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FROM THE ZITZER CLUB TO THE BATTLE OF LASLOVO.

The involvement of the Hungarian minorities in the 1991-1995 Yugoslav wars

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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses a 'blind-spot' of the scholarly works dealing the 1991-1995 wars in former Yugoslavia, namely: examining the involvement of the Hungarian minorities of the Baranja and Vojvodina regions in the armed conflicts of the war in Croatia. It starts with a short presentation of the demographic and political situation of the Hungarian communities living in the two regions. The following comparative analysis will embed the issue in the ongoing scholarly discussions on ethnicity formation and ethnic conflict, giving a conceptualization of the phenomenon discussed, and explaining the nature of the involvement of the Hungarian minority in the war. The case of the Hungarian minorities reinforces the perspective that the armed conflict was not an 'ethnic war', but an artificially imposed aggression and polarizing force that went against the 'normal' frame of mind and social behavior of a multiethnic federal state.

KEYWORDS

- Yugoslavia
- Baranja
- Vojvodina
- minorities
- ethnic conflict
- ethnic manipulation
- conscription
- anti-war demonstrations
- cognitive frames

Introduction

When discussing the wars in the former Yugoslavian territory, the attention of scholars has been focused almost exclusively on the major actors and victims involved, and in their works they dealt only with issues concerning the population of Serbs, Croats, Slovenians, Bosnians, and later Albanians. This is understandable, since the political conflicts and discourses that ignited, motivated, legitimized and explained the wars were constructed on these ethnic lines, and not others. The categories of 'us' and 'them' in the narratives on the conflicts were determined by the above mentioned national categories, and no significant attention was paid to other ethnic groups, like the role of the several smaller ethnic minorities that

lived in Yugoslavia: Hungarians, Italians, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Romanians etc. Yet, it is still striking that, with the exception of a few general overviews¹, one finds no discussion and/or thorough investigation concerning the involvement of these minorities in the conflicts, in spite of the fact that several of their communities suffered directly and indirectly because of the war.

On the one hand, members of these minorities became victims of the armed conflicts, suffering heavy casualties in certain areas, and on the other hand, an extensive percent of the male members were incorporated by conscription into the opposing war machines of the Yugoslav conflict. Additionally, the aftermath of the wars, which was characterized by a widespread, and sometimes forceful, relocation of war refugees and uprooted populations, dramatically changed the demographic structure of the areas where these minorities lived. These changes caused the disruption of the local political balance between the minority and majority groups, and the large-scale emigration of the members of the minority.

The purpose of this paper is to address one of the ‘blind-spots’ of scholarly work dealing the 1991-1995 wars in former Yugoslavia, namely: to examine the involvement of the Hungarian minorities of the Baranja and Vojvodina regions in the armed conflicts. I start with a short presentation of the demographic and political situation of the Hungarian communities living in the two regions. The aim of the following analysis will be to embed this issue in the ongoing scholarly discussions on ethnicity formation and ethnic conflict, so then I can move on to conceptualize the nature of the involvement of the Hungarian minority in the war.

In theorizing the Yugoslav conflict as an ‘ethnic war’ I will use the approach developed by Rogers Brubaker for explaining ethnicity as a project, as the ‘crystallization of groupness’. Then I will link the process of ethnic manipulation involved in creating ‘groupness’ to the concepts of ‘normal’ and ‘crisis’ cognitive frames, elaborated by Anthony Obershall, to explain ethnic conflict in the Yugoslav context. In the second part of the paper I will analyze two cases related to the involvement of the Hungarian minorities in the war in order to exemplify different processes of group ‘crystallization’ and the effects of the crisis frame in specific, local situations. In the first case, focusing on the anti-war demonstrations in Vojvodina, I will demonstrate how the external ethnic manipulation fails, crystallization is unsuccessful and the crisis frame remains inactive, with almost all Hungarians adhering to the anti-war opposition. Conversely, in the second case, related to the attacked and devastated villages of Baranja, I will try to show how the crisis frame imposed by violent conflict created a strong sense of groupness, with many Hungarians voluntarily joining the Croatian Guard. Examined from this perspective, the case of the Hungarian minorities can reinforce the claim

1 L. Arday, ‘Hungarians in Serb-Yugoslav Vojvodina since 1944’, *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1996, pp. 467-482; AB Székely, ‘The Hungarian minority in Croatia and Slovenia’, *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1996, pp. 483-489; M Klemenčič & J Zupančič, ‘The effects of the dissolution of Yugoslavia on the minority rights of Hungarian and Italian minorities in the post-Yugoslav states’, *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2004, pp. 853-896; A Ludányi, ‘The Fate of Magyars in Yugoslavia: Genocide, Ethnocide or Ethnic Cleansing’, *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, vol. 28, no. 1-2, 2001, p. 134.

that – although it was almost impossible not to get implicated in the war – the armed conflict was not an ‘ethnic war’, but an artificially imposed aggression and polarizing force that went against the normal frame of mind and social behavior of a multiethnic federal state.

What makes this kind of examination difficult is the lack of explicit data and empirical research on the ethnic identification patterns of the minority members in the context of war. Since the ethnic categories produced and reinforced by the political armed conflict worked according to the oppositional logic of Croat vs. Yugoslav and/or Serb, ethnic manipulation left no room for a third, possibly neutral ethnic or minority category. This polarizing perspective is also characteristic of the literature on the war, where the only significant differences acknowledged are the ones produced by the discourses of the ‘ethnic’ and media wars. I consider my paper only a preliminary investigation into the question of the involvement of the Hungarian minority in the war. Being a novel attempt to discuss a topic which has not yet been seriously addressed, the investigation is based on secondary sources (reports, articles, interviews and a documentary film, all of which are limited and/or subjective), and so the conclusions I reach will reflect in some measure the lack of direct contact with my object of study. A thorough and serious account of this topic would require an extended empirical field research to be carried out.

