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RELIGION AND ETHNIC IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

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Introduction

This article explores how the two largest religious factions in the former Yugoslavia, Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, achieved ethno-religious congruency in the wake of state disintegration. The crucial question to this theme is how did religious elites influence ethnic identity formation?

Although the contentious issue of nationalism has received considerable attention since the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990's, the complex relationship between religion and the process of nationalist identity formation has yet to be sufficiently scrutinized. Many observers outside the Balkan arena have frequently characterized the period of Yugoslav disintegration as the outcome of a power struggle between megalomaniacal actors. Others saw the wars as primordially linked to violent chapters of history. This perspective, adopted most visibly by the international media, relentlessly claimed that Serb-Croat enmities were rooted in ancient ethnic hatreds, overlooking or underplaying long periods of peaceful coexistence.¹ Still other, less-primitive factors such as the rapidly failing economy of the 1980's, post-communist social developments in Eastern Europe, or geopolitical constraints on the region have been equally ignored many academics. I am interested in the complex relationship between religion and the process of nationalist identity formation during period of social upheaval.

¹ P.H. Liotta, *Dismembering the State: the Death of Yugoslavia and Why It Matters*. (New York: Lexington Books 2000), 3.

The simultaneous declarations of independence by Slovenia and Croatia in 1991 signaled the initial phase of complete disintegration from a centralized, multi-ethnic state in five politically independent entities (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and the remaining Yugoslav Federation).² Religion played an insignificant role at the outset of the secessionist conflicts, which first pitted Slovenia's territorial defense units against the numerically superior Yugoslav People's Army or JNA. Religious difference, however, rapidly became a contributing element as the conflict spread to Croatia and Bosnia. Misha Glenny observed that:

the wars increasingly assimilated the characteristics of religious struggle, defined by three great European faiths—Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam, the confessional detritus of the empires whose frontiers collided in Bosnia.³

Despite the exceptionally high number of inter-religious marriages, an ethnic delineation along lines of faith was continuously being applied whether the parties in conflict formally practiced one or not. In contrast to many other ethnic conflicts, historical and contemporary religious beliefs and experience tend to shape ethnicity and identity in the Balkans far more than in many other parts of the world.⁴ What contributions did religion make in shaping identity in the turbulent last decade?

Detailed analyses of Yugoslav society reveal that religion presents the clearest cultural marker.⁵ This does not suggest that the conflict was exclusively of a religious or civilizational nature.⁶ On the contrary, Yugoslav society under Communist rule had experienced extended periods of broad-based secularization across the confessional spectrum. Nevertheless, as racial, linguistic or class

² At the time of this writing, Serbia and Montenegro still formed the 'rump' Yugoslav federation or FRY. Since the election of Milo Djukanovic on 20 October 1997, his party, *Pobjeda je Crna Gora* (the Victory is Montenegro), has pushed for outright independence from Belgrade. The efforts of Momir Bulatovic's party *Za Jugoslaviju* (For Yugoslavia) have galvanized an opposition for the retention of the federation. A recent referendum, however, indicated that neither of the parties was capable of achieving an absolute majority, effectively postponing the question of Montenegrin independence until Spring 2002. Currently the two states are negotiating a new constitutional arrangement for a joint state of Serbia and Montenegro, abandoning the name Yugoslavia.

³ Misha Glenny, "Carnage in Bosnia, for Starters," *New York Times* 29 July 1993: A23.

⁴ Raju G.C. Thomas, "History, Religion and National Identity," in *The South Slav Conflict: History, Religion, Ethnicity and Nationalism*. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 25.

⁵ During the Titoist period the Slovenian and Macedonian languages were constitutionally recognized, although linguistically distinct from the larger Serbo-Croatian group which covers present-day Bosnia, Croatia and Yugoslavia. In these cases, one could claim that language would be a significant cultural marker. Despite nationalist rhetoric, linguistics generally agree that similar variants spoken in Croatia, Bosnia or Serbia all stem from the larger Serbo-Croat language group.

⁶ See Samuel P. Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order" for an explanation of how the historical borders of the Austro-Hungary, Ottoman and Byzantine empires accounts for the violent break-up of Yugoslavia.

differences were not stable foundations for ethnicity construction, religious affiliation became by default the only discernable characteristic among the warring parties. Members of the church hierarchy of Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs recognized a window of opportunity at an early stage to create a more congruent identity. Distinctive religious groups in modern times have often developed into ethnically self-conscious communities, but it has also often happened, particularly in Eastern Europe and in South Asia, that religious differences have been used or even created to establish or emphasize barriers.⁷

Religion was effectively manipulated as a cultural marker and mobilized as a standard for ethnic exclusion of other groups with little regard to the fragile multi-ethnic tapestry. Leaders of the three monotheistic confessions of Yugoslavia (for this project, Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy) all engaged in effusively distributing nationalist rhetoric with little as to other's interpretation. As will be noted later, such blatant lack of sensitivity for other's historical experiences reinforced old stereotypes and exacerbated current nationalist identity formation.

