 March (1999–2000) by Slobodan Milošević, which initiated a hegemonic narrative of Serbian martyrdom; second, the Long Period of Ambiguity (2001–2014) shaped by the former democratic governments, who pursued a policy of reconciliation without questioning the one-sided memory in relation to the war in Kosovo; and third, the Return of 24 March with Aleksandar Vučić's rise to power, which describes the 78 days of air raids as a collective trauma of Serbian society, from which, however, strength and defiance can be derived. The author shows that memory politics in Serbia today continue to focus almost exclusively on Serbian sacrifices made due to the bombing, while the war in Kosovo remains silenced.

Keywords: Serbia, Kosovo, 1999 NATO intervention, memory politics, commemoration

On 24 March 2019, at the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia, Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić declared pride in his country for "bravely defending itself when the whole world conspired against it". He spoke to a crowd of around 20,000 people who, according to media reports, had gathered in the southern Serbian city of Niš: "For five years now, we have been remembering, in this extraordinary way, the anniversary of NATO's aggression against a small, freedom-loving country that will never surrender" (UŽIVO—Niš, *Tanjug*, 24 March 2019). By viewing the NATO bombing as an "act of aggression" (*NATO agresija*) and hence as a one-sided use of armed forces and not

***Corresponding author: Elisa Satjukow**, Department of History, Leipzig University, Leipzig, Germany, E-mail: elisa.satjukow@uni-leipzig.de

as a military intervention in an ongoing conflict, he built on the rhetoric of the Milošević regime in the 1990s by reviving conspiracy theories of an "evil coming from the outside" (Bock-Luna 2007, 197; see also Obradović-Wochnik 2013; Blanuša 2021), remembering the 1999 NATO bombing as a stand-alone event, disconnected from the war crimes and ethnic "cleansing" committed by Serb forces against the Albanian people in Kosovo. More than this though, he also described the 78 days of air raids as a collective trauma of Serbian society, from which, however, strength and defiance (*inat*) can be derived. With the rise back to power of Vučić, himself a former member of the Milošević government and minister of information during the Kosovo War in 1998/99, a nationalist shift took place in Serbian memory politics, bringing the NATO bombing back to the forefront of a re-established national(ist) calendar.

In my article, I analyze how this shift in memory politics took place, showing how 24 March first became the central day of remembrance of the NATO bombing and how the commemorations have changed over the last 20 years. I argue that there are three different phases of memory politics that need to be distinguished: First, the Making of 24 March (1999–2000) by Slobodan Milošević, which initiated the narrative of a criminal act of aggression against a sovereign country and its people by disconnecting the bombing from the context of the Kosovo War and silencing the crimes committed by Serb forces against Albanians in Kosovo. This was followed by the Long Period of Ambiguity (2001–2014) after the political changes which preceded the overthrow of Milošević in October 2000. While the newly elected democratic government was pursuing a policy of reconciliation with regard to the Yugoslav wars of disintegration, this did not affect the narrative framing of 24 March, which maintained it as the central day of remembrance but largely eliminated it from the public sphere. This changed when Aleksandar Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska Napredna Stranka*, SNS) rose to power, constituting a new phase of memory politics, which was followed by the Return of 24 March. The article concludes that 24 March was made into and still functions as the central day of remembrance, highlighting the NATO bombing as a one-sided war against Serbia, disconnected from what Florian Bieber describes as the "Kosovo wars": "the bombing of Yugoslavia by NATO on one side and the campaign of mass expulsions and murder in Kosovo by the Yugoslav army and paramilitary groups on the other" (Bieber 2003, 321).

My study builds on a body of research on memory politics in Serbia since the 1990s, which illustrates the consequences of nationalist politics from the Milošević era to the present day (see, e.g., Bieber 2003; Gordy 2013). With regard to the NATO bombing of Serbia, I draw on the work of Orli Fridman (2016), Krisztina Rácz (2016), Srđan Atanasovski (2016), Gruia Bădescu (2016, 2019), Jelena Subotić and Filip Ejdus (2014, 2020), and in particular Marija Mandić (2016). In an in-depth study of

the 15th anniversary in 2014, Mandić revealed how the ambivalent semantics in Serbian commemorative discourses have developed over the years. My article expands the scope of these studies, arguing that the commemorative patterns have changed profoundly since 2015 with Vučić's rise to power (see also Jovanović 2022, in this issue).

From a theoretical perspective, I follow Orli Fridman's distinction between national and alternative memory practices in Serbia (Fridman 2015), by focusing on 24 March as the main day of commemoration of the NATO bombing and the way it entered and was kept in what Eviatar Zerubavel describes as the "national calendar". Understanding the latter as a "social organization of national memory" (Zerubavel 2003), promoted mainly by state officials, the alternative calendar in the sense of Fridman is mainly driven by civil society organizations and initiatives that strive to bring to the fore those events that have been deliberately forgotten, silenced or ignored (Fridman 2015, 213).

