Yugoslavia & the Perpetuation of Violent Nationalism

Luke Andrews

November 19, 1998

The twentieth century has witnessed the rise and fall of one of the most complicated and intricately troubled states in modern history. Yugoslavia, the former coalition of South Slavic peoples, has been, and continues to be, a locus of political, social, religious and ethnic strife and violence. Its multiethnic conflicts have been central to both World Wars and, more recently, to the bloody civil war that framed the nation's collapse. At the core of these conflicts (as well as the present trouble in the Serbian province of Kosovo) is the partisan nationalistic ideologies of the various South Slavic people and, more importantly, their leaders, who chose bitter separation after fifty years of coexistence under Communist rule. Conventional wisdom suggests this nationalism is pervasive and inherent, as evidenced by the term 'balkanization.' As one examines the issue, what becomes clear is that the emotions and ideologies that run so strong today are anything but a natural phenomenon. That such chilling traits might be artificial is indeed a comforting thought; yet before more closely analyzing the issue, some historical background is necessary.

Eager to create homogenous nations from the civil war, Yugoslavians have displayed a xenophobic intolerance rarely matched in history. They introduced the world to the concept of 'ethnic cleansing,' whereby scores of people living outside their perceived 'homeland' were exterminated *en masse*. Militant Serbs living in Bosnia-Hercegovina are now under international prosecution for crimes of genocide against Bosnian Muslims, perhaps the most victimized group in the war. An American scholar visiting Serbia in 1993 recorded a conversation he had with locals:

> A number of Serbs…said that Serbia once again stood alone protecting Christian Europe from the threat of a Muslim *reconquista* and once again had taken up defending Christian Europe against militant Islam. (Rubenstein, 1996, p. 30)

No doubt similar conversations took place during World War II when the Nazi-supported Croatian *Ustasi* regime exterminated hundreds of thousands of Serbs and Jews.

Analysts seeking causes of Yugoslavian conflict have no trouble pinpointing this paranoid ultra-nationalism. What is more mysterious is the roots of that nationalism—how did these people grow to hate each other so? Media pundits often point to irreconcilable differences among the South Slavs as the source of their animosity. Religion, especially is seen as playing a major role in dividing people who mostly speak a common language (Serbo-Croatian): traditionally Catholic Croats clash with the Orthodox Serbs, both of whom oppose Muslims of any ethnicity. Popular explanation suggests that one can trace such feelings back several centuries and that historical events and divisive occurrences have

engendered the nationalistic self-representations that make coexistence today so intolerable. In short, nationalism is a trait of South Slavs. Yet if these feelings of antagonism run so strong, how did Yugoslavia, or "the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes," come to exist at after World War I? Moreover, after the horrors of the *Ustasi*, how did Tito and the Communists hold the various republics together for fifty years?

In fact, historical evidence indicates that these traits are a false consciousness. These are a people who have been manipulated by their leaders and who have long been fed a diet of propaganda that has coerced feelings and ideas that are unnatural to the people. Western media have at least noted that current leaders make heavy use of propaganda to achieve their goals. Slobodan Milosevic, the dictatorial leader of the Serbian state (which is still anachronistically called Yugoslavia), governs his people both directly and with propaganda. In any case, the media are state-controlled and espouse whatever viewpoints Milosevic himself espouses (Demick, 1994). His rise to power, initially in the mid-1980s as the President of the Serbian League of Communists (SKS) in Yugoslavia, can be associated with a number of successful coercive measures. He adopted a tactic of subtly encouraging stereotypes against Albanians in a successful effort to topple the Albanian leaders of the Serbian provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina (Banac, 1992), which under Marshall Tito, had received powers almost equal to Serbia itself. Milosevic routine addresses to the republic typically contained inflammatory statements against Muslims and Croats (Ibid.). The latter, in particular, were subject to a tainting through re-education of history. For example, Vasilije Krestic, a historian with dubious ties to Milosevic, wrote in 1986:

> Genocide against the Serbs in Ustasa is a specific phenomenon in our centuries-old common life with the Croats. The protracted development of the genocidal idea in certain centers of Croat society…did not necessarily have some narrow—but rather a broad—base, took deep root in the consciousness of many generations. (quoted in Banac).

In a broader stroke of deceit, the Catholic Church was linked to the *Ustasi* regime (in fact, the Catholic leaders at the time largely opposed it), and criticized for its attempts at conversion in the 1930s (Ibid.).

