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VIOLENCE IN REPUBLIKA SRPSKA'S NATIONAL NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT. This article investigates the integration of violence as a semiotic, cultural and historical phenomenon within the Bosnian-Serb national narrative by the government-backed dominant historiography. Based on the analysis of a corpus of historiographic works produced by historians of Republika Srpska, it seeks to interrogate how they have become entrepreneurs of historicising strategies turning violence into a momentum of the entity's history.

KEYWORDS: Republika Srpska, former Yugoslavia, historiography, nationalism, political uses of the past.

1. INTRODUCTION

The semiotics of collective memories are more often than not conveyed by circulating signs that contribute to mold Nora's sites of memory (French, 2012). As such, they can either be used to unite a given population around shared memories of the past that structure the group or to stir divisions and conflicts among two or more distinct groups, with polarising collective memories being one of

the fault lines. The cultural and social functions of those representations, signs and symbols of a collective past, whether violent or not, also shape the historical narrative of this past and therefore hold an eminently political value (De Zalia, Moeschberger, 2014, 1). This value proves to be even higher when it comes to a divided and violent past, as the semiotic, narrative and representation mechanisms once used to stir conflicts might

later become tools for unification among a formerly warring population or might remain divisive in order to perpetuate the wartime dissensions.

When it comes to “symbols that bide and divide,” the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina is worthy of study. In the 1990s, Western and sometimes local historiography and common knowledge usually considered the Western Balkans as a space of unresolved disputes, inherently belligerent peoples and therefore inevitable wars (Kaplan, 2005). This essentialist reading eludes the long-, middle- and short-term structural causes for the upsurge of high-scale violence that characterized the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995, among which were authoritarian and populist power, a corporate, corrupt and mafia state, and the instrumentalization of ethnic nationalism by those same leaders (Lukić, 2004; Ramet, 2009). It also fails to account for how this violence has been explained, represented and signified within post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina and how the specificities of the last conflict have endured in order to forge the polarised national narratives of the three constitutive peoples, Bosnian Muslims, Croats and Serbs.

This issue will constitute the core of this article, with a special focus on Republika Srpska, which is the predominantly Bosnian Serb-populated and Serb-governed federated entity of post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, for which the reason is twofold. Firstly, while the three warring sides have to be held accountable for the atrocities of the war, the concentration of armaments, troops and material and financial supplies provided by the government in Belgrade strongly favored the army of Republika Srpska during the conflict and led to unparalleled manifestations of violence from its part, such as the siege of Sarajevo, the campaigns in Central and Eastern Bosnia between 1992 and 1993, and the fall of Goražde, Zepa and Srebrenica in the summer of 1995. The non-Serb historiography stresses how these brutal onslaughts resulted in the majority

of the ethnic cleansing, forced displacement, mass murders and destructions that paved the war. Some scholars state that the entity was born from a criminal and genocidal endeavor (Gow, 2003), a reading also defended by predominantly Bosnian Muslim leaders to advocate for the dissolution of Republika Srpska. As a matter of fact, violence has surrounded Bosnian-Serb statehood since the proclamation of the entity on 9 January 1992, and semiotics of conflict, and more particularly semiotics of violence, have remained particularly vivid in the last two decades of peace following the Dayton Peace Agreement in November 1995.

How they have remained that vivid is the second reason why Republika Srpska proves a valid case study for one interested in the semiotics of violence in a post-war polity and which will be more particularly the core of this article. The study of the reactivation of divisive pasts in post-communist Europe, which can be seen through memory politics and quarrels over historiographic interpretations, have in the past decades been brought to scholars’ attention (Mink and Bonnard, 2010; Mink, 2007). The state’s intervention in the field of interpreting historical facts leads to the apparition of new strategies of historicization (Mink and Bonnard, 2010, 21) that are the common point among various institutional realities of reactivating the past. Those strategies rely on “representations of historical facts internalized through formal (for example at school) or informal (for example in family) socialization which have a potential for collective mobilization, necessary for political influence” (Mink, 2007, 17). With them appear new uses and new entrepreneurs of history, but also new configurations for the position of historians who can become, among other things, the artisans and users of a symbolic past designed to form the collective references of national history. Post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina has not been a stranger to the phenomenon, as the exhaustive work of Cecile Jouhanneau shows: the necessity to deal with the past

faces the contradictory injunctions of formal arrangements sought by international authorities and the real objectives of local authorities (Jouhanneau, 2019).

