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"Remove Kebab"

The Appeal of Serbian Nationalist Ideology among the Global Far Right

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Abstract: *This article examines the appeal of Serbian nationalist ideology among the contemporary far right. We argue that the discursive othering of Bosnian Muslims as "Turks" as well as the Serbian grand narrative presenting the Bosnian War as a civilizational struggle between Christian Europe and Islam are uniquely resonant with the popular anti-Muslim and xenophobic discourses that are mobilizing right-wing extremists across the globe. Through an analysis of Serbian and far-right discourses, we demonstrate how the patterns of representation that were used to incite and justify the violence committed against Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s are being exported to remote corners of the world via the internet, where they merge with extraneous Islamophobic and racist ideologies to inspire a new generation of extremism, hatred, and violence.*

Keywords: Bosnian War, genocide, terrorism, Islamophobia, right-wing extremism

One March afternoon in 2019, an Australian man named Brenton Tarrant murdered fifty-one people at the Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand.[1] On his rifle, Tarrant had scrawled the names of several Montenegrin

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1   While acknowledging the decision of many international academics and journalists to refrain from identifying the perpetrators of such attacks by name in order to avoid contributing to their fame or notoriety, the authors of this article share a different perspective informed by the Balkan postconflict experience. Since the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina nearly three decades ago, establishing individual criminal responsibility has been a critical component of transitional justice as well as the struggle to establish a societal consensus on the facts and nature of wartime events. We contend that relegating

folk heroes—Bajo Pivljanin, Marko Miljanov Popović, and Novak Vujošević—all famed for their bloody victories over the Ottoman Turks in the eighteenth century.[2] Also inscribed on Tarrant's weapon were a number of enigmatic phrases including "Hagia Sofia," "turkofagos" (Turk-eater), and "Remove Kebab." This last slogan has become fashionable among global communities of right-wing extremists, used as a metonym for the removal of Muslims from "Western" soil. The slogan, popularized in the form of a meme that was widely circulated on niche corners of the internet, is derived from a Serbian nationalist folk song entitled "From Bihać to Petrovo village." During his drive to the Al Noor Mosque, which he broadcast on Facebook Live, Tarrant could be heard listening to this anthem. Written in 1993, in the midst of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the song famously urges the Bosnian-Serb leader Radovan Karadžić to lead "his Serbs" to victory against the "Ustaša" and "Turks"—pejorative terms that refer to Croatians and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) respectively.

While well known in the Balkans to Serbian nationalists and Muslim populations alike, the cultural references Tarrant employed in his attack are completely alien to most in New Zealand and across much of the world. How, then, did such obscure symbolism come to inspire an act of violence separated by continents, cultures, and decades from its context of origin? In answering this question, this article examines the appeal of Serbian nationalist ideology among contemporary communities of right-wing extremists. We argue that the discursive othering of Bosniaks as "Turks," and the Serbian grand narrative presenting the Bosnian War as part of a historic struggle between Christian European and Islamic civilizations, are uniquely resonant with the popular anti-Muslim and xenophobic discourses that are mobilizing right-wing extremists across the globe. Through an analysis of Serbian and far-right discourses, we demonstrate how the patterns of representation that were used to incite and justify the violence committed against Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s are being exported to remote corners of the world via the internet, where they merge with extraneous Islamophobic and racist ideologies to inspire a new generation of extremism, hatred, and violence.

Serbian Nationalism in the Far-Right Cybersphere

The Serbian nationalist presence on the internet began with only a handful of websites, many of which were operated by members of the Serbian diaspora living in the West. Most notable among these were www.srpska-mreza.com and www.serbianna .com, which became propagandistic strongholds for the pro-Milošević community

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violent perpetrators to anonymity may constitute a form of impunity, potentially facilitating revisionist historical accounts seeking to deny or distort the violence itself and/or glorify the perpetrators.

2   Hariz Halilovich, "Long-Distance Hatred: How the NZ Massacre Echoed Balkan War Crimes," *Transitions Online*, March 19, 2019, https://tol.org/client/article/28295-long-distance-hatred-how-the -nz-massacre-echoed-balkan-war-crimes.html.

following the NATO bombing campaign of 1999. While these websites have proliferated significantly, their content remains largely consistent, centering around narratives of Serbian victimhood, Islamophobia, the illegitimacy of Kosovo, NATO demonization, genocide denial, and historical revisionism of both the 1990s conflict and events of the Second World War.[3] In addition to organizing public events, Serbian ultranationalist groups have been expanding their online presence through internet chatrooms,[4] free content platforms like YouTube and Wikipedia,[5] and social media outlets.[6] The contemporary social media landscape has proved especially conducive to the dissemination of Serbian radical ideology and hate speech in new popular formats including short video clips and memes.[7]

The internet has also facilitated a revival of wartime Serbian nationalist pop culture, in particular songs and anthems that were created during the war and functioned to propagate virulent hatred and anti-Muslim sentiment. Lyrics from Serbian nationalist songs that have been popularized in the far-right cybersphere include "Serbian shells are guided by God's hand"; "the time has come for the Serbian revenge, all the Mosques are flying in the sky"; and, a particular far-right favorite, "I don't like you Alija because you are a Balija."[8] The most famous of such songs is undoubtedly "Od Bihaća do Petrova Sela" (From Bihać to Petrovo village), featuring the line "Karadžić, lead your Serbs,"

3   Notably, Russian actors have made substantial contributions to right-wing revisionism of Second World War history, particularly in the Balkans. See Hikmet Karčić, "Russia's Campaign to Rewrite WWII History Is Dividing the Balkans. Just as Putin Intended," *Haaretz*, September 7, 2020, https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/2020-09-07/ty-article-opinion/.premium/russias-campaign-to-rewrite-wwii-history-is-dividing-the-balkans-as-putin-intended/0000017f-e586-dc7e-adff-f5af8ff20000. Russian president Vladimir Putin's claim during a recent interview that Poland forced the hand of the Nazis in their 1939 invasion is emblematic of these narratives, which are promulgated at the highest echelons of the Kremlin and used to bolster and legitimize its foreign policy objectives. See "Interview to Tucker Carlson," President of Russia (official website), February 9, 2024, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73411.

4   Srđan Mladenov Jovanović, "The Dveri Movement through a Discursive Lens: Serbia's Contemporary Right-Wing Nationalism," *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 66, no. 4 (2018): 481–502.

5   Richard Rogers, *Digital Methods* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 165–202.

6   Srđan Mladenov Jovanović, "The Portal 'Nationalist' as the Nutshell of Recent Serbian Nationalism," *National Identities* 23, no.2 (2021): 149–62.

7   Hikmet Karčić, "Srebrenica Genocide Denial: From Dodik to TikTok," *TRT World*, March 16, 2021, https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/srebrenica-genocide-denial-from-dodik-to-tiktok-45051; Admir Muslimović, "Srebrenica Pupils Who Published Serb Nationalist Photo Disciplined," *Balkan Insight*, January 20, 2020, https://balkaninsight.com/2020/01/30/srebrenica-pupils-who-published-serb-nationalist-photo-disciplined/.

8   The first is a wartime song by a certain Perica Ivanović. See "Serbian Artillery Is Led by God," April 18, 2017, YouTube video, 2:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFteJlDJvqY. The second is from Miro Semberac's album *Puče puška u sred Semberije*, released by Super Ton in 1993. The third is from Baja Mali Knindža's album *Živeće ovaj narod*, released by Nina Trade in 1992.

which was explicitly referenced by Brenton Tarrant prior to the Christchurch attack. Although YouTube subsequently took down the video, which then had around nine million views, various versions continue to be reuploaded by far right enthusiasts, for whom the song has become a sort of unofficial anthem.

The first "remix" of this music video appeared on YouTube in 2006 and is believed to have been created by Croatian film director Pavle Vranjican as an ironic disparagement of the song's original message. Notably, this video contained images from the trial of wartime Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadžić before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), as well as photographs from Bosnian Serb concentration camps originally published in Western media outlets in 1992. In response to this video, a new remix soon appeared entitled "Serbia Strong / God is a Serb." Purged of sardonic imagery, this version restored the original pro-Serb meaning of the nationalist war song and included English-language subtitles of the lyrics.[9]

This video spawned the "Remove Kebab" meme, alternately known as "Serbia Strong," which has emerged as one of the most striking examples of Serbian nationalist ideology's penetration of the global far right through modern modes of cultural communication. The "Remove Kebab" meme was first posted on 4Chan and 8Chan, and has since spread to other platforms, gaining widespread popularity among Serbian diaspora as well as alt-right communities online. The classic iteration of the meme depicts a low-resolution still from the video featuring two Serb soldiers with musical instruments, overlayed with the text "REMOVE KEBAB" (figure 1).

