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# Graphic Memories of Yugoslav Wars: *Rat* by Đo & Dju and *Vojna* by Goran Duplančić

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*Abstract.* Starting from the capacity of comics to simultaneously confirm and challenge dominant narratives of war and conflict, this article discusses graphic narratives of the wars in which socialist Yugoslavia disintegrated in the 1990s. It outlines an arc of the comic production related to the Yugoslav wars, from those which emerged in the course of the wars, to those made and published with a temporal distance. Such a broad temporal arc offers a lens for understanding the ways in which comics relate to different layers of memory of wars and what they add to other narratives about war experiences. The central part of the article is dedicated to the discussion of two comic books that poignantly address questions of the subjective experience of soldiering in the 1990s, but also the generational experience of war and trauma: *Rat* (The War) by Đo & Dju (2018) and *Vojna* (The War) by Goran Duplančić (2021). The concluding part of the article is dedicated to the discussion of the ways these subjective and generational graphic narratives intervene in the memory landscape of post-Yugoslav societies.

*Key Words:* Yugoslavia, war, trauma, comic, cultural memory, Goran Duplančić, Đorđe Balmazović

**Grafični spomini na jugoslovanske vojne: *Rat* Đoja in Djuja ter *Vojna* Gorana Duplančića**

*Povzetek.* Izhajajoč iz zmožnosti stripov, da hkrati potrjujejo in izpodbijajo prevladujoče pripovedi o vojnah in konfliktih, članek obravnava grafične pripovedi o vojnah, v katerih je v devetdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja razpadla socialistična Jugoslavija. Opisuje in razčlenjuje produkcijo stripov, povezanih z jugoslovanskimi vojnami, od tistih, ki so nastali med vojnami, do tistih, ki so bili ustvarjeni in objavljeni s časovno distanco. Tako širok časovni lok ponuja objektiv za razumevanje načinov, kako se stripi povezujejo z različnimi plastmi spomina na vojne in kaj dodajajo drugim pripovedim o vojnih izkušnjah. Osrednji

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del članka je namenjen obravnavi dveh stripov, ki pronicljivo obravnavata vprašanja subjektivnega doživljanja vojskovanja v devetdesetih letih, in tudi generacijske izkušnje vojne ter travme: Vojna (*Rat*) avtorjev Đo & Dju (2018) in *Vojna* Gorana Duplančića (2021). Sklepni del članka je namenjen razpravi o tem, kako te subjektivne in generacijske grafične pripovedi posegajo v spominsko pokrajino postjugoslovanskih družb.

*Ključne besede:* Jugoslavija, vojna, travma, strip, kulturni spomin, Goran Duplančić, Đorđe Balmazović

## Introduction

Comics, just as films, have always been a fertile ground for both fictional and non-fictional narratives of war, conflict, combat and soldiering. As argued by Prorokova and Tal (2018, 6), 'war provides a good story, uniquely bringing together universal themes, such as the battle between good and evil, and offering tales of heroism and transcendence, tragedy and heightened drama. Unsurprisingly then, graphic novels and comics about war are perhaps the most established and most popular genre of graphic narratives.' With their Manichean narratives about heroes and enemies, and privileging heroism over the suffering and horrors of war, comics have also been an important vehicle for propaganda and nationalism in times of war and their aftermath. In case of the US, Trischa Goodnow and James J. Kimble argue that comics 'helped forge a united home front by cultivating a patriotic sensibility that celebrated both American triumphalism and virtue' (Goodnow and Kimble 2016, 4; see also Rech 2014). Harriet E. H. Earle similarly argues (2017, 11) that 'the early superheroes were all, to some extent, symbols of nationalist pride, and Superman is no exception. However, it was the introduction of Captain America in 1941 that opened up the comics form as a medium for conveying nationalist pride and encouraging "homeland morale."'

At the same time, comics have demonstrated an important capacity to challenge fixed narratives about wars and conflicts and complicate our knowledge about them, thus defying the widespread view that they are ill suited to serious subjects, especially those that incorporate authentic social history (Schjeldahl 2005). Writing about the journalist and comic author Joe Sacco, Edward Said pointed to comics' capacity to open 'new and radical imaginative avenues' (Earle 2017, 16). Said wrote that 'comics seemed to say what couldn't otherwise be said, perhaps what wasn't permitted to be said or imagined, defying the ordinary processes of thought,

which are policed, shaped and re-shaped by all sorts of pedagogical as well as ideological pressures [...] I felt that comics free me to think and imagine and see differently' (quoted in Whitlock 2006, 967). An already classical and still resonating example of this capacity of comics to articulate and bring into public consciousness what is otherwise difficult to say is Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (see Chute 2016b).

Starting from the capacity of comics to simultaneously confirm and challenge dominant narratives of war and conflict, this article discusses graphic narratives of the wars in which socialist Yugoslavia disintegrated in the 1990s, focusing on the comics narrating the reality of war from the perspective of combatants/soldiers. This section is followed by an outline of comic production related to the Yugoslav wars, from those which emerged in the course of the wars to those made and published with a temporal distance. Such a broad temporal arc offers a lens for understanding the ways in which comics relate to different layers of memory of wars and what they add to other narratives about war experiences. The central part of the article is dedicated to the discussion of two comic books that poignantly address questions of the subjective experience of soldiering in the 1990s, but also the generational experience of war and trauma: *Rat* (The War) by Đo & Dju (2018) and *Vojna* (The War) by Goran Duplančić (2021). In the concluding part of the article, I ask how these subjective and generational graphic narratives intervene in the memory landscape of post-Yugoslav societies.

