Prospect
MAGAZINE
Issue 1, October 1995

The Yugoslav tragedy

by Aleksa Djilas

As the war in the former Yugoslavia moves towards a denouement,

Aleksa Djilas, son of the late dissident Milovan Djilas, disputes the view that it is a peculiarly Balkan horror. Instead, he argues, it is part of the unstoppable process of border formation and ethnic homogenisation already experienced throughout the rest of Europe

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Aleksa Djilas lives in Belgrade. He wrote The Contested Country: Yugoslav Unity and Communist Revolution, 1919-53.

Many years ago I was discussing with a cousin The Mountain Wreath, an epic drama in verse written by Petar II Petrovic Njegos, a 19th century prince and Eastern Orthodox bishop of Montenegro. The drama-the "Paradise Lost" of Serbian literature- is about the early 18th century "ethnic cleansing" of Montenegrins who had converted to Islam.

As a ruler, Njegos did not pursue extreme anti-Muslim policies. But his poetry reverberates with profound enmity to Islam. He considers the struggle against it to be of cosmic significance, beyond considerations of ordinary morality. In macabre and beautiful verse, Njegos warns that the Christian and Muslim faiths will swim in blood; the faith which does not sink will have proved its superiority.

My cousin, who had recently arrived from Montenegro to study in Belgrade, was expressing his love of Njegos's poetry when I asked: "How did the Muslims in your class react when they had to read The Mountain Wreath and learn parts of it by heart?" He could not answer. It had never crossed his mind to ask his Muslim classmates such a question-even though some of them were close friends. Clearly, he did not connect them with the Muslims against whom Njegos wrote.

My cousin, like most other Serbs and Montenegrins, had an ambivalent attitude towards Muslims. Because Muslims are indistinguishable by language and appearance from Serbs, Serbs generally considered them as "our people." Friendships and intermarriages were common. Yet, at the same time, Serbs could not forget their history. This teaches that the Ottoman empire, which in the 15th century brought Islam to the Balkans, was an absolute evil. Ottoman rule was undoubtedly harsh and the Christians who lived under it benefited less from European civilisation than those in neighbouring Habsburg lands. Yet the Ottoman empire showed in some periods more religious tolerance than Catholic central Europe; it built roads and bridges and initiated urban life in the Balkans. It was a simplification to claim that "five centuries under the Turkish yoke" brought only violence and humiliation, cultural decline and political marginalisation.

Serb uprisings limited Ottoman power in Serbia in the first half of the 19th century, but Bosnia-Herzegovina was only freed from it in 1878-when the Congress of Berlin put the province under Austro-Hungarian administration. Under the Ottomans, many Slavs who converted to Islam enjoyed a privileged position. Serbians regarded these converts as traitors, although most of them had become Muslims as early as the 16th century and little is known about why they abandoned the Christianity. In the next centuries, they developed a distinct culture of their own.

Throughout their history, Serbs have seen themselves either as noble heroes or innocent victims. This characterisation appears repeatedly in history books, literature and art, as well as in school textbooks and newspapers. Serbian politicians have always aspired towards national expansion and Serbs have often fought for the "liberation" of territories which were in reality not Serbian. A narcissistic and self-pitying view of their history, combined with ambitious and belligerent national policies, was also characteristic of Croats and Muslims. Croats saw themselves as a "bastion of Christianity" which had protected Europe from the Ottoman Turks. They felt entitled to a Croatia which would include the whole of Bosnia and parts of Serbia and Montenegro. During the Second World War, the German and Italian occupiers of Yugoslavia gave almost all these territories to Croatian Fascists (the Ustashe). The Ustashe then attempted to "cleanse" Greater Croatia of Serbs-by massacres, expulsions and forced conversions from the Orthodox faith to Catholicism. The Muslims were proud of their heritage and of the Ottoman empire, on whose side their ancestors fought the Balkan and central European Christian states; they hated The Mountain Wreath. They aimed at predominance over Serbs and Croats in Bosnia and incorporation into it of parts of Serbia and Montenegro where there was a Muslim minority.

But Serbs, Croats and Muslims were not exceptional in central and eastern Europe. Since the end of the 19th century, similar passions and expansionary designs were to be found in most nations of the region. Germany was the most obvious case of a nation convinced it deserved more than history had allotted it. Its people were intent on proving they could be makers of Weltgeschichte. Poles also considered Poland-partitioned between Russia, Austria, and Prussia-to be a Christ among nations. They wanted to extend its borders from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Hungarians in the inter-war years lamented the "Calvary" their state underwent in the post-1918 peace settlements. During the Second World War they tried to claim back land, but non-Hungarians were in a majority on most of the territories they wanted back. Ukrainians and Romanians, Bulgarians and Greeks, even Macedonians-all had at different times felt exaggerated grievances and held megalomaniac ambitions.

During the 19th and 20th centuries the borders of central and eastern Europe have been frequently contested. Bloody and unstable, they have moved east and west, north and south. Intoxicated by an uncritical, pseudo-romantic view of history, nation has fought nation. Millions of people have been killed or expelled, while the minorities which survived were often forcibly assimilated.

West Europeans had also fought brutal wars. But their states were formed by strong dynasties which consolidated territories already (relatively) ethnically homogeneous. Old and continuous, these states generally had stable borders; violent eruptions were rare. By contrast, until comparatively recently many cities of central and eastern Europe were multi-ethnic-such as Sarajevo before the Bosnian war. For example, Vilnius, the capital city of Lithuania, ceased being predominantly Polish only after the Second World War. It was once a centre of Jewish culture and used to be called the "Jerusalem of the North." Now, it is almost completely Lithuanian. Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, was a German trading centre and until 1848 the seat of the Hungarian parliament. Slovaks, its present majority, were less than one fifth of the population when the Habsburg monarchy disintegrated in 1918.

