

The Wish to be a Jew : The Power of the Jewish Trope in the Yugoslav Conflict

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When Serbian writer Vuk Draskovic proclaimed in 1985 that "Serbs are the thirteenth, lost and the most ill-fated tribe of Israel", he was invoking an analogy that has long existed as one of what I call the "stories Serbs tell themselves (and others) about themselves". I have tried to show elsewhere (Zivkovic 1997) how these stories were resurrected and put to work in the service of various political agendas in Serbia since the mid-1980s. I divided Serbian national narratives into three main "cycles" – the Kosovo, WWI, and WWII cycles. While it is true that, on the most general level, the common denominator of all these stories is a theme of eternal victimization, I have made it my task to investigate the actual narrative elements through which this message was enunciated. The "Jewish trope" as I will call it here, was one of the most important of these narrative elements, especially in linking the central Serbian myth of Kosovo to the more recent cycle of narratives that

focus on the Ustasa genocide against Serbs during the Second World War. Here I outline some of the ways the "Jewish trope" provided a bridge between what I call, in shorthand, the "Kosovo" and the "Jadovno" narrative cycles.

In order to understand the uses of the Jewish trope in Serbia it is necessary to situate them in at least three major contexts. First, the Jewish trope was a part of the national discourse, produced by a particular group of Serbian intellectuals, that paved the way for Milosevic's rise to power. Secondly, Serbian national narratives were to a significant degree in a (contentious) dialogue with the similar narratives of other Yugoslav nations, and the way these competing narratives conditioned each other played an important part in the dynamics of Yugoslavia's dissolution. The second context for Serbian uses of the "Jewish trope" is thus uses of that same trope by other Yugoslav nations, most importantly by Slovenes, Croats and Bosnian Muslims. Finally, the importance of the Jewish trope in all these discourses was immediately and decisively conditioned by the importance of the Jewish trope in "Western" (European and American) discourses.

MILOSEVIC'S RISE : "MOUNTING THE HORSE ALREADY SADDLED BY THE SERBIAN INTELLIGENTSIA"

The story of Slobodan Milosevic's rise to power involves at least two separate lines of development or "tracks" that are commonly seen to have come together at his fateful speech in Kosovo Polje on April 24, 1987. One track involves Milosevic's

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climbing through the Serbian Communist Party ranks on the coat tails of his mentor Ivan Stambolic¹. On the other track, an important segment of the Serbian intelligentsia, gathered around the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (SANU) and the Serbian Writers' Association (UKS)², was moving from Yugoslavism to Serbian particularism (Budding 1998). Aside from increased conflict with Slovenia, the major impetus for this movement was the plight of Kosovo Serbs.

The two tracks merged when Ivan Stambolic dispatched Milosevic to Kosovo Polje to quell the near explosive frustrations of Kosovo Serbs and Montenegrins. While Milosevic was meeting with various local functionaries and representatives of Kosovo Serbs,

some fifteen thousand Serbian and Montenegrin protesters gathered around the Kosovo Polje cultural center, screaming "Thieves, murderers" and throwing rocks. As police moved to stop the crowd from storming the building by beating people with their truncheons, Milosevic stepped outside and uttered the sentence that miraculously transformed him from a bland apparatchik to the Serbian nationalist icon: "No one should dare beat you" (Niko ne sme da vas bije). The mood suddenly changed and the crowd started chanting "Slobo, Slobo". Whether he was genuinely moved by the plight of Kosovo Serbs (and many analysts think that he indeed was) or whether he cynically realized the potential of nationalism, from then on Milosevic used his new status as a "Tsar of Serbs" to oust his mentor, Ivan Stambolic, and rise to ultimate power in Serbia.

Practically all accounts stress the way Milosevic appropriated, simulated, or, as Djilas put it, cannibalized³ nationalist discourses. These discourses were being developed by a significant segment of most influential Serbian intellectuals quite

¹ Milosevic was still a student at the Belgrade Faculty of Law when he first befriended Stambolic. As Stambolic rapidly ascended the rungs of political power in Serbia, he typically arranged for his protégé to succeed him in his previous position. When Stambolic became president of the Serbian League of Communists in 1984, he appointed Milosevic as head of the Belgrade Party Committee, and when he became president of Serbia, Milosevic succeeded him as a chief of the Serbian Party.

² The Serbian Writers' Association (Udruzenje knjizevnika Srbije – UKS) was the most prominent stage for the new prophet-poets of Serbdom. In the early eighties, the Association publicly confronted the Yugoslav regime over book bans and political persecution of writers and dissident intellectuals in general. By 1987, however, UKS discourse changed from that of freedom of speech and democracy to that of Serbian victimhood as it organized "protest evenings" in support of Serbs from Kosovo who sought redress for their persecution at the hands of the Albanian majority.

