

From Organized Oblivion to Forced Remembering: Memory and Identity among Serbs and Croats

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Introduction

Control of information and of a shared, common memory is crucial if authoritarian regime wants to keep a society under its control. The authoritarian regimes thus consider it necessary to obtain a monopoly on such control and every alternative source of information and memory is seen as threatening to their rule. In extreme circumstances, such as war, this perception is maximally intensified and any memory which is not in tune with the official one is classified as treacherous.

The Communist Party, which came to power in the former Yugoslavia after the World War II, created such official common memory. Although being to a large extent fabricated and tailored to serve the needs of the authorities, this memory was willingly adopted and shared by a majority of population of the former Yugoslavia regardless of their nationality. Among its many shortcomings, the most important was its inability to deal with the World War II ethnic hatred and killings in a constructive way instead of just brushing them under the carpet. The bloody ethnic war was presented as a conflict between the communist-led resistance, supported by all Yugoslav nations, and various military formations, collaborating with the occupying German army. Despite that, the official memory imposed on the people of Yugoslavia did manage to turn the “Brotherhood and Unity” myth into a widely accepted “truth”. The exceptional cruelty of the post-Yugoslav bloodshed confirms rather than denies this claim. If all was really as false as it is widely believed today, Yugoslavia would disintegrate in a much cleaner fashion than it actually did and as was for example the case with Czechoslovakia. The only way to efficiently implement the new national identities and to endow them with appropriate memories was to write them down in blood.

In this paper I intend to analyze how was the intentional resurrection of the pre-1945 memory among Croats and Serbs exploited and used to destroy first the common Yugoslav memory and then to push the whole country into a devastating war. As Paul Connerton points out, each new beginning, and especially a creation of a new nation-state, cannot happen without recollection of the past and without feeding on the old memories.¹

Resurrection of the Serbian nationalism was therefore characterized by commemorations of the old heroic events (more than million Serbs have gathered on June 28, 1989 at Gazimestan, the scene of the famous Kosovo battle, to celebrate its six hundredth anniversary), old nationalist slogan “Only Unity Saves the Serbs” started to appear everywhere, Cyrillic script pushed the widely used Latin into obscurity, “Turbo Folk” (modernized version of Serbian folk music) conquered the radio waves.

In Croatia, nationalists glorified the medieval Croatian kingdom and the achievements, wisdom and intrinsic “Europeaness” of its most famous medieval ruler Tomislav. Statue of the

¹ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 2-4.

national hero, Josip Jelacic, returned to the main square of the Croatian capital Zagreb from where it was removed after the World War II. The Fascist "Independent State of Croatia" was apologized in all possible ways and portrayed as a predecessor of present independent Croatia.

To justify their intention for violent redrawing of Yugoslav borders, both Croatian and Serbian leaders launched an aggressive propaganda war with the intention of making their nations "remember" all the suffering they have allegedly endured in the past at the hands of "the others."

When the wars fought in the 1990s have finished and especially after the fall of the nationalistic regimes in Serbia and Croatia, the new democratic governments had the chance to reveal the truth about the recent events and thus seriously limit the damage done by the new myths and the new "official memory," in which both Croats and Serbs were presented as victims. Instead, the new governments opted for the conformist approach, unwilling or unable to go against the nationalistic tide, and as a consequence, Croatian and Serbian war criminals are today still largely seen as national heroes. Therefore, the mistake committed by the Yugoslav authorities after the World War II, is being committed again. This paper will thus also deal with the memory of the 1990s wars, shared today by majority of Croats and Serbs, and which could represent a time-bomb, threatening to go off again sometime in the future.

Memories, Myths and Nation-building

Nations are always engaged in the process of (re)building. Each new generation questions the reasoning behind a sense of national belonging, inherited from the previous generations, readjusts it and forms its own perception. Corrections are usually minor and perhaps hardly noticeable, yet they exist. But in times of major and rapid social changes, corrections are much more noticeable, and significantly modified perception of national belonging and consequently of common national identity will emerge. Such change, together with the unavoidable erasing of existing memories and substituting them with new, invented or modified ones, is not something new for the peoples of ex-Yugoslavia.

After the Second World War, the memories of war-time ethnic hatred and of violent civil war were officially "erased." State propaganda, dispersed through the educational system, media and mass culture (especially literature and films), instead presented a picture, which testified about mass support among all Yugoslav peoples for the joint struggle against invaders and "domestic traitors," as numerous ethnically based military formations during the war were called (for example, Croatian *Ustashe* and *Domobrani*, Serbian *Chetniks*, Albanian *Balisti*, Slovenian *Belogardisti*, etc). Extreme hardship of the first post-war years in war-devastated Yugoslavia made many people highly susceptible to believe in anything promising a better future. The enthusiasm which thus accompanied the adoption of new Yugoslav identity(ies), together with all the accompanying myths, can hardly be regarded as surprising.

Similarly, the rapid collapse of Yugoslavia's socialist system in the second half of 1980s made people very vulnerable and thus again very susceptible to propaganda, offering and promising a change for the better.

Nationalist craze swept over Yugoslavia because it was the only alternative to the decaying socialism offered by those in power. A different set of myths was employed, presenting the common identities held since 1945 as false and advocating new or modified ones. In this process, an exceptionally interesting interplay of past and present could be observed: while past strongly influenced the way the present was shaped, the present in turn modified the popular perception of the past. Nationalism, assisted by myths, influenced the change of the social memory and consequently also the change of national identities of Yugoslav peoples.

As stated above, nation-building is a recurrent activity, which involves endless reinterpretations, rediscoveries and reconstructions. This, however, always happens within a limited extent, restricted by tradition. The values, myths, symbols and even the holy places each new generation chooses to praise as its national essence can be different from those worshipped by the previous generations, but they cannot be invented completely anew. They have to be based somewhere in the nation's past. The past defines the nation's present and directs it towards its future. Yet, the present needs and the future goals in turn influence the way "the past" is reconstructed and that is why the myths occupy the central role in nation-building.²

Mythical account of an event, which is supposed to be perceived as historic, will be more believable if it stems from a genuine historic root, regardless of how big (or small) its role in the overall context of the myth. For example, Croatian myth about their exceptional importance for stopping the Ottoman advance into Central Europe stems from reference Pope Leo X made in 1519 about Croats as *Antemurale Christianitatis* (or the ramparts of Christendom). Even though historic evidence clearly shows that Croats did not play an exceptionally important role in stopping the Ottomans, the "memory" of this event became one of crucial pillars on which modern Croatian national identity was built. Similarly, virtually all Serbs today are convinced that their medieval empire was destroyed when (what they perceive as) their army suffered a crucial defeat on Kosovo polje, despite the fact that evidences largely contradict most claims of the myth.

When a society experiences a rapid transformation in which its social and political arrangement is seriously modified (for example a revolution, or unification or dissolution of a country), both its future and its past are seriously questioned. New traditions are introduced, based on traditions popular before the regime just overthrown took power, preferably in the society's "Golden Age." Thus all traces of the *ancien regime* are erased and the successor legitimized.

Members do not have to perceive the myth as historically accurate. It is enough that they accept the content and the message of the myth and the myth will successfully perform its main task of establishing connection between members of the society and creating boundary between this and other societies. Sharing the same myth is one of the most important elements, distinguishing members from non-members.³ Myths and mythic histories bring the collective heritage back to life and are therefore essential in identifying "who we are."⁴

Collective heritage can also separate the present members of a community from the previous generations if such separation is viewed as necessary (e. g. if political system changes). The new Croatian authorities returned the monument of Croatian most popular *ban* (governor), Josip Jelacic, to the main Zagreb square, demonstrating a clear difference between "communist" and "democratic" Croatian national identity. During the 1848 revolution in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Jelacic calculated that siding with the Emperor against the revolutionaries would be in Croatian interest. To his disappointment, his loyalty to the Emperor did not bring any benefit to Croats, let alone the autonomy they were hoping for. After World War II, his monument was removed because the new Yugoslav Communist authorities could hardly tolerate a memorial to a "reactionary servant of anti-revolutionary

² Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, pp. 206-208.

³ George Schopflin, "The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths" in *Myths and Nationhood*, ed. Geoffrey Hosking and George Schopflin. London: Hurst & Company, 1997, pp. 19-20.

⁴ Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, p. 202.

terror.” In 1991, when Croatian government proclaimed independence, the statue of “one of Croatia's greatest sons” was returned to its original place.⁵

The “historic” memory of the NDH (the Independent State of Croatia, established during World War II) also went through a process of rebirth, acquiring in the post-1990 mythic history a central space as an important link in the historical continuity of the Croatian state, which was interrupted only by two period of subjugation, first by Serbs and later by the communists.⁶ Croatian President Tudjman, for example, described the NDH as an expression of the historical longing of the Croatian nation for a state of its own.⁷ The burden of the collective guilt for Ustashe crimes Croats carried for 45 years came to be seen as completely unjust and imposed on the Croats by the Serbs, who wanted to completely devalue any manifestation of Croatian independent statehood to prevent Croats from asserting their right to it again.

