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SEEDS OF THE FUTURE

‘PRESENCE’ OF THE PAST IN RELATION TO ETHNIC VIOLENCE

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When your icon of the enemy is complete
you will be able to kill without guilt,
slaughter without shame.

The thing you destroy will have become
merely an enemy of God, an impediment
to the sacred dialectic of history.

– Sam Keen

1. Violent Neighbours

In a refugee camp in Kırklareli, north-west Turkey, a young Bosnian Muslim woman from the municipality of Foča recalls how her next-door-neighbour entered her house in full battle dress in September 1993. He was a good friend of her husband and had even helped her in-laws build their house and vice versa. This, however, did not keep him from raping her in front of her in-laws. Afterwards, he killed all of them except this woman who managed to escape and live to tell her story (Clark 1993).

The villagers of Stupni Do were shocked when a group of thirty to forty Croatian paramilitaries marched down the village's main street. Even though they were dressed in black and hid their faces, villagers recognized them. They were former colleagues from a nearby town. The platoon frightened the villagers with martial songs, calling for women to be brought out to be raped and shouting ‘Let’s kill the Muslims!’ Within forty-eight hours all of the fifty-two houses were burned down, at least twenty-five villagers were dead, and several women were raped (Human Rights Watch 1998). The foregoing events are only two examples of the numerous accounts of neighbourly violence that exist.

Not all of the perpetrators were known to their victims. Individual accounts identify both neighbours and outsiders as perpetrators. Political scientist John Mueller (2000) even argues that most of the groups that committed atrocities were ‘bands of opportunistic marauders’, consisting of persons recruited from street gangs, soccer hooligans, and even criminals released from prison with the specific intent to join these bands. Painting a clear picture of who the perpetrators were in each situation is not an easy task. On the other hand, there are also numerous stories of wartime solidarity across ethnic and religious boundaries that make the overview even more complex.¹ Nevertheless, violence by neighbours, often very brutal, emerges as a major theme in numerous accounts of war and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Lieberman 2006a:295-298).

Notwithstanding the importance of studying how organized bands and paramilitary forces committed atrocities, it is the sudden turn from pre-war friendships to ethnic hatreds that is stupefying. One aspect of understanding the enigma of local villagers participating in massacres includes the role of (nationalist) narratives in convincing people to commit atrocities. Legal scholar Lawrence McNamara (2004:373) interprets national narratives as ‘the ways the nation interprets and explains its identity’.² Some interesting parallels can be identified between the research on the role of national narratives and a recently introduced concept in the field of philosophy of history.

A number of scholars have noticed that these narratives seem to bring the past and the present together, as if historical time and everyday time collapse. Nationalists tried to convince neighbours and friends that they had been ‘massacring each other since time immemorial.’ Allegations covering such a time span are not supported by historical evidence, but it can be argued that memories and stories of mutual atrocities committed during both World Wars are of historical importance to the Yugoslav conflict in the 1990s. Collective memories appear to have transcended the chronological limits of the individual and realized a ‘direct living connection with the past’ (Ignatieff 1993; Jedliciki 1999).³ It seems the past in some instances triggered individuals as well as groups to commit atrocities that just before seemed unlikely in everyday life.

In the field of philosophy of history, several scholars have been discussing the notion of ‘presence’: the way the past seems to manifest itself in the present. Since the discussion is still going on, we are, as philosopher of history Frank Ankersmit (2006:28) argues, ‘in the welcome possession of great freedom to maneuver when using the term. In fact, the only feasible requirement for its use is that it should maximally contribute to our understanding of the humanities.’

Psychologist and historian Eelco Runia (2006a:6) provides a lead for studying the relation between presence and mass violence in Bosnia, when he argues ‘the fact that our past – though irremediably gone – may feel more real than the world we inhabit.’ The notion of presence might help us understand how the past convinces persons to commit atrocities. Not in the sense that the past operates as an agent, but rather that it is able to generate momentum for violent behaviour. Hence, the main question in this paper: What role does the presence of the past play in the sudden outbursts of violence between people that were in amicable relationships just moments before?

This paper does not investigate particular outbursts of violence; numerous studies have been and are being conducted on this topic. The conflict in Bosnia serves merely as a case study to analyse what role the past can play in ethnic violence. In the second section I will discuss how and why ordinary men get involved in ethnic violence and the role narratives play

in these events. Next, I will introduce the notion of presence and propose to understand it as an analogy of the phantom limb. Finally, in the fourth section, I will illustrate how presence and narratives interact in three different areas: agency and responsibility, meaning and experience, and the order of time.