³ "The mass movement of Kosovo Serbs... was not openly anticommunist, though it could easily have become so. Milosevic only gradually overcame his caution and started supporting it, but he was nonetheless the first leading communist to do so. With the help of the party-controlled media and the party machinery, he soon dominated the movement, discovering in the process that the best way to escape the wrath of the masses was to lead them. It was an act of political cannibalism. The opponent, Serbian nationalism, was devoured and its spirit permeated the eater. Milosevic reinvigorated the party by forcing it to embrace nationalism" (Djilas 1993: 87).

independently of Milosevic's rise through the party hierarchy, indeed initially in fierce opposition to the Serbian Party's anti-nationalist policies. And when the two tracks met, it was not so much Milosevic who tried to attract the national intelligentsia as much as that the intelligentsia eagerly embraced him. As Vuk Draskovic said four years after the event : "With his speech in Kosovo Polje Milosevic mounted the horse that the Serbian intelligentsia had saddled long ago" (in Djukic 1992 : 130). "The crucial thing that intellectuals have done for Milosevic, says Budding, was to "generalize" Kosovo, spreading the belief that not just Kosovo's Serbs, but *all* Serbs were deprived of their national rights, and urgently in need of a savior" (Budding 1998 : 358).

In terms of the national narrative, this "saddling" was accomplished by connecting what I call the "Kosovo narrative cycle" to the "Jadovno narrative cycle" – a task eagerly and quite successfully taken up by novelists and, even more importantly, by a few highly influential poets⁴.

⁴ It was poets who provided the most extreme, condensed and persuasive forms of the new mythicized speech in the mid-1980. They were the prophets of the re-awakened nation, professional wordsmiths whose poetic hyperbolae were so extreme as to preclude any rational discussion. Preeminent among them, enjoying near divine status as both an academician and president of the Serbian Writers' Association, was Matija Beckovic, a distinguished looking, white-haired Montenegrin whose poetry was steeped in regional dialect and "Montenegrin metaphysics".

Numerous deep pits are a prominent feature of the limestone landscape⁵ of the area of Bosnia, Herzegovina and Croatia that was populated mostly by the Serbs of the so-called Krajinas (Military Borderlands) and that belonged to the Independent State of Croatia during WWII. It was in these pits that slaughtered Serbs were thrown by the Croatian and Muslim Ustase as a part of their campaign to eliminate all Serbs on their territory. One of the most notorious pits was called "Jadovno" and, just as Auschwitz came to stand for all concentration camps and the Holocaust in general, so Jadovno came to stand for all the pits and for the genocide itself.

Archbishop Atanasije Jevtic of the Serbian Orthodox Church made a pilgrimage in 1983 from Kosovo to Jadovno and published his travel diary in 1987. In the introduction, his colleague, Archbichop Amfilohije Radovic, wrote :

« Kosovo is the beginning and measure of Serbian Jadovno, and Jadovno is a continuation of Kosovo. ... In Jadovno, Kosovo culminates ; the word and reality of Jadovno is the full revelation of the secret of Kosovo and confirmation of the

⁵ It is interesting to note that most poets and writers who were active in assimilating Kosovo to Jadovno actually hail from those regions (Beckovic is Montenegrin and Draskovic is from Herzegovina). The WWI cycle, with its emphasis on the Serbian peasantry, however, is predominantly promulgated by novelists (not poets) hailing from the Serbian heartland of Sumadija. This is an interesting case of Highlanders vs. Lowlanders (and limestone vs. mud), a dichotomy very relevant to Serbian (as well as Croatian) politics (See Ūivkovic 1997a).

Kosovo choice and Kosovo covenant. Up until then, Serbian fate had unfolded under the sign of Kosovo ; from then on it would unfold between these two poles, Kosovo and Jadovno, the base and the peak of Golgotha » (Jevtic 1987 : 5).

When in 1988 and 1989 the holy relics of Prince Lazar, the leader of the Serbian army at Kosovo, were carried from Belgrade, through parts of Croatia and Bosnia, and finally back to Serbia and Kosovo, this ritual was marking the extent of what was seen as the maximal potential extent of Serbian territory. It was Vuk Draskovic, by then the leader of the largest opposition party, who famously stated in 1989 that, in the case of Yugoslavia's demise, its Western borders should coincide with the WWII pits and graves that the Croatian Ustasa leader Ante Pavelic had filled with slaughtered Serbs. Draskovic's fellow writer, poet and party member, Milan Komnenic, formulated the Kosovo-Jadovno axis succinctly in 1988 : "the borders of the Serbian people are marked on the east [Kosovo] by sacred places that must not become pits, and on the west by pits that must become sacred places" (In Draskovic 1990 : 89).

In their quest for the most powerful metaphor, the most extreme analogy, the allegory that would top any other allegory, Serbian myth-makers of the 1980s turned to yet another resource that could bring together both Kosovo and the WWII pits. There exists a people whose narrative of martyrdom and suffering, of exile and return, of death and resurrection is, in its moral impact, probably unrivaled in the West – the Jews.

