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How Propaganda Works: Nationalism, Revenge and Empathy in Serbia

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Abstract

What is the relationship between war propaganda and nationalism, and what are the effects of each on support for, or participation in, violent acts? This is an important question for international criminal law and ongoing speech crime trials, where prosecutors and judges continue to assert that there is a clear causal link between war propaganda, nationalism, and mass violence. Although most legal judgments hinge on the criminal intent of propagandists, the question of whether and to what extent propaganda and nationalism interact to cause support for violence or participation remains unanswered. Our goal here is to contribute to research on propaganda and nationalism by bridging international criminal law and the behavioral and brain sciences. We develop an experiment conducted with Serbian participants that examines the effects of propaganda as identified in the latest international speech crime trial as causing mass violence, and thereby test hypotheses of expert witness Anthony Oberschall's theory of mass manipulation. Using principal components analysis and Bayesian regression, we examine the effects of propaganda exposure and prior levels

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of nationalism as well as other demographics on support for violence, ingroup empathy, and outgroup empathy. Results show that while exposure to war propaganda does not increase justifications of violence, specific types of war propaganda increase ingroup empathy and decrease outgroup empathy. Further, although nationalism by itself is not significant for justifying violence, the interaction of increased nationalism and exposure to violent media is significant for altering group empathies. The implications of these findings are discussed with respect to international criminal law and the cognitive science of nationalism.

Keywords

international criminal tribunals – nationalism – war propaganda – Serbia – speech crime trials – Bayesian regression

1 Introduction

Over the last twenty-five years, military tribunals such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) have prosecuted over thirty war propagandists for allegedly inducing crimes against humanity and genocide. The success of these *speech crime trials* has varied extensively (see Wilson, 2017). A recurrent problem is that prosecutors advance two popular but unsupported assertions about the effects of war propaganda: first, propaganda directly causes mass violence such as ethnic cleansing, terrorism, and genocide (Benesch, 2012; Wilson, 2016; Wilson, 2015); and second, mass violence is likely to ensue when propagandists utilize a set of harmful messages (discussed below) about a targeted outgroup in a sociopolitical context of nationalism (see Oberschall, 2012; Ronnen, 2010; United Nations, 2012). Because these assertions lack sufficient empirical support, their prevalence in speech crime trials has raised questions for both legal theory and the behavioral and brain sciences. How do harmful messages – those recognized in international law as likely to induce violence – increase hostility toward outgroups? Does exposure to these messages, notwithstanding cultural variability, effect populations in similar ways, and, if so, how do they interact with local culture and nationalist beliefs?

We begin to address these questions here by discussing recent developments in international criminal law and a related experiment ($n = 416$) conducted in Serbia on the effects of war propaganda. The experiment examined how a Serbian audience reacted to messages by Vojislav Šešelj, a Serbian ultranationalist and the most recently convicted war propagandist by international criminal courts. It also tested whether Šešelj's messages interacted with participants' levels of nationalism (as a personality characteristic regarding nationalistic stance) on the likelihood of justifying violence, increasing ingroup empathy, and decreasing outgroup empathy. Bayesian regressions show that while such harmful speeches are likely to increase ingroup empathy and decrease outgroup empathy, they are unlikely to increase support for outgroup violence. Nevertheless, high scores on nationalism and exposure to violent media appear to strongly interact with one another. Based on these findings, we conclude that international prosecutors may overstate the direct effects of particular speeches on proximate acts of violence, but are likely justified in emphasizing that war propaganda, heightened nationalism, and exposure to violent media can shift a population over time toward persecution of outgroups.

2 War Propaganda

Much has been written about the uncertainty surrounding the role of war propaganda[1] in international criminal law (Dojčinović, 2019; Kiper, 2015; 2020; Wilson, 2015; Wilson, 2016, 2017; Wilson & Kiper, 2020). The core problems center on justifying blanket prohibitions of war propaganda (as outlined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; see Kearney, 2007), and identifying which types of propaganda – and in which contexts, on which media, and by whom – influence populations to accept or actively engage in mass crimes (see also Dojčinović, 2012, 2019; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2018; Leader Maynard & Benesch, 2016; Stanley, 2015). Greater precision on these issues remains vital to ongoing debates about the regulation of speech on- and off-line, and efforts worldwide to diminish political extremism, hate crimes, and terrorism.

The applied study of war propaganda (henceforth, "propaganda," for sake of brevity) faces several challenges. The first is that despite a surplus of publications about how propaganda works (Bernays, 2005; Ellul, 1973; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2018), little is known about the actual effects of propaganda on perpetrators or targeted populations. Most scholarly works to date offer generalized theories based on putatively universal techniques of mass persuasion (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001) or post-hoc observations about notorious propagandists (Bytwerk, 2004). An important exception is the empirically-driven, post-conflict ethnographic literature on the Rwandan genocide (for a review, see Kiper, 2015). A remarkable finding from these studies is that regional coverage of Hutu propaganda by the radio station RTLM correlated with a 10% increase in regional participation in mass violence (Yanigizawa-Drott, 2014, p. 44; see also Thompson, 2007). Nonetheless, even this finding is contested, as there is debate about how exactly, and to what extent, RTLM amplified perpetration (Mironko, 2007; Straus, 2007).

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[1] Propaganda is defined as political communication that deliberatively attempts to shape the perceptions, manipulate the cognition, or direct the behavior of audiences toward some desired goal of the propagandist (Wilson, 2017, pp. 20–1; see also Jowett & O'Donnell, 2018, p. 6). Building on this definition, war propaganda is any such political communication in the context of war, intergroup conflict, or rising tensions between groups.