2. Ordinary People and Violence: The Power of Narratives

2.1 The Eruption of Ethnic Conflicts

To analyse the role of narratives it is important to understand the context in which these narratives are able to take root in the minds of many. There are numerous examples of different ethnic groups living together without inflicting atrocities on each other. Before the violent eruptions in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the different ethnic groups had lived together peacefully for almost five decades. Ethnic differences alone are not sufficient to explain outbursts of violence (Mann 2005; Ignatieff 1993).

Ethnic conflicts occur often where ethnicity is the most important measure for social stratification. In these societies, ethnical differences are emphasized and play an important role in everyday life. Conflicts occur mostly when different ethnic groups strive to be in power. Bi-ethnic communities especially with relatively old ethnic groups claiming the same territories frequently face violence. Furthermore, in weak states the interaction between potential ethnic rivals is harsher than in areas where government authority is strong. This is one of the reasons why ethnic violence is often related to wartime situations. Not only do other motives and needs prevail in time of peace, armed battle also causes normalisation of violence and following of orders (Mann 2005:5-7, 33; Naimark 2001:186-187).

Of particular importance in ethnic conflicts is cultural heritage. Ethnic groups often use physical manifestations of this heritage (monuments, temples, artefacts, but also human remains) to define their identity. This heritage evokes national and historical imagination, and at the same time

canalizes feelings and emotions shared among the group. The possession of such artefacts provides authority. The battle for these artefacts can be seen as a competition for ethnic groups to strengthen or create a 'fitting' identity (Barkan and Bush 2002:16-22). In the Yugoslav war of the 1990s, rival groups claimed historic rights to territories and cultural sites, and used symbols and names referring to belligerent factions in World War II, such as Ustasha (Croat) and Chetnik (Serb).

In this competition for identity and heritage, nationalist narratives play an important role. They propose a reading of a certain situation, designate threats (either real or conceived) and are able to call for a collective mobilization towards the destruction of these threats (Semelin 2000:196). National 'hate narratives' centre around themes of betrayal and victimization.⁴ These narratives often deal with a national struggle and recall attacks from, and treason by, other nations. They display hatred of enemies of the protagonist nation, that are 'inherently and irredeemably bad'. Removal, disappearance, or destruction of the hated group can resolve the problems created by it (Lieberman 2006a:300).

Even though national hate narratives account for several of the salient features of ethnic cleansing, they do not constitute the one and only cause for such violence. These events do not have a single cause. According to historian Benjamin Lieberman narratives are nevertheless crucial for ethnic cleansing. Borrowing Norman Naimark's terminology, Lieberman argues (2006a:300): 'National hate narratives do not simply start fires of hatred (...): they make them burn more quickly, and far more intensely.' It is when national hate narratives shape interactions in the present that they become most powerful and destructive: when the stories about historical betrayal and victimization concur with charges of *contemporary* violence and betrayal.

2.2 A Case of Cognitive Dissonance

Besides studying what impact narratives can have, it is also necessary to analyze how they come to play such an important role. To comprehend

this, Lieberman (2006a) introduces the concept of cognitive dissonance: the conflict that arises when a person either holds two starkly conflicting ideas or acts contrary to his or her strongly held beliefs. Lieberman uses cognitive frames introduced by sociologist Anthony Oberschall to understand this paradox. Oberschall (2000:989) defines a cognitive frame as '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.'

Oberschall discerns two types of cognitive frames the Yugoslav people experienced relations through: the normal frame and the crisis frame. In peaceful times, the crisis frame was 'dormant'. The normal frame prevailed and interethnic relations were friendly and cooperative. The crisis frame, however, had its roots in experiences and memories of previous generations and earlier wars. Although Tito had tried to eradicate the crisis frame after World War II, it remained in the memories of older people, intellectuals and religious leaders. Tito's promise of partisan solidarity failed to overcome past distinctions. Politicians that pursued a nationalist agenda, such as Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman, did not invent the crisis frame, but they appealed to it, managed to activate it, and through historical narratives amplified it. The crisis frame merged nationalism with threat propaganda, the first emphasizing the glorification of the nation, the second exaggerating the (imagined) threat to the nation by others, undermining and discrediting the normal frame (Oberschall 2000; ICTY Expert Report of Oberschall 2006; Lieberman 2006b). This, however, seems to imply that the friendly neighbourly relations discussed earlier were only superficial and that beneath the surface old – not necessarily ancient – hatreds were latent, only waiting to be stirred up by nationalists.

