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THE IDEOCRATIC STATE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: THE SERBIAN EXPERIENCE IN THE 20TH CENTURY

ABSTRACT: Since the end of the second decade of the 21st century the Serbian people have been living on the ruins of Yugoslavia. In this country, formed over a century ago, the Serbs were united for the first time in their history, yet they gambled it away. How did this happen? While some interpretations emphasize the role of individuals, others give prevalence to structural elements. As a potential link between the two, this paper examines the influence different ideologies had on the creation of the Serbian identity in the 20th century and scrutinizes the role of these ideocratic tendencies in the process of nation building and state formation, as well as its integration and disintegration.

KEYWORDS: The Balkans, South Slavs, Serbian Nation, Identity, Religion, Ideocracy, Ethnic Conflicts, Disintegration

The Theoretical Framework

Ideocracy as a symbol of the epoch

Ideocracy is a term describing government based on a monistic ideology. “Monism is the doctrine that reality may be understood as one unitary, indivisible whole; thus a monistic ideology postulates that this reality can be interpreted by a universally true and exhaustive system of ideas”. Such an ideology presents as totality, rests on a higher purpose, and requires social obedience: “The ideocratic decision makers rely on a general framework of strictly defined rules and hence claim the right to infallibility”, Piekalkiewicz and Penn observe and conclude: “Many ideocracies involve complete or partial fusion between religion and a historical doctrine”.¹

¹ Jaroslaw Piekalkiewicz and Alfred Wayne Penn, *Politics of Ideocracy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 26, 41–42.

Ideocracies are governments where one dominant ideology has become deeply ingrained into politics, and where, generally, politics have become deeply ingrained into most or all aspects of society. In ideocracies the rulers justify their rule by a totalitarian or utopian ideology that claims exclusivity and aims at the comprehensive rearrangement of society. An ideocratic state can either be totalitarian (citizens being forced to follow an ideology) or populist (citizens voluntarily following an ideology). Even pluralistic liberalism can develop ideocratic elements, which repress pluralism and distort democratic processes. Ideocracy therefore offers a set of legitimization tools for a variety of political projects, which can play out in many different forms.²

In the case of Serbia, throughout the 20th century, ideocratic tendencies have tended to prevail over rational political projects, leading to incomplete democratic structures, severe discontinuity and wartime euphoria. During this period, Serbia had taken part in two Balkan wars, two world wars, wars for the Yugoslav succession, and finally, the war for Kosovo. The outcome was devastating. At the onset of the 20th century Serbia was a country without strong institutions, with a defective legal system and an underdeveloped economy. The Great War augmented a new epoch in Serbian history in which the creation of a Yugoslav state was seen as a paramount goal. This idea was renewed during the Second World War, leading to a new social, political, and economic order in a communist Yugoslavia, which was a state incorporating the majority of the Serbian people. The collapse of Yugoslavia marked a step back in that respect.

In addition to the domination of ideologies, the most important characteristic of modern Serbian history is its unfinished statehood. All the state formations remained incomplete, conceived as provisional solutions that remained permanently undefined. While the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which barely lasted over two decades, was run under two constitutions (brought in 1921 and 1931), communist Yugoslavia saw four (in 1946, 1953, 1963 and 1974). These changes were reflected in the constitutions of the Republic of Serbia, changed for the last time within the Yugoslav federation in 1990. Three more constitutions followed after the collapse of Yugoslavia – the one in 1992 announced the creation of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, composed of Serbia and Montenegro, the one in 2003 revising this union, and the one in 2006 resulting from its collapse, from which Serbia again formally resurfaced as an independent country.

During this long period, even the state borders were undefined, and all the features of statehood were based on extreme ideologies unsubstantiated in reality, yet typical for ideocratic states. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was formed as a home for “one people with three names”. A similar doctrine that treated the Southern Slavs as a single nation was promoted during the dictatorship of King Alexander I of Yugoslavia as an ideology of integral Yugoslavism. The ideocratic aspect of statehood was even more expressed in communist Yugoslavia. As in the Soviet Union, the Yugoslav regime sought to change not just

² More on the comparative approach to ideocracies in *Ideocracies in Comparison. Legitimation-cooptation-repression*, edited by Uwe Backes and Steffen Kailitz (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1.

people's behavior, but their whole way thinking – the ultimate goal being to create a new man. Publicly justified in terms of building the communist future and creating an alternative and a more superior road to modernity than the one prevailing in the “rotten capitalist West”, communism was presented as a new form of civilization. This notion was functioning on three levels: ideology, metanarrative, and myth. Central to the regime's revolutionary quality was its ideocratic nature; this means that its core was made up of a formal and codified ideology.³

The ideology of Yugoslavism based on “brotherhood and unity” was forcefully implemented in the first post-war years, only to be abandoned at the expense of furthering socialism. Its promoters were not democratically elected representatives, but thought of themselves as the “avant-garde”, a group which in accordance with the communist doctrines “saw better” and knew the road to “a new future”. The socialist order was not developed as a reflection of reality, but as an attempt to create a “new world”, shaped in accordance with the ruling vision of the future. Although Marxist ideology was anti-elitist in its teaching, the communist regimes were in reality constructed on a Leninist notion of a party as a vanguard of society. It was guaranteed a leading (and de facto ruling) role because of its vision of the future built on its ability to understand the General Laws of History, to see further into the future and thus to construct reality according to this vision: “The party leadership was the main interpreter of the aims of social development. Its mission was to lead society toward a true communist form of social organization. Thus, while in theory the socialist societies were anti-elitist, in political reality only the party elite mattered. The main political conflicts in Socialist Yugoslavia were interrelated conflicts”.⁴

Jović observes that socialism was a process in which the past and the present had been deconstructed in order to make space for the construction of the future: “Constructed by the ‘enlightened vanguard’, this bright future was to be built in opposition to the present and the past. The forces of the past and the present, the ‘retrograde elements’ and the ‘conservative forces’, are thus the main enemies of socialism. The stronger they are, the more brutal is the repression against them. Violence is justified if it serves ‘social progresses’. But even in a later phase of the revolution (once its first, brutal phase was over) the vanguard needed to be aware of the existence of the forces of the old, because the ‘enemy never sleeps’. The revolutionary army and the secret police are tools of this instrumentalist understanding of violence. They are essentially revolutionary institutions, whose purpose is not only to defend the country and prevent violence (as in liberal democracies) but to increase class consciousness and safeguard the revolution. The army and the secret police in socialism do not defend the state as such, since the state is a conservative institution of the past and present. They

³ About the Soviet model see Graeme Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

⁴ Dejan Jović, *Yugoslavia: A state that Withered Away* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2009), 2.

defend the revolution, the vision of the future and its supreme visionaries. In a socialist society, these institutions are by definition ideological”.⁵

Ideology dominated during the epoch of Slobodan Milošević as well, this time worded as belonging to a ‘chosen nation’, based on the idea of a Serbian national tragedy as a consequence of the heroic national character of its people. The heroic traditions of the Serbian people were misappropriated to sustain the claim that the Serbs were building their identity through centuries by “crossing the boundaries set by divine and human laws, by historical reason, and experience” in their quest for liberty at any price, including self-destruction. In the last decade of the 20th century, national ideocracy was functioning as a substitute for democracy. Political life was resting on the ‘principle of the enemy’ that functioned through the creation of fear and general distrust and the desolidarization and destruction of society. In this period, Serbia was kind of a privatized state ruled by the regime for its personal goals, with the mere pretenses of institutionalized political order.⁶

