

11-2014

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Recommended Citation

Torlo, Maja (2014) "Religion Misused by Serbs and Croats," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 34 : Iss. 5 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol34/iss5/2>

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RELIGION MISUSED BY SERBS AND CROATS

By Maja Torlo

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Abstract:

This research concentrates on the Christian and Orthodox religion among the Serbs and Croats in former Yugoslavia and how it contributed to the outbreak of the Serbo-Croat war in 1992. This is done by assessing the main ways in which religion was abused and twisted to raise anger, fear, and enmity between Croats and Serbs by both nationalistic leaders and Church leaders in the period from the communist rule to the outbreak in 1992. Therefore, first, the following things are assessed: the consequences of (1) identification and grouping of people along religious and ethnic lines, (2) mass religious events, which estranged the nations, (3) minimization of the cultural similarities through striving to present each nation as fundamentally different and, to an extent, (4) the failure of ecumenical dialogue under communism. Furthermore, the contribution of the enforcement of homogenous identity and the fusion of religion and ethnicity into one is determined, allowing for a better understanding of the actual role religion played among the two ethnicities. Crucial for understanding the course of events is the conveyed characteristic that ethnicity and religion were so deeply interlaced that it was almost impossible to determine where one began and the other ended. And finally, the last and crucial phase during the disintegration of Yugoslavia is analyzed, as it is where nationalistic leaders worked hard to gain dominance among their people and turn one ethnicity against the other by playing on memories, past wars, the atrocities during World War Two, etc.

Introduction

Ethno-religious¹ conflicts have dominated the modern world, especially in the post-Cold War period. Yugoslavia was a crossroad of the Orthodox Byzantine East, the Roman Catholic

¹ Ethno-religious conflict is a situation where groups of different religious and ethnic background engage in conflict due to fear, suspicion, lack of trust etc. <http://www.academicjournals.org/ingoj/pdf/pdf2011/Oct/Fawole%20and%20Bello.pdf> accessed on 6/10/2012 13:10

West, and the Islamic Southeast. Its nations, among which the most prominent were Croats and Serbs, first lived under foreigners and then united into a system that was dominated by Serbs and renamed Yugoslavia in 1929. During World War Two, the state was infiltrated and torn apart by Nazis and their puppet state² with Ante Pavelić as the leader. Widespread massacres, especially of Serbs, Jews, and Roma (Gypsies) were committed across Yugoslavia. Ustaše³ were engraved into the memories of the Serb due to the forcible conversion and widespread killings they committed. Under Josip Broz-Tito's control, partisans⁴ liberated the country from the Nazis and then created the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia with a communist regime in control. Tito suppressed nationalistic tendencies and animosities between the people during his reign. The idea of "brotherhood and unity" became the cultural religion⁵ that connected Yugoslavs. But the idea of Yugoslavia was damaged. Their religious leaders, mainly heads of Churches and religious writers, rallied the people around their respective Churches. The difference between Catholicism and Orthodoxy, which was minimized during the secular period under Yugoslavia, started to be emphasized. Religion started to represent the synonym of ethnicity; they became too intertwined, which was crucial for the outcome in 1992. Thus, the reconciliation that was attempted under communism began to fade, and nationalistic and ethnic rhetoric took the lead. After Tito's death, fear and suspicion, intensified by religious leaders and nationalistic politicians, led to one ethnicity seeking domination while the other sought independence. As memories of violence and animosity between people were re-invoked and manipulated by nationalistic and religious leaders, one side accused the other for the atrocities of the past and of planning new ones, and the situation escalated into the Serbo-Croat war of 1992. Thus in the following sections this paper will discuss to what extent Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, used in the ways mentioned above, caused the outbreak of the Serbo-Croat war.

Period Under Communism and the Deterioration of Church Relations

Under communism certain important events took place which hindered the stability of the regime: grouping of people around religion and ethnicity, mass religious events which estranged

² Independent nation of Croatia

³ Label for the Croats who sided with Hitler

⁴ The communist-led resistance fighters, a.k.a the National Liberation Army

⁵ It became the erzats- religion of the whole Yugoslav culture, the civil religion of all the Yugoslav people regardless of ethnicity.

the nations, and minimization of the cultural similarities through striving to present each nation as fundamentally different.

While Tito was alive, a period of semi-peace enveloped Yugoslavia as unresolved issues between the regime and the churches, and between churches themselves, were still present. Through their history, these churches, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and the Catholic Church of Croats (CCC), have always been ultimate guides of their believers. Convinced it was their duty, they often parted from the realm of the sacred and engaged in politics. Crucial for understanding the course of events was the fact that ethnicity and religion were so deeply interlaced that it was impossible to separate them. However, under communism, the Churches were deprived of political activity. The cultural religions of Catholicism and Orthodoxy were substituted by “Brotherhood and Unity”.

In the 1960s, Vatican together with figures such as Vjekoslav Bajsić and Tomislav Šagi-Bunić attempted to reintroduce the ecumenical reconciliation between SOC and CCC. However, the request by SOC for a public apology for the Ustaša killings of Serbs received a cool response and reconciliation deteriorated. The League of Communists of Serbia, at a session in 1972, accused SOC of being “distrustful and unreceptive toward reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the Catholic Church” and of “opening the explosive issue of the Second World War massacres at Jasenovac and other Ustaša crimes while making no reference to Četnik Crimes”⁶.

Thus, as reconciliation between churches faded, in several settings in the 1980s both churches strained relations between Serbs and Croats awaking nationalism by enforcing homogenous identity,⁷ or identities based on common origin, culture, and beliefs of nations along ethnic and religious lines. Rallying points used were the historical myths, symbols, places of worship (sacred spaces each nation honored and wanted to protect) making it possible to abuse the feelings and fears of people. Thus, in the early 1980s, Churches staged massive pilgrimages with which they “sought to flex muscles, deliver a message to enemies, encourage the faithful, revitalize the faith, and mobilize believers in response to crisis and challenge.”⁸ The Great

⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

⁷ Homogenous identities meaning identities which are shared by people of common origin/ethnicity/religion: purely Croat Catholic identities or purely Serb Orthodox identities.

⁸ Vjekoslav Perica, *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 67.

Novena of 1979⁹ (prayer gathering) served such a purpose for the CCC. At that gathering a speech held by Cardinal Franjo Kuharić took overtones of nationalistic rhetoric: referring to the Serb Church, its creation was portrayed as a misfortune that occurred due to St. Sava's deceit of Serbs. Serbs while under Ottomans were accused of jealousy toward the more free Catholics, which the vehement aggression against Stepinac by Serbs helped by enforcing the adoration of Stepinac among Catholics.¹⁰ Stepinac was simultaneously a national figure who resisted Nazis, defending the Serbs against Ustaša and their violence, and, for Croats, a martyr who, because he refused to betray Rome, was imprisoned and oppressed under communists. These speeches, tarnished with nationalism, drew great support from audiences, giving them a sense of belonging, reviving national emotions, and showing them who their enemies were: those attacking their saints, nation, and heritage. Franić finished the ceremony by reinforcing the idea of SOC as the Byzantine invader: “God rendered to us Catholic Croats this land in which we have lived for a thousand and three hundred years, and we will not let anyone else rule over us in our own land.”¹¹ CCC, by rushing to defend and reinserting itself into the center of Croatian nation, contributed to national awakening, but also to the revival of nationalism.

