

An Obstacle to Decolonising Europe

White Nationalism and Its Co-option of Serbian Propaganda

Jordan Kiper

ABSTRACT

While the central aim of decolonisation is undoing colonial legacies, a major obstacle is white nationalism. A new wave of transnational anti-globalist, Islamophobic, and white-grievance tropes have hybridised with local political ideologies of right-wing politics and authoritarian populists in Europe and the United States. Here, I review the cultural characteristics of this new wave of white nationalism by focusing on its co-option of Serbian nationalist propaganda from the Yugoslav Wars and shared receptivity to narratives among far-right political groups in former colonial powers. The portrait that emerges is one of cross-cultural variations on a common theme: maintaining white supremacy and actively countering ideological challenges to it. Critically, the new wave of white nationalism expands our anthropological understanding of white supremacy but also highlights the significance of white nationalism in obstructing justice initiatives that address the race crimes of colonialism. Less consensus has been reached, however, on how to counter white nationalist networks and transnational extremist propaganda. In addition to highlighting ways to counter white nationalist propaganda, I argue that decolonising Europe and achieving its envisioned relations of sociative peace will not be fully realised unless more is done to minimise the influence of white nationalism.

KEYWORDS

Decolonisation, decolonising practices, extremism, propaganda, white nationalism, Serbia

For peace and human rights scholars (e.g. Burke 2013), decolonisation is a prerequisite for sociative peace.¹ This imperative becomes all the more urgent as attempts to deconstruct colonial ideologies develop against a new wave of white nationalism. As with neonationalism more broadly, white nationalism, in its contemporary form, has hybridised across digital networks in former colonising powers, thus alarming human rights groups. For instance, Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, recently called the latest rise in white nationalism a ‘transnational threat’ (Reuters Staff 2021). Perhaps most alarming



are its anti-globalist, Islamophobic, and white-grievance tropes, which have become common talking points for violent extremists, right-wing politicians, and populists alike, but have an unsettling history in former nationalist regimes.

As an illustration, some anti-globalist tropes can be traced to Nazi propaganda about Jews, Bolsheviks, or other intellectual elites controlling the world (Baker 2010: 158), while threatening tropes about global conspiracies, Muslims as ‘invaders,’ and the so-called ‘white genocide’ can be traced, in part, to late century Serbian nationalists (e.g. Hajdarpasic 2019). Such propaganda, often decades old, now circulates regularly across white-nationalist networks. Why is this so? What are its effects? And what can be done about it?

Here, I briefly address these questions and discuss their relevance for decolonisation. *Decolonisation* is understood broadly to cover liberation (Sanders 2019), cultural determination (Matolino 2020), and deconstruction of colonial ideologies (Betts 2012). The latter, which is the focus of this article, involves challenging the denial of colonial injustices, indigenous praxis, and cultural repatriation (Betts 2012: 29). My central claim is that decolonising practices, such as deconstructing colonial ideologies (Allen and Jobson 2016; Thomas 2018) and addressing the legacies of state-organised race crimes (Ward 2014), remain obstructed by white nationalism, the latest wave of which has crystallised around themes in Serbian nationalist propaganda. Having studied this propaganda (Kiper 2018), I suggest that its co-option by white nationalists in Europe as well as its transnational receptivity stem largely from collective white grievance, a vestige of colonial ideologies. Further, given the renewed opposition to decolonisation and racial justice efforts by white nationalists (see Benkler, Farris, and Roberts 2018; Veilleux-Lepage and Archambault 2019), a critical part of decolonising colonial ideologies in Europe (but also Australia, Canada, and especially the USA) is countering white nationalism and transnational extremist propaganda.

To be sure, I am not attempting to put Serbia in the context of present-day decolonisation, nor am I claiming that Serbian propaganda is motivated by white nationalism. Although, the othering of Muslims, Roma, and non-Serbian neighbours during the Yugoslav Wars often conflated ethnonationalism, racism, and xenophobia (Bošković 2006: 560–562). I am concerned, instead, with the current circulation of Serbian propaganda across networks of white nationalists living in Europe and other former colonising nations. In particular, I am struck by three trends: 1) co-opting Serbian tropes from the Yugoslav

Wars, 2) opposing decolonial perspectives, and 3) finding transnational appeal. In what follows, I construct my argument around these observations.

