

KOSOVO IS THE MOST EXPENSIVE SERBIAN WORD: POLITICAL ENCHANTMENT AND MILOSEVIC'S RISE TO POWER

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The starting point for what might be called the Serbian and Yugoslav disaster is often traced back to the fateful April 24, 1987 when during his visit to Kosovo, Polje Serbian Party President Slobodan Milosevic, in Audrey Helfant Budding's words, "experienced the political power of national feeling first-hand, and began his conversion from Communist apparatchik to national leader" (Budding 1998:354).²

The story of Milosevic's rise to power involves at least two separate "tracks." On one track Milosevic was climbing through the Serbian Communist Party ranks on the coat tails of his mentor, then president of Serbia, Ivan Stambolic.³ Commonly seen as a typical apparatchik of decidedly hardline bent, Milosevic initially pleased Serbian party conservatives by being tough on "dissident intellectuals, all demands for liberalization, and any manifestation of Serbian nationalism" (Djilas 1993:86).

On the other track, an important segment of Serbian intelligentsia, gathered around the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Serbian Writers' Association was at the same time – mid to late 1980s – increasingly engaging in the rhetoric of Serbian national grievances. At that point, the major grievance had to do with the problems of Kosovo Serbs, whose voices were suppressed by the Serbian Communist party for fear that they would stir up Serbian nationalism. The Academy and the Writer's Association were the first Serbian institutions that made this problem public by promoting petitions and organizing protest gatherings in support of Kosovo Serbs.

Since 1974, Kosovo, as an autonomous province within Serbia together with Vojvodina, had all the elements of a full statehood except the right to secession granted only to the six Yugoslav republics. Provinces were represented both at the Serbian and the Federal Yugoslav level. Serbia as a whole could not decide anything internally without the consent of its autonomous provinces, and the same autonomous provinces could (and often did) vote against Serbia (of which they were

constituent parts) in the federal Yugoslav presidency.

Serbian Communist leadership, led by Stambolic, was troubled by this awkward position and was already working to bring about constitutional changes that would address the issue. However, they were doing that behind the scenes and taking great care not to disrupt the delicate balance of power that existed between Yugoslav republics.

In 1981 the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo took to the streets to demand their own republic. While the demonstrations were repressed, the Kosovo Albanian campaign for republican status (with its clear secessionist implications) only increased. On the other hand, the Serbian public was made increasingly aware of the protests of the Serbian and Montenegrin minorities over their treatment by the Albanian majority. Kosovo Serbs and Montenegrins were claiming that the Albanian majority was pressuring them to leave by all kinds of means, ranging from covert threats to overt acts of violence. This was a drive, so the complaint went, to make Kosovo "ethnically clean," and the Serbian minority in Kosovo had no redress within the province.⁴

The two tracks merged when Stambolic dispatched Milosevic to Kosovo in April of 1987 to quell the 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 building throwing rocks. As police moved to stop the crowd from storming the building beating people with their truncheons, Milosevic stepped outside and uttered the sentence that miraculously transformed him from a gray apparatchik to a Serbian nationalist icon: "No one should dare to beat you."

Whether he was genuinely moved by the plight of Kosovo Serbs 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 the ultimate power in Serbia.

Practically all accounts stress the way Milosevic pre-empted, appropriated, colonized, simulated, or, as Aleksa Djilas put it, “cannibalized”⁵ nationalist discourses. These discourses were being developed by a significant segment of most influential Serbian intellectuals quite independently of Milosevic’s rise through party hierarchy, indeed initially in a fierce opposition to the Serbian Communist Party’s anti-nationalist policies. 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. Some of those who supported Milosevic at the crucial time when he was rising to power soon sobered up, but it was too late. They were no longer important once the reins of power were firmly in his hands. As one of the major opposition figures, Vuk Draskovic said four years after the event: “With his speech in Kosovo Milosevic mounted the horse that the Serbian intelligentsia had saddled long ago” (in Djukic 1992:130).

