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The National Question across the Balkans (1875 to 1903)

_The Great Eastern Crisis, 1875 to 1878_

In the summer of 1875, Christian peasants in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who had become infuriated by unbearable tax burdens, forced labor, and the excessive use of force against them, revolted against the feudal Ottoman rule, an uprising that was attentively and anxiously watched by the Great Powers of Europe. During his wanderings through both provinces, the Oxford archaeologist Arthur Evans was shocked by the inhumane conditions he witnessed: “The Christian ‘kmet,’ or tiller of the soil, is worse off than many a serf in our darkest ages, and lies as completely at the mercy of the Mahometan owner of the soil as if he were a slave.” In order to enforce socage tenure and collect levies, torture was used: “In the heat of summer men are stripped naked, and tied to a tree smeared over with honey or other sweet-stuff, and left to the tender mercies of the insect world. For winter extortion it is found convenient to bind people to stakes and leave them bare-footed to be frost-bitten.”

Ottoman rule over the Balkans had begun to crumble at the end of the eighteenth century, a process of decline that was intermittently accelerated in the nineteenth century by major Eastern crises, in which the Great Powers rivaled for hegemony in “European Turkey.” This had been preceded by the Greek War of Independence (1821 to 1832) and the Crimean War (1853 to 1856). At the time of the Great Eastern Crisis, only Greece was a sovereign state, while the Principality of Serbia was autonomous. The greater part of the Balkans remained under Ottoman rule, including Bosnia and Herzegovina. Today’s Slovenia and Croatia were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The various national movements in the Balkans profited from the increasing decline of the Sublime Porte. In June 1876, Serbia and Montenegro entered the war to support their Bosnian compatriots in the fight against the Ottomans. Serbia intended to annex Bosnia, and Montenegro was to take over Herzegovina, but both countries soon found themselves in trouble militarily.
Russian pan-Slavic committees sent volunteers as reinforcements, thereby prompting Austria-Hungary and Great Britain to react. These revolts meant that the Eastern Question, resulting from the heralded collapse of Ottoman rule, had entered a new phase. Once again, the strategically and economically interesting Balkans were to become “the center of particularly difficult and above all course-setting crises of the European system.”

As the power of the Ottoman Empire waned, Austria-Hungary and Russia became the main rivals for its territories on the Balkan Peninsula. The Russian czar was driven by strategic interests, above all by the opportunity to gain control of the Turkish Straits, but also by economic motives. In addition, he was motivated by a sense of pan-Slavic solidarity with the Orthodox Christians. For the Austrian emperor Franz Joseph, the chance to carve out a piece of Ottoman territory for his empire was more a question of restoring his personal honor, following the humiliating defeats in Italy (1859) and against Prussia (1866). Bosnia-Herzegovina was to be occupied not only to better protect the naval port in Dalmatia but also to facilitate advances farther south from there. The chief objective was to prevent the succession of the South Slavs in the wake of the successful independence movement of the Italians, who, led by Piedmont, had established the Kingdom of Italy in 1861.

At the time, both Austria-Hungary and Russia were still interested in supporting Ottoman power in the Balkans to a certain degree in order to keep national movements among the Balkan peoples in check. At the Congress of Berlin in 1878, which resolved the Great Eastern Crisis, Serbia and Montenegro were recognized as independent states and were somewhat enlarged territorially. However, the historic region of southern Serbia, Kosovo, and Macedonia still remained part of the Ottoman Empire, and the demands of the new Albanian national movement to create an autonomous administrative region (vilayet) within the Ottoman Empire fell on deaf ears.

Austria-Hungary secured the right to occupy Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sandžak. A secret protocol also assigned Serbia to the Habsburg sphere of influence while the eastern Balkan region including Bulgaria was left to Russia. Serbia was then forced to sign disadvantageous trade agreements and not only had to approve a railway connection to Hungary but also had to accept a strong Austro-Hungarian say on the control of the Danube, which was declared neutral territory below the Iron Gates. Although Serbia had been given full sovereignty, it had not achieved the important war aim of liberating Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia and thus incorporating them into its national territory. This meant that more than half of all Serbs still lived outside the motherland. Furthermore, Austrian troops stationed in Sandžak blocked any chance of unification with Montenegro and thus the desired access to the sea.
The problems arising from the occupation and later annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina would significantly impact the rest of Austria-Hungary’s foreign policy agenda. The erosion of Ottoman rule in the Balkans and the independence of Serbia, Montenegro, Romania, and later Bulgaria intensified competition with Russia for hegemony over the region. At the same time, it was becoming clear that South Slavic nationalism would become a question of survival for the monarchy.

**The “South Slavic Question” in the Habsburg Monarchy**

A closer look at Viennese politics starting in the mid-nineteenth century, which the Austrian prime minister Count Eduard Taaffe once accurately described as “muddling along,” reveals that there is no justification for nostalgia of any kind regarding the Habsburg era. The ideal, supposedly harmonious world of the multiethnical “Kakania” (Robert Musil), posed as an alternative to war-torn and violence-ridden Yugoslavia, did not correspond at all with reality. Granted, the metaphor of the *Völkerkerker* (dungeon of peoples) appears exaggerated. At the same time, the albeit halting socioeconomic transformation process in the nineteenth century had produced all over the empire an educated and economic elite in the various nationalities, who were now demanding autonomy and democratic rights with ever-growing urgency. When faced with these demands, however, the Habsburg monarchy never once seriously considered granting political representation, economic participation, or linguistic and cultural autonomy. Rocked by its first major existential crisis caused by the revolution of 1848, the monarchy had concentrated since then solely on ensuring its very survival. For this reason, Emperor Franz Joseph was doomed to fail in his attempt to instill loyalty for the monarchical empire as a whole and against ethnic nationalisms. Austria-Hungary did not collapse because it “lost a decisive war” in 1918 or was the victim of Serbian agitation, but because it never resolved the growing internal conflict between political and social dynamics of change and its poor ability to reform itself.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the South Slavic question became increasingly relevant. Like the Italians, Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, and Romanians, the South Slavs had been demanding more political rights for decades. The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 established the dual monarchy and thereby satisfied the long-sought Magyar desire for self-government. However, no other nationality was granted substantial political, economic, and cultural autonomy, let alone self-rule. Budapest, in whose half of the empire the Croatian lands lay, treated the Slavs no differently than they had been formerly treated by the Austrians. In the Croatian-Hungarian Settlement of 1868 (*nagodba*), it granted the “Kingdom of Croatia and Slavonia” autonomy within Hungary, including its own bureaucracy, judicial system,
and cultural sovereignty, but no independent government. Even though this compromise promised the unification of Dalmatia with Croatia and Slavonia, which had been a central demand of the national movement since 1848, this was never realized.

The Croats were particularly annoyed by the Hungarian nationality law stipulating that Hungarian was not only the national language but also the language to be used in teaching. Moreover, under the absolutist regime of the Hungarian Ban Károly Khuen-Héderváry (1883 to 1903), the Croatian opposition was subjected to political repression. Croats and Serbs were pitted against one another through crude divide-and-conquer politics. Fifty-five percent of the country’s tax revenue had to be turned over to the Hungarian authorities. Press and election laws discriminated against non-Magyar nationalities. Except for a small class of Croatian “Magyarons” loyal to the state, the Croats viewed the established system as corrupt and fraudulent and deeply despised it.

The idea of the South Slavic peoples as a single Yugoslav nation developed concurrently with Croat political frustration and growing self-awareness. Its origins can be traced back to the 1830s and 1840s among proponents of the Illyrian movement. The idea adopted the arguments of early sixteenth-century Croat humanists who derived the origins of Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes from an antique people, the Illyrians. Influenced by the ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder and Romanticism but caught in the pinch of Hungarian, German, and Italian hegemonic impulses, Croat intellectuals and aristocrats propagated the vision of all South Slavs as a single nation, since they spoke the same language.

The Illyrians called for an imaginary national “rebirth” (risorgimento, preporod) through linguistic unity. Ljudevit Gaj, a leading scholar, wanted to create a common “Illyrian” written and literary language and to disseminate it by way of cultural activities. Reading societies, newspapers, and publishing houses were founded, and literature was used to advance “our dear native tongue.” Gaj and his fellow activists decided deliberately to use the Štokavian dialect as the guide for standardizing the written language because many Croats shared this dialect with the Serbs.