Having control over myths, symbols and rituals is one of most important conditions for controlling the whole society. By stressing certain memories, diminishing the importance of others, and propagating certain symbols, values and behavior, those in control can reinforce solidarity and mobilize the masses.⁸ It was no accident at all that Slobodan Milosevic chose the celebration of the six hundredth anniversary of the Kosovo battle (at Gazimestan, the scene of the battle, on June 28, 1989, attended by over a million Serbs) to proclaim that “today, [Serbs] are again in battles and facing battles. These battles are not armed battles yet, although such battles cannot yet be excluded.”⁹ Controlling myths is made easier by the fact that myths do not need to stay the same for members of society to continue to feel connected. Myths just need to keep on reassuring them that they are unique and different from others. The exact content of myths is not of crucial importance.¹⁰

Likewise, the nationalistic elites who control the production and distribution of myths do not need to believe in them, since this has no decisive influence on the effect their propaganda has on their listeners. What matters, if myth is to have a desired effect, is the nature of the mass instinct the myth is meant to appeal to.¹¹ For instance, when Yugoslav communist authorities after World War II declared that 1.7 million Yugoslavs had died during the war, they were perfectly aware that this figure was much too high (the real number of victims was, according to most believable estimates, just over a million). The inflated figure was produced primarily for external use, since it was trying to provide Yugoslavia with the highest possible war reparations.¹² Yet, it resonated especially well among Serbs, who as the biggest nation also had the highest number of victims. This reinforced the myth about Serbs as a martyr nation, which always has to go through an ordeal before rising again like a Phoenix to an even greater glory.

Suffering has an exceptionally prominent place in the process of the Serbian nation-building. The Kosovo battle and the epic songs, connected with it, are full of references to suffering. The most notable example is an epic song *Smrt majke Jugovica* (The Death of the Mother of the Jugovic Boys), who died broken-hearted after learning that her husband and all

⁵ Marcus Tanner, *Croatia: A Nation Forged in War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997, pp. 90-93.

⁶ Dubravka Ugresic, *The Culture of Lies. Antipolitical Essays*, trans. by Celia Hawkesworth. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998, pp. 228-229.

⁷ Predrag Lucic and Ivica Djikic, “Tudjmanovo desetljeće” (Tudjman’s Decade) in *Feral Tribune*, no. 743, January 1999.

⁸ Schopflin, “The Functions of Myth,” p. 22.

⁹ Olivera Milosavljevic, “Yugoslavia as Mistake” in *The Road to War in Serbia: Trauma and Catharsis*, ed. Nebojsa Popov. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000, p. 69.

¹⁰ Walker Connor, “The Nation and Its Myth” in *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, vol. 33, no. 1-2, 1992, p. 49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹² Tanner, *Croatia*, p. 152.

nine sons have died on the Kosovo battlefield.¹³ Needless to say, the almost five centuries of Ottoman rule are described (quite inaccurately) as one long period of suffering. Serbian suffering in both World Wars (though being very real and truly substantial) has been similarly magnified through historic myths. The infamous Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, written in 1986 and considered as a nationalistic program later adopted by Milosevic, presented the Serbian experience in Socialist Yugoslavia as suffering. The justification provided was that Serbia was the only republic without a right to control its whole territory (due to autonomy of Kosovo and Vojvodina), that Serbs were the only Yugoslav nation forced to live in several republics and that Serbs were allegedly exploited by other nations.¹⁴ Worst of all, other nations in Yugoslavia showed no gratitude for the sacrifice Serbs made in both World Wars for “liberating” them, and after exploiting them for 45 years, they decided to secede from Yugoslavia.¹⁵

Dragoljub Zivojinovic argues that during World War I, the Serbian government was offered by Great Britain the possibility to create Greater Serbia after the war, including the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Vojvodina, Slavonia and parts of the Dalmatian coast (the remainder of what was not promised to Italy). Yet Serbs, according to Zivojinovic, did not want even to consider it, since they were faithful to their commitment to the Yugoslav state. Serbs were made to pay terribly for their loyalty to the Yugoslav cause, suffering terrible losses in the war, and were “rewarded” by having to give up, as Zivojinovic writes, its democratic constitution, independent statehood, its flag and its anthem, for creating a state for Croats and Slovenes who “invested [neither] their blood [nor] money” in its creation.¹⁶

Some very notable references to suffering can be found also in earlier periods of Croatian history (for example, in the sixteenth century the nobles in Croatian Parliament – *Sabor* – lamented that only “the remains of the remains” of Croatia were still free from the Ottoman rule¹⁷). But none can compare with the perceived suffering of Croats under the “Serbian occupation,” as the periods of 1918-1941 and 1945-1991 came to be known after the Croatian secession. The Croatian “suffering” should not be understood literally. Rather, Croats suffered symbolically. Because the nature of the Ustashe-Croat relation was never openly discussed, but simply “forgotten,” Croats, despite being recognized as equal participants in the brotherly struggle against Nazism, continued to be viewed as collectively guilty for the Ustashe atrocities, especially by many Serbs. This semi-subconscious bias against Croats came into the open in 1971 when the *Maspok* was crushed. *Maspok* stands for *masovni pokret* (mass movement) and is a name under which the 1968-1971 liberal-cum-nationalist movement in Croatia is popularly known. It started as a liberal reform process of the young Croatian Communist Party leadership, and soon got out of their control, acquiring mass following and nationalistic orientation. It was crushed in 1971, with many ringleaders arrested and Croatian party purged. Despite similar movements in Slovenia and Serbia (following the clampdown in Croatia, purges also swept through Ljubljana and Belgrade, bringing the reform process in Yugoslavia to its end), the purge was exceptionally thorough and massive in Croatia, making anything which could be potentially understood as a manifestation of Croatian nationalism an absolute taboo. Making a reference to anything “Croatian” became virtually impossible and in the period from 1971 to 1989, Croatia was known as “the Silent Republic.” Croatian silence was broken in 1989 and the winner of the

¹³ Milne Holton and Vasa D. Mihailovich, *Serbian Poetry from the Beginnings to the Present*. New Haven: Slavica Publishers - Yale Centre for International and Area Studies, 1988, pp. 98-102.

¹⁴ Olivera Milosavljevic, “The Abuse of the Authority of Science” in *The Road to War in Serbia*, pp. 279-281.

¹⁵ Dragoljub Zivojinovic, “Serbia and Yugoslavia: Past, Present, and Future” in *Serbia's Historical Heritage*, ed. Alex N. Dragnich. Boulder: Columbia University Press - East European Monographs, 1994, pp. 61-62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-59.

¹⁷ Tanner, *Croatia*, pp. 29-37.

elections held the following year was the *Croatian Democratic Community* (or HDZ - *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*). Its nationalistic electoral rhetoric was loud enough to compensate for almost two decades of silence.

Present-shaping Past and Past-shaping Present

Myths are therefore truly of exceptional importance for nation-building. But it is equally true that only certain myths can perform this task successfully. As Mary Fulbrook points out, to have nation-building potential, myths have to resonate with popular collective memories and offer an answer to the present needs.¹⁸

According to Connerton, the way we experience the present depends heavily upon our knowledge of the past. Different pasts influence different perceptions of the same present. In turn, present influences -- or even distorts -- what we perceive as the true past.¹⁹ The logical consequence is the parallel existence of several "pasts," or, as Smith calls them, "invented traditions," each "remembered" according to our present needs. To make a past suitable for a desired form of nation-building, some of its segments need to be remembered and some forgotten. Some segments, if no appropriate ones exist, are simply invented, as long as they can be convincingly infiltrated into the succession of real memories.²⁰

For example, during the Yugoslav wars, the memories some Serbs, especially those living along the Dinaric mountain range in Croatia (the centre of Ustashe terror), had about WWII killings, made them very prone to believe that history was repeating itself. At the same time, nationalistic propaganda and hate-speech generated in Serbia proper exaggerated the war-time terror, creating "memories" of Ustashe crimes even among the people who were not their victims. In Croatia, the memories of the same experience went through a similar process, but with different goals. Minimizing the extent of the Ustashe massacres became the most popular pastime in post-election Croatia, because the pro-independence course of the new Croatian authorities needed more acceptable and popular memories of the last incarnation of Croatian "independent" statehood to legitimize their political goals.

The most important factor shaping the common memories is the national identity. Identity depends on memory, and memory in turn depends on identity. Both change in time, and both change interdependently. Both identity and memory are political and social constructs.²¹

The past, or its segments, can be used by elites to manipulate mass emotions, and to generate and control mass mobilization.²² For example, during the 1990 election campaign in Croatia, all HDZ's election posters were marked by a fat letter "H" (for *Hrvatska*, or Croatia), decorated with medieval Croat ornamentation. The party was also using the old Croatian chessboard flags at the rallies, bringing the memories of past Croatian glory back to life.²³ In Serbia, the relics of Prince Lazar (Serbian leader in the time of the Kosovo battle) were taken out of their resting place and sent on a long tour around Yugoslavia's Orthodox monasteries. Millions of Serbs came to pay respect to the remains of one of their greatest heroes, many of them decorated with Chetnik symbols such as the double-headed white eagle, symbol of the Serbian royal Karadjordjevic dynasty. Prince Lazar concluded his journey on June 28, 1989 at

¹⁸ Mary Fulbrook, "Myth-making and National Identity: The Case of the G.D.R." in *Myths and Nationhood*, pp. 73-74.