Another challenge is understanding the dissemination of propaganda on social media by hate groups (e.g., Alvarez-Benjumea & Winter, 2018), terrorist organizations (e.g., Lakomy, 2019), militaries (Potzsch, 2015; Zeitzoff, 2017), and state-aligned 'trolls' (e.g., Kargar & Rauchfleisch, 2019). Recent studies indicate that such online propaganda can increase political polarization (e.g., Bulut & Yoruk, 2017), support for exclusionary movements (e.g., Farkas, Schou, & Neumayer, 2018), violent ideations (Shortland, Nader, Imperillo, Ross, & Dmello, 2017), and intolerance for distant others (Hoffner & Rehkoff, 2011; Kalmoe, 2014; Schemer, 2012; Soral, Bilewicz, & Winiewski, 2017). As with radio or television sources, the challenge remains to identify the mechanisms through which propaganda induces violent effects and whether it is a primary or secondary cause (see Aly, MacDonald, Jarvis, & Chen, eds., 2017).

Determining the concrete effects of different types of propaganda has flummoxed international law over the last two decades. At speech crime trials, prosecutors have struggled to demonstrate a so-called "possible causal link" between propaganda and mass crimes (see Benesch, 2012; Wilson, 2015), and about half of all defendants have been acquitted. Most convictions to date have been based on the intentions of the accused and the proximate timing of their harmful messages and subsequent violence (Wilson, 2017, pp. 128–38). Despite the centrality on intentions and consequence, and the clear inability to demonstrate cause-and-effect, international criminal tribunals continue to demand clear and compelling evidence that propaganda causes audiences to perpetrate or accept outgroup persecution (pp. 71–99). While persuasion studies demonstrate the influence of authority figures and the power of the situation on violence, they are rather silent about the types of propagandistic messages (e.g., atrocity, dehumanization, revenge, etc.) that induce violence. Accordingly, there is a definitive need in law, cognitive science, and behavioral studies to develop informed theories about propaganda, and to generate data regarding the actual impact of propaganda on intended audiences (see also Dojčinović, 2019).

3 Mass Manipulation

It is not our intention here to advance a new theory of war propaganda, but rather to scrutinize the strongest social science theory to emerge from speech crime trials. In the case of Serb ultranationalist Vojislav Šešelj at the ICTY (Šešelj IT-03-67), expert witness and sociologist Anthony Oberschall (2006) advanced what is known as the *information processing model of mass manipulation*. Based on historical cases of mass crimes, Oberschall (see also 2000, 2012) claims that the world's most notorious propagandists contribute to persecution by using mass media to shift a population's moral judgments about the legitimacy of inflicting violence on an outgroup. Specifically, propagandists such as Šešelj exploit sociopolitical crises, and in many cases manufacture them, to fabricate public paranoia about existential threats, thereby creating a popular need to remove the apparent sources of those threats (Oberschall, 2006, p. 13). Propagandists then scapegoat threats onto an identifiable civilian population and also frame the regime's actions against the scapegoated group – which ultimately empower and enrich state-aligned elites – as providing sociopolitical relief to the public (pp. 12–17). For authority figures, the key to manipulating a population is using mass media to saturate the public space with threat messages such as false news reports and inflammatory claims about an enemy (pp. 12–13; 34–38).

While mass media is a necessary condition for mass manipulation, it is the underlying shift in cognition that often suffices to inculcate in the population an acceptance of persecution. Here, harmful messages play the central role of shifting people's thinking away from a peacetime frame, in which cooperative outgroup relations are valued, to a crisis frame, in which ingroup protections and defending against outgroup threats are prioritized (p. 15). A crisis frame is a frame of mind that occurs at the individual level and collectively when a population comes to view its current sociopolitical situation through the lens of extreme ingroup commitments – in particular, nationalism (which we return to below) – and share in the central belief of coalitional members that they are innocent victims targeted by a maligned outgroup (see also Hett, 2018; Mamdani, 2001). Further, ingroup members come to identify with their culture's mythic heroes whose actions, which propagandists twist to serve present-day threats, are considered just and, in many cases, destined or divinely sanctioned (Oberschall, 2006, pp. 12–17). Critically, targeted outgroups are portrayed as the embodiment of historical enemies, whose living members are responsible for past wrongs and current crises, including the ingroup's way of life or its survival (pp. 17–18). Consequentially, after exposure to harmful messages, the population becomes more likely to regard violent actions against the outgroup as a necessary and justified form of self-defense (p. 21).

To illustrate, Oberschall (2006, 2012) observes how President Slobodan Milošević led a coalition of ultranationalists in Serbia to power and orchestrated a series of armed conflicts to seize so-called Serbian lands from Muslims and Croatians, thus engulfing the Balkans in a decade of brutal warfare. Before the conflicts began, ultranationalists seized on rising nationalist sentiments and used Serbia's state-controlled mass media to blame the mounting crises on Muslims and Croatians. Šešelj, a leading propagandist, served as the central voice of ultranationalist leaders, who endeavored to convince the Serbian population that they, and all of Serbia, would be destroyed unless they reclaimed a homeland and excluded threatening neighbors from it.

Once Yugoslav succession commenced, Šešelj used his authority and media access to mobilize Chetnik fighters, to gain public support from the Serbian Orthodox Church, and to spread disinformation about non-Serbs (Oberschall, 2006, pp. 43–4). Šešelj claimed that cleansing Croatians and Muslims from Serbian territories was not only necessary to prevent a Serbian genocide, but also to enact payback for historical crimes against Serbs (pp. 17–20). He also framed Serbia's military and paramilitary assaults as protecting Europe (p. 40; see also Segesten, 2011, p. 179). For Oberschall (2006), Šešelj's messages heightened Serbian fears about ingroup survival, diminished empathy for Muslims and Croatians, and increased support for both military and paramilitary campaigns into Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo (pp. 5–9, 18–37, 44–5). Hence, Šešelj contributed to mass violence in the Yugoslav Wars, including numerous massacres and genocidal acts (see also Oberschall, 2012).

