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Executive Summary

For centuries the Serbs have been strengthened and challenged by their sense of history and their belief that they are a chosen people of God. This consciousness has sustained them during long periods of oppression and inspired them to sacrifice both for themselves and for others. Their courage won them the admiration of much of the world, particularly during the world wars of the twentieth century. In recent years, however, Serb leaders have manipulated the nation’s myths to lead their people down a very different path. They have asked the people to sacrifice everything for a goal that actually betrays the legacy of their rich past. The result is the destruction of the multinational state of Yugoslavia, the death of tens of thousands, an impoverished Serbia, a tragically demoralized people, and the loss of the world’s respect. None of this, however, makes most Serbs accept their responsibility for what has happened in the Balkans in the last six years. They are harmed as much by their own fixed ideas about themselves and their history as they are by unexamined stereotypes trumpeted about them by many on the outside. In order to move beyond the current tragedy and stalemate in the former Yugoslavia everyone--Serbs included--needs to look critically and objectively at the Serbs, their history, and their myths. It is important for policy makers on the outside to understand Serbia’s pride in a centuries-long tradition in order to see the current crisis from their perspective and to offer some empathy for what the Serbs are experiencing today. It is equally important for Serbs to move beyond their sense of obligation to the past, their fixation on themselves as victims, and their myopic vision of the world in which Serbian values and historical perspectives are projected as normative for themselves and others. The healing depends on it.

The Serbs’ view of themselves and their long history is dominated by one myth in particular which emerged in the late medieval period as the Serbian state collapsed and the Serbs fell under the control of the Ottoman Turks. They came to interpret a battle with the Turks on the Serbian plain of Kosovo in 1389 as their nation’s Golgotha. It was there that they lost their prince and much of the Serb aristocracy. Eventually falling under complete Turkish control, the Serbs developed a cult of the struggle on Kosovo in which they viewed themselves as a chosen people of God who would now be tested by their own Babylonian captivity. They saw themselves as martyrs and victims and promised from one generation to the next to avenge Kosovo and liberate all Serbs from oppression.

This idea sustained them through five centuries of Ottoman rule and inspired them in the nineteenth century to great acts of bravery in the struggle for independence. Having finally achieved an independent Serbian state in 1878, Serbs began to look beyond the narrow confines of Serbia to the liberation of other Serbs in neighboring Ottoman and Austrian lands. Their great sacrifices and success in the nineteenth century and the incredible suffering they experienced in World War I led them to believe again that history had bestowed on them a particular right and responsibility in the
Balkans. A Serb-controlled Yugoslavia, created in 1918, was their reward; and they believed that it was only natural to expect the gratitude and cooperation of the other South Slavs.

That gratitude never came, however, and it seemed impossible for the Serbs to empathize with the perspectives of other national groups in the state of Yugoslavia. Ultimately, the lack of tolerance and cooperation among the Yugoslavs led to a brutal civil war during World War II in which the Serbs suffered an attempt to eliminate them from Croatian and Bosnian territory.

Within time the relative successes and prosperity of the second Yugoslavia under Marshall Tito following World War II seemed to help all Yugoslavs put the animosities and difficulties of the first half of the century behind them. Serbs looked forward to a brighter future; and for a few years it appeared that their old myths and perceptions had lost their power.

Sadly, however, the decade of the 1980s signaled the revival of Serb nationalism. The death of Tito, economic decline, and the development of serious tensions in the province of Kosovo led increasing numbers of Serb intellectuals and political figures to sound the national alarm and to resurrect old myths as a shield for the defense of Serbian national interests. Serbia found a new leader in Slobodan Milosevic who convinced his people that they were a special people at the dawn of a new history. In the beginning he found plenty of true believers who were certain that they had been given the responsibility to bring a final solution to their long history of oppression and martyrdom. Tragically, by manipulating Serbian history for their own selfish political interests, Milosevic and his circle helped to destroy Yugoslavia.

Today Serbia is isolated in the world and its people are disillusioned with what has happened to them. A long campaign last winter to bring democracy to the land and to remove Milosevic has failed. Many of its best educated citizens have fled the homeland, and yet those who remain still believe that their cause was right in spite of the misery it has brought them.

Serbia needs help to move forward, to embrace democracy, and to eschew the excesses of their narrow national perspective. It has to face the challenge of freeing itself from the burden of its long past. A clear understanding of that past and a sensitivity to what is most positive in it are needed by those in the international community who work with the Serbs to effect a meaningful peace in the Balkans. We may have to wait for another generation of Serbs to find the real courage to move confidently into the future and integrate themselves into the European community; but stability in the Balkans demands that the first steps be made now.
REINTERPRETING SERBIA’S PAST: THE AUDACIOUS CHALLENGE OF UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY OF A CHOSEN PEOPLE

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More than a year after a relative peace has been established in the lands of the former Yugoslavia it would seem a propitious time to take a fresh look at the history of Serbia. Certainly the war in the Balkans stimulated a great interest in the Serbs, although unfortunately it also offered many people their first significant introduction to Serbia and the Serbs. As introductions go it was not a positive experience. The Serbs and their leaders were branded as the aggressors in a conflict that destroyed Yugoslavia, devastated the lives of millions, and exhibited a level of violence that Europe had not seen since the holocaust. In a modern world, which demands quick answers to complex problems, all of the Serbs were painted as pariahs with the same broad brush.

Their opponents and some western observers were certain that explanations for the violence were readily apparent in Serbian history and culture, and yet by the end of the war few had done much to advance a broader understanding of Serbia and Serbian history. In the last years of the twentieth century and after years of a brutal civil conflict which inspired an extraordinary number of new publications about the war and the region, it is not clear that the world is markedly less ignorant of the history of the peoples of the troubled Balkans.

Trying to give new understanding and insight into the complex and often controversial history of the Serbs is not necessarily an enviable task. Objectivity has been one of the great victims of the war, and there are too many people too close to this war (not surprisingly including many scholars of the region) who are burdened by fixed ideas about this region of Europe. These are the people who expect any evaluation of Serbia’s history to reflect their own perspectives. One has to be somewhat audacious to walk into such a minefield. In taking the challenge, however, you have to set out on the journey determined to accept the relatively modest goal of discussing the history of a fascinating people whose story has rarely been examined critically in Western European languages. There are plenty of other people willing to selectively scrutinize the historical record to provide justification for or indictment of Serbian actions in this most recent of Balkan wars.

The partisan nature of much analysis about Serbia contributes to the phenomenon in which Serbia enjoys little compassion in the world, and the sufferings of Serbs either go unreported or are dismissed as a kind of justifiable payback for the sufferings some Serbs have brought others. Much of the responsibility for the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the resulting war rests on the shoulders of Serbia’s political and intellectual leaders, but the Serb people are paying the price and sharing all of
the blame. The level of hostility toward Serbia and the Serbs exhibited in the Western European and American media is quite extraordinary.

These attitudes were established early in the war once Serbia was seen as the aggressor. Such views only intensified as the conflict continued, and eventually they had a noticeable influence on most analyses of Serbia, its history and culture. There was a marked unwillingness to get beyond fixed ideas. We looked to Serbia’s history for explanations for its current actions and attitudes, and not surprisingly we found exactly what we were looking for. But as John Lampe reminds us in his carefully constructed new study, Yugoslavia as History, “Going forward into the past makes for bad history.” It can also frustrate realistic efforts to bring lasting peace to the region.

