

**Same Soil, Different Roots:
The Use of Ethno-Specific Narratives During the Homeland War in Croatia**

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Abstract

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This work looks at the way interpretations and misrepresentations of the history of World War II changed and evolved and their ultimate consequence on the Homeland War in Croatia from 1991 to 1995 between the resident Serb and Croat populations. Explored are the way official narratives were constructed by the communist regime, how and why this narrative was deconstructed, and by more ethno-specific narratives prevailed that fueled the nationalist tendencies of the war.

This paper is organized chronologically, beginning with the historical background that puts the rest of the paper into context. The paper also discusses the nationalist resurfacing before the war by examining the Croatian Spring, nationalist re-writings of history, and other matters that influenced the war. The majority of the paper analyzes the way WWII was remembered and dismembered during the late 1980's and early 1990's by looking at rhetoric, publications, commemorations, and the role of the Catholic and Serbian Orthodox Churches. Operation Storm, which was the climax of the Homeland War and which expelled 200,000 Serbs serves as an end-point.

The paper concludes by assessing the ways in which Serbs and Croats have behaved since the war and following Operation Storm. Some efforts have been made, such as social media initiatives for reconciliation. Some other incidents, however, still harbor the ill will and ethnocentric interpretations of WWII.

INTRODUCTION

The territory of what was once the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), which at one point consisted of what are now seven states, has been a site of ethnic struggle and conflict in the 20th century. In the “land of the Southern Slavs” (the literal meaning of “Yugoslavia”), different historic events have shaped the way in which these conflicts are either expressed or suppressed. As the Yugoslav communist regime began to crumble in the 1980’s, the nationalist revival that accompanied the communist decay highlighted the discrepancies in historic interpretations. The final result was a declaration of independence of Slovenia and Croatia (in June 1991) from Yugoslavia, the declaration of independence of the Republic of Serbian Krajina or *Republika Srpska Krajina* (RSK) within the territory of Croatia, and a four year war between Croatia’s Serbs and Croats that resulted in the expulsion of 200,000 Serbs from Croatia after military operation “Storm”. Perhaps no single event has had as much influence in the formation of ethnic relations in the region as World War II. The region of the former SFRY has seen ethnic conflict wax and wane and now seems to have culminated in a tense peace, where each of its past components are split off from others. Arguably the ethnic relations between the Serbs and the Croats have been the longest enduring and the most contentious. The experiences and events that occurred during WWII and immediately after serve as a reference point for many individuals and their memories of these events shape their perceptions of the other group.

In the following pages, we will look at the evolution of multiple WWII narratives and the ways they were thought to have re-emerged in the Socialist Republic of Croatia

in the 1980's and 1990's. The need for reflection after the trauma of WWII was not allowed in the public sphere while the communist party had control of the narrative if it were to be put in the context of ethnicity. The way in which the socialist government created a monopoly on the memory of WWII and paved the way for ethnic struggles in Croatia is twofold. On one hand, the refusal to recognize that the wartime atrocities committed were based on ethnic lines did not give either the victims or the perpetrators proper time or space for reflection. On the other hand, the fact that these matters were not properly dealt with after the war created opportunity for exploitation of memory during the nationalist movements of the 1980's and 1990's¹. We will look at the way official memory was developed, how and why it came unraveled, and its ultimate consequence on Serbo-Croat relations during Croatia's Homeland War.

SETTING THE STAGE (1918-1945)

From the creation of the first united Yugoslav state, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) in 1918 to the end of World War II, a number of important historical events shaped the conflict that would arise between the Serbs and Croats on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, ultimately culminating in the Homeland War from 1991 to 1995. These events, and their subsequent interpretations and purposeful misinterpretations were used as weapons to demonize the opposing ethnic group. Though the terms would eventually devolve to simply "Serbs" and "Croats", the

¹ Wolfgang Hoepken writes about the effects the communist monopoly had on the development of public and private memory and discourse. Firstly, it created "subversive" memories that later overpowered the official narrative and secondly, it created "white holes", or blank spaces of memory that were filled by nationalist propaganda in the 1990's.

groups in conflict during WWII were notorious members of these ethnicities- the Četniks and Ustašas, respectively.

Though the atrocities and the genocidal campaign of the Ustaša during the Independent State of Croatia or *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* (NDH) of 1941-1945 are the defining feature of the Serbo-Croat mistrust and complex relationship that would resurface in the 1990's, those hostilities themselves had roots from the previous 30 years. The way the first Yugoslavia (the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) functioned had been met with disapproval from Slovenes and Croats. This new state was heavily centralized and controlled by Belgrade, Serbia. The nation's minority populations, especially their elites, wanted greater political autonomy for their regions. The state's founding constitution of June 28, 1921 "sanctioned the untenable centralist solution of Yugoslavia's national question"². This constitution established Serbian control and hegemony and was always a reference of the illegitimate way in which the state was created and of the favored status Serbia and Serbs had in a united Yugoslav state³.

When WWII began, secession from Yugoslavia and the establishment of independent states became a possibility. When the Axis Powers invaded Yugoslavia on April 6, 1941, Croatia's most popular party, The Croatian Peasant party, declined the offer to take control of the new government that would be established. The fascist nationalist anti-Yugoslav, Italian-backed group, the Ustaša, led by Ante Pavelić, used the opportunity and chaos of the war to establish a state they would control with the help of the Italy and Germany. The German authorities were initially worried that the Ustaša's "combination

²Ivo Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 416.

³ During the assembly that was to vote on the constitution, members of the Croatian as well as Slovenian delegation walked out. The constitution established Serbian dominance of the state, and eventually led to the dictatorship of King Aleksandar after 1929.

of narrowness, incompetence, savagery and dependence was undermining rational German interests”⁴. Exploiting the national desire for an independent state, the Ustaša established the Independent State of Croatia on April 10, 1941 though it was independent in name only.

