History of Yugoslavia

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From the mid-1980s onward, confidence in the functionality of the Yugoslav state vanished at an accelerated pace. The crisis filled people with uncertainty, destroyed their faith in the capacity of institutions to manage the crisis, wrecked the relations between the republics, and eventually branded even colleagues and neighbors as traitors and enemies. Social and political changes were perceived as omens of looming downfall and destruction. Trepidation about the future unsettled and paralyzed people; their faith in the established rules of ethnic coexistence dissipated.

Social Inequality
In the 1980s, Yugoslavia had become an industrial society. The percentage of the population working in agriculture was only 29 percent in 1981, while the industrial and service sectors had grown to levels of 35 and 36 percent, respectively. Every second person lived in the city, the acute housing shortage had been mastered, and even the supply of electricity and running water worked. Statistically, every tenth Yugoslav owned an automobile and a telephone; every fifth, a television. In 1979, Yugoslavs went abroad 22 million times. People had become accustomed to prosperity, international exchange, and vacation trips.

Seemingly all at once, the crisis revealed the dark aspects of rapid socialist modernization. In 1980, half a million students were matriculated at universities, a figure that represented one young graduate for every 50 inhabitants (as opposed to 1:1,000 in the interwar period). Since the economy not only failed to expand as quickly as the educational system but had even shrunk, a growing surplus of well-trained graduates flooded the job market, and young people thus had a hard time finding employment. In 1984, every second job-seeker was professionally qualified and every third was under the age of 30. At the same time, the system produced a large number of half-educated and semi-literate people: in 1981, 44 percent of the Yugoslav population had no
school diploma (as opposed to 80 percent in 1945). Every tenth Yugoslav still could not read or write.⁵

Among those who were hit particularly hard by the crisis were the millions of people who had been uprooted socially and emotionally by industrialization and rural exodus. In 1981, 41 percent of the population no longer lived in the place they had been born, and many of them made up the reservoir of a “nonagrarian, nonurbanized” class that now populated the peripheries of the cities.⁶ These people had become city dwellers only in a statistical sense, but not in their attitudes and lifestyles. For them, the job prospects also looked dim. This created fertile soil for simple explanations and radical ideas.

In the three decades of its existence, self-management had not produced less social inequality but more—a situation that was only made worse by the economic crisis.⁷ Income distribution in Yugoslavia corresponded with that of Western Europe in the 1980s. The 20 percent poorest households earned 6.6 percent of the national income (in France, 5.3 percent; in Great Britain, 7.3 percent). The middle classes, which made up 60 percent of the population, earned 54.7 percent, and the richest 20 percent earned over 38.7 percent—all very similar to the ratios of distribution found in capitalist countries on the continent. Blue-collar and white-collar workers no longer identified with their jobs any more than they did in France. Dissatisfaction and the degree of “alienation” was equally great everywhere.⁸ The economic crisis facilitated this differentiation in income, because the slump did not affect all sectors and all of the employed equally. The 10 percent of the population at the wealthiest end of the income scale now owned more than the 40 percent at the lower end. These were proportions similar to those in Great Britain, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries.⁹ However, the growing inequality raised questions about the credibility of the system in general and about the privileges enjoyed by the elites in particular.

The economic crisis and monetary devaluation hit a society in which status, prestige, personal satisfaction, and social identity were already being measured primarily by material wealth. The inflation rate not only eroded incomes, savings, and funds set aside for old age, it also posed a serious threat to the plans people had for their lives.¹⁰ As everywhere in Europe, individualism and materialism were becoming more prevalent—and such attitudes often slipped quickly into cynicism when times got hard.¹¹

The crisis radicalized existing dissonances: for one, between the aspirations for advancement harbored by the younger generation and the limited possibilities available to them in an economy that had long been stagnating; for another, between the status quo enjoyed by the older generation and the increasingly real threat of losing social and economic status. Social conflicts
between rich and poor, urban and rural, and particularly the nationalities became all the more evident in the context of such gloomy prospects for the future. The pressure of inflation also made it clear that socialism could not fulfill what it had promised: to provide employment, affordable housing, food, health facilities, and education.\textsuperscript{12}

**Experiencing Crisis and the Loss of Values**

Suddenly, the word “crisis” was on everyone’s tongue. It reduced the complex experiences of an entire decade to a single word, a code word for insecurity, trials and tribulations, and an uncertain future.\textsuperscript{13} Against this backdrop arose a new type of scientific expertise: “crisology.” While the symptoms of the country’s impending destruction were being debated in the newspapers, economists and political scientists were investigating its origins and consequences, and pollsters were tracking down the moods and opinions of the populace.\textsuperscript{14} All of this had great analytical value but very little prediction power and—more importantly—no practical impact on how to overcome the problems. If anything remained unexplained, it was that the crisis, in all its manifestations, had been astutely identified but no effective antidote had been discovered. The unpredictability of the future and a loss of orientation undermined the popular understanding of society and security, authority and identity, meaning and morality. Growing fears threw doubt on the values, institutions, and functionality of the political system as a whole. In 1985, it was reported that 31 percent of the population was plagued with concerns and anxieties, 19 percent had mixed feeling with regard to the future, and 10 percent had given into resignation and apathy and wanted to see a “strong hand” intervene.\textsuperscript{15}

The youth in particular found themselves in a desolate situation. They either exhibited an especially aggressive and pessimistic attitude or, at the other extreme, succumbed to helplessness, indifference, and apathy. As one youth summarized, “you are young, but unemployed; educated, but feel superfluous; full of ideas, but can’t make any of them happen; just waiting around instead of having hope.”\textsuperscript{16} Three-fourths of this generation developed a fundamentally anomic attitude: “Often I think that everything our parents worked for is being destroyed before our eyes,” said one. “Today everything is so uncertain; anything, really anything could happen,” said another.\textsuperscript{17} These were indicators of a deep-seated identity crisis and a massive loss of purpose and orientation. They point to a mood that cried out for emotional release, for scapegoats, and for the eradication of the supposed cause of this entire malady. People’s trust in theexisting order was rapidly dwindling. In particular, the younger generation sought to question and rethink Yugoslav socialism and the very notion of Yugoslavism. A surge of debate erupted over the inability and irresponsibility of the political class and over the nepotism, highhandedness,
and corruption of the bureaucracy and technocracy. By the end of the 1980s, self-management, once the pride of the nation, had degenerated into an insult. Fundamental social values—those key virtues in the socialist codex of heroism like equality, solidarity, and self-sacrifice—crumbled.18

Imaginative metaphors attempted to put into words that which seemed unexpected and inexplicable. This crisis vocabulary depicted inflation as a quasi-alien force by evoking the idea of divine punishment ("hell of inflation") or of a fatal illness ("cancerous tumor") or of an unstoppable natural catastrophe ("biblical flood"). Such metaphors for inflation depicted people as the plaything of higher powers, tossed about with no control over their own fate.19

The crisis was increasingly perceived as the epochal threshold, as a time of upheaval pushing toward radical change. More and more people felt a diffuse wish for transcendence in a social world that was not necessarily rationally understandable.

The Revival of Religion

As the bedrock of socialist ideological certainties crumbled, so too did the base for a rational world view and secular belief in progress. The emptiness was filled more often than not with religious interpretations—a typical human response when social order and patterns of identity suddenly collapse. The rediscovery of religion replaced former notions of socialization with communitization and reactivated faith as a constitutive element of identity formation. At the same time, each of the religious communities worked actively to glorify its own nation as being sacred.

In 1974, sociologists noted a gradual increase in religiousness, which by the mid-1980s had increased exponentially among the younger generation. In 1967, a third had called themselves religious; in 1987 it was already more than half. This figure neared those of Northern Ireland, Denmark, France, Great Britain, and West Germany. The personal search for meaning in life had since led every second individual back to church, if more for the purpose of cultivating national and cultural traditions than for reasons of faith. The values, orientation, and identities of religion filled the void that developed during the crisis.20

The clergy seized the opportunity to exploit the ever greater yearning for community, purpose, and transcendence and to regain at least part of their lost power to interpret and explain societal issues. After Belgrade reinstated full diplomatic relations with the Vatican in 1970, the Catholic Church intensified its activities. For example, it held official commemorative days for Cardinal Stepinac, who was celebrated as a faithful servant to the pope, a bastion against the infidels, and a martyr for the rights of Croats. In 1960, the cardinal, who had been convicted as a war criminal, was buried with full
honors in the Zagreb cathedral. In 1971, the Catholic Church declared the town of Marija Bistrica a place of pilgrimage, for this is where the apotheosis of the nation, a “Black Madonna” similar to the one in Poland, was enshrined. An international congress consecrated the holy shrine as “Our Lady Queen of Croatia.” In honor of thirteen centuries of Croatian Christianity, the Catholic Church held a novena, in this case a nine-year cycle of jubilee celebrations known as the Great Novena between 1975 and 1984. It was the stated attempt to tackle the “phenomena of secularization, urbanization, industrialization, and atheism” by reawakening historical and religious awareness.

Not only did the Catholic Church explicitly direct its crusade against the social consequences of modernization, it also worked to reinstitutionalize the place of religion in national politics and to reassociate church and nation. The Marian cult was particularly effective for intensifying the close connection between the Catholic Church and the Croat nation. It also openly declared an affiliation with the Western-Catholic Occident and a disassociation with the Orthodox East. In 1984, more than a half million believers traveled from all over Yugoslavia to attend the National Eucharistic Congress at the shrine in Marija Bistrica—a gigantic spectacle that called for unification of the nation under the auspices of the church.

However, the yearning for religious fulfillment could not be contained by existing institutions and dogma. In 1981, a group of children in the impoverished village of Medjugorje in profoundly Catholic Herzegovina were reported to have seen apparitions of the Virgin Mary. Although the bishop of Mostar critically noted that “this is all merely mass delusion, euphoria, and a spectacle for tourists,” the provincial town became a powerful symbol of Croat national consciousness and grew into an important pilgrimage site within a short period of time. Suddenly 400 hotels, eighteen currency exchange shops, and five duty-free shops popped up out of nowhere to accommodate the ten million believers who visited annually.