None of this is meant to suggest an apologia for Serbia and its clear role in the Yugoslav tragedy. Serbia’s leaders and many of its people cannot escape their culpability in these terrible years of war. The Serbs may, in fact, have been harmed as much by their own fixed ideas about themselves and their history as they were by the unexamined stereotypes trumpeted about them by so-called experts on the outside. Rather this essay appeals to everyone—Serbs included—to look critically and objectively at the Serbs, their history, their myths and traditions, and their unique perspectives on life so that there is a greater chance to move beyond the current tragedy. As long as Serbia remains Europe’s pariah in this post-Communist world, there is perhaps less chance that Serbia can move peacefully toward democracy.

SERBIAN HISTORY AND MYTH

As with most peoples, the Serbs’ view of themselves and their long history is dominated by certain myths. Perhaps few other peoples, however, cling to their myths and their history as tenaciously as the Serbs. Their myths have sustained them through the long centuries of foreign rule and inspired them in their struggle for liberation and the establishment of an independent Serbian state. Unfortunately, their myths have also led the Serbs down less attractive paths. They have encouraged a myopic vision of the world in which Serbian values and historical perspectives are projected as normative for themselves and for others. Utilized in the cause of narrow national interests, these myths have become weapons which have helped to destabilize the fragile stability of the Balkan Peninsula.

What are these myths and how have they evolved over the course of the last five or six hundred years? All Serbian myths about themselves and their history are related to a perception of themselves as a chosen people of God. This idea emerged in the late medieval period and was an interpretation encouraged by monks who were the only intellectuals of the day and who were clearly influenced by their primary sources: the Old and New Testaments. The experiences of the people of the Old Testament offered the Serbs an explanation for their suffering and provided a messianic view
of history to sustain them through that suffering. It allowed them to see themselves as martyrs and often as victims, but always as people who were “right” because God had chosen them.

The first elements of this view of history emerged in the early fifteenth century as Serbian monks attempted to give meaning to the disastrous events of the second half of the fourteenth century: the collapse of the medieval Serbian state and the arrival in the Balkans of the Ottoman Turks. The view from a Serbian monastery must have seemed very different in 1400 than it did only fifty years earlier. In 1350 Serbia was at the pinnacle of its power as an empire controlling almost two-thirds of the Balkan Peninsula. The memory of this great medieval state became the first and most important ingredient in the preservation and evolution of a rudimentary historical consciousness among the Serbs. This was the ubiquitous golden age to which so many aspiring nations returned in the nineteenth century. In the case of Serbia, however, the gold was fairly authentic. Particularly in the context of southeastern Europe, medieval Serbia was very successful.

THE MEDIEVAL LEGACY

It all began in the 6th and 7th centuries A.D. when the Serbs and other South Slavs migrated to the Balkan Peninsula. The Serbs lived in tribes headed by lords with the title of zupan, and for several centuries they struggled under the domination of their more powerful neighbors—the Bulgarians and Byzantines. Eventually two main centers of Serbian settlement came to prominence in the eleventh century and began the struggle for independence from foreign control. One of them in Zeta (modern-day Montenegro) dominated most of the eleventh century; and it was there that the first, short-lived Serbia kingdom was established. The other settlement was in the southwest corner of what is today Serbia and was known in the medieval era as Raska (Rascia).

It was in Raska in the late twelfth century that Zupan Stefan Nemanja finally freed his territory from Byzantine control. In doing so he took the first steps toward establishing a dynasty that would rule the Serbs for almost two hundred years and come to dominate the Balkan Peninsula. Under the leadership of Nemanja’s son, Stefan the First-Crowned (1196-1217), Serbia became an independent kingdom with an autocephalous church. This gave the young land a certain legitimacy in the eyes of other European states and encouraged a solid foundation for the internal growth and outward expansion that was to occur in Serbia during the thirteenth century. By the end of that century Serbia was taking control in the Balkan Peninsula and setting the stage for its advance to the South all the way to the Gulf of Corinth.

Serbia’s greatest success in territorial aggrandizement came in the fourteenth century and was largely due to the effort and vision of Stefan Dusan, who was crowned as Emperor of the Serbs and the Greeks on Eastern Sunday, 16 April 1346 in the city of Skopje (the capital today of Macedonia). He was an ambitious leader who planned to conquer what was left of the Byzantine Empire and establish a Serbo-Greek Empire in the spirit and tradition of the Byzantines. The entire course of his
twenty-five years as king and emperor (1331-1355) was dominated by this grandiose objective. Serbian culture continued to develop in the shadow and example of Constantinople, and Dusan adopted all the trimmings of Byzantine ceremony at his court, including the hierarchy of imperial titles which he distributed to members of the dynasty and to particular members of the nobility. His crowning achievement was the issuance of a legal code, which became the most important administrative contribution of his dynasty and was designed to consolidate and strengthen the sprawling empire.

Unfortunately for Serbia, nothing came of Dusan’s great plans after the emperor died suddenly in December of 1355 on his way to Constantinople. His sole surviving son was not a capable ruler and was destined to be the last of the Nemanjic dynasty. The empire disintegrated quickly as Serbia’s neighbors and a handful of powerful Serbian territorial lords assumed authority in the lands of the one-time empire.

In the meantime, the Ottoman Turks were making their first significant incursions into the Balkan Peninsula. The Turks had captured their first territory in Europe in 1354 and immediately thereafter began to secure their position in the Balkans. In 1371 they defeated the strongest Serbian lords in Macedonia in a battle on the Marica River. The valley of the Marica was a crucial highway between Constantinople and Thessalonika, and it opened the way to the rest of the Balkans. Less than two years after the Marica battle the Byzantine emperor had to accept a vassal relationship with Murad I, the Ottoman sultan, and the ever-retreating line of defense against the Turks moved northwest to the more central territories of what was left of Serbia.

KOSOVO AND SERBIAN MYTH

By 1389 only the central Serbian territory of Prince Lazar Hrebeljanovic stood in the way of the Ottoman advance, and it was his destiny to command a coalition of Christian forces in a large battle of defense against the Turks on the field of Kosovo in southern Serbia on 28 June 1389. When it was over both Lazar and Murad, the Ottoman Sultan, lay dead. While contemporary sources appear to leave the outcome of the battle in question, it did not take long before Serbia writers started to view the battle of Kosovo as the critical moment in Serbia history—the catastrophic event which brought about the collapse of the medieval Serbia state and the centuries-long subjugation to the Ottoman Turks.

Although Serbia did not fall under direct Ottoman control until 1459, the future seemed bleak to the generation which survived the battle. The loss of their prince and the coming of the Turks overwhelmed them, and in the hagiographic works dedicated to Lazar there is a gnawing doubt about the future of Serbia. Recognizing the understandable pessimism of the population, the monastic authors of these works struggled to interpret the events of the day in some positive light. They concluded that Lazar himself chose martyrdom as a sacrifice for Serbia. Like the chosen people in
Babylonian captivity, so the Serbs would one day be free in their own land. The myth of the Serbs as a chosen people of God had been launched.

Over the centuries the legendary and poetic interpretations of the Battle of Kosovo and the martyred prince evolved to become the core of the cult of Kosovo and its unique ethos. This ethos helped to shape the historical consciousness of the Serbia people. Remembering the example of Kosovo, Serbs looked beyond the tragedy of conquest to the promised day of their nation’s resurrection. Kosovo became the symbol of Serbia’s future liberation. For centuries the legacy of Kosovo would inspire the Serbs with examples of sacrifice, bravery, and determined opposition to foreign domination. It would also leave them burdened by their sense of indebtedness to their ancient history.