The period of the NDH saw multiple isolated massacres as well as a number of concentration camps aimed at eliminating minority populations. In the NDH, this meant that Roma, Jews, and especially Serbs were targeted and that several events and locations connected with these developments became especially important to the Serbs after the war. The concentration camp Jasenovac, probably the most famous but certainly not the only, became emotionally significant both because of the number killed and because the brutality of executions that happened there. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website cites the number of victims in Jasenovac alone as between 77,000 and 99,000⁵. The massacre of Serbs in Glina, Croatia would also bear emotional importance. Mass executions took place in this town from May to August of 1941 and about 300 Serbs were killed⁶. Of particular concern was the May 13 execution of Serbs in the local Serbian Orthodox Church that was left to burn. WWII in Yugoslavia eventually ended with the victory of the communist guerilla fighters, the Partisans (led by Josip Broz Tito), who had been fighting against the Ustaša as well as the Serbian nationalist faction, the Četniks. The defeat of the Ustaša prompted their surrender to the Allied Forces who eventually turned them over to the victorious Partisans. The significance of Jasenovac

⁴ Joseph Rothschild, *Return to Diversity: A Political History of East Central Europe Since World War II*. (New York: oxford University Press, 1989), 51.

⁵ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Jasenovac.” Holocaust Encyclopedia. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005449>. Accessed on March 7, 2015.

⁶ Sabrina Ramet *The Three Yugoslavias: State-building and Legitimation, 1918-2005*. (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006), 119.

would have a Croat countermyth, that of the massacre at Bleiburg which followed the Ustašas' surrender, where a disputed but nonetheless large number of Ustaša, as well as civilians working within the structure of the NDH regime, were killed in May 1945 by the Partisans. The number of victims of Bleiburg is contested but British political scientist, David Bruce Macdonald in his book *Balkan Holocausts*, lists the reported number as ranging from 20,000 (as Tim Judah in his book *The Serbs* claims) to 200,000 (that some Croatian nationalists claim). Macdonald concludes that “most impartial historians converged on the lower numbers of dead”⁷ somewhere around 50,000 to 70,000. The number of victims in both Jasenovac (and all of the NDH) as well as the massacre in Bleiburg would be contested in the 1990s.

The period between 1941 and 1945 on the territory of the former Yugoslavia was riddled with war and war crimes, often targeting civilians and those of different ethnic, religious, or political beliefs. The eventual victory of Tito and the Partisans formally established a second Yugoslavia, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) whose principles were based on “brotherhood and unity”. This brotherhood and unity was apparently Tito’s way of reconciling the feuding ethnicities of Yugoslavia, including those in focus here, the Serbs and the Croats.

ACT I (1945-1980’s)

Tito built Yugoslavia on “brotherhood and unity”, which one was supposed to “guard like the pupil of his eye”. Ethnic tensions were regarded as “obsolete throwbacks

⁷ David Bruce Macdonald, *Balkan holocausts?: Serbian and Croatian victim-centred propaganda and the war in Yugoslavia*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 170

to a discredited past”⁸. Tito said, “We in Yugoslavia have to show by example that there cannot be minorities and majorities. Socialism rejects the notions of majority and minority. It seeks equality among the majority and the minority so that in the end there is only one kind of nation and man left, the socialist”. Though it may have been a surprise to Western audiences that Yugoslavia would so quickly and brutally fall apart in the 1990’s, there were earlier signs of conflict, especially in Croatia between its ethnically Serb and Croat populations. Earlier expressions of nationalism in Croatia as well as revisions of the official interpretations of history slowly built up until conflict finally erupted.

Croatia in the 1970’s and 1980’s

An important aspect of Croatian politics in the late 1960’s and 1970’s that ultimately changed the structure of the SFRY was the Croatian Spring. This was a political movement in Croatia that came to a head in 1971 and was suppressed by the federal government. The movement had political, cultural, and economic demands that centered primarily on the demand for more autonomy for the republics⁹. More concretely, the people taking part in the Croatian Spring demonstrations demanded economic reforms so that more profit be given to the Croatian republic instead of being “redistributed” to the federal capital and poorer republics. Central to their demands were also an independent Croatian army. The right to highlight the individual *narod*

⁸ Gale Stokes, "From Nation to Minority: Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia at the Outbreak of the Yugoslav Wars", *Problems of Post-Communism*. 52 no. 6 (2005): 5

⁹ The Croatian Spring was kick-started by “The Declaration On the Status and Name of the Croatian Literary Language”, which challenged the idea of a single Serbo-Croat language and instead claimed that the Croatian language was being pushed out and suppressed in favor of the state language.

(nation/people) and its accomplishments were integral to the movement¹⁰. The Maspok (*masovni pokret* or “mass movement”) as it was called, was finally suppressed and its suppression justified by the communist party due to its “restoration of nationalism”. Many of the demonstrators were arrested and later imprisoned. The reaction of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) to the Croatian Spring would be another grievance that would fuel Croatian anti-Yugoslavism.

It is also in this time frame that Franjo Tuđman would rise to prominence. Tuđman, a historian and once a Partisan himself, slowly began adopting a more nationalist viewpoint and challenging the communist narrative through his publications. He would turn to politics only in the late 1980’s by founding the Croatian Democratic Union or *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* (HDZ). In his book *Bespuća povijesne zbiljnosti* (literally translated, *The Roadlessness of Historical Reality*, Tuđman contends that the number of those killed under the NDH regime is just a fraction of what the official communist count claims it to be. Though he disagrees with the total number of victims of WWII in Yugoslavia as a whole, he especially contests the reported number of Serbs killed in the NDH. Tuđman feels that this “manipulation of the number of war victims” serves to assign a collective guilt to the Croat nation. Tuđman concludes that “everything Croatian feels threatened by the Serbian inclination toward centralism and unitarism”¹¹.