Let me dwell a moment longer on the imagery of pits. The pit in this case is a mine shaft in Kosovo. In the late winter of 1989, the tension in Kosovo culminated with the hunger strike of 1300 Albanian miners who vowed to stay underground until their demand for the resignation of the pro-Milosevic leadership of the province was met. On February 27, while the strike was still going on, a meeting was held in the Slovenian capital of Ljubljana, in the *Cankarjev dom* concert hall, to express Slovenian support for the Albanians. The Slovenian youth organization – one of the organizers of the meeting – distributed traditional Albanian skull-caps with a Star of David affixed on them to the participants. The intended message was clear – Albanians are the Jews, a persecuted minority, and by implication, the Serbs are the Nazis. Underlying this was also the identification of Slovenes, as a minority in Yugoslavia supposedly dominated by the majority Serbs, with Albanians in Kosovo, so that the link could also be read as : Slovenes equal Albanians equal Jews. The meeting, which was televised live throughout Yugoslavia, caused a burst of outrage in Serbia, a big rally in Belgrade, and barrage of harsh denunciations of Slovenes in the regime media. And it was Matija Beckovic, the "Prince of Serbian Poetry," who came up with the most extreme formulation. Here is what he said about the whole event after the strike was over :

« The first Albanians thrown into pits were volunteers who came out of it hale and happy. In Ljubljana they were

proclaimed Jews thrown into pits by Serbs. They forgot that the pits are the only ethnically clean Serbian habitations and that somewhere under the ground the kinship of Jews and Serbs has been forever sealed » (Beckovic 1989 : 436).

So, according to the Slovenes, Beckovic implies, the Serbs are Nazis. And they are "throwing" (that is to say, forcing) poor Albanians into a pit (the mine). In the pit, Albanians are starving to protest Serbian oppression. But it is all staged, Beckovic implies, and the "starving" miners emerged healthy into the light of day at the end of the strike, while the Serbs never returned from their pits. He invokes the WWII Independent State of Croatia in which the Serbs, thrown in pits only because they were Serbs, and the Jews, exterminated in Ustasa concentration camps only because they were Jews, cohabitate in a joint, ethnically clean⁶ underground realm.

This is probably the most powerful and succinct statement of the thesis for which the *locus classicus* could be found in the "Letter to the Writers of Israel" written in 1985 by Vuk Draskovic. The five hundred years Serbs endured under Turkish rule were likened by Draskovic to the Babylonian slavery ; Kosovo, as the cradle

of the conquered Serbian Empire, was proclaimed to be the Serbian Jerusalem ; and the waves of Serbian migrations from Turkish domains were likened to the Jewish exodus. « Even after the liberation from the Turkish rule, Draskovic wrote, the Serbian Golgotha continued – one third of the population died in the two world wars – and it was in that last "genocidal slaughter" that the centuries long history of Jewish-Serbian martyrdom was sealed and signed in blood. It is by the hands of the same executioners that both Serbs and Jews have been exterminated at the same concentration camps, slaughtered at the same bridges, burned alive in the same ovens, thrown together into the same pits » (Draskovic 1987 : 73).

It is as if, Draskovic wrote, « we Serbs are the thirteenth lost and the most ill-fated tribe of Israel ». And he concluded : « I hail you (the Israeli writers) as our brothers and with the same oath that our ancestors heard from the Jews, the meaning of which is carried in the heart of every Serb expelled from Kosovo : If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand be forgotten... » (Ibid. 75).

After this proclamation, the following set of correspondences gained currency in Serbia :

– Both Serbs and Jews are the "chosen peoples" – slaughtered, sacrificed, denied expression, yet always righteous, always defending themselves, never attacking.

– The Kosovo Albanians stand to the Serbs as the Palestinians stand to the Israelis.

– Serbs are the ones who should say "Never again" like Israel, and rely on their military power to defend their brethren wherever they happen to be living in

⁶ The term "ethnic cleansing" was originally used in Serbia to describe the program of ethnic Albanians to eliminate all non-Albanian minorities in the province, most importantly the Serbian and Montenegrin minority, and its connotations in Serbia were thus obviously negative. In Serbian discourses "ethnic cleansing" was at first something that others did to Serbs, not what Serbs did to others (most notoriously in Bosnia).

Yugoslavia, bringing them together into a unitary state which alone can guarantee them safety in a hostile world.

The discourse set in motion by Draskovic's letter in 1985 came to be embodied in the Serbian-Jewish Friendship Society (*Drustvo srpsko-jevrejskog prijateljstva*) established in 1988 by a number of prominent Serbian writers and intellectuals together with a smaller number of Jews. The majority of Serbian Jews did not join the Society, feeling that it had become primarily a political organization openly backing the Serbian regime.

The Society immediately set itself on improving the ties between Israel and Serbia.⁷ It organized a delegation of 440 businessmen, politicians, and intellectuals who went to Israel in 1990, and helped establish sister-city relations between 15 Serbian and Israeli cities. During the Gulf War, a delegation of 12 city mayors from Serbia went to Israel to demonstrate Serbian solidarity with Israel's plight. Underlying these activities was a naive hope of eliciting Israel's support for the Serbian cause, and even of obtaining Israeli weapons for the "reconquest of Kosovo" – the Serbian Jerusalem. There were also attempts to enlist the American Jewish lobby, imagined to wield immense, mythical power, to help in the "Serbian cause".