Figure 1. "Remove Kebab" meme. Source: Ristić, "Remove Kebab" (note 9).

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9   Katarina Ristić, "Remove Kebab: The Transnational Circulation of Far-Right Memes and the Memory of the Yugoslav Wars," Global Network on Extremism and Technology, June 14, 2023, https://gnet-research.org/2023/06/14/remove-kebab-the-transnational-circulation-of-far-right-memes-and-the-memory-of-the-yugoslav-wars/.

The kebab, or döner kebab, is a Turkish meat dish cooked on a vertical rotisserie that originated in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire. Popularized by Turkish immigrants in Europe during the late twentieth century, the dish quickly became a staple of economical late-night street food in many European countries. Recently, however, in what has been termed "gastronomic racism," Muslim-operated kebab shops have come under attack by right-wing politicians in many countries such as France, Austria, and Italy, reflecting broader Islamophobic and anti-immigrant trends.[10] As the "Remove Kebab" meme illustrates, the racial connotations of the dish were already deeply entrenched within far-right discourse, where "kebab" has been used as a pejorative metonym for undesirable Muslim and immigrant populations for over a decade.

Hundreds of stylized variations of the meme continue to circulate on social media, where praise for the Bosnian genocide, Serbian war criminals, and Serbian nationalist ideology is widespread.[11] Conventional social media networks as well as online forums such as Reddit and 4chan are uniting a new, transnational generation of right-wing extremists around the glorification of violence, enabling them to draw inspiration and legitimization from one another's hate-fueled ideologies. What is more, the bonds forged between Balkan and right-wing extremists on the internet are also engendering tangible connections in real life.[12] Recent investigations by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network have revealed that white supremacist groups from Germany and the UK are actively collaborating with their nationalist counterparts in Serbia to expand their online presence and amplify their shared message of Islamophobia, historical revisionism, and racial hatred.[13]

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10   See Jillian Cavanaugh, "Il y a kébab et kébab : Conflit local et alimentation globale en Italie du nord," *Anthropologie et Sociétés* 37, no. 2 (2013): 193–212; Jyhene Kebsi, "Gastronomic Racism in France and Australia: Food Practices in the War on Muslims," *The Overland Journal*, May 11, 2021, https://overland.org.au/2021/05/gastronomic-racism-in-france-and-australia-food-practices-in-the-war-on-muslims/; "What Explains Europe's Love-Hate Relationship with the Kebab?," *TRTWorld*, 2021, https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/what-explains-europes-love-hate-relationship-with-the-kebab-12752724 (accessed June 26, 2024).

11   Murtaza Hussain, "From El Paso to Sarajevo: How White Nationalists Have Been Inspired by the Genocide of Muslims in Bosnia," *The Intercept*, September 1, 2019, https://theintercept.com/2019/09/01/bosnian-genocide-mass-shootings/.

12   Barbara N. Wiesinger, "The Continuing Presence of the Extreme Right in Post-Milošević Serbia," *Balkanologie* 11, nos. 1–2 (2008): 1–15.

13   Nenad Radicevic, "We Are Their Voice: German Far-Right Builds Balkan Alliance," *Balkan Insight*, October 24, 2019, https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/24/we-are-their-voice-german-far-right-builds-balkan-alliances/; Jelena Cosic, Lawrence Marzouk, and Ivan Angelovski, "British Nationalist Trains Serb Far-Right for 'Online War,'" *Balkan Insight*, May 1, 2018, https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/01/british-nationalist-trains-serb-far-right-for-online-war-04-30-2018.

Research Approach

This research employs the qualitative methods of discourse and narrative analysis to examine the various representations underlying both Serbian violence following the collapse of Yugoslavia and more recent episodes of radical right-wing terrorism. Through the dissection of stories, speech, and written language, discourse and narrative analysis reveal the strategies of representation and socially constructed meanings that serve as collective cognitive frameworks through which individuals and groups interpret reality, defining the normative range of individual and collective action. In this section, we lay the theoretical groundwork for this analysis, beginning with an overview of the contemporary far right and the transnational cross-contamination of extremist ideology over the internet. We continue with an elucidation of political narratives and the "othering" of victims as foundational components underlying the transmission of ideology and the commission of violence. In the following section, these dynamics are unveiled through a detailed account of the narratives and representations employed by Serb elites before, during, and in the immediate aftermath of the wars in former Yugoslavia in order to identify the ideational structures that governed the commission of genocide and mass atrocities against Bosniaks. Subsequently, we turn our attention to the ideology of the extreme right, expressed in the communications of growing online communities as well as through the discursive practices embedded in acts of right-wing terrorism. Through this bifold analysis, we locate the organic appeal of Serbian discursive representations among international agents of far-right extremism and highlight the dynamics through which these representations are appropriated and repurposed in the service of a new, radical right-wing agenda.

The Contemporary Transnational Far Right

Bypassing the extensive academic debates surrounding far-right terminology, this research adopts a broad definition of the far right as "a political space whose actors base their ideology and action on the notion of inequality among human beings, combining the supremacy of a particular nation, 'race' or 'civilization' with ambitions for an authoritarian transformation of values and styles of government."[14] This encompasses a wide range of racial and cultural nationalisms characterized by prejudicial attitudes toward religious and ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ+ community, feminists, leftists, and civil society activists, among others.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the global far right has been steadily enlarging, resulting in an increase in right-wing populism as well as hate

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14   Maik Fielitz and Laura Lotte Laloire, *Trouble on the Far-Right: Contemporary Right-Wing Strategies and Practices in Europe* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2016), 17–18.

crimes and terrorist attacks against Muslims and minority communities.[15] Influxes of migrants and refugees across Europe have further galvanized xenophobic narratives, which are increasingly infiltrating the mainstream political discourses in many Western democracies.[16] In contrast to earlier historical manifestations, the contemporary far right is a vastly decentralized movement operating beyond the boundaries of traditional command structures. In the twenty-first century, far-right violence is characterized by "lone wolf" and "copycat" attacks, motivated more by ideological influences than organizational directives.[17] The rise of the internet as a means of communication and influence has been crucial to the growth of the far right, allowing extremists to "increasingly communicate and cooperate across borders and show signs of collective learning."[18]

The digital landscape underlying right-wing growth includes a vast array of mainstream and underground social media websites, gaming platforms, and communication channels.[19] As Eitan Azani et al. observe:

> Within this decentralized collective of loosely-connected anonymous activists, the esoteric boundaries between organizations and movements, instruction and inspiration, and satire and incitement are becoming more and more ambiguous. . . . These amorphous networked communities provide for anonymous, unorganized participation in ideologies by a variety of individuals who may or may not engage with formally organized groups. Lone Wolves are the new vanguards of the violent far-right revolution, and ideology is the potent, mobilizing force galvanizing their action. Online interactive participation also serves to connect a myriad [of] right-wing extremist ideologies, creating a nexus of hate-based narratives that expands the pool of potential recruits.[20]

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15   Daniel Köhler, "Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in Europe: Current Developments and Issues for the Future," *Prism* 6, no. 2 (2016): 86.

16   Katy Brown, Aurelien Mondon, and Aaron Winter "The Far Right, the Mainstream and Mainstreaming: Towards a Heuristic Framework," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 28, no. 2 (2023): 162–79.

17   Eitan Azani, Liram Koblenz-Stenzler, Lorena Atiyas-Lvovsky, Dan Ganor, Arie Ben-Am, and Delilah Meshualm, *The Far Right: Ideology, Modus Operandi and Development Trends*, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, September 2020, 2, https://www.ict.org.il/images/The%20Far%20Right%20–%20Ideology.pdf.

18   Julia Ebner, *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism* (New York: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2017), 58.

19   See Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

20   Azani et al., *The Far Right*, 13.

The exchange of memes, videos, and ideology across borders is a crucial component of the transnational nature of the contemporary far right, where narratives are interwoven across languages and causes, producing "groups and clusters with membership from multiple countries and ideological rationales that are not always consistent."[21] Moreover, these virtual environments not only facilitate exposure to far-flung ideologies and narratives but also magnify the process of radicalization, serving as echo chambers where, through prolonged interaction with those sharing the same opinions and worldviews, individuals are propelled to greater depths of extremism, hatred, and in many cases, violence.[22]

One of the most notable phenomena occurring in these transnational online spaces is the construction of alternative histories, which have come to underlie much of the ideology exchanged on the far right. Louie Dean Valencia-García describes the "alt-histories" of the far right as intentionally distorted narratives "constructed for ideological purposes through the denial of history, the overemphasis of certain historical facts or an incomplete understanding of historical context," which, when weaponized, "are used to exculpate the guilty, casting blame on a marginalised group."[23] As attempts to "impose our present on the past to justify an understanding about the present,"[24] alt-histories are often cyclical and/or teleological in nature, lending themselves to the incorporation of diverse narrative strains far removed in both time and space from their origins.