Banac's scholarly evidence nicely complements the plethora of mainstream journalism on the subject. A 1995 article in *The Ottawa Citizen*, for example, documented how Milosevic continues to preserve in the minds of Serbs the memory of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, in which the Turks defeated the Serbs and initiated 500 years of Turkish rule. Milosevic "had the bones of Prince Lazar, the Serb leader defeated at the battle of Kosovo in 1389, paraded around Serbia…" (Moseley, 1995). In short, what

Milosevic has done, is to preserve and artificially enhance memory. In the Battle of Kosovo, the Serbs fought alongside Albanians and Bosnians (Dedijer et al., 1974), but this fact, and others similarly contradictory to Milosevic's goal (the entrenchment of nationalism), were forgotten. Infiltrating media and education have allowed him to instill a historical consciousness among Serbs, and greatly inflame feelings of national pride. Like any effective propaganda, Milosevic's methods were and are based on fear. In this case, it is a fear of losing a treasured Serbian identity, as it might manifest (ludicrous as it may seem) through Muslim conquest and Croatian cruelty.

In Croatia, things were eerily similar under the leadership of Franz Tudjman. A historian himself, Tudjman published *Wasteland: Historical Realities*, in which he argued that there were 'only' 35,000 casualties at Jasenovac (the Auschwitz of *Ustasa*), which is probably five percent of the true total (Wilmer, 1997). Tudjman adopted *Ustasi* symbolism, renamed streets after nationalist heroes, and even organized the publishing of "Croatian" dictionaries (Ibid.).

Despite all this, it easy to contend that Milosevic and Tudjman are not responsible for manufacturing Serbian and Croatian national identities; they merely retrieved a dormant consciousness. Moseley, the author of the article in *The Ottawa Citizen*, partially excuses Serbs, saying, "they have been shaped by a difficult history" (p. A4). He romanticizes their struggle, arguing, "Serb pride and honor were kept intact during the long twilight of Turkish rule by uprisings against the oppressor…" (p. A4). Scholars, too, have eagerly pointed to historical events as cause for a strong Serb identity. Vuckovic (1997) claims that sixteenth century Serbs, oppressed under Ottoman rule, turned to their language and religion for cultural affiliation. Indeed, there is little doubt that the Serbian Orthodox Church has played a key role in maintaining Serbian identity. Whether Serbs naturally "turned to their religion" is another matter.

During the period before the defeat at Kosovo (which Milosevic and others view as the Serbian golden age), Serbia was governed by the dynasty of Stefan Nemanja, who ruled in close proximity to the Church; Nemanja and his son were both canonized (St. Simeon and St. Sava, respectively). After the Turkish Conquest, Turkish rule and the conversion of so much of the populace to Islam threatened the Orthodox Church, accustomed to power in matters of state. Religious leaders sought ways to keep the Serbian Orthodox tradition alive, as a means to maintaining power and influence. The Church selectively built monasteries where it could influence large groups of the population (Dedijer et al., 1974). It actively educated people, teaching literacy to permit larger propagation of religious texts. These were not insidious methods to deceive a population, but they involved the desire to maintain

power and spread ideology, and by their subversive nature, represented the earliest form of elite propaganda.

If the Orthodox Church was able to maintain Serbian identity under centuries of Turkish rule, it did it without instilling much of a sense of nationalism in the geopolitical sense. It took 400 years before the first Serbian insurrection took place in 1804, and it was anything but a great national success. Djordje Petrovic (known as Karadjordje or "Black George") led the revolt but was unable to garner enough support for his cause (Vuckovic, 1997). In 1815, Milos Obrenovic was more successful, gaining partial autonomy for Serbia, but was ultimately overthrown by Serbs who found him a less tolerable ruler than the Turks. Stokes (1975), in an article tellingly titled, "The Absence of Nationalism in Serbian Politics Before 1840," highlights how Serbian revolt leaders had to resort to threats and their influence with the Orthodox Church to garner support from the peasant population. This also marked the first use by politicians of comparisons with the Namenjic dynasty as a symbolic means to increase their authority (Ibid.). Serbian nationalism in its modern sense emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and then, not because of a grassroots awakening, but because wealthy businessmen, who suddenly found power in Serbia's new autonomy, sought the means to increase trade (Stokes 1975; Chirot and Barkey, 1983). The solution was to teach Serb peasants the ways of Western Europe; youths were sent to school in Austria where educated Europeans instructed them on 'modern administration,' including the idea of nationalism as a means of state strength. As Stokes succinctly argues, "it was the creation of Serbia that evoked national consciousness, not vice versa" (p. 87). Again, the elite used education as a means to an end.

