UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY

UNU-GEST

Gender Equality Studies and Training Programme

Confronting Serbia‘s Past: The Feminist Memory Politics of Women in Black

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May 2018

Final assignment submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for post-graduate degree in International Gender Studies at the United Nations University Gender Equality Studies and Training (UNU-GEST) Programme.

Reykjavík, Iceland. 2018.

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Abstract

This essay is about the intersection of gender and memory politics in Serbia. Focusing on the Belgrade-based Women in Black (WiB), I analyse the forms of their mnemonic mobilisation as part of their efforts to offer counter-narratives to state-sponsored memory projects designed to uphold continuity between the past and present. This anti-war, anti-patriarchy, anti-nationalist and anti-capitalist movement is a unique phenomenon not only regionally but also in the global political arena. By exploring the Women in Black's use of calendar to contest dominant commemorations and national identity constructions, I pay specific attention to the dynamic interchange of memory resistance, the public space and the state. I demonstrate how the engagement in the struggle over interpretations of the past may be used to deconstruct narratives of masculinised war-related memory politics. While the influence of Women in Black on government policies has been marginal, it has had far greater influence on Serbian society through their activism and the staging of symbolic commemorative events. I argue that the WiB have played a crucial role in breaking the politics of silence and denial when it comes to the recent war past. This has been extremely difficult due prolonged state oppression, but it has been achieved through the WiB's ideological and political consistency.

Introduction

More than a quarter of a century after its foundation, the Women in Black (WiB) network is still attracting interest from scholars as well as from the regional and international media. It is not only due to its longevity, but it can also be ascribed to its ideological clarity and consistency over time (Bilić, 2012). From the outset, the activism of WiB has been based on feminist, anti-war, anti-militaristic, and anti-nationalist values. Despite years of oppression by the Milošević regime, particularly during the NATO bombing campaign and the conflict in Kosovo in 1998–1999, their political message has remained more or less unchanged from the beginning (cf. Women in Black 1993, Zajović, 1999, 2010; Zajović *et al* (eds.), 2012).[1]

During the wars in the former Yugoslavia (1991–1999), WiB was the most prominent and important anti-war civil society organisation in Serbia. After the conflicts, the group turned their activist focus mostly toward commemorations and vigils for victims of war crimes and towards demands for the recognition of Serbia's responsibility and accountability for what they saw as its recent criminal past. Since the turn of the century, Women in Black have had an ambiguous and often problematic relationship with the Serbian state. The organisation has survived hardships generated by the economic recession in 2008 and the neoliberal policies pursued by successive governments, and it is still marginalised in Serbian society.

In this paper, I look specifically at the memory activism of the Women in Black to analyse the intersection of gender and memory politics. I explore the WiB's use of calendar – and the marking of particular dates and events from Serbia's troublesome past – as a contested site of memory. I also focus on WiB's attempts, which have so far been unsuccessful, to rename streets and public spaces in Belgrade and throughout Serbia to reconstruct and reinterpret them for victims of state-sponsored wars. I seek to address several specific questions. First, I analyse

[1] WiB was established, in 1991, on the eve of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia; the founding of the organisation followed that of the Israel-based WiB after the First Intifada in Israel/Palestine towards the end of the 1980s. Both groups were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. They are part of a non-hierarchical network with other Women in Black organisations in Spain, Australia, the United States, England, India, Italy, Argentina and many other countries. This network fights for just peace and against war and any other form of violence and discrimination. Other than their black cladding, they are mostly identifiable by their silent vigils that take place simultaneously sometimes in a number of countries. Their main emphasis is on women's solidarity, internationalism and a feminist perspective, especially on issues of peace, justice and non-violence. Along with similar organisations and activists from the former Yugoslavia WiB from Belgrade formed a regional network and additionally with the Kosovo Women Network a Women Peace Coalition. They have also organised networks dealing with self-explanatory titles such as Network of Conscientious Objectors and Anti-Militarists or Anti-Fascist Coalition. They have thus far organised more than two thousand street actions, vigils and performances. They were also responsible, along with regional feminists, for the ultimate feminist approach to transitional justice in the Balkans, epitomised by the Women's Court (Duhaček, 2015).

the significance of WiB's mnemonic mobilisation designed to offer counter-narratives to state-sponsored memory projects that seek to cast Serbia's history in a positive light. Thus, it is a question of dealing with issues of collective memory and the politics of the past. I seek to answer the question of whether WiB's recurrent activism has contributed to the fact the organization – unlike many similar activist groups – are still in the streets and occupying public spaces, harping on the same message. By using WiB's mnemonic struggle, as a case study, I attempt to expound the dynamics of memory resistance and the reaction of the state and its apparatuses to it.

The activist work of the Women in Black was already known and recognised during the Yugoslav conflicts (see, for example, Sekulić 1994, Enloe, [1998] 2004; Landsberg, 1993 or Zavareei, 1999). Later, Orli Fridman offered the most extensive account of the organisation through her research on anti-war activism in Serbia, with a focus on social memory (2006, 2011, 2015, 2016). Other scholars, notably Cynthia Cockburn (2000, 2007) and Bojan Bilić (2011, 2012) have examined – from a sociological point of view – the feminist anti-war activism in Serbia and as well as in post-Yugoslav space. In addition, using an anthropological approach, Ana Dević (1997), Donna M. Hughes and Lepa Mladjenović (1995) have analysed the role of the WiB in the women's struggle against war and nationalism. Finally, WiB have been a steady producer of knowledge in their own right. Over more than two decades of their political engagement as peace activists they have published numerous accounts of their own activity under their collective name *Women in Black* (Žene u crnom) (1993, 1998, 2017) and edited their own theoretical work (e.g., Zajović *et al*, 1993, 2007, 2012), as well as published work on other feminist or gender based anti-war engagements (Papić, 1999).

Here I seek to complement this body of knowledge by looking, specifically, at WiB's mnemonic interventions. I articulate the feminist side of the politics of memory and what this has meant to successive regimes and Serbian society as a whole. It is also a way of bringing out the memory fragmentation Serbia is currently facing. Moreover, I am concerned with the political forte of these agents of memory whose ideology has remained remarkably consistent. WiB's activism in a post-conflict, post- Milošević Serbia will be examined through the lens of what Cynthia Enloe (2004) terms "feminist curiosity." I analyse the clash between a feminist narrative of the past and a dominant, exceedingly masculine and oftentimes war-related, state-sponsored narrative. These are encapsulated in two conflicted and parallel calendars, with each marking its own dates. Thus, I show how the Women in Black have developed a counter-memory frame in opposition to official memories of Serbian political and cultural elites. Furthermore, I seek to evaluate whether WiB's activism has had any impact on state policies.

My purpose is to engage the dialectic between remembering and forgetting, the politics of responsibility, and the WiB's fight against the politics of silence and denial. I concentrate primarily on recent struggles and activism relating to the memory of wars and conflicts in the former Yugoslavia (Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo; the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia).

In the paper, I rely on the theories of leading memory scholars, starting from the obligatory ones, such as Maurice Halbwachs (2008 [1950]) and Pierre Nora (1989, 1997), whose works are normally considered a starting point of collective memory discussion, to more recent ones, such as Jeffrey K. Olick (2003, 2007), Eviatar Zerubavel (2003a; 2003b) and John K. Gillis (1994). I also place my analysis of Serbian memory politics within the context of works by theorists like Patrick Devine-Wright (2003) or Lorraine Ryan, who have dealt with memory in relation to ethnic conflict and mnemonic resistance, respectively.

