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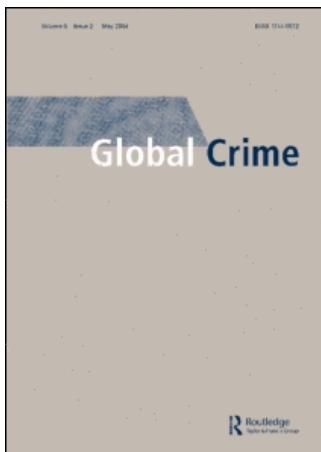
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Political Opportunities and Local Contingencies in Mass Crime Participation: Personal Experiences by Former Serbian Militiamen

Samuel Tanner

Participation in mass crime is often approached from a top-down perspective that centralizes the actions of the masses under the order of elites and leaders. While there is some evidence to support this approach, a more complete assessment of participation in mass crime must also consider the grassroots contingencies that unite the collective motivation and capacity that induce such actions. Such a bottoms-up approach is developed in this article with a particular focus on the personal experiences of former Serbian militiamen who took part in scenes of mass violence in Croatia and Bosnia—Herzegovina. Interviews with former militiamen illustrate how political opportunities, diverging nationalistic attitudes, proximity to growing violence in increasingly localized killing fields, incentives to participate in parallel criminal activities, and an influence within community networks that were submerged in mass crimes united to legitimize and facilitate their personal commitment to the events that took place in this region during the 1990s.

Keywords mass crime; former Yugoslavia; nationalism; militia; collective action; networks

'You know, since you are here, I cannot sleep at night, I have bad dreams... But it is important that we proceed, I know several of us regret what happened. We did not have any choice, that's true. It was our brothers that were being killed in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. We had to eliminate the enemies. But still, those lives we have ruined, those families we have destroyed. I think it is good that we can talk about it to someone, the truth on these wars still needs to be written, but who do you want us to talk to?' ('Radislav', former Serbian militiaman)

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Introduction

The mass violence that occurred in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s may be analysed as a sequence of multiform aggressions against a civilian population by a coproduction, or joint action, of various types of perpetrators.¹ Some are statutory actors, such as political leaders, the Yugoslav Popular Army (JNA), Secret Services of the Republic of Serbia or local police forces. They act within the state and under the command of authoritative organizations. Others emerge from private and peripheral contexts, such as militias or criminal thugs, and they act either under state command or out of a private initiative. My focus is on militias, and more specifically, on four former Serbian militiamen who will be referred to individually as Radislav, Nenan, Ivan and Janko and collectively as the 'perpetrator-respondents'. I define a militia as an armed organization whose members essentially come from civil society and who occasionally join, or are appointed by, political, cultural, national or criminal groups to promote their interests, mostly by use of force. These four individuals participated in collective actions in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo—what where qualified as crimes against humanity, war crimes and crimes of genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

Based on social movement theory and on sociological new institutionalism, this paper considers participation in mass violence as resulting from a legitimating process *as perceived* by those who committed it. How did these four individuals become so convinced of the necessity to act that they had no choice but to get involved in mass violence? How did they become so confident that perpetrating and contributing to mass crimes appeared legitimate? Even though committing violence is undeniably and indisputably the most worrisome of the whole participation, it is essential to consider the sequence of events in order to address the underlying dynamics and logic involved in this progression. In this respect, I will study four elements that I consider crucial: timing; attitude; space and finally; parallel incentives and facilitating resources. Timing refers to the idea that their participation must be considered in the context of an ongoing political struggle between the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) led by Slobodan Milosevic and the Serbian Party of Renewal (SPO), headed by Vuk Draskovic. Such a contentious atmosphere led to a *militarization* of the Serbian forces, which constituted incentives for individuals to join the war. Attitude refers to the same timing that must be indexed on strongly nationalist cognitive scripts and moral templates, such as political goals shared by the small community of perpetrators interviewed for this research. Space relates to the repertoire endorsed by these individuals, namely mass violence, which was highly influenced by both their proximity to ongoing violence and by the power struggles within chains of command on the killing fields. Finally, parallel incentives and facilitating resources are contextualized by grassroots and local dimensions. Among these I consider past

1. Bassiouni, C. *Final Report of the United Nations Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780 (1992): Annexe IIIA, Special Units*, United nations, 1994.

petty criminality and interaction patterns between the perpetrator-respondents and their community as well as the influence such templates had on their capacity to mobilize in the war. Finally, my conclusion sketches some limits and implications that this study may have in conceptualising participation in mass crimes. Mass crimes may not exclusively be considered as ethnic related and "top-down" orchestrated.

Conceptual Premises

One approach in studying mass crimes is to address how political leaders implemented such criminal plans. According to Vladisaljevic,² elite theory might not be the most suitable conceptual framework with which to study nationalism. As he demonstrated in his analysis of the emergence of the Serbian opposition in Kosovo in the 1980s, even though grievances and strong identity feelings need to be accounted, political contexts and situational opportunities that condition the emergence of a nationalist movement must also be recognized. As Vladisajevic concluded, such contexts hold great influence on both the repertoire of actions adopted by such social movements, as well as their consequences, whether these are anticipated or not. Vladisaljevic defined political opportunities as: '[...] dimensions of a movement's political environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting peoples' expectations for success or failure.'³

Such conceptual premises might also be relevant when applied to participation in events of mass violence. As such, mobilization in, and commission of mass crimes can be conceptualised as specific repertoires of collective actions that might stem from multilevel causality. Many explanations have been developed that tried to conceptualise and understand how ordinary people commit genocide and mass killing.⁴ Yet, whether they stem from structural⁵ or psychological⁶ dimensions, most explanations contain a determinist presupposition that does not account for those people in the same situations who do not commit mass violence. Moreover, these explanations are also grounded in 'elite theory', whereupon leaders and state apparatuses are usually considered as holding the most power in policy planning and implementing criminal plans. As I will demonstrate below, such conceptual frameworks are not supported by the evidence revealed through

2. Vladisaljevic, N. (2002) 'Nationalism, Social Movement Theory and the Grass roots Movements of Kosovo Serbs, 1985–1988', *Europe–Asia Studies*, vol. 54, no. 5, 771–790; Vladisaljevic, N. (2004), 'Grassroots Groups, Milosevic or Dissident Intellectuals? A Controversy over the Origins and Dynamics of the Mobilisation of Kosovo Serbs in the 1980s', *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 32, no. 4, 781–796.