Narrative and Political Violence

Political narratives are critical to understanding social phenomena, including collective violence. According to Jerome Bruner, socially constructed narratives can be defined as "accounts of a community's collective experiences, embodied in its belief system[,] and represent the collective's symbolically constructed shared identity."[25] As collective strategies of representation that structure human interpretations of reality, narratives lend intellectual coherence to lived experiences, providing a means of "organizing action, episodes, and accounts of action . . . [which] allows for the inclusion of actors' reasons, as well as the causes of happening."[26] During times of conflict, narratives serve

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21   Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*, 144.

22   See Cass R. Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

23   Louie Dean Valencia-García, "Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History," in *Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History*, ed. Louie Dean Valencia-García (New York: Routledge, 2020), 3–26, at 13–14.

24   Valencia-García, 9.

25   Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 76.

26   Theodore Sarbin, *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (New York: Praeger, 1986), 9.

an especially important function. In order to mobilize individuals and collectives to violate social norms and moral codes of conduct, narratives that justify these violations must be constructed and effectively disseminated at all levels of society.[27] Only then can the grassroots perpetrators of extreme violence rationalize the decision to participate in mass atrocities and manage the psychological consequences that surface as a result.

Thus, in times of conflict, mobilizing elites construct and deploy elaborate narratives that "describe the causes of the conflict, its nature, the image of the rival, the conditions needed to win the conflict, and more."[28] Coherently linking historical events to contemporary circumstances is crucial to these narratives. Accounts of past events are manipulated in such a way as to buttress expedient interpretations of contemporary conflicts and justify a community's participation in them.[29] Temporal elements such as the naming of historical epochs, structural representations of time (as linear or circular, for example), and the identification of historical origins and antecedents all function to substantiate the political claims on which conflicts are grounded.[30] In situating present circumstances within a historical continuum, conflict narratives not only describe the origins and development of violence in a coherent and meaningful manner, they also dictate the objectives of the conflict and its trajectory into the future.[31] Often drawing direct connections between exigent circumstances and historical precedents, these narratives also frequently imply the potential of history to be repeated, and thus the dangerous consequences of failing to confront present challenges.

In Serbia, as elsewhere, conflict narratives have been chiefly produced and institutionalized by elite actors in the political, military, and cultural spheres of society. The efficacy with which a narrative takes hold among the general population often depends on the ability of these elite actors to incorporate preexisting ideational structures such as cultural values, identity signifiers, and longstanding historical interpretations. Resonance with cognitive frameworks already firmly established not only increases the mobilizing potential of these narratives within their indigenous contexts but can also facilitate their transmission among extraneous audiences sharing similar repertoires of symbolic associations and narrative cues. In many cases, elites engaged in waging violence deliberately construct narratives to appeal not only to those they are intended

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27   Daniel Bar-Tal, Neta Oren, and Rafi Nets-Zehngut, "Sociopsychological Analysis of Conflict-Supporting Narratives: A General Framework," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 5 (2014): 662–75, at 662–63.

28   Bar-Tal, Oren, and Nets-Zehngut, 665.

29   James Liu and Denise Hilton, "How the Past Weighs on the Present: Social Representations of History and Their Role in Identity Politics," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 44, no. 4 (2005): 537–56.

30   Evyatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

31   Daniel Bar-Tal, "Sociopsychological Foundations of Intractable Conflict," *American Behavioral Scientist* 50, no. 11 (2007): 1430–53.

to mobilize, but also to a wider community of political actors from whom they desire support. As Bar-Tal, Oren, and Nets-Zehngut observe:

> The goal is to influence this community, since the in-group needs moral—and often diplomatic—support from international organizations, as well as their tangible assistance with certain resources (both financial and military). Therefore, the in-group needs to persuade the leaders and public of other states and international organizations of the validity of their own conflict-supportive narrative.[32]

This aim is most commonly achieved through the presentation of conflicts as part of a broader civilizational struggle. The identities of the adversarial parties and their respective wartime objectives are generalized so as to imply direct parallels to outside parties and confrontations. A successful example is the "war on terror" narrative,[33] which has been appropriated in various conflict settings for the purpose of eliciting extraneous sympathy and support. The deliberate efforts of mobilizing elites in times of conflict to disseminate their narratives to wider audiences has also been significantly bolstered by the forces of globalization and modern communication technology. In the age of the internet, well-crafted narratives are able to penetrate ever more remote quarters of the globe, and to inspire any of a diverse array of actors who find something relatable or appealing in another's ideology of violence.

The "Othering" of Victims

One of the most important components of conflict narratives is the reconceptualization of the identity of the Other, or the victim group. In a recent work, Maureen Hiebert articulates three often overlapping discursive patterns of victim-group representation that contribute to creating a "permissive socio-political environment" for extreme violence against the Other.[34] The first of these is representing the victim as foreign—either non-native in origin, or a traitorous agent of insidious external power. In this way, the victim group is effectively excluded from the political community and thus denied the rights and benefits of civic belonging, including protection from violence. The second pattern of representation entails portraying the victim as a mortal threat to the political community. The group may be depicted as an all-powerful enemy intent on the

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32   Bar-Tal, Oren, and Nets-Zehngut, "Sociopsychological Analysis," 668.

33   See, for example, Sue-Ann Harding, "Translation and the Circulation of Competing Narratives from the Wars in Chechnya: A Case Study from the 2004 Beslan Hostage Disaster," *Meta* 56, no. 1 (2011): 42–62.

34   Maureen S. Hiebert, *Constructing Genocide and Mass Violence: Society, Crisis, Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 23.

utter annihilation of the perpetrating community, or the threat posed may be construed as demographic or biological. Seemingly in direct contradiction, the third pattern of representation asserts the genetic inferiority or subhuman characteristics of the supposedly all-powerful group. This discourse frequently invokes animalistic metaphors along with imagery of biological deformity and atavism in order to dehumanize the victim and ultimately justify their inhuman brutalization.

Genocide scholar Emir Suljagić has demonstrated the applicability of Hiebert's framework to the discursive reconstruction of Bosniak identity by Bosnian Serb elites before and during the genocidal violence of the 1990s. In a recent article, Suljagić focuses on the transcripts of the Bosnian Serb assembly between October 1991 and December 1995, illuminating the substantial influence of this particular elite body in shaping public perceptions of Bosnian Muslims.[35] Drawing on Hiebert's tripartite model, Suljagić argues that the assembly and its members catalyzed the reconceptualization of Bosniaks as "Turks"—that is, as "cultural aliens whose very existence presented a mortal threat to the existence of the Serb people."[36] Reinforcing this central assertion, the present research expounds on the reconstruction of Bosniak identity within the elite sectors of Serb and Bosnian Serb society. We then proceed to analyze how these patterns of representation interact with the broader Islamophobic and racist discourses on the global far right, aiding the conceptual facilitation of right-wing hatred and terrorism.

The Social Construction of the Bosnian Genocide

Following the collapse of the multiethnic federative republic of Yugoslavia, Serbian nationalist forces waged a three-and-a-half-year war of aggression against the sovereign state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition to the wholescale slaughter of entire populations, prominent features of this campaign included the use of torture, detention camps, forced population transfer, and systematic rape as instruments of genocide.[37] Underpinning this unspeakable and widespread barbarity, the dominant discourse of Serbian nationalist elites drew extensively on historical representations to construct images of Bosniaks, Islam, and the violence itself that were conducive to the perpetration of violence. We begin our analysis of this discourse with the othering of Bosniaks as "Turks," followed by the institutionalization of essentializing and opprobrious representations of Islam. Finally, we conclude the section by examining the overarching grand narrative of the conflict, which continues to permeate Serbian

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35   Emir Suljagić, "Genocide by Plebiscite: The Bosnian Serb Assembly and the Social Construction of 'Turks' in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Journal of Genocide Research* 23, no. 4 (2021): 568–87.

36   Suljagić, 568.

37   For more on camps and the "collective traumatization," see Hikmet Karčić, *Torture, Humiliate, Kill: Inside the Bosnian Serb Camp System* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

nationalist discourse and, increasingly, to inspire admiration for and solidarity with the Serbian nationalist cause among radical right-wing actors worldwide.