The Historical Context

Memory battles in Serbia are part of a wider historical struggle over the past, such as the Serbian medieval myth of statehood and legitimacy over Kosovo versus Kosovar Albanian counter-narratives (Zerubavel, 2003b). Currently, a wholesale re-evaluation of the Second World War is taking place in Serbia through court cases designed to rehabilitate highly controversial Serbian historical figures during the Nazi occupation from 1941 to 1945 and to introduce dubious, ethnically-coloured forms of commemorative events, such as a recently reinvented commemoration of the Liberation of Belgrade by the Yugoslav partisans and the Soviet Red Army.

The WiB have been very active in protesting against trivialisations of historical facts through the courts, not only because the Women in Black see themselves as a continuation of (post-) Yugoslav anti-fascist legacy[2] but also because they are fighting against such historical re-evaluations in their activist engagement. The WiB see a clear line of continuation between the Nazi collaborators and those responsible for war crimes during the 1990s conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. Following this political stance, WiB combined two important events on 9

[2] During the Second World War in Yugoslavia, a parallel bloody civil war took place, with rival groups and factions fighting, *inter alia*, for the country's future social and political organisation of the state. The main two guerrilla forces were the Partisans led by Josip Broz Tito and the Chetnicks led by General Dragoslav Draža Mihajlović. The Allies initially supported the latter, but in 1944 their support changed to the Partisans. The consequences of this struggle were numerous war crimes against civilians, often ethnically based, even though both groups were constituted of members from all Yugoslav regions. This past had not been comprehensively dealt with in the name of Brotherhood and Unity after the war. The divisions, however, still exist in contemporary Serbia.

May commemoration: the Victory Day [over the Fascism and Nazism] and the Day of Concentration Camp Detainees of Bosnia and Herzegovina of the Bosnian War from 1992 to 1995 (Women in Black, n.d.). This is a *par excellence* example of WiB's understanding of the dynamics of memory politics. After a ruling by the Supreme Court of Cassation in Serbia, which led to the rehabilitation of a much contested figure, the general of the Chetnik Detachments of the Yugoslav Army, Draža Mihajlovic, one of the cofounders of the Women in Black vowed that the group would continue their struggle against what she termed the "fascistisation" of Serbia (*N1 Bosnia*, 2015). Many see the government rehabilitation agenda as an attempt to de-legitimise the anti-fascist and socialist Yugoslav past. At the same time, the counter-demonstrations staged by the WiB have been interpreted as injecting new life into anti-governmental agitation against these historical re-evaluations (Fridman, 2016).

The other main form of official memory politics serves as means to re-establish ahistorical links and institutional continuation between the 1944 Liberators of Belgrade and the current post-conflict Serbian army through military parades and a series of commemorative events.[3] It also follows the type and style of ritualistic commemoration happening in Vladimir Putin's post-Soviet Russia. On the face of it, these events seem to be the consequences of certain mnemonic confusions and narrative contradictions. Nevertheless, the recent introduction of Armistice Day into the Serbian calendar follows the tradition of many Western countries, such as the UK, France, New Zealand and Belgium, who have made this day a national holiday.

It is not surprising that the recent commemorations that mirror those in Russia, particularly taking into account historical ties of two countries and the fact that those ties feat as a core element in Serbian official identity politics. Yet, it highlights the impossible geopolitical position of Serbia, which is in a crevice between Russia (and more recently China) and the West, at a time, when the country's dominant narrative and ideology is centred unconditional transition towards the European Union (EU) membership. One of the conditions for Serbia's EU accession is *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – the coming to terms with its [more recent] past – which has dominated the political and social debate in Serbia in the post-Milošević years. However, Serbia's relationship with Russia has been put under severe scrutiny by the EU in recent years. The special relationship between Russia and Serbia is deeply rooted, with most Serbs harbouring positive attitudes toward the Russians. After all, many Russians were involved in – and lost their lives – during the battle for the liberation of Belgrade the end

[3] It is an absolute necessity for army to relegitimise itself as one of the state's and society's pillars, particularly after losing all the recent wars, and especially those ones in which it officially did not take part, such as those in Bosnia and Croatia. More on this commemoration in Aleksić (2017).

of the Second World War. The same applies to other former Soviet nations. Ambassadors of independent states that emerged from the USSR, such as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Ukraine and Russia lay wreaths on Serbian monuments every 20 October (as is the case with Victory Day on 9 May), and some Belgrade streets still bear the name of the generals, who led the Red Army in liberation of Yugoslavia. Savvy post-ideological Serbian politicians know well that the triangulations of the Russia and the EU narratives garner the largest number of voters.

These contradictions, however, also demonstrate the degree of memory fragmentation, as well as the old conundrum of the mutual influence of the past over the present and vice versa. Among many other conflicts over Serbia's troublesome past, the historical ones have been incorporated into WiB's activism. Yet, as a country that has just recently come out of protracted conflict, struggles over interpretations of the more recent and more pressing past have taken precedence in memory activism of the organisation.

Memory Activism and Resistance: Theory and Practice

Memory activism has to be considered as a collective political practice, regardless of the theoretical standpoint one uses when dealing with social memory. One the hand, one can take a more traditional approach, which often sees Halbwachs (2008 [1950]) and Nora (1989; 1997) as a starting point and unavoidable reference, in particular because of their conceptualisation of collective memory as a group or collective phenomenon. On the other hand, the problem can be approached from another direction, as Crane (1997) has done, whereby the individual has to be "written back" into collective memory.

The Women in Black have not only used collective memory as a tool in their memory politics but it also serves as a lifeline to their collective existence. According Ryan (2010), shared narratives based on collectivity and commonality – in the case of WiB oftentimes traumatic experiences as consequences of verbal threats or actual physical violence from the state or members of society – help construct group or collective identity. Hence, she sees memory and identity as being mutually constitutive (p. 158). On the other side of the coin is the kind of entwining of identity and memory. WiB has fought against, (ethno-) nationalist identity constructions and the almost impervious, master narratives of the nation-state in Serbia. Such a narrative is a culturally constructed storyline that furnishes the group members with the idea of their shared, collective past (Zerubavel, 1995). They are enacted via conventional media such as historical documents, national anthems, calendars, commemorations, public

monuments, but also by way of a myriad of less conventional sites of memory through which remembering and forgetting (un)consciously trickles into the public sphere. Geoff Eley counts many of them in film and television, photographs, theatre, museums, tourist spots and theme parks, fictions, ceremonial, school curricula and political speeches (Eley, 2011: p. 560).

This relationship between commemorations and national identities has been problematized by Gillis and his colleagues (see, for example, 1994). Although ubiquitous, memory and identity have found themselves completely detached from their former selves in regard to their original meanings. Now, they have to be considered, as Gillis argues, as "free floating phenomena" removed from their historical context (Gillis, 1994: p. 3). These notions have become so intertwined that the very notion of identity "depends on the idea of memory" and vice-versa (Ibid.). Nonetheless, collective memory is still central to – and plays a key role in – the processes of identity formation (Ryan, 2010). As Gillis puts it: "the core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely a sense of sameness over time, is sustained by remembering, and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity" (Gillis, 1994: p. 3). No memoir, (auto-) biography or a comprehensive anthropological research has been produced on the WiB. Yet, the notion that the Women Black as a group owe their longevity, *inter alia,* to their collective identity solidified by means of their shared memories, has to be understood within the context of larger and more complex groups that may have a totally different ideological agenda (Lazović, 2017).