The cult that evolved celebrated martyrdom on the one hand but also demanded of all generations of Serbs that they avenge the loss of Serbian freedom at Kosovo and liberate all Serbs from oppression. During Ottoman rule, which lasted in some parts of what had been medieval Serbia until the early twentieth century, the Serbs believed that God would protect His people and return them one day from their captivity. Kosovo was the moral apotheosis of the Serbia people, chosen by God as “the new Israel.”

THE OTTOMAN CENTURIES

During the long Ottoman centuries those Serbs who remained in the mountains or who fled there to find refuge from the Turks preserved the old tribal traditions of that remote, mountain life. The mountains became the protector of the cultural and ethnic characteristics of this patriarchal society. When these mountain Serbs began to colonize other parts of the Balkan Peninsula, including parts of Bosnia and Croatia, they brought with them both these patriarchal ideas and the memory of an independent Serbia. From this tribal society came the understanding that there can be no free state without a struggle. Serbian patriarchal society encouraged a feeling for justice and social equality.

These ideas are seen most clearly in the oral epic poetry that was an expression of Serbian society during the centuries of Ottoman rule. The epic poem is a chronicle in verse through which the Serbs expressed their past at a time when they had no state of their own and when most of them were illiterate. Only those events that were important for them and for their collective fate became subjects of the epic tradition. The result is that the epic contains a peculiar periodization of history in which events that were viewed as turning points in the history of the Serbs became so important that earlier developments were all but forgotten. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the Serbs viewed the collapse of the medieval Serbian state as the central event in their history and sought an explanation for it in the Battle of Kosovo. Thus, the epic tradition preserved among the Serbs a sense of national history and identity. For Serbia the medieval past became the only guide to the future.
The highly moralistic society of the Serbian village is clearly reflected in the epic tradition. Such virtues as courage, honor, justice, and respect for tradition were fundamental to the ethos of the village and the epic. This was a society that refused to accept the right of any man to rule another; thus we discover in the epic the glorification of those brave men who fought against tyranny. Milos Obilic, the assassin of the Ottoman Sultan Murad in the Battle of Kosovo, came to represent the ideal hero who sacrifices himself in order to strike a blow against tyranny. The epic interpreted sacrifice for the good of society as the noblest of virtues and inspired the Serbs to countless struggles and sacrifices in the cause of liberation.

One marvels at the ability of a patriarchal, peasant society to preserve its history, language, religion, and cultural identity through long centuries of subjugation to a powerful empire with very different cultural and religious traditions and values. The Serbian Orthodox Church played an important role in this preservation. In one of those great ironies of history, the Ottoman Grand Vezir Mehmed Sokolli who helped shape the Ottoman empire at its pinnacle of power in the sixteenth century, made the decision to restore the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate of Pec in 1557. Sokolli was a Serb from Bosnia whom the Ottomans had forcefully taken as a child from his homeland and raised as a Muslim to serve the Ottoman state. Sokolli never forgot his origins; and by reestablishing the Serbian Patriarchate he contributed to the preservation of Serbian identity in the Balkans. From the late sixteenth century until its abolition in 1766 the Serbian Patriarchate controlled most of the Serbian, Bosnian, Macedonian, and Montenegrin lands and thus united most of the Serb population in a single entity.

Without a secular state, the Serbs found themselves, nevertheless, under the jurisdiction of a powerful church that often acted as a secular power. It became the essential link between the powerful medieval Serbian state and the rebirth of Serbia in the nineteenth century. The church romanticized the medieval Serbian state for the masses and, removing any negative feudal connotations, helped to create the image of a once glorious state.

While the Serbian church and the Serbian oral tradition were most responsible for the preservation of Serbian identity, the Ottoman system itself also made this possible. At the height of Ottoman power in the sixteenth century the guiding principle for the empire followed the tradition long established in the region by earlier empires. This was to be a cosmopolitan enterprise in which a vast variety of peoples and faiths would live under one sultan but would continue to enjoy a certain autonomy in their own lives and cultures. The non-Turkish and non-Islamic peoples of the empire were organized according to their religion into millets, independent communities which functioned as a sort of prototype to the later nineteenth century nation state. The millet allowed the Serbs to practice their Orthodox religion, speak their language, and preserve some of their unique customs as a people. Designed to give strength to the cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic complexity of the Ottoman Empire the Ottoman system thus encouraged the preservation of traditions that would eventually and
perhaps ironically allow the native peoples of southeastern Europe to liberate themselves from Ottoman control. Granted this liberation would not occur for centuries, but the opportunity for Serbs and other Balkan peoples to preserve their unique identity testifies to the success of the Ottoman experiment.

It is perhaps this aspect of the Ottoman system that has led some to argue that the imposition of Ottoman control in the Balkans was a welcome relief for the vast majority of the people who were peasants. The Ottoman scholar Lord Kinross concludes in his study of the Turkish Empire that the “Balkan peasant soon came to appreciate that conquest by the Moslem invader spelled for him liberation from Christian feudal power, whose manifold exactions and abuses had worsened with the increase of monastic lands. Ottomanization was now conferring upon him unforeseen benefits. Not the least of them was law and order.”

While this may have been true in the very beginning of Ottoman rule in certain areas of the empire, it would be a gross exaggeration to suggest that the long centuries of Ottoman rule represented a progressive development for the Serbian population. Whatever benefits the imposition of Ottoman rule over much of Southeastern Europe may have had, it cannot be denied that in the end the balance sheet was not a positive one. Much of Serbian culture was destroyed by the Ottoman conquest. Serbia lost most of its native aristocracy. A wall went up between the Ottoman world and Western Europe, and Serbia remained relatively isolated through the long centuries of Western Europe’s Renaissance, Reformation, Scientific and Urban Revolutions, and Enlightenment.

The Serbs greeted the nineteenth century as a backward, largely illiterate peasant people. It is this cultural and intellectual impoverishment of the nation that has always led most Serbs to view the long centuries of Ottoman rule as one long nightmare. R.G.D. Laffan, a British historian who wrote one of the first studies of the Serbs in English in 1917, reflected the commonly held characterization of the Ottoman period when he wrote, “Then the Serbs sank into a deep sleep of four hundred years. The gross darkness of Turkish rule covered the land.” This darkness became particularly acute in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the Ottoman Empire declined. With that decline the strong centralized rule from Istanbul was replaced with the more arbitrary rule of local Turkish authorities. The native, non-Muslim population paid the price of this transformation of the empire, as the local lords exploited land and peasantry for their own aggrandizement.

THE ERA OF REVOLUTION AND INDEPENDENCE

The harsher the oppression became the more ready the Serbs were to resist it. The legendary tradition of Kosovo encouraged brigandry and revolutionary acts against the Ottomans throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the late eighteenth century, as the spirit of revolution in Europe found an echo in the Balkans, Serbs were ready to utilize the powerful psychological factor of Kosovo in the struggle for liberation and unification.
By this time a number of factors made revolutionary action possible. Constant wars between Austria and the Ottoman Turks had devastated Serbia. Thousands of Serbs fled the Turks and sought refuge in southern Hungary across the Danube. There in the eighteenth century a very different Serbian society emerged which included an urban, educated element that had important economic and cultural ties to the West. Some of these Serbs began to dream about the liberation of their co-nationals south of the Danube.

Moreover, during the eighteenth century the expansion of trade and the evolution of local Serbian self-government in Ottoman-occupied Serbia led to the emergence of a native class of leaders among those Serbs. Such leaders were necessary as the Serbs began the campaign to reclaim their independent state. A final factor that was critical to the eventual success of Serbia in its struggle against the Turks was the migration into Ottoman Serbia in the eighteenth century of large numbers of Serb settlers from the mountainous regions of Bosnia, Hercegovina, and Montenegro. These were the Serbs who were fiercely independent and who had preserved the ethos of Kosovo in their remote, tribal society. They would be a critical element in the emergence of an independent modern Serbian state.