Several white nationalist perpetrators of recent mass crimes consumed and circulated the propaganda of Serbian nationalists such as ethnonationalists, paramilitary leaders, and gorilla fighters known as Chetniks (Hajdarpasic 2019; Smith and Banic 2019).² Circa the Yugoslav Wars, they claimed that Muslims were invading Europe and, along with globalists, were traitors to European-Christian values, and should therefore be expelled from the nation. Besides fascinating perpetrators of hate crimes, Serbian nationalist propaganda is one of the most popular forms of content shared across white-nationalist networks worldwide. A good example is the song ‘Karadžižu, vodi Srbe svoje’, otherwise known as ‘Remove Keab’, which advocates for the ethnic cleansing of Muslims. Like other memes, this song has become a popular chronotype; a trope that enables a shared understanding across fluid, mobile contexts (Bakhtin 1981). Despite attempts to remove it from social media, the song is routinely uploaded and appears in thousands of threads across user-created platforms (Ward 2018). It is important to stress, though, that Serbian nationalist propaganda does not represent Serbian culture, but rather extremists therein whose ideas have resonated with twenty-first century white nationalists.

Since 2013, the most common narrative in white nationalists’ rhetoric worldwide is that Muslims, immigrants, and globalists intend to overwhelm the ‘nation’ and that white (often Christian) Europeans, akin to Serbian knights or Chetniks, are the last defenders of European culture (Stevenson 2019: 236–237). This narrative has emerged in many nations with a history of colonisation (Hutchison et al. 2021: 2), and its underlying tropes have now entered politics, though mostly among the far right. Victor Orban, prime minister of Hungary, for instance, echoed white nationalists by describing immigrants as nightmarish criminals beset on destroying Europe (Wilson 2020: 6), while Czech President Milos Zeman was re-elected on an anti-immigrant, anti-globalist, and Islamophobic platform (Smith and Banic 2019). What such narratives demonstrate is that white-nationalist tropes are tolerable if not appealing to sizeable populations across Europe (Daniels 2018: 64–65).

How did this happen? Put simply, once atomised clusters of online users comprising the manosphere, identitarians, and white supremacists hybridised (Ganesh 2020: 892–893) around social media’s

algorithmically amplified communications. In so doing, they circulated propaganda that resonated with their shared sentiments, and their main tropes appealed to far-right political circles, among others (see Feola 2020).

Digging deeper, however, the portrait of white nationalism that emerges is one of cross-cultural variations on a common theme: maintaining white supremacy and actively countering ideological challenges to it. Drawing from anthropologies of race (Belisio-De Jesús and Pierre 2020), white supremacy is a spectrum of racialised power, ranging from white majoritarianism to far-right political extremism. The former asserts social primacy on the grounds of majoritarian racial composition, while the latter includes white supremacists who work to ensure that only whites exercise power (Berlet and Sunshine 2019). Extremism is understood as the refusal to accept democratic values, rules, or outcomes, whether it concerns white nationalism, militant Islamism, anarchism, or other forms (Jekel, Lehner, and Vogler 2017: 296). Extremism, in this sense, can be value-based and reject democratic means in favour of coalitional ingroup identification, or violence-based and adopt violence to achieve ingroup political commitments (Hutchison et al. 2021: 5).