After this achievement, perhaps because of it, propaganda in Serbia became a tool through which the ideals of political leaders spread to the people. Ilija Garasanin, a Minister of the Serbian government during the mid-1800s, was the author of *Nasertanije*, a plan to unite all Serbs, and was perhaps the first to organize a propaganda ring to more effectively disseminate such ideology. Garasanin built a network of agents to incite revolt in Bosnia-Hercegovina against the Ottoman Empire (MacKenzie, 1982). This led to the formation of *Narodna Odbrana* (National Defense), an entire state organization devoted to the unification of Serbs. The Minister of Education at the time later admitted, "it inspired activity by guerilla bands, recruited volunteers, organized shooting societies, and exerted political pressure for a militant national policy" (Ibid., p. 334), and also naturally collaborated with the Church. One of the more extremist nationalist groups, *Ujedinijenje ili Smrt* (Unification or Death), alternately known as the Black Hand, gained much influence of *Narodna Odbrana*, and spread its ideologies through a newspaper it eventually came to control outright, *Pijemont*. The Black Hand is of

course infamous for one of its members, Gavrilo Princip, who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, thus providing the spark for the outbreak of World War I.

Serbian nationalism rarely looked back since. Just as Milosevic celebrated the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo in 1989, in 1889, the myth was reinforced through an extravagant 500th anniversary. Textbooks of the early twentieth century in Serbia omitted mention of any South Slavic people besides Serbs (Lampe, 1994). Croats have not ignored all this, of course. More fervent Croatian nationalists saw the initial creation of Yugoslavia in 1917 as an expression of “Greater Serbia,” rather than a kingdom of South Slavic people. The monarchy only exacerbated this viewpoint, of course, when in 1918 it exiled General Stephan Sarkotic, a Croatian nationalist. To trace the roots of this Croatian resistance, however, one must examine historical phenomenon.

The initial push for Croatian identity came in the form of Illyrianism, which was the identification of Dalmatia (the Adriatic region of the Balkans inhabited by Croats) as the cradle of South Slavic civilization. In fact, the Catholic Church used this idea as a way to propagate its religion, and the creator of Illyrianism was a Dominican priest and professor of theology of the sixteenth century. Through such peasant-oriented means as folk songs and poetry, Illyrian mythology was spread to encourage Catholicism as the ‘true’ religion of South Slavs (Ramet, 1985). The ideology gained more prominence in the nineteenth century, after the Croatian elite had been influenced by Napoleon’s rule and the French ideals of *liberté, egalité et fraternité*. Seeking an ideology that would motivate people to participate in the national movement, they found Illyrianism to be suitable (Gross, 1979). Newspapers such as the *Croatian News* and *Croatian, Slavonian and Dalmation Morningstar* changed their names to *Illyrian National News* and *Illyrian Morningstar*. Working at first among the proportionately small middle-class, ideologues such as Bishop Josip Strossmayer and Franjo Racki, a Catholic priest developed a following through education, such as the promotion of “national science” at the Yugoslav Academy of Arts and Sciences (founded 1867), which worked by “awakening and strengthening the national consciousness among the Croats” (Ibid.).

In the minds of Strossmayer and Racki, Illyrianism was the means to achieve Yugoslavism, or the unification of the Slavic people. Unfortunately, most of their ideas, such as the unification of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches (obviously favouring Catholicism), had little appeal to Serbs who were developing their own, parallel sense of identity. Ramet (1985) even points to the Illyrian idea as a catalyst to recognition of Islamic identity among Muslim Croats who felt disenfranchised by the Catholic bias. Thus, while the propagation of Illyrianism was successful to some degree, its failure to appeal to everyone helped sparked nationalism in its own right. Two initial proponents of Illyrianism,

Ante Starsevic and Eugen Kvaternik, abandoned it in favour of the pursuit of an independent Croatian state and focused their efforts on re-writing history for the intelligentsia of Croatia (Gross, 1979). Starsevic's ideology, for example, denied that Croats were Slavic at all, and insisted that Serbs would eventually "Croatianize" themselves (Ibid., p. 19).