It is the narrative logic of this “saddling of Milosevic’s horse” that I hope to address here. It involved political rhetoric that drew its power from entrenched national narratives or what could be called a fund of ethnonationalist mythology. But who were the people who most powerfully shaped these stories? Academicians were certainly among the most prominent. Certain eloquent archbishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church were another important group. Journalists, pundits and various TV personages played a central role in disseminating this kind of discourse. Yet, I would argue, it was a group of poets who provided the most extreme, condensed and persuasive forms of the new mythicized speech in the mid-1980s. They were the prophets of the re-awakened nation, professional wordsmiths whose poetic hyperbolae were so extreme as to preclude any rational discussion. They turned Serbian grievances, imagined and real, into a poetically exaggerated metaphysics of national victimhood.

It is relatively easy to reduce all this enormous output of Serbian national “bards” to simple phrases like “resurgence of Serbian nationalism” and relegate it to the “saddling of Milosevic’s horse” in the larger scheme of things. It might seem that the account of Milosevic’s rise to power gives us all we need to know about Serbian politics of the last decade or so. The service Serbian nationalist intelligentsia rendered

him at a crucial moment with its mythologizing discourses is then just one of the many components of the account. I, however, agree with Katherine Verdery (1999) when she argues for the enchantment of political analysis as it is usually practiced. This implies a recognition of the importance, even centrality, of what is sometimes called “the symbolic dimension” of political behavior.⁶

Most of the time these poets didn’t speak through poems, but through slogans and sound-bites. And these slogans and sound-bites, in their turn, relied for their power on invoking certain larger narrative units, most importantly the mythicized Battle of Kosovo.

The crucial thing that intellectuals have done for Milosevic as Budding said, 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).

Here, I cannot possibly go into the details of the Kosovo mythology. I will just try to present, through the hyperbolic rhetoric of poets, how Kosovo, as the central mystery of Serbian national identity, was linked to narratives of Serbian victimhood in Croatia and Bosnia. In a word, I’ll try to show some of the narrative logic underlying this “generalization” of Kosovo to all the threatened Serbs in need of a Savior. I will explore only one such link here, the one I came to call the Kosovo-Jadovno axis.⁷

In an interview given in August of 1991, Rajko Petrov Nogo, one of the most prominent firebrand nationalist poets, offered his spatial summary of eternal Serbian victimhood. He talked about the three parallel migrations of the Serbian people – to the heavens, into foreign lands and to the depths, into the pits. These three “migrations” correspond to particular clusters of Serbian ethnonationalist mythology. Let me start with the pits.

Numerous deep pits are a prominent feature of the limestone landscape of that area of Bosnia, Herzegovina and Croatia which was populated by the Serbs of the so-called Krajinas (Military Borderlands) and which belonged to the Independent State of Croatia during WW II. It was in these pits that slaughtered Serbs were thrown by the Croatian Ustase as a part of their campaign to get rid of all the 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 Holocaust in general, so Jadovno came to stand for all the pits and for the genocide itself.⁸

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

Kosovo is the beginning and measure of Serbian Jadovno, and Jadovno is a continuation of Kosovo. Between them, the cross-bearing path of a people, a path of the Cross which, like an arch, as if by a heavenly rainbow, conjoins our old and our new torments ... In Jadovno, Kosovo culminates; the word and reality of Jadovno is the full revelation of the secret of Kosovo and confirmation of the Kosovo choice and Kosovo covenant. Up until then Serbian fate 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 [our] Golgotha (Jevtic 1987:5).

Now let's hear what the "Prince of Serbian Poetry," Matija Beckovic had to say on Kosovo. Beckovic, a distinguished looking, white-haired Montenegrin living in Belgrade whose poetry was steeped in regional dialect and "Montenegrin metaphysics," was a pre-eminent national poet enjoying near divine status as both a member of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the president of the Serbian Writers' Association.