3. Vladisaljevic, N. (2002), *Ibid.*, p. 780.

4. Waller, W. (2002) *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*, Oxford University Press, New York.

5. Arendt, H. (1963), *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin Books, New York; Bauman, Z. (1989), *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, New York.

6. Staub, E. (1989) *The Roots of Evil. The Origin of Genocide and other Group Violence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

my field inquiry. Even though Milosevic was largely responsible for the Balkans' havoc, it is necessary to account for alternative logics and lateral causes that contribute to mass crimes. I will also demonstrate that if some mass crimes can be interpreted as the result of an intention to kill a specific group by governmental leaders; mass crimes also might be the outcome of opportunities arising from contentious politics between major political actors in Serbia. To be analysed, these opportunities have to be indexed on grassroots dynamics and attitudes of the perpetrators. Thus, I consider a structuralist, or 'top-down' approach as counterproductive in grasping these alternative dynamics.

Inspired by social movement theory and sociological new institutionalism, I will account for participation in mass crimes in terms of multilevel opportunities (timing, attitude, space and parallel incentives and facilitating resources). Committing mass crimes is viewed as the result and the accomplishment of decisions made by 'skilled' and 'knowledgeable' actors⁷ whose interpretations and goals have to be examined. Political activists and criminal entrepreneurs use opportunities to their advantage whenever they want to achieve personal or collective goals, which they perceive as legitimate. Thinking in terms of opportunities also allows for the possibility of disaggregating the complex social phenomenon of mass crimes into sequences, or units of a bigger process that have to be considered one by one.

Consequently, and because interpretation comes into play, it is necessary to account for the social frames guiding the participants' actions. Nationalism is definitely a vital element of these individuals' semantic universe. According to Rogers Brubaker,⁸ and grounded in sociological new institutionalism, nations or nationalism must not be considered as '*substantial entities, collectivities, or communities.*'⁹ Rather, the concept of nation needs to be viewed as a practical category that '*structure[s] perception, [...] inform[s] thought and experience, [...] organize[s] discourse and political action.*'¹⁰ As such, nationalism as an institution both constrains and enables the individual's choices in his/her social practices. Brubaker (1996) distinguished '*homeland nationalism*' from '*nationalizing nationalism.*'¹¹ The former relates to a state's obligations to protect and support its ethno national kin living abroad, that is, Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, for the purpose of this article. The latter considers the core nation as the 'owner' of the state and, therefore, privileged group on such matters as human rights, education and the delivery of main public services. Accordingly, '*homeland nationalism*' is opposed to '*nationalizing nationalism*', for example, as

7. Giddens, A. (1995) *Politics, Sociology and Social Theory. Encounters with Classical and Contemporary Social Thought*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.

8. Brubaker, Rogers (1996) *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

9. Rogers, B. (1996), *Ibid.*, p. 16.

10. Rogers, B. (1996), *Ibid.*, p.7.

11. These two concepts stem from Rogers Brubaker (1996). The first one refers to a state's obligations to protect and support its ethno national kin leaving abroad. The second one considers the 'core nation' (Croatian population in that case) as the 'owner' of the state and therefore privileged.

perpetrated by the ethnic Croats in their secession procedure from the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ) in 1991.¹² Such frames of meanings are at the heart of individuals' construction of identity and preferences.¹³ Even though institutionalised nationalisms may, on the one hand, provide a crystallized definition of who is the *enemy* and, on the other hand, set the conditions by which the perpetrators saw themselves as being in a constraining situation, I argue that such practical categories have to be indexed on the social patterns of interactions and past experiences in criminal activities—in group dynamics—that characterize these former perpetrators' social networks. In a different context, but along similar, Gould¹⁴ showed that the Paris Commune uprising of March–May 1871 depended primarily on neighbourhood solidarity and newly created ties across individuals who became involved in their battle against the French army. Counter-intuitively, Gould argued that *class struggle* was neither the main dimension producing collective action nor the base of such a collective identity. Following such an outlook, I argue in favour of the social network perspective's relevance for the analysis of participation in mass crimes in the former Yugoslavia. Rather than being the outcome of a strictly 'top-down' criminal plan implemented by perpetrators who obeyed political leaders, such participation is considered as the interaction of multidimensional logics. Such logics included the community-based ties between the four perpetrator-respondents in this study. Political contentions led to a schism of nationalist identities between supporters and opponents of the Milosevic regime. In order to understand the experiences of these four perpetrator-respondents in the participation in mass crime activities, one has to index such an anti-Milosevic identity to grassroots dimensions, such as social networks and local activities, or to constraining interaction patterns within such environments. A network understanding of these experiences also reveals that if nationalism was a crucial dimension for committing mass crimes, it did not account, by itself, for how these respondents found their human and material resources to perpetrate the violence.

Finally, organizations, such as militias, must be considered as material expressions of institutionalised practical categories, such as nationalism, and thus must result from a logic of '*social appropriateness*'.¹⁵ Mobilization into militias was the result of a perceived process required to implement political objectives that were believed to be legitimate, and that arose from a context where social institutions that were needed to fulfil these objectives were considered to be lacking. Because the regular army was seen as a fifth column by the perpetrator-

12. That phenomenon has been documented by Drakulic, S. (1993) *The Balkans Express: Fragments from the Other Side of War*, W. W. Norton, New York.