## Comic (Super)Heroes of the Yugoslav Wars

In the series of ethnic conflicts in which Yugoslavia disintegrated, a variety of military and paramilitary units took part – from the Yugoslav People's Army (the JNA/JLA), which aligned itself with the Serbian side in the ensuing ethnic conflicts (Bieber 2008), to more or less spontaneously formed units of national armies, paramilitaries and criminal groups – among which a clear dividing line could not always be drawn (see Sacco 2003; Vivod 2013; Vukušić 2023). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia, the early 1990s were marked by local comic production that brought new (super)heroes, placed in the battlefields where newly established armies and paramilitaries were fighting each other. This production was densely intertwined with other popular culture products, such as movies, TV series, illustrations, stickers, etc. (see Matošević and Škokić 2014; on Cro-Army stickers, see Bukač 2021). Many already established comic authors, active in 'the golden age' of Yugoslav comic production

of the 1970s and 1980s, embarked on this new production of war comics. The comic *Zelene beretke* (1994) was created by Ahmet Muminović, the author of 'partisan comics' *Otpisani* (in the late 1970s) and *Valter brani Sarajevo* in the mid-1980s. Jules Radilović, the author of the series *Partizani* (started in the late 1970s), created illustrations of Croatian Army soldiers published as chocolate stickers for the album Cro-Army (see Bukač 2021; Dragaš et al. 2014).

In 1991, Belgrade *Politika* started publishing *Knindže – vitezovi srpske krajine* (by Žarko Katić and Danko Đukić), inspired by paramilitary units whose name combines Japanese ninjas and the name of a Croatian city and a major war zone, Knin. They had names from Serbian folklore (Sava, Radojica, Milica, Dijete Grujica, Starina Novak), and were presented as descendants of Serbian freedom fighters from the remote past, devoted to traditional, patriarchal values, having superpowers and far eastern martial skills, but also rich cosmopolitan experience obtained in the criminal underground across Europe (see Čolović 2000; Matošević 2004/2005; Vivod 2013; Pasanović 2018); they were 'in good physical shape, dressed in modern camouflage uniforms' (Shymkevych 2021). Dragan Vasiljković, aka Kapetan Dragan, leader of the Serbian paramilitaries in Kninska krajina, was an inspiration for comics as well: *Osmica* published the comic *Kapetan Dragan,* while *Radio TV revija* published a series of comic strips *Kapetan Knindža* in 1991 and 1992 (Zupan 2007, 112).

A Croatian superhero from the same period was *Superhrvoje* (Ercegovac and Listeš 1992) who came into being when Hrvoje Horvat, a son of Croats who emigrated to Germany and got killed in a traffic accident, came to Croatia after receiving a call from his best friend Stjepan and got transformed into an undefeatable stone-man.

Bosnian comic superhero, *Bosman* (created by Ozren Pavlović in the mid-1990s), fought 'wild Chetniks' who attempted to conquer Sarajevo. Created in the besieged Sarajevo, *Bosman* 'was envisioned as an ongoing story for young readers to bring them hope and a form of escape from their daily horror' (Pasanović 2018, 60). Similarly to Serbian and Croatian (super)heroes, *Bosman* was closely connected to a remote, past mythology; in his case, pre-Ottoman and Ottoman imagery and traditions. Simultaneously, he was modern and cosmopolitan: he runs halfnaked 'through the woods and observe[s] the occupation forces moving around Sarajevo months before everyone else will admit there is a problem. When snipers start shooting, he is woken from his yoga rituals and is depicted as the only one who runs into buildings to stop the snipers from

killing innocent people in the crowds protesting wars in Bosnia, Croatia, and elsewhere' (p. 60).[1]

As several authors have already pointed out, these post-Yugoslav superheroes draw from both global superhero imagery (characters such as Captain America, Superman, Flash Gordon, etc.) and rediscovered (medieval) national imageries and histories of their respective nations. They were also based on the sharp opposition between 'us,' patriotic, traditionalist, but simultaneously modern, West-oriented, and 'the enemy,' presented as wild, cruel, incompetent, and primitive. These heroic graphic narratives do not depict traumatic effects of war events, but another kind of trauma often shapes and drives their superheroes' actions: it is trauma related to Yugoslav socialism. It turns out that the Yugoslav regime was responsible for the death of Hrvoje Horvat's parents in *Super Hrvoje,* while his best friend Stjepan's father was imprisoned in Goli otok in the 1970s because, while drunk, he blamed the Yugoslav regime for their deaths (see Matošević and Škokić 2014, 133). The childhood of Savo, protagonist of *Knindže – vitezovi srpske Krajine,* has also been marked by the trauma of Yugoslav socialism: in 1971, his father was killed by Ustaše in Lika because he allegedly worked for UDBA (Yugoslav secret police) (p. 126). In this way these comics contributed to the widespread Balkanist tropes of the Yugoslav wars as being caused and driven by centuries-old hatred among different ethnic groups, as just another iteration in an endless chain of violence, and thus as something primordial and inevitable.

Closer to the real experiences of combat are comics describing experiences of young fighters, whose authors sometimes had a first-hand knowledge of fighting in the war. Many of these comics were created during wartime by Croatian authors (e.g. *Mudraci* by Štef Bartolić (2011), 'Čistači' by Miljenko Horvatić and Mario Kalogjera (2014), 'Savjest' by Brajen Dragičević and Goran Sudžuka (2014), all comics were first published in 1992). Despite their narrative complexity and emotional multilayeredness, these comics still follow the clear pattern in which 'our' fighters are presented as 'good boys,' modern, listening to rock music and having 'western' values, while 'the enemy' is homogenized, presented in

[1] Kosovo-Albanian superhero *Shqiponja* (2012) by comic artist from Prizren, Gani Sunduri, may be added to this list of national(ist), post-Yugoslav comic heroes, although his author 'was insistent his superhero had no political message, and was aggrieved that some thought he harked back to the political superheroes of the Yugoslavian era' (Freeman 2022).

