
Trauma and Taboo: Forbidden Political Questions in Croatia

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Summary

This paper tries to differentiate cultural trauma from political taboo, as well as to show the manifestations of both in Croatia. By capturing the recent tendencies of political tabooization and de-tabooization of the main national identity signifiers, it is possible to discern several clear lines of collective relationships towards the country's cultural traumas. First, the cultural victim trauma related to the Homeland War is sanctified and frozen. Furthermore, narratives built from that period have been increasingly applied to the Second World War, in order to represent the quisling Independent State of Croatia in a more positive light. Such attempts of making an ideological continuity are a clear falsification of history. Second, the cultural perpetrator trauma from both periods is denied and silenced. There have been several attempts to question both forms of cultural trauma in the fields of arts and civil society, but they are of limited reach and influence, especially because the mainstream media, political and religious actors promote the relativization and revision of the past. At the end of the paper, the author gives several pieces of advice for public action in order to change this mainstream condition of silencing and the tabooization of troubling traces from the past.

Keywords: Cultural Trauma, Political Taboo, National Identity, Defense Mechanisms, Theatrical Plays

Introduction

In this paper, the focus is on silence. Silence that is different from stillness, and related to uneasiness and discontent, produced by trauma. However, such silence is different from ideologically produced silence and silencing the past or political taboos. Therefore, the first task of this paper is to differentiate cultural trauma from what is politically taboo.

We define cultural trauma as a retroactive collective epistemic process “when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that

leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness” (Alexander, 2004: 1). It involves an assemblage of reactions to abrupt event(s) that have produced the breakdown of a meaning-making system. This process of affectively charged interpretational contestation leads to the creation of a *narrative of pain* and its further consolidation and legitimation. To be widely accepted, such a narrative should be supported and disseminated to the public by various carrier groups, in arenas such as politics, religion, law, education, arts, science, and media (*ibid.*: 15-21). As such, it transcends the social area of its origin and becomes constitutive for collective identity formation and part of a culture.

On the contrary, a political taboo is a hegemonic silence around some mystified and sanctified words, concepts and narratives, promoted as important for a group’s symbolic coming to consciousness of itself. It is articulated in the form of a social norm, shared, but not by all members of society. The taboo is imposed by the ruling class as an unquestionable way of public thinking and speaking that includes silencing any critical examination of the past. As such, it transforms selected and problematic traces from the past “in the sphere of the forbidden”, considering them as fearsome and potentially destructive or destabilizing, as well as, “if not unmentionable, at least untouchable” (Van den Braembussche, 1998: 103). Freud already recognized this double face of the taboo: “on the one hand [it means] ‘sacred’, ‘consecrated’, and on the other ‘uncanny’, ‘dangerous’, ‘forbidden’, ‘unclean’” (Freud, 2001 [1913]: 21). The political taboo tries to define a group’s collective identity and sense of individual belonging. If someone does not think by using those sacred codes and myths, even more, if someone dares to question them, he/she automatically becomes a traitor and enemy, in other words the Other, stigmatized and often ostracized. It is prohibited to discuss or criticize the taboo, and there is a demand for its monolithic acceptance and admiration, expressed like that among the apes in *A Space Odyssey 2001*.

To further differentiate between these two concepts, we can rely mostly on the work of the Belgian philosopher of history, Antoon Van den Braembussche. According to him, many historical experiences bring about the mixture of trauma and taboo (1998: 97; 2001: 1060). Threatening historical traces are at the heart of both phenomena, but the way and origin of the threat are different (1998: 102). Therefore, their roots of silence are different. The trauma emerges from the past itself, from a dreadful and almost immediately repressed trace, created through an overwhelming and painful experience, delayed up to the moment of its symptomatic return. On the contrary, the political taboo emerges as an ideological challenge of past experience for the present (*ibid.*) because of its threat to the prevailing demands, norms, values and supposed collective identity promoted by the ruling class. Because of its profound influence, the traumatic event is not suppressed, but dissociated from consciousness and always barely possible to explain, while the taboo takes part in

historical consciousness as something contagious, shameful and for that reason forbidden to be uttered. Traumatized people cope with the numbness and the impossibility of putting experience into words. To use the Lacanian terminology, they are facing the limits of representation that stems from the experience of the horror of the Real. On the other hand, in the case of taboo we are not dealing with a term-less experience, but deliberate concealment and censorship, as well as conscious denial, “forgetting”, and the possible falsification and reinterpretation of the experience, with the purpose to create ideological consistency and historical continuity.

Taboo’s Defense Mechanisms

Dealing with a problematic and haunting past involves several defense mechanisms with the purpose to remove the historical burden. According to Van den Braembussche (1998: 106-110) there are four such collective strategies to deal with threatening traces from the past. The first one is *denying the unmanageable traces / evidences*, which includes deliberate repression, conscious forgetting, falsification of the past and censorship. “The incriminating facts will be declared non-existent, fictitious or characterized as inventions of those who are in a conspiracy against the existing order” (*ibid.*: 106). In today’s Croatia this involves the (extreme group’s) negation of systematic killings in Jasenovac concentration camp during the Second World War, the more prominent erasing of the facts and significance of the Croatian antifascist movement from the history curriculum, the denial of war crimes during the Homeland War etc. Furthermore, this sort of defense mechanism can follow the deliberate destruction of historical and artistic monuments as places of memory. After such destruction, denial is much easier to manage.¹

The second defense mechanism is *the cognitive type of repression*, which is a more active and nuanced way to deal with the past, produced by cognitive dissonance and discontent because of the traces that cannot be denied (*ibid.*: 108). At the heart of this mechanism lies the reinterpretation of historical facts for the purpose of altering the collective perception of problematic traces. Therefore, to make a harmonious tale disturbing facts are neglected, or just mentioned, poorly explained, while at the same time emphasizing the facts in favor of a monolithic and heroic tale. For example, mass exodus of Serbs from so-called Krajina after Croatian Army “Operation Storm” in 1995 was excluded from the proposal of The National Curriculum for Primary School in 2006, as well as war crimes of the Croatian side, while “only those crimes in which Croats and Bosnian Muslims were victims are explicitly mentioned (Dubrovnik, Vukovar, Srebrenica)” (Koren, 2015: 24). As a part of

¹ Regarding the crimes against cultural and historical heritage in former Yugoslav wars see: <http://www.heritage.sense-agency.com/> [accessed on: December 30, 2016].

the culture of victimization, social invisibility of war crimes of one's own side is still a major problem in facing the violent past in most post-Yugoslav states. Another example is the recent story about the "Triple concentration camp Jasenovac", which extends the previously mentioned denial of threatening traces into a wider narrative which blames post-Second World War communist authorities for most of the atrocities, though without any evidence.²