Researching WiB from the perspective of their collective identity, Bilić (2012b) has concluded that "pre-agreed protest", that is, a protest revolving around certain dates, "characterized by a straightforward ideological undercurrent […] downplays the educational, professional or age variety within the group and produces a set of expectations to which its members are supposed to conform, thus creating a sense of responsibility for the organisation's survival (p. 618). In other words, internal, organisational memory politics and set of values inherent to the group has helped this organisation to survive as a *par excellence* radical political group.[4]

Another intricacy should be stressed at this point. The 1990s conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, the WiB's *raison d'être,* have coincided with an escalation of memory and history within and outside academia (Devine-Wright, 2003). To Devine-Wright (2003), there has been

[4] Numerous groups that started as either feminist, anti-war or rights orientated organisations turned into fully professional NGOs thanks to the symbolic capital amassed during the conflicts of the 1990s. Now in advisory roles to the state, and occasionally financed by the state, they cannot be considered anymore as activist organisations. Athena Athanasiou (2012), when discussing WiB, articulated this challenge as the greatest force of post-Yugoslav post-conflict depoliticisation of feminist and anti-nationalist, anti-war groups.

a “heightened awareness of the link with processes of remembering and issues of ethnic conflict” (p. 9), as well as reconciliation and conflict resolution**.** It stems primarily from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa but also from the action of “memory agents” in South American countries, for instance Uruguay, Argentina and Chile and their confrontation with the memory of human rights violations (Olick & Robbins, 1998; Jelin, 2003). Although a bloody war was waged, the WiB in Belgrade were certainly aware of such processes of dealing with a tainted past. Thus, like many other anti-war organisations, Women in Black instantly understood the necessity of documenting and then commemorating war crimes and crimes against humanity. This development was, however, reciprocal when it comes to scholarship. The conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, coupled with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, influenced the way scholars saw the dynamics of the politics of memory via new nation-states, which were created through a bloody conflict and the subsequent reconstruction of their memory narratives.

At the same time, this period before and after the turn of the century was characterized by numerous political tendencies related to the past. To put it more precisely, this new age had become the perfect opportunity for pointing to the moral necessity not only of public remembering of past wrongs but also of public expressions of guilt, regret, apology and [historical] responsibility. Olick (2007) has articulated this new framework for confronting past transgressions, referring to it as the politics of regret. Olick and Coughlin (2003) have been addressing this paradigm shift in the beginning of the 21th century by analysing numerous apologies and public expressions of regret by world leaders. Tony Blair apologised for the Irish potato famine, even if he has not done so for the Iraq catastrophe; Bill Clinton contemplated an official apology for slavery; and Pope John Paul II also did so for Galileo among other transgressions of the Catholic Church he apologised for. Olick and Coughlin take further examples of how the past has become very much on the present public agenda. But it is now often about a “horrible, repulsive past” as opposed to heroic “golden ages” that were so often associated with public discourse in the service of nation- building in previous centuries (Olick & Coughlin, 2003: p. 37). The latter have been theorised by both Anthony D. Smith, as “ethnomyths,” or nostalgic remembrance of some better, if not “golden age” times, which are, as a rule, necessary if not for the construction of then for the solidification of Andersonian “imagined communities (as cited in Devine-Wright, 2003: pp. 16–19).” The paradigm shift, according to Ryan (2010) meant that: [P]atriotism and acknowledgement of guilt are no longer mutually exclusive, but indeed sustain each other, as a nation’s integrity is now evaluated on its ability to confront and resolve past wrongdoings (p. 161.).”

Other thinkers have also contributed to growing body of literature on the moral duty of public remembering of past transgressions from different perspectives (see Dimitrijević, 2011; Govier 2009). These tendencies have led scholars, such as Marina Warner, to conceptualise these belated public feelings of regret as the politics of apology. These ideas have, in turn, spurred a plethora of scholarly works (Warner, 2002; Torpey 2003a). In the Serbian context, Dragović-Soso (2012) has written about a lost opportunity for a public apology for the genocide in Srebrenica. In a similar fashion, Prosić-Dvornić (2000) has warned that unless the Serbs face "the deeds" of their leaders and collectively apologise for Vukovar, Sarajevo, Srebrenica, Kosovo, there will be no fresh start" (p. 355). And particularly no reciprocal apology for crimes committed against Serbs has been forthcoming. Certainly, there have been numerous half-hearted apologies from various politicians; yet, it had no positive impact on Serbia's relations with the successor states of the former Yugoslavia. In election times, militant or war-mongering rhetoric is still the dominant methodology employed by nationalist politicians when it comes to the mobilisation of voters.

Precisely because of such occurrences, the Women in Black have demanded from the Serbian government and society as a whole, a comprehensive, honest and unreserved dealing with Serbia's criminal past. They have also pressed the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Academia of Sciences and Arts (SANU) to take responsibility for their role in the wars of the Yugoslav succession and breakup. Incidentally, the former organisation does not allow female members to hold any position other than those of the priests' wives, whilst the other rarely lets women into their membership. One of the cofounders of WiB, Staša Zajović, put it this way: "[A]s one of the pillars of the project of "Greater Serbia" hegemony, SANU still actively works in that direction, representing ideological support to ethnic and theocratic fundamentalism (Zajović, 2005).

Apropos addressing a problematic and difficult past, Gutman (2017) argued that the first and crucial, unavoidable step is to find a common ground between former foes. In her words: "A new approach to peace activism has emerged in line with past-oriented politics: memory activism (p. 55)." It relates to the commemoration of a contested past so as to influence public debate and dialogue, "primarily towards greater equality, plurality, and reconciliation (Ibid.)." By the same token, Gutman (2017) maintains that memory activism is to be perceived as a "knowledge-based effort for consciousness-raising and political change. Like some other peace activist efforts, it uses a range of cultural practices, visual media, and spatial actions to produce and distribute knowledge (p. 58)." In this respect, the memory activism of the Women in Black is similar to many other memory activism organisations from around the world. The WiB use

a contested and silenced past and varied but regular and cyclical commemorative practices to partake in the creation of a foundation of a new, reconciliatory vision for the future.

In liberal nation-states, there are tendencies to amend historical injustices as a way of "coming to terms with the past." Symbolic of this mnemonic shift is what Lorraine Ryan terms, the recent rise of the "counter-monument," which symbolises a discomforting reminder of indigestible and intentionally forgotten memories. *Gegendenkmal* is the original term for this practice. Ryan uses Edkins's example of highlighting the German participation in the Holocaust through an examination of a monument built in Hamburg (Edkins, as cited in Ryan, 2010: p. 162). The WiB, together with their colleagues from the art and theatre world, have demanded on several occasions that such a monument be built in Belgrade. It was part of the organisation's fight against a monument that was designed to mark "all the victims" of wars on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. The monument, which was erected in 2012 in Savski Trg square in Belgrade, was the first one to refer (to victims of) the wars outside of Serbia. Yet, the monument was dedicated, rather confusingly "to all victims of wars and defenders of the homeland on the territory of the former Yugoslavia in the wars of the nineties" (Žene u Crnom, 8 March 2012). To counter what they saw as an attempt to relativise war victimhood, the Women in Black reacted by issuing a statement under the heading "Permanent mark of the crime" in which they pointed to the hypocrisy of the project:

> Official Belgrade refuses to establish a monument for the victims of the genocide in Srebrenica. The same conceptual creators of this monstrosity of a monument did not allow the installation of a memorial plaque to Croatian prisoners in 1991 in the Serb-JNA [Yugoslav National Army] camps Begejci and Stajićevo near Zrenjanin [In Serbia proper]. This memorial plaque would, to a small extent, turn Serbian civilisational and military defeat in Croatia into a moral victory over Milošević's Serbia. The official Belgrade refuses to construct a monument to the Unknown Serbian Deserter. In Germany there are seven memorials of deserters from Hitler's War (Ibid.).

