

# MYTHS AND SYMBOLS IN THE WARS OF EX-YUGOSLAVIA (1991-1999)<sup>1</sup>

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*"The Balkans produce more history than they can consume."*  
Sir Winston Churchill

*"Yugoslavia is a nation of six states, five cultures, four languages,  
three religions, two alphabets, but one political party."*  
Marshal Josip Broz Tito

**Abstract:** *The Balkans have long been a land of myths and symbols that have influenced the actions of ordinary people and political leaders alike. The recent bloody wars of the former Yugoslavia after 1990 have brought to life ancient legends, as well as contemporary myths used as tools to justify and fuel ethnic hatred and conflict. Today, as the region moves towards European integration, new symbols arose, some ready to replace the old ones. Along with them, the Balkans have a real chance to move out of the darkness into a brighter future.*

**Keywords:** myth, symbol, former Yugoslavia, war, ethnic conflict, Balkans

## Introduction

Just as the former communist bloc used to be one of the favorite grounds for recent mythology, the Balkans, partially due to the fact that they were a part of the aforementioned bloc, but also as an independent entity due to their ethnic and cultural diversity, have given birth to contemporary myths or revived legends from the distant past.

While for some of the most recent myths there may be substantial proof, others remain suspended somewhere between reality and fiction. However, in both cases, their strong influence in shaping and strengthening the national identity of the peoples in the region is unquestionable<sup>2</sup>.

Throughout the more or less recent history, the Balkans have been a generator of symbols and an inexhaustible source for myths and legends that today are being

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony Smith, *National Identity*, University of Nevada Press, 1991, p. 71-90.

evoked all over this region<sup>3</sup>. Nationalism or bravery, if often imaginary, is based on legends, myths and symbols, which are currently used to justify violence, atrocities, interethnic hatred or war crimes<sup>4</sup>.

The symbolism that characterizes the region is one of the richest in Europe and was incessantly invoked and resorted to during the conflicts in Ex-Yugoslavia in the '90s.

Labeled as Europe's "powder keg" at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or accused of "producing more history than they can consume"<sup>5</sup>, the Balkans have been and remain a controversial region which, at present, is trying to break away with a past driven by unresolved national and interstate crises<sup>6</sup>.

The interethnic conflicts that occurred in the Balkans in the '90s and that eventually led to the breakup of Yugoslavia brought to the fore the symbolism and the mythology which appeared to have faded or to have been replaced by other myths and symbols under Tito's dictatorship<sup>7</sup>, an autocratic regime spiced up with elements of market economy and free movement of the citizens.

These symbols and myths either fuelled such conflicts (Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo), or were (re)born along with them (Macedonia), in an attempt to redefine statehood and the nation or to shape the collective identity of the newly formed states (Kosovo, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina).

The present paper aims to present the main symbolic elements, myths or legends which have been and remain an important part of the Balkan region. It might appear strange that, in times when we talk about the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans, the myths of the past are so much alive. This is actually the challenge of the Balkans – nothing can be dissociated from the past, even though the region is now looking towards a European common future.

### **Myths, legends and symbols Yugoslavia and Tito**

The Yugoslav Federation is a myth in itself. The myth of reuniting different peoples, in the name of certain principles, and of their own will. However, interethnic harmony and tolerance of the "other"<sup>8</sup> proved to be either artificial, or feeble in the absence of Tito's one and only communist party dictatorship.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in Croatia there is a myth according to which Ulysses heard the mermaids' song in the Pakleni Archipelago (an island chain west of Split in the Adriatic Sea), or another one saying that Marco Polo originated from the Korcula Island, west of Dubrovnik. Even though such "stories" are usually presented as "curiosities", they are subtly used to explain the "historical importance" of a state, people or region.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Smith, *National Identity*, p. 123-140.

<sup>5</sup> Winston Churchill (1874-1965), Prime-Minister of Great Britain during World War II.

<sup>6</sup> Vasile Pușcaș, *Căderea României în Balcani*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 2000, p. 10-20.