The next defense mechanism is an outright creation of myths or *the mythical type of repression* (Van den Braembussche, 1998: 109). In the previous mechanism, there was a kind of accommodation with the past, but in this case "the moment historical consciousness transforms the past in a battleground for present action by creating a legend or historical myth, which is merely an instrument of justification, any accommodation with a difficult past is clearly left behind" (*ibid.*). An emotionally appealing past is constructed in the form of a core historical narrative, which is subsequently used as an unquestionable frame for interpretation. To paraphrase the old statement: If the facts do not fit to the myth, so much the worse for the facts. There are numerous historical examples of such myths,³ and Croatia is not an exception. In the last 25 years, right-wing groups have developed the myth of virginity and innocence of the young Croatian state that was repeatedly attacked by the same mortal enemies, namely Serbs (local ones and/or from Serbia) together with communists during the 20th century. Such interpretation has been applied to recent Homeland War from the 1990s, where it simplifies the dynamics of the internal mutiny of local Serbs and the external aggression of the Yugoslav People's Army. The application of the myth also extends its definition of communist enemy to the Social Democratic Party as the legal successor of the Croatian League of Communists, to other parties allied with them, as well as to all Croatian citizens whose ancestors were members or supporters of the Partisan resistance movement. A more important interpretational manoeuvre is made regarding the Second World War Independent State of Croatia (NDH), which was supposedly just defending itself from the uprising of local Serbs and Croatian communists. In fact, the NDH was a quisling state, established by the Axis powers during the Second World War, and governed by Croatian fascists. It was well known for its concentration camps and genocidal policy against Serbs, Jews, Roma people, and Croatian antifascists.⁴ The myth of virginity and innocence was made for present ideological purposes by using the basic facts from the Homeland War, simplifying the story and applying it to the past, which was completely the opposite. The aim of the myth is to show that history is repeating itself, that the enemies are the same, characterized as "those who neither

² Demystification of this story was very well done by Slavko Goldstein (2016).

³ See plenty of examples in Van den Braembussche (1998, 2001, 2002).

⁴ The genesis of NDH genocidal policy is maybe best described in Goldstein (2007/2013).

wanted nor loved Croatia”, as well as that the NDH was a truly good and authentic state and the fulfilment of the one-thousand-year dream of national independence.

The last defense mechanism is *the unconscious type of repression*, “dictated by anxiety and collective self-defense... likely to acquire traumatic overtones but, in contrast to historical trauma’s, the latent components of memory are not feared in terms of the historical experience itself, but in terms of present awareness” (*ibid.*: 107). This mechanism differs from the first mechanism because it is not calculated, but a rejection fueled by the fear of a latent memory that could lead to a loss of the stability of national identity, such was the case of Germany after the Second World War “Catastrophe” (*ibid.*). This type of silencing is, in our opinion, more common in the perpetrator’s trauma (Giesen, 2004: 112) and those fears are related to the present concerns and current identity, because the recognition of its own side’s atrocities and/or defeat is traumatic in itself. As unconscious repression often results in the return of the repressed, the perpetrator’s, as well as the victim’s trauma could be further tabooed or blocked from the process of *working-through* by the previously mentioned, more conscious defense mechanisms.⁵ In the case of Croatia, the mechanism of unconscious repression was activated by the military occupation of a part of its territory during the first phase of the Homeland War. The possibility of a permanent loss of these occupied territories was a victimizing threat to the nation’s national identity. To be more precise, that was a threat to the way of perceiving the national territory as a symbolic space (Salecl, 1994: 15). Since then, the seeds of war were planted and various traumas and taboos have been developed in Croatia. I will try to give a broader picture of these phenomena in the following sections, as well as to complement the picture of defense mechanisms developed to make certain narratives and questions taboo.

Political Taboos in Croatia

To give a first impression regarding the recent tabooization in Croatia, it is worth citing three symptomatic statements. The first one was given on 3 May (World Press Freedom Day) 2014 by Tomislav Karamarko, then leader of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), the country’s biggest political party, which is now in office:⁶

⁵ This is clearly shown in the study of the perpetrator’s collective trauma in Japan, conducted by Tsutsui (2009) by using somewhat different but compatible classification of conscious defense mechanisms.

⁶ His last position was the First Deputy Prime Minister in the government cabinet of Tihomir Orešković from January 22 to June 15, 2016, when he resigned because of the conflict of interest. Soon after, the same government lost a vote of no confidence in the Parliament. Karamarko resigned from the party presidency on June 21, 2016. He was succeeded by Andrej Plenković, current Prime Minister.

Everybody can think what he or she wants, but only in his or her own room, courtyard or house – certainly not in the public arena. Everyone will have to respect values that are in the very foundations of the Croatian state – these are the Homeland War, our defenders, our dead, the political doctrine of Dr. Franjo Tuđman and the great deeds of Gojko Šušak.⁷

Such demand for obeying “the only proper” monolithic national interpretation was a part of a broader radicalization of the country’s political discourse and ideological battle of “re-Tudjmanisation”, performed not only by HDZ officials. In the same context, on 20 March, 2015, President of the Zagreb County Court, Ivan Turudić, expressed the next symptomatic statement:

Croatia’s new criminal code should contain sanctions against those denying the defensive character of the independence war of the 1990s and of the 1995 Croatian military operation “Storm”. ... I’m asking for jail for those who say that the Homeland War was a civil war and operation “Storm” ethnic cleansing.⁸

Taken together, these two statements were not only open attacks on the freedom of speech, but also strong demands, from the position of power, against questioning burdening events from the recent war past. As such, they are the first instance of hegemonic silencing led by carrier groups (Alexander, 2004: 11), which could lead to, as well as be followed by any of the above-mentioned defense mechanisms. However, during the same period there were several counter-tabooing reactions, mostly by journalists and NGOs. The well-known journalist Viktor Ivančić gave the most elaborated one, on February 13, 2015.

The only truth about the Homeland War is that you cannot speak about it truthfully. If you say something bad about the Homeland War, you’re bound to fall. Fundamentalism reflects itself in literal beliefs in myths of the state and statehood, whether it is the story [of dreaming about the state of Croats] “from the seventh century”, of bloody wars, or collections of enemies that you should always be ready to use. We have an extremist reality and someone who tries to question that reality will be swallowed by extremism. It is a cynical society that tows the extremism through its core.⁹

⁷ <http://www.novilist.hr/Vijesti/Hrvatska/Karamarko-Ja-sam-to-iskarikirao-zato-sto-je-to-bioskup-branitelja-i-svi-su-bili-emosivni> [accessed on November 30, 2016].

⁸ <http://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/trazim-zatvor-za-sve-koji-kazu-da-je-domovinski-rat-bio-gradanski-a-akcija-oluja-etnicko-ciscenje/488407/> [accessed on November 30, 2016].

⁹ <http://www.novilist.hr/Vijesti/Rijeka/Ivancic-Jedina-istina-o-Domovinskom-ratu-je-da-o-njemu-ne-smijete-govoriti-istinito> [accessed on November 30, 2016].

Denial, mythical and cognitive defense mechanisms are clearly emphasized in these statements. Such a radical taboo discourse is not only a part of the HDZ's electoral strategy of a revival of old wars, not only the one from the 1990s, but also the Cold War and the Second World War,¹⁰ with the strong tendency of historical revision and the active support of Croatian nationalism and fascism.

