Origins of a Veteran: Combat, commonality and (re)constituting transnational identities in the Post-Yugoslav space

CHARLES O. WARNER III
University of Leuven

This paper contributes to discussions of Serbs and Croats in regional and global contexts by examining the methods and realizations of ethnographic engagement with war veterans living today in Southeast Europe/former Yugoslavia. By centering veterans of the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, this research expands discursive and methodological frames that act to more holistically project veteran problems and potentials into socio-academic considerations. Furthermore, it works to bring aspects of veterans studies into conversation with one another while also positioning Serbian and Croatian veterans as active contributors to emerging transnational studies of war veterans. As such, this work is both an agenda-setting piece as well as a work of conceptual scoping that builds from the argument that the socially-constructed identity of "veteran" is one that has been overlooked or ignored by researchers examining post-war relations. Recognizing this state-of-affairs, this work moves first through a methodological discussion of veteran engagement via ethnographic fieldwork in SEE/FY. The second section then opens a discussion of select concepts that offer – based on encountered veteran narratives and perspectives – new ways of considering and understanding veteran lifeworlds. The paper concludes by noting how enhanced understandings of veteran post-war relations can influence participation with realms such as memory activism and peacebuilding – in the post-Yugoslav space and beyond.

KEYWORDS: *Veterans, Veteran Identity, Toxic Veteranality, Croatia, Serbia*

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My gambit in titling this paper[1] "Origins of a Veteran" plays out in two dimensions. On the one hand, it signals an argument and an agenda for fundamentally (re)approaching "the veteran" as an object of social scientific inquiry. In other words, "origin" refers not to the emergence of veterans after combat, but the emergence of veterans within the social sciences. It is an argument that calls for veterans to be more comprehensively "seen" in regional and global post-war/conflict studies. Such studies frequently intersect with or take as primary points-of-departure the frames of solidarity, memory activism, and transitional justice. Yet it is within these frames that war veterans are absent, homogenized/stereotyped, rendered silent, or (implicitly) positioned as problems rather than as partners in pursuing equilibriums of peace after combat. As a counter to this state-of-affairs, the first part of this paper reflects upon on-going ethnographic research I am conducting alongside war veterans in Southeast Europe/former Yugoslavia (SEE/FY). While aspects of fieldwork being conducted in multiple sites across Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and Kosovo are opened in this section, the discussion primarily focuses on select encounters with Serbian and Croatian veterans. The selected encounters personify and project a response to the call by the editors of this special issue of conference proceedings to identify "topics that remain under-researched in order to encourage further research" flowing forward from the 1990s.

On the other hand, the title of this paper seeks to provoke a curiosity toward the social dimensions and relations that arise with the evolution of veteran positionality, identity, and subjectivity in post-war societies – in SEE/FY and beyond. While combat can be called the common denominator for "the veteran" thus acting as a fixed referential point in the past, the origins of veteran relations are dynamic and progressively (re)act to pressures of the present or premonitions of the future. In essence, this realization brings veterans

out of the history books and into the socio-political praxes of transition and transformation (attempted) since the wars of the 1990s[2]. Encountering these points of origin for (emerging) veteran relations and exploring the social dynamics working upon – or interfering with – veteran relations returns us to the aforementioned argument for veteran ethnographies. Such a methodological approach reveals emic perspectives and hidden transcripts of veteran interactions. And it is these perspectives and transcripts that (re)constitute what can be seen as veteran transnational identities. Identities structured and sustained by shared experiences in combat and the (imagined) commonality of post-war veteran struggles. Unsurprisingly, seeing veterans as contemporary, complex, agential social actors can inspire multi-faceted conceptual discussions that move simultaneously along numerous axes.

Therefore, keeping with the frame of this conference proceeding, in the second part of this work I examine but two social dynamics encountered alongside Serbian and Croatian veterans. These dynamics, rendered visible by ethnographic inquiry, speak to wider contexts of veteran (transnational) relations: 1) social capital vis-à-vis veteran individuals/networks and 2) negative reinforcements and penalties against veterans who transgress certain norms that I currently conceptualize as "toxic veteranality." In specifically centering considerations of social capital and toxic veteranality in this work, the intention is not to overemphasize or rank these conceptualizations over other (socio-psychological) research with combat veterans. More to the point, they are presented here in order to offer concrete instances of how lived realities and narratives of veterans can move from the ethnographic "field" to (in)form regional and global contexts.

Following two brief notes on positionality and visuality incorporated into this work, I move from reflections of ethnographic encounter to reflecting upon the interconnected possibilities found in the concepts of social capital and toxic veteranality. As I note in the next section, these approaches and possibilities facilitate an engaging entanglement between anthropology, ethnography, and the contexts active in the emerging interdisciplinary field of "veterans studies"[3]. I conclude these reflections by noting (future) veteran potentialities related to peace and reconciliation. For I argue that with enhanced understandings of veteran relations – meaning between veterans themselves and veter-

2 See Jović 2022.
3 See Corley 2017; Lira & Chandrasekar 2020.

an relations with other social strata – comes enhanced viability of veteran participation in processes of peace(building). It is a conclusion that points to a reciprocal realignment of regional and global contexts instigated, in a sense, by attending to Serb and/or Croatian veteran relations. Relations encountered, centered, and followed as a methodology of engagement that resists the defaults of traditional comparative methodologies.