The Hungarian Minorities in Croatia and Serbia

After the 1920 Peace Treaty of Trianon the newly formed state of the Serbo-Croatian-Slovenian Monarchy gained a territory of 21,000 square kilometers from the defeated Hungary, and with it a population of 577,000 ethnic Hungarians, which made them the second largest minority after the Albanians. In Arday’s account, according to a 1910 census, one-twentieth of this population came under the jurisdiction of Slovenia, and was living in the Eastern Prekmurje region. One-fifth became part of Croatia, where traditionally Hungarians inhabited the region called Baranja (Baranya), and parts of Eastern and Western Slavonia. The overwhelming majority of Hungarians was located in the North-Eastern part of the new federal state, and lived in strongly interconnected villages and towns of the multiethnic region which became known as Vojvodina (Vajdaság).²

The position and rights of minorities was upheld by the second AVNOJ (Anti-Fascist Council of National Liberation of Yugoslavia) Assembly in November 1943, which proclaimed that: “National minorities in Yugoslavia shall be granted all national rights”; and later codified in the 1946 and 1963 constitutions.³ In the 1974 Constitution of Yugoslavia, which significantly decentralized the state, these minority groups were defined as ‘nationalities’ (as opposed to ‘nations’, since they were seen as related to the neighboring ‘nations’ of Hungary, Romania or Albania), but nonetheless declared that ‘nations’ and ‘nationalities’ should have equal rights

² Székely, p. 483.

³ Arday, p. 473.

(Article 245). These rights were embedded in the structural decision to transform the regions of Kosovo and Vojvodina into autonomous provinces which had *de facto* veto power in the Serbian parliament.

Although in theory the Yugoslav standards for minority protection were higher than in many European countries, Arday is quick to observe that – similarly to other Communist regimes – “there was an ever-widening gap between theory and practice” when it came to the actual implementation of these rights.⁴ He explains that, firstly, most of the rights offered stayed on a rhetorical level, and no sanctions were imposed in case of their violation; secondly, in practical matters it was always the assimilationist attitude of the local leaders that dominated social life; and thirdly, there were no financial allocations available for carrying out the prescriptions of the minority rights.⁵

In Serbia, the situation of minorities at the end of the 1980s worsened significantly. Following the events in October 1988, that later became known as the “Yogurt Revolution”, the ‘autonomist’ leadership of Vojvodina were replaced by political actors loyal to the new regime of Milošević. Additionally, as consequence to the adoption of a new constitution for Serbia in March 1989, the province of Vojvodina, along with Kosovo, lost its quasi-republican status, which meant that these administrative entities were stripped of all legislative rights and decision making. The provincial parliaments became a ‘consultative bodies’, and all the vital decisions were to be made in Belgrade.⁶ As Tibor Várady notes, this was not only an administrative change towards a more centralized state structure, but an essential change in paradigm on how minorities were viewed within the state:

“What makes the Yugoslav situation particularly serious is a sudden disappearance of all precepts and standards. Minorities have found themselves outside of these new trends, and outside of the logic of the new communities which have been taking shape. They have essentially become an encumbrance because of their different culture, language, alphabet – even by their very existence.”⁷

As a reaction to this change, in 1989 the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Vojvodina (Vajdasági Magyarok Demokratikus Közössége – VMDK) was founded with the aim to become the representational organization for the Hungarians of the province. It claims to be a grassroots social organization, not a political party, having as its goal the “assertion of individual and collective human rights for Hungarians in Vojvodina”⁸. Nonetheless, in the 1990 Serbian elections the VMDK ran candidates in every constituency with a Hungarian majority, and managed to secure 80 percent of the Hungarian votes, winning 8 seats in the parliament.⁹ Its political program

4 Ibid., p. 473

5 Ibid., p. 473

6 Klemenčič & Zupančič, p. 887

7 T Várady, ‘Minorities, Majorities, Law, and Ethnicity: Reflections of the Yugoslav Case’, *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1997, p. 14

8 Arday, p. 478

9 Ibid., p. 479

for creating an equal status for the Hungarian minority rests on a so-called “three-tiered program”, which calls for: personal-cultural autonomy, local self-government and, as an ultimate request, territorial autonomy. The VMDK’s program met with rejection from the Serbian authorities, and was accused by the press of promoting the secession of Vojvodina.¹⁰ Even after the fall of the Milošević regime, minority issues were not addressed in a significant manner, and the question of autonomy for Vojvodina was repeatedly ignored or rejected by the new governments. Worse still, after 2004, the inter-ethnic relations in the region deteriorated, resulting in several cases of attacks against Hungarian intellectuals and political leaders.¹¹

Since, even initially, the Hungarian population in Croatia was significantly smaller than in Vojvodina, and witnessed a dramatic fall in numbers after the Second World War (dropping 57% between 1948 and 1991, to approximately 22,000), the question of minority rights and political representation has different implications in this context. All of the cultural and social issues of the minority group was addressed by a single organization, the Association of Hungarians in Croatia (AHC), which was founded in 1949 and was known as the “Hungarian Cultural and Educational Federation of Croatia” until 1969.¹² Just before the 1990 multi-party elections, the Hungarian People’s Party of Croatia (HPPC) was founded to become the political organ of the Hungarian minority, since the AHC could not fulfill that role. Due to its size and the limitations of its constituency, the party managed to secure only one seat in the Croatian parliament in 1992. Nonetheless, the question of minorities in Croatia was addressed by the authorities, introducing a special resolution into the 1990 Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, declaring that Croatia “is the national state of the Croatian nation and members of the other nations and minorities who are its citizens: Serbs, Muslims, Slovenes, Czechs, Slovaks, Italians, Hungarians, Jews, and others to whom equality with citizens of Croatian nationality is guaranteed.”¹³ This resolution was repeated in the Declaration on Independence and Sovereignty of the Republic of Croatia, and other following decrees concerning minority rights in Croatia.