Concurrently, Serbs held their greatest jubilee: 800th anniversary of birth of St.Sava. As with the Novena, it served to mark SOC as the last stronghold-enforcer of nationalism. The topic of Ustaše was again played onto, raising nationalistic feelings, and the determination of the people never to allow it again, while Četniks were not mentioned. It invoked pride and nationalism with myths such as the Kosovo myth (valorous Serbian defeat by Turks) aiming at reviving the great “Serbdom” and persuading people that Serbia was facing disintegration which needed to be stopped by the unification of Serbs; voicing the alleged violence against Serbs by Croats and Albanians.¹² The SOC strongly and effectively presented itself as the sole political and spiritual leader. These gatherings invoked ethno-religious violence through abuse of religion and myths. As both nationalistic revivals were occurring almost simultaneously, a battle of churches had already begun in the 1960-70s.

Due to conflicts between Churches, from then on a need arose to differentiate one nation from the other as much as possible, which further alienated the ethnicities and deteriorated their

⁹ Ibid., pp. 65-69.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 70.

¹² Ibid. pp. 50-56.

relationship in the 1980s. “Identity is built on difference, and when differences become too small, identity becomes threatened,”¹³ especially in Yugoslavia, as Serbs and Croats shared a common language, the Serbo-Croatian. Thus, groups sought ways of distancing themselves from the other, finding shelter among their own. The national origin, which always included religion, was a crucial component of identity and culture. It was necessary to present it as completely different from the other—in short, to present it as the glue of the nation. Thus, different historiographies were written in Yugoslavia: histories that were subjective and nationalistic and, crucially, encouraged, accepted, and aided by Churches. Debates between historians from both sides began, each contesting to glorify its own version and disgrace the other. The Serbians portrayed the decision of the Croats to side with Rome after the Great Schism as a selfish decision by Croat kings for personal gain. Croats on the other hand talked of Serbs as tricked into choosing to stay with Constantinople and Orthodoxy. Furthermore, Serbs argued that Croats and Serbs were one before the Schism. At the Great Novena, such statement was vehemently protested. Instead it was asserted that Croats and Serbs were ethnically different people and should have independent states. Further aggressive and emotional debates on very explosive topics of the Ustaše and Četnik killings, and also the Croatian oppression by Serbs during the first Yugoslavia, were elaborated on. Understandably, such sensitive topics had the great effect of propaganda, stirring animosity and hatred, and also fear of such tragic events reoccurring. An urge to prevent that increased, but even before Tito died animosities had greatly risen. Rhetoric with nationalistic overtones was not only used by nationalists themselves, but first by anti-communists and clergy. With that, possibility of reconciliation seemed increasingly bleak.

Death of Tito and the Beginning of the End

Tito died on May 4, 1980--a grievance for all. The deterioration of the economy, which had already started under Tito, now reached troubling dimensions and gave a gloomy outlook, making it easier for people to be manipulated against each other. Combined with numerous transitions, the survival of the communist regime became inevitable. Scandals and corruptions, seen as causes of economic decline, invalidated the regime. Accusations between the ethnicities of Yugoslavia began; each was convinced that others had caused the problems. Seeing that the

¹³ Torsten Kolind, *Post-war Identification: Everyday Muslim Counterdiscourse in Bosnia Herzegovina*. (Oakville, CT: Aarhus University Press, 2008), p. 39.

Communist Party was discredited, the elites turned to the nationalistic, ethno-religious rhetoric as means of gaining support and undermining rival ethnicities. Churches followed a similar course; they found nationalism to be a very efficient tool for gaining legitimacy and influence. The revival of religion, at the price of desecularization, increased the politicization of religion and vice-versa. The Serbs and SOC saw an opportunity to gain the dominant position in Yugoslavia, the one they had had before, and to form the Great Serbia. Croats, on the other hand, believed it could do much better on its own and yearned to join the West, as Croatia was a more prosperous state. In such a society of divided aspirations, it was difficult to reach agreements, which ultimately spelled ruin for Yugoslavia. In January of 1990, the League of Communists met in Belgrade for the last time. The meeting was unproductive. Slovenia and Croatia were oriented towards independence, and Serbia for a centralized Yugoslavia. Failing to reach an agreement, representatives went back to their republics, gave up on communism, and continued politics along religious and nationalist lines rather than political ones.

