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Special Issue

“Powershifts, Practices and Memories of Violence in the Balkans”

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Introduction to the Special Issue:

Powershifts, practices and memories of violence in the Balkans

Nathalie Clayer*

When the editors of this volume, Jovo Miladinović and Franziska Zaugg, contacted me and requested that I write this introduction, they referred to my approach in terms of “time, space and trajectories” that I was using and promoting in my most recent research. Indeed, the texts collected here represent a set of studies that aim at better understanding the issue of cycles of violence or sequences seen as continuities of violence in South-Eastern Europe. When read through such a prism (time/space/trajectory), they offer a new way of seeing the social mechanisms that lead to such cycles, be they experienced or perceived.

Conflicts and violence, especially inter-ethnic conflicts and violence in the Balkans, have been widely studied, also in terms of continuities and memories¹. In the present set of texts, what appears to me as original is the fact that they all concentrate on moments of powershift, or potential powershift, and endeavour to give new insights on continuities and

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¹ See, for example, Wolfgang Höpken, “Performing Violence: Soldiers, Paramilitaries and Civilians in the Twentieth-Century Balkan Wars,” in *No Man’s Land of Violence: Extreme Wars in the 20th Century*, ed. Alf Lüdtke and Bernd Weisbrod (Göttingen: Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte / Wallstein Verlag, 2006), 211-49. Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), and the recent special issue edited by Hanna Kienzler and Endkeleja Sula-Raxhimi, “Collective Memories and Legacies of Political Violence in the Balkans,” *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 47, Special Issue: Collective Memories and Legacies of Political Violence in the Balkans, no. 2 (2019): 173-81.

discontinuities in the practices or memories of violence that play a central role in these shifts, in order to understand the social and political mechanism at stake, in particular legitimization, mobilization and ethnicization processes. Indeed, the volume presents, on one side, two cases of violent powershifts in relation to a military occupation (here the Italian, German and Bulgarian occupation of the regions of Kastoria and Kosovo during World War II), which introduces new actors on the ground; and, on the other side, three cases of non-violent powershifts or horizon of powershifts which also represent shifts in the public memory of violence: the Yugoslav elections of 1925, when the People's Radical Party tried to prevent an electoral defeat and consolidate its power hereafter; the political shifts of 1966 in Socialist Yugoslavia, which corresponds to the eviction of the Minister of the Interior, Ranković, and to a decentralisation of Communist power; and the political shift of the 1970s and 1980s again in Socialist Yugoslavia with, among others, the rise of Serbian nationalism and later, the growth of anti-Communism. I would like to introduce these five studies together using the prism of time/space/trajectories in order to highlight the mechanisms at work between powershifts and practices or memories of violence.

Let us consider first the two studies by Franziska Zaugg and Paolo Fonzi referring to the military occupation of the regions of Mitrovica in Kosovo and Kastoria in Greek Macedonia during WWII. At the first glance, these cases seem to show more discontinuities than otherwise concerning violence and inter-ethnic relations. The presence of the occupying forces not only imply the centrality of the new foreign actors on the ground, but the powershift also introduces important changes within the local society. First, during this period of war, time is running very fast; changes are quick and rapid; the consequence is that synchronic dynamics seem to count more than diachronic ones. As both papers show, violence that is committed at the end of the period is often linked to events or dynamics that have taken place in the previous weeks or months during the war, and not before. Military repression, circulations of arm and the formation of militias by the occupiers are new factors that allow or induce new mechanisms of violence. The changing of the spatial configurations that accompany the powershift is also significant. In both cases, the region under study becomes a border zone, with a neighbourhood that forms another zone of occupation. It also means that the circulation and supply of goods are radically changed, as is the circulation of people. In the case of Kastoria, however, Paolo Fonzi underlines the persistence of the spatial divide between the town and the countryside, even if at the micro-level – at the village level other factors

tend to influence, in different ways, the mobilization of peasants (here Slavo-Macedonians). In the case of Mitrovica, integration into the space of “Greater Albania” contributes to new relations between “Albanians”, “Serbs” and “Montenegrians”, to new conflicts, notably because of the involvement of Albanians from Albania mobilized there, in Kosovo, by the Italian authorities. Indeed, when paying attention to people and their trajectories, be they authority holders or not, it can be seen that such periods of powershift are periods of new constraints as well as new opportunities. In the midst of violence, death and shortages, people adopt varying and changing strategies of survival and resistance, but also, in some cases, of empowerment, as in the case of the family Draga studied by Franziska Zaugg, and more generally in the case of Slavo-Macedonian villagers around Kastoria who seized the opportunity to form armed units against the resistance and later to disband, or to join the ranks of the resistance. In fact, according to the two studies, mistrust seems to have been the common way of seeing the other and engaging with them, more than loyalty. Strategical use in both directions, top-down and bottom-up, was frequent. Besides, in the Greek case, new dynamics of conflicts were no longer over land but over supply; they were no longer peaceful, but armed and violent.