That said, white nationalism spans this entire spectrum of white supremacy. The latest wave, in particular, includes groups and individuals who adopt practices and values defending colonial views: that the ‘nation’, as they imagine it, is synonymous with the white ‘race’, or, equally as specious, that whites are uniquely talented (Berlet and Sunshine 2019). For example, white-settler colonialism adopted the logic that their race, being superior to others, could engage in displacement, dispossession, and subordination to attain an imagined liberty for their ‘nation’ (Berlet and Sunshine 2019: 484). Vestiges of this worldview survive to this day. White-nationalist propaganda not only targets immigrants, Muslims, and globalists but also romanticises the colonial past, denies the severity of race crimes (Schuhmann 2017: 305–306), delegitimises racial justice as anti-patriotic, justifies the expulsion of ‘national’ enemies (Bai and Federico 2021: 1), and stresses the cultural superiority of Europe (Ganesh 2020: 898). Especially striking is its recursive narrative that the nation is superior to others but ever endangered by foreign elements. From this recursive theme, white nationalists engage in slippery slope arguments, such as the often-circulated claim that any sociopolitical compromise that breaks from the nation’s traditions will lead to an inferior culture (Hervik 2019: 538).

Thus, like many nationalists (see Kapferer 2001; 2010), white nationalists manufacture ‘otherness’ relative to an imagined nation or ethnicity and engage in an identity politics (Eriksen 2002) that insists on distinguishing ‘us’ from ‘them’ (Bošković 2019: 924). Social media, however, has allowed white nationalists today to construct an ‘us’ that includes a relative nation-state but also outside communities who are thought to share a relational embeddedness to culture, land, or ancestry. Likewise, the ‘them’ is routinely portrayed as groups associated with ideas that symbolically threaten the imaginary of white-European traditions, majoritarianism, or superiority (e.g. Farrell-Banks 2021). The latter typically encompasses immigration, miscegenation, and multiculturalism, including cultural integration and the restructuring of society so as to abandon European-centred, colonial practices or ideologies.

Taken together, then, if decolonisation is the undoing of colonial legacies and providing a means towards sociative peace, then white nationalism is a prevailing obstacle. For its propaganda and increasing popularity uphold white-supremacist ideologies and deny colonial perspectives, thus avoiding the affective labour of facing-up to colonialism (Schuhmann 2017).

What provides the transnational receptivity to Serbian nationalist propaganda? I hypothesise that it is white grievance, an identity politics – but more often than not, a collective sentiment – shared among members of a community, usually in former colonising nations, which centres on anxieties concerning cultural, economic or political change. Specifically, white grievance is a collective reaction to changes brought about by the perceived or real gains of immigrants or non-whites, and losses among ‘national’ or ‘white’ citizens (Feola 2020). Though primarily documented in the USA, white grievance remains an issue for Europe (Canada and Australia; see Hutchison et al. 2021). As Moisi (2009: 95–207) observed, events in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries eroded collective hopes in much of Europe, and thus engendered growing subcultures of humiliation and fear. For many, globalisation and its effects have induced a sense of irreversible decline in the West, and at the same time raised fears of ‘the other’ (see also Herzfeld 2011).

An important finding is that perceptions of ingroup decline often correlate with support for extremist ideologies. Perceived ingroup losses tend to bring about psychological states of existential threat, which in turn contribute to heightened prejudices, fear of outgroups, or believing conspiracies (Bai and Federico 2021: 1). Ingroup losses

also contribute to feelings of shame when combined with intergroup strife. When it comes to violence prevention, these feelings are by no means trivial, since extremists often exploit them to recruit would-be followers (Ginges and Atran 2008). And if persons become identity-fused, in which they see their individual and group identity as one, they are more likely to take risks defending apparent infractions against their ingroup (Swann et al. 2012).

Returning to white nationalists, the dominant issues in their transnational propaganda centre on outgroups as threats to the nation (Wilson 2020: 8). Moreover, white nationalists, whether online extremists or majoritarian-populists in mainstream politics, typically present themselves as the only ones who are willing to stand up to these threats, including the so-called ‘anti-patriotic’ or ‘self-hating’ values conveyed by racial or post-colonial justice efforts (Dean, Bell and Vakhitova 2016: 130). Rhetoric of this kind apparently attracts broad support in communities experiencing white grievance (Choat 2020). Commonly experienced grievances include the perceived loss of material wealth, social or class-standing, political values, and culture relative to non-whites. Yet, opposing racial or post-colonial justice efforts, whether due to grievance or expressive racism, inherently denies the perspectives of the colonised and ignores the ongoing effects of colonialism (Choat 2020: 2; see also Ngũgĩ 1986).