In the eyes of Women in Black, the main purpose of the memorial was to erase the boundaries between the victim and the perpetrator. Additionally, they argued that if the Serbian state was really concerned about Serbian war victims, it would try to find out their names and document them properly (Ibid.). David (2014b) has brought this particular mnemonic battle to scholarly attention soon after the monument's construction.

The idea of the monument consecrated to the Unknown Serbian Deserter is not only exemplary of the paradigm shift relating to the changes in the way we see our past. As has been theorised by Olick and Coughlin (2003), Torpey (2003b) and Cairns (2003), this has led to a

turn away from the heroic, usually distant past, to the ostensibly more shameful past, particularly in the living memory of the catastrophic 20th century, with the carnage in the trenches of the First World War, the Holocaust, the gulags, the American-Vietnam war, and ending with genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This relatively new mnemonic *Weltanshauung* also epitomises the values and ideology of feminist pacifist organisations, such as the Women in Black. In their view, conscientious objection is the highest of all moral actions, when it comes to war. They respect and celebrate such endeavours to such an extent that they put the international day of conscientious objection on their calendar. Another interesting phenomenon is at play here. The construction of such a monument would help deconstruct Serbian dominant narratives related to patriarchy and the past. One way of doing so is to rearticulate the meaning attached to an already existing monument in Belgrade: the Monument to the Unknown Hero, which was constructed as a Great War memorial. This monument is the place where the leaders of Russia, China, or Western states, as well as presidents and leading Serbian politicians lay wreaths every 11 November or 9 May to remember Armistice Day and Victory Day

A monument to the Unknown Deserter, such as those that have been built in Germany and Austria, would not only subvert the masculine essentialised notion of the Serb as a warrior-hero, but would salvage from forgetting a memory of important historical fact: the sheer number of Serbian men who refused to fight in the Yugoslav wars, whether as deserters or draft resisters (for the detailed account on desertion in the former Yugoslavia, and WiB's role in them, see in Aleksov, 1994). This monument would consecrate a struggle that WiB as anti-war feminists supported as a fundamental political stance and a choice rather than from the gendered role of a sister or a mother (Aleksov, 2015). In a way, this monument would be a counter-monument to all those responsible for the wars of the 1990s, or the "warriors, the masters of oblivion" as Dubravka Ugrešić (1998) labelled them:

> Warriors, the masters of oblivion, the destroyers of the old state and builders of new ones, used every possible strategic method to impose a collective amnesia. The self-proclaimed masters of life and death set up the coordinates of right and wrong, black and white, true and false (p. 6) .

It would also be a counter-monument to those monument that have mushroomed all over the former Yugoslavia, oftentimes celebrating war criminals or highly contentious figures, as national heroes, as a way of perpetuating "ethnic divisions set in stone (Ristić *et al*, 2013)." This monument, however, would also be a shrine to WiB's almost three decades long struggle.

Not only because they provided shelter for deserters and objectors but also because it would celebrate them and all other "social agents" and "memory activists" that have committed their lives to creating sites of memory [symbolic if not of more solid, physical material] that will serve the posterity, in the future. As Jay Winter argued, these activists, bonded by their experience, "share imprint of history on their lives" in such a manner that we might even call them a "fictive kin" (Winter, 1995; 1999). Nonetheless, without the mnemonic work of such agents, collective memory and remembrance would not be possible, let alone mnemonic resistance to dominant, in their spirit hegemonic, memories, against which the Women in Black are fighting.

Similar to this social agency as related to collective memory, the term collected memory is a useful tool to explain the goal of WiB's mnemonic work and activism (Olick, 2007). It is emphasised that by using this term one avoids potential pitfalls, specifically many potential "reifications and political biases" of approaches that "begin with collectivities and their characteristics (Olick, 20007: p. 24)." To him, collective memory of a given social group or society are more often than not "accounts of some subset of the group," for such a group, if dominant within a society, would likely have the means of "cultural production" as well as opinions that are deemed more valuable than others in that society. What Olick proposes to get around this dilemma is to resist favouring one over many collective memories in a society (Ibid.). In a somewhat similar manner, Elizabeth Jelin has introduced the term "labours of memory," arguing that labour warrants the engagement and agency that carries transformation potential in itself. Moreover, traumatic memory, as a consequence of memory rituals, but also silence and compulsion feats as an intrusion of the troublesome past. The notions, such as mourning is also intrinsic to this struggle over meanings and much more so than the sum of their parts, for they can be seen as ethical and political acts.

Judith Butler (2004) has elevated these notions of mourning and vulnerability to the political principle, their relations to the political life, and, interestingly enough, therein she found a "basis for community" (p. 19). Another concept advanced by Butler can also be used for analysing WiB's resistance: the idea of a body in a public space (see for example 2014). Butler emphasised how bodies congregate, move and speak together, and "lay claim to a certain space as public space, (2011, no pagination)." The WiB's silence in this way speaks louder than words, as in their commemorations of *unspeakable* crimes, words become "superfluous," whereas female bodies subvert the supposedly gender-neutral public space and social order (Bilić, 2012: p. 168). In this way, the WiB occupy a physical public space by means of their public protests and activity, or with their proposed transformation of public spaces with physical

sites of memory, such as the monuments they fought for. Similarly, they occupy a more symbolic and heavily contested space, that of the calendar.

The silent and public mourning of the Women in Black is, thus, meant to be considered as a fundamental political [and ethical] act and theorised as such (see Bilić, 2012; Fridman, 2006, 2011, 2015). The moral character of WiB's mourning [mnemonic] practice is self-evident here, much like the black colour has a long tradition in Serbian burial ceremonies and rituals. Soon after the organisation was founded in 1991, the Women in Black (2012) explained their agenda:

> Women wear black when their loved ones die. We wear black because of the known and unknown victims of this war. We wear black in protest to the irresponsible nationalist leaders we hold responsible for this war because their only argument is a brutal military force and violence (p. 7).

In her work, Jelin (2003) has dissected the hegemonic role the state plays in the construction, maintenance and legitimisations of memories; simultaneously, she has carefully added the salient point relating to the claim that the state is not a monolithic entity any more than a social group opposing the state is. In other words, irrespective of how strong the state is with its sponsored and hegemonic narratives about the past, there will always be a space for a counter-memory of different agents within the same society.

When theorising mnemonic resistance, that is, resistance to dominant collective memory narratives, Ryan (2010) posited that resistance is enabled on individual as well as collective levels. Both the individual and the repressed group by their indispensability in its reception and intrinsic characteristics "will allow the individual to resignify" powerful mnemonic narratives (p. 159). In her analysis, Ryan relies on the work of Stuart Hall and his emphasis on social practices of negotiation and struggle over meanings and on how such outcomes are never "certain or fixed." It ultimately led Hall to suggest how the same event can be "construed in different ways (Hall as cited in Ryan, 2010: p. 159)." What allows collective memory to be resignified is its very nature: individuals, or repressed groups, it is argued, hold agency on several fronts, for collective memory has a dynamic and inclusive character; it is oft ambiguous, and dependant on generational change (Ryan, 2010).