13. Hall, P. A. & Taylor, R. C. R. (1996) 'Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms', *Political Studies*, vol. 44, pp. 936–957.

14. Gould, R. V. (1995) *Insurgent Identities. Class, Community, and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, London.

15. Hall, P. A. & Taylor, R. C. R. (1996), *Ibid.*, p. 949.

respondents, teaming up and leaving for Croatia was the legitimate action needed to both help the Serbs in Croatia and to create their own autonomous region.

Methodological Approach

The selected material was collected in a small town, 'Y', in western Serbia. My ethical attitude towards such events was, of course, not one of neutrality, and collecting such stories was a shattering academic and personal experience. Yet, my concern was to analyze social dynamics rather than identifying and naming those responsible. Therefore, because of confidentiality and the fact that the four participants of my inquiry have never been investigated for their deeds, I use fake names. The town where this material was collected and the militia with whom they acted will also not be disclosed. Because no criminal investigation against them exists to date that would corroborate their accounts, precise names, places or people involved in their acts are discussed with caution. But for a few exceptions,¹⁶ field perpetrators, so far, remain in the margins of academic, Non-Governmental Organizations and judicial discourses. As such, validity criterions are difficult to assess. To counterbalance this problem, I verified most of their stories with material obtained through the ICTY—all of which will be specified where required. Also, in anticipating critique based on 'serbophobia' or 'serbophily,' I insist that the reason my focus is exclusively on Serbian perpetrators is strictly due to the circumstances of my field inquiry. Considering the sensitive issue at hand, and the context of ongoing criminal investigations by both national and international courts on the territory of former Yugoslavia, these four individuals were the only agreeing participants that I met. Further research, beyond my own field inquiry, is required to generalize overall results.

A few circumstantial elements of their participation in mass violence need to be presented. Scenes and contexts where these perpetrator-respondents acted constitute empirical findings and will be further specified. These executioners were divided into two groups: Radislav, Nenan and Ivan acted in a militia affiliated with the political opposition of the ultra nationalist SPO, led by Vuk Draskovic, then a strong opponent to the Milosevic government (SPS). Janko acted under the banner of a militia associated with the central government and was led by an internationally known mobster. Apart from Nenan, who was met during the events in Krajina, they all came from the same town, 'Y', and had known each other for decades.

The type of material amassed is bound to the conditions of the field inquiry. I spent one week 24/7 with Radislav who introduced me to Nenan, Ivan and Janko. Some of the data result from formal interviews conducted with each of them. Nenan helped me with the translation. Informal meetings in bars and at Radislav's also took place, which generated field notes and observations that added to the

16. Browning, C. C. (1992) *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, Harper Perennial, New York.

material collected, and which will mostly account for parallel incentives and facilitating resources. Much of the data presented here come from memories of the war, stories and anecdotes, as well as shared experiences they recalled in conversations about the wars—all of which my presence helped to incite. The field inquiry stopped due to political events: the suspected arrest by Serbian police in a neighbouring region of the ICTY fugitive, Ratko Mladic, and his alleged transfer to Belgrade for talks about his surrender and ultimate transfer to The Hague.¹⁷ There was strong support for the accused Mladic in the region, and I was advised to leave for my personal safety.

As I stated earlier, some material also comes from indictments and judgements of known war criminals accessible from the ICTY's website. It was used to corroborate the accounts of the perpetrator-respondents, in particular, their specific references to episodes and scenes in Croatia and Bosnia. Due to the high volume of cases and information available, I applied a selection process based on a simple criterion: I chose cases of people who acted in the same areas as those mentioned by the four respondents of my inquiry. Those cases will be specified in the present analysis, but I mention the following examples: 1) *The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Milan Martic*, Case No IT-95-11; 2) *The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Radislav Krstic*, Case No IT-98-33; 3) *The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Miroslav Deronjic*, Case No IT-02-61; 4) *The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Zeljko Ratnjanatovic a.k.a. Arkan*, Case No IT-97-27; 5) *The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Vojislav Seselj*, Case No IT-03-67; and 6) *The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Ratko Mladic*, Case No IT-95-18. Some other material, such as a documentary produced by the ICTY, is specified throughout the analysis. These data were useful to account for the space, or the contextualization of the events in which these individuals said they participated.

Findings

The Political Context and Militarization Plot in Serbia: 1990–1991

The political climate that confronted pro-Milosevic and -monarchist factions was one underlying plot that initiated the participation in mass crimes of the four perpetrators-respondents, and as such, constituted a crucial *timing* for the respondents to act. A plot is considered as the set of events, which brought together, make up the knot of a play. Such play here is the Serbian militarization process and armed forces involvement in mass crimes in Croatia in 1990–1991. These developments constituted political opportunities that had major

17. Agence France-Presse, Reuters, The Associated Press, 'Mladic Reported Close to Surrender', International Herald Tribune, 22 February 2006. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/02/21/news/serbs.php>, consulted 26 February 2007.

consequences, as interpreted by these four perpetrators. The following remark by Radislav, speaking on behalf of his fellow mates, is an illustration:

'What was going on in Krajina was a catastrophe. How did they [the government lead by Slobodan Milosevic] let that happen? Very quickly we took action, informally, to go and see what was going on. We were a group from here ["Y"] and we went to help the Serbs [in Croatia]. The army was almost absent and we had to start the job by ourselves.'

Even though the SPO and the SPS had been contending for a long time for political legitimacy, two events constituted important opportunities for the opposition to momentarily weaken the political equilibrium. They also help illuminate Radislav's remark.

Milosevic was accused by the opposition of having stolen the political platform of the SPO in the electoral campaign, for the December 1990 multiparty elections, which the SPS won. This was the first event. According to the four participants, the platform—namely, the creation of a greater Serbia and the reunion of all the Serbs in one state—was initially proposed by the SPO. Consequently, as put by Radislav:

'From that moment on, Milosevic was our worst enemy. We had to take action to counter him. [...] We were in strong dispute with the Milosevic government who let the Serbs be killed in Croatia.'