<sup>7</sup> Marshal Josip Broz Tito (7 or 25 May, 1892 – 4 May, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Mark Winward, *Symbols, Others and the Wars of Yugoslav Secession*, in Grad Symposium, Dalhousie University, Centre for Foreign Policy Studies, 2011, <http://centreforforeignpolicystudies.dal.ca/pdf/gradsymp11/Winward.pdf>

A legend himself, Tito, dictator and unifier at the same time, created the myth of the Serbian-Croatian harmony symbolized, among other things, by the Serbian-Croatian language and by the Brotherhood and Unity Highway which was later on to become “a road to nowhere”<sup>9</sup>, a symbol of everything that went wrong in Yugoslavia<sup>10</sup>.

Over time, Tito has been compared to various figures. From “the maverick who defied Moscow” to Ceausescu or Pinochet, Tito “earned himself” all kinds of nicknames. Even though coming from an ethnically mixed (Croatian-Slovenian) family, large and poor, Tito developed a taste for class and luxury. In comparison with Tito, the figures, often extravagant, of all other communist dictators fade. He was a passionate lover of “high-life”: he owned a luxury yacht and a protocol villa on Brijuni Island in the Adriatic Sea, where he hosted, among others, the American actors Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton<sup>11</sup>. It was on the Brijuni Island that he, together with other leaders of the Third World, laid the foundations for a non-alignment movement, officially inaugurated in Belgrade in 1961.

Today, after more than ten years from the end of the last Balkan War (the one in Kosovo), Ex-Yugoslavia is still the realm of enchantment and legend that Tito left behind. Most citizens still agree with the idea that, had Tito not died, the massacres in Croatia, Bosnia or Kosovo would not have been committed, and Yugoslavia would have undergone its dissolution process in a more peaceful way.

### Victories and defeats, heroes and martyrs

Recent conflicts in the Balkans appear to resume what happened 600, 200 or 100 years ago. The battles, the wars, the confrontations and their protagonists, the heroes and the martyrs who resulted are permanently present in the national discourse and represent extremely influential symbols in defining the national identity of the Balkan peoples<sup>12</sup>.

Thus, the battle of Kosovopolje is considered by the Serbs a great national event, even though Kosovopolje meant to them a terrible defeat by the Ottoman army. This historical event was used by the Serbian nationalists between 1986 and 1999 as a leitmotif in their endeavor to establish Greater Serbia. Even though most peoples take advantage of their historical victories to emphasize their sovereignty, with the Serbs such a statement is based on a tragedy, which was subsequently used to inspire the masses not to yield to any foreign powers ever again<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging. Journeys into the new Nationalism*, London, BBC Books, 1993, p. 19-56.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Burton played Tito in the film “The Battle of Sutjeska” (1973). The film, the most expensive production in the history of Yugoslavia, presents the fiercest battle fought by Tito’s partisans against the Nazis in World War II.

<sup>12</sup> George F. Kennan, *The Other Balkan Wars: A 1913 Carnegie Endowment Inquiry in Retrospect*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, 1993, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> In his well-known speech of Kosovopolje (1989), occasioned by the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “Battle for Kosovo”, considered to be “the trigger” of the policies aimed at establishing Greater Serbia, Milosevic said: “once we used to be a great army, brave and proud, undefeated even when losing a battle”, <http://emperors-clothes.com/milo/milosaid.html>

On the other hand, we can notice an alteration or modification of the popular conception regarding certain historical events. Thus, the figure of Gavrilo Princip, the Serbian Bosnian who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo in 1914, determining the outbreak of World War I, has “evolved” in Bosnia from a symbol of the emancipation and the liberation of the peoples under the Austro-Hungarian domination (as he was perceived in Tito’s time) to that of “Serbian terrorist” (after the breakup of Yugoslavia).

The eradication of “the other” has been another favorite theme in defining or re-inventing national identity<sup>14</sup>. It is well-known that Ratko Mladic, the military leader of the Serbian Bosnians and the “author” of the Srebrenica massacre of 1995, felt deep personal hatred for the Croats because his father had been killed by Croatian fascists; later, his hatred spread to any nationality other than Serbian.