Significantly, the inability to find a solution for the problems regarding Yugoslavia was a foreshadowing of its downfall as ethnicity and religion became the favored markers of the new cultural identities and provided the social matrix within which political interests were defined.¹⁴ People found it hard to find their place, or legitimacy for their culture and religion inside the Yugoslavian system, and thus became easy targets for the nationalist rhetoric of elites and churches. “Brotherhood and Unity” was replaced with a mind-set of "us against them:" hatred for those responsible for the past sufferings and losses of each nation. Multi-ethnic society ceased to hold credibility and each group chose religious-cultural identification. The Communist Party was right when in 1984 it stated:

If we allow [a] multiparty system in this country, all . . . the people would get would be several new ethnic and religious parties without any specific political or economic agenda and issues except hatred for one another and their leaders' cries for partitions and secessions...¹⁵

Inner-Church Problems and the Intensification of Conflicts between Churches

These lethal methods of nationalism against the regime, including the intensified conflicts between the Churches, only added to the already highly fractious situation. From the 1960's on,

¹⁴ R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), p. 57.

¹⁵ Perica, *op.cit.*, p. 57.

even though both churches had recovered significantly, the Serbian Orthodox Church faced challenges during the period from 1970s to the 1990s. Already in 1970s it was faced with the uprising of Albanians in Kosovo. The clergy publicly lamented the alleged constant violence of Albanians against the Serb minority in Kosovo. The SOC responded to Albanian protests with propaganda that defined the exodus of Serbs as genocide of Serbs and filled many reports and articles with alleged rapes, murders, and destruction of monuments. The Kosovo myth prevented any possibility of Serbs giving up their claims to Kosovo. As the Church was constantly reminding Serbs of the pride of their nation, the constant struggles and reports of deaths of Serbs, it only enhanced their resolved to defend it. Simultaneously, the SOC also faced division of its branches such as the Macedonian Orthodox Church which wanted independence and a North American branch broke away from the Patriarchate of the SOC. Significantly, the relationships between the Churches was frustrated by the Vatican's behavior. Vatican sympathized with the Macedonian Orthodox Church's aspiration for independence and expressed support for the Albanian autonomy through series of radio broadcasts. Though the Pope didn't support these movements to aggravate the SOC, it came across as aiming at exactly that. This can be seen in the SOC Patriarch's statement:

No other Orthodox Church has accepted the forceful separation of one part of the Serbian Orthodox Church from the rest of it. On another side, they (Macedonians) are recognized by Vatican! Doesn't this one detail really tell you enough?¹⁶

These two crises widened the void between the SOC and the Catholic Church. The Serbian Church found its solutions in invoking the nationalistic feeling among the Serbs as the most powerful tool of national and emotional mobilization. It came to be an integral part of the Serbian national identity: "The nation is a corporate unity, held together much more by force and emotion, than by mind."¹⁷

Furthermore, the Serbian frustration was fuelled by representations of Serbian people as the greatest martyrs after Jews and drew energy from the interpretation of their history as a series of sufferings and injustices. The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts accused Croatia of persecuting the Serbian minority, which gained support from SOC. And Croatian nationalism and anticommunism was fed by the Medjugorje miracles. Visions of the Virgin Mary that

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁷ Reinhold Neibuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2002). p. 44.

happened there, greatly celebrated and channeled through media, angered the Serbs. They experienced it as a slap in the face of the Church and claimed that this was only the celebration of Ustaša and their reawakening. The Serbian newspaper “Pravoslavlje” published a statement of Svetozar Dušanić suggesting the division of Yugoslavia into a Byzantine and Roman sphere of influence due to tremendous differences between the Croats and Serbs in historical, cultural, and religious aspects. He believed it would divert more tragedies, such as the killings during World War II.¹⁸ This was also a way to frighten Serbs and increase their hatred and suspicions of Croats. Furthermore, in 1989 the SOC demanded reparation for the losses at the hand of Ustaša from Croatia. Serbian accusations of the mistreatment and murders of Serbs in Croatia were labeled by the Croatian government as means of aggravating inter-church and inter-ethnic relations.