¹⁹ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, p. 2.

²⁰ Smith, *The Ethnic Origin of Nations*, pp. 177-178.

²¹ John R. Gillis, "Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship" in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 3-5.

²² Anthony D. Smith, "The 'Golden Age' and National Renewal" in *Myths and Nationhood*, pp. 36-38.

²³ Tanner, *Croatia*, p. 226.

Gazimestan, the scene of the Kosovo battle, on the same place where he was killed exactly six hundred years ago, with more than a million Serbs coming to celebrate both the anniversary and Milosevic's "coronation" as the president of Serbia.²⁴

The biggest danger in invoking the past for legitimizing present policies is that the idealized past can become a fixation or even a national obsession. In times of a rapid social change (such as the collapse of socialist system in Yugoslavia), such obsession can obscure the real needs of the present (for example, democratization and economic liberalization) and instead push the nation into chasing the utopian dream about resurrection of the ancient empire in its greatest territorial extent. The greater and more glorious the past appears, the easier it becomes to mobilize masses to try to bring it back to life for one more time.²⁵

Common, or social, memory has a great influence over individual memory. People will often recall a particular memory through contact and interaction with other members of their group. In order to communicate effectively with them, we need to remember the same things they remember. Our personal memories, if we want to truly be a part of a given society, need to be in tune with the persons, places, dates, language and symbols characterizing our community. They can exist only in the mental space, provided by the community. Being actually present when the event, which is "remembered," took place, or even being alive at the time, is neither important nor necessary.²⁶ For instance, since 1990 it was virtually impossible to be a "true" Croat without remembering the *Maspok*, or a true Serb without "remembering" the Kosovo battle. In making this possible, commemorative ceremonies play the most important role (interactions with other people, and education, media, religious services and culture also serve the same, commemorative purpose).

Commemorative ceremonies remind a community of its identity and explain its past as some sort of "collective autobiography." They are more than just distributors and preservers of collective memory. In order to be truly effective, they must become a way of life -- members of community need to become habituated to them.²⁷ Nation-building is therefore impossible without commemorations. All new nations are most vulnerable and fragile at the very beginning, hence the need to endow them with an inspirational "moment of glory."²⁸ Such a "moment" can also fuel the sense of "historical debt" -- present generations should feel indebted to their predecessors for their sacrifice and should uphold their values and, if needed, make similar sacrifices to protect their heritage.²⁹

National heritage is what makes each nation unique. To create its own, unique identity, each nation seeks out or invents its own distinctive heritage, which it is not ready to share with any other nation. It is always *our* heritage, exclusive to *us*, and as a rule, it is superior to *theirs*. Consequently, *we* are also more civilized and therefore superior to *them*. Heritage can be passed only to descendants -- to the same blood. Outsiders can admire it, but can never share it.

Each nation's perceived past is therefore one of the most important factors shaping where the nation stands today and what is the direction it is likely to take in the future. At the same time, the present situation and needs shape the way the past is perceived.

Yet, since only a limited number of appropriate pasts are available, the present also depends on (the interpretation of) the past(s). Evoking a certain past and using it to justify the present action is possible only if one, extremely important condition is fulfilled: the majority

²⁴ Laura Silber and Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation*. New York: Penguin Books, 1997, pp. 71-72.

²⁵ Smith, "The 'Golden Age' and National Renewal," pp. 38-39.

²⁶ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, pp. 36-38.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

²⁸ Gillis, "Memory and Identity," pp. 8-9

²⁹ David Sutton, *Memories Cast in Stone*. Oxford: Berg, 1998, p. 142.

of a community's members need to be manipulated or forced into “forgetting” the past which legitimized the previous community's existence (under the previous regime, or in the previous state, or during the previous social or national identity).

Collective Amnesia and Organized Oblivion

Connerton argues that any attempt to break completely with the existing social order and to substitute it with a new one demands that a process of forced forgetting take place. The more total the aspirations of the new regime, the harsher and more complete this process will be. State apparatus employs various means for this goal. In the not-too-remote past (for example, after WWII), contemporary writers were proscribed, historians were dismissed from their posts and denied public access, people were silenced and removed from their jobs, all becoming invisible. Schools spread the new dogma, media reflected and described the new reality, all making it increasingly difficult for people to remember the politically undesirable past.³⁰ Today, in the age of electronic media, the process can take place much easier and much faster. Non-stop bombardment from the TV screens that, for example, Ustashe were again slaughtering Serbian women and children, or that communism was an ideology forced upon Croats by Serbs, can make the majority of people inclined to believe that this was true, and that 45 years of peaceful coexistence under the regime, widely accepted in all Yugoslav republics, had been a lie. Yet, to make the majority actually believe that this was so, a war was needed. A war, especially a civil war, is the most drastic, most extreme form of a rapid social change, during which all good aspects of the *ancien regime* need to be forgotten to make way for the creation of a new social order, the most “perfect” to date.

The memory, produced by four decades of life under the “Brotherhood and Unity” slogan and shared by the majority of Yugoslavia's people, created a perception of existence in which a repetition of 1941-1945 civil war was considered virtually impossible. With this memory intact, elites in Serbia would most likely have much less success in convincing the Serbian people that they were again threatened by genocide. Systematic campaign of creation of a new social memory generated in Serbia support for policies, which in few years led to the destruction of Yugoslavia. The rationale was to make Yugoslavia “unimaginable” by confiscating and destroying all memory Serbs had of it. Without the imposition of new national memories, it would be much more difficult to persuade the majority of Yugoslavia's people that what was happening was a hate-generated ethnic war, rather than elite-provoked conflict. Ethnic cleansing was just the most effective and deadly tool that could be possibly used in the process. The tragic results of its efficiency are well known and have been widely documented. The social memory, shared by a majority of former “Yugoslavs” has been written anew and adopted to the new geo-political circumstances.

Claudia Koonz argues that forced forgetting had been pushed to its extremes in the communist states, where regimes imposed “an organized oblivion” -- a single allowed and officially imposed narrative which praised the leaders and demonized their enemies -- upon their citizens.³¹ As already discussed, individual memory is conditioned by a social memory. If the two are in conflict, if the individual memory continues to nostalgically recall something banned from the social memory, then the individual and social identity will be in conflict too, and in a case when the social identity equals the national identity, a consequence of the conflict will be a non-loyal member of a nation. In other words -- a traitor. Just like the old “Yugoslav” identity never managed to engulf all of the citizens of the former Yugoslavia, the

³⁰ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, pp. 12-15.

³¹ Claudia Koonz, “Between Memory and Oblivion: Concentration Camps in German Memory” in *Commemorations*, p. 258.

new national identities did not manage to implant themselves into the minds of all people who were supposed to start considering themselves as Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, etc. Some, instead of “remembering” all the injustices and exploitation they have allegedly suffered because of “their” nationality, remembered all the benefits of life in which nationality was not an issue of any, let alone of crucial importance.

As Dubravka Ugresic points out, when memories are being erased, any nostalgia, regardless of how trivial and harmless it is, is considered extremely dangerous and subversive.³² There can be no nostalgia without memory, and if too much memory has survived, chances are that the new regime -- eventually -- will not.

It is rather curious that all new nationalist elites from various ex-Yugoslav republics gave the same name to the people who refused to join the flock – “Yugo-nostalgics”. But, as Zdenko Lesic warns, the term should be treated with caution. The people experiencing this phenomenon were not nostalgic so much for the former country and even less so for its political system, but for the “experience of existence” associated with the former Yugoslavia. For them, this country represented “a natural space in which they were free to move and in which they enjoyed moving.” Having lost all hope for the future, they were left only with the memory of the (better) past.³³ A significant number of Yugo-nostalgics was thus a necessary outcome of the pressure to forget the only life they have ever had and to start “remembering” the one they have never led.

The nationalist elites have used numerous methods to try to fight the Yugo-nostalgia. Knowing that “historical sites can make [people] remember the distant past,”³⁴ buildings or even the whole cities of exceptional historical value became the prime target of artillery attacks. Historic walls of Dubrovnik were shelled, the famous Ottoman stone bridge in Mostar was destroyed, all Banja Luka mosques, including the city's symbol - the sixteenth century architectural masterpiece *Ferhadija* mosque, were blown up.

Renaming of the streets and invention of new public holidays were another tool employed, as Connerton puts it, “to deprive the citizens of their memory.” Post-Yugoslav regimes were thus behaving like typical totalitarian regimes. By pursuing the policy of “organized forgetting,” they have tried to ensure the total submission of their subject by taking their memories away.³⁵ The name of the central Zagreb square was changed from “The Square of the Victims of Fascism” to “The Square of the Croatian Heroes.” New, “Independence” and “Statehood Days” substituted the old holidays, celebrating the formation of Yugoslavia.

Returning to post-1945 Yugoslavia, forced forgetting was there needed not only to legitimize the new authorities, but it also served as a bandage over the exceptionally traumatic war-time experience. With most people who would be inclined to resist the imposed forgetting either dead,³⁶ emigrated or sent for “re-education” to *gulags* like Goli otok, the remaining majority of Yugoslav people actually welcomed the new beginning and the new set of memories, created through organized forgetting of the old ones.

³² Ugresic, *The Culture of Lies*, p. 225.

³³ Zdenko Lesic, ed. *Children of Atlantis. Voices from the Former Yugoslavia*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 1995, pp. 18-20.

³⁴ Maurice E. F. Bloch, *How We Think They Think: Anthropological Approaches to Cognition, Memory, and Literacy*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1996, p. 114.

³⁵ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, pp. 14-15.

³⁶ A telling example is the Bleiburg episode. Around 50,000 people, many of them Ustashe or people associated with their regime, or members of Slovenian White Guard, but also many people fleeing the uncertainty of the coming communist regime, tried to escape into Allies-held Austria. At Bleiburg, on May 15, 1945, they surrendered to the British troops, who disarmed them, packed them on trains and sent them straight back to Yugoslavia, where they were executed virtually upon arrival. In the following months, many pits and caves all over Slovenian and Croatian Karst became mass graves. Tanner, *Croatia*, pp. 169-170.

Forced forgetting is much more effective if the living conditions are extremely bad or at least much worse than they were in the recent past. Being preoccupied with trying to make ends meet, people have no energy or even no need to question the validity of social memories being imposed on them.³⁷ That is why it was so easy for so many Serbs during the 1990s to believe that they were truly the victims, waging a just, defensive war, completely misunderstood by the whole world.³⁸ Daily hardship made it much easier to adopt as genuine a “memory” in which the “images” of the good sides of living in multi-national Yugoslavia were suppressed by the “images” of injustices and suffering Serbs were presumably exposed to.

Forced Remembering

After collective amnesia has taken place, it is time for new social memory to develop through the process of similarly organized, or forced, remembering. The black hole, which has appeared in the memory, has to be filled up, and a new, modified “national history” is imposed on a nation, which underwent a rapid and thorough social change. Especially in the case of revolution (and the collapse of Yugoslavia may also be considered as a revolution of a kind), the post-revolutionary remembering is driven by the need for a complete break with the past and consequently for a new beginning. By producing memories in which the old regime is presented as absolutely backward, tyrannical and unjust, the new era is given a saintly glow and an exclusive copyright to define the future. This is what has happened after the French and American Revolutions. Their leaders have made a considerable effort to reject the past and construct a radically different future, urging their subjects to forget everything that came before. Jefferson thus proclaimed that “the dead have no rights” and the leaders of the French Republic declared 1792 to be the Year 1.³⁹

Yet, starting completely from the scratch is impossible. Even the Year 1 after the revolution and after the abolishment of the *ancien regime* and of everything it represented has to be based on some prior context. Since the most recent past is discredited (it was the past created by the regime we do not want to have anything with), the directions and the context need to be found further in the past.⁴⁰ An ideal point of reference is the “Golden Age.” To be suitable for such a task, the “Golden Age” needs to fulfill several conditions. First, it must be authentic – it needs to be well documented, believable, reconstructed from within and not imposed from outside, and above all, it needs to be distinctively *ours*. Second, the “Golden Age” has to be inspirational – all members have to be able to identify with it and it needs to provide them with examples of such mythic/heroic/sacred value, that they can be motivated to try to repeat them. Third, it must be capable of future reinterpretation – that is, members have to be convinced that the past glory can truly be achieved again.⁴¹

A break with the past is most clearly demonstrated with the adoption of “new” bodily practices and “new” commemorative ceremonies. Ceremonies, parades and mass gatherings are organized in places with a special position in the national memory, and these places extend their ancient credibility and the holiness of their existence to the new rituals and to the new regime. And thus Milosevic’s choice to celebrate his ascendancy to the Serbian “throne” at Gazimestan, on six hundredth anniversary of the Kosovo battle.

³⁷ Koonz, “Between Memory and Oblivion,” pp. 262-263.

³⁸ Tim Judah, *Kosovo: War and Revenge*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 304-308.

³⁹ Gillis, “Memory and Identity,” pp. 7-8.

⁴⁰ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, pp. 6-10.

⁴¹ Smith, “The ‘Golden Age’ and National Renewal,” pp. 55-59.

New bodily practices are among the most important new rituals. They can include, but are not limited to, new style of clothing, new or modified language, new gestures and especially new greetings, and even new gastronomic orientation (cleansing all inappropriate dishes from the menu). The main reason behind them is to create a new, clear border between members and non-members. Anyone who did not adapt to the new vocabulary (not just in language, but in all bodily practices), should be viewed at least with suspicion.⁴² For instance, in Croatia a process of “purification” of language started in 1991. All words suspected of sounding “too Serbian” were eliminated and instead, numerous archaic (“truly Croatian”) or completely new ones were introduced. The national flag and the coat of arms were changed, the traditional chessboard substituting the red star. The main slogan of the Croatian army became *Sve za Hrvatsku* (Everything for Croatia), bringing back memories of Ustashe slogan *Za dom spremni* (Ready for the Homeland). In Serbia, Chetnik uniforms and insignia, together with the characteristic long beards returned. A “traditional” Serbian greeting was invented (raised hand, with thumb, index and middle fingers stretched out, symbolizing the Orthodox way of making a sign of the cross, for which these three fingers are used). In both republics, the most extremely nationalistic political parties took the names of their most nationalistic predecessors from the past (Serbian Radical Party and Party of [Croatian State] Right).

In the process of remembering again what was in turn forgotten under the previous regime, not surprisingly, borders between right and wrong, good and bad, appropriate and inappropriate, and moral and immoral get blurred, if not completely erased. In Croatia, the shameful NDH episode came to be remembered almost as a crown jewel in the history of Croatian independent statehood, which was only occasionally tarnished by one or two excesses of few over-enthusiastic Ustashe soldiers. In few Croatian towns, streets were named after Mile Budak, the Minister of Education in Ustashe government, “famous” for his solution to the question of Serbs in Croatia (one third should be killed, one third expelled and one third converted to Roman Catholicism).⁴³

The cyclic process of remembering through forgetting (or forgetting through remembering) inevitably effects different people in a different way. Among those old enough to have lived through the previous cycle, some could be very pleased and truly enjoy the change. The new regime might again sanction the memories confiscated by the previous regime and confiscate those, which were imposed by it. In Yugoslav case, some people in Croatia and the overwhelming majority of the Croatian diaspora, returning home after 46 years of exile, could finally reconcile their personal memories with the emerging new Croatian national memory. Their old flag was flying again, Ustashe symbols could be seen sprayed over the walls, even the portraits of Ustashe leader Ante Pavelic could be seen here and there.⁴⁴ The Serbs in Croatia, whom the Serbian nationalistic poet Matija Beckovic called in 1989 “the remnants of the slaughtered people,”⁴⁵ were in the same period for the first time officially encouraged (by the authorities, media and intellectuals in Serbia) to “remember” how were they being slaughtered.

While some were given the opportunity to rediscover and regain their long-lost past, others had to go through the same process the other group had gone through after 1945. Each cycle of remembering - forgetting thus seemingly benefits some while harming others. In fact, both groups, regardless whether they are allowed to remember again or forced to forget (or vice versa, forced to remember or allowed to forget) have little to look forward to. As Ugresic

⁴² Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, pp. 10-12.

⁴³ Tim Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth, and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997, p. 126.

⁴⁴ Ugresic, *The Culture of Lies*, pp. 227-228.

⁴⁵ Silber and Little, *Yugoslavia*, p. 93.

writes, the most important “political battle is a battle for the territory of collective memory.”⁴⁶ Whoever controls the collective memory, controls the people and has the power over them. The people, no matter which group they belong to, are just pawns in the game, completely controlled by those who control the memories.

From Myths to War and from War to Myths

The confiscation of the common memory was not the most tragic aspect of Yugoslavia's destruction. Unfortunately, the competition for this title is too serious. But it is undoubtedly, and completely undeservedly so, the most ignored one. The common Yugoslav memory was destroyed so that Yugoslavia could be destroyed and vice versa. The two processes were intermingled in a vicious spiral, leading directly to the war.

The over-production of “memory” begun in the second half of the 1980s and reached enormous proportions after 1990. Arguments that the other side has always been plotting against “us” with the goal of either complete subjugation (of Croats by Serbs) or outright annihilation (of Serbs by Croats) have been abundantly present on both sides. Newspapers, magazines, TV, numerous books and public appearances of various politicians all assured both Croats and Serbs that they were in danger, creating an atmosphere in which the outbreak of the war was possible.⁴⁷ Many Serbs and Croats believed by 1991 that the “others” really hated them and that this hatred had existed virtually forever. The belief in the persistent hate of the “other” was indeed a powerful motivator and made it possible to generate even more hate in turn. Yet, this hate was far from being “ancient.” A few isolated outbursts of ethnic violence (even the long and gruesome episode from WWII was an exception and not a rule, occurring in a time when the whole Europe was one large killing field) cannot outbalance the usual long periods of peace and cooperation separating them.

