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Master in, International Studies

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PhD Pedro Nuno Alves Vidal de Seabra, Assistant Profesor,
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SOCIOLOGIA
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

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Dedicated to my Mother

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the instrumentalization of radicalism during the Yugoslav wars, with a specific focus on Bosnia & Herzegovina and Croatia. Moving beyond simplistic narratives of innate ethnic hatreds, this research argues that the conflict was shaped by a synergy of internal radicalization and external power strategy. This study employs a multi-level analysis, grounded in a realist theoretical framework and utilizing Astrid Bötticher's conceptual distinction between radicalism (reform-oriented change) and extremism (anti-pluralist violence). It posits that the elite-driven weaponization of competing Bosniak, Croatian and Serbian historical narratives provided the essential ideological catalyst for mass radicalization. This internal process was then critically enabled and intensified by the strategic interference of external powers, whose policies (including a selectively enforced arms embargo and a timed NATO intervention) furnished the military means and political coverage for extremist projects to escalate. By deliberately excluding the term "terrorism," the analysis instead treats the systematic commission of terror as a tactical manifestation of extremism. The dissertation concludes that the wars in Bosnia & Herzegovina (1992-1995) and Croatia (1991-1995) are best understood through this nexus: where internal narratives supplied the motive ("the why") for radicalization and external geopolitical strategy provided the capacity ("the how"), resulting in devastating conflicts whose legacy continues to define the regional landscape.

Keywords:

Radicalization

Radicalism

Extremism

Bosnia

Croatia

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Glossary of Acronyms

US	United States
EU	European Union
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
UN	United Nations
UNHCHR	United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
SANU	Srpska Akademija Nauka i Umetnosti - Serbian Academy of Sciences & Arts
HSS	Hrvatska Seljačka Stranka - Croatian Peasant Party
NDH	Nezavisna Država Hrvatska - Independent State of Croatia
ORJUNA	Organization of Yugoslav Nationalists
HDZ	Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica - Croatian Democratic Union
UDBA	Uprava Državne Bezbednosti - State Security Service
LCY	League of Communists of Yugoslavia
VRS	Vojska Republike Srpske - Army of the Serbian Republic
SVK	Srpska Vojska Krajine - Serbian Army of Krajina
JNA	Jugoslovenska Narodna Armija - Yugoslav People's Army
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
HVO	Hrvatsko Vijeće Obrane - Croatian Defense Council
ARBiH	Armija Republike Bosne i Hercegovine - Army of the Republic of Bosnia & Herzegovina
APZB	Autonomna Pokrajina Zapadna Bosna - Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia
SDA	Stranka demokratske akcije - Party of Democratic Action
SFRY	Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
HV	Hrvatska Vojska - Croatian Army
HOS	Hrvatske Obrambene Snage - Croatian Defense Forces
SDS	Socijaldemokratska Stranka - Social Democratic Party (Serbia)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MPRI	Military Professional Resources Inc.
UNPROFOR	United Nations Protection Force
OHR	Office of the High Representative
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

I - Introduction

The focus of this dissertation is the term 'radicalism' as framed in the regional context of the following countries – Bosnia & Herzegovina[1] and Croatia. The study focuses largely on the period of the Bosnian (1992-1995) and Croatian (1991-1995) wars, with the necessary contextual examination of the preceding decades. The meaning of the term *radicalism* has changed throughout history, during which people would get branded as radicals based on their political inclinations and aspirations (Bötticher, 2017). However, the underlying idea of radicalism throughout history is to change the 'current' power structure of the place and people in question, by introducing new, or old, modes of behavior. While in the 18th century the label radical was often given to those who advocated for democracy and equality, in the 20th and 21st century the term has been applied to a wide range of political and cultural actors ranging from anti-colonial and revolutionary movements to civil-rights, feminist, religious and environmental movements (Vincent, 2009). The excessive politicization of the term is proof of its own when it comes to the importance of understanding it.

I have chosen to study radicalism because it represents a persistent challenge to international stability, often manifesting in violent conflict, ideological polarization and external interference that disrupts global order (Sedgwick, 2010). Here I am foremost referring to outbursts of violent armed conflict which inevitably affect the international order in various ways. Modes of behavior such as the use of dehumanizing and fear-mongering propaganda by utilizing symbols that have left deep scars on the collective psyche of various groups (Gagnon, 2004), and the interference of 'outside' actors due to either national and/or personal interests are arguably the biggest recurring obstacles to peace and prosperity (Parenti, 2000). And here, radicalism is, to a certain extent, ambiguous, considering its application in political and in academic circles. At times, it is hard to differentiate radicalism from extremism and terrorism, or the boiling point that allows radicalism to turn into extremism/terrorism (Bötticher, 2017). This is just one of the instances where the murkiness of the term radicalism demands closer scrutiny. It is precisely because of the vagueness in applying the term 'radicalism', that I have decided to study its instrumentalization in the post-Yugoslav context.

In this case, the problematization of radicalism is best explored when considering how the high degree of mutual intelligibility among Bosnian[2], Croatian and Serbian languages

[1] For the sake of simplicity, 'Bosnia & Herzegovina' will be subsequently referred to as 'Bosnia'. This is not intended to diminish the significance of the Herzegovina region.

[2] Despite its formal standardization being a post-Yugoslav development, this dissertation treats Bosnian as a distinct linguistic reality, separate from Croatian and Serbian, while emphasizing their structural proximity and mutual intelligibility

contrasts sharply with the politicized construction of ethno-religious divisions. While these languages remain structurally proximate, radicalized nationalist discourses have strategically mobilized religious identity – Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism and Islam – to reify perceived differences and suppress shared cultural and linguistic heritage. This divergence exemplifies a broader mechanism of ideological radicalization, wherein political actors instrumentalize symbolic identity markers (e.g., religion, script or lexicon) to manufacture artificial boundaries, thereby legitimizing exclusionary narratives while taking advantage of their shared intelligibility. This, in turn, allows us to underscore how radical ideologies often depend not on objective cultural distance but on leveraging potent symbols like religion and invoking historical enmity to foster antagonism.

Bearing in mind the identified mechanism, the analysis is centered on Bosnia and Croatia owing to two sets of reasons. First, due to the mutual intelligibility of the Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian languages. The countries in question, unlike others that were part of Yugoslavia (Slovenia, Macedonia), still maintain a high degree of mutual intelligibility in spite of state-led attempts to distance the languages from each other as much as possible through commissioned linguistic experts. It is also important to note that the question of mutual intelligibility remains a permanent issue in the context of Croatian, Bosnian and Serbian languages. The question of whether those languages are in fact dialects of a single language with their own sub-dialects is part of a heated political, historical and linguistic debate in those countries (Bailyn, 2010). This becomes clearer as we take into account that the process of creating a nation-state often leverages a shared national identity based on a common language, among other elements (Gellner, 1983). While Bourdieu (1991) theorized language as a medium of symbolic power, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) emphasized its role in colonial subjugation. Both perspectives, however, converge in viewing linguistic practices as sites of historical and ongoing power struggles that can be radicalized.

Second, the contemporary identities and political landscapes of these countries remain profoundly shaped by the religious dimension of the civil wars in Bosnia (1992-1995) and Croatia (1991-1995) and by shared historical ties. This dimension is rooted in a long-standing historical boundary, which created distinct Croatian Catholic and Serbian Orthodox spheres of influence. The subsequent period of Ottoman rule introduced Islam as a third major religious and identity component in Bosnia. While this dissertation acknowledges that these religious affiliations became the primary markers of ethnic belonging and group identity during the conflicts – often superseding other forms of identification – it does not undertake a deep sociological investigation of the religions themselves. Instead, it analyzes how these preexisting religious identities were politicized and instrumentalized within the radicalization

process.

The main goal of this dissertation is to explore the main actors and factors involved in the radicalization process in the specified countries, in order to better understand the root causes behind the process of radicalization, and their beneficiaries. Therefore, I intend to answer the following main research question:

> "*How was Radicalism instrumentalized in Bosnia & Herzegovina and Croatia, especially during the wars in Croatia (1991-1995) and Bosnia & Herzegovina (1992-1995)*?".

Building on the main research question, two secondary questions are established that aim to unpack its core dimensions. Firstly, it is important to note that generations of armed conflict have left an indelible mark on the hearts and minds of the Croatian, Bosniak and Serb nations. This deeply embedded trauma has manifested not only in memory but also in the very interpretation of history itself, leading to the establishment of fundamentally different and irreconcilable historical narratives. These divergent stories, entrenched over time, continue to shape the region's political and social landscape. This leads to the first secondary research question:

> "*How did competing historical narratives of national identity, trauma, and political victimization, lay the groundwork for radicalization in Bosnia & Herzegovina (1992-1995) and Croatia (1991-1995)?"*

To address this question, I propose the following hypothesis:

> C*ompeting narratives of victimhood, strategically activated by political elites, served as the essential catalyst for the mass radicalization required to initiate the conflicts in Bosnia & Herzegovina (1992-1995) and Croatia (1991-1995).*

While historical memory undeniably shaped the available narratives for political mobilization, the specific form and intensity of the 1990s conflicts cannot be understood without analyzing the external forces that granted them political opportunity and military viability. This, in turn, compels a focus on the international sphere, leading to another secondary research question:

> *"How did the interventions of great powers create sufficient conditions and incentives to shape the development of radicalism in Bosnia & Herzegovina (1992-1995) and Croatia (1991-1995)?"*

Considering that the dissertation will be largely based in the realist school of international relations, a second hypothesis is established:

The rise of radicalism in Bosnia & Herzegovina (1992-1995) and Croatia (1991-1995) was inextricably linked to the influence of foreign interventions, including the acquiescence of great powers.

This underlines the importance of considering other driving forces of societal change in the specified countries, namely the strategy of major and aspiring powers in the geopolitical landscape. While the conflict seemed isolated within its own sphere on account of certain cultural differences such as ethnicity, religion and history, it is well known that various warring factions received help from abroad in different ways, ranging from financial to military, even in spite of an arms embargo.

This research will examine the Bosnian (1992-1995) and Croatian (1991-1995) wars as primary case studies, drawing on historical data to analyze the instrumentalization of radicalism, its connection to extremism, geopolitical interference and identity politics in the context of Bosnian and Croatian wars. By analyzing these elements together, the research seeks to highlight that the wars are better understood through the synergy of two dynamics: internally, the weaponization of historical narratives, which created a receptive audience for radicalization, while externally, the decisions of foreign powers enabled this radicalization to be violently enacted. For conceptual clarity, the dissertation engages with Bötticher's (2017) work, which delineates critical theoretical distinctions between these phenomena. The geopolitical dimensions of the conflicts will be primarily analyzed through Mearsheimer' s (2014) framework of *offensive realism* – particularly his arguments about how great powers exploit instability – and Parenti's (2000) critique of imperial interventions in the Balkans. Historical context will be grounded in Ramet's (2006) structural analysis of Yugoslavia's collapse, Perica's (2002) work on sacralization of ethno-nationalist ideologies and Malcolm's (1996) deconstruction of contested historical narratives in Bosnia. Non-English archival materials and regional scholarship will supplement these sources to ensure a nuanced understanding of local political, economic and social dynamics.

My methodological process will consist of an applied investigation using a deductive method in line with the realist school of thought. Realism was chosen as the analytical framework due to its demonstrated capacity for anticipating geopolitical outcomes – a strength derived from its focus on power dynamics and state-centric rationality. In contrast, liberal approaches grounded in complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye 1977) emphasize transnational networks and economic ties as pacifying forces, yet struggle to explain cases where high interdependence coexists with strategic rivalry (e.g., U.S.-China relations) or fails to prevent conflict (e.g., Russia-EU energy ties pre-2022). While complex interdependence remains influential in explaining globalization's constraints on state behavior – particularly

among Western policymakers – its inattention to structural power asymmetries (e.g., U.S. dollar dominance) and security imperatives has drawn sustained realist critique (Mearsheimer 2014; Waltz 1979).