Destroying tyranny, liberating the land of all foreign rule, and reuniting all Serbs in one strong state became primary goals among Serbs in the nineteenth century. At the time of the Serbian uprising against the Turks, which began in 1804, the whole cult of Kosovo and its legacy for Serbia were given new life. The evolving state of modern Serbia in the nineteenth century was built on the foundation of the medieval legacy and a powerful desire to avenge Kosovo, restore the lands of medieval Serbia, and deal with those who betrayed the land. The Serbian motto, “Only Unity Will Save Serbia,” has its inspiration in part in the nineteenth century need for unity as Serbs attempted to free themselves from foreign rule and extend their control over lands which were once theirs.

It is impossible to overestimate the important influence of history in the evolving national consciousness of the Serbs. By the nineteenth century when modern national states were being constructed throughout Europe, the Serbs had long been conscious of themselves as a unique people with a specific historical memory and unique cultural attributes. There was no need to create an ancient past in order to undergird the objectives of the state builders. The Serbs had a clear understanding of themselves as a chosen people with a distinct history and a certain future.

By 1830 a small autonomous principality of Serbia had been created out of the former Ottoman province of Belgrade. While it is from this date that we can trace the evolution of the modern Serbia state, the process was long and painful. During the first decades of the nineteenth century most of Serbia was an extremely primitive land with few roads, thick forests, miserably poor villages, and few literate people. The record confirms just how devastating the Ottoman impact was on Serbia. As the late Serb American historian Michael Boro Petrovich observed, “An illiterate people ruled by an illiterate prince was faced with the task of rising out of the darkness of centuries and out of the ashes
of a brutal and destructive war for independence to form a society that would take its place among the European nations."

By the 1840s, however, Serbia had made great strides in expanding education, transforming the economy, and creating the beginnings of a modern government and bureaucracy. At the same time autonomous Serbia was very small, and the imperative remained to expand the state and liberate those Serbs who were still subject to foreign rule. Two men in particular expressed with their ideas and actions Serbia’s desire to fulfill the national obligation of their great medieval myth. In 1847 the poet-prince of Montenegro, Petar Petrovic Njegos, breathed new spirit into the myth of Kosovo and harnessed that myth to guide new generations in the struggle for freedom and liberation. For Njegos life consisted of war against the Turks, and the spirit and memory of Kosovo dominated his actions and writings. In his epic poem, “The Mountain Wreath,” Njegos gave final shape to the image of Milos Obilic, the legendary assassin of the Ottoman sultan in the 1389 Battle of Kosovo. Obilic represents the pure, Christian hero—the symbol of freedom. Njegos’s message was clear. Encouraged by the long centuries of Ottoman rule and the spirit of the Kosovo heroes, Serbs were to understand that the noblest of acts was to kill the foreign tyrants and those who had betrayed Serbia by converting to Islam.

Njegos’s compatriots in the mountains of Montenegro needed little coaxing. According to the analysis of Jovan Cvijic, Serbia’s great early twentieth century geographer and ethnographer, there was an uncompromising quality about the Serbs who inhabited the remote mountains. They wanted freedom and independence for the poor peasantry in all those lands that were once part of Serbia. Cvijic observed that the Serbs did not expect help from the outside but understood their own obligation to “liberate their brothers with a constant heroism, a never-ending sacrifice, and with blood.”

Njegos made this very clear in his poetry:

Those who escaped the Turkish sword
Who did not blaspheme against their faith
Those who refused to be chained
All of us have gathered high in these mountains
To give our lives, to spill our blood
To preserve our heroic heritage—
Our glorious name and sacred liberty.

Njegos’s “Mountain Wreath” had an enormous influence on the Serbia national movement in the decades following its publication in 1847. In its oral transmission it was of special importance among those Serbs who remained rural and uneducated.

Only three years before the appearance of Njegos’s epic poem, a less passionate but very important expression of Serbian national objectives was articulated by Serbia’s Minister of the Interior, Ilija Garasanin. As the young autonomous principality of Serbia struggled to define itself and plan for the future, it needed a set of guidelines to chart its course. Under the influence of
Polish and Czech colleagues who hoped Serbia might be the force to lead the liberation of all the South Slavs one day, Garasanin produced a draft document known as Nacertanije which laid out long-range goals for Serbia’s expansion.

Garasanin is blamed by many today for essentially giving the first modern expression to the idea of the creation of a “Greater Serbia”. In a recent controversial book entitled Serbia’s Secret War, Philip J. Cohen argues that “the idea of an ethnically homogeneous Greater Serbia, deeply rooted in Serbian political culture, was first codified in 1844 by Ilija Garasanin…” Such an interpretation is, however, inappropriate in the context of Garasanin’s day. While Garasanin rejected the Illyrian or proto-Yugoslav ideas of his Polish and Czech mentors, still his emphasis on the restoration of a large Serbian state was understandable for the time. As the Ottoman Empire declined, Garasanin dreamed of recreating the empire of Dusan (minus its Greek territories) by eventually taking Old Serbia (the unredeemed Serbian territory to the South) and joining to it territories in Bosnia, Hercegovina, Montenegro and northern Albania. Few people had a clear understanding of national identity in this era of awakening, and Garasanin like others believed without any intentional malice that most Slavs in these regions he hoped to liberate were Serbs.

The inspiration behind that assessment was probably Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic, the leading Serb intellectual of the 1840s. Karadzic collected Serbian epic poetry, published it, and introduced it to Western Europe. He also established a new literary language for Serbia based on a dialect in Hercegovina. His blind spot at the time was his inability to see any differences among the South Slavs based on history, culture, and religion. Believing that the dialect he chose for the Serbian literary language was essentially spoken by most Slavs in a wide area of what was to become Yugoslavia, Karadzic concluded that most of these Slavs—regardless of their religion—were Serbs.

This perspective was certainly reflected in Garasanin’s writing. While it can be explained within the context of the first half of the nineteenth century, the whole idea of a large Serbian-dominated state in the Balkans would become both the dream and the dilemma of the next one hundred and fifty years. Surprisingly, Garasanin’s draft remained a secret document until the beginning of the twentieth century; and few of its objectives were met before the Balkan wars in the early twentieth century.

As Serbia began to emerge from its Ottoman isolation in the 19th century after the uprisings against the Turks and the establishment of an autonomous Serbia state, the curtain of ignorance about the Serbs began to rise in the West as well. Modern interest in Serbia was first stimulated by the Serbian uprisings in 1804 and 1815 during the Napoleonic era and by the dissemination of Serbian epic poetry in translation in the 1840s. Eventually one could not follow the Eastern Question without some familiarity with the perspectives, objectives, and fortunes of the Serbs. In the half century or so before World War I and especially after 1878 when it was recognized as an independent state by the Great Powers, Serbia enjoyed a much wider reputation. This was the period when Serbia evolved
as a parliamentary democracy, expanded its territories to encompass regions it considered its
historian core, and struggled to articulate its responsibility to other Serbs and other south Slavs under
Ottoman or Habsburg rule.

The road to modernity was not easy. Travelers to the region in the half century before World
War I were still often shocked by the relatively primitive conditions of life outside of the capital and
a few large towns; and Serbian territory which had not been liberated from the Ottomans remained
terra incognita (with brief exceptions due to the remarkable courage and curiosity of those
indomitable Victorian women, Miss Irby and Miss Mackenzie, who traveled in the 1860s from one
end of the old Serbia lands under Ottoman control to the other in an effort to enlighten their
compatriots at home).

But progress continued in Serbia. In 1913 W.Y. Morgan, an American journalist from the
Midwest allowed that Serbia was “doubtless on its way to civilization”. “Belgrade is marching on,”
he observed. “The Serbians have licked the Turks and the Bulgarians. Next they will have bathtubs
and then they will be redeemed but still uninteresting.” Along with his humor he was also optimistic
about the future: “Of course, the Serbians say they are the best of the Balkan people. They may be.
At any rate, they are getting up to date. Their pride is aroused to make Serbia one of the modern
states of Europe and they are doing it rapidly. The schoolteacher is abroad in the land, and that
means good-bye to superstition, brutality, and dirt. This is a democratic country....the people come
closer to running their own affairs in Serbia than they do in New York.”

There was a downside to all of this, of course, which most writers never failed to see. As
Morgan reported, “Unfortunately, there are more cross-purposes, ancient feuds, hostile religions
and belligerent races in this Near East than anywhere else on which the sun shines. All that is
necessary to start a fight is to get out in the street and holler”—a characterization of the region which
continues to be trumpeted by journalists and foreign policy makers today.

WORLD WAR I

The cataclysm of World War I in Serbia generated enormous sympathy for the Serbs in the
West and inspired two books in English on the subject of the Serbs and their history. Serbia, the
“darling” of the Central forces, paid an enormous price for its efforts to preserve its sovereignty.
Hundreds of thousands met their death in the army or in the deportations and concentration camps of
the enemy. Those who remained behind were decimated by the privations of war and the occupation
and by disease. “Is it possible for the Serbs ever to recover from the desolation that has swept over
them? asked R.G.D. Laffan, that British historian who gave a series of lectures on the Serbs to
British forces in Salonika and then published them as a book. While Laffan argued that it would be
very difficult “to build up once more the national life,” he never doubted the ability of the Serbs to
overcome their misery and “resume the almost forgotten arts of peace.” It was, he believed, the
defining part of their spirit: “If ever a nation bought its union and its liberty with blood and tears, the Serbs have paid that price. For five hundred years they have never been content to submit to slavery, but have unceasingly struggled towards the light...Let us...ask ourselves how it was that they came to be abandoned to their fate, and resolve that never...shall they fail in the achievement of their national liberty.” This was the characterization of the Serbs which mirrored the Serbs’ own self-image and which dominated western perspectives on the Serbs for much of the twentieth century.

Laffan observed the world’s woeful ignorance about anything that had to do with the Balkans. “Nine out of ten [Englishmen],” he remarked, “have said that all the Balkan nations were as bad as each other...that all were savages and cut-throats and past praying for. The tenth man has usually been a philanthropic crank, who would only see good points in his own pet Balkan nation...” Having discovered, however, that the Serb soldiers in his midst were “the best of fellows,” he hoped that some discourse about their history would contribute to a broader appreciation for them and for their sacrifices in the Great War. He was clearly partisan in all this. He wanted his own work to play a part in preparing for the day when the Serbs “will again take their place among the mighty nations of the earth.”

THE FIRST YUGOSLAVIA

With the end of the war and the establishment of a Yugoslav state the centuries-long ordeal was apparently over. Serbs believed that history had bestowed on them a particular right and responsibility in the Balkans. After the misery they experienced under the Turks, the disasters they faced in their nineteenth century wars of liberation, and the indescribable slaughter that befell them in the years of World War I, they saw the establishment of Yugoslavia in 1918 under the leadership of the Serbian Karadjordjevic dynasty as their just reward. The Serbs believed that it was only natural to expect the gratitude and cooperation of the other South Slavs who comprised the new state of Yugoslavia.

Unfortunately, while the suffering of the Serbs throughout the ages was very real, so was their illusion about history’s role for them in the Balkans. The years between World War I and World War II brought anything but gratitude from some of the non-Serb population of the new state of Yugoslavia. The Kosovo that the Serbs liberated on the eve of World War I, for example, was not the same territory they had lost over five hundred years earlier. Over the centuries it had become home to a very large population of Albanians, most of whom were not happy with their new masters. And the failure to produce a federal state structure between the wars poisoned the atmosphere as well for Croats and allowed them to view the Serbs as oppressors.

In the face of growing interethnic tensions during the turbulent interwar years, it is interesting to see that the Serb-dominated government often invoked the myth of Kosovo as the essential spirit
of Yugoslav unity, rather than as a more narrow expression of Serbian identity. After the assassination of King Alexander in Marseilles in 1934, for example, there was a popular attempt to identify the king and his death with Prince Lazar and his sacrifice on Kosovo in 1389. Just as Lazar had martyred himself for the future of Serbia, so Alexander was hailed as the first martyr for the idea of a strong and unified Yugoslavia.

In 1939 as the clouds of war in Europe again loomed on the horizon, the commission for the 550th anniversary of Kosovo announced to all Yugoslavs that the Kosovo ethic was, indeed, a Yugoslav ethic:

The [Kosovo] mystique was that magical lever for all our unprecedented undertakings and accomplishments in history. It was the foundation of our national, spiritual image, our heroism, and our Christian view of man. It was the greatest and most difficult test of the Serbian people, and it remained as an example not only to them but to all Yugoslavs... 11.

And the Serbian organization “National Defense” designated the anniversary of Kosovo as “a holiday of thanksgiving to known and unknown heroes, as a day of commemoration and remembrance for our obligations to king and country, and as a holiday for the cult of freedom and the indivisibility of the Yugoslav spirit, land, people, and state.” 12 One member of this organization encouraged an even broader interpretation of the power of Kosovo: “Kosovo is a pan-Slavic, universal idea. It can be accepted only by rejecting all selfish concerns, prejudices, and all national pretensions.” 13

Tragically, that appeal for tolerance and cooperation among the Yugoslavs came too late. In 1941 Yugoslavia’s fragile unity was destroyed by the Nazi invasion. An independent fascist state was established in Croatia and most of Bosnia, which undertook a vicious policy of genocide against the Serb population there. All of Yugoslavia was to suffer through four brutal years of civil war and the war of resistance to the Nazis. Through it all the Serbs saw themselves again as a martyred people. Accepting the myth that they had sacrificed everything throughout the nineteenth century and especially during World War I in order to create an independent state for all Yugoslavs, they could not understand why they became victims at the hands of their fellow Yugoslavs.

SOCIALIST YUGOSLAVIA

As Tito’s socialist Yugoslavia evolved after World War II that question remained unanswered. The privileged position of Serbia was not guaranteed in this second Yugoslavia. Recognizing the tensions among national groups in the interwar years and understanding the role that Serbs expected they should play in any South Slav state, Tito was said to have argued that a weak Serbia would guarantee a strong Yugoslavia. The most visible sign of this policy came three decades after the war, when the 1974 constitution recognized Kosovo as an autonomous province in the Yugoslav federation, thus taking direct Serbia control away from its most sacred territory.
Surprisingly, however, this measure and others did not seem to evoke much public reaction in the Serb population of Yugoslavia. A number of factors account for this, including a relatively prosperous economy in the 1960s and 1970s, the centralized control of a communist regime in Belgrade, and Serb domination of the military. The first post-war generation of Serbs and other Yugoslavs for the most part acknowledged themselves as part of a multinational state and seemed to put the animosities and difficulties of the first half of the century behind them. There was much less consideration of the past and its lessons. Serbs, like others in Yugoslavia, looked forward to a brighter future; and for a few years it appeared that old myths and perceptions had lost their power as Serbia faced the demands and opportunities of a modern society.