Christopher Bennett argues that none of the reasons for Yugoslavia's collapse were ancient, especially since mass media, one of the most decisive factors, is a relatively new phenomenon. The Yugoslav media originally served the communist regime(s) of the Yugoslav republics. By the late 1980s these regimes had already turned into nationalistic ones, and the media, still in their service, started to deliberately fan the flames of hatred to divert attention from the complete inability of current leaders to stop the economic and social disintegration of the country.⁴⁸

The deteriorating standard of living, the increasing insecurity and the total lack of vision displayed by most of those in power (with the notable exception of the last Yugoslav Prime Minister Ante Markovic, who unfortunately came along too late to make a difference) made people susceptible to believe that someone else was truly exploiting them, and most of them rallied behind those leaders who were most convincingly promising to protect them.

The continuously worsening economic conditions intensified the quarrels between the republican leaderships and the federal government over the federal budget, taxation, and jurisdiction over foreign trade and investment. One of the principal measures to improve the balance-of-payments was to increase exports and to reduce imports – a measure which disproportionately benefited Slovenia and Croatia at the expense of the less developed republics, intensifying the inter-republican fighting. Being unable or unwilling to find a

⁴⁶ Ugresic, *The Culture of Lies*, p. 228.

⁴⁷ See Drinka Gojkovic, “The Birth of Nationalism from the Spirit of Democracy,” pp. 330-334 and 340-342, Aleksander Nenedovic, “*Politika* in the Storm of Nationalism,” pp. 539-547, Rade Veljanovski, “Turning the Electronic Media Around,” pp. 577-586, and Zoran Markovic, “The Nation: Victim and Vengeance,” pp. 600-607, all in *The Road to War in Serbia*. See also Tanner, *Croatia*, pp. 263-266, Silber and Little, *Yugoslavia*, pp. 120 and 142 and Christopher Bennett, *Yugoslavia's Bloody Collapse: Causes, Course and Consequences*. London: Hurst & Company, 1995, pp. 121-126 and 147-149.

⁴⁸ Bennett, *Yugoslavia's Bloody Collapse*, pp. 5-13.

solution for the whole country, the republican authorities, especially when it became clear that elections were inevitable in the near future, devoted all of their energies to convince their domestic power bases that “the others” were to blame for everything. This created an atmosphere of localism and hostility, and a pressing need for finding scapegoats. Since 1986, most republics regularly failed to pay their dues to the Federal Budget.⁴⁹ This naturally intensified the crisis and made economic recovery virtually impossible. The result, Susan Woodward concludes, was a complete breakdown of the social and political order, and the rise of nationalism.⁵⁰

The political elites, threatened by the economic and social disintegration, which undermined their political authority, therefore used Yugoslavia's ethnic diversity to divert attention from their own incompetence and found a convenient scapegoat either in other ethnic group(s) or in Yugoslavia's federal arrangement. Most often, these two excuses were combined into a claim that a particular ethnic group had created the existing federal structure so that it could exploit and subordinate other nations. To make their claims resonate better with their targeted audience, the elites connected them with real or mythical episodes from the past, giving their newly coined conspiracy theories a “historical” dimension.

When the war broke out, the elites needed to create new myths, which were used to present an appropriate image of the war, in order to preserve the popular support for the war on a level high enough to first, continue the war effort, and second, to guarantee the political survival of the regime. Members of the political elites and the media under their control thus presented the war in a way, which would appeal to the largest segment of the population under their rule. In the Serbian case, the war was presented as another episode in the old Serbian struggle against the genocidal Croats and their “Turkish” (Bosnian Muslim) partners. As Heavenly People, Serbs would inevitably win this struggle, the propaganda proclaimed, offering strong incentives to Serbian people to join the war. On the Croatian side, mythical presentation of the war pictured it as the final and ultimate Serbian attempt to subjugate and annex parts of the “historic Croatian land.” All Croats should therefore feel obliged to stand up to defend their homeland, just as their ancestors did on numerous occasions in the past, and if necessary, sacrifice their lives on the altar of the sacred Croatian soil.

After 1945, the Communist authorities forbade all memories of the crimes and atrocities their side committed during the war and replaced the confiscated set of memories with a new one in which all the horrors were remembered as committed *only* by the enemy: German and Italian Fascists and their Ustashe and Chetnik servants. After 1991 the same pattern was repeated. The new post-communist⁵¹ (but equally authoritarian) authorities declared that they were waging a war for freedom and justice against vicious fascists who, naturally, were responsible for *all* the crimes and horrors committed. *Our* side was just and innocent, simply a defenseless victim. Thus, the only thing, Ugresic suggests, for which there was absolutely no place in the aggressive propaganda glorifying *our* just struggle, was shame. What in other circumstances would represent a total moral defeat was celebrated as a collective triumph, which the members of new nation-in-making should feel proud of.⁵²

⁴⁹ Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1995, pp. 77-79.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-51.

⁵¹ It can be argued how “post-communist” they actually were. In Serbia, Milosevic's Socialist Party of Serbia just slightly modified its name, and Milosevic and his new communist-turned-socialist government continued to rule more or less in the same way as before. In Croatia, both Tudjman and his first Defence Minister Spegelj were former communists and high ranking officers in the Federal Army. After the elections, the reforming Croatian Communist Party rapidly lost many of its members, many of whom joined the HDZ.

⁵² Ugresic, *The Culture of Lies*, pp. 193-195.

Heavenly People versus Genocidal Ustashe

A part of the Serbian society had been speaking the “genocide-is-threatening-us” language well before the war even started. At first, its main target were the Kosovo Albanians. They were allegedly terrorizing the Serbs in the province, forcing them to leave. The Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU, *Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti*), written in 1986, was the first occasion on which the term “genocide” was used. The Memorandum warned that the Serbs were facing “genocide,” “genocidal terror” and “neo-Fascist aggression” in Kosovo. In the following years, “genocide” became the most abused and misused word in the Serbian war propaganda vocabulary.⁵³

The effect the Memorandum had on the ordinary Serbs was a result of the authority and prestige enjoyed by its sixteen authors (all well-known and respected Serbian academics). The Memorandum “scientifically” confirmed the popular Serbian self-perception as victims, and reinforced the conviction that other Yugoslav nations were plotting against them (a view widespread in Serbia since the 1974 Yugoslav constitution, which thoroughly decentralized the federation).⁵⁴

Serbian historians dug out selections of old documents to legitimize current policies. A telling example is Vasilije Krestic's book *Through Genocide to a Greater Croatia*. Krestic, claiming to have reached his conclusions after several years of study of Croatian history, states that Croats have “always” hated Serbs and that their hatred was intensifying until it reached genocidal proportions during WWII. Ever since the revolution of 1848, Croat politicians have, according to Krestic, striven to create an ethnically pure and exclusively Catholic Greater Croatia.⁵⁵ For him, the Croatian constitution of December 22, 1990, which transformed Serbs from a constituent nation into a national minority, was just a transitional step to a new chapter in the eternal drama of Croatian genocide against Serbs. Krestic concludes that Croatian hatred for Serbs was manifested in Croatian insistence that the Croatian nation has exclusive political and historic rights to the territory of the Republic of Croatia. Given this hatred, the war hardly came as a surprise, since in Krestic's opinion Croats believed that Croatia can become a truly Croat state only through the complete annihilation of Serbs.⁵⁶

The Serbian Orthodox Church also started to get involved in politics. Its officials started to send petitions to the Serbian and the federal authorities, demanding protections of “the spiritual and biological being of the Serbian people in Kosovo.” The church newspaper *Pravoslavlje* (Orthodoxy) regularly published articles, describing alleged crimes committed by the Kosovo Albanians against Serbs. The newspaper also started a series of articles, which featured detailed stories about the mass killings of Serbs in the NDH, and about the Ustashe concentration camps. In 1984, the then-Patriarch German dedicated a new church in Jasenovac (location of the most infamous Ustashe concentration camp). On the occasion, he called upon people to forgive, but not to forget. In 1988, Dragomir Ubiparipovic, a priest from Sarajevo, wrote an article about “cultural and religious genocide against Serbs in Sarajevo.” He supported his claim with the fact that all tourist brochures about Sarajevo deliberately promoted mainly Islamic cultural monuments.⁵⁷

The Association of the Serbian Writers, which appeared in the early 1980s as a very liberal-minded centre of resistance to the communist regime, also joined the nationalistic camp, especially after Milosevic's 1986 ascent. The Association also first picked up the

⁵³ Milosavljevic, “The Abuse of the Authority of Science,” pp. 279-280.

⁵⁴ Branimir Anzulovic, *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide*. London: Hurst & Company, 1999, pp. 114-118.

⁵⁵ Vasilije D. Krestic, *Through Genocide to a Greater Croatia*. Belgrade: BIGZ, 1998, p. 57.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-84.

⁵⁷ Radmila Radic, “The Church and the ‘Serbian Question’” in *The Road to War in Serbia*, pp. 248-256.

Kosovo cause, but soon moved to Croatia, expressing concern over the fate of Serbs in that republic, in which “political demonism has destroyed all reason.”⁵⁸ Poets and writers played an exceptionally important role in the promotion of hatred and intolerance. The already quoted Matija Beckovic’s reference to the Croatian Serbs as “the remnants of a slaughtered people” had an enormous effect among Serbs. Beckovic was also among the first to demand that Serbs in Croatia be armed. Radovan Karadzic, one of those most responsible for the genocide in Bosnia, was a poet. Nikola Koljevic, his close associate and his Vice President, was also a poet and one of the leading Yugoslav experts on Shakespeare. Bozidar Vucurevic, another poet, became one of the paramilitary warlords in eastern Herzegovina and was a commander of troops, which were bombing Dubrovnik. One of the most prominent Yugoslav novelists Dobrica Cosic became a hard-line President of the third, rump Yugoslavia in 1992.