In 2018, Šešelj's acquittal by the ICTY Trial Chamber was overturned by the Appeals Chamber of the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT). His conviction for hate speech and instigating persecution rested on his intent to target Croatian civilians, the timing of a single speech, and subsequent ethnic cleansing in Hrtkovci, Serbia. Although Oberschall's work was not directly cited in Šešelj's conviction (largely due to unprecedented courtroom proceedings in which Šešelj, who represented himself, managed to derail the presentation of witnesses and evidence; see Ristic, 2016), it informed several background assumptions and crystalized arguments about the role of mass manipulation in the commission of crimes against humanity.[2] Thus, Oberschall's theory of mass manipulation is likely to influence future cases involving war propaganda.

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[2] See Akayesu, ICTR-96-4; Banović, IT-02-65/1-S; Nahimana, Barayagwisa, Ngeze, ICTR-99-52; Karadžić, IT-95-5/18; Kordić & Cerkez, IT-95-14/2; Tadić, IT-94-1.

4 The Content of War Propaganda

In his theory, Oberschall (2006) advanced two untested but regularly advocated assertions. The first is that propagandists instigate support or engagement in violence by repeating nine types of harmful messages:

- *Direct threat or paranoia*: conveying a threatening message about the outgroup that arouses fears or public demand for action to reduce the threat (p. 13).
- *Past atrocities*: referencing historical or recent atrocities against the ingroup (whether genuine or fabricated) to depict the ingroup's actions against the outgroup as justified (p. 53).
- *Victimization*: referring to past or ongoing victimization and stressing that unless the ingroup takes action, the population will be victimized again (p. 18)
- *Justice*: attempting to create a consensus that actions against the outgroup are just and consistent with laws or customs (p. 11).
- *Revenge*: claiming that the ingroup bears no responsibility for the conflict or violence enacted against the outgroup since the ingroup is merely retaliating for unpunished crimes committed against them (p. 28).
- *Religion*: appealing to religion or using religious language to construct a moral conscience or spiritual principle behind the ingroup's actions (p. 36).
- *Nationalistic speech*: arguing that because the ingroup and state are congruent, members of the ingroup are justified in defending the "nation's" traditions, lands, ancestry, language, and culture (p. 5).
- *Negative outgroup stereotyping*: generalizing or labelling everyone from the outgroup according to the ingroup's most negative and oversimplified images or ideas about the outgroup (p. 22).
- *Dehumanization*: depicting the outgroup as animals, pests, diseases, or otherwise harmful to the ingroup and not fully human (p. 12).

Remarkably, the above categories and content identified by Oberschall parallel similar language recently associated with terrorist organizations and hate groups (Lakomy, 2019) as well as militaristic regimes who manipulate memories of intractable conflicts to bolster political policies (Bar-Tal, Oren, & Nets-Zehngut, 2014). Although recent studies suggest that such violent language elevates aggression (e.g., Kalmoe, 2014), it is less understood whether certain categories of propaganda – and the particular messages identified by Oberschall – engender support for violence. This leads to another untested assertion in international criminal law.

5 Harmful Speech in the Context of Extreme Nationalism

Oberschall's (2006, p. 33) second claim is that the effects of propaganda are strengthened by extreme nationalism (EN). EN is any nationalist commitment pushed to the extreme, whereby the "nation," whether an ethnic, religious or racial group, is portrayed as the state itself, and whose concerns are prioritized above nearly all others (see also Berezin, 2019; Brubaker, 1992, 2012; Juergensmeyer, 2010). Often peaking during national renewal movements (Grosby, 2019), EN goes beyond nationalism's mere support for state sovereignty, self-determination and cultural preservation, and embraces an absolute devotion to restoring the "nation." This typically includes reinstating traditional group hierarchies, reclaiming lost territories, and settling scores with national enemies (Blamires, 2006, p. 452). In addition, it includes heightened authoritarianism, xenophobia, anti-globalization, and mythic notions about the nation's destiny (Gorski & Turkmen-Dervisoglu, 2013, pp. 193–6; Juergensmeyer, 2019, pp. 5–8). Thus, when coupled with propaganda, EN makes a population more likely to shift to a crisis frame and thus reject nonviolent conflict-management and accept violence against apparent threats to the nation, including civilian populations (Oberschall, 2006, p. 39).

There is no shortage of observations linking EN with mass violence. A common observation is that EN renders a population more willing to accept the prospects of war, and makes propaganda more explosive by rousing emotional commitments to national defense (Brewer, 1999; Dyrstad, 2012; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006; Weisel & Bohm, 2015). In a similar vein, heightened nationalism is said to contribute to a biopolitical zeal (Foucault, 1997) among a majority for vilifying a domestic other (Mbembe, 2003; Molina-Guzmán, 2019; Panaitiu, 2020). Another observation is that cultural contexts with longstanding power differentials or recurrent intergroup conflict are more vulnerable than other cultures to targeting historically threating outgroups (Benesch, 2012; Leader Maynard & Benesch, 2016). Finally, other scholars observe that the very concept of nationalism is an acquired cognitive schema, propagandists are particularly adept at manipulating when it is heightened among a population (Brubaker, Loveman, & Stamatov, 2004; Oberschall, 2012).

