

Serbia's war with history

By Christopher Bennett, Greek Helsinki Monitor, [21 April 1999]

The propaganda battle stretches well into the past. Official Serbia boasts of its defiant and heroic history. The only problem is the facts.

As Serbia challenges the might of the West, many Serbs boast that their history proves that despite the imbalance in firepower, they will never be vanquished. The trouble is that the version of the past recounted in Belgrade does not stand up to scrutiny. Serbia is not only fighting NATO, it is also at war with history.

The passion and apparent expertise with which so many Serbs talk so often and at such length about their country and its heroic past conceal a depressing lack of balance and understanding. Opinions are almost invariably based on prejudice and conditioning. From the infamous 1389 battle of Kosovo to the events of this century, history and myth have been intertwined into a quasi-religious national creed. Anyone who questions the articles of faith is branded a heretic.

According to the Kosovo legend, the Serbian leader, Prince Lazar, was offered on the eve of battle a choice between a kingdom on earth or in heaven. Vowing that "It is better to die in battle than to live in shame," he chose the other world, and was duly killed the following day in what is commemorated as a glorious defeat ending the medieval Serbian empire and ushering in nearly five centuries of darkness under alien, Ottoman rule.

And indeed, a battle did take place on St. Vitus's day in 1389 in Kosovo Polje, the field of the blackbird, in which both Prince Lazar and Sultan Murat, the Ottoman leader, were killed. That much is clear. However, almost every other aspect of the battle—including the result itself—remains a mystery.

Based on the historical evidence, both the Serbian and the Ottoman armies were probably multinational forces. Indeed, it is likely that most of the Christian peoples of the Balkans, including the Albanians, contributed troops to the Serbian cause and that Serbs and Albanians fought on both sides.

Concerning the outcome, it seems that the battle was not as decisive as it has been portrayed. The result was more a draw than an Ottoman victory, since the Turkish forces subsequently withdrew from the region. The Serbian empire itself had disintegrated some 30 years earlier, though independent statehood remained for another 70 years.

Historical myths are by no means exclusive to Serbs, of course, nor are they necessarily harmful. Indeed, most societies draw strength from legends—whether Arthurian or about Washington and a cherry tree—which, if critically examined, are

historically unsound. The difference with the Kosovo covenant, however, is that it has been abused to inculcate a sense of victimisation in Serbs which has blinded them to the plight of other peoples in the Balkans.

The deadly Greater Serbian agenda for the late 20th century grew out of the thinking and writing of Dobrica Ćosić, one of Serbia's most distinguished novelists, a writer of popular, historical epics.

Ćosić had been a partisan during the Second World War and a friend of Tito's for more than 20 years, yet he could not come to terms with Tito's attempts to emancipate Yugoslavia's Albanians and was purged for nationalism in 1968. In his frustration after his fall from grace, Ćosić developed a complex and paradoxical theory of Serb national persecution. Over two decades, this evolved into the Greater Serbian program which Slobodan Milošević first hijacked and then pursued.

The Serb national psyche which has so revolted the world since 1991 is thus not the product of centuries of historical evolution, but has been deliberately manufactured and intensively cultivated by the Serbian media since Milošević's arrival in power in 1987.

Myth, fantasy, half-truths and brazen lies have been packaged each night into television news. The conspiracy theory dreamed up by frustrated nationalists such as Ćosić in the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s became the literal truth.

Every conceivable event from Serb history was dredged up and distorted to feed the persecution complex of ordinary people who, at a time of collapsing living standards, were gradually taken in by the barrage of xenophobia. The atmosphere was so heated and the campaign so all-encompassing that people lost touch with reality.

According to the new orthodoxy, Serbs were victims exploited by and in danger from Yugoslavia's other peoples. While they had made huge sacrifices in blood to create Yugoslavia and had been victorious in war, they had allegedly been cheated in peace and thus divided between several republics in Tito's decentralised state.

Like any conspiracy theory, there is a kernel of truth in the new Serb orthodoxy. But it is a very small kernel.