a stereotypical, caricatural way as primitive, dirty, cruel and grotesque.[2] This is also true for the majority of comics created after the Yugoslav wars were over. They do not challenge dominant binary views based on the idea of the moral and cultural superiority of 'us' and serve to support nation-building narratives. The preface for the collection *Domovinski rat u stripu* (Dragaš et al. 2014) was written by then president of Croatia Ivo Josipović, who stated (2014, 3) that the 'popularity of comics offers possibilities to show the greatness of the Homeland war to many generations and also express acknowledgement, respect, and gratitude to soldiers and all victims of war.' But this book itself reflects the complexity and ambiguity of war, the memory of it and its effects, showing how heroic narratives of war are inseparable from those exposing its absurdity, terrifying reality and the deep, painful traces it leaves on individuals, communities and societies.[3] Among the comics produced with a temporal distance from the war in this collection, there were also those which address the disastrous aftereffects of war – trauma, mental health issues, loneliness, difficulties of reintegration, etc. ('Poslije rata' (Sudžuka 2014) or 'Baba i ja' (Petruša 2014). Trauma, generational loss and discontinuity are also at the centre of the two longer albums, *Papak* by Frano Petruša (2010a; 2010b) and *Vukovar Haš* by Nenad Barinić (2018).

Another important body of comic works addressing the wars through which Yugoslavia disintegrated mostly concerns the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and consists of works authored by foreign artists who either had a chance to observe war events as war correspondents, or to learn about these events from their friends and acquaintances in Sarajevo or other places. Sarajevo and the war in Bosnia were the subject of Hermann's *Sarajevo Tango* (1995) and Joe Cubert's *Fax from Sarajevo* (1996), Tomaž Lavrič's *Bosanske basni* (1997) and *Evropa* (2003), and *Les tam-*

[2] War comics The Prout Pictures by Dubravko Mataković, published in *Nedjeljna Dalmacija* in the 1990s, abounded with grim and ironic humour, cruelness, grotesqueness and absurdity, and offered a picture of war in Croatia that was an alternative to the narratives of heroism and moral superiority of Croatian soldiers, but also ironically mocked all conflicting sides in the Yugoslav wars, 'chronologically following events related to the start of the Homeland war in Croatia, ten-days war in Slovenia, war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, animosities within the disintegrating federation, but also the mentalities of its citizens' (Banić 2014, 34).

[3] For an overview of 'the independence comics' in Slovenia and Croatia, see Gale (2019). Gale emphasizes the importance of narrating the wars for independence of these two societies through the comic medium and thus paying tribute to the selfless soldiers who fought for it, but also points to the pointlessness and cruelty of war.

*bours de Srebrenica* by Lobjois and Raimbeau (2019). Joe Sacco visited war-torn Bosnia and Herzegovina several times between 1992 and 1995 and authored several war comics (*Christmas with Karadzić* (1997), *Šoba* (1998), *Safe Area Goražde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992–95* (2000), *The Fixer: A Story of Sarajevo* (2003)). These comics stand out as complex narratives exposing ambiguities of positioning within a reality defined by war and violence. They are also characterized by a high level of the author's self-reflexivity and awareness that these same ambiguities define his own position of 'confused observer' (Georgievski 2022). Tomaž Lavrič's comics related to the Yugoslav wars are also multi-layered, exposing the brutality of war, the ambiguity of its effects, and the long-lasting damaging consequences of violence and trauma, as well as the troubling work of hegemonic relations of power that have marked the European continent for centuries already and have strongly shaped relations, operations and people's destinies in the wars of Yugoslavia as well.

The above overview of comics related to the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, although inexhaustive and inevitably simplified, points to the variety of discursive frames, domains of media content production and genre conventions with which they communicate. What connects this diverse comic production is a complex, often tense dialectics between the reality of war and combat and these broader frameworks. Some of the comics, particularly those made during the wars and published by mainstream media such as *Politika* in Serbia or *Slobodna Dalmacija* in Croatia easily read as nationalistic war propaganda. They were simultaneously interpreted as a way to keep the spirits of the population high. What the very short life of comics such as *Super Hrvoje, Bosman* and others seem to suggest is that their propagandistic narratives did not really resonate with the reality of life in war – the same suggestion is made by the authors who have analysed these comics so far (e.g. Matošević 2004/2005; Pasanović 2018). More personal comic narratives, many of which were told from a temporal distance from the war events, are more complex, but often remain within the binary understanding of two sides in war and insist on clear, unquestionable moral positions. As a consequence, they are perceived as a suitable tool for nation building and shaping the collective memory in which the figures of fighters for independence/freedom/democracy have the central role. Some of the comics created in the wake of the Yugoslav wars reveal aspects of war which are less suitable for romanticizing and veneration – the criminal background of paramilitaries and their leaders, corrupt politicians, the highly ambigu-

ous role of the international community and the UN forces, etc. They are often characterized by a blend of genres and referentiality: from a crime drama (*Sarajevo Tango*), a road-movie (*Evropa*), and a thriller (*Les tambours de Srebrenica*), to more (self-)reflexive works that explore 'the limits of autobiography' (Matović 2022, 256) and blend 'field journalism and its subsequent, often painstakingly long, graphic envisioning, altogether commonly referred to as comics journalism or graphic journalism' (Matović 2022, 256; see also Chute 2016a), as in Joe Sacco's graphic accounts of war in Bosnia. Such diversity of a rather limited number of comics related to the wars in Yugoslavia confirms the plasticity of the genre of the graphic novel (Hatfield 2005, 4).

## Time, Biography, Generation

With the passage of time, the comic narratives on the Yugoslav war became even more rare. *Les tambours de Srebrenica,* published in 2019, presents a rather isolated event, and it seems that in the late second decade of the twenty-first century the international publishing market largely lost interest for the now distant Yugoslav wars and graphic stories about them. The appearance of two book-length graphic narratives whose titles both translate as *War* in this same period thus may seem a surprise: in 2018, Belgrade publisher Fabrika knjiga published the comic book *Rat* with Đo and Dju listed as its authors,[4] while in 2020, another small, independent publisher, Barbatus from Zagreb, released *Vojna* by Goran Duplančić.[5] But, as I will argue below, their appearance at that moment reflects the fact that time and its passing are essential for the very

[4] These pseudonyms are made of the first letters of the first name of the artist Đorđe Balmazović, who wrote and drew the comic book, and of the surname of Saša Đukičin, whose story was told in the book. The decision to indicate authorship in this way has been informed by the long-lasting opposition by Đorđe Balmazović and the art group Škart to which he belongs to the art-historical regime in which the authors and their identity are central and decisive to the artistic value of their works. In addition, it was important to acknowledge Saša's equal role in the creation of the comic book (interview with Đorđe Balmazović, 10 January 2024).