Constructing "the Turk"

Serbian national identity began to take shape during the mid-nineteenth century in the context of national liberation from Ottoman rule. As such, the Serbian political and intellectual classes necessarily defined Serb identity in direct opposition to their imperial occupiers—as "the antithesis of everything 'Turkish.'"[38] Despite the relatively tolerant policies of the Ottoman Empire toward its colonies,[39] the narrative of Serbian statehood became increasingly dependent on the rhetorical trope of Ottoman oppression, proverbially expressed as "five hundred years of Turkish slavery." In the 1830s, the Montenegrin poet Petar II Petrović-Njegoš refocused the collective ire of the Serbian people from the Turkish Empire itself to the so-called *poturice*[40]—those in the Balkans who converted to Islam during Ottoman occupation. His notorious epic poem, The Mountain Wreath, tells the story of the wholesale slaughter of the *poturice* on Christmas Eve in the village of Cetinje by Orthodox Montenegrin tribesmen. Although the historicity of the account is dubious, the myth of the massacre has become deeply embedded in the Serbian collective memory and serves as a powerful element of nationalist myth.[41] By casting the Muslim inhabitants of the region as not just traitors to the Serbian state but to the Orthodox religion and thus God himself, Njegoš' work concretized the motif of betrayal in Serbian nationalist discourse.[42] More crucially, it prescribed vengeance in the form of the indiscriminate massacre of Muslims as the appropriate penalty for race treason.

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38   Frederic F. Ancsombe, "The Ottoman Empire in Recent International Politics—II: The Case of Kosovo," *The International History Review* 28, no. 4 (2006): 758.

39   According to Kenneth Harl, "Christians and Jews living in the Ottoman Empire were . . . afforded certain protections, including the right to practice their religion, in exchange for their obedience to the Ottoman sultan. . . . Although there were some notable instances of forced conversions to Islam . . . the Ottoman sultans of the 15th and 16th centuries were exceptionally tolerant, especially in comparison to western Europe bitterly divided by the Reformation. . . . Christians and Jews prospered under Ottoman rule because of the important economic and social roles they played within the empire and because of the Porte's [i.e., the Ottoman court's] own policy." See *The Ottoman Empire* (Chantilly, VA: The Great Courses, 2017), 97–102. See also Peter F. Sugar, *Southeastern Europe under Ottoman Rule, 1354–1804* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983).

40   Often translated as "those who were Turkified" or "those who became Turks."

41   Dennis Washburn and Kevin Reinhart, *Converting Cultures: Religion, Ideology and Transformations of Modernity* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 87.

42   Petar II Petrović-Njegoš, *The Mountain Wreath*, trans. James W. Wiles (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930), available at https://www.njegos.org/petrovics/wreath.htm.

As nationalist leaders hastened to galvanize historical grievances in the run-up to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the use of the terms "Turks" and *poturice* as pejorative labels for Bosnian Muslims became one of the defining features of Serbian nationalist discourse. Although bearing religious and political associations with Islam and the erstwhile Ottoman Empire, these terms chiefly signified an ethnic distinction, casting Bosniaks as both foreign and genetically inferior.

With the outbreak of war in 1992, this language became even more prominent among senior Bosnian Serb officials, as evidenced in their meticulously documented written and oral communications. While a catalogue of examples is outside the scope of the present research, selected statements from the military commander of the Bosnian Serb army, General Ratko Mladić, provide a sufficient sample of the interrelated rhetorical purposes served by this imagery. One such purpose was as an imperative for violence. In labeling someone "a Turk," Bosnian Serb officials implicitly called for his or her extermination. This was expressly articulated by Mladić in his instructions to one senior officer: "[W]henever you see a Turk, take aim at him, and send him off to the al-akhira [afterlife]."[43] Similarly, in April 1994 during the Bosnian Serb operation to take over Goražde, Mladić told his troops unequivocally that "[t]he Turks must disappear from these areas."[44] In a video from 1994, Mladić not only prescribes the proper course of action for dealing with "the Turks" but also demonstrates the pride and relish with which crimes against "Turks" are to be celebrated. As he drives through a decimated town formerly inhabited by Bosniaks, he boasts to his companion of how his forces "kicked the hell out of the Turks. . . . [W]ho gives a fuck about them!" He goes on to say:

> Here is the village of Plane, it used to be Turkish. . . . You film this freely, you know. Let our Serbs see what we have done to them, how we took care of the Turks. In Podrinje we thrashed the Turks. . . . See what a village they got. Look there. . . . Should I slow down a bit so you can film them? . . . Film it. Look what a house this Turk motherfucker had! This is a Turkish house. . . . This was a Turkish house. The one over there was Turkish and that one, all of them.[45]

43   "Transcript of an Intercepted Telephone Conversation between Ratko Mladić and a Certain Gutović," March 28, 1995, Thomas D. Jodd Research Center, University of Connecticut, https://collections .ctdigitalarchive.org/islandora/object/20009%3AP01609#page/1/mode/2up.

44   International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, Case No. IT-95-5/18-T, Trial Judgement, March 24, 2016, 1064, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/karadzic /tjug/en/160324_judgement.pdf.

45   International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Prosecutor v. Ratko Mladić, Case No. IT-09-92-T, Trial Judgement, November 22, 2017, 2266, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/mladic /tjug/en/171122-4of5_1.pdf.

These examples are only a small sampling of the ways imagery of "the Turk" was used by Bosnian Serb elites throughout the war. The institutionalization of these representations within the Bosnian Serb military establishment is likewise evidenced by their proliferation among perpetrators on the ground. Survivor testimonies provide ample evidence of such language as it accompanied the unspeakable acts of violence committed by the rank and file of the Bosnian Serb army. In the course of carrying out acts such as rape, torture, and mass murder, soldiers frequently invoked the imagery of "the Turk" alongside references to their victims' supposed Ottoman heritage.

The level of brutality that the invocation of "the Turk" clearly sanctioned can be partly attributed to historical conceptualizations of Turkish treason and transgression. Equally important are the dehumanizing mechanisms deployed by Serbian elites, which sought to portray Bosniak "Turks" as genetically inferior. By presenting their victims as less human or nonhuman and thereby deserving of inhumane treatment, perpetrators benefitted from a biological as well as historical justification for their horrific crimes. Biljana Plavšić, an influential Serbian intellectual, was a particularly prolific and effective source of such theorizing. Citing her credentials as a professor of biology, she made frequent incendiary and dehumanizing claims about the genetic inferiority of Bosniaks, which, she alleged, justified acts of genocide.

> I'm a biologist, I know genetics, and I know that the Serbs and Muslims are genetically structured in a way that they cannot live together. Ethnic cleansing is a natural phenomenon, and it is not a war crime.[46]

She expounded on this further, asserting:

> It was genetically deformed material that embraced Islam. And now, of course, with each successive generation it simply becomes concentrated. It gets worse and worse. It simply expresses itself and dictates their style of thinking, which is rooted in their genes. And through the centuries, the genes degraded further.[47]

These sentiments likewise permeated the discourse of the Serbian military and were used to justify acts of horrific violence against Bosniaks during the war. Luka Dragičević, a wartime assistant commander, encouraged soldiers laying siege to Sarajevo by stating:

46   Biljana Plavšić, *Svet*, September 6, 1993; Admir Mulaosmanović, "Islam and Muslims in Greater Serbian Ideology: The Origins of an Antagonism and the Misuse of the Past," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 39, no. 3 (2019): 300–316, at 309.

47   Plavšić, *Svet*; Michael A. Sells, "The Construction of Islam in Serbian Religious Mythology and Its Consequences," in *Islam and Bosnia: Conflict Resolution and Foreign Policy in Multi-Ethnic States*, ed. Maya Shatzmiller (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 56–85, at 58.

> We are genetically stronger, better, handsomer and smarter. . . .
> Remember how many Muslims there were among the ten best
> pupils, students, soldiers? Precious few. Why? Because they are
> poturice, and only the weakest among the Serbs became poturice.[48]

In a manner consistent with other episodes of mass violence, Bosniak victims were also frequently conceptualized as a form of biological contagion or disease. Serbian wartime correspondent Zoran Piroćanac, for example, famously accused Bosnian Muslims of bringing a plague to Europe, crassly stating, "Fuck their mothers, what have they brought us? A plague, motherfuckers. . . . Muslims were motherfuckers who brought a plague to Europe."[49] These and similar representations constituted not only a form of dehumanization but also a biological variation on the thematic conceptualizations of Bosniaks as a mortal threat. As previously noted, this "mortal threat" paradigm also manifested in discourses of Bosniak foreignness, and as the next section will demonstrate, culminated in invidious representations of the Islamic religion.