Consider, for example, relations between Serbs and Croats. While contemporary propagandists (on both sides) claim that these peoples have been at each others' throats since time immemorial, Serb-Croat rivalry is actually a 20th century phenomenon. In the 19th century, Croat nationalists, who were preoccupied with a struggle against Austrians and Hungarians, had actually been great admirers of Serbia and the keenest advocates of a Yugoslav state. And the ruling party in the Croatian parliament in 1914 which voted to go to war with Serbia was the Serb-Croat Coalition.

And then there is the Second World War. For Serbs, this conflict is the ultimate proof that they have a near monopoly on suffering and can therefore do no wrong. After all, they will tell you that they fought together with the Allies against the Nazis and suffered great casualties. But is this really an accurate picture of what actually happened?

To a large extent Second World War in Yugoslavia was several civil wars which had little to do with the world war raging outside the country. All groups, with the exception of the Slovenes, fought against Serbs, though not in unison, while extreme nationalists on all sides were able to indulge their wildest fantasies.

The backbone of Tito's partisan army initially consisted largely of Serbs escaping Ustasa atrocities in Croatia and Bosnia, but not of Serbs from Serbia proper. Apart from an immediate uprising in 1941, which was savagely put down, Serbia remained more or less quiet until close to the end of the war.

Hitler installed a Quisling leader, Gen. Milan Nedic, who was loyal to the Nazis. In the absence of fighting, Nedic was able to wipe out Serbia's Jewish community under German supervision, more efficiently than the Ustasas could wipe out the Jews of Croatia and Bosnia. Nevertheless, Serb propagandists in the 1990s did not hesitate to claim a special affinity between Serbs and Jews.

The issue of war dead has also been seriously distorted. The official number of Yugoslavs who died fighting against the Axis powers was 1.7 million. The figure was only a rough calculation arrived at immediately after the war for reparations and propaganda purposes. Tito aimed both to maximise war compensation from Germany and to demonstrate to the world the scale of Yugoslavia's heroism and suffering.

But in Serb nationalist circles, operating on the principle "the more the better", estimates of Serb dead extend to absurd levels—sometimes upwards of 700,000 at the notorious Jasenovac concentration camp alone.

During the 1980s, however, independent research into the question by two men, Bogoljub Kocovic, an emigre Serb, and Vladimir Zerjavic, a Croat, produced very similar results. Both investigations were based not on body counts or survivors' recollections but on computer analysis of census returns and demographic indices. According to Kocovic, whose figures are marginally higher than those of Zerjavic, a total of about 1,014,000, or 6.4 per cent of Yugoslavia's 1941 population, died during or in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War on all sides. According to their findings, in absolute terms, Serbs were the biggest losers, with 487,000 dead. The figures are shocking—and numbers alone cannot adequately convey the horrors. But mercifully they are well below the official number, and certainly those of the most extreme nationalists.

Yugoslavia's contribution to the overall Allied effort has also been greatly exaggerated, first by the victors themselves and more recently by statesmen wishing to justify a policy of non-intervention in the present conflict.

Given the extent and the chaos of Yugoslavia's own civil wars, Germany never needed to commit large numbers of troops. The only time when significant numbers of German troops were in Yugoslavia was during the initial 12-day invasion in 1941 and in 1944 when units stationed in Greece retreated across the country. Otherwise, Germany relied on its allies, the Italians, Hungarians and Bulgarians, and on local collaborators to keep Yugoslavia under control. The fighting itself took place largely in Bosnia.

No matter what aspect of Serbian history one cares to examine, the official version emanating from Belgrade appears to be at odds with the facts. What is especially depressing is that not so long ago, before Milosevic's emergence, Serbia was, in many way, the most liberal and progressive of Yugoslavia's republics. The Serbian media were remarkably open by the standards of eastern Europe and political opposition was tolerated, if not encouraged.

Looking back further in Serbian history it is possible to interpret many events in a very different manner and even to highlight periods of enlightenment and cooperation between Serb and non-Serb. Whatever the results of the NATO campaign, Serbia's future may ultimately depend above all on its war with its own history.

Christopher Bennett is former director of the International Crisis Group in the Balkans and author of Yugoslavia's Bloody Collapse (Chris Hurst).

Greek Helsinki Monitor
P.O. Box 51393
GR-14510 Kifisia
Greece
Tel. +30-1-620.01.20
Fax +30-1-807.57.67
e-mail: office@greekhelsinki.gr
<http://www.greekhelsinki.gr>