[5] In this article I refrain from using the designation *graphic novel* to describe *Rat* and *Vojna,* although they satisfy most of criteria used to define it as a genre: they are both 'longer narratives that are contained within one book' (Earle 2017, 23) and represent 'long comic books that require a bookmark' (Spiegelman 2011). My reasons to call them *comics* or *comic books* instead are similar to some of those informing Harriet E. H. Earle's decision to abstain from referring to comics as graphic novels in her work: she quotes Daniel Raeburn, founder and writer of *The Imp,* who writes (2004, 110): 'I snicker at the neologism first for its insecure pretension – the literary equivalent of calling a garbage man a "san-

possibility of articulation of the personal and generational experience of young men coming of age during Yugoslavia's disastrous dissolution.

At the heart of *Rat – priča u slikama* (The War – A Story in Images) is the story of Saša, a man from Novi Bečej in the Serbian province of Vojvodina, who answered a call for mobilization in 1991 and ended up in the battlefields of Eastern Slavonia in the uniform of the Yugoslav People's Army. 'Saša's Story,' the chapter describing events from the battlefield, is preceded by the chapter 'May 2007,' which provides a framework within which the main narrative that follows has been shaped. In May 2007, Đorđe Balmazović Žole, an artist and activist, and member of the artist duo Škart,[6] headed to London and stayed there with his friend Saša, who have lived there already for many years. In company of Miško (Mišel), Saša's Montenegrin friend who works as a taxi driver in London, they sit, talk and listen to music. At some point, they listen to Miles Davis' songs and start discussing when exactly he passed away. Žole asks whether it was in 1992. 'No, in 1991,' answers Saša. Žole asks if he is certain about it, and Saša answers: 'I am positive. It was at the end of 1991. I was on the frontline then.' This is an interlude into Saša's story about how he got mobilized, sent to the frontline, about the bizarre everyday reality of war, and about his injury in a battle. The story is not linear and gets interrupted several times with zooming out to its narrative here-and-now, in which Saša, Žole and Mišel continue their conversation, asking questions

itation engineer" – and second because a "graphic novel" is in fact the very thing it is ashamed to admit: a comic book.' As Earl (2017, 24–25) further emphasizes, 'To my mind, the term "graphic novel" serves to give legitimacy to a form that has been unfairly tarnished by its past as a mass-produced medium, or more precisely by high cultural prejudices about the age of mass production. Comics has earned its stripes as a legitimate narrative form. As such, there is no reason why a long comic that deals with "serious" issues and memoir should have any special term, hence my preference for the original term "comic".' An additional reason not to use *graphic novel* for *Rat* and *Vojna* comes from the fact that their authors do not use this term, either. *Rat* is described in the subtitle as 'a story in images' (serb. *priča u slikama*), and Goran Duplančić refers to *Vojna* as 'a comic' (cro. *strip*).

[6] Škart is an artist-activist group consisting of two members – Dragan Protić Prota and Đorđe Balmazović Žole. As stated on their website, 'Škart is a collective founded in 1990 at the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade. While experimenting through their work, they focus primarily between the medium of poetry and design. "Architecture of the human relationships" is their main concept. Through the constant flux within the collective, present since its very beginning, members collaboratively work to develop new values. They are particularly capable through the process of making, to embrace "beautiful" mistakes and tirelessly strive to combine work with pleasure' (Škart, n.d.; see also Yildiz 2022).

about Saša's war experience and commenting on it. The epilogue ('What happened afterwards') has been crafted after a friend suggested that the authors add it. It talks about Saša's transfer to the Novi Sad hospital after wounding, his hospital days, return to his home town, and travel to Sarajevo, from where Saša emigrates to the UK. The book ends with his boarding the London-bound plane.

*Vojna* is the personal story of Goran Duplančić, who in 1991, as a 19-year-old man from the town of Split, performed mandatory service in the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) in the Boris Kidrič military base in Ljubljana's Šentvid neighbourhood. Together with other young men from all corners of former Yugoslavia, Goran found himself in the middle of the conflict between the JNA and Territorial Defence, the military units of Slovenia who just declared independence. Under information blockade, without electricity and without food supplies, Goran and his army buddies take care of, encourage, and support each other. Abounding with humour and details recognizable to several generations who served in the JNA, with tense situations, chaos, and absurdities, this comic book ends with no tragedy, but announces tragedies of an incomprehensible scale that unfolded when the war moved further to Croatia and then Bosnia and Herzegovina.

*Vojna* focuses on the tense days of the summer of 1991 in Slovenia, without an ambition to place them in a broader context of consecutive events in which Yugoslavia disintegrated, or to reflect on them from the present-day point of view. As the writer Miljenko Jergović pointed out (2021), *Vojna*'s author 'managed to recreate the emotion of a distant past, making no use of the privilege of knowing the outcomes.' Although framed as a personal account of events encompassing a short period in Šentvid, Slovenia, detached from what came after, *Vojna* narrates a generational trauma of young men marked by violent conflicts in Yugoslavia. For this reason, it cannot be read (only) as an amusing, albeit tense, episode with no tragic consequences.