Ryan also has a Foucauldian view of the power-resistance relationship; where there is power, there must be a resistance. Hence, where there is a dominant memory, there must be a reaction to it, from individual, or a "small-scale" resistance group or a movement (Ryan. 2010: pp. 159–160). What Ryan does not explain, however, is the fact that there is a whole realm

outside the "discursive" realm and, unlike many scholars that have stressed the role of emotions in processes of remembering and forgetting (see Devine-Wright, 2003), this aspect is absent. Yet, it might prove useful in shedding a new light onto mnemonic mobilisations of feminist anti-war and peace groups such as WiB. What is more, there is, as many cases and studies of collective memory show, a need for an individual or group of certain social stature to mobilise swathes of atomised individuals into struggles for change in interpretations of the past. In the literature, these are referred to as "agents of memory" (see, for example Aguilar, 1999: pp. 84–103) or "memory entrepreneurs" (Torpey, 2003a). Evidently, the WiB belong to such marginal formations in terms of numbers and platforms to voice their standpoints. This not to minimise their contribution. WiB cofounder Staša Zajović, who as a *de facto* leader of the group has been particularly influential. But we should not forget other Serbian women involved in the same struggle of documenting war crimes, addressing the memory of crimes against humanity, particularly as regards to the victims of the "Other," such as Lepa Mladjenović, Biljana Kovačević-Vučo, Nataša Kandić or Sonja Liht.

On the basis of his research on the (post-) Yugoslav anti-war activism,[5] Bojan Bilić argues that the Women in Black did not appear in a "political vacuum." Many oppositional networks date back from socialist Yugoslavia, when they were created through feminist, environmentalist and student engagement (Bilić, 2012: p. 19). They were, subsequently, turned into organisations devoted, primarily, to human rights protection, as well as documenting war crimes, on the territory that was formerly known as Yugoslavia (Ibid.). The most active feminist anti-war groups operated in Serbia and Croatia (Bilić, 2012). As Bilić (2012) puts it, Belgrade and Zagreb were spaces of intense civic struggle against the elites' efforts to impose "the congruence between ethnic identity and political position (p. 23)." The coming of armed conflicts, arguably, democratised the feminist scene. Many groups reduced their emphasis on theoretical work, with elitist undertones, which had been dominant since the 1970s. They also opened their doors for activists from different social strata. Many women turned into refugees, in Bilić's (2012) words, could now "regain control over their lives by sharing and transforming painful experiences (p. 94)."

It was in this milieu that the Women in Black came into being in 1991. Staša Zajović was also very active in other feminist circles, such as Women and Society, and co-founder of SOS Helpline, Belgrade Women's Lobby (Ibid.). What is more, the organisation overlapped, in ideas as well as in membership, with the first regional gay and lesbian rights group. Finally,

[5] Bilić uses plural [activisms] to emphasise diversity and differences, ideological, personal, and geographical of the anti-war engagement.

its foundation has to be put within the context of the return to regressive nationalist politics. Parallel to beginning of the war in Yugoslavia, there occurred a patriarchal backlash: the percentage of women in the parliament plummeted in 1990, across most of the Yugoslav republics, and attempts were made in Serbia and Croatia to roll back abortion rights, which had been guaranteed by law since 1951 (Bracewell, 1996; Bilić, 2012).

The activist labour of WiB is an example of how a civil society organisation has fought against dominant state-sponsored interpretations of past. Having survived the wars of the 1990s, the network has stuck to the original message based on the maxims "not in our name" and "always disobedient.[6]" Even though the network is based in Belgrade, it is active in 15 Serbian cities and towns, using "cyclical protest plans," that is, they are on the streets either every week (as they were during the wars), or month or year (as in their annual commemorations). By adopting top-down approaches of ethnic nationalism – as was often the case with Western and regional scholarship and the mainstream media dealing with the topic of dissolution of Yugoslavia – it may be argued that scholars failed to take into sufficient account the origins of civic, anti-war and feminist activism (Bilić & Janković, 2012).

Indeed, understanding collective memory solely in terms of elites and hegemony ignores the equally important reception of official memory (Confino, 1997; Ryan, 2010). To Bilić (2012), scholarly practice, thus far, has privileged elites and elite-orientated explanations, while obscuring, at the same time, local histories and "grassroots mobilisations" (p. 45), regardless were they in favour of or opposing the Milošević's regime. In a similar vein, scholarship that has been dealing with the breakup of Yugoslavia has employed nationalism as the exclusive "explanatory paradigm" (Bilić, 2012: p. 39). Bilić had writers like Misha Glenny (1992, 1999) in mind, when he suggested that. But it was also the Western mass media which was at fault for propelling the ethnic conflict paradigm in its treatment of the breakup of Yugoslavia (for different interpretations see Duijzings, 2003, Gagnon 2004). In the end, according to Bilić (2012: p. 44), this negates history and historical memory of anti-fascism and suppresses the rather pluralistic nature of Yugoslav socialism.

Furthermore, the production of a body of knowledge that solidifies elites has spurred ethno-nationalist formulations to dominate scholarly discourses. Bilić sees this as "glossing" over decades of dynamic political developments (Bilić, 2012: p. 45). These dominant views

[6] Serbo-Croatian, or BCS (BHS) language has grammatical gender-bias, much like all other Slavic languages. This WiB seek to counter it by writing in feminine gender language to highlight their struggle against so called "gender neutral" usage whereby masculine nouns are utilised when referring to both genders. For a detailed, linguistic feminist account about this topic see Savić *et al* (2009).

have arguably neglected the "diversity of experiences," both in Yugoslavia (see Dragović-Soso, 2007) and after its breakup. These do not leave much space for counter-narratives or counter-memory, for they undermine anti-essentialist perspectives of society and identity whether at the grassroots or elite levels. Consequently, this development has created strange bedfellows: on the one hand, there are nationalist elites and, on the other, social scientists, who, through completely different means and processes, help each other in forging memory and remembrance of Serbia and the (post-) Yugoslav space as being homogenous. As Eric D. Gordy (1999) noted, Serbia in the 1990s went through a wholesale process of destruction of all social, political and cultural alternatives, but those in the academia did not break the silence to say what had to be said (Winter, 2010: p. 12) like other mnemonic agents during or after the conflicts.

Calendars as Sites of Memory Battles

Shifts in state and societal calendars often result from political turmoil or transitions. Zerubavel (2003a) is usually the starting point of calendar-based discussions on social memory. To him, the calendar is "the most spectacular" site of collective memory (Ibid.). What national calendars reveal is the normally unseen creative work of mnemonic communities and the self-preservation of social memories (Fridman, 2015). Calendars also pinpoint particular days reserved for remembrance. This, in turn, requires from each member of society not only to behave but also to feel in a particular way.

Contemporary perception and grounding of time are pierced and punctuated with certain momentous happenings and watershed moments that are constructed, elevated and incorporated into national calendars. Thus, long blocks of time of supposedly uneventful historical periods, or "lulls" as Zerubavel terms them, are discarded. Their significance is reduced to a mere historical footnote, and they can be interpreted as being part of forgetting processes (2003a: p. 316). Commemorative holidays play a crucial role in "mnemonic socialisation (Zerubavel, 2003a: p. 317)." They provide not just the knowledge of what we remember but also when we remember (Ibid). In addition, what has to be taken into account is how we remember and what kind of ritual is used. Such mnemonic socialisation refers to processes by which one learns how to conventionalise, structure and narrativise his/her memories in accordance to hegemonic social values and beliefs (Zerubavel as cited in Ryan, 2010: p. 156). These processes take place in the individual's different mnemonic communities. Yet, the learned experience reflects the values embedded in the national calendar. The most important point is that the calendar will

ensure that remembering is done collectively, involving the entire community (Zerubavel, 2003: p. 317). This line of thinking unavoidably presupposes Chernilo's (2008) understanding that a nation state is the necessary and ultimate representation of modern society. Nevertheless, by way of institutionalisation of commemorative holidays, Zerubavel (2003a) argues that calendars define an annual series of commemorative events envisioned for members of community to remember important happenings in their shared past so to create the frame for memory "socialisation" (p. 318).