In Croatia, Franjo Tudjman, “the father of the nation”, tried not only to eradicate “the other” but also to physically erase history and certain special events. Denying that the Holocaust had ever happened, Tudjman ordered a part of the Jasenovac concentration camp to be covered with concrete; ordered the abrogation of all rights to citizens of Serbian ethnicity; and restored the concept of “ustash”<sup>15</sup> to national policies, going so far as to involve former Croatian Nazis, exiled to South America, in the war for independence.

In Serbia, the concept of “chetnik” travelled a long way from “royalist combatants against the Nazis” to “enemies of the people” in Tito’s time, and to “heroes who fight to safeguard the Serbian nation and to do away with the Muslim threat” during the wars in Croatia (1991-1995) and Bosnia (1992-2005), and, partially, to “fascist collaborationists” at present. Despite these controversies, the chetnik leader Draza Mihajlovic, sentenced to death for high treason and collaboration with the fascist regime in Yugoslavia, was decorated by the Americans for outstanding merits and acts of courage during World War II<sup>16</sup>. However, the use of the word “chetnik” by Serbian paramilitary groups during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, as well as the atrocities committed, shed a negative light on the historical, already controversial, image of the chetniks.

Perhaps the least genuine myth that appeared in the aftermath of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia was the one claiming that the Serbs alone triggered the conflicts and were solely responsible for the acts of aggression<sup>17</sup>. Even though there is little talk about these aspects, they have been historically acknowledged. While there is no voice to contest Slobodan Milosevic’s expansionary nationalistic intentions, the guilt is,

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth mentioning that, while the Serbs or Croats had seen some forms of state organization throughout history, Bosnia and Macedonia, for example, did not exist as independent entities before 1991.

<sup>15</sup> The Croatian revolutionary movement was a fascist, separatist, anti-Yugoslav movement, ideologically based on Croatian nationalism and Nazism.

<sup>16</sup> Draza Mihajlovic was decorated by the American President Harry Truman for outstanding courage in saving 500 American pilots captured by the enemy in Yugoslavia during World War II. The conferment was kept secret so as not to offend the new regime in Belgrade after the war and was posthumously awarded by President George W. Bush to the daughter of the chetnik leader in 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Sam Vaknin, *The Myths of Yugoslavia*, <http://samvak.tripod.com/pp49.html>

undoubtedly, shared. In Croatia, immediately after the declaration of independence, Franjo Tudjman ordered the amendment of the Constitution so as any right of the Serbs should be abolished, declaring that “the Serbs are not human beings” and, consequently, have no human rights<sup>18</sup>. This event occurred immediately after Tudjman and Milosevic had a mysterious meeting at the Serbian leader’s residence in Karadordevo, near Belgrade, in March 1991, where the two discussed the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina in such a way as to serve their own interests<sup>19</sup>. The Serbs were to get the territories inhabited by the majority Serbian population of Bosnia, while the Croats were to get the Croatian part of Herzegovina, mainly inhabited by Croats. Legend has it that the division was drawn on a napkin, a reminder of the splitting of Europe by the great powers at Yalta, after World War II. The agreement failed, Croatia proclaimed its independence and started the war. Naturally, the Serbs reacted disproportionately to such threat; naturally, their deeds were a lot more visible and their scope much ampler (the siege of Vukovar is an illustrative example); however, there is shared responsibility for the outbreak of the conflict. A similar situation arose in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the independence referendum of February 1992 was boycotted by the minority Bosnian Serbs (30%). Subsequently, feeling threatened, the latter attacked the new republic, trying to create a safe Bosnian-Serb territory, while the war spread out all over Bosnia and culminated with the siege of Sarajevo and the massacre of Srebrenica in July 1995; these events have become dramatic symbols of the conflict. Although allies against the Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims waged war against one another for eleven months before “making peace” under the pressure of the international community. The climax of the conflict was registered in the Croatian-Muslim city of Mostar, where historical monuments were destroyed, in particular the emblematic bridge over the river Neretva<sup>20</sup>.