A second event also had a crucial influence on the Serbian militarization process and armed forces involvement in mass crimes. It was the JNA's legitimacy collapse in both the eyes of many high ranking officials from the army and the Serbian population. The ongoing war in Croatia was perceived by many Serbs as illegitimate and criminal. As such, in summer 1991, the army faced a massive shortage of human resources due to desertions and draft dodging.¹⁸ Accounts of the situation on the front, of soldiers coming home, and of major shortages in material resources were also dissuasive. Due to the JNA's federal nature and multi ethnic soldiers and officers, it was viewed by the opposition as a 'fifth column.' Milosevic never totally mobilized the male population in the war effort, thereby jeopardizing national security, and that is precisely the issue on which the SPO fought the government. The opposition's strategy was to spread fear and emphasize the worrisome war context. How would Croatian Serbs, to say nothing of Serbs in Serbia, be protected by such an army? According to Judah:¹⁹

'This was also the period when Serbian television played its part by the constant screening of documentaries about the Ustashas and Jasenovac [extermination camp run by the same group during WW II where many Serbs had been executed], implying all along that President Tudjman was the heir of Ante Pavelic. The effect of all this was profound and did much to terrify and soften up the Serbs, especially

18. Glamocak, M. (2002) *La transition guerrière yougoslave*, l'Harmattan, Paris.

19. Judah, T. (1997) *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, New Haven, Yale University Press, London, p. 171.

those in the rural Krajina regions. These programs made them susceptible to the suggestion that their only course of action was to take up arms and so to be prepared—unlike in 1941.'

In a context where nationalism was definitely a vital legitimacy lever, as emphasized by Stojanovic (1996), Milosevic's absence of a response regarding the collapsing JNA was viewed as highly unpatriotic. Moreover, in a context where the population felt insecure, the SPO resourcefully used a security and nationalist based rhetoric to trigger collective action. The opposition's repertoire consisted of promoting and building a genuine Serbian national—and nationalist—army. They wanted the return of the Chetniks²⁰ who would restore Alexander Karadjodjevic's kingdom—a despotic ruler of the 1st Yugoslavia between 1921 and 1941.²¹ This discourse reverberated on Radislav, Nenan and Ivan:

'We were against and hated communism. So, with one or two people, we knew that we had to act on our own, and so, we decided to create our own militia to help the Serbs abroad.' (Radislav)

Such a scenario accounts for the *timing* of their implication in mass crimes. By considering these respondents' attitude, it is possible to demonstrate what incentives made them participate in mass crimes. This is examined in the next section.

Nationalist semantic universe and local cognitive scripts as 'practical categories.'

The conflictual political climate shook nationalistic attitudes and thus moral templates and cognitive scripts. If social practices are guided by frames of meanings, as stated by new institutionalism, it is necessary to account for the institutionalisation of 'practical categories,' as defined by Rogers Brubaker (1996). Assessing the motives of mobilization and participation in mass crimes appears a good starting point. As Radislav says:

'What we wanted was to rehabilitate the real warriors of Serbia, I mean the Chetniks who fought against the Ustashas and Communists during World War II. [...]. It was out of the question at that time that anybody would threaten or attack the Serbs, wherever it took place in Yugoslavia. Our aim, as a militia, was to

20. The Chetniks are very important figures in the SPO's ultranationalists practical category and action frame. Among the Communists and the Nazis, they constituted major protagonists during WWII in Yugoslavia and fought against Tito's Partisans and the Nazis' ally Ante Pavlic and his Ustashas. The Chetniks were rapidly eliminated and their chief, Draza Mihailovic, was sentenced to death and hanged by the Communist regime. During the nineties, ghosts from WWII reappeared when Croatian forces were assimilated to the Ustashas, and therefore required immediate action to eliminate them.

21. All those facts are corroborated by: Stojanovic, D. (1996) 'The Traumatic Circle of the Serbian Opposition', in *The Road to War in Serbia. Traumas and Catharsis*, ed N. Popov, Central Europe University Press, Budapest, pp. 449–478.

contribute to a certain extent to the restoration of Serbia's borders, such as under the king (Alexander Karadjordjevich). We were being spoiled, once more.'

In addition to the rehabilitation of the warriors from WW II, the will to protect the Serbs from Croatia and the restoration of old frontiers, institutionalised nationalism by these four perpetrator-respondents is articulated around three other main axes that contributed to the definition of the scripts and moral templates. A first axe refers to racial theories inspired by evolutionism where, not surprisingly, and according to these four respondents, the Serb type holds the highest position. History is largely reinvented and disregards elementary facts about Balkan demography. For example, Radislav mentioned several times:

'Muslims do not exist in Yugoslavia. There are only Slavs and Serbs who converted to Islam during the Ottoman Empire, out of cowardice.'²²

Mythology and religion constitute the second axe of these perpetrator-respondents' institutionalized nationalism. Evenings in their company often ended by listening to Chetnik songs extolling the prowess of former warriors. Prince Lazar Hrebeljanovic's myth is the most recursive—he led the Serbs in the mythical Kosovo Polje battle against the Ottoman Empire, which was lost on 28th June 1389. According to the story, Lazar was approached by the prophet Elija on the eve of the fight and was given a choice. Lazar could either win the battle and gain a terrestrial kingdom, or loose and hit heavenly realm with all his people. History shows that he opted for the latter. Lazar was presented as a strong man and as such supported by the Orthodox Church who feared the Turkish invasion. That event also constituted a myth whereby warriors take action for Serbia and against Turks—both are heavenly and blessed actions under the Orthodox Church. Such semantics are still present in the perpetrator-respondents' accounts, as revealed by Nenan:

'We fought to save our land, our religion, our culture. This territory is Christian [...]. We acted in the name of Christianity, like all the Serbian combatants involved in war against the Ottoman Empire.'

Except for Janko, the three other participants became true believers after committing their deeds. One evening, Nenan showed me all the icons he permanently held in his wallet, presented as his protectors.

Finally, a third axe revolves around localism, soil and tradition as an heirloom handed down from generation to generation. That set includes elements like suspicions about foreigners (due to NATO bombings in 1999); mistrust about people living in cities; recesses on local preoccupation and values (pig or chicken farming; agriculture); and a strong resistance to modernization of the Serbian society, such as human rights activism, feminism and homosexuality. These shared semantics feature both solidarity and strong social bonds. That institutionalised nationalism reveals an *attitude* and provides terms by which

22. It is, however, interesting to notice that such contradictions do not prevent them from participating in such massacres.

meaning is assigned. As such, "*institutions do not simply affect the strategic calculations of individuals, [...] but also their most basic preferences and very identity*".²³ This is illustrated by the deputy commander's account of the Bratunac Brigade of the Republika Srpska in Bosnia–Herzegovina, Dragan Obranovic, during his trial in The Hague:

'On the territory of the country in which I was born [Republika Srpska, Bosnia–Herzegovina], shooting with firearms was usual when celebrating the birth of a male child. These shots tell you everything, what a new male member of the family means and what is expected of him. Strength, protection, he should be a warrior, a soldier, the head of the family, as they say in our part. Unfortunately, when other kinds of shootings started in the former Yugoslavia, shootings in war, it was normal for every man, every male child to put on a uniform, take out a weapon and go to protect his homeland, his nation, and ultimately his family. This was expected of him, this was his role, a sacred role, and there was no choice. You could be either a soldier or a traitor. [...] We did not even notice how we were drawn into the vortex of interethnic hatred, and how neighbours were no longer able to live beside each other, how death moved into the vicinity, and we did not even notice that we got used to it. Death became our reality, unfortunately, it became everyday reality. [...] Surrounded with horrors, we got used to them and went on living like that.'²⁴

The two previous sections demonstrate that both timing and attitude entailed *transformative consequences* according to Brubaker's (1996) formula. I contend that political context, militarization, nationalist universe and local cognitive scripts facilitated Radislav, Nenan and Ivan's decision to get involved in war and mobilize as militia. These dimensions also provided legitimacy to marginal actors and an opportunity for closer proximity to control of central power. But these elements do not sufficiently account for the four participants' repertoire of mass violence. In this respect, it is necessary to consider the space from within which the four perpetrators they acted—that is, the influence of the ongoing violence and the power struggles between multiple chains of command on the killing fields. This is the object of next section.

Contextual opportunities: Theatres of The Mass Violence Practices

The rise of nationalistic attitudes transferred into the first signs of collective action. Violence was definitely the repertoire these four perpetrators used for collective action. Because most of the accounts referred to experiences and events in Croatia and Bosnia–Herzegovina, I will converge on those two spaces.

Croatia

The first setting concerns the participation of Radislav, Nenan and Ivan, between August 1991 and February 1992, in the events surrounding the formation of the

23. Hall, P. & Taylor, R. C. R. (1996) *Ibid.*, p. 948.

24. Obranovic pleaded guilty. This quotation is extracted form the documentary: ICTY, (2005) *Srebrenica 11.07.1995—11.07.2005*, XY Films, ICTY AV unit, English version. (From time 41').

Autonomous Region of Krajina, in eastern and western Slavonia, Croatia. According to the then Minister of Defence of Krajina, Milan Martic, who was indicted by the ICTY,²⁵ the entire non-Serb population was cleansed in that area. The actions in which the perpetrator-respondents participated have been qualified by the ICTY as both 'crimes against humanity' and 'violations of the laws and customs of war.'²⁶

In July 1990, the Serbian National Council of Croatia, established by the Serbian Democratic Party, demanded a referendum asking for the autonomy and sovereignty of the Serb nation in Croatia. A month later, the referendum was declared illegal by the Croatian government, who sent police forces into the Krajina regions. A struggle started under the name of 'log revolution,' where barricades were set by the local Serbs. From that time on, violence associated with the autonomy process of the Krajina became more systematic and intense between the two parties. Starting from July 1991, Krajina received more and more external supply and support, specifically from Serbia, either under the command (officially or unofficially) of the central government, or from volunteers such as Vojislav Seselj's *Chetniks* or SPO affiliated fighters like Radislav, Nenan and Ivan. According to one of these volunteers—Dragan Vasiljkovic, better known as Kapetan Dragan—for a long time they did not act on behalf of the central government, or the JNA:

'Q [The Prosecutor]: At this point in time [April 1991], can you describe what, if any, relationship your training had with the Yugoslav People's Army.

A: Absolutely none. Believe me that 60% of my forces were kept on the alert with any possible clash with the JNA. The JNA, in those days, was pretending to be a peace force or a buffer zone between the Croats and the Serbs. They didn't like me at all. I had no contact with any single officer. It was only later, many months later, that I managed to establish my first contact with someone from the JNA.'²⁷

Radislav, Nenan and Ivan arrived in the region of Knin where they pretended to have been close to Milan Martic. The situation was rather complex and from the participants' accounts, including Vasiljkovic's, several chains of command existed, struggling against each other to establish control in their respective areas. Consequently, this led to both an indeterminate character of mass violence and a brutalization phenomenon. Main protagonists included the JNA; the Croatian Serbian Territorial Defences led by Milan Babic; Martic's police; several militias, among them Vojislav Seselj's *Chetniks*; as well as criminal thugs. According to Radislav:

25. *The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Milan Martic*, International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, Case No IT-95-11. Milan Martic was in charge of the whole Serbian forces of the Krajina region.

26. *The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Milan Martic; The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Vojislav Seselj*, International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, Case No IT-03-67.