Re-writings of History

¹⁰ Marko Zubak, "The Croatian Spring: Interpreting the Communist Heritage in Post-Communist Croatia", *East Central Europe*. 32 (2005): 191

¹¹ Franjo Tuđman, *Bespuća povijesne zbiljnosti*. (Zagreb: Nakladni Zavod Matice Hrvatske: 1989), 470.

Ethnic hatreds in the former Yugoslavia (especially between Serbs and Croats) are not ancient history like some, such as Robert Kaplan¹², contend. They are however, engrained in more recent history and in misperceptions about the past. It is precisely this history which Serbs and Croats tend to transpose onto the present and future. Though Serbs and Croats lived on the same soil and coexisted for decades in the SFRY, it is their different roots, formed by historic identities, that prevailed over “brotherhood and unity”. The fall of communist ideology created space for alternative narratives of the war to be presented in public discourse. After the loosening of communism’s grip over memory, especially after the death of Tito in 1980, the ordinary citizen could reinterpret history based on more private, personal experiences and narratives. “Nationalist rewritings of history were successful because they overlapped, far more than official communist versions, with experiences and memories of ordinary people”¹³. Ordinary citizens more readily identified with these new ethno-specific versions of history perhaps because individuals may feel either “supported or threatened by public representations of pastness that seem either to guarantee their identity or deny its significance”¹⁴. After Tito and during the collapse of the SFRY, identity (which became synonymous with ethnic identity) was paramount. Additionally, if one believes his ethnic identity was what made him a victim, no matter how many generations removed, it may be easier to try to justify his aggression currently or at some point in the future.

¹² Robert Kaplan’s now famous book, *Balkan Ghosts*, tries to make sense of the Balkans’ violent history by assuming ancient, century-long hatreds are to blame.

¹³ Stef Jansen, “The Violence of Memories: Local Narratives of the Past After Ethnic Cleansing in Croatia.” *Rethinking History* 6, no. 1 (2002): 77

¹⁴ Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1992), 10

Communist revisionism was happening on both the Serb and Croat sides in an effort to manipulate history and the previously accepted communist narrative to better fit the new nationalist discourse. Croatian revisionism was relatively minimal in the late 1970's and early 1980's and it is only after the Homeland War that more prolific writings have surfaced challenging the official narrative of the CPY. Some publications more centered on the history of language or fine art surfaced but were denounced as anticommunist. Individuals such as Franjo Tuđman were limited in their capabilities to publish more controversial material at this time due to strict control of what may have been considered nationalist material in Croatia, especially after the Croatian Spring¹⁵.

In his speech at Gazimestan, the monument to the Battle of Kosovo in 1989, Serbian President Slobodan Milošević said that it “is difficult to say what is the historical truth about the Battle of Kosovo and what is legend. Today this is no longer important.” The same disregard for historical integrity was echoed in a number of Serbian publications leading up to the war, especially when rewritings and reinterpretations of WWII and the Serbian experience in socialist Yugoslavia were concerned. During the Homeland War, in 1992 Ivo Banac published an article addressing the issue of Serbian historical revisionism of the communist narrative. He cites Branko Petranović's book, *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Yugoslavia 1941-1945*, as being one of the first contributions to Serbian reinterpretations of the war whose “principle innovation was the ideological redefinition of the Četnik movement”¹⁶. Petranović wrote that the “most significant antifascist manifestation among the Serbian bourgeoisie was connected with

¹⁵ Ivo Banac, “Historiography of the Countries of Eastern Europe: Yugoslavia.” *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 4 (1992): 1098

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1094

the Četnik organization of Dragoljub Draža Mihailović¹⁷”. Under the communist regime, the Četniks were culpable for being collaborationists; Banac believes that this redefinition made the Četniks more palatable to Serbs as they were then associated with a counterrevolution “of the Western type”. Other publications at the time that Banac cites more directly referenced the conflict between the Serbs and Croats. Historian Vasilije Krestić authored a book in 1983 titled *Serbo-Croat Relations and the Yugoslav Idea* as well as an article in 1986 titled “On the Origin of the Genocide of Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia”. Both of these works were used as pseudo-academic sources that highlighted the idea of a Croat “genocidal nature”. The Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, which will be discussed more below, was a more high profile example of the revisionism of the Serbian reinterpretation of WWII and the current state structure and policies.

ACT II: REMEMBERING AND DISMEMBERING WWII (THE 1990’S)

On May 4, 1980 Josip Broz Tito died and with him, Yugoslavia itself. Without Tito to keep a firm grasp on the communist party, the communist party could no longer keep a firm grasp on the narrative of the public sphere. Moreover, the exogenous factors contributing to the SFRY’s very existence had become obsolete. The fall of communism in 1989 made Yugoslavia’s “third way” not only unnecessary but archaic compared to the newly capitalist Eastern Europe. Yugoslavia, despite it being a socialist state under Tito, had served as a buffer zone between the capitalist West and the communist East. Tito’s implementation of “workers’ self-management” policies, despite their relative successes

¹⁷ Though to a lesser degree than the Ustaša, the Četniks under the leadership of Draža Mihailović also collaborated with the fascist axis powers during WWII.

compared with the rest of the socialist world, quickly became outdated after his death and during the fall of communism in the surrounding areas. The fall of communism itself coupled with the loosening communist narrative of WWII created a power vacuum that was filled with leaders who created and welcomed space for alternative, subversive memories in an effort to justify their nationalist claims and by extension, their own political power. In the former Yugoslavia, the system turned from state socialism to state chauvinism.