Tourism and anticommunism struck up a lucrative relationship. It was not by accident that the Madonna appeared close to the anniversary of the apparitions of 1917 in the Portuguese village of Fatima, an event that at the time mobilized millions of people all across Europe against Bolshevism. Likewise, the Madonna cult in Croatia possessed not only religious and cultural connotations, but also ideological-political ones in that it sacralized the Croat nation. It also recalled the ill-fated alliance between the Catholic Church, Franciscans, and the Ustasha regime. During the Second World War, horrific atrocities against Serbs had taken place in the vicinity, for which sixty-seven Franciscan monks were sentenced to death after the war. At least seventeen mass graves were known to exist. The Orthodox Church decided this was a welcome opportunity to honor the Serb victims of Croat fascism with a
The 1980s: Anomie

In 1991 the Orthodox Church also endeavored to attract more believers back to church, which prompted it to draw more public attention since the late 1960s. For example, in May 1968, the patriarch put on a spectacular procession through the center of Belgrade with relics of the Serbian czar Stefan Dušan. A year later the church celebrated the 750th anniversary of its independence, and in 1975, the 800th anniversary of the birthday of Saint Sava, its founder. Enormous effort was expended to celebrate Vidovdan, the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo. The overarching theme was always the self-assertion of the Serb nation—and its unification. Such activity caused the communist leadership to become concerned about the possible revival of Greater Serbian ideas. As early as 1972, the Central Committee reported that a vision of Greater Serbia was indeed being idealized, that Serbs in Croatia were being instrumentalized, and that the Ustasha’s crimes were being exploited for propaganda.

A new theological faculty was founded in 1984 in Belgrade, and a year later construction started in the middle of the city on the monumental cathedral of Saint Sava. When completed, the gigantic edifice would seat 12,000 believers and thus surpass the capacity of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Hundreds of thousands heeded the church’s call to participate in anniversary celebrations of major national events, whether the breakthrough on the Salonica Front in the First World War, the founding of the monastery Studenica in the Middle Ages, or the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo. In June 1989, the remains of Saint Great Martyr Prince Lazar were transferred to the Ravanica monastery in an elaborate celebration on the occasion of the 600-year anniversary of the battle that cost him his life. In 1990 and 1991, the Orthodox Church organized a series of commemorations of the outbreak of the Second World War and the persecution of the Serbs.

For Islamic theologians and politicians, the end of the 1980s also offered welcome opportunities to establish closer ties between religion and national identity. In the day-to-day life of a Bosnian Muslim, a sense of identity had not been determined primarily by religion for quite a while; and for many, not at all. In 1990, only 37 percent of the Bosnian Muslims considered themselves religious, compared with 60 percent of the Slovenes and 53 percent of the Croats. Over 60 percent of them never visited a mosque. However, nationalism provided an effective means by which to transform secular identity back into religious affirmation. Between 1969 and 1980, about 800 new mosques were built. In 1976, around 40,000 copies of the Koran and 50,000 copies of the brochure How to Become Muslim were distributed. In the following year, an Islamic theological faculty was set up in Sarajevo, where the next generation of religious teachers, both men and women, studied. Because of Yugoslavia’s
good relations to other nonaligned countries, many students were awarded scholarships to study in Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or even Sudan.

Generous donations from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Libya made it possible to build what would become Europe’s third-largest mosque in 1987 in Zagreb, one nearly as impressive as those in London and Rome. An increasing number of imams adopted radical stances, and more clerics called for the return to Muslim traditions in order to revive religious laws, rituals, and customs, such as the fasting month of Ramadan, study of the Koran, pilgrimage, and the veiling of women. A key component of re-Islamization was the adherence to rules of behavior that set the Islamic community apart from others: the strict ban on mixed marriages and the consumption of alcohol, the education of children in the faith, and the use of Muslim names. Such religious customs also mobilized political forces. The journal *Muslimanski glas* (Muslim voice) maintained that “an important message for all who fight for truth, justice, and freedom” could be found in the Battle of Badr, an improbable military victory described in the Koran, which the Prophet Muhammad is said to have won with Allah’s help in the year 624. Ramadan was the month of jihad and the defense of the faithful, wrote the magazine of the Ulema association. The “message” to the Islamic faithful was quite similar to that of the Kosovo myth, for it extolled important heroic values: faith in God, self-sacrifice, unity, and discipline.

In 1990 and at great effort and expense, the Islamic community commemorated the Islamization of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the sixteenth century. Ajvatovica was dedicated as a holy pilgrimage site, and 100,000 faithful attended the celebrations remembering the arrival of Islam. For the first time, one could see green flags with Arabic inscriptions and thoroughly veiled women. Not only the Serbs and Croats, but also the Muslims now had a holy place in Bosnia-Herzegovina that was meant to represent the enduring character of their nation.