Oberschall's thesis is supported by the observations of anthropologist Andrei Simić and former Yugoslav diplomat Civjeto Job. Simić (2000: 106,115) argues that well before the conflict of the 1990s, a deep and obvious separation between the different ethnic groups existed, characterized by mistrust and apprehension. On several of his visits to the Balkans, it was all too evident to him 'that superficial cordiality, more often than not, masked a deep sense of alienation, suspicion and fear'. Notwithstanding

the fact that the people were very similar to each other in many ways; they were deeply divided in reality. In addition, Job acknowledges that ‘the visible evidence of an undisturbed ethnically mixed life was real’, but at the same time realized that ‘something seemed to smolder beneath, a second kind of reality’ (Lieberman 2006b: 303).

2.3 Identity and Violence

The mobilization of underlying tensions between groups requires an analysis of the relation between identity and violence. It can be further understood by examining how individuals operate in groups and how groups perceive outsiders. Henri Tajfel (1974) established a solid basis in experimental literature on this topic. To a large extent, individuals define themselves in terms of their role (or position) in the group. Positions are perceived as more important when the group as a whole performs better than a rival group. Instead of maximizing profits for both groups, individuals tend to maximize differentiation rather than profit.

For a group to exist it is crucial that it manifests itself in the individual’s everyday experience. A person’s way of thinking, relating, knowing and feeling is influenced tremendously by a person’s belonging to a group. Individuals externalise their representation of the group they belong to (e.g. by wearing the same clothes, expressing the same thoughts, using the same words) and at the same time they experience other group members doing the same. As a result, the community becomes inter-subjectively real. Narratives play a crucial role in this process. They situate an individual’s actions in a wider context of his or her social surroundings and provide an instrument with which to understand the world: it shows how the part (individual) fits into a larger whole (group) (Theiler 2003; Steuber 2008).

Submersion in groups decreases the focus on personal identity. Individual norms are overtaken by group norms and can cause people to partially lose awareness of themselves. They are no longer able to evaluate their own actions properly in the relative anonymity the group provides. The

individual does not operate as him or herself, but as a member of a group. This de-individuation and the subsequent loss of self-awareness have a strong effect on normally internalized controls as shame, guilt, or fear, and makes activities otherwise regarded as unthinkable, possible (Waller 2002).

One of the most debated examples of group-based violence is the German Police Battalion 101, part of Operation Reinhard which was responsible for the execution of the Final Solution in Poland. The battalion left a trail of violence, terror and death during a mission in 1942-43. Explanations for these atrocities range from the argument that the people in this Battalion were ‘peculiar people’ (i.e. real Nazis) to the argument that they were mostly ‘ordinary men’.

Michael Mann (2000) compared fifteen hundred biographies of those active in violence committed by German battalions. He concludes that especially Battalion 101 consisted of ‘ordinary’ men, rather than real Nazis. Nevertheless, around eighty-five to ninety percent of them obeyed when they were ordered to shoot women and children. This number is even more striking when we learn that those who opted out did not face serious consequences and did so not because of ethical qualms but physical revulsion (Goldhagen 1996; Reich 1992). Why did these ordinary men commit these deeds?

Historian Ian Kershaw (2008:314-323) examines the two most significant answers to this question. Political scientist Daniel Goldhagen argues (1996) that the unique German racial eliminationist anti-Semitism was a sufficiently potent motivator for the Germans to willingly kill the Jews. Goldhagen advocates the *Sonderweg*-thesis, claiming that what happened could only have happened in Germany because of its specific and unique history. However, most scholars consider Goldhagen’s book a great simplification of the events studied. It is characterized by a speculative style of questioning, selective use of evidence, inconsistencies and inadequacies in the empirical findings, and a lack of comparative analysis (e.g. with Lithuanian, Latvian and Ukrainian participation during the operation).⁵

Opposite to Goldhagen, Christopher Browning argues (1992) that most members of the Battalion were ordinary people who found themselves in coercive yet also comradely organizations. Even though non-compliance was not punished, the men had to face withdrawal of comradeship by peers when they did not comply. Most believed, or at least could tell themselves, that they had little choice. The implications of Browning's analysis are that people of all nationalities present, past, or future are able to commit atrocities because of peer pressure.

Both scholars tried to answer the question 'What made it possible for these ordinary men to do what they did?' – indeed, very similar to the question posed in this paper. Obviously, the example of Battalion 101 can only be partly extrapolated to the case of Bosnia. I have addressed Browning's point of view in the section on ordinary men, identity and violence. In the following chapters I want to focus on the unique aspects of ethnic violence. In the end, this should result in a balanced view that does justice to both the unique historical context of atrocities and the idea that appalling perpetrator behaviour is not limited to specific nations or ethnic groups.

2.4 Perception of Time

Before I turn to the unique aspects of ethnic violence, the observation that for a group to exist it has to manifest itself in the individual's everyday life requires explanation. As I elaborated earlier, the everyday life manifestation in Bosnia was a rather friendly relationship between groups. Nevertheless, individuals and groups derived much of their identity not from everyday life manifestations, but from historical narratives and symbols.

Two different perceptions of time introduced by Lieberman (2006a) can help explain this. The stories of every day life (*quotidien*) deal with everyday activities – eating, dating, playing, sporting, etcetera – whereas the stories of ethnic hatred rely on a sense of *longue durée*. This sense may very well be imagined, but it is a historical time in which national enemies

fight over many decades and which transcends generations and even centuries. The *quotidien*, on the other hand, takes place in a chronology that can be described as everyday time. It is the narratives of the *longue durée* that create 'a direct living connection with the past'.

Lieberman (2006a:307) furthermore argues that narratives repeatedly transform the relationship between past and present: 'They remake the past, and provide a framework for interpreting personal experience that goes far beyond interactions of daily life. Paradoxically, when most powerful, they fuse together the present and the imagined historical past while disconnecting the present from an actual personal past.'

Moreover, nationalist narratives create an idea that a nation is something that as a coherent and bounded unit travels unaffected, and persists, through time. These narratives were crucial for generating violence, but it is important to realize that in isolation they would not have propelled people to drive out their neighbours. It is the fact that the mental boundary between past and present faded that made the actions of individuals a direct response to atrocities committed long before the 1990s (Petrović 2000; Lieberman 2006b). To understand this fusion, I will now turn to the debate on presence.

3. Presence of the Past

The notion of 'presence' was introduced by Eelco Runia (2006a). Although his ideas are not undisputed, his line of thought provides a good point of departure for discussing the unrepresented way the past is present in the present.

Metonymy is the most important notion in Runia's understanding of presence.⁶ Fundamental is that a metonymy realizes a 'presence in absence'. Runia (2006a:20) not only argues that metonymies present something that is not there, but exactly because of 'the absence (...) that is there, the thing that is not there is still present'. In an interview (VPRO 2008), Runia pointed out that metonymies focus on details rather than on

the main issue and by doing so the main issue becomes the most prominent.

Runia (2006a:17) uses modern monuments to clarify how metonymy works. In contrast to their early nineteenth-century equivalents, modern monuments are predominantly metonymical. For example, Peter Eisenman's Berlin Holocaust Memorial – a site with a large number of slabs of different height arranged in a grid pattern on a sloping field – 'has little to say, but much to stand for.' The monument does not represent the event, but rather it presents the absence of that event in the here and now. Instead of transferring meaning, as pre-modern monuments tend to do, modern metonymical monuments concentrate on a transfer of presence. The past is not present by representation, but conserved in an underlying way by means of temporal transposition, or metonymy (Cf.: Kasabova 2008).

Runia's elaboration on presence becomes more problematic when he attributes presence an *Aktuelle Macht* (i.e. agency). Runia (2006b: 306-308) claims that presence *itself* can either make people think or do things. For example, the American soldiers who tortured Iraqi prisoners in Abu Grhaib prison had to do so because of the presence of the past in this prison: history *had* to repeat itself. Very explicitly, Runia argues that the past can operate as a *locus genii*: 'that the past may have a presence that is so powerful that it can use *us*, humans, as its *material*'.

Although it can be argued that our experience of the past can have tremendous influence on our perceptions of both the past and present, I cannot concur with Runia when he claims it can operate solely and bring about effects on itself. Ironically, Runia (2007:317) seems to express this idea when he writes: 'We can understand history because we have *made* it, because we *are* history'. Indeed, it is us who make the past, intentionally and unintentionally, and during this process we are moved both by the past we know through representations and the past we experience through presence. It is us, however, who are the agents.

Not surprisingly, very few scholars want to go as far as regarding the past as a *locus genii*. Although most of them acknowledge the usefulness of

the presence-paradigm, they find it hard to cope with the idea of a past that pro-actively influences our lives. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht provides a more appealing alternative when he argues (cf. Kramer 2009:91) that presence might cause an epiphany. Not in the religious sense, but rather a very brief moment in which self-conscious reflection on meaning is reduced. It might even result in a temporary loss of control over oneself, but also in feeling peacefulness and 'being in sync with the world.' Gumbrecht relates this epiphany to aesthetic experiences, but I argue there is also an unpleasant version, which instead of peacefulness triggers feelings of hate, resentment, and revenge. These feelings might be provoked by symbols, monuments, artefacts, or other material things with which the past travelled as a 'stowaway'.⁷