With regard to the establishment of remembrance days, Aleida Assmann argues that political memory mostly refers to either victories or defeats. Although victories are easier to remember in the short term, defeats often have a long-term identity-forming effect (Assmann 2006, 218; see also Koselleck 2003, 68). What is remembered is what is suitable for the respective memory narrative, and this depends on what serves the positive self-image of a nation and its future political goals. The Kosovo War can be considered a textbook example of this: While from the Kosovo-Albanian perspective, NATO's military intervention is remembered as a decisive step on the road to independence, deeply connected with the heroized role of the Kosovo Liberation Army (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës*, KLA) (Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers 2006; Ströhle 2010, 2012; Zeidler 2022, in this issue), in Serbia, the same event symbolizes an illegal attack on a sovereign state, with only the "defence" of the Serbian people against NATO being remembered, while the war in Kosovo, and thus the reason for NATO's intervention in the first place, is excluded from political memory.

To this day, many people in Serbia only have scant knowledge about the historical context, the reasons that led to the bombing and its connection with the war crimes in Kosovo (Gashi 2020). Nevertheless, many people feel "a strong eagerness" (Obradović-Wochnik 2013, 174) to talk about their personal circumstances and the impact of being subject to aerial warfare. This comes as no surprise, considering that the NATO bombing was the only military action in the course of the Yugoslav wars that took place in Serbia itself and is therefore remembered by many as an extraordinary and life-threating experience. Even though NATO was targeting precisely preselected "military objectives", the final report to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) shows that these targets were often located near places where civilians lived and

therefore "collateral damage" could hardly be avoided, not to mention the dangers caused by using cluster bombs and munitions filled with depleted uranium (for reviews on the mixed outcomes of the NATO intervention, see the Committee Established to Review the NATO Bombing Campaign 2000; Benvenuti 2001; Civilian Deaths in the NATO Air Campaign, *Human Rights Watch* February 2000; Amnesty International 2000).

To answer the question of how the memory politics of 24 March evolved over time, I examined different media outlets and their print and online reports around the anniversary of the date for the time period from 1999 to 2019. I looked at various public manifestations of remembrance, such as monuments, commemorations and other mnemonic events. My main sources were the daily newspapers *Politika, Blic* and *Večernje Novosti*. While *Politika* and *Večernje Novosti* tend to be conservative, *Blic* is a tabloid newspaper, which changed its stance from rather critical during the 1990s to a more populist outlet during the 2000s and beyond. Considering that the media situation radically changed between 1999 and 2019, discourse analysis over such a long period is a difficult undertaking. While for the first phase of my analysis, the press was subject to a new media law, established in 1998 and containing strict censorship regulations (Committee to Protect Journalists 2000; Satjukow 2019), the situation changed with the overthrow of Milošević in October 2000. In the following years, the media situation in Serbia slowly developed according to the democratic standards of free press until the recent nationalist backlash of the Vučić government. In 2019, the World Press Freedom Index ranked Serbia at number 90 of 180 countries, a lower position than in 2013 where it was at number 63 (Serbia: Fight against Impunity Continues, 2021). Keeping in mind that the media have played an active role in constructing and communicating certain hegemonic narratives of memory politics, I start each section with a short introduction to the political and social frameworks within which the different commemoration ceremonies were situated.

The Making of 24 March (1999–2000)

On 9 June 1999, the treaty of Kumanovo sealed the end of the Kosovo War and the NATO bombing. One day later, the Serbian government began to withdraw its troops from Kosovo while the UN was establishing a transitional administration under the protection of what was called the Kosovo Force (KFOR). While the presence of NATO on the ground brought great relief for the Kosovo-Albanian population, on the one hand, it could not, on the other, prevent acts of revenge and the subsequent mass flight of the Serbian and Roma people from Kosovo (Abuses against Serbs and Roma in the New Kosovo, Human Rights Watch, August 1999).

Even though the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was in disastrous political and economic condition after the 78 days of NATO air raids, Serbian newspapers announced victory over NATO. In his speech "On the end of the NATO aggression", Slobodan Milošević thanked "the Serbian people who from infants to soldiers defended the freedom and dignity of their fatherland […]. As heroes we rebuild our country and step into a new future with united strength" (Milošević 1999). This narrative framing of a "heroic defence" against NATO has thus dominated Serbian propaganda since the very beginning (Goff and Trionfi 1999; Blagojević 2003). Even though, in practical terms, the treaty of Kumanovo enforced the territorial reorganization of Kosovo and Serbia, which Milošević refused to accept in previous peace negotiations and which had been the reason for the intervention in the first place, the Serbian regime proclaimed its defeat as a moral victory. Far from everyone agreed with this interpretation, however. Towards the end of the military intervention, demonstrations were already being held against Milošević and his party (Bieber 2009). Although public assemblies were officially prohibited during the air raids (with the exception of state organized events), more and more bereaved relatives of soldiers killed by KLA soldiers or NATO bombs in Kosovo were demanding an end to Serbian war politics. Thus, shortly after the bombing, a broad movement for political change emerged, but it was not until the elections in 2000 that this movement gained so much political power that it ultimately led to the overthrow of Milošević on 5 October (Gordy 2000).

This is why the first anniversary of the NATO bombing oscillated in a distinctive way between traumatic personal experiences and losses and the political need of the Milošević regime to ascribe meaning to those experiences in order to maintain public support. Hence, choosing 24 March as the main anniversary served a specific political purpose: to disconnect NATO's intervention from its origins and mark it solely as an injustice experienced by the Serbian people. Consequently, it was not the war in Kosovo, which started as early as spring 1998, at the centre of national memory politics, but rather exclusively the NATO air raids from March to June 1999. Importantly, the focus was not on the end of the Kosovo War and the air attacks on 9 June 1999 but on the start of the bombing. The Milošević regime made 24 March a symbol for the suffering that Serbia experienced due to NATO and the "heroic resistance" with which people supposedly reacted.

The state commemoration on the first anniversary of the bombing was held on 23 March 2000 at the symbolic site of the Monument of the Unknown Hero on Mount Avala, 20 kilometres south of Belgrade, and one day before remembrance events took place all over the country. The tomb of the unknown Yugoslav soldier, built by Ivan Meštrović in the 1930s, was not only an important symbol of Yugoslavism (Ignjatović 2010) and therefore a location of historical significance, but the bombed television tower located on Mount Avala also served as a sign of

destruction by NATO (Staničić 2021, 378–82). In his speech, Milošević criticized the "aggression" against Serbia and thanked "the heroes of the fatherland who fell defending the freedom and dignity of the people and the state against new fascism" (Neka je večna slava, *Politika*, 24 March 2000; see also Mandić 2016, 466). The term "aggression" was used by the Milošević regime to describe NATO's air strikes as a unilateral and illegal act of war,[1] drawing comparisons between Nazi Germany's attacks on Serbia in World War II and repeating the narrative of the "genocide of the Serbian people" which had been a dominant trope in Serbian propaganda of the 1990s (Živković 2000; MacDonald 2003; Blagojević 2003). In the context of 1999, this image was not only used by the Serbian side to criticize NATO, but also by NATO to legitimize an intervention in the Kosovo War (Hering and Stahl 2022, in this issue).

The state commemoration was followed by other mnemonic events taking place on 24 March, starting with a vigil in all Serbian schools, remembering the "criminal bombing of Yugoslavia and the heroic defence of the country from the NATO aggressors", as required by the Ministry of Information (Ramet 2001, 39). This was followed by concerts in central squares all over the country in memory of what were called "anti-war concerts", which took place every day at noon during the 78 days of the 1999 bombing campaign (Atanasovski 2016; Satjukow 2020, 169–91). According to *Blic*, up to 15,000 people attended the main concert in Belgrade in 2000, which featured rock stars like Rambo Amadeus and other famous pop and folk singers (Obradović and Radojević 2000). The concerts were accompanied by a "marathon of peace" under the slogan "Vidovdan 99" as well as a series of cultural events, such as film screenings, exhibition openings, or book presentations dealing with the experiences of the Serbian people during the NATO bombing campaign. Ruling politicians visited bombed sites across the country, while the memory of the deceased was honored with wreath-laying ceremonies and memorial services (Venci i sveće za sve nastradale, *Blic*, 25 March 2000).

Originally, for the first anniversary, Slobodan Milošević and his wife Mira Marković planned the ceremonial opening of a newly erected memorial for the victims of the NATO bombing on the bank of the River Sava in Belgrade. Due to financial and time constraints, however, this could only be opened two months later on 21 June 2000. It comprised a 28-m-high obelisk with a bronze flame on top; the inside consisted of the name-giving "Eternal Flame" (*Večna Vatra)*. According to Christine Lavrence, who conducted interviews on the subject matter in the early 2000s, the reactions to the monument were mostly negative. Respondents stated that they considered the monument to be "stupid" and "a waste of money", that "it

1 For more detailed accounts of the debate on the legitimacy of the NATO bombing under international law, see, for example, Wheeler 2002; Hehir 2012; and Castan Pinos 2019.

had no purpose" and "only served to shelter drug addicts and homeless people". Shortly after its opening, it fell victim to vandalism (Lavrence 2007, 443).

However, another monument unveiling—this one entitled *Nezaboravnik* (Forget-me-not)—took place in Belgrade on 24 March 2000. The monument, dedicated to the children killed by NATO bombs, in the form of a butterfly with the inscription "Bili smo samo deca—We were just children" was located next to St. Mark's Church in Belgrade's Tašmajdan Park in the city centre. Originally, a bronze bust of a girl with a teddy bear in her hand was part of the sculpture. But, for unknown reasons, this part of the sculpture has been stolen twice, the first time shortly after its opening in 1999. It was most recently replaced for the third time in 2015 (Po treći put, *RTS*, 24 September 2015). Although the original design of the bust was not dedicated to one specific person by name, there was a striking resemblance to Milica Rakić, a three-year-old girl who died during the bombing from shrapnel that had hit her house in the Belgrade district of Batajnica. Her tragic death became a symbol of the suffering of children under the NATO bombs and the merging of the statue of the girl and the real Milica soon took on a life of its own (Avakumović and Grbić 2004).

The erection of the monument was made possible by donations from the Serbian newspaper *Večernje Novosti*, as stated in the Serbian and English inscription: "Dedicated to the children killed in NATO aggression 1999. Večernje Novosti and its readers" (Adamek 2016, 4). The inauguration was part of the series of commemorative events on 24 March 2000, attended by a delegation of the municipality, representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the Greek ambassador to Serbia.[2] During the ceremony, the names of the 88 children, which were published in *Politika*, were first read out to pupils from three Serbian schools, and the memorial was then unveiled (Vasiljević 2000). The monument was not only designed as a place of mourning for the bereaved but fulfilled a political purpose as well. This is shown particularly clearly by the English-language inscriptions, which not only accuse NATO of killing innocent children but at the same time also claim to honour all children killed in the conflict, regardless of their nationality, despite the fact that the location of the monument in Belgrade suggests that the majority of these children were of Serb ethnicity (Samardžija 2017, 92–3).

The question of the number and nationalities of the victims of the NATO bombing warrants closer examination, as it remains one of the biggest controversies to date. While Serbian officials claim that there were between 2,000 and 2,500 Serbian victims, and the majority of media reports between 1999 and 2019 concur, the death toll recorded by the Humanitarian Law Center in Belgrade refers

2 For a detailed account of Greek–Serbian relations with regard to the NATO bombing, see Fotiadis 2021; and Fotiadis 2022, in this issue.

to a total of 758 victims, among them 453 civilians, most of them not Serbian but in fact Albanian, Roma, or other nationalities, born and killed in Kosovo.[3] The same holds true for the claimed death of 88 children, a number which appeared in the Serbian print media for a long time (Beoković 2010). Nowadays, reports stated that 79 children were victims of the NATO bombing (Srbija ne da da je slome, *RTV*, 24 March 2019).

In my search for what Orli Fridman (2015) describes as the alternative memory culture, in the sources I examined, I was only able to locate a few examples with regards to the first anniversary of the NATO bombing. As the independent media were still suffering from the economic and political consequences of their partial shutdown during the bombing (Collin 2004), it is necessary to read between the lines of the ongoing Milošević propaganda. For the first anniversary, the public presence of the resistance movement *Otpor*, which was founded in 1998 but had to interrupt its anti-Milošević campaigns due to the NATO bombing, was especially noticeable. With a nationwide campaign and numerous local protest actions on 24 March, the activists challenged the one-sided memory politics of Serbian victimhood. To give an example from the central Serbian town of Kragujevac: As described in *Blic*, the municipality called for a memorial concert under the slogan "And we live on". In response, *Otpor* disseminated posters with the inscription "10,000 are dead, but he lives on" and "4,000,000 starve, but he lives on", challenging the cynical irony of the state's nationalist campaign. The government acted against the protesters with the usual severity and there were numerous arrests (Otpor Agresiji, *Blic*, 25 March 2000). The trade unions also joined the protest against the patriotic style of public commemorations, although their motives were different to *Otpor*'s. In Belgrade, trade unions managed to mobilize thousands under the motto "Against NATO, against sanctions" to hold protests calling for an end to the economic sanctions and for regular payment of worker's pensions and salaries (Protest simpatizera sindikata penzionera Srbije, *Večernje Novosti*, 24 March 2000).

The gap between the national calendar and the alternative calendar is particularly striking with regard to the case of the Serbian state television company *Radio Televizija Srbije* (RTS). The death of 16 employees on 23 April 1999 as a result of a heavy NATO attack became a symbol for the double threat to the Serbian people: from the NATO bombs *and* the Milošević regime. Although NATO had issued warnings, managing director of RTS Dragoljub Milanović did not have the building evacuated. Milanović was later sentenced to 10 years in prison, but on the first anniversary of the NATO bombing, the lines of conflict between national and

3 Humanitarian Law Center 2011. This figure was first shared by Human Rights Watch in 2000, see Civilian Deaths in the NATO Air Campaign, *Human Rights Watch*, February 2000.

alternative memory politics become particularly apparent. On 24 March 2000, Dragoljub Milanović, still in charge of RTS, held a commemoration for the deceased with a wreath-laying ceremony in front of the ruins of the RTS building. While Milanović staged the deceased as martyrs for their fatherland (Venci i sveće za sve nastradale, *Blic*, 25 March 2000), their relatives tried to obtain state support to finance a memorial stone for those they had lost. Finally, a memorial stone was erected in front of the destroyed RTS building in Belgrade's Tašmajdan Park. The monument was engraved with the inscription *Zašto?* (Why?) and was unveiled on 23 April 2000, exactly one year after the air raids had hit the building. Ever since the unveiling, the victims' families have organized anniversary commemorations (Kijevčanin 2017, 83).

