

Yugoslav Wars: The “Revenge of the Countryside” between Sociological Reality and Nationalist Myth, *East European Quarterly*, vol. XXXIII, n° 2, June 1999, pp. 157-175.

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The Yugoslav Wars as a “Revenge of the Countryside”

Numerous journalists and intellectuals have with good reasons rejected the Hobbesian presentation of the Yugoslav wars, the idea of a “war of everyone against everyone,” as a mere reflection of the age-old hatred between more or less barbarian Balkan people. Unfortunately, many of them reintroduced through the window what they drove out through the door. First of all, the presentation of the Yugoslav wars as a “revenge of the countryside” has led to some exaggerations and misunderstandings. For instance, the Sarajevian architect Ivo Straus, in his book “*Sarajevo, the Architect and the Barbarians*,” describes the Serbian fighters besieging and shelling the town as “armed, toothless and ill-washed primitives,” and considers that they are the representatives of a specific social category: the “hardly cultured newcomers.”¹ Of course, it is quite understandable that a direct victim of Serbian shellings would use such expressions. But it is nonetheless regrettable that some western commentators turned them into analytical categories.

During the Yugoslav wars, identifying the fighters with uneducated and barbarian country people was not just the habit of a few pacifist intellectuals. In Sarajevo, the inhabitants did willingly contrast the “*raja*,” the peaceful urban people, with the quarrelsome “*papci*” on the surrounding hills.² A similar hostility was expressed by the fighters themselves when they spoke about their enemies: the Serbs often used the word “*Balije*” for the Muslims, and the Muslims called the Serbs “*Vlasi*” (“Vlachs”). In both cases, the enemy was likened to a nomadic population, foreign to the city, to civilization.³ The opposition between “civilized” towns and “barbarous” countryside has not only fed conversations between the Sarajevian intellectuals and their visitors, but also various class contempts and war discourses.

This does not mean the absence of a link between the origins of the Yugoslav wars and the rural and mountainous areas of the Yugoslav space. Many warlords are natives of the Dinaric Alps,⁴ and these areas were the first strongholds of the nationalist parties and their militias. Conversely, the Yugoslav wars were characterized by great fierceness against the urban centers and the very symbols of their urbanity, during the deliberate destruction of Vukovar in Croatia, or during the sieges of Sarajevo and Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina. But the state of devastation of many Croatian and Bosnian villages, comparable with Vukovar or Mostar,

¹ Ivan STRAUS, *Sarajevo, l'architecte et le barbare*, Lintreau, Paris (1991).

² In the Ottoman Empire, the *rea'ya* were the producers, the subjects, both in towns and in the countryside, in opposition to the *askeri*, the soldiers and the state servants. But in contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina, the word “*raja*” refers only to the urban population. The word “*papak*” (pl.: *papci*) means the hooves of the livestock and, by extension, is a pejorative term used for the country people.

³ The *balije* are nomadic Muslim stockbreeders of Eastern Herzegovina, and the Vlachs are a nomadic Orthodox population of the Balkan peninsula.

⁴ The Dinaric Alps stretch from Slovenian Alps to Bulgarian Rodhopes, and cover the regions of Croatian Krajina (Dalmatian hinterland), Herzegovina, Montenegro and Sandjak.

shows to what extent the idea of a “revenge of the countryside” during the Yugoslav wars is out of place.

Dinko Tomasic and the tribal culture

Since the publication of “*The Balkan Peninsula*,” the founding study on the Balkan written by Serbian geographer Jovan Cvijic (1865-1927), the insistence on the opposing towns and countryside or, more precisely, towns, plains and mountains, is constant in sociological and ethnological works on this area. It is thus not surprising to find it again in the analyses of the Yugoslav wars.

A good illustration of this phenomenon is the recent fancy in Croatia for the sociologist Dinko Tomasic (1902-1975), whose main works underline the opposition of two “cultural types” within the Balkan societies: the tribal culture (*plemenska kultura*) on one hand, structured around the *pleme* (clan, tribe) and characteristic of the mountains’ stockbreeders, and the cooperative culture (*zadrusna kultura*) on the other hand, structured around the *zadruga* (household organized as indivisible economic unity) and characteristic of the plains’ peasants.

In a paper published in 1936, and called “*The Tribal Culture and its Contemporary Remains*,”⁵ Tomasic analyses more specifically the role of tribal culture in the violent practices of Balkan societies, as well as in the formation of Balkan national states. According to him, physical strength and spatial mobility of the Dinaric populations explain “that the tribal social organization generated bands [*cete*] of looters and warriors, that within it carrying a weapon became synonymous with manliness, and ‘heroism’ – that is, outbidding in plunder and crime- became the dominant social value.” In his idea, worship of violence, focused on the mythical figures of *hajduk* and *uskok* (the social bandit), rose from the patriarchal and tribal culture of the Dinaric populations, and rapidly succeeded in dominating the societies and states of the Balkan peninsula.