As seen through the examples, the reconciliation of the Churches had greatly deteriorated by propaganda of the SOC regarding massacres by Ustaša and mistreatment of Serbian minority in Croatia, but also by the CCC’s support of Međugorje apparitions without empathy for the Serbs.

But what crucially angered the SOC was the unwillingness of the CCC to apologize for killings and its quest for the beatification of the controversial figure of Alojzije Cardinal Stepinac. Even though it was a controversial topic, the CCC could have still apologized for all involved in the conversion and murder of great numbers of Serbs. The CCC was right in protesting against the portrayal of all Croats as killers, but an apology might have greatly repaired the relations between the Churches. If the SOC hadn’t persevered with its demand in such a strong manner it might have encouraged the Catholics to express their apologies. Instead, Croats tended to minimize casualties while Serbs exaggerated the numbers. This left space for nationalists to play on these feelings of anger and fear for their own nationalistic aspirations. “Ethnic and religious leaders are key players in defining ‘the people’, a slippery concept difficult to control but easy to manipulate.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Perica, *op.cit.*, p. 158.

¹⁹ Appleby, *op.cit.*, p.58.

Multiparty Elections and Rise of Nationalists Backed by Churches

Sadly, the religious and political leaders from late 80s appealed to religious identities, ethnic claims and historical struggles to divide Serbs and Croats (uniting their own) and set the ground for conflict. Churches, especially at that time, felt it was their mission to support the nationalistic parties which would allegedly defend their people and prevent them from being enslaved.

In the late 80s, political leaders from all sides arose. These included extreme nationalists such as Serbian Slobodan Milošević and Croatian Franjo Tuđman. They found that by invoking religion they could win the support of the Churches, and thus, of their followers. Presenting themselves as champions for the hopes of their nations they won sympathy and support. Clergy in Serbia believed that Milošević would lead the Serbian nation out of its suffering and unify their territory. The image of Greater Serbia was reawakened. Milošević knew how to play on the wounds of memory and anger, such as the Kosovo myth and Ustašas, and connections to tradition, history, and ethnicity. The main fear of SOC, which was passed onto the people, was disunity, and Milošević was well aware of that.

On St. Vitus Day, in the conclusion of the 600th celebration of the Kosovo battle, Slobodan Milosevic gave a speech in which he conveyed that new battles for Serbia shall soon be fought, including armed battles.²⁰

Furthermore, in the pre-election year of 1989 Milošević would be remembered not only by the statement “Only Unity Saves Serbs”²¹, but also for, “nobody will ever beat you [Serbs] again.”²² His nationalist partner from BiH, Radovan Karadžić, in 1991 at funeral dedicated to fallen victims of Ustaše, called Serbs to look at the Church as the unifier of the people and rally around it. Milošević’s ultra-nationalistic policies were blindly adopted and justified by his appeal to religion.

The historian (and former Yugoslav Army general) Tuđman, on the Croat side, had already built himself an image under Tito when he refused to acknowledge the new (Serbian) historiography. He was also a partisan; not Ustaša, but he was nationalistic enough to gain the sympathy of the CCC and its full support. With his powerful speeches and strong appearance, he made them less afraid of Serbs and Milošević. Seemingly, he would prevent Croatians from

²⁰ Perica, *op.cit.*, p. 128.

²¹ Appleby, *op.cit.*, p. 68.

²² Robert Thomas, *Serbia under Milosevic: Politics in the 1990s* (London: C. Hurst and Co. 1999), p. 44.

being dominated by Serbs again, and even fulfil the ideal of Greater Croatia by annexing “Croatian” parts of BiH when Croatia became independent.

The sacralized quest for an autonomous polity—for a nation and a state corresponding to each ethnic group—inflamed the competition between ethnic groups for control of disputed territory played into the hands of extremist politicians and religious leaders.²³

Thus, in 1990 when multiparty elections were held, the nationalistic leaders backed by churches won: Tuđman’s Croatian nationalistic party, HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union) won by a slight margin (thanks to CCC) and Milošević’s party SDS (Socialist Party of Serbia) won in Serbia. In Milošević’s case, even though SOC hadn’t helped him win directly, a lot of clergy supported him and joined his party. The CCC gave unlimited support for the new regime and its aim of independence. HDZ became the movement for independence and sovereignty—a reward for the loyalty of Catholics. They used nationalistic propaganda in order to rally people around ethnic nationalism and both Churches. Seeing the dominating parties as national movements gave them monopoly over their states and the freedom to misuse religion and the emotions of the people.

Propaganda: The Last Push

At the peak of the friction in the 90s, propaganda through media was used to misuse the past and cause violence. Funerals arranged by SOC for victims of the Ustaša genocide or celebrations of saints were transmitted by TVs across Serbia. Nationalists and politicians held speeches against the other Church. Thus, SOC was a tool of nationalistic propaganda. Similarly, at the opening of the Parliament in Croatia, pictures were taken of religious and nationalistic leaders conveying the idea of unity of church and nation. Religious newspapers were used for politics. *Glas koncila*, a Croatian newspaper which supported Tuđman published articles dedicated to him. *Veritas*, another Catholic magazine, published a speech in which the author clearly showed the relationship of the Church and State:

The cross of Christ stands next to Croatian flag, Croatian bishop next to Croatian minister of state. Present at masses in churches are officers and Croatian soldiers. Guardsmen wear rosaries around their necks... Thank God it all ended well, due to Pope and Croatian politics.²⁴

²³ Appleby, *op.cit.*, p. 60.

²⁴ Quoted in Paul Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno: Ethnoreligious Warfare in the Balkans* (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 130.

Other propaganda served the same purpose. Serbian hierarchs published false reports on destruction of monuments and murders/rapes of Serbs to mobilize the Serbs in Croatia and cause rebellions instead of pacifying people. Allegedly, the main targets were priests, women, and children. They compared Tuđman to Pavelić, and warned people to prepare for genocide. In response, Tuđman removed all Serbian cultural expressions from Croatia, a move backed by Cardinal Kuharić. Symbols which to Serbs seemed as invocations of Ustaše spread across Croatia. This was deadly as Tuđman disregarded the unstable position of Serbs in Croatia created by the propaganda.

Immediately after the free multiparty elections in the Republic of Croatia 1990, mistreatment of Croats by Serbs who went around in vehicles with pictures of the Serbian leader and Church symbols was reported. Already by 1991, many clashes had occurred where Serbs attacked Croatian Catholic villagers and police units. Large massacres occurred at Škabrnja, Kusunje. Thus, Serbo-Croat war erupted in 1992.

Conclusion

Thus, efforts of Church figures, even though not aiming for a war, resulted in it. In creating such merging of religion and ethnicity, and playing on past traumas, wounds, and unsurpassed animosity, a situation of cracking tension was created. The failure to find a solution for the economic problems and the future of Yugoslavia allowed for the creation of identities based on religion and ethnicity. People, amid the economic crisis and the disintegration of the regime, were vulnerable to nationalistic rhetoric of Tuđman, Milošević, and the Churches, and were placed in a scenario of “us OR them.” The Kosovo crisis and propaganda speeches brought Serbs near the edge. But religion did not solely cause the outbreak of the war. The unstable climate of Yugoslavia, the gloomy outlook for the future caused by the deteriorating economy, the history of conflict between Serbs and Croats, and the propaganda, were all necessary for the situation in 1992 to pass into the Serbo-Croat war. Therefore, though a very important cause of the war, both a long and short-term one, it only caused the war to the extent of aiding nationalists in turning Serbs against Croats and of making people fearful and vengeful so that they would turn to the Churches as their guides and reinforce the Churches’ positions.

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