To summarize, in the year 2000, two central days of remembrance were established: 24 March as the date of state commemoration was entered in the national calendar, and 23 April appeared as the day of remembrance in an alternative calendar, representing the ambivalent memories of Serbian society "between NATO's hammer and [the] regime's anvil" (Let Civility Prevail, 16 April 1999).

The Long Period of Ambiguity (2001–2014)

Although the narrative framing of the bombing as an event of primarily Serbian suffering did not change substantially after the regime change in 2000, some important developments in memory politics did occur. While the common goal of bringing down Milošević had had an integrating effect, leading to the revolution on 5 October 2000, the country subsequently got caught up in controversial debates about Serbia's future. While the prime minister and chairman of the Democratic Party (*Demokratska stranka*, DS), Zoran Đinđić, stood for reforms and a course of rapprochement with the European Union, the Serbian president and leader of the coalition partner Democratic Party of Serbia (*Demokratska stranka Srbije*, DSS, a splinter party of the DS), Vojislav Koštunica, changed "his stance […] from one that was anti-Milošević and moderately pro-Western to a nationalist and extremely anti-NATO orientation" (Mandić 2016, 469). The assassination of Zoran Đinđić on 12 March 2003 by former Milošević cadres happened in these very years of political reorientation. The question of how the country might have developed if Đinđić had not been murdered preoccupies many liberal forces in Serbia to this day, which is why the memory of the "Serbian Kennedy" (Greenberg 2006, 126) has had a strong renaissance in the nationalist backlash of recent years. While Koštunica, who was president from 2001 to 2004 and later prime minister from 2005 to 2008, pursued an ambivalent course in memory politics, Đinđić's successor Boris Tadić, who took over the presidency in 2004, was committed to prosecuting Serbian war crimes and

taking steps towards reconciliation. It was in this period that the phrase "aggression" disappeared from the media to be replaced by the more neutral term "NATO bombardment" (*NATO bombardovanje*).

Looking at the media coverage around the days of the anniversary on 24 March between 2001 and 2014, it becomes apparent that the reporting on the NATO bombing was greatly reduced in comparison to the Milošević era. Only around the fifth and tenth anniversaries of the bombing did the media coverage comprise extensive reports and cover stories. On the other anniversaries, the NATO bombing completely disappeared from the front pages and the reports about local commemorations often only consisted of a few lines. Nevertheless, 24 March remained part of the national calendar, a day on which memorial services and wreath-laying ceremonies took place, but they had become more decentralized and they were nowhere near the size and resonance of the last year of the Milošević government. The main commemoration was not organized by the government but by the Serbian Orthodox Church at St. Mark's in Belgrade, an event that Koštunica attended every year during his presidency—unlike Đinđić, who, according to Marija Mandić, never even made an official statement on 24 March (Mandić 2016, 468).

While the democratic change in 2000 led to a politics of rapprochement with the West and therefore to a rather cautious policy of remembrance, when it came to condemning the NATO attacks, the nationalists who had previously been in government continued with their mnemonic course from the ranks of the opposition. In 2001, member of the Socialist Party (*Socijalistička partija Srbije*, SPS) and now foreign minister Ivica Dačić called for a nationalist protest on Belgrade's Republic Square under the slogan "Never forget, never repeat" (Da se ne zaboravi, da se ne ponovi, *Politika*, 25 March 2001). During the years that followed, nationalist and right-wing groups regularly used 24 March as an occasion to communicate anti-European, anti-American, and NATO-critical messages to the people. The Kosovo question, in particular, remained virulent. When violent riots broke out in Kosovo in 2004, Boris Tadić used the fifth anniversary of the NATO bombing on 24 March 2004 to send a message of peace. During the memorial ceremony in the surrounding area of Preševo, a small town near the border with North Macedonia and Kosovo where numerous members of the Yugoslav army were killed in 1999, Tadić argued that the government would work toward a peaceful solution to the conflicts between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo: "Under no circumstances should there be a repetition of the events in 1999" (Stevanović 2004). Even in the wake of Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, which led to serious unrest in Serbia, the government stuck to this course, although Tadić stressed that Serbia would never recognize Kosovo as an independent country (Tadić: Svima je jasno, *Politika*, 25 March 2009).