Furthermore, he claims that the *hajduks*, whose “only aim is looting and plundering,” were nevertheless used by European powers as “champions of ideologies and state-founders” against the Ottoman Empire: “The *hajduks* bands were given cross-printed flags, and the *harambasa* [the band leaders] moral and material support in order to launch so-called liberation uprisings.” After having monopolized the state and its military apparatus, the Dinaric populations are using their smuggling skills in order to seize trade activities, and are imposing their economic and cultural domination on the plains’ peasantry and the towns’ bourgeoisie. Tomasic considers this domination of tribal culture as the cause of the authoritarian and unstable features of the Balkan states created in the 19th century, and explains in this way Serbian domination in the first Yugoslavia, the rising of the Partisan movement during World War II or, when broadening his field of investigation, the triumph of communist ideology in Russia and Eastern Europe.⁶

Confronted with the violence of the war, some Croatian sociologists have rediscovered Tomasic’s analyses. In 1992, Aleksandar Stulhofer published in the review “*Drustvena istrazivanja*” (“Social Researches”) a paper called “*A Prediction of the War ? Dinko Tomasic's*

⁵ D. TOMASIC, “Plemenska kultura i njeni danasnji ostaci,” *Mjesečnik*, n° 62 (1), January 1936, reprinted in “Sociologija Dinka Tomasica,” *Drustvena istrazivanja*, vol. II, n° 6, November 1992.

⁶ D. TOMASIC, *Personality and Culture in Eastern European Politics*, G. Stewart Pub., New-York, 1948.

Ethno-sociology".⁷ A few months later, the same sociological review dedicated a special issue to this author.⁸ Finally, in 1993, three Croatian sociologists, Stjepan Mestrovic, Slaven Letica and Miroslav Goreta, published a book in the United States called "*Habits of the Balkan Heart*," devoted to the study of the influence of "social characters" on the various forms of post-communism in Central and Eastern Europe.⁹ These three authors often refer to Dinko Tomasic in their analysis of the Yugoslav wars, and also establish a distinction between the cosmopolitan character of the towns and the peaceful one of the plains on one hand, and the "power-hungry, aggressive" character of the mountains on the other, personified by the Serbs and Montenegrins. Against this background, the Serbian aggression against Croatia is readily explained:

"It is well known in Yugoslavia that Serbs and Montenegrins adhere to a sort of cult of the warrior. They have continually dominated the police and armed forces. They habitually own guns and engage in hunting as part of a machismo set of values. Within Yugoslavia, they are known for being stubborn, irascible, and emotionally unstable."¹⁰

Sociological Reality or Nationalistic Myth ?

Mestrovic, Letica and Goreta link the Dinaric character only with the Orthodox populations and, in this way, associate a conflict between social characters with a clash between religious cultures. They point out that "the dividing line between East and West runs roughly along the present-day border between Croatia and Serbia, which is known as the Krajina region," and that this region is the one "in which the fiercest fighting occurred in the war of 1991, as well as in previous Balkan wars."¹¹ Therefore, in their opinion, the war in Croatia is a mere confrontation between two cultural areas, the Western and Catholic one, represented by the Croats and Slovenes, and the Eastern and Orthodox one, represented by the Serbs and Montenegrins:

"The Catholic church had maintained a universalist cultural base that is still medieval in many ways but is nevertheless recognizably Western. Thus, Croatia and Slovenia led the anti-Communist rebellion in 1989, voted for democracy, tend to favor pluralism, want to join the European Community (...) By contrast, Serbia and Montenegro tend in the direction of an Eastern orbit of cultural values. They typically have close ties with Russia and are neo-Communist, following free-elections in which democracy was rejected. Orthodox or Muslim in their religious orientation, they seek a pyramidal power structure and are militaristic."¹²

Such a presentation of the Yugoslav crisis, in which Bosnia-Herzegovina has miraculously vanished (in reality, Krajina is located on the border between Croatia and Bosnia), is – to say the least – simplistic. Its culturalist hypotheses, linked to analyses of post-communism in terms of a democratic Central Europe versus an authoritarian or chaotic Eastern Europe, have already been criticized by Milica Bakic-Hayden.¹³ But a single fact has to be stressed: Dinaric

⁷ A. STULHOFER, "Predvidjanje rata ? Etnosociologija Dinka Tomasica," *Drustvena istrazivanja*, vol. II, n° 6, November 1992.

⁸ "Sociologija Dinka Tomasica", *op. cit.*

⁹ S. MESTROVIC / S. LETICA / M. GORETA, *Habits of the Balkan Heart. Social Character and the Fall of Communism*, Texas A&M University Press, College Station, 1993.

¹⁰ S. MESTROVIC, *op. cit.*, s. 36.

¹¹ S. MESTROVIC, *op. cit.*, s. 29.

¹² S. MESTROVIC, *op. cit.*, s. 30.