In this investigation, I will essentially resort to documental analysis of official records, academic literature, media content, institutional documents such as Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) reports and publications, and official documents of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The dissertation itself will be divided into six chapters, including this introduction. The second chapter will elaborate on the various terminologies that will be used for the purpose of this work. This chapter is paramount to establishing a foundation for the often politicized and ambiguous nature of radicalism and extremism. Afterwards, follows a chapter dedicated to explaining competing historical narratives of national identity, trauma, and political victimization of Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, and how mutual intelligibility proved to be insufficient in preventing emergence of different and conflicting historical narratives. The fourth chapter examines the conflicts in Bosnia and Croatia by distinguishing three dominant narratives (Bosniak, Croatian and Serbian) and operationalizing the concepts explored in the second chapter. The fifth chapter focuses on the issue of foreign interference in order to contextualize the situation in a global narrative and give further explanation to the development of the conflicts. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the main findings and indicates areas worthy of further research.

II – Operational Concepts

It is difficult to pinpoint a clear definition of what radicalism is, as the term gets thrown around often, even when it is not appropriate. For example, it is not uncommon to see *ad hominem* attacks in the political domain, of almost any state or across the borders, under the guise of radicalism. That is why so often, when talking about radicalism and its accompanying terms such as radicalization and radicals, there is a negative connotation to it, in spite of its earlier history in politics. Historically, radicalism emerged as a legitimate political tradition advocating for progressive or revolutionary change, such as the 19th-century European radical movements that pushed for democracy, secularism, and social reforms (Hobsbawm, 1962). Whereas now it is often used interchangeably with the term extremism, but also terrorism. Today, radicalism can encompass a wide array of issues and political questions, ranging from nationalism, religion, anti-capitalism to environmentalism, feminism and trans-humanism.

In contemporary times, the term *radicalism* often depends on how the legal authorities in question define it, or to be more precise, apply it (Bötticher, 2017). However, there is another important component to it and that is public discourse. Without societal approval, the implementation of such actions becomes harder if not impossible, particularly within democratic contexts. In the sphere of western liberal democracies, radicalism is increasingly tantamount to invoking the era of failed, genocidal, ethnonationalist dictatorships of the previous century in a sympathetic way (Mudde, 2019). On the other hand, there is also a growing number of people in those very same liberal democracies who consider the political actions taken by the people who are governing them as radical (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

While there have been academic studies that have touched on the issue, it remains largely a responsibility of each country to establish a way of conduct in regard to the phenomena, often in cooperation with other countries. And while academia searches for a clearer, universal definition of radicalism – such as debates over whether wartime mobilization in Yugoslavia (1991-1995) constituted 'radicalization' or a continuation of historical logics (Ramet, 2005) – so does the understanding of the matter evolve and change. This is specially true when the global geopolitical context is a major consideration. The following sections provide tentative definitions to clarify this debate.

Definitions

Radicalism, extremism and terrorism remain closely related terms as both define a struggle against the current order in power – demanding a certain degree of change in some way or shape. However, there is a substantial amount of consensus that the three differ from one another (Bötticher, 2017; Schmid, 2013). While radicalism often remains inside the democratic

debate and enjoys a certain amount of tolerance from the current order, extremism, on the other hand, almost exclusively resorts to violence in order to achieve its aims given how, unlike the radicals, extremists have proved to be extremely uncompromising – historically speaking (Bötticher, 2017).

For the purpose of this dissertation, I will use the definitions provided by Astrid Bötticher, which outlines clear definitions for both radicalism and extremism. The following are her definitions, firstly for radicalism, secondly for extremism.

> *Radicalism refers to a political doctrine embraced by socio-political movements favoring both individual and collective freedom, and emancipation from the rule of authoritarian regimes and hierarchically structured societies. In that sense radicalism, advocating sweeping political change, represents a form of hostility against the status quo and its establishment. Often, its initial milieu is found among the sons and daughters of a bourgeois elite, young people who identify with, and seek to improve, the social conditions of larger sections of the population. Historically, radical political parties were key drivers in the progress towards greater democracy in a number of states. Radicalism as an ideological mindset tends to be very critical of the existing status quo, pursuing the objective of restructuring and/or overthrowing outdated political structures. By their opponents, radicals are often portrayed as violent; but this is only partly correct, as radicalism tends to be associated historically more with a progressive reformism than with utopian extremism, whose glorification of violence it rejects. Radicalism is emancipatory and does not seek to subjugate people and enforce conformity like extremism does. Radical narratives contain utopian ideological elements, but they do not glorify a distant past. Although unwilling to compromise their ideals, radicals are open to rational arguments as to the means to achieve their goals. Unlike extremists, radicals are not necessarily extreme in their choice of means to achieve their goals. Unlike extremists who reject the extremist label, radicals also self-define themselves as radicals. (pp. 74-75)*

> *Extremism characterizes an ideological position embraced by those anti-establishment movements, which understand politics as struggle for supremacy rather than as peaceful competition between parties with different interests seeking popular support for advancing the common good. Extremism exists at the periphery of societies and seeks to conquer its center by creating fear of enemies within and outside society. They divide fellow citizens and foreigners into friends and foes, with no room for diversity of opinions and alternative lifestyles. Extremism is, due to its dogmatism, intolerant and*

> *unwilling to compromise. Extremists, viewing politics as a zero-sum game, tend – circumstances permitting – to engage in aggressive militancy, including criminal acts and mass violence in their fanatical will for gaining and holding political power. Where extremists gain state power, they tend to destroy social diversity and seek to bring about a comprehensive homogenization of society, based on an often faith-based ideology with apocalyptic traits. At the societal level, extremist movements are authoritarian, and, if in power, extremist rulers tends to become totalitarian. Extremists glorify violence as a conflict resolution mechanism and are opposed to the constitutional state, majority-based democracy, the rule of law, and human rights for all. (p. 74)*

She also asserts ten key distinctions between radicalism and extremism which enable us to better discern the difference between the two concepts. What can be summarized from these distinctions is that radicals generally embrace democratic values of compromises, human rights, diversity with an outlook into the future, the extremists prefer authoritarian values embodied in domination and supremacy by any means. However, the author does conclude with the notion that radicalism and extremism, in their struggle against the *status quo* and its establishment, can often find themselves in the same camp. Furthermore, she argues that "*the links between radicalism and terrorism are much weaker than those between extremism and terrorism*" (p. 76). However, the danger lies in the fact that even legitimate resistances against unjust, violent and corrupt regimes, that violate human rights, are disqualified as illegitimate extremism.

The United Nations (UN) also points to this danger as the potential to undermine the global prospects for prosperity and peace, through the suppression of legitimate dissent and criminalization of non-violent expression. The annual United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) Report mentions that:

> *Some domestic laws and policies address the phenomenon of 'extremism' without qualifying it as 'violent'. They define 'extremism' as 'vocal or active opposition' to the values of the respective country or society, including 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs'. Some definitions of 'extremism' refer to notions or aims which are racist, anarchist, nationalist, authoritarian or totalitarian regardless of their political, ideological, religious or philosophic character, and which are contrary, in theory or in practice, to principles of democracy or human rights, to the good functioning of the democratic institutions of the State or to other basic principles of the rule of law. Some laws and policies go further and describe extremism as encompassing non-violent conduct,*

> *including conduct deemed to insult national pride or breach national dignity, or knowingly disseminating false accusations against federal or regional officials, such as allegations that they have committed illegal or criminal acts in their official capacity. (A/HRC/33/29, para. 18).*

The report further notes:

> *[A] legal or policy framework that fails to clearly define the phenomenon it seeks to address not only risks leading to inefficient measures, but may also become harmful. Vague concepts such as 'violent extremism', 'extremism' or 'radicalization' are open to interpretation and may easily be abused. In particular, they risk encompassing manifestations or acts that are lawful under international human rights law. (A/HRC/33/29, para. 20).*

As the report points out, the label extremist is applied to both radicals and various State actors alike, which further damages and weakens the rules based international order by misusing the concept for political gain and inevitably committing transgressions against international law. Such misuse only exacerbates the issue in the context of the rules-based international order and complicates the notion of a universally accepted definition.

The international community's effort to define terrorism exemplifies the tension between the aspiration for universal legal norms and the persistence of state sovereignty and political interests. While the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (2011) asserted in its Interlocutary Decision that a customary international law defining terrorism has crystallized, this ruling was met with significant scholarly criticism, as noted by Saul (2021), who argues that the treaties cited by the Tribunal failed to establish a comprehensive, general crime of terrorism due to a lack of state consensus. This definitional void exists despite repeated United Nations attempts to provide clarity. Non-binding instruments like UN General Assembly Resolution 49/60 (1994) and the more robust UN Security Council Resolution 1566 (2004) outline core elements of terrorist acts (such as the intent to spread terror among a population or coerce a government) yet, as Ganor (2005) contends, states often reject any perceived obligation to implement a particular definition, frequently leveraging the ambiguity for political ends, such as suppressing dissent. Consequently, the global approach remains fragmented, leading to a regionalization of counter-terrorism strategies that reflect local priorities, a phenomenon consistent with Crenshaw's (2011) analysis that effective strategies must account for specific, endemic factors. This fragmentation is exacerbated within the contemporary multi-polar world order, where, as Nye (2021) might suggest, the concept of terrorism becomes another tool in the arsenal of great power competition, further complicating the achievement of a cohesive and universally applied

international definition.

Radicalization is therefore best understood not as a singular trajectory toward violence, but as a political socialization process where individuals or groups adopt ideologies fundamentally opposed to the status quo. Critically, this process can culminate in distinct endpoints, a distinction central to this dissertation. Following Bötticher (2017), the outcome can be radicalism – a reform-oriented, albeit sweeping, ideological stance that operates within the bounds of democratic debate, embraces compromise and rejects glorification of violence. Conversely, it can also lead to extremism – an ideology defined by a dualistic worldview of good and evil, intolerance and a propensity to employ violence as a legitimate political tool. The precise characterization of this process is not merely academic; it carries significant political consequences. As underscored by the UNHCHR (A/HRC/33/29), the vague and often politicized application of the "extremism" label by states to suppress non-violent dissent and legitimate radical critique risks undermining international human rights law. This misuse can itself become a driver of radicalization, potentially pushing those engaged in legitimate resistance toward the very violent extremism the state purports to combat, thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophecy and further destabilizing the rules-based international order.

While acknowledging the conceptual proximity between extremism and terrorism, this dissertation deliberately refrains from employing "terrorism" as a standalone analytical component. The inherent politicization and definitional ambiguity of the term render it problematic for a precise historical analysis of the wars in Bosnia (1992-1995) and Croatia (1991-1995). Instead, this study focuses on the documented commission of systematic war crime as established by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) – specifically those which were undertaken with the strategic intent to spread terror among a population, such as the shelling of civilian centers, the various prison camps in which tortures and starvation were common, and events commonly characterized as ethnic cleansing. Within the context of a total war, where extremist ideologies flourish, the following analysis will treat this specific tactic – the deliberate infliction of terror – not as a distinct phenomenon of "terrorism," but as a manifestation of an extremist strategy and a logical culmination of the radicalization process. The analytical focus will then be set on applying the established framework of radicalism and extremism to the dominant political and military actors in the civil wars of Bosnia (1992-1995) and Croatia (1991-1995). It is the argument of this research that the instrumentalization of competing Bosniak, Croatian and Serbian historical narratives constituted a dominant mechanism of the radicalization process and that external state actors enabled this process during the wartime years.

Summary

This chapter established the conceptual framework for the dissertation by examining the contested and politicized nature of radicalism and its related terms. It argues that these concepts are often deliberately conflated by state actors to delegitimize opponents and justify repression. To counter this ambiguity the chapter adopts Astrid Bötticher's definitions which provide the analytical clarity necessary for the historical analysis to follow. This framework crucially distinguishes between radicalism, a reform-oriented ideology that operates within democratic bounds – and extremism, an anti-pluralist ideology that employs violence.

This distinction is vital for analyzing the political and military landscape of the wars in Bosnia (1992-1995) and Croatia (1991-1995), where the line between radical and extremist was frequently blurred. The proposed framework allows this study to explore not only the adoption of extremist tactics but, more precisely, the collaboration and tactical convergence between radical and extremist factions against a common enemy, as observed by Bötticher (2017). Furthermore, the scope of this dissertation deliberately excludes 'terrorism' as a standalone analytical category for two principal reasons. First, while Bötticher's framework acknowledges the strong conceptual links between extremism and terrorism, the focus here is on the ideological and processual distinctions within radicalization that precede and enable such violence. Second, part of the empirical core of this research (the documented rulings of the ICTY) overwhelmingly deals with charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The ICTY's findings provide evidence of a strategic intent to spread terror among civilian populations, which this study treats not as a distinct phenomenon of terrorism, but as a tactical manifestation of extremist ideology within the communication and military landscape of the conflict.

III - The Different Historical Narratives

Radicalism in the Western Balkans has a complex history influenced by ethnic tensions, political instability and socio-economic challenges. In the 20th century, the region experienced significant upheaval, particularly during the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990's, which led to violent conflict and the rise of nationalist movements. Radical ideologies often emerged in response to perceived injustices, economic hardship and the desire for greater autonomy or independence among various ethnic groups (Hadžić, 2021). The rise of extremist groups and political parties has been a concern, especially in the context of the post-war reconstruction and the integration of the region into European structures. In recent years, issues such as unemployment, corruption and the influence of foreign powers have continued to fuel radical sentiments (Bieber, 2006). Efforts to promote stability and reconciliation have been ongoing, but challenges remain in addressing the root causes of radicalism in the region.

When a nation possesses a dominant historical narrative that offers a widely accepted interpretation of the past, this collective self-understanding can significantly influence political behavior. The nature of nationalism tied to such narratives – whether heroic, traumatic, messianic, or otherwise – shapes how the past is mobilized in the present (Smith, 1991). Among the most effective instruments for transmitting these narratives are school textbooks, which serve as key tools through which the state can construct and perpetuate a preferred historical consciousness (Apple, 2000). State oversight of educational materials thus becomes a direct means of reinforcing national identity and ideological cohesion.

However, historical narratives are not solely propagated through formal education. The media and cultural artifacts also play a critical role. In multiethnic societies, different national groups often consume distinct media and literature, reinforcing divergent interpretations of history and identity. This can fragment public discourse and complicate democratic consolidation (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983). In the case of socialist Yugoslavia, the educational system was federalized, allowing each republic to design its own curriculum. Over time, this led to the creation of increasingly divergent history textbooks. Furthermore, ethnic groups such as the Slovenes, Croats and Serbs tended to consume localized media – television, newspapers and literature – further entrenching regional and ethnic perspectives. Language differences among Slovenes, Macedonians and Albanians reinforced these divisions in cultural and informational consumption (Ramet, 2006).

Importantly, a nation's historical narrative is dynamic, evolving gradually in response to significant events, educational reforms and shifts in editorial or political priorities. While these changes are typically incremental, moments of crisis or transformation may prompt abrupt revisions. In such instances, new national myths may be created to supplement or even

supplant older ones, thereby reshaping the collective memory and dominant narrative (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Zerubavel, 1995). Considering the different educational means by which narratives are constructed and instrumentalized, the following sections explore the three dominant historical narratives in Bosnia and Croatia: Serbian, Croatian and Bosniak. By distinguishing and comparing such narratives, the research points to certain events that have conflicting interpretations but also components that are unique to each respective narratives. Furthermore, it can be discerned that all three dominant narratives were often that of victimhood, with the Serbian one being embellished with specific messianic elements.

The Serbian Narrative

During the 1980's, many Serbs viewed themselves as the selfless architects of Yugoslav unity – an image reinforced by opinion polls of the time – which they believed was not appreciated, and even maligned, by other Yugoslav nations (Ramet, 2006). Over time, this perception deepened into conviction that Serbs were being unjustly vilified, both in Western media and within Yugoslavia itself (Cigar, 1995). A recurring theme in Serbian historiography is the portrayal of the Serbian nation as one marked by suffering. Analogies comparing Serbs to Jews or even Christ are not uncommon. Vuk Drašković, a Serbian novelist who founded a Serbian nationalist party, notably articulated the sentiment, asserting that "We Serbs are a lost unhappy tribe of Israel (p. 306)" proposing a "blood brotherhood" between Serbs and Jews (Drašković, as cited in Ramet, 2006). This notion is further corroborated by Dobrica Ćosić[3] who stated that the Serb is "the new Jew at the end of the twentieth century (p. 124)" (Ćosić, as cited in Perica, 2002).

The Battle of Kosovo in 1389[4], particularly the death of Tsar Lazar, occupies a central place in Serbian national mythology. This event became a potent symbol of Serbia's subjugation to the Ottoman Empire and therefore it is often used as a rallying cry against a perceived conqueror (Ramet, 2006). Serbian textbooks in the late 20th century recount not only this event but also episodes such as the migration of Serbs under Patriarch Arsenije III

[3] Dobrica Ćosić (1921-2014) was a Yugoslav partisan, a prominent Serbian dissident and a novelist whose works laid the ideological groundwork for the Serbian national revival. He was a co-author of the influential 1986 SANU Memorandum and is widely considered the most important intellectual figure behind the rise of Serbian nationalism in 1980s.

[4] The Battle of Kosovo took place on 15 June 1389, between an army led by the Serbian Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović and an invading army of the Ottoman Empire under the command of Sultan Murad I. It was one of the largest battles of the Late Middle Ages.

Čarnojević in 1690[5] and the expulsion of Serbs during 1877-1912[6], highlighting a perceived historical pattern of Albanian encroachment and violence (Pavlowitch, 2002).

Furthermore, narratives of Serbian sacrifice during World War I are often emphasized. As Singleton (1985) notes, a statement by King Peter to a reporter from The Observer refers: "My people numbered well over four million when the war began, and now barely two and a half million are living (p. 125)" – pointing to losses of more than a quarter of the Serbian population (Singleton, 1985). These losses are interpreted as the price paid for the right to lead the formation of Yugoslavia.

Textbooks used in Serbian schools in the late 1990s, including in Republika Srpska, presented the interwar Vidovdan Constitution of 1921[7] as a democratic initiative, omitting Croatian opposition and highlighting Serbia's foundational role in the Yugoslav state. Croatian politicians like Stjepan Radić[8] and Vladko Maček[9] were depicted negatively, reinforcing a nationalist narrative that cast non-Serbs as obstacles to unity and progress. Likewise, Gavrilo Princip was described as a "hero and a poet (p. 482)" rather than a terrorist, and the interwar state was depicted as "an open, tolerant democracy (p. 482)" (Ramet, 2006).

The Cvetković-Maček Agreement of 1939, which created the Banovina of Croatia[10], was viewed within Serbian narrative as a betrayal. Serbian political leaders generally denounced it, whereas even the ones who welcomed it argued that it exposed the unresolved "Serbian national question" that needs to be addressed (Ramet, 2006). This perception fed into long-standing anxieties about Serbian marginalization within the Yugoslav framework.

Serbian narratives also celebrate the 1941 coup that overthrew Prince Paul following

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5 Known as the Great Migration of the Serbs, this was a mass relocation of Serbs from Ottoman-controlled territories into the Habsburg Empire following a failed uprising. It is a pivotal event in Serbian national memory, symbolizing a retreat from Ottoman persecution.

6 This refers to the period following Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878) and the subsequent Balkan Wars (1912-1913), when retreat of Ottoman authority from the Balkans was accompanied by violence and demographic shifts. Serbian narratives highlight the flight and expulsion of Serbs from regions incorporated into newly established state of Albania, framing it as a continuous process of displacement.

7 The Vidovdan Constitution was the first constitution of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. It was approved by the Constitutional Assembly on 28 June 1921 despite the opposition boycotting the vote. The Constitution is named after the feast of St. Vitus (*Vidovdan*), a Serbian Orthodox holiday. The Constitution required a simple majority to pass. Out of 419 representatives, 223 voted for, 35 voted against and 161 abstained.

8 Stjepan Radić (1871-1928) was the founder and leader of the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS). He was the foremost political advocate for Croatian autonomy and federalism within the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia).

9 Vladko Maček (1879-1964) succeeded Stjepan Radić as the leader of the Croatian Peasant Party. He led the Croatian opposition throughout the 1930s, becoming the most prominent Croatian political figure.

10 The Banovina of Croatia was an autonomous territorial unit established within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The agreement granted Croatia significant self-governing authority and its borders incorporated large parts of Bosnia & Herzegovina.

his signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact. The event, marked by the slogan "Better the grave than a slave," is commemorated as a moment of Serbian heroism and defiance against fascism (Pavlowitch, 2002).

World War II is represented in Serbian historiography as a triple conflict involving Croatian Ustaša fascists, communist Partisans and royalist Četniks. While atrocities against Serbs, particularly at Jasenovac, are emphasized – often citing inflated figures such as 500,000 or more deaths, despite scholarly estimates being closer to 100,000 total Serbian deaths – Četnik collaboration with Axis powers is often omitted in school materials (Hoare, 2006; Ramet 2006). In contrast, Draža Mihailović is presented as a resistance hero, and the quisling Milan Nedić's regime is often overlooked or even defended (Djokić, 2012).

In textbooks used in Republika Srpska during the late 1990s and early 2000s, crimes committed by Croatian and Muslim forces are emphasized, while Četnik crimes and collaboration are downplayed or omitted altogether (Ramet, 2006). The trial of Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac, seen in Serb narratives as justified, reinforced anti-Catholic and anti-Croat sentiment. Despite scholarly consensus that the charges against Stepinac were politically motivated and poorly substantiated, many Serbs remained convinced of his guilt well into the 1990s (Perica, 2002).

In the postwar communist period, Serbs were frustrated that settlers expelled from Kosovo during World War II were not allowed to return. These frustrations were crystallized in the 1986 Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU), which accused the federal system of undermining Serbia's sovereignty and claimed that Albanians were committing genocide in Kosovo (Dragović-Soso, 2002).

The "Croatian Spring" (1967-71) was interpreted by Serb nationalists as a revival of Ustaša ideology, and the 1974 Constitution's granting of near-republic status to Kosovo and Vojvodina was seen as a deep betrayal (Pavlowitch, 2002). Tensions in Kosovo escalated in 1980s, with media reporting attacks on Serbs, desecration of churches and the so-called "Martinović affair"[11] in 1985, which became emblematic of Serbian victimization. The Serbian press, particularly the magazines Duga and Intervju, played a central role in fueling public hysteria about Albanian nationalism and demographic growth (Ramet, 2006).

Following Slobodan Milošević's rise to power, the regime repudiated Tito and the ideal of "brotherhood and unity," laying the ideological groundwork for revoking the autonomy of Kosovo and Vojvodina in contradiction to the 1974 Constitution (Cohen, 1995). The Serbian

[11] The "Martinović affair" (1985) refers to the case of Đorđe Martinović, a Serbian farmer in Kosovo who was hospitalized with a bottle inserted into his rectum. This incident was presented in the Serbian press as a deliberate, politically motivated act of torture by Albanians. It became a potent rallying cry for the Serbian nationalist movement led by Slobodan Milošević.

narrative about the dissolution of Yugoslavia blamed Croatian President Franjo Tuđman for allegedly rehabilitating the NDH, purging Serbs from public employment and reintroducing Ustaša symbols, such as the checkerboard shield with the first field being white (Glenny, 2012).

Ironically, despite nationalist portrayals of Tito as an anti-Serb Croat, a 2004 opinion poll found that Tito was still regarded by 18.1% of Serbian respondents as the person who had most contributed to Serbia's prestige over the past 200 years – more than any other figure, including Nikola Tesla and Slobodan Milošević (Ramet, 2006).