In the case of Republika Srpska, the complex history of violence it experienced during the war is an integral part of historiography politics in times of peace. It has been mobilized by successive governments to back up claims for extended statehood, to widen the divide with the central government in Sarajevo, and to stress the specific national identity of the Serbs of Bosnia and Herzegovina in comparison to their fellow constitutive peoples. Driven by a combined political and scientific engineering, signs, symbols and representations of violence in Republika Srpska fall directly into the category of those with the double function of uniting one group against another. The semiotics of violence, to be understood as the symbols and signs of both physical and rhetorical violence inflicted by or upon the Serbs of Bosnia and Herzegovina throughout the defined frame of their national history, have to be thought of as a signifier within the historiographic narrative produced in Republika Srpska. They provide a convenient means to analyze the fabrication and maintenance of a Bosnian-Serb identity territorially anchored in Republika Srpska as the historiography erects them as inherent expressions of nationhood (Elgenius, 2005, 302). This semiotics of violence must therefore, but not exclusively, be studied as a mirror of the nation and references of a complex notion of community. However, the contribution this article intends to make is not limited to accounting for expressions of the nation in the semiotics of violence that pave Republika Srpska's national narrative and reflecting on the construction of post-war Bosnian-Serb nationalism. It also, and mostly, seeks to interrogate how the historians of Republika Srpska have become entrepreneurs of historicising strategies by taking up semiotics of violence and turning them into a founding characteristic of the national narrative.

For the article to capture the mechanisms through which the dominant historiography has, over time, integrated violence as a semiotic, cultural and historical phenomenon within Bosnian-Serb national narrative, it will be based on the analysis of a corpus of historiographic works examined during research stays in Banja Luka and selected based on the following three criteria: the relevance of the topic in relation to the last war, the history of Republika Srpska and the Serb people; the academic position of its writer(s) in Republika Srpska (academic staff employed permanently or partially by a Republika Srpska university); and the date of publication (post-1995). These sources will be completed by the collection of press archives gathered at the National Library of Republika Srpska in Banja Luka, as well as materials from international organizations involved in wartime and post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina. Finally, it will rely on a prosopographic study of historians of Republika Srpska in order to identify the common characteristics of a group of historical actors based on systematic observation of careers and political involvement.

The demonstration is organized in three points. First, the proclamation and the state-building of Republika Srpska occurred in a highly turbulent paradigm of mass violence that historians have integrated and made consistent with a longitudinal history of violence, suffering and victimhood of the Serbs that is presented as a defining characteristic of the nation. Second, the very specific context in which historiography is produced in the entity tends to turn historians into producers of the dominant national narrative, and as a matter of fact to blur the divide between science and politics. And third, as national history occupies a growing place in the contemporary public debate, semiotics of violence become usable tools, dedicated to supporting historicising strategies and a political agenda of reclaiming statehood, as the 2016 constitutional crisis around the celebration of the National Day of Republika Srpska proves.

2. A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE: ITS SEMIOTICS AS A FOUNDING PARADIGM IN THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE OF REPUBLIKA SRPSKA

On 21 December 1991, Radovan Karadžić declared in front of the newly founded Assembly of the Serb People of Bosnia and Herzegovina that the goals Serbs pursued could be achieved in peace and that war would not bring anything that could not be done peacefully. In 1992, however, the Serb Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina proclaimed unilaterally that it had gone too far down the warpath. At the sixteenth session of the Assembly, both Karadžić, then President of Republika Srpska, and General Ratko Mladić, Chief Commander of the Republika Srpska Army, disclosed the war goals and the military plans to be carried out. Karadžić enunciated six “strategic objectives” for the Serbian people of Bosnia and Herzegovina:

1. Drawing state borders between Republika Srpska and the rest of BiH
2. Drawing a corridor between Semberija and Krajina in order to connect RS and RSK (Plan Most)
3. Drawing another corridor in the Drina Valley in order to connect the territories held by RS along the border with Serbia (Plan Drina)
4. Establishing the border of RS via the Una and Neretva rivers
5. Partitioning Sarajevo between Serbs and Muslims
6. Providing RS with access to the sea (Karadžić, in Donia, 2012).

Given the territorial imbrication of the constitutive peoples in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the *opština* were not, by an overwhelming majority, populated by a Serb majority. Therefore, the question of non-Serbs in Republika Srpska was raised very quickly by the authorities after the proclamation of the aspiring state. This issue was presented, in the words of the deputy, as twofold: first, it was absolutely necessary to prevent non-Serbs from settling in the territories claimed by Republika Srpska and, at the same time, to discourage the non-Serbs who had already settled from staying. In December

1991, even before the war began, a deputy expressed the concerns raised by the presence of the Muslim population in the region of Krajina in front of the National Assembly (Kuprešanin in Donia, 2012, 161). According to him, the presence of 200-300,000 Muslims in the area did not sit well with Bosnian-Serb plans and might even be detrimental to them, especially in terms of housing once other Bosnian Serbs came to settle in those lands. This question found itself at the heart of the debates for the rest of the war and was an object of discord between the civilian government and military command.