Drawn in fast, sharp moves, *Vojna* relies upon and simultaneously creates a recognizable imagery of war comics – it shows men in uniform, strategizing, weapons, etc. At the same time, however, the author pictures his army buddies and himself as rich, diverse characters and depicts complex relationships among them, including care, solidarity and love. At the very end of the comic, the reader is faced with the author's photograph from the army days and with the fact that he and other soldiers were very young, almost children, at the moment they were pushed into an absurd

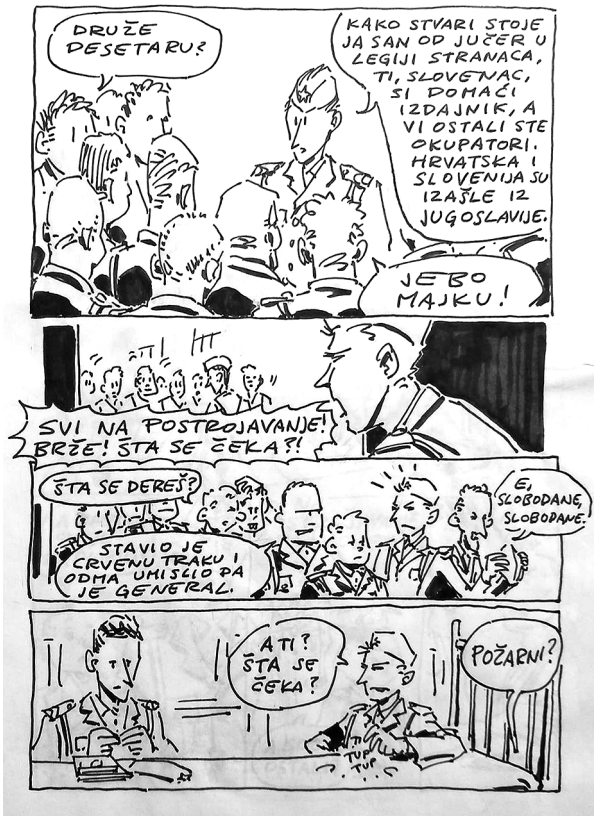


**Figure 1**

A Detail from Goran Duplančić's Sketchbook with Drawings from *Vojna* (reproduced with permission of the author)

armed conflict – a fact that has been slightly obscured by the sharp lines in which the author portrays himself in comic frames.

*Rat,* on the other hand, engages more explicitly with the narration of the generational experience by addressing the lasting effects of war violence: emigration, trauma, separation, and loss. It is visually narrated in simple, black and white images, which amplify the intensity, absurdity and tragedy of events described. While *Vojna* is a personal story in which the author is the protagonist and in control of the narrative, *Rat*'s narrative results from interpersonal interaction and negotiation between Žole, who drew the story, and Saša, who narrated it. Their relationship and role in shaping the narratives is much more complex, though: they both grew up in Novi Bečej, were in the same class and have been good friends from those early days. The voices of both of them are present in the book and equally engaged in shaping the story, including when their views of the

past diverge significantly. From the closing text on the last page (p. 158), which offers the readers an insight into the process of creating the comic book, it is clear that one of the factors contributing to its long-lasting production was a negotiation between Saša and Žole over the content, its presentation and formulation. The readers learn that they took 20 months to compete the epilogue. 'We argued most over the footnote on page 42 – whether it is necessary at all and what should it say.'[7]

In spite of different narrative techniques, both *Rat* and *Vojna* tell personal stories that are simultaneously a story of the Yugoslav generation coming of age in the 1990s, and a universal story of the absurdity of war and dangers of nationalism and what they do to individuals, their dreams and futures. What is also common to both is that they were shaped during a long period of time and after a significant amount of time has passed since the events which they describe took place. Goran Duplančić (in Mager 2023) thus explains his decision to start drawing his story as late as in 2013:

> When I was experiencing these events, I was telling myself that this would be a good story to make a comic, if I only make it through. But then, I felt no need to put it on paper for a long time, probably also because after every war 'big stories' of suffering and heroism dominate the public sphere, while 'little stories' seem unimportant in comparison to them. The fact that the conflict in Slovenia, as compared to subsequent wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, seemed quite unserious did not work in favour of making a comic, either. I actually started working on it once I had my own children. I started thinking of what could I teach them about big truths of life and realized that everything I know I learned during those ten days of war in Slovenia. Those events have irreparably affected myself and our entire generation.

To be told as a graphic narrative, Saša's traumatic experience of participating in war operations in Slavonia had to wait for the two childhood friends to reunite in London in 2007, and then making the comic book took several years. Both comics thus resulted from a long process and became tellable only in a certain moment in time and from a certain distance from the traumatic events.[8]

[7] This footnote explains who Slobodan Milošević was.

[8] A significant amount of time used for the production of war comics also characterizes Joe

Temporal distance notwithstanding, the authors of these two comic books were careful to remain faithful to the events as they really happened decades ago and to provide exact and just representation of their actors. In the introductory note to *Vojna,* Goran Duplančić states that after almost 30 years he does not remember the faces and names of all the participants in the events he described, and 'that those he still remembers were arbitrarily ascribed to persons in the comic.' Đorđe Balmazović told me that for Saša it was very important that the events from the 1990s were told exactly as they happened, and once they started talking about the war and mobilization, he started remembering details gradually, in the process of creating the comic book.[9]

Another common characteristic of *Rat* and *Vojna,* which separates them from most of the war comics from the 1990s, is that they do not create a narrative with a clear dividing line and a moral opposition between 'us' and 'them.' *Rat* discusses openly the Serbian role in the Yugoslav wars and responsibility for it. *Vojna,* as Miljenko Jergović emphasized (2021), is a book 'that can be read with exactly the same feelings in all countries from which the soldiers came to the Šentvid military base 30 years ago.' Goran Duplančić carefully and skilfully draws his characters of the soldiers from different parts of Yugoslavia, emphasizing linguistic and other differences between them. However, specific linguistic and other features, which indicate the ethnic background and geographical origin of young men are not caricatured and used to mark anyone in a negative way, as was a standard technique in most of the comics about the Yugoslav wars.