The Croatian Narrative

Croats embrace and continue to uphold the Croatian nationalist historical narrative, which contains elements that resonate with all or most Croats, while other aspects may appeal primarily to those with a strong nationalist orientation. Variations exist within the Croatian narrative, similar to those found in other national narratives, encompassing both more nationalist and moderate viewpoints. Nevertheless, it is essential to delineate the dominant Croatian narrative during the early years of the Tuđman era.

Croats often perceive themselves as Central European rather than Balkan, a self-image influenced by their historical association with the Habsburg Empire. They believe they have been unjustly subordinated, first to the Hungarians and later to the Serbs. Vjekoslav Perica (2002) highlights a significant divergence between Serb and Croat historical recollections; for instance, the great migration of Serbs in 1690 is seen by Serbs as a national tragedy and a form of retreat, while Croats interpret it as an invasion of Croatian territory, emphasizing the subsequent attempts by Serbian Orthodox clergy to convert local Uniate communities.

Educational materials reflect these differing narratives. For example, a textbook used among Bosnian Croats in the late 1990s characterized Gavrilo Princip as an “assassin trained and instructed by the Serbs to commit this act of terrorism (p. 482),” portraying the interwar kingdom as a “dictatorship (p. 482)” bravely opposed by the Croats. In contrast, a Croatian textbook from the same period adopted a more neutral stance, merely noting that the assassination was executed by members of the secret organization “Young Bosnia” (Ramet, 2006).

Croats also recall their incorporation into the interwar kingdom as abrupt and unconsented, reflecting on the events of December 1, 1918, in Zagreb. They learn that the Versailles peace conference resulted in parts of Croatia being assigned to Italian control and that the Croatian Republican Peasant Party opposed the centralist Vidovdan constitution by boycotting parliamentary sessions. While Serbian textbooks depict the interwar kingdom as a constitutional monarchy without reference to state-sponsored terrorism, Croatian educational

materials highlight the lawlessness of the interwar system, exemplified by the activities of the ORJUNA – a militant, pro-Yugoslav organization known for using violence and intimidation against perceived enemies of the state, particularly Croatian nationalists (Perica, 2002).

Figures such as Stjepan Radić and Vladko Maček are revered in Croatian memory, with some polls indicating Radić's high respect among Croats (Perica, 2002). Ivo Banac (1992) notes that Croats attribute the problems of interwar Yugoslavia primarily to the issue of the centralist Vidovdan Constitution, which was widely seen as step into a "Greater Serbia". The assassination of Radić in 1928 is recalled as a significant event that eventually lead to King Aleksandar annulling the constitution, dissolving the Assembly, banning all political parties, naming a new government and changing the name into Kingdom of Yugoslavia from the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. (Ramet, 2006).

In educational narratives, where Serbian children learn about the Cvetković-Maček agreement as an anti-Serb act, Croatian students are taught that the formation of the Banovina of Croatia ended Serbian hegemony in the state, with Maček's prestige growing among Croats as a champion of their national interests. However, the subsequent 27 March 1941 coup, executed by Serbian officers without consultation with Croats, is viewed by the latter as reckless, given the international context (Djokić, 2003).

The Croatian historical narrative maintains that opposition to the Ustaša regime should not be overlooked, while also addressing the collaboration of Serbs with the regime. The emergence of the Ustaše is often interpreted as a reaction to Serbian oppression over the previous two decades, reflecting the dual perspectives within Croatian accounts of World War II (Perica, 2002).

Franjo Tuđman and the HDZ's efforts to reintegrate the NDH into Croatian history, including the portrayal of the Ustaše as pivotal figures in the Croatian national narrative, have sparked debates over the representation of this period, with some viewing it as flawed and other as a form of rehabilitation. This discrepancy became evident in the educational material that portrayed the NDH favorably while neglecting the term "genocide" in their discussions (Perica, 2002).

Croatian narratives emphasize the atrocities committed against Croats by Partisan forces, particularly during events at Bleiburg[12] and Kočevje[13]. Ramet (2006) provides a detailed

[12] The term "Bleiburg" refers to a series of events in May 1945 involving the surrender, mass executions and forced death marches of tens of thousands of Croatian (and other Axis) soldiers and civilians who were attempting to surrender to British forces in Austria. The Partisans, considering them collaborators, systematically killed a significant number. In-post communist Croatia, Bleiburg has become a central memory and a national symbol of communist persecution and martyrdom.

[13] The "Kočevje" massacres refer to the systematic execution of several thousand members of the Slovene Home Guard (Slovensko domobranstvo) and their suspected collaborators by Partisan forces in the Kočevje forest

analysis of the persecution of Croats across various periods, highlighting a focus on their past hardships within national memory. In considering the role of Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac, many Croats seek to downplay any association with the Ustaša regime, emphasizing his efforts to protest against atrocities committed during that time (Perica, 2002).

Ivo Goldstein (2001) critiques Stepinac's focus on secondary aspects of the Croatian Holocaust, arguing that the Catholic Church has sought to present him as a heroic figure. The trial of Stepinac is interpreted in various ways within Croatian memory, seen as a balance to the trial of Mihailović or as a reprisal against his loyalty to Rome (Perica, 2002).

The period from 1945 to 1966 is characterized in Croatian memory by persecution and cultural aggression against Croatia, with the removal of Ranković[14] in 1966 marking a turning point. The aftermath of the Croatian Spring further solidified feelings of alienation among Croats, despite a significant portion still viewing Tito favorably in subsequent polls (Ramet, 2006).

Croats contend that the 1974 constitution was perceived as anti-Serb, while they believe that Serbian opposition stemmed from a desire for dominance (Perica, 2002). Throughout the communist era, Croats felt discriminated against, perceiving an overrepresentation of Serbs in positions of power and military leadership (Perica, 2002). The initiative for confederalization in 1990 is seen as an earnest attempt to preserve Yugoslavia, while the public statements of Dobrica Ćosić[15] ignited tensions regarding territorial claims (Perica, 2002).

The Bosniak Narrative

The term "Bosniak," which has historical roots spanning centuries, was officially adopted in 1993 to replace the term "Muslim," which had been recognized as a national designation by the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) in 1968 (Malcolm, 1996). While "Bosnian" refers to all citizens of Bosnia, "Bosniak" is generally understood as an ethnic identifier. Although the majority of Bosniaks are Muslim, there have been instances of Catholics in the region identifying themselves as Bosniaks (Donia & Fine, 1994).

Ethnic identifiers like "Bosnian Serb" or "Bosnian Croat" do not present a contradiction; however, the term "Bosniak" – even when applied to populations outside Bosnia,

region in late May and early June 1945. While a Slovene event, it is integrated into a broader Croatian narrative as a parallel tragedy, representing the brutal post-war consolidation of communist power through the elimination of anti-communist and nationalist forces across Yugoslavia.

[14] Aleksandar Ranković (1909-1983), a senior Yugoslav communist official of Serbian descent, was a powerful head of the state security service (UDBA) until his removal in 1966, which halted systematic spying on domestic clergy.

[15] Most notably through his novel "The Believer", Ćosić explicitly framed Serbs as a people betrayed by communism and threatened by other ethnic groups.

such as in Serbia's Sandžak region – is seldom prefixed with "Bosnian" (Ramet 2006; Malcolm 1996). The concept of distinct Bosniak or Bosnian Muslim identity can be traced back to at least the 17th century, with figures like Muhamed Hevaji Uskufi[16] and journalist Mehmed Šaćir Kurtćehajić identifying as Slavs. By the 19th century, the Franciscans of Bosnia were also referring to the local language as "Bosnian" (Malcolm, 1996).

During Tito's era and earlier, the origins of Bosnian Muslims were hotly contested. Serb nationalists asserted that they were Islamized Serbs, while Croatian nationalists claimed they were Islamized Croats. Muslims themselves pointed to their ancestry from adherents of the medieval Bosnian Church who converted after the Ottoman conquest. Some even argued that they descended from Turkish-speaking settlers who adopted the local language (Donia & Fine, 1994). The LCY promoted a synthetic narrative that acknowledged all these perspectives, framing Bosnian Muslims as a distinct ethnic group formed through historical evolution.

These conflicting origin myths, notably promoted by figures such as Ante Starčević in the 19th century, resurfaced vigorously during the 1980s and 1990s. Serb nationalists paradoxically claimed that Bosniaks were both "real" Serbs and traitors for abandoning Orthodox Christianity. The education system in Bosnia prior to the war played a significant role in perpetuating these divisive narratives through stereotyped and partisan interpretations of history (Ramet, 2006).

The war further exacerbated these divisions. In post-war Bosniak textbooks, for instance, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand is portrayed as the act of an extremist rather a patriotic deed, and the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia is primarily depicted through the lens of its oppression of Muslim (Torsti, 2007). Bosniak students were taught that Gavrilo Princip was an "nationalist whose assassination [of Franz Ferdinand] sparked anti-Serbian rioting that was only stopped by the police from all three ethnic groups (p. 482)" Specific chapters in textbooks are dedicated to events like abolition of Islamic religious autonomy and violence in the Sandžak region, reflecting a broader tendency to minimize Bosniak identity during the interwar period. This is illustrated by the 1939 Cvetković-Maček Agreement, which partitioned parts of Bosnia into the Croatian Banovina, inciting outrage and protest from Bosniak political, cultural and religious groups (Ramet, 2006).

Despite decentralization in the post-war Bosnia, educational segregation persists. Each canton independently designs its curriculum, leading to Croat and Serb schools frequently utilizing textbooks from Croatia and Serbia, respectively. As Torsti (2007) notes, this has resulted in ideologically charged narratives in history, literature and geography, further

[16] Muhamed Hevaji Uskufi was born 1601 in Dobrnja near Tuzla and died 1651, he was a Bosnian poet and lexicographer. In 1631 he wrote the Bosnian - Turkish dictionary, which is considered the first Bosnian dictionary.

entrenching ethnonational divisions. Since 2003, reintegration laws have failed to prevent segregated school system from deepening divisions and consolidating ethnically pure territories (Torsti, 2007).

Bosniak textbooks often employ the term "genocide," particularly when discussing attempts by the NDH (Independent State of Croatia) to forcibly assimilate Bosniaks. Bojić (2002) even characterizes the interwar period (1921-1929) as a "political genocide" against Muslims. While his work acknowledges positive figures such as Croatian leader Stjepan Radić, it is highly critical of the 1939 Cvetković-Maček Agreement, arguing it undermined Bosnia's historic territorial integrity. This interpretation feeds into long-standing grievances, especially when contrasted with the brutalities faced by Bosniaks during WWII at the hands of Četnik forces, who collaborated with both German and Italian occupiers while also targeting Muslim and Croat civilians (Bojić, 2002; Ramet, 2006).

These wartime atrocities have contributed to a Bosniak victim narrative, often overlooking the complicity of some Bosniaks and Croats who joined Axis-aligned forces like the SS Handžar Division. In the post-war context, Bosniaks continued to be marginalized in various state structures. For instance, in 1965, Serbs held 54.4% of seats in the Bosnian Republic Assembly – an overrepresentation relative to their population size (Malcolm, 1996). Despite eventual reforms in the 1970s, disparities in the distribution of public and institutional power persisted.

The recognition of Bosniak identity was achieved only incrementally. In 1961, they were permitted to register as Muslims in an ethnic sense, but nationalist narratives continued. As Malcolm (1996) observes, some public figures maintained that the entire Bosnian population, including those from Dalmatia, were ethnically Serb. Tito himself claimed late in life that the national question had been resolved in principle, though growing tensions by the late 1980s suggested otherwise.

By the early 1990s, tensions escalated sharply. Bosniak intellectuals like Mahmutćehajić (2000) wrote about a long-standing Serb tradition of massacring Muslims, asserting that these acts were often not wartime incidents but deliberate campaigns of ethnic violence. While such views reflect genuine and historical memory, they also contribute to an entrenched ethnonational discourse that continues to hinder reconciliation efforts in post-war Bosnia.

Summary

This section established that the process of radicalization in Bosnia and Croatia is fundamentally driven by the mobilization of distinct and conflicting historical narratives. It

demonstrated that the high degree of mutual inteligibility between the Bosnian. Croatian and Serbian languages proved insufficient to foster a cohesive national identity, instead providing a common medium through which profoundly divergent historical truths could be articulated and contested. Formal education and ethnically segregated media became the primary vehicles for transmitting these narratives, creating parallel "imagined communities" within the same linguistic space. The analysis delineated three dominant historical narratives – Serbian, Croatian and Bosniak – demonstrating how each constructs a unique framework of victimhood.

The injustices – both real and perceived – that occurred between 1918 and 1991 did not directly cause the collapse of Yugoslavia, but they did create a fertile ground for the reinforcement of intergroup boundaries, distrust and resentment. This environment allowed political leaders to effectively mobilize their constituencies by activating deeply held grievances. A critical distinction emerges in the nature of this victimhood: while all Yugoslav peoples viewed themselves as victims (haunted by memories of Germanization, Italianization, or Yugoslavization), only the Serbs developed a uniquely rooted sense of national entitlement, embodied in the concept of "Heavenly Serbia." These diverging interpretations of both distant and recent history explain why different segments of the population were susceptible to varying forms of propaganda and extremist recruitment. Ultimately, these narratives are shown not as passive recollections but as active, state-sponsored tools.

This dynamic created the conditions for what Bötticher identifies as the dangerous convergence where radicals and extremists can find themselves in the same camp. In the Yugoslav context, the initial, radical desire for democratic reform and national emancipation among various groups was systematically co-opted and redirected by extremist leaders who weaponized historical grievances. The potent narratives of victimhood and historical aggression did not merely facilitate an alliance; they provided a moral and ideological bridge that justified the transition from a radical critique of the status quo to the adoption of extremist methods. This blurring of line was pivotal: it was within this corrupted ideological space that the systematic commission of war crime became normalized. The framing of other ethnic groups as perpetual historical aggressors provided the necessary rationale for these acts, which were intended to spread terror and achieve the homogenizing goals of an extremist ideology, thereby betraying the emancipatory principles of the original radical impulse.

The prior analysis addressed the dissertation's first secondary research question: "*How did competing historical narratives of national identity, trauma, and political victimization, lay the groundwork for radicalization in Bosnia & Herzegovina (1992-1995) and Croatia (1991-1995)?"* By delineating the Serbian, Croatian and Bosniak narratives, this chapter provided substantial evidence to support the corresponding hypothesis that these competing narratives

of victimhood and entitlement were not merely historiographical disputes but were strategically activated by political elites. These narratives served as the catalyst, manufacturing the perceived existential threats and moral justifications necessary to mobilize populations and create the fertile ideological ground from which both radical and extremist movements could emerge and flourish in the lead-up to the wars.

IV – Perspectives of Politics and War (1991-1995)

This chapter argues that the Bosnian and Croatian wars were not isolated events but phases of a broader, interconnected process of state collapse fueled by radicalization and ethnonationalist extremism. Both conflicts involved the same three primary ethnonational groups Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs – mobilized under mutually exclusive nationalist visions of statehood. Crucially, the wars shared not only actors and ideologies but also transnational military and political structures. In Bosnia, the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) operated with substantial logistical, strategic and personnel support from Belgrade, maintaining close ties to the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA). The same can be said for the Serbian Army of Krajina (SVK) in Croatia (Burg & Shoup, 1999; CIA 2002). Simultaneously, the Croatian Defence Council (HVO), representing Bosnian Croats, functioned as an extension of the Croatian Army, receiving direct assistance and coordination from the Tuđman government in Zagreb (CIA 2003; ICTY, Prosecutor v. Prlić et al., 2017). These cross-border connections facilitated the movement of troops, weapons and resources, blurring the line between internal civil conflict and interstate war. Moreover, the recurrence of Croatian and Serbian political leadership, military units and nationalist media rhetoric across both theaters underscored the integrated nature of these wars (Gagnon, 2004; Gibbs, 2009).

Political elites – Milošević and Karadžić, but also Tuđman and Izetbegović – deliberately mobilized exclusionary ideologies, transitioning from radical critiques of the Yugoslav state to the implementation of extremist tactics that recast national identities as incompatible and irreconcilable for political ends. These leaders used tactics such as sieges, forced displacement and ideological indoctrination to dismantle the multiethnic fabric of Yugoslavia and replace it with ethnically homogeneous polities (Ramet, 2006). While Alija Izetbegović, president of the internationally recognized Bosnian government, officially promoted a multiethnic vision, his wartime leadership was not free from controversy. The presence of foreign mujahideen fighters, who arrived to support the Bosniak cause and were integrated into the ARBiH's 3rd Corps as the El-Mudžahid Detachment, led to several war crimes against Croat prisoner and civilians. The ICTY found that Bosnian army commanders failed to exercise effective control over these units, and that crime (including murder and inhumane treatment) were committed in villages such as Grabovica and Zavidovići (ICTY, Prosecutor v. Hadžihasanović and Kubura, 2006). Although Izetbegović was not indicted or directly implicated, his administration's tolerance of these fighters and inability to prevent their abuses points to a broader pattern in which political leaders across all factions facilitated or failed to restrain radicalized violence for strategic purposes. Furthermore, during the war, a bitter internal conflict emerged between Izetbegović and Fikret Abdić, a powerful Bosniak

businessman and politician who broke with the Sarajevo government and established the self-declared Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia (APZB) in 1993. He was politically backed by the Serbs and the Croats through the establishment of non-aggression pacts, however, his paramilitary formation frequently cooperated with the Serb forces in Bosnia fighting Bosniaks. Abdić's militia clashed with loyalist Army of the Republic of Bosnia & Herzegovina (ARBiH) units in northwestern Bosnia in an intense intra-Muslim conflict that led to widespread civilian displacement and political fragmentation (Burg & Shoup, 1999). Notably, Abdić's followers identified as "Muslims" rather than "Bosniaks," maintaining relative peace with external ethnic groups while targeting, and getting targeted by, those aligned with Izetbegović's multiethnic vision.

This case illustrates how intra-ethnic divisions, reinforced by elite-driven identity politics, sometimes produced violence within the same broad ethnic community. The assassination of Josip Reihl-Kir, the police chief of Osijek and a prominent advocate of peaceful coexistence, exemplifies this dynamic. Reihl-Kir was known for promoting dialogue with local Serb leaders during the early stages of Yugoslavia's disintegration and publicly declared: "Dok sam ja načelnik policije, neće biti rata između Srba i Hrvata na ovom području" ["As long as I am police chief, there will be no war between Serbs and Croats in this region"] (Nacional/S.B., 2021). His refusal to adopt the dominant nationalist agenda made him a target. On July 1, 1991, while en route to a meeting with Serb representatives, he was ambushed and killed by Antun Gudelj, a Croatian reservist. The murder, carried out by a fellow Croat rather than a perceived ethnic adversary, underscores how ideological divisions within ethnic groups could escalate into lethal violence. Like the intra-Muslim conflict between Izetbegović and Abdić, this episode reveals how competing visions of legitimacy – particularly those that challenged nationalist orthodoxy – were often resolved not through debate, but through coercion and assassination.

Violence in the Yugoslav wars emerged through processes consistent with radicalization and moral disengagement: the systematic use of dehumanizing rhetoric, historical revisionism and the portrayal of coexistence as betrayal. For example, Serbian media referred to Bosniaks as "Turks" or "Islamic fundamentalists" to evoke historical enmity (Gagnon, 2004), while Croatian propaganda invoked the specter of "Četnik barbarism" (Jović, 2009). This psychological conditioning created a discursive environment in which targeting civilians was not only justified but portrayed as necessary for national survival (Burg & Shoup, 1999). The wars also demonstrated features commonly associated with terrorism: the use of violence against civilians to instill fear, the symbolic targeting of urban centers and the manipulation of public perception to delegitimize coexistence. The ICTY found that political and military

leaders in Bosnia and Croatia oversaw campaigns of ethnic cleansing which involved widespread terror against civilians, including forced displacement, destruction of religious sites and systemic violence (ICTY, Prosecutor v. Karadžić, 2016; Prosecutor v. Blaškić, 2004). Furthermore, in the aftermath of these campaigns, all three primary ethnic groups – Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs – constructed narratives of victimhood, often emphasizing their own suffering while minimizing or rationalizing their group's role in the violence. This competitive victimhood has complicated post-war reconciliation and reinforced ethnic boundaries in the region (Subotić, 2013).

Prewar Yugoslav society complicates the notion that ethnic violence was the inevitable outcome of deep-rooted divisions. Although ethnically homogeneous marriages remained dominant – with 88.5% of all marriages in the early 1960s being within-group unions – interethnic marriage was nonetheless encouraged under socialist policies and represented a meaningful form of social integration. By 1968, one in nine marriages in Yugoslavia was mixed, with such unions significantly more common in urban settings, where they reached over 28%, while in rural areas the rate was just under 5% (Lendák-Kabók & Örkény, 2025). Furthermore, the educational system and mass media reinforced a supranational Yugoslav identity through a standardized curriculum, including instruction in a shared language (Serbo-Croatian) that was mutually intelligible across ethnic lines. Bilingualism was not a minority skill but a normative reality: individuals regularly consumed media, literature and official communications in both Latin and Cyrillic scripts, and regional dialects rarely aligned cleanly with political and religious boundaries (Greenberg 2004; Bugarski, 2012). The use of both "Ekavian" and "Ijekavian"[17] variants in public discourse, as well as the absence of strong dialect boundaries in everyday life, reflects the permeability of linguistic and ethnic identity in Yugoslav society. These indicators of integration – social, linguistic, institutional – complicate nationalist narratives that retrospectively cast the constituent nations of Yugoslavia as inherently incompatible. Rather, they reveal how differences were constructed and instrumentalized by political actors seeking to fracture a pluralistic society. The relative fluidity of identity prior to the wars stands in sharp contrast to the hardened, mutually exclusive categories imposed during the conflict. The success of radicalization, then, lay not in the expression of long-standing hatreds, but in the manufacture of perceived distance between groups that had previously coexisted in overlapping cultural, familial and linguistic spheres.

This perceived distance became further entrenched during the wartime as violence began to unfold, evolving into three very distinct perspectives on the reasons behind the

[17] Serbo-Croatian dialects are divided along Ekavian, and Ijekavian isoglosses (linguistic boundaries), with the reflects of the vowel "jat" being /i/, /e/, and /ije/ or /je/ respectively.

violence and justifications for the development and the outcome of the wars. These perspectives can also be understood as a continuation of different historical narratives, as it is possible to account for three different interpretations of the same historical events, and also each perspective contains elements unique to it. The following sub-sections therefore delineate three different perspectives: Bosniak, Croatian and Serbian, in order to explain the intricacies behind them. Lastly, the chapter provides a realist interpretation of the events to provide further explanations to the underlying mechanisms of the development of the conflict.

The Bosniak Perspective

The Party of Democratic Action (Stranka demokratske akcije, SDA), led by Alija Izetbegović, emerged as the principal representative of Bosniak political interests during the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Founded in 1990, the SDA articulated a platform that combined civic nationalism with a strong emphasis on Islamic cultural identity, presenting itself as the protector of Bosnia's sovereignty and multiethnic composition (Donia, 2006). Bosniaks generally reject the Serb nationalist portrayal of Alija Izetbegović as an Islamic fundamentalist. They contend that Izetbegović, author of the "Islamic Declaration," was dedicated to a democratic, secular state. In interviews, including one with Dani in 1994, he acknowledged ideological diversity within the SDA while reiterating his commitment to liberal governance (Izetbegović, 2001).