The Study of Identity

Anthony Smith, one of the greatest authorities in the field of national identity, maintains that “national identity and the nation are complex constructs composed of a number of interrelated components: ethnic, cultural, economic and legal-policy”. According to Smith, “they signify bonds of solidarity among members of communities united by shared memories, myths and traditions that may or may not find expression in states of their own but are entirely different from the purely legal ties of the state. Conceptually, the nation has come to blend two sets of dimensions, the one civic and territorial and the other ethnic and genealogical, in varying proportions in particular cases”.⁷

This process played out inversely in different parts of Europe. As Dominique Schnapper has noted, in the process of creating nations in Europe there are at least two distinct ideas of the nation, which have been permanently opposed to each other, and the histories of the construction of the nation and national ideologies have been different in the eastern and western parts of Europe. In various terms, theorists of the nation have opposed the nation of Western Europe – civic, voluntary, and contractual – to the nation of Eastern Europe – populist, organic, natural, and ethnic. The Western European nation of citizens is opposed to the Eastern European nation of ancestors.⁸ The Western European definition dates back to the French Revolution and defines the nation in non-ethnic terms. This concept of *nation citoyenne* is opposed to the ethnically-

⁵ Dejan Jović, “Communist Yugoslavia and Its ‘Others’”, in: *Ideologies and National Identities. The Case of Twentieth-Century*, edited by John Lampe and Mark Mazower (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2004), 279.

⁶ More in: Nenad Dimitrijević, „Srbija kao nedovršena država“, *Reč*, 15. mart 2003, 7.

⁷ Anthony D. Smith, *National identity* (Reno Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1991), 13-15.

⁸ Dominique Schnapper, “Les sens de l’ethnico-religieux“, (1), *Archives des sciences sociales des religions*, no. 81, (1993), 155.

based definition of the nation. The crucial element in this definition is the idea of the nation as an association of citizens, each of whom possesses certain rights that should be guaranteed and safeguarded by the state. The nation is defined on the basis of the idea of citizenship and a commitment to pluralism: the nation is not to be understood in terms of a community that is ethnically and culturally homogeneous.⁹

The Eastern European concept of the nation is more ethnic than political and is based on the idea of exclusive adherence to a collective entity, characterized by cultural homogeneity: “Political structures are deemed to derive from a pre-existing historic-biological community, and the state is seen as the supreme, almost sacred, political incarnation of such a community, and not necessarily based on law or the democratically articulated political will of equal citizens, which is by definition negotiable and open to criticism and contestation as well as to rational and competent public discourse”, Srđan Vrcan writes, scrutinizing the role of religion in shaping Serbian and Croatian national identity.¹⁰

Focusing on the Serbs, Sima Ćirković came to the following conclusions: “Ever since the loss of belief in a ‘spirit of the nation’, in origin and language as an essential and enduring characteristic of national identity, it has become more difficult to shed light on the creation and destiny of a nation. When the nation is observed as a social group, it is constantly susceptible to change and movement. At no time is it ever complete to such an extent that it can neither grow nor decline; its cohesion may increase or contract, the essence of its individuality and difference from others may undergo change, and some of its symbols may be discarded while new ones are adopted. Changes important for the preservation and development of a group occur over centuries, and thus it is not just the oldest or the most recent period that is significant, as is sometimes thought. The search for an essential identity has revealed an assortment of numerous ‘historical strands’ instead of one single factor that can be traced through many centuries. In the case of the Serbs (and other Balkan nations) the region of their development was relatively unknown outside their group and their immediate neighbors”.¹¹

Ćirković argues that this fact has additionally obscured the process of understanding the Serbs’ long, complex, changeable, and visibly unfinished history.

An ethnic group is a structure that slowly changes and influences the everyday lives of its members with its long-term and enforced influence (through ethnic myths, symbols, and different rituals related to its myths). Collective identities in general, and especially ethnic ones, are based on common interpretations of common experiences. That is how an ethnic bond is created

⁹ John Schwarzmantel, “Nation versus class: nationalism and socialism in theory and practice”, in: John Oakley (ed.), *The Social Origin of Nationalist Movements: The Contemporary West European Experience* (London: Sage, 1992), 57.

¹⁰ Srđan Vrcan, “The War in Former Yugoslavia and Religion”, *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 22, no. 4, (1994), 375.

¹¹ Sima M. Ćirković, *The Serbs* (Carlton, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), xvi.

when a group has a clear ethnic identity. If those experiences occur in traumatic wars, then there is a tendency toward later strengthening their ethnic identity.

The general opinion is that Balkan conflicts are evolving around clear-cut and fixed ethno-religious groups. But, as noted by Ger Duijzings, the ethnographic evidence shows that Balkan identities are full of ambiguities, caused by processes of conversion, dissimulation, and other forms of manipulation, which are seen as important survival strategies in conditions of endemic violence and insecurity.¹² In this part of the world there are regional identities, but they do not coexist to fit other identities and merge into a multiple identity. With the South Slavs, a national–spatial identity exclusively identifies with territory considering it to be its own personal space by one of the countries. That is how a structure of a territory as a ‘multi–century historical whole’ of just one ethnic group is made, especially considering its own environment.

The research of regional identities, particularly in multi-ethnic environments such as the Former Yugoslavia, indicates an extent of regularity in the sense that identification with one’s own community ensues distancing from the adjacent ones (ethnic distance). This then leads to the formation of firm convictions, representations, and standpoints among the members of one group about themselves and the others. This emphasizing of the distinctions existing in relationship to the other groups and identification with the own group stimulates internal homogeneity, which, in turn, produces a group ethno–cultural identity.

In this concept, identity is perceived as a fundamental human category acquired by birth – an unchangeable, permanent and closed concept. The feeling of togetherness is based on the idea of a common origin and historical experience of the community, on the common myths, tradition, and culture. This approach considers national identity as fundamental because, along with the characteristics acquired by birth and those received by belonging to a national culture, it serves as a vehicle for emotions, instincts, and recollections of collective experience in a manner that does not have much in common with the individual’s choices. National affiliation is also derived from religious affiliation (faith). The ‘unity’ created in this way is associated with collective memory based on a common origin and culture interpreted as a product of a common history.