One of the most difficult aspects of Runia's notion of presence is the temporal aspect of the going together of past and present. In two different but largely overlapping articles, Ewa Domanska (2005; 2006) provides a well-elaborated and useful understanding of how present and past do not necessarily need to be mutually exclusive. Domanska argues that the ambivalent status of the so called *desaparecidos* – those who disappeared without a trace – in Argentina can be used as a paradigm of the past itself. Their somewhat uncanny status resists the dichotomous classification of present versus absent.⁸ The disappeared body is both continuous with the present and discontinuous from it, since the absent bodies and empty graves prevent settling the issue. In a sense, Tito's vigilant attempts to put away the memories of the atrocities of World War II and replace them by the state-driven mentality of 'Brotherhood and Unity' could also serve as an example. The unprocessed, neglected and unrepresented history remained in the (collective) memories of many people. The World War II issues were never settled, and as such had a comparable status as the *desaparecidos*.

Since there are no adequate terms to analyse this contradiction, Domanska introduces Algirdas Julien Greimas' semiotic square to find terms outside the binary opposition of present versus absent. The model is used to refine oppositional analyses by increasing the number of analytical classes. This is achieved by expanding the opposition from two to four or more. For example, the opposition masculine – feminine can be expanded to include non-masculine and non-feminine, and even both masculine and

feminine or neither masculine nor feminine. These categories could include hermaphrodites or eunuchs, and even gender-neutral metaphysical concepts such as angels and demons fit into these categories (cf. Hébert n.d.). Applied to the present-absent dichotomy, Domanska arrives at the following model (2006:345):

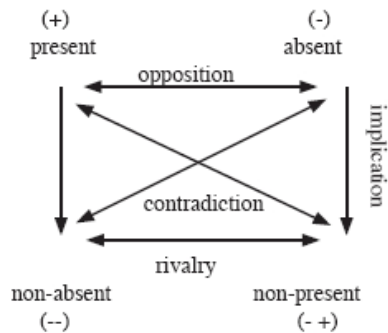


Figure 1. The present-absent semiotic square

The primary concepts present (+) and absent (-) stand for the here and now (+) and the past that is irredeemably gone (-). The secondary concepts, non-present (-+) and non-absent (--), respectively deal with the representation of something that no longer exists (e.g. historical writings) and a category beyond representation in which the past is non-absent (i.e. who's absence is manifest, as is the case for the *desaparecidos*). Whereas contemporary debates have dealt extensively with the non-present past, a category which according to Domanska (2006:345-346) is subject to interpretation (and thus manipulation), the past that is non-absent represents a whole different category: '(...) a past that is somehow still present, that will not go away or, rather, that of which we cannot rid ourselves.' Domanska thus creates a conceptual, but ambivalent and liminal space of the uncanny. A space that undermines our sense of the familiar and is not easy to subject to finite interpretation. This is where she places the missing bodies of the *desaparecidos*. This is also, I believe, where one can place the repressed memories of atrocities committed during World War II in the former Yugoslavia.

Finally, I will turn to Frank Ankersmit (2006), who makes a clear distinction between two conceptions of representation. First, the common variant where representations are categorically different from what they represent (e.g. paintings, sculptures, etc.). Second, and this is the kind of representation to be associated with Runia's notion of presence, is the representation that truly is a repetition or re-enactment of a previous action, an 'already existing human artefact'. The past is presented again and as such is being 'carried in to the present'. Whereas the first concept of representation deals with human artefacts, the latter has to do with human actions. Moreover, in the latter case there is a continuum between the representation and what is represented, they are part of one and the same reality.

Ankersmit furthermore relates presence to myth, a notion that is particularly useful in the context of this essay. Ankersmit (2006: 333) understands myth as 'what a civilization, nation, or institution never succeeds in properly objectifying when thinking about itself and its past'. Myth is the 'blind spot' of a nation that is situated at the very origin of the subconscious beliefs and convictions of that nation. It is when human actions – regardless of their effects – are represented (for example in narratives) that they are *repeated* as well. This repetition of past events, its persistence into the present, is what might be called 'presence'.

It is narratives that provide coherence to both the past and the present and that try to give meaning to it. But, as soon as narratives represent actions of the past, these actions are (in a way) repeated. It 'stubbornly' persists into the present, creating an infinite loop of presence. It is exactly *because* we want to attribute meaning to presence, that it manages to live on into the present and the future (Ankersmit 2006).

I believe the best way to describe and summarize the foregoing, is to look at presence of the past as a phantom limb. People who have amputated limbs sometimes still experience these limbs as if they were there; as if they were never amputated. They feel it itch or ache and cannot distinguish these experiences from 'real' ones. For the presence of the past the same applies: the past is not there anymore, yet it *is*. It makes us feel and experience things from our (collective) memory. These emotions are as real as

every other experience. But as soon as you look at the past, when you try to understand the 'itching', you realize it is gone. You can feel it, realize it, experience it, but you cannot understand it or prevent it. Furthermore, exactly because the limb that has been amputated is gone, the focus is on what is not there (anymore): it is present in its absence, perhaps even more than when it was still there.