From a Bosniak perspective, the 1992 independence referendum was a legitimate democratic act, conducted under the guidance of the European Union (EU) and aimed at establishing a state that guaranteed equality for all citizens – not a precursor to Islamic rule, as some Serb narratives suggest (Bieber, 2006). Bosniaks tend to attribute the instigation of the war to external nationalist leaders – including Milošević, Karadžić and Ražnatović on the Serbian side, and Tuđman and Boban on the Croatian side. Izetbegović notably sought to maintain Bosnia's neutrality during the war in Croatia, even permitting JNA troop movements through Bosnia in recognition of the SFRY's formal existence – a move some Croats perceived as collaboration.

While officially advocating for a unified and pluralist state, critics have argued that the SDA's political strategy increasingly aligned with Bosniak ethnic interests as the war intensified (Burg & Shoup, 1999). The SDA's central political objective during the war was the preservation of Bosnia's territorial integrity against secessionist efforts by Serb and Croat entities. To this end, the party initially accepted the 1992 Lisbon Agreement (also known as the Carrington - Cutileiro Plan), which proposed organizing Bosnia into ethnically based cantons with a decentralized power-sharing structure. However, President Izetbegović withdrew his endorsement shortly after meeting with U.S. Ambassador Warren Zimmermann, reportedly

following encouragement to oppose the plan in favor of maintaining a unified Bosnian state (Holbrooke, 1998). Ironically, the Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995 ultimately implemented a similar territorial and ethnic division, confirming the persistence of ethnic federalization (Burg & Shoup, 1999). In pursuit of its goal to preserve Bosnia's sovereignty and multiethnic composition, the SDA organized the, largely Islamic, Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ARBiH), which served as the main military force resisting both Republika Srpska and the, briefly existent, Croat-led Herceg Bosnia. The party's strategy relied not only on diplomatic engagement and humanitarian appeals but also on support from Muslim-majority countries, which included the arrival of foreign mujahideen fighters and armament.

The SDA's perception of the other two major ethnic groups evolved with the war. Serb forces, aligned with the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) and supported by the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), were largely portrayed as aggressors committing genocide against Bosniaks, particularly following events such as the siege of Sarajevo and the Srebrenica massacre. Croatian forces were initially allies but increasingly framed as betrayers during the Croat-Bosniak war phase (1993-1994), particularly as the conflict over Herzegovina escalated (Burg & Shoup, 1999; CIA, 2002). The SDA simultaneously framed itself as a defender of coexistence and a victim of externally imposed aggression, contributing to the narrative of exclusive victimhood commonly adopted by all three national groups (Subotić, 2013).

The internal conflict between the SDA-led government and Fikret Abdić's secessionist Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia (APZB) further complicated the Bosniak wartime narrative. Although limited in territorial scope and military capacity, Abdić's breakaway enclave diverted crucial manpower and resources from the ARBiH, ultimately providing a strategic advantage to Serb, and at times Croat, forces (CIA, 2002). This intra-Muslim confrontation, marked by Abdić's alignment with opposing sides, reveals how elite political rivalries could override broader ethnic or religious solidarities. Rather than confirming a view of the conflict as driven solely by ethnicity, ancient hatreds or religious divisions, the episode illustrates the instrumental role of political ambition and opportunism in shaping dynamics of violence (Burg & Shoup, 1999).

The Croatian Perspective

The Croatian perspective on the Yugoslav wars was shaped by a dual imperative: defending national sovereignty in Croatia and securing territorial and political influence in Bosnia. The Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), under the leadership of Franjo Tuđman, envisioned the creation of a sovereign Croatian state following the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Initially engaged in direct conflict with the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Serb paramilitary forces

in Croatia, the HDZ simultaneously pursued irredentist ambitions in Bosnia, particularly in areas with significant Croat populations (Ramet, 2006). To operationalize this dual vision, the Croatian government supported the establishment of the Croatian Defence Council (HVO) as the main military and administrative structure of Croat communities in Bosnia.

The HVO coordinated closely with the Croatian Army (HV), with logistical and command structures often linked across borders (CIA, 2002). This coordination enabled the strategic occupation of territory and facilitated the formation of the self-declared Croatian Community (later Republic) of Herceg-Bosna. Although initially cooperating with the ARBiH against Serb forces, tensions between Croats and Bosniaks escalated into open conflict between 1993 and 1994. The ICTY found that Croatian officials, including President Tuđman, were part of a joint criminal enterprise aimed at ethnically cleansing non-Croat populations to create a Croat entity within Bosnia that could potentially be annexed (ICTY, Prosecutor v. Prlić et al., 2017). However, many in Croatia viewed the ICTY's findings as politically biased or unjust, particularly after the 2017 suicide of General Slobodan Praljak in the courtroom, which became a potent symbol of national grievance and martyrdom in public discourse (Subotić, 2019).

Alongside these official structures, the Croatian Defence Forces (HOS) emerged as a potent paramilitary organization that exemplified the rapid radicalization of the conflict. Journalists on the ground documented how the HOS openly embraced the iconography and slogans of the World War II-era Ustaša regime, most notably the salute "Za Dom Spremni" (For the Homeland – Ready!), making it a central part of their public identity (Glenny, 2012). This slogan served as a powerful ideological marker, a direct parallel to the Nazi-associated "Sieg Heil", and its use was a deliberate invocation of a historical narrative that framed contemporary struggles as a direct continuation of the Ustaša's fight for an ethnically pure Croatian state (Goldstein, 2001).

This created a profound ideological contradiction within the Croatian national movement. The official HDZ policy under Tuđman was one of pragmatic state-building, strategically framing Croatia's sovereignty as a legitimate successor to the Croatian Partisan anti-fascist tradition of WWII, seeking international legitimacy by distancing itself from the Ustaša legacy. However, in practice, the HDZ's pragmatic pursuit of statehood led to a tactical tolerance and utilization of the extremist HOS as a militant vanguard. An event that points to this tolerance is a moment when those tactical goals diverged, as was the case in Bosnia in 1992 when HOS Commander Blaž Kraljević and eight of his staff were assassinated by HVO troops due to HOS embracing the cause of Bosnia's territorial integrity (Ramet, 2006). This created a fraught coalition where the quest for national sovereignty and a supremacist vision of ethnic purity uneasily coexisted, a tension that would have devastating consequences during

the wars in Bosnia (1992-1995) and Croatia (1991-1995).

Media narratives, education policies and wartime propaganda portrayed Serbs as aggressors and Bosniaks as unreliable partners, reinforcing a sense of existential threat to Croat identity and statehood (Jović, 2009). The Croatian government also engaged in international diplomacy to frame its role as defensive and stabilizing, even as it supported parallel institutions across the Bosnian border with the argument of protecting its people. This approach highlights the contradiction at the heart of Croatian wartime policy: the simultaneous defense of national sovereignty and the subversion of Bosnia's territorial integrity. While the 1994 Washington Agreement eventually ended hostilities between Bosniaks and Croats and facilitated the creation of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the long-term implications of Croatian involvement in Bosnia continue to shape postwar ethnic relations and governance structures.

The Serbian Perspective

The Serbian political and military strategy during the Yugoslav wars reflected a coherent and centralized vision of territorial expansion framed as ethnic unification. Spearheaded by Slobodan Milošević and supported by the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) in Bosnia and the Serb Democratic Party of Croatia, the project aimed to consolidate Serb-majority areas into a "Greater Serbia" through the creation of ethnically homogeneous territories (Ramet, 2006). This political vision was heavily influenced by the 1986 Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU), which articulated a grievance-driven nationalist narrative that framed Serbs as victims of historical injustice and threatened by the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The document criticized the federal structure and emphasized the need for the protection and unification of Serbs across republic borders (Dragović-Soso, 2002; Perica 2002; Ramet 2006). In this ideological context, the wars in both Bosnia and Croatia were marked by the strategic deployment of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and its transformation into a Serb-dominated military force that supported local Serb paramilitary formations (Cigar, 1995). The SANU Memorandum thus provided an intellectual foundation that helped legitimize Serbia's interventionist and expansionist agenda under the guise of national self-defense.

Serb leaders argued that if Croats had the right to secede from Yugoslavia, then Serbs in Croatia had the right to secede from Croatia. Similarly, Bosnian Serbs considered themselves entitled to autonomy under the 1990 constitution, which recognized Muslims, Croats and Serbs as coequal "constituent peoples." Many cited Alija Izetbegović's earlier "Islamic Declaration" as evidence of an Islamist agenda behind Bosnian independence (Burg & Shoup, 1999). Because many Serbs in Croatia had deep historical roots in the region, they generally viewed

the wars of the 1990s as a civil war(s).

In Croatia, Serb insurgents backed by Belgrade declared autonomous regions such as the Republic of Serbian Krajina, which received arms, funding and personnel from Serbia. Similar efforts were undertaken in Bosnia, where the Republika Srpska was proclaimed under the leadership of Radovan Karadžić and General Ratko Mladić, with direct logistical and military support from the Serbian government and army structures (Burg & Shoup, 1999). This strategic cross-border support highlighted a transnational Serbian command network and a unified political-military apparatus. The methods employed to achieve these goals were systematically violent. The ICTY concluded that Serbian leaders engaged in campaigns of ethnic cleansing, sieges and terror against civilians across multiple fronts in Bosnia and Croatia (ICTY, Prosecutor v. Karadžić, 2016; Prosecutor v. Martić, 2007). Serbian media played a central role in radicalizing the population through dehumanizing rhetoric, portraying Croats as fascist "Ustaše" and Bosniaks as Islamic extremists (Gagnon, 2004). These narratives helped foster public support for military actions that were framed as defensive, despite their aggressive character. The Serbian political elite's narrative of victimhood, invoking historical trauma such as the genocide of Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia during World War II, further legitimized the pursuit of territorial goals. Subotić (2019) argues that this victimization discourse was instrumental in shaping Serbian collective memory and resistance to post-war justice mechanisms. The refusal of many Serbian officials and media outlets to accepts the ICTY's findings, even in the face of overwhelming evidence, underscores the persistence of nationalist narratives and the challenge of transnational justice in Serbia and Republika Srpska.

In sum, the Serbian case exemplifies how state institutions, political leadership, and military infrastructure were mobilized beyond national borders to pursue an ethno-territorial agenda, facilitated by propaganda and framed through historical grievance. Hence, the wars in Croatia and Bosnia cannot be understood in isolation from Belgrade's central role in planning, supporting and executing violent campaigns under the guise of national self-defense.

Realist interpretation

While the previous analysis details the internal dynamics of radicalization and elite manipulation, a realist perspective (specifically John Mearsheimer's theory of Offensive Realism) provides a compelling, system-level explanation for the behavior of the primary state actors. From this viewpoint, the wars in Bosnia and Croatia were not primarily the result of historical hatreds but rather a predictable consequence of the beginning of the dissolution of the Yugoslav federal state, which created a multipolar anarchy in the region. In this new and perilous security environment, the region's dominant powers, Zagreb and Belgrade, were

driven by an inescapable imperative to maximize their power and ensure survival at the expense of the weak, nascent Bosnia.

Mearsheimer argues that in an anarchic international system, where no higher authority exists to guarantee security, great powers are primed for offence. Their ultimate goal is to achieve regional hegemony to eliminate threats. The beginning of the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991 precisely created such an environment in the regional context, where the aforementioned anarchy was exacerbated. For Serbia under Slobodan Milošević, the primary goal was to ensure that the perceived Serbian territories and Serb-inhabited lands, such as Republika Srpska and Republika Srpska Krajina, remained within Yugoslavia (which would then either remain as a Serb dominated federation, or be transformed into 'Greater Serbia'). Croatia, under Franjo Tuđman, sought to secure its sovereignty and territorial integrity against an initially much stronger Serbian adversary. This logic explains the transnational military structures detailed in this chapter: the VRS or SVK were not merely a Bosnian Serb or Croatian Serb army, but rather instruments of Serbian state power, designed to secure territory and create a buffer zone or a "Greater Serbia". Similarly, the HVO was a projection of Croatian power into Bosnia, aimed at preventing Serbian hegemony and securing perceived Croat territories and Croat-inhabited lands, with the ultimate goal of annexing them or making them a client state.