Even further south, (outside Europe geographically if not politically), Izmir, the most important city in Asia Minor after Ankara, had a similar destiny. As a result of the Turkish victory in the 1921-22 war with Greece, it changed its centuries-old European and Greek character and became a Turkish city. The war itself was accompanied by massacres and expulsions. So were the Balkan wars of 1912-13 (which began when Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria and Greece attempted to expel Ottoman Turkey from south eastern Europe), and the First and Second World Wars.

The Nazis all but emptied central and eastern Europe of its Jewish population. Because of its magnitude, irrationality, and systematic execution, this crime is universally known. But the full history of terror in central and eastern Europe has yet to be written. Many terrible deeds are virtually unknown. For example, not many people have heard of the murder of hundreds of thousands of Catholic Poles by Ukrainian nationalists. Between 1942-44 in the provinces of Galicia and Volynia the inhabitants of one village after another were hacked to death or locked into churches which were then set on fire.

In the early 19th century, before the rise of the modern nation state, central and eastern Europe was a patchwork quilt of ethnic groups. Minorities were so large that one could hardly tell which was the majority. But now central and eastern Europe

consist of nation states with mostly homogeneous populations. Large minorities are an exception. If the fanaticism of the 16th and 17th century European wars of religion found its principle in cuius regio, eius religio, then the tenet of the no less fanatical modern nationalism could be "the ethnic group which wins gets the territory."

The cultural and political leaders who erected the borders and brought about ethnic uniformity were guilty of creating profound human suffering and the destruction of cultural variety. Sometimes they were called "fascists" (and during the Second World War proudly labelled themselves thus), but what they did was more repugnant than anything Mussolini, Franco or Salazar ever accomplished.

yet moral revulsion must not blind us to the tragic fact that all attempts at stopping the formation of homogeneous nation states have failed. Neither the Hohenzollern, Habsburg, Romanov nor Ottoman empires which once ruled central and eastern Europe, nor communist internationalism, could resist the force of modern nationalism. Nor has a realistic plan for reversing ethnic cleansing been devised. The expelled receive sympathy, but they never return.

Between 1918 and 1991, Yugoslavia, with its multi-national composition, was an honourable exception in central and eastern Europe. The Yugoslav civil war, which has been fought in Croatia since 1991 and in Bosnia since 1992, has been marked by great cruelty towards civilians, precisely because their expulsion from conquered territory was one of the main goals of all three groups. Muslims have been the most numerous victims, but hundreds of thousands of Serbs and Croats have suffered too. It is a little known fact in the west that there were about 600,000 refugees in Serbia, most of them Serbs expelled from Croatia and Bosnia, even before the arrival of a further 200,000 after the Croatian May and August offensives in western Slavonia and Krajina.

According to the 1991 census there were 581,663 Serbs in Croatia. Now there are only 130,000. The Krajina offensive was the conclusion of the "final solution"of the Serbian question in Croatia. This was started by the Ustashe in 1941 and recommenced when Franjo Tudjman came to power in May 1990. In 1995 Tudjman realised a century-old dream of Croatian militant nationalists to create an ethnically and religiously "pure" Croatia. The country is now over 90 per cent Croatian and Catholic.

Mass evictions have taken place not just at gunpoint; harassment and an atmosphere of fear have been enough to make people flee. Another cousin of mine, daughter of a Serbian father and a Croatian mother, was a manager in a Zagreb bank when Tudjman came to power. One day she found herself demoted without explanation. When the war in Croatia broke out, her colleagues stopped talking to her, and started calling her names. On her desk, she sometimes found newspaper articles about Serb atrocities. (This persecution would not attract a cnn crew or be debated at an international peace conference, but it was dramatic to her.) She left her job and her apartment and went to Belgrade with her husband, three daughters and as many belongings as would fit in a car. Some 40,000 Serbs from Zagreb, about two thirds of the Serbian population of Croatia's capital, left for similar reasons. In the main they had not been beaten, raped, or directly threatened, but they were unable to lead a decent human life.

The same has been true for hundreds of thousands of Croats and Muslims. The Serbian majority in many Bosnian towns have been particularly brutal towards Muslims. By comparison, Belgrade has been tolerance itself. Yet many Muslims still felt threatened. Some left, others gave themselves Serbian names. A Muslim building contractor explained to me: "I do not want my company to lose deals worth hundreds of thousands of Deutsche Marks just because of my Muslim name." These experiences have left an indelible mark. The chances of re-mixing the populations in Croatia and Bosnia, and of recreating Bosnia as a multi-ethnic state, are nil.

the civil war in Yugoslavia is part of the same terrifying process of border formation and ethnic homogenisation which the rest of Europe has already been through. What is happening is not Balkanisation, but Europeanisation, and it is irreversible. The international community has not been ready to send hundreds of thousands of soldiers to the former Yugoslavia, yet nothing less would suffice for its reintegration.

But could there not have been a force in the country strong enough to defeat the nationalists, to reunite the country and reverse

ethnic cleansing? After all, the partisans, led by Tito and the communists, did exactly that towards the end of the Second World War, during which Croatian, Serbian, Muslim and other nationalists committed terrible crimes.

There are two reasons for the absence of a pro-Yugoslav movement. First, nationalism is more widespread today than during the Second World War. Then, only minorities were politically or militarily engaged. But the growth of literacy and education and the spread of the media have taken nationalism to the masses. Second, the Serbs, Croats and Muslims all have a strong sense of d

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