The "All-Destructive Islamic Octopus"

Essentialized constructions of Islam were a critical component of the "othering" of Bosniaks and play an enormous role in the Serbian grand narrative of the conflict in Bosnia. In the Serbian nationalist discourse of the 1990s, Islam was construed as a determining feature of Bosniak identity and action, as well as an existential threat and mortal enemy to the Serbian people. Like constructions of "the Turk," these representations of Islam were produced by elite actors across the Bosnian Serb political establishment and became deeply entrenched in the social fabric of Bosnian Serb society. In the statements of Radovan Karadžić, wartime president of the self-declared Bosnian Serb Republic, we can find numerous emblematic examples of this discourse. In May 1993, for example, Karadžić characterized the war in Bosnia as "a conflict between us and the greatest enemy," who would "absolutely move to eradicate us."[50] Expounding on the theme of Islam as a mortal threat, he later spoke to the Serbian president Slobodan Milošević about the "ancient danger posed by the toxic, all-destructive Islamic octopus," which he claimed was "constant in its irreconcilable poisonousness towards the Serbian Orthodox being."[51]

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48   "Mladic's Witness: Serbs Are Genetically Stronger, Better, Handsomer and Smarter," Sense Transitional Justice Center, July 9, 2014, https://archive.sensecentar.org/vijesti.php?aid=15996.

49   International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Prosecutor v. Karadžić, IT-95-5/18, Transcript of May 3, 2012, 28477, https://www.icty.org/x/cases/karadzic/trans/en/120503IT.htm.

50   Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 31st Session, May 9, 1993, 16, Radovan Karadžić.

51   Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, Trial Judgement, 1030.

The imagery of the octopus has been applied in other historical contexts,[52] serving not only to dehumanize the targeted group but also to cast it as a uniquely alien threat, capable, with its many tentacles, of far-reaching if not global domination. Similarly, the discourse of the Bosniak "all-destructive Islamic octopus" presented Islam as inherently expansionist, totalitarian, and intolerant. Karadžić himself described the "nature of Islam" as "a big effort to equalize everything, for everything to be Islam."[53] The specter of the Islamic state governed by sharia law was portrayed as the ultimate goal of the Bosniak political movement. As early as 1991, Karadžić declared that "even our gloomiest forecasts, which say that [Bosniak president Alija] Izetbegović wants Bosnia-Herzegovina to become an Islamic Republic, are being fulfilled."[54] The fate of any non-Muslim citizens in such a state was likewise presented with fatalistic certainty. Karadžić predicted that if Serbs endeavored to share a state with Bosniaks, they would find themselves "dhimmis, i.e., second- and third-rank citizens."[55] This rhetoric was echoed across the Bosnian Serb establishment. In a 1992 speech, Tomislav Savkić, a high-ranking member of the Serbian Democratic Party (Srpska demokratska stranka, SDS), declared that "Serbs were under threat as they would be killed and eliminated from BiH when an Islamic state was formed."[56] Another SDS official argued that living with Bosniaks in a single state would amount to "packing the Serb people . . . into Islamic reservations and dooming them to decades of squabbles, bloody clashes, and friction with their fundamentalist jailers."[57]

The specter of "fundamentalism" operated alongside that of the Islamic republic within the Serbian discourse of the intrinsically menacing nature of Muslim identity, and Bosniaks were routinely characterized in the language of Islamic radicalism. At the outset of the war, for instance, Serbian nationalist Vojislav Šešelj characterized BiH as unequivocally Serbian, adding that if "any Muslim fundamentalists do not like that, they

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52   See Phil May, "The Mongolian Octopus—Its Grip on Australia," *Bulletin*, August 21, 1886, https://www.nla.gov.au/stories/blog/australia-white-man; Josef Plank, "Churchill as an Octopus," c. 1938, US Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/churchill/interactive/_html/wc0213.html.

53   Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 46th Session, November 9–11 and November 23, 1994, 27/2, Radovan Karadžić.

54   Laura Silber and Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 213.

55   Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 25th Session, January 19–20, 1993, 4, Radovan Karadžić. Notably, the concept of "dhimmitude" emerged at the end of the twentieth century to refer to the alleged state of perpetual subjugation and discrimination endured by non-Muslim populations under Muslim rule since the eighth century. Widely dismissed by scholars as polemical and historically fallacious, the concept has been embraced by various iterations of Islamophobic extremists. See Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, "When the Elders of Zion Relocated to Eurabia: Conspiratorial Racialisation in Antisemitism and Islamophobia," *Patterns of Prejudice* 52, no. 4 (2018): 314–37.

56   International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Prosecutor v. Momčilo Krajišnik, Case No. IT-00-39-T, Trial Judgment, September 27, 2006, 443–44.

57   Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 25th Session, January 19–20, 1993, 30, Slobodan Bijelić.

will have to pack their suitcases and leave."[58] Attempts to legitimize Serbian violence by framing it as a war against Islamic terrorism were widespread both during and after the conflict. Following the release of photographs that showed Serbian soldiers executing Bosniak civilians in Bijeljina in 1992, for example, the District Council of Bijeljina wrote to the international mediator Cyrus Vance, inviting him to visit Bijeljina. In their invitation, they claimed that the number of victims published in the media was exaggerated and that these victims had been "Muslim Fundamentalists and Albanian Mercenaries."[59] Similarly, the Bijeljina police reports from that time refer to the Bosniaks as Muslim "fanatics," "extremists," and "fundamentalists . . . [who] wanted to establish a Muslim state," adding that they "have stained their hands with the Serbs' blood."[60] A similar narrative was used to justify the genocide committed in Srebrenica in 1995. To this day, the claim that many of Srebrenica's eight thousand Bosniak victims were Islamic terrorists continues to be a discursive staple of the genocide's deniers.[61]

In addition to the threats purportedly posed by Islamic political expansion and radical terrorism, Muslims' allegedly preternaturally high birth rate was a final feature of Serbs' essentialization of Islam, which they argued posed an imminent threat to their continued existence. On the one hand, unnaturally high birth rates were presented as integral to the Muslim character. Karadžić absurdly claimed, for instance, that the Muslim population increases by 1 percent daily because "that is how it is with them."[62] On another occasion, he warned:

> They quadruple through the birth rate, and we Serbs are not up to that. Not only are the Serbs not up to that. . . . Neither Serbs nor Croats together can control through the birth rate the penetration of Islam into Europe, since in five to six years Muslims would make 51 percent of the population of unitary Bosnia.[63]

On the other hand, high birth rates were also described as a deliberate mechanism of Islamic demographic warfare—a premeditated Bosniak plot to dominate and ultimately eradicate the Christian Serb population. This same discourse had been used at the outset of the war to mobilize Serbian nationalists around demographic trends in Kosovo, with claims that "the Serbian nation was dying out" and Serbs in Kosovo

58   Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, Trial Judgement, 1256.

59   Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, Trial Judgement, 237.

60   Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, Trial Judgement, 238.

61   Monica Hanson-Green, "Srebrenica Genocide Denial Report," Srebrenica Memorial Center, 2020, https://weremember.gov.tr/documents/Srebrenica-Genocide-Denial-Report-min.pdf.

62   Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, Trial Judgement, 1056.

63   Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 17th Session, July 24–26, 1992, 87–88, Radovan Karadžić.

were being "swamped" by Muslim Albanians in what was tantamount to "genocide."[64] The rhetoric of a deliberate Muslim plot to create "ethnically pure" territories played a significant role in inciting the ethnic-nationalist fervor of the late 1980s, and was effectively reproduced to characterize the threat posed by Muslims in Bosnia.[65] For example, citing the Muslim propensity to "overwhelm you with their birth rate and their tricks," Karadžić also asserted that Muslim and Christian populations would have to be separated in "each and every village."[66]

The Serbian Narrative of the Bosnian Genocide

In addition to reconceptualizing the victim group, the Bosnian Serb leadership also sought to incorporate the violence itself into broader historical narratives of Serbian national identity. More specifically, they endeavored to situate the conflict of the 1990s as historically rooted in the era of Ottoman occupation of the region. One common discursive mechanism for establishing this connection was the rhetorical trope of vengeance, wherein the contemporary genocidal campaign against Bosniaks was presented as warranted revenge against the "Turks" for the perceived oppression and injustice experienced by Serbs during the colonial period. Perhaps the most famous example of this pattern of representation occurred on July 11, 1995, when General Ratko Mladić led his army into the United Nations "safe zone" of Srebrenica. Before a crew of television cameras, he declared that "finally, after the Revolt against the Dahis, the time has come to take revenge on the Turks in this region."[67] In a speech delivered in Banja Luka a year prior, senior SDS official Rajko Kasagić capsulized Serbian perceptions of their murderous undertaking in more graphic terms:

> They turned us into Turks and converted us to their religion, they
> impaled us, and they gouged out our eyes. . . . We want our own
> house, around which the winds will play freely, and we shall live
> freely in that house of ours. We can do that, brothers and sisters, and

64   Miloš Macura, "Problemi politike obnavljanja stanovnitva u Srbiji," *Demografski zbornik* (1989), 1.

65   "Petition of Belgrade Intellectuals," January 21, 1986, in Branka Magaš, *The Destruction of Yugoslavia* (London: Verso, 1992), 49–52.