The most popular Serbian opposition leader in the first half of the 1990s, Vuk Draskovic, was also a novelist. In 1982, he published his most well-known work, a best-selling novel entitled *Noz* (The Knife). Most of the novel takes place during World War II in Bosnia, and is full of exceptionally graphic descriptions of scenes in which sadistic Croat and Muslim Ustashe are massacring innocent Serbs. A number of other works similarly described killings of innocent Serbs by Croatian and Muslim Fascists.⁵⁹ None of these works made even a slight reference to innocent Croats and Muslims, massacred by Chetniks and other Serbian paramilitary troops.⁶⁰

Serbian authorities, with the help of the controlled media, began an aggressive campaign of “production” of alleged Serbian enemies. This created a strong nationalistic backlash in other republics, especially in Croatia, reinforcing the initial claims of Milosevic's propaganda regarding the reemerging anti-Serb sentiment in Croatia. Following the HDZ electoral victory in Croatia, Serbian authorities intensified their demonization of Croats. The state media in Serbia were full of stories, warning the Serbian readers that Ustashe had returned.⁶¹

With elections in Serbia approaching, and wanting to make sure that they avoid electoral defeat suffered by Communists in Slovenia and Croatia, Milosevic and his associates engaged in what Woodward called “a psychological warfare.” Psychological warfare soon turned into a real war. In Yugoslavia, every nation was a minority, and constant bombardment with references to exploitation, threats and victimization quite naturally resulted in the creation of dangerous paranoia. Influenced by propaganda, many ordinary people begun to “recall” their own unpleasant experiences with people from other nations and to realize just how much “truth” was actually in various stereotypes they had always regarded as nonsense (for example, all Croats are Ustashe, or all Serbs are barbaric primitives).⁶² Fear, intensified with a number of staged violent confrontations (like in Plitvice, Pakrac and Borovo selo, where Seselj's paramilitaries ambushed and killed twelve Croatian policemen on May 2, 1991) made most of the people chose sides and give their support to those promising to protect them.

When the real war started, psychological warfare intensified even more. To present the Serbian involvement in the war as a just and defensive struggle against the demonic enemy and thus as a worthy replica of glorious events from the past, quotations from folk songs and proverbs, and citations from various literary works, were added to the militant speeches.

⁵⁸ Gojkovic, “The Birth of Nationalism from the Spirit of Democracy,” pp. 340-342.

⁵⁹ See for example: Vojislav Lubarda's trilogy *Transfiguration, Repentance and Ascension*, Nedjo Sipovac's *Springtime in the South* and *Summer on the Mountain, 1941*, Jovan Radulovic's *Golubnjaca* (name of a pit in Croatia, were bodies of massacred Serbs were thrown) and Slobodan Selenic's *Timor Mortis* (Fear of Death).

⁶⁰ Anzulovic, *Heavenly Serbia*, pp. 128-140.

⁶¹ V. P. Gagnon jr., “Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict: The Case of Serbia” in *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 3, winter 1994-1995, pp. 151-157.

⁶² Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy*, pp. 228-229.

Thus, a genre of “war propaganda folklore” was created, easing the transformation of the truth about the war into a myth.⁶³ In August 1991, when the war in Croatia was well under way, Croatian Serbs organized a festival of music and dance in the village of Strmica. Milan Martić, the President of the “Republic of Srpska Krajina,” was sitting in the first row, listening to succession of singers, accompanied by bagpipes and guslas (traditional Serbian string instrument). One of them was singing: “Krajina, our Mother / We won't leave you to the Ustashe.”⁶⁴

The daily *Politika*, which used to be the most prestigious Serbian daily was soon transformed into an important element of Milosevic's propaganda machine.⁶⁵ When the Serbs in Croatia proclaimed autonomy on July 25, 1990, *Politika* hailed the Serbian uprising (the same word, uprising or *ustanak*, is used to refer to the Serbian rebellions against the Ottoman Empire in 1804 and 1815) and quoted the then Krajina leader, Jovan Rasković that he would not “negotiate with Ustashe.” The remainder of the issue featured numerous articles about the crimes Ustashe committed during WWII. In the following month, *Politika* was full of headlines such as “Serb children held as hostages,” “Ustashe are destroying Yugoslavia,” “Attack on the Serb people,” “Scenes from 50 years ago repeated,” “1941 started with same methods,” “Genocide must not be repeated” and similar. Articles often pointed out that unarmed Serbs were defenseless and left to the mercy of the vicious enemy.⁶⁶ Articles, describing Serbian involvement in violent occurrences, were entitled “We shall resist,” “Protecting the Serbian people,” and “Serbian unity saving Krajina,” stressing its defensive character.⁶⁷ Even when it was openly agitating for the war and called on Serbs from Serbia proper to go to fight in Croatia, *Politika* stressed that their mission was defensive, since they were going to “defend our people from Ustashe.” When the war in Bosnia started, *Politika* reprinted a series of First World War propaganda posters communicating the idea that “Serbia needs your help.”⁶⁸

Daily newspapers, despite being very important, could not match the state-owned Radio-Television Serbia (RTS), which became *the* most important means for spreading Milosevic's propaganda. In the summer of 1991 the entire RTS management was dismissed and the institution was transformed into a tool of the ruling party. Croat and Muslim victims and refugees were never mentioned, and the atrocities committed by the Serb army and paramilitaries were also carefully omitted. Numerous documentaries, produced by RTS, drew parallels between WWII and the current war. In October 1991, three million Serbs (more than 60 per cent of the population over 10 years of age) named RTS evening news as their main source of information.⁶⁹

In its coverage of the war, the RTS commentators referred to Serbs as “fighting for freedom” and “protecting their native soil” against “evil-doers,” “cut-throats,” “Ustashe,” “*mujahedins*,” “Fascist terrorists” and “Islamic extremists.” According to RTS news, the Serbian side never attacked, but was only responding to attacks. When Serbs took over a town or a village, they “liberated” it, just like the communist resistance was liberating towns and villages during WWII. RTS therefore constructed a parallel reality, according to which forces from Serbia proper never attacked Bosnia, in which Serbs were always innocent and “almost”

⁶³ Olga Zirojević, “Kosovo in the Collective Memory” in *The Road to War in Serbia*, pp. 208-209.

⁶⁴ Judah, *The Serbs*, pp. 42-43.

⁶⁵ Nenadović, “*Politika* in the Storm of Nationalism,” pp. 537-542.

⁶⁶ Mark Thompson, *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina*. London: Article 19 - International Centre Against Censorship, 1994, pp. 70-73.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-81.

⁶⁹ Veljanovski, “Turning the Electronic Media Around,” pp. 577-580.

defenseless victims, and in which Serbs never killed innocent people and destroyed villages and towns.⁷⁰

Dragan Terzic, the editor of *Pravoslavlje* wrote an article, warning that Serbs would again become slaves as they were for almost five centuries if they allow *mujahedins* to govern them. A theologian Bozidar Mijac wrote that God was on the side of Serbs, because just like in 1389, Serbs were fighting to defend their souls, soil and religion. The Kosovo battle was recalled also by an article, published in July 1993, which declared that the Almighty God and His Justice, and all of the Serbian saints, led by Saint Sava, were standing beside the proud Serbian people, who choose to defy the threatening forces.⁷¹

What remains unclear is why the majority of Serbs actually believed what they were told. First, one should not underestimate the almost absolute lack of immunity against intoxication with propaganda, characteristic for people who live in conditions of *total* economic and social collapse. The devastating economic conditions in Serbia during the war (forty per cent of the factories stopped working, coupons were introduced for rationed supplies of flour, oil, sugar, detergent, fuel and other products, a record-breaking hyperinflation depleted the savings) made people concerned only about the survival of their families. Seeking out the “truth” about the war was far from being a top priority. Moreover, the myth which completely confirmed the self-perception most of Serbs grew up with (namely, that throughout history, Serbs were *always* on the right side, engaged in a heroic struggle against tyranny and oppression), did an exceptionally important thing for most of them, and this should not be underestimated. In a time of complete personal humiliation and powerlessness, the myth about the Heavenly People liberating again the enslaved and terrorized brethren, gave many Serbs the only thing that kept them going through the hardship – collective dignity. Having nothing else to hold on to anymore, many Serbs held on to a lie.

The second factor was almost complete monopoly on information Milosevic’s regime had. Pauperization made it virtually impossible for majority of people to seek alternative sources of information, since they either could not afford them or were completely preoccupied with trying to feed themselves and their families. The third important factor was the church, especially in rural areas the pole around which a large part of village life was spinning. Lastly, the aura of the Serbian heroic past, which embraced the official account of the Serbian participation in the war through numerous references and ties made with the myths and mythic history depicting it, cast all the doubts away. When “Heavenly People” were fighting “the Genocidal Ustashe” and “the Turks,” did an individual Serb really have a luxury of choosing sides?

“European” Victims and “Balkan” Aggressors

From the very beginning, Croatian President Tudjman and his party, Croatian Democratic Community, adopted an exceptionally aggressive nationalistic tone, which clearly set the boundaries between (allegedly) “European,” civilized, democratic, developed, educated and Catholic Croats on one side, and (allegedly) “Balkan,” primitive, authoritarian, backward, illiterate Orthodox Serbs on the other.

In a speech delivered to the Croatian Parliament when the new constitution was promulgated on December 22, 1990, President Tudjman stated that Croats had been developing their national identity and statehood since their first independent medieval kingdom and that the Croatian state never ceased to exist until 1918. In his long speech he similarly did not fail to stress again that Croats always belonged to Central and Western

⁷⁰ Thompson, *Forging War*, pp. 102-111.

⁷¹ Radic, “The Church and the ‘Serbian Question,’” pp. 260-267.

Europe, as opposed to half-oriental Serbs, whose culture was a combination of Ottoman and Byzantine influences.⁷²

Almost immediately after the HDZ electoral victory, a rebellion started in the predominantly Serb-populated Kninska Krajina. Refusing to acknowledge the new republican authorities, the Krajina Serbs soon proclaimed autonomy of their region and used force against the attempts of the Croatian police to retake control of the area. Croatian media mocked the Serbian rebels, portraying them as drunken hillbillies, wearing Chetnik hats and characteristic long beards. Since the Serbs used trees to blockade the main roads, leading to Knin, their rebellion was dubbed *balvanska revolucija* (the log revolution).⁷³ *Vecernji list* described the event as “terrorist revolution” and referred to the insurgents exclusively as “Serb terrorists,” “Chetnik terrorists” or “Chetnik hordes.”⁷⁴

The President Tudjman compared Serbs to a “cancer, destroying the Croatian national being at the very heart of Croatia.”⁷⁵ In a booklet issued in Croatia in 1992, the publisher collected a number of Serbian documents and extracts of statements made by Serbian politicians and intellectuals between 1844 and 1986. All these documents supposedly proved how Serbs have always planned to implant this “cancer” into the “Croatian national being.” This “cancer,” or the presence of Serbs in Croatia, was a justification used in the nineteenth century to plan and in the twentieth to create a Greater Serbia. The authors of the booklet dismissed all those sections of the published documents that did not confirm their thesis about an “eternal” Serbian plan to incorporate historic Croatian land into Serbia, as a Serbian attempt to hide “their true motives with a series of historic and demographic falsifications.”⁷⁶

Similarly, another publication issued during the war in Croatia, blamed the war on persistent Serbian hegemonic aspirations over Croatia. The booklet traces the beginning of these aspirations to the second Serbian uprising against the Ottomans in 1815 after which Serbia gained autonomy and started to develop its modern statehood. The latter was based on the idea of Greater Serbia within the borders of the fourteenth-century empire of Tsar Dusan.⁷⁷ These aspirations were finally realized in 1918 when the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was established, which, according to the authors, was in fact Greater Serbia in all but name, since Serbs were privileged and Serbia economically exploited other regions.⁷⁸ Serbs, they argue, continued to dominate and exploit the other nations also in socialist Yugoslavia, outmaneuvering the federal constitution, continuing to rule the country as their private property.⁷⁹ When the forces of democracy took over Croatia and wanted to put an end to Serbian exploitation, the authors claim, the Serbian army attacked Croatia, starting a war of aggression, ethnically cleansing Croatia and trying to annex its territory in order to realize their almost two centuries old plan.⁸⁰

The new Croatian constitution declared Croatia a sovereign state based on a “millennial national identity of Croatian nation and the continuity of its statehood” during

⁷² Franjo Tudjman. “We Stand Before a Great Historic Test” in *Yugoslavia through Documents: From its Creation to its Dissolution*, ed. Snezana Trifunovska. Dordrecht: M. Nijhoff, 1994, pp. 237-240.

⁷³ Thompson, *Forging War*, p. 161.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 179-180.

⁷⁵ Mariana Lenkova, ed., *“Hate Speech” in the Balkans*. Athens: International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, 1998, p.39.

⁷⁶ Ante Beljo, ed., *Greater Serbia: From Ideology to Aggression*. Zagreb: Croatian Information Centre, 1992, pp. 6-8.

⁷⁷ Dusan Bilandzic et al, *Croatia Between War and Independence*, Zagreb: University of Zagreb, 1991, pp. 11-15.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-32.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-43.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-73.

more than 1,300 years, and on “the Croatian nation’s historic right to full sovereignty.”⁸¹ The references to “millennial statehood,” terminated only by the Serbian “occupation” in 1918 became a central point of the HDZ pro-independence campaign. These references sometimes went to ridiculous proportions. *Hrvatski Politicki Leksikon* (Croatian Political Lexicon) thus states that the consequence of the Serbian occupation was that the name of the Croatian state disappeared from official usage after thirty-five (sic!) centuries of continuous existence. The occupation also allegedly separated Croatia from Europe, Western civilization, Western markets and economy, and Catholicism, and was destroying the Croatian language, economy and historical heritage, pushing it into the backward, repressive, tyrannical Serbian-ruled prison-state.⁸²

Just like in Serbia, the media played the most important role in spreading the “mythical” presentation of the war. The State Radio and Television (HRT), and the main daily newspapers, *Vjesnik*, *Vecernji list* and *Slobodna Dalmacija* were purged. Editors and reporters were dismissed, and new ones took their places, perfectly aware to whom they should be thankful for their promotion.

The Croatian media presented the war as a struggle of a small democratic state, trying to assert its right to independent statehood. HRT programs were full of stories, featuring heroic “Croatian sons defending their homeland” or devoted “Croatian mothers, sending their sons of to the homeland liberation war.”⁸³

From the very beginning of the war, the media completely subordinated their *raison d’être* (to impartially inform and report the truth) to the needs of the state propaganda and did their utmost to present Croatia as an innocent victim. There can hardly be any doubt that Croatia was a victim. A part of its territory was occupied, many of its towns and villages were bombed and some completely destroyed, many Croats were killed and many more forced to flee their homes. Yet, the drive to present Croatia as a victim and nothing but a victim was so strong that it pushed aside all ability to critically and realistically evaluate the situation, making it virtually impossible for the majority of Croats to imagine that their side could commit crimes and be an aggressor. The collective emotion of feeling like a victim, generated by the government and the media, and endorsed by the public, was strong enough to almost completely cast aside the rational evaluation of the facts, supplied by foreign and independent Croatian media and by increasing international criticism of Croatia during the Croat-Muslim conflict. Every objection to the image of Croatia as a victim was perceived as anti-Croatian and therefore pro-Serbian, and as a treacherous attack on the young Croatian state.⁸⁴ For example, on October 23, 1993, UN forces discovered the bodies of 15 Muslim civilians in the central Bosnian village of Stupni Do. The investigation revealed that they were killed by Bosnian Croat forces, which shot them at close range and then set them on fire. Croatian news agency HINA reported that “Muslim and some foreign agencies reported the alleged massacre of civilians in the village of Stupni Do” and then added that Stupni Do was a centre from where Muslim forces were attacking Croatian villages.⁸⁵

In general, the coverage of the Croatian participation in the war in Bosnia continued to present Croats as victims. According to HRT reports, they were only defending “themselves and their centuries-old homes” against Serbian and Muslim forces, which were expansionist, aggressive and genocidal. The media practically never criticized the extreme nationalism of the leadership of “Herceg-Bosna” (the Croat-populated part of Bosnia-Herzegovina) and insisted that forces from Croatia proper never participated in the fighting in Bosnia, despite

⁸¹ “The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia” in *Yugoslavia through Documents*, pp. 251-252.

⁸² Hrvoje Sobic, *Hrvatski Politicki Leksikon* (Croatian Political Lexicon), part II. Rijeka: Tiskara Rijeka, 1993, pp. 1094-1096.

⁸³ Tanner, *Croatia*, pp. 264-265.

⁸⁴ Ugresic, *The Culture of Lies*, pp.72-77.

⁸⁵ Thompson, *Forging War*, pp. 148-149.

the fact that many foreign journalists provided proofs for just the opposite. The crimes committed by the Croatian forces were regularly concealed. When this was not possible (like in the case of Ahmici massacre, where Croatian paramilitaries killed at least 104 Muslim civilians), the media blamed “certain criminals, wearing black uniforms and Ustashe symbols,” trying to put the responsibility for the atrocities on Croats. On other occasions, the press reports about the crimes against the Muslims, committed in the Croat controlled parts of Bosnia, were appropriately surrounded with articles like “Muslims wound seven children.” Often, when Croatian crimes were acknowledged, Sarajevo leadership was blamed for them, since “Muslim victims were a necessary part of the hellish plan for an Islamic Bosnia.”⁸⁶

The creation of a myth, which concealed the truth about the war, followed in Croatia a pattern similar to the one used in Serbia. The ruling elites, state-controlled media (especially the television and few most influential newspapers, which were all staffed with reliable cadres), numerous intellectuals and popular public figures joined to create a black and white “reality” in which Serbs (and later Muslims) were inevitably the villains, and Croatia and Croats innocent victims. Unlike in Serbian case, in which the alleged threat to Serbs was to a large extent pure fabrication, Croatian propaganda had a lot of ready-made material to use. After all, between July 1991 and January 1992, Croatian towns and villages were burning, Croats were forced to flee their homes, and the Serbian forces undoubtedly had the upper hand in the fighting.