Closely connected with this is the insistence on the persistence and homogeneity of identity, that is to say, denied significant agency to an individual in developing their personal identity. When so defined, the concept opposes what the modern age has brought – the ambivalence, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and openness of perspectives once the identities have become something changeable, historical, contextual, and dynamic. The modern concept of identity refers to its dynamic, interactive character, to its firmly structured multi–dimensional feature, and to the close link existing between identity and language, identity and culture. Being a changeable category of several layers, identity is perceived as something not consistent, but rather as something that keeps

¹² Ger Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000).

multiplying and transforming down one's lifetime, as something constructed with various social discourses, like a product of different antagonistic processes, practices, and positions that frequently cross with each other.¹³

This is why violence is the main force behind the formation or transformation of ethnic and national identities, either as a way of bolstering the nation, or as a force that drives people to change their identity or dissimulate it. War has often been the engine of nation-building. Duijzings argues that the wars fought in the Former Yugoslavia and the processes of national homogenization and 'ethnic cleansing' that have accompanied the wars, have been primarily motivated by the necessity to create single and unambiguous identities out of a population that is very much mixed and of diverse origins and to erase the elements of mixture, "population", and ambiguity that are threatening the newly established national states. In fact, at the end of the day, the violence in the Former Yugoslavia was not only the result of opposite and incompatible identities, but perhaps even more so the means of achieving them.¹⁴

Creating Yugoslavia

During the 19th century, Serbian intellectuals and political leaders devoted most of their energy and attention to expanding and consolidating the Serbian state that had emerged from the First and Second Serbian Uprisings (1804–1813 and 1815, respectively). "They viewed Serbia as the leader of the Serbian and South Slav struggle for unification. Often, they equated unification with the territorial expansion of Serbia", Aleksa Đilas concludes.¹⁵

This policy is frequently identified with Ilija Garašanin, the leading Serbian statesman, and his secret document called *Načertanije* (1844), a draft of a program for Serbia's foreign policy. His principal aim was to transform Serbia into a strong state with an efficient centralized administration and a standing army. Garašanin's belief in centralism was typical of many 19th century European statesmen, who identified regionalism, autonomy, and federalism with the feudal anarchy. He maintained that "alliances should be based on a realistic appraisal of power and be guided solely by the interests of the Serbian state and the Serbian nation".¹⁶

Historical circumstances caused the Serbs and the other South Slavic nations to unite in another way. The Yugoslav state created in 1918 was a state of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, formed on ethnic lines, after the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, as Đilas noted, *Načer-*

¹³ Milena Pešić i Aleksandar Novaković, „Problem identiteta i multikulturalizam”, *Srpska politička misao*, 2, (2010), 147.

¹⁴ G. Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*, 32–33.

¹⁵ Aleksa Djilas, *The Contested Country. Yugoslav Unity and Communist revolution 1919–1953* (London: Harvard University Press Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1991), 29. More in: Christian Axboe Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs. Identity in King Aleksandar's Yugoslavia* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto press, 2014), 17.

¹⁶ A. Djilas, *The Contested Country*, 29.

tanije crystallized the attitudes of the intellectual and political elites, “which would remain dominant in Serbia until the creation of Yugoslavia and would also decisively influence the policies of Serbian political parties between the two world wars”.¹⁷

On July 28, 1914, Austria–Hungary’s declaration of war initiated a four-year struggle for the survival of Serbia as a nation. At the same time, the Serbian Government responded by formulating the program of Yugoslav unification. It was instigated by the leading Serbian intellectuals and accepted by politicians and Aleksandar Karađorđević, Serbia’s crown prince and regent (Yugoslav King as of 1921). The leading Serbian politicians had consistently spoken of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes as Yugoslavs, clearly implying that they were of the same ethnic-cultural group. On December 7, 1914, the Serbian Government publicly declared the unification and liberation of all Southern Slavs as its primary wartime goal.¹⁸

Despite Serbia’s military defeat and occupation by the Central Powers in 1915, Serbia’s government, military, and people together played a central role in the Southeast European war theater throughout the Great War and were a fundamental force behind the political organization of the post-war Balkans. Also, the Great War had an important role as a stage in the construction of Serbian national mythology and martyrology, given their staggering human losses, their epic retreat through Albania and across the Mediterranean, their regrouping and facing the enemy again at the Salonica Front (1916 – 1918).

As 1918 drew on, Austria-Hungary floundered more and more, exhausted by its wartime efforts and weighed down by economic, social and political burdens. At the same time, conditions in its Yugoslav provinces were becoming less stable while guerrilla warfare had become widespread in the occupied areas of Serbia and Montenegro. In the summer of 1918, the Allies finally took the initiative on the battlefield and the German troops started to withdraw. Revolution was at the gates of the two Central European empires, and the Serbian Army was finally preparing to advance. The defeated Central Powers surrendered one after the other to the Entente Powers. Meanwhile, the population of the Yugoslav areas was at this time also calling on the Serbian Army to protect its national territory and maintain law and order there. In parallel with this occurred the de facto unification of the states of Serbia and Montenegro with the Yugoslav lands of the former Austria-Hungary.¹⁹ The general conditions were thus created for the birth of a Yugoslav state.²⁰

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Andrej Mitrović, “The Yugoslav Question, the First World War and the Peace Conference, 1914–1920”, in: *Yugoslavism. Histories of a Failed Idea 1918–1992*, editor Dejan Djokić (London: Hurst & Company, 2003), 42–43.

¹⁹ On November 26, 1918, the Grand National Assembly in Podgorica decided to unite Montenegro with Serbia, under the Karađorđević Dynasty. With Italian backing, the outset Petrović dynasty and its supporters became bitter opponents of the new state.

²⁰ Andrej Mitrović, *Serbia’s Great War 1914–1918* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2007), 312–313, 323–324.

On December 1, 1918, following the four-year tragedy of the Great War, Aleksandar Karađorđević solemnly proclaimed the unification of Serbia with the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs into the unified Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. He promised to establish a government whose first and foremost task would be to determine the state borders in accordance with ethnic principles. As a constituent act this statement represented the basis of the state and legal organization in the newly created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes from its unification to the adoption of its Constitution on June 28, 1921.

Serbia, a winner in the Great War, willingly transferred its sovereignty to the new state. The terms of these transfers would however prove to be controversial, not only among the Croats, Slovenes, and other non-Serbs, as is well known, but also among the Serbs themselves: “The new kingdom would integrate a long array of newly founded states. At the same time, the profoundly restructured political map of Europe no longer had a place for four great empires – Ottoman, Russian, German, and Austrian-Hungarian. The small Kingdom of Serbia, which had credentials initially as an autonomous and then sovereign state for almost a century, had also vanished. Given the persistence of unification as a desired end throughout the modern history of the Serbs, the creation of Yugoslavia could have been perceived as a great, or even final, accomplishment of their national goals”.²¹

The declaration of unification fulfilled an ideal that must have seemed unattainable only a few years earlier: for all Serbs to be in one state. It seemed that the conditions had been met for the different parts of the divided Serbian nation to finally link together and develop harmoniously. The creation of the new state established a single framework, but it was unable to quickly or efficiently eradicate the consequences of the long historical separation. In any case, the Serbs and their interests were not, and could not have been the main concern of the newly created state.²²

This nation-building project was in fact based not only on ethnic similarities between the Yugoslav groups, but also on the prevailing liberal concept of nationhood. Yugoslavia followed the French political model of a unitary state, using at the same time the unification of Germany (1871) and Italy (1870) as models for its own unification. However, no less than four different elements of cultural–civilization circles had been inherited from the past: Byzantine, Mediterranean, middle–European, and Islamic. All of them left visible marks and distinct traditions in the social life of the South Slavic people.

