Book Review

Elisa Satjukow. 2020. *Die andere Seite der Intervention. Eine serbische Erfahrungsgeschichte der NATO-Bombardierung 1999*, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag. 303 pp., ISBN: 978-3-8376-4939-0 (Hardcover), ISBN: 978-3-8394-4939-4 (eBook), € 35.00 / € 34.99

Reviewed by **Geert Luteijn**, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, E-mail: geertluteijn@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2021-0045>

Die andere Seite der Intervention (The other side of the intervention) refers to the experience of Serbian people during the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombing campaign of 1999 and the way they have remembered it since. *Elisa Satjukow* investigates how people lived through the 78 days of bombings and what strategies they employed to maintain a sense of normality in these exceptional times (22). As part of her doctoral studies at Leipzig University, she searched for expressions of emotion in published diaries, reports from the war, and oral history interviews. Satjukow presents a “panorama” of multiple storylines, with both similarities and contradictions, as the experiences of Serbian civilians during the bombings cannot be reduced to a single objective history, but consist of multiple subjective realities (28–30).

This book documents the various experiences of civilians and the underlying emotions, far better than any discussion of nationalist rhetoric does. Within the social sciences, there is a tendency to allow theoretical assumptions to get in the way of a broader understanding. The NATO bombings are a very sensitive subject for many people in Serbia, yet Satjukow shows that behind the nationalist rhetoric, used by the Milošević regime and the current Serbian government alike, lies a much more complicated history. This history elucidates the Serbian ambivalence towards the European Union, beyond the established political dogmas. Political analysis tends to overemphasise geopolitics and fails to acknowledge public opinion beyond polls. *Die andere Seite der Intervention* shows the complexity behind the emotions evoked by the memory of 1999.

Chapter 2 sketches the context of the bombings, namely the “long 1990s”. People understood the bombings in the context of a period of immense uncertainty. The wars in Bosnia and Croatia (1992–1995) isolated Serbia, sanctions enforced by the West meant that people’s lives were affected by shortages and hyperinflation. The economic turmoil, accompanied by the postsocialist transition and ensuing political chaos presided over by Slobodan Milošević, led to a constant state of abnormality (*Ausnahmezustand*) for most people. This is what Satjukow

calls the “long 1990s”, a period that for many extended well into the 2000s, or even continues today (37).

In Chapter 3, Satjukow describes how everyday life continues during the state of abnormality that took on another dimension during the 78 days of NATO bombings. In particular the diary of Vesna Tešanović, an anti-Milošević activist, provides a compelling testimony of the frustration and sense of injustice that grew amongst the Western-oriented people of Belgrade. The diary mentions the conflicting feelings of being abandoned by both the West and the Serbian government (76–7). Interviews with Dušan, Slaven, Bojan, Nenad, and Radmila provide a civilian perspective on the situation, from the day the bombings started until the end of the campaign. The author tells, for example, Radmila’s story on how she would stockpile salami, canned food, candles, and matches (111), and how she would meet with her students in a café on a set weekday to maintain a sense of structure and thereby normality (109). The pursuit of normality stands in contrast to most citizens’ evenings, which were characterised by air-raid sirens and, at first, fleeing to bomb shelters. After a few nights, most people would risk sleeping in their own beds, trusting NATO not to bomb civilian areas, yet still sleeping uneasily (95).

Chapter 4 moves on from the experience to the moral sentiments that the bombings evoked in people, creating a moral history. Satjukow maintains a descriptive position, not taking part in the moral debate herself, but rather explaining the different sides in the debate amongst ordinary people, intellectuals, and bloggers with an online presence at the time. The general conclusion she arrives at is that even the Western-oriented intellectuals blamed NATO for the bombardments, not because they supported the Milošević regime, but because they felt abandoned by the West (150). The Internet forums provide an insight into the racism towards Kosovo Albanians and denial of the atrocities committed in Kosovo that are absent in the interviews (156). She further points out that the Kosovo War is often seen as an entirely separate issue rather than something that might explain NATO’s actions.

The following two chapters describe the bombings as a happening and as a memory culture that took shape after the NATO campaign. Satjukow paints a picture of the concerts performed by popular artists that were organised by the regime during the bombings, and the use of the symbol of a target during protests in which people stood hand in hand on bridges to protect them from being bombed. The regime organised and exploited such acts to disseminate the national victimhood narrative. Chapter 6 is about the memory politics and culture that emerged after the bombings and continues to this day. Satjukow concludes that the Serbian president, Aleksandar Vučić, has given rise to a renaissance of cultural commemoration within the victimhood narrative of the Milošević regime (258).

There are limits to Satjukow's account, as she does little to analyse and identify agency in the historical narratives that appear. Overarching questions such as how successful the indoctrination of the Milošević regime was or what societal actors gain from the victimhood discourse, are not directly asked or answered. Furthermore, her account does not include the experiences of military personal, nor does it address the experience of people living in Kosovo, which was more heavily bombed than Serbia. I also wonder why the author limits her interviews to the experiences of those in Belgrade. It makes sense as a starting point, yet many people endured bombings in smaller cities and villages, which would presumably add another layer to the experiences and commemoration of the bombings. Overall, the account diversifies our understanding of the NATO bombings and crucially our understanding of what it meant to people beyond the nationalist stereotypes often reiterated in the media.