In Tito's Yugoslavia, the Jewish community, numbering no more than 6000 (largely assimilated) members, kept a low

profile and was mostly left in peace⁸. With the imminent breakdown of the country, the Yugoslav Jews found themselves stranded in mutually hostile republics. Owing to their small numbers and relative inconspicuousness, the issue of loyalty to the new regimes turned out, however, to be less pressing than the dilemma posed by the symbolic charge of Jewish symbols that their respective republics sought to appropriate to their own political ends. Perhaps more than with anti-semitism, those Jewish communities had to cope with the efforts their Croatian, Serbian, or Slovenian compatriots were making to woo them, identify with them, or co-opt them for the media struggle against the hated enemy. Responses were varied – some Yugoslav Jews allowed themselves to be co-opted by their new regimes, some even enthusiastically offered their services, but the majority tried to walk the tightrope of politely refusing to lend their heritage of suffering and its attendant symbolic power to political uses, while still affirming their loyalty to their new states⁹. The power of

⁸ Originally a supporter of Israel's independence, Tito's Yugoslavia broke diplomatic relations with Israel after the 1967 war, and as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, sided firmly with the Arab states and the Palestinian cause. Despite this official anti-Israel policy, the Yugoslav Jewish community was allowed to keep its contacts with Israel with the tacit agreement that it stayed low key and minded its own business (See Gordiejew 1999, and Freidenreich 1979)

⁹ In the wake of the Cankarjev dom incident, the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia (SJOJ), as an official representative of all the Yugoslav Jewish communities, with its seat in Belgrade, was faced with a delicate

⁷ The Yugoslav Federal authorities, or what was left of them, were still refusing to re-establish diplomatic relations with Israel at that time.

the Jewish trope, however, was largely out of the hands of Yugoslav Jews themselves. The various republican regimes fighting to secure the most advantageous media image in the West could not resist exploiting it. What follows are brief analyses of the ways the imagery of Jewish suffering, or what I here call the "Jewish trope," was used in Croatia and Bosnia.

Croatia

Croatia has been largely successful in presenting itself as a Westernized, democratic, and free-market oriented republic oppressed by the Byzantine, totalitarian, Bolshevik Serbs. Yet there were a few blemishes on that image, most importantly the atrocious record of the Independent State of Croatia during the Second World War, when Croatian fascists committed wholesale slaughter of Jewish, Gypsy and Serbian populations. The other, more current, problem was the anti-Semitic

situation. Reacting too strongly against the Slovenes could be interpreted as Jewish support for the Serbian regime, especially as it would come from Belgrade, while, on the other hand, there was an urge to react officially and demand that the Jews and their suffering be left out of Yugoslav squabbles. After a period of agonizing over what the right and properly diplomatic response to the abuses in the *Cankarjev dom* should be, the Federation issued its public protest. The Slovenian Youth Organization was reminded that during the war Jews were wearing that same Star of David while being taken to concentration camps and gas chambers, and that there were no gas chambers in Kosovo. The Federation saw such political uses as trivializing and debasing symbols burdened with heavy associations to an all too real experience of suffering.

statements of their president, Franjo Tudjman.

The media in Serbia tried their best to exploit these weak spots both on the domestic and the international fronts. On the domestic front, harping on WWII genocide was largely successful, if not in wholesale mobilizing of the Serb population for war, then at least in insuring its passive acceptance of things like the Yugoslav Army's shelling of Dubrovnik and Vukovar. On the international scene, however, it is my sense that this strategy achieved much less. Predisposed to let bygones be bygones, and charging Serbs with being obsessed with history, the Western media did not, with some exceptions, unduly pester Croatia with its unsavory past. Tudjman's anti-Semitic statements, on the other hand, especially in his book "Wastelands of Historic Reality" (published in Zagreb in 1989), earned him the opprobrium of international Jewish organizations, such influential figures as Simon Wiesenthal, and criticism from the Croatian Jewish community, while Israel had stalled with establishing full diplomatic relations with Croatia for years after it recognized Croatia's independence.

On the Croatian side, official protests were, of course, made that the English translation (provided by Serbs) was misleading, that the quotes were out of context, etc., while Tudjman himself publicly apologized in 1994, revising the controversial parts for the new edition. This damage control, however, does not seem to have been particularly successful. The atrocious Croatian WWII record, whatever the successes or failures of Serbian propaganda in exploiting it, *was*

perceived in Croatia as a dangerous threat to their media image. To simplify what was often a convoluted struggle over numbers of victims and interpretations of history, the Croatian media essentially pursued a two-track strategy in dealing with this issue. On the defense, the main strategy has been to present anti-Semitism in the Independent State of Croatia as a purely Nazi import, the Croatian population at large as strongly opposed to the Ustasa regime, as exhibiting solidarity with their Jewish compatriots and as perishing alongside them in the anti-fascist struggle¹⁰. Yet, while this strategy might have worked well domestically to calm any lingering sense of guilt, the record of who did what during the war was far too reliable and complete for this strategy to really work on international Jewish organizations, Wiesenthal, or Israel. The second track, therefore, relied on the maxim that attack is the best defense, and rather than minimizing one's own responsibility, the attempt was made to show that the Serbs were actually no better and possibly worse than Croats when it came to genocide against their Jews during the war.