It was clear to the pioneers of the Croatian national movement that they needed allies in order to ensure the success of their project for national self-rule against the resistance of Austrian centralism and Magyar cultural hegemony. Compared with the deep language gap that divided the South Slavs and the dominant nationalities (Germans, Magyars, Italians), the cultural and dialectal differences between Croats, Serbs, Bosniaks, and Montenegrins appeared marginal. In the course of language reforms in the 1850s, this dialect was chosen as the basis for both Croatian and Serbian literary standards. Until
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The Illyrianist idea represented the early stage of Croat national awakening. But it simultaneously addressed the issue of a common culture and identity of all South Slavs under the neutral name of an ancient people. Indeed, this idea also found supporters among the Slovenes in Carinthia and Styria—here as a defense strategy against Germanization—and among Croatian Serbs. The historical importance of Illyrianism lies in the fact that it created the basis of both the modern Croatian culture and a bourgeois political movement that fundamentally questioned the legitimacy of the Habsburg monarchy. At the same time it planted the seed for Serbian-Croatian-Slovenian cooperation and the idea of forming a unified South Slavic (that is, Yugoslav) state.

In the 1860s, South Slavic nationalism (or Yugoslavism) developed out of Illyrianism to become the core idea adopted by a large part of the Croat intelligentsia, because the belief in a single Yugoslav nation simultaneously legitimized the creation of either an independent nation state (Greater Croatia) or a unified Yugoslav state. However, both options presupposed either the dismemberment of the Habsburg monarchy or a “trialist” recomposition of Austria-Hungary, as well as the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. The chief political protagonist of the Yugoslavists was Josip Juraj Strossmayer, the bishop of Đakovo since 1849, who demanded the formation and autonomy of the “Triune Kingdom of Croatia, Slavonia, and Dalmatia” within—and eventually also outside—the Habsburg monarchy.

According to the manifesto Jugoslovjenstvo, written in 1860 by the then well-reputed historian Franjo Rački, Croats, Serbs and possibly Slovenes, despite their historical particularities and different religions, were understood as “branches” of a single primordial nation, united by common descent and shared history. The Yugoslavists also believed in pre-schismatic religious unity, although they realized that church and religion were the two factors that chiefly conferred national identity, established differences, and—whether intended or not—thwarted a Croat–Serb symbiosis. They used the Cyril–Methodius idea to encourage rapprochement between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. They referred to the ninth-century Slavic apostles who had made it their mission to spread a supposedly authentic Slavic-Christian culture throughout Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Bulgaria two centuries before the Great Schism of 1054. A vestige of this East–West ecclesial symbiosis is, for example, the Glagolitic alphabet (glagolica), which was developed from the Greek alphabet and was still being used along the Croatian coast up to the nineteenth century. However, the return to pre-schismatic religious unity as propagated by Strossmayer and Rački had
already failed in the nineteenth century when it ran up against the historic realities of stronger, more institutionalized church hierarchies.

The enlightened elite who put their faith in progress, namely the liberal bourgeoisie, intelligentsia, and Catholic clergy, believed in the obliteration of historical, cultural, and religious differences between Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. For them, the unification of South Slavs seemed to be the only realistic strategy to ensure the survival of the Croat nation in light of Austro-Hungarian supremacy. The idea of a primordial Yugoslav nation, although varied and controversial, greatly influenced the political discourse in the South Slavic lands in the decades preceding the First World War.

Among the Slovenian national movement, Yugoslavism also became popular across the entire political spectrum during the period of the dual monarchy. It appeared to be the only political idea that could bring about the realization of a United Slovenia, as had been propagated since 1848. In 1870, Croat, Serb, and Slovene representatives met in Ljubljana to hold a South Slavic conference, in which they vowed to combine “all their strength” in order “to use it for unification in the literary, economic, and political fields.”

Competing against the Yugoslav idea was an irredentist and hegemonic nationalism that emerged in the last third of the century in the form of “Croatianism” as propagated by the aspiring petite bourgeoisie. Unlike the Yugoslavists, Ante Starčević and Eugen Kvaternik from the “Party of Rights,” founded in 1861, called for the creation of an exclusively Croatian nation state outside the “treacherous” Habsburg monarchy. They based their legal claims for a Croatian state on the *Pacta conventa* (agreed accords) of 1102, in which the Croat nobility had acknowledged the supremacy of the Hungarian king but allegedly had never surrendered the autonomy of Croatia. They considered the Yugoslav idea to be a tragic mistake and rejected the argument that the other South Slavic peoples had a national identity of their own. Instead they claimed that Serbs and Slovenes were basically also Croats. Even if the importance of this ideology waned after the turn of the century, it contributed significantly to enhancing the awareness for Croatian nationalism and popularizing the idea of an independent Croatia.

