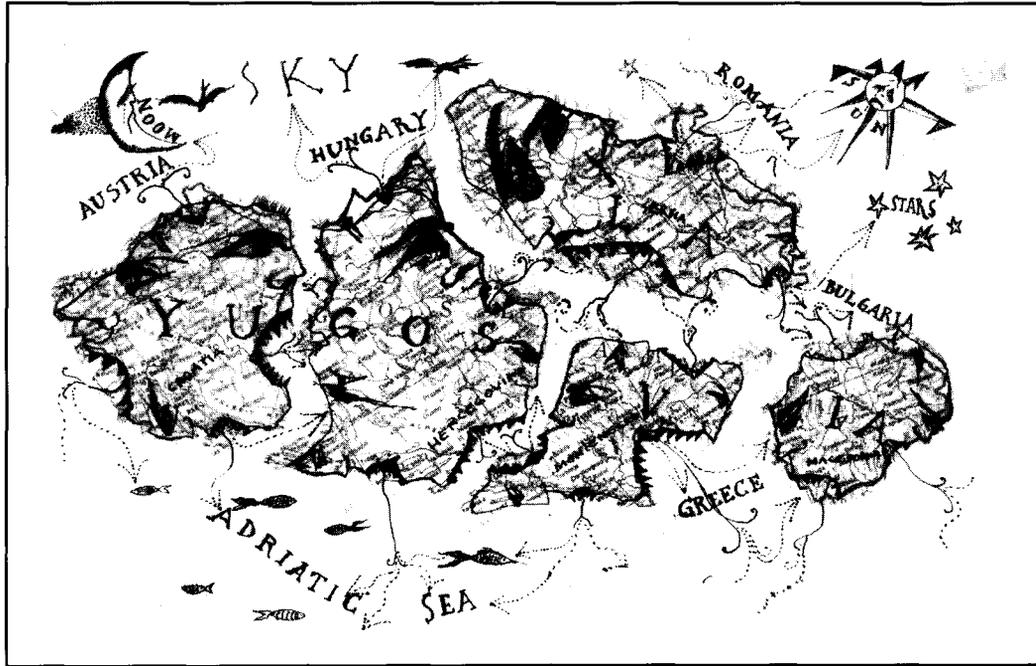


The Yugoslav Mythology

A Multicultural Pathology

by Tomislav Sunic



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

One must agree with Georges Sorel that political myths have a long and durable life. For 74 years the Yugoslav state drew its legitimacy from the spirit of Versailles and Yalta, as well as from the Serb-inspired pan-Slavic mythology. By carefully manipulating the history of their constituent peoples while glorifying their own, Yugoslav leaders managed to convince the world that Yugoslavia was a “model multiethnic state.” Many global-minded pundits in the West followed suit and made a nice career preaching the virtues of the Yugoslav multiethnic pot. By tirelessly vaunting the Yugoslav model, scores of starry-eyed Western academics gave, both pedagogically and psychologically, additional legitimacy to artificial Yugoslavia. In 1991, faced with massive geopolitical tremors, stretching from Siberia to Spain, the Yugoslav mythology began cracking up, and with it, its multiethnic mystique. The sudden beginning of the democratization of Yugoslavia led, naturally, to the country’s demise, the bloody postscript to which is yet to unfold.

Nothing seemed easier for the European Community and the United Nations than to describe the 1991 Serbian aggression against Croatia as a Serbo-Croat tribal war. At the be-

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ginning of the conflict, France, America, and a gallery of faceless U.N. mediators shrugged off Serbian territorial appetites by calling them the result of an ancient Serbo-Croat balkanesque feud. After all, why would big powers have to intervene in an area of Europe that, according to their definition of international law, offered no precise definition of the aggressor vs. the victim? The paralysis of the United Nations and European Community was seen by the Serbs as a green light to salvage Yugoslavia by force—even if that meant destroying it by force. As self-declared victims of hard times and soft former allies, the Serbs are today angry at France and America. These two countries once offered them Yugoslavia—only to strip them of it today.