In the late 1980s, all sides applied the semantics of religious symbolism quite successfully to mobilize support from their respective ethnic community for nationalist aims. While the economic-political crisis and its various contingencies undermined the established Yugoslav order, the resurgence of religious faith provided an alternative way to interpret time and history, to depict a complex and confusing reality simply, and to create a distant horizon of transcendence toward the greater ethnic community. The Madonna cult, the Kosovo myth, and the Battle of Badr sacralized each respective nation, suggested a privileged place nearer to God, and cultivated a deeply felt emotional connection to others of the same ethnicity that transgressed political borders and legal distinctions. In this way, the national theology of each group exalted itself to the point of becoming an absolutely binding normative value, which
required from every individual an unconditional willingness to sacrifice in order for it to survive.\textsuperscript{32}

\textit{Politics of Memory}

Yugoslavia became obsessed with history. Historical topics flourished in academic research, popular publications, and memoirs. In the 1980s, the legitimacy of the League of Communists dwindled at the same rate that controversy proliferated over fundamental questions focused on the country’s view of itself. Who are we in Europe? How did we become what we are? A contributing factor to this phenomenon was that many people who had lived through the Second World War a good forty years earlier were now reaching an age at which they felt the need to relate to posterity their own accounts and interpretations of events. The liberal atmosphere in the media also made it possible to address openly topics found in exile literature that had been previously taboo.

Two large and prominent projects reached an impasse already in the early 1970s because of outbursts of national antagonism: the \textit{History of the Communist Party/League of Communists of Yugoslavia} and the multivolume publication \textit{History of the Yugoslav Peoples}. Croat, Bosnian, and Serb historians became so mired in controversy over the nineteenth-century nationalist movements that the monumental historical overview ended with the year 1800. The revision of the \textit{Encyclopedia of Yugoslavia} that had begun in 1975 also resulted in a half-hearted compromise: it was to appear in six different languages and a condensed English edition. The fact that the precarious consensus in historiography finally collapsed altogether in the mid-1980s reveals how serious the situation had become, not only in its ideological, economic, and regulatory dimensions, but also in the deepest regions of the collective subconscious.

The controversy over the \textit{Encyclopedia of Yugoslavia} had been simmering since the 1970s and finally boiled over into strong polemics at the end of the 1980s when the first volume of the revised edition was published. Particularly controversial were the contributions on the origins of the Albanians and the Montenegrins, the history of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the sections on language and literature in general. The project was discontinued in 1991.

The search for new identities, authorities, and political causes revived nationalistic constructions of history and stereotypes of ethnic differences. The main topic of revision was Tito and the events of the Second World War.\textsuperscript{33} With the publication in 1980/1981 of a relatively moderate criticism of Tito in his book \textit{Novi prilozi za biografiju Josipa Broza Tita} (New contributions on the biography of Josip Broz Tito), Vladimir Dedijer opened the floodgates for the demystification of the great leader. Others subsequently dragged out into the
open the dark sides of Tito’s character, the personality cult, and piquant details from his private life until the former hero of the revolution had been reduced to no more than a power-hungry, vain, egotistic, and politically confused old man. The deconstruction of Tito served a twofold purpose. It made it possible to delegitimize both socialism as a political system and Yugoslavia as a multinational state. If Josip Broz had actually been just a decadent autocrat, then “brotherhood and unity” was only an illusion. After 1989/1990, Tito’s public presence was also removed. Streets, squares, and cities were renamed, and his mausoleum was temporarily closed.

The Second World War also underwent reinterpretation. As early as 1983, Branko Petranović blurred the good-and-evil dichotomy between partisans and Chetniks in *Revolucija i kontrarevolucija u Jugoslaviji, 1941–1945* (Revolution and counterrevolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945). His colleague Veselin Djuretić carried the revisionist iconoclasm too far in his 1985 publication *Saveznici i jugoslovenska ratna drama* (The allies and the Yugoslav war drama) when he rehabilitated the Chetniks and General Nedić as saviors of the Serb nation and claimed that the Western powers shared the blame for the communist takeover of power. The Communist Party reacted by issuing toothless threats of sanctions against the apologia of the Chetniks but was not in a position to save even a sliver of consensus on the interpretation of war and revolution as its authority slipped rapidly away.

Even the circumstances leading to the communist takeover of power were critically reexamined when Vojislav Koštunica and Kosta Čavoški denounced the Stalinist practices used between 1944 and 1948 and the destruction of the bourgeois multiparty system. The regime was hit by an immense wave of criticism from all sides in culture, art, and science. Novels, dramas, poems, songs, and films focused on topics that questioned what until then had been the rarely contested legitimacy of the system. The poet Gojko Djojo was arrested in 1981 and later convicted because his book of poetry *Vunena vremena* (Woolen times) included metaphoric allusions to the tyrannical and ignorant regime of Tito. The banning of this book shook the cultural scene because it was the first time that the regime had come down so hard on a writer. Emblematic of the awakening criticism by intellectuals was the genre of Goli otok literature, work that dealt with the persecution of Cominform sympathizers after 1948 on the infamous prison island of Goli otok. In 1982, Antonije Isaković’s novel *Tren 2* was published; in 1985, Emir Kusturica caused a great deal of controversy with his film *When Father Was Away on Business*. That same year Slobodan Selenić published his socially critical novel *Father and Forefathers*.

The paradigm shift to nationalism manifested itself quite drastically in the debate on the victims of the Second World War, a topic that had raised
tempers for a long time and was also being exploited with relish in political publications. Few topics were as emotionally laden as the number of people who had been murdered, tortured, and displaced, and no other topic could be better used to celebrate the national myth of victimization that each national group thrived on. This debate discussed the ethnopolitical dimensions of the civil war and undermined the dogma of “brotherhood and unity” so fundamental to the Yugoslav order.