Conceptualizing the War in ex-Yugoslavia

When attempting to understand the 1991-1995 wars in the former Yugoslav territories, one of the most intriguing challenges of the scholarly approach is to explain how an internal political conflict of a federal state turned into an armed conflict that constructed its opposing camps along ethno-national lines. The series of conflicts, which at first were seen as amounting to a ‘civil war’ (or even ‘guerilla war’) between different interest groups lead by political agents, soon became known as an ‘ethnic war’. In Dubravka Žarkov words, this ‘ethnic war’ was “supposed to indicate that in different regions different ethnic groups were fighting each

¹⁰ Klemenčič & Zupančič, p. 888

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 881

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 887

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 877

other and proclaiming their right to sovereign control of specific territory.”¹⁴ The ethnic labeling was imposed and reinforced both internally, by the ethnopolitical entrepreneurs and the national media (in the media war that framed the actual war); and externally, by the international media discourse, which Žarkov identifies as the further manifestation of the Eurocentric perspective on the Yugoslav context (playing into the phenomenon called ‘Balkanism’, following Todorova).¹⁵

But, as Žarkov’s critical approach already suggested, accepting the ‘ethnic war’ label as unproblematic brings the result of brutally essentializing and simplifying the conflict as a war between opposing ‘ethnic groups’, between ‘Croats’ and ‘Serbs’, or ‘Serbs’ and ‘Muslims’, etc. No doubt, the driving discourse of the war did in fact rest on developing and maintaining ethnic antagonisms – and the war was indeed perceived by most of the actors and victims according to this logic. Nonetheless, the essentialization implied in the ‘ethnic war’ label presupposes the existence of internally homogeneous, externally bounded groups with common purpose, and the will to engage in warfare against other groups. Yet such a level and intensity of ‘groupness’ or ethnic antagonism did by no means characterize the pre-war Yugoslav context, or the actual, social experience of the war itself.¹⁶

If we would accept the description of the war as (for example) between ‘Croats’ and ‘Serbs’, we would buy into the discourse of the war itself, or in Brubaker’s terms, we would “uncritically adopt categories of ethnopolitical practice as our categories of social analysis.”¹⁷ It would mean reducing the complexities of social reality to the misleading coherence and homogeneity of the ethnic labels. But, aside from the scholarly traps, it would also mean to ignore the multitude of voices and actions that opposed, rejected and criticized the war, on every side. Even more importantly, the ethnic framing would obscure the underlying political and personal interests, dynamics and strategies of the ethnopolitical entrepreneurs that were involved in the conflict.¹⁸ Additionally, it would further complicate explaining the presence and activity of the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA), an institution of the collapsed federal state, which by its very definition was multiethnic (or non-ethnic, that is, Yugoslav).¹⁹ Nonetheless, on a discursive, perceptual level, the war was indeed characterized and determined by ethnic polarization, or antagonism, with the power to create such strong instances of ‘groupness’ as to effectively engage in acts of violence (symbolic and real). Yet it is far more useful to follow Brubaker’s approach to the formation of ‘groupness’, by conceptualizing it as an ‘event’, as something that ‘happens’, or a project that is being realized. By:

14 Ž, Dubravka, *The Body of War: Media, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Break-up of Yugoslavia*, Duke UP, Durham, 2007, p. 5

15 Ibid., p. 5.

16 A Oberschall, ‘The Manipulation of Ethnicity: From Ethnic Cooperation to Violence and War in Yugoslavia’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 23, no. 6, 2000, p. 983.

17 Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, MA: Harvard UP, Cambridge, 2004, p. 10.

18 Brubaker, p. 18.

19 F Bieber, ‘The Role of the Yugoslav People’s Army in the Dissolution of Yugoslavia – The Army without a State?’ in J Dragović-Soso, L Cohen (eds), *State Collapse in South Eastern Europe: New Perspectives on Yugoslavia’s Disintegration*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, 2008, p. 305.

“treating groupness as variable and contingent, rather than fixed and given, allows us to take account of, and to account for, phases of extraordinary cohesion and moments of intensely felt collective solidarity, without implicitly treating high levels of groupness as constant, enduring, or definitionally present.”²⁰

It is equally important to be attentive and sensitive to instances when/where ‘groupness’ does not happen, that is, it fails to ‘crystallize’, “despite the group-making efforts of ethnopolitical entrepreneurs, and even in situations of intense elite-level ethnopolitical conflict.”²¹ Groupness, that is, the mobilization, stimulation and manipulation of part of the population along ethnopolitical lines, should be seen as the project of certain political organizations – but the success or effectiveness of this project should be judged on a case-to-case basis, contextually; always counting on the possibility that the project might fail.

Yet, even in the case where the ethnic discourse was successful and a sense of groupness managed to ‘crystallize’, there remains the question: how do we get from a sense of togetherness and solidarity, ‘national pride’ and ‘patriotism’, to the stage of engaging in violent acts against a perceived ‘other’ group? How do we get from the pride and positive self-image of ‘belonging’ to the atrocities of the Yugoslav wars?