66   Prosecutor v. Krajišnik, Trial Judgement, 323.

67   Prosecutor v. Mladic, Trial Judgement, 1257. *Dahis* were Ottoman Empire renegade elite officers (janissaries) who took power in the Sanjak of Smederevo (Belgrade region) in 1801, rebelled against the Sultan, and terrorized the local population. This led to the First Serbian Uprising in 1804. See the definition of *Dahije* in *Hrvatska enciklopedija (1941–1945)*, ed. T. Ujević, https://hemu.lzmk.hr/Natuknica .aspx?ID=10755.

> we have won that right and we are Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox and justice is on our side.[68]

This quotation illuminates two prominent aspects of the overarching Serbian historical narrative that were used to justify the violence. The first of these is the representation of violence against Bosniaks as a struggle for freedom. The discourse of "liberation" was one common discursive mechanism for establishing this historical connection. A report published by the Bosnian Serb army in 1993 stated that the ultimate goal of all contemporary military operations was "the liberation of territories which are ours and which belong to us by historical birthright."[69] That same year, a representative in the Bosnian Serb assembly noted the "historical importance" of the campaign as "the end of a two-hundred-years long . . . liberation struggle of the Serb people."[70] Territories violently captured by Serbian forces throughout the conflict were likewise routinely characterized by political and military leaders as having been "liberated from the Turks."[71]

In addition to the trope of historical liberation, the second theme illustrated by Kasagić's remark is the religious justification for genocide. That is, not only was their violence justified by the universal principles of retribution and freedom from foreign domination, it was also portrayed as divinely sanctioned. As Karadžić explained, "God himself led us along the road we needed to follow to attain our freedom after five hundred years."[72] The religious discourse not only vindicated already completed atrocities, it also served as a rallying cry for future violence. As SDS member Radislav Brđanin articulated explicitly, "[I]t is the obligation of Serbs over the next hundred years to wipe their feet from the foul non-Christians who have befouled this soil of ours."[73]

These religious sentiments were deeply rooted in historical notions of Serbs as a chosen people, charged by God with a sacred mission. The myth of Serbia as the *Antemurale Christianitatis*, or bulwark of Christendom, has long been a salient component of the Serbian identity discourse. This narrative situates the Serbs as the historical protectors of Christian Europe, burdened with the onerous task of defending the frontiers of Western civilization from the relentless onslaught of Islam. In the Serbian political

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68   International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Prosecutor v. Momčilo Krajišnik (Transcript), IT-00-39-T, November 18, 2005, 18788, http://www.icty.org/x/cases/krajisnik/trans/en/051118IT.htm.

69   Prosecutor v. Krajišnik, Trial Judgement, 354–55.

70   Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 24th Session, January 8, 1993, 28, Dragan Mićić.

71   For example, see Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, 555.

72   Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 14th Session, March 27, 1992, 11, Radovan Karadžić.

73   Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, Trial Judgment, 548.

and intellectual tradition, this myth has functioned as an interpretive framework for various episodes in national history from the medieval period to the modern.[74] A crucial component of the *antemurale* discourse is the trope of European ingratitude for Serbian sacrifices made on behalf of the Christian world. Congruous with the ethos of a "chosen people" mythology, the *antemurale* myth inexorably entails a degree of suffering and humiliation consistent with myths of divine election. The preservation of Christendom is thus presented as a thankless task, and its protectors as perpetual victims of disrespect and injustice.

The war of aggression against Bosniaks during the 1990s and the response of the international community reinvigorated this discursive strain of Serbian nationalism. In 1993, Vojislav Kuprešanin observed that "for hundreds of years we defended Catholicism against the Turks and their penetration toward Vienna and no one ever thanked us for that."[75] Another member of the Bosnian Serb assembly similarly observed that "as the last bulwark against the penetration of Islam into Europe, ours is a humiliating position in the Europe of today."[76] The violence against Bosnian Muslims was constantly presented as a heroic stand against Islam's penetration into the heartland of Europe, and the growing censure of the international community was increasingly interpreted within the broader framework of ingratitude for Serbian altruism. Karadžić himself lamented at length:

> Nobody has ever offered us any other option but to disappear, to abolish our state, to accept a joint state with Izetbegović, or, rather, with the Muslims and the Croats, and they clearly told us so at the cocktails and lunches: "Gentlemen, it's because we don't want to accept the existence of an Islamic state in Europe!," which means we were sacrificed so that such a state wouldn't exist, so that it would be mixed, which means that we've wasted our own lives and the lives of our generations to neutralize Islam, so that Europe could be a community of happy Christian peoples, while we guard its walls, as a kind of a moat filled with filthy water, with no other purpose to its existence but to neutralize Islam. We haven't accepted this.[77]

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74   Ana Anti, "The Evolution of Boundary: Defining Historical Myths in Serbian Academic and Public Opinion in the 1990s" in *Myths and Boundaries in South-Eastern Europe*, ed. Pål Kolstø (London: Hurst & Company, 2005), 191.

75   Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 25th Session, January 19–20, 1993, 11, Vojislav Kuprešanin.

76   Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 25th Session, January 19–20, 1993, 46, Nikola Erceg.

77   Assembly of the Serb People in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 49th Session, February 13, 1995, 78, Radovan Karadžić.

These discursive strains were further catalyzed in the wake of the West's 1995 intervention on the side of the Bosniaks, as well as by the 1999 NATO bombing of Belgrade to end Serbian aggression against Kosovar Albanians. Following these events, the themes of European ingratitude and Serbian indignation metastasized into a broader narrative of a global anti-Serb conspiracy, and Serbian representations of the West became markedly more hostile. Where once they were portrayed as merely insufficiently grateful for Serbian sacrifices made on behalf of Christendom, now Western powers were accused of actively conspiring with Muslims under the guise of multiculturalism in order to further subjugate Serbs. Military intervention against the Serbs was portrayed as an attempt to assert a "New World Order" governed by American hegemony. International efforts to prosecute Serbian war crimes and memorialize victims were explained as an attempt to institutionalize anti-Serb bias. The genocide committed in Srebrenica became a particular focal point for this narrative, with Serbian nationalists continuing to insist that the slaughter of over eight thousand Muslim men and boys was "a staged tragedy with an aim to satanize the Serbs."[78]

Serbian Ideology and the Global Far Right

The murder of fifty-one Muslim worshipers in Christchurch, New Zealand, described at the opening of this article is only one example of recent acts of right-wing terror known to have drawn inspiration from Serbian ideology. In 2011, prior to murdering seventy-seven people in Norway, right-wing terrorist Anders Breivik published a 1,538-page manifesto in which he explicitly praised Serbian war criminals and regurgitated many of the Islamophobic tropes characteristic of Serbian discourse.[79] Three years later, the perpetrator of an attack at the Pennsylvania State Police Barracks, thirty-one-year-old American domestic terrorist Eric Frein, was revealed to be likewise infatuated with the Serbian military and its genocidal campaign against Bosniaks in the 1990s.[80] In this section, we first demonstrate how the preexisting Islamophobic and racist discourses among the global far right complement Serbian constructions of Islam and "Turks," and thus provide fertile ground for the influence of Serbian ideology. Finally, in this

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78   Dusan Stojanovic and Radul Radovanovic, "Bosnian Serb Leader Milorad Dodik Disputes 1995 Srebrenica Genocide," *Associated Press*, August 14, 2018, https://apnews.com/b76aa3d8b22747 4aa065ce3464dca714/Bosnian-Serb-leader-denies-scope-of-Srebrenica-massacre.

79   Andrew Berwick [Anders Behring Breivik], *2083: A European Declaration of Independence* (self-pub., London, 2011), available on Internet Archive, accessed June 13, 2024, https://archive.org/details /2083-a-european-declaration-of-independence.