The resort to ethnic cleansing, through the systematic displacement and/or mass murder of non-Serb populations, aimed, as Marie-Janine Calic puts it, to “break military resistance by the Bosniak population and secure what they called the vital ‘corridor of life’” (Calic, 2009, 126), but also, as a result, to change the ethnic structure of administrative units where a majority of Serbs had not lived prior to the war. When comparing the figures, it is quite clear that the ethnic balance reversed in originally mixed areas, such as Foča, where Bosniaks and Croats, who used to comprise 51 percent of the population in 1991, were almost all gone by the end of 1992 (Calic, 2009, 125-127). The same goes for *opštinas* like Zvornik, Bratunac, Ključ and Sanski Most, that is, zones of strategic interest that happened to be populated by a significant number of non-Serbs before the war. The Srebrenica massacre of 10-11 July 1995 was the climax of this strategy when more than 30,000 persons from the Srebrenica-Žepa “safe havens” were forced to flee and between 6,500 and 8,800 men were slaughtered after the VRS (*Vojska Republike Srpske*, the Army of Republika Srpska) conquered the zone (Calic, 2009, 129).

This incredibly brutal and multifaceted violence was not the sole fact of the Serb military and paramilitary but was rather a structural aspect of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (United Nations Security Council, 1994). Nevertheless, even though not unique, it must be con-

sidered as an indissociable element of the process of the constitution, nationalization and statization of Republika Srpska and, more particularly, not only in times of war but also in times of peace. Therefore, it is worth focusing on the semiotic mechanisms surrounding the issue of the last war, its mass violence and atrocities, and one of its outcomes, that is, the recognition of Republika Srpska as a federated entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Dayton Peace Agreement.

These mechanisms mostly rely on the narrative of the “war for the defense of the homeland.” They come to signify that the upsurge of violence committed by the Republika Srpska Army and connected or disconnected paramilitaries during the war was imperative and legitimate. They are particularly visible in the historiographic production concerning the war. Indeed, the narrative on the Serbs fighting for the “defense of the homeland” during the Bosnian war holds a particularly federative potential and grants it a key place in writing the “national novel.” The strategy of labeling and conceptualizing the Bosnian war as such conditioned both the dominant historiography and the political discourses related to the conflict. The use of the term “homeland” to describe the Bosnian-Serb war goals reveals much of what its historians want to transmit: fighting this war was, on the Bosnian-Serb side, lawful and just.

For instance, in *Istorija Republike Srpske*, Čedomir Antić and Nenad Kecmanović (2016) make a point of the suppression by the SRBiH Assembly (National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia) of the right for opštine to exert their constitutional right to secession and instead established the Council for the Equality of the Peoples. Therefore, the creation of the Assembly of the Serbian People of BiH is depicted as a legitimate response to the process towards independence impulsed against the will of the Bosnian-Serb representatives and of the Bosnian-Serbs as a constitutive people (Antić and Kecmanović, 2016, 306). Hence, the outbreak of the war could not be read, in

that perspective, as a manifestation of Serb and Serbian irredentism, but rather as an act to defend Yugoslavia, torn apart by the Bosniaks' and Croats' undue and unilateral will for independence. In the book, no mention is made of the other violent actions led by SDS (Serb Democratic Party) activists in towns other than Sarajevo, for instance Mostar, Goražde and Bosanski Brod, where they were the first ones to fuel the tensions (Ramet, 2006, 427). Second of all, high-scale operations of ethnic cleansing were committed by Serbian paramilitaries against non-Serb populations throughout the entire war without necessarily responding to previous aggression, as was the case for Bijelina, for instance (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, 1997). The foundational meaning of this truncated narrative is to deny that the Republika Srpska government and Belgrade had prepared for war since the very first steps taken by the SRBiH Assembly towards independence (Antić and Kecmanović, 2016, 335). According to the historians, the reason for being of the “war for defending the homeland” lies in the fact that Serbs could not accept the dissolution of their state, which had had a detrimental impact on them, and simply responded to that.

Indeed, the thesis of the “war for defending the homeland” cannot sustain itself if historians do not present the unfolding of the events as spontaneous and uncontrollable, since the defensive aspect would then be undermined. In that regard, the historiography shows the role of Yugoslavia as a political actor and that of the JNA (Yugoslav People's Army) as a military one as something remote, punctual and not structured. It is unclear whether this “homeland” describes Bosnia or Yugoslavia; however, the historiography rejects the intervention of the Yugoslav military forces along with the VRS and adheres to the version corroborated by the authorities of both governments, that is, the JNA never intervened on Bosnian soil after its withdrawal in April 1992. Subsequently, the “war for defending the

homeland” also relies on the labeling of the conflict as an intra-state one, a civil war allegedly led without backup, at least on the Bosnian-Serb side, from exogenous military forces. This historiographic dimension proves crucial for understanding how the Serbian and Bosnian-Serb dominant historiographies reject claims of irredentism coming from local and international historians as well as officials.