According to the doctrine of national unity, the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes were on their way to forming a single Yugoslav nation. The existence of three ‘tribes’ who had lived in different empires and professed different reli-

²¹ Marko Bulatović, “Struggling with Yugoslavism: Dilemmas of Interwar Serb Political Thought”, in: *Ideologies and National Identities. The Case of Twentieth-Century*, edited by John Lampe and Mark Mazower (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2004), 254-258.

²² S. Ćirković, *The Serbs*, 252.

gions was recognized as a transitional fact. Yugoslavia was to be a vehicle for the development of a 'Yugoslav identity' and a 'Yugoslav nation'. The ideas of separate political identities were to be suppressed and eliminated from political life. The constitutional structure (unitarism) was created to help the transition of identities from tribal separateness to 'Yugoslavism'.²³

The decisions leading to Yugoslavia's creation were made by narrow elite circles. The question of unification was never directly put to the populations of the various territorial entities that constituted Yugoslavia. During all the political negotiations leading to the formation of Yugoslavia, no agreement had been reached as to the constitutional structure of the multi-national state. This fundamental question was left to be resolved once the state had been formed. The major point of contention was whether Yugoslavia should have a centralized-unitary or decentralized-federal constitutional structure. The major centralist impulse came from the Serbian leaders. They had been accustomed from pre-war times to such a model, plus it also seemed convenient given that they were the largest and the most politically powerful component of the new Yugoslav state. Croatian political leaders preferred a de-centralized constitutional arrangement, or at least a dualist one, modeled on the former Austria-Hungary.²⁴

The Constitution was adopted on June 28, 1921, the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo (1389) and a sacred day in the Serbian national calendar. It reflected the official view that the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes were three tribes of one unified nation, namely Yugoslavs (South Slavs). This approach was echoed in Article 3, which stipulated that the official language of the state was "Serbo-Croato-Slovenian". But the Constitution marked the beginning of a long-standing political crisis and a struggle between the different concepts of the state that ruled during the interwar period.²⁵

The creation of Yugoslavia represented a huge historical and political step, yet it was based on a considerable degree of unrealistic idealism. Since the creation of Yugoslavia, the conflict between the Croats and the Serbs posed the greatest threat to the unity of the state. Its causes can be traced to their development of different cultural and political identities after taking the key steps toward becoming modern nations in the 19th century. The latent distrust toward Serbs among the Croats systematically cultivated and spread by enemies of South Slav unification, was one of the burdens of the past. There was a fear of Serbian dominance, and all Serbian assurances that only in a union could real equality be achieved failed to pacify the Croats. The Serbs, for their part, did not sufficiently realize what a delicate task lay in store for them.²⁶

²³ More in: D. Jović, *Yugoslavia: A state that Withered Away*, 48.

²⁴ Dejan Djokić, "(Dis)integrating Yugoslavia: King Alexander and Interwar Yugoslavism", in: *Yugoslavism. Histories of a Failed Idea*, 138.

²⁵ See Peter Radan, "Constitutional Experimentation and the National Question in Interwar Yugoslavia", *Istorija 20. veka*, 3, (2011), 26 and D. Djokić, "(Dis)integrating Yugoslavia: King Alexander and Interwar Yugoslavism", 139.

²⁶ Alex N. Dragnich, *The first Yugoslavia. Search for a Viable Political System* (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1983), 57–58.

On October 3, 1929 the country was renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The essential aims of King Aleksandar's reform were firstly, to establish a more effective centralized political system, and secondly, to suppress all forms of nationalistic expression. There is no evidence that Aleksandar favored one particular nationality. On the contrary, all the available evidence indicates that he was a sincere Yugoslav. Unrealistic as it was, he believed that it was necessary for citizens to think of themselves first as Yugoslavs and only secondly as Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Despite the variety of means used in this period, from idealism to dictatorship, from changing the name of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes to Yugoslavia to dissolving its historical regions, the policy of integral Yugoslavism failed. Neither the Serbs nor the Croats identified with Yugoslavism. They could not simply accept the disappearance of the separate identities of their respective nations. Ironically, in using dictatorial rule in an effort to impose a consensus, Aleksandar did not win over the Croats but increasingly divided the Serbs.²⁷

Communist Yugoslavia

Yugoslavia's failure to resolve the national question during the interwar period was largely a product of the lack of agreement about the constitutional foundations of the multi-national state at the time of its creation. This created a vacuum that could not be filled as the competing visions of Yugoslavia's constitutional structure struggled for supremacy in a climate of increased nationalist sentiments. All this turmoil was happening in a country whose very existence was being threatened by an increasingly shaken European political order. Yugoslavia's constitutional experimentation did not resolve the national question, nor did it keep Yugoslavia out of the maelstrom of World War II. This meant that the military conflicts within Yugoslavia during World War II were as much about determining the basis of future constitutional experiments to resolve Yugoslavia's ever-present national question, as they were about resisting the Axis Powers.

Communist Yugoslavia was a product of World War II. The memory of the war was a crucial factor in its mythology. Like all mythologies, the partisan myth was irrational and dogmatic. The official post-1945 narrative about the joint struggle of all the Yugoslav nations against the Axis Powers was immensely reductive. During World War II a horrible conflict occurred in Yugoslavia. That war contained elements of a liberation and antifascist struggle, but also an ideological, civil, inter-ethnic and religious war, with the implementation of holocaust and genocide in the Independent State of Croatia over the Jews and Serbs. At least a million Yugoslavs died in the war, mostly Serbs. What statistics cannot provide is a reliable indication of how those people died and who the perpetrators were. It can be safely assumed, however, that more Yugoslavs were

²⁷ See P. Radan, "Constitutional Experimentation and the National Question in Interwar Yugoslavia", 33 and Alex N. Dragnich, "The Anatomy of a Myth: Serbian hegemony", *Slavic Review*, volume 50, no. 3, (1991), 661.

killed fighting or persecuting each other than as a direct result of the Axis operations, deportations and reprisals.²⁸

In the official view of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, “Serbia had acted in a hegemonic fashion in interwar Yugoslavia; the Serbian bourgeois, military, government, and monarchy had acted as the gravediggers of the interwar state and the oppressors of the remaining nations of the state. Serbia thus came in for some very specific treatment after the liberation”.²⁹ The national restructuring of the Yugoslav state, carried out by the communists, was taking place under the banner of the fight against “Serbian hegemony”, which loomed as a permanent accusation attached to the Serbian people. In the name of Yugoslavia’s rebirth, a specific strategy of silence regarding the Serbian victims was employed. The newly introduced policy of “brotherhood and unity” changed Serbia’s position drastically.

The “three-tribe, one nation” idea was abandoned; the communists believed that the concept of the “Yugoslav nation” was in fact Serbian. The national policy formally established by the first Constitution of the new Yugoslavia adopted on 31 January 1946 was created under the direct influence of the 1936 Soviet Constitution, also known as the Stalinist Constitution. The country’s official name was the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia. A complete discontinuity with the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was finalized with the declaration of the federal system and six new republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia each had their own government, assembly, and constitution. Serbia also had an autonomous province, Vojvodina, and an autonomous region, Kosovo and Metohija, set-up because of its mixed ethnic population.³⁰

The Serbs were the most dissatisfied with the reorganization of the state along federal lines, as they had been the predominant force in the partisan army that brought those changes about. Historical experience has confirmed that Serbia was the clear loser in the Communist Yugoslavia. The formation of Serbia as a future federal unit bore witness to the utter inability and unwillingness of the Serbian communists to protect basic Serbian national interests.