"Kosovo is the most expensive (dearest) Serbian word," proclaimed Matija Beckovic in the speech he gave in Canberra, Australia in 1989 as a part of the celebration of 600th anniversary of Kosovo Battle.

It has been paid for with the blood of the whole people. With that price in blood it became enthroned on the throne of the Serbian language. Without blood it couldn't have been bought, without blood it couldn't be sold.

The Kosovo Battle has never ended. It is as if the Serbian people fight only one battle – enlarging the Kosovo boneyard, adding weeping upon weeping, joining new martyrs to Kosovo martyrs. Kosovo has long since reached Jadovno and it is a miracle that the whole Serbian land hasn't assumed the name of Kosovo.

Kosovo is the equator of the Serbian planet. The roof of the lower and the foundation of

the upper world. Kosovo is a hearth that assembles, a pillar that congregates the Serbian people. Kosovo is the crossroads on which the Serbs found themselves and found their path. Kosovo is the deepest wound, the longest remembrance, the most vivid memory, the most beloved ash – the spiritual cradle of the Serbian people (Beckovic 1989:19, 23).

On the mystical body of Serbdom, the Archbishop Atanasije Jevtic inscribed the Cross of Serbian suffering by making a pilgrimage from Kosovo to Jadovno and back. It was a journey both in time and in space, both horizontal and vertical. Kosovo is the bottom, the base of the Serbian Golgotha, but also the peak, the ascension of the whole people to the Heavenly Kingdom – the migration heavenwards that Nogo talks about. Beckovic's juxtaposition of pillars and wounds, equators and hearths, crossroads and cradles induces the same kind of motion sickness. Kosovo is both above and below, it is in the past, in the present and in the future, it is the alpha and omega of the Serbian national being, and it is fundamentally identical to Jadovno.

One of the major premises that underlies the Kosovo and Jadovno narratives is the premise that links bones, graveyards, and spilt blood, with soil, borders and territory. Beckovic, as ever, succeeds in giving one of the most succinct formulations:

According to our popular belief, the land where there are graves is not for sale. Householders without progeny, or those who feared that their descendants might sell the land would prevent this possibility by burying their dead in the yard. Both the buyer and the seller would balk at the grave. In the Kosovo graveyard the whole Serbian people have been buried and that's why Serbs can neither sell nor trade that land (Beckovic 1989:28).

Beckovic first gives us what seems to be a sober ethnological information about Serbian beliefs regarding the relationship between the graves and soil and then, in his trademark fashion, he shocks us with his metaphysical paradox: if the *whole* of Serbian people were buried in the Kosovo graveyard, who is then left (to sell or not to sell the land)? This is a brilliant example of yet another code phrase that jolts the listener into entering the metaphysical world of the nation. What we cannot grasp with our ordinary logic must therefore pertain to some greater mystery. Nation can obviously perish completely yet continue to exist. It dies only to be resurrected.

And the native soil, drenched with blood and strewn with the bones of ancestors or martyrs, obviously plays an important mediating role in this resurrection process.

Belgrade ethnologist Ivan Colovic made a detailed study of the major components of this national metaphysics and came up with the following summary of the logic underlying the relationship between nation, bones and soil:⁹

The mythical regeneration of the ethnos is realized by the fertilization of the native soil with native blood. This is a magic, or more precisely, a sacrificial fertilization through the medium of the blood spilt in the war for the living space, that is to say, for the ethnically defined state territory. This is the blood with which, it is said, "every foot of our land is soaked." The soil fertilized by the blood of those who fell for the native land is given the role of the ethnic uterus, while the wombs of individual biological mothers are reduced to the role of relaying the embryos that come *ex terra*. ...The survival of the people takes place in two installments, as the eternal alteration between two times, the time of death and the time of resurrection. To encourage their fighters, the promoters of war like to borrow the image of the resurrection from religion and transform it into a propaganda slogan: "There is no resurrection without death!" (Colovic 1997:23)