According to the three previous statements, we can easily discern the main tabooed signifiers in Croatia. These are:

- the Croatian nation-state and consequently definition of “a proper” Croatian national identity, or who are “the real” Croats,
- the Homeland War as one of the constitutive processes for the creation of nation-state and identity,
- the political doctrine of Franjo Tuđman as the founding father of the independent state, and,
- political enemies, broadly defined as those who are opposing that doctrine.

Psychoanalytically speaking, those signifiers are the core elements of a collective identification system, and the basis of the quadruple phantasmatic politics of Croatian nationalism. The question is what do these four elements represent?

Descriptions of a proper nation's attributes, proper national identity, and who are the purebred Croats represent an instance in psychoanalysis called an *Ideal-Ego* – the image representing “what we would like to be” as a collective entity, in this case also as a political community.

The Homeland War is a relational term, or the source of bipolar oppositions, which defines both the enemy as the *Other*, and – as its mirror image – the features of true Croats, as well as how the national community is endangered by the enemy. As such, it points both to paranoia towards the enemy, and to nostalgia of a unified and unmediated bond between fellow members of the Nation during the war. In the nationalist politics such a bond is always constituted as lost and something that should be regained in the future. That is why such politics always appeals to national togetherness as a precondition for successful political action. “Nostalgia and paranoia usually operate side by side in order to provide the subject a way of figuring its missing enjoyment” (McGowan, 2013: 44). The paranoid explanation points here at those who are responsible for the lost enjoyment. Depictions and images of the enemies established through the war (like serbo-chetnics or yugo-communists) were perpetuated after the war in the country's usual politics and their usage was extended to other political opponents, defined by these terms as state enemies, e.g. so-

¹⁰ Originally this idea was expressed by Dejan Jović. Link: <http://www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/biepag/node/144> [accessed on November 30, 2016].

cial-democrats, liberals, critical intellectuals, etc. In the last few years, along these metaphors, another one has been created, used as a common denominator of the previous two, which describes the enemies as “those who never wanted nor loved independent Croatia”. Usage of these metaphors is nothing but a continuation of war by the same discursive means! The recent history of their political articulation, especially during elections and right-wing protests, appears as a fetishist process of repetition or *acting-out* against all those who do not support such rigid phantasmatic politics, as well as a self-destructive process of paranoid detection of the same enemies on various political and ideological positions over and over again.

Another instance of identification, represented here by president Tuđman and his doctrine, is described in psychoanalysis as an *Ego-Ideal*, or the instance for whom we as a collective perform (or should perform) the previously explained ideal-ego role. The crucial question to be asked here is for whose gaze do we want to be perceived as likeable and worthy of love (Žižek, 1989/2008: 116)? Who is to be impressed? The answer is some sort of socio-symbolical order, represented by its authorities, ancestral heroes, saints and martyrs. Such order was described in the Preamble of the Croatian Constitution, which interprets the history of statehood and constant longing for it from the 7th century. Fulfilment of such a 1000 year desire for and dreaming of the state is condensed into the figure of Franjo Tuđman as the founding father who is loved and admired in this ideological scheme. His doctrine called Tuđjmanism was based on reconciliation between offsprings of communist Partisans and fascist Ustasas, who fought against each other during the Second World War. It also includes the nationalistic deification of the Croatian people, the concept of the ethnic nation, conceived as harmonic organismic unity, and conservative anti-liberalism (Ravlić, 2006: 113).

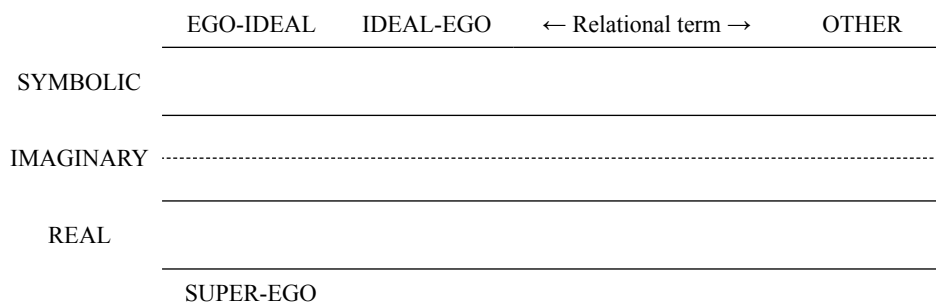
Picture 1. Tabooed national signifiers as instances of collective identification

EGO-IDEAL	IDEAL-EGO	← Relational term →	OTHER
President Franjo Tuđman	Croatian nation-state and identity	Homeland War	National enemies

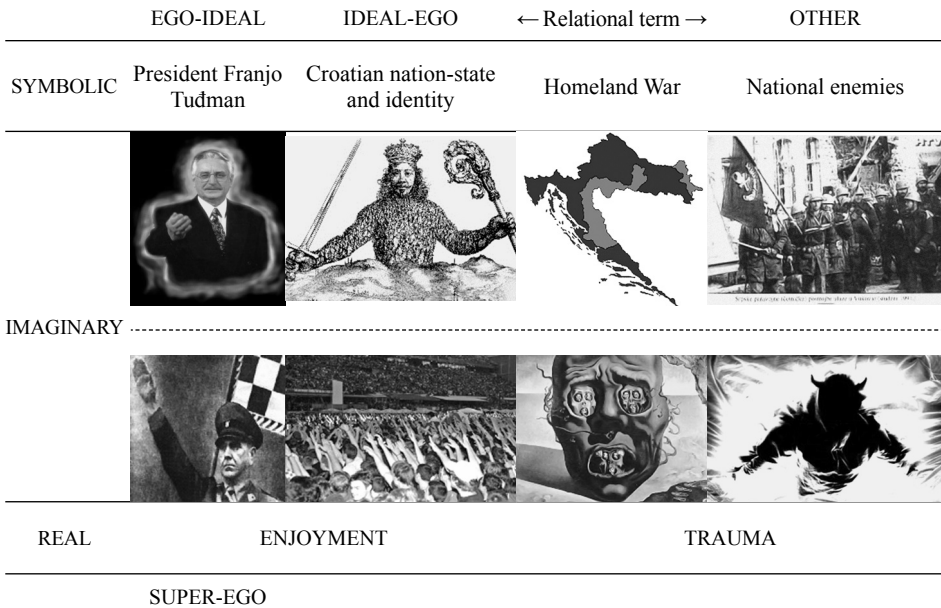
According to psychoanalysis, beside their symbolic dimension, these sanctified signifiers have another two dimensions: imaginary and real. The Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real are the three fundamental registers of experience and every human experience can be described by using them. In brief, the Symbolic is an order of signifiers, the Imaginary is an order of idealistic pictures attributed to those signifiers, and the Real is a part of the phenomenon we encounter, but cannot put into words or imagine. It makes us speechless. The Real is outside of language and resists absolute symbolization (cf. Lacan, 1988: 66). We could say the Real is

that barrier which language in use cannot pass to get to the core of imagined referent. It is beyond the words, most vividly experienced in the traumatic events that leave human subjects speechless. That is the moment of experiencing uncanniness. Nevertheless, what leaves the subject speechless is also an experience of excessive enjoyment. In each case, experiencing the Real is symbolically and imaginarily unassimilable. The relationship between the Symbolic and the Real mediates the Imaginary, and the last register is always in a double appearance: as the support of a Symbolic order through the images that provide the illusion of functional completeness. That (upper) part of the Imaginary articulates condensed images of social myths. Another (lower) part of the Imaginary is related to the Real and it serves the function of filling up the void of the traumatic encounter with the Real. Picture 2 generally depicts this theoretical system.