¹³ M. BAKIC-HAYDEN / R. HAYDEN, "Orientalist Variations on the Theme 'Balkans': Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics," *Slavic Review*, Spring 1992.

populations are not exclusively Serbian or Orthodox, and the link between these populations and the lords of Yugoslav wars is not limited to the Serbian case, as shown by the military role of Herzegovinian Croats in Eastern Slavonia, or the similar role of Sandjak's Muslims in Sarajevo. From this perspective, when Mestrovic, Letica and Goreta locate the border between Western and Eastern culture in Medjugorje, a Catholic place of pilgrimage located in Western Herzegovina (that is, in the stronghold of the Croatian militias), one can do nothing but smile!¹⁴

This tendency to "ethnicize" some features of the Balkan social and cultural reality is not a recent one: Tomasic and his predecessors did the same. Tomasic's "cultural types" are merely a reinterpretation of the "psychological types" elaborated by Cvijic in "*The Balkan peninsula*." For Cvijic, however, the "patriarcal regime" of the "Dinaric type" is not an inferior degree of civilization but, on the contrary, its regenerating factor, standing in contrast to the *raya*, the plains' "inferior and servile class," and to the urban population, which "degenerates within a few generations." And Cvijic praises the military qualities of the Dinaric population, personified by "the *hajduks*, the *uskoks*, the avengers," which serves the case of "the freedom and independence of all the lands it knows by tradition as having been a part of its [Serbian] state, and which are inhabited by the poor *raya*, the oppressed people of its own race."

Cvijic's liberator is strongly contrasted with Tomasic's predator. But in both cases, the relations between towns, plains and mountains are described only in ethnic and national terms. Of course, this type of analyses can find some justifications in the history of Yugoslav space: both in the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian Empires, ethnic belonging, geographical location and social position were all linked. But these analyses are ideological reinterpretations of historical realities, and are connected with the various and antagonistic nationalisms of the Yugoslav space. Cvijic was one of the main ideologists of Serbian nationalism, and Tomasic was close to the Croatian Peasant Party. Similarly, the crystallization of Muslim nationalism in Bosnia during the war went together with the emergence of analyses interpreting this war as a confrontation between the "urban civilization" of the Muslims and the "barbarious and tribal mind" of the Serbs.¹⁵ These Muslim analyses offer a third distribution of the attributes of mountains, plains and towns: the *pleme* is actually identified to the "slavonic, rural and patriarcal *zadruga*," and contrasted with the "old bosnian *citluk*," presented as... an urban institution.¹⁶

Hobbesian State of Nature or Khaldunian *Asabiyas* ?

Focusing on Dinaric populations "who seized control of local urban areas [and who] learned to consolidate their rule by propagating a religious, nationalistic or party ideology," Tomasic is reducing the history of Balkan societies to a tragic recurrence of "tension between peasant, herdsman and urbanite".¹⁷ This cyclic conception of history is close to that of Ibn Khaldun, well known to specialists of the Arab world: the *pleme* evokes strongly Ibn Khaldun's *asabiya*

¹⁴ On Medjugorje pilgrimage and its links with the tribal culture of western Herzegovina, see Mart BAXT, "The Saints of Gomila: Belief and Blood Vengeance in a Yugoslav Peasant Society," *Ethnologia European*, n° 22, Spring 1992.

¹⁵ J. ZIGA, *Islamska civilizacija i bosanski Muslimani*, Vijeće Kongresa Bosanskomuslimanskih Intelektualaca, Sarajevo, 1994.

¹⁶ M. BOROGOVAC, "Kulturni kanibalizam," *Muslimanski Glas*, vol. III, n° 42, 7 February 1992. In Ottoman Bosnia, the word *citluk* or *ciftluk* (turkish: *çiftlik*) designates the land owned by a *beg* or an *aga*.

¹⁷ D. TOMASIC, *Personality and culture...*, op. cit., p. 12.

(solidarity group founded on blood or allegiance links), and the cleavage between towns, plains and mountains is similar to the opposition established by Ibn Khaldun between *hadara* (urbanity) and *badawa* (nomadism).¹⁸

For Ibn Khaldun, however, *asabiya* is a regenerating factor for the state: in this respect, he is closer to Cvijic than to Tomasic. Another, more important difference is that both Tomasic and Cvijic define the *pleme* as pre-existent and external to the state, and the latter as a mere instrument in the relations between towns, plains and mountains. For Ibn Khaldun, however, the state (*daula*) is at the center of the relations between *badawa* and *hadara*, and represents the main stake in the *asabiyas'* action. As rightly underlined by Aziz Al-Azmeh, in Ibn Khaldun's idea, "without *daula* [state], the concept of *asabiya* would be superfluous regardless of its 'real existence.' As a concept, it is subject to the exigencies of the concept of the state and cannot exist conceptually without it or, indeed, except in its proximity."¹⁹

Therefore, in order to understand the underlying social factors of Yugoslav wars, it is necessary to place the issue of the state at the center of the analysis. For, contrary to the beliefs of open or covert Hobbesian analyses of these wars, the realities of the Dinaric populations, their tribal organization and their culture of violence, cannot be understood without taking into account their relations with the state.

The *Hajduk* and the State: A Culture of Military Borders

In the history of the Yugoslav space, mountains often constituted a refuge against the imperial powers, as illustrated by the autonomy of Montenegro in the Ottoman Empire, or the predominance of Orthodox and Catholics in Herzegovina, a remote and therefore slightly islamized region. But it could be also a strategic position, a border to be maintained, as illustrated by the Cazinska Krajina (area around Bihac in Bosnia), where muslim populations withdrawing from Slavonia and Dalmatia at the end of the 17th century were concentrated on the newly established northern borders of the Ottoman Empire, or by the Kninska Krajina (area around Knin in Croatia), where Serbian populations fleeing from the same Empire were put in charge of the Austro-Hungarian side of the borders. This imperial influence on the spatial distribution of the Dinaric populations is still reflected today by the peripheral location they hold inside of their own community (Krajina's Serbs, Herzegovinian Croats, Sandjak's Muslims, etc.).