In 1988 and 1989, as a part of the comprehensive preparations for the commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the Kosovo Battle, the holy relics of Prince Lazar, the leader of the Serbian army at Kosovo, were carried from the Patriarchate in Belgrade through parts of Croatia and Bosnia, back to Serbia and finally returned to the monastery Gracanica in Kosovo. The relics were passing through the same areas in which the pits were being excavated and the bones of WWII genocide victims reburied. The Serbian Orthodox Church organized both. There was no question that these rituals were marking the extent of what was seen as the maximal potential range of Serbian territory.

It was Vuk Draskovic who formulated the relationship between graves and territory most clearly.¹⁰ In the speech he gave at the Serbian Writers' Association in 1989, he famously stated that in the case of Yugoslavia's breakup, the Western borders of Serbia will actually extend as far as the Serbian pits and graves in Croatia. If Yugoslavia disintegrates, he said in a typical poetic exaggeration, the right of vote will be extended to Jasenovac and Jadovno, to all our pits"

(Draskovic 1990:111). In this ghoulish metaphor then, the dead will vote under the ground and will claim the part of Croatia framed by their pits and graves for a new, enlarged Serbia.¹¹

Kosovo and Jadovno were connected by means of ritual performances and pilgrimages. In public discourses the nationalist poets like Nogo and Beckovic connected them in pithy, paradoxical formulas. Victimhood in its archetypal, metaphysical, eternal power was the main message of this discourse. Launched by poets, multiplied and disseminated massively through regime media, the story of how "they" slaughtered "us" has bombarded Serbian citizens incessantly at least since 1988. Needless to say, such "monumental evil" done to "innocent victims" cried out for redress. Yet, hate towards Serbia's enemies (mostly "our own brothers" – Croats and Bosnian Moslems) was usually not enunciated explicitly in the poets' discourse. But revenge and reconquest were precisely the secret message of this whole barrage of bloodcurdling metaphors.

In one of his poems, Branko Miljkovic once asked "How can I jab a tender word into a hard ear? The poet was despairing of his subtle messages ever penetrating the crass sensibilities of ordinary people. Miljkovic's suicide in 1961, at the age of 27, surrounded him with a Romantic aura and made him a favorite poet among adolescent rebels and dreamers. The poets of 1980s and 1990s led by Beckovic and Nogo, however, were, on the contrary, jabbing hard words into ears made "tender" by their eagerness to receive the message of victimized Serbdom.

This avalanche of extreme words did not necessarily make ordinary people in Serbia into rabid nationalists ready to fight for Greater Serbia, as evidenced, for instance, by widespread draft-dodging in most Serbian cities. Most people under most circumstances in most places hold onto views that under close inspection are heterogeneous and often outright contradictory. A great variety of often logically incompatible ideas about Milosevic, Yugoslavia, Serbia, Communism, Kosovo, etc. have circulated among the citizens of Serbia during the last decade or so, and were often held by one and the same person without any clear sense of inconsistency. Even if, in general, one can say that the avalanche of hard words coming from the poets of Serbdom had indeed effected a turn from widespread Yugoslavism to Serbian particularism, that turn was slow, torturous, hesitant, incoherent, and subject to reversals. After

all, the ideological work of building Yugoslavism was immense and of longer duration. The slogan of Yugoslav brotherhood and unity was driven into tender ears for more than 40 years before the message of Serbdom got its turn. It was hard work turning the tide.

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Endnotes

¹ This is a slightly expanded version of the paper read at the San Francisco AAA Meetings in November 2000. The original version was written before the September 2000 elections and October "revolution" in Serbia that brought Milosevic down. I am, however, leaving the paper as it was – a "voice from the dark past."