In addition to these observations, there is indirect evidence that EN may strengthen the effects of propaganda. For example, recent psychological studies suggest that strong national commitments can fuse one's personal and national identity (Zmigrod, Rentfrow, & Robbins, 2018), sow distrust for alternatives to nationalism (e.g., pluralism, diversity, or cosmpolitanism; see Brock & Atkinson, 2008), and reinforce indifference or antagonism for persons outside the nation (Leidner et al., 2010). Strong nationalism may also satisfy human proclivities for ingroup commitments and vigilance toward outgroups such as parochial altruism (Bowles, 2012), ingroup belonging (Brock & Atkinson, 2008), and preference for group boundaries (Moffett, 2013).

These observations support Oberschall's (2006) claim that EN strengthens the effects of harmful messages (pp. 38–39). As EN increases, it is more likely that one perceives the actions of an outgroup as threatening and is therefore more willing to support violence to protect the ingroup from the outgroup. Whether this is the case and the degree to which it does so remains an empirical question, and to our knowledge, there is no experimental evidence on the direct effects of EN and propaganda. Hence, we consider this study as a starting point for investigating propaganda as it pertains to international criminal law and the cognitive science of nationalism.

6 Current Study

We conducted an experiment at Belgrade University to explore the effects of harmful messages on judgments about ingroups and outgroups, including support for outgroup violence. Our research design was based on Oberschall's predictions (2000, 2006, 2012) and examined excerpts from actual speeches identified by Oberschall as fitting the nine categories of the most dangerous propaganda, and references to such speeches, at Šešelj's trial. Accordingly, these excerpts are pertinent examples from the most recent speech crime trial in international criminal law.

While nationalist sentiment in Serbia has decreased since the Yugoslav Wars, recent studies indicate that EN persists in Serbian politics and mass media (e.g., Djokic, 2012). Thus, although Serbia is a dynamic culture with multiple identities and political orientations, it remains a relevant context for investigating propaganda and heightened nationalism.

Taken together, the present study tested the following hypotheses:

> Hypothesis 1: Harmful messages will differentially contribute to (a) increased justifications for using violence to resolve political conflict, (b) increased empathy for the ingroup, and (c) decreased empathy for the outgroup.
>
> Hypothesis 2: Harmful messages will interact with the effects of prior levels of nationalism on (a), (b), and (c).

Attempting to falsify these hypotheses is important for contemporary studies of propaganda. First, if harmful messages contribute to (a), (b) or (c), it would count as tentative evidence reinforcing Oberschall's theory and also fill the gap in international criminal law regarding which kinds of messages are most likely to induce potentially harmful intergroup dynamics. Second, if any of the harmful messages interact with heightened nationalism to influence (a), (b) or (c), it would provide tentative support for the strong effects of propaganda on nationalistic audiences.

7 Methods

7.1 *Site and Procedure*

An online experiment was developed using Qualtrics and administered on Amazon's MTurk webservice to participants (*n* = 416) recruited from Belgrade University in 2012, who received 200 Serbian dinars (equivalent to $2.00) and class credit for participation. After following a weblink, participants were informed in Serbian on the first webpage that the experiment investigated social cognition and decision-making. If they consented to participate, participants first answered 43 randomized questions of four personality characteristics on a five-point scale from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree." These four personality characteristics consisted of 15 questions on nationalism, 12 on authoritarianism (Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991), 10 on self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), and 6 on just world beliefs (Collns, 1974). Participants were then asked to imagine themselves belonging to a fictitious country described as East Margolia, and thereafter told:

> The following paragraphs are about the countries of East Margolia and West Margolia. Tensions have been rising between the two countries, who once were a single country. They are now on the brink of war. The following speech was given by a political leader of East Margolia. Please read it VERY carefully and then answer some questions about your opinions.[3]

Participants were then told they were to evaluate a speech by an East Margolian leader and randomly assigned to one of nine messages which served as a

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[3] "Sledeći tekstovi su o zemljama Istočne i Zapadne Margolije. Tenzije između ove dve zemlje, koje su nekada bile jedna država, su u porastu. One su sada na ivici rata. Politički vođa Istočne Margolije je održao sledeći govor. Molimo Vas da VEOMA pažljivo pročitate taj govor, a onda da odgovorite na postavljena pitanja."

TABLE 1 Frequency of themes in Šešelj's Speech Acts

Type of propaganda	**N**	**%**
Direct threat	99	31.2%
Past atrocity	47	14.9%
Victimization	40	12.6%
Negative outgroup stereotype	40	12.6%
Nationalistic speech	29	9.2%
Dehumanization	21	6.6%
Revenge	21	6.6%
Justice	18	5.7%
Religion	2	0.6%
Total	**317**	**100%**

distinct treatment. The nine treatments were thus adapted from the actual public speeches and writings by Šešelj during the peak of his propaganda campaign from 1990 to 1994.

In adapting Šešelj's speeches, we selected nine utterances from a sample of 317 speeches (Table 1) that were themselves drawn from forty-four propaganda sources examined during Šešelj's trial (Oberschall, 2006; Prosecutor v. Šešelj, IT-03-67). Each selection was based on an exemplary instance of speech coded by Oberschall and his assistants for the ICTY, and identified using interrater reliability as belonging to one of nine types: direct threat, past atrocity, victimization, justice, revenge, religion, nationalistic, negative stereotype, and dehumanization (see Supplementary Materials for excerpts). Each speech was then altered by changing the referenced ingroup (Serbs) and outgroup (Croatians) to the fictitious countries "East Margolia" and "West Margolia," respectively.

As an illustration of our adaptation and translation back into Serbian, we include here the modified speech excerpt for revenge:

> When it comes to revenge, you know, revenge is blind. There will be innocent victims, but what can be done? So, the West Margolians better think first. With our strikes, we won't pay attention to who we hit. And unless the West Margolian's urgently disarm their base, there is going to be a lot of blood spilt.
>
> We Eastern Margolians are very tolerant and will remain such as a people. But, if the West Margolians try to massacre us, the East Margolians will not forgive nor forget. Our revenge will be horrific.