27. *The Prosecutor of the International Tribunal against Slobodan Milosevic*, International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, Case No IT-02-54, Transcripts from 19.02.2003, p. 16482.

'Among the groups that were present in Krajina [...] there were a lot of criminals and armed groups that did not have any specific training. Sometimes, we even were totally opposed to these groups' political affiliations. Some, we did not even know who they were and where they came from. But for sure, the result was the same. [...] Many groups were on the field. Some were not even organized, you could see that. They were looking like ordinary guys and I think it was what we called 'week-end killers.' They were opportunists that crashed because they heard there was something to do in the area. Those individuals, for sure, they were not affiliated to any political group, they came here to loot and kill.'

Radislav, Nenan and Ivan's mobilization patterns followed alternative paths. Rather than being appointed by a central government—either to complement the JNA or militias loyal to the central government—they joined the war on their own. Once on the field, they linked with units close to their ideology and thus considered more prone to protect the Serbian interests in Croatia.

'We did not join the JNA because at that moment [July–August 1991] we could not trust it. There were too many non-Serbs in its ranks and we could not be sure of what was going on' (Radislav).

The three men took part in the ultimate cycle of brutalization and 'cleansing' of the area, at the end of 1991 and beginning of 1992. They participated in killing civilians as revealed by Radislav in the following example. He decided to bring me to a farm to buy a pig, a very common dish in that area, but mostly he wanted me to see how the pig is put to death. The scene is short: one man goes and gets the animal, the second one hits it on the head, and finally, once the beast is on the ground, a third slits its throat from behind. At that moment he said:

'Have you seen how the scene is happening? Everybody is quiet, well coordinated and everyone knows exactly what to do. This is exactly how we proceeded, in a professional way. I don't like to see that, I feel uneasy'. And then: "On many scenes, we did not use firearms. We were at the frontlines and it was crucial that nobody took notice of us. We had to do the job in silence. I personally used to stab individuals in the back, so as to hit the aorta and the guy falls quickly and that's it.'

Finally, the decision by the United Nations Security Council to establish a Protection Force according to the Vance Plan, on 21 February 1992,²⁸ made them leave the region and go to other areas, namely eastern Bosnia–Herzegovina.

The absence of a monopolistic authority controlling the mass violence—a polycentric governance of such crimes—appeared to be creating opportunities for many stakeholders of the 'Greater Serbia' project to take action. Such a *space*, that is, the created space of opportunities, opened the door for competition to implement 'homeland nationalism' and influenced the repertoire the four perpetrator-respondents used. Brutalization—realized either by volume or techniques employed—accelerated the ongoing mass crimes, and sank the

28. UN Security Council Resolution 743 Establishing a United Nations Protection Force "UNPROFOR" on Croatian territory controlled by para-authorities. S/RES/743/1992.

perpetrators that much deeper into their involvement in mass crimes. This decentralized mass violence, at least in the first months of the war, presented a multipoint of access for many in terms of political capital and legitimacy.

Bosnia—Herzegovina

Ivan, Nenan and Janko also took action in Bosnia—Herzegovina. They participated in mass crimes in Bijeljina, Visegrad, Bratunac and Zvornik during the first months of the war, in March and April 1992. According to the indictments of major actors who also were present in these areas, these events have been qualified as crimes against humanity and war crimes.²⁹ Also, Nenan, Ivan and Janko acted in Srebrenica before and during the genocide, in July 1995, qualified as such by several judicial decisions.³⁰ Recounting the scripts of their participation, Janko explains:

‘Some of the orders used to come from our leader [a political mobster], but you have to know that some instructions about what to do, as well as where to go, also came from both local crisis staff and the local population. Once we knew where to go, we were free to act and everybody knew exactly what to expect from us.’

The local crisis staff to which Janko refers played a crucial role in the coordination of the mass crimes in Bosnia. This crisis staffs were implemented by the leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Radovan Karadzic, and his SDS political party, which reassembled strategic actors, for example, the local command of the Bosnian Serb Army (VRS), local political officials, and secret services from both Bosnian Serbs and Serbs from the Republic of Serbia. These actors were charged with the coordination of ethnic cleansing scenarios in their respective regions. One of their missions was to steer militias coming from outside Bosnia. Janko also revealed a consensual context wherein perpetrating mass crimes, at least in the regions where he was involved, were not problematic—consensual attitudes by both the official and the local population provided an “authorizing space” for these perpetrator-respondents. Yet, and still recounting the scripts and repertoires he

29. As qualified in the Indictment of Miroslav Deronjic, President of the Crisis Staff in Bratunac, *The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Miroslav Deronjic*, International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, Case No IT-02-61-PT, 29th September 2003. Such qualifications are also present in the Indictment of Mico Stanisic, who was Minister of the Serbian Ministry of the Serbian Affairs in BiH; *The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Mico Stanisic*, International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, Case No IT-04-79-PT, 22nd September 2005.

30. Such as in the Krstic Case, who was at that moment Deputy commander of the VRS/Drina Corps responsible for the massacre of 8,000 Muslim civilians. *The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Radislav Krstic*, International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, Case No IT-98-33, 27th October 1999; Vidoje Blagojevic, commander of the 1st Light Infantry Brigade (Bratunac Brigade) responsible of the security of the territory opposite of the Srebrenica ‘safe area’, *The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Vidoje Blagojevic*, International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, Case No IT-02-60-T, 26th May 2003; Application of the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (Bosnia—Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro), International Court of Justice, Press Release 2007/8, 26th February 2007.

used during his participation in the events, Janko indicates there were no precise modus operandi and states:

'We usually operated at night. I personally used to work in a small unit; we were three to four individuals. Then, we crossed the river [Drina] and even though we did not know exactly where to go once on the other bank, we knew what we had to do. On the other side [of the river], someone would welcome us and tell us where to go and where to operate. [...] Once in the village [that had been designated to be cleansed] we acted as quick as possible and we used to cleanse with guns, knives whatever. [...] It was not difficult to find weapons. Once the army [JNA] withdrew,³¹ they let all the armament and we knew where to pick it up. There wasn't any problem for that, and there was trafficking as well. Then the army [VRS] came and dug mass graves to erase the traces. They were the only ones to have enough means to do that.'