Picture 2. Three orders of experience



In the next steps of our analysis, the goal is to show the imaginary and real dimensions of tabooed signifiers in Croatian politics. If we start from the Ego-Ideal instance of identification, a divinized image of the first Croatian president as the representative of public law and order, it is in the upper imaginary dimension (see Picture 3). The underside of this public law, its transgression and obscene side of the Ego-Ideal is expressed in psychoanalysis as the *Super-Ego*. It belongs primarily to the order of the Real and works through the imperative, especially expressed in the command “Enjoy”, and imposes “tyranny... a senseless, destructive, purely oppressive, almost always anti-legal morality” (Lacan, 1988: 102). As such, it is nothing but Sade’s “Supreme Being-in-Evil” (Lacan, 1966: 773), frightening figure whose enjoyment transgresses civilizational restraints. According to psychoanalysis, what “holds together” a community most deeply is not only and “not so much identification with the Public Law that regulates the community’s ‘normal’ everyday circuit, but rather identification with a specific form of transgression of the Law, of the Law’s suspension (in psychoanalytic terms, with a specific form of

Picture 3. Tabooed signifiers, images and affects of Croatian nationalism

enjoyment)” (Žižek, 1994: 55). Such an obscene figure of identification in Croatia is Ante Pavelić, the fascist leader of the quisling formation of the NDH. Collective identification with this obscene, super-egotistic instance is observable among Croatian football fans at stadiums, saluting and chanting in a fascist manner (see Picture 3). In the last 25 years, this obscene identification has been tolerated by the legal system and encouraged by political and religious elites.¹¹ Consequently, it gradually gained more and more space in the public. In the previous government that lasted from January to October 2016 this tendency was indirectly expressed in statements of the Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the HDZ, especially in his abandonment of Tuđman’s idea of reconciliation, considering it as naïve and abused by the offsprings of communists. Furthermore, the former Minister of Culture is consid-

¹¹ For example, in 2015 there was an initiative, signed by more than 3000 people, for decriminalization of the Nazi-era salute “For Homeland ready” (equivalent to the German “Sieg Heil”) and its introduction as the official salute of the Croatian Army. It was initiated by one of the war commanders of the town of Vukovar and supported by a few high officials of the Catholic Church, academicians and extreme right-wing journalists, lawyers, etc. Link: <http://net.hr/danas/hrvatska/tri-tisuce-potpisa-peticijom-traze-da-za-dom-spremni-bude-pozdrav-oruzanih-snaga/> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWCHexfbH84> [accessed on November 30, 2016].

ered by many, with good reason, an apologist of the Ustasha movement.¹² During the mandate of the same government, one of the deputy speakers of the Croatian parliament was a president of an extreme right-wing party, which supports, at least, some elements of the Ustasha ideology, and he was involved in protests against the Croatian Agency and Electronic Media Council because of the suspension of a local TV station due to hate speech against the Serbian Orthodox Church in Zagreb. Pro-fascist statements and acts were also coming from the prominent figures of the Croatian Catholic Church, culminating last year on 8 May. At the Sunday sermon, broadcasted live by public service (Croatian Television), the priest said that he could not forgive the current President for her statement that the Independent State of Croatia had not been independent and that it had been criminal.¹³ Nevertheless, what is even more symptomatic as a super-egotistic transgression is his next statement: “*Whom have we really ever killed outside our borders?*” Given that in such a context one can easily conclude that it is acceptable to kill people inside “our” borders, when we are “on our own”. That is an expression of forbidden desire and identification with the crime in the name of the NDH fascist regime, in order to achieve historical continuity. This horrific regime, imagined through the fascist ideology, is the Real underside of Croatia’s current nationalism, and it appears more and more as the “return of the repressed” of perpetrator’s trauma from the Second World War. In the priest’s speech a cognitive type of repression or displacement is clearly discernible. He admits the crimes of the NDH without any remorse, but relativizes it by bringing up crimes of the US against Japan.

Public expectations of similar tendencies were reduced after the last year electoral win of a more moderate conservative, Andrej Plenković (HDZ). However, in November another incident occurred in the town of Jasenovac. Near the former concentration camp from the Second World War, members of the para-military unit of the ultra-right Croatian Party of Rights, called Croatian Defense Forces, together with local politicians, installed a memorial plaque with the Ustasha fascist slogan “For Homeland ready”, the equivalent of the Nazi Germany “Sieg Heil”. Moreover, instead of a clear condemnation, Plenković relativized the problem by saying “it is delicate that such a monument has been erected in Jasenovac”.¹⁴ By adding that the

¹² See more about him on: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/what-were-the-ustasa-for-minister-hasanbegovic--02-12-2016>, and: <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/observations/2016/05/make-croatia-great-again-how-fascism-emerged-eu-s-youngest-state> [accessed on November 30, 2016].

¹³ The whole speech is available at the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWCHexfbH84> [accessed on November 30, 2016].

¹⁴ Link: <https://vlada.gov.hr/news/pm-dismisses-claims-of-reviving-fascism-in-croatia/19774> [accessed on November 30, 2016].

problematic coat of arms with the fascist slogan was registered during the government led by the Social Democratic Party, he tried only to remove the burden of responsibility and to project it on the rival political party.

Another, Ideal-Ego element of Tudjmanism is the nation, conceived or imagined as an organic community or collective body that reproduces itself through time. On the upper imaginary level such embodiment or a body politic has a sacred status. The best way to explain the imaginary dimension of such nationalism is to use the picture of Leviathan, which represents a symbolically unified collective body, incorporated by singular bodies. What should be also noticed regarding Leviathan's picture is its double form, which is in accordance with the double nature of the Imaginary. Underneath the already described symbolic body are the land, establishments and human activities,¹⁵ a living space and sacred territory of the people so valuable that it cannot be described by words. All these experiential elements constitute the so often pronounced vague phrase of "our way of life" (Žižek, 1994: 71), which is in war conceived as being under siege. This brings our analysis to the war, already explained as the relational term, important for national identification. The Real dimension of the war is tremendously traumatic. At the "lower" imaginary level this void is usually filled with the pictures of ultimate horrors, devastated lands, settlements and human bodies, as a threat to the previously explained body of the Nation. To give a metaphor for our scheme in Picture 3, maybe the best example is Salvador Dali's painting "The face of the War" (1940), whose complement is the enemy, conceived as a fearful figure or threatening force which assumes the form of diabolic evil. On the "upper", representational imaginary level, it takes its shape in the process of constructing the collective or cultural trauma in accordance with the available social stock of knowledge, historical memory and actual experience, as well as images forged in the ideological articulation of the conflict. According to Salecl (1994), that is a picture of the homeland at war, as a phantasmatic structure or "the scenario, through which society perceives itself as a homogeneous entity" (*ibid.*: 15). In the Croatian case, an image of the homeland, potentially and partially occupied during the 1990s by enemy forces that should be defeated, eliminated and expelled, serves this ideological function.

One exemplary illustration of the imaginary construction of the Homeland War was made by Croatian History Museum in Zagreb (Mataušić et al., 2011) in the form of an animated movie of military clashes and battles. Furthermore, through this film it is possible to analyze what is taboo in the official Croatian story about

¹⁵ According to Kristiansson's and Tralau's (2014) analysis of this picture in the light of iconographic tradition, there are some not so obvious features which actually depict the situation on the ground and sea as a stage of war, which is important for our analysis as *par excellence* condition for unified action of the people.

the Homeland War. This animation was relatively unknown before its appearance in August 2014 on YouTube.¹⁶ Since then it has been viewed almost 500.000 times and received more than 5.000 comments, mostly positive or negative comments on the veracity of its representation of the Homeland War. At the beginning of its release the most negative reactions appeared from Serbian daily newspapers¹⁷ and the raging debate on YouTube continues. The Croatian side of the debate was clearly expressed by the author of animation who said: "... there is nothing controversial in my animation... neither insult nor attitude, there are no value judgements. Only dates and historical facts. No one took anyone's side, nor expressed his own opinion..."¹⁸ But, is it even possible to express such material without value judgements?

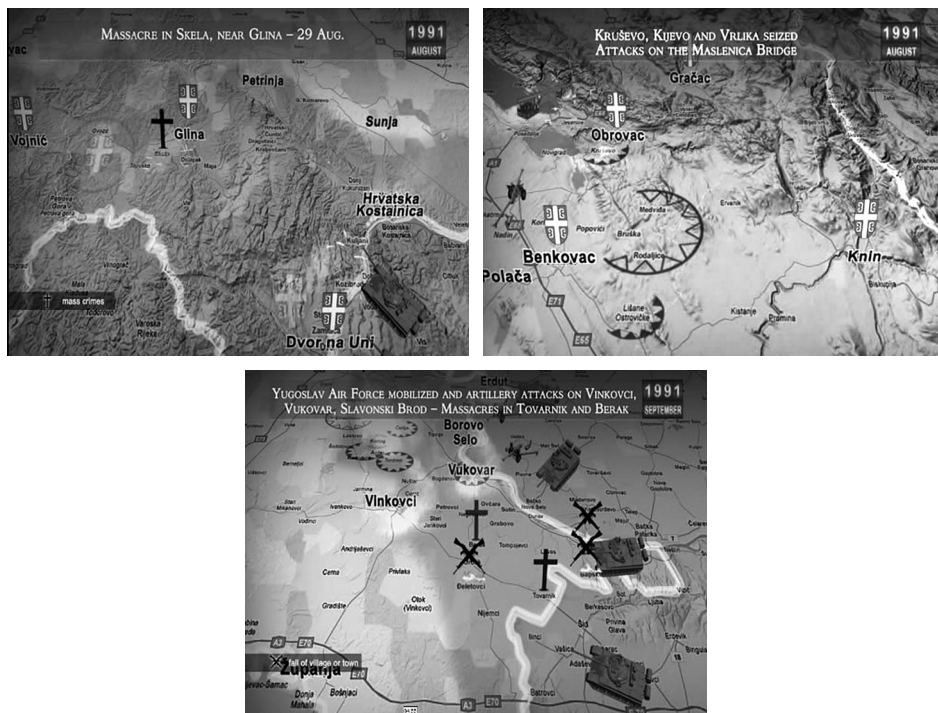
For the purpose of our analysis we can discern two uneven parts of the film. The first one, which lasts for the first ten minutes or three quarters of the film, describes the war trauma in the form of victimization and heroic resistance, while the last three minutes show the heroic liberation of Croatian territory and the country regaining its full sovereignty. Taken together, by using various animated sequences and symbols, they construct a general heroic story of the Homeland War. Nevertheless, in both parts of the film the authors were using different means of representation for the enemy and the Croatian Army's military actions. Enemy actions are depicted as concrete by using symbolic images of heavy weapons and animating its destructive activities, among other reasons, to show the disparity in equipment and the enemy's superiority in weaponry. Sounds and images of war violence, e.g. of bombing, shootouts, fire, smoke and the demolition of buildings made by the enemy are always emphasized, as well as the traumatic consequences for the Croatian people by using symbols of massacres and mass crimes (black Christian cross), defeats and fall of village or town (two crossed rifles) (see Picture 4).

As opposed to the use of such imagery, the actions of the Croatian Army are depicted as abstract, only by blue arrows spreading across the territory, without previously used sounds and pictures of the war's violence, followed by music with determined and enthusiastic overtones (see Picture 5 on page 184).

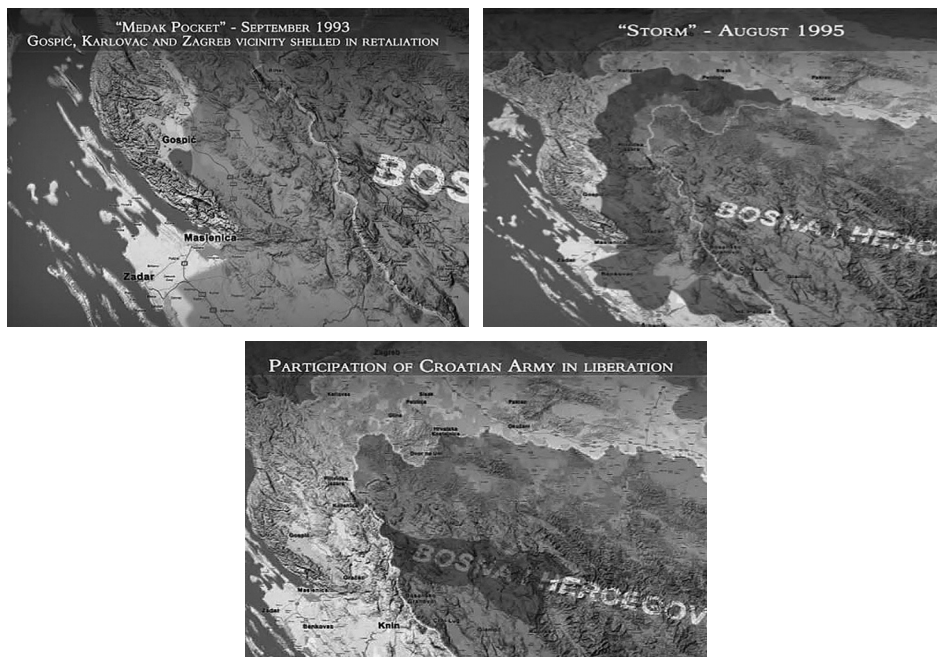
¹⁶ Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EyxOBHFYVNo> [accessed on December 1, 2016].