The Empires did not only spatially redistribute the Dinaric populations, they also learnt to instrumentalize their forms of social organization and their practices of violence. Indeed, the steady resistance of Montenegrins to the Ottoman authorities was due to the strength of their tribal structures, and was accompanied by razzias and plunderings in the neighbouring provinces. However, the expansion of the Ottoman Empire itself was linked to similar tribal structures and predatory practices, as exemplified in the 15th and 16th century by the *martolos* and the *vojnuks*, auxiliary troupes recruited from the nomadic orthodox populations of the Balkan peninsula. Likewise, the Ottoman authorities controlled and taxed the conquered populations by relying on their domestic, tribal and local structures, and contributed in this way to their reinforcement.

¹⁸ On Ibn Khaldun's thought, see A. AL-AZMEH, *Ibn Khaldun. An Essay in Reinterpretation*, Frank Cass, London, 1982.

¹⁹ A. AL-AZMEH, *op. cit.*, s. 28.

A similar relation between center and periphery existed in the military organization of the Ottoman Empire. Its central forces were the janissaries, taken from the periphery through the system of *devshirme* (levying of christian children in the provinces of the Empire, who were educated in Istanbul, and linked to the central power through the payment of a regular salary). Its peripheral forces, on the contrary, were the *sipahis*, in charge of the provincial troupes, and remunerated through the attribution of *timars* (land and tax concessions). From the 18th century, after the territorial losses of the Karlowitz Treaty (1699), the *timar* system in Bosnia-Herzegovina turned into a true system of military borders, relying on the *kapetani* (captains), whose extended military and judicial powers explain the strength of the bosnian *ajani* (notables).²⁰

At the same time, the Austro-Hungarian Empire established its own system of military borders, differing noticeably from the Ottoman one, insofar as it was not based on a military aristocracy, but on a mass of peasant-soldiers. The Austro-Hungarian authorities gave a special status of *Militärgrenzen* (military borders) to the new conquered territories. The protection of these *Militärgrenzen* was then entrusted to the Serbian populations just arrived from the Ottoman Empire, whose *zadrugas* received enlarged economical and military competences.

It is within this framework that one is able to understand the complex relations which exist between the military apparatus of the Empire and the *hajduks* of the Dinaric areas. The words “*hajduk*” or “*uskok*” refer to the same central phenomenon in the history of the Yugoslav space: social banditry. *Hajduks*, often former *kmets* (serfs) running away from the fiscal pressure of the Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian authorities, were withdrawing in the mountainous areas where they formed *cete* (armed bands) led by a *vojvoda* (war chief). Withdrawn in these border regions, free from the control of the imperial authorities, they were able to “jump” from an Empire to the other, in order to smuggle or plunder some goods. Such is the origin of the word “*uskok*” used in some regions of the Yugoslav space: in Serbo-Croatian, “*skok*” means “jump.” *Hajduks* and *uskoks* thus became a widespread form of violence against the state, taking a central place in the epic tradition of Dinaric populations.

But in reality, the relationships between *hajduks* or *uskoks* on one hand, and the imperial authorities on the other, were full of ambiguities.²¹ In the border regions, or during military campaigns, the *hajduks* were incorporated into auxiliary formations called *delis* (“mads”) on the Ottoman side, *pandur* or *Freikörper* (“free corps”) on the Austro-Hungarian side, and remunerated through direct predation (spoils sharing) or indirect predation (land sharing). This integration of the *hajduks* into the military apparatus of the Empires is confirmed by the use of the words “*hajduk*” and “*vojvoda*” in some particular statutes granted to Serbian populations of the Austro-Hungarian military borders.²²

Located at the borders of two Empires, the Yugoslav space is thus characterized for a long time by countless shifts between armed rebellion against the state and armed service to the

²⁰ On the South Slavs in the military apparatus of the Ottoman Empire, see A. SUCESKA, “The Position of Bosnian Moslems in the Ottoman State,” *International Journal of Turkish Studies*, vol. I, n° 2, Fall 1980 ; H. G. MAJER, „Albaner und Bosner in der osmanischen Armee. Ein Faktor der Reichsintegration im XVII. und XVIII. Jahrhundert,“ in K. GROTHUSEN (Hg.), *Jugoslawien. Integrationsprobleme in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1986.

²¹ On the relations between *hajduks* and Ottoman authorities, see Karen BARKEY, *Bandits and Bureaucrats. The Ottoman Road to Centralization*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca-London, 1994.