At the heart of the controversy was the concentration camp Jasenovac, one of the most prominent places in Yugoslavia’s collective memory and the signum for the politics of anti-Serb annihilation. Plausible sources calculate that about 83,000 people died in Jasenovac and another 120,000 in the other Croatian concentration camps. However, Serb and Croat historians outdid each other in their attempts to decrease or increase the estimated number of victims. In an article published in 1986 titled “On the Genesis of Genocide on Serbs in the NDH” [Independent State of Croatia], Vasilije Krestić developed the theory that genocidal intent was a constitutive component, both historically and religiously, of the Croatian idea of nationhood, while Radomir Bulatović spoke in 1990 of a record number of 1.1 million victims. Franjo Tudjman, who had been challenging the official party statistics since the 1960s, repeated his well-known argument in an apologetic piece written in 1989 titled “Fallacies of Historical Realities.” In it he argued that no more than 60,000 people died in the Independent State of Croatia. He also maintained that the dimensions of the Holocaust were greatly exaggerated. Citing dubious witnesses, he attempted to prove that the camp in Jasenovac had been run by Jews, who were the ones actually responsible for selection and liquidation. These were the people who were truly guilty of persecuting the Serbs, he argued with reference to another source of information: “A Jew is a Jew . . . egoism, cleverness, unreliability, greed, treachery, and acting as an informant” were in his mind their most important characteristics. Tudjman did not limit his remarks to the past but spoke out on current affairs, noting that after the war, Nazi fascism became “Judeo-Nazism” because Israel was conducting a “true Holocaust” against the Palestinians. A year after making those remarks, he warned that it should not be forgotten “that the NDH . . . was also the expression of the historical drive of the Croat people for an independent state.”

Finally the time had arrived to create a myth of victimization for the Croat nation, something exile organizations had been cultivating for a long time. “Bleiburg,” the place where partisans had executed up to 70,000 collaborators at the end of the war, now became the metaphor of the anticommunist Croat resistance. The right-wing nationalist emigrant Ante Beljo blazed ahead on this path with his publication *YU-Genocide*. A flood of other studies, many
written by emigrants, spoke of up to a half million dead in order to show that the Croats had become the victims of a Serbo-communist “Holocaust” and had been forced into the “Yugoslav dungeon of peoples” only by armed force. Although the discourse on crimes committed by the partisans was long overdue, the Bleiburg discourse that took place was apologetic. Terms like “holocaust,” “death march,” “exodus,” and “genocide” transformed the Ustashas into patriots and martyrs and the Serbs into archenemies—certainly not people to share a country with. In “Fallacies,” Tudjman also supported the claim of victimization. In 1997, the Croatian government even held a religious mass to honor those who died at Bleiburg.

The academic field of history was not the only battlefield in the struggle to construct and deconstruct national icons. At least as influential were historical novels, films, and political publications that provided a public hungry for history with great tales of the past. Unlike scholarly work, fiction enjoys the unbeatable advantage that it can simply invent a master narrative—irrespective of actual historical events. Literarily sophisticated and emotionally stirring, the monumental three-volume *A Time of Death* and *A Time of Evil* by Dobrica Ćosić or *Knife* by Vuk Drašković transplanted the narrative of the Serbs’ suffering, embodied by the protagonists, to the historical settings of the First World War or the Ottoman Empire. About the same time, Mića Popović produced his Serbian Scenes Paintings that would come to represent the iconography of a new Serbian self-image. These and many other literary and artistic works conveyed the message that ultimate salvation lay in a revival of Serbian national consciousness.

It was clear by the end of the 1980s that the communist regime’s attempt to filter out the civil war and nationally driven persecution from memory had failed, because the generation who had lived through it still had vivid memories, and their recollections of the most recent past and their own personal experiences were passed down through the collective memories of their family. The failure to deal with traumatic experiences in the past seriously hampered efforts to move beyond them. In fact, it benefited the nationalists’ efforts to mobilize public support for their cause. Their rhetoric appealed to repressed feelings of powerlessness, mourning, bitterness, and anger in people who had lost relatives during the war or had heard the stories of atrocity, and such feelings provided the perfect justification for taking preemptive measures of self-defense.

Yet it would be wrong to argue that the identity crisis of the 1980s simply revived the old conflicts. The experience of war is not a given with invariable influence; it changes in the process of remembering and with the language used retrospectively to describe it. The Yugoslav example shows how ideas about the past and the creation of historical consciousness are continuously
being filtered and reshaped into something new by existing social conditions. In political confrontations it was rarely important what people and their forefathers had actually experienced. What counted was that interpretations of the past produced new perspectives of the present, which gave people a new orientation and generated ostensible legitimacy. The conflicts of the 1980s were not predestined to occur because of the bloody history of the Second World War, but because certain images of the past triggered fears that then affected and influenced people’s thinking, feelings, and actions. To a degree they were instrumentalized deliberately by politics.

Political Communication and Populism

By the mid-1980s, the old concept of a state-controlled public realm had become obsolete. Pluralism in the media and the lively cultural scene, featuring events and discussions in the larger cities, involved broader sectors of the population, so that debates on reform and alternatives to the system were no longer limited to smaller circles of intellectuals and dissidents. Whoever sought to speak to the ordinary urbanite or rural inhabitant needed to adopt a new language style and a new form of communication.

