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HOW SHOULD WE REMEMBER?

In spring 1999, the traumatic decade in the Balkans came to an end when NATO bombs fell on Yugoslavia.

25 years later in Belgrade, Gazeta Sasha's former editor-in-chief Juho Pitkänen spoke with two Zoomers with roots in ex-Yugoslavia, in search of a path for their generation to reconcile better than their parents.

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In early 1999, the Kosovo War had raged on for months, and the possibility of another Balkan genocide seemed to be on the horizon, as Yugoslav forces were ethnically cleansing the local Albanian population. Traumatized by the few-years-earlier Bosnian war and the genocide committed by the Bosnian Serbs, the West decided to act. The bombardment of Yugoslavia began, without the approval of the UN Security Council.

The US-led bombings lasted for two and half months and were largely focused on the crumbling nation's capital, Belgrade. While the official policy was to focus on critical infrastructure and military targets, hundreds of civilians died – the official number still being debated, though.

Strolling through the streets of Belgrade, the impact of the events of 1999 on the public space is unmistakable: some bombed buildings have been intentionally left in ruins, while anti-NATO graffiti dot the walls of most streets. The NATO peacekeepers in Kosovo are seen as occupiers of “the heart of Serbia”, as a banner

next to the Defence Ministry of Serbia tells you. Earlier in the spring, graffiti calling people to take to the streets on March 24th also appeared on several buildings – marking the 25th anniversary of the beginning of the bombings.

For outsiders, the culture around the NATO bombings seems complex, painful, and often toxic. Due to the trauma, it's a dominant topic in the national narrative, but also something to avoid when conversing with Serbs, especially if you think the bombings were at least somewhat justified. That's why I wanted to meet two locals from ex-Yugoslav countries and to discuss how our generation could create a culture that enables honest and less toxic discussion on such a painful topic.

Those born at the turn of the millenia are now in universities, writing the histories and soon creating the policies that deal with the past. Svetla Jaksic, a Macedonian born in 2000, is studying International Relations in Belgrade. For her family, the events of 1999 constitute a painful topic, as her father is Serb, and her mother a Macedonian – a mixed family, typical for the Yugoslav period.



“The NATO bombings and the Kosovo war in general are difficult to discuss, as my father’s side of the family were Serbs from Pristina who fled the war to Belgrade. At first, they and other people fleeing the war received harsh treatment.”

Even though there is painful trauma involved, her family and friends still discuss the 1990s.

“My parents were shocked that Yugoslavia fell. They really thought it’d stay intact forever, in the name of brotherhood and unity. But there was provoked nationalism, which now feels like a sad story”, Jaksic says, emphasizing

the word provoked – in her parents’ Yugoslav youth, a war between its citizens seemed out of question.

“When the wars started, my parents’ generation looked at each other as different nations for the first time. All of their memories and the most beautiful times of their lives were destroyed.”

“One of my friends in Belgrade lost his entire family when a clinic was bombed. There is too much pain, and the topic is impossible to discuss with him. Maybe I would be like that too if it had happened to my family.”

In the Skopje bazaar, Albanians and Macedonians live together peacefully. That is how society should be.

While North Macedonia was not directly involved in the Yugoslav wars, the bombings of 1999 became a relevant topic again in the late 2010s, as the country was about to join NATO. Jaksic sees the North Macedonian accession to NATO as a strategic move, not a middle finger to their northern neighbor.

“Some Macedonians were not happy with us joining because of what happened in 1999 - also some Serbians thought it was selfish from the Macedonian side. I understand why people who grew up in Yugoslavia feel the NATO bombing as their own, but for our generation it is not as relevant. Montenegro has joined NATO, as have Croatia and Slovenia. We must remember what happened and collectively move on.”

In the 1940s, the Independent State of Croatia, a Nazi German puppet state, committed genocide against the Serbs, while the violent Serbian Chetniks slaughtered Croats and Muslims while fighting guerilla warfare against the Croatians and Yugoslav partisans. The complicated Balkan fabric of World War 2 pitted neighboring families against each other, and similar violence happened 50 years later during the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

In fact, in her 2003 book *They Would Never Hurt a Fly*, Croatian journalist **Slavenka Drakulić** argues that one of the reasons for the violent Yugoslav 90s is the trauma from the Second World War never being addressed. Instead, the pain was repressed for several decades to make way for Yugoslav *brotherhood and unity*.

When it comes to the new generation’s responsibility in preventing the cycle of generational trauma from continuing, Jaksic sees only one option: not to dwell in the past. For her, the answer is creating the conditions for democracy, rule of law and less corruption – in a nutshell, working towards a functioning and inclusive state.

“In 10 years, our generation will be in position to change things. We have lived only under democracy, and the past has taught us that conflict can be provoked in various ways, which we must be aware of. Instead of nationalism, the human side in all of us must be awakened. In the Skopje bazaar, Albanians and Macedonians live together peacefully. That is how society should be.”





Milena Djordjevic was born in late 1998 in Kokomo, Indiana. Her Serbian parents emigrated from Yugoslavia to the United States in the early 1990s, but the events of 1999 were felt across the ocean.

“My mom had just had me when the bombardment began, it was extremely stressful for her. We had family close to the bombing sites in Novi Sad and Belgrade. My grandfather remembers standing on the balcony in the outskirts of the capital, seeing the city aflame.”

In Djordjevic’s family, discussion on the bombings is not impossible. Her parents bring the topic up when they want to criticize the US.

“For them, the bombing was a demonstration of American hypocrisy. My dad has told me that he had culture shock when he was watching American news about the events in Yugoslavia. For example, they were talking about bombing the bridges in Novi Sad to prevent the army from entering Kosovo. If you look at the map, you understand how that makes no sense.”

For a Serb growing up in the US, the discussion on the bombings created cognitive dissonance. Djordjevic's family gave her a negative portrayal of the US, but her school education was very patriotic. Since then, she has explored the same topics during her bachelor's at the University of Texas and her master's at the University of Belgrade.

"It was a huge thing to be from a country that the US had bombed. As a kid, I thought the bombing was unjust, and I had these *Kosovo je Srbija* opinions. As I grew older, I wanted to have an objective opinion – something a well-educated Croat or Albanian could agree on. I wanted an understanding of this mess that would do justice to what happened and take all sides into account. As they say, the truth will set you free, but at first it will piss you off. I think that's part of the reason that sent me on this Eastern European studies route."

Like Jaksic, Djordjevic is somewhat critical of memorialization for memorialization's sake.

"Some scholars are entirely against memorialization. Usually each group memorializes their own side, while having amnesia on what they themselves did. Here, there is basically no discussion about what was done in the name of Serbia both in Bosnia and Kosovo. The NATO bombings are important to memorialize, but in an ideal world, it would be done in the wider context of the Yugoslav wars, and the lesson would be to prevent it from happening ever again."

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"Only democracy and rule of law cannot address the inner identity of people. There should be reckoning that both vindicates valid trauma of the Serbs and addresses the cycle of violence done in the name of Serbia."

In Belgrade, the memorials of the NATO bombing are extremely one-sided. The memory sites have plaques which are written solely from a victim's perspective, without providing proper context. Addressing this, for Djordjevic, could be one the first step towards a healthier culture of remembrance.

"We need to construct a new narrative of not just being the victim, but of the wars in general. Everyone here wants to forget what they have done, and to remember what has been done to them. Our generation has the responsibility of preventing something similar from happening ever again."

When working on her master's thesis on nationalism in the Balkans, Djordjevic received a comment from her friend that influenced her thinking.

"In my thesis draft, I used the term *co-existence*. My friend from Skopje said that it is a Western idea, an idea of only tolerating the people living close to you. Instead we should focus on *mutual existence*."

During Yugoslav times, army personnel were sent to other parts of the country during their service to get acquainted with the multi-ethnic country's other peoples and regions. Djordjevic thinks social media could serve a similar purpose today.

"We are a generation connected by technology. I follow many people from other ex-Yugoslav countries, I think it helps with recognizing our shared humanity. We have been here for centuries, and our existence is not exclusive, but mutual." 📖