Necessary Conditions

Before any process of ethno-religious identification can be initiated, certain social settings conducive to such development must be available. The existence of favorable conditions in the late 1980's and early 1990's drastically increased the possibility of religiously motivated identity formation. I recognize three pronounced characteristics, which influenced the social and ecumenical environment in Yugoslavia. Firstly, massive social, economic or military upheaval is necessary for any initial development of nationalist movements. Ethnic communities are created and transformed by particular elites in modernizing, post-industrial societies undergoing dramatic social changes.⁸ The former communist states of Central and Eastern Europe all experienced different forms of severe social transformations ranging from the internal breakdown of social and economic structures (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary) to violent and/or ethnic conflict (Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia). This process invariably involves competition for political power and economic and social benefits between competing elites, both within and among different ethnic categories.⁹ Similar to political elites' struggle to consolidate power, religious leaders must also engage in competition to solidify their own power base.

Secondly, the process of intensifying the subjective meanings of a multiplicity of symbols and of striving to achieve multi-symbol congruence among a group of people defined initially by one or

⁷ Paul A. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1991), 24.

⁸ Brass, 25.

⁹ Ibid.

more central symbols becomes apparent.¹⁰ Ethnic demands center around a central symbol, such as religion, language or territory.¹¹ As confessional affiliation was the most recognizable marker in the former-Yugoslavia, both Croat Catholic and Serb Orthodox leaders strove to mobilize religion as the central symbol.

Lastly, efforts must be undertaken to produce greater internal unification. This is achieved by elites who increasingly stress the variety of ways in which the members of the group are similar to each other and collectively different from others, this process of identifying the other effectively sets into motion exclusionary identity formation.¹² Necessary for this development are nationalist adherents to persuade or coerce group members to change their language, religion, behavior or dress.¹³

This study examines the process by which Catholic and Orthodox elites profited from such an environment and implemented these tools to promote a congruent, centralized ethno-religious identity.

THE CHURCH'S CONTRIBUTION TO NATIONALIST IDENTITY FORMATION

This section will investigate how religion was symbolically employed as a factor for ethnic congruence and how nationalist identity was achieved along these lines. This section begins with a brief overview of the role of religion and secularization during Tito's communist regime. It is followed by a diametrical overview of the historical and modern factors, which made the rise of ethno-nationalism in the two religious communities possible.

Secularization in Communist Yugoslavia

Research conducted by Yugoslav analysts in the 1960's and 1970's observed a striking trend toward secularization.¹⁴ In relative terms, religious belief appeared less intense among the traditionally Orthodox segments of the population (Serbs, Montenegrins and Macedonians) than in Roman Catholic areas such as Slovenia and Croatia or among the Islamic population of Bosnia.¹⁵ However, despite regional variations, the trend indicated a marked decline in the identification and practice of all religious activities. Indeed, a country-wide survey of adults revealed that in the fifteen years after the

¹⁰ Ibid., 20.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 21.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Lenard J. Cohen, "Bosnia's Tribal Gods: the Role of Religion in Nationalist Politics," in *Religion and the War in Bosnia*. Ed. By Paul Mojzes (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press 1998), 47.

¹⁵ Ibid.

first census in 1953, the number of citizens expressing religious belief had plummeted to less than half of the population, while atheists, non-religious respondents and those indifferent to religion had collectively undergone a five-fold increase.¹⁶ It therefore became less difficult for Marshall Tito to promote his style of Socialist self-management and the unitary, inclusive model of Yugoslav multiethnic *Bratstvo i jedinstvo* (Brotherhood and Unity).

However, as the Communist regime began to encounter serious economic, political and inter-ethnic problems during the twilight of Tito's rule and the first half-decade of the post-Tito period, Yugoslav analysts began to identify new tendencies toward the slowing and possible reversal of the secularization process.¹⁷ The failures of economic policy from 1979 to 1985 contributed at least indirectly toward religious revitalization; in this period net personal income per worker fell by 26%, foreign debt stood at 18 billion US Dollars and massive waste of foreign loans in less productive or unprofitable investments in the poorest regions, chiefly Kosovo and Macedonia, made repayment very difficult.¹⁸ Additionally, the end of Tito's personal control and the mushrooming of internal conflicts concerning the accumulated problems of the one-party regime partially accounted for a major shift in public attitudes regarding religion.¹⁹

A 1985 survey of 6,500 people demonstrated an increased in religious belief; most notably in traditionally Catholic and Muslim regions of the country: 62.3% of Catholic families said they were religious, as compared with 43.8% from Muslim families and 26.2% from Orthodox families.²⁰ Another countrywide study of citizens employed in the social sector indicated that the trend toward enhanced religiosity might actually be stronger among younger people than among the older generation.²¹ The younger Yugoslav generation increasingly found itself unable to identify with Tito's central-minded 'Brotherhood and Unity' and thus began to search for more representative ethnic definitions.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁸ Aleksandar Pavkovic, *The Fragmentation of Yugoslavia: Nationalism in a Multinational State* (New York: St. Martin's Press 1997), 77.

¹⁹ Cohen, 51. Albanian nationalist demonstrations in Kosovo during 1981, more overt nationalism in the Serbian intelligentsia during 1985-1986 and festering dissatisfaction with Tito's earlier crackdown of the *Croatian Spring* nationalist movement became more menacing challenges to Yugoslavia's legitimacy as a state.

²⁰ Sabrina Petra Ramet, *Balkan Babel: Politics, Culture and Religion in Yugoslavia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1992), 140.

²¹ Cohen, 51.

As the economic and social woes after Tito's death in 1980 continued, members of different communities gradually lost confidence in the federation's legitimacy. The decrease of authority was characterized by a shift of political power from the federal, centralized system to the republic level; this transfer was constitutionally guaranteed by several amendments, most notably, in 1974.²² David Brown accurately summarizes such a political malaise: the inability of state elites to fulfill their developmental promises translates into the erosion of its main legitimacy ideology.²³ This forces disillusioned citizens to become more receptive to new social justice claims by aspiring political elites who depict ethnicity as the alternative imagined kinship community.²⁴ The rising desecularization, combined with constitutional decentralization, massive social and economic decline and the erosion of state legitimacy allowed Yugoslav religious elites, profiting from a vast social vacuum, to create more ethnically-congruent identities.

By 1990, the problems seemed irresolvable. In January of the same year representatives of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) from the eight republics assembled in Belgrade for the last time in an extraordinary Party congress.²⁵ The debate was mainly centered on the independence-minded Slovene Communists versus the Serb Communists supporting a centralized state system. Unable to reconcile their differences on reforms for the dying federal system, Slovenes, Serbs, Croats, Bosnians and Macedonians returned to their respective republics and began to politically organize themselves along ethnic, rather than policy lines. The failure to resolve the immediate issues of the federation signified the end of secular party politics in Yugoslavia.

Both the Orthodox and Catholic Churches actively pursued similar goals of restructuring from the remains of the once-inclusive Yugoslav identity an exclusionary, ethnically congruent model around their respective belief systems. As the Yugoslav system began to crumble, the elites of both confessions took advantage of the social vacuum left behind by the failing Communist ideology of 'Brotherhood and Unity.' Both churches have labored mightily to get close to a 100 percent fit between religion and ethnic identity among Serbo-Croatian speakers and have tended to reinforce

²² The 1963, 1969 and 1974 constitutional augmentations provided broad concessions of autonomy to the republics and to the autonomous regions of Kosovo and Vojvodina in Serbia. In Alex N. Dragnich's *Yugoslavia's Disintegration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), Tito engineered these amendments to quell any latent secessionist leanings. These two autonomous provinces were effectively awarded the same parliamentary right to veto policy as the other republics.

²³ David Brown, "Why is the Nation-State so Vulnerable to Ethnic Nationalism?" *Nations and Nationalism*, 4 (1998): 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Marcus Tanner, *Croatia: A Nation Forged in War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 220.

nationalism.²⁶ In relationship to nationalist identity formation, the churches are indeed both militant and national and, ironically, reinforce each other, as will be seen below.²⁷

The Serbian Orthodox Church

Perhaps the most central principle in the Serbian Orthodox Church (hereafter SOC) is its perception as the sole defender of Orthodoxy against Islam's expansion from the East and Catholicism's from the West. Ideologically, the SOC offers itself as the underpinning of traditional national security and the center of national life.²⁸ Several historical events have left permanent impressions on the SOC's ecumenical identity and are therefore crucial in examining its contribution to identity formation: the Battle of Kosovo (1389); war crimes committed against Orthodox Christians during the Nazi occupation of Croatia (1941-1945) and the participation of Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac; a nation-wide increase in ethnic tensions beginning in the late 1970's in Kosovo; the *Memorandum* published by the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts; and finally, the SOC's support of the authoritarian Milosevic regime.

The SOC and its links to the Serb nation lie in the historical origins in the southern-most Serb province of Kosovo. The historical defeat of Prince Lazar's forces at the hands of the advancing Ottomans at the Battle of Kosovo serves as one of the most significant historical pillars for Serbian ethnic identity and the SOC. On 28 June 1389 Turk forces engaged Prince Lazar at Kosovo Polje (Field of the Blackbirds).²⁹ Unable to secure support from the peoples of Central and Western Europe, the superior Ottomans handily defeated Prince Lazar's rag-tag army and beheaded him. Instead of reciting the legend as a military defeat, the Battle of Kosovo represents a badge of honor for Serbs.³⁰ The Ottoman's would rule for five centuries with the Serbs regaining independence only in the second half of the 19th century (1878) and the SOC reestablishing its autocephalous status in 1920.³¹

The events of World War II strengthened the SOC's image as defender of its flock, especially those living outside the borders of Serbia proper.³² The Nazi invasion of Yugoslavia ended the

²⁶ Bogdan Denitch *Ethnic Nationalism: the Tragic Death of Yugoslavia*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 30.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Radmila Radic, "Serbian Orthodox Church and the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina," in *Religion and the War in Bosnia*, 165.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Djordjevic, 152.

³² With exception of Slovenia, ethnic Serbs prior to the outbreak of civil war were represented in

Yugoslav monarchy under King Alexander I. The German 14th Tank Division entered Zagreb to rapturous cheers. On 10 April 1941, Croat Minister of the Armed Forces Slavko Kvaternik proclaimed the Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Drzhava Hrvatska*, hereafter NDH).³³ Waving the traditional red-and-white checkerboard flag, the NDH would embark on a policy to categorically eradicate undesirables from its society: Serbs, Jews and Roma.³⁴ Although the NDH and its *Ustasha* leader Ante Pavelic only lasted as long as Nazi Germany, it attempted to establish a singularly Catholic Croatia by enforced conversions, deportations, and mass extermination.³⁵

Despite conflicting stories of his relationship to Pavelic and Croatian fascism, many historians cite Archbishop of Zagreb, Alojzije Stepinac (1898-1960), as having played an instrumental role in the expulsion and maltreatment of Croatia's non-Catholic population. Instead of promoting restraint and understanding toward other religions in Croatia, Stepinac generally supported the intentions of the *Ustasha*. On 28 April 1941, a pastoral letter was read from all Catholic pulpits calling on the clergy and faithful to collaborate in the work of their leader, Pavelic.³⁶ Other local religious leaders, particularly the Franciscan order, fervently took up the message and offered their services in the mass killings and conversion of Orthodox 'schismatics.'

Archbishop Stepinac referred to these mass conversions in several letters as "a good occasion for us to help Croatia to save the countless souls."³⁷ In his own diary, Stepinac writes

The most ideal thing would be for the Serbs to return to the faith of their fathers; that is, to bow the head before Christ's representative, the Holy Father. Then we could as last breathe in this part of Europe, for Byzantinism has played a frightful role in connection with the Turks.³⁸

significant numbers in all the Yugoslav republics outside of Serbia proper, i.e. Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Vojvodina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo. Alex Dragnich claims on page 11 in *Yugoslavia's Disintegration* that roughly 40% of all Serbs lived outside the confines of 'narrow Serbia.'

³³ Richard West, *Tito and the Rise and Fall of Yugoslavia*. (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1995), 79.

³⁴ Gregory R. Copley, ed., *Defense and Foreign Affairs Handbook*. (London: International Media Corporation Ltd, 1996), 305.

³⁵ John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: the Secret History of Pius XII*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 249.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 253.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.

³⁸ Kaplan, 11.

While the exact number of NDH victims is still hotly debated (Croat sources claim 60,000 were exterminated, while Serbs offer figures of approximately one million), there is sufficient information to assume a large-scale and systematic removal of non-Croats.

Toward the end of the 20th century, Kosovo's historical importance resurfaced as tensions between the majority Muslim Albanians and minority Serbs intensified. Due to the Albanian population explosion and the exodus of Serbs beginning in the 1970's, the SOC warned about the Albanian menace.³⁹ SOC bishops from New Zealand, Europe and the Americas formulated an appeal entitled 'The Declaration of the Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church Against the Genocide Inflicted by the Albanians on the Indigenous Serbian Population, Together with the Sacrilege of Their Cultural Monuments in Their Own Country,' which contained lists of rapes, murders and the desecration of Orthodox places of worships.⁴⁰ This publication acted as a request for improved government protection against vandalism of their religious shrines and hostility toward Serbs and Orthodox clergy.⁴¹

The already precarious situation for both Serbs and Albanians was further enhanced as SOC leaders and intellectuals regularly issued charges of planned genocide perpetrated against Serbs, without any attempt to align its allegations with its internationally accepted definition.⁴² Obviously, it is quite difficult to assess the accuracy of such allegations. Nevertheless, such publications from the SOC certainly strengthened Serb resolve not to give up Kosovo and produced a powerful anti-Albanian feeling among Serbs.⁴³

Six years after Tito's death, the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (hereafter, SANU) published a pamphlet simply known as the *Memorandum*. Although mostly devoted to a calm assessment of Yugoslavia's economic travails and to promoting the kind of centralizing solutions favored by Yugoslav integrationists, the SANU *Memorandum* did contain venomous attacks of the persecution of Serbs in Kosovo and Croatia.⁴⁴ It claimed that despite their great sufferings on behalf of

³⁹ Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno: Ethnoreligious Warfare in the Balkans*. (New York: Continuum, 1995), 136.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Michael A. Sells, "Serbian Religious Nationalism, Christoslavism and the Genocide in Bosnia, 1992-1995," in *Religion and the War in Bosnia*, 201.

⁴² Ibid., 202.

⁴³ Paul Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno*, 136.

⁴⁴ Tanner, 212.

Yugoslavia, they were the most exploited and victimized during the Communist period.⁴⁵ This message was ravenously circulated up by the media and received staunch support from the SOC and an undistinguished, but successful LCY apparatchik: Slobodan Milosevic.⁴⁶

On 24 April 1987 Milosevic was sent to assess the situation in the Serb enclave of Kosovo Polje. After listening to ethnic Serbs complaints of suffering and mistreatment, Milosevic infamously guaranteed members of the Serb minority that no one had the right to beat the people (*niko ne sme da bije narod!*).⁴⁷ By quickly offering its support to the Milosevic regime, the SOC attempted to advance legitimate national, cultural and religious rights that were suppressed under Communism.⁴⁸ They perhaps did not realize that they entered into Faustian partnership with a despot.

The SOC sponsored a program in 1989, which, instead of calming the already stressed relations between ethnicities in other republics, caused greater destabilization. The six-hundred-year-old bones of Prince Lazar, borne from monastery to monastery with the media close behind through all the areas inhabited by Serbs, not only established the quasi-territorial claims for the ethnic Serb state, but also re-awakened days of glory as the first medieval state formed in Southeastern Europe, as if 1389 were yesterday.⁴⁹

Due to 45 years of strict exclusion by the atheist Communists, the SOC leadership leapt at the chance to regain its lost stature among its believers by placing itself behind Milosevic's authoritarian policy. In a deceptive counter-reaction, Milosevic actively mobilized the SOC to amplify his future aims. The ultimate conflation of Church and state leaders, the exaggerated allegations of genocide against Serbs in Kosovo and Croatia and the SOC's historic role of defending Serbdom took place in 1989 at the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Polje. Milosevic was able to present himself as the man who has reversed the defeat of 1389 and reclaimed the Serbs heartland for the '*nebeski narod*:' the heavenly nation.⁵⁰ Surrounded by a group of black-robed Serb Orthodox bishops and facing huge crowds, starved of the romance of history and of contact with religion during Tito's rule, Milosevic declared, in a fiery speech, that Serbdom "after six centuries was confronting battles they are not armed, though that cannot yet be excluded."⁵¹ Soon after Kosovo's status as a virtually

⁴⁵ Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno*, 162.

⁴⁶ Tanner, 213.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁴⁸ Gerard F. Powers, "Religion, Conflict and Prospects for Peace in Bosnia, Croatia and Yugoslavia," in *Religion and the War in Bosnia*. 239.

⁴⁹ Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Post-Socialist Change*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 98.

⁵⁰ Tanner, 218.

autonomous republic was revoked and replaced with JNA and Federal police units to quell any further Albanian demonstrations.

Powerful religious symbolism continued to be transmitted by the media and directly affected public awareness. The SOC held an immense posthumous funeral in August 1991 for three thousand victims of the World War II genocide, whose bones were removed from ten caves in Herzegovina following nine months of exhumations.⁵² The funeral was televised live throughout Serbia. Lines of coffins were stretched for one and a half kilometers as the patriarch of the SOC sung the liturgy, with speeches held by leading nationalist intellectuals and politicians.⁵³ Such actions by the SOC blurred the division between politics and religion.

By 1992 a low-level war in Croatia threatened to spread. Media repression in Belgrade and the situation in Kosovo were also on the increase. By this time several leaders of the SOC, primarily Patriarch Pavle I, had realized that the dictatorial practices of the Milosevic regime could cause more harm than good to its interests in remaining a strong social factor. A defining event was the Belgrade regime's adamant refusal to recognize the results of citywide elections held in 1992. Such acts of arrogance, combined with draconian UN economic sanctions placed on Yugoslavia, helped to convince the SOC to change its supportive relationship toward the Milosevic regime. It organized and participated in several immense anti-government demonstrations in Belgrade and other major cities throughout the 1990's.

Despite the vociferous criticisms against the increasingly oppressive regime, other SOC leaders ironically refused to renounce their support of other leading nationalist figures. In the Serb entity of Bosnia, for example, indicted war criminal and former Bosnian Serb leader, Dr. Radovan Karadzic, enjoyed considerable support. He regularly made public his links to the SOC and its positive influences on his decision-making.⁵⁴ In a Montenegrin publication, *Svetigora*, Dr. Karadzic, considering himself the personal defender of his people and faith, was quoted as saying:

God graced me to do something in my life that is significant, so significant that I think it was worth being born, live and die to help my people. God gave me good health. It is only difficult to make a decision, then I ask many people, even children, and even more importantly we ask our Church. Not a single important decision was made without our Church.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Ibid., 219.

⁵² Verdery, 101.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Paul Mojzes, "The Camouflaged Role of Religion in the War in Bosnia and Herzegovina," in *Religion and the War in Bosnia*, 75.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 89.

The shift in support came to late and by the early 1990's the stage had been set for violent conflict in Croatia and Bosnia. By manipulating the ancient sentiments of defeat and victimization from the Kosovo legend and the more recent atrocities against Serbs by Croat fascists in World War II, the SOC masterfully mobilized large numbers of people to realize their shared historical experiences. In this manner it reversed what was considered so detrimental under Tito's secular rule: the state-imposed marginalization of religion. Because the single-party system began to experience massive social challenges to its legitimacy, the church elites saw an opportunity to reassert its lost importance. By initially linking itself to Milosevic's rise to power and solidifying support from the regime, the SOC narrowed the gap between church and state. Serb ethnicity and Orthodoxy were successfully fused into a more narrowly defined identity.

The Roman Catholic Church of Croatia

Many authors claim that the SOC made the largest contribution toward the Serb nationalist build-up in Yugoslavia. Contrary to this perspective, one finds little differentiation between the actions of the SOC and the Catholic Church in Croatia (hereafter, the Church) and the representation of their respective ethnic nation. Detailed inspection demonstrates that the Church bears considerable responsibility for inciting nationalism among its believers and reinforcing insecurity among non-Catholics.

During the recent secessionist war and, to a lesser extent, in Titoist Yugoslavia, several actions implemented by the Church indicate its contribution to the development of ethno-religious nationalism. Firstly, its interpretation of and unwillingness to offer any message of atonement for World War II atrocities perpetrated against Serbs, Jews and Roma infuriated non-Croats. Additionally, the Church's relentless exoneration of Archbishop of Zagreb Stepinac from any participation in war crimes did little quiet latent fears. Secondly, its alignment with President Franjo Tudjman's rightwing, nationalist party prior to and after the 1990 multi-party elections added further suspicions of its intentions. Lastly, the Church's utilization of symbolism and historical parallels reawakened the nightmares of fascist World War II Croatia. These decisions blurred the line between the Church and Tudjman's authoritarian state and failed to pacify non-Croat's legitimate historic fears.

The outbreak of World War II hostilities in the Yugoslav lands brought vile atrocities. War crimes, however, were also conducted by the occupying German army, as well as the Royalist *Chemik* divisions from Serbia and Tito's Partizan force, who massacred thousands of *Ustasha* regulars and Croatian *Domobrani* (Home Guard).⁵⁶ Without revisiting the topic, I shall hereby only mention that the nature of World War II atrocities strongly influenced perceptions during Communist rule and after the

⁵⁶ Denitch, 31.

1990 multi-party elections. These perceptions severely hampered reconciliation between the SOC and the Catholic Church, as we shall see below.

The Cold War saw West Germany, especially under Chancellor Willy Brandt, apologize to the millions of victims for the heinous acts of the Nazis. This moral dimension was best symbolized by Brandt's gesture of dropping to his knees at the site of the Warsaw Ghetto during a 1970 visit to Poland.⁵⁷ West Germany did not attempt to offer revisionist explanations of its involvement in World War II. Reconciliation with its past and improved relations with its Eastern neighbors under Brandt's *Ostpolitik* required of West Germany to admit its implication in the horrors perpetrated by its sons and asked for forgiveness from Jews and other victims around the world.

The Church in Croatia showed little willingness to express such regret for the massacres against Serbs, Jews and Roma, in which a number of Catholic clergy were directly culpable.⁵⁸ Indeed, there is only one documented case of a Catholic official offering an apology. Bishop Pihler in 1963 did issue a statement asking Serbs and others for forgiveness.⁵⁹ In the tense atmosphere prevalent in the late 1980's and early 1990's, the SOC emphatically requested the Church leadership to condemn the events of World War II.

During communism, Catholic officials regularly declared the figures offered by Serbs as propaganda. Catholic bishops have reacted by minimizing the number of casualties inflicted, claiming that many Croats were killed as well.⁶⁰ The concentration camp at Jasenovac and in other areas, according to Croat calculations, exterminated *only* a maximum of 60,000 persons. Figures taken by *German* soldiers stationed along side Croat forces produced numbers of 350,000 missing and 20,000.⁶¹ Even if we accept the Church's calculations, would not at least some official statement of regret be appropriate? After all, there were numerous attempts of forcible conversion from Orthodoxy to Catholicism and such an act is ecclesiastical and repentance would be in order.⁶² The simplest atonement would have drastically improved the strained relations with the SOC long before the recent hostilities began. It presumably would not have reinforced the SOC's rhetoric of victimization and mistreatment of Serbs in other republics in the 1980's and 1990's.

⁵⁷ William E. Paterson, "The Chancellor and Foreign Policy," *Adenauer to Kohl: The Development of the German Chancellorship*, ed. Stephen Padgett. (London: C. Hurst & Company. Ltd., 1994), 146.

⁵⁸ Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno* 133.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁶¹ Cornwell, 259-260.

⁶² Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno*, 133.

Enhancing the Church's World War II interpretation was its vigorous protection of Archbishop Stepinac against all criticism. The promotion for sainthood by the Church created international outrage, most visibly among Orthodox believers and Jewish victims in Israel. Again, if we were to assume that Stepinac was not directly involved in executions, his well-documented approval of the Croatian episcopate to actively undertake forced conversion of Orthodox to Catholicism deserves stern condemnation. By not recognizing, much less celebrating the fragile religious patchwork that was Yugoslavia, the Church's consistent revisionist stance on World War II had a considerable destabilizing effect on the region and incited nationalist tendencies among Serbs. This acted like a spiral, reinforcing Croat nationalism leading up to the post-1990 period.

The first multi-party elections were held throughout Yugoslavia in 1990. The nationalist, rightwing party Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ, *Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica*), won control of the Croatian parliament, the *Sabor*, on 30 May and elected former Communist and historian, Franjo Tudjman, as its president.⁶³ The Church demonstrated unlimited support for the new regime and advocated its main objective: secession from the federation. The Church leadership was well represented at the opening of the *Sabor* sessions; politicians and clergy did not fail to use photo opportunities in order to be seen together in the media and much was done to reinforce the unity of church, nation and state.⁶⁴

With its immediate endorsement of the HDZ, the Church became the quasi-official amplifier of independence and sovereignty, depicting its as a reward to the Croatian people for thirteen centuries of loyalty to Rome.⁶⁵ A 1992 article published in the popular Catholic magazine *Veritas*, author Josip Beljan leaves little doubt about the Church's relationship to the state:

God has, by way of his Church, by way of the Holy Father, looked after his faithful people; spoke on their behalf, directly intervened in history, in the struggle, warring together with his people for their liberation. God returned to the entire mass media, political, social and state life of Croatia, from where He was driven out forty-five years earlier. The cross of Christ stands next to the 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. This was truly again a real war for the honored cross and golden liberty, for the return of Christ and liberty to Croatia; here was not a battle for a piece of Croatian or Serbian land but a war between good and evil, Christianity and Communism, culture and barbarity, civilization and primitivism, democracy and dictatorship, love and hatred. Thank God, it all ended well, due to the Pope and Croatian politics.⁶⁶

⁶³ Copley, 306.

⁶⁴ Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno*, 133.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Under Cardinal Franjo Kuharic, the Church further unified its policy with that of the HDZ. For example, the Church supported the exclusive usage of the Croatian language rather than Serbo-Croatian.⁶⁷ Upon unseating the Communist Party of Croatia, Tudjman decreed the immediate removal of all signs in the Cyrillic script (i.e. monasteries, places of worship, Orthodox schools, village names). Representing approximately 14% of Croatia's population, Serbs interpreted this decree as a restriction of cultural expression and the erasure of evidence of Serbs historical presence.⁶⁸

Symbolism and historical parallels played a major role in the reinforcement of nationalist perceptions. The HDZ leadership, much like the Church, quickly dispelled any doubts about its interpretation of World War II events. Disregarding victim's historical experience, the Tudjman regime reinstated symbols harking back to the World War II period. One such move was the reintroduction of the red and white checkerboard flag or *Shahovnica*, which flew next to the Nazi *Hakenkreuz*. In 1990 it was proudly displayed in front of administration buildings and places of worship. The British war journalist covering the war, Anthony Loyd, encountered such symbolism in the Bosnian-Croat town of Tomislavgrad:

Ante Pavelic himself gave me the stiff-armed salute from a large photograph [hanging on the wall immediately facing the door]. Various smaller pictures, brown-edged with age, showed his Croat NDH troops in German coal-scuttle helmets that carried a large U center-pinned by a cross on their front: *Ustasha*. Swastikas, Sieg Heils and Wehrmacht helmets. These were still the symbols of gas chambers and goosesteps.⁶⁹

Additionally, the Tudjman regime brought back the World War II anthem, *Lijepa Nasha* (literally, Our Beauty). Such decisions would be the modern equivalent of Germans wearing the World War II Iron Cross, singing *Deutschland Uber Alles* while crossing into present-day Poland or the Czech Republic.

By the early 1990's, Church elites, particularly Cardinal Kuharic, began to distance itself from the nationalist policies of the HDZ. The Church was quite pleased with the defeat of the atheist communist regime; however, its successor became increasingly repressive toward the media and any other parties challenging its authoritarian rule. Kuharic publicly revealed, "the Church would guard its autonomy and respect the autonomy of state authority, as well as adopt a critical attitude toward public authority where it is necessary."⁷⁰ The Church recognized the possible risks in remaining a political appendage of the HDZ's hyper-nationalism and, therefore, opted for an arms-length policy.

In the end, the Church experienced similar success as the SOC. It, too, succeeded in leaving behind its prior marginalized position under communism and developed an influential role in politics.

⁶⁷ Ibid.,131.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Anthony Loyd, *My War Gone By, I Miss It So*. (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999), 73.

Indeed, the Church was able to create a congruent ethnic identity with religion at its center. By supporting nationalist policies toward the erasure of Serb cultural and linguistic marks, the Church was able to create an exclusionary image of the ‘other.’

Conclusion

Reviewing the actions of the SOC and the Church in Croatia, one realizes that the violent breakdown of Yugoslavia was not a clash between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. Rather, the actors employed concepts of nationalist identity formation along confessional lines with the ultimate goal of ethno-religious congruency.

Massive social changes worked to the advantage of both communities and to the most unfortunate disadvantage of Yugoslavia. The deteriorating economic situation, the rise in unemployment and faults of Tito’s one-party system, coupled with the waning of Communist secularization, produced the necessary social vacuum for such nationalism. Thus, an atmosphere promoting competition between elites evolved and both churches intended to profit from this long-awaited opportunity to re-establish their social position.

The SOC and the Church masterfully utilized symbolism to support the realization of their goals. The SOC’s re-activation of the mysticism of Kosovo and re-enforcement of the massive World War II atrocities suffered at the hands of the Pavelic regime created a concise center around which its observers began to orient themselves. It clarified the delineation between Serb and Croat by ascribing collective blame to the Croats, thus intensifying the markers of separation.

The Church in Croatia brought up its brutal World War II collaboration with little collective regret. Its deliberate failure to offer any form of atonement for the heinous acts of genocide was instrumental in instilling the historic fear among the Serbs and the SOC of yet another round of forced conversions. This reinforced the SOC’s mentality of victimization and defender of the Serbian Orthodox flock. The uncontrollable cycle of identifying the other set into motion the formation of an exclusionary identity.⁷¹

Both parties successfully achieved multi-symbol congruence. The patriarchs of both faiths, in particular Patriarch Pavle and Cardinal Kuharic, made strong efforts to link themselves to the emerging nationalist regimes. Although they would eventually realize the brutality of their respective allies and, consequently, attempted to distance themselves, their initial support created a solid foundation upon which particular identities could be constructed. By doing so, they made the division between politics and religion virtually unrecognizable.

⁷⁰ Cohen, 63.

⁷¹ Brass, 21.

The Church in Croatia mobilized other forms of symbolism, such as supporting the HDZ's Croatian-only language policy and flying the history-laden *Shahovnica*. The SOC's posthumous services on live television and the procession of Prince Lazar's bones throughout Yugoslavia certainly convinced many observers that Serbs intended to expand their state. These were, indeed, powerful forms of symbolism and produced great internal unification among their respective believers, while instilling fears in others.

Although a reduced Yugoslavia has emerged as ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse as ever, despite violent attempts to join Serb lands in a 'Greater Serbia,' Serb ethnicity still tends to imply membership to Eastern Orthodoxy. Through its own brutal military campaigns, notably the 1995 *Oluja*

and *Blejsak* offensives, Croatia has emerged as a largely mono-ethnic, mono-religious state. Thus, Croat ethnicity is inseparably tethered to Roman Catholicism.

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