In retrospect, the good guys appear to be those who define the international system, which in 1993, unlike in 1919 and 1945, does not well suit the Serbs. By detour, we could refer to Edward Carr’s dictum that before we study history we must first study the historian—if we are to decide who to side with in the Balkans. Historically, the “Greater Serbia” mythology has functioned only by wallowing in victimology—even as Serbs victimized the Other. In the latest spasm of this endless victimology, Serbs are today heaping their anger for the collapse of Yugoslavia on everybody: the Vatican, Muslims, the CIA, the Fourth Reich, and, of course, always available nearby

Croats.

All the rest seems to be distant history now. In 1990, on the eve of Yugoslavia's breakup, the majority of Catholic Slovenes and Croats favored the transformation of centralized Serb-dominated Yugoslavia into a confederal state. Serbian communist leader Slobodan Milosevic flatly refused the idea of a confederal Yugoslavia for fear that Serbia would lose its historic Yugoslav mandate, which it had received at Versailles in 1919 and inherited at Potsdam in 1945. When in 1991 Slovenes and Croats voted in defiance for a complete divorce from Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav Army launched a large-scale invasion against Slovenian and Croat "fascist separatists." As the war began to rage, so did the inflated word fascism become an expedient metaphor for the Western media. It was hurled by everybody at everybody—and it therefore hit nobody. The Serbs see themselves as fighting the just war against a resurgent fascist papal Croatia and Islamic fundamentalism. The Western media, by contrast, is portraying Serb President Slobodan Milosevic as the fascist butcher of the Balkans, bent on ethnic cleansing. Yet, old dogs cannot learn new tricks. Milosevic is still a communist *apparatchik*, and the party he presides over is still euphemistically called the Socialist Party of Serbia.

Unquestionably, the roots of the present conflict in what in the past tense used to be Yugoslavia are grounded in recent history, which by now has turned into self-serving mythology. During World War II, Serbia suffered under fascism but, like all European countries, also experimented with fascism. Serbia experienced its own share of killing and suffering just like Croatia, or, for that matter, any other country in Europe. World War II and postwar sufferings of Muslims, Albanians, ethnic Germans, and Hungarians at the hands of the Yugoslav communists still appear to evade the contemporary media comparisons. Serbia's less glorious World War II past was for years swept under the red carpet of oblivion, first by Yugoslav communist clerics and then by contemporary Serbian hagiographers.

The real warfare in Bosnia and Herzegovina has now ceased to be a war of Serb-Croat-Muslim memories; it has turned into a surreal war for respective numbers of casualties and endlessly increasing national trigonometries. Since 1945, Yugoslav politicians, the Serb Christian Orthodox Church, and a number of Serb intellectuals have steadily inflated Serbian World War II casualties, which portray Serbs as victims of in-born Croatian and German fascism. The president of Croatia, former Partisan general and historian Franjo Tudjman, is intensely hated in Serbia because his World War II body counts fly in the face of Serbian victimology. Before becoming president of Croatia, Tudjman tried to demolish Serbian and communist historiography by deflating the number of Serbian World War II dead from the official 700,000 to a very modest 70,000. Predictably, his excursion into historicism regarding Serbian mythical martyrdom unleashed Serbia's wrath. Faced with a sudden Croatian attack on her mythology, Serbia launched, in 1991, a military counterattack against separatist Croatia. Political reality may change, but mythical surreality must remain untainted by any profanity.

Tudjman's books and statements also led to an outcry among Western liberal opinion-makers, who were quick to dub him an anti-Semitic revisionist. The real problem with Tudjman is not so much his substance, but rather his awkward Central European *schwerfällig* style. Unlike the Serb Slobodan Milosevic, who is a slick Byzantine con man with an excellent knowledge

of English and the ability to fool "prime-time" Westerners, the Croat Tudjman, just like all Central European politicians, stutters and mutters. Small wonder, therefore, that he could not quickly sell the Croatian cause to the videopolitical world of Washington and Paris.

