

The roots of

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SERB NATIONALISM

OVER THE past eight years, the former Yugoslavia has been torn apart by a series of bloody wars which have left more than a quarter of a million people dead. In 1991, a brief conflict in Slovenia was followed by a major war between Serbia and Croatia. As that came to an end the following year, an even more violent confrontation broke out in Bosnia involving Serbs, Croats and Muslims. Less than three years after that war ended in 1995, violence flared again between Serbs and ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, eventually leading to massive military intervention by NATO.

Time after time, Western observers attempting to explain these events have talked of centuries-old irreconcilable national antagonisms between the region's inhabitants. An increasingly popular—and racist—variant on this explanation has been to blame the recent conflicts on the supposed national characteristics of the Serbs in particular, who are claimed to harbor an irrational hatred for their neighbors. A recent article in *Time* magazine, for example, described Serbs as “Europe’s outsiders, seasoned haters raised on self-pity. Even the ‘democrats’ are questionable characters.”

Neither of these explanations is even remotely adequate. For most of the past thousand years Serbs, Croats, Albanians and the other ethnic and national groups that inhabit the Balkans have lived together peacefully. While some Serbs today certainly are rabid nationalists, the majority is not.¹ Nevertheless, it is obviously true that nationalist ideas have come to play a decisive role in the region over the past few years. In order to fully understand the current situation, we need to understand both where nationalist ideas come from and why, in little more than a decade, nationalism has moved from the margins of political life to occupy center stage.

History

To answer these questions, we should start with a little history. Slav peoples first settled in the Balkans in the seventh century following the collapse of the Roman Empire. By the ninth century a distinction had arisen between Croats, descendants of settlers in the western part of the region who became Catholic, and Serbs, who settled in the east and joined the Orthodox church. Apart from this religious difference, the two groups have always been similar in most other respects, including their common language.

By the fourteenth century, the Serbs had established a kingdom which extended over most of what is today Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia and Greece. But this Serbian empire was short-lived. In 1389, the advancing Ottoman Empire defeated the Serbs (and Albanians fighting alongside them) at the battle of Kosovo Polje. By the middle of the next century, the Turks had conquered all of Serbia. They ruled it for the next 400 years. During this long period of occupation, myths and legends of the heroism of Serbia's early rulers became a part of Serb culture, cultivated in particular by the Orthodox church.

Modern Serbian nationalism, which emerged in the late eighteenth century, cloaked itself in these traditions during its fight for liberation from Turkish rule. Serbia won autonomy in 1830 and gained its independence in 1878. As the Ottoman Empire crumbled in the early twentieth century, Serbia embarked on an expansionist foreign policy aimed at reclaiming the lands it had controlled 600 years earlier, even though few Serbs lived there by that time. During the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, Turkey was finally expelled from the region and Serbia took control of Kosovo and Macedonia.

While Serbia was under Turkish control, Croatia and Bosnia were ruled by the Habsburg Empire of Austria-Hungary. Hungarian authorities in Croatia tried to create antagonisms between Croats and Serbs in the time-honored tradition of divide and rule. Yet despite such efforts, Croatian nationalists generally admired Serbian expansion.²

The First World War, however, significantly changed the relationship between Serbia and Croatia. The war began after a Serb nationalist in Bosnia assassinated the heir to the Habsburg throne. This precipitated anti-Serb riots in Croatia, which authorities initially incited. The war ended, however, with the collapse of Austria-Hungary, and with Serbia on the winning side. More than a million people in the Balkans died in the war. Out of the ashes emerged the first Yugoslavia, known officially until 1929 as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The merger was embraced by Croat and Slovene landlords who needed the Serbian army to help them crush peasant rebellions and defend them against Italy and Austria.³

But the new country “was not a union of equals. Instead, [the constituent states] came together as victors and vanquished⁴ in a country where Serbs ran much of the state machinery. “Bad blood between Serbs and Croats is not centuries



A Bosnian Serb stones a UN vehicle

old,” notes the historian Christopher Bennett, “but dates from the early Croat experience in a Serb-dominated Yugoslavia which disillusioned even the most Yugoslav-oriented Croats.”⁵

The Second World War

If Croatian nationalists still nurse grievances from the First World War, today’s Serbian nationalists use the dreadful treatment of Serbs during the Second World War to promote their own cause. In 1941, Yugoslavia was overrun by the Axis powers, which took considerable territories for themselves and set up collaborationist regimes in what remained of Croatia and Serbia. The Nazis annexed Bosnia to Croatia and placed in power the fascist Ustashe movement of Ante Pavelic, which had virtually no support before the war. The Ustashes resorted to sheer barbarism as they attempted to implement their plan: kill a third of the territory’s almost 2 million Serbs, drive out another third of the Serbs and convert the remaining third to Catholicism. One author described the Ustashe terror:

Bands of Ustashes turned up unannounced at Serb villages and wiped out every last man, woman and child. The orgy of violence then continued at concentration camps which the Ustashes set up to eliminate their remaining opponents, both Serb and non-Serbs. At Jasenovac, the most infamous camp... death was by beating, starvation or knives.⁶

According to reliable recent estimates, more than 330,000 Serbs died in Croatia and Bosnia during the war, including at least 85,000 in Jasenovac. Total wartime casualties in Yugoslavia (which had a prewar population of 16 million) were more than 1 million, approximately half of them Serbs.⁷

It was far from the case, however, that the majority of Croats supported the Ustashes’ barbaric treatment of the Serbs. The main opposition to German occupation and its puppet regimes came from the Communist-led guerrilla army of Josip Broz Tito. Tito, who was himself half Croatian, won support from members of all of Yugoslavia’s ethnic groups, including many Croats. “In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the main theatre of war, partisan units contained all three major national groups, Serbs, Croats and Muslim Slavs, fighting together under the slogan ‘brotherhood and unity’ (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*).”⁸ It was precisely Tito’s success in uniting Yugoslavs across ethnic boundaries in his partisan movement that allowed most Yugoslavs to quickly forget the atrocities of the war after 1945, and for Yugoslavia’s nationalities to live together peacefully for the next 40 years. As Duncan Blackie observes:

Tito’s achievement in building a movement which united Serbs, Slovenes, Croats, Macedonians and others was impressive. Not only did it win the war of liberation, it also left indelible marks on the postwar state....[It allowed] the creation of a state in which the three decades of systematic inequality between Serb and Croat were decisively overcome. This is why the chauvinist labels of today have to be dredged up from *before* 1945; neither the Croats nor the Serbs can claim, with the Albanians, to have suffered oppression since the Second World War.⁹

Tito’s Yugoslavia

The state that Tito constructed after the war was in no sense genuinely socialist. Despite the facade of worker self-management after 1953, all effective political and economic power remained in the hands of a privileged party bureaucracy driven to

extract surplus value from the mass of the population in order to build a strong national economy. Like the other Stalinist regimes of postwar Eastern Europe, Yugoslavia was state capitalist, not socialist.¹⁰ Nevertheless, through a complex set of constitutional and political mechanisms, Tito attempted to ensure that no single ethnic group dominated the new Yugoslavia in the way that Serbia had dominated it before the war. Serbian nationalism was the most potentially explosive, because Serb minorities were scattered throughout the republics: in Bosnia (34 percent), Croatia (12 percent) and Kosovo (10-20 percent). Any breakup

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of Yugoslavia would render each of these minorities “stranded” in a separate state. According to one commentator:

Rigid use of an affirmative-action ethnic ‘key’ assured a near-equal distribution of cabinet posts, ambassadorships, and other important federal appointments between cadres from the republics and provinces. The parliament and other federal institutions made major efforts to be multilingual....Until the second half of the 1980s these complex arrangements had produced a stable multinational federation where, whatever else was wrong (and a great many things *were* wrong), the national question seemed to be settled.¹¹

This assessment, though, is too sanguine. Tito’s setup did not “settle” the national question in Yugoslavia; it merely muted it by balancing the republics against each other, and by stamping out any manifestation of national separatism. This arrangement could hold in the postwar period of economic growth—roughly from the 1950s into the late 1960s—when Yugoslavia experienced growth rates of 6 percent and higher. But already by the late 1960s, Yugoslavia had begun to experience serious economic problems, leading to sharp conflicts of interest between the various republics. In Croatia in particular, the local leadership attempted to use a revival in nationalist ideas to pressure the federal government for concessions. “As these manifestations of Croat nationalism grew,” reports one historian, “the Serb population of Croatia began again to remember the terrible massacres of 1941 and to prepare for self-defence.”¹² Tito responded by arresting several hundred nationalists, banning their publications and thoroughly purging the Croatian bureaucracy.