The military interventions of Croatia to support the HVO (Croatian Defence Council) that destabilized the front and made the VRS lose ground are then vehemently denounced as aggressions and parts of a broader strategy to harm Republika Srpska and the Serbs as a whole (Spaić, 2008; Velimirović, 2012). The book published by the Republika Srpska Bureau for relations with the ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia) in 2008 on the “Aggression led by the Republic of Croatia on the territory of Republika Srpska” reports that the Croatian military campaign consisted of an “occupation of the territory of Republika Srpska” and provoked an exodus of its population and a breach of its sovereignty (Velimirović, 2012, 27). The NATO bombings of Bosnian-Serb positions during the summer of 1995 are depicted in the same light as the Croatian deployment of troops: as an unfair targeting of the Serbs in a context of civil war for a conflict in which all parties should be held equally responsible. The historiography denies that the Serbs led a high-scale campaign of ethnic cleansing as part of the territorial and political war goals and “the vision of perpetrators that had been imposed on them” (Kojić, 2017, 234). Under the guise of narrating in a new light, different from the academic and political readings that are dominant in the international arenas, some voluntary omissions, mitigations, minimizations, and sometimes historical distortions are at work. The dominant national narrative in Republika Srpska knowingly excludes central historical elements related to the war and its unfolding, for instance, by alluding that the Serbian paramilitaries such as those of

Šešelj or Arkan formed spontaneously to defend Serbian land and people instead of having responded to Belgrade’s orders (Vukusić, 2019, 256-272), or to the fact that the JNA paved the way for the formation of the VRS by leaving Bosnian-Serb staff, weapons (including heavy artillery) and ammunitions behind in the wake of its withdrawal (Gow, 2003).

The narrative of the past war must be integrated into a broader one about the historical sufferings of the Serbs that has become a topos in the literature. The historiography describes them as targeted victims who were attacked precisely because of what they fought for or what they were by essence: Serbs. The post-socialist period marked the end of the institutionally-imposed silence about the extent and the scale of the crimes committed by the Independent State of Croatia against the Serbs and the calling into question of the institutional narrative backed by two reports unveiled by the regime, one from Tito himself and one from the “State Commission for establishing the crimes of the occupying forces and their supporters” (Sindbæk, 2012, 52). Globally speaking, the historiography, as shared by the communist regimes, consisted of depicting the war as a struggle between two distinct factions: the Partisans on one side and their opponents on the other, terms encompassing the Axis, the Ustaša and the Četniks as well, to the great displeasure of the next generations of Serbian historians (Sindbæk, 2012, 41). Putting Četniks and Ustaša on the same scale and not acknowledging the anti-Serb nature of the NDH (Independent State of Croatia) regime and the persecutions that resulted from it has been read in post-socialist Serb historiography as supplementary proof of the absence of emphasis on the suffering of Serbs throughout history. The socialist policy of not directly confronting the reality of the facts led to the use, from the perspective of nationalistic mobilization, of distorted figures and historical manipulations at the dawn of Yugoslavia’s dissolution by Serbian intellectuals and politicians. Indeed, it

helped fuel the narrative according to which Socialist Yugoslavia had discriminated against the Serbs and built itself against them from the start, as well as the narrative regarding the potential risks, if Serbia's ruling elites did not awaken, of seeing the emerging Croatian politicians striving for independence and achieving the irredentist project of a Greater Croatia (Krestić, 1983, 375-431; Krestić, 1998). As a matter of fact, those manoeuvres endured, and the sensitivity of the issue makes it a very useful historiographic subject to insert into the national narrative, especially into one in the making, as in Republika Srpska.

The common thesis is that, once again, the suffering of the Serbs is overlooked and even denied, and a unitary country has been rebuilt without solving those pending issues and punishing the criminals who committed crimes against the Serbs. In many works, a comparison between Jasenovac and Srebrenica appears, followed by the argument that one cannot ask the Serbs to recognize the genocide in Srebrenica without recognizing the genocide against the Serbs under the NDH, since its severity resulted in between 100,000 and 300,000 victims, of whom approximately 50,000 died in Jasenovac (Ramet, 2006; Pavlovic, 2008). This parallelism aims to defend the thesis according to which the suffering of the Serbs is equal to or even worse, in terms of time and quantity, than any other national group in former Yugoslavia, but is not worth the same in the eyes of other constitutive peoples and the international community. The document *Report about Case Srebrenica* provides the best example of the claims by the dominant historiography that violence, sorrow and suffering punctuated the history of Serbs in BiH and that it has been voluntarily obfuscated.

The account was not *stricto sensu* a scientific text, however. From the start, it undoubtedly carried a historiographic intention as well as a political value. It was commissioned by the government to the Republika Srpska Bureau for relations with the ICTY in order to comply with

the demands of the HR and other international actors urging Republika Srpska to shed light on the events following the capture of Srebrenica by the VRS. Its publication in 2004 provoked huge turmoil within Bosnian and international circles. Castigated by the ICTY as "one of the worst examples of revisionism in relation to the mass executions of Bosnian Muslims committed in Srebrenica in July 1995" and by the HR as "tendentious, preposterous and inflammatory," the main argument of the report, apart from the fact that the actions conducted by the VRS were perfectly appropriate in a context of war, was to insist on how Srebrenica and its surroundings became through time a *locus terribilis* for the Serbs, and that the crimes committed against them in the area in WWII and at the beginning of the Bosnian war (especially in Bratunac) partly justified the firmness of the VRS in July 1995 (Bureau for relations with the ICTY, 2002). The introduction of the reports therefore states that "the goal of this report is to present the whole truth about crimes committed in the Srebrenica region regardless of the nationality of the perpetrators of the crimes and the time when they were committed" (Bureau for relations with the ICTY, 2002, 5), implying that emphasis would also be placed on the Serb victims in the area during the war. The report begins with the enunciation of five postulates:

[T]he events in Srebrenica can not be considered as detached from the crimes committed in the rest of the territory of BiH; events connected to Srebrenica can not be cut off from events around the Srebrenica-Bratunac region; the events of Srebrenica can not be cut off from what happened between 92-95; the events in Srebrenica can not be seen as specific to a nationality, particularly in relation to the crimes committed by the so-called "BiH army" and possible crimes committed by the VRS; truth about the above-mentioned events is important in the process of reconciliation and peace, because it can not be done without justice; the perpetrators of crimes committed against Serbs between 92-5 can still go freely, while the RS holds information about crimes and perpetrators and gave them to the UN General Assembly and Security Council. (Bureau for relations with the ICTY, 2002, 5)

The rest of the report unfolds as a tribute to the “depressive history of Serbs in Srebrenica,” detailing how Serbs from Bratunac and Srebrenica had faced attempts to exterminate them carried out during WWII by the SS Handžar legion, composed of Bosniaks, and how the demographics testified to the extent reached by the process, pointing out that, before WWII, Serbs represented 50,6% of the population in Srebrenica, compared to 35,6% in 1991 (Bureau for relations with the ICTY, 2002, 12). Arguing that this historical fact had been disregarded by those who pressure Republika Srpska to shed light on the 1995 massacre, the report also points out the lack of consideration for the Serbs who found shelter in the area after fleeing the Bosniak-controlled territory and that they still lived in terrible conditions without drinking water, home repairs, basic sanitary infrastructures or economic prospects (Republic Statistical Office of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, 2002, 9). The construction of a victimhood discourse together with a structural denial and permissiveness for the exactions committed characterized the content of the report throughout.

The *Report about Case Srebrenica* hence participated in the making of a “suffering history” whose narration represents a common denominator of a Serb identity among the Republika Srpska population that overlooks the very recent and artificial creation of the entity (Benbassa, 2007). Violence is therefore not only signified in the national narrative but aestheticized and magnified, so those who suffered from it as well as, by extension, those who inflicted it as justified retribution became pantheonized as national heroes. This pattern in the Bosnian Serb national narrative is not circumscribed to an historiographic issue, but also has to do with contemporary Republika Srpska politics as it was used to fuel nationalist rhetoric against the central government in Sarajevo, the unicity of the Bosnian states and the other constitutive peoples. It was favored and fuelled by the conditions of historiographic production and

the historicising strategy implemented by Republika Srpska governments since Dayton, which puts historians into the position of creators of the national narrative.

3. HISTORIANS, HISTORICIZING STRATEGIES AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE SEMIOTICS OF VIOLENCE

The production of the national narrative by historians stems from a policy of research administration and attribution of funding that favored topics related to the history of Republika Srpska, the history of the Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the history of violence as a founding paradigm for their quest for statehood. A typology of the means of historiographic production reveals that they depend mostly on direct government financing through channels that are not only those of the Ministry of Education. The historiographic production from the main universities of Republika Srpska, namely the University of Banja Luka and the University of East Sarajevo, proves interesting when examining the trajectories of their most visible scholars. Indeed, in contemporary history in particular, the “national history” of Republika Srpska became one of the shared themes among their respective research interests. Subsequently, many of the history or philosophy faculty members’ focus was on topics related to the medieval, modern and contemporary political, social or cultural history of the Serbs either in BiH as a whole or in localities that nowadays constitute parts of the Republika Srpska territory. Publications of the faculties reveal the predominance of national history with a focus on the struggle for achieving statehood in the research interests of the faculty, with works like *Young Republic of Srpska (BiH)* at the beginning of the 21st century, *Science and education: essential factors of Serbian spirituality*, *One hundred and twenty years since the beginning of the struggle of the Serbian people in Bosnia and Herzegovina for church-school self-government (1896-2016)*, and *the rise of Serbs in Herzegovina and Bosnia (1875-1878)*.

This proves that in the academic circles of Republika Srpska universities, the elaboration of the entity's national history is continuing apace. To this must be added the historiographic production stemming from institutional orders, plethoric in comparison to the overall publications in the field of history. Most of the time, those books inscribe themselves in a commemorative context related to the history of Serbs, of the polity or of its institutions. For instance, the book *25 Years of the National Assembly of Republika Srpska* was commissioned by the institution in 2016 to three historians: Bojan Stojnić, also the director of the National Archives, Verica M. Stošić and Goran Đuran. In their advertising for the book, which took the shape of a feuilleton published in the local newspaper *Glas Srpske*, the authors described the historical foundations of the Republika Srpska and its National Assembly as a century old, fluctuating in the wake of "Serbian rebellions in the Ottoman Empire and under the Austro-Hungarian occupation, with great engagement of the political and social leadership of the Serbian people" (Stojnić, Stošić & Đuran, 2016). In the book, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska is placed in a long tradition of self-determination and searches for national autonomy, defined as "categorical historical imperatives." The proclamation of the National Assembly of Republika Srpska resulted then from this long process, and the institution was considered as "the guarantor of the Serbian national interest and an expression of the general will of the Serbian people" (Stojnić, Stošić & Đuran, 2016, 7).

Another case of historiographic work commissioned by the government can be found in the *Istorija Republika Srpske*. Funded directly by the Presidency of Republika Srpska and resulting from a common involvement and close collaboration between the authors and staff from various institutions of Republika Srpska in order to provide archival and other types of resources, the book was quickly translated into English in order to reach an international audience, especially among

the diaspora communities. It obeyed the same logics as those that were behind the publication of the anniversary book on the National Assembly, since it was depicted by the authors during the promotional campaign as a "testimony of the struggle of the Serbian people for the creation of Republika Srpska and a kind of historical view of the movement in this area." Again, the description of the work stresses the historical depth that backed the justification for the existence of Republika Srpska as a territory and supports the national narrative about Republika Srpska as a result of a history of violence.

The government can also rely on its own institutions to produce historiographic texts. Among them is the work of the Republican Institute for Researching War, War Crimes and Missing Persons. This institute, with which we have been able to conduct interviews, observations and archival consultations, depends on the Ministry of Justice, even though it has a mostly research-centered vocation. The institute has been granted its own publishing house in order to enable the broader diffusion of its research. Gathering legal scholars, sociologists, archaeologists and historians, these researchers collaborate on various projects that aim to shed light on war-related historical events that have directly impacted the Serbs either in Republika Srpska when focusing on the past war or in Bosnia and the broader area when focusing on WWII and the NDH ruling. Among their publications are *Aggression led by Croatia in Republika Srpska: The Occupation of Mrkonjić Grad (Sept 95-Feb 96)*, *Women Victims of War in Republika Srpska (1992-1995)*, *Political Anatomy of One Judgement* on the Hague trial of Radovan Karadžić, and *War Crimes Committed against Serbs in the Municipality of Visoko* (Velimirović, 2012; Vranješ & Miodragović, 2016). The institute also publishes books close to its own research thematic and whose historiographic line fits in with it as well, that is, the interpretation of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a civil war in which the Serbs were depicted unfairly as the perpetrators.

For instance, the book *Undercover Operation at Tuzla's Kapija Square* by Il-ija Branković denies any involvement by the Bosnian-Serb military in a bombing targeting civilians in Tuzla in 1994 and instead accuses the army of BiH (Branković, 2016). While the author is a retired General of the VRS who never, during his active career, held any research position, the institute nevertheless published and promoted the book at the same level as its own. Also, as a governmental organ of Republika Srpska, it was able to sign a Protocol of Cooperation with Radio Television Republike Srpske in order to “work together to build a culture of memory through media reporting and certain documentary content of RTRS on the topic of the past defensive-homeland war, and with the professional capacities of the Republic Centre ... train the RTRS staff on how and in what way to transfer certain content, as well as marking important historical dates regarding the suffering of the Serbian people” (RTRS, 2009). Therefore, this means of producing historiographic knowledge, because of its proximity with the government, can benefit from multiple opportunities of diffusion through other governmental channels and thus, as the institutional commands, from a larger audience not restricted to the scientific circles.

Despite their variety, all these initiatives have some common points not only in their making but also, and more particularly, in their expected outcomes: they benefit from funds invested by the authorities in order to achieve, in the long-run, the narration of the Republika Srpska national story, thus conferring the entity with some historical depth. This way, a dominant and state-approved historiography will come to help legitimize the existence of Republika Srpska as a territorial and political outcome of the history of Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It underlines an extreme porosity between scientific production and politics in the first place, including by the governmental political discourses taking up the most salient patterns of the historiography.