Besides his pro-European orientation, this shows an ambivalent strategy of remembrance, shifting between democratization and reconciliation, on the one hand, but sticking to a Serbian nationalist course on the question of Kosovo's status, on the other. Nonetheless, Tadić was the first Serbian president to have not only publicly apologized for Serbian war crimes, but also to have participated in the commemoration ceremonies in Srebrenica and Vukovar, in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, respectively (Denti 2015). This policy of reconciliation was evident not only in the rapprochement with neighboring countries, but also in the judicial prosecution of Serbian crimes committed during the Yugoslav wars. The cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was of central importance in this regard, evident in the extradition of six high-ranking officials who had been indicted for war crimes in Kosovo between 2002 and 2005 (Waters 2013; Ristić 2014).

However, the wars were not only dealt with using legal means, but also with regard to memory politics, as becomes apparent in the memorial for the victims of the Yugoslav wars, inaugurated by Belgrade's mayor Dragan Đilas on the thirteenth anniversary of the NATO bombing on 24 March 2012. The ceremony on Savski Square took place in silence and without the involvement of a larger public. Even though the monument is located directly in front of Belgrade's central railway station, it remains practically hidden on a square that is mostly used for transit. In tiny letters, the following words are engraved on the plaque: "To the victims of war and the defenders of the fatherland 1990–1999". Already in the run-up to the official opening protests were held. While the anti-militarist non-governmental organization (NGO) Women in Black (*Žene u crnom*) criticized the portrayal of victims and perpetrators as equals in the inscription, the bereaved families expressed their general dissatisfaction with its format: The memorial plaque contained neither the names of the deceased nor a cross. "We have waited 20 years and what we now receive is humiliating and shameful", they told Đilas on 24 March 2012 when the monument was unveiled, a ceremony to which protesters tried to deny Đilas access (Pandurević 2012).

It had taken a total of 10 years and three competitive tenders to install the plaque (Marusic et al. 2013). Lea David shows just how controversial discussions about the question of "Who should be remembered and how?" were in relation to the monument (2014). To schedule the inauguration on the anniversary of the NATO bombing is directly linked to the message the monument conveys: to stress the victimization and the heroism of the Serb people as the two key narratives of remembering the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Đilas underlined this notion in his speech, assuring listeners that "all those are remembered who were victims of the civil wars or who died in the belief that they were defending the freedom of their homeland" (Pandurević 2012).

The erection of the Savski Square monument in 2012 was part of what Jasmina Kijevčanin calls a "new wave of transitional justice activities" (Kijevčanin 2017, 383) by the government, followed by the announcement of a new monument to commemorate the RTS employees. For a long time, no one was sure what to do with the remains of the bombed television building in the centre of Belgrade. Then, in 2013, an official competition for the design of a memorial to the RTS workers was announced (Staničić 2021, 383). The aim was to develop a "monument that would bear witness to the tragic death of RTS employees during the NATO bombing on Aberdareva Street No. 1 in Belgrade" (Bădescu 2016, 513), including not only the preservation of the ruins but also a memorial room with personal objects of the deceased. But to this day, the opening of the memorial complex, which was originally announced for the 20th anniversary in 2019, has still not taken place (Odata pošta radnicima RTS, *Politika*, 24 March 1999).

These examples show that the memory politics of the Yugoslav wars in Serbia remained highly elusive between 2000 and 2014. Gruia Bădescu calls this an "ambivalence of narratives" (Bădescu 2016, 508), in which the roles of victims and perpetrators and the question of guilt and responsibility were deliberately concealed. On the one hand, the government pursued a policy of reconciliation, but, on the other, this remained strongly patriotic, which led to unsatisfactory compromises. As far as the commemoration of the NATO bombing is concerned, a shift took place on the semantic and performative level, as expressed in the rhetorical turn from *agresija* to *bombardovanje* as well as in the scope and significance of the anniversary. Nevertheless, continuities persist on the rhetorical level, in which the memory of the Kosovo War is still determined by Serbia's suffering due to the NATO bombing.

The Return of 24 March

In the 2014 parliamentary elections in Serbia, the SNS and its leader Aleksandar Vučić won the absolute majority and the Democratic Party found themselves in the opposition again. The change of political direction also led to a decisive change in memory politics. On the occasion of the 16th anniversary of the NATO bombing on 24 March 2015, the commemoration moved back to the centre of public attention. With a ceremony in front of the illuminated ruins of the former Ministry of Defence, Vučić gave a prelude to his nationalist agenda. For the first time since the end of Milošević's rule, the commemoration did not take the form of a series of decentralized events but rather a large state-organized ceremony, which was broadcast live on television. And for the first time ever, a state-organized commemoration of the NATO bombing took place in the Serbian capital.