Spectacular political actions like mass marches and meetings drew hundreds of thousands into the streets. Those who could not attend watched broadcasts of the events for hours on television, which had meanwhile become the country’s most important and favorite medium. Euphoric masses waved Croatian, Albanian, or Serbian flags, cheered the speakers, and chanted aggressive populistic slogans. Slobodan Milošević was the first to mobilize the masses with such events, starting in 1987. During his “antibureaucratic revolution,” so-called “truth rallies” were held even in the deepest backwaters of the land. Thousands of demonstrators held banners high that read “Only Unity will save the Serbs!” or “Czar Lazar, so unlucky you were, if only Slobo had been at your side awhile!” or “Mother Serbia, save us from the Autonomists!” or “Down with the Bureaucrats!” In such settings, people came together as an ethnic collective, and the political messages drew on historical and folkloric slogans because economic deprivation, vulnerability, and fear of loss drove people to seek what they felt was familiar, ageless, and constant. Milošević successfully gave the distraught nation new hope after a decade of doubt and uncertainty and revived buried feelings of pride and unity.

At the heart of Serbia’s political message in the late 1980s was the Kosovo myth, the source of the sacred allegories as applied to the Serb nation. It was the hinge between the spiritual, national, and political awakening and provided the historical underpinning for the widespread belief, common to many religions, that theirs was a chosen people. According to legend, Prince Lazar took his vows on the evening before the fateful battle and thereby prepared
himself for the “Kingdom of Heaven” for eternity. The religiously laden myth supported the Serbs in that it bestowed legitimacy on their cause that far surpassed all political arguments and justifications. In this decade, the Serbs were often referred to as a “heavenly people,” and this image became a pivotal figure in their discourse. The fateful battle between their heroes and traitors served exceedingly well as a metaphor for the times at hand. The narrative of the eternal battle for freedom and self-determination communicated a hope for salvation, encouraged Serbs to reassert their own identity, and helped mobilize and emotionalize the masses. Moreover, the religious overtones distinguished the Serbs from the Albanians, their rivals for what was seen as the embattled holy land Kosovo.

In 1989, Slobodan Milošević cleverly played up the Kosovo myth when he addressed the Serb people in a highly publicized speech celebrating the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo. He spoke of the past, but he meant the present and vowed that Serbia would return to its former greatness. Back then, like today, he said, “tragic disunity” was the cause of the malady to befall Serbia. At the same time, he also pointed to the future: new battles were ahead that would demand determination, bravery, and self-sacrifice. Milošević condemned the older generation of communists for their concessions to the Yugoslav state and led the crowd in cheers for freedom, justice, and brotherhood. The use of rhetoric imbued with cultural symbolism helped generate a common sense of identity, establish moral commitment, and suggest superiority over the stereotyped enemies of the people. “Kosovo” was the perfect metaphor to cloak political messages in universal and transhistorical validity and to link the present and the past by placing them side by side in a quasi-timeless context.47

Subsequent political movements and parties that formed starting in the late 1980s used similar communication strategies. For example, Slobodan Milošević was celebrated in Serbia as Tito’s heir, while in Croatia those campaigning for Tudjman praised him as the figurative descendent of the seventeenth-century conspirators and freedom fighters Petar and Nikola Zrinski and Fran Krsto Frankopan.48 Banks and firms also used folk epics in their advertising. The Chetniks emerged in the 1980s as the modern version of the Serb resistance movement from the Second World War. An entire commemorative industry produced magazines, pennants, emblems, postcards, CDs, and other memorabilia linked to the long-tabooed guerrilla fighters. They now became the protagonists in pop and rock music, in cartoons, and in other forums of youth culture. Other heroes reemerged from the nationalist pantheon: Prince Lazar and Miloš Obilić as the martyrs of the Battle of Kosovo, the Madonna of Medjugorje and Saint Sava, the Serb revolutionary Karadjordje and the Croatian Ban Josip Jelačić. Folkloric accessories, crests,
flags, iconic images of the saints, and insignias became important props of this commercialized mass culture.

Popular folk music set the emotional tone for the euphoria over all things ethnic. In the age of modern mass communication, it experienced renewed recognition and a political transformation. In the past, partisans and Chetniks had once fought bitterly to appropriate folksongs to their cause. These nationalistic versions were banned after 1945, but now enjoyed a revival. The traditional folksingers—the gusle players—did their best at singing political ballads with contemporary references in the pedestrian zone of Belgrade. For centuries, such bards had traveled throughout the countryside with a simple type of single-string violin that they held vertically between their knees while singing about historical times and events in a lamenting, monotone voice. The old songs were the key to the microcosm of longings, fears, and fantasies that kept the oral traditions and tales alive from generation to generation.

The so-called “newly composed music” was a contemporary genre that became an important instrument in political communication. It adapted elements of folk music, supplemented with components of pop music and political messages. Cassette tapes were found everywhere with songs like “The Twentieth-Century Man,” which celebrated the birth of Slobodan Milošević as the birth of a new era.

Not everyone was captivated by customs, epics, and myths. All over Yugoslavia, a new political generation, a cohort that had been socialized in the 1960s and 1970s, aimed at rethinking Yugoslav socialist federalism without necessarily negotiating its dissolution. Their main concern was bringing about greater freedoms and a new sense of civic identity and Europeanness rather than promoting a nationalist agenda. Thus the constant exposure to the same stylized historical figures had an adverse effect on some, like the school pupil who found the required reading of the Montenegrin national epos The Mountain Wreath to be “ludicrous, exaggerated, rural, macho,” and simply “repulsive.” However, for many others, such folklore developed an incredibly emotional and motivational power filled with new meaning. Like religion and history, it merged ideas about the past, present, and future; intensified deep and binding feelings of community; and created reservoirs of powerful, politically relevant trust.

Multicultural Symbiosis and Ethnic Distancing
Nationalist propaganda obscured the less spectacular realities of Yugoslav life. Most people lived with a twofold identity, being Croat, Serb, Macedonian, and so on, on one side and Yugoslav on the other. In a survey taken of 6,200 young adults in 1985, the majority said that they considered themselves to be Yugoslav citizens first and members of one of the constituent nations only
second. This opinion was held to a particularly large degree by Muslims, Macedonians, Montenegrins, and Serbs (76 to 80 percent) and less so by Croats (61 percent) and Slovenes (49 percent). At the end of the 1980s, the large majority of those polled were still of the opinion that every community did not necessarily have to establish a nation state of its own.

The Yugoslav census also revealed another interesting phenomenon: the massive increase of “Yugoslavs.” Between 1961 and 1981, the percentage of those who no longer claimed to belong to any nation or nationality but considered themselves only to be citizens of Yugoslavia increased from 1.7 percent to 5.4 percent, representing more than 1.2 million people. Because the number of “Yugoslavs” clearly increased faster than that of mixed marriages, it could be concluded that a gradual change was occurring in the attitude of the more mobile, better educated, and occupationally skilled younger generation. Only Slovenes, Macedonians, and Albanians emphasized their ethnicity for reasons linked to language differences. Because the political system did not provide for the representation of “Yugoslavs” and the central state was doing nothing in the way of active nation building, a full-scale discussion began on questions like: were Yugoslavs experiencing a stronger sense of community as political citizens or was this a new type of ethnicity? Was there only one form of (socialist) patriotism or could the love of country consist of two components (loyalty to the state and to the respective ethnic community)?

Compared to the 1960s, however, the relations between the nationalities had worsened measurably. In 1985, most people described the ethnic relations in their neighborhood, republic, and in all of Yugoslavia as acceptable or good. The further people got from their own horizon of experience, the more negative their assessments tended to become. Ten percent attested to a poor interethnic atmosphere in their hometown, but 22 percent felt the same with regard to their own republic, and 31 percent thought so with a view toward the country as a whole. Most of those polled attributed ethnic tensions to nationalist propaganda, political egoism, regional disparities, and economic problems, not to religious, ethnic, and cultural differences.

The social distance between nations and nationalities also widened at the end of the 1980s. The percentage of ethnically mixed marriages had not increased significantly since 1960 and averaged at 12 percent, even in ethnically diverse Bosnia-Herzegovina. More than half of those questioned expressed a moderate to very strong objection to marriage outside their ethnic community. Yet, even here the picture appears more complex because of the differentiations people made. Researchers found that the greatest aversions were to marriages between Macedonians and Albanians and between Serbs and Albanians. Relationships between Croats and Serbs caused the least aversions,
whereby among women, the less educated, and the very religious, many people tended to prefer complete ethnic seclusion.60

The spheres of socialization in which each individual moved varied, which helps explain why ethnic affiliation began to take precedence over state citizenship in the late 1980s. Although everyone was subjected to institutions extolling patriotic loyalty to the Yugoslav state, such as the schools, the military, and the workplace, the primary milieu of socialization was that of the usually ethnically homogeneous family. For example, in the villages of central Bosnia where Croats and Muslims lived side by side, neighbors still helped each other build houses and harvest crops; they met to drink coffee, chat, and watch television together just as they had in earlier times. Hospitality and a sense of village community shaped a social-moral code that each ethnic community considered to be part of their own innermost culture. Still, most people continued to believe that a marriage partner from another nationality would disrupt family life.61 When institutions and values, and even the state itself, broke down at the end of the 1980s, nothing was left to counterbalance the trend toward ethnic segregation.

A person who argued that ethnic affiliation was gradually becoming insignificant in Yugoslavia was therefore just as correct as the person who argued that religion and ethnic affiliation were still paramount categories of identity. Especially in the large cities, a person’s origin, nationality, and religion were of little interest in the 1980s, but the picture was quite different in the rural parts of the country, where the influence of family background, relatives, and ethnicity had never waned. This phenomenon of a simultaneous occurrence of very different if not contradictory perceptions explains why people’s views and interpretations of the world around them differed so drastically and almost developed into ideological trench warfare in the 1990s. “Yugoslavia was a multicultural biotope,” claimed one side. “No, it was a constant powder keg of primordial conflicts,” countered the other. Actually, in the day-to-day realities of life, both occurred simultaneously: coexistence and conflict.