As relations between Serbia and Croatia worsened, open confrontation in Croatia between Serbs and Croats began in early 1990. The mutual animosity was fueled by the rhetoric of both groups who relied on their ethno-specific historic memory and projected it onto the current situation. On the Croatian side, no conversation was had on the topic of the NDH and its crimes, public discourse instead concentrated on Četnik and Partisan atrocities perpetrated against Croats. There was a shift for Croats from the communist narrative of liberation to the narrative of “occupation” and subordination of Croatia within socialist Yugoslavia¹⁸. The Serbs were equated with the old communists due to their perceived privileged status. It is true that a larger number of ethnic Serbs than Croats were in places of authority within the state structure but that was not due to Tito’s ethnic preference or vendetta against Croats. As a persecuted minority in Croatia during the NDH, Serbs were disproportionately more likely to join the Partisan movement in WWII and later the CPY itself. Tito awarded individuals for loyalty to the party, not for having been part of any one ethnic group. To some nationalist Croats, staying in a united Yugoslavia was to stay under Četnik and communist oppression while to the Serbs, living

¹⁸ Renata Jambrešić Kirin, "The Politics of Memorizing and Forgetting: Reminiscences of the Second World War in Croatia." *Research Support Scheme* (2000): 5

in an independent Croatia would be the reemergence of Ustaša extermination policy. The “insensitive use of symbols” and the “uncritical remembrance of Ustaša representatives in public” were “examples of the unreflective way in which the past was memorialized in Croatian politics”¹⁹.

Publications and Rhetoric

The political atmosphere in late 1980’s and 1990’s Zagreb and Belgrade was volatile. The way the Croatian and Serbian leaders spoke about the ethnic conflict that had not yet erupted into a war was such that it was often hard to tell if they were speaking about 1991 or 1941. The nationalist leaderships of both Serbia and Croatia were quick to establish control of the official media and thereby influence the information that citizens had access to. Having the power over discourse gave the new nationalist agenda power over knowledge and interpretation of past, which had a direct impact on the present and future.

Perhaps the most infamous piece of literature coming from this time was the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU Memorandum or just Memorandum) which illustrated not only the Serbian nationalism that had been growing but also the type of propaganda used by the leadership to further drive a wedge between the Serbian people and the communist past as well as between the Serbs and the Croats themselves. The Memorandum was a draft document that was leaked in 1986 and was a compilation of grievances the Serbian cultural elite had (and believed and encouraged average citizens to have) against the current and past state structure and

¹⁹ Wolfgang Hoepken, "War, Memory, and Education in a Fragmented Society: the Case of Yugoslavia." *Eastern European Politics and Societies* 13, no. 1 (1999): 216

policies. A key point in the document was the idea that Tito and the CPY deliberately weakened Serbia in the 1974 Constitution by making Vojvodina and Kosovo-Metohija sovereign territories within the Serbian Republic. No other republic was carved out in such way and moreover, Kosovo-Metohija has a deep cultural tie to the creation of the Serbian heritage and culture. The second section of the Memorandum, dealing with the “status of Serbia and the Serb nation” more directly references WWII and the events in Croatia²⁰. The last paragraph of point 7 of the Memorandum laments that Serbia had sacrificed 2.5 million people in the last two wars for Yugoslavia but is the only one without a state where all of its constituents were in the same territory. The authors write that a “worse historical punishment for peace cannot be imagined”. Speaking on the situation in Croatia, point 8 of the Memorandum states that “with the exception of the period of the existence of the NDH, Serbs have never been as threatened as they are today”.

While the situation in the 1990’s was not in any way realistically reminiscent of the NDH, Serbs did in fact have some legitimate concerns. Firstly, the new Croatian Constitution of 1990 removed Serbs from being a constituent nation and instead gave them the status of minority. This would create an atmosphere of resentment about status reversal that would further fuel violence²¹. Secondly, Croats replaced Serbs in positions of authority. This was due to the Croatian perception that Serbs had unfairly been given privileged status for their participation and support of the CPY. In a state company, “Adria” in Zadar, 15 ethnic Serbs were let go from their jobs by one Ivan Petrica because

²⁰ <http://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/memorandum%20sanu.pdf>

²¹ See Roger Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in 20th Century Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge: 2002)

they did not sign a text indicating their support of the Croatian government on May 3, 1991²². Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly in reinforcing the fears that the NDH was being reestablished, was the rhetoric of the newly elected Croatian president, Franjo Tuđman. His past Croat nationalist advocacy had more than once resulted in imprisonment during the socialist regime. At the party congress in 1990 Tuđman said that “our opponents see nothing in our program but the claim for restoration of the NDH. These people fail to see that the state was not the creation of fascist criminals, it also stood for the historic aspirations of the Croatian people for an independent state²³”. His description of the NDH being a natural aspiration of the Croatian people played into the Serbian narrative that the Croats were by nature genocidal against the Serbs and that the policies of the HDZ were simply an extension of Ante Pavelić’s regime during the NDH. Even the Croatian periodical, *Danas*, writes in its April issue of 1992 that “in independent Croatia Ustaša folklore is seen exactly where there is no place for it. This resurfacing can be understood psychologically and commercially, but it is politically absolutely counterproductive to Croatia abroad”²⁴.