Both of these national integration ideologies—the South Slavic and the pan-Croatian—invo

ded historic rights (of medieval Croatia) but at the same time natural law (language and culture) without ever clarifying in detail how these two elements concurred. Czech constitutionalists used similar arguments to call for the unification of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia. Time and again, both the integrative South Slavic model and the Croatian-exclusive model were debated as fundamental political alternatives throughout the entire twentieth century, and at various times in history one and then the other temporarily prevailed.
The Occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina

Both inside and outside of Bosnia-Herzegovina, South Slavs were extremely bitter when Austria-Hungary occupied Bosnia-Herzegovina in the summer of 1878 following the Congress of Berlin. As the troops marched into the country, they met with unexpectedly fierce resistance. The dual monarchy mobilized around 250,000 soldiers and lost more than 5,000 men in order to bring the situation under control militarily. It took months to pacify the country.\textsuperscript{20} The annexation of the two provinces invited more significant problems for the Austro-Hungarian dynasty. At the time, more than two million South Slavs lived in the Austrian part of the realm (7.8 percent of the total population) and another three million in Hungary (15 percent).\textsuperscript{21} The annexation meant that the empire now included nearly two million more Serbs, Bosnian Muslims, and Croats, thus posing the question of why the greater percentage of South Slavs in the monarchy’s entire population shouldn’t be reflected in its political system. The specter loomed large not only of solidarity among Serbs and Croats but even of the founding a South Slavic state.

The efforts of Austria-Hungary to modernize the former Ottoman provinces were dictated by strategic, economic, and power interests; the emperor’s aim was to integrate the occupied regions into the empire as extensively as possible.\textsuperscript{22} The crux of the problem was the primacy of politics over all other developmental objectives: Vienna and Budapest identified Bosnia-Herzegovina as the key to containing the South Slavic nationalism that so threatened the existence of the dual monarchy. What needed to be prevented at all costs was the creation of a larger South Slavic state in the southern part of the monarchy, one that could become a focal point for Serbs and Croats within Austria-Hungary, a South Slavic “Piedmont.” A unified Yugoslav state would have blocked both Vienna and Budapest from having access to economically and strategically vital Adriatic ports.

There were indeed reformers in Austria who wanted to federalize the monarchy and create a Slavic entity as a third and equal pillar alongside Austria and Hungary, in order to accommodate the demands of the Slavs. However, the conservatives feared that this would only encourage the nationalities to make ever more far-reaching demands. Among those opposing trialism was Emperor Franz Joseph’s nephew and heir to the throne, Franz Ferdinand. He was an avowed anti-Liberal, an opponent of universal suffrage, a militant Catholic, and an unabashed anti-Semite.\textsuperscript{23} Franz Ferdinand eventually had the entire idea of trialism struck from the program drawn up in preparation for his succession to the throne because, as was noted in internal instructions, “the Slavic part of the state will often side with Hungary, where certainly the interests of the Crown will never be found.”\textsuperscript{24} Then again, Hungary also
wanted to thwart any possible plans that would expand federalization, in the sense of establishing trialism.

Both the bureaucracy and the military saw themselves as being on a historical mission to bring the achievements of Western civilization to this part of the Balkans and to instill in Bosnians the feeling of belonging to a great and powerful nation. The region was to be developed in three phases. In the first phase, the emphasis was on advancing the economy and the general welfare, if for no other reason than to tap additional resources in administering the provinces. The educational system would not be expanded until the second phase, long before any thought would be given—in a third phase sometime in the distant future—to the idea of granting any rights of political participation whatsoever. Economic growth and “Europeanization” were to curb nationalism.²⁵

Governor Benjamin Kállay, who ruled the country from 1882 to 1903, chose to implement a combination of measures meant to conserve much of the status quo while gradually modernizing the region. Because the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy was fearful of alienating too greatly the almost exclusively Muslim class of gentry and landowners—the agas and beys—in Bosnia-Herzegovina, it left the archaic agrarian system nearly intact. Instead, it advanced transportation, industry, and urban development and thus fundamentally reshaped the old order to fit the Central European model. By 1907, the occupation government had built more than 1,250 miles of roads and 630 miles of railway lines. Forestry and the mining of coal, copper, chrome, and iron ore were intensified.²⁶