Anthony Oberschall proposes a theory to explain the success of ethnic manipulation in driving groups and people to join the fighting and commit violent acts. His explanation rests on the concept of a cognitive frame that is accessible and familiar to all members of a given society:

“A cognitive frame is a mental structure which situates and connects events, people and groups into a meaningful narrative in which the social world that one inhabits makes sense and can be communicated and shared with others.”²²

Oberschall argues that in the Yugoslav context people experienced ethnic relations, or the question of ethnic identification, through two frames: the normal frame and the crisis frame; with both frames being “anchored in private and family experience, in culture and in public life.”²³

He describes the normal cognitive frame as a neutral state, where “ethnic relations were cooperative and neighborly. Colleagues and workers, schoolmates and teammates transacted routinely across nationality.”²⁴ In other words, ethnic identification was not central in the daily experience, groupness was effectively non-existent, and other, non-ethnic discourses dominated everyday life. In opposition

20 Brubaker, p. 12.

21 Ibid., p. 12.

22 Oberschall, p. 989.

23 Ibid., p. 989.

24 Ibid.

to this, the crisis frame²⁵ has a different dimension, since it “was grounded in the experiences and memories of the Balkan wars, the first and second world wars.” In the context of such crises: “civilians were not distinguished from combatants”; and more importantly, “everyone was held collectively responsible for their nationality and religion, and became a target of revenge and reprisals.”²⁶ Thus, in this second, exceptional cognitive frame, ethnic identification becomes important, it is assigned automatically, involuntarily, and the logic of social action and behavior is determined by the discourse of ethnic polarity. As Oberschall observes, each group becomes “encapsulated”, eliminating the possibility of dialogue and understanding.²⁷

From all this, Oberschall develops the following argument: when the crisis frame got ‘switched on’ by strategic misinformation and perceived threats, the discourses of ethnic antagonism “became persuasive, were believed and inspired fear”.²⁸ The fear and chaos resulting from the crisis frame created a sense of ethnically defined groupness even on the grass-roots level, and propelled ethno-political entrepreneurs (nationalist politicians like Tudjman and Milošević) into ruling positions. The nationalist elites eliminated the moderates and the opposition, and effectively organized structures through which members of one ‘ethnic group’ can (or are forced to) fight against the ‘other group’ (be it by way of creating militias or conscripting for the national, or federal army). The application of the crisis frame can thus provide a possible explanation to how the ‘crystallization’ of groupness can be instrumentalized for the purposes of war.

In the following two sections of the paper I will analyze two cases related to the involvement of the Hungarian minorities in the war in order to exemplify different processes of group ‘crystallization’, and the effects of the crisis frame in specific, local situations. In the first case, focusing on the anti-war demonstrations in Vojvodina, I will demonstrate how the ethnic manipulation fails, crystallization is unsuccessful and the crisis frame remains inactive, with almost all Hungarians adhering to the anti-war opposition; and in the second case, related to the attacked and devastated villages of Baranja, I will try to show how the crisis frame imposed by violent conflict created a strong sense of groupness, with many Hungarians voluntarily joining the Croatian Guard.

1. The Reaction to the War in Vojvodina

The developing war in Slovenia, Croatia, and later Bosnia, was by no mean received with widespread enthusiasm throughout Serbia, on the contrary, it sparked a significant outburst of opposition and criticism, on every level of the society. As Robert Thomas writes:

²⁵ The concept of the crisis frame is helpful in analysis if it is used without the historical reference, not as a ‘dormant’ attitude waiting at the back of individuals’ minds, but as a potential framing of an antagonistic attitude brought on by present circumstances

²⁶ Oberschall, p. 989.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 993.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 998.

“The progress of the fighting in Croatia prompted a wave of anti-war sentiment across Serbia. Instances of resistance to conscription were common not only in the capital and other large cities, but also in the small towns of the Serbian interior. The forms that this resistance took ranged from individual acts of evasion to instances of collective mutiny.”²⁹

He mentions such a memorable case from March 1992, when 380 reservists from the town of Gornji Milanovac refused to return to their positions in Western Slavonia.³⁰ Also very interesting is the case of the feminist opposition to the war, which manifested itself, among other forms, in the demonstrations of the ‘Women in Black’ group (*Zene u crnom*).³¹ Organized following the Israeli example, the group gathered in the center of Belgrade every Wednesday evening, starting with 9 October 1991, to protest the war, militarism, nationalism and violence against women.

But the most common form of rejecting or escaping the war was draft-dodging, the refusal to be conscripted in the Yugoslav People’s Army, which resulted in either a continued and difficult hiding strategy, or more likely, in choosing emigration. Mark Shapiro, writing in 1999, gives the estimate that “between 100,000 and 300,000 young men have fled Serbia to avoid military service over the past decade”.³² Of course, the high numbers of draft-dodging should not suggest that all those who emigrated, were sympathetic with the Slovenian, Croatian or Bosnian cause, or, more importantly, that the ones that did get conscripted (and many did) were supportive of the war. Serbian authorities applied several forceful methods (as I will show with the examples from Vojvodina) to coercively draft young men into the army, and even in the absence of these, refusing military service automatically lead to court-martial and jail. The effects of forced drafting and lack of commitment were to be witnessed in the difficulties the JNA encountered when trying to impose discipline all through the war. This was observed by Silber and Little, in writing about the Battle of Vukovar:

“The attack on Vukovar revealed the shambles to which the dissolution of Yugoslavia had reduced the country’s once-proud fighting force. The level of desertion, particularly among non-Serb officers and conscripts, was high. So was the degree to which the conscripts, in the face of battle, disobeyed orders.”³³