Economic crisis and the rise of nationalism

While Tito was alive, he was able to use his political authority, and repression when needed, to ensure the balance of power between Yugoslavia’s various national groups. But after his death

in 1980, no other figure in the central government could play the same role. More importantly, Yugoslavia's economy limped along unimpressively in the 1970s, growing ever more indebted to Western banks. It went into a tailspin in the early 1980s in the wake of a global recession. The International Monetary Fund demanded an austerity program which slashed working-class living standards but did nothing to turn the economy around. "Between 1982 and 1989 the standard of living fell nearly 40 percent and in December 1989 inflation peaked at more than 2,000 percent."¹³ The attempts to integrate Yugoslavia into Western markets reinforced, despite efforts to overcome it, the extreme uneven economic development between the different republics. If Slovenia's economy resembled its richer northern neighbors, Kosovo and Macedonia were the poorest in Europe. The onset of economic crisis fragmented the federation of different republics, as the richer republics, Slovenia and to a lesser extent Croatia, complained that their wealth was being used to "pay" for the poorer republics in the south. Trade between republics declined dramatically. It was against this background of fragmentation that nationalism began to reemerge in the different republics.

It is important to note, however, that the resurgence of nationalism did not come from ordinary people. On the contrary, workers across Yugoslavia responded to the crisis with a huge upsurge in the level of class struggle.

Strikes, of which there were less than 100 in 1983, rose to 699 in 1985 and 851 in 1986....Over 1987 as a whole there were 1570 strikes involving some 365,000 workers....The pressure continued into 1988 with strikes in the first half of the year running at twice the level for the same period in 1987.¹⁴

But while workers responded to the crisis in class terms, groups of intellectuals in Serbia began propagating the idea that Serbs were an oppressed group in Yugoslavia. In 1986, for example, the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences published a memorandum claiming, absurdly, that Tito's policies had systematically discriminated against Serbs and, even more absurdly, that in the province of Kosovo, Serbs were threatened with genocide by the Albanian majority.

The latter claim echoed the grievances of Kosovo's Serbian minority, who had never come to terms with the autonomy that Tito had granted the province following massive student demonstrations in the late 1960s. Prior to that time, ethnic Albanians had been treated as second-class citizens. Although living standards remained the lowest in Yugoslavia after the change to autonomy, educational opportunities improved and Albanians moved into positions of power in the government. Unhappy with these changes, some Serbs started moving out of the province. At first this was not an issue, but in 1981 heavy-handed repression of more student demonstrations led to unrest throughout the province. Federal authorities responded by imposing martial law.¹⁵ After this, articles began appearing in

the Serbian media claiming that Albanians were conducting a terror campaign to force Serbs out of Kosovo.¹⁶ In Serbia, political leaders who wanted to reassert their control over Kosovo allowed the nationalists to publish their allegations in the hope that this would pressure the other republics to permit revision to the constitution.

Once the genie was out of the bottle, however, it was difficult to control. By 1986, Serb nationalists were organizing protest rallies in Kosovo demanding that the province's leadership be removed. As the movement began to get out of hand, Serbian President Ivan Stambolic sent his trusted protégé Slobodan Milosevic, then the leader of the Serbian League of Communists, to calm the situation. It was a fateful move. Instead of attempting to defuse the protests, Milosevic saw an opportunity to both derail worker unrest and further his own political career by jumping on the nationalist bandwagon himself: "In a televised speech Milosevic endorsed the allegations of genocide against the Serb nation and appealed to Serbs' warrior traditions, promising them: 'Nobody will ever beat you again.' News of the speech reverberated across Serbia and the shock waves spread fear throughout the federation."¹⁷