To grasp Serbian anger at Croatia and the West one should read the 19th-century Serbian satirist Radoje Domanovic. Domanovic described the royal house in Serbia as the site of endless Byzantine persecution complexes coupled with pan-Slavic zeal to convert Catholic and Muslim Slavs. Serbian royal hallucinations, stretching from the House of Karadjordjevic all the way down to the House of Milosevic, are still visible in Belgrade today. Every Serb is made to believe that a conspiratorial West, along with an Islamic East, is plotting to enslave the Serb people. Croats, by contrast, see Bosnia's Muslims as stupid, neolithic, stray-away Croats who now need to be reconverted to Croatian national consciousness. In Croatian popular jokes, Bosnia's Muslims are endlessly portrayed as species with bizarre lovemaking conduct and strange toilet habits.

The more secular European Community and United Nations also border on mythical melodrama. Their vicarious humanism manifests itself in occasional drops of culinary diplomacy, as well as in the presence of "peace-keeping forces" in a country torn by violent war. U.N. Samaritans lecture against Serbian ethnic cleansing, forgetting that ethnic cleansing is only the postmodern spin-off of the *cujus regio ejus religio* of all countries in the making. Ethnic cleansing did not start with Milosevic and his likes; it began with communist Tito, who either killed or expelled a half-million ethnic Germans and Hungarians from early Yugoslavia. Tito only practiced in chorus the art of other East European communists, which resulted in the largest German *Völkerwanderung* in history: from the Balkans to the Baltics, from Königsberg to Karlovac. The Croatian exodus from Vukovar last year and the agony of Dubrovnik under Serbian bombs, followed today by death on the installment plan in Sarajevo, are only the continuation of the funeral march that began at Bleiburg and Breslau in 1945 . . . and that is finishing in Bosnia in 1993. Forty years after Tito's ethnic cleansing, Milosevic miscalculated: he grotesquely followed his predecessor's suit, and he grotesquely failed.

During its brief communist interregnum, Tito's Yugoslavia offered the foreign visitor bizarre features, which only the morbid and satirical painter, the 17th-century Jacques Callot, could have captured. In one of Callot's pictures, showing the Thirty Years War in Europe, one sees a scene of boundless popular revelry near a tree decorated with dozens of hanged men. Similarly, Titoist Yugoslavia could for years boast of the largest number of nudist beaches in Europe, but also of the largest prison population per capita in Eastern Europe. Just like in permissive Amsterdam, one could freely light up a joint in the center of Belgrade or Zagreb, but one could also easily end up, for a minor "political incorrectness," in a real communist joint. Yugoslav conviviality allowed everybody everything—provided one did not touch the infallibility of the mythical Tito. For 40 years, Yugoslav communist vocabulary dubbed every Croat a "fascist" if he ventured to evoke his national ancestry. In Yugoslavia, as everywhere else in Eastern Europe, one could display national sentiments and unfurl his flag only behind closed family doors or in the open soccer field.

A number of Serbians ended up in Tito's prisons too. Cut

into three parts, Voivodina in the north, Kosovo in the south, and Serbia proper in the middle, Greater Serbia was a myth that Tito was well able to keep under his control. In turn, however, Tito rewarded the Serbs with leverage in the two most important nerves of the Yugoslav government: high diplomacy and the Yugoslav army.

The targets of Serb rage are not just the proverbial Croat Nazis and Muslim fundamentalists. All other neighboring nations, ethnic groups, and minorities are being put in the category of fascist world conspirators. Ironically, Croats and Serbs probably hate each other most because they resemble each other. Is it not true that racism is always directed at the Other, who psychologically and morphologically always represents the travesty of the Same? One does not discriminate against beasts; one discriminates against his likes. Following the logic of the cursed Other, a great number of Serbs, both in Serbia and Bosnia, are deeply convinced that ethnic cleansing is the rightful way to pursue a noble struggle against Croatian fascism and Muslim fundamentalism, for which all military means and tools are morally justifiable. The destruction of Croatian Catholic churches and Muslim mosques, the killing of thousands of non-Serbs, bears witness to the never-ending logic of the worse. Tomorrow, times may change and political constellations may alter. Who will prevent tomorrow's Albanians or nearby Hungarians from similar mythical aggrandizements

The Brownings

(For Katherine McAlpine)

by Richard Moore

Metaphysical dread
made their spirits so restive!
Confined to her bed . . .
he found that suggestive.