One reflection of this was a marked decline in public comment on the meaning of Kosovo and its legacy during the decades of socialist Yugoslavia. The government’s ideologues and many of the survivors of World War II helped to create new legends about great battles of the Partisan movement. Commemorations of the Battle of Kosovo were essentially confined to services of the Serbian church; and it was the church that continued to remind the faithful of the basic religious and humanistic qualities of the Kosovo ethic:

One of the main characteristics of Kosovo is the idea of a conscious, willing sacrifice for noble ideals, a sacrifice of one individual for the benefit of the rest, a sacrifice now for the sake of a better future. According to popular understanding which developed in our folk literature, the Battle of Kosovo was not an event in which it was possible to win or lose. It was rather a conscious, heroic sacrifice. A slave is only half a man; a freeman is similar to God.14

Miloslav Stojadinovic provided a more secular interpretation of the basic idea of the Kosovo spirit in 1970 in the preface to his Kosovo Trilogy. He maintained that the Kosovo spirit is the “revolutionary spirit of justice, humanity, equity, equality of rights, with a noticeably democratic spirit and progressive quality of respect for the rights of all other peoples.”15 The peace and relative prosperity of Yugoslavia during the best of the Tito years allowed this generous interpretation of the Kosovo ethos, stripped of its narrow Serbian complexion, to prevail. To a certain extent Stojadinovic’s words represent a twentieth century spin on an old idea. Certainly Njegos’s “Mountain Wreath” with its appeal to kill the Muslims (“sacrifice now for the sake of a better future”) would appear to have little in common with Stojadinovic’s ideas about the Kosovo spirit.

PRELUDE TO WAR

Unfortunately, the good will expressed in Stojadinovic’s words began to fade not long after Tito’s death in the spring of 1980. Within weeks of his death Albanian voices in Kosovo began to agitate for republic status for their province in the Yugoslav federation. The Serb population in Kosovo then began to feel the effects of repression by the preponderant Albanian population.
Thousands of Serbs left Kosovo in a steady migration that was interpreted by Serb leaders as the result of an attempt at ethnic cleansing on the part of the Albanians. Continued demonstrations and agitation in Kosovo led to the imposition of martial law in the region, the imprisonment of thousands of Albanian dissidents, and the presence of the Yugoslav army, which remains there to this day.

As tensions heightened in Kosovo, Serb intellectuals were the first to raise the alarm. It began in the early 1980s with some extensive revisionism in Serbian historiography—not unlike what eventually happened as well in much of the former Soviet Union and the post-revolutionary states of Central Europe and the rest of the Balkans. Most of the debate centered on so-called “Communist myths” about critical issues concerning the character of each of the first two Yugoslavias, the reasons for their creation, and the dominant forces in those creations. Throughout the century the Communist Party demanded conformity in historical interpretations about Yugoslavia between the world wars and Yugoslavia during and after World War II. The Party’s view of the “People’s Liberation War” was sacred as was its characterization of the whole interwar period as a time of Serbian hegemony and oppressive rule by the Serbian bourgeoisie. In the 1980s the Serbian Clio began to ask many new questions: Did history prepare the region for the creation of Yugoslavia? Was it an accident? Was Yugoslavia the creation of the great powers who wanted a state to halt the German drive to the South or was it the desire of the region’s many national groups? Did it satisfy only the Serbs? Was it the prison of the people or a land whose internal structure evolved toward a federal structure? Was it a land of relative freedom or a land oppressed by great Serbian force?

The first challenges to the canon culminated in the now infamous Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Science and Art in 1986. Supposedly an in-house document written collectively by a number of Serb scholars, it offered a long analysis of socialist Yugoslavia’s economic problems followed by an extraordinarily provocative and chilling list of grievances concerning the position of Serbia and the Serbian nation. The scholars clearly perceived the Serbs as victims of the system.

The authors observed that Serbia “subject to the charge that it is ‘oppressive,’ ‘unitaristic,’ ‘centralist,’ and ‘policelike,’...has been unable to achieve equal status in Yugoslavia.” They branded “the physical, political, legal, and cultural genocide against the Serbian population of Kosovo [as] the most serious defeat suffered in the liberation struggles waged by Serbia from 1804 to the 1941 uprising.” “Responsibility for that defeat,” they argued,

falls primarily on the still-lively Comintern legacy in the nationalities policy of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and the adherence of Serbian communists to that policy, to costly ideological and political mistakes, ignorance, immaturity, or already-chronic opportunism of generations of Serbian politicians after the war, always on the defensive and always more concerned about what others think of them...than about the objective facts that condition the future of the nation that they lead.

They were not only concerned about the fate of the Serbs in Kosovo, however. Believing that Serbs in Croatia were threatened as well, they voiced their alarm:
The Serbian people in Croatia are not only culturally cut off from the motherland; the motherland does not have any opportunity to get information on their fate, on their economic and cultural situation, nothing close to the ties that certain nations in Yugoslavia have with their compatriots in other lands. The integrity of the Serbian nation and of its culture throughout Yugoslavia is a fateful question for its survival and development.

Serbia’s intellectual leaders seemed to believe that Serbia and its culture were in grave danger:

Bearing more than half a century the stamp and burden of having been the jailer of the other Yugoslav nations, the Serbian nation has been unable to seek support in its own history. In many of its forms, that very history has been drawn into question. Under the influence of the prevailing ideology, the cultural achievements of the Serbian nation are alienated, arrogated or disparaged, ignored or rejected, the language is curbed, and the Cyrillic alphabet is gradually being lost. Not one other Yugoslav nation has experienced as glaring a challenge to its cultural and intellectual integrity as the Serbian nation has. In less than 50 years, over two consecutive generations, twice subjected to physical destruction, forcible assimilation, religious conversion, cultural genocide, ideological indoctrination, the degradation and rejection of their own tradition under an imposed complex of blame, and intellectually and politically disarmed, the Serbian nation has been subjected to many difficult experiences for this not to have left behind deep traces in its mental state, which should not be ignored at the end of this century of great technological flights by the human mind. If it is considering its future in the family of the world’s cultured and civilized nations, the Serbian nation must gain the opportunity to find itself again and become a historic subject, to regain awareness of its historic and intellectual essence, to clearly contemplate its economic and cultural interests, to find a contemporary social and national program to inspire present and future generations.

"Finding itself again as a nation" seems to be the main inspiration behind much of the revisionism that the Memorandum has encouraged in Serbia today. The debate centers on three main controversies: 1) the nature of the heroic tradition and the role of myth in Serbia’s history; 2) Serbia’s role in the unification of the South Slavs and the evolution of the common Yugoslav state in the twentieth century; and 3) Serbia’s role in World War II.

While few would deny the importance of Kosovo to Serbian historical consciousness, there was a long time in the nineteenth century when Serbs placed less emphasis on the martyrological image that is associated with Kosovo and much more on those periods of Serbia’s greatness. By the end of the nineteenth century Serbia’s first critical historians even challenged the factual bases of many of Serbia’s sacred myths. They attempted to separate fact from fiction and to establish a more solid and scientific basis for an understanding of the past. Now we find historians and others returning to the legacy of Kosovo and Serbian martyrdom as a way of understanding what they believe to be Serbia’s innocence in the face of attack by others. The Memorandum clearly expresses this sense of victimhood.