In the months that followed, Milosevic used his control of the Serbian media and built a series of mass rallies to gain an enormous following, thereby pushing aside his opponents in the Serbian leadership:

The rallies, or meetings as they were called, were carefully stage-managed...On occasions, more than 100,000 people came to hear Milosevic tell them how they had been exploited in Tito's Yugoslavia, how they were facing genocide, and how now they had to fight for their rights as a nation. Those who attended the meetings were bussed in at no expense, had the day off work and were fed to boot.¹⁸

Having gained complete control of the party apparatus in Serbia, Milosevic continued the mass rallies to force out the leaderships and replaced them with his own supporters in the

provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina, as well as in the neighboring republic of Montenegro. When Albanians in Kosovo responded with a general strike in early 1989, Milosevic pressured the federal government to declare martial law, then stripped the province of its autonomy. Meanwhile the media kept up a steady barrage of nationalist propaganda, directed first against Albanians in Kosovo, but increasingly against the rest of the country too. When Slovenia refused to

allow its security forces to participate in the repression of Kosovo, for example, the Serb media began a hate campaign against Slovenes:

Though it was difficult to dredge up a history of animosity between Serbs and Slovenes, enterprising Serbian propagandists rose to the task and within days everybody in Serbia knew how Slovenia had systematically exploited Serbia since the creation of Yugoslavia, how Slovenes had invented Worker Self-Manage-

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ment to weaken Serbia economically and even how Slovenia's relative wealth was derived from Serbian factories which were transplanted to Slovenia in 1948! The allegations were endless and the propaganda campaign was so overwhelming that it became dangerous to speak with a Slovene accent or even to carry a Slovene newspaper in Serbia.¹⁹

As Serbian nationalism reached fever pitch, party bosses in the other republics also turned to nationalism, partly as a response to Milosevic, and partly as a way of diverting working-class anger away from the state of the economy. Most of them, however, proved less adept than Milosevic at controlling the forces they had unleashed and were soon outflanked by more genuine nationalist leaders. In Croatia, the right-wing party Croat Democratic Union defeated the Communists in the elections of April 1990. The party's leader, Franjo Tudjman, was a former general in Tito's army who ran an openly nationalist campaign and promised to stand up to Milosevic's provocations.

By that time, Serbia had been churning out anti-Croatian propaganda for more than a year: "At the end of 1988 the media offensive against Croatia [had gone] into overdrive with allegations that radioactive waste had been deliberately dumped in Serb villages in Croatia and that Serbs were falling ill and dying as a result."²⁰ When the Croatian authorities dug up the site to investigate and found nothing, the Serbian media simply made allegations against new sites. Around the same time, Milosevic's supporters began holding commemorations for dead Serbs in areas where Ustashe massacres had taken place in the Second World War.

During the election campaign, Tudjman responded by talking of a "Greater Croatia" while his supporters marched through Serb-populated towns using the slogan "God in the Heavens and Tudjman in the homelands."²¹ Following his election victory, he demanded that all Serbs in Croatia take an oath of loyalty to the state. British writer Mary Kaldor describes the cycle of provocations that took place on both sides:

It is true that Belgrade subjected the Serb minority areas to merciless propaganda, that memories of the Ustashe period were continually exploited by Serb extremists, and that Serbian paramilitaries were armed by Belgrade. Nevertheless, it is also true that many Serbs were dismissed from their jobs, Serbian property was confiscated and, most provocatively of all, Serbian policemen were replaced by Croats in Serbian areas. The use of the Croatian shield to replace the Yugoslav red star, the renaming of the 'Square of the Victims of Fascism' as the 'Square of Croatian Great Kings', and Tudjman's remark during his election campaign that he was glad his wife was not a Serb or a Jew must have been very frightening to the Serbian minority.²²

In the end, Germany's recognition of Croatia's independence—without any guarantees of the Serb minority's national rights in Croatia—made the outbreak of war and the disintegra-



Anti-Milosevic protesters in Belgrade, 1996

tion of Yugoslavia inevitable. The same holds true for Bosnia. Germany and the U.S. recognized Bosnian independence even though the majority of Bosnian Serbs and Croats—about 51 percent of the republic—had rejected it. By doing so, they put their seal of approval on Bosnia's descent into war.