¹⁰ Theodor Barth, who studied the Zagreb Jewish community in the late 1990s, points out that even in Croatia there was some identification with the Jewish position. He says that "the role model of the "Jew" as the epitome of historical victim and suffering was elaborated in Croatia beyond the simple rhetorical use of the comparison. Quite a few Croats were serious about this. And in a number of cases the yearning for things Jewish crossed the threshold of hostility, or remained ambiguously defined in terms of philo- and anti-Semitism: « the stronger the silence on Jasenovac, the stronger the desire » (Barth 1999: 215).

By the end of 1990, the official Catholic newsletter (*Glas Koncila*) in Zagreb published a series of texts entitled: "*The Jewish Question*" in Serbia during the Second World War. The author, Tomislav Vukovic, tried to show that anti-Semitism was firmly entrenched in Serbian mentality and that it was the Serbian collaborationist authorities under German occupation who were largely responsible for the Holocaust in Serbia – thus transferring the blame from the Wehrmacht, SS and Gestapo to the Serbs themselves. In 1992, the same author published a 200-page book titled *Overview of Serbian Anti-Semitism* with some 400 footnotes and over 100 references. For the international media campaign, however, the Croatian Ministry of Information relied primarily on a few simple points, such as a report to Hitler in 1942 that proudly proclaimed Serbia as the first *judenfrei* country in occupied Europe. The trick consisted in not mentioning that the report was sent by Harald Thurner, the Head of Wehrmacht Military Administration in Serbia, to Lieutenant General Alexander Löhr, Commander for South East Europe, thus implying that it was the Serbian authorities who had done the dirty job.

The culmination of this strategy is a book by Philip Cohen, *Serbia's Secret War: Propaganda and the Deceit of History* (Cohen 1996). The strategy is simple and effective: assemble all the manifestations of Serbian anti-Semitism during the last 150 years, and the thesis easily emerges that anti-Semitism is a deeply-rooted, institutionalized, and all-pervasive tenet of Serbian mentality and national ideology. What is sophisticated about this argument is that there is no need

to lie or distort the sources (as far as I was able to check, Cohen did neither). It suffices to neglect to weigh that evidence. The reader gets no inkling of the actual societal impact these manifestations of anti-Semitism had in Serbia, and no sense of whether they were marginal or dominant (I will return to this question in the last section).

The Jewish Community in Serbia was again faced with a delicate situation – the historical facts were well established for that period in Serbia¹¹ and it was relatively easy to refute the gross distortions in Vukovic's thesis, but the Serbian record in the Second World War, while definitely better than the Croatian, was nevertheless far from spotless. If the Jews in Serbia had taken it upon themselves to refute the Croatian claims, this could easily have been construed as rehabilitation of Serbian collaborationist authorities and paramilitary units who did, in fact, help the Germans in exterminating Jews in Serbia. Such absolution, because it would come from the Jews themselves, would indeed carry much weight. The dilemma then was how to counter the abuses of history and instrumentalization of Jewish suffering coming from the Croatian side, while at the same time avoiding the corresponding instrumentalization by the Serbian side. While the majority of Jews in Serbia and the leaders of the Federation tried to hold to this precarious line, some members of the Serbian Jewish community argued that

Serbian Jews should side more strongly with the Serbs and defend them more actively against the demonization carried out in the ex-Yugoslav and international media¹².

Bosnia

The jockeying for position on the "Jewish issue" in the former Yugoslavia was from the beginning heavily influenced by the surrounding "symbolic landscape" of the Western media, which all the participants rightly perceived as highly sensitive to the history and legacy of Jewish suffering. It was, however, only with the start of the war in Bosnia that the Holocaust, and more generally, the Second World War, definitively emerged as the dominant metaphor, particularly in the

¹² I was present at one meeting in the Serbian Jewish Community where these issues were debated. The faction of mostly older members who were for a more vocal support of Serbs in the current media war were using the old Jewish argument that *history teaches us* that you never know how the things might turn for the Jews (meaning, we are now safe in Serbia, but it can turn ugly ...). The then president of the Community first disputed that Jews should be offering any kind of support that would end up implicitly endorsing Serbian collaborationist authorities like General Nedic or Ljotic, for both were indeed anti-Semitic and did indeed help the Germans in carrying out the extermination of Serbia's Jews. Secondly, he said, it is true that "you never know" how it may turn, but what history teaches us is that no show of loyalty to the regime had ever made any difference if things did indeed turn for the worse. And if expressing loyalty to the regime has absolutely no influence on whether the Jews will be left in peace or persecuted, then why compromise one's integrity and offer support to Milosevic?

¹¹ Main sources: Browning 1985; Romano 1980; Hilberg and Holmes 1985; *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, London: Collier MacMillan, 1990;

American media. Milosevic was cast as Hitler,¹³ a number of Western leaders seen as appeasing him were likened to Chamberlain in München, the International Commission for the War Crimes in the former Yugoslavia was seen as the new Nürnberg, and Bosnian Moslems were presented as Jews facing another Holocaust at the hands of Serbs¹⁴.