Tuđman’s comments also played to the Croatian narrative that had always lamented the “thousand year dream” of the Croats to have an independent state. Their “subjugation” by the CPY and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was nothing more than an extension of the national suppression they had suffered while under the rule of the Habsburg Empire only now under a different occupier. To further cement the “thousand year dream” in the hearts and minds of the Croatian people, Tuđman began a

²² Vojin Dabić, *Persecution of Serbs and Ethnic Cleansing in Croatia, 1991-1998: Documents and Testimonies* (Belgrade: Serbian Council Information Center, 1998), 30

²³ Doris Godl, “Challenging the Past: Serbian and Croatian Aggressor-Victim Narratives” *International Journal of Sociology* 37, no. 1 (2007): 51

²⁴ See Gojko Borić "Ustase I Hrvati: Dlaka U Demokratskoj Juhi." *Danas* 28 Apr. 1992

reconciliatory campaign between Croats themselves. His argument was that all Croats, whether they had fought for the Ustaša or the Partisans, were first and foremost Croats who had fought for Croatia and were all members of one nation. There was no reason for them not to continue to fight for those same principles now. In a meeting of Croatia's Parliament (Sabor) Hrvoje Šošić (a HDZ member) proclaimed that "to me, every dead Croat is alive. Tuđman is in fact reconciling living people because the Croat never dies. The Croat lives forever"²⁵. Tuđman's other argument (as well as that of other nationalist, anti-communist Croats) is that a large number of those dead Croats were dead due to communist "terror". Croats used the events in Bleiburg to counter Serbian charges about Jasenovac. At a commemoration in Bleiburg in 1990, a former Ustaša member, Dinko Šakić, said that he was proud to have been in the Ustaša; regarding the number of those killed in the NDH he said that "it is normal for a state to kill its enemies"²⁶. Wolfgang Hoepken recognized the "tendency in parts of the Croatian public to stress the massive killings at the end of the war and forget those during the war"²⁷. Bleiburg became a major talking point of the HDZ and other nationalist leaders to illustrate how the Croatian people were made to suffer and were unfairly targeted during the communist period. Bishop Slobodan Štambuk of Hvar, at the 1990 commemoration in Bleiburg, called upon the remaining communists to "be brave, admit your crimes, and ask for forgiveness from the Croatian people"²⁸.

²⁵ Dejan Djokić, "The Second WWII: Discourses of Reconciliation in Serbia and Croatia in Late 1980s and Early 1990s" *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans* 4, no. 2 (2002): 138

²⁶ Vjeran Pavlaković, *Red Stars, Black Shirts: Symbols, Commemorations, and Contested Histories of World War Two in Croatia*. Seattle, WA: National Council for Eurasian and East European Research (2008): 23

²⁷ Hoepken, "War, Memory, and Education in a Fragmented Society: the Case of Yugoslavia", 215

²⁸ Pavlaković, *Red Stars, Black Shirts: Symbols, Commemorations, and Contested Histories of World War Two in Croatia*, 1

The use of strong rhetoric to fuel fear and hate was seen on both sides in an effort to invoke victim status of an ethnic group; this was almost always done by referencing WWII. Some references were admittedly more drawn out and convoluted than others. After Germany's support of the secession of Croatia from Yugoslavia in late 1991, some references were made by some extremist Serbs that made a connection between Nazi Germany's support of the NDH and unified Germany's support of Croatia. In the summer of 1992 in Benkovac, Željko Ražnatović "Arkan", a notorious war criminal from the Yugoslav Wars, who led a nationalist Serbian paramilitary group during the Yugoslav Wars, made that very same connection. He said that "the Serbian people are fighting against fascism. It is fighting against fascist Germany. Understand, that the Ustaša are a small and poor people and we could eat them for breakfast but behind them stands the Third Reich. Remember that. Those tanks were not made in Zagreb, but in fascist Germany. Understand that if it is necessary we will go all the way to Berlin and liberate them as well from this new fascism"²⁹. Arkan equates not only the current leadership of Croatia with the Ustaša, but the entire Croatian population. He then takes this weak analogy even further by insisting 1991 is a repeat of 1941, when Germany and Croatia conspired in fascist policy.

Some references to WWII, however, were very direct and realistic. The Serbian president at the time, Slobodan Milošević in August 1990, went so far as to exhume mass graves of the Ustaša victims³⁰. The victims' remains were shown as well as descriptions of the mutilations the bodies suffered either before or after their death. These disturbing

²⁹ Ozren Zunec, "Socijalna konstrukcija pobune Srba u Hrvatskoj 1990.-1995. godine." *Časopis za Suvremenu Povijest* 40, no.1 (2008): 42

³⁰ Marko Živković, *Serbian Dreambook: National Imaginary in the Time of Milošević*. (Bloomington [Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2011), 181

images were broadcast on the state controlled media and Croats were called “fascist” and “genocidal” while Franjo Tuđman was called the heir of Ante Pavelić. This was undoubtedly the most extreme and most reprehensible of the propaganda techniques. Not to be outdone, the Croats also countered with claims and calls for commemoration for the Croat victims of WWII. Tuđman wanted to establish a museum of “Pan-Croat Reconciliation” at the site of Jasenovac. In an interview in 1996, Tuđman said that “Jasenovac could be a place for all victims of war, which would warn the Croatian people that in the past they were divided and brought into an internecine conflict”³¹. The plan was to transfer the bones of the victims at Bleiburg to Jasenovac in what was surely an effort to not be undermined in the struggle for “greatest victim” status. After Tuđman’s death in December 1999 and even international outcry, however, the project was abandoned³².

Symbols and Commemorations

The efforts to establish real and imagined differences between the Croats and Serbs did not stop with the media and the explicit shows of aggression. More indirect though equally important matters such as the use of symbols and commemorations also took place.