¹⁷ Reactions are available at the following links: <http://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/1256473-hrvatinapravili-animirani-film-o-ratu-srbi-za-sve-krivi-za-sve-mi-nismo-ni-za-sta-video>; <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/planeta.300.html:513733-Iz-hrvatskog-ugla-Mi-smo-heroji-Srbi-su-ubice-i-zlocinci> See also Croatian sources: <http://www.vecernji.hr/hrvatska/film-o-domovinskom-ratu-razljutio-srbe-krivi-smo-za-sve-hrvati-ni-za-sto-966097> [accessed on December 1, 2016].

¹⁸ Link: <http://nikmon.com/animacija-o-domovinskom-ratu-digla-veliku-prasinu/> [accessed on December 1, 2016].

Picture 4. Images of Serbian violence used in the film “The Homeland War”

Animated in this way, Croatian military operations give the impression of unstoppable pace of justice and “clear actions” in contrast to the first part of the film. There is no sign of war crimes of the Croatian side, while the mass exodus of Serbs from so-called Krajina after Operation “Storm” is completely absent, and the role of the Croatian Army in Bosnia and Herzegovina is depicted as only positive. All these omissions point to the silencing and denial of troubling events from the past. Furthermore, taken as a whole, this animated story has a structure of myth. Such a story has been nurtured since 1995, when the Homeland War started to acquire an important place in the official memory. Mostly right-wing politicians, mainstream media and the war veterans considered it as the foundation of the very existence of the state of Croatia. Strong reactions toward the ICTY war crimes indictments against Croatian generals, together with two parliamentary declarations demonstrated how strong and important the Homeland War is for national consciousness. The parliamentary *Declaration on the Homeland War* from the year 2000 contends that Croatia waged a just and legitimate, defensive and liberating war, and not a war

Picture 5. Images of Croatian Army military operations

of conquest and aggression against anyone. It also tries to impose non-problematic interpretation by obliging state officials and institutions to protect the value and dignity of the Homeland War, based on that declaration.¹⁹ In coping with problematic traces from the past, it only mentions that individual war crimes should be persecuted by the Croatian legal system, but other possible levels of responsibility, such as at the state policy level (which antagonized and discriminated the Croatian Serbs), or a broader societal responsibility (Subotić, 2011) were completely omitted. The forbidden word for this and other official narratives is “civil war”, although Croatia was a part of SFRY until October 8, 1991 (Pavlaković in Kolstø, 2014: 38-39). Another completely unmentioned aspect is the state policy responsibility regarding the role of the then Croatian government in the Bosnian war from 1992 to 1995,²⁰ which was swept “under the carpet as it has the potential to undermine the narrative

¹⁹ Available only in Croatian at: http://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2000_10_102_1987.html [accessed on December 1, 2016].

²⁰ See about that, e.g. at: http://www.icty.org/x/cases/blaskic/acjug/en/040730_Blaki_summary_en.pdf [accessed on December 1, 2016].

of a solely defensive war” (*ibid.*).²¹ Related to the previous one, the *Declaration on Operation Storm* from 2006 describes it as the legitimate, victorious, allied, international, antiterrorist, decisive, glorious, unforgettable and final Croatian battle.²² Furthermore, the *Declaration* imposes the obligation to state officials and authorities, scientific, educational institutions and the media to transform “Storm” into the “useful past” for future generations. The question is what would be the useful past? What the “nation” should learn from it is left unanswered. What is obvious here is an attempt to invoke all these carrier groups to adopt the same monolithic narrative. Although it allows the right to write about “the dark side” of the operation, it places such discussion in the same way as the previous declaration on the level of individual crimes or “a few bad apples” story, which avoids the questions of the responsibility of decision makers, as well as citizens who were silent bystanders during that period. Since then, black and white optics regarding the Homeland War, as well as the Second World War have just become more rigid.

Recent De-tabooizations

These central national taboos were not left unquestioned in all public areas. Although the mainstream media have been very quiet, if not outright supporting such tabooization and mythical construction of Croatian national identity, there are still public agents who are very critical about these attempts. Along with several non-profit media who work in constant resistance to forgetting the black stains on Croatia’s past, the most profound recent de-tabooization appeared in the form of theatrical plays and songs. For the purpose of our analysis I would like to emphasize the theatrical play “Trilogy of Croatian Fascism”, directed by Oliver Frlić and performed in the Croatian National Theatre in Rijeka, the YouTube clip “We, the Croats”, made by Croatian movie and theatre actor René Bitorajac, and the theatrical play “The Fall”, directed by Miran Kurspahić and performed in the Zagreb Youth Theatre.

“Trilogy of Croatian Fascism” was originally performed as three separate plays, now joined into one play in three acts. The first one, originally performed in 2008 was named “Bakhes”, but only partially based on Euripides’s ancient Greek original, retaining its basic idea that there are moments when the gods make humans go crazy and then they become beasts to each other. This play was forbidden at first, but performed after the intervention of then Prime Minister Ivo Sanader. The reason for the ban was, allegedly, the safety of the audience, because of the throwing of

²¹ Although official proceedings of Croatian Parliament show that the biggest antagonism between MPs was regarding the role of Croatia in the Bosnian War (Koren, 2011: 135).

²² The *Declaration* is available at: http://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2000_10_102_1987.html [accessed on December 2, 2016].

Picture 6. Scenes from the theatrical play “Bakhes”

large pieces of raw meat on the stage from a great height. What that meat represents are the bodies of the victims of war crimes that no one wants to admit exist. In the local context, those are the crimes of the Croatian side in the Homeland War, which are concealed and negated. One of the actors said: “We want to activate the audience, we want the audience’s full interaction and the break of the oath of silence and fear.”²³ The whole play is densely imbued with symbols. For example, one actor wears a coat made of remnants of meat from a slaughterhouse, which represents the bare life or what is behind the flayed skin of social conventions and hypocrisy. Decency is considered as an alibi for self-censorship,²⁴ so the play openly shows the crimes and risks of scapegoating. The play ends with burning a model of the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb, which, behind its walls, hides the meat grinder,

²³ Source: <http://www.slobodnadalmacija.hr/scena/kultura/clanak/id/14359/provokativno-splitsko-ljeto-glumac-u-govedini-gorjet-ce-zagrebacki-hnk> [accessed on December 3, 2016].

²⁴ Compare it with ideas expressed in: <http://slobodnadalmacija.hr/scena/kultura/clanak/id/15007/bakhe-da-je-bilo-vise-hrabrosti> [accessed on December 3, 2016].

Picture 7. Scenes from the theatrical play “Aleksandra Zec”

described as a xenophobic machine.²⁵ Originally, it was performed in the schoolyard as institutions of education are seen as one of the most important ideological apparatuses. Another symptomatic fact was that during the rehearsal in the town of Split some local bullies threw stones and bottles on the actors just because they heard them speak in verse.²⁶ After the premiere one theatre critic said that the “Bakhes are not only contemporary view on Ancient-Greek text about the violence. They function as a practical use of antiquity with the purpose to fight the demons from our courtyard by other means. In wider perspective that was an intrusion of embarrassing reality in the theatre.”²⁷

The second play, “Aleksandra Zec”, originally from 2014, was named after a particular victim, a twelve-year-old girl, killed in 1991 by members of the Croatian

²⁵ More about various aspects of this play at: <http://www.zarez.hr/clanci/razgovor-s-oliverom-frljicem> [accessed on December 3, 2016].