¹³ It is interesting to note that Milosevic comes as the last in the long list leaders demonized by the Western (esp. USA) media. Thus, for instance, Quaddafi was the Idi Amin of Libya, Saddam Husein, the Quaddafi of Iraq, and Milosevic the Saddam of Serbia [interestingly, this equation was appropriated by early anti-Milosevic protesters in Belgrade, who used to chant "Slobo-Sadame" during 1991 and 1992 rallies]. The ultimate referent in this chain is, of course, Hitler - the incarnation of the unspeakable evil. It is not necessary to go into specific circumstances of each case, it suffices to invoke a name of a previous bad guy. In that way, the effort spent in demonizing one dictator is never wasted, because the cluster of associations and conditioned reflexes built around one figure can be readily and economically transferred to the next one in line.

¹⁴ Here are a few representative titles that appeared in the leading American daily newspapers over a period of several months in 1992 and early 1993: *What do we say when "never again" happens?* (Stuart Goldstein *USA Today*, August 5, 1993); *The Holocaust analogy is too true*, (Henry Siegman, President AJC, *Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 1993); *"Never again" - Except for Bosnia*. (Zbigniew Brzezinski, *New York Times*, April 22, 1993); *Make "never" mean never*. (*USA Today*, April 22, 1993); *Are comparisons to Bosnia valid?* (interview with Patrick Glynn, *USA Today*, April 20, 1993); *Stopping Holocaust*. (Abraham Foxman, *Atlanta Constitution*, Aug. 6, 1992); *"This is a Holocaust": Surrounded by Death, Sarajevo Resolves to Live*, (Storer Rowley, *Chicago*

The rhetorical strategy of presenting Bosnia as the Holocaust reached its crescendo with two powerful symbolic events of April 1993 – the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and the opening of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. The war in Bosnia haunted both occasions and there was hardly a dignitary in attendance who failed to draw a parallel to it. The Museum in Washington, in particular, was generally seen as a reminder to the Civilized World never to let Holocaust happen again¹⁵. Situated so prominently on the Mall, in the center of American memory and power, the Holocaust Museum emerged as perhaps the most important nodal point in the emotionally charged debate over Western policy in the Balkans. In the light of all this, it is quite understandable that the Moslem-led Bosnian government did its best to present the plight of Bosnian Moslems as another Holocaust. What is less easy to understand is the quickness and zeal with which American Jewish organizations and a number of prominent Jewish intellectuals jumped on the bandwagon. While the Jewish community in Yugoslavia for the

Tribune, August 30, 1992); *It's not a holocaust: Rhetoric and Reality in Bosnia*, (Richard Cohen, *Washington Post*, Feb 28, 1993).

¹⁵ However, a number of Jewish intellectuals offered a dissenting view. Rather than as a strengthening of memory, they saw the Holocaust Museum as a domestication, Americanization, and ultimately as "the taming of the Holocaust." "I see the existence of the museum as a statement of raw power, and that's the only thing I like about it," wrote Melvin Jules Bukiet in the *New York Times* (April 18, 1993).

most part tried hard not to get involved on anybody's side, and to remain neutral in the ongoing conflict, their American counterparts seemed only too eager to join the Balkan game of the political instrumentalization of the Holocaust.

POSTSCRIPT : THE JEWISH TROPE AND ANTI-SEMITISM IN SERBIA AFTER THE NATO BOMBING

If we take Draskovic's 1985 "Letter to Jewish Writers" as the starting point, over the next fifteen years the Jewish trope only intermittently claimed the spotlight of Serbian national identity discourses. It played a prominent role in the "saddling of Milosevic's horse" in the late eighties, and it was present whenever Kosovo was compared to the Serbian Jerusalem, but the strong philo-Semitism and identification with the Jews were more of a continuous undercurrent to Serbian narratives of victimhood, than a dominant "story".

The latest Kosovo crisis, which led to the NATO intervention, re-awakened the Kosovo theme with its Jewish associations once more, but it was the bombing itself that made even Serbs who had been up to that point immune to the state-disseminated paranoia see themselves as innocent victims. As *The Chicago Tribune* reported on September 27 1999, in the wake of the bombing, Serbs were claiming "We are the new Jews of Europe". "The analogy with the Jews may be breathtakingly inappropriate, but most Serbs truly feel

they are the wronged party in this drama", wrote Tom Hundley in that article¹⁶.

The Holocaust analogy was again at the very center of justifying the NATO bombing of Serbia in the spring of 1999. In an interview he gave to *Radio Free Europe* on May 18 1999, the famous Yugoslav film director Dusan Makavejev invoked a *New York Times* article¹⁷ on General Wesley Clark published a few days before :

« Our national morbid identification with the bones of slaughtered ancestors has been transposed onto the planetary level. We are now learning that Clark's ancestors perished in the Holocaust and that he is resolved to "go all the way". Rasa Karadzic shot at Turks in Sarajevo, while Clark thinks that Belgrade is inhabited by Germans who killed his grandfather. »

Makavejev was obviously referring to the *NYT* article from memory and got it wrong. Clark's grandfather "was a Russian Jew who fled his country to escape the pogroms there a century ago", according to the article, not a victim of the Holocaust. But when we distort our memories we usually distort them along the lines of dominant narrative patterns, and Makavejev's mistake is very telling. Two

¹⁶ One would have to wonder, however, whether the likening of the plight of Kosovo Albanians to that of Jews in the Holocaust, served as the central justification for the NATO bombing, was significantly less "breathtakingly inappropriate."