Interestingly, and rather contentiously for a post-conflict multi-ethnic society such as Serbia, calendars are prone to reflecting social identities: by marking certain dates on a calendar, social groups can tacitly articulate idea of their present view of the self (Zerubavel, 2003a: p. 319). It is not hard to imagine that calendars also serve as major battlefields in post-conflict societies. Todor Kuljić has pointed out that as soon as the armed conflicts on the territory of the former Yugoslavia ended, a civil war of remembrance and memories commenced (2009; 2010). Unsurprisingly, most of the successor states from the former Yugoslavia emerged from the wars with new sets of calendars, with the aim of celebrating a newly-acquired statehood.

In Serbia, the dominant aspects of national history and official mnemonic practices currently centre around three events: the creation of the nation state in the 19th century, the 1999 NATO bombing campaign, and, in line with other European states (which by and large take their uncontested nationhood for granted), Armistice Day in 1918. David (2012a, 2012b, 2014, 2015) has researched the momentous shifts and changes in the Serbian calendar in the last three decades. She argues that the state, "via the newly tailored national calendar, manages and reframes the contested elements of Serbia's past for both its internal and external purposes (David, 2014: p. 474)." The purpose is to demonstrate – to the "international community" – Serbia's level of democratisation and European-ness, while, at the same time, legitimising "a wide range of emotions on the local level" (David, 2014: p. 473).

Orli Fridman (2015) stresses that these national commemorative holidays and calendars of nation states are pivotal for understanding how collective memory operates in Serbia and elsewhere (p. 214). The Serbian case is a particularly interesting mnemonic peculiarity. For one thing, many Serbs still do not know what they commemorate on the national calendar. The older generations still remember old Yugoslavia, whilst the new ones, who do not have any such memories, simply do not know the meaning of the commemorative events (Fridman, 2015: p. 215). A look at the new Serbian calendar and what it commemorates, reveals that, on the surface, it does not differ much from calendars of other nations. It marks certain religious and statehood dates, international holidays, such as International Labour day or Armistice Day. All

nations commemorate their birth, and nations almost as a rule born in blood, whether it is by way of a treaty or colonial wars of liberation. The same applies to the peaceful, and not so peaceful dissolution, as was the case with the nations of Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans in the 1990s.

The Serbian calendar, however, reflects the dominant, patriarchal, and masculine worldview of the nation's past. The master commemorative narrative of Yugoslavia (Brotherhood and Unity, Anti-fascism and Worker's Self-management), which was patriarchal if less so than that of Serbia, has been replaced with a Serbian nationalist one in which sentiments of ethnicity and Orthodox Christianity prevail (David, 2012; Fridman, 2015). In her work on calendars, Fridman (2015) argues that "performances of commemorative rituals allow participants not only to revive and affirm older memories of the past but also to modify them (p. 214). These commemorations ultimately enact not only commemorative narratives but even more so form a "master commemorative narrative that structures collective memory" (Ibid.). As states have the power to implement the master narrative, underpinning national identity, we can talk about a "national memory" (Young, as cited in David, 2014: pp 474-475). Going back to Halbwachs (2008 [1950]), whose conceptualisation explains the fact that a collective memory structured by prevailing commemorative narratives stands for all social groups, regardless of their size and numbers of individuals remembering together. Thus, the collection of mutually unfamiliar individuals, such as nations, have their own meta-narratives that bind these communities together, much like small groups in numbers have their own "holy" days that keep them together. Alternative calendars, as the ones developed by WiB, although having different dynamics, hold a similar structural matrix. Let us see now what is constitutive of these two conflicted mnemonic communities.

The elites designing the Serbian calendar, and establishing the master commemorative narrative after the collapse of Yugoslavia, Kosovo's declaration of independence and Montenegro's departure from the loose union with Serbia, went through considerable difficulties and a certain degree of resistance. As David (2012) argues, this was precisely because there was a perception that Serbia's role in these events had been "anti-heroic, filled with violence, atrocities, and bloodshed" (p. 475). It was decided to localise the master narrative in the nineteenth century to highlight a more distant and, therefore, a less tarnished past. It, in turn, serves to legitimise the current Serbian nation-state as being born out of a sustained struggle for freedom rather than in terms of preventing others from breaking away to achieve their own national statehood. Twenty-one commemorative events are listed in the Law on Holidays as "historical events of the liberation of Serbia." One celebrates the distant 14th

century Kosovo battle, eight elevate nineteenth century Serbia and uprisings against the Ottoman Empire, and almost a dozen involve the Balkan wars, the Great War and the Second World War. There is, however, only one solitary event that relates to the recent wars of the 1990s (David, 2012: p. 13; Fridman, 2016: p. 4).

WiB's calendar, and commemorative rituals, challenge and contest the state-sponsored calendar, taking the form of a counter-memory. They mark numerous international dates related to human rights, peace, women's rights, LGBT rights, such as the International Day of Nonviolence, International Women's Day, International Day Against Racism, International Day of Conscientious Objection, International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament Day, International Day against the Occupation of Palestine, International Pride Day. All these commemorative events stand out in clear contrast to the masculinised war-related memories of nation-states, including that of Serbia. However, the majority of the WiB's commemorative rituals relate to the wars of the 1990s and Serbia's responsibility for them. These include the commemoration of the Štrpci kidnapping, the beginning of the war in Bosnia and Hercegovina, the victims of the Serbian security and paramilitary forces in Kosovo 1998–99, crimes committed around the city of Vukovar in Croatia, and many more. The master commemorative narrative and central date on their calendar is reserved for the commemoration of the Srebrenica massacre as a genocide. To WiB cofounder Staša Zajović (2012), Srebrenica is "a paradigm of all Serbian war crimes (p. 12)." She transposes Giorgio Agamben's example of Auschwitz into Srebrenica to articulate Serbian moral duty towards the victims of this crime (Zajović, 2012).

State-sponsored vs Alternative Mnemonic Events and Commemorations

Based on the politics of victimhood, the Serbian commemorative event surrounding the 1999 NATO bombing campaign – and the mourning observance of the Croatian Operation Storm, which resulted in the exodus of the Serbian population from Croatia – represent new emerging mnemonic patterns and shifts in the Serbian calendar (see Fridman, 2016). They may not fit well with Serbia's EU accession aspirations, but they reflect a nationalist political turn and an attempt to justify a troubled past in a volatile political environment. For years, official, state-sponsored commemorations of the NATO bombing campaign over what was then still known as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia have been problematic. As Kuljić (2008) has observed, since successive governments have stuck to Serbia's goal of entering the EU, whose member

states consist almost exclusively of NATO countries, such a commemorative events seemed out of place. But as of 2015, the beginning of the bombing has been marked in a state-sponsored manifestation in Belgrade as well as in other towns, such as Varvarin. The central commemoration took place in the capital, where an appropriate site of commemoration, the modernist marvel of General Staff building in the centre of Belgrade, was carefully selected amongst several potential sites. The building was severely damaged during the bombing campaign, and has subsequently been part of ongoing debates and contested narratives about whether the ruins of *Generalštab* should be kept as a monument to Yugoslav architecture or a ruin-monument to "NATO aggression." The government opted for the latter, with ruins serving primarily as a totem of Serbian victimhood as well as a tourist attraction (for a more detailed view on these debates, see Badescu, 2017). Yet, given the logic of the age, with neoliberal thinking predominant in Serbian government circles, it should not come as a surprise if the site would, at some point, be sold off to Gulf or other wealthy investors as the remaining state's assets for sale are now few and far between.