In the second area of controversy—Serbia’s role in the unification of the South Slavs and its responsibilities in the interwar period—Serbian historians continue to maintain that the creation of Yugoslavia was an epochal event and the greatest expression of Serbian altruism. Today, however, younger historians question such enthusiasm for a state which they believed almost destroyed Serbia.
Not only do they reject any idea of Serbian hegemony in the interwar years, they essentially believe that all other Yugoslav nations fared better during the period and preserved their national identity more successfully than did the Serbs. Nikola Pasic, head of the Serbian government during World War I, worried that Serbia might “drown in the sea of some kind of Yugoslavia.” Contemporary historians today suggest that that is exactly what happened.

The third subject of debate concerns the Serbian Cetnik movement during World War II. Serb historians have rehabilitated this resistance movement led by Draza Mihailovic by arguing that Serbia essentially experienced a civil war between two realisms: that of Mihailovic and his Cetniks and that of Tito and his Partisans. This perspective sees the Cetniks as equally anti-Axis and anti-fascist as the Partisans and suggests that the Cetnik movement may have succeeded if it had not been for the machinations of the great powers.

In the end all of the controversies play in some way upon the old theme of Serbia as martyr and victim. In this view Serbia struggled throughout the century to build a viable Yugoslavia that would keep all Serbs in one state. In spite of sacrificing everything for that state, they were the biggest losers. The final insult for them was the alleged harassment and discrimination of Serbs on Kosovo. They interpreted this as another crucifixion of the Serb nation.

The myth of Kosovo seems to reappear in its less tolerant interpretation as a shield for the defense of Serbia when Serbs feel themselves threatened or are encouraged to believe that they are threatened. This is the tragic legacy of the last ten years when increasing numbers of Serb intellectuals and political figures orchestrated a national renaissance, eager again to have “Serbia takes it place among the mighty nations of the earth.”

THE RISE OF MILOSEVIC

All of this, particularly the conflict in Kosovo, eventually played into the hands of Slobodan Milosevic, a relatively young and ambitious Serb politician. In April, 1987 Milosevic traveled to Kosovo and put himself on the line as the defender of all Serbs. In a non-famous speech he admonished his compatriots to stay in Kosovo and fight. Playing upon old fears and resurrecting old illusions he declared:

I want to say to you comrades, that you must remain here. This is your land. Here are your homes, your fields and gardens, your memories. I assume that you will not leave your land because it is difficult to live on it or because injustice and humiliation oppress you. It has never been characteristic of the soul of the Serb and Montenegrin people to succumb to obstacles, to demobilize just when you have to fight, or to become demoralized when things are difficult. You must remain here because of your ancestors and your descendants....

Milosevic’s success was immediate. In the spring of 1989, playing on the hypernational sentiments of Serbs, he virtually abrogated the autonomy Kosovo had enjoyed since 1974 and
returned the province to direct Serbian control. It was, therefore, a strong and unified Serbia that eagerly prepared for the six hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo.

And Milosevic was more than ready to manipulate that national sentiment as he headed south to Kosovo for that anniversary on 28 June 1989. He was the only speaker that day when a million Serbs from Yugoslavia and around the world gathered on the famous battlefield to “reclaim their history.” He fed their illusion by arguing that the Serbs had suffered more at the hands of some of their own politicians during the decades of socialist Yugoslavia than did any other people in Yugoslavia.

“Why did we lose the Battle of Kosovo?” Milosevic asked the multitudes. “It was because of disunity and betrayal which then followed the Serb people like an evil fate throughout their history.” He blamed Serb political leaders for holding Serbia back and accepting an inferior position for it in the Yugoslav federation. But he went on record to say that Serbia was not going to stay down any longer.

He admonished his compatriots to remember that they were again engaged in battles. And while he reminded the crowds that these were not armed battles, he did not rule out the use of force. Moreover, it was clear that he accepted the old myth of Serbia as defender of Europe against the infidel: “Six centuries ago Serbia defended itself on Kosovo but it also defended Europe. She found herself on the ramparts for the defense of European culture, religion, and European society as a whole.”

Since that day and during the years of the tragic war in Bosnia, Serbs continually tried to convince themselves and the world that they were fighting for the very defense of Europe against Islamic fundamentalism. It mattered little to them that most of the Muslims in Bosnia were either Hanafi or Hanbali Sunnis and had little interest in fundamentalism, or that Europeans did not perceive any need for defense. For them it was enough to believe that they were honoring “the spirit of Kosovo”.

One hundred years earlier the Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs explained the meaning of Kosovo to the world: “An inexhaustible source of national pride was discovered at Kosovo. There was never a war for freedom—and when was there no war?—in which the spirit of the Kosovo heroes did not participate. The new history of Serbia begins with Kosovo—a history of valiant efforts, long suffering, endless wars, and unquenchable glory.”

Milosevic and others convinced the Serbs that they too were at the dawn of a new history for Serbia. In the beginning they found plenty of true believers who were certain that they had been given the responsibility to bring a final solution to their long history of oppression and martyrdom. In their view, one great Serbian state and its largely Orthodox population, liberated from Catholics and Muslims, would never again have to face the agony of its long and troubled history. Tragically,
by manipulating the “spirit of Kosovo” for their own selfish political interests. Milosevic and his circle helped to destroy Yugoslavia.

CONCLUSION

Today after five years of brutal war Serbia finds itself trying to recover from the devastation it unleashed. Completely isolated and supported by no ally, it has lost its reputation as a land of noble, heroic people. That may be one of the most lasting effects of the war and the most difficult to reverse. The realization of this has demoralized the population. I found this to be particularly true in Belgrade during a visit there this past June.

Year after year the warm days of summer in Belgrade always managed to revive the city’s inhabitants. The streets and sidewalk cafes filled with people relieved to be finished with another long winter and eager to enjoy the rites of a continental summer. At first glance this year might appear to be little different; but sadly after months of endless protests against the government and increasingly desperate economic and social conditions everyone knows that nothing is the same in the capital or in Serbia. A mood of resignation prevails there, especially among the youth. Their courage and persistence in the struggle for political change in Serbia achieved too little. While the opposition leaders dissolve in endless argument, Slobodan Milosevic has consolidated his power and has now been inaugurated as President of the Yugoslav Federation.

The frustration with the failure to make progress toward democracy is only made worse by the extraordinarily difficult conditions of life for most people. At a press conference in Washington last spring Carl Bildt, the Head of the Special Forces in Bosnia and Hercegovina, worried about a potential “economic and social explosion” in Serbia. The litany of problems facing the citizens of Milosevic’s Yugoslavia would test the mettle of most peoples: one million unemployed (out of a population of eleven million); average incomes less than half what they were in 1989; many people unpaid for months; a brain drain to the West of enormous proportions; a refugee population of hundreds of thousands; a clear suspicion of privatization and foreign capital; and a growing and increasingly dangerous underground crime element.

On the day of Milosevic’s inauguration as President of the Yugoslav Federation, a thousand citizens of Belgrade, mainly students, gathered in front of the Philosophy Faculty of the University. They carried old shoes in their hands as a protest. Each pair of shoes was meant to represent someone who was no longer in Serbia because of the conditions of the past eight years. In the words of the demonstration’s organizers, “We must stop the tyranny and never forget the legacy of eight years of Milosevic’s dictatorship: 450,000 young people forced to flee the homeland, 100,000 dead and wounded in war, one million refugees, three million citizens without adequate nutrition, and ten million citizens essentially robbed of everything.” When the protestors could not deliver their shoes to the Parliament, they threw them at Milosevic’s motorcade as it left Parliament and headed
for Milosevic's new home—a luxurious mansion not occupied since the days of President Josip Broz Tito.

The optimists argue that Serbia only needs time and a period of economic stability in order to move forward toward democracy. But there is such a weariness with the years of deprivation and international isolation that it is difficult to imagine that the Serbs will find the courage and energy to challenge the current authoritarian government and move toward effective democracy. It is true that the old Serbia motto—Only Unity Will Save Serbia—has been resurrected in the recent years of the new Serbia nationalism, but as always that unity is largely illusive. Sadly, the only thing that unifies most Serbs in yet another summer of discontent is their disillusionment.

In June this summer over a late afternoon beer in a largely empty outdoor cafe in the center of the city, a leading Serb writer told me with his own tears what many were thinking. The loss of the other constituent parts of the former Yugoslavia had diminished him, had robbed him of people and places that complemented and enhanced his own experiences and outlook as a Serb. The long days of summer brought to mind memories of years of holidays spent among Yugoslav and international friends and colleagues on the Adriatic Sea. Now he could only look to the South in sadness and resignation, knowing that he would never enjoy his "days of pure bliss" again.

For those who know Belgrade well, the familiar facade cannot hide the sense of loss, hopelessness and frustration that overwhelms those who live within its walls. While the war and the economic sanctions of the first half of the 1990s have not brought down Milosevic's authoritarian government, they have helped to alter dramatically the lives of the vast majority of the city's inhabitants. Stripped of energy, vitality, and many of its most interesting citizens, the city looks exhausted. In some ways Belgrade seems like a museum piece of some of the worst elements of Soviet-style socialism—a bit like Prague in the 1970s without the benefit of that city's extraordinary architecture. Goods are in short supply and variety in most stores. The old hotels look tired with everything in desperate need of repair and a facelift. Clerks in stores and public institutions were never very friendly or helpful during the socialist era; now their disinterestedness is matched by their sheer weariness with life. A young woman in a spacious second-floor room of a large bank eyed me suspiciously or perhaps jealously as she sipped her coffee and fanned her face with my passport. I was the only customer in the room but the transaction took twenty-five minutes, and she only had enough money to change one of my traveler's checks. Living in Belgrade always demanded extraordinary patience.

Now it demands caution too. The city that was once wonderfully safe has, like other Eastern European cities, witnessed the proliferation of a mafia-like criminal element. When I checked into my hotel in June, the concierge gave me two pieces of advice: never walk alone after 11:00 p.m. and avoid the small private coffee shops apparently frequented by the criminal element. One evening I left the National Theater in the center of the city at 9:30 p.m. and began my walk back to the
hotel. Within 200 yards I almost stumbled over the body of a young man, clearly murdered only minutes before, his blood still flowing toward the curb. As police officers appeared on the scene, I rushed to the other side of the street, horrified by the scene. Others simply made their way around the body and continued on their way.

A few minutes later as I picked up my pace, I passed three or four of those small private outdoor cafés. In each of them the only patrons were well-dressed men who sat glued to their cellular phones. Their Mercedes and BMWs, parked close to the tables, seemed to announce their presence in the area. Only a few feet away from one of the cafés a distinguished looking gentleman about seventy years old played Mozart on his violin as he solicited donations. And on the next corner an amputee from the recent war tried his best to coax a coin or two from the few people who passed his way. A sign around his neck proclaimed, “I did it for you, Serbia.”

The last few years have not been kind to Belgrade and to most of Serbia, and it seems likely that the situation will not improve for a very long time. The burden of collective guilt is a difficult one. A number of recent pieces in the Western press have argued that there is little good that can come to Serbia until its people acknowledge their culpability for the tragedy in the former Yugoslavia. Looking on from the outside it might be difficult to deny the cathartic benefit of confession. From the inside, however, it must be almost impossible to imagine that confession will do much to improve the current disaster. Rather it is the establishment of true democracy that is critical for Serbia’s tomorrow. Sadly, as Slobodan Milosevic moves from the Presidency of Serbia to the Presidency of the Yugoslav Federation, the prospects for democracy there appear even more illusive. The mood in Belgrade only reflects this reality.

As I sat alone one night last June in Belgrade’s “Three Hats” restaurant, an old man came up to me and asked me for some money for a meal. When I gave it to him, he told me that he was a Tito Partisan during World War II and now could only wonder what the sacrifice was for. As he shuffled his way across the cobblestones and the restaurant’s musicians began to play an old Serbia patriotic song from World War I, I sat quietly and remembered that poignant scene in Broadway’s Les Miserables when Marius sees the ghosts of his generation’s lost idealists:

There’s a grief that can’t be spoken
There’s a pain goes on and on
Empty chairs at empty tables
Now my friends are dead and gone
Here they talked of revolution
Here it was they lit the flame
Here they sang about ‘tomorrow’
And tomorrow never came.

The task ahead for Serbia will not be easy. When Ferdinand Schevill penned the words to his last chapter of a History of the Balkan Peninsula in 1921, he looked to the future with anxious hope. While nationalism and imperialism had encouraged “what was vital and full of promise,” they also
threatened to end “by destroying their best handiwork.” Like others of his war-tired generation, he put his faith in a new spirit of internationalism and worried that failure to eschew the excesses of nationalism would lead to a time when some might actually mourn the passing of lost empires.

The Second World War represented the realization of the darkest of Schevill’s fears, especially in Yugoslavia, whose brief life ended in a catastrophe of interethnic strife. The second Yugoslavia arose from the ashes of war more confidently than the first and for many years succeeded in dispelling doubts about the viability of a multinational state in the Balkans. Now, however, at the end of the twentieth century after five years of a “living nightmare” in what had been Yugoslavia, it becomes more difficult once again to challenge the “pessimistic faith that men are incapable of summoning the wisdom necessary to restrain their passions.”

Such wisdom indeed seems rare in Serbia today. Serbs complain that the outside world doesn’t understand their heroic history; critics in the world claim to know it all too well. At the end of the nineteenth century Demetra Vaka, a Greek traveler in Serbia, observed, “Indeed, the whole of Servia [sic] is an appeal of the dead to the quick. It is the past presenting arms to the present. It is a song of battle, sung by the dead to the living. And while in Florence the past is only a background, in Servia it dominates the present: the souls of the dead guide the souls of the living. This difference in effect may be because Florence has outlived the past, while to-day Servia is facing the same problems. is fighting the same battles, as in the past.” Unfortunately, at the end of the twentieth century, it is clear that Serbia has still not outlived the past, but sees itself “fighting the same battles.”

Serbia must face the challenge of freeing itself from the burden of its long past. As a Montenegrin poet recently observed, “It’s our obsessions with history and politics, and communism above all, that has led us where we are. What we need most is a catharsis. We must repudiate myths, especially the modern ones.” Today more than ever the Serbs need an objective accounting of their past and, more importantly, a willingness to confront that past and move beyond it. This will mean the ability to take responsibility for their actions and to transcend the confinement of myth. Without this they cannot hope to recover from the crisis and join the road to an integrated Europe. And it is a vicious circle. If they are unsuccessful in this and are marginalized in Europe, they will see themselves as victims once again.
ENDNOTES


5Jovan Cvijic, Balkansko poluostrvo i juznoslovenske zemlje (Belgrade, 1966), p. 369.


7Philip J. Cohen, Serbia's Secret War (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1996), p. 3.


9Laffan, pp. 281-282.


13Ibid.


15Miloslav Stojadinovic, Kosovska trilogija (Belgrade, 1970), p. 5.

16 Excerpts from the Memorandum found in: The Crisis of the Yugoslav Economy and Society (Suppressed Memorandum of Members of the Serbian Academy of Science and Art) (New York: Serbian Literary Association, 1986).


18This and the whole text of Milosevic's speech is found in "Kosovo i sloga," Nin, 2009 (2 July 1989), pp. 6-7.


23Schevill, p. 533.