¹⁷ "His Family's Refugee Past Is Said to Inspire NATO's Commander" by Elizabeth Becker. The blurb says: "Some say General Clark's roots give him empathy for Kosovo's victims." (*NYT* May 3, 1999)

weeks after he read the article the story in his mind had migrated from Russian pogroms to the truly central story of the Holocaust. I would venture to say that this was exactly what was intended by the *NYT* article.

The centrality of the Holocaust for the ideology of "humanitarian intervention" as a newly forged global interventionist policy of the US and its allies deserves further study. It would, however, be a study of "Stories Americans tell"¹⁸, whereas I am mentioning American uses of the Jewish trope here only to point out that it conditions some of the "stories Serbs (as well as Slovenes, Albanians, Croats or Bosnian Moslems) tell themselves and others".

As a Jew in Serbia I never personally experienced anti-Semitism. Moreover, in all my personal interactions with Jews in Serbia, I have never found even one who complained of Serbian anti-Semitism. The opinions of the Jews I talked to ranged only from neutral to highly pro-Serb (but see Mihailovic 1996 for anti-Semitism in Serbi in the nineties). And even though I was aware of occasional anti-Semitic incidents (documented by the Jewish community in their *Bulletin* and other publications), I tended to agree with what a prominent Jewish intellectual, sociologist Laslo Sekelj¹⁹ said in *Nasa Borba* :

« In Serbia anti-Semitism is a peripheral phenomenon. Not because of some special tolerance, but because there are a lot of minorities here, so that Jews don't stick out. The main channel of hate is oriented towards nations with which you are in conflict, the Croats, Muslims, Albanians. The South Slav brothers hate each other so badly they don't need Jews to have someone to hate » (in Bisevac 1997).

Another prominent Jew from Serbia, writer Filip David, however, recently remarked that as Serbia kept losing its wars, "the list of 'enemies' became exhausted. In the end, only the 'domestic traitors' and 'world conspirators' remained. And while it is already known who the 'domestic traitors' are, the role of 'conspirators' is traditionally easiest to hang on to Jews" (David 2000).

Innumerable variations on the theme of world conspiracy against Serbs have been highly prominent features of everyday life in Serbia during the last fifteen or so years. Most of them feature the usual cast of Serbian enemies – Germany, the Comintern, the Vatican, and of course, the "New World Order". As these theories conveniently transfer responsibility for the whole series of the last decade's disasters (four lost wars, one of the world's highest hyperinflations, Serbia's pariah status, etc.) from Milosevic's regime to outside enemies, they have been actively promoted by the regime itself. An important node in this dissemination of conspiracy theories is the so-called "New Serbian Right" – a small group of neo-fascist intellectuals led by the

book *The Time of Infamy: Essays on the Rule of Nationalism*.

¹⁸ For the role the Holocaust plays in American imagination see Peter Novick (1999).

¹⁹ That Sekelj is very far from those Jews living in Serbia who tend to endorse the regime position is perhaps best proved by the fact that the Serbian-Jewish Friendship Association sued him for slander that allegedly appeared in his

Belgrade art critic Dragos Kalajic. Their quasi-erudite theories often feature the Freemasons, or the "Usurers' International" as the secret enemy of Serbdom (or Orthodox Slavdom in general) and it is quite clear they are using the classical World Jewish Conspiracy as their template. Yet even there, it is very hard to encounter any overt negative reference to Jews. I would argue that the power of the Jewish trope in Serbian discourses on identity acted to counteract overt manifestations of anti-Semitism, and led even the likes of Dragos Kalajic and the New Serbian Right, whose neo-fascist ideology predisposes them to virulent anti-Semitism, to sometimes pay lip service to the prevalent philo-Semitism.

This however, seems to be changing as conspiracy theories, which yet again gripped Serbia during and after the bombing, seem increasingly to display openly anti-Semitic tones. Grabbing at any support they could get, some diaspora Serbs disseminated anti-Semitic articles written by American extreme right-wingers over the internet during the NATO bombing. The bombing itself was officially justified by Holocaust analogies, and endorsements of the "humanitarian intervention" coming from Jews were given a lot of attention in the NATO media. Clinton's team featured several Jews (Defense Secretary Cohen, White House Spokesman, Rubin, etc.) while Albright and Clark both conveniently discovered their forgotten Jewish roots around that time. It is then no surprise that the "conspiracy of the whole world" or "the new world order" against Serbs was often presented as a Jewish conspiracy in Serbia.