Be it as it may, the introduction of this date highlights the only date on the national calendar where the conflicts leading to Yugoslavia's breakup are referred to. The beginning of the NATO bombing campaign has been particularly accentuated as a momentous happening in modern Serbia, a rapture in time and history, completely disconnected from the historical context of the other wars (Lazovic, 2017: 15). It serves the purpose of stressing the memory of Serbian victimhood (Fridman, 2016, p. 4-5). All other events related to the bombing, but particularly the atrocities committed by Serbs preceding it and during the campaign are part of the [socio-political] processes of silence (Ibid.), and, consequently, denial or forgetting. The decision to organise this commemorative event was made by individuals who after serving in Milošević's government during the bombing campaign, had rebranded themselves as pro-Europeans. Cynics would say that this feat could only have been accomplished through sheer pragmatism, as this is the winning ticket to power in Serbia. The former PM and now the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, in now in complete control over the country well as the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS); the former president, Tomislav Nikolić, who is generally seen as the initiator and patron of these commemorative events, had to be content with being relegated to a mere symbolic role. Although Nikolić now is detached from the centres of power, his legacy of sponsoring a series of highly contentious commemorative events still lingers over Serbia.

Of a similar nature is another date that is observed in a state-sponsored manifestation. Due to the ambiguity of Serbia's official position, which states that it did not take part in the

wars in Croatia and Bosnia even if it empathised with Serbs living there, this date is not part of the law regarding the regulation of national holidays (Official Gazette of RS, 92/2011). The date in question is 5 August, when every year a commemoration of Croatian Operation Storm (Oluja) takes place.[7] What is a day of victory in neighbouring Croatia and that of mourning in Serbia makes a perfect opportunity for the heads of both states to emphasise their respective mnemonic master-narratives. Analogous to the NATO bombing campaign observations in 2016, this new commemorative ceremony with respect to the plight of Serbs from Croatia emerged. Here, too, the selection of the commemorative location was done with careful consideration: it was in one of the mushroomed informal settlements on the outskirts of Belgrade populated by the Serbs expelled from Croatia after Operation Storm. During the ceremony, memories of Serbian victimhood dating back to the Jasenovac concentration camp during the Second World War were conjured up in front of the leaders not only of the Republic of Serbia but also of Republika Srpska, the Serb statelet in Bosnia and Hercegovina. As David (2014) points out, embedding the Jasenovac camp into this master commemorative narrative represented a "continuity" with Milošević's agenda (p. 478). Again, it is not only a way to legitimise Serbia's past through victimhood but also to solidify the current regime's hold on power. This underscores what Eley (2011) has stressed about the main logic or direction of the commemorative politics of anniversaries that it "seems an affirmative one, working with the grain of the status quo and strongly to the advantage of the powers that be, often conceived and orchestrated deliberately as such (p. 558)."

The WiB have consistently contested such official narratives centred on memory of victimhood by commemorating war crimes committed *in our name*, such as those in Bosnia (Srebrenica, the siege of Sarajevo, Štrpci Train Massacre, the camps in Omarska), Croatia (Vukovar) and Kosovo (Račak). Moreover, their mnemonic struggle is devoted to fighting what Viet Thanh Nguyen (2016) termed "unjust memories" that "limit empathy and compassion to those just like us" and "terminate empathy and compassion for others (p. 267)." Alternative calendars of WiB mnemonic activism is set to reframe and subvert such interpretation of the past, whereby one's own victim somehow negates numerous others unwanted memories. Their activism, which works as a reminder of one's own nation's crimes, is conceived to cause severe feelings of discomfort in ordinary men or women. They may not have been involved, or

[7] Operation Storm signifies a disputed victory of Croatian forces over Serb rebels in 1995, in what was a rebel statelet called Srpska Krajina. Conflicted views on the Operation Strom have long been a bitterly divisive factor in relations between Croatia and Serbia. While Croatia marks *Storm* as a state holiday on state's official calendar that commemorates a military triumph and territorial unification, in Serbia it is seen as a day of mourning of the hundreds of killed and 200.000 refugees as a result of the operation (Ristić, Nikolić and Milekić, 2015)

individually responsible for such crimes, but because of the affective sense of belonging to the nation and solidarity with all those brothers and sisters, there is a feeling that their identity is somehow "violated" and devalued (Kuljić, 2006: para 2). This shows the potential of political means, such as alternative calendars and related rituals, when it comes subverting ethno-nationalist regimes.

Starting after the "regime change" of 2000 when Slobodan Milošević was ousted, alternative commemorative rituals have shaped new civic struggles by way of alternative calendars used by Serbia's social agents (Fridman, 2015). They represent forms of counter-memories to the dominant, hegemonic memories as related to the wars of the 1990s but also to the new calendar detailed above. The main date on WiB's calendar, as well on other alternative memory agents' calendar, is 10 July, when the Srebrenica genocide took place in 1995. This commemoration for victims of the Srebrenica massacre has been taking place in the centre of Belgrade for more than two decades. WiB, civil society organisations and citizens mark this date as a commemoration of genocide. Using WiB's visibility and symbolic capital, the purpose is to raise awareness, break the silence and the state of denial, and remind society of this crime (Bilić, 2012: p. 172). To this day, however, the Serbian government and large parts of Serbian society still refuse to accept the ruling of the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), which defined the massacre of 8000 Muslim Bosniaks as a genocide, despite a parliamentary *Resolution* condemning it as a "crime" rather than genocide (see Dragović-Soso 2012; Dujizings, 2007; Fridman 2015, Zajović *et al*, 2012).

Remembrance, such as this, is thus both an exercise of memory (Devine-Wright, 2003), as well as a bodily action, a ritual. Conceptually, these forms of active remembering are embedded in tradition and commemoration (Ibid.). Belgrade's WiB combined these two aspects of commemorative politics and through their connection with art and theatre collectives, such as Škart, Dah Teatar, MMC Art Clinic, they have organised frequent performances as forms of commemoration, using blackness, silence and bodies to convey the message of breaking the silence as a deliberate political act based on the refusal to forget. Performances of the theatre and art collectives became part of the ritual in July 2010 after *A pair of shoes, one life* public performance to mark 15th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide took place in the main pedestrian street in the heart of Belgrade. WiB called upon Serbian citizens and the international public to donate a pair of shoes with a signed message to the survivors of the Srebrenica genocide and members of the victims' families (Bilić, 2012b: 620). The ultimate aim was to

collect a pair of shoes for each genocide victim (Ibid.).[8] The 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide was marked with a series of commemorative events, culminating in the Republic Square – in central Belgrade – where members of art collectives stepped into red paint and walked over white sheets, leaving a bloody trace as it were. On this occasion, WiB demanded that the denying of Srebrenica massacre become punishable by law.

What the WiB are, however, ultimately trying to achieve is state-sponsorship of these commemorations. In the mould of the yet unbuilt Monument to the Unknown Deserter, the Women in Black have demanded on numerous occasions that the state and the Belgrade city authorities provide a location for the permanent monument that would commemorate the victims of the genocide in Srebrenica. What is more, they proposed that such monument be built on the location of an extermination camp, dating back to the Second World War, or another relating to the anti-fascist struggle. WiB argued that the building of such a monument would usher in a process of "public mourning" and that from that moment on, it would not be a matter of "privacy and intimacy" any longer but a "cultural, moral and political fact (Zajović, 2012: 20)." Unsurprisingly, the authorities flatly refused the proposal in 2011, which propelled WiB to declare that the state does not possess "a political will nor the moral capacity for compassion towards the victims (Ibid.)." The point stands to this day.

In contrast, state-sponsored markings and commemorations often serve as a cleanser of undesirable memories that tarnish national reputations and exceptionalisms. As Kuljić (2006, para 2) put it: "Obsessive cleansing of the national identity from war crimes is the cause of emotionalisation of current debates around Srebrenica, in Serbia, and expulsion of Serbs in Croatia. Perhaps it could be even said that the heated emotions of this kind are a reversal of a growingly meaningless life that is reduced into the hope in well-being of an ethnically homogeneous state." Numerous attempts, often state-sanctioned, have been made to relativise this date. Fridman (2015) observes that on the brink of the 10th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre, the Belgrade Faculty of Law organised panel on the subject of "the truth about Srebrenica" prior to a celebratory event organised to highlight the "Liberation of Srebrenca" or the capture of the town from the Bosnian Muslims (p. 218). For years, far-right groups have also sponsored counter demonstrations on the Srebrenica day (Fridman, 2015). The heavy

[8] I was surprised to find in the Bloody Sunday Museum, in Derry, that similar protest, collecting shoes for the missing persons, was organised in Northern Ireland for the missing and murdered alleged members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army. As mnemonic agents of certain, global stature, I am sure that WiB were aware of this performance. Yet what is really interesting that they as pacifist used the iconography of those who believed in armed struggle as a legitimate political action. This happening, and a March for Srebrenica led by alleged war criminal Naser Orić are two ideological inconsistencies that could be ascribed to WiB. But after almost three decades in political life, those are to be expected.

police presence for the protection of WiB and other participants determined to remember the victims of Srebrenica was not typical for how the Serbian state has treated the activist organisation since its foundation. It has been a troublesome relationship from the start.

According to WiB, state repression against them organisation has gone through several phases (Zajović, as cited in Bilić: 2012b: 610). During the first phase, the Milošević regime repressed WiB via state apparatuses such as the secret police who would question refugees receiving help from the Women in Black (Ibid.). WiB would routinely be taken to police stations for questioning, so much so that they packed necessities and toiletries when they went on to the streets every week in case they get arrested (Fridman's interview with the member, [2004] 2011). Visas were denied to feminist colleagues visiting WiB from abroad (Bilić, 2012b). Such reprisals, numerous court cases, and arrest warrants were the price paid for the constant reminder of Serbia's involvement in the wars, which the state continued to deny. Towards the end of the 1990s – and with the insurrection in Kosovo – the position of WiB became increasingly precarious. It reached its nadir when Vojislav Šešelj, the leader of the Serbian Radical Party and a former ICTY detainee, "threatened that in case of a military intervention they would kill one Woman in Black for each NATO plane (Fridman, 2011)."

After the overthrow of the Milošević regime, the situation improved for some time, only to deteriorate after several years, resulting in routine verbal and physical attacks against the WiB. After 2008, the organisation was granted state protection, but their performances continued to be heavily policed (Bilić, 2012b). The state has never abandoned its strategy of portraying the anti-nationalist, anti-war, "anti-denial," and "consciousness-raising" (Cohen, 2001: p. 95) struggle as being essentially anti-Serbian via its apparatuses such as the media, whether private or public-owned. What this amounts to is the pursuit of an active policy of forgetting. There has been no official or media space for publicising WiB's actions and their assistance to the refugees: Croatian and Bosnian as well as Kosovan Serbs during the Yugoslav wars, as well as Syrian ones, during the recent refugee crisis. There is no mention that they took to the streets as a consequence of systemic expulsions of Serbs from Kosovo or of their commemorations for the employees of the Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) killed during the NATO bombing campaign or for the Soldiers of the Guards Brigade. In fact, they are the only group who has been invited to organise commemorations with the families of the victims of wars, be they of Serbian, Kosovar Albanian, Bosniak or Croatian origin (Ibid.).

The mnemonic labour of the WiB has created possibilities for another generation of social agents, such as the Youth Initiative for Human Rights in Serbia (YIHR) founded in 2003. Although this organisation takes risks with certain memory activities, it is already going through

the processes of professionalisation, or NGO-isation, with its programmes in Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia. The pitfalls and problems of this process have been researched by many scholars, some of whom like Bilić (2011) are particularly critical. This process of NGO-isation has not only enabled many to be "professional" activists for years. But it has also led to what Bilić terms "accumulation of financial, social and symbolic capital which might start obstructing the appearance of grassroots initiatives and hinder their access to institutions and sources" through outright collaboration and unhealthy proximity to consecutive governments (Bilić 2012b: p. 619; Bilić, 2011). In this aspect, WiB are the only anti-war, anti-patriarchy, anti-nationalist and anti-capitalist activist group that has successfully survived the political transition undamaged.

Conclusions

As a way of looking more closely at the intersection of feminist and memory politics in contemporary Serbia, I have used the almost three decade long struggle of Serbia's Women in Black to define what memory activism is and how it relates to dynamics of politics and the past. I looked at WiB's political struggle from positions of marginality as well as their significance. By showing the mnemonic modes that WiB use as political means, I have made the point that their memory politics has not only occupied a central role in Serbia's alternative political space. As a group, they have also closed ranks through years of oppression and have stayed together despite personal, professional, age and educational differences, whilst maintaining a consistent ideological stance.

WiB's take on monument construction can be seen as an ingenious and subversive narrative deconstruction of patriarchal and masculinised war-related commemoration politics. Although these never-built monuments decorate only the symbolic landscape, they are nonetheless important memorials to the knowledge-based memory struggle for peace in the region. As I have highlighted here, what has epitomised the mnemonic battles in Serbia, as manifested in conflicted views of the past, are two parallel calendars. On the one hand, there have been state-sponsored, ethnically based commemorations, underpinning the politics of the national victimhood. On the other hand, WiB have introduced an alternative calendar, which carries a certain degree of socio-political implications through cyclical commemorations, contributing to breaking the society's and state's politics of silence and denial.

The state has not heeded the WiB's call for coming to the terms with Serbia's past, as its response to the commemorative rituals, portraying the Srebrenica massacre as a genocide testifies to. The state's response towards WiB over the years has showed that successive governments understood WiB to be formidable political opponents. Yet, WiB mnemonic endeavours have rarely translated into public policies after the 2000 regime change, showing that the influence of the organisation on governmental policies remains marginal. It may be argued that the impact of the WiB's memory activism has been far more visibly felt at the societal level, particularly when it comes to confronting, in a highly symbolic way, the nation's denial in relation to war crimes committed *in our name*.

To be sure, there have been occasional romanticised portrayals of WiB in the scholarly literature and the international media, which are in contrast to the hostile characterisation of the women as Serb-hating "prostitutes" in the local media controlled by dominant nationalist elites. Both perspectives have contributed to a distorted image of the WiB. The latter view is something that the organisation has become accustomed to throughout the history of its activism: the women have been locked up, spat on, verbally and physically attacked, threatened and routinely insulted. Even though they are completely dedicated to commemorating all the victims from the Yugoslav and other conflicts, they have never wallowed in self-victimisation. While both the exalting and pejorative views of the WiB are essentially discourses with the aim of depoliticisation of WiB, the Women in Black would probably find the former more problematic. Their disobedience that has lasted for decades – regardless of the prevailing political and ideological orthodoxy – bears witness to a unique political subjectivity that could have not been developed anywhere else than in the midst of a conflict-ridden, embargo-burdened Belgrade and matured in what can be termed the never-ending neoliberal transition to EU membership. Without such a political subjectivity, Serbia is left with a struggle of two elites, one conservative that perceives this world only through an ethnic lens and the other more liberal and cosmopolitan but patently similarly patriarchal and regressive. Women in Black have successfully resisted the challenge of NGO-isation, which usually leads to political irrelevance. The WiB may look backward to the past, but are labouring in the present for a better future, and as such they function as a harbinger of something worth fighting for.

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