But her father loathed art.
So—cleverly, wittily—
they out-foxed the old fart
and eloped to Italy.

To accomplish these ends,
they had many to thank—
their servants, their friends
and their pounds in the bank.

Taint art with no penny!
No, 'taint; but for the true
and the beautiful, any
old trust fund will do.

and ethnic cleansing of Serbs? Permanent peace has never meant much in Europe; peace has always been seen by the Other as punitive. Alas, European laws of the tragic are timeless, and their meaning lies only in the bowels of wild geese, or in the rhymes of the Greek chorus . . .

The Serbian government does not deserve all the blame for the carnage in the Balkans. Western governments, particularly the United States and France, preached for decades the "unity and integrity" of Yugoslavia, as if Yugoslavia could be held together by some French decree or State Department *ukase*. The U.S. State Department (and especially its year-long chief *apparatchik* Lawrence Eagleburger), with its decades-long support of "Yugoslavia's integrity," gave a decent alibi to Serbia's war of aggression. Hybrid Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, two virulently anti-German countries, fit geopolitically into the NATO doctrine of "double containment": on the one hand, they contained the Red Bear in the East; on the other, they contained the mythical and unpredictable German in the West. Small wonder, therefore, that nobody in Washington or at Quai d'Orsay was ecstatic with the sudden unification of Germany; nobody was too ecstatic with the sudden disintegration of Yugoslavia, either. In the supreme irony of history, this time around it is not the proverbial "ugly German" who is destroying the Versailles architecture. This time, the Versailles architecture is falling apart due to its surreal Potemkin Hollywood-like facade. Woodrow Wilson and his progeny have suffered a serious defeat in Europe.

The whole holy story of the Balkans has just begun to unravel. The Serbian leadership in Belgrade shows great concern for Serbs living in Croatia and Bosnia, but ignores the rights of the swelling tide of Albanians within its own house. Albanians in Serbia, like the Palestinians, have perfectly learned an ancient wisdom, which Christian Europe forgot long ago: demography is the continuation of politics by other, more enjoyable means. Any cohabitation in the Balkans, any brand of federalism or "power-sharing," which Western pundits preach until their dying breath, is out of the question. Endless wars seem to be the only answer. At some point, some outsider from a distant galaxy may reassemble bits and pieces of the scattered Berlin Wall and fence off different versions of the ethnic truth here. Multiethnic countries are like prisons, in which citizen-inmates communicate with the Other only after each is granted his own territorial imperative. Crammed into one promiscuous cell, all hell breaks loose. Short of a giant mine field separating Serbs and Croats today, or Poles and Russians tomorrow, Europe will be entering another chapter of the Hundred Years War. When different historical destinies clash, when different national mythologies collide, and when different geopolitical tectonic plates start rattling under Eurasia, then the myth of a united Europe will sound like a titanic joke.

Today it is the turn of ex-Yugoslavs to live the violent beauty of their congested multiethnic laboratory. Tomorrow it may be the turn of multiracial Marseilles, Frankfurt, or Brussels. The West is moving full-speed ahead into its own Yugoslav pathology. Last year's events in sunny Los Angeles have shown that no paradigm, no academic model, no formula, and no single truth can supply an answer for our multicultural future. The multicultural daydream functions nicely in soft, sunny, "cool," consumer society; with the first heavy clouds it spells chaos of unbelievable proportions. Emile Cioran was right when he wrote that if we knew what the future holds for us, we would immediately strangle our children. ☞