The province of Vojvodina (like Kosovo) witnessed a very intense process of drafting in the first two years of the war, and as a reaction, this gave rise to a series of serious anti-war and anti-conscription demonstrations. Though it is hard to objectively judge to what measure did the Milošević regime actually apply a discriminatory drafting policy against Vojvodina, the local Hungarian political or

29 R Thomas, *Serbia under Milošević: Politics in the 1990s*, Hurst, London, 1999, p. 107.

30 Thomas, p. 107.

31 <http://www.zeneucrnornom.org/>

32 M Shapiro, ‘Serbia’s Lost Generation’, *Mother Jones*, Sept.-Oct. 1999, 26.

33 L Silber & A Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation*, Penguin, New York, 1997, p. 177.

intellectual actors were determined to prove this, and convince the international community about the aggressions committed against the Hungarian minority. The president of the Democratic Community of Magyars in Vojvodina (the VMDK), András Ágoston, sent an official letter to Lord Owen and Cyrus Vance, Co-chairmen of the Conference on Yugoslavia in Geneva on 7 December 1992, complaining that: “The [Serbian] government mobilized 2.5 times more Hungarians into front-line battalions than the Hungarians’ percentage in Serbia’s population would warrant.”³⁴ Previously, the Hungarian Human Rights Foundation published one of its Alerts, on 28 January 1992, which contained the full text of another complaint coming from the VMDK about the strategic drafting of its leaders, saying that: “The latest large-scale mobilization campaign is having a particularly adverse effect on the representative organ of the Hungarian minority, the VMDK”.³⁵ Scholar, and former Vojvodina politician, Tibor Várady states in his report submitted to the Helsinki Commission, on 5 May 1994, that the military draft had been used to pressure ethnic Magyars into leaving the country. In his estimation, about 40,000 Hungarians, mostly military age, have left the province since the war started. He also reinforces the position that disproportionately high numbers of Hungarians were forcefully conscripted into the army:

“Mobilization in the Vojvodina has been pursued with more zeal than elsewhere in Serbia. In a number of Hungarian villages, police blocked the streets during the night while draft-calls were delivered. Many were taken to service forcibly, in disregard of existing regulations. Numerous cases of harassment and beating were also reported.”³⁶

The report published by the Human Rights Watch/Helsinki in 1994 about the “Human Rights Abuses of Non-Serbs in Kosovo, Sandzak and Vojvodina” has even higher numbers than the ones Várady reported:

“More than 100,000 Vojvodina men were mobilized to fight in Slavonija (Eastern Croatia). Another 100,000 fled the country to avoid the draft. At the same time, the regime began resettling thousands of Serbian refugees from Croatia and Northern Bosnia in Vojvodina, thus planting the seeds for conflict.”³⁷

In probably one of the very first articles published on the issue of the involvement of Hungarians in the wars, Andrew Ludányi states that, on the one hand, the forced conscriptions were implemented by the authorities to “break the opposition to the war”³⁸, that is, to physically remove those political actors who spoke against the war (like in the case of Nenad Čanak); and on the other hand, he goes to the lengths of arguing that the “induction into the military had become an instrument of ‘ethnic cleansing’ for the Milošević administration” in

34 Quoted in Ludányi, p. 134.

35 Ibid., p. 134.

36 Quoted in Ludányi, p. 134.

37 Human Rights Watch, ‘Human Rights Abuses of Non-Serbs in Kosovo, Sandzak and Vojvodina’, *A Human Rights Watch Report*, vol. 6, no. 6, 1994, p. 12.

38 Ludányi, p. 134.

Vojvodina.³⁹ It bears repeating that it is highly difficult to objectively demonstrate the explicitly anti-Hungarian or anti-minority nature of the drafting policy, but the charge of indirectly caused ‘ethnic cleansing’ does have some validity if one looks at the patterns in the repopulation of Serb refugees into Vojvodina, and the radical demographic changes produced by these measures in the province (I will discuss them in a later section of the paper).

Nearly every small town or village in Vojvodina organized protests against the conscripting of the local men, and against the war which was considered absurd and in totality alien to the province and its people. The first protest was held in Kispiac (Male Pijace), on 6th and 7th September 1991; then on the 19th a mixed ethnic demonstration of mothers in Temerin; followed by a protest of several thousand people against drafting in Zenta (Senta), on 5th October, where an elected committee demanded a referendum through which the residents can express their rejection of participation in the war. In November, Amnesty International published an alert⁴⁰, drawing the world’s attention to the anti-war movements in Serbia, explicitly mentioning the Hungarian demonstrations; and in December the Hungarian Foreign Ministry issued a statement⁴¹ which condemns the Serbian authorities for the political pressure and disproportionate drafting policies applied against the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina.

Probably the most original and daring anti-war attempt was carried out in a small Hungarian village in the North of Vojvodina, in a three-month sit-down protest which became to be known as the Zitzer Club. On 6 May 1992, in the small village of about 2000 people called Oromhegyes (Serbian name: Trešnjevac), 200 men received official notice that they are to report in the next days to the neighboring military barracks for drafting. On the next day the women of the village started preparations to call together a meeting to protest against the conscription of their husbands, sons, brothers or partners. Together with the local branch of the VMDK (represented by Balla Lajos-Laci), on 10th May, they organized an anti-war, anti-drafting demonstration in the village pizzeria, called Zitzer Club (hence the fitting name). The representatives of the VMDK issued a message to the entire region calling on all those who wish to participate in the meeting. The demonstration saw itself as a movement of civil disobedience, having as its slogan: “Our only weapons are words!” The commonly proposed demands of the first meeting were the following: the withdrawal of the conscriptions; the immediate return of the already conscripted reservists; general amnesty for those who fled the country because of the drafting; the establishment of a Peace Committee in Kanizsa (Kanjiža).