Both the Croatian and Bosnian contexts revealed the most worrisome aspect of these individuals' commitment in mass crimes. Taking action in the name of protecting the Serbs from the Croatian 'nationalizing nationalism' transformed marginal actors into trustful and true protectors of both the Serbian nation and tradition in the eyes of many Serbs. Yet, many nationalists did not join such militias and did not participate in mass crimes. How can this be accounted for? Material collected during the field inquiry contributes to the development of a hypothesis about this issue and might account for *parallel incentives and facilitating resources*.

Local Grassroots Dynamics: Templates, Interaction Patterns, and Cognitive Scripts

Within the context of political conflict, nationalistic upheaval and the spread of collective violence, parallel incentives and facilitating resources were also in place to induce participation in mass crimes. Former and lasting friendships, petty crime activity, daily interactions between these four perpetrator-respondents and within their community, all constituted opportunities that also created frames of action accounting for ultimate participation in mass crimes. I will articulate these dimensions around two major axes: criminal activities and local organizational features.

Parallel Criminal Activities

As mentioned previously, except for Nenan, these three other respondents knew each other since youth. Many experiences bonded them, not the least of which was petty crime, as revealed by Radislav:

'Before I participated in the war, we were a group and we had known each other for a long time. Our ideas were quite the same on a lot of issues, and of course, politics. We had a lot of good times and did a lot of stupid things before getting

31. He refers to the European Union's demand addressed to Serbia on 11th April 1992.

involved in the war. Other guys showed us the way. I think activities, such as petty crime, contributed to our participation in actions [crimes] that we committed during the war. It was a kind of continuation but of a different nature.'

Developing further the idea of overlapping criminality, Janko adds that even though their participation in the violence in Bosnia—Herzegovina was motivated by the "*threat*" Muslims were exerting on the Bosnian Serbs (he refers to Nasser Oric's exactions against Serbs in Bratunac and Srebrenica, eastern Bosnia, at the end of 1992 and beginning of 1993),³² he confirms that he made a lot of money by looting properties and stealing from the houses of his victims, which also constituted a reason to continue. As such, war provided another opportunity to continue his criminal activities. In this regard, the week spent with the respondents showed how three of them are still criminally active albeit at different degrees. At the time of my inquiry, Radislav and Ivan were involved in 'small business' like bets, games and commissions on transactions with local mobsters. Several anecdotes confirmed this, for example, showing me winning lottery tickets. The case of Janko is more troublesome, because he is now involved in the trafficking of women between eastern and western European countries. Criminal activities induce solidarity among the perpetrators; and this solidarity contributes to the construction of networks of trust that facilitate criminal enterprise because they generate connections, and because they compel individuals to protect stakeholders and criminal activities from external threat (challengers or police).³³ As such, criminal activities were already institutionalised, and even though the actions in which these perpetrators were involved were of a different nature, networks, scripts and templates characterizing their relations at the time they participated in mass crimes already existed. Petty crime does not lead to mass violence, however, and taking into consideration nationalism as a practical category, there is a good possibility that such templates contributed, at least, to their mobilization as Radislav previously revealed about their opposition to the Milosevic government and their will to counter him. Their conviction of the central government's inaction, and toward which they were strongly opposed, paved the way for those non state actors and activists to use non state institutional action and as such, criminal networks facilitated collective action.

Local Organizational Features

Prior criminality is not the only facilitating dimension. Radislav is an official in the town where these interviews were conducted, and as such he was an important political figure in the region. At the time of the field inquiry, his party did not hold majority in the area, therefore requiring many displacements around the region, and as a consequence, weaving affiliations. Due to both his function at city hall

32. *The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Naser Oric*, International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, Case No IT-03-68.

33. Tilly, C. (2005), *Trust and Rule*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

and his political affiliation, he also held funds he could spend at his discretion for regional projects. For example, as he mentioned, some money which was invested on an anti-drug campaign in a region where youth unemployment was high, brought him increasing political and social capital. He was also very close to farmers' preoccupations; as a result, some of them acted with him in mass violence. Consequently, it was a complex web of affiliations that was exposed during the week I spent with him in his multiple activities. But even though Radislav was a key member of that web, his position nonetheless required efforts from him to maintain his social capital—for example, offering drinks, resolving conflicts between members of the community, and showing solidarity toward members experiencing tough times.

'I did a lot to help the local population here. Through my political party, we helped young people that had drug problems. Unemployment is very high in this region and you have to show solidarity with people around you. Some guys that I helped out are now helping me in my activities. It's like a big family here.'

(Radislav)

Such small events may not have accounted, on their own, for participation in mass violence. However, once coupled with other dimensions (timing, attitudes and space), they restore the complexity of such social webs and they provide a better understanding of the logic of an individual's trajectory through such experiences. These former perpetrators are affiliated to different spheres that all account for a small part of their participation in mass crimes, and that facilitated the violence perpetrated by these four respondents. All these small sequences and pieces, put end to end, may be summed up by the local concept of *komsije*. It consists of a set of daily practices and considerations that sustain and consolidate solidarity between people affiliated to the same bars, sports clubs, and neighbourhoods. Even though *komsije* may sound banal, it translates into a series of small actions and sequences that produce binding ties, and where ideological or behavioural alternatives eventually stigmatize the actors. Social ostracism and financial precariousness are often the result. Informal mechanisms, such as shaming, compel the individuals to abide to the rules mostly decreed by individuals like Radislav, Nenan, Ivan and Janko. People trust them and mobilize upon their request. Consequently, as Radislav remarks:

'People [in the town] knew me, and they knew that I was one of them. Some lost family members in Bosnia and in Croatia because of the war. They know that they can trust me. They saw me acting during the war to help and save the Serbs. You can understand now that, thanks to my position here and my political party, I can gather 200 men at once and intervene if any of ours is being threatened again.'