Cracks in the monolith

At the end of 1990 in Serbia's own elections, Milosevic used his control of the media and of the state apparatus to ensure the victory of his party (renamed the Serbian Socialist Party), portraying himself as the only person who could protect Serbs from resurgent Croatian fascism and the threat of genocide. Within a few months, however, it became clear that the hysterical claims of Serbian nationalism were not all-powerful. During the election, Milosevic had promised to revitalize the economy and improve living standards. But as inflation cut into the value of wages and pensions, a half million people rallied in March 1991 demanding his resignation:

For two days Milosevic appeared on the verge of losing power and was forced to call on the JNA [Yugoslav Army] to restore order in Belgrade. In street fighting two people, a student and a policeman, were killed and hundreds more injured. The demonstrators produced a list of demands including the resignation of Milosevic's police chief and media barons but failed to go for the jugular when Milosevic was at his most vulnerable. Unrest was confined to Belgrade and Milosevic retained control of the security apparatus.²³

Despite its failure, the rebellion showed that even four years of relentless nationalist propaganda had failed to make class issues disappear. Milosevic was shaken by the uprising and responded by planning for war as Slovenia and Croatia both prepared to declare their independence. But even as fighting broke out, with Milosevic posing as the defender of Serbs living in Croatia, the vast majority of people in Serbia continued to want peace. As Andreja Zivkovic explains, "Despite the mood of war

hysteria cultivated by the regime, workers' nationalism was basically defensive. Workers in their thousands expressed mute opposition to the war in the form of draft dodging and desertion from the front."²⁴ As the war with Croatia came to an end, Milosevic was able to hold on to power by blaming Western sanctions for Serbia's economic crisis. At the same time, half a million young people who had opposed the war and demanded greater democracy left the country. His "corrupt and unstable regime could only survive through a system of constant purges of suspect institutions and terror against its opponents. The paramilitary police was reinforced to act as Milosevic's personal guard against the army and to discourage dissent, and the media pumped out disinformation."²⁵

But as unemployment climbed to almost 50 percent and inflation skyrocketed, "[forcing] the majority of people into destitution, the masses began to tire not only of the war [which had spread to Bosnia], but also of nationalism. From 1993 onwards Milosevic was forced to drop Greater Serbian nationalism and sue for peace to keep step with the popular mood."²⁶

When Milosevic refused to recognize the victory of the opposition coalition Zajedno in local elections at the end of 1996, mass rebellion once again shook Serbia. Huge demonstrations of more than 100,000 marched every day in Belgrade for close to three months until Milosevic backed down. Yet once more it was a missed opportunity. The opposition parties refused to demand anything more than acceptance of the election results, and again Milosevic was allowed to survive.

With the economy in tatters, Milosevic faced increasing criticism from the country's independent media and democratic activists. He again sought salvation in a military campaign, this time in response to armed resistance by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in Kosovo. "However, the regime was increasingly riven by vicious faction fighting. Key figures in the ruling class openly criticised Milosevic's strategy in Kosovo, fearing that it would lead to a further spell of international isolation for Serbia. The economic and political system was imploding at an alarming rate with only the glue of the Kosovo campaign to hold it together."²⁷

Contrary to Western propaganda, the appeal of nationalist frenzy around Kosovo was beginning to fade among the majority of Serbs before the brutal NATO bombing campaign began. Thousands of young men went into hiding to avoid being drafted, and small protests of mothers demanded their sons in uniform be returned home. But NATO's attack has allowed Milosevic to once again play the nationalist card once again. Despite—or rather, because of—the death and destruction the bombing has caused, his position has been strengthened while opposition voices have been silenced.