Yet, what is striking is how willing victim Croatia actually was. Many authors have written that Croatian authorities on many occasions provoked violent clashes and destruction (Vukovar and Dubrovnik are often quoted as typical cases) in order to receive an international recognition of Croatia as a compensation for its “suffering.”⁸⁷ In cases where the conflict stubbornly refused to begin (like in western Slavonia, where local Serbs and Croats were used to coexist peacefully with each other), Croatian special forces were employed to provoke one. Thus a few days before the massacre of Croatian policemen in Borovo selo on May 2, 1991, a small unit of the HDZ commandos, led by Gojko Susak (who was to become Croatian Defense Minister), sneaked to the village during the night and fired a few shoulder-launched Amburst missiles on Borovo selo.⁸⁸

When in early 1993, Croatian army re-conquered parts of Dalmatia (around Zadar), the action was hailed as a first step towards complete liberation of “occupied territories.” However, virtually not a single similar action followed until the summer of 1995. Only few weeks later, the Muslim-Croat war started in Bosnia and the area around Zadar was the natural route through which the Bosnian Croat army was supplied with arms, fuel, fresh troops, and wages (the income of Bosnian Croat police and army forces was coming from the budget of the Republic of Croatia). Instead of defending or liberating its territory, Croatian authorities, the democratic leaders of a country, which was supposedly a defenseless victims, devoted its material and human resources to carve up a Croatian state in Bosnia, and to eventually annex it to Croatia.

Conclusion

Most of the people in Croatia and Serbia continue to believe that “their” side was a victim, and that all the horrors and all the atrocities were committed only by “the others.” Even if some Serbs or Croats acknowledge that the role their homelands played in the war was aggressive, rather than defensive, they blame it on the corrupt and greedy politicians, crazy

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 166-184.

⁸⁷ Lucic and Djikic, “Tudjmanovo desetljeće” (Tudjman's Decade), Tanner, *Croatia*, pp. 265-268, Silber and Little, *Yugoslavia*, pp. 178-179, Bennett, *Yugoslavia's Bloody Collapse*, pp. 171-172.

⁸⁸ Silber and Little, *Yugoslavia*, p. 140.

and primitive highlanders, obsessed nationalists or criminal gangs. There is always someone else to blame, and to a point, this is understandable. It is true that numerous extremely nationalistic intellectuals, artists and writers contributed a lot to fanning of nationalist passions in the late 1980s. It is also true that a limited number of people with unlimited power in both Croatia and Serbia made a decision to go to war, and kept the war burning for as long it suited their interests. Above all, it is true that ordinary Serbs and Croats rarely participated in warfare and were even less often involved in committing atrocities. Yet, this does not pardon them from the “crime” of making all this possible by not preventing it. The opposition to war in both republics were virtually non-existent and only an odd anti-war protest was occasionally staged in Belgrade or Novi Sad, or in Zagreb or Split. Most people, just like people usually do anywhere in the world (like, for example, they did all over Europe during the Nazi or Communist “occupation”), simply adopted to the new circumstances and waited for it to pass.

The “democracy” of life under Tudjman’s and under Milosevic’s regime has passed, and the normality is truly returning to both Serbia and Croatia. The memory of true Croatian and Serbian role in the war, confiscated by the imposition of a mythic, parallel reality in which the aggressors were remembered as victims, however, did not return.

Zarko Korac, a psychology professor at the University of Belgrade, was asked if Serbs would experience a catharsis after the war and acknowledge their responsibility for what happened. His negative reply is hardly surprising. Korac said that instead, many Serbs would say that they did not know, and others will reply that Serbs did nothing the others did not do to them.⁸⁹ Looking at Serbia after Milosevic's downfall, one cannot but admit that Korac was right. Even a democrat and anti-nationalist like the late Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic, has not been immune to this trend. When asked by a Croatian journalist on a press conference whether Serbian government plans to apologize to Croatian people for aggression, committed by Serbian army, Djindjic answered that when he looks at over a million of Serb refugees from Croatia and Bosnia, he gets the feeling that someone should apologize to Serbs instead.⁹⁰ Most of the people, who were sent to The Hague and have been convicted there, are still regarded as national heroes. The two most wanted suspects for the crimes against humanity, committed during the war in Bosnia, Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, are still at large. Even the trial against Milosevic, which is broadcasted live on one of Serbian TV channels, has helped Milosevic to build an image of a true patriot, who kept on fighting for the Serbian “national cause” against the rest of the evil and unfair world. The sudden death of Milosevic a week ago (on March 11, 2006) could have terrible consequences. Despite being hated by a majority of Serbs, he will enter their collective memory as someone who had died “an innocent man.” The four-year long trial against Milosevic, which will now never come to its logical and necessary conclusion, is the worst kind of “gift” the international community could have given to the Serbian nationalists.

The reluctance to face the truth regarding the Serbian participation in the war and to deal with its consequences is not only the feature of the new authorities, but is also shared by a large part of the public. With over a million refugees from Croatia and Bosnia living in Serbia, with having to cope with the harsh consequences of years of life under sanctions and almost completely destroyed economy, and with more than 200,000 of the youngest and best educated emigrated and most likely lost for Serbia forever, everyone trying to convince Serbs that they were not *the* victims will face an extremely difficult task.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Judah, *The Serbs*, p. 248.

⁹⁰ “Obtoznice v javnost” (The Indictments Made Public), *Dnevnik*, January 19, 2001.

⁹¹ Judah, *The Serbs*, pp. 309-310.

As Serbian scholar Miodrag Popovic wrote, Serbs need to emancipate themselves from the blind slavery of their historic heritage, so that they could finally become not what their myths tell them they should be, but instead what *they* want to be.⁹²

The situation is almost identical in Croatia. The Croatian government is extremely troubled every time the Hague Tribunal opens a case against another “Croat,” rather than trying to calm down tensions and protests of Croat nationalist die-hards. The nation-wide hysteria over the arrest of one of “the greatest Croatian heroes” Ante Gotovina is a perfect example. The official “reality” regarding the war is still that Croatia was a victim, and never attacked anyone. The Croatian *Sabor* adopted a declaration in December 2000, in which it was clearly stated that “Croatia was not involved in any aggressive military operations.” Its role in the war was therefore strictly defensive. Vesna Pusic, president of the HNS (*Hrvatska narodna stranka*, Croatian People’s Party), protested and declared in *Sabor* that opposite was the case, namely that Croatia was an aggressor in Bosnia. Pusic was criticized for her “blasphemy” in *Sabor* and verbally attacked and abused on numerous protests, organized by Croatian nationalists for daring to oppose the official dogma about Croatian innocence.⁹³

If Croats truly want to turn their country into open, democratic, civil and tolerant society, they will also have to come to terms with the consequences of Croatian policies in Bosnia. Even the untouchable operations “Storm” and “Lightning,” in which Kninska Krajina and western Slavonia were again brought under Croatian control, need to be scrutinized and the numerous crimes committed during them acknowledged and punished. Above all, Croats need to come to terms with the fact that, in their case, the victims became aggressors, who ran concentration camps, massacred innocent civilians, destroyed towns, villages and numerous historic buildings (the famous Mostar bridge being one of them).⁹⁴ Regardless of a mass of evidence to the contrary, the image of Croatia and Croats as victims survived. Similarly preoccupied with daily struggle to survive (although in not such an extreme way as Serbs), similarly bombed with one-sided media campaign, and similarly misunderstood by the whole world that they, the *Antemurale Christianitatis*, cannot be the bad guys, since they have always been and are again defending the European civilization⁹⁵ from the onslaught of the Asiatic hordes, most Croats simply could not come to terms with the fact that they truly do not have a lot to be proud off.

A full decade after the end of the war in the former Yugoslavia and with democratic governments in power in Zagreb and in Belgrade, revealing the truth about the war, hidden by the myths created by those who waged a so-called “ethnic” war above all to benefit themselves, is absolutely necessary. Those responsible for the terrible crimes need to be stripped of their “defenders-of-our-nation” alibis. Instead of protesting in their support, “their” people should be the first to demand that they be punished. Failing to do so in 1945 left too many skeletons hidden in the Yugoslav closet, and opening of this closet in late 1980s led to the bloodiest war Europe has witnessed since 1945. Serbs and Croats, whose new national identities were similarly built by hiding numerous skeletons in their new national closets, must avoid giving history a chance to repeat itself.

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⁹² Quoted in Anzulovic, *Heavenly Serbia*, p. 8.

⁹³ Igor Lasic and Boris Rašeta. “Herceg-Bojna” (Herceg-War), *Feral Tribune*, no. 806, March 2001.

⁹⁴ Lucic and Djikic, “Tudjmanovo desetljeće” (Tudjman's Decade).

⁹⁵ Tudjman stated that history would place him “right next to General Franco as a saviour of the western civilisation (sic),” quoted in Lucic and Djikic, “Tudjmanovo desetljeće” (Tudjman's Decade).

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