80   Terrie Morgan-Besecker and David Singleton, "Eric Frein Infatuated with Serbian Military," *The Morning Call*, October 12, 2014, https://www.mcall.com/news/local/mc-eric-frein-serbian-20141012 -story.html.

section we analyze the far right's fixation on the Bosnian War, showing how the Serbian narrative of the conflict is uniquely emblematic of the far-right worldview.

Anti-Muslim and Anti-Immigrant Discourses

The Islamophobic rhetoric of the global far right relies on many of the same tropes and representations found in the Serbian nationalist discourse since the 1990s. Islam is portrayed as an existential threat to Western and European society, while Muslim religious identity is constructed as inherently incompatible with modern national identity and political belonging. The terror attacks of September 11 as well as other high-profile instances of Islamic radicalism in the twenty-first century have reinforced and perpetuated these discursive strains, creating an environment of fear and mistrust conducive to the exclusion of Muslims from the Western political community. In the United States and Europe, Islamic communities are frequently portrayed as "a sort of 'fifth column,' a danger to 'our way of life,'" and are accused of giving "succor to enemies within the nation and support to enemies outside."[81] In many Western countries, these stereotypes persist regardless of whether an individual Muslim is a legal resident or natural born citizen.[82] The transnational nature of the Islamic community (*ummah*), as well as some of its members' failure to assimilate to the "Christian values" of their American or European homelands, consigns Muslims in the West to the status of quintessential "other"—a politically and culturally foreign element destabilizing an otherwise unified nation.

It is easy to see how the Serbian nationalist construction of Bosniaks as "Turks" would resonate deeply within this broader strain of Islamophobic discourse. Despite the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage they share with others in the Balkans, Bosniaks are relentlessly portrayed as a foreign, specifically Turkish, element in the midst of a European society. In his sprawling manifesto released prior to his 2011 terror attack, Andres Breivik explicitly demonstrated the appeal of this strain of the Serbian nationalist discourse. The compendium, which speaks adoringly and at great length about the Bosnian genocide, included entire sections like "Who Are the Bosniaks?" and "Historically, Bosnia Is Serbian Land."[83] If mere adherence to Islam is enough to deprive Bosniaks of any entitlement to the lands they have occupied for centuries, the exclusion of far more recently arrived Muslim communities in Western countries from such rights is a foregone conclusion.

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81   George Morgan and Scott Poynting, *Global Islamophobia: Muslims and Moral Panic in the West* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 8.

82   Liz Fekete, *A Suitable Enemy: Racism, Migration and Islamophobia in Europe* (New York: Pluto Press, 2009), 44.

83   It is worth noting that these sections were not Breivik's original compositions but rather were compiled from the online Serbian-American diaspora network Srpska-Mreza, notorious for its Islamophobic content.

Another discursive strategy for the exclusion of Muslims from the political community is the representation of Islam as fundamentally opposed to democracy, human rights, and constitutional values.

> Islamophobic discourse creates a Western subject, understood in terms of a cultural form that cherishes freedom, equality and liberalism, on the one hand, and situates Muslim culture in a context of pre-modern traditions and values that are unable to transcend beyond the structure of Islamic thought, on the other.[84]

In the global right-wing discourse, this is achieved through emphasis on specters such as "sharia law" and "the caliphate," in addition to deviant practices such as honor killing, genital mutilation, and gang rape that persist only in small anomalous segments on the outermost margins of Muslim society.[85] The Serbian narrative that depicts the ineluctable goal of the Bosniak nationalist project as establishing an Islamic republic governed by sharia law fits within this broader discursive strain. It essentializes Islam as not only a monolithic entity devoid of regional nuance or variation but also as an intrinsically expansionary, ravenous force seeking to dominate and transform the entirety of the global political and cultural landscape. The fear generated by this narrative furnished a main justification for the genocidal campaign against Bosniaks in the 1990s and continues to provide a powerful impetus for extremist violence today. Conceptualized as the fear that Islam will "spread its wings,"[86] it is rooted in the apprehension that as a collective, Muslims have the capacity and desire to transform a given territory to their own advantage and at the expense of all others.[87]

This anxiety is not solely political in nature—that is to say, it is not merely the fear of finding oneself in an Islamic state governed by sharia law. The fear that Muslims can fundamentally alter "who we are" and the space in which "we live" is increasingly expressed in cultural terms. Whereas the threat of an Islamic coup in a strong secular democracy requires a strenuous stretch of even a delusional imagination, the idea that Muslims are surreptitiously working to erase indigenous cultures is, while not credible, much more difficult to disprove. This cultural shift within the global Islamophobic discourse has given rise to the normative structuring of a "a hierarchical order, within which individuals are categorized as subjects of superior or inferior cultures."[88] The emphasis on elusive and intangible "cultural" differences has lent itself readily to the

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84   Asif Mohiuddin, "Islamophobia and the Discursive Reconstruction of Religious Imagination in Europe, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 39, no. 2 (2019): 135–56, at 140.

85   Fekete, *Suitable Enemy*, p. 63.

86   Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadžić, Trial Judgment, 1901.

87   Mohiuddin, "Islamophobia," 140.

88   Mohiuddin, 143.

consolidation of anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, and generally racist narratives, which is catalyzed by pervasive ignorance surrounding nuances of religious, ethnic, and national identity. Invariably fueled by indifference, this ignorance is clearly perceptible in right-wing discourses, where terms referring to religion, ethnic identity, and citizenship status (e.g., "migrant" and refugee) are used interchangeably. The same pattern is evident in the Serbian discourse of the 1990s, where Bosniaks were othered on the basis of religion, perceived foreignness, and constructions of inferiority that utilized both racial and cultural elements.

Thus, it is readily apparent how the Serbian reconfiguration of Bosniak identity in the 1990s aligns with Islamophobic and racist discourses among the contemporary far right. Essentializing narratives of Islam as an expansionist and malign force seeking to subjugate or even eliminate all states and cultures within its reach, as well as common representations of the Muslim "other" as inherently foreign, inferior, and threatening, provide a robust basis for ideological alignment. All of these elements are amplified by the overarching narrative within both Serbian nationalist and international right-wing discourses that depicts an epic historical conflict between the "Muslim East" and the "Christian West"—between foreign ethno-cultural minorities and invariably white defenders of European cultural heritage. According to this narrative, indistinguishable processes of Islamization and racial colonization constitute an exigent and mortal threat to "Christian European culture" and the Western way of life.

The Symbolic Appeal of the Bosnian Genocide

Thus far, we have seen the myriad ways by which Serbian nationalist ideology of the 1990s has been disseminated across time and space to reach remote corners of the right-wing extremist online community. We have also established the inherent compatibility between Serbian nationalist constructions of Islam and Bosniak identity and the racist and Islamophobic discourses inspiring contemporary far-right violence. Although critical, these elements alone cannot fully account for the popularity of Serbian nationalist ideology within movements both geographically and temporally removed from its context of origin. In order to complete our understanding of this phenomenon, it is necessary to undertake a deeper exploration of the symbolic appeal of not only Serbian ideology itself but also the violence it precipitated, and the overarching narrative of this violence developed by the perpetrators.

In many respects, the Serbian nationalist narrative of the Bosnian genocide can be seen as emblematic of the far-right world view. The enthusiasm with which right-wing extremists have incorporated this narrative into their own interpretations of not only history but contemporary politics is evidenced by the parallels expressly drawn by far-right actors between the war in BiH and current conflicts. The previously cited manifesto published by Andres Breivik furnishes one of the most explicit examples. In addition to referring to the Bosnian genocide as a "just cause to fight and oppose Islamic demographic warfare," Breivik also lionized Radovan Karadžić:

> [The Bosnian War] was never about ethnicity but about ridding the country of the genocidal hate ideology known as Islam. . . . [F]or his efforts to rid Serbia of Islam he will always be considered and remembered as an honorable Crusader and a European war hero.[89]

This example illuminates the symbolic interpretation of various aspects of the Serbian narrative among the global far right. Serbia itself is regarded as a paragon of "Christian Europe," despite its history of not only communist atheism but also of exclusion from European political structures. Decades of peaceful cohabitation between Christians and Muslims in BiH during the socialist era are omitted and distorted within the symbolic interpretations of Balkan history promulgated on the far right. Instead, the preferred focal point of these right-wing actors is medieval history, which looms especially large in the Serbian national identity discourse—both in narrative and iconography. This is hardly surprising given the rampant medievalism observed among the far right in recent years,[90] sustained by ahistorical fantasies of the Middle Ages as a golden age of contemporary right-wing values, characterized by blood-and-soil identity, "traditional" gender norms, violent racial hierarchies, and of course, the Crusades.