The new national policy was the most prejudicial to the Serbs in Croatia. The Croatian constitution highlighted that the People’s Republic of Croatia was constituted by Croats and Serbs and that the two were equal, but the Serbs’ right to self-determination was never mentioned – this was only granted to Croats. In addition, the use of the word “Serbs” and not “the Serbian nation” suggested that Serbs belonged to the Croatian nation in the political sense.³¹

²⁸ United Nations, International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Court Records, process IT-95-13/1: Mile Mrkšić, exhibit 00447, <http://icr.icty.org>. Statement of Mark Crawford Wheeler, January 12, 1998.

²⁹ Nick Miller, *Non-Conformists: Culture, Politics and Nationalism in Serbian Intellectual Circles 1944–1991* (New York: Central European University Press, 2007), 10.

³⁰ Kosta Nikolić i Ivana Dobrivojević, “Creating a Communist Yugoslavia in the Second World War”, *Balkanica*, XLVIII, (2017), 257.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 261.

The “national liberation struggle” has remained dominant in the collective memory among the Serbs in Croatia. They ignored all other forms of identity: its religious aspect was reduced to a minimum; initiatives concerned with the Serbian letters and language became side-tracked, and politically they did not exist. The depth of this negation of national identity was visible in postwar censuses, where a large part of the Serbs from Croatia declared themselves as “Yugoslavs”.³²

The most dominant viewpoint in Serbia was that the new federation had been detrimental to the Serbs in a number of ways, mainly through the separation of the Montenegrins from the Serbs and the proclamation Montenegrins as a new nation. During World War II a brutal identity war broke out in Montenegro. The extreme violence which marked this conflict did not originate from “opposite and incompatible” identities, but was as a way of creating a new Montenegrin identity, that is, to eliminate the Serbian identity from Montenegro. At first, it seemed that the communists were vigorously promoting the politics of “brotherhood and unity”, but instead they simply sought to erase the Serbian national consciousness among the Montenegrins, alongside with everything that was common in their history.

The Bosnian Muslims were also “added to the list” of new nations in Communist Yugoslavia. The identity of the Muslim population of Bosnia and Herzegovina passed through various stages. In the period before the creation of Yugoslavia, the Muslim secular intelligentsia was divided into pro-Croat and pro-Serb factions; which both equally rejected the name Muslims, preferring to declare themselves as Croats or Serbs of Islamic faith. In the first post-war census (1948), the Muslims were provided with more options for their national determination: “Serb-Muslim”, “Croat-Muslim”, and “Undecided-Muslim”. In the census materials, the first two categories are included in the Serbs and Croats, respectively. In the 1953 census the term “Undecided-Yugoslavs” was introduced for Muslims; in the 1961 census, for the first time, the term “Muslim” in terms of ethnicity was introduced.

* * *

When the Yugoslav communists came to power, they claimed to have introduced a socialist system, offering in their view a just solution to the Yugoslav national question. This solution originally promoted a federal state framework. Five of the constitutive nations were granted their “home” republics and were constitutionally guaranteed the right to self-determination, including secession. The solution was resting on the principle of national equality with no group able to dominate within Yugoslavia. The constitutional and institutional aspects of this solution were based on the slogan of “Brotherhood and Unity”,

³² Filip Škiljan, „Identitet Srba u Hrvatskoj“, *Politička misao*, 2, (2014), 131–132.

combined with an aspiration to develop a socialist society under the leadership of a fully unified Yugoslav Communist Party. This ideology was later complemented with an attempt to infuse society with a new concept of “socialist Yugoslavism”, a concept that sought to give socialist theoretical legitimacy to the Yugoslav Communist Party (since 1952 named the League of Communists of Yugoslavia) as a solution to the national question.³³

This period, which could be labeled as the Partisan Yugoslavia, lasted until 1952. This short period following the end of the war is very important, because it seemed that the ethnic tensions had been eliminated at this point in time and that there was a general common will to forget the past and overcome ethnic differences and conflicts.

Contrary to widespread belief, partisan Yugoslavism was a thin veil designed to cover the rampant nationalism of the Yugoslav communists (with the noted exception of those of Serb origin), as well as to provide a framework for the dictatorial rule of Tito and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia.

As in all ideocratic systems, the Party insisted on a “clear vision”, without which there would be no possibility of constructing Yugoslav unity and thus no possibility of preserving either socialism or the country’s independence. For Yugoslav Communists the process of formulation of that vision performed the same function as election-based institution building in liberal democracies. Not only the “unity of the nation”, but also its very existence as a nation would be endangered without a “clear vision”.³⁴

According to the ideology of the Yugoslav Marxist elite, the essence of Yugoslavia’s existence was to protect the “small” Yugoslav peoples rather than the creation of a Yugoslav nation. The purpose of the communist revolution was in solving the national question. Consequently, the Yugoslav identity was no longer based on ethnic similarities between the Yugoslav nations, nor was it justified by the very fact that there was a Yugoslav state, as was attempted for Royalist Yugoslavia. Neither ethnic similarities nor the existence of the state could have served as pillars of identity within a Marxist framework. According to that doctrine, forging a Yugoslav identity was nothing but a cover for the assimilation of smaller cultures. It was deemed particularly problematic if the ideas about wider South Slavic identity as a solution for overcoming nationalisms were coming from Serbia. They were seen as political illusions or ill intentions.³⁵

Yugoslavism was therefore discouraged even when it took roots as a genuine identity. Its promoters were labeled as reactionaries, therefore also enemies of socialism. Census was treating those who declare themselves as Yugoslavs as nationally undeclared. No Yugoslav became a top member of party ranks or the state hierarchy. Therefore, Yugoslavia failed to transform from a

³³ Hilde Katrine Haug, *Creating a Socialist Yugoslavia. Tito, Communists Leadership and the National Question* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2012), 1.

³⁴ D. Jović, “Communist Yugoslavia and Its ‘Others’”, 280.

³⁵ Коста Николић, *Србија у Титовој Југославији 1941–1980* (Београд: Завод за уџбенике, 2011), 408–409.

multinational into a multi-ethnic community. Multi-ethnic society significantly differs from a multinational one, as it is based on a civic community grounded in constitutionality and democracy. In a political sense, those are single national states, regardless of ethnic, religious, or cultural differences, like the United States or Switzerland. Multinational states such as Yugoslavia are based on a territorial principle of politics, through which every nation could allegedly protect its freedom and fully develop. Everything is hence subordinated to the interests of one's nationality, and the national question kept being solved constantly, without ever being resolved.³⁶

This difference was crucial for Yugoslavia; the events were unfolding as a logical outcome of such a misguided policy. Since the adoption of the Constitution in 1974 Yugoslavia was no longer a community of South Slavs. It became only an ideological project, without an ethnic or civic basis of unity, leaving a shaky foundation for the identity of its citizens. The idea of the Yugoslav state union itself was also rejected. Yugoslavia became only a geographical concept, establishing on its territory six independent, even opposing national states.