The obvious zealotry of the latter viewpoint makes it understandable why a fracturing of Croatian nationalist ideologies occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Starsevic's ideas formed the basis for the Party of the Right, but proved hard to swallow among Croatian peasants, and were abandoned in practice—though this fact was never revealed in their propaganda (Gross, 1979). The point one must glean from this, however, is that Croatian nationalism was an idea onto which various elite groups grasped. Each of them attempted by the use of rhetoric to win over the Croatian populace. In some sense the competing ideologies made it impossible to unite the Croats and led to the success of Yugoslavism. However, it was the efforts of these ideologues that planted the consciousness of skepticism that prevented Croats from ultimate satisfaction with that union and inspired radicals like the aforementioned Sarkotic. In an instruction to his officers during a World War I campaign, Sarkotic (who preferred Hapsburg dominance to unification with Serbia) wrote this inspired propaganda, referring to Serbs of eastern Bosnia:

> 'The local population is sympathetic toward the enemy, and is permeated and in_uenced by Serbian agents and Komita bands, therefore officers and men should at all times act on the assumption that they are operating in hostile territory.' (quoted in Spence, 1990, p. 148).

This is doubtless what leads Spence to refer to Sarkotic as the pioneer of the Croatian ultra-nationalist movement, "bent upon achieving his people's 'destiny' by virtually any means…" (p. 147). The *Ustasi* movement which later developed found inspiration in Sarkotic, and encouraged Croatian writers to borrow ideas from the earlier Starsevic, such as the denial that Croats were Slavic people (Ramet, 1985).

Just as the modern leadership of Tudjman and Milosevic share patterns of behaviour, so too did the initial formations of Serbian and Croatian nationalism. The largely peasant populations of early nineteenth century Serbia and Croatia did not carry a historically-transmitted grudge, it was only through a core elite attempting to gain power that such ideas were spread. In both cases, common methods exist—a sense of fear and the use of education as a Machiavellian tool, for examples. One recent scholar criticizes the manner in which mainstream media have stereotyped former Yugoslavians: "…violence in the Balkans has been not only a description of a social condition but considered inherent

in the nature of its people" (Bakic-Hayden, 1995). Lampe (1997) points out that the atrocities committed during the civil war did not represent the actions of the majority of Yugoslavians. Hopefully this essay has highlighted how even those who did commit those actions were not operating from some historically in-laden nationalism, but rather that it was the result of nearly two centuries of attempts to instill such a consciousness in the citizenry. To be sure, 200 years is a long time, and that may explain why it has been relatively easy to arouse and inflame the emotions of contemporary South Slavs through modern propaganda. Such a length of time is not, however, representative of some inherent trait, and the long periods of time in which the people coexisted (not the least of which was fifty years of Communist rule) is testament to that fact.

Works Cited

Banac, Ivo (1992). "Yugoslavia: The Fearful Asymmetry of War." *Dædalus* 121(2):141-174.

Bakic-Hayden, Milica (1995). "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia." *Slavic Review* 54(4): 917-931.

Chirot, Daniel and Barkey, Karen (1983). "States in Search of Legitmacy: Was there nationalism in the Balkans of early nineteenth century?" *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 24(1-2): 30-46.

Dedijer, Vladimir et al. (1974). *History of Yugoslavia*. McGraw Hill Book Company: Montreal.

Demick, Barbara (1994). "Serbian shock; After 3 years of fuelling war media have done an about-face." *The Montreal Gazette* August 29, 1994, Final Edition: A1.

Gross, Mirjana (1979). "Croatian National-Integrational Ideologies from the End of Illyrism to the Creation of Yugoslavia." *Austrian History Yearbook* 15-16(1): 3-33.

Lampe, John R. (1994). "The Failure of the Yugoslav National Idea." *Studies in East European Thought* 46(1-2): 69-89.

MacKenzie, David (1982). "Serbian Nationalist and Military Organizations and the Piedmont Idea, 1844-1914." *East European Quarterly* 16(3): 323-344.

Moseley, Ray (1995). "Balkans: Unhappy history fans flames of Serb nationalism." *The Ottawa Citizen* September 17, 1995, Final Edition: A3.

Ramet, Pedro (1985). "From Strossmayer to Stepinac: Croatian National Ideology and Criticism." *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 12(1): 123-139.

Rubenstein, Richard L (1996). "Holocaust and Holy War." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 548(1): 23-44.

Spence, Richard B (1990). "General Stephan Freiherr Sarktoic von Lovcen and Croatian Nationalism." *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 17(1-2): 147-165.

Stokes, Gale (1975). "The Absence of Nationalism in Serbian Politics Before 1840." *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 4(1): 77-90.

Vuckovic, Gojko (1997). *Ethnic Cleavages and Conflict: The Sources of National Cohesion and Disintegration.* Ashgate: Aldershot.

Wilmer, Franke (1997). "Identity, Culture, and Historicity: The Social Construction of Ethnicity in the Balkans." *World Affairs* 160(1): 3-16.