In order to better acquaint the Muslims with the new order, the Habsburg bureaucracy decided to combine tradition and modernity. For this reason, the long-established religious and secular Ottoman schools and universities were not abolished, but at the same time new occupational training schools, teacher training colleges, and secondary education schools were established. In 1887, the governor opened a training institute for sharia judges, in which both Islamic and Austrian law were taught.²⁷ As a result, the Austro-Hungarian government succeeded in instigating certain socioeconomic transformation processes but did not win the hearts and minds of the population.²⁸ For all practical purposes, the local populace remained excluded from higher positions in bureaucracy and enterprise, and elementary schools were accessible only to a minority of 15 percent. The ethnically discriminatory agrarian system created a highly explosive situation right up to the First World War. In 1910, Muslims still accounted for 91.1 percent of all landowners, whereas only 6 percent were Orthodox Christians and 2.5 percent Catholic Christians. The flip side of the coin was that the tenant crop farmers (*kmets*) were 73.9 percent Orthodox, 21.5 percent Catholic, and only 4.6 percent Muslim.²⁹
In an effort to neutralize the increasing nationalistic agitation coming from Serbia and—to a lesser degree—from Croatia, Kállay worked to push the historical individuality of Bosnia-Herzegovina into the limelight and to rope in nascent nationalism with the help of bošnjaštvo (Bosniakhood), an artificial construct depicted as a political nation with medieval historical roots.\textsuperscript{30} Except for a small minority of Muslims, the people found this idea foreign; too deep were the ingrained divisions between the religions and identities.\textsuperscript{31} The developmental policies of the Habsburg provincial government also stalled. The lack of agrarian reform and consumer-goods industries brought about little improvement in people’s standard of living and hindered self-sustained economic growth. At the same time, the tax burden multiplied because the provinces had to cover the costs of the occupation themselves. All this fed the fires of social frustration. In 1906, a general strike took place on behalf of the nine-hour day; in 1910, there was a peasant revolt. For nationalists across the entire South Slavic region, it was clear that the conditions within Bosnia-Herzegovina were untenable and cried out for radical change.\textsuperscript{32}

**The Serb “Piedmont”**

In Serbia and Montenegro, nationalism developed under completely different conditions than it did under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Serbia had attained autonomy in 1830 and independence in 1878. Here, nation- and state-building processes ran parallel, and the country had several decades to create and develop modern institutions and strong national self-confidence. Throughout the entire nineteenth century, especially after 1878, the state served as an energetic and resourceful agency for nation building.

Another structural difference was that, at the time, Serbia was to a large extent ethnically homogeneous. Unlike in Croatia, people in Serbia did not experience competitive coexistence in multiethnic regions on a daily basis, which is why the cooperation with other South Slavs was not seen as immediately pressing. Still, nearly two million Serbs lived outside the young state, particularly in Bosnia-Herzegovina, southern Hungary (Vojvodina), the former Military Frontier (krajina), and Dalmatia. Many of them perceived independent Serbia as their national-political focal point, their springboard for the ultimate independence of all Serbs—in other words, their “Piedmont.” But there were also cases in which the situation was more ambivalent, such as that of Montenegro and Macedonia. Belgrade considered Montenegro a (second) Serbian state, as did many Montenegrins themselves. Only a few saw themselves as members of a separate people. Furthermore, Serbian national politics viewed the Macedonians either as a mixture of Serbs and Bulgarians or simply as “South Serbs.”
Against this backdrop, the leitmotiv of national-political thinking and action in Serbia was the liberation of its fellow countrymen and the annexation of what was believed to be Serbian lands. This had already been expressed quite clearly in *Načertanije* (The plan), written in 1844 by the statesman Ilija Garašanin, a work considered to be the earliest and an important statement on the “Serb question.” His thoughts strongly influenced Serbian national policy until 1914.33

Garašanin was himself greatly influenced by the Polish national movement, whose homeland was divided between Prussia, Russia, and Austria. The Poles were in a situation very similar to that of the South Slavs, which is why they recommended to the Serb national movement that they create a unified South Slavic state in order to counter the predominance of the hegemonic powers.34 From this Garašanin derived the fundamental principle of Serbia’s foreign policy: “That it does not limit itself to its current borders but strives to unify all Serb people surrounding it.”35 Like other European national movements, Garašanin invoked historical medieval law. He designated Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, northern Albania, and Vojvodina as Serbian lands, thereby influencing the mental map of a future (Greater) Serbia.36 As a result, Serb nationalism tended to be highly self-confident and to lean toward irredentism and expansionism, even if delusions of conquest to bring about a Greater Serbia cannot be inevitably derived from this.