The multimedia memorial "show" started at 7.58 p.m. on the dot, the precise time the air raids began in 1999, to the sound of sirens, while spotlights illuminated different angles of the bombed building. The people who gathered at Kneza Miloša Street were shown images of the bombing on a screen, emphasized by the words of Avram Izrael, who famously announced the attack on television and radio: "Attention, attention, air raid danger for Belgrade!". Back in 1999, he was the spokesman of the city's intelligence service, and for many people he still serves as an "icon of the bombing" (Stojanović 2013). After this multimedia intro, a girl sang the Serbian national anthem, joined by a children's choir. This was followed by a stage play, in which several victims of the bombing, played by actors, spoke about what their lives would be like if they had not been killed by NATO. One of the actors played the ghost of Milica Rakić, the three-year-old girl who had died after being hit by shrapnel and whose statue is part of the butterfly monument for the deceased children in Belgrade's Tašmajdan Park.

The return of Milica to memory politics is only one illustration of how emotions were used in staging the commemoration: the darkness, the sounds, the shadowy silhouettes of the bombed-out twin ruins of the former General Staff of the Yugoslav Army and the Ministry of Defense of Yugoslavia (jointly known as the *Generalštab* building), the resurrection of the dead—all this served to reactivate an already familiar emotional order of grief, fear, and anger, reviving the memory of the bombing as a shared traumatic experience of the Serbian people. Mourning and pain, however, only set the stage for the actual message of Vučić's subsequent speech: "For 78 days we showed the world how stubborn and how brave our small country can be", Vučić told the assembled guests, which included the entire party leadership and the president of the Republika Srpska in Bosnia, Milorad Dodik (Obeležavanje 16 godina od početka NATO bombardovanja, 27 March 2015). In this line of thinking, Serbia had literally risen from the ashes created by NATO and would now—with Vučić's guidance—regain its former strength. What was verbalized here as the memory paradigm of the NATO bombing is rooted in Milošević's politics of defiance. Defiance, which in Serbian is expressed by the notion of *inat*, is often mystified as a genuinely Serbian form of spiritual resistance which gained popularity as part of the nationalist politics of the 1990s, reaching its peak when, during the NATO bombing, Milošević called on the population to gather on the country's bridges and squares as living shields with target signs on their chests (Satjukow 2020, 173–92).

With Vučić, the NATO intervention reappeared not only at the forefront of the national calendar after 15 years of absence, but also in the narrative framing of what is referred to as the "Kosovo myth" (Vučetić 2021). On the one hand, Vučić built on Milošević's propaganda of heroic Serbian resistance in an unjust war, but on the other, he included personal experiences of grief and anger into a collective

trauma discourse. He used what Vamık Volkan calls a "chosen trauma" (1999, 84–98), that is a mentally shared representation of a massive trauma which is reactivated when the identity of a group is threatened and in need of protection, in order to promote his nationalist agenda. But unlike Milošević, Vučić pursued both nationalist and patriotic narratives of victimization *and* a politics of pragmatism. Under the slogan "Forgiven, but not forgotten", Vučić emphasizes that Serbia has "strong friends in the East and serious partners in the West" (Nikada više, 24 March 2017), integrating the memory of the NATO bombing into a future in the European Union, while maintaining solid relations with Russia and, more recently, also with China.

Looking at the subsequent locations of the 24 March state commemorations, it becomes clear that Vučić was shifting central places of remembrance related to the civilian victims of the NATO bombing to the centre of the state's memory politics. The commemoration in 2016 took place in the small town of Varvarin, where 10 people were killed and 14 injured by an attack on the bridge over the Morava River on 30 May 1999. In 2017, Vučić held the state commemoration at the Grdelica Bridge in southern Serbia, where passengers of express train D 393 fell victim to a double military attack by NATO on 12 April 1999, leaving 20 dead and 16 injured. In 2018, Vučić travelled to the town of Aleksinac, which was attacked by NATO in the morning of 5 April 1999—12 civilians were killed and around 40 wounded. Lastly, in 2019, the commemoration took place in the southern Serbian city of Niš, where cluster bombings occurred on 7 and 12 May 1999, causing 14 civilian injuries.

The 20th anniversary of the NATO bombing was in many ways reminiscent of the "prelude" of Vučić's new mnemonic course, which had begun in 2015 in Belgrade. Both were broadcast on television at prime time and used a similar dramaturgical structure. Starting with a children's choir and the Serbian national anthem, the 2019 commemoration was also accompanied by a historical play. Again, a little girl appeared on stage together with her mother who recounted the suffering they endured during the nights of bombing. While emotions were mobilized in all the commemoration ceremonies after 2015, in 2019 things became personal. The day after the anniversary, newspapers announced that the president was so overwhelmed by his memories that he was moved to tears, showing Vučić's picture with tears streaming down his face. In his speech, Vučić once again emphasized that people must "never forget the crimes committed to this country" (Srbija ne da da je slome, *RTV*, 24 March 2019), highlighting the sacred nature of the memory of the NATO bombing. While the church has always played a central, but also independent role in shaping the memory of the NATO bombing, church and state now appeared side by side at the state commemoration with the Serbian Orthodox Church patriarch Irinej giving his own speech. The public reunification set a strong sign for a unified position, symbolizing that the time during which both

pursued different politics of remembrance, as under Đinđić and Tadić, was a thing of the past.

The recent popularity of commemorating the NATO bombing also becomes apparent with regard to the representation of monuments to and ruins of the bombing. In 2017, the Russian media satellite *Sputnik Serbia* published a proposal to create a new memorial to the victims of the NATO bombing. According to *Sputnik*, this project was supported by numerous politicians, including Aleksandar Vučić, who in an interview with the broadcaster stated, that "Serbia will fulfil all its obligations to the innocent victims of the aggression against our country" (Serbia to Commemorate All Victims, *Sputnik News*, 11 April 2017). Besides Vučić, the filmmaker Emir Kusturica, the president of the Bosnian Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, and Vučić's predecessor Tomislav Nikolić are in favor of the construction of a new monument, although concrete plans are not available at this time. This not only proves the strong ties between Russia and Serbia but also raises the question of why Serbia would need another memorial for the victims of the NATO bombing, when the one that Milošević built in 2000 on the banks of the River Sava has been left to decay for so long (Knežević 2017).

While the question of the need for a new memorial to the victims of the NATO bombing remains controversial, the ruins of the bombing have assumed a life of their own. When it comes to sightseeing tours of Belgrade, for example, nowadays one can book a special "bombing tour" given by eyewitnesses and visiting destroyed buildings accompanied "by promising insights into the memories of the Serbian people" (NATO Bombing in Belgrade Private Tour, Serbian Private Tours, n.d.; NATO Bombing Scars in Belgrade, Dark Tourism, n.d.). The ruins of the *Generalštab* building and RTS, as well as the location of the bombed Chinese embassy (see Zhou 2022, in this issue), where a Chinese cultural centre is now being built (Nismo zaboravili, *Politika*, 29 May 2020), remain important sites for such thematic tours and are also frequently visited destinations for regular tourist tours in Belgrade.

Conclusion

Looking back on 20 years of commemoration of the NATO bombing in Serbia shows that the intervention is still being used to cover up and maintain silence about the ethnic "cleansing" of the Albanian people by completely erasing the Kosovo War from memory. Nevertheless, it is crucial to keep in mind that the official memory politics of the NATO bombing in Serbia and the way they are represented in the media is by no means synonymous with the ambivalent experiences and memories of the people, as I discuss in detail in my book (Satjukow 2020).

While the first anniversary, the Making of 24 March (1999–2000), was positioned in a place of particular tension between political interests and individual mourning, during this first phase, 24 March was implemented as the central day of commemoration within the national calendar, placing the focus of memory politics on the beginning (rather than the end) of the intervention. This meant not only a continuation and deepening of the nationalist narratives of heroism and martyrdom invented by the Milošević regime but also set the foundation for a politics of remembrance that treats the NATO bombing as a singular event and separate from the war in Kosovo. At the same time, the anniversary of the NATO attack on Serbia's public broadcaster RTS on 23 April became part of the alternative memory calendar. To this day, the memory of the RTS bombing symbolizes the double threat situation people in Serbia faced in 1999: on the one hand exposed to NATO's bombs, and on the other subjected to the Serbian regime, which used the NATO intervention to create an enemy to stabilize its own power.

During the Long Period of Ambiguity (2001–2014) after the overthrow of Milošević and the democratic changes in 2000, 24 March gradually faded from public perception. Not only did the state no longer organize any commemorations and mnemonic events became much more decentralized, also on a semantic level the term "NATO aggression" disappeared from the media and was replaced by the more neutral "NATO bombardment". Nevertheless, this policy did not lead to a comprehensive public effort to critically engage with Serbia's role in the Kosovo War, with the exception of the ongoing and relentless work of NGOs, which is only mentioned here cursorily (see, e.g., Fridman 2006; Mehler 2015; Nießer 2020).

Finally, Aleksandar Vučić's rise to power as the current Serbian president marked the Return of 24 March characterized by a pronounced reappearance of the commemoration of the NATO bombing in the national calendar. Vučić not only continues with the initial commemorative rites installed by the Milošević regime in 1999–2000 on a semantic and performative level, but also accentuates them even more. "NATO aggression" is no longer merely the narration of a heroic resistance in an unjust war but also serves to reactivate a collective trauma discourse, in order to legitimize the renewed nationalist shift in Serbian memory politics.

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Bionote

Elisa Satjukow is a postdoctoral researcher and a lecturer for the History of Eastern and Southeastern Europe at the Department of History at Leipzig University. She completed her PhD on the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia in 2020 and works in the fields of (post)socialism, gender, history of science, memory studies and postcolonial theory.