A Note on Positionality: Anthropology, Peace, and Veteran Relations

The call carried by this conference paper for enhanced, ethical ethnographic engagements that fundamentally support further research with veterans in SEE/FY emerges from a broader research project positioned within the discipline of social and cultural anthropology. By centering veterans and peace, it is a project that works at the intersection of anthropological engagement with the veterans studies and the field of peace(building) studies[4]. As such, the theoretical positioning/legacies this work takes up follows extensively with anthropologist Anna Tsing's developments of thinking through assemblage theory[5]. Echoing my own experiences with veteran lifeworlds, Tsing writes that she finds herself "surrounded by patchiness, that is, a mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life, with each further opening into a mosaic of temporal rhythms and spatial arcs" (2015, 4). Moreover, "Assemblages cannot hide from capital and the state; they are sites for watching how political economy works" (2015, 23). Such sites are precisely where social anthropology can "meet" veterans to understand different flows of power and persuasion active in veteran social lives. By extension then, such flows are key to understanding how veterans influence or transform paradigms of peace(building) at the local and regional levels of SEE/FY. A proposition that unfolds more fully in the first segment below.

Engaging assemblage theory in the registers of Tsing allows for alternative augmentations to what Bosnian anthropologist Safet HadžiMuhamedović sees as "projects of ruination, grouped under the shared trope of nationalism"

4 See Eltringham 2021; Chandler 2017.
5 See Nail 2017.

that "still ossify the discursive spaces" of SEE/FY (2018, xi). For example, Tsing's reference of capital and the state opens here a discussion of veteran embodiment of capital; a discussion that moves with Pierre Bourdieu's long-standing treatise on the forms of capital. Therein, he notes that it is "impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms" (1986, 242). Drilling down into Bourdieu's treatise to his interlocking considerations of "social capital," we find an aggregate of resources linked to a network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquittance and recognition (1986, 248). Such relationships, writes Bourdieu, may be "socially instituted and guaranteed by the application of a common name...they are also partially irreducible to objective relations of proximity in physical (geographical) space or even in economic or social space" (1986, 249). And it is here that I argue we should begin thinking through "the veteran" as such a common name, thus requiring very fundamental discussions and examinations of the "name" as it is shared, embodied, or contested by veterans in SEE/FY.

Further strategies of de-ossification of the discursive spaces, to follow with HadžiMuhamedović, are also to be found as the ethnographic research project (outlined in Part I below) informing this work travels the lines of veteran relations. Such relations are elemental to conceptualizing (transnational) assemblages and identities that share a sense of commonality yet are also frequently "in translation" with one another. Translations of not only veteran language or lingo, but translations of veteran social lives and solidarities that work to connect across borders, temporalities, and cultures. This research strategy takes on additional importance when considering that State recognition is not the sole determinant (or, perhaps, not even a reliable determinant) for veteran status and, by extension, veteran identities. This is evident with the allegations of corrupted state registers of "official" veterans in, for example, Croatia and Kosovo. These state registers are allegedly bloated by so-called "fake veterans" who had connections that enabled their names to be included for pensions and benefits despite no wartime service[6]. Although these issues and allegations in Croatia emerged even while President Franjo Tuđman was still at the head of the government and were challenged with the publishing

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6 See Clark 2013; Lumezi 2018; Puljiz 2015.

of the veteran register in 2012[7], the concerns by both veteran and non-veteran elements of Croatian society were reawakened with a recent expansion of the veteran register[8].

When speaking of veteran origins (and recalling Tsing's encounters with "patchiness" within assemblages), reflecting on determinations of veteran status by the State or how veterans adopt their own criteria for declaring who is or who is not a veteran is a fundamental task - a task that is on-going and processual. During what can be considered a four-year-long (and counting) conversation on veteran recognition and relations in Serbia, Mile Milošević - veteran and the president of the association of Serbian War Veterans (СРПСКИ РАТНИ ВЕТЕРАНИ) headquartered in Rakovica – has expressed time-and-again frustration with political intransigence regarding the resolution of outstanding veteran demands. One of which is a more open and/or more inclusive range of dates for past military service that would grant official recognition of veteran status. This frustration is seemingly matched by a frustration with how fractured veteran associations have become/have remained across Serbia over the past years. "We had to organize ourselves and our advocacy," Mile argued as we spoke in his office in late 2021 while discussing veteran-oriented legislation, "The politicians want to keep [the veterans associations] broken up and competing with one another." In keeping the veteran assemblages fractured, the politicians remain insulated from a collective political voice that veterans might otherwise be able to organize to assert their demands regarding recognition (or so go Serbian veteran perspectives on the matter). A perspective that I would encounter again with Serbian veterans in Niš and elsewhere.

Alternately, the symbolic annihilation[9] of veterans from State recognition, registers, or archives due to post-Yugoslav States' development of official narratives (or official memories) also thins the ranks of "authorized" veterans. Yet these determinations are problematized and/or redressed by veterans and along veteran lines of relation – acting with and for veteran assemblages as "possessors of an inherited social capital, symbolized by *a great name* [veterans]" (emphasis added, Bourdieu 1986, 250). While veterans may

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7 See MBB 2024; Vlada Republike Hrvatske 2012.
8 See IK 2024; Jutarnji 2022.
9 On the origins of the concept of "symbolic annihilation," see Tuchman 1978.

not speak of their networked relations and lines of connectivity/common-
ality in the register of social capital à la Bourdieu, we nonetheless encounter
via ethnography his argument: "…they do not need to 'make acquaintance'
of all their 'acquaintances'; they are known to more people than they know,
and their work of sociability, when it is exerted, is highly productive" (1986,
250—251).