> I don't think that all West Margolians have to pay for their crimes. What is fundamental to our people, no matter how much we have been massacred, abused, and humiliated throughout history, is that we East Margolians have never stained our hands with the blood of innocent Margolians. We have never been unholy like that and will not act that way. But we will return to the West Margolians an equal measure of what they have done to us.
>
> This is a lesson for the West Margolian people. We may be weaker than West Margolians in arms, but we have a knightly heart and an unbreakable will. Let them just continue attacking our lives – and then we shall not only present them with the bill for current victims, but we shall collect the fee for all victims. The people of the East Margolians will no longer forgive or forget. Those who survived have no right to forgive in the name of the slaughtered.[4]

Next, participants answered twenty randomized questions on support for violence; namely, justificatory support for violence such as taking revenge for perceived wrongdoing or feeling morally justified in enacting violence, as well as perceptions of East and West Margolian relations. Participants then answered two questions on frequency of exposure to violent media (viz. violent shows, films or video games), and nine demographic questions, including gender, age, religious affiliation, strength of religious affiliation (measured as a composite of three questions), political orientation, education, environmental and regional orientation in Serbia, and income. As a check-question, participants were also asked from whose perspective they were imagining themselves, and we assessed whether they could identify the quote, either as Šešelj's or pertaining to the Serbian conflict. In total, 416 enrolled, 17 were eliminated for not completing the study, and though no one identified the speech as belonging to Šešelj, two participants identified the speeches as originally pertaining to Serbia. After completing these questions, participants were debriefed about the nature of the study (see Supplementary file 1: Appendix).

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[4] "Znate, kada se sprovodi odmazda, osveta je slepa. Biće tu i nevinih žrtava, ali, šta se tu može. Neka prvo Zapadni Margolijanci razmisle. Udare, mi nećemo gledati koga udaramo. I ako se pod hitno ne razoružaju, biće mnogo krvi.

Istočni Margolijanci su vrlo tolerantni i ostaće takav narod. Ali, ako Zapadni Margolijanci pokušaju da nas masakriraju, Istočni Margolijanci više neće ni praštati, ni zaboravljati. Naša će osveta biti strašna.

Ne mislim da svi Zapadni Margolijanci moraju ispaštati zbog njihovih zločina. Ono što je osnovna vrednost našeg naroda, bez obzira koliko ubijan, zlostavljan i ponižavan kroz istoriju, je da Istočni Margolijani nikada svoje ruke nisu umazali krvlju nevinih Margolijanci. Se nikada nisu svetili na taj način i neće se svetiti na taj nači. Što će Zapadnim Margolijancima vraćati ravnom mjerom za ono što su oni njemu učinili.

Ovo je poslednja lekcija Zapadnomargolijanskom narodu. Slabije smo od Zapadnih Margolijanaca naoružani ali imamo viteško srce i nesalomljivu volju. Neka su i dalje atakuju na naše živote ne samo da ćemo im ispostaviti račune za današnje žrtve. Istočno Margolijanaca narod više neće oprostiti ili zaboraviti. Oni koji su preživeli, nemaju pravo da praštaju u ime zaklanih!"

7.2 *Participants*

The sample (*n* = 399) was 56% female (female and male were coded as 1 and 2, respectively, for correlational purposes), mostly ranged in age from 18 to 29, had no religious affiliation, oriented toward the middle-liberal end of the political spectrum, lived in a middle income household, and were from Belgrade, in Central Serbia. The details of the sample composition are documented in Table 2.

TABLE 2 Sample characteristics (*n* = 399)

	n	**%**	**Mean**	**SD**
Gender				
Male	175	43.9		
Female	224	56.1		
Age			1.93	1.32
1) 18–29	237	59.4		
2) 30–39	48	12		
3) 40–49	44	11		
4) 50–59	43	10.8		
5) 60+	27	6.8		
Religion				
Serbian Orthodox	10	2.5		
Roman Catholic	4	1		
Hindu	2	0.5		
Protestant Christian	6	1.5		
Jewish	6	1.5		
Muslim	7	1.8		
Other	75	18.8		
None	289	72.4		
"How strongly do you affiliate with your religion?"			2.96	1.35
1) Not strongly at all	93	23.3		
2) Not strongly	37	9.3		

TABLE 2 Sample characteristics (*cont.*)

	n	%	Mean	SD
3) Somewhat	116	29.1		
4) Strongly	99	24.8		
5) Very strongly	54	13.5		
"How strongly do you hold to your religious beliefs?"			2.91	1.37
1) Not strongly at all	98	24.6		
2) Not strongly	44	11		
3) Somewhat	106	26.6		
4) Strongly	97	24.3		
5) Very strongly	54	13.5		
"How strongly do you agree with the teaching of your religion?"			3.04	1.32
1) Not strongly at all	77	19.3		
2) Not strongly	47	11.8		
3) Somewhat	122	30.6		
4) Strongly	90	22.6		
5) Very strongly	63	15.8		
Political Orientation			2.39	.961
1) Very liberal	75	18.8		
2) Somewhat liberal	148	37.1		
3) In-between	125	31.3		
4) Somewhat conservative	46	11.5		
5) Very conservative	5	1.3		
Education			5.79	1.13
1) Primary school completed	3	.8		
2) Unfinished secondary school	6	1.5		
3) Completed three-year secondary school	11	2.8		
4) Completed four-year secondary school	190	47.6		
5) Gymnasium	47	11.8		
6) Faculty (college)	125	31.3		
7) Specialization (Master's, Ph.D.)	17	4.3		
"Which of the following best describes the environment in which your household is located?"			3.23	1.05
1) Rural area or village	36	9		
2) Small town	76	19		
3) Suburb of a city	48	12		
4) Urban area or big city	239	59.9		