During the decades after 1878, Serbia developed its state and parliamentary system, further refined its national culture, standard language, and literature, and thus generally consolidated its national identity. Baron Benjamin von Kállay, at the time the Austro-Hungarian consul in Belgrade, warned as early as 1873 of the widely held opinion “that Serbia is called upon to play the role of Piedmont among the Slavs of Turkey.” The Balkan state did indeed want to model itself after the Italian province as the nucleus in the process of crystallizing a transregional movement of national Serb consolidation. These political ambitions were “so strongly rooted” in public opinion, Kállay noted, “that the Serbs can no longer understand that the Slavs of the different Turkish frontiers should seek aid and protection from any state except Serbia.”37 When the news of the Bosnian uprising of 1875 reached Belgrade, there were demonstrations, and Serbia’s Prince Milan would have risked a revolution had he not decided to intervene eventually on behalf of his fellow Serbs.38

The Serbs evaluated the outcome of the Great Eastern Crisis as a national tragedy, for it meant only a partial success for Serbian national politics. All sides, regardless of political affiliation, now put a solution of the national question prominently in their party programs. Opinion did not differ over the aim, only over strategy.39 In 1894, the Radical Party under Nikola Pašić,
which dominated politics during the 1890s, stated in its national program: “Serbia simply cannot abandon the interests of Serbdom. From the Serbian standpoint, there is no difference between the Serbian State interests and the interests of other Serbs. The question of Serbdom is ‘to be or not to be’ of the Serbian State. . . . Cut off from other Serbian lands, Serbia by itself means nothing and has no reason to exist at all.” In order to achieve his goal of “one nation—one state,” Pašić sought an alliance with Russia and a compromise with Bulgaria on Macedonia. The Radicals were open to, if still skeptical of, the South Slavic idea because Serbs and Croats differed in their religion and their historical-political traditions, which for them raised the question whether “we are the same people or not.” Therefore, the Radicals considered the union of all South Slavs as a possible and, under certain circumstances, a logical result of Serb unification, but not as an alternative to it. From their point of view, Yugoslavism did, however, possess the potential to place Serbian plans for fusion onto a broader platform.

What at first was not attainable politically was shifted to the cultural realm. The intellectual elite in the various regions where Serbs lived created a cross-border cultural sphere through media, literature, travel, and youth meetings. In 1886, the new Kingdom of Serbia founded the Serbian Academy as the center for this activity.

Like all new European nations, the South Slavs sought to legitimize their national existence with recourse to historic traditions and to strengthen social and emotional cohesion by attributing historic meaning to it in order to give the nation the appearance of a natural community, as opposed to a politically created one. During the Romantic era, the linguistic reformer Vuk Karadžić was second to none in helping shape the Serb national ideology by his collection of folk epics and folk songs.

During the course of the century, the Kosovo cycle, which celebrated in song the famous Battle of Kosovo that took place on Vidovdan (St. Vitus Day), 28 June 1389, became the bedrock on which the identity-establishing national myth was founded. It tells the story of the fateful fight between the Serbian prince Lazar Hrebeljanović and the assailing Sultan Murat I, a confrontation that allegedly led to the fall of the medieval Serbian empire. Lazar was killed in battle and later canonized. In the national consciousness, 1389 is remembered as a cataclysmic reference point, comparable to the Hundred Years’ War between England and France.

Throughout the centuries, the legend of the Battle of Kosovo evolved in hagiographic texts and epic poems to become a monumental story, albeit one in which the actual course of historical events was often downplayed or altered, such as the fact that the Serbian state did not completely disappear in 1389. Still, it had all the components of a great national myth. Lazar’s
son-in-law Vuk Branković appears in the role of a typical traitor who becomes a collaborator with the Ottomans and thereby helps bring about the fall of the Serbs. The nation’s rescuer in the tale is the fabulous Miloš Obilić, who murders the sultan and thus causes the Ottoman army to retreat. The basic motives portrayed here—discord and disloyalty, on the one hand, and courage, freedom, and justice, on the other—provided an elementary sense of meaning and purpose. With the help of biblical figurations of memory such as heroism, sacrifice, and betrayal, the Kosovo myth provided the ideological mortar to hold together an increasingly polarized Serbian society, one that found itself searching for a new self-image after the break with the oriental heritage of the Ottoman era.