The porosity between academia and politics proves much more visible when focusing again on the trajectories of the people who produce this dominant historiographic knowledge. This system lies on two types of actors, who might be referred to as “historians involved in politics” and “politicians involved in historiography.” Coming back to the cases of Nenad Kecmanović and Čedomir Antić, the authors of *Istorija Republike Srpska*, their biographies directly insert them into the first group. Kecmanović, a Bosnian-Serb, got involved in politics in the early 1990s, following the authorization to hold free and fair elections in BiH. Contrary to most Bosnian-Serb intellectuals and scholars from Sarajevo, he did not rally the emerging SDS and rather chose to serve as the main candidate of the SRSJ in BiH, even though he had been offered the position of President of the new political formation. Multi-positioned in his academic career, since he taught at Belgrade University and at the same time in Banja Luka and East Sarajevo after the war, he has also experienced a political career in parallel. He served as a Senator in the Republika Srpska Parliament from 1996 and was reinstalled to this office in 2009 by the President, Milorad Dodik. Then, even though he did not confirm or deny it during a meeting with Kecmanović in Belgrade, it is quite likely that, at the time of appointing two historians to carry out the monographs on Republika Srpska's history, Dodik found it suitable to pick someone whose political line he could agree with. Kecmanović has also been very vocal about his lack of belief in the survival of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a unitary country, to the point of entitling his newest book, in which he relates the allegedly structurally conflicting dynamics that have weakened Bosnia and Herzegovina since Dayton, *Nemoguća država* (meaning, “the impossible country”).

The members in the category of “politicians involved in historiography,” though less numerous, undeniably participate in the elaboration of an official history. Since these are already public characters, the

impact and outreach of their books surpass those of scholars in the public debate. Among them, the case of Slobodan Nagradić deserves to be focused on. Born in 1957 in Gradiška, he oscillated throughout his career between politics, high public service and academia. He served as an advisor to the Minister for Human Rights and Refugees in the Government of Republika Srpska, after which he served for almost a decade as Vice-President and President of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), and today he is the Director of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural, Historical and Natural Heritage of Republika Srpska (Nagradić, 2016). After running unsuccessfully for President (2006) and Deputy at the Republika Srpska National Assembly (2010), he left the party for good and, from his office at the Institute, became very prolific when it comes to book-writing. His book *Bosna vs Srpska* points out the antagonistic nature of the relations between the central state and the entity without any possibility for compatibility regarding Republika Srpska's complete political fulfillment within a failed state (Nagradić, 2015). Given that he has acted for most of his career in the decision making-circles of the government of Republika Srpska, it seems very likely that his evolution had been conditioned, not to say favored, by his support of the dominant historiographic patterns that punctuate scientific production in the entity.

4. HISTORICIZING STRATEGY AND THE CASE OF THE REFERENDUM ON 9 JANUARY

The political signification held by the semiotics of violence in the Republika Srpska national narrative, reinforced by the conditions of historiographic production in the entity, was notably translated into the controversy about the National Day of Republika Srpska, which ended up in the most important constitutional crisis post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina had had to face. As Susanne Citron states in the *Le mythe national*, "what we take for [our] history is the result of a writing of the past by elites in the service or support of different powers" (Citron, 2017, 207).

This apologetic historiography of the state underlies the national imaginary and is much more political than scientific. In Republika Srpska, this phenomenon is all the more visible as the scientific community is totally locked by these purveyors of official history, and a critical approach of the discipline is still not present enough. The official history serves to spread the sense of national belonging necessary to the government project, but also to make it legitimate in intellectual terms. It participates all the same in building a community of references, a space of common Serbian references in the territory of Republika Srpska, the transmission and solidification of an identity conceived by the elites. When it comes to the entity's violent past, the semiotics of violence have been integrated within the historicising strategy in order to fuel the political rhetoric and perpetuate symbols of unity among the Serbs and disunity between them and the other constitutive peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

On 25 November 2015, the BiH Constitutional Court ruled that the Law on Holidays of Republika Srpska was not in conformity with Article I(2) of the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Constitutional Court of Bosnian and Herzegovina, 2015). In other words, the Court ruled that the National Day of Republika Srpska, marked on 9 January, does not fit the constitutional principle of non-discrimination on a religious and/or national basis since it excluded the entity's non-Serb population from the celebration. A review of the constitutionality of the Law on Holidays had been requested by Bakir Izetbegović in 2013, then a Bosnian Muslim member of the BiH government, who called out the National Day of Republika Srpska as a celebration of the Declaration Proclaiming the Republic of the Serb People of Bosnia and Herzegovina of 1992, which proclaimed "territorial demarcation between them and political communities of other peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina" (*Glas Srpske*, 2013).

Here, the symbols that bide and divide are at work in what turned out to be

a memory crisis at the same time, with collective group memory weaponized to harm the memory and commemorations of another (Assman, 2006, 20) and a constitutional crisis with the government of Republika Srpska run by SNSD (Alliance of Independent Social Democrats) leader Milorad Dodik declaring the organization of a referendum for Republika Srpska citizens to vote on the validity of the Constitutional Court's decision. In this case, two competing narratives faced each other, as the Bosnian-Muslim narrative of the war of 1992-1995 has been reciprocally shaped by the same mechanisms as the Bosnian-Serb one. While the Bosnian-Muslim leaders considered the celebration of 9 January as the celebration of the irredentist and genocidal project carried out by Republika Srpska leaders of the time, their Republika Srpska counterparts undermined the legitimacy of celebrating Bosnian independence, on 1 March, as a symbol of denying the Bosnian-Serb right to self-determination. Igor Radojičić, then the Serb representative at the tripartite BiH Presidency, depicted Independence Day as "perceived by the Serbian people in this country as a symbol of the majorization of two peoples above the third" (*Politika*, 2014). According to him, "Republika Srpska will never agree to celebrate 1 March because a referendum on the secession of BH from the then SFRY was held that day, which was the prelude to the bloody war" (*Politika*, 2014). In fact, Republika Srpska officials used the same argumentation as Izetbegović in his complaint to the Constitutional Court to contest the celebration, based on the statements that it should not be imposed as a binding holiday in the whole country because it is accepted differently by the constitutive peoples and that it is the date of the Federation of BiH, which will never be accepted in Republika Srpska.