Despite the tumultuous history and the seemingly mutually exclusive historical memory of Serbs and Croats, the nationalist leadership knew that they had to exaggerate the differences between Serbs and Croats because they had been taught to be “brothers

³¹ Pavlaković *Red Stars, Black Shirts: Symbols, Commemorations, and Contested Histories of World War Two in Croatia*, 27

³² Djokić “The Second WWII: Discourses of Reconciliation in Serbia and Croatia in Late 1980s and Early 1990s.” 137

and comrades” during Yugoslavia. The fact that Serbs and Croats had traditionally practiced different types of Christianity was not enough. Language, then, became the ground for change. The weekly *Komunist* (Communist) published an article in 1985 that “complained of the infiltration of purely Croatian words into the Croatian schoolbooks and media”. The purpose of this, the article’s author Franjo Butorac writes, was to “indoctrinate young Croats with the spirit of nationalism”³³. This illustrates the important point of hypersensitivity to what constitutes nationalism on the opponent’s side. Despite the fact that Butorac’s accusations may have been worded strongly, Ivo Banac agreed that linguistic changes did occur and with nationalist motives. “The goal of the policy of linguistic changes was to create differences between Croatia and Yugoslavia so that communication between the two is more complicated and the idea of separate identities strengthened”³⁴. In Stef Jansen’s interviews with villagers in five Croatian villages (both under pseudonyms), one Croat, “Ante” apologizes for “using so many of [their] words”³⁵. Some differences between Serbian and Croatian are minimal, such as the additional letters in the word for “milk” (*mleko* in Serbian and *mlijeko* in Croatian). Some words, however, are entirely different. Tuđman’s Thousand Year Dream was always talked about with the Croatian word for “thousand” (*tisuća*) instead of the Serbian word (*hiljada*).

As the ethnosymbolist theory of nationalism asserts, symbols became an important medium of expression as well as repression. After it became clear that Yugoslavia would not survive, both Serbs as well as Croats had to find a unifying symbol

³³ Ramet *The Three Yugoslavias: State-building and Legitimation, 1918-2005*, 310

³⁴ Mila Dragojević “Competing Institutions in National Identity Construction: The Case of Croatia”. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 11 (2005): 75

³⁵ Jansen “The Violence of Memories: Local Narratives of the Past After Ethnic Cleansing in Croatia”, 82

that was not the communists' red star. The Serbs chose the “Serbian four C’s” (“C” is “S” in Cyrillic and translates to “solely solidarity saves the Serbs”). The symbol would be redrawn in graffiti all over Belgrade and has, to some extent due to its ubiquity lost meaning. The Croats, however, during the time of transition chose the *šahovnica*. The *šahovnica* is a red and white checkerboard design that was put on Croat uniforms, the flag, and graffiti³⁶. The issue that the *šahovnica* came to present was based on the fact that it had been used by the Ustaša as their symbol as well, though the Ustaša also incorporated the letter “U” which the new Croatian leadership naturally did not use. Moreover, the *šahovnica* used by the Ustaša began with a white field while the *šahovnica* used in the transition period sometimes began with the white field but sometimes with a red one. (The current Croatian flag uses the red-field first design). Seeing the more Ustaša-oriented *šahovnica* used so explicitly scared some Serbs into further believing that the new HDZ leadership was intent on continuing the previous Ustaša genocidal policies. When the *šahovnica* was introduced to police uniforms, some Serbs refused to wear it and rebelled. They were later replaced by ethnic Croats.

The break with communism in Croatia involved eradication of all symbols that might be public reminders of that period. This meant the changing of the names of streets, parks, and city squares. Vjeran Pavlaković writes that about 3,000 monuments commemorating the Partisan struggle were destroyed in Croatia in the 1990's. “Whereas Croatian nationalists wanted to destroy antifascist monuments because they were perceived as communist and Yugoslav, and thus anti-Croat, systematic destruction of Partisan monuments did not take place in Republika Srpska Krajina (RSK, the

³⁶ The use of the *šahovnica* was not something that was used for the first time under the NDH regime. The *šahovnica* had long been on the Croat coat of arms and was on the coat of arms of the Socialist Republic of Croatia during the SFRY.

unilaterally declared independent state within Croatia) because the shift between Partisan and Četnik narratives took longer”³⁷. Here the Croat identification of Serbs with communists was reinforced. In addition to changes to city and state squares, street names also were changed. The new names were often associated with Croatian writers, poets, and statesman. Some, however, were more inflammatory than others. Mile Budak, a notorious Ustaša member, as well as Jure Francetić (another Ustaša member who lead a brutal military unit) were honored in the same way by the new government. The use of Mile Budak is particularly alarming to some due to his alleged “solution to the Serbian problem” which would see 1/3 of Croatia’s Serbs killed, 1/3 expelled, and 1/3 converted to Catholicism. Though allegations that he spoke of this in a speech in 1941 are unsubstantiated, it is nonetheless important because a large number of Serbs believed it to be the truth and still reference the “1/3, 1/3, 1/3 solution”. These changes were yet another way Serbs perceived the HDZ as rehabilitating the NDH and its genocidal campaign. Though the HDZ did not explicitly commemorate the Ustaša regime, especially at the state level, the Croatian Party of Rights or *Hrvatska stranka prava* (HSP) did commemorate April 10, the day that the NDH was established in 1941³⁸. The HSP was much more blatantly nationalistic than the HDZ, which meant that Tuđman was sometimes criticized for what they believed were lax policies towards the “Serb problem”.

The Serbs also made more implicit references to WWII through speeches and more contrived commemorations. Slobodan Milošević’s infamous Gazimestan speech in

³⁷ Vjeran Pavlaković “Symbols and the Culture of Memory in Republika Srpska Krajina.” *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 41, no. 6 (2013): 903

³⁸ Pavlaković *Red Stars, Black Shirts: Symbols, Commemorations, and Contested Histories of World War Two in Croatia*, 6-7