²² On the Austro-Hungarian military borders, see G. ROTHENBERG, “The Habsburg Military Border System,” in B. KIRALY / G. ROTHENBERG (eds.), *War and Society in East Central Europe (18th and 19th Centuries)*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1979.

state, and D. Tomasic himself notes that “border areas, where two or more spheres of influence confront each other and where the administration is weakly organized, are especially favourable to *hajduks*’ activities. (...) If these areas are inhabited by representatives of the tribal or nomadic culture, prone to plunder and to abduct, *hajduks*-rallying and border-crossing become common phenomena. These are tolerated or even encouraged by legal powers, when they are in a situation of open or latent confrontation, in order to wreck the authority of the opposite power, and to facilitate military operations.”²³

The tribal culture mentioned by Tomasic is therefore linked to a border culture, in which the state is far from being absent. Besides, the regional designation “*Krajina*,” transformed into a cultural barrier by Mestrovic, Letica and Goreta, is actually present on both sides of the Croato-Bosnian border (Kninska Krajina in Croatia, Cazinska Krajina and Bosanska Krajina in Bosnia), and comes from the term “*vojna krajina*,” which means... military border.

Tradition, Modernization and “Retraditionalization”

When Tomasic claims that “the origin of these states can be found in the personality traits of the predatory herdsmen and the military whose power-seeking traits have remained basically unchanged throughout the centuries,”²⁴ he does not only oversimplify the complex relations which have, for a long time, linked the tribal culture to the state apparatus in the Balkans. He also omits to take into account the socio-economical and cultural modernization of this area during the 19th and 20th centuries. Similarly, the analyses of Yugoslav wars in terms of “Dinaric mentality” or “revenge of the countryside” often do not take into account the extremely rapid modernization of the Yugoslav space over the last decades, deliberately ignoring its imbalances and contradictions, refusing, so to say, to specify the nature of the revenge to be taken.

However, it seems difficult to oppose without reserves an urban culture to one or several rural cultures in a Yugoslav space where 73 % of the total population was still living on agriculture in 1948, and only 27 % in 1981. Forty years of accelerated modernization and urbanization have shifted the traditional antagonisms between town and countryside into the towns themselves, endangered the balance of the urban social system and broken the structures of the rural one. This is probably the reason why towns like Sarajevo or Mostar were at the center of the war between 1992 and 1995, whereas they remained relatively untouched by the fighting of World War II. It also explains the fact that the various militias attracted first of all the neo-urban strata of the population, misintegrated in the urban economy and culture, whereas the urban elites were the principal support of the pacifist movements.

From the 1960’s onwards, imbalances in the modernization of the Yugoslav society provoked its “retraditionalization,” expressed by the resurgence of nationalist ideologies and communalist practices in political life, and by the reactivation of clan and kin solidarities.²⁵ Dinaric populations, marginalized by the economic modernization and located outside the republic corresponding to their own nationality, were the first to use these solidarities to take over parts of the state apparatus (Krajina’s Serbs in the croatian police), to facilitate their

²³ D. TOMASIC, “Plemenska kultura...”, op. cit.

²⁴ D. TOMASIC, *Personality and culture...*, op. cit., p. 115.

²⁵ On this “retraditionalization” of the Yugoslav society, see J. ZUPANOV, *Samoupravljanje i društvena moc*, Globus, Zagreb, 1985; C.-U. SCHIERUP, “Quasi-proletarians and a Patriarchal Bureaucracy: Aspects of Yugoslavia’s Re-peripheralisation,” *Soviet Studies*, vol. XLIV, n° 1, Spring 1992.

migration abroad (Herzegovinian Croats in Northern America and Sandjak's Muslims in Germany), or to control different activities linked with organized crime.

Trying to sketch the typical profile of the volunteers engaged in the Serbian Tchetnik Movement (*Srpski Cetnicki Pokret* – SCP) led by Vojislav Seselj, the independant newspaper “*Borba*” wrote in November 1993 that “he is between thirty and thirty-five years old, holds a diploma from a technical secondary school, has a job, has at least one child and a broken marriage in his life. The majority of the volunteers has rural origins, but is living in a medium-sized town (most often, Smederevo or Leskovac). One volunteer out of ten had serious problems with the law (prison sentences), and some came to the front immediatly after their release from prison. According to unchecked testimonies, prisoners are offered sentence reductions if they agree to join the volunteers.”²⁶

Therefore, the important role of tribal solidarities in the forming of various militias during the Yugoslav wars is not due to their entrenchment in the high villages of Dinaric *karst*, but to their spreading through the chinks of an ill-mastered modernization, and to their extension to the “world village.” The best illustration of this reality is no doubt the role of the Herzegovinian diaspora in the financing of Croatian militias. This ambiguous reality of the militias, situated halfway between village and “world village,” can be observed in their symbolical productions. For example, “special units” of the police in the “Serb Republic of Krajina” were nicknamed “*Knindjas*,” an association of Knin, the name of the capital of this self-proclaimed state, and “Nindja tortoises,” the name of a well-known japanese cartoon. Similarly, the name of the Muslim militias at the beginning of the war was “*Green berets*,” an allusion both to the traditional headgear of the Muslims (a black beret, adopted after the banning of the turkish *fes* in 1950) and to special units of the U.S. Army.

Militia's Folklore as an Invention of the Tradition

During the Yugoslav wars, a majority of militias and “special units” cultivated an appearance imitating the look of heroes from north-american movies (ray-bans, sleeveless tee-shirts and bullet-strings around the neck), whereas the “muslim brigades” of the Bosnian army found a sartorial inspiration in the Iranian *pasdaran* (green bands with yellow Koranic verses tied around the head). Only some Serbian militias claiming to belong to the Chetnik movement were prone to wear the outfit of the perfect *hajduk* (untrimmed beard, long hair, fur hat). More generally, nationalist mobilization in Serbia was linked with the rediscovery of epic songs and with a general “folklorization” of political vocabulary and symbols.²⁷ For example, Vojislav Seselj conferred the title of “*vojvoda*” to his seconds, and Zeljko Arnatovic, a warlord better known under the nickname of “*Arkan*,” celebrated his marriage with the *turbo-folk* star Svetlana Velickovic-*Ceca* wearing a traditional Montenegrin dress and firing in the air.

This tendency to resort to mountains' symbolical register is one of the distinctive features of Serbian militias, even though it was sometimes used by other actors of the war (Sime Djodan, the first Croatian Defense minister, praised also the “Dinaric man, brave, frank, prone to chivalrous rather than sneaky attitudes”²⁸). Besides, it is significant that *gusla*, a traditional string instrument accompanying the Dinaric epic songs, was presented as an attribute of the

²⁶ G. KATIC / M. MIKULJANAC, “Kako su formirane dobrovoljacke jedinice u Srbiji ?,” *Borba*, 20 November 1991.

²⁷ On the “folklorization” of Serbian political life, see I. COLOVIC, *Bordel ratnika*, XX. vek, Belgrade, 1993.

²⁸ Z. BATUSIC, “Dinarski super-covjek,” *Danas*, 19 May 1992.

Serbian fighters both by the Serbian and the Bosnian war comic strips.²⁹ In the first case, *gusla* was a symbol of heroism, in the other, a symbol of primitivism:

"Knindze" ("The Knindjas"), Belgrade, 1991: *gusla* as a symbol of heroism



"Rat strip art" ("War strip art"), Lukavac, 1994: *gusla* as a symbol of primitivism

But, once more, such an “ethnicization” of mountains’ attributes is fallacious: *gusla* was traditionally played by all Dinaric populations, and epic songs became components of Serbian militia’s folklore only after their “reinvention” by the Academy of Science, by literary circles or, more prosaically, by soccer supporters.³⁰ In the symbolical production of the militias, figures and deeds of the mountains do not represent the waking of a collective memory, but an invention of the tradition,³¹ and are linked to the same ideological constructions as Cvijic’s and Tomasic’s typology. More generally, the paramilitary formations of the Yugoslav space reflect a particular aspect of its modernization: the creation of modern nation-states. And, just as the recurrent renewal of urban elites is part of a wider urbanization process, the regular raising of these formations fitted into a continuous yet unfinished process of political modernization.

²⁹ On comic strips in the Yugoslav wars, see X. BOUGAREL, « Les beaux dessins de la guerre sale. La bande dessinée de guerre en ex-Yougoslavie, » in *L'espace yougoslave: un siècle d'histoire*, BDIC, Paris, 1998.

³⁰ On the relations between soccer supporters and nationalist militias, see the special issue of the Croatian review *Erasmus* on this topic (n° 10, February 1995).

³¹ See E. HOBSBAWN / T. RANGER, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1983).

The Chetniks: from *Hajduks* to Police Auxiliaries

The military practices of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires, some of which resemble the contemporary militias in their mode of the recruitment, were linked to an indirect exercise of the monopoly of legitimate violence, characteristic of the imperial political systems. From the 19th century, the crisis of these Empires and the emergence of modern nation-states, both in the Yugoslav space and in the Balkan area as a whole, were associated with a recomposition of the modes and spheres of exercise of this monopoly.³² National uprisings and Balkan wars were only stages of this recomposition, and the first World War represented its outcome, or rather its climax. During these uprisings and wars, the new nation-states were also relying on paramilitary formations similar to the contemporary militias, a good example being the Chetnik movement and its relations with the Serbian state and the Serbian nationalist organizations.

Created in 1815, after an uprising led by former *hajduks*, the Serbian state first organized armed forces relying on peasant militias, whose fighters had to provide their own uniform and weapons. Defeated in 1876 by a modernized Ottoman army, despite the help of panslavist Russian officers and Garibaldi's Italian volunteers, these militias were progressively replaced by a genuine army with professional officers.³³ However, for its expansionist purposes, the Serbian state still resorted to volunteers coming from the whole Yugoslav space, and stirred up uprisings outside its frontiers. Insurrectionary networks were created in the 1860s by Ilija Garasanin, the then Serbian Minister of the Interior, and were supervised from 1911 by the organization "Unification or Death" ("*Ujedinjenje ili smrt*"), better known under the name of "Black hand" ("*Crna ruka*"). This organization, created by officers of the Serbian army and led by captain Dragutin Dimitrijević – *Apis*, is often deemed to be behind the murder of archduke Franz-Ferdinand, committed in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 by members of the revolutionary organization "Young Bosnia" ("*Mlada Bosna*"). A real state in the state, the "Black hand" was broken up in 1917 by regent Alexander, with the help of another conspiratorial organization, the "White hand" ("*Bela ruka*").³⁴