/ A Note on Visuality: Algorithms and Assemblages

During preparations to present this research in a conference setting, I became
interested in how to visually depict or represent aspects of the material to
be discussed (e.g. toxic veteranality or veteran assemblages). Material that at
times can defy traditional photographic expressions in/of ethnography thus
are frequently left to the mind's eye for conception. This interest reflects
more than an attempted tactic to capture and sustain the attention of the
audience by complementing PowerPoint slides that frequently (and, at times,
painfully) rely on extensive chunks of text. For I understand efforts toward
encountering, (co)creating, or prompting visuality to be a continuation of re-
flexive exploration into one's own research "data" and how such data perform
representations of people and perspectives. Visuality also becomes a mecha-
nism to invite the audience to "see" and engage research in varying dimen-
sions by opening up new access points. So while we have become accustomed
to photographs (as well as "screenshots" of digital content) being incorporated
into research output, for the conference where this paper first met the world
I wanted to expand the potentialities of engagement via visuality. (Especially
as I was presenting in English at a conference where Serbo-Croatian was more
the norm.)

Generally speaking, "arts-based methods" is a category of visual or
performative practices (from painting to creative movement to poetry[10]) that
have been imbued with fresh response-abilities and rigor as the social sciences
move with the "participatory turn" in research and emphasize polyvocal
co-productions of knowledge (Seppälä, Sarantou, & Miettinen 2021, 1). In turn,

10 See, for example, an interplay of poetry and sensory anthropology in Howes, Geertz, & Lam-
bert 2018.

an "amplified call" for multi-media experimentation and collaboration – both with local research reciprocators and the art world – has come to "engage the complexity of ways artists and anthropologists think about the contemporary world" (Feld 2010, 109). For as artist and anthropologist Susan Ossman notes in *Making Art Ethnography: Painting, War and Ethnographic Practice*, "A sketch or painting can be rather like a field note – it can focus attention on certain objects, regularities or connections... Art becomes a method of working out and working with others" (2010, 134). In a similar register, the anthropological embrace and development of multimodal research endeavors traces its legacy back through "extra-textual" methodologies long-mobilized within the discipline (Welcome & Thomas 2021, 392; see also Pink 2011). Indeed, "multimodality" and what some now reference as "multimodal anthropologies" speak to anthropological media in the social sciences while acknowledging the importance of reflexivity as anthropologists pursue collaborative/reciprocal modes of knowledge production (Collins, Durington, & Gill 2017, 142—143; see also Takaragawa et al. 2019).

As a response to these movements within anthropology and the social sciences, and as an extension of the conference experience, I embed in this paper a selection of the visuals generated from elements of my ethnographic encounters with veterans. This effort follows with a broader research interest I have maintained over recent years that looks to efforts at bringing into closer alignment art and anthropology[11]. An alignment that serves to move past static, text-based representations of lifeworlds in academic work. To pursue such an alignment for this particular conference, I turned to the AI generator DALL-E3 and over the course of many hours and experiments with prompts, there emerged compositions that reflect – and enabled reflection upon – research narratives. For example, to generate the visual seen in Figure 1, I began with the prompt "memories and memorials of female veterans in the Balkans in the 1990s in the style of Félicien Rops at sunrise" and moved forward with different tweaks, terms, and instructions. Such tweaks are represented in Figure 2 wherein I asked to see a veteran "assemblage" in Southeast Europe that did "not contain weapons or uniforms." Interestingly, these seemingly default or "token" expressions of veteran societal visibility – a variation of artist

11 A virtual selection of such alignments can be found at: https://www.americananthropologist.org/online-content/category/Multimodal+Anthropologies.

Wangechi Mutu's "cultural cutouts" – were frequently centered in DALL-E3's output. Thus, taken as works of "composite realities" that speak to solving the "issue of invisibility" motivating the work of artists such as Mutu[12], analyzing the algorithmic assemblages of veteran visibility became a research point in-and-of itself. One that arguably points back to (self)reflexivity in research via a new dimension of popularly accessible expression.

Figure 1 & 2 **Two examples of emerging experiments with depicting visually the complex assemblages of veterans, (gendered) narratives, memories, and temporality present today in SEE/FY.**

12 Mutu unpacks her motivations and methodologies during a brief, but engaging interview here: https://youtu.be/Kwd64sQK_yU. As a counterpoint to the use of AI generators, see the interview with artist Sacha Jafri on "technology driven art" (versus digitally assembled art): https://www.creativebloq.com/features/sacha-jafri-on-digital-art.