In the nineteenth century, national-minded elites transformed the originally religious Kosovo myth into a secular legend to be used for political purposes, particularly for the mobilization of resistance against both Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian rule. This historical narrative, based on a system of symbols, merged the past, present, and future into one; “nation,” “history,” and “freedom” constituted a whole. Thus, Kosovo represented not only Serbian identity but also the Serbian foreign policy program. Likewise, the messages of the Kosovo myth lent themselves to pictorial aggrandizement in historicizing art forms, in painting and novels. In 1889, the 500th anniversary of the battle was celebrated as a highly symbolic, major national event.

Sagas and legends about the Battle of Kosovo were not just incorporated into Serb national mythology, they provided a rich source from which to create a common Yugoslav national culture. It was helpful that several of the historic epics were equally popular among Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, such as those about the heroic and universally revered Serbian prince Marko (Kraljević Marko) from the fourteenth century, the icon of justice in the fight against the Turks. Further inspiration was provided by contemporary national poetry, especially the immensely popular, monumental work The Mountain Wreath by Montenegrin prince-bishop Peter II Petrović Njegoš from 1846, who praised the sixteenth century. This epic poem and play represented one of the most important works of the time.

Similar importance was also given to the epic poem The Death of Smailaga Čengić written by the Croat poet, literary scholar, and politician Ivan Mažuranić. This epic poem depicts the struggle against the Ottomans and codifies the messages of freedom, betrayal, heroism, sacrifice, and martyrdom.

The celebratory mood surrounding the 1889 commemoration of the Battle of Kosovo thus reverberated euphorically among both Croats and Serbs living under Habsburg rule. The Zagreb city government even discussed the
The ancient folk epics and their modern adaptations created a universe of signs, metaphors, and myths, out of which any liberation ideology could derive meaning. They created cohesion, legitimated authority and rule, shaped norms and values, and offered concrete guidelines for action.

Yet the reception of national ideology occurred less smoothly than might be expected, because Yugoslavism simultaneously served two different, if not always clearly distinguishable concepts of identity: the Croatian and the South Slavic. Serbian intellectuals feared that their own culture would be undermined and influenced by a Croatian national ideology cloaked in Yugoslavism. Contrary to the South Slavs in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Serbs already enjoyed their own established cultural institutions, such as the cultural-scientific institute Matica srpska, founded in 1826. At first, Serb intellectuals wrote with verve against the idea of South Slavic unity imported from Croatia and polemicized against the term “Illyrian.” Following the Prussian victory of 1866, politicians from Croatia and Serbia contacted one another in order to deliberate how the South Slavs could be liberated from Ottoman rule and how the Yugoslav “tribes” could be later unified into a federated state. The situation changed following the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1878. The fact that almost all Croats now lived in the Habsburg monarchy turned the issue of Ottoman rule into an exclusively Serb problem and thus underscored, at least for the time being, the feasibility of pursuing two separate national strategies.

Perhaps the very disparate national ideologies and objectives caused more disagreement between peoples than the religious and language differences did. Croats and Slovenes were more willing to compromise with the Austro-Hungarian monarchy than the Serbs were with the Ottoman Empire. After all, the Habsburgs had established their power by way of contractual relations (in the Pacta conventa), and not only through military subjugation. Catholicism also helped build a bridge between the rulers and those ruled, unlike Islam, which erected high religious, political, and social barriers against the Christian populations. Therefore, Slovenes and Croats first gave greater consideration to the possibility of federally restructuring the existing Habsburg order than to its overthrow. The Croatian concept of a Catholic-universalistic state, conceived as possessing constitutional continuity and territorial constancy throughout history, contrasted with the Serbian version of rather expansionist-oriented cultural nationalism, one that originated from an independent Serbia and its Serbian-Orthodox state church and which strove to fulfill its historic mission: namely, the unification of the South Slavic countries by the Kingdom of Serbia.