Kosovo that is often cited as the beginning of aggressive Serbian nationalism was held on June 28 in 1989. Though Milosevic formally denounced the SANU Memorandum, this speech echoes many of the same sentiments. The speech marked the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo on Vidovdan (St. Vitus Day), which is a major historical and cultural reference to nearly all Serbs. Kosovo has had a huge emotional significance to Serbs as being the ancient heartland of their culture. The way the famous Battle of Kosovo is remembered, however, is hugely mythologized and is an example of how myths come to be accepted as real history. Milošević said that, "Serbs have never in the whole of their history conquered and exploited others. Their national and historical being has been liberational throughout the whole of history and through two world wars, as it is today. They liberated themselves and when they could they also helped others to liberate themselves."³⁹ Also important to note is Milošević's lack of reference to "Yugoslavia" as early as 1989 and instead to "Serbs" and "Serbia", again invoking their role in WWII. Locations that were important during WWII and afterward were also used as propaganda. On July 25, 1990 a mass meeting took place in Srb, Croatia, the location of the first organized uprising against the Ustaša in WWII. It was here that the Serb National Council was established, the same council that would go on to declare the RSK as autonomous and later a fully independent state. The Serbian Orthodox Church also played a role in using location for its own purposes. Patriarch Pavle opened the church assembly in May 1991 in Jasenovac, instead of the usual location in Belgrade. Though these things may seem relatively minor, they served as a constant reminder of the perpetual "victimization" and "martyrdom" of Serbs who felt threatened in a Yugoslavia

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http://cmes.arizona.edu/sites/cmes.arizona.edu/files/SLOBODAN%20MILOSEVIC_speech_6_28_89.pdf

they felt they helped create. The type of revisionism the Croatian government used did nothing to assuage those fears.

Each group's antagonizing propaganda against the other ethnic group increased. It served to remind both Serbs and Croats that they were victims of the communist regime and of each other and will continue to be victimized unless they do something to guarantee their group's territorial domination. It is in this context that the war in Croatia openly began.

The Role of the Churches

Vjekoslav Perica, a Croatian historian, observes that “the crucial difference among the three Slavic Serbo-Croatian speaking Yugoslav ethnic nations is not religion, but the myth of national origin, which is consecrated by native religious institutions”⁴⁰. When Radovan Karadžić⁴¹ said that “the Serbian Orthodox Church is not merely a religious institution. It is a cultural institution and part of national leadership; it is irrelevant whether one believes in God or not”⁴², it seems that Perica is right. With the collapse of communism in Yugoslavia, the number of practicing Orthodox and Catholics rose⁴³. This became another way in which ethnic groups were further alienated and in which their respective religious organizations referenced and manipulated memories of WWII.

⁴⁰ Vjekoslav Perica *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5

⁴¹ Karadžić is a former Serbian politician and former President of Republika Srpska currently on trial at the ICTY for war crimes and crimes against humanity. He is sometimes referred to as “the Butcher of Bosnia” for allegedly having ordered the notorious massacre in Srebrenica.

⁴² Perica *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*, 162

⁴³ In a book published in 2011 by a Croatian cultural foundation, *Matica hrvatska*, titled “The Repression and Atrocities of the Communist Regime in Croatia”, the erosion of Catholicism is a major grievance listed against the communist regime

Despite the fact that religiosity was not an important factor during the SFRY, especially not the Serbian Orthodox Church, nationalist Serbs quickly turned to their religious institution as a means of regaining and establishing distinctly Serb identity⁴⁴. The church itself, as well as attacks on the Croatian Catholic Church, referenced WWII and played into the nationalist narrative the political and cultural elite was trying to create. Smilja Avramov, a Serbian academic who was known for her support of Milošević and who has personal ties to the concentration camp in Jasenovac, tried to establish a connection between the Catholic Church and the NDH regime. She said that “the crime of genocide in the Independent State of Croatia was carried out according to a fixed plan, with the active assistance of the Zagreb Archbishop...In Croatia, for instance, the Catholic Church was the high priest and theoretician in the cult of exterminating the Serbs, Jews, and Gypsies”⁴⁵. While her statement was certainly exaggerated, there was some truth to her accusation of the Church’s support of Ustaša activities during WWII. Sabrina Ramet writes, “for the Ustaše, religion and nationality were closely linked”. “As early as 3 May 1941, a law concerning religious conversions was passed in order to pressure Serbs into converting to Catholicism...; in mid-July an ordinance was passed banning the use of the expression ‘Serbian Orthodox faith’, which was described as ‘no longer compatible with the new state order’”⁴⁶. Additionally, the infamous Miroslav Filipović (who earned the nicknames “Satanic Friar” and “the Devil of Jasenovac”), for example, served as a military chaplain to the Ustaša and oversaw the atrocities going on in Jasenovac. Other clergy were also involved. Ivo Guberina, a priest, said that the

⁴⁴ Vjekoslav Perica cites surveys of religiosity in 1960, 1965, and 1968 carried out by the Institute of Social Sciences in Belgrade that found that those that declared themselves to be religious were mostly of the Catholic and Muslim faiths.

⁴⁵ Perica *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*, 151

⁴⁶ Ramet *The Three Yugoslavias: State-building and Legitimation, 1918-2005*, 118-119

Ustaša's "revolutionary activity is in maximal harmony with the Catholic morality"⁴⁷.

Archbishop Šarić, on Catholic Christmas Day in 1941, held a service praising Ante

Pavelić, with the following exaltation:

"Dr. Ante Pavelić, dear is his name,
He is Croatia's heavenly treasure.
May he, the King of Heaven, always watch over you.
Our dear leader!"⁴⁸

The Catholic Church's support of the NDH was easy for Serb nationalists to exploit and use the Church's support of the newly independent Republic of Croatia to again assert that the NDH was being rehabilitated. Admittedly, the Catholic Church did play a large role in Croatia in the period before and during the Homeland War⁴⁹.

Additionally, on 25 May, 1991 President Tuđman met with Pope John Paul II; shortly after, the Vatican officially recognized Croatia as independent.