### **National flags, coats of arms, statues and personalities**

Symbols have always been extremely dear to extremist leaders or modern dictators in Ex-Yugoslavia. Historical or religious, these symbols have always inflamed the passion of the rival ethnicity; they have fuelled frustrations, threats or, on the contrary, they have justified national pride. Thus, the Tudjman regime in Croatia infuriated the Serb community by adopting as the coat of arms of the newly established independent republic of Croatia the red-and-white chessboard (“shahovnitza”), the same symbol that had appeared on the flag of the ephemeral republic proclaimed by the “ustash” pro-Nazi Croatian regime during World War II. The emblem was preserved as such, and some other symbols representing the regions of today’s Croatia were

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<sup>18</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/294990.stm>

<sup>19</sup> The discussions are known as “the Karadordevo agreement”. Apparently, there is recorded evidence of the conversation.: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/bosnia/1343702/Tudjman-tapes-reveal-plans-to-divide-Bosnia-and-hide-war-crimes.html>

<sup>20</sup> See the chapter “Bridges (Material and Spiritual)” in the present paper.

added. Today, this coat of arms continues to be a reason for interethnic discontent and division<sup>21</sup>.

Perhaps the most well-known contemporary dispute over symbols is the one between Macedonia (FYROM) and Greece with regard to the name of Macedonia, to the national flag of the former Yugoslav republic, and to the personality of Alexander the Great. The national flag of FYROM, a 16-ray sun against a red background signifying the Macedonian people's aspiration for liberty, is considered by the Greeks a Greek symbol, more precisely the star of Vergina, connected, in its turn, with the Macedonian dynasty. The Greeks consider Macedonia a province in the north of the country, with the capital in Thessaloniki and by no means a Slavic state in the North. Following the same trend of thought, Alexander the Great was Greek, and the Slavic people who settled in the northern part of Greece during his reign and that of his father, Philip II, came from a different part of Europe. Obviously, the FYROM Macedonians see the problem as exactly the reverse<sup>22</sup>. However, it is certain that this dispute blocked FYROM's accession to NATO and it complicates the negotiations with the European Union since in both instances there is a requirement that the accession state should not have any open dispute with its neighbors. Greece, as a NATO and EU member, is using all its resources to block the negotiations until the dispute has been resolved. Beyond these extremely serious aspects, there are also anecdotic accents, such as the fact that on both sides of the border between FYROM and Greece there are hoardings reading "Welcome to Macedonia!" or the fact that "Alexander the Great" is the name of one of the two airports in Skopje, while the international airport in Thessaloniki is called "Makedonia". The statue of Alexander the Great dominates both the centre of FYROM's capital, Skopje<sup>23</sup>, and the Thessaloniki pier; the unveiling of the statue in Skopje in the summer of 2001 generated a lot of tension<sup>24</sup>.

Another "Gordian knot" to be untied in Ex-Yugoslavia is the claim for the population of mixed/double ethnicity and/or nationality. This issue deeply refers to worldwide acknowledged personalities, winners of Nobel Prizes or renowned scientists. The most notorious are: Ivo Andric, (1892-1975), born in Bosnia, in a Catholic Croatian family, who lived and worked in Belgrade. His most famous novel, "The Bridge on the Drina", was awarded the Nobel Literature Prize in 1961; the author was praised "for the epic force with which he has traced themes and depicted human destinies drawn from the history of his country"<sup>25</sup>. Andric is a matter of dispute among Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia who equally claim that he "belongs to them". Nikola Tesla,

<sup>21</sup> For example, the supporters of the football teams Dinamo Zagreb or Hajduk Split, well-known all over Europe as ultranationalists and extremists, carry the flag of Croatia and sing ultra nationalistic and "ustash" songs every time when attending a match and, consequently, the match usually ends in street fights and arrests.

<sup>22</sup> Oana Cristina Popa, *Cooperare și securitate regională. Europa de sud-est după 1989*, Alba Iulia, Edit. Unirea, 2004, p. 100-129.

<sup>23</sup> The bronze statuary monument of impressive size was named "A Warrior on a Horse" to avoid using the name of Alexander the Great.

