

Thoughts about Serbs

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I have been thinking about Serbs for almost six decades—not every day, to be sure—but more and more in the last thirty years.

The first time I became aware of the people called Serbs was in 1942. That was back home in Illinois. I was eleven years old and I was already passionately interested in the course of World War II. My father was the foreign editor of *The Chicago Daily News* and his whole activity was devoted to the war. My brother had enlisted in the Army Air Force and my sister was soon to join the Navy. One day in the corner drugstore I picked up a comic book called *War Comics* and the main story in it was about the *Chetniks* of Draža Mihajlović fighting the Nazis in Serbia and their bravery and self-sacrifice in battling the better armed Germans. I was dazzled. There was Colonel Mihajlović with his beard and wire-rimmed glasses. Here were people inside occupied Europe who dared for the first time to resist the mighty war machine of Hitler—not in France, not in Poland, not in Czechoslovakia, not in Holland, not in Scandinavia, but in Yugoslavia, in the Balkans. I talked with my father about those brave Serbs. Later in the war I read a bit about Tito and his Yugoslav Partisans. But it was Draža's Serbs who remained most vivid in my memory.

One day a dozen years ago, I was visiting my oldest friend in Yugoslavia, Aleksandar Nenadović, a Serb from Trbušani who joined the Partisans when he was fourteen. He later became the editor of *Politika* when it was still an estimable paper, only to be crushed by Tito in the disgusting crackdown on Serbian, Slovenian and Croatian liberals in the early 1970s. Yugoslavia was still whole, but was showing unmistakable signs of disintegration. Saša Nenadović said to me: "In Yugoslavia you can do many things against the Serbs, but in the Balkans, you cannot do anything without the Serbs." This aphorism rang true to me then. It rings true to me today and it will always ring true, because of how many Serbs there are, because of where they are, and because of who they are.

Shortly after that I was in Belgrade again and on a Saturday I knocked on a door on the second floor at No. 8 Ulica Palmotićeve. Milovan Đilas invited me in. He was then the most famous living Montenegrin, but as he had begun

to say and write at that time, “Montenegrians are Serbs.” He was meeting the author Dobrica Ćosić and the poet Matija Bećković, as he did every Saturday evening “for political discussions.” I had barely sat down when Ćosić and Bećković indignantly challenged me: “Why don’t you Americans tell the world how we Serbs are being persecuted, how we are being repressed by the Croats, by the Albanians?” I was taken aback and after reflection I responded: “Look. For forty years you have been telling us you were Yugoslavs. We learned to deal with that. Now, all of a sudden, you tell us you are Serbs. That is very confusing for Americans and maybe for other peoples.” Ćilas smiled across the room at Bećković and Ćosić. “Binder is right,” he said. I still remember this story because I think that even ten years after the disappearance of what we knew as Yugoslavia, Americans remain confused about what and who Serbs are.

I believe this confusion has deep historical antecedents. If we go back to 1883, everything was relatively simple. The United States and the Kingdom of Serbia signed a commercial treaty and thus began diplomatic relations—our first with any Balkan nation. The two peoples became allies in World War I and President Wilson frequently expressed his admiration for the Serbs. But there was a catch, a tempting trap. In the name of self-determination, Wilson promised the creation of something called Yugoslavia, with the valiant Serbs in the lead in the person of their king. For the Serbs, and the other South Slav peoples, that instantly became both a blessing and a curse. The same catch was inherent in the creation of a Communist Yugoslavia under Tito, the Croat-Slovene. He concluded before World War II that Yugoslavia could only be re-created on the basis of a weakened and constricted Serbia. But he worked very artfully, liquidating Draža Mihajlović and the remnants of the *Chetniks*, slicing off Vojvodina and Kosovo-Metohija and making them provinces on the one hand while moving swiftly on the other hand to install mainly Serbs in the new leaderships of the armed forces and security services. The potential dangers from those quarters were eliminated in 1966 with removal of Aleksandar Ranković. A further move by Tito that could be interpreted as aimed at weakening Serb authority was his recognition of Muslims as a constituent nation in Bosnia that was anchored in his 1974 constitution. As if that were not enough to hold down Serbs, Tito extended the autonomous rights of the Albanians in Kosovo-Metohija, empowering them in the provincial government, in education, in the police. After Tito’s death, Serbia was left with a leadership that had been largely corrupted and slavishly beholden to a Communist system that was dying of its own incompetence. And Serbia was left with the hopelessly entangled Kosovo mess.

No wonder Serbs, including Ćosić and Bećković, were bewildered and desperate. They had made more blood sacrifices than any other nation for the

first and second Yugoslavias and now everything around them was collapsing. They were as uncertain as children who missed the school bus, and then it began to rain. No wonder they fell for Slobodan Milošević who, when I first became aware of him in 1987, was dreaming of becoming a new Tito, a Serbian Tito. What was he then? A small Balkan despot with great pretensions. And what is he today? A small Balkan despot with only one remaining pretension: to hold onto power. Let us not forget, even if he enjoyed the still powerful levers of the dying Communist party, including a near monopoly on the press, and the perquisites of authority over the army and the police, many Serbs voted for Milošević. And under his aegis some Serbs committed atrocities, first in Croatia, later in Bosnia and Kosovo-Metohija—not that they were alone in doing gruesome deeds. Nor was Milošević alone as a despot—he had his equals in Zagreb and Sarajevo, but there was one fatal difference: Serbia was relatively big; the others were relatively small.

In one of the perversities of that perverse peninsula we call the Balkans, Milošević soon developed a symbiotic relationship, that is, a mutually beneficial relationship, with his despotic Yugoslav adversaries: first with Slovenia's Milan Kučan, then with Croatia's Franjo Tuđman and shortly thereafter with Bosnia's Alija Izetbegović. Their antagonisms greatly strengthened each of them in their own back yards. Add the Kosovo Albanian leaders and Macedonia's Kiro Gligorov, if you will, to the list of symbioses, and even Montenegro's Milo Đukanović. For that matter, I think we could also find symbiotic relationships involving Milošević and some of the opposition leaders on the internal Serbian scene: Vuk Drašković, for instance, who served briefly in a coalition with Milošević during the NATO campaign against Serbia. Moving on to the international stage, I now think that Milošević soon developed and has sustained to this day a symbiotic relationship with the United States government—first under George Bush and then under Bill Clinton. The United States never countenanced a Serb other than Milošević since he came to power at the end of the 1980s, and by that token, have never given substantial support to any credible Serbian opponents of Milošević. The American leaders deplored him, they professed to despise him. They compared him to Hitler (and Serbs to the Nazis) and they ultimately got him indicted as a war criminal, which in the political court that is the American-run tribunal at The Hague is the same as convicting him. Yet they dealt with him over a truce with Croatia in 1992, over a cease-fire in Bosnia-Herzegovina and a settlement at Dayton in 1995, and over an agreement on Kosovo-Metohija in 1999—the last even after the Hague indictment was made public.

In retrospect I believe, as grotesque as it may sound, we can say that Milošević and Milošević's Serbia saved NATO. Without him, without his

Serbia, the Atlantic alliance would have had little or no reason to continue existence. And without NATO, the United States would have had little ground to remain in Europe and to dominate the non-military European Union. With him NATO found a pretext not only to continue existing, but to expand, to add new members, and dominate them, too. This was the primary reason for singling out the Serbs as the evil villains of the last decade of the last century and the first year of the new century. Today, justification for continuing NATO is found by American, and not only American leaders, in the mere survival of the hated Milošević and the hated Karadžić and the hated Mladić, unbound by Western chains. Richard Holbrooke said so in the UN Security Council on June 20. In short, we can say that Serbs and Serbia are being sacrificed on the altar of NATO. But to come back to the idea of symbiosis, I think this makes the United States, and NATO, hostage to Milošević. It also makes the Serbs who remain in Serbia and even Serbs who moved abroad hostage to this isolated and indicted leader.

The Clinton administration badly miscalculated when it thought in March 1999 that massive high altitude bombing would subdue and subjugate the Serbs, already desperately poor as they were under eight years of sanctions. It miscalculated even more gravely that bombing would hurt Milošević. On the contrary, it gave him a new lease on life. He has already outlasted General Wesley Clark. Yet Milošević also miscalculated, he did not understand that the reason Clinton launched the bombs and missiles was that he felt his credibility—severely damaged by the Monica scandal—was at stake. Sure, Milošević was in a corner. But given the size and strength of the United States, Clinton, in March 1999, was in a corner a thousand times bigger.

Why think about Serbs? Or anybody else in the South Slav space? After all, the Balkans never was central to the national interests of the United States. However, the peculiar evolution of the collapse of Yugoslavia and the increasing involvement of Americans by way of NATO in the present and future of far off Bosnian Muslims and Kosovar Albanians has created in this new world of virtual realities what I would call a virtual essentialness of Serbia: the country we love to hate, for the moment, and which we cannot begin to understand, because we are unwilling to try.

For all their openheartedness, Serbs are not so easy to comprehend. With an unfamiliar script and an unfamiliar language and, if I may observe in a friendly spirit, a people seemingly hopelessly divided, both in Serbia and in the Diaspora. We Americans, for all our nominal openness, are not so easy to understand either, for other reasons. And Serb Americans? Impossible.

But Clinton will go, soon, and Milošević will go, sooner or later. Then we will have not a virtual Serbia, but a real Serbia—a Serbia that not only has created great works of art, of music, of literature, of science, but has been a

beacon for other exceptional South Slavs who chose to identify themselves with Serbia: Ivo Andrić, Meša Selimović, Emir Kusturica, Goran Bregović, and others. Vuk Karadžić, whose collection of Serbian folk songs made such a profound impression on Goethe and the brothers Grimm, is quoted—at least in folklore—as saying, “Speak Serbian that the whole world understands you.” In a higher sense, but with humility, that remains a valid duty for Serbs.