This intricate configuration of insurrectionary networks, volunteers units and nationalist organizations already existed when the Chetnik movement, a cluster of irregular armed formations linked to Serbian nationalism, appeared at the beginning of the 20th century. After the 1903 uprising in Macedonia, the Serbian state decided to support the creation of armed bands on this territory, called "Old Serbia" by Serbian nationalists. Led by nationalist students, former officers or local *hajduks*, these bands followed the pattern of *hajduks*' bands (*hajdučke cete*), and took up the *hajduks*' terminology to name their guerilla warfare (*četovanje*) and their fighters (*četnik*, pl.: *četnici*): the Chetnik movement was born.³⁵

The use of Chetniks' bands acting behind the front lines recurred during the Balkan Wars and World War I. The word "Chetnik" then lost its initial social meaning and developed an ever more national connotation, thus showing how the Chetnik movement was at the turning point between violence against the state and state violence. The same goes for the volunteers

³² See A. GIDDENS, *The Nation-State and Violence*, Polity Press, Cambridge (1985).

³³ See B. KIRALY / G. STOKES (ed.), *Insurrections, Wars and the Eastern Crisis in the 1870s*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985.

³⁴ See D. Mac KENZIE, "Serbian Nationalist and Military Organizations and the Piemont Idea (1844-1914)," *East European Quarterly*, vol. XVI, n° 3, September 1982.

³⁵ On the Chetnik movement, see J. TOMASEVIC, *The Tchetniks*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1975; N. SEHIC, *Cetnicki pokret u Bosni i Hercegovini (1918-1941)*, ANUBiH, Sarajevo, 1971.

incorporated into special units of the Serbian army, who were recruited by nationalist organizations acting on the Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian territories, or enticed with promises of land and looting opportunities.

After the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918, its army was made up of officers from the former Serbian and Montenegrin armies and closely controlled by the “White hand.” But the first Yugoslav state had serious difficulties in establishing its authority over its whole territory. The rejection of draft and taxes by non-serbian populations led to several armed revolts (peasant jacqueries in Croatia, tribal uprisings in Montenegro, guerilla warfare of the Albanian *kaçaks* and Macedonian *komitadjis* in “Old Serbia”).³⁶ Against this background, the state resorted again to Chetniks, organized in gendarmerie or “national guard” units. These Chetnik formations exerted a harsh repression, often accompanied by plundering and illegal land appropriation. Later, the associations of Chetnik veterans played an important role in the Yugoslav political life, as strikebreakers or during the election campaigns.

This new relation between the Yugoslav state and the Tchetnik movement is exemplified by the figure of Punisa Racic, president of the “Association of Serbian Chetniks ‘Petar Mrkonjic’ for King and Fatherland” (“*Udruzenje srpskih cetnika ‘Petar Mrkonjic’ za kralja i otadzbinu*”). Racic, born in the Montenegrin Vasojevici clan, joined the Tchetnik movement in Macedonia during the Balkan Wars. As a member of the “White Hand,” he took part in the elimination of captain Dimitrijevic – *Apis* in 1917. After 1918, he organized the uprising of the Catholic tribes in Northern Albania, before quelling the *kaçaks* in Western Macedonia. After becoming a rich landowner in this region, he was elected deputy in 1927, and became famous on 20 June 1928, when killing in the Parliament House Stjepan Radic, president of the Croatian Peasant Party.

Violence against the State, Violence for the State

This “exemplary” case of Punisa Racic shows how the Chetnik movement progressively shifted from insurrectionary activities outside the Serbian boundaries to repressive activities inside the Yugoslav ones. It also shows how the state violence gave rise to new violences against the state, and ultimately hastened the collapse of the first Yugoslav state. The murder of Stjepan Radic worsened the relations between Serbs and Croats and led, on 6 January 1929, to the establishment of a dictatorship supported by the Yugoslav army, the associations of Tchetnik veterans and certain nationalist youth organizations such as the Serbian National Youth (*Srpska Nacionalna Omladina* – SRNAO). The same year, the Croatian Peasant Party organized paramilitary formations called “Civic defense” (“*Gradjanska zastita*”), and the Croatian Party of the Right led by Ante Pavelic founded the Ustasha movement, with the support of Italian fascism.³⁷ Like the Chetnik movement at the beginning of the 20th century, the Ustasha movement established itself in the Dinaric regions, especially in western Herzegovina, where it organized terrorist attacks against police-stations and state buildings, with the help of local populations still hostile to draft and taxes.

Before 1929, the word “*ustasha*” (sing.: *ustasa*; pl.: *ustase*) literally meant “insurgent,” and had no national connotation. It can even be met in some Serbian documents at the time of the Balkan Wars, as a synonym for... Chetnik ! It took the meaning of Croatian nationalist only

³⁶ On the first years of the Yugoslav kingdom, see I. BANAC, *The National Question in Yugoslavia*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca-London, 1984.