It might seem as if we have drifted far away from the neighbourly violence in the Bosnian villages. In the following section I will bring the previous chapters together and provide some examples of how narratives and presence interact to create a situation in which neighbours and friends become ancient enemies.

4. The Past as a Decisive Factor

Central to this paper is the question how it is possible that present individuals re-identify themselves as – not *with* – past agents and are able to kill or molest those who were their friends only moments before. In the final part of this paper I want to address three areas where I believe narratives and presence interact, i.e. where the previous sections come together: (i) agency and responsibility; (ii) meaning and experience; and (iii) the order of time.

4.1 Agency and Responsibility

In the debate on presence I take the side of those authors who do not attribute the past with an *Aktuelle Macht*. At the same time, I do argue that the past can have tremendous influence on human behaviour and even generate momentum for conflict. A paradox arises. If the past can influence people to act the way they do, is there a difference between agency and influencing?

As historian Michael Bess argues (2006:249), even though choices are often constrained by circumstances (in this case: presence of the past), in the end individuals still make decisions. With this imperative to make decisions, to choose a course of action, comes responsibility. From this argument George Cotkin concludes (2008:304): 'if agents can choose from a variety of possibilities, then they are also liable for judgment by historians.'

Cotkin extends his analysis by arguing that the combination of historical analysis joined to philosophical considerations contributes to research on the interaction between character and circumstance. I want to argue that the concept of presence is necessary to assess the circumstances under which perpetrators acted the way they did, without diminishing individual choices, and with those choices, responsibility for what happened.

4.2 Meaning and Experience

The past is often distorted and manipulated by individuals when they try to attribute meaning to it. A conclusion we can draw from Ankersmit's elaboration on presence and myth (cf. section 3) is that when we want to analyse the role of presence as a generator of momentum for ethnic conflict, we first have to investigate the instances where ethnic groups try to attribute meaning to their (mythical) past. This often happens through nationalist narratives. To illustrate how presence and meaning interact, I will show how Vojislav Šešelj, a Serbian politician and leader of the Serbian Radical Party during the 1990s, manipulated history and turned it into a national hate narrative, and indicate what the consequences were of his attempt to provide meaning.

The example is derived from Oberschall's expert testimony for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)⁹ on the use of propaganda by Šešelj (ICTY Expert Report of Oberschall 2006). Oberschall shows how this propaganda managed to activate the crisis frame (cf. section 2.2). He argues (2006:25,27) that Šešelj 'uses partial, biased and misleading, and sometimes fabricated, information on history' to convince

the Serbs about the validity of his territorial demands and claims for greater Serbia. Moreover, as Oberschall shows, Šešelj ‘goes beyond words to try to change history.’ The consequences of these actions are disastrous in an area where the lives of so many people would be destroyed because of ‘the misuse of history for inflaming nationalist passions’. Šešelj’s impudent distortion and misuse of history both justified and legitimized aggressive and coercive policies against other ethnic groups to the Serbian public. Oberschall provides an example of one of Šešelj’s notorious actions:

‘In record 110 (8/4/90), he [Šešelj] said: “A 46-person delegation of the Serbian Chetnik movement was at the famous Serbian monastery of Prohor Pcinjski yesterday. There we tore down what represented a great heresy, we tore down the pagan plaques that were attached to the walls of the temple and that were witness to an alleged formation of the first parliament of that artificial Macedonian state and an artificial Macedonian nation.” What the Chetniks “tore down” were plaques commemorating the 2 August 1944 meeting at the monastery of the Anti-Facist Assembly of the People’s Liberation of Macedonia. The Assembly decided to set up a Macedonian Republic within the future Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and adopted as the official language of the People’s Republic of Macedonia a new standard language based on Macedonian vernacular speech. This meeting was a peak event in the history of Macedonian nationalism that Šešelj denied by removing the commemorative plaques. There is no better example of the intimate link between words and violent actions in the falsification of history.’

The example shows how narratives are used to attribute specific meaning to the past. At the same time, a mental impression of the past (reminiscence) is recalled, evoking emotions based on a (mythical) past. Meaningful narratives are crucial to the cognitive frames discussed in section two. Narratives can provide meaning and coherence to experiences, events and memories, and as such are able to create a context in which anachronisms make sense. Denominations such as Chetnik and Ustasha, referring to a bygone past, become real and in sync with the present. At the same time, the use of narratives fit the individual into a larger context. Nationalist narratives might provide links between different cognitive frames, or even attribute meaning to them, but they do not cause the overlapping of these

frames. The reminiscences, the emotions evoked by them, or for that matter the blending together of the normal and the crisis frame is caused by presence.

In the last few decades there has been a very clear tension between language and experience in the field of philosophy of history. There is a strong tendency towards an absolute mutually exclusive relation between the two. But let us turn to Ankersmit (2006:332) once more, who argued that when we speak of presence there appears to be ‘a continuum between the representation and what is represented (...) the representation and its represented are part of one and the same reality’. It is important to keep in mind that representation here means the repetition or re-enactment of an already existing human artefact. However, and this is fundamental, that which is represented is *not presented explicitly*. There is no awareness of this repetition in presence, whereas there is the awareness when referring to, for example, narratives [where the representation and that what is represented are categorically different]. Those who are involved are blind to what is happening. The two notions are interwoven in a complex manner and it appears when the two domains of representation and what is represented flow over into each other.

This is exactly how presence and narratives interact. The former is an experience of the past, brought about by everything that is not represented (the non-processed past), and the latter is a conscious reminding of the past, a representation of an (imagined) past. Together they complement each other and provide an understanding of the past that fits, a past that makes sense in the here and now. Photojournalist Ron Haviv, best known for his photo of a Serbian paramilitary commando kicking the body of a Muslim civilian who just had been killed, mounted a photo exhibition of the war in Bosnia called *BLOOD & HONEY*. The first of his chapters – called ‘loyalty’ – hints at the interaction just mentioned (Haviv n.d.):

‘It began quietly with stories of the past. Sometimes they would speak of World War II, sometimes the 14th century. They would say “My father was killed by... My great-grandfather was tortured by... My grandmother, may she rest in peace, suffered in her village at the hands of...” They were

stories often told by drinking men clutching old photos and conjuring up either real or imagined past glories. When “they” were in control, god and destiny were both on their side. Others were evil, out to destroy their goodness. “Look at these symbols that show how great we once were. In the past our flags flew high and proud. They were proof of a great nation that once existed and will exist again”. Every side thought that their time would come again and that now was that time; for destiny to be fulfilled. The flags of the past are the seeds of the future. “We shall win...”

But it was not only old men who were referring to past instances. In several testimonies before the ICTY there are references to family members who were killed by the opposing side in World War II. The use of references from those wars, such as Chetnik and Ustasha, become very real in instances where actors believe they are participating in a resurgence of a previous war: in that sense it appears history was repeated. The connection made in the minds of the people is that the perpetrators of today are similar to the ones who committed yesterday’s atrocities.¹⁰

4.3 The Order of Time

It is only through re-identification with past agents that notions such as Chetnik and Ustasha become real. It appears that the line between past and present fades away, that the past and the present collide. It is also for this reason that the past continues to cause such distress in places like the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and South Africa. It can and does so exactly because it *is not past*, or as Michael Ignatieff explains (Bevernage 2008: 149): ‘These places are not living in a serial order of time, but in a simultaneous one, in which the past and present are a continuous, agglutinated mass of fantasies, distortions, myths and lies. (...) Crimes can never be safely fixed in the historical past; they remain locked in the eternal present, crying out for vengeance’.

As such, these cases fit in Ewa Domanska’s conceptual space of the non-absent past. It is some sort of temporal no man’s land, where neither the past nor the present reigns. It is a grey area where the fine line between

past and present gets blurred and where past and present coalesce rather than dissipate. It is not, as Lieberman suggests, when the *longue durée* takes over the *quotidien* that cognitive frames are switched, it is when they come together. And this is exactly, as Lieberman argues, when national hate narratives become most powerful – and destructive. It is in this grey area that interactions are shaped. It is here where charges of contemporary violence and betrayal accumulate with past aggravations.

Lieberman (2006a;2006b) argues that narratives are the most powerful when they fuse together the present and an *imagined* historical past, and in doing so, disconnect the present from an actual personal past. However, it is the narratives that create a past that travels unaffected through time. Even though the narratives might not be true to all the facts, the experiences evoked through the presence of the past in these narratives made actions of individuals almost a direct response to atrocities committed long before the 1990s (Cf.: Petrović 2000). Even though the past that was referred to in these narratives is irremediably gone, and perhaps not even in line with what actually happened, the emotions evoked by it blurred the actual situation in the real present-day world inhabited by perpetrators.

5: Concluding remarks

The foregoing is intended to show how presence can create mounting momentum for committing atrocities. Presence travels as a stowaway with historical narratives and can realize a direct living connection with the past, to an extent where the past may feel more real than the world we inhabit. The past, however, does not operate as an agent. Rather, it can serve as a catalyst in situations that are already in the process of disintegrating. Presence helps perpetrators pass a threshold for committing atrocities. In addition, it transforms former friends and neighbours into ancient enemies.