Here we find the appeal of Serbian nationalist propaganda. Two of its main tropes are invoking European identity and promulgating the myth of the great replacement. The former is a common rhetorical strategy for Balkan nationalists, who portray foundational national myths, such as the Battle of Kosovo, as clashes of civilisation, such that the ‘nation’ not only defended but symbolically represented ‘Europe’ (Ballinger 2004: 41–43). The myth of the great replacement, which is arguably more effectual for white nationalists, is the idea that recent shifts in demography, such as white population declines, are the beginning of an ethnonational replacement, if not a coming ‘white genocide’ (Feola 2020: 2–3). Over three decades ago, Serbian nationalists claimed that Albanians and other Muslims in the Balkans were consciously or unconsciously replacing Serbians by having higher reproductive birthrates. Further, some Muslims communities – and globalists who assisted them in order to weaken Serbia – adopted more aggressive means of displacement, including cleansing and genocide. This conspiracy theory, which I was once surprised to encounter so widely during my fieldwork (eighteen months total, intermittently from 2010 to 2016), was nevertheless believed by many

former combatants (Kiper 2018). When placed in its historical context, the great-replacement myth is a potentially dangerous idea. In short, the great-replacement's attraction for many whites is due to their conspiratorial thinking or collective panic, caused by perceived ingroup decline (Ganesh 2020: 898). Those fears, if unabated, are likely to yield the psychological need for affirming one's identity and, in the extreme, identity-fusing with one's group and thus acting against symbolic threats to it (Swann et al. 2012). If so, white grievance today, as it is expressed transnationally in white-nationalist propaganda, could be fostering dangerous ideas, which may explain a common occurrence of the far-right in Europe and the USA: resistance to some decolonisation efforts and support for aggressive policies against targeted outgroups.

How does white-nationalist propaganda, such as the circulation of Serbian nationalist propaganda, contribute to these effects? Adding to what has already been said, exposure to such propaganda may increase ingroup cohesion and outgroup aversion, regardless of the audience, and thus contribute to a false sense of ingroup security. To illustrate, my colleagues and I conducted an experiment using tropes from Serbian nationalists of the Yugoslav Wars, finding that mere exposure to them increased ingroup empathy but decreased outgroup empathy (Kiper, Gwon, and Wilson 2020). Additionally, the recursive character of white-nationalist propaganda – that is to say, its scapegoating, nation-in-danger or great-replacement rhetoric – may perpetuate the illusion of strength for white supremacists, but at the cost of being anti-democratic. For white-nationalist propaganda conveys the idea that whites have dominion over nation, culture, and power that ought to be protected, which runs counter to democratic ideals (Ganesh 2020). After all, democracy, like social justice, requires that members of a society accept the future shaped by the reality of their neighbours, which white-nationalist propaganda rejects. Finally, such propaganda is now highly networked and circulated transnationally, ranging from social media to user-created platforms and news outlets on the far right (see also Roberts, Faris, and Benkler 2018), possibly rendering many with the impression that its ideas are acceptable.

To conclude, the proximate solutions to white-nationalist propaganda include education about how it endangers intergroup relations, democratic ideals, and thus sociative peace. Ultimately, addressing white nationalism requires that former colonising nations live up to their egalitarian commitments by, among other things, dismantling institutional arrangements that perpetuate white supremacy and engaging in new,

civic imaginings of an inclusive nation. That entails decolonising Europe (and Australia, Canada, and the USA) by grappling with the reverberating outcomes of colonial and genocidal histories, which includes taking the ongoing threats of white-nationalist propaganda seriously. Of course, this conclusion is not new. For instance, Betts (2012) raised concerns a decade ago about growing white nationalism in Europe; Chen (2010) called on scholars to ‘deimperialise’ Europe (see also Chakrabarty 2000); and Belisio-De Jesús and Pierre (2020) urged anthropologists to address the ongoing colonial legacies of white supremacy. I myself hope that this article joins these authors and the chorus of warnings about the digital spread of racist extremist movements in Europe and in former colonising nations (see Reuters Staff 2021), and how addressing them is a part of the ongoing efforts of decolonisation.

◆
Jordan Kiper, Department of Anthropology, University of Alabama at Birmingham.
E-mail: jkiper@uab.edu

◆

Notes

1. That is to say, reforming harmful social structures and thereby enervating violent extremism, fostering inclusion, and supporting democratic processes (Verbeek and Peters 2018: 3).
2. Chetniks are Serbian nationalist guerrilla forces who are known for adopting a variety of tactics and collaborative policies during the German-occupation period of Serbia in World War II. Also known for their violent defines of Serbia and ‘Greater Serbia’, Chetniks are admired as patriots or Christian warriors by militant white nationalists. Ironically, many white nationalists also admire the Croat Usthasas, a nationalistic and fascist regime that also collaborated with the Nazis during World War II.

References

- Allen, J. and R. Jobson (2016), ‘The Decolonising Generation: (Race and) Theory in Anthropology since the Eighties’, *Current Anthropology* 57, no. 2: 129–148.
- Bai, H. and C. M. Federico (2021), ‘White and Minority Demographic Shifts, Inter-group Threat, and Right-wing Extremism’, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 94: 1–26.
- Baker, L. D. (2010), *Anthropology and the Racial Politics of Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press).

- Ballinger, P. (2004), 'Authentic hybrids in the Balkan borderlands', *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 1: 31–60.
- Belisio-De Jesús, A. and J. Pierre (2020), 'Anthropology of White Supremacy', *American Anthropologist* 122, no. 1: 65–75.
- Benkler, Y., R. Faris and H. Roberts (2018), *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Berlet, C. and S. Sunshine (2019), 'Rural rage: The Roots of Right-wing Populism in the United States', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46, no. 3: 480–513.
- Betts, R. F. (2012), 'Decolonisation: A Brief History of the Word', in E. Bogaerts and R. Raben (eds.), *Beyond Empire and Nation: The Decolonisation of African and Asian Societies, 1930s–1970s* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill), 23–37.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981), *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press).
- Bošković, A. (2006), 'Balkan Ghosts Revisited: Racism – Serbian Style', *Anthropos* 101, no. 2: 559–564.
- Bošković, A. (2019), 'Anthropology and nationalism', *American Anthropologist* 121, no. 4: 924–928.
- Burke, R. (2013), *Decolonisation and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).
- Chakrabarty, D. (2000), *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Chen, K. H. (2010), *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press).
- Choat, S. (2020), 'Decolonising the political theory curriculum', *Politics*, October: 1–17.
- Daniels, J. (2018), 'The Algorithmic Rise of the "Alt-right"', *Contexts* 17, no. 1: 60–65.
- Dean, G., P. Bell and Z. Vakhitova (2016), 'Right-wing extremism in Australia: The Rise of the New Radical Right', *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 11, no. 2: 121–142.
- Eriksen, T. H. (2002), *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press).
- Farrell-Banks, D. (2021). 'Crossing borders and building walls in right-wing uses of the past', *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 30, no. 1: 104–113.
- Feola, M. (2020), "'You Will Not Replace Us": The Melancholic Nationalism of Whiteness', *Political Theory*, December: 1–26.
- Ganesh, B. (2020), 'Weaponizing White Thymos: Flows of Rage in the Online Audiences of the Alt-right', *Cultural Studies* 24, no. 6: 892–924.
- Ginges, J. and S. Atran (2008), 'Humiliation and the Inertia Effect: Implications for Understanding Violence and Compromise in Intractable Intergroup Conflicts', *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 8: 281–294.
- Hajdarpasic, E. (2019), 'How a Serbian war criminal became an icon of white nationalism', *The Washington Post*, 20 March, www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/03/20/how-serbian-war-criminal-became-an-icon-white-nationalism/ (accessed 16 January 2021).
- Hervik, P. (2019), 'Denmark's Blond Vision and the Fractal Logics of a Nation in Danger', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 26, no. 5: 529–545.
- Herzfeld, M. (2011), 'Crisis attack: Impromptu Ethnography in the Greek Maelstrom', *Anthropology Today* 27, no. 5: 22–26.