/ Exploring the Eclectic: Veteran Ethnography

> The archaeology of everyday life is the sort of thing that only
> oddballs care about. Yet it is this history of the commonplace
> which is the custodian of our most intimate recollection…
> — Dubravka Ugrešić in the essay "Ostalgia" (2007, 27)

To inform the opening arguments and insights outlined above, I draw upon
ethnographic fieldwork[13] and participant observation that was conducted over
two continuous years (2020 — 2022) across SEE/FY, with periodic returns[14]
occurring in 2023/2024. Situated primarily in Croatia, Serbia, BiH, and
Kosovo, the fieldwork (see Figure 3) includes ethnomethodological analy-
sis[15] of archives and the silences they maintain, extensive semi-structured
interviews (at times expanded to multiple returns to follow certain interview
topics) and/or guided group discussions with (women) veterans and veteran
association leadership[16]. Concurrently, dynamics of participant observation[17]
ranged from assisting with content creation (e.g. local speeches for town/re-
gional meetings), to acts of commemoration to which veterans were invited,
and embedded attendance within veteran-organized rallies (see Figure 4). A
further dimension of participant observation is reflected by my membership
with three different veterans associations in the SEE/FY region. As both a
veteran myself[18] and an anthropologist working in close collaboration with

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13 For ethnographic methodologies, see HadžiMuhamedović 2018; Perica & Gavrilović 2011;
    Šarenac 2021; or Tsing 2005/2015. On theory, see Ballestero & Winthereik 2021; Davies 2008;
    Fabian 2014; Hage 2005; Radeljić & González-Villa 2021.

14 Many of these periodic returns are now initiated by (or follow invitations from) veteran
    research reciprocators and their associations as the collaborative nature and visibility of this
    research approach has increased.

15 See Zeitlyn 2012.

16 As the fieldwork progresses, gender and gendered experiences of veterans in SEE/FY have
    become more prominent dimensions of understanding veteran (intra)relations in the region.
    Predominantly encountered in Croatia and BiH, women veterans and their associations are
    currently working to secure equal positionality with their male comrades in the eyes of
    society and the State.

17 See Ingold (2014, 2015) on the distinctions between anthropology, ethnography, and partici-
    pant observation.

18 I served six and a half years (2000-2007) with the U.S. Air Force as explosive ordnance

certain veterans associations, these memberships were offered and accepted over the course of my fieldwork (with annual membership dues paid and membership cards issued).

Furthermore, in a manner that reflects back upon the conference theme of "context" vis-à-vis Serbs and Croats, I want to highlight recent developments at the intersection of peace studies and ethnographic methodologies. These developments have come to contextualize both my research and, in many senses, the veteran research reciprocators themselves in broader local, regional and transnational narratives. With the rise of "local legitimacy" (a.k.a. "return to the local") in peace(building) studies[19] has come new reflections of ethnographic methodology and its (potential) contributions[20]. The resulting methodological engagements speak an answer to noted peace scholar Oliver P. Richmond's call "to utilise eclectic, adaptive, cross-cultural and inventive approaches based on contextual experience" (2018, 238) in affecting collaborative, innovative approaches to strategic or nonlinear peacebuilding. It is within this emergent space that I position aspects of my ethnographic fieldwork with war veterans – aspects that draw upon fundamental conversations with veterans of SEE/FY as well as case studies and theoretical discussions that envision veterans as more visible actors living "the local" in peacebuilding research. It is, in the opening words of Ugrešić, an archaeology of everyday veteran life.

These research conversations and interviews (nearly one hundred hours and counting) have been guided by a three-part questionnaire. The first part opens discussions about the very nature of the word "veteran": what it means to the individual former combatant, when/if it has been adopted in a self-referential manner, who the discussants see as fellow veterans, and how the word "veteran" is in translation with other post-war, socio-linguistic markers such as *borac* or *branitelj*[21]. The second part builds from discussants' initial

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disposal technician (a.k.a. the Bomb Squad) in the U.S., Germany, South Korea, and Iraq. I was honorably discharged with the rank of staff sergeant (E-5) at the end of my active-duty service period.

19 Kwon 2020; Millar 2018/2020/2021; Richmond & Mac Ginty 2020; and Smith & Yoshida 2022.
20 See Björkdahl et al. 2016.
21 Borac (fighter) and branitelj (defender) are local/regional designations embraced by former combatants that reflect both wartime and post-war perceptional narratives of participation in the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

considerations of "veteran" to inform a conversation that looks to reveal post-war relations between individual veterans, between veterans who were on opposing sides of combat in the 1990s, and between the veteran discussant and the veteran associations to which they may/may not be members. Regarding the planning of fieldwork for an ethnography that is driven by veteran relations, the revelations made during this section of the interviews act as guides to encountering other veterans "in the field." As such, these drove the determinations of new sites of engagement. Thus the fieldwork is moved forward following veteran relations visible at the local/grassroots level as opposed to being predetermined externally or at a distance from potential research reciprocators.

Figure 3 **Map of fieldwork sites across Southeast Europe/Former Yugoslavia. Black denotes long-term or repeated visits, gray denotes short-term visits, and white indicates future sites of (continued) research alongside war veterans.**

The third and final phase of the interview questionnaire moves from the realities of post-war relations to more hypothetical explorations of (imagined) roles for veterans in processes of peace(building). How does the discussant view veterans with similar ethnic/national/combat backgrounds as themselves

participating in multi-party dialogues or joint commemorations with former enemies? Would they themselves participate if invited? What would be the discussant's concerns with accepting such an invitation to participate? Are the concerns driven by the possible perceptions/responses of fellow veterans? And/ or out of concern for post-war, socio-economic precarities that are addressed by state benefits, social status, or veteran networks? At times, these questions moved from the hypothetical realm to lived realities and memories. For as I followed relational lines connecting veterans, news reports or social media coverage of contested, controversial, or quietly convivial veteran interactions were continuously inserting themselves into our day-to-day conversations.