The authorities ordered 12 tanks to surround the village, ‘in case peace is disrupted’ by the demonstrators, and although the officers would not agree to meet with the representatives of the protest, the army did not attack, but instead withdrew after 3 days. The Zitzer Club protest went on to last 93 days, with up to 700-1200

39 Ibid., p. 134.

40 <http://www.freeweb.hu/faktum/dokument/vmdok/vmkron/vmkr9111.htm>

41 <http://www.freeweb.hu/faktum/dokument/vmdok/vmkron/vmkr9112.htm>

people attending some meetings. The attendants were of mixed ethnicity, mostly Hungarians, Serbs and Croats, and every statement, demand or complaint was issued in the two languages. All through its existence, the movement did not adopt a specifically Hungarian stance since the position of the organizers was anti-war and anti-authority, but not anti-majority. This attitude was reinforced by a gesture that wished to upgrade the movement to an international level: on June 26th some of the participants established the “Zitzer Spiritual Republic”, an original version of a peace organization, with a president, constitution, a hymn (Ravel’s ‘Bolero’), and a coat of arms (a pizza with 3 billiard balls). Due to the media attention given to the protest, shortly after its founding, hundreds of people joined the ‘Republic’ from countries around the world.⁴² The protest was successful in stopping the conscription of the reservists, but the Serbian authorities brought charges against most of the organizers, some of them serving a sentence up to four months.⁴³

The common feature of all the protests and demonstrations presented above, especially the case of the Zitzer Club, is the non-ethnic character of the discourses and participants involved. This mixed ethnic character went against the repeated attempts of ethnic manipulation coming from different political elites: on the one hand, there were several Hungarian ethnopolitical entrepreneurs from the Vojvodina political organizations who accused the Serbian authorities of anti-minority measures, and promoted an ethnically based discourse of ‘victimization’ (on an international scale); and, on the other hand, there was the powerful pro-Great Serbia, war-propaganda coming from Belgrade (through the media)⁴⁴. Yet the protests did not form along ethnic lines, but according to the logic of opposition to the war. Ethnic manipulation (of any kind) was unsuccessful in creating a general sense of groupness: neither for the purposes of the war (against the ‘enemies’), nor for creating polarization and antagonism between the minority and the majority. One of the main reasons for this failure of ‘crystallization’ is the absence of the ‘crisis frame’ which could have induced a disruption of social relations. Even in the case of Oromhegyes, where the army surrounded the village, the crisis frame did not activate, the strategies of civil disobedience and anti-violence were stronger than the possible threat coming from the tanks. The stability of the normal cognitive frame managed to prevent the production of antagonism along ethnic lines.

2. Reaction to the war in Baranja

It is significantly more difficult to give a scholarly account of the involvement of the Baranja Hungarians in the war due to the lack, or high subjectivity, of the sources related to this topic. It is generally reported that Hungarian communities, just like the rest of the non-Serb population in Baranja and Eastern Slavonia, were directly affected by the war in Croatia, since they inhabited the territories which were

42 <http://www.c3.hu/~farkashe/english/zitzer.html>

43 Interview in the documentary film by Péter Pál Tóth and Zoltán Bárdy. „Magyarok a Balkáni Háborúban, 1991-1997” (Hungarians in the Balkan Wars 1991-1997), Kapu-film, 1999.

44 See: Žarkov, *The Body of War*; or Milan Milošević, ‘The Media Wars: 1987-1997,’ J Udovički, J Ridgeway (eds), *Burn This House. The Making and Unmaking of Yugoslavia*, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 1997, pp. 108-130.

the first to be occupied by the Yugoslav People's Army and the Serb paramilitary forces. Villages with a mostly Hungarian majority, like Szentlászló (Laslovo), Kórogy, Kopács, Újbezd, Ernőháza (Ernestinovo) etc., were heavily shelled and destroyed by the artillery of the federal army, and then purged by the 'liberating' paramilitary forces that occupied the villages after the shelling was done. With the non-Serb population either driven away in large numbers, or killed on the spot, the majority of these villages became part of the Republic of Srpska Krajina after 1992, until their reintegration into Croatia in 1998, when some of the Hungarian families moved back from Hungary.⁴⁵

Yet, in spite of the deep and first-hand involvement of the Hungarian minority in the worst parts of the war, there is no investigation of the position Hungarians (individuals or local communities) in Croatia took in relation to the discourses promoting the 'ethnic war' narrative, and the ethnic manipulation processes applied on both sides towards creating the antagonism needed for the conflict. Taking into consideration that not all Hungarians left Baranja when the war started, but instead joined the Croatian Guard, and participated in the fight against the JNA and the Serb paramilitaries, the question arises: what motivated these individuals or groups to take sides and play active roles (sometimes fighting against Hungarian conscripts of the JNA) in such a deeply ethnicized conflict?

To seriously address these questions, of course, a thorough ethnographical research should be carried out in the region involving the surviving or resettled population – presently existing sources related to the topic (interviews, memoirs, documentary films) are scarce, difficult to access, and highly subjective. Out of all, the most interesting and useful account on the involvement of Hungarians in the war is a four-part documentary film made by Péter Pál Tóth and Zoltán Bárdy in 1999, entitled „Magyarok a Balkáni Háborúban, 1991-1997” (Hungarians in the Balkan Wars 1991-1997).⁴⁶ It is a very emotionally driven, shock-effect seeking account of the devastations and atrocities of the Yugoslav war, with a special focus on the Hungarian communities of Vojvodina and Baranja. While building the 'victim' image for the minority, it implicitly creates a strong anti-Serb position, uncritically reproducing the ethnic oppositions of the war. Yet, besides its obviously biased character, the documentary contains several revealing interviews with ethnic Hungarian men from Yugoslavia who fought in the war: either as soldiers of the JNA, or as volunteers in the Croatian Guard.

From the interviews in the documentary several stories unfold about how certain Hungarian individuals decided to join the Croatian side, or were forced by circumstances to do so. Some young men from Vojvodina, after receiving the conscription papers from the Serbia authorities, decided to dodge the draft, fled to Baranja and joined the Croatian Guard. There is the story of József Juhász (or,

45 S Krisztián, *A borvátországi magyarlakta falvak története (The history of the Hungarian villages in Croatia)*, pp. 359-374. Retrieved from <http://tortenelemszak.elte.hu/data/4151/szigetvari.pdf>

46 Accessible on Youtube (but only in Hungarian): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyscXnxXlHg&feature=youtu.be_gdata_player

Julien Josic), from Novi Sad, who, after serving twice in the French Foreign Legion, joined the Croatian paramilitary group HOS (Hrvatske Oslobodilacke Snage) in 1991, and then fought all through the war, leaving the army as a colonel, also getting the Croatian citizenship, and becoming the only non-Croatian to receive the Hero of Croatia medal. Another story is about Eduardo Rosa-Flores, a Bolivian-Hungarian mercenary, who joined the Croatian Guard while on assignment as a journalist working for the BBC. He confesses in the documentary that the first time he identified himself as a Hungarian, was in the context of the conflict zone in Baranja. Rosa-Flores had a leading role in organizing the defense of Laslovo, where together with other international and Hungarian mercenaries they founded the First International Brigade (PIV). Rosa-Flores was also granted Croatian citizenship, and has written several times about his involvement in the war.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, in order to gain some insight into the attitude of the Baranja Hungarians facing the war, one needs to look at the interviews made with those (anonymous) members of the minority community who joined the fighting. From their accounts it is revealed that with the beginning of the war, the Hungarian villagers found themselves in a critical situation: the invading forces automatically considered them to be on the side of ‘the enemy’, so their reaction could either be hurried emigration, or actively, consciously taking up the role that the Serb forces attributed to them, that is: joining the Croat side of the war machine. As one of the female ex-soldiers explains: “Those were very critical minutes: it was either them or us. We couldn’t just stand patiently, and wait for them to bash our brains out.”⁴⁸ Another participant states that in his view, it was the Battle of Vukovar that changed the minds of many people in choosing sides, since after seeing the atrocities committed there “everybody realized that the whole thing is a big, chauvinistic, Serb war, fought for the single purpose of gaining territories.”⁴⁹ Perhaps the most commonly shared position among the men from the small Hungarian villages was verbalized by one of them in the following way:

“First we said that it’s not our war, but by 1993 most of us, Hungarian men, joined the Croatian army. We saw that truth is on this side. The truth was really on our side. If back in 1918 they transformed this region into Croatia, now I feel that it is my country as well.”⁵⁰

From these accounts it seems fairly reasonable to claim that in the context of the heavily attacked Baranja villages the crisis frame was externally and uncompromisingly activated. The local Hungarians were automatically grouped together with the other non-Serb ‘enemy’ population by the invading forces, so ethnic identification and polarization was involuntarily ascribed to the communities. The reverse effect of the same process framed the attackers, be they soldiers of the JNA or paramilitary groups, all as ‘Serbs’, producing and reinforcing the ‘ethnic

47 E Rosa-Flores’ blog: <http://www.freeweib.hu/eduflores/keretmunkaim.htm>

48 *Hungarians in the Balkan Wars, 1991-1997*, Part 2.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

antagonism' of the war. Faced with the blunt fact that their physical existence was unwanted in the occupied territories, most of the locals escaped to Hungary, but others⁵¹ accepted the role attributed to them by the crisis situation, and joined the fighting on the Croatian side. The activation of the crisis frame managed to produce a strong sense of solidarity towards the new Croatian state, towards the other non-Serb communities, and a determined animosity towards the invading, destructive forces which were simply seen as the "Serbs".

So, as the analysis of the two cases shows, the forceful penetration of the war in the two regions where Hungarian populations lived produced different phenomena that played out according to opposing logic. While the activation of the crisis frame induced the crystallization of groupness for the Baranja Hungarians, where the identification as 'Hungarian' meant a prompt mobilization in favor of the Croatian side of the war machine, the stability of the normal cognitive frame prevented groupness from being produced in Vojvodina, rendering 'Hungarianness' unimportant in face of the cross-ethnic anti-war demonstration.

Effects of the war on the Hungarian minorities

Besides the fact that both of the Hungarian communities of the former Yugoslavia were to some certain extent directly involved in the war, they also went through a disruptive transformation due to the massive emigration processes, and the forced repopulation practices which accompanied and followed the war. Fearing the violence of war, either as possible victims or as involuntary perpetrators, large numbers of ethnic Hungarians left Baranja and Vojvodina (mostly to Hungary), leaving, in the first region, deserted villages behind, and in the second, local communities without young members, work force, intellectuals, and a leading elite. In many cases, the return of families was discouraged by the mass relocation of Serb war refugees from Krajina and Bosnia, who took over the abandoned houses with the blessing of the authorities.