Finally, it is important to mention that taking action was sometimes due to situational circumstances, as one event revealed. While we sat in a bar and talked about their war experiences in Bosnia—Herzegovina, and their ideas about both Islam and the war crimes led by Oric in Bratunac and Srebrenica against Serbs, Ivan stood on his feet and shouted:

'Come on guys, let's take the car and cross the border to cut off some throats!'

Radislav confirmed that such reactions sometimes led to actions. Individuals like Radislav, Ivan and Janko acted as political or criminal entrepreneurs exercising a huge influence on fellow mates through their control of economic and material resources, and thus, as being able to manipulate events to serve their own personal interests. Consequently, they contributed to the shaping and defining of scenarios and sequences followed by the events, even though they were not affiliated to the Milosevic government, and even though main parts of their trajectories might not be attributable to ethnic hatred. Although nationalism is definitely a crucial element of the mass violence equation, findings reveal that it was precipitated by certain events. Along with local grassroots patterns of interaction, this is a crucial stake of participation in mass crimes. I hope my contribution sheds some light on these and similar atrocities

Conclusion

Based on these findings, and as it concerns these four participants, thinking of mass violence in terms of processes and sequences of opportunities and how people interpret them, rather than in terms of outcome, helps conceptualise such crimes. Due to the small number of participants, my approach would require further material and research on other types of perpetrators (soldiers, political leaders, criminal thugs). Violence appears, consequently, as an indeterminate process where scripts are not designed in advance, even though they are conditioned by political and nationalist scenarios. As such, participation and actions of mass violence appear as emerging strategies, or as an emerging order. I propose then to consider participation in mass violence as an *emerging premeditation pattern*. Nationalism is clearly at stake, but the way it contributes to mass crimes is not straightforward and has to be taken into account in the context of that emerging premeditation pattern.

Although these four individuals appear marginal in the whole process of mass crimes, this study allows for some conceptual remarks. If the impact of nationalism as a practical category in mass crimes is not straightforward, as just mentioned, it is also the case of relations between some perpetrators with elites (political leaders, high ranking officers). Chains of command may not be as clear as scholars contend. On the contrary, and especially in Krajina, findings reveal that even though many competing actors shared a common political agenda, some viewed themselves more apt than others in implementing these agendas. The aforementioned account of Kapetan Dragan demonstrated this. Conceptually, structuralist and 'top-down' accounts are not supported by the evidence collected during my field inquiry, or as they appear in some transcripts of ICTY cases referred. It is, therefore, necessary to use conceptual frames that consider contentious dynamics and social changes. I propose social movement theory and sociological new institutionalism as relevant. Other alternatives are possible and I do no pretend to be exhaustive.

Finally, I have a few remarks about extensions that might be added to this research. First, while writing, I realized a strong dichotomy between discourses referring to what might be called a 'mythic war' as opposed to 'massacres as lived.' The patriotic, heavenly and heroic semantic field to which these four respondents refer when they account for the reasons they decided to join the war, and upon which they mobilized individuals from their community, differs radically from the experience as lived on the killing fields. Radislav, Ivan and Nenan still have scenes and nightmares from what they did to individuals, families and people who belonged to the wrong group at the wrong moment. As such, even though Radislav, Ivan and Nenan suffer somehow for what they did, the three of them continue justifying their deeds using heavenly reasons and objectives that surpass their own individuality and encompass the destiny of a whole country, a whole nation. At this point, further research is needed to more precisely discriminate the true reasons from the discourses of these three respondents about why they committed mass crimes. At some moment of the field inquiry, few statements were said about these three respondents' motives that revealed more materialistic and immediate preoccupation than ideological objectives. It is still an enigma and further research must be conducted.

Another extension would be to address the human dimension of these perpetrator-respondents' victims. Classic literature on genocide usually considers perpetrators as lacking (purposely or out of structural determinism) empathy that would allow them to take the victim's perspective and then render the consequences of their deeds tangible for themselves, characterized by in-differentiation and deprived of any reciprocal compassion. Although I have not insisted on that specific issue, the material reveals that, at least for Radislav and Nenan, they were fully conscious of the human dimension of their victims. Even though it is particularly morbid, they confessed stabbing in the aorta so as to lessen the sufferings. Based on the previous paragraph, I would even say that such a consideration is what provokes their suffering and nightmares now. When these respondents spoke of specific scenes and actions, some of them almost instantly started to feel sick and anguished. Radislav even told me that he would never recover from what he did and that a great part of his time was spent coping with these past events. Further research grounded in clinical psychology would definitely expand this understanding and further develop this contribution.

Janko definitely represents the most enigmatic character of the four individuals. He never showed any regret about his actions and in the eventuality of Kosovo's independence, he might even continue to 'fight' to keep the province within Serbia. Also, accounts are lacking that would explain how he could have been affiliated to a pro-Milosevic militia and still be so close to the other three respondents. A multilevel analysis would help uncover the dimension, or bond, that is perceived as the most important in maintaining the connection between these former perpetrators. Further analysis should also be undertaken on the alternative cycles of the different types of criminality perpetrated by these individuals. If, as suggested above, implication in petty crimes helped crystallize

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networks of trust and, as presented by these participants, contributed to some extent to their collective participation in more serious forms of criminality, such as crimes against humanity, are these trust networks still a threat in present day Serbia? Finally, considering the resurgence of nationalism templates with regard to the issue of an independent Kosovo, are these individuals a scourge in the event of a total independence of the autonomous province?