TABLE 2 Sample characteristics (*cont.*)

	n	%	Mean	SD
"In which part of Serbian territory do you live?"			2.06	.55
1) Northern Serbia	50	12.5		
2) Central Serbia	274	68.7		
3) Southern Serbia	73	18.3		
Income			2.48	.96
1) Low	74	18.5		
2) Low-middle	110	27.6		
3) Middle	173	43.4		
4) High-middle	34	8.5		
5) High	8	2		

7.3 *Principal Components Analysis*

To understand the underlying structure of variables, we conducted exploratory factor analysis and principal components analysis (PCA) with varimax-rotation technique of the twenty questions on justificatory support for violence and perceptions of East and West Margolians. The PCA revealed three factors which we explore here that explained a total of 50.57% of variance (see Supplementary file 1: Appendix). The first factor accounting for 22.36% of variance was *justification of violence* consisted of seven items: good people could engage in violence, law could be taken into one's own hands, revenge was justified, force was justified, violence was justified, even good people would commit violence, and violence could be morally justified. The second factor, which accounted for 14.87% of variance was *ingroup empathy*, comprised three items with respect to perceptions of the ingroup, East Margolians: understanding fellow East Margolians' viewpoints, feeling their emotions, and behaving like them. *Outgroup empathy*, which accounted for 13.34% of variance, was comprised of three similar items concerning the outgroup, West Margolians: understanding their viewpoint, feeling their emotions, and behaving like them. Communality scores indicate that these factors reflected clear patterns in participant response. Additional support was provided by Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (0.730) and Bartlett's test ($\chi 2$ (136) = 2966.68, $p < .001$).

To explore these factors, correlations were examined alongside participants' personality characteristics (see Table 3). Justification of violence positively correlated with ingroup empathy, outgroup empathy, exposure to violent media and higher income, but negatively with just world beliefs and being female.

TABLE 3 Correlation of observed variables and personality characteristics

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Support for Violence	–													
2. Ingroup Empathy	**.123**	–												
3. Outgroup Empathy	**.233**	**.137**	–											
4. Authoritarianism	.082	**.170**	.054	–										
5. Nationalism	.025	**.464**	.012	**.390**	–									
6. Just World Beliefs	**−.148**	.090	**.105**	−.006	**.212**	–								
7. Self-Esteem	−.001	**.085**	−.067	**.214**	**.153**	.001	–							
8. Engaging with violent media	**.290**	−.012	.069	−.007	−.029	−.081	−.061	–						
9. Political Orientation[a]	.058	.092	−.060	**.164**	**.259**	.047	−.023	.094	–					
10. Income[b]	**.102**	−.068	.028	−.069	**−.203**	.002	.042	−.004	**−.121**	–				
11. Religiosity[c]	−.048	**.238**	.003	**.115**	**.411**	**.178**	.006	−.014	**.321**	**−.125**	–			

Note. Coefficients printed in bold are significant ($p < .05$).

a Political orientation is measured as tending towards conservativism, where 1 = very liberal, 2 = somewhat liberal, 3 = in-between, 4 = somewhat conservative, 5 = very conservative.

b Income (SES) was measured as 1 = low, 2 = low-middle, 3 = middle, 4 = high-middle, 5 = high. ender is measured here as being male, were 2 = male and 1 = female.

c Religiosity was based on a composite of religious strength regarding the degree to which one affiliated, held to the beliefs, and agreed with the teachings one's religion.

TABLE 3 Correlation of observed variables (*cont.*)

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
12. Education[d]	–.021	**–.174**	.012	**–.133**	–.190	–.092	–.041	–.076	.013	**.287**	–.079	–		
13. Environment[e]	–.013	**.111**	–.010	.004	**.188**	.094	**.139**	–.064	–.077	.039	.042	**.169**	–	
14. Regional Territory[f]	.042	–.016	–.089	–.065	**–.102**	–.062	–.079	.006	.009	.015	.098	.041	**–.216**	–
15. Gender[g]	**.151**	.086	–.028	–.009	**.194**	.041	–.059	**.346**	**.117**	.044	**.153**	.051	.073	–.034

[d] Education was measured on scales of 1 = unfinished elementary school, 2 = primary school completed (8 years), 3 = unfinished secondary school, 4 = completed three-year secondary school, 5 = completed four-year secondary school, 6 = higher school, 7 = faculty, 8 = specialization, Master's or PhD.

[e] Environment was measured on a scale from rural to urban, where 1 = village, 2 = small town, 3 = suburb of city, 4 = city center.

[f] Regional territory was measured on a scale from Northern to Southern Serbia, where 1 = North Serbia, 2 = Central Serbia, 3 = Southern Serbia.

[g] Gender was measured as 1 = Female, 2 = Male.

Ingroup empathy positively correlated with outgroup empathy, authoritarianism, nationalism, religiosity and living in an urban environment, while negatively correlating with higher education levels. The only positive correlation for outgroup empathy was with just world beliefs. Finally, given the purported importance of nationalism with these factors, we also examined associations with nationalism, which positively correlated with just world beliefs, self-esteem, political conservativism, religiosity and living in an urban environment, but negatively correlated with higher income and education levels.