## Fear, Trauma, and the Workings of War

While fear and trauma do not go well with heroic narratives of war, comics seem to be a suitable form for mediating traumatic experiences and memories (see Whitlock 2006), due to their capacity to locate 'the reader in space' and 'to spatialize memory' and thus 'to map a life, not only figuratively but literally' (Chute 2011, 108–109). Goran Duplančić, the author of *Vojna,* also points to the ability of comics to tell traumatic (hi)stories: 'The written text is invaluable, but it cannot be rewound. But one can rewind images and drawings. Even film does not have such

Sacco's work, which has been labeled 'slow journalism,' 'not solely because of the sheer amount of time it takes to complete the publications, but more significantly because of the kind of reading experience they provide' (Matović 2022, 257; see also Chute 2016a, 7).

[9] Interview with Đorđe Balmazović, 10 January 2024.

power, because you cannot pause your gaze and establish a relationship with protagonists, you are primarily a spectator. In comics, on the other hand, the reader chooses the rhythm herself. For these reasons, there is no better medium than a comic book to tell personal, emotionally loaded stories' (Duplančić in Mager 2023).

The feeling of fear and its workings are the central motive of both *Rat* and *Vojna.* In Duplančić's comic book, the fear the main protagonist/the author feels during the days he was trapped in the military base during the war in Slovenia is depicted as a terrifying black wolf haunting him and known to him from his early childhood days. In *Rat,* the fear is explicitly mentioned and discussed several times. It is exposed as a driving force for decisions and as a feeling in the roots of important moral questions the two friends keep asking themselves over the years. On pp. 38–40, the authors deconstruct the very idea that answering the mobilization call was a sign of braveness while draft dodging was a sign of cowardness: Saša explains that his going to war was a consequence of the fear that one of his friends would get mobilized instead of him, and he would feel guilty in front of him or his mother. 'The same way your mum feared my reaction because you did not respond to the call to go to war. She told me that when I met her after I came back,' he says to Žole, adding: 'In my mind it looked like choosing between war and jail. For some reason, going to the front line seemed as a less bad option. At least I thought so back then. In a way, I went to the war because of cowardice.' 'So you both were afraid?,' asks Mišel. Saša and Žole both exclaim: 'Yes!'

The authors of both these comic books, as emphasized above, concern themselves with the precise and faithful narration of war events. The strong presence of fear and the fact that many years passed between the events and their recreation in the form of comic books (the process of remembering suppressed events and experiences particularly shaped Saša's story), already signal the highly traumatic nature of these events. However, neither of these two comic narratives reflects on trauma explicitly, which is in line with the insights that trauma is not 'fully narratable,' but 'it unquestionably influences narratives that emerge around it' (Jelača 2016, 3).

*Rat* faces the readers with terrifying experiences of death, wounding, and destruction in Eastern Slavonia during war operations and the painful reality of war in Serbia at the same time. Discrepancies between simple moves that slightly resemble children's drawings, mostly static, often metaphorical (e.g. soldiers depicted as skittles with helmets) and

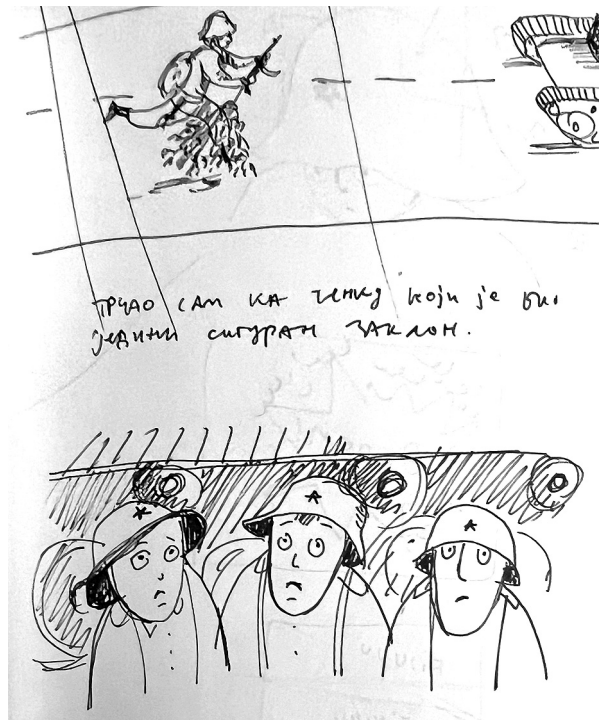

**Figure 2**

A detail from Đorđe Balmazović's Sketchbook with Drawings from *Rat* (reproduced with permission of the author)

scenes of killing, suffering and destruction have profound effects and point to the inability to comprehend and narrate events in all their traumatic dimensions, simultaneously revealing the absurdity and pointlessness of war.

With such a driving technique, Balmazović breaks with the tradition of comic representations of war as heroic and abounding with action and glorification of war and conflict (Earle 2017, 13) which erases 'all the gore and truth from the battle' (Kermode 2011, 4). Moreover, *Rat* overtly opposes the mythology of war heroism extensively employed in the nation-building narratives with humour and fine sarcasm: in the beginning of Saša's story from the frontline, there is a scene in which, in search of a place to go to toilet, he crouches in the field with his pants down. The bullets start flying above his head, so he runs back to the transporter in rush. He then imagines how his monument would look if he got shot while relieving himself – a crouching soldier with his pants down and full military equipment on a pedestal.