- Hutchison, J., A. Amarasingam, R. Scrivens and B. Ballsun-Stanton (2021), 'Mobilizing Extremism Online: Comparing Australian and Canadian Right-wing Extremist Groups on Facebook', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, March: 1–31.
- Jekel, T., M. Lehner and R. Vogler (2017), 'Mapping the Far Right: Geomedia in an Educational Response to Right-wing Extremism', *International Journal of Geo-Information* 6, no. 10: 294–308.
- Kapferer, B. (2001), 'Ethnic Nationalism and the Discourses of Violence in Sri Lanka', *Journal of Transnational & Crosscultural Studies* 9, no. 1: 33–67.
- Kapferer, B. (2010), 'Nationalist Ideology and a Comparative Anthropology', *Ethnos* 54, no. 3–4: 161–191.
- Kiper, J. (2018), 'Propaganda and Mass Violence in the Yugoslav Wars: A Post-Conflict Ethnography', PhD diss. (University of Connecticut).
- Kiper, J., Y. Gwon and R. A. Wilson (2020), 'How Propaganda Works: Nationalism, Revenge and Empathy in Serbia', *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 20: 403–430.
- Matolino, B. (2020), 'Whither Epistemic Decolonisation', *Philosophical Papers* 49, no. 2: 213–231.
- Moisi, D. (2009), *The Geopolitics of Emotion: How Cultures of Fear, Humiliation, and Hope are Shaping the World* (New York: Anchor Books).
- Ngũgĩ, W. T. (1986), *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Curry).
- Reuters Staff (2021), 'White supremacy a "transnational threat," U.N. chief warns', Reuters, 22 February, www.reuters.com/article/us-un-rights/white-supremacy-a-transnational-threat-u-n-chief-warns-idUSKBN2AM0NX (accessed 5 February 2021).
- Sanders, J. (2019), *The First Wave of Decolonisation* (New York: Routledge).
- Schuhmann, A. (2017), 'Decolonisation and Denazification: Student Politics, Cultural Revolution, and the Affective Labor of Remembering', *Critical Philosophy of Race* 5, no. 2: 263–319.
- Smith, S. and V. Banic (2019), 'New Zealand attach exposes right-wing extremists' fascination with Balkans', CBS News, 25 March, www.nbcnews.com/news/world/new-zealand-attack-exposes-right-wing-extremists-fascination-balkans-n984721 (accessed 5 February 2021).
- Stevenson, J. (2019), 'Right-wing Extremism and the Terrorist Threat', *Survival* 61, no. 1: 233–244.
- Swann, W. B., J. Jetten, A. Gómez, H. Whitehouse and B. Bastian (2012), 'When Group Membership Gets Personal: A Theory of Identity Fusion', *Psychological Review* 119, no. 3: 441–456.
- Thomas, D. A. (2018), 'Decolonising Disciplines', *American Anthropologist* 120, no. 3: 393–397.
- Veilleux-Lepage, Y. and E. Archambault (2019), 'Mapping Transnational Extremist Networks: An Exploratory Study of the Soldiers of Odin's Facebook Network, Using Integrated Social Network Analysis', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 2: 21–38.
- Verbeek, P. and B. Peters (2018), 'The Nature of Peace', in P. Verbeek and B. Peters (eds), *Peace Ethology: Behavioral Processes and Systems of Peace* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell), 1–15.

- Ward, J. (2018), 'Day of the trope', Southern Poverty Law Center, www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/04/19/day-trope-white-nationalist-memes-thrive-reddits-rthedonald (accessed 10 March 2021).
- Ward, G. (2014), 'The Slow Violence of State Organized Race Crime', *Theoretical Criminology* 19, no. 3: 299–314.
- Wilson, C. (2020), 'Nostalgia, Entitlement and Victimhood: The Synergy of White Genocide and Misogyny', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, November:1–16.