The Hungarian community of Croatia was the most directly involved in the armed conflict, most of the Hungarian villages being in the territories first to be occupied by the JNA and the Serb paramilitaries. During the 1991-1998 period, when the region was part of the Republic of Srpska Krajina, almost all Hungarian families fled from their villages, and only moved back gradually after the territory was reintegrated into Croatia. The rebuilding of the devastated villages (Szentlászló, Kórogy, Kopács, Újbezd) was initiated in 1999 with the financial help of the Hungarian government (200 million Ft), and donations from several organizations and local communities from Hungary.⁵² The 2002 census showed that the number of Hungarians in Croatia has decreased by more than one-quarter (from 22,000 in 1991 to 16,000).

51 It is difficult to get an estimate of their number, since the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs, the *Ministarstvo branitelja*, has not yet released the official documents containing the 'Homeland War Veterans' Register' which could possibly help in identifying the 'Hungarian' component of the Croatian Army at the time of the war.

52 Szigetvári, p. 372.

The dynamics of migration and demographic change were dramatic in Vojvodina also, resulting in the transformation of the ethnic composition of the whole province. In 1994 the Human Rights Watch/Helsinki report gives very high numbers related to the migration:

“Over the past three years, an estimated 60,000 Hungarians and 40,000 Croats have been forced to leave Vojvodina. Hundreds of opposition leaders and many of their supporters who lost their jobs were forced to emigrate. Ethnic, social and political structures of the province have been changed.”⁵³ (Helsinki)

In 2004 Klemenčič & Zupančič provide more accurate data about the measure of demographic change. Judging from the census of 2002, the number of Hungarians living in Vojvodina dropped by some 50,000 (or 14.88%) since the 1991 count (from 340,000 to 290,000). The main reasons for leaving were the economic crisis that came with the war, the unemployment and poverty that followed, and also the “tense atmosphere between the Serbs – particularly Serbian refugees (242,340 persons in 1996) from Croatia and Bosnia – and the Hungarian and other minorities”.⁵⁴ In the same period between 1991 and 2002, the number of the Serb population grew by more than 170,000 (or 14.80%). In terms of percentage, the census shows that the proportion of Serbs had reached 65.05% (compared with 57.21% in 1991) and that of Hungarians had fallen to 14.28% (compared with 16.94% in 1991).⁵⁵ These changes have significant consequences in matters related to the local and regional levels of political representation, which directly influence the implementation of minority rights. As already mentioned above, this demographic transformation brought continued friction between members of the minority and majority groups, with the inter-ethnic relations in the region deteriorating after 2004, and resulting in several cases of attacks against Hungarian intellectuals and political leaders.⁵⁶

Conclusions

The paper started out from the initial observation that, even though the two major Hungarian communities of the former Yugoslavia, living in the provinces of Vojvodina and Baranja, were directly involved and indirectly affected by the wars, one finds no serious scholarly discussion and/or thorough investigation concerning this issue. The involvement of the Hungarian minority manifested itself in many aspects. On the one hand, members of these minorities became victims of the armed conflicts, either being forced to leave their home regions in great numbers, or suffering heavy casualties in the fighting. And on the other hand, an extensive percent of the male members of such communities were incorporated by conscription into the opposing war machines of the Yugoslav conflict. Additionally, the aftermath of the wars, which was characterized by a widespread, and sometimes forceful,

⁵³ Human Rights Watch, p. 13.

⁵⁴ Klemenčič & Zupančič, p. 864.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 864.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 864.

relocation of war refugees and uprooted populations, dramatically changed the demographic structure of the areas where minorities lived. These changes caused the disruption of the local political balance between the minority and majority groups, and the large-scale emigration of the members of the minority.

The purpose of the paper was to address this ‘blind-spot’ in the scholarly work dealing with the 1991-1995 wars in former Yugoslavia, namely: to examine more closely the involvement of the Hungarian minorities of the Baranja and Vojvodina regions in the armed conflicts, focusing on the war in Croatia. The aim of the analysis was to embed this issue in the ongoing scholarly discussions on ethnicity formation and ethnic conflict, and then to conceptualize the nature of the involvement of the Hungarian minority in the war. In theorizing the Yugoslav conflict as an ‘ethnic war’ I used the approach developed by Rogers Brubaker for explaining ethnicity as a project: as the ‘crystallization of groupness’. Then I linked the process of ethnic manipulation involved in creating ‘groupness’ to the concepts of the ‘normal’ and ‘crisis’ cognitive frames, elaborated by Anthony Obershall, to explain ethnic conflicts in the Yugoslav context.

In the second part of the paper I analyzed two specific cases related to the involvement of the Hungarian minorities in the war in order to exemplify different processes of group ‘crystallization’, and the effects of the crisis frame in specific, local situations. In the first case, focusing on the anti-war demonstrations in Vojvodina, I tried to demonstrate how the external and internal ethnic manipulation failed, crystallization was unsuccessful and the crisis frame remained inactive, with almost all Hungarians adhering to the anti-war opposition. Conversely, in the second case, related to the attacked and devastated villages of Baranja, I attempted to show how the crisis frame imposed by violent conflict created a strong sense of groupness, with many Hungarians voluntarily joining the Croatian Guard. The application of the conceptual framework concluded that the inevitable crisis frame produced the crystallization of groupness for the Baranja Hungarians, while the stability of the normal frame prevented it from being produced in Vojvodina. Examined from this perspective, the case of the Hungarian minorities just reinforces the claim that – although it was almost impossible not to get implicated in the war – the armed conflict was not an ‘ethnic war’, but an artificially imposed aggression and polarizing force that went against the normal frame of mind and social behavior of a multiethnic federal state.

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