Among the global far right, the bloody confrontations between Christian and Muslim forces that characterized the medieval period are something of a symbolic obsession, serving as a framework through which they interpret the contemporary world order. As Ariel Koch observes, Western right-wing extremists maintain that the goal of Muslims in the twenty-first century remains "to try to conquer Europe as their ancestors did."[91] As such, the Crusaders, the Christian forces who allied themselves against the perceived incursion of Islam into Europe, are a salient symbol in the identity discourses of the Western far right. This can be seen in the abundance of Crusader symbolism appropriated by right-wing individuals and organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, which even publishes a periodical called the *Crusader*. "The Crusaders" was also the name chosen by a group of men who were arrested in Kansas in 2016 before they could carry out a planned terror attack against Muslims.[92] Koch enumerates examples of various "Defense Leagues" across Europe who identify with the right-wing "Counter Jihad Movement" and operate under the symbols and slogans of these

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89   Berwick [Breivik], *2083*, 1407.

90   See Thomas Blake, "Getting Medieval Post-Charlottesville: Medievalism and the Alt-Right," in *Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History*, ed. Louie Dean Valencia-Garcia (New York: Routledge, 2020), 179–97.

91   Ariel Koch, "The New Crusaders: Contemporary Extreme Right Symbolism and Rhetoric," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 5 (2017): 15.

92   Mark Berman, Sarah Larimer, and Cleve R. Wootson Jr., "Three Kansas Men Calling Themselves 'Crusaders' Charged in Terror Plot Targeting Muslim Immigrants," *Washington Post*, October 15, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/10/14/three-kansas-men-calling-themselves-crusaders-charged-in-terror-plot-targeting-muslim-immigrants.

medieval knights. Crusader shields and similar iconography have become ubiquitous at far-right events, and romanticized notions of medieval Christian European history are now a staple of right-wing online forums. On the internet,

> there is an extensive use of memes and photos of knights, many of whom are accompanied by a caption that threatens to execute a Crusade as a counter-response to Jihad, such as "Jihad Works Both Ways" or "I'll See Your Jihad and I'll Raise You One Crusade," and others who call for a fight against the "Muslim invaders" as was done by their Christian ancestors.[93]

The construction of Byzantium, a foundational pillar of Serbian nationalist identity narratives, has likewise become a prominent feature of global right-wing identity discourses.[94] Since 2017, a white supremacist group called The New Byzantium has been furtively gaining traction in remote corners of the radical right-wing cybersphere. Founded by American neo-Nazi Jason Kessler, the organization offers a classic example of contemporary historical revisionism on the far right. Within these revisionist narratives, the true religious and ethnic diversity that characterized the Byzantine Empire is completely omitted; instead, Byzantium is presented as having been a force for the preservation of white, Christian, European civilization following the fall of Rome. In a similar fashion, Kessler's New Byzantium is "intended to preserve white dominance after what he calls 'the inevitable collapse of the American Empire.'"[95]

Although seamlessly incorporated into the racial ideology of white supremacy, Islamophobia is the foundational component of the Byzantium discourse on the global far right. Across right-wing online platforms, Roland Betancourt observes, "the reconquest of Hagia Sophia is emblematic of the destruction of Islam and the restoration of a mythic white Byzantium."[96] In addition to lauding the genocidal accomplishments of Serbian nationalists in the 1990s, Brenton Tarrant also made extensive references to this narrative. In the manifesto he published prior to committing the 2019 terror attacks in New Zealand, Tarrant wrote, "We are coming for Constantinople, and we will destroy every mosque and minaret in the city. The Hagia Sophia will be free of minarets and Constantinople will be rightfully Christian owned once more."[97]

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93   Koch, "New Crusaders," 16.

94   Roland Betancourt, "Why White Supremacists and QAnon Enthusiasts are Obsessed—but Very Wrong—about the Byzantine Empire," *The Conversation*, March 4, 2021, https://theconversation.com /why-white-supremacists-and-qanon-enthusiasts-are-obsessed-but-very-wrong-about-the-byzantine -empire-154994.

95   Betancourt.

96   Betancourt.

97   Brenton Tarrant, *The Great Replacement*, 37, Charles University (Prague), https://dl1.cuni.cz/pluginfile .php/1192779/mod_resource/content/1/Tarrant_vyber%20%281%29.pdf.

Thus, within a community that widely perceives itself as Crusaders in their own right—the last line of defense against colonizing hordes of Muslims and immigrants—the Serbian myths of the *Antemurale Christianitatis* and Byzantium are expressly appealing. If Serbia functions symbolically as the paragon of white Christian Europe, it is clear how the violence committed in the 1990s against the supposed human remnants of the Ottoman Empire likewise serves an archetypal function. Within this context, the phenomenon of triumphalism or the glorification of the Bosnian genocide that has persisted in the decades following the war takes on a symbolic dimension of its own for radical right-wing communities, who yearn to celebrate their own violent campaigns against Muslims and foreigners with such unbridled relish.

A final element of the Serbian narrative that has taken on emblematic appeal within the discourse of the global far-right interprets the intervention of Western powers on the side of the Bosniaks during the war, as well as the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, within the context of a global conspiracy. Rather than limiting the nature of the conspiracy to being anti-Serb, it is here viewed as part of a much more ambitious plot jointly contrived by cosmopolitan liberal elites and minority communities to erode indigenous cultures and national identities. The specter of a "New World Order" designed by a secretive cohort of powerful globalists is a dominant theme in the conspiracy theories buttressing far-right movements in Western countries. By presenting themselves as rebels against this supposed conspiracy and as the victims of an expansionist and corrosive globalist agenda, Serbs have become a natural ally and role model for right-wing individuals and groups aspiring to similarly violent resistance against this imagined global threat to their identities.

Conclusion

In recent years, the conflict-supporting narratives that were used to mobilize and justify Serbian violence during the Bosnian War have become a source of inspiration for right-wing terrorists around the world. In this article, we have examined the various discourses that were used to reconceptualize the identities of Bosniak victims as inherently threatening, genetically inferior foreign elements outside the political community. In addition to these constructions, Bosnian Serb political, military, and intellectual elites characterized the violence as part of a civilizational struggle between Christian Europe and the Muslim East, as well as part of the global war on radical Islamic terrorism. In framing their crimes in these broader contexts, the Serbian establishment actively sought to gain the support and sympathy of the international community. However, when international popular, political, and legal consensus came down on the side of Bosniak victims, Serbs adopted a new discourse of global conspiracy and anti-Serb bias to explain the war's outcome and international perception.

These narratives and ideational constructs have proven appealing to radical right-wing actors worldwide. Through internet forums and social media networks, this ideology has permeated remote corners of the globe and become deeply embedded

within the popular discourse of the extreme right. Beginning with platforms like 4Chan and 8Chan, Serbian Islamophobic and conspiratorial constructs have been disseminated in the form of memes, videos, and other modes of online communication. In the last decade, the perpetrators of numerous acts of right-wing terror in Western countries have made explicit and symbolic references to the Bosnian genocide as a source of inspiration, attesting to the viral potential of ideologies of hatred in the age of globalization.

The success with which Serbian narratives have taken hold among the global far right in recent years is not, however, only attributable to the deliberate efforts to disseminate this ideology on the internet. The fundamental congruity between Serbian ideology and preexisting Islamophobic, xenophobic, and conspiracy discourses across the West also greatly enhances the receptivity of these audiences. Serbian construction of "the Turk" and essentialized characterizations of Islam are uniquely resonant with contemporary right-wing conceptualizations, which also rely heavily on the tropes of foreign invasion, mortal threat, and biological hierarchy to mobilize their constituencies. Furthermore, the Serbian nationalist narrative of the Bosnian genocide is emblematic of the contemporary right-wing worldview. As evidenced by the manifestos and communications of these actors, the "civilizational struggle" between Christianity and Islam, the imminent threat of Islamic radicalism, and the conspiratorial and corrosive nature of the neoliberal order are all integral components of extreme right-wing ontology. The glorification of the Serbian genocide against Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s demonstrates the extent to which these events have been interpreted as emblematic of modern "crusader" ideals, and as laudable examples of how the so-called Muslim and immigrant questions can be effectively dealt with through violence. By understanding the broader appeal of Serbian ideology within the international community of right-wing radicals, we are better able to ascertain the dynamics by which philosophies of hatred metastasize in the era of globalization to inspire acts of violence far removed in both time and space from their contexts of origin.