Next, we fitted Bayesian linear regression models using the Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) method to examine whether exposure to the nine types of messages predicted the likelihood of justification of violence, ingroup empathy, and outgroup empathy. To carry out Bayesian regressions, we implemented models in the PROC MCMC (Statistical Analysis Software, SAS version 9.4). We used 5,000 MCMC samples, which were taken from every tenth iteration, after a burn-in of 5,000 iterations to compute all posterior estimates and DICs. The MCMC convergence was checked using diagnostic procedures including trace plots and autocorrelation plots within PROC MCMC procedure in SAS 9.4.

8 Results

The details of the Bayesian regression analysis for the effects of harmful speeches on justification of violence is documented in Table 4. To determine a significant predictor, we used a posterior estimate to be "statistically significant at a significance level 0.05" if the corresponding 95% HPD (Highest Posterior Density) interval does not include the value of zero. Using this criterion, we showed that none of the predictors were statistically significant. These results are relevant for Hypothesis 1(a).

We then ran another Bayesian regression to evaluate the effects of harmful messages on ingroup empathy (Table 5). Of these messages, victimization (b = 1.01, SD = .221), revenge (b = .864, SD = .217), nationalistic (b = .708, SD = .219), past atrocities (b = .615, SD = .233), dehumanization (b = .530, SD = .229), and justice (b = 0.423, SD = .212) were statistically significant insofar as the 95% HPD interval did not include the value of zero and positively associated with ingroup empathy. On the other hand, direct threat (b = .410, SD = .213), religion (b = .360, SD = .240), and negative stereotype (b = .046, SD = .227) were not statistically significant. Taken together, the analysis provides support for Hypothesis 1(b).

Table 6 details our final Bayesian regression assessing the effects of harmful messages on outgroup empathy. Of these, the only statistically significant message to decrease outgroup empathy was revenge (b = −.474, SD = 0.186)

TABLE 4 Posterior summaries of justification of violence for harmful message types

			95% HPD interval	
Predictor	***Mean***	***SD***	**Lower**	**Upper**
Past atrocities	−0.372	0.200	−0.748	0.026
Victimization	−0.330	0.185	−0.678	0.039
Justice	−0.327	0.185	−0.678	0.050
Negative stereotype	−0.242	0.188	−0.604	0.121
Religion	−0.169	0.200	−0.577	0.209
Nationalistic speech	−0.105	0.184	−0.485	0.242
Dehumanization	−0.080	0.191	−0.445	0.290
Direct threat	−0.048	0.178	−0.397	0.302
Revenge	−0.025	0.180	−0.372	0.322

TABLE 5 Posterior summaries of ingroup empathy for harmful message types

			95% HPD interval	
Predictor	***Mean***	***SD***	**Lower**	**Upper**
Victimization	1.01	0.221*	0.594	1.443
Revenge	0.864	0.217*	0.441	1.291
Nationalistic speech	0.708	0.219*	0.279	1.136
Past atrocities	0.615	0.233*	0.153	1.072
Dehumanization	0.530	0.229*	0.073	0.970
Justice	0.423	0.212*	0.021	0.848
Direct threat	0.410	0.213	−0.021	0.804
Religion	0.360	0.240	−0.111	0.829
Negative stereotype	0.046	0.227	−0.386	0.485

* stands for the significant predictor.

insofar as 95% HPD interval did not include the value of zero. However, messages of justice (b = −.275, SD = .192), negative stereotype (b = −.264, SD = .194), religion (b = .203, SD = .206), nationalistic (b = .165, SD = .185), direct threat (b = −.103, SD = .187), dehumanization (b = −.089, SD = .197), past atrocities (b = −0.053, SD = .206), and victimization (b = −.054, SD = .196) were not statistically significant. These results offer support for Hypothesis 1(c).

TABLE 6 Posterior summaries of outgroup empathy for harmful message types

			95% HPD interval	
Predictor	***Mean***	***SD***	**Lower**	**Upper**
Revenge	−0.474	0.186*	−0.833	−0.110
Justice	−0.275	0.192	−0.635	0.110
Negative stereotype	−0.264	0.194	−0.630	0.127
Religion	0.203	0.206	−0.216	0.589
Nationalistic speech	0.165	0.185	−0.184	0.538
Direct threat	−0.103	0.187	−0.475	0.260
Dehumanization	−0.089	0.197	−0.451	0.319
Past atrocities	−0.053	0.206	−0.460	0.341
Victimization	−0.054	0.196	−0.437	0.329

* stands for the significant predictor.

To explore possible interactions between harmful messages and nationalism, we completed a series of additional Bayesian regression analyses using interaction terms. Because our analyses were intended to find the most likely interaction effects, we examined several regressions for nationalism and other significant demographic variables such as authoritarianism, religiosity, and exposure to violent media, as predictors of ingroup and outgroup empathy (see Supplementary file 1: Appendix). Of these exploratory analyses, only one interaction was a significant moderator prior to propaganda exposure: a participant's heightened nationalism and frequency of exposure to violent media were together statistically significant for outgroup empathy, b = .539, 95% HPD interval (0.158, 0.923). While this finding offers tentative support for the role of heightened nationalism and violent media exposure in strengthening the effects of propaganda, it does not provide explicit support for Hypothesis 2(b or c).

9 Discussion

As the first study of its kind, the results were rather surprising. Prosecutors in speech crime trials have argued for decades that there is a clear causal-link between propaganda, extreme nationalism, and support for violence – an outlook crystalized in Oberschall's (2006, 2012) theory of mass persuasion. Surprisingly, we found no evidence that propaganda increased violence justifications (1.a) or that such justifications were moderated by extreme nationalism (2.a). Yet, exposure to propaganda increased ingroup empathy (1.b) and decreased outgroup empathy (1.c), and though extreme nationalism did not moderate these effects (2.b and 2.c), the interaction of extreme nationalism and exposure to violent media was also significant for ingroup and outgroup empathy. In what follows, we discuss the possible implications of these findings for criminal law and behavioral and brain sciences, and offer suggestions for further research.