More importantly, however, the hyperbolic philo-Semitism inaugurated by Draskovic, and later, in the early 1990s, by the Serbian-Jewish Friendship Association, fueled quite unrealistic and naive hopes that both the "powerful Jewish lobby" in America and the state of Israel would leap to the defense of Serbia in the international media arena as well as in terms of military hardware. What happened instead was that Israel (understandably) remained neutral, while many prominent Jewish figures in the West stepped to the forefront of denouncing Serbian savagery in Croatia and Bosnia (Alain Finkielkraut, Susan Sontag, Bernard Henry-Levy, etc.). This provoked resentment and a sense of betrayal in the Serbian public that culminated when, on September 1 1993, over 100 prominent individuals (including such prominent Jewish figures as Elie Wiesel, Josef Brodsky, George Soros, Susan Sontag, the director of the American Jewish Congress, Henry Siegman, etc.) signed an open letter to President Clinton asking that, among other things, NATO warplanes bomb the Bosnian Serbs and even military targets in Serbia proper. Some members of the Serbian Jewish community, including then chief rabbi Cadik Danon, publicly denounced the Jewish signatories of the open letter, and a message was sent to international Jewish organizations asking them to refrain from passing judgment and taking sides in the Yugoslav civil war "because they don't understand its historical roots". Ordinary citizens wrote letters to editors of the type "we (Serbs) sacrificed ourselves for Jews in WWII, we offered them our friendship, but see how the Jews pay us back – by leading the

demonization campaign in the West against us and by calling on Clinton to bomb us".

The latest twist came with the conspiracy theory that is now circulating in Belgrade. As Filip David reports, the Belgrade TV channel "Palma" started promoting theories about Jews as "killers and criminals", responsible for all the catastrophes of modern history, from the October Revolution and both World Wars to the recent bombing of Yugoslavia.

A long-held "secret" is unveiled that the modern (Ashkenazi) Jews are actually not real, but "false" Jews – the descendants of the Khazars, a Turkic tribe that converted to Judaism and then miraculously disappeared. This is (according to these theories), a great deception, for the Judaized Khazars actually assimilated the (real) Jews. Now these "false Jews" or Khazars fill the highest positions in the US and Russia, are heads of leading European states, receive instructions from secret conspiratorial cabals, and pull the strings of world politics aiming to rule the entire world and destroy Serbia in the process (David 2000)²⁰.

²⁰ I was able to trace this theory to Dejan Lučić, the author of such bestsellers as "The Secrets of the Albanian Mafia" (Tajne Albanske mafije) and "The Rulers from the Shadow" (Vladari iz senke), Described on the "Bad Serb Club" web site as "a cult writer for all of those who are looking for the essence behind the politics that we see," Dejan Lučić is reported to have attributed the NATO aggression against Yugoslavia to "The rulers from the shadow, 13 of them, [who] are planing to bring "the new world order" by the year 2000. The first step is

I see this latest conspiracy theory as a kind of "compromise" between two opposing narrative forces at work in contemporary Serbia. On the one hand, the xenophobia and paranoia actively fostered by the regime, and finally driven home by the NATO bombing, seems to be bringing classical Jewish World Conspiracy theories to the fore in a way seldom seen before in Serbia. On the other hand, it seems that among national intelligentsia there is still a large investment in portraying Serbian victimhood as analogous to Jewish victimhood, and in keeping alive the story of that special Serbian-Jewish friendship, forged in common suffering. The "Khazar theory" thus finds a "happy" resolution to this contradiction by splitting the Jews into the evil ones, who are false, and the "real Jews", who could still supposedly be our "friends".

The link that came to be established between the Holocaust and the state of Israel helped promote the perception that to be a victim of a genocide is to be entitled to a state. Thus the narrative strategy of identifying with Jews as archetypal victims of an archetypal genocide is a high-stake game in that part of the world in which the Holocaust had come to assume the place of the central morality story. It pays to be a

the fire in the Balkans, not only in Yugoslavia, but also in Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Cyprus... This is the beginning of the World War Three, and not against the small Yugoslavia. This top of the ruling pyramid is "the thirteen invincible free masons". The first of the invincibles is David, also known as David Rockefeller, who comes from a Turkish tribe which accepted Judaism" (www.computec-int.com/bsc/war/archives/masons1.htm).

Jew (symbolically) – thence the "Wish to be a Jew", or, as some have called it, "Holocaust Envy", The war of words that accompanied and even fueled the Yugoslav wars of the last decade has shown how such a powerful morality story as that of Jewish suffering could be misused – precisely because it was perceived as powerful. In the south-east corner of Europe it was misused by Serbs and Slovenes, Albanians and Bosnian Muslims, as they strove to position themselves as victims, but these local misuses were contingent on and sometimes fatally interlocked with misuses of the Jewish trope in the global media space dominated by the US and Western Europe. It is hard to steer between the strong ethical messages that the Jewish narrative of suffering can impart and the dangers of its misuse in international relations. In my personal efforts to find a "moral gyroscope" in this situation, I find best guidance in the gut feelings of those Serbian Jews who were as uneasy with the outburst of philo-Semitism in the late eighties and early nineties as they might be uneasy now with the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories propagated by the Belgrade TV in the wake of the NATO bombing.

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