*Vojna,* on the other hand, does not depict armed conflict, casualties and violence directly. According to its author, his ambition was to recall

in the comic the recognizable atmosphere of serving in the Yugoslav People's Army: 'I wanted to give the comic the aura that resembles conversations of friends who meet and evoke memories of their youth. Many people who read the comic told me that comics remind them of their high school days, although the events my comic describes are not really something they want to recall' (Duplančić in Mager 2023). It is rather what could happen than what happened (as well as the knowledge that it did happen just months later in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) that points to the fact that trauma significantly shapes the memory of described events in Vojna as well. The recognizable JNA humour and comic situations *Vojna* abounds with do not conceal the fear, tension, and absurdity of war, but actually amplify them. *Vojna* describes a moment in which Goran and other young men trapped in the Šentvid army base were denied the possibility to imagine the future and have dreams and plans for it. Between one day and the next, from being the soldiers of the common socialist country, they became enemies for the Slovenian Territorial Defence and the public (despite the fact there were still Slovenian soldiers among them), while the JNA authorities required them to blindly follow orders, even when it implies shooting at a friend who attempts deserting and leaving the confined space of the barracks where they were kept without food, electricity and information for weeks.

Several renowned researchers of trauma maintain that trauma has a distinctively individual character and insist that trauma is a singular experience (LaCapra 2001; Tal 1995; see also Earle 2017). For example, Dominick LaCapra warns against generalizing and relativizing, pointing out that 'the notion of trauma [should not] be rashly generalized or the difference between trauma victim and historian or secondary witness – or, for that matter, between traumatization and victimhood – be elided' (LaCapra 2001, 97). Both *Rat* and *Vojna* narrate personal experiences; however, these experiences strongly resonate both generationally and within the space and time of post-Yugoslav societies. They expose trauma as cultural memory (see Jelača 2016), shared by many belonging to the last Yugoslav generations who experienced mobilization, draft-dodging, war, forced migration, massive emigration and futures cut short. Trauma also marked the lives of the parents of these generations and significantly shaped inter-generational relations (which is poignantly illustrated by a scene in *Rat* in which an unknown woman cries and embraces Saša after he is back home from hospital and tells him 'Children, what did we do to you.').

The way these two comic books evoke trauma goes beyond the dichotomy of victims vs. perpetrators, destabilizes moral positions these two categories usually imply, and points to the ambiguous nature of involvement in war and conflict and the consequences of that involvement. In the Šentvid military base in 1991, Goran is faced with an order to shoot at his fellow soldiers, which he rejects, putting himself into danger. In *Rat,* Saša tells his father who manages to visit him on the frontline: 'Dad, why am I here? What do we want here? I just want to save myself. Dad, I cannot shoot at another human being!' His father answers: 'Son, if you have to choose whom to save, choose yourself!' The authors also reflect upon other workings of war that profoundly affect an individual in ways which often do not relate to what kind of person this individual is in 'ordinary' situations: Goran is rude and violent toward a Spanish female journalist who comes to the base and tries to get a statement from him. In *Rat,* Saša and his fellow soldiers laugh when they hear that their transporter hit *Fića,* a small Yugoslav automobile. Later, in the hospital, he encounters the driver of that car, who is badly injured, with multiple fractures in his legs. 'I was horrified remembering that a few days ago we were laughing because of the accident between *Fića* and our transporter,' says Saša.

Both comics critically expose war propaganda by both opposing sides and the ways it dehumanizes 'the enemy,' and what this dehumanization does to soldiers on the frontline. For example, in *Rat,* Saša and other soldiers watch TV news, first on the Belgrade television channel, where the reporter says that Croatian units broke the ceasefire, and Serbian soldiers liberated the village of Sarvaš. The soldiers loudly approve what they hear. Then they switch to the Zagreb channel, where the reporters say that Sarvaš was occupied by the Serbian aggressor army. The soldiers disagree in rage, and attack Saša when he asks them: 'Haven't you seen with your own eyes what happened?'

These comics do not romanticize war, battles, and bonds among men resulting from participation in dramatic and traumatic events. In *Vojna,* solidarity and comradeship among soldiers is not presented as a social infrastructure fostering their braveness and readiness to fight, but as survival strategy, their last resort and a way to oppose the hegemonic work of war and the military institution. They also expose collectivity and solidarity as sources of pressure and hegemony in war situations: before attacking Vukovar, the officer asks men in Saša's unit if there is anyone who feels incapable of participating in the forthcoming action. 'Everyone was silent, so I was silent, too,' describes Saša in *Rat* of how this pressure

works. In *Vojna,* Goran refuses to escape the military base and go home to Split when his mother visits and proposes it. The Slovenian soldier, Tomaž, also stays in the barracks with his army buddies, even though he meets his brother on the other side of the fence, who is a member of the Slovenian Territorial Defence unit, and although everyone expects him to leave.

### *Rat, Vojna,* and Memory Cultures in Post-Yugoslav Societies

If we understand cultural texts as 'repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception,' following Ann Cvetkovich (2003, 7), then *Rat* by Đo & Dju and *Vojna* by Goran Duplančić may be read as cultural texts. They engage the readership and the public in the former Yugoslav societies in complex and manifold ways. These two comic books have manifold lives, too.

*Vojna* was originally published on the largest regional web forum for comic authors and lovers, www.forum.stripovi.com, under the name *Na mestu … vojna!* The first six pages appeared on 8 March 2013, and the author periodically published new pages over the next two years. The last, 264th page, was published online on 14 January 2015. From the author's post on the forum preceding publication of the first pages, we learn that he decided to publish a web comic although it was originally planned to appear in print in the Q Library edition.[10] He enjoyed the immediate online interaction with the readers – members of the comic forum community and their feedback, and was quite surprised by an idea by Josip Sršen, another comic author and publisher, to publish the book that came several years later.[11] Publishing house Barbatus released *Vojna* in 2021, six years after Duplančić uploaded the last page on the web forum. The author was even more surprised by the significant interest in the comic book – the first edition sold out within only half a year, and the second addition appeared in 2021. In autumn 2022, the Slovenian translation of *Vojna* was published by the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (Duplančić 2022). It provoked interest that clearly exceeded the usual circles of comic fandom and, travelling across state borders established through the events it describes, engaged in new debates in the ways its author did not anticipate or care about while creating

[10] See http://forum.stripovi.com/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=43600&whichpage=1.