In a parallel to Church support of the NDH in the 1940's, the Serbian Orthodox Church, along with a number of individual clergy, openly supported some questionable elements of Serbian nationalism in the 1990's. Similar to Archbishop Šarić's praise of Pavelić, Metropolitan Amfilohije, in a 1990 interview said that "Milosevic and other leading politicians in Serbia should be commended for understanding the vital interests of the Serb people at this moment"⁵⁰. The most important individual in the Serbian Orthodox Church, who at that time was Patriarch Pavle, also openly supported the before-mentioned notorious criminal, Arkan. Patriarch Pavle presented Arkan with an

⁴⁷ Mitja Velikonja *Religious Separation and Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2003), 173

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁴⁹ Perica writes extensively on the way the Catholic Church aided in funding and support, especially through the Croatian diaspora. He specifically mentions the priests Ljubo Krasic and Tomislav Duka living in Canada and Germany, respectively.

⁵⁰ Perica *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*, 143

autographed icon of St. Nicholas after Arkan said that he was fighting for the Orthodox faith and that the Patriarch was his commander. Arkan's notorious paramilitary groups, the Tigers, were also blessed by Bishop Lukijan of Osek-Polje⁵¹. In addition to the support of these individuals and endeavors, the Church also participated in propaganda tactics to further scare the Serb minority living in Croatia and delegitimize the Croatian Catholic Church. On 13 September, 1990, a group of Orthodox priests released a message accusing Croatian authorities of "daily cases of insults and intimidation, and even proven cases of murder and rape...the major targets being Orthodox priests and their families"⁵². Playing on the new role the Orthodox Church had taken among some Serbs, the Ministry of Information of the Republic of Serbia in 1992 published a catalog of documents and pictures of damage sustained by Serbian Orthodox Churches in Croatia. The catalog includes a list of 96 churches in Croatia which were damaged. The name of the church was accompanied with a description of the damage sustained and photographs. Some churches had additional descriptions, which compared damage to it in WWII by the Ustaša to the damage sustained in the 1990s. Examples include the Church of St. Nicholas in Belo Brdo which in WWII was transformed into a Catholic church after its Orthodox characteristics were destroyed. The catalog lists Homeland War damages as four broken windows and a façade riddled with bullets. Another example is the four Orthodox churches in Vukovar whose WWII damage includes looting and burning and whose Homeland War damage includes shelling and looting. This is yet another example, where parallels between WWII and the 1990s were laid out literally side-by-side. The

⁵¹ Velikonja *Religious Separation and Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, 162

⁵² Perica *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*, 145

catalog called the damage to these buildings a part of the “cultural and spiritual genocide of the Serbian people”.

Despite the obvious lack of genocidal policy by the HDZ and the church’s less than enthusiastic support of Tuđman, some connections were again made between the Catholic Church’s role in the NDH and its role in the 1990’s. A controversy arose in 1991 when Croatia introduced Catholic religious instruction to public schools. Only 76% of Croatia’s citizens were Catholic at the time, and there were accusations of discrimination by the other 24%, especially among the Serbs. Though these classes were optional, “pressure from teachers and fellow students was often too difficult to resist”⁵³. There were also allegations of baptisms of Serbian Orthodox children into the Catholic Church. “That all of this stirred memories, among Croatia’s Serbs, of forced baptisms and other forms of religious pressure in the days of the NDH goes without saying”⁵⁴.

CONCLUSION

It is important to keep in mind that the renewed ethnic struggle between Serbs and Croats in the 1990’s did not happen in isolation. The late 1980’s and 1990’s were a time of ethnic struggle throughout all of the former Yugoslavia. The war in Croatia has to be understood in the context of the wars in Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo, where similar, if not more brutal, struggles for ethnic domination were taking place. The disintegration of Yugoslavia “marked the failure of the imagination of a Yugoslav community”⁵⁵. The nationalist propaganda techniques as well as some cases of genuine

⁵³ Ramet *The Three Yugoslavias: State-building and Legitimation, 1918-2005*, 591

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Robert Hayden *Imagined Communities and Real Victims: Self-determination and Ethnic Cleansing in Yugoslavia* (Washington, D.C: National Council for Soviet and East European Research, 1994), 788

hatred and fear proved to be too strong for the idea of “brotherhood and unity” to survive. This failure of the imagination had the tragic consequences of war, and because the community could not be maintained it had become “unimaginable”⁵⁶.

Though the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990’s are over and serious efforts are being made by both present-day Serbia and Croatia to assimilate into the perhaps even more unimaginable European community, ethnic tensions, conflicted memories, and self-victimization are never too far from the surface. During a soccer match in 2013, a Croatian player came onto the pitch and saluted with *za dom, spremni* (for the fatherland, ready) which was a standard Ustaša salute. In a challenge to memory, in the town of Glina where Serbs were massacred in a church in WWII and for which there had been an annual dirge, the dirge has been banned. In everyday conversation, some Serbs still routinely refer to Croats as Ustaša and some Croats routinely call Serbs Četniks. Some efforts to move past these struggles, however, have been made especially in the younger generation. Social media has become a medium through which these movements seem most likely to take effect. Recently a picture of a couple kissing (one wrapped in a Serbian flag and the other in a Croatian flag) went viral. Additionally, a Serbian musician, Slobodan Trkulja, and a Croatian artist, Josipa Lisac, performed together in 2014 at the MasterPeace Concert “Music Above Fighting”, put on by the UN, which encourages musical collaboration between artists from countries in conflict.

WWII obviously continues to be used to reference and demonstrate the victimization of one’s own ethnic group. The Homeland War simply served to add on additional grievances. *Dani oluje* (Days of the Storm), which commemorate the military offensive that resulted in a mass exodus of Serbs from Croatia in August 1995, are

⁵⁶ Ibid.

celebrated in Croatia as a day of national liberation while they are mourned in Serbia. Operation Storm's upcoming 20th anniversary on August 4, 2014 will see a monument raised in Belgrade to the victims. It seems that these conflicts will continue until both sides concede that they were not only victims, but sometimes were also aggressors. Unfortunately, it does not seem, at the time of writing, that that will be the policy of either state, nor the view of either nation.

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