Fin de siècle
Because social change had progressed at such a rapid pace and had simply overridden antimodern sentiments after 1945, society became all the more disconcerted when the dynamics of progress floundered and then came to a sudden halt. What had previously been applauded was now rejected and criticized. Similar to what was happening in the West, philosophers, writers, and artists became exasperated with an ever more complex and globalized world in all its negatives guises. Riding a wave of postmodern criticism of the existing order, intellectuals renounced key fundamental certainties of the
industrial age, such as modernity, progress, and the future. At the same time, earlier utopias like Marxism were thoroughly bankrupt, and ultraliberalism and market radicalism seemed to have exhausted their credibility because the shock therapy they prescribed had thrown the Yugoslav economy into an abyss of recession. No alternative societal models were in sight. Therefore, what happened first was the total deconstruction of all known dogmas. The protagonists of postmodernity fled into a rather noncommittal analysis of discourse, symbols, and culture, in which they offered no ideas of their own for explaining the past or shaping the future. The zeitgeist was plagued with a lack of orientation and an intellectual caste that had surrendered in the face of diffuse feelings and fantasies—all of which created the ideal conditions from which a new politics of identity could emerge.

The ideological vacuum and the identity crisis among intellectuals took on many manifestations. Only a very small part of society, one located in the more developed regions of the country, turned to the new social movements organized in environmental, peace, antinuclear, and women’s groups. The majority drifted into seemingly nonpolitical types of group awareness, into consumerism, or into a generally apocalyptic mood. Hedonism and commodity fetishism shaped the lifestyle of the dizelaši (named after the fashion label Diesel), who believed in nothing except extravagant behavior. One critical contemporary commented: “The guys who belong to this, let’s say, ‘movement,’ wear streetwear from the clothing brands Diesel and Nike, usually track pants, and—very important—they always stick their shirt into their pants. They are bald and look like bodybuilders. And it is very popular to run around packing heat. . . . The women fulfill the other half of the heterosexual code: sexiness, short skirts, bare midriff.”62 This all had very little to do with the traditional virtues of the Kosovo myth, but very much to do with the role models presented at the time in Rambo movies and commercial television broadcasts like MTV.

The music of the younger generation also expressed a change of values and a questioning of norms, as can be seen in the multitude of rock bands that existed as the vehicles of an increasingly aggressive protest culture. In 1982, there were about 3,000 rock bands in the entire country, but by 1987, the number had already increased to more than 5,000. The cult groups of the 1980s were Laibach (Ljubljana), Riblja čorba (Fish Soup) from Belgrade, Leb i sol (Bread and Salt) from Skopje, and Bijelo dugme (White Button) from Sarajevo, whose lead guitarist, Goran Bregović, gave the group’s music a signature sound by combining Balkan folklore with Western rock elements.63 In addition there were other types of music, such as punk, rap, techno, and heavy metal.
Instead of expressing social and generational criticism as had been done earlier, the bands of the 1980s like Šizike (The Lunatics), Električni orgazam (Electric Orgasm), Videosex, and 4R (The Fourth Reich) paid homage to an apocalyptic culture. Contemporary music was nihilistic, iconoclastic, Nazi-like, and pornographic in its texts, performance, gestures, habits, and symbols. The Slovene group Laibach startled with its Nazi punk, decorated the stage with swastikas, and sang the praises of Adolf Hitler. “We want a great totalitarian leader,” said one musician. “God is a totalitarian being. Totalitarianism, for us, is a positive phenomenon.”

Heavy criticism of societal values was coupled with aggressive fin de siècle moods. The group Satan Panonski sang in English: “Auto-destruction is eruption; it will destroy all my enemies, my victory is toxicant peace.”

Soccer clubs had always cultivated a strong feeling of allegiance. In the mid-1980s, the stadiums first gave effusive fans a place to work off their frustrations in public. Hardly a game took place in which the public did not hold up posters featuring politicians and saints, wave flags, sing Chetnik songs, or give the fascist Ustasha salute. Hooliganism and violent incidents became increasingly frequent. Starting in 1989, the press was full of warnings about excessive chauvinism. In May 1990, violent rioting took place in connection with a Serbian–Croatian game. From then on, the aggression that had originally been focused on a competitive sport took on a dynamic of its own, and the soccer stadium became an arena for fights between nationalities.

One of the most well-known warlords was the president of the fan club for the Belgrade soccer club Red Star Belgrade, Željko Ražnjatović. In October 1990, he founded the Serb Volunteer Guard, also known as Arkan’s Tiger, and linked the milieu with a particularly vulgar version of newly composed music, turbofolk. In 1995, he staged a lavishly gaudy wedding event with his bride, the pop icon Ceca. Within his and other soccer clubs, a particular milieu of violence had emerged already by the late 1980s. Since daily life for many young men was fully devoid of meaningful activity, this void was filled with a latent chauvinistic and aggressive counterculture, with excessive drinking, video games, and violent pornography. It produced a hollow, sadistic atmosphere that later transformed into open bellicosity. Many of the members of these fan clubs would later join one of the numerous paramilitary units. Soccer teams represented the ethnic nation, and the fans were the soldiers. Not long after that, the worst atrocities of the war were perpetrated by these people.