[11] Interview with Goran Duplančić, 22 April 2023.

it. If the dynamic, witty and emotional story and numerous references to military service in the Yugoslav People's Army made this comic appealing for readers in Croatia and other parts of former Yugoslavia, in Slovenia it acquired additional, more distinctively political meaning. As the first-hand account of dramatic events during the ten-day-war in Slovenia, *Vojna* challenges the narrative dominating the Slovenian public sphere, in which JNA soldiers, including the young men performing their military service who were trapped in military bases across Slovenia, were presented as the enemies and aggressors who were eventually defeated by the heroic actions of the Territorial Defence. October 25, the day when in 1991 the last JNA soldier left the territory of Slovenia, is marked as a national holiday (see Janša 2013). With a biographical story from the ten-day war, *Vojna* insists on that war's absurdity and pictures it as chaotic and morally ambiguous. Its challenge of the fixed narrative of virtuous and victorious defeat of the aggressor had a somewhat cathartic effect for the Slovenian public because it opened a space to remember the days of getting independence outside the petrified categories of national(ist) mythology.[12]

Most of the memorable, witty, and tragic images that comprise the narrative of *Rat* carry strong and important anti-war messages if taken individually or in shorter sequences. As painful 'postcards of the 1990s' (Kalaba 2019), they find their place in art exhibitions in the region. In December 2019, the Museum of Yugoslavia staged the exhibition *The Nineties: A Glossary of Migrations* whose aim was 'to generate a new vocabulary that would at least temporarily rearticulate [...] dominant concepts and discourses' about the nineties in former Yugoslavia. 'All the artists were invited, in collaboration with the curators, to choose a term, syntagm or idiom that they thought articulated the position of the work, initiative or community in the most accurate way – of course, primarily from the perspective of the exhibition's problematic focus – and they were also asked to write a statement explaining that choice' (Ognjanović 2019, 27–28). Škart/Đo & Dju choose *courage and/or cowardice*. The words constitut-

[12] See, for example, the discussion at the book launch of *Vojna* in Ljubljana, 23 February 2023, available at ZRC SAZU (2023). Although it might have not been the author's intention or ambition, *Vojna* thus joined a body of other texts and works of art which problematize the idea of Slovenia's morally unquestionable and superior role in Yugoslavia's breakdown and the narrative which is the foundation of the Slovenian independent state. Among them are the theatre play *Republika Slovenija* (2016), and Zoran Smiljanić's and Marjan Pušavec's comic *Zadnji let Tonija Mrlaka* (2017).

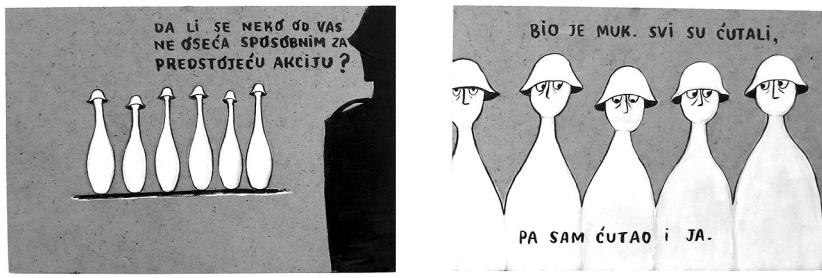


**Figure 3** Frames from *Rat* (acrylic on cardboard, reproduced with permission of the author)

ing this pair seemingly function as antonyms, but actually demonstrate that 'in the given context, it was difficult to discern between choice and coercion, that is, between the possibility of stepping out of the discourse of absolute victimization and passivization' (pp. 25–26). This is how the artists reflect upon the meaning of these words (Škart 2019, 169):

> What did it mean, in the nineties, to be brave, and what did it mean to be cowardly? To head on to a war one did not know the reason for, or to avoid it? Now, almost thirty years later, when it is known that the war resulted in approximately 140,000 killed and that around 4 million people became refugees (most of whom left Yugoslavia), the extent of the evil brought on by nationalism is clear and why it is so important to recognize it in time, and stop it.

This statement is accompanied by several frames from the comic book *Rat* – those depicting the conversation between Saša and his father, those in which the officer asks whether anyone feels incapable of participating in the forthcoming action and everyone is silent, an image of Saša on the monument pedestal with his pants down, and some others. Frames from *Rat* were also exhibited in Sarajevo in the summer of 2023, in the framework of the exhibition *Art War* curated by the artist Slaven Tolj. The Škart was faced with negative reactions by some visitors of this exhibition because of the frames depicting differences in reporting on the war operations in Sarvaš on TV channels in Belgrade and Zagreb – for these visitors, even after so many years, it was unacceptable to publicly present the 'Serbian side' of the story in such a negative light.[13]

*Rat* and *Vojna* are graphic narratives of the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s that both offer individualized accounts and tell of personal experi-

[13] Interview with Đorđe Balmazović, 10 January, 2024.

ences, traumas, fears and moral dilemmas. Due to their testimonial nature, immediacy and high affective charge, they are capable of emotionally mobilizing different publics in various localities. However, the focus on personal and individual stories and memories by no means implies that these comic books de-politicize events, persons and their voices. On the contrary – as Žole emphasized, 'it is very important to collect as many documents and testimonies about the 1990s as possible. That is one of the reasons Saša and I made this book. Documenting events through testimonies prevents perpetuation of myths and legends. Myths and legends are either exaggerations or lies, they fabricate history, and we witness this fabrication almost daily in Serbia' (Balmazović in Kalaba 2019). Manifold ways in which these two comic books engage with dominant narratives about the Yugoslav wars, traveling from one post-Yugoslav state to another, from the web to printed media, from printed pages to the exhibition halls, from one language to another, demonstrate the capacity of these individual and personal voices to challenge and destabilize fixed, hegemonic and binary discourses and imaginations of the wars through which Yugoslavia disintegrated, and to point to alternative ways of building a collective, thinking subjectivity and responsibility, remembering the past and imagining the future.

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