By discouraging both the ethnic and civic basis for Yugoslav unity, the ruling elite promoted nationalism in its constitutive nations. This particular nationalism was becoming stronger at the same time that Yugoslav nationalism and the Yugoslav state were becoming weaker. Paradoxically, the regime in fact promoted such nationalism as the main alternative to itself.³⁷

After 1974, a widespread belief was created in Serbia that the position of this republic in the Yugoslav Federation was unjust and could not be improved within the framework of the existing ideological and political system. The outraged Serbian public - in whose minds the 1974 Constitution had become a symbol of national humiliation, especially because of the position of the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija - began to seek change. History therefore opened the door for the revolt in Serbia. Initially, this revolt was targeted toward the communist regime but gradually it was reduced to quintessential Serbian nationalism. In such circumstances, any politician who was able to promise changing the "humiliating position of Serbia" would become the hero of the nation. In a bad twist of fate, this role was played by Slobodan Milošević.

Slobodan Milošević – Defending the Nation

Slobodan Milošević's march to absolute power began with the well-known, violent confrontation at the Eighth Session of the League of Communists of Serbia (1987), after which he quickly gained the aura of "leader of the nation".³⁸ The basic claim over which Milošević launched his revolution

³⁶ More in: Vesna Pešić, „Rat za nacionalne države“, in: *Srpska strana rata. Trauma i katarza u istorijskom pamćenju*, I, edited by Nebojša Popov (Beograd: Samizdat B92, 2002), 32–33.

³⁷ D. Jović, *Yugoslavia: A state that Withered Away*, 20–21.

³⁸ More in: Kosta Nikolić, „Osma sednica – kraj borbe za Titovo nasleđe u Srbiji“, in: *Slobodan Milošević – put ka vlasti. Osma sednica CK SK Srbije – uzroci, tok i posledice*, edited by

was the relationship of the Republic and its provinces, Vojvodina and Kosovo. The central problem was based in introducing changes to the Constitution of 1974 - Serbia was expected to regain its statehood. In an irony of history, the former hard-line communists knew better than anyone else how to use the wave of nationalism that had swept all of Yugoslavia. During the autumn of 1988 and spring of 1989, the streets of Serbian cities were crowded with millions of people in rallies and demonstrations, labeled the 'event of the nation'.³⁹ The Serbian national movement was glorified as the 'rebirth of the nation'.

The Serbian national narrative centered on the sacrifices they had made in creating Yugoslavia and their disadvantaged position in the Communist state. It was the age-old narrative that focused on Serbian suffering and heroism, being traced all the way back to the fateful Battle of Kosovo in 1389. Drawing on epic poetry in which the loss of this battle was depicted as an apocalyptic choice of the Kingdom of Heaven over the Kingdom of Earth, Serbian thinkers created the image of Serbia as a martyr nation. By the mid-eighties the discontent of Serbian intellectuals and political figures revolved ever more recurrently around the issue of Kosovo.⁴⁰

The Serbs, in true pseudo-religious ecstasy, believed that after half a century of decreed brotherhood and unity, Milošević would help them regain their pride and dignity and their national identity. This process cannot be understood without analyzing the historical role of religious institutions, particularly the Serbian Orthodox Church at this period.

In the history of the Yugoslav state, an important place is dedicated to the study of the relationship between religion and politics. Why is the role of religion in the study of populations in the Balkans, which, for most of the 20th century had lived in the same state, so important? Religion is considered to be the most important element of a common culture. Religious affiliation became a significant marker of ethnicity and religious symbolism, "rituals and institutions were used to activate aggressive nationalistic feelings for the promotion of political agendas".⁴¹ Furthermore, numerous studies suggest the possibility that different religions may produce differences in behavior that would have been significant in an evolutionary sense. Specifically, given that even today religion tends to be traditional, (i.e., vertically inherited from parents to offspring), a suggestion has been put forward that different religions may have encouraged different traditional reproductive strategies and life histories.

Momčilo Pavlović, Dejan Jović i Vladimir Petrović (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju; Stirling: Centar za proučavanje evropskog susedstva, 2008).

³⁹ See: Nebojša Vladislavljević, *Serbia's Antibureaucratic Revolution: Milošević, the Fall of Communism and Nationalist Mobilization* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁴⁰ Andrew Wachtel and Christopher Bennett, "The Dissolution of Yugoslavia", in: *Confronting the Yugoslav Controversies*, edited by Charles Ingrao and Thomas A. Emmet, second edition (Washington, D. C., West Lafayette, Indiana: United States Institute of Peace Press, Perdue University Press, 2013), 21–22.

⁴¹ Angeliki Sotiropoulou, *The role of ethnicity in ethnic conflicts: The case of Yugoslavia* (Athens: Hellenic Foundation for Defence and Foreign Policy, 2004), 8.

The interaction of nationality and religion to the point of overlapping and defining nations is a well-known phenomenon in much of Eastern Europe, especially in the Balkans.⁴² In contemporary confessional cultures, Orthodox and Catholic and Islamic religions were practiced by the South Slavs, hence a very specific concept of the nation had evolved. It is a legitimate and intriguing challenge to look into the role of religion in the Yugoslav crisis. According to Srđan Vrcan, this question “involves more than simply the relationship between religion and war; it involves the predating and wider question of the role of religion in deepening the social divisions and scissions until they reach the point of fracture and in exacerbating social conflicts until they reach maximum incandescence. It also involves the question of the relationship of religious confessions to each other and to the otherness of the others in an area with a population that is mixed, multi-confessional, multi-national, and multi-cultural”.⁴³

There is no doubt that religious symbolism, for some obviously relevant reasons, has been used widely and deliberately in the armed conflicts in the former Yugoslav region, especially during the World War II.

After the elimination of the defeated military forces in World War II and other opposition forces, churches and religious communities remained the only place of resistance to the communist shaping of social life. Therefore, the communists launched a series of measures aimed at weakening and discrediting all the religious communities in Yugoslavia. Paradoxically, although the communists rejected the old, inherited beliefs, the new social order in Yugoslavia was itself established as a secular religion. It concerns the transformation of prophecies that aspired to be scientific into objects of faith and worship. In the foundation of leftist atheism lies the idea of the historical inevitability of movement toward communism by force. Marxism was not merely a teaching of historical or economic materialism; it was also a teaching about the “Messianic mission” of the proletariat, about a perfect future society. A logically contradictory blend of materialistic, scientific-deterministic, and non-moralistic elements and idealistic, moralistic, and religious mythmaking elements has existed in the Marxist system. Marxism was not merely a science and a political ideology, but also a religion.⁴⁴

In addition, the 1946 Constitution introduced the concept of separation of Church from State. Because of that, according to some Serbian critics, the Catholic and Islamic Serbs were not defined as members of a unique Serbian nation in a political sense. That is an example which did not exist in the development of other modern European nations. This process was influenced by the repressive attitude of the communist regime toward the Serbian Church. The regime used various overt and clandestine means of persecution in order to di-

⁴² Paul Mojzes, “The role of religious communities in the development of civil society in Yugoslavia 1945–1992”, in: *State-society relations in Yugoslavia 1945–1992*, edited by Melissa K. Bokovoy, Jill A. Irvine, and Carol S. Lilly (New York: St. Martin’s Press 1997), 221.

⁴³ S. Vrcan, “The War in Former Yugoslavia and Religion”, 367–368.

⁴⁴ K. Nikolić, I. Dobrivojević, “Creating a Communist Yugoslavia”, 262–265.

minish the influence the Church had among the people. That is why the Serbian nation evolved as a typical secular category in the period after World War II.

“In the modern era, the forms of spiritual life have changed”, observes Vjekoslav Perica: “Patriotic sentiments and national identities seem to have been far more powerful as social forces, as well as individual emotions, than the beliefs in a heavenly God, angels, theologies, and religious myths that modern societies organized as nation-states have inherited from antiquity”. He and other researchers referred to nationalism as a “secular religion” and implied that this kind of religion overpowered ancient forms of spirituality. They have spoken about the fusion and interaction between religious symbols, rituals, myths, and other similar practices and the new secular profane forms of national identity and state worship, calling this phenomenon civil religion”.⁴⁵

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) has long been openly and actively involved in national politics and historically connected with the Serbian national ideology. It has also played a tremendous role in building Serbian identity; since the 19th century, national ideology indeed was a form of secular religion. The Church did not advocate nationalistic secessionism like in Croatia, but presented itself rather as the guardian of Serbian unity under Yugoslavia in the 20th century. In the case of Serbia, the Serbian Orthodox Church had been closely linked with the state and the monarchy until World War II; it was thus a national feature. The SOC reinforced the sense of exclusiveness and the unique role of the Serbs in the Christian world.

When the Serbian national identity was virtually destroyed, the Serbian Orthodox Church started the process of its renewal and its return to national tradition. The glorification of the past for many was the path to the future. At first it was possible through the reminder of the legacy of the Middle Ages, which was presented as a period of the greatest Serbian historic ascent. The Serbian Orthodox Church offered an alternative platform for all those that did not follow socialism. Also, the Church played a key role in stressing the importance of Kosovo in Serbian identity. Kosovo is the most important place in Serbian mythology. It symbolizes the struggle of the Serbs against the Ottoman Empire and stresses Serb suffering and martyrdom and the conflict between Islam and Christianity. In the Serbian national discourse, Kosovo is the Serbian Jerusalem.

In the years following the enactment of the Constitution in 1974, the Serbian Orthodox Church played an active role in defending Serbian unity within Yugoslavia. The turbulent political events in the decade since Tito's death leading to the breakup of Yugoslavia, allowed the SOC to renew its stance in history as the protector of the Serbian people. It positioned itself above the state, representing the supreme moral arbiter and therefore its intentions being unquestionable. And in this case, we could see the resurfacing of the Church's deep historical involvement in national politics.

⁴⁵ Vjekoslav Perica, *Balkan Idols. Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.

When Milošević came to power, relations between church and state were cordial for a while. But this did not continue for long, as the church became agitated by Milošević's arrogance and persistent socialist posture.⁴⁶ However, a short convergence of the regime and the church was very impactful. The commemoration of six centuries since the Kosovo battle (on June 28, 1989), which took place at Gazimestan, had the main role in this process. Milošević then set aside any reservations he might have had about religion in order to strengthen his national orientation. He reached for the most powerful element of national tradition - the Kosovo myth, exploiting its ethos to steer the emotions of the masses. By organizing a spectacular commemoration on the field where "the Serbian soul rose to the sky", in the province that represented the key traumatic symbol of "Serbian suffering" in post-war Yugoslavia, Milošević demonstrated that the Serbian state had been reunited and that he was its undisputed master. This ritual was seen as 'restoring the dignity' of the whole nation. Milošević was aware of the political potential of these emotions, so it was on the eve of the collapse of communism that he used traditional symbols and national myths to protect his own position.⁴⁷

After the commemoration at Gazimestan, the Serbian ruling elite enjoyed huge support from the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Church asked the state more openly to reinstate its role which had been 'unjustly and forcefully taken away' in the previous period. From this time, one could follow the increasing politicization of the activities of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The inclusion of the Church in political life was supposed to symbolize the full support of the entire society (unity of the people, the state and the Church) in implementing the Serbian national program. The Church was also directly engaged in guiding religious nationalism toward the achievement of national homogenization.⁴⁸

Numerous religious symbols were used to signal the huge political change in which the leading role was intended for 'the people'. Populist rhetoric was promoted and shaped with the help of epic literary forms, especially through traditional versification, which equated the "Voice of the People" with the "Word of God". Orthodoxy was set in the center of the nation, as the place of its birth, as the essence of the "people's will".⁴⁹ The socialist ideological model was easily and swiftly replaced with the renewed Orthodox religiousness among the population, which seemingly had been atheist and anti-religious for decades. However, the religious chord was hit quickly and hard. In addition to the need for a new affirmation of earlier values, the national component of Orthodoxy has played an important role. Affiliation to the Orthodox faith was a key determinant of national identity, guaranteeing the nation's very survival.

⁴⁶ G. Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*, 201.

⁴⁷ Slobodan Naumović, *Upotreba tradicije u političkom i javnom životu Srbije na kraju 20. i početkom 21. veka* (Beograd: Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, IP Filip Višnjić, 2009), 70.

⁴⁸ Radmila Radić, „Crkva i 'srpsko pitanje'“, in: *Srpska strana rata*, I, 316.

⁴⁹ Miloš Timotijević, *Vek sumnje. Religioznost u čačanskom kraju 1886–2008* (Čačak: Narodni muzej, 2009), 198–199.

Conclusion

The Serbian 20th century started with the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 and ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This ‘short century’ was also the period which saw the emergence and demise of Yugoslavia. The forces unleashed by the outbreak of the Great War led to the birth of Yugoslavia in 1918. Similarly, the forces unleashed by the end of the Cold War contributed significantly to the wars that destroyed Yugoslavia from 1991 onwards. The historical forces that dominated the 20th century - war or the threat of war and aggressive nationalism - also dominated Serbia’s history.⁵⁰

Yugoslavia’s breakup and descent into internal ethnic warfare is one of the most enduring case studies for the importance of ethnicity as the basis for a social community and its linkage with nationalism as an ideology. The dissolution of Yugoslavia represents not only the failure of state building but also the triumph of national identity within the republics. It offers a number of questions for research of nationalism; firstly, regarding the strength of state-making national constructions that seek to set aside or forge previously sharply distinguished ethnic identities in multi-ethnic states in favor of a unified national identity, especially for those with complex historical legacies. Secondly, it raises important questions about the reasoning and the mechanism through which individual identities can be reframed on the sole basis of ethnicity or national belonging and the speed at which this process can take place.⁵¹

At the end of the 20th century, contemporary Serbian national identity is built on the ancient archetypal myths. The Serbian intelligentsia had a very important role in this process. As nationalist concerns and loyalties overshadowed all other aspects of its political agenda, many former dissidents were abandoning humanistic principles that were initially at the core of their activism. The Serbian critical intelligentsia’s preference for the national cause over democracy and its consequent endorsement of Milošević represents a classic case of “treason of intellectuals”. It demonstrates that even those individuals whose self-defined social role is based on their defense of universal principles can be seduced by nationalist ideology. This ‘treason’ was significant as it undermined any democratic alternative to Milošević’s policy, helping the regime overcome its legitimacy crisis and contributing to Yugoslavia’s descent into war.⁵²

Whereas all the other former Yugoslav nations successfully renegotiated their religious and cultural tradition in the process of creation of new historical and cultural identities, those elements of tradition were misused and compromised in Serbia. The Serbian intelligentsia was deeply anti-Western in orien-

⁵⁰ P. Radan, “Constitutional Experimentation and the National Question in Interwar Yugoslavia”, 25.

⁵¹ Jason Richard Young, *Nationalism and Ethnicity as Identity Politics in Eastern Europe and the Basque Country* (Vancouver: The University of British Columbia, 2008), 57.

⁵² Jasna Dragović Soso, *Saviours of the Nation: Serbia's intellectual opposition and the revival of nationalism* (London: Hurst-Company, 2002), 2.

tation, perceiving any opening to other civilizations as an abandonment of the basis for its autochthonous culture, therefore as a danger to its national identity. The intellectuals who dominated in this new cultural model were reinforcing the stereotypical images of the “historical right” of their own people above others. Implicit and explicit ethnocentrism was dominating the field, presupposing even that the salvation of the community depends on individual sacrifice. The cult of an “honorable death” was reintroduced into the public scene, assuming that the loss of life in combat is simply an obligation toward “our revered forefathers” who once sacrificed their own lives for Serbian freedom. Therefore, at the end of the 20th century, the Serbian nation built its identity around the mythical cult of death, bringing it into constant connection with existing political relations.

The collapse of the political order of real socialism brought liberalism and democracy to Eastern Europe. Robert Hayden, however, thinks that state socialism was not inherited by the idea of democracy as a community of equal citizens but by the idea of creating a national state for a local, ethnically-defined majority.⁵³

In Yugoslavia, democracy mostly overlapped with other means of mobilization for the war as the old idea of “community” was introduced over the idea of “society”, just as the idea of “collectivity” and especially the “nation” suppressed the idea of the “free individual”. Instead of freedom and pluralism, a new “national unity” was promoted. Political pluralism was considered “suspicious” and was rapidly abandoned. According to Dejan Jović, a serious and rational dialogue was never conducted on the crucial issues and the key taboos and myths of the previous period remained intact. On the contrary, the political elites preferred to maintain that life with other nations was no longer possible and were preparing for war accordingly. Also, they were suspicious toward free approaches to new ideas and solutions, especially toward the so-called national question.⁵⁴

In Serbia this process has been brought to its ultimate consequence, as its most important politicians projected the future as a return to the past, a sort of “new birth” of their nation. Such a concept simply could not be realized without a war, which was perceived as a vehicle of “organic transformation” that divides time into the “small” and “great” epochs of a nation.

The Serbian wartime goals stemmed from the conservative revolution triggered by Slobodan Milosevic. He brushed aside the program of economic and political reform in order to achieve the unification of the Serbian people within a single state. Publicly, the Serbian leaders maintained that the right to self-determination belonged to the Yugoslav peoples, not the republics. They also declared that a reformed Yugoslavia must rest on the principle of “one person – one vote”, which was taken to be the supreme democratic principle. In the background was the conviction that the borders of the republics, as defined

⁵³ Robert Hayden, *Skice za podeljenu kuću. Ustavna logika jugoslovenskih sukoba* (Beograd: Samizdat B92, 2003), 31.

⁵⁴ Dejan Jović, „1989: godina koja nam se nije dogodila“, *Politička misao*. <http://politicka.misao.com>

in 1943 at the Second Session of the AVNOJ, did not correspond to the ethnic composition of the country. The principal complaint - that the Serbs were the greatest post-war losers, victimized by the communist regime, was further reinforced by the provisions of the 1974 constitution, "which attributed virtual statehood to the republics and equal federal status to Kosovo."⁵⁵

The disintegration of Yugoslavia was therefore considered to be a unique opportunity to settle the national question in this region once and for all. Therefore, in Serbia there was almost no doubt what had to be done once the collapse of Yugoslavia started. The general opinion was that the time had come for the Serbs to create their national state on the Yugoslav territory where they were the majority, whatever the cost. And the cost turned out to be staggering. Even the biological foundation of the Serbian people was jeopardized in the 20th century, partially through collective wartime atrocities, and partially through the attempts to realize collectivist ideologies that lacked reality checks.

Collectivism was both social and national, as observed by Latinka Perović, and the idea of equality in a poor society was always favoring the "just distribution of goods over the production, creation of social strata, and competition". The idea of national liberation and unification absorbed all the national energy and was raised above the society's developmental needs: "The goal was determining the value system. Human life was undervalued. Essentially, the space for freedom was always narrow, and this freedom mostly meant liberty from the others".⁵⁶

Two decades into the 21st century, the Serbs are on the brink of biological survival. Wars, political and economic migrations, the loss of standard, and the declining birth rate have accounted for millions of perished, migrated or unborn. The demography of the Serbian countryside has been destroyed, the refugees have not resettled, the political emigration and deterioration of hopes and energies are the basic frame for an uncertain future and are the historical legacy of the errors of the Serbian political elites. They were not concerned with the "demographic cost" of their ambitions, nor did they take adequate measures to enable the recovery of the biological resources of the Serbian nation. Regarding the power and capability of the Serbian people to successfully organize, protect, and defend their national identity and living space, historical experience does not inspire optimism. That is why the future of this nation with a long history is completely uncertain.

⁵⁵ Aleksandar Pavković, *The fragmentation of Yugoslavia. Nationalism and War in the Balkans*. Second edition (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 88.

⁵⁶ Latinka Perović, „Teško breme odgovernosti“, *Reč*, 62, (8. jun 2001), 90.

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THE IDEOCRATIC STATE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY:
THE SERBIAN EXPERIENCE IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Summary

In Serbian history, the twentieth century represents a dynamic period in which the state dramatically changed its borders, disappeared and reappeared on a couple of occasions, investing its former statehood into the Yugoslav project. Such changes had a deep impact on the development of the society and its features, with violence as a worrying, yet constant trait. With its democratic structures never fully built during the 20th century, Serbia remained a non-stratified and underdeveloped society, characterized by serious deficits in its legal order. Oscillating between dictatorship and democracy, Serbian society experienced several authoritarian regimes, often with devastating consequences. These regimes fostered fragile institutions, an unfinished state, and an underdeveloped society. Occasional attempts to jump-start Serbian society and move it from the European periphery through shortcuts and sideways led to unsuccessful outcomes.

Historical experience has shown that Serbian modern history rarely revolved around the individual, as clear prevalence was given to “the people”. The domination of this collective principle did not completely exclude individualism, but hardly centered around it. The individual was always forced to fit into the collective frame, as a member of a family, a people, and a nation. The principle of “popular sovereignty” materialized as the myth of the nation as an ultimate legitimization for exercising power. “The people” was conceptualized as a collective factor whose “will” is a final and unlimited principle of organization of political community.

KEYWORDS: The Balkans, South Slavs, Serbian Nation, Identity, Religion, Ideocracy, Ethnic Conflicts, Disintegration