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.rferl.org/content/macedonia\\_alexander\\_the\\_great\\_statue\\_greece\\_dispute/24237371.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/macedonia_alexander_the_great_statue_greece_dispute/24237371.html)

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1961/](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1961/)

(1856-1943), American inventor and engineer of Serbian-Croatian origin, has been an “apple of discord” between Belgrade and Zagreb, both erecting monuments and inaugurating memorial houses to honor him. Under the pressure of the international community, in 2006, on the occasion of celebrating 150 years from his birth, the two countries participated in joint activities, stepping beyond national and ethnic barriers. The Croatian President of the time, Stipe Mesic, described Tesla as being a “Serb, a son of Croatia and a citizen of the world”<sup>26</sup>. Mother Theresa (1920-1997), born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu (Gongea Boiagiu) in what we today know as Skopje, the capital of FYROM, was a Roman-Catholic nun of Albanian origin. She has been claimed by the Albanians, by the Macedonians and by the Romanian Vlach precisely due to the worldwide notoriety that she gained for her work to the benefit of the poor and helpless around the world, ultimately winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.

### **Bridges (Material and Spiritual)**

Within the context of the conflicts in Ex-Yugoslavia, bridges used to be not only military and strategic targets, but also symbolic links between two worlds, ethnicities or peoples. While the 1999 NATO bombardments during the Kosovo war targeted the bridges in order to affect economic interests and to annihilate commercial routes physically (as was the case of the Novi Sad bridges), in some other places bridges were only destroyed as an expression of interethnic hatred.

Thus, during the war in Bosnia, more precisely during the battle for Mostar, a city divided between Muslims and Croats, in 1993, the latter destroyed the “Old Bridge”<sup>27</sup>. The attack was led by the Croatian general Slobodan Praljak (a former film director), at present under trial at the ICTY in the Hague; he is said to have used to motivate his soldiers by telling them that “the Croats must learn to hate Muslims since hatred is a prerequisite to success in a war”. The bridge was a UNESCO protected monument dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, built of stone in the time of the Ottoman Empire by order of Suleiman the Magnificent, and rapidly became a symbol of the city. Even though the bridge was rebuilt (including some original parts, recovered from the river bed) and, in 2004, inaugurated in the presence of numerous international personalities, the two communities stood motionless on the two opposite banks of the Neretva river, suggesting very poor prospects for future reconciliation.

### **Conclusions**

The way in which today symbols and myths are being (re)interpreted or analyzed has become a part of everyday life. Wherever you go in Ex-Yugoslavia you will discover some history, a legend, a story, a myth, an anecdote. Even though the region is

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.cosmosmagazine.com/news/411/croatia-marks-150th-anniversary-nikola-teslas-birth>

<sup>27</sup> Mostar is a city in south-western Bosnia, divided into two communities, Croatian and Muslim, by the river Neretva that crosses the city.

heading towards the European Union and NATO, some of the states already being members or extremely close to such a status, the recent or distant past is still present. Many physical bridges have been rebuilt (Serbia), other spiritual bridges are still pending (Bosnia, Kosovo). Wounds heal slowly and the collective memory is filled with more or less reality-bound memories. Interethnic reconciliation has seen great progress in some cases (as, for example, the Serbian-Croatian relationship) or, in others, is still a remote dream (for example the ethnic communities of Bosnia-Herzegovina). In other parts of the territory, people even try to reverse history, to take revenge or to suppress it altogether (as, for example, in Kosovo where reverse ethnic cleansing and national reinvention have taken place)<sup>28</sup>.

It is worth mentioning that most states in the Balkans have shown an amazing readiness to replace old symbols with new ones (EU-Europe, NATO-USA)<sup>29</sup>, mainly because of their desperate desire to escape isolation and to be internationally recognized as democratic countries. This fact is nothing but rhetorical ammunition to ultranationalists and Euro-skeptics, still present in large numbers in Croatia, for example, who claim that joining the European Union would mean nothing else than being annexed to a new federation.

Nevertheless, maybe for the first time in recent history, the Balkans have a real chance to break away from the ghosts of the past and to dismiss the long-standing myth according to which they produce more history than they can consume.

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<sup>28</sup> Vasile Pușcaș, *op.cit.*, p. 89-106.

<sup>29</sup> They consider that Croatia left the Yugoslav Federation at extremely high human and material costs, a fact that should be understood as a warning in regard to joining another “federation“, i.e. the European Union.