Figure 4 **Serbian veterans gather at the Serbian Veterans Association headquarters near Belgrade to hear a statement from then-Minister of Labour, Employment, Veteran, and Social Policy Darija Kisić and to present her with questions/issues (photo by author – 2021).**

Combined, each phase of the interview process builds upon the other to (in)form fresh insights of veteran social imaginaries while also driving how researchers see, speak, and represent veterans in the social sciences. Especially with regard to the first round of interview questions, there opens an initial access to emic perceptions of the particulate matter(s) moving within the substrates of veteran social assemblages and resulting (transnational) identities. As I note in my introductory comments, this brief reflection upon ethnograph-

ic fieldwork, ethnomethodological analysis, and strategies of inquiry serves to forward an agenda seeking to amplify calls to reflexively (re)encounter "the veteran" and their origins in the social sciences. Via ethnographic engagement, we begin to see relational commonalities (at times in translation with one another) and other constituent elements of veteran lifeworlds. Lifeworlds shared/contested by Serbian and Croatian veterans thus spaces of multiple engagements that can influence what may be called counter-contexts – contexts that oppose external generalizations (e.g. "west-plaining") or chip away at the "ossified" discourse dominant in "Balkanized" frames[22]. Accessing these spaces of post-war friction and conviction in SEE/FY allows academics to push back against the stereotypes and silences within which local veterans must live. In so doing, we also project local voices and perspectives into global/transnational realms of theoretical and methodological discourse (in anthropology, veterans studies, peacebuilding and so on).

Here then, we return to Tsing and her (research) presence in open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life. In SEE/FY, such entanglements are reflected, reproduced and reified in the course of fieldwork alongside veterans. In some instances, by Serbian veterans living in precarious economic and psychological conditions in rural Kuršumlija or in the metropole of Niš. Veterans who, though distanced from the consolidated center of power that is Belgrade, nonetheless capture/force State attention via protests (see Figure 5 & 6), political parties[23], or court cases[24]. Veterans who organize amongst themselves to support other veterans – whether those individuals are State sanctioned veterans or seen as veterans by the veteran assemblage(s) – in matters as simple as transportation to hospitals or as grave as providing end-of-life care in the absence of State resources. In other instances, by Croatian veterans who are mobile in their manifestations as they crisscross Croatia and the region to join "acquaintances" – to recall Bourdieu's terminology – who they may or may not know personally to perform mutual acts of visibility. Manifestations that ren-

22 On this note, see Pavlowitch 1994.
23 "Borci najavili izlazak na izbore na listi Ratni veterani Srbije" Danas 02.11.2023 (https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/borci-najavili-izlazak-na-izbore-na-listi-ratni-veterani-srbije/).
24 See, for example, one such series of cases brought before the European Court of Human Rights: https://balkaninsight.com/2013/02/06/serbia-appeals-strasbourg-war-veterans-ruling/ or https://balkaninsight.com/2014/03/25/serbian-veterans-should-ask-rights-before-national-courts/.

der visible for society and for the State the entanglements of veteran relations and networked cooperation. In Zagreb, such manifestations peaked (for the moment) with what has been collectivized (at times in a derogatory sense) as the šatoraša or "tenters" occupation. In 2014 — 2015, Croatian war veterans assembled in the capitol to occupy spaces with tents as a strategy to force the State to address issues with veterans' benefits and psychosocial care[25] (Figure 7). Such was the intensity and longevity of the veteran manifestation that counter-protests erupted which adopted incredibly stark rhetoric (Figure 8) in a country where veterans of the 1990s – when actually seen or remembered – are held with high regard by certain strata[26] of society.

   In speaking with Croatian veteran research reciprocators nearly six years after the protests in Zagreb, we can access those moments of veteran manifestations across certain distances - distances that work to muddle past priorities or homogenize individual experiences. Yet, as one Croatian veteran from the town of Karlovac I spoke with recalled, "Many of [the veterans here] mobilized in the beginning to support the veterans that had set up the tents... by either bringing warm food or just being present for a few hours when we could. But I don't think there were many from here who were there from

25 It must also be mentioned that such manifestations of veteran activism can be initiated by (or be extended into) other socio-political issues; issues that can trigger efforts and outcomes which intersect with broader desires of political change. For as Prof. Dejan Jović and I have discussed during the abovementioned conference in 2023 and in private communication (2024) since the conference, one of the slogans adopted by veterans was "Both have fallen!" (Oba su pala!) which is reference to the then-ruling party's prime minister and president of the Croatian government. As governments around the world and throughout history have discovered to their dismay, protests initially begun over one issue can quickly morph into broader demands for change. (Here I also recall the so-called "Albanian Civil War" of 1997 which emerged following the collapse of several financial "pyramid schemes" that eradicated the savings and investments of Albanians struggling to keep up with structural reforms. What began as demands for restitution and/or political accountability morphed into "insurgents" or "rebels" occupying territory and marching on Tirana, prompting the deployment of United Nations' forces (see Ypi 2022, 272-304).

26 Though I am unaware of any longitudinal studies specifically looking to perceptions of recent generations of Croatian young adults relating to war veterans, informal conversations in Zagreb and elsewhere suggest certain levels of resentment. Resentment triggered by the "extensive" or "generous" benefits bestowed by the Croatian state upon veterans that are extended to their widows and children. I most frequently encountered this resentment amongst university students and other junior academics who must pay, for example, in full for books or tuition.

start to finish. I became less involved after things became more about politics than talking about veteran issues" (interview extract – June 2021). Alternately, several members of the Crne Mamba Veterans Association I spoke with in Dugo Selo spoke less of whether or not veteran concerns had been addressed before the politics took over protest narratives (although it is debatable to what extent politics were absent even from the onset). Rather, our conversation during an association anniversary BBQ continuously drifted back to the treatment the veterans had received at the hands of the police and from counter-protesters.

I draw focus here in a very circumscribed manner to such veteran protests in particular for two reasons. First, such protests are global in their occurrence and the protests in Serbia and Croatia similarly took up the tactics of tents as both visual markers and as zones of virtual demarcation. Second, reflections upon the protests became clear points-of-departure for fieldwork discussions I held with veterans in the years since their inception. Discussions that spoke to how veteran assemblages operate, become entangled, and are supported or contested by the veterans themselves. In one case, while embedded with the Motorcycle Club Veterans Croatia (MKVC) during their multi-day rally across Croatia and Bosnia, there were multiple discussions with the veteran-bikers about individual participation (or not) in the 2014 — 2015 protests as well as general reflections upon the protests. Their stories revealed how buses of veterans from southern Croatia were organized and funded. How food was sourced and prepared by veteran associations in close proximity to Zagreb. How veteran networks were acknowledged, activated, or (re)aligned, thus overcoming (temporarily perhaps) issues of distance, politics, or memory activism. Also heard in this mélange of veteran reflections are critical opinions or expressions of frustration regarding how the protests were performed and the results achieved. Alternately, frustrations were aired against fellow veterans and veteran associations that attempt to inject or center certain narratives, slogans, or imagery into broader veteran mobilizations and manifestations (in 2014 — 2015 and now). Some of which fall within the realm of memory activism[27], thus reveal the contestations between veterans regarding the consecration of certain historical events – with such contestations influencing official, state-level narratives and activities.

27 See Fridman 2022.

Figure 5 & 6 Left: Screenshot from BrusOnline 2020 (www.brusonline.com/drustvo/ 12408-ratni-veterani-srbije-zapoceli-strajk-razgovarali-sa-ministrom-dordevicem) with a headline that translates to, "War veterans of Serbia started a strike, spoke with Minister Đorđević." Right: 2021 Veteran protest site in central Belgrade, Serbia (photo by author).

Figure 7 & 8 Left: Croatian veteran protest tent in central Zagreb, Telegram 2015 (www. telegram.hr/). Right: Counter-protests in central Zagreb, Radio Velkaton 2015 (www. velkaton.ba/).

In a similar vein, sitting with Serbian veteran-organizers at their association headquarters in Belgrade after an appearance by a state minister (who stood in front of one of the larger assemblies of Serbian veterans I have so far encountered in my fieldwork), I opened a discussion into the connections between veteran associations around the country. What roles did the association play in co-organizing with or supporting other associations? Furthermore, what is the position of the association with regard to the tent protests in central Belgrade or the court cases brought by members against the State? Citing private interviews conducted with individual Serbian veterans, what of the internal tensions between veteran associations? What has driven the proliferation of veterans associations across the country? One of two responses that

were to continuously re-appear during these lines of inquiries with veteran associations across SEE/FY is that such fracturing of associations is a "divide and control" strategy on the part of politicians in Zagreb and Belgrade. Keep the veterans divided (while supporting the divisions by allocating funding for each association that appears) and veterans remain fragmented thus unable to challenge the status quo in a cohesive manner. Such perceptions of the State point to a possible inference: by working to undermine, silence, or otherwise interrupt its assets and networks, the State "recognizes" (the potential of) veteran social capital.

/ Local Contexts, Global Concepts

> History has chosen the confluence of Belgrade's rivers as a perfect place to shuffle its tarot cards and mix fates, races, civilisations and cultures.
> — Momo Kapor in *A Guide to the Serbian Mentality* (2020, 23)

As is frequently – and frustratingly – the case during fieldwork, some of the most interesting conversations and insights occur *after* the recorder is turned off and the (semi-structured) interview concludes. In ways I did not totally anticipate, such frustration was compounded as my homestays with veterans in Croatia and Serbia multiplied, lengthened, and repeated. During a week-long stay with a semi-retired/semi-unemployed Serbian veteran – let's call him Slobodan, since I have always liked the name's provenance: freedom – at his home in a village about forty minutes from Belgrade, we had long hours to talk, visit local points-of-interest, and drink rather spectacular volumes of his preferred spirit. A daily routine that by nightfall lent to me a new appreciation of cultural critic Momo Kapor's attempt to capture and convey the "ouzo-mez-ze" culture of Belgrade in his writings: "[I] could not stand on my legs due to my extreme scientific research" (2020, 292). Yet it was during such meanderings that a more rich and insightful sense of Serbian intra-veteran relations emerged to compliment initial interview inquiries. And though such terms as "social capital" or "toxic veteranality" (a term which I unpack below) were not used, it was in these free-ranging periods (and in the feverishly scribbled fieldnotes collected during the final moments of the night) that the stories

contributing to the "hidden" or, perhaps just ignored, transcripts began to emerge. Transcripts that offer local contexts and common contributions to grand notions such as social capital.