²⁶ See more about that at: <http://arhiva-splitskoljeto.hnk-split.hr/54splitskoljeto/dramski%20program/BAKHE/index.htm> [accessed on December 3, 2016].

²⁷ Link: <http://arhiva-splitskoljeto.hnk-split.hr/54splitskoljeto/dramski%20program/BAKHE/SD%20Bakhe%20osvrt%20BMunjin%2021%2007%202008.pdf> [accessed on December 3, 2016].

police, who were never convicted despite of the fact that they admitted to the murder. They were released because of the procedural mistake of taking their confessions without the presence of legal representatives. In 2004, when the surviving children of the Zec family pursued legal action, the Croatian government decided to compensate them with 1,5 million kunas and stopped the process. Nevertheless, there were protests in front of the theatre, asking why the director did not make a play about the 402 killed Croat children. His answer was that Aleksandra Zec was a Croatian child as well (regardless of her Serb ethnicity), and that the play is dedicated to all children killed in the war in Croatia. By showing the last moments of the murdered family and their emotional drama, this theatrical play breaks the experience of derealized violence, committed in the name of Croatian people. As such, the play itself is an act of mourning, grieving in the public for the victim for whom grief is prohibited. Furthermore, it poses uneasy questions regarding state patronage over war crime (one of the perpetrators was awarded the medal of honor), societal responsibility for being passive bystanders, and for supporting the collective self-victimization, and state silencing.

The third play, "Croatian Theatre", also from 2014, questions the responsibility of the Croatian National Theatre for silencing, relativizing and the promotion of war crimes. In front of the National Theatre in Rijeka, before one of the performances, the extreme Catholic organization Opus Dei organized prayers for the souls of the director and actors, and protests against the play. The play begins as the last supper, but then the apostles take off their biblical coats. Under the coats, they wear the black uniforms of Croatian fascists from the Second World War and the play then transforms into an orgy, with the raping and undressing of the actors. On their underpants are the photos of well-known directors, actors, writers and theatre managers who are held responsible for promoting or tolerating fascism in Croatia. This play tries to show all that was concealed, swept under the rug in the Croatian National Theatre as the underside of the country's political reality, such as the silence and revision of the status of the Jasenovac concentration camp, hate toward others, especially Serbs, physical violence, and relationship between the Catholic church and political violence. At the end, a girl who plays Aleksandra Zec appears on the stage carrying a gun. She points the gun to the choir, but she does not shoot, and only says: "I do not hate. What about you?"

Second recent de-tabooization suddenly appeared on April 28, 2016 as a YouTube clip, titled "We, the Croats",²⁸ according to the well-known football fans' slogan. This technically amateurish three-minute collage of photos, accompanied by a satirical adaptation of the song *Sound of Silence* is a work of Croatian theatrical and film actor, René Bitorajac, internationally known for the role played in the Academy

²⁸ The clip is still available at the link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEoWdkJI6_M [accessed on December 3, 2016].

Picture 8. Scenes from the theatrical play “Croatian Theatre”

award winning film *No Man's Land* (2001). In one month, the clip acquired more than 789.100 views and 900 comments, either positive or negative reactions. It also produced a furious reaction from the right-wing media and an explosion of hate speech on social media. One TV station publicized the address of Bitorajac's place of residence, along with the suggestion that he is the descendant of communist partisan grandparents.²⁹ That was a well-known and proven method of intimidation and

²⁹ Link to the show: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2aDwbrD17A> [accessed on December 3, 2016].

media call to lynch, used in Croatia before and during the Homeland War against all those who were considered national enemies, especially Serbs. The question is why did they react in such a rabid way? The reasons for such a reaction lie in the answers to the question *Who says What to Whom in What Way*. *Who* is an actor, René Bitorajac, whose best known role was in the movie *Metastases* (2009),³⁰ where he played a nationalist football hooligan, as well as an aggressive and desperate war veteran. Such a character is perhaps the best-played figure of ultimate right-wing identification in Croatia's recent filmography, psychologically transferred at the imaginary level to the actor itself in everyday life. If some left-wing individual attempted to produce a similar video clip, it would be easily ignored by the wider audience. In that sense, Bitorajac is a subject that is supposed to be theirs, who shares their "patriotic way of life". As such, when he was about to talk about the Nation and its "true qualities", as it is announced in the title "We, the Croats", every decent right-winger supposed that it would be a kind of foundational speech. On the contrary and unexpectedly, what he gave them was a feedback in an inverted form, by using gradual satirical distancing through the video clip. Its composition (as the *Way* of talking) is very important, because it hits to the core of nationalist identification and ideology. It starts as a set of seducing postcards from Croatia, along with suggesting instrumental relationship of Croats to the tourists, who are depicted as obese victims, ready to be robbed by enormous prices at markets and restaurants. The critique of such a relationship is amplified by showing public gatherings, Catholic religious symbols and masses, ironically exaggerating the role of religion in the Croatian national identity, and mocking their public image of "good Christians". The pictorial critique is then aggravated by showing unpleasant, vulgar pro-fascist protests of young Croats against a local LGBT Pride parade and further focused on identity issues by repeating the phrase "That's what we are, the Croats". It further progresses by mocking the right-wing fears of communist specters, contrasting it with the fascist character of the Independent State of Croatia and its identification among the country's youth, along with their "right" to be intolerant. Furthermore, tendencies against human rights among right-wing activists, parliamentary politicians and judiciary were shown just as another side of the same coin. The next critical point was accomplished by contrasting football as the national obsession with profound economic problems and poverty, expressed in photos of people eating from dumpsters. Another few photos criticize the self-promotion and hypocrisy of ethnic religiosity, expressed in the phrase "we are Popes bigger than the Pope", together with the photo of the Pope Francisco who looks like he's choking. The photo functions here as a device for revealing the right-wing secret wish

³⁰ More about it at: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1433816/?ref_=ttexrv_exrv_tt [accessed on December 3, 2016].

of killing the Pope, who represents completely opposite values to Croatian Catholic prelates. The last minute of the video clip starts with the suggestion to the tourists just to stay shortly and then run away from this desperate country and continues with plain description of supposed collective characteristics of Croats, such as “self-sufficient, well-favored to no one, ideologically confused, indecent, even vulgar, full of hate to anyone who doesn’t think in the same way...”,³¹ accompanied by photos of actions against homosexuals, Roma people, hate speech in slogans and newspapers headlines, together with Croatian Catholic bishops, whose silence about these tendencies suggests complicity or even benediction. Furious massive right-wing reactions just proved the influence of such a mirror-imaging technique, but what is even more important, it provoked ten times more positive reactions,³² thereby encouraging resistance towards nationalistic mainstreaming and its tabooing mechanisms. We should be very cautious here not to overemphasize the long-term influence of such single breakthroughs. Their influence will be protracted only together with other similar engaged artistic and political acts that will continue to question problematic traces from the past.