The most straightforward explanation for the lack of effect on violence justifications is that onetime exposure to propaganda is unlikely to induce support for violence. This coheres with studies indicating that combatants require considerable preparation for engaging in violence, including social pressures (Li, 2004; Mironko, 2007), indoctrination into fighting units, and combat training (Oppenheim & Weintraub, 2017). Likewise, non-combatants in general do not support violence unless they have been attacked (Wallace, 2012), collectively blame an outgroup for wrongdoings (e.g., Lickel et al., 2006), or lose a functioning marketplace of ideas (Benesch, 2012). To what extent propaganda changes people's attitudes towards violence after long-term exposure or how context influences these effects still needs to be investigated more thoroughly.

A remarkable take-away from our study is that certain types of harmful messages in war propaganda (references to past atrocities, victimization, revenge and dehumanization) increased ingroup empathy, while only one type (revenge speech) decreased outgroup empathy. Other research has found that similar messages increase negative intergroup attitudes – for instance, reminders of past atrocities activate group-defensive strategies (Kofta & Slawuta, 2013); references to exclusive ingroup victimization strengthen ingroup commitments (Cohrs, McNeill, & Vollhardt, 2015); and dehumanizing messages enable outgroup violence by conveying that, albeit immoral, attacking an outgroup is instrumentally necessary (Rai, Valdesolo, & Graham, 2017). Furthermore, given the known influence of revenge on group cooperation and punishment (e.g., McCullough, 2008; McCullough, Kurzban, & Tabak, 2013), it is likely that revenge messages are highly effective in strengthening group empathies (see also de Vos et al., 2018; Rodriguez-Carballeira & Javaloy, 2005)

We therefore suggest, contrary to recent speech crime trials, that the effects of propaganda are not due to any single speech act, but rather exposure to messages over time that change a population's attitudes toward groups (see also Seliktar, 1980; Sears & Funk, 1999). Specifically, propaganda appears to work by preparing the groundwork for persecution through the enhancement of apparent divisions between groups, and thereby undermining intergroup relations and the ingroup's concern for an outgroup. As a result, international courts are likely mistaken when emphasizing the cause-and-effect nature of a single speech but correct when stressing the significance of an entire propaganda campaign in an environment of extremist ideology, including extreme nationalism.[5]

Based on our results, exposure to violent media may also be necessary for inducing support for violence. The effects of such exposure may explain why propaganda campaigns are often accompanied by both nationalistic territorial ambitions and violent imagery. We propose, then, that the combination of altering group empathy (viz. an increased empathy for one's ingroup and decreased empathy for an outgroup), heightened nationalistic sentiment, and exposure to violent imagery are core cognitive facets behind the most harmful messages in propaganda (see also Kiper, 2020).

In particular, given that enhanced empathy correlates with social cognition (Völlm et al., 2006) and affective moral decision-making (see Greene & Haidt, 2002; Greene et al., 2001; 2002), harmful messages in a propaganda campaign may function mostly to increase emotionally-driven regard for an ingroup. Yet, they also function to move a population toward instrumentality treating – and passively or actively disregarding – an outgroup, as decreased empathy correlates with utilitarian moral decision-making (Ibid.) and decreased responsiveness to another's pain (Ruckman et al., 2015). And while the perceived division between groups is exacerbated by ingroup commitments (e.g., Haidt & Graham, 2007), extreme nationalism – especially sacrificial nationalism, in which all is given for the "nation" (Hogan, 2009, pp. 265–67) – may significantly alter group commitments, arguably by means of identity fusion (Swann et al., 2010) and various collective rituals (Sosis, Kress, & Boster, 2007). Furthermore, exposure to violent media is known to increase aggression by elevating physical arousal and the likelihood of imitating observed violence, as well as priming cognitive scripts for aggression-supporting beliefs and behaviors (Anderson et al., 2003). Thus, propaganda that is replete with violent imagery and messages about past atrocities, ingroup victimization, revenge, and dehumanization is likely to change the intergroup attitudes of nationalistic communities towards outgroups, and thereby increase the likelihood of persecution over time rather than by a single speech act.

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[5] Just when a propaganda campaign begins-and-ends or when nationalism among a population crosses into extremism are contextual quandaries. While we are unable to address these concerns here, we do wish to note that Vojislav Šešelj carried out his propaganda campaign in the context of Serbia after a period of suppressed nationalism under Tito. This raises the question of how Serbia turned so quickly from Titoism to ultranationalism. Given the massive protests in Belgrade throughout the Milošević era, only a portion of the population experienced heightened nationalism. Further, numerous scholars (Beiber, 2002; Denitch, 1994; Kiper & Sosis, 2020) observe that much of national socialization stemmed from the Serbian Orthodox Church.

To conclude, the relationship between war propaganda and nationalism is notably weaker than prosecutors at international criminal courts have presumed. Even extreme nationalism of the type propounded by defendant Šešelj is by itself unlikely to predict justifications of violence or ingroup empathy, nor is it significant for decreasing outgroup empathy. Rather, the combination of a propagandized media environment, whether crafted by a nation-state or an online echo chamber, as well as repeated exposure to violent media, are likely critical for altering group empathies. Central factors here are the types of harmful messages and violent media conveyed to a population, the period of time in which they are exposed, and the resulting shift in group empathies that render individuals more willing than otherwise to accept outgroup prejudice if not persecution. Consequentially, international courts may do better to consider the violent nature of an entire propaganda campaign and the extremism of its recipients in their environment rather than the effects of any given speech.

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Supplementary Material

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