I have tried to show that narratives propose a reading of a certain situation. In a struggle for identity and power, narratives can provide meaning.

The examples of Šešelj and Haviv show how these narratives are manipulated by individuals. The urge to contribute meaning to a situation is closely related to the longing to understand the mythical constellation that lies at the heart of a nation's identity.

When we want to analyze the role of presence in ethnic conflicts, this attempt to attribute meaning to the past is where we have to start our research. Since every nation has its own nationalist narratives, the experience of the past and its ability to spur ethnic conflict will differ from nation to nation. The way perpetrators respond to the presence of the past is unique in that sense. At the same time, we are all potential perpetrators, regardless of our different pasts. Thus, presence can only be seen as a necessary, not as a sufficient cause.

To increase our understanding of the relation between present day violence and the role of the unrepresented past therein, more empirical, methodological as well as theoretical research and discussions are necessary. Such research should aim to study the past from both a historical and philosophical perspective. This joint enterprise can highlight the complexity of moral choices, without necessarily diminishing individual responsibility. The concept of presence is necessary to successfully understand the circumstances under which perpetrators acted as they did. In the end, the historian can only reach a mixed verdict, paying attention to both character and circumstances.

Philosophers can provide concepts and ideas which might prove to be valuable to our understanding of human behaviour. Questioning and adequately applying such concepts will assure a dynamic and self-reflective role of history in present day society. Finally, we should not be afraid, as Runia (2007:317) rightfully notices, to ask the question 'who are we that this could have happened?' But this question can only be answered completely if we also ask ourselves the question: 'who *were* we that this could have happened?'

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¹ Some of these accounts can be found in: S. Broz (2004) *Good People in an Evil Time: Portraits of Complicity and Resistance in the Bosnian War*. New York: Other Press.

² His complete definition is: 'By "national narrative", I mean the ways the nation interprets and explains its identity. It includes the stories the nation tells about its values, about its past, and about the relationships between its citizens. It is national narrative that makes sense of and legitimises our legal, political, social and economic relationships. Accordingly, it can be mobilised or appealed to in support of a particular stance regarding those relationships.'

³ The phrase 'a direct, living connection with the past' is derived from Ivan Čolović (2002) *Politics of Identity in Serbia: Essays in Political Anthropology*, New York: New York University Press: 5. Cited in: Lieberman (2006a) : 300.

⁴ The term hate narrative was coined by historian Halil Berktaç.

⁵ For a complete overview of the ‘Goldhagen debate’, see I. Kershaw (2008), *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution*. Yale University Press: New Haven and London:314-323.

⁶ A metonymy is ‘a figure in which the name of an attribute or adjunct is substituted for that of the thing meant, e.g. sceptre for authority.’ Runia mentions several different uses: ‘maker for product (‘Jim reads DeLillo’); part for whole (‘a flotilla of fifteen keels’); attribute for property (‘finally the king handed the scepter over to his son’); place for event (‘Arthur goes to Wimbledon’); controller for controlled (‘Bush invaded Iraq’); container for contained (‘Fred smokes a pack a day’); behavioral reaction for emotion (‘Sheila gives me the creeps’); physiological effect for psychological affect (‘Dick is a pain in the ass’); institution for the people who are responsible (‘the Red Cross underestimated the damage’); and so on.’

⁷ The term ‘stowaway’ is derived from Runia who uses it to describe the way the past travels into the present.

⁸ Domanska derives the term ‘uncanny’ (unheimlich) from Sigmund Freud : ‘The uncanny’ is terrifying because it is strange and unfamiliar, yet we actually have this feeling in relation to something that used to be familiar (heimlich) but has become unfamiliar as a result of repression. It is something alien, weird, and demonic and whose experience is petrifying. In his definition of this concept, Freud cites a statement by Schelling, for whom ‘the uncanny’ is all that should stay hidden but has been revealed. One source of this feeling, according to Freud, is uncertainty caused by the ambivalent nature of a thing as to which we do not know whether it is dead or alive, man or machine, etc.’

⁹ Officially: International Tribunal for the Prosecution of Persons Responsible for Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law Committed in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia since 1991.

¹⁰ Examples that support this argument can be found in testimonies in front of the ICTY. For example: Prosecutor v. Martić (IT-96-11) Transcript 18-09-2006, p. 8456; Prosecutor v.

S. Milosević (IT-02-54) Transcript 20-05-2003, pp. 20761, 20771, 20803 ; Transcript 20-09-2005, p. 44345.