³⁷ On the Ustasha movement, see B. KRIZMAN, *Ante Pavelic i Ustase*, Globus, Zagreb, 1983.

after the appearance of the Ustasha movement in 1929, and the creation of the Independent Croatian State (*Nezavisna Drzava Hrvatska* – NDH) in 1941. After the collapse of the Yugoslav state, the NDH was created in April 1941 by the Axis powers, and Ante Pavelic became the Chief (“*Poglavnik*”) of this *quisling*-state. The “Civic defense” was then turned into local defense troops (“*domobranstvo*”) of the new Croatian state, and the Ustashes became officers of special units in charge of the extermination of the Serbian population. The Serbs, fleeing into the mountainous areas, joined the Chetnik resistance movement supervised by former officers of the Yugoslav army. The roles were thus promptly reversed: Andrija Artukovic, who had led a famous attack against the police-station of Brusani in 1932, became NDH’s Minister of the Interior, and Draza Mihailovic, a colonel in the Yugoslav army, took the lead of the “terrorists” of the Chetnik resistance movement.

Shifts between state violence and violence against the state are therefore not specific to the Serbian state. During the Balkan Wars, the Serbian tchetniks already had to fight in Macedonia against the Bulgarian *komitadjis*, the Greek *handartes* and the Ottoman *basibozuks*.³⁸ During the first World War, they fought in Bosnia-Herzegovina against *Schutzkörper* (“Defense corps”) recruited from the Croatian and Muslim population. Finally, during World War II, a period during which the different nationalist ideologies of the Yugoslav space clashed with utmost violence, this profusion of paramilitary formations came to its climax: not only Ustashes and Tchetniks took part in the warfare, but also Tito’s Partisans and a broad range of Slovenian, Croatian, Muslim and Albanian militias.³⁹

In spite of its revolutionary ideology, the Partisan movement fitted in with this recurrent decomposition and recomposition of Yugoslav state realities and legitimacies. Its organization reproduced the distinction between two kinds of military formations (local brigades on one hand, and mobile and politicized “proletarian brigades” on the other), and its final success was also due to its ability to absorb entire units of the Tchetnik movement and various *quisling* militias. Fifty years later, the result of the militarization and institutionalization of this Partisan movement, the Yugoslav Popular Army, became again involved in and swept away by a new violent recomposition of the Yugoslav space, giving birth to three different Serbian armies and a plethora of militias, and fighting against other armies and militias led by its former Croatian and Muslim officers.⁴⁰

Recurrence of the Militias and Incompletion of the State

Historically, the Yugoslav space is thus characterized by intricate and ever changing configurations of political violences for and against the state. Such configurations reflect the recent political history of the Balkan peninsula, in which the constitution of the modern state is contradictory and still unfinished: its monopoly of legitimate violence is flimsy, its territorial and institutional boundaries are unclear. It is all the more true for Yugoslavia, the only Balkan state which remained a plurinational one after World War I.

³⁸ On the Balkan wars, see B. KIRALY / D. DJORDJEVIC (ed.), *East Central European Society and the Balkan Wars*, Columbia University Press, New-York, 1987; G. KENNAN (ed.), *The other Balkan Wars: a Carnegie Endowment Enquiry in Retrospect*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, 1993.

³⁹ On the second World War in the Yugoslav space, see W. ROBERTS, *Tito, Mihailovic and the Allies*, University of New Brunswick, Durham, 1973.

⁴⁰ On the Yugoslav Popular Army and the Yugoslav wars, see J. GOW, *Legitimacy and the Military. The Yugoslav Crisis*, Pinter, London, 1992; X. BOUGAREL, “De l’armée aux milices, des milices aux armées,” in X. BOUGAREL, *Bosnie. Anatomie d’un conflit*, La Découverte, Paris, 1996.

During the recent Yugoslav wars, the intricate and changing relations between states, self-proclaimed “republics” and militias showed to what extent the territorial and institutional boundaries of the state are still unclear in the Yugoslav space. This uncertainty preceded the breakdown of the Yugoslav federation, as illustrated by the relations between federal and republican institutions, Yugoslav army and republican Territorial defences, Yugoslav secret services and organized crime. It outlived the consolidation of the new national states and the militarization of their armed forces, as shown by the permanency of paramilitary formations and militias in Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. Within this context, these militias seem to be an essential instrument for the recomposition of the state realities and legitimacies in the Yugoslav space, and a lasting symptom of its incompleteness.

Quite obviously, the militias of the Yugoslav space did instrumentalize some social practices of the populations living in this area, and of the Dinaric populations in the first place, such as private weapon owning and displaying, blood and honour codes, tribal solidarities. Nevertheless, analyzing the militias as a “come-back of the society” would mean reversing their reality and their aim. In the former Balkan wars as in the recent Yugoslav ones, militias and paramilitary formations compensated the difficulties met by the states in sending their own population to the front. For example, the Serbian militias led by Zeljko Arnautovic – *Arkan* or Vojislav Seselj were created in the fall of 1991, after the complete failure of the mobilization in Serbia.

In the lasting inadequacy between state and society, which is characteristic of the Yugoslav space, the militias are therefore on the side of the state, organizing provocative actions in order to sow fear and distrust in the population, tearing away local fighters from their village in order to create a territory, expelling the people whose ethnic identity does not fit with this territory. Instruments in the building of national states, militias are thrown back into the depth of Balkan societies by the nationalist ideologies. And such a reversal does not represent a fortuitous intellectual error, but a real political mystification.