Nationalism continues to play a powerful role in Serbia, but it is orchestrated from the top—it does not arise spontaneously from below. The past 12 years in Serbia illustrate how nationalist propaganda can be used to divert workers' struggle and create ethnic conflict. But they also show that nationalist ideas are not all-powerful. Faced with economic crisis and political repression, workers will also turn to mass resistance. As NATO's

murderous war is brought to an end, the possibility of renewed class struggle in Serbia can again return to the agenda.

- 1 A study conducted in 1998 by researchers at the Institute for Advanced Study in Vienna concluded that "the citizens of the FRY [Federal Republic of Yugoslavia] were not at all the most nationalistic amongst the East European countries—in fact they were among the least nationalistic, as measured by the variables we were using....The people of FRY were much more negative about their country as measured on all questions than were the other inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe. One quarter of them indeed wished that they had been born elsewhere."
- 2 As Christopher Bennett notes: "While the pseudo-historians who today have free rein in both the Croatian and Serbian media have striven to dredge up a history of hatred between Serbs and Croats, in truth they have failed to come up with much before the First World War and the creation of Yugoslavia. Though a potential for conflict appears to exist wherever rival churches live side by side, relations between the communities were remarkably tranquil." *Yugoslavia's Bloody Collapse: Causes, Course and Consequences* (New York: NYU Press, 1995), p. 27.
- 3 Duncan Blackie, "The Road to Hell," *International Socialism* 53 (Winter 1991), pp. 36-7.
- 4 Bennett, p. 32.
- 5 Bennett, p. 35. The worst oppression was suffered by Albanians in Kosovo, who fought a guerrilla war for independence during most of the 1920s.
- 6 Bennett, p. 45-6.
- 7 Bogdan Denitch, *Ethnic Nationalism: The Tragic Death of Yugoslavia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 32-3. The real figures are quite horrific, but Serbian nationalists have greatly exaggerated them, sometimes claiming that a million Serbs died in Jasenovac alone. The actual number is probably around 50,000. While there were no comparable killings of Croats in Serbia during the war, Serbian Chetnik guerrillas in Croatia and Bosnia (followers of the royalist General Mihailovic) carried out retaliatory massacres against Croats and Muslims, and the collaborationist regimes in both Croatia and Serbia engaged in extermination campaigns against Jews and Gypsies, killing tens of thousands.
- 8 Bennett, p. 53.
- 9 Blackie, p. 38.
- 10 For further discussion, see Mike Haynes, "Nightmares of the Market," *International Socialism* 41 (Winter 1988), pp. 17-32 and Blackie, pp. 30-4.
- 11 Denitch, p. 38.
- 12 Cited in Blackie, pp. 42-3.
- 13 Bennett, p. 69.
- 14 Haynes, pp. 3-4.
- 15 Bennett, p. 90. He argues that this was a decisive turning point for the whole country: "Tito [had] endeavored to remain impartial at all times and never to favour one people over another... However, as soon as the JNA [Yugoslav army] turned its guns against the country's Albanians, the Titoist vision of Yugoslavia had come unstuck. Within a year of his death and more than a decade before the country disintegrated in war, Tito's Yugoslavia had already died in spirit, if not yet in form."
- 16 Bennett, p. 93. As Bennett points out, charges that Albanians were systematically raping and murdering Serbs were little more than ludicrous. "According to official figures, the incidence of both murder and rape in Kosovo was extremely low, much lower in fact than in the rest of Serbia, while the incidence of Albanians murdering or raping Serbs was negligible. A more appropriate explanation for the Serb exodus is that it was an economic migration and the result of the high unemployment and lack of prospects for all people in Kosovo."
- 17 Bennett, p. 94.
- 18 Bennett, p. 95.
- 19 Bennett, p. 107.
- 20 Bennett, pp. 124-5.
- 21 Blackie, p. 51.
- 22 Quoted in Duncan Blackie, "The Left and the Balkan War," *International Socialism* 69 (Winter 1995), pp. 28-9.
- 23 Bennett, p. 145.
- 24 "The Resistible Rise of Slobodan Milosevic," *Socialist Review* Issue 230 (May 1999), p. 10.
- 25 "Resistible Rise," p. 10.
- 26 "Resistible Rise," p. 10.
- 27 "Resistible Rise," p. 11.