Interestingly, Bourdieu in his initial development of the concept of social capital takes as an example of social institutions the "knight" (can we read in this medieval forerunner to *borci* or *braniteljica*?) that "presupposes and produces mutual knowledge and recognition" (1986, 250). Setting aside this broader discussion of social capital vis-à-vis veteran embodiment, I want to instead focus on pursuing the social interactions that can precede, thus in turn promote, what may be seen as the codification of veteran social capital. Here then, I work from Lin's consideration of social capital as "assets in networks" (2000, 3) and their causal mechanisms leading to individuals engaging "in interactions and networking in order to produce profits" (2001, 6). Lin sees within this rendering four "elements" that explain why social capital works: information, influence, social credentials, and reinforcement (2000, 6—7). Each of these elements and how they interconnect, I argue, can be more fully understood via ethnographic methodologies such as the ones I have touched on here. For each of the elements articulated by Lin are reflected by veteran social relations that emerge in post-war societies and enter into translated discourse with broader (transnational) veteran networks. For example, the "social credentials" earned and projected by veterans are far from uncontested at their fundamental levels – especially when the State's declaration of who and who is not a veteran clashes with the parameters of inclusion set by the veterans themselves (as can be seen with Serbian veterans today).

Returning to my week living alongside Slobodan (a period mirrored multiple times in Croatia and elsewhere), an "inside story" of different periods of veteran relations across Serbia began to unfold. One relational dynamic that would routinely emerge in our conversations were the (sometimes bitter) disputes over leadership of veteran associations – which I unsparingly called manifestations of the "big man syndrome" during one conversation, an unscripted remark that brought a laugh and a nod of recognition from Slobodan. Perceived as being implicitly encouraged and funded by the State (as highlighted above), such leadership disputes arise from varying reasons yet frequently return to the same outcome: fragmentation. This fragmentation of veteran associations works upon each of the elements of social capital in ways that render problematic senses of cohesion presumed/desired by actors (e.g.

NGOs, civil society) external to veteran assemblages. In noting this observation, I do not intend a rejection of social capital theory nor an attempt at essentialization based on geography or ethnicity. By acknowledging how the cohesion of veteran networks – rendered visible via interactions of veteran associations – is not static but dynamic, a space opens within which researchers can interrogate how and when veterans (networks) come into contact and (re)constitute elements theorized as foundational to social capital. As such, it is a space that reciprocally links local contexts of assets and networks with global conceptualizations of (veteran) social capital.

Whether we speak of social capital in general or look to more recent considerations of "bridging" and "bonding" social capital[28], the development processes – of the past and the present – nurtured at elemental levels are potent and accessible points for ethnography. With such ethnographic nuance to contextualizing and communicating these elements comes more informed socio-academic engagements with exchanges within and between networks. Exchanges that are themselves elemental in understanding broader post-war social interactions (or, perhaps more substantially, understanding the lack of such social interactions). For as Lin argues, "Divorced from its roots in individual interactions and networking, social capital becomes merely another trendy term to employ or deploy in the broad context of improving or building social integration and solidarity" (2004, 26).

Though abbreviated, this conversation moving through Bourdieu and Lin sets the stage for a final illustration of methodology informing theory. When thinking through the frame of social capital and how it is derived, tangible lines of acquaintanceship extend past familiar relationships into networks formed of commonality. For our purposes here, such a commonality is either of the shared experiences of combat or the shared experiences of veteran life after combat. These relational lines of influence and resources can operate in multiple ways to form what Bourdieu calls "a minimum of objective homogeneity," with "membership in a group [being] the basis of solidarity which makes them possible" (1986, 249). Yet what happens when a veteran or group of veterans transgress the normative standards – or minimum homogeneity – of veteran behaviour as established by the "group"? Standards that are formed, sustained, and enforced by the veterans themselves. Arguably, it is

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28 See, for example, Kopren & Westlund 2021; Pickering 2007.

at these points of perceived transgression where interrogations of cause and effect vis-à-vis reinforcement should be enacted. For it is here the frictions of conviction and connection become quite exposed, with such friction igniting personal and social abuse against the perceived veteran transgressor. I have come to conceptualize this negative enforcement – preventative or proactive, implicit or explicit – as "toxic veteranality."

Figure 9 **How to visualize such concepts as toxic veteranality? Does visuality provoke new engagements by the viewer? Engagement different from that generated by paragraphs of text? How to capture the past's influence on the present? Or, alternately, how to capture the presence of fallen veterans as carried by their comrades still alive today? While these influences are not "toxic" by default, their invocation as a means of controlling veterans, veteran narratives, and veteran participation can result in detrimental or negative social pressures.**

While I frequently approached interrogations of veteran transgression via hypotheticals during research discussions, the hypotheticals I pose are prompted by real-world experiences shared by affected veterans. For example, I would ask a Serbian veteran such as Slobodan how he felt about other ethnic Serb veterans joining Croat veterans in joint post-war commemorations. Was this a transgression of his perceptions of acceptable (Serbian) veteran actions? If yes, how is that veteran "handled" or treated by fellow veterans? The real-world experiences informing these hypothetical lines of inquiry first emerged in Croatia as I began to encounter veteran stories and experiences of ostracization, verbal violence, and social exclusion. Experiences predominantly unheard or unexpressed outside the ranks of veteran assemblages. (Experiences that also seem to be conveniently ignored by, or somehow never reach, NGOs interacting with veterans.) These encounters emerged as I looked to past and present veteran participation in local processes of peace and reconciliation during my initial travels in the field. As a case in point, over the course of several visits to small communities in the Slavonia region of Croatia, the aftermaths of certain normative "transgressions" – primarily relating to inter-ethnic meetings between veterans – began to coalesce into cogent research streams that would eventually appear as my fieldwork progressed in other areas of SEE/FY.

Following with these research streams, I derive the term toxic veteranality from a more common concept: toxic (patriarchal) masculinity[29]. This is not to diminish or replace the applicability of the toxic masculinity lens to understanding veteran relations in conservative, patriarchal societies[30] that project or protect normative notions of masculinity. I build the notion of toxic veteranality[31] off of the premises of toxic masculinity so as to account for 1) specific veteran subjectivities and 2) the different genders of veterans engaging in negative (re)enforcement strategies of veteran social behaviour. This in turn reflects two conceptual elements to toxic veteranality. One is the notion of embodied norms and experiences of veterans – veteranality[32]

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29 For the purposes of this presentation, I work within a register structured succinctly by Martín & Santaulària 2023.
30 Dumančić & Krolo 2017.
31 Introduced in Warner 2022.
32 The term "veteranality" was first introduced by Murray (2013) and has since entered into efforts of expansion and re-signification (Warner 2022) that reflect advances in the interdisciplinary field of veterans studies.

– that may be rendered or applied in toxic manners. The second reflects the manifestation of toxic responses directed at veterans, such as the afore-mentioned ostracization or verbal violence. So combined and aligned, this articulation of toxic veteranality (Figure 9) can be held up as an example of what local ethnographic encounters can contribute to/create within theoretical contexts operating in transnational registers. Furthermore, it can be understood as a lens through which to see in a more nuanced manner the entangled elements of social capital theory – whether performed by individual veterans of Serbia or Croatia, found in the veteran networks crisscrossing the SEE/FY region, or transferred/translated within veteran assemblages across societies today.

/ Conclusion

The reflections upon the origins of a veteran – in the social sciences as well as in emergent veteran relations – that this paper presents are a response to a call to (re)envision research topics that intersect with Serbian and Croatian socio-political contexts. Contexts that are convened and contested today across spectrums of entangled relations emerging from "the local" to engage regional and global narratives that mutually (at times) inform one another. By first moving through one possible approach to ethnographic engagements with war veterans in SEE/FY, a research agenda is proposed that seeks enhanced attention to local lifeworlds and the (intra/inter)relations of veterans from the 1990s onwards. I submit that such an agenda and the centering of (Serbian and Croatian) veterans in research contexts via ethnography will offer more nuanced understandings of the pressures, problems, and potentiality of veteran participation in social issues. As a demonstration of what this proposed agenda can contribute to socio-academic considerations of theory and methodology (e.g. the transnational study of veterans), two concepts are discussed: veteran social capital and toxic veteranality. The conceptual scoping that opens past considerations of social capital to contemporary veteran relations is an effort towards bringing specific lives into broader theories. In the same vein, this effort introduces toxic veteranality as a specific lens through which to see veteran normativity and enforcement in a manner that reciprocally addresses four elemental aspects of social capital.

Finally, in working through realignments of regional and global contexts instigated by attending to Serb and/or Croatian veteran relations, I integrated into this paper several "framing" notes that serve to project the influences active upon this research. One such note offers a circumscribed intervention and alternative to how academic authority is traditionally embodied or projected solely by textual works. By incorporating visual components (in this case, AI-generated assemblages of veteran presence and pressures), I have sought alternative provocations of engagement with an academic text formed at the intersection of anthropology, veterans studies, and peace(building). Each of these realms are turning to see arts-based methodologies as robust yet accessible to non-academic audiences, which suggests an intriguing (and hopefully aesthetically appealing) new frontier of academic participation, expression and communication.

Speaking of new frontiers and the potentials of veteran-centric research – arts-based, ethnographic, or otherwise – I conclude by returning to a second framing note brought forth in this paper. By inserting a brief synopsis of current narratives operating in peace(building) studies, I have highlighted how both ethnography and ethnographic engagement with veterans can respond to a field of study that looks to our collective futures. For as I have argued here, with enhanced understandings of veteran relations – meaning between veterans themselves and veteran relations with other social strata – comes enhanced viability of veteran participation in processes of peace(building). While veterans are frequently spoken of in the past tense or in historical registers, we must move to consider how the shared experiences of combat and the (imagined) commonality of post-war veteran struggles impact contemporary transnational, transitional relations – in SEE/FY and beyond. With such movement, perhaps we will one day speak not just of veteran origins in academia, but of the origins of tomorrow's transformations as assembled from the experiences of veterans today.

/ Acknowledgements

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