Traditiona Value Patterns and the War in Ex-Yugoslavia (English)

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The Balkans
Traditional Patterns of Life
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In the inner courtyard of an Albanian house in Kičevo a street tradeswoman offers her colourful cloths for sale. The family head – left in the picture – has to give his consent first, however, before the materials are bought. (Lída Miček-Jahn ©)

All pictures of Lída Miček are printed by her kind permission. They were taken on her on various travels in the Balkans between 1978 and 1985. The pictures on pages 11, 17, 18, 20, 21, 27, 29 first appeared in print in: Lída und Tomáš Miček, Entdeckung Balkan. Jugoslawien Griechenland Bulgarien, Munich 1987
Traditional Value Patterns and the War in Ex-Yugoslavia

The various national movements in the Southern Slavonic countries concerned themselves very thoroughly with their respective village cultures. In them, in a world of rapid modernisