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ALL VICTIMS MATTER
RECONCILIATION OF BALKAN FAITHS AND PEOPLES: AN
ASSESSMENT OF RECENT PROGRESS

By Vjekoslav Perica

Vjekoslav Perica is a Croatian-American historian, author of, among other things, *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States* (Oxford University Press, 2002; Belgrade, 2006). His most recent publication is “Serbian Jerusalem: Inventing a Holy Land in Europe’s Periphery, 1982-2019,” Chapter IX, in Nadim N. Rouhana and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, eds. *When Politics Are Sacralized: Comparative Perspectives on Religious Claims and Nationalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). Perica holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, USA. In the 1970s in former Yugoslavia he was a basketball player, and before the war, a jurist and journalist until coming to America in 1991. As a US academic he was, among other things, first Peace Scholar in residence at the United States Institute of Peace, lecturer at several universities, and Fulbright scholar in Belgrade, Serbia. In 2012 he held a research fellowship at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS). Since 2006, Perica has been a Professor of History at the University of Rijeka, Croatia, from which he has recently retired. Perica regularly contributes to *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe (OPREE)* and western Balkan regional internet magazines *Pescanik*, *Tacno* and *XXZ*. He lives in Baltimore, Maryland, and on the Dalmatian isle of Solta, Croatia. In between, he spends time with grandsons and their pets in New York City.

Introduction

In the last two years, religious and secular elites in Serbia and Croatia have exchanged more kind words than ever since the fall of Yugoslavia. Even though those involved are all ideological ethno-nationalists, it seems that moderates have prevailed over zealots. The far right, however, did not cease its hateful propaganda and mythmaking. Nevertheless, interethnic fights and incidents in public have subsided, and earlier common angry disputes at elite level discontinued. From January 2019 to November 2020, the wartime enemies have sought rapprochement through joint commemorations for all innocent victims of recent and earlier wars.

PHASE ONE: ESTRANGED BROTHERS

Religious Leaders' Initiative

Croatian Catholicism and the Serbian Orthodox Church opened the reconciliation process early in 2019 and the secular elites followed suit in the second half of 2020. On January 17, 2019, seventeen bishops, representing the Croatian branch of the Catholic Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church, convened at the Catholic diocesan seat of Požega in northern Croatia. After two days of ecumenical prayers and worship at the occasion of the annual Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity (also joined by Protestants), leaders of the two major Balkan churches appeared together before the media and released the following statement:

We remember the grave suffering of the Serb and Croatian peoples and other citizens of Croatia during the recent past in wars, conflicts, persecutions, and killings, caused by hatred. We are aware that by accusing each other, manipulating historical truth, interpreting war events for daily political purposes, and continuing with mutual insults and degradations only because of belonging to different faiths and nationalities, we will remain captives of the past and losers in the present. . . . We deeply regret and honor every innocent victim of any nationality, religious affiliation or political viewpoint from our recent past . . . Only by seeking mutual forgiveness we can rise above the evil that ashamed, diminished and humiliated us. . . . Without vengeful thoughts and feelings of hatred, we keep the memory of our innocent victims, we heal our wounded souls, promote trust and understanding among individuals and nations and thus lay a solid foundation for a better and more just future in our homeland for every human being. ¹

The Požega declaration contains hopeful rhetoric behind which there is a good dose of idealism. It was also pragmatic, addressing controversies from the recent past, namely the Balkan wars of the 1990s. Although the statement could loosely apply to all historical periods, yet it avoided to mention specifically the more complex legacies of the Second World War. Therefore, conciliatory gatherings and pronouncements would address the major controversy, concerning interethnic massacres and genocidal policies in World War II, that actually fueled the crisis leading to the Serbo-Croat War in 1991.²

¹ My translation from newsletter of the Serbian National Council of Croatia: "Biskupi i episkopi zajedno protiv podjela i mržnje *Novosti*, 17. January 2019, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/episkopi-i-biskupi-zajedno-protiv-nacionalnih-podjela-i-mrznje>).

² See among other titles of a massive literature, Tea Sindbaek, *Usable History? Representations of Yugoslavia's Difficult Past from 1945 to 2002*. (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press), pp. 139-183; Mila Dragojevic, *Amoral Communities. Collective Crimes in Time of War*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), pp. 94-100; Paul Mojzes, *Yugoslavian Inferno; Ethnoreligious Warfare in the Balkans*. (New York: Continuum, 1994), *Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century*. (Lanham, Md. : Rowman & Littlefield, 2011); Vjekoslav

Despite this, the Požega declaration was definitely a historic document. Its pronouncements and symbolic gestures of fraternity, with church leaders smiling to TV cameras, have started a new postwar phase of rapprochement, 25 years after the major war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The tragedy involved Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) as both warring factions and victims. In those wars, about 150,000 people lost their lives and several million were forcibly resettled. Mass murder, torture, mass rape, bombardment, and destruction of places of worship and civilian targets, cultural institutions and works of art were widespread. The United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague, the Netherlands, prosecuted the cases of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.³

After the war, the conflict continued, and hatred reigned. State and Church authorities sponsored propaganda and mythmaking at the expense of objective research, scholarship, human rights, and peace activism. Until recently in Croatia, for example, human rights groups and ethnic minority Serb associations reported and document more than one hundred incidents annually ethnically motivated violence: people were assaulted in the streets merely for wearing symbols of a sports team or speaking in different accent. This occurred in addition to hateful chauvinist chanting in sports arenas, the desecration of cemeteries, the destruction of memorials, ubiquitous Ustasha, Nazi, and racist graffiti, and comparable forms of barbarism. In neighboring Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina the situation was similar.

Similar meetings, pronouncements and commemorations followed the breakthrough at Požega. In January 2019, Croatian Catholicism issued a rare pronouncement condemning the Ustasha regime. At the national cathedral on January 27, speaking on the occasion of Holocaust Remembrance Day, Cardinal Josip Bozanić, Archbishop of Zagreb, contextualized Ustashism as the counterpart to Nazism and fascism. The Croat Ustasha carried out massive crimes of genocide and ethnic cleansing against Serbs, Jews, and the Roma people, while also murdering thousands of fellow Croats who opposed them; the Cardinal specifically condemned the Ustasha crimes in the Holocaust that nearly annihilated Croatia's Jewish community of thirty thousand people. The

Perica, *Balkan Idols. Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*. (New York: Oxford University Press 2002), chaps. 9-10.

³ War crimes were committed by all warring factions, but among those sentenced, Serb military and political leaders were the most numerous. Overall, the Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia sentenced 167 individuals for war crimes including genocide and crimes against humanity. Owen Bowcott, "Yugoslavia Tribunal Closes, Leaving a Powerful Legacy of War Crimes Justice." *The Guardian*, December 20, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2017/dec/20/former-yugoslavia-war-crimes-tribunal-leaves-powerful-legacy-milosevic-karadzic-mladic>.

Cardinal said that the Ustasha who committed these crimes could not call themselves Christians. He added: "Today on January 27, we commemorate the day of the liberation of Auschwitz. This concentration camp is symbol of the suffering of six million Jews most of whom perished there. This death camp and other Nazi-fascist camps throughout Europe, including the concentration camp of Jasenovac and other such prison camps in Croatia, were mass execution sites of innocent people. . ." ⁴

Another major event of what had by now evolved into a Balkan peace and reconciliation process took place on May 2, 2019, at the memorial site of the main Ustasha concentration camp, Jasenovac, in northern Croatia. According to Radio Free Europe, "high representatives of four religious communities--Jews, Orthodox, Catholics and Muslims--paid tribute to six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust at a commemoration in the crypt of the Jasenovac monument, condemning 'extreme ideologies,' and called for 'reconciliation, forgiveness, and turning to the future.'" ⁵ Representatives of all the four present religious communities also spoke at the Jasenovac commemoration. Bishop Metropolitan Porfirije, of Zagreb-Ljubljana archdiocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church, called for a "path of repentance and forgiveness" when visiting the place of mass human suffering such as Jasenovac. Bishop Škvorčević added that no word of revenge, manifestation of hatred, or manipulation of the number of victims is allowed at Jasenovac or concerning it, but only "repentance, forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation." Muslims from Croatia also participated. Chairman of the *Meshihat* of the Islamic Community in Croatia, Aziz efendija Hasanović, said: "God is just. We ask you to take away the sword from the oppressors and give the weak the power of faith in truth and justice. Forgive us and teach us to forgive others. God, we ask that sorrow be hope, and revenge be justice, that tears be a prayer that Jasenovac and no crime of this world will ever happen to anyone again. . . ." ⁶

The basis for these conciliatory activities has been long in preparation, perhaps since the mid-1990s. It involved contacts among church diplomacies, appeals for peace and mitigating historical controversies, contacts among benevolent church leaders and the papal visits to the

⁴ Mladen Pleše, "Božanič se jučer konačno odredio" *Telegram.hr*, 25.01.2019, <https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/bozanic-se-jucer-konacno-odredio-ljubitelji-ndh-ne-mogu-biti-krscani-ovo-je-analiza-njegovog-vaznog-govora/>.

⁵ "Katolici i pravoslavni zajedno u Jasneovcu," May 2, 2019, Radio Free Europe, at <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/jasenovac-prastanje/29916904.html>.

⁶ Ibid.

region. It began with the Croatian Catholic bishop's letter on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Second World War, which, for the first time, specifically expressed regret for losses and suffering of the Serbian Orthodox Church at hands of the Croat nationalist regime in WW II:

Therefore, we will mention the victims of the Croatian people and the Catholic Church at the holy altar. We will mention the victims of Serbian nationality and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Croatia. We will mention Jewish victims, the Roma people, and all those killed in our country in the Second World War only because they belong to different nationalities, other confessional affiliations or other political beliefs. . . . The main difficulty is not how to mourn the victims of one's own community but how to admit one's guilt for the suffering of another community. Croats and Serbs, Catholics and Orthodox, Muslims and others are confronted with a more difficult moral question: How to mourn the victims of another community, how to admit guilt in one's own community? And how to atone for guilt, how to obtain the forgiveness of God and man, peace of conscience and reconciliation between peoples and nations? How to start a new age based on justice and truth?⁷

In a similar vein, Pope John Paul II's homilies in Croatia 1994 and in Bosnia 1998 encourage seeking mutual forgiveness and reconciliation among the neighboring peoples of Slavonic ancestry divided by religion which, in his words, also has the potential for healing and reunification. During his first visit to then still-war torn Croatia, the Pope spoke not only of peace, but also of fraternal reunification among the close ethnic relatives of western Balkans as a historical reality and divine plan, suggesting that fratricidal wars here are an aberration from history:

The present tragic divisions and tensions must not be the cause of the forgetting that many elements unite the peoples at war today. And that is why it is urgent and necessary to gather everything that unites--and this is not a small thing--and thus build new perspectives of fraternal solidarity. Peace in the Balkans--I especially want to emphasize this in this moment of suffering--is not a utopia! On the contrary, peace imposes itself as a perspective of historical reality! The peoples of these lands of Europe have accepted each other over the centuries; they have carried out many exchanges in the fields of art, language, script, cultural, and national treasures. Is it not a commonwealth and tradition of religious tolerance, which has been maintained through almost a millennium, even during very dark periods of history? No, the phenomenon of nationalist intolerances that plague these parts cannot be attributed to religion!

In these parts, put to such a test today, faith must once again become a force that unites and bears good fruit, like the rivers that flow through these lands. Like the Sava, which originates in Slovenia, it flows through your homeland, continues along the Croatian and Bosnian-Herzegovinian borders, and in Serbia flows into the Danube. The Danube is

⁷ Branimir Pofuk, "Ove komemoracije bi trebale biti posvećene svim satrtim životima" "Autograf, 05.27.2020, <https://www.autograf.hr/komemoracije-bi-trebale-biti-posvecene-svim-satrtim-zivotima/>.

another large river that connects Croatian and Serbian land with large countries in Eastern, Central, and Western Europe. These two rivers meet, just as the various peoples they connect are invited to meet. This must be achieved especially by the two Christian Churches, the Eastern and the Western, which have always lived together in these very areas.

In that metaphor of rivers, we can almost notice the traces of the path that God is asking you to tread in this difficult historical moment. It is a path of unity and peace that no one should avoid. He is required by reason alone, even before faith. Has not history created thousands of unbreakable bonds among your peoples? Your languages, although different, are they not so close to each other that you understand and understand each other more than is the case in other parts of Europe? The very geographical position of the Balkan countries imposes itself as a peacebuilder because these countries are a mandatory passage between the Middle East and Central Europe. That is why in the past centuries, trade, exchange of various goods and entrepreneurship flourished here, all for the benefit and well-being of all. The future of the Balkan Peninsula is in that perspective. In cooperation and solidarity, the peoples of the Balkan Peninsula will be able to face and solve many problems. The progress and good of the people in the Balkans have only one name: "Peace!"⁸

Pope Francis understands his papal predecessor's passion about peace in the Balkans as well as the Second Vatican Council's Eastern ecumenism. In recent years, Pope Francis' cordial contacts with Serbian Patriarch Irinej (Gavrilović) exemplified for the bishops of the two churches how to meet as friends and exchange views on issues and problems that concern both churches and peoples. In a 2018 letter to the Patriarch of Serbia, Pope Francis exhorts: "For mutual meetings and conversations, for striving for understanding, for building bridges in direct fraternal communication, to which occasional meetings between individual bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church and bishops of the Catholic Church in Croatia also contribute. . . we should jointly testify that forgiveness and reconciliation are the only way of liberation from the captivity of the past and daily political interests. . . ."⁹

The Serb-Croat religious leaders' rapprochement, in particular, has been also facilitated by individual enthusiasm and friendship among local bishops. Dr. Porfirije (Perić), Bishop Metropolitan of Zagreb-Ljubljana labored to improve relations with the host Church and

⁸ "Holy Father's Homily at the Hippodrome", my translation from the Croatian *Propovijed Svetoga Oca na Hipodromu*), September 11, 1994," Archdiocese of Zagreb/Zagrebačka nadbiskupija, <http://www.zg-nadbiskupija.hr/govori-prigodom-prvog-pohoda-pape-ivana-pavla-ii-hrvatskoj-1994>.

⁹ The Serbian Orthodox Church, Official Website/Srpska pravoslavna crkva, zvanični sajt, „Saopštenje za javnost“, 9. februar 2019, http://www.spc.rs/sr/saopstenje_za_javnost_37.

government in Croatia's capital city. Together with cultural and political association of the Serbian National Council, Bishop Porfirije worked to alleviate the animosity toward Serbs in Croatia. Additionally, Dr. Anton Škvorčević of Požega and Bishop Jovan (Ćulibrk) od Pakrac led two neighboring dioceses close to the two states' border in which they initiated and managed logistically the Požega meeting. Finally, Catholic Bishop Mate Uzinić of Dubrovnik and Orthodox Bishop Grigorije of Herzegovina have become known as pioneers of postwar interfaith dialogue and reconciliation.

Another factor that made the rapprochement possible was the prevalence of moderate and pragmatic forces in the region's politics. Of course, the consolidated ideology of ethnic nationalism mixed with religion has no alternative here yet. The extremists would prefer to make the war a permanent condition, in contrast to the moderates, who seek a peaceful coexistence and cooperation among neighbors as ethnic relatives. The liberalizing shift most notably occurred within the governing ethnic nationalist party HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union) in the EU-member state of Croatia. Following his 2020 victory in parliamentary election, Croatian Prime Minister Plenković, backed by the Vatican and the EU, purged his party of nationalist extremists and marginalized the far right. Yet, he could not have succeeded without Serbs from Croatia as his allies. By supporting HDZ moderates and Croatia's left-wing governments, Croatian Serbs again, as many times before in history, have proved their patriotic loyalty to Croatia as their homeland rather than siding with pressures from Serbia that made many attempts at using them. When they sided with Serbia they erred, such as most recently in the rebellion against Croatia in the 1991-1995 war, Croatian Serbs have more often backed Croat parties since the nineteenth century, even when they struggled with Great Serbian nationalism. Without Croatia's Serbs as allies, Croat moderate nationalists would have never been able to resist nationalist challenges and pressures from Italy, Hungary, Austria, and Serbia. That is why Ustasha genocide against Serbs in Croatia and subsequent Croat nationalist attempts to vindicate the NDH (Independent State of Croatia--WW II Ustasha pro-Nazi state) were not just anti-Serb but also anti-Croat. Considering the recently completed monument to the Holocaust in Croatia's capital city, today's Zagreb also needs a memorial to those victims among Serbs from Croatia who were killed by Croats, along with a memorial to the joint Serb-Croat anti-fascist resistance in World War II, so that future generations finally learn the origin of the brotherhood-unity slogan.

After the 2020 shift in Croatian politics, similar trends followed in neighboring states. Ethnic nationalist and religious parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina lost in recent local elections while multiethnic, secular and liberal-left coalitions took power in the major cities. In Serbia, which has remained the major nationalist fortress of the Balkans, President Aleksandar Vučić and his regime were pressured toward liberalization and improving relations with neighboring countries by the EU as a way to keep Serbia on the candidate country track. The Vučić regime has long struggled on the Kosovo front with no actual resolution in sight; the rapprochement with Croatia would only improve Serbia's international standing. Vučić also found the idea of a ritual Serb-Croat reconciliation useful for redeeming his own extremist nationalist past: during the Serb-Croat war of 1991-1995, when he was a member of a Chetnik paramilitary group. Vučić also noted the favorable view on the reconciliation initiative in the Serbian Orthodox Church, an institution that is generally a locomotive of Serbian nationalism, with occasionally pragmatic politics. Accordingly, both the nationalist-populist Vučić and the paradigmatic religious-nationalist Serbian Church have revived the old idea of a regional balance of power between the two largest ethnic nations in the region, Serbs and Croats. The two peoples, close ethnic relatives and both majority Christian nationalities, are imagined in Serb religious-nationalist myths as "estranged brothers," sometimes compared to the biblical Cain and Abel. Eventually, brothers will reconcile based on mutual forgiveness and repentance of the guilty party. If both were guilty, they can pray for all innocent victims. While the recently deceased Patriarch Irinej (Gavrilovic), during his ten years as head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, had extensively commemorated Serb victims of Croat fascism in World War II and its reverberation in contemporary Croat nationalism, he also frequently spoke of the need for forgiveness, and Serbs and Croats as the two closest ethnic relatives among European peoples. "Victims need remembrance," the Patriarch pointed out on several occasions, and added, "yet, commemorations must lead to forgiveness and reconciliation."¹⁰

Accordingly, the ritual reconciliation between the two peoples and churches is partly product of the nationalist narrative, and partly that of political agenda, states' and churches'

¹⁰ Visit to Jasenovac: "Irinej: Mi, Srbi, nemamo bliže od Hrvata," *Vijesti*, 24. February 2016, <https://www.vijesti.me/svijet/balkan/139400/irinej-mi-srbi-nemamo-blizih-od-hrvata>

interests. There are precedents for ideal of ethnic brotherhood as well as a Serb-Croat *realpolitik* have been on the table earlier in history.

Secular Authorities Getting Involved

A new momentum in the process of the commemorations dedicated to all innocent victims of wars, has followed in the second half of 2020. This time, secular authorities stepped in. Croatia's Prime Minister Andrej Plenković played a key role, assisted by President Zoran Milanović and the Serbian National Council of Croatia. President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić also participated, aided by Belgrade journalist and peace activist Veran Matić, who served as the Serbian president's special representative for missing persons. The task was left-over from previous peace missions and reconciliation attempts undertaken by liberal Presidents Tadić of Serbia and Josipović of Croatia. Prime Minister Plenković prioritized the interethnic cooperation and reconciliation agenda following the 2020 landslide electoral victory for the long-reigning nationalist party Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ). A moderate Catholic conservative from the isle of Hvar, trusted by the Croat episcopate and the Vatican and favored by the leaders of the European Union, Mr. Plenković isolated Croatia's nationalistic far right while designing the mainstream party as a European mainstream conservative party, a Balkan version of the Christian Democrats. The liberal turn in Croatia has continued with the corresponding election of Zoran Milanović, a social democrat, as president.

Thanks to the cooperation with the Serbian National Council in Croatia, Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković put his new politics on display on the occasion once exploited by radical nationalists. Mr. Plenković succeeded in changing the triumphalist tone and nationalist-populist contents of the annual victory parade in Knin. The event had for thirty years glorified the military-police operation "Storm" of Summer 1995, after which the war ended with Serbian rebels' surrender to the Croatian Army. The fall of the rebel Serb republic in Croatia also created a refugee crisis for some 200,000 ethnic Serbs, natives of Croatia who had to flee and have mostly not returned. Many resettled in Serbia which used them as a propaganda tool to pressure Croatia by characterizing the events as a repetition of WWII Ustasha genocide. The Patriarch of Serbia led annual commemorations of the Serb 1995 exodus, connecting it with Ustasha genocide in World War II. The Patriarch described Serbs as greatest collective martyrs of humankind, their hardship

comparable only to the fates of Jews and Armenians. The head of the Serbian Orthodox Church added that Serbs are prepared to forgive Croats but will never forget.¹¹ The President of Serbia Vučić emphasized that Serbia has a strong military that will prevent future Croatian assaults on the Serb minority.¹² President of Serbia also blamed what he calls Croat postwar “triumphalism” as one of chief obstacles for a postwar reconciliation. There will be in the ensuing paragraphs a few additional notes on the issue of triumphalism as one of the major obstacles to reconciliation and normalization of interethnic relations. International observers and experts for Balkan affairs emphasize triumphalism among the causes of the wars in the 1990s. The last U.S. ambassador to Belgrade, Warren Zimmerman, observed in 1989 that the Serbian nationalist triumphalism, notably the journey of Prince Lazar’s relics and the mass gatherings of the 600th jubilee of the Kosovo battle, was one of the major triggers of the Balkan wars of the 1990s.¹³

"We should now pay due respect for every innocent victim, be it Croatian, Serbian or other nationalities," Prime Minister Plenković pointed out in Knin in August 2020, recognizing the 25th anniversary of the war’s end.¹⁴ For the first time since operation "Storm," the high political representative of the Croatian Serbs, the former Member of Parliament and President of the Serbian National Council, and now one of the four Deputy Prime Ministers of the Croatian Government, Boris Milošević, also sat in the front row at the commemoration. His father took part in "Storm" as a Croatian soldier, and his grandmother was killed in a Serbian village in the hinterland of Šibenik a few weeks later by vengeful Croat militants.

Subsequently, on August 25, 2020, in the Serb village of Grubori near Knin, President Zoran Milanović, along with Croatian Deputy Prime Ministers Tomo Medved and Boris Milošević, took part in the commemoration for Serb civilian victims at end of the war. After the Orthodox Church’s religious service and commemoration, President Milanović said: "The murder of six innocent elderly villagers that occurred here at the end of the Homeland War is nothing but

¹¹ “Patrijarh Irinej o oluji: Ovakvu golgotu doživeli su Jermeni, Jevreji i mi Srbi od Ustaša!” *Srbija danas*, August 4, 2016, <https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/drustvo/patrijar-irinej-prastamo-sve-lose-sto-su-hrvati-uradili-srbima-ali-ne-zaboravljamo>.

¹² “Vučić: Oluja više neće biti.” *Al Jazeera Balkans*, August 4, 2016, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/vucic-oluja-vise-nece-bit>.

¹³ Warren, Zimmermann. *Origins of a Catastrophe: Yugoslavia and Its Destroyers -- America's Last Ambassador Tells What Happened and Why*. (New York: Times Books, 1996).

¹⁴ Plenković na obilježavanju 'Oluje': Pijetet nevinim hrvatskim i srpskim žrtvama, Aug. 5, 2020, RFE/RL, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/hrvatska-oluja-zrtve/30767646.html>.

horror and revenge that cannot be justified with whatever kind of justice."¹⁵ Another state-sponsored commemoration was held on September 27, 2020, at Serb village of Varivode, where similar kind of vengeful crimes against civilians took place. Prime Minister Andrej Plenković laid a wreath at the monument to nine Serb civilians killed a month and a half after the Croatian military-police operation, "Storm," in Varivode in the Šibenik hinterland in 1995. After the Orthodox Church's funeral service, the Croatian Prime Minister said: "As the Prime Minister of Croatia, I deeply regret this, and on behalf of the Government I express my condolences to the members of your families whose lives the Croatian state—unfortunately--failed to protect."¹⁶ Addressing members of the Serb community in Croatia, Plenković added that he wanted to send a message of reconciliation. This does not mean forgetting what happened in the war, including the Serb rebellion incited from Serbia and Croat victory in a war of self-defense, but learning lessons and forgiving and learning how to live in peace again.

A major breakthrough took place in November at an annual commemoration for the first great battle of the Homeland War in 1991, which occurred in and around the city of Vukovar which is near the border with Serbia. There, after a three-months-long battle, when the city fell to the invading Yugoslav army and Serb paramilitaries, two hundred Croat prisoners of war, civilians and hospital patients, were summarily executed by a firing squad. The new policy of reconciliation advanced by Prime Minister Plenković involved balancing the traditional parade charged with nationalistic and vengeful sentiments (with a number of right-wing groups participating) and the new policy of reconciliation. The Serb participation was crucial, led again by the Deputy Prime Minister, Boris Milošević, but this time also joined by Mr. Matic, the special envoy of Serbia's President Mr. Vučić.

Boris Milošević said in a statement for Serbian National Council's newsletter *Novosti* and Croatian media as follows:

As a citizen of Croatian Serb nationality and as Deputy Prime Minister, I cannot find strong enough words to express regret over what happened to Vukovar, because all Vukovar graves speak louder than my every word I also regret the fact that after 30 years of the

¹⁵ "Hrvatski politički vrh na komemoraciji srpskim žrtvama u Gruborima", RFE/RL, Aug. 25, 2020. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30802438.html>.

¹⁶ Plenković u Varivodama: Sućut za srpske žrtve koje hrvatska država nije zaštitila., 28. septembar/rujan, 2020, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/plenkovi%C4%87-u-varivodama-su%C4%87ut-za-srpske-%C5%BERTve-koje-hrvatska-dr%C5%BEava-nije-uspjela-za%C5%AItiti/30862620.html>.

Vukovar tragedy, many Vukovar men and women cannot find their peace. I can't find my loved ones. I regret everything that the war has done to interpersonal and interethnic relations in this city, a city that was once proud of the richness of its diversity. With my arrival, I want to pay tribute to all the victims of Vukovar and send a message of reconciliation, a message of tolerance and express a desire to establish a dialogue at the local level. I believe that Croatia today, as a modern republic, democratic and European country can and must find the strength and find ways to create preconditions for successful healing of wounds of all city residents, citizens of all nationalities, as a pledge to build a place of quality living and promising future. Eternal memory to the innocent victims of Vukovar!¹⁷

Also, on this occasion, representatives of Croatian left-wing parties and human rights associations held special commemorations in Vukovar for victims of the battle and subsequent civilian and war prisoners' suffering. By throwing a wreath in the Danube, they also commemorated Serb civilians who were tortured, shot, and thrown into the river near Vukovar. Furthermore, the commemoration for the Croatian victims of Vukovar, organized by the "Women in Black" in Belgrade, a well-known association for peace and human rights, was of special importance. But it was the Serbian President's representative, Veran Matic, who paid tribute with the most spectacular move at Vukovar commemoration. Mr. Matic attended all commemorations yet, in Vukovar, he went a step further from just observing and paying tribute. Recalling the historical precedent of Willy Brandt in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1970, when the German Chancellor fell to his knees (*genuflectio* or *Kniefall*), as a manifestation of German regret for Nazi crimes against Jews, Veran Matic knelt at the monument to Croatian prisoners of war and civilians killed by Serb force and Yugoslav People's Army after the fall of Vukovar. Mr. Matic explains his gesture as follows:

Every visit to an execution site or reminder of anniversaries of wartime massacres creates anxiety in me, which, I believe, stems from the strong empathy I feel towards the victims and their families. In Questions of Guilt, Karl Jaspers, a book we published in Samizdat, states, in addition to criminal responsibility, political guilt, moral guilt, and metaphysical guilt, "There is solidarity among people as members of the human race that makes everyone co-responsible for every guilt and injustice in the world, and especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge. If I don't do everything in my power to prevent them, I'm partly to blame..." Maybe that's the closest definition of anxiety that occurs. I did not get rid of it even when I knelt in front of the monument in Ovčara, but I did something that created at least a small space to do much more, or to make gestures of piety and pity and regret until the preconditions are made to take concrete steps toward

¹⁷ Boris Milošević: Empatija prema svim žrtvama pretpostavka je pomirenja, *Novosti*, Nov. 18, 2020, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/milosevic-postovanje-i-empatija-prema-svim-zrtvama-pretpostavka-su-pomirenja>.

*resolving open issues and controversies, the most difficult of which are finding the missing persons, exhumation, identification...*¹⁸

His gesture was welcomed by many in Serbia and Croatia. As expected, radical nationalists of both nationalities attacked him and condemned his move: Serbians construed it as an insult to Serb pride and betrayal of Serbia, while to Croats it was an insufficient show of remorse by Serbia. The problem, however, was not in Matić, whose move is only praiseworthy, but in President Vučić, whom he represented. Aleksandar Vučić was personally involved in the Serbian paramilitary formations led by indicted war criminal Vojislav Šešelj during and after the battle for Vukovar 1991. Vučić also used for his party propaganda the sentenced war criminal, Veselin Šljivančanin, the Yugoslav army commanding officer who ordered the executions in Vukovar. Although Matić is not responsible for his president's past actions and political convictions, he received criticism from the Serbian left and human rights activists who hold that Matić anyhow helped Vučić to redeem and rehabilitate himself although the ideal solution is that Vučić and people like him leave government. Nevertheless, Mr. Matić's *genuflectio* was sincere and a bold move as recognized by many intellectuals in Serbia and Croatia. After all, regardless of who holds the office, historians will have to note that the institution and the office of the President of Republic of Serbia has actively participated in and helped the reconciliation effort.

PHASE TWO: A ROAD AHEAD

What seems to be a "phase one" of the Balkan peace and reconciliation process has been initiated successfully, and that was largely a Christian and Serb-Croat affair. A massive unfinished business awaits the peacemakers on the road to a lasting and just peace. If the momentum is to be maintained, the remaining issues and challenges need to be approached and managed as soon as possible. To begin with, the motto of "phase one" was honoring all from any religion, nationality and political persuasion. Two categories of victims have not been honored as yet: Bosnian Muslims as principal victims of Balkan wars in the 1990s, and the victims, members of Yugoslav antifascist resistance in the Second World War whose commemoration was discontinued when the former Yugoslavia collapsed. In addition, the task of facing and managing historical controversies cannot

¹⁸ Veran Matić, "Zašto sam kleknuo pred spomenikom na Ovčari," *Autograf.hr*, December 2, 2020. <https://www.autograf.hr/zasto-sam-kleknuo-pred-spomenikom-na-ovcari/>.

be bypassed. Historical revisionism, mythmaking and controversy have plagued this region for the last four decades. While it is not possible to lift the burden of the past quickly, or entirely, the formula tested in “phase one” in Croatia can be extended to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and elsewhere. That is to say, coming together united to worship and commemorate at historical sites of memory and suffering in order to honor all innocent victims of any nationality, religion, and political idea. Afterward, together and united, these nations can condemn public incidents that spread hatred.

Honoring Bosnian Muslim Victims

As noted earlier, the recent progress toward reconciliation in the Balkans has been mainly a Catholic-Orthodox, i. e. a Serb-Croat affair. The third concerned party in the region, Bosnian Muslims (or Bosniaks by national name), harbor mixed feelings about it. The highest religious authority for Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina, *Reis* Husein Kavazović, welcomed the inter-church peace initiatives, but warned that building of a lasting and just peace in the region must also involve Bosnian Muslims. Following the August 2020 commemoration in Knin, *Reis* Kavazović issued a special statement to the media which combines conciliatory and warning overtones. In his words:

*We are following the news about Serb-Croat reconciliation initiatives with joy and hope for a brighter future in this area. We hope that all nations, as well as political and religious leaders in the Balkans, have matured enough to turn a new page in the history of our peoples. We also welcome the fact that the early voices of reconciliation come from Serbia and Croatia, as the two largest nations of the former Yugoslavia. They are also most responsible for everything that happened in the 1990s, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina . . . in the wars of the 1990s, Bosniaks were the ones who paid the highest price, and both Croatia and Serbia, during four years of aggression, often by joint efforts, tried to partition Bosnia and Herzegovina and annex its 'ethnically cleansed' territories to their own nation states . . . (Therefore) reconciliation will not be possible if it is not sincere and if it excludes Bosnia and Herzegovina and its leaders and if it is not based on the postulates of truth and justice, i.e. through the naming of the perpetrators. We assure our neighbors, instructed by agreements and events from the recent and distant past that any agreement that may harm Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot pass. Especially not at the expense of those who are ready to die for their homeland, as many times before. . . . Today Bosnia and Herzegovina has many friends around the world who will not allow peace in the Balkans to be called into question. . .*¹⁹

¹⁹ „Reis Kavazovic: 'Pomirba u regiji potrebna ali nije moguća bez BiH' (Aug. 11, 2020); <https://www.24sata.hr/news/reis-kavazovic-pomirba-u-regiji-potrebna-ali-nije-moguca-bez-bih-710581>; “Reis Kavazović: Srpsko-hrvatsko pomirenje na štetu BiH neće proći,” *BHRT*, Aug. 11, 2020. <https://bhrt.ba/reis-kavazovic-srpsko-hrvatsko-pomirenje-na-stetu-bih-nece-proci/>.

The commemorations with public regrets expressing respect for all innocent victims of recent wars are especially important for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Something similar to the events in Požega, Knin, Gurbori, Varivode, and Vukovar in Croatia is possible, necessary, and urgently needed at places like Sarajevo, Srebrenica, Omarska, Ahmići, Mostar, and other sites of memory and suffering of innocent victims in Bosnia-Herzegovina. There are obstacles, however, both politically and logistically. The Serbian Orthodox Church is about to elect a new patriarch, so the extension of the reconciliation process from Croatia to Bosnian-Herzegovina will depend on his views on the reconciliation process. The most delicate yet important commemoration at Srebrenica will probably have to wait, though an interfaith meeting at Sarajevo may be possible earlier. Additionally, the Pope may be prepared for his second visit to Sarajevo and even to commemorate in Srebrenica, and Croat bishops would likely follow. What the Serbian Patriarch and Serb bishops will do is difficult to predict. A compromise may be possible in form of a joint interfaith commemoration for all victims, mentioning specifically Muslim victims, at Sarajevo, during the expected papal visit. Attendance of religious and secular elites from Croatia and Serbia would be essential.

MANAGING LEGACIES OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Will the Pope Pray at Jasenovac?

The idea for the Pope and Serbian patriarch to lead an interchurch commemoration for victims of Jasenovac concentration camp emerged during the Cold War and came to Yugoslavia in 1984. The Serbian Orthodox Church commemorated at Jasenovac as a counter-commemoration to the massive gathering concluding Catholic Church's jubilee "Thirteen Centuries of Christianity of the Croat People." At Jasenovac, the Serbian Patriarch spoke in a way that would resonate in Croatia, with the message: "We must forgive but we will not forget." The Catholic Church interpreted this as a provocative gesture, part of the Serb nationalist collective strategy to inspire guilt in the Croat people. The two Churches' relations further worsened amidst the pre-war crisis. A hypothetical yet instructive question is hard to evade: if the two major Balkan churches had reconciled back then, only several years before the war, if the Pope had come and with the Serbian

patriarch together prayed for the victims at Jasenovac, would the Balkan wars of the 1990s have been averted?

The long-awaited papal visit to Serbia may happen in the next year or two and include the mythical Catholic-Orthodox interfaith worship at Jasenovac. The popes after the Second Vatican council and the renewal of diplomatic ties with Yugoslavia might have been willing to undertake trip to Jasenovac, but Marshal Tito would not allow it as, in his view, it would be a nationalistic provocation. John Paul II would have likely gone to Jasenovac, but the situation in wartime and early postwar was such that the Croat bishops would object. After the November commemoration at Vukovar, however, a new opportunity arises. Logistically, two commemorations in one day at two geographically adjacent locations seem feasible. A papal commemoration at Vukovar (together with the Patriarch) would be possible as a stop upon his return from Jasenovac to Belgrade. Thus, Veran Matic's *genuflectio* at Vukovar might have paved the way for this major historic achievement. A rigorous preparatory diplomacy is still needed, and the historic opportunity has never been so apparent as now. In the meantime, Serbian Orthodox Church authorities in Croatia are long overdue in honoring victims of Serb Chetnik massacres against Croat civilians and Catholic clergy in World War II, such as in Dalmatia. Such a commemoration would help preparations for the papal pilgrimage to Jasenovac.

The Stepinac Controversy

Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac was beatified in 1994. As his canonization neared, in 2016, Serbian Patriarch Irinej wrote to Pope Francis asking for a delay. The Patriarch offered new information to clarify Stepinac's ties with the Ustasha regime in World War II, particularly concerning the crimes against the Serbian Orthodox Church and forcible conversions of Serb Orthodox Christians to Roman Catholicism. The result was the freezing of the canonization process and the initiation of further research. Stepinac, like the Catholic Church in Europe (as several church documents have admitted since 1998), did not help the victims as much as he could. He also supported the pro-Nazi Croat satellite state as much as he could to the very end of the war and was decorated by the Croat pro-Nazi regime. Stepinac, however, did oppose the communists and was imprisoned, which earned him a beatification. The Stepinac case became a political nationalist myth with multiple purposes: first as anti-communist myth sanctioned by the Church,

and, after foundation of Tudjman's Croatia, also by the state, which together uphold the myth to inspire anti-communism in future generations; then, the narrative became a Croat nationalist counter-myth against Serb nationalism, blaming the Catholic Church for inciting genocide and portraying Croats as collectively guilty of massively supporting the Ustasha regime.

Internationally recognized research about the Ustasha state and its crimes was conducted and this scholarship has been available to the Holy See.²⁰ If this literature did not stop the beatification, neither will the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Besides, this Church itself has done many canonizations according to political criteria. It has canonized so far 76 native Serbs as saints, including almost all Serb rulers and kings, some of whom did not live saintly lives.²¹ Concerning specifically Catholic-Orthodox relations, two recent Serb saints, Nikolaj (Velimirović), canonized in 2003 and Justin (Popović) who was made saint in 2010, were both vocal and published anti-ecumenical and anti-western theological writings. Finally, there has been a vehement anti-Vatican campaign within Serbian nationalism, accusing the Holy See without compelling evidence of allegedly inciting the Croat Ustasha to forcibly convert Serbs to Catholicism and destroy Orthodox faith in the Balkans. When seeking a papal intervention to hold the process for Stepinac's canonization, Patriarch Irinej did not apologize for this anti-Catholicism and the political saint-making in his own church. Eventually, the Serbian Orthodox Church will have to accept Cardinal Stepinac as a Christian saint based on his opposition to communism and long suffering in communist jail and confinement. Although Stepinac did in fact support the Ustasha regime, he was personally not involved in crimes and pro-Nazi collaboration, in contrast to the Serb war criminals General Milan Nedić, head of the pro-Nazi government in Serbia, or Serbian native clerical fascist Dimitrije Ljotić and leader of the Chetniks, Draža Mihailović, all of whom the Church of Serbia considers patriots and seeks to rehabilitate. Finally, Stepinac's sainthood alone should not make reconciliation between Serbs and Croats impossible. But, in order to further improve relations with the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Croat episcopate should

²⁰ For example, Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941-1945: Occupation and Collaboration*. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001); Jozo Tomasevich, *Chetniks*, (Stanford University Press, 1975); Rory Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation: the Ustasha Regime and the Cultural Politics of Fascism, 1941-1945*. (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013); Slavko Goldstein and Ivo Goldstein, *Holocaust in Croatia*; (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, published in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016); *Jasenovac: tragika, mitomanija, istina*. (Zaprešić: Fraktura, 2016); Slavko Goldstein. *1941: the year that keeps returning*; translated from the Croatian by Michael Gable. (New York: New York Review Books, 2013).

²¹ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 75–76.

discontinue support for historical revisionism. In particular, they should cease the annual commemorations in Austria dedicated to the retreating NDH army captured by Yugoslav partisans in 1945. Not only does the Serbian Church view it as glorifying the Ustashas as martyrs, but the Church in Austria, the Vatican, and the Church in Croatia also disapprove of it.

Denigrating Yugoslav Antifascists' Sacrifices

Only a few months before the Second World War's end, on the outskirts of the port city of Split, Croatia, German Nazis and their Croat Ustasha allies captured 22-year-old Palmina Piplović, a young Croat woman who was a member of the Yugoslav antifascist resistance movement. Palmina was on a mission as a liaison between the city resistance cell and Partisan guerillas in the adjacent hills. After three days of brutal torture, Palmina was hanged on an electric pole along the road to the city. It took her comrades several days to obtain and bury her body in a dignified funeral. When Croat ethnic nationalists came to power in the 1990s, they renamed a kindergarten named after Palmina Piplović, under pretext that she fought for a totalitarian communist regime and a Serb-dominated Yugoslavia. This was recently contested by a Croatian writer, who wrote: "That is not true, she was a Croat patriot and a true martyr, who, along tens of thousands of other fallen heroes Croat antifascists, sacrificed life to liberate Croatia from foreign occupation and redeem the Croats for the criminal Ustasha stigma." Recently in Split a human rights group initiated the return of Palmina Piplović's name to the kindergarten and unveiled in the city a large mural with her portrait.²²

Indeed, the myth of Cardinal Stepinac's martyrdom and his alleged resistance to "all totalitarian regimes and ideologies" will not save the Croat's face and redeem the Croats from their association with the Ustasha and the collective guilt placed upon them by Serb nationalists. The redeemers of the Croats are martyrs and heroes like Palmina Piplović and Croat antifascists. Paradoxically, Croat nationalists' labor to erase Croat antifascism from memory plays into the hands of Serb nationalism. Serbia and Croatia not only seek rehabilitation of individual collaborators and war criminals, but also entire regimes, such as the Nedić regime in Serbia and

²² Vedran Sršen, "Palmina čuva Hrvatsku", *Tacno.net*, 10 November 2020, <https://www.tacno.net/novosti/palmina-cuva-hrvatsku/>.

the NDH in Croatia, while the antifascist Partisans are portrayed as godless communists and worst war criminals.²³

The Yugoslav multiethnic antifascist movement was one of the most massive and effective resistance movements in Nazi-occupied Europe in the Second World War. Yugoslav Partisans fought a war against foreign invaders and an interethnic civil war against the Ustasha, the Chetniks, and other domestic collaborators with the invaders, and liberated and reunified the country as a federation of equal ethnic nations. The costs of their efforts were enormous: more than 355,000 Partisan fighters died in combat, two-thirds of the pre-war membership of the Communist party and the Communist youth had perished, and several hundred died under brutal torture or heroically in battle (1,322 of these victims were awarded the "People's hero" honor posthumously). Finally, about 1.5 million civilian victims were after the war identified by international commissions as victims of fascist terror and invaders' reprisals. International authors would customarily write that most of those 1.5 million Yugoslavs (2 million if the combatants are counted) were killed by other Yugoslavs, specifically the Croat Ustasha, Serb Chetniks, other quisling militia, and the Partisans. It may be so, yet the foreign invaders, Nazis and fascists from Germany, Austria, Italy, Bulgaria, Hungary and Albania are responsible for killing, hanging, torturing, and displacing hundreds of thousands Yugoslavs. Italian fascists and German Nazis in particular are responsible for deliberately and systematically inciting genocide between Serbs and Croats, although it has become later customary in some historical studies to ascribe it to the two Balkan people's "ancient ethnic and religious hatreds." Credible authors and witnesses of history, however, testify to the massive crimes and genocidal politics carried out by invading Germans, Italians, and other collaborators domestic and foreign.²⁴ The Yugoslav Partisan antifascist epic inspired massive cultural production, notably in literature, film, sculptures, and memorials, paintings, and other works of art.

When in the 1990s ethnic and religious nationalists took power, they attempted to erase the Yugoslav antifascist tradition from memory. Some do try to find ways of rehabilitating them through historical revisionism. Authorities in the Serb Republic in Bosnia-Herzegovina have

²³ "Croatia's WWII Revisionism 'Terrifying', Says Historian," Interview with Rory Yeomans, *Balkan Insight*, 28 September, 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/09/28/croatia-s-wwii-revisionism-terrifying-says-historian-09-26-2016/>; Srđan Milošević, "Rehabilitacija Nedića", *Pescanik*, Belgrade, July 26 2018; <https://pescanik.net/rehabilitacija-nedica/>.

²⁴ Louis Adamic, *My Native Land*. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943); Milovan Djilas, *Wartime*. Translated by Michael B. Petrovich. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977).

recently considered building a chapel and conducting reburials at the memorial site commemorating the battle of Sutjeska, the largest battle in the Balkans in the Second World War. There, more than 8,000 Partisan fighters, including several hundred women in combat units, lost their lives.²⁵ They were buried together because they fought and died together: Serbs, Montenegrins, Croats, Bosniaks, Slovenes, Jews, and others. The following is a commentary by a senior Bosnian writer and journalist:

Today's rulers trade in human bones, destroying the elementary values of the antifascist struggle. When the media reported last year that the authorities of the Republika Srpska entity were building an Orthodox church in Tjentište for the Serb partisans killed in Sutjeska, numerous protests followed. The construction of the church on that occasion on that place, said many prominent anti-fascists, cannot be understood in any other way than as an attempt to make the fight against fascism completely meaningless, with a flagrant abuse of religious symbols. . . . For years, Sutjeska has been a gathering place for partisans and anti-fascists from all parts of the former common state, so it is obvious that certain political circles, supported by the church, are trying to somehow alienate the place from those who inherit anti-fascist and partisan heritage. Many historians, even outside Bosnia and Herzegovina, have placed the move in the context of trying to give the partisan movement an exclusively Serbian prefix during World War II This dimension is even more meaningless in Sutjeska, where partisans from all nations died together and literally side by side. Sutjeska, from the point of view of the current Croatian government, is an even bigger paradox. The parliament of that country is the patron of the anniversary of Bleiburg, but Croatian institutions are not the patron of the anniversary of the battle in which the youth of Dalmatia perished. There were 1,316 partisans from the city of Šibenik and its surroundings on Sutjeska alone, and 787 were killed. Only from Split and its surroundings, 1,091 partisans took part in that great battle, 688 of them were killed. Instead, every mention of anti-fascism in Croatia regularly turns into a discussion about "crimes of all totalitarian regimes", without anyone trying to explain what connections Dalmatian partisans, who died on the Neretva, Sutjeska and other battlefields, have nothing to do with any totalitarian regime. They perished in a collision with the greatest evil in human history before they even experienced the creation of socialist Yugoslavia and Tito's regime²⁶

Yet, for nationalists and historical revisionists, there are also unintended consequences of the suppression of the anti-fascist tradition. They are now facing internal divisions and collective identity crises within the newly constructed post-Yugoslav ethnic nations. Paradoxically, Serbia and Croatia as sovereign nations conduct diplomacy aimed at reconciliation, while, at the same time, each remains divided internally, along the World War II clashes between antifascists and ethnic

²⁵ Ingrid Strobl. *Partisanas: Women in the Armed Resistance to Fascism and German Occupation (1936-1945)*. (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1989).

²⁶ Amir Sužanj, "Sutjeska – ogledalo apsurdna ovdašnjih antifašizama", *Al Jazeera Balkans*, June 7, 2020, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/blog/sutjeska-ogledalo-apsurda-ovdasnjih-antifasizama>.

nationalists. So, why don't the antifascist victims matter? Why would it be objectionable for interethnic and interfaith ecumenical commemorations to be held at major sites or massive antifascists' human losses and suffering, such as, for example, Sutjeska, Neretva, or Kozara? If sacrifice and victimhood of persons whose identities cannot be determined in exclusive ethno-religious terms are anyhow exempt, if these humans do not merit human empathy and tribute as victims, the idea of honoring all victims (and thus purchase the moral capital for reconciliation) is falling apart.

Why Did the Communists Omit Reconciliation after WW II?

According to official perspectives on World War II and the communist era in Balkan states today, the victorious communists failed to carry out a necessary reconciliation after a bloody interethnic civil war during World War II because they were atheists, immoral, brutal, and vengeful. Their leader Marshal Tito is portrayed as a brutal dictator and charismatic authority, enjoying a massive secular worship and new cult glorifying his heroic personality. Tito was therefore the opposite of historical figures known for post-civil wars reconciliation policies such as, say, Abraham Lincoln or Francisco Franco. To be sure, the Yugoslav communists were openly and perhaps excessively triumphalist following their victory in the Second World War. This triumphalism deepened their enemies' hatred and determination to continue the struggle while also inspiring envy in their allies, notably the Soviet Russians, which led to the Tito-Stalin split in 1948. The temptations of an excessive triumphalism and revenge have affected many secular and religious movements in history. It is generally considered harmful by moral philosophers, theologians, as well as political scientists studying revolutions, no matter how justified it could seem, due to the gravity of massive suffering and human losses.

Although the 1945-1953 period of the Yugoslav revolution was relatively the most repressive in its history, the postwar Communist Party policies involved prosecution of wartime enemies (though some major war criminals had, by this point, escaped), continuous struggle with ethnic nationalist guerilla and terrorist groups, but also amnesty and reintegration. Concurrently, commemorations dedicated to victims of war as well as jubilant celebrations of the victory were almost daily occurrences. Marshal Tito and Yugoslav leaders came up with an official explanation why no reconciliation among ethnic nations would be needed in the Yugoslav case. In short, the

reason given was that the antifascist popular front unified all nationalities and faiths regardless of the enemies' effort to divide them. Their joint struggle forged brotherhood in arms that evolved into the patriotic ideology of unity. This joint multiethnic struggle also redeemed their peoples from the stigma caused by the ethnic nationalists' genocidal crimes and the treasonous collaboration with foreign invaders.

Following the Cominform affair and the Tito-Stalin split in 1948, a new category of victims came from within the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. In order to prevent a coup or guerilla uprising, the Tito regime imprisoned thousands of most devout communists, supporters of Stalin against Tito, to a concentration camp *Goli otok* (Naked isle) in the north Adriatic. There they were tortured and kept long years in this gulag.²⁷ Although some were rehabilitated and the Party later labored to erase this ugly episode from its history, ethnic nationalists used these events to fuel their conspiracy theories. Serbian nationalism used the fact that most of the prisoners were ethnic Serbs and Montenegrins, known for their traditional love for Russia, to argue that they were especially targeted to suffer at hands of a Croat of Catholic background (Tito), aided by the then his right-hand man who was a Slovene (Edvard Kardelj). The truth is that those communists who sided with Stalin against Tito were largely the most dogmatic and zealous world revolutionaries, though some were innocent victims of the secret police's abuses of power, career competition, intrigue, and envy.²⁸ Probably most of the 50,000 that suffered there were excessively punished for merely expressing political views or were simply innocent victims of a repressive regime. Who will commemorate those victims? Since the 1980s, Serbian nationalism has appropriated most of them, characterizing them as innocent victims persecuted by communists of other nationalities merely because of their ethnic origin. In sum, the idea of commemorating all innocent victims of all wars and repressive regimes, including all nationalities, religions, and political convictions, appears as the only solution in the case of Yugoslavia and its successor states whose history generated so much controversy that it cannot be completely resolved, thoroughly clarified, and accepted by all.

²⁷ Ivo Banac, *With Stalin against Tito: Cominformist Splits in Yugoslav Communism*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

²⁸ Milomir Marić, *Deca komunizma*. (Belgrade: Mladost, 1987).

Triumphalism as an Obstacle to Reconciliation

As noted earlier, besides mythmaking and historical revisionism, triumphalism is one of major obstacles for normalization of interethnic relations and reconciliation in the Balkans. Triumphalism corresponds to the notorious “Balkan mentality” characterized by parochial consciousness and tribal warrior ethos. As nations, they remain incomplete, especially in comparison with the Tito era in the 1970s, the highest point of development. Inter-tribal envy led to conflict and hindered the social development from tribal to national consciousness. Triumphalism is today best seen in football stadiums through wild fans’ chanting: “We are champions; kill and trample the opponent; let the envious suffer. We are world champions!” In a modern secular society, it may be best that this energy is sublimated into sports, many in which Yugoslavs were (and are, in many post-Yugoslav successor states) exceptionally successful (Land of champions sings proclaiming “Magnifico”).²⁹ But, such an attitude is counterproductive in religion.

Historically, Serbia’s triumphalism after World War One gave way to Yugoslav disillusionment. Tito's triumphalism after World War II fed into the excessive retaliation against war opponents in 1945, angered Stalin, and led to the 1948 Cominform affair. Serbia likewise caused anxiety and anger among neighboring peoples with the triumphalist Prince Lazar relics’ parade and the 600th Kosovo jubilee in 1989, whose battle cries led to the wars of the 1990s. The Croat victory in the 1991-1995 Serb-Croat war angered Serbia. And triumphalism in Serbia, under the nationalist President Vučić, caused conflict with the Croatian triumphalism of the 1995 war, which celebrates the militarily superior offensive operation "Storm" and the expulsion of Serbs. It was noted earlier that the Croatian Prime Minister Plenković took this complaint into account, attempting to limit the Knin jubilee of triumphalism and turn it into a dignified celebration of the end of the war and commemoration in honor of all innocent victims. The success of this reconciliation, so that these rituals stop being a farce, requires the persuasiveness, modesty, and true humility in leadership.

Triumphalism is a well-known phenomenon in religions. Israeli-American historian Richard Landes writes that “triumphalist religiosity, which makes claims to truth subject to contests for dominion, is fundamentally hostile to the modern democratic project, this ongoing

²⁹ Magnifico - Land of Champions - Director's cut, <https://youtu.be/EcH4aHOjnGo>.

experiment in human freedom of speech and faith.” For Landes, “there is a close correlation between triumphalist religiosity and tribal warrior, honor-shame culture;” he goes on to argue that “culturally, triumphalism is at the intersection of two powerful social forces: a tribal warrior ethos that appeals especially to the youth, and an imperial, millennial ethos that mobilizes the drive for world conquest. . . .”³⁰

An American Catholic author wrote in 2015 as follows:

*Religious triumphalism is the conviction that one’s religious beliefs are superior to other people’s. Ironically, triumphalism violates the virtue of humility that is extolled by virtually every religion. It is the theological equivalent of sports’ fans chanting “We’re number one.” In sports the practice is innocuous, even somewhat charming. That is certainly not the case in religion. Unfortunately, religious triumphalism is most common among the staunchest religious believers. . . .*³¹

Accordingly, the symbolic peacemaking in the Balkans can be enthusiastic without becoming triumphalist. Further success will also depend on each group’s and leader’s abilities to avoid the triumphalist, egocentric, and ethnocentric attitudes, theatrical gestures, and pomp. The participants will hopefully show restraint, humility, sincerity, and, above all, respect for all innocent victims of any nationality, ethnic and religious background, and political ideals for which they sacrificed their lives. Last but not less important--as some religious leaders have pointed out--is that the purpose of these commemorations is not only to foster remembrance, but to also encourage forgiveness and reconciliation among the successor generations.

CONCLUSION: GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

A relative success of "Phase one" of the Balkan peace and reconciliation process was initiated “from above” and remained largely a Serb-Croat “fraternal” affair, seeking to heal the estrangement between two close ethnic relatives. Cooperation between the two peoples is also made possible by church diplomacy, that is, a Catholic-Orthodox ecumenical rapprochement. In order to advance, this initiative needs to be completed. The next major challenge will be the anticipated papal visit to Serbia and the commemoration at Jasenovac, and then, in “phase two,”

³⁰ Richard Landes, “Triumphalist Religiosity: The Unanticipated Problem of the 21st Century,” *Tablet Magazine*, February 10, 2016, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east/articles/triumphalist-religiosity>.

³¹ Vincent Ryan Ruggiero, „Overcoming Religious Triumphalism,” *Catholic Journal*, December 18, 2015. <https://www.catholicjournal.us/2015/12/18/overcoming-religious-triumpalism/>.

the expansion of these commemorations to Bosnia-Herzegovina, with inclusion of Bosniaks and commemorations of Muslim suffering at key sites of memory such as Sarajevo and Srebrenica. The achievements of the Balkan peace in 2019-2020 will yet face further tests and challenges. The plan outlined earlier also needs to involve proper responses to possible challenges from the clerical-nationalist far right. The success for the further commemorations, for example, at Jasenovac and the expansion to Bosnia-Herzegovina, is probable. Yet the religious elites' participation in the commemoration of the Yugoslav antifascist tradition is unlikely. The antifascist tradition can count on commemorations through cultural, artistic, and scholarly production and by progressive and left-wing politicians, leftist and liberal clergy, and the human rights, peace, and historical associations. The official religious and government institutions will likely abstain and some will continue with the historical revisionism. That is to say, all victims matter, provided they can be identified in religious, national, or ethnic terms and appropriated by nation-states, political or religious organizations. It seems that no idea, principle, ideal or set of memories can survive unless protected by a state or by organized religion.

Overall, the recent progress toward reconciliation of the peoples and faiths in the Balkans is good news. The moderates within ruling nationalists' ranks marginalized the extremists domestically and found support abroad, notably in the European Union, which is interested in fostering greater stability in the troubled southeastern periphery, as well as from the Vatican, both during the pontificate of John Paul II and under Pope Francis, with his ambitious ecumenical agenda concerning the Eastern Orthodox sister church. Serbia and Serb-Croat relations in western Balkans seem particularly important to the Vatican, which has concurrently labored on improving relations with Eastern Orthodox Churches in Romania and Bulgaria and in particular the Catholic-Orthodox relations in the warring and unstable Ukraine.

Balkan wars of the 1990s brought to power vehement ethno-religious nationalisms. Their war aims were to secure that every ethno-denomination establishes a state of its own, with a religious monopoly. Those nationalisms emphasize myth, self-pity, triumphalism, commemoration, and revisionist obsession with mythical history. The idea of reconciliation at mass graves and sites of memory and suffering comes from the religious nationalist narratives and discourses. Concurrently, after thirty years of the rule of such nationalism in this area, it has become clear that instead of mastering the past based on objective research and accepting facts, nationalists prefer to manage collective guilt and historical controversies by prayers, rituals, peace

rhetoric, public apologies, and commemorations for all innocent victims. Nothing else could be done insofar as the contesting interpretations of the past, counter-myths, and the negative perceptions of the Other have been cemented into national identities and even consecrated by new religious saintly cults. Regardless, the ritual reconciliation and commemorations dedicated to all innocent victims of the conflict, which is now being increasingly perceived as a tragedy rather than triumph, is not without its value and has been working well during the last two years. Therefore, let's give peace a chance. Commemorations that acknowledge and honor all victims and call for forgiveness and reconciliation of faiths and peoples, even though it may be only symbolic, will help normalize and civilize these wounded societies.