This brings us to the next such questioning in the form of the theatrical drama entitled “The Fall”, directed by Miran Kurspahić, which premiered on 7 May 2016 in the Zagreb Youth Theatre. It deals with the fall and trauma of the town Vukovar in 1991, after the siege of Serbian forces, as well as with the moral fall of Croatia’s political leaders, especially then president Franjo Tuđman and his nearest associates. Although 25 years have passed since the fall of Vukovar, no one before ever problematized it in theatre. According to some theatre critiques, this is the biggest taboo of the Homeland War.³³ The play is composed of two parts. The first is based on authentic transcripts of conversation between Tuđman’s office and the war headquarters in Vukovar and nearby towns in the days before the fall. It functions as the play of deaf phones³⁴ between the luxurious and wealthy presidential residence and inhuman conditions of the desperate defenders of the town, where all promises of help given by the president and his associates were broken. This part ends with the fall of the town and Tuđman’s subsequent order to arrest the leaders of the town’s defenders. The second part is fictitious and simulates the same situation that was in

³¹ Translated from the video clip indicated in footnote 28.

³² Until the beginning of December 2017, there were more than 10000 likes and only 1800 dislikes of the video clip indicated in footnote 28.

³³ <http://www.seebiz.eu/kurspahiceva-predstava-pad-propituje-izdaju-vukovara/ar-135189/> [accessed on December 3, 2016].

³⁴ It functions as a game of Chinese whispers, but with the implication that one of the players is deliberately misunderstanding the message passed around by the other players. In Croatia this version of the game is called deaf phones.

Picture 9. Scenes from the theatrical play “The Fall”

Vukovar now in Zagreb in 1993. The whole scene takes place in a basement, under a red light, which underlines the hellish atmosphere, where the actors are performing an adapted scene from *Hitler's Downfall* (2004), now in the form of Tuđman's final fall.

The hot topics of the play are the high treason and decadence of the political leaders, their war profiteering, scapegoating of real wartime heroes, subsequent general loss of hope, and the fall of values, morals and ideals. This play also evokes several silenced and almost forgotten issues, which originally appeared immediately after the fall of the town or during the 1990s. Those are the possibility of defending the town, related to the deliberate withholding of weapons and the refusal to evacuate civilians in order to enable the creation of the symbol of sacrifice by leaving them to the mercy of the Yugoslav army and Serbian paramilitary forces. Was the fall of the town also a part of a secret plan of territory swap made by Tuđman and Milošević?³⁵ Was such a plan realized by creating a double line of military com-

³⁵ This belief was examined in the nationally representative survey of the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Zagreb from 2007 to 2016. 40% of Croatian citizens believed in 2007 that Vukovar was sold in 1991 as part of a secret plan of territory swap. In 2012 this number even increased to 42% and in 2016 it decreased to a still significant 29%. Data from 2007 and 2012 are published in Blanuša (2013: 19) and for 2016 are still unpublished but available on request.

mand? Was the money collected for the war defense redirected secretly to those who were chosen by the president and his fellows to buy privatized companies and in that way to create the new elite of 200 families?³⁶ By introducing the last theme the play only slightly touches very prominent trauma from that period, the trauma of social change (Sztompka, 2000), euphemistically called transition in the mainstream discourse. It would also be interesting to investigate how the people from Vukovar changed their interpretation of the meaning of the fall. Was it transformed from the furious reaction because of betrayal to the acceptance of the fall as a necessary evil and sacrifice? In my opinion, they accepted some sort of positive stigma and redefined themselves as subjects with privileged experience of “looking directly in the eyes of a death”, a death that is “worth dying”. To paraphrase Renata Salecl (1994: 144), such sacrifice for the homeland is in parallel with the sacrifice of Christ in the Christian religion, where the state territory is perceived as a “corpus mysticum”. But the problem is that the whole town is still captured in some kind of perpetual “agony for justice” (*ibid.*), which prevents its inhabitants from becoming neighbors. But who can expect something more if the violent pasts of both Croats and Serbs are digested as a combination of mythical and cognitive defense mechanisms.

Conclusion

According to this analysis, which captured only the recent tendencies of political tabooizations and de-tabooizations, it is possible to discern several clear lines of collective relationships towards Croatia’s cultural traumas. First of all, the cultural victim trauma related to the Homeland War is sanctified and frozen. Furthermore, narratives built from this period have been increasingly applied to the period during the Second World War in order to show the quisling Independent State of Croatia in a more positive light. Such an attempt of constructing this ideological continuity is a clear falsification of history. Second, the cultural perpetrator trauma from both periods is denied and silenced. There are some attempts to question both cultural traumas in the fields of arts and civil society, but they are of limited reach and influence, especially because the mainstream media and ruling party promote the relativization and revision of the past, compatible with the current construction of cultural traumas. In that sense, carriers of influence, especially the local Catholic Church,

³⁶ That the transition to a market economy and privatization were mostly the result of conspiracy between the mafia and the Government was believed by 75% of Croatian citizens in the same survey in 2007. In 2012 it was 65%, and in 2016 55%. The decrease in these numbers is mostly due to introduction of younger generations in the sample, who were not even born in the turbulent 1990s. Data from 2007 and 2012 are published in Blanuša (2013: 19) and for 2016 are still unpublished but available on request.

courts, politicians, Croatian television, some daily newspapers, etc. are the main obstacle for a more constructive way of dealing with the violent past. Instead, several mechanisms of tabooization are here at work, first of all the mythologization of sacrifice, expressed through constructed symbols and rituals, especially commemorations, e.g. in Bleiburg, Knin and Vukovar. Another nodal point of such nationalist ideology is the asymmetrical binary opposition of *victim vs. aggressor* that is applied first of all to the Homeland War as the cornerstone of reasoning, which, accompanied with denial, prevents any calm discussion regarding war crimes committed in the name of Croatia. But, supported by new myths, especially of the innocence of the Independent State of Croatia, this binary opposition is generalized and more frequently used in the public with the purpose of constructing the narrative of a continuous fight against the same enemy, whose definition is extended to all those who are not publicly enchanted by the state. Consequently, the taboo signifiers of national identifications in Croatia are the Homeland War, the Nation, Enemy and political leaders, in both their public and obscene sides.

The question is how to change this mainstream condition of silencing and tabooization of troubling traces from the past. As chosen examples of de-tabooization show, it is important to ask brave questions, especially regarding the state and societal responsibility of each citizen in whose name nasty things were committed. Complicity in the moral fall of leaders and its meaning should be shown as a matter of individual choice and the decision to be silent and obedient. The de-binarization of the past is the next task to be done in order to face its dark and bright sides, as well as to show the consequences of the obscene side of national identification, especially in the form of self-destructive paranoia, which destroys the mutual trust in the political community. The current primary signifiers of national identification should be further de-militarized and de-ethnicised, and other signifiers should be made more important, such as the referendum of independence, the process of peaceful reintegration, and constitutional values. Further support should be expressed in responsible research, dialogue and civic activism in order to overcome the “grid of victimization” (LaCapra, 2001: 199) and to stop its reproduction through following generations. As it is never possible to escape from ideology as a form of our human life, the next question is how to build the new phantasmatic network of identifications that will avoid making others and ourselves desperate. That is an infinite task, but we can start by refusing to do what is expected from us.

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