The three other cases are different, since they do not concern a period of war. But as I have already argued, the studies by Jovo Miladinović, Isabel Ströhle and Danilo Šarenac are also dealing with powershift (or potential powershift) sequences. There, violence appears more in terms of memory of violence. A past, thus time, no longer short and changing, is at the heart of the reshaping of public memory, which takes place in various main arenas: a trial in the first case, a Party commission in the second, and public media in the third one. In each case, some actors have an interest, for their own empowerment, to refer back to this past or to let the others discuss it: among others, the formation of armed units during the period of the Austro-Hungarian occupation (1916-1918) in the case studied by Jovo Miladinović; the 1955-1956 weapon confiscation campaign, and more specifically the post-1945 period of reintegration of Kosovo into Socialist Federative Yugoslavia in the case studied by Isabel Ströhle, and the period of the First World War in the case analysed by Danilo Šarenac. In the three cases, the reemerging past had been silenced for different reasons: by an amnesty law; because the perpetrators of violence were the legitimate organs of the state; or by the predominance of the Socialist narrative in which World War II was the founding event, at the expenses of WWI. If the past is then recalled, in the three cases, it is also because of a power balance between different spaces. The powershift or potential

powershift has a spatial dimension inasmuch as it is partly related to the negotiation of the relation between a province or a federative unit and the centre: centralisation, decentralisation, defederalization processes are all at work. At the micro level, in following the trajectories of the actors involved, the three authors show that these processes are the result of various competing personal and eventually collective agencies and that they are shaped by various personal and group interests: in the case studied by Jovo Miladinović, the interest of Ferhat Draga, his family and its local network, but also the interests of the networks of the political parties in competition; in the case studied by Isabel Ströhle, the trajectories of Yugoslav leaders in Belgrade cross those of local Communist leaders, but also those of local people which have suffered from past violence, when the study of Danilo Šarenac shows that, besides the interests of several anti-Communist and Serb nationalist milieus, there are the interests of the veterans of WWI themselves and probably the interests of publishers, journalists and historians.

In relation with this last point, the five studies bring to light three kinds of processes that are accompanying powershifts: legitimation/delegitimation, mobilization and complex ethnicization processes.

The redefinition of legitimate/non-legitimate, in particular of the legitimate/non-legitimate authority, but also of the legitimate/non-legitimate violence is at the heart of the powershifts under study. The reshaping of the memory of violence is a tool for delegitimizing and legitimizing past attitudes or deeds, but, above all, for delegitimizing or legitimizing present searches for empowerment. However, since these processes develop through interactions, there can be multiple and competing attempts of empowerment, made possible by the powershift (or the possible powershift). In the case studied by Isabel Ströhle for example, the Albanian Communist leaders of Kosovo use the denouncement of violence committed during the seizing of weapons campaign of 1955-56 in order to reinforce their power both towards the centre and the local population. In relation with violence or the memory of violence, shaping an image, legitimizing, or delegitimizing the Other, is also a manner of expressing a (dis)loyalty and of ensuring a capacity of mobilization or neutralising a mobilizing power during this powershift period. But, at the same time, this serves on one hand, the very power of Tito at the head of the Yugoslav Federation and on the other, it begins to give empowerment to the local society along nationalist claims through a process of ethnicization. Even in the case analysed by Danilo Šarenac on the use of oral history and testimonies of WWI veterans by political actors

for the reinforcement of their own position in a changing political field at the end of the Socialist period, one can also see the empowerment of Momčilo Gavrić himself, one of these veterans, in changing his own narrative according to the time and to his interlocutors.

What also emerges from these studies is that ethnicization is not a simple, natural and primordial phenomenon in Balkan societies. It has to be contextualized and historicized. In the case handled by Jovo Miladinović for instance, the memory of violence during the Austro-Hungarian occupation makes apparent the existence of local loyalties that cross ethno-confessional boundaries, despite the fact that media are covering the trial of Ferhat Draga with a mood, which opposes Muslim Albanians to Christian Serbs. Indeed, at the local level, factions around local leaders are generally not mono-ethno-confessional since they are built on socio-economic interests. It should also be noted, all the studies introduce notions such as moral economy, expectations, trust and mistrust, changing loyalties that are multiple, sometimes opposite, forces that are working the social matter, especially at the moment of powershifts.

In short, these essays invite us, rather than to analyse violence in terms of continuities and discontinuities, to look at processes of the reshaping of practices and memories related to reconfiguration of power. They drive us to analyse the top-down and bottom-up dynamics underpinning this reshaping and to observe personal and collective empowerment processes through the control and the reshaping of violence or memories of violence, and how through them legitimation (individual and collective), mobilization and ethnicization are renegotiated.

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