The public and political indignation raised by the Constitutional Court's judgment among the Republika Srpska's Serb citizens and their leadership reveal how the semiotics of violence served their role

in the national narrative. The violence depicted as being a century long by the dominant historiography had been signified as indissociable from a quest for statehood that climaxed with the past war. Consequently, 9 January falls into this semiotic dynamic within the Bosnian-Serb collective memory, and the declaration of its unconstitutionality gave an opportunity to the Republika Srpska political leaders to put this collective memory at the service of politics, and more particularly at the service of making a stance against the central government in Sarajevo. Benefiting from a seemingly sacred union between the nationalist parties on this issue, Dodik had repeatedly promised a referendum to assess whether or not 9 January would remain the National Day of Republika Srpska (*Politika*, 2016). In April 2015, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska voted for a Declaration, in prevision of the ruling, that "expresses its full will and readiness to use all legal and political means in order to defend legitimate interests and to preserve the identity of Republika Srpska confirmed by the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina" (National Assembly of Republika Srpska, 2015).

After months of confrontation and heated debates between Banja Luka and Sarajevo, on 15 July 2016, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska crossed the Rubicon. With an absolute majority of the present representatives (64 out of 83), a "Decision on calling a referendum" to assess the binding character of the Decision of the Bosnian Constitutional Court on the territory of Republika Srpska was adopted (National Assembly of Republika Srpska, 2016). Without any surprise and with no major obstacle able to prevent the government from carrying out its objective, the referendum took place, as planned, on 25 September. The turnout was minimal, barely enough to validate the results according to the Law on Referendums and Popular initiatives. In total, 55% of Republika Srpska voters went to the polls, but 99,81% of them answered positively to the question "Do you

agree that 9 January should be marked and celebrated as the National Day of Republika Srpska?" Parts of the media that were supportive of Dodik and the SNSD relayed messages from officials that 25 September embodied the day when democracy rose in Republika Srpska and when the Serbs stood up for their national interests (*Glas Srpske*, 2016).

The calls for participation in the referendum, if they only mobilized those in Republika Srpska who were already inclined towards ethnonationalist discourses, showed how the narrative of violence and conflict being historically linked to achieving statehood has shaped collective representations on the necessity to fight for Republika Srpska's integrity when threatened. Referenda, because they testified to the ability of local autonomist or secessionist leaders to mobilize the population of the territory they intended to govern, had provided them with significant political leverage. Republika Srpska was no exception in that regard, and this shows the power of a shared national narrative when it comes to political mobilization.

5. CONCLUSION

The semiotics of violence have been intermingled with the Bosnian-Serb national narrative to a deep point, so deep that they still influence the perceptions and representations of Republika Srpska's contemporary politics, as shown by the example of the National Day referendum. They have been shaped within the national narrative as a deep expression of nationhood and as indissociable from the quest for statehood pursued by the Serbs of Bosnia and Herzegovina before and after Dayton. Systemic upsurges of war crimes, mass deaths and ethnic cleansing are, according to the dominant historiography that shaped the national narrative, more fights in the century-long struggle for self-determination, freedom and statehood, in which violence paradoxically becomes an incidental part of the struggle when committed by the Serbs but a founding paradigm when committed against them.

It is worth reflecting on how the semiotics of violence meet the semiotics of nationhood and statehood in the national narrative of Republika Srpska. The semiotics of violence play a great part in presenting a symbolic version of the Bosnian-Serb identity. Apart from historiography and the making of the national narrative, the convergence between semiotics of violence and semiotics of nationhood is manifested elsewhere in the public space. Popular celebrations and commemorations constitute another field in which the overlapping of the semiotics of violence and nationhood can be observed, and they participate in the same logics of the historicising strategy depicted throughout the article. Every year on 12 May, the authorities, regardless of the political party in power, still commemorate the Day of the VRS, even though it has been incorporated among the joint armed forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Negationism does not hold back commemorative ceremonies, which unfold every year as high-scale denials of any wrongdoing that could have been committed by the VRS and its leaders. The *Dan Vojske Republike Srpske* therefore attests that both the intellectual and political elites of Republika Srpska have embraced and assumed on their behalf the main historiographic lines as conveyed in Republika Srpska: the war of 1992-1995 as a war to defend the homeland and Republika Srpska's aborted historical progression towards statehood.

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