The best single source in Serbian for Milosevic's political career is Slavoljub Djukic's *Kako se dogodio vodja (How the Leader Happened)* (Djukic 1992), but there is now a number of good accounts available in English (e.g. Cohen 1993, 1997, and especially Cohen 2001, Djilas 1993, Vujacic 1995, Woodward 1995, Silber 1996, Budding 1998, Gordy 1999).

³ Milosevic befriended Stambolic while still a student at the Belgrade Faculty of Law. As Stambolic rapidly ascended the rungs of political power in Serbia he would typically arrange 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 the head of the Belgrade party committee, and when he became the president of Serbia, Milosevic succeeded him as a chief of the Serbian party.

⁴ It is in this context that the term “ethnic cleansing” originated. It was used in Serbia to describe the supposed program of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo to eliminate all the non-Albanian minorities in the province, most importantly the Serbs and Montenegrins.

⁵ “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).

⁶ This is of course, the territorial claim that cultural anthropologists like to make against realist or rational choice political science. As Verdery puts it, arguing for the inclusion of the study of “dead bodies” in postsocialism, “I hope to show how we might animate the study of politics in general, energizing it with something more than the opinion polls, surveys, analyses of “democratization indices,” and game-theoretic formulations that dominate so much of the field of comparative politics” (Verdery 1999:26). I will not enter into abstract discussion about the symbolic or sacral or cultural aspects of politics here, but will let my eloquent poets and writers weave their word enchantments on their own.

⁷ Other narrative links, such as those that draw on the analogies to Jewish history, are explored in greater length in Chapter 5 of my dissertation (Zivkovic 2001).

⁸ The notorious concentration camp Jasenovac run by the Croatian Ustase is another such term, and arguably in much wider use than Jadovno. The numbers of people who perished at Jasenovac (and the percentages of various ethnic groups therein) were hotly disputed in the late 1980s – with Serbian side exaggerating and the Croatian side minimizing (Tudjman’s role in this minimization was notorious). Jasenovac had visibility, even during Tito’s rule when such disputes were suppressed. The appeal of Jadovno – a pit among many pits – for the nationalist poets in the 1980s, I would argue, was precisely in its character of

suppressed memory. Here was something presumably as terrible as Jasenovac but excluded from public awareness. Poetic pilgrimages and homages to Jadovno thus had an additional appeal of bringing the forbidden to light. This is not to say that Jasenovac was absent from the poetic slogans. One of the most bloodcurdling of Beckovic’s metaphors, for instance, proclaimed Jasenovac “the largest Serbian underground city.”

⁹ These summaries are given in a playful, tongue-in-cheek spirit and with the full awareness of their artificiality. It is a thankless task, in addition to being methodologically wrong, says Colovic, “to decompose myths into a set of clearly distinguished motifs and topoi, or into a catalogue of clearly formed ideas and representations, for mythical discourse is characterized by fragmentariness, fluidity and ambivalence. This inherent “resistance” of the myth to analytical interpretations, however, is somewhat reduced when we talk about modern political myths because they are a result of mythologization, that is to say, of the reworking of the “original” mythical material under a particular angle, whose magnitude could be determined” (Colovic 1997:13).

¹⁰ The following joke that I heard in Serbia attests to the notoriety of this formula while providing a highly ironic and self-reflexive commentary on the whole graves=territory logic: Bosnian spaceship lands on the Moon. The Bosnian space team is comprised of three delegations, Croat, Muslim and Serb, and they have to stake their claims to the Moon territory. “We are used to mountains,” say the Muslims, “so we will take all the mountains.” “We cannot live without the sea,” Croats say, “so we will take all the Moon seas.” Nothing’s left for Serbs. One of them takes out his gun and shoots his fellow Serb. “Where there are Serbian graves, that’s Serbia.”

¹¹ Denich (1994), Hayden (1994) and, drawing on both, Verdery (1999) have written extensively about how in the late 1980s and early 1990s, exhumation and reburial of those slain in WWII helped symbolically revive the genocide and played an important part in the nationalist mobilization that led to the dismemberment of Yugoslavia.