The central tragedy of the Bosnian position is perfectly illuminated by the realist security dilemma. As Mearsheimer contends, the best guarantee of survival is to be as powerful as possible. Bosnia, under Alija Izetbegović, was born into this anarchy as an inherently weak state, lacking a serious army and multiethnic unity. Its declaration of independence was a desperate gamble for international protection. However, from the perspective of Belgrade and Zagreb, a sovereign, multiethnic Bosnia was a strategic liability – an unstable entity that could become a pawn of the other side or a source of conflict. Therefore, the preemptive partition of Bosnia became a rational strategic objective for both Croats and Serbs. Their cross-border interventions and support for secessionist entities (Herceg-Bosna and Republika Srpska) were not irrational acts of aggression but calculated moves to maximize their share of power in the new regional order. The Bosnian government's attempts to preserve a multiethnic state and its reliance on foreign mujahideen were the actions of a weak actor with no other viable means to enhance its military capability. Although it is also important to note, that Izetbegović's vision of the multiethnic state implied one where Bosniaks would constitute the largest ethnic group, which would subsequently endow Bosniaks with a dominant role in the political landscape of a democratic Bosnian society.

This perspective does not exonerate the elites who propagated radical and/or extremist

ideologies and orchestrated violence; rather, it explains the permissive conditions that made their strategies not only possible but logical. The rhetoric of historical grievances and ethnic incompatibility, as detailed in the cases of the SANU Memorandum and the revival of elements associated with the Ustaša, served as a powerful mobilizing tool. However, from an offensive realist standpoint, these were superficial elements used to legitimize the underlying pursuit of material power and territorial security. The failure of the international community to fill the security vacuum or to deter aggression early in the conflicts only reinforced the anarchic environment, convincing local actors that self-help and preemptive violence were the only reliable strategies. This notion further substantiates the necessity to dive deeper into the subject of foreign involvement in this conflict (e.g. Operation Deliberate Force), on which the next chapter elaborates. As a final note, the interconnected wars can be interpreted as a brutal but predictable process of power-maximization by regional state actors navigating the deadly uncertainties of a new anarchic system.

Summary

This chapter argued that the Croatian and Bosnian wars were not isolated conflicts but interconnected phases of a single, violent process of state dissolution, driven by a deliberate political strategy of radicalization. The analysis, framed through Bötticher ’s concepts explored in chapter 2, demonstrated how political elites systematically dismantled Yugoslavia’s multi-ethnic fabric by instrumentalizing the competing historical narratives of victimhood to manufacture the perceived existential threats necessary for radicalization. They employed dehumanizing rhetoric and state-controlled media to recast coexistence as betrayal, creating an environment where violence against civilians became a legitimate political tool. This process culminated in the widespread commission of war crimes, which were analyzed not as isolated instances of “terrorism” but as tactical manifestations of extremism intended to spread terror and achieve ethnically homogeneous territories.

The conflict dynamics provide powerful illustrations of Bötticher’s observation that radicals and extremists can converge in a shared camp against a common enemy. This manifested differently within each national movement. In the Croatian case, the HDZ’s radical pursuit of sovereign statehood – publicly framed as a defensive struggle in Croatia – was fundamentally complicated by its parallel project in Bosnia. The actions of the HVO show an offensive, irredentist agenda that contradicted Croatia’s defensive posturing. This strategic pragmatism also led to a tactical alliance with the extremist HOS, whose Ustaša-era ideology the official government simultaneously disavowed for international legitimacy. Among Bosniaks, the SDA’s mission to preserve a multiethnic Bosnia (in which Bosniaks would

maintain a majority) created a precarious coalition that encompassed both secular liberals and the foreign mujahideen. This was accompanied by the violent suppression of competing visions of legitimacy, as seen in the intra-Bosniak conflict with Fikret Abdić's autonomist movement, demonstrating that the struggle was not merely against external aggressors but also for the definition of the Bosniak political self. The Serbian project, while appearing monolithic, also contained this tension; the radical nationalist aim of protecting Serb rights within Yugoslavia was rapidly overtaken by an extremist campaign of ethnic supremacy and territorial conquest, with political leaders tolerating and utilizing paramilitary forces. In all three cases, broad-based resistance to the *status quo* was co-opted by extremist elements that political elites proved willing to accommodate for strategic gain, blurring the lines between emancipatory politics and supremacist violence.

While Bötticher's framework explains the internal ideological engine of the conflict, Mearsheimer might suggest the security vacuum following Yugoslavia's collapse created a permissive environment for radicalization to escalate into sustained warfare. In this emerging anarchic system, the warring factions' pursuit of security through territorial conquest directly fueled the demand for the extremist ideologies that could justify such campaigns. The widespread commission of war crimes and the tactical alliances between radicals and extremists can thus be seen as manifestations of a brutal ethnic realpolitik. Furthermore, the significant flow of weapons throughout the region, occurring despite a formal international arms embargo, hints at a broader geopolitical context that must be examined to fully understand the conflict's duration and intensity. This suggest that the internal logic of radicalization was critically enabled by an external structure of power politics, a dynamic that the following chapter will explore.

V - Foreign Interference

This chapter argues that the process of radicalization in the Yugoslav wars, while driven by internal actors and ideologies, was also critically enabled, shaped and prolonged by foreign interventions, including the acquiescence of external great powers. It is crucial to state at the outset that this analysis, while acknowledging the primary agency of local political elites in fomenting violence, deliberately focuses on clarifying how the policies of external powers created the conditions for that violence to escalate and endure. From this perspective, the chapter posits that the US and its European allies, operating from a position of unipolar dominance after the Cold War, pursued a strategy that, while often framed in humanitarian terms, interfered in the conflict to advance their own geopolitical and economic interests in the Balkans. This external interference ensured that the radical ideologies of local actors were furnished with the military means and political space to escalate into full-scale ethnic cleansing, ultimately structuring a post-war order that entrenched dependency and continued instability.

To substantiate this argument, the analysis will chart the impact of external powers by focusing on their role in orchestrating the conflict's military trajectory. It begins by examining the initial diplomatic interventions and the strategically lopsided enforcement of the arms embargo, which predetermined the early course of the war. The focus then shifts to the logic and timing of direct NATO military intervention, proposing a more complex calculus beyond humanitarian motives. Through this progression from diplomatic interference to military orchestration the chapter establishes the geopolitical environment as an active and decisive force.

When we consider the competing Bosniak, Croatian, and Serbian historical narratives we must also take into account the implications surrounding it. Arguably, it is implied that those very same competing historical narratives are used by outside actors to pursue their own agendas. These narratives are not merely historiographical disputes but have been instrumentalized by external powers – such as the US, the EU, and later Russia – to legitimize interventions or sustain spheres of influence (Glenny, 2012). In the case of the civil war in Yugoslavia, or conflicts in former Yugoslav Republics, the global state of geopolitics played a crucial role in the outcome of the war. The Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001) unfolded during the zenith of US unipolar dominance, a period marked by the absence of Soviet counterbalance and the unchecked expansion of Western political and economic power. More specifically, the US played a pivotal role in the outcome of the various conflicts that took place in the former Yugoslav Republics. This influence extended beyond military intervention (e.g., the Dayton Accords, NATO bombing of Serbian forces in Bosnia) into the economic realm, where post-war reconstruction policies mandated by the IMF and World Bank facilitated the predatory

acquisition of key industries – such as telecommunications, banking, and energy – by EU and US corporations (Pugh, 2005). The resulting economic dependency exemplified how unipolarity enabled both NATO's geopolitical expansion and corporate penetration into Balkan markets, often reframing humanitarian interventions as vehicles for neoliberal economic restructuring (Chossudovksy, 1996).

The disintegration of Yugoslavia became a proving ground for US unipolar dominance, where humanitarian rhetoric masked what John Mearsheimer's (2014) offensive realism would identify as the inherent aggression of great powers in an anarchic system – a drive to weaken potential rivals and dominate strategic regions (pp. 33-34). As Gibbs (2009) points out, Germany and the US have from the outset manipulated diplomatic and military levers to fracture a federation, recognizing Croatia and Bosnia's independence, in 1991 and 1992 respectively, despite warnings that this would ignite a war if the recognitions happened before a regional settlement to the issue was concluded. He then on suggests that Germany was the major destabilizing foreign factor in the case of Croatia, while the US was in the case of Bosnia, with the primary reasons being pushing for international recognition, among other, such as the case of "American mafia[18]" that advised Izetbegović. The arms embargo imposed by the UN (Security Council Resolution 713, 1991) was selectively enforced, thus ensuring Serb military dominance early in the conflict (Parenti, 2000; Ramet 2006). This lopsided policy, as Mearsheimer might argue, was not incompetence but calculated realpolitik: prolonging the war weakened all Balkan actors, making them dependent on Western arbitration.

The Yugoslav Wars laid bare the brutal logic of post-Cold War power politics, where the movement of weapons revealed more about international priorities than any diplomatic statement ever could. While Resolution 713 (1991) ostensibly sought to limit violence through comprehensive arms embargo, its enforcement became an exercise in geopolitical hypocrisy. Bosnia's government forces found themselves systematically starved of heavy weaponry, while Croatia initially received clandestine arms shipments through US-aligned channels, including Germany. Later, the US started supplying Bosniaks with various weaponry through a series of "black flights". Iran was also a notable arms supplier as it was generally the main arms supplier of Bosniaks. However, they have also supplied Croats as well, as the routes to supply the Bosniaks had to pass through Croatian territory, which came at a price of seizing parts of the shipments (Gibbs, 2009, pp. 156-160). This deliberate imbalance ensured initial Serb military dominance only to later position NATO as the indispensable peacemaker, unraveling what could be dubbed *controlled chaos* – the deliberate cultivation of instability to achieve

[18] This is how French general Phillipe Morillon (commander of the UN peacekeeping forces in Bosnia) referred to a majority of immediate advisors to President Izetbegović, of which many had studied in the US and had many US contacts (p. 107)

geopolitical aims (Bartles 2016; Mazarr, 2015).

The privatization of violence occurred through firms like MPRI, which was staffed by retired U.S. officers who provided Croatia with training under the guise of "democracy assistance" (Gibbs, 2009, p. 158). This indicates a policy where formal US neutrality masked deep strategic manipulation. Meanwhile, paramilitary groups like Arkan's Tigers, armed through Belgrade's security apparatus with weapons from Russian and Greek networks (ICTY, 2001), and Bosniak force forced to turn to Iranian and other Muslim state suppliers, while the Croats also profited from the Iranian arms imports (Gibbs, 2009, p. 156-160), demonstrated how all sides became entangled in a shadow economy where weapons were traded for loot, drugs, and even humanitarian aid (Andreas, 2008).

The case of the fragile military alliance between Bosniaks and Croats during the 1992-1995 war, as documented in declassified CIA records (Central Intelligence Agency, 1994), exemplified the volatile nature of wartime coalitions in multi-ethnic conflicts. The instability in this relation was perhaps best captured by UNPROFOR Sector Southwest Commander A.P. Ridgway's observation: "They started fighting for no good reason, they stopped fighting for no good reason, and there's no good reason now for them not to start fighting again" (Central Intelligence Agency, 1994, p. 2) – a statement that speaks volumes about the arbitrary nature of their cooperation. The CIA assessment reveals how the Bosnian government's military dependence on Croatian-controlled supply lines created a precarious dynamic where temporary alignments could shift unpredictably based on immediate tactical considerations rather than strategic objectives.

Remarkably, this uneasy alliance persisted despite deep mutual distrust and competing visions for Bosnia's future. Bosnian Government officials claimed that, among other grievances Bosnian Croat leaders helped Bosnian Serbs in the shelling of Mostar by doing artillery spotting for them, and also conspired with Bosnian Serbs to cut a deal dividing the northern corridor. Furthermore, Bosnian Prime Minister Silajdžić feared that Croatian President Tuđman would strike a separate deal with Serbian leader Milošević, potentially trading eastern Slavonia and autonomy for Serbs in Krajina in exchange for a Croat entity confederated with Croatia (Central Intelligence Agency, 1994). These concerns reflected the fundamental tension at the heart of the Muslim-Croat partnership: Croats increasingly sought to protect their identity from what they perceived as Muslim domination, while Muslim leaders aimed to preserve their demographic majority and territorial control. The alliance was further strained by the Bosnian Serbs' categorical rejection of any federation that maintained Bosnia's internationally recognized borders. As the CIA memorandum notes, Radovan Karadžić consistently demanded full sovereignty for the self-proclaimed "Serbian Republic",

demonstrating how all three groups pursued mutually exclusive nationalist agendas even while engaging in tactical cooperation (Central Intelligence Agency, 1994).

The CIA's analysis of potential outcomes from lifting the arms embargo presents two starkly different scenarios for the Muslim-Croat alliance's future. The first suggests the embargo's termination would likely fracture the federation as Bosnian Croats refused to escalate against Serbs, revealing the alliance's inherent fragility and mutual distrust. Conversely, the second scenario posits that lifting restrictions could strengthen cooperation if Tuđman – frustrated by failed peace efforts to regain Krajina – ordered joint offensives against Serb forces (Central Intelligence Agency, 1994). These contradictory possibilities demonstrate the alliance's transactional nature, where cooperation depended entirely on momentary convergences of interest rather than shared goals. This dynamic best exemplifies Mearsheimer's (2014) offensive realism, which predicts such fragile, interest-driven alliances in anarchic systems where security concerns override lasting partnerships (pp. 34-36). The very fact that the same policy change could either cement or shatter the federation underscores how temporary alignments remained vulnerable to shifting power calculations.

In this context, NATO's intervention in 1995, culminating in Operation Deliberate Force[19], was framed as a moral imperative to halt Serb aggression, particularly following the shelling of Sarajevo's Markale market. However, the timing revealed a more complex geopolitical calculus. As Gibbs (2009) argues, the United States was willing to authorize decisive air strikes only once the military balance on the ground had been fundamentally altered in favor of Bosniaks and Croats. This shift had been achieved in August 1995 by Croatia's US-trained and supported Operation Storm[20]. The offensive's success was compounded by simultaneous, coordinated pressure from the ARBiH and HVO on multiple fronts in Bosnia. With the Croatian front secured and Bosnian Serb forces weakened and isolated, NATO's subsequent bombing campaign proved highly effective in compelling Serb agreement to negotiations.

The military gains achieved by Croatia within its own borders were subsequently consolidated through the Erdut Agreement (November 1995), which peacefully reintegrated the final Serb-held region of Eastern Slavonia. Concurrently, the Dayton Accords (November

[19] Operation Deliberate Force was a sustained air campaign conducted by NATO, in concert with the UNPROFOR ground operations, to undermine the military capability of the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS). The operation was carried out between 30 August and 20 September 1995, involving 400 aircraft.

[20] The 2011 Trial Judgement found Operation Storm to be part of a joint criminal enterprise aimed at permanently removing Serb population, a legal finding overturned on appeal in 2012 (Prosecutor v. Gotovina et al., Appeals Judgement). The Appeals Chamber acquitted the defendants on narrow legal grounds, rejecting the predicate crime of indiscriminate shelling, but did not contest the factual records that documented the exodus of 150,000 to 180,000 Serbs, which stands as a documented instance of ethnic cleansing.

1995) institutionalized the new military outcome, rewarding Croat and Bosniak territorial gains while freezing Bosnia into an externally governed state – a protectorate where the Office of the High Representative (OHR) could override elected officials (Chossudovsky, 1996; Parenti 2000; Ramet 2006). In this light, the Western intervention appears less as a neutral humanitarian mission and more as a force that ratified a new *status quo* shaped by decisive military action and prior political alignment.

For Mearsheimer (2014), such interventions exemplify the dangers of unipolarity: the absence of a counterbalancing power allowed NATO to act as a legalized hegemony, disguising expansionist aims as collective security. Parenti goes further, noting that post-Dayton privatization saw Bosnian Federation's state-owned assets such as energy, water, telecommunications, media and transport sold off to private firms at "garage-sale prices" (2000, p. 55). Meanwhile, Croatia's cooperation was rewarded with NATO membership (2009), embedding it firmly within the US military-industrial sphere, by supplying weapons, instructors, creating bases and gaining unfettered access to previously inaccessible territories.

This occurrence of external powers shaping conflict outcomes while professing humanitarian motives helps explain the persistent radicalism that characterizes contemporary politics across the former Yugoslavia. The hypothesis, that radicalism in Bosnia and Croatia was inextricably linked to foreign interventions, finds strong support in this case, as external actors' calculated decisions during 1990s wars – including the selective condemnation of war crimes, the uneven enforcement of arms embargoes, and the timing of military interventions or initial acquiescence – created enduring grievances and distorted political development throughout region.

The role of external powers in instrumentalizing local divisions was perhaps most visibly embodied by the foreign volunteers who joined the conflict. The Yugoslav Wars attracted a diverse array of international fighters whose allegiances often mirrored the geopolitical interests of external powers. A considerable amount of Western European extreme-right volunteers, mainly from Germany, joined Croatian forces, more specifically HOS. Some neo-Nazis from post-communist countries fought alongside Croatians in Bosnia. And while volunteers from Russia generally sided with the Serbians, a small neo-Nazi unit Werewolf from Moscow fought alongside Croatians during the mid-1990s (Mareš & Stojar, 2012).

Conversely, Bosniak forces drew thousands of jihadist volunteers from the Middle East and the North Africa, whose participation was at times facilitated by Iranian logistical support (Gibbs, 2009; Ramet 2006). Their presence, while militarily significant, later complicated post-war reconciliation efforts and contributed to the perception of the conflict as a civilizational struggle. On the Serbian side, Russian volunteers and ultra-nationalist groups fought alongside

Bosnian Serb forces, often with cover assistance from Moscow – a pattern Ostanina (2020) links to Russia's broader strategy of maintaining influence in Orthodox Slavic territories.

The fact that these foreign fighters aligned so neatly with the geopolitical fault lines of the conflict – Westerners with Croatians, Islamists with Bosnian Muslims and Russian nationalists with Serbians – underscores how external actors aided the instrumentalization of local ethnic divisions. Their involvement did not merely reflect pre-existing alliances; it actively deepened sectarian narratives and prolonged violence, leaving a legacy of radicalization that persists in the region's politics today. Far from being marginal actors, these volunteers served as human conduits for external agendas, further binding local conflicts to global power struggles.

Summary

This chapter provided the overarching international context for the dissertation, showing that the internal radicalization examined in previous sections was facilitated and intensified by the strategic involvement of external powers. The previous analysis directly addressed the second secondary question *"How did the interventions of great powers create sufficient conditions and incentives to shape the development of radicalism in Bosnia & Herzegovina (1992-1995) and Croatia (1991-1995)?".* It strongly corroborates the secondary hypothesis that *The rise of radicalism in Bosnia & Herzegovina (1992-1995) and Croatia (1991-1995) was inextricably linked to the influence of foreign interventions, including the acquiescence of great powers*. The analysis applies Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism to contend that Western powers, from a position of unrivaled post-Cold War dominance, influenced the conflict to serve their own strategic objectives, often under the cover of humanitarian concern.

This argument is substantiated by the tracing of a clear trajectory of external orchestration. It first demonstrates how initial diplomatic acts – specifically, the rushed recognition of new states and the strategically lopsided enforcement of the UN arms embargo – deliberately set the war's trajectory and created a controlled imbalance of power. Then, it reveals how direct military intervention, particularly NATO's Operation Deliberate Force, was a calculated move that ratified military facts on the ground established by client forces, most notably following Croatia's Operation Storm. Ultimately, the chapter establishes that the geopolitical environment was not a passive backdrop but a decisive enabler of the conflict. The actions of external powers did not create the homegrown extremist movements but systematically furnished them with essential resources and political coverage.

VI – Conclusion

This dissertation set out to investigate the instrumentalization of radicalism in the conflicts that accompanied the dissolution of Yugoslavia, with the specific focus on Bosnia and Croatia. The central research question – "*How was Radicalism instrumentalized in Bosnia & Herzegovina and Croatia, especially during the wars in Croatia (1991-1995) and Bosnia & Herzegovina (1992-1995)*?" – sought to move beyond simplistic narratives of longstanding grievances. Through a structured analysis of conceptual frameworks, historical narratives, wartime conduct and geopolitical interference, this research provided a more nuanced and complex explanation: the wars in Bosnia & Herzegovina and Croatia were shaped by a synergy of internal radicalization and external power strategy.

The foundations of this argument were laid in Chapter II, which established the essential conceptual distinction between radicalism and extremism, drawing on the work of Astrid Bötticher. This was not a mere theoretical exercise but a necessary methodological clarification. By defining radicalism as a sweeping but reform-oriented ideology and extremism as an anti-pluralist, violent struggle for supremacy, this dissertation selected the appropriate analytical tools needed to dissect the region's political evolution. This framework allowed to trace how movements initially seeking democratic emancipation could be co-opted into projects of ethnic homogenization. Furthermore, the deliberate decision to exclude the term "terrorism" in favor of analyzing the "deliberate infliction of terror" as a tactical manifestation of extremism ensured that the focus remained on the ideological drivers and strategic goals of the actors, rather than contested labels.

Building on this conceptual groundwork, Chapter III demonstrated that the primary internal catalyst for mass radicalization was the instrumentalization of history. The analysis of the Serbian, Croatian and Bosniak national narratives revealed how deeply held, and often contradictory, memories of victimhood and historical entitlement were not passive cultural artifacts. Instead, they were actively weaponized by political elites to manufacture perceived existential threats, dismantle the shared identity of Yugoslavia, and legitimize a new exclusionary politics. This chapter provided considerable evidence to support the first secondary hypothesis, confirming that these competing narratives of identity, trauma and victimization were indeed the essential ideological precondition for the radicalization that followed. The high degree of mutual linguistic intelligibility in the region proved insufficient to counter this divisive mobilization; rather, it became the very medium through which these conflicting truths were articulated and contested.

Chapter IV then traced how this ideological radicalization was operationalized into sustained extremist violence. The analysis of the wars themselves illustrated Bötticher's

observation that radicals and extremists can find themselves in the same camp. The fraught coalition between the Croatian HDZ's radical state-building project and the extremist, Ustaša-ideology of the HOS served as a potent case study of this dynamic. The chapter argued that the wars in Croatia and Bosnia were not isolated conflicts but interconnected campaigns within a single dissolution process, characterized by a systematic transition from radical dissent to extremist strategies of ethnic cleansing.

Finally, Chapter V completed the argument by introducing the role of the international dimension. It demonstrated that the external geopolitical environment was not a passive backdrop but an active force that shaped the conflict's trajectory. The initial diplomatic recognitions and the strategically lopsided enforcement of the UN arms embargo created a controlled imbalance of power. Subsequently, the timing and logic of NATO intervention served not as a neutral humanitarian mission, but as a calculated move to ratify military facts on the ground established by client forces. This external strategy furnished the internal extremist projects with the military resources and political space they needed to succeed.

In conclusion, this dissertation posits that the instrumentalization of radicalism was a two-stage process. The internal, elite-driven weaponization of historical narratives provided the ideological fuel – the "why" – for radicalization. The external strategy of great powers provided the structural enablement – the "how" – supplying the means for that radicalization to escalate. The wars in Bosnia and Croatia, therefore, stand as stark testament to the destructive potential that can be unleashed when internal drivers of radicalization converge with the strategic interests of external powers. The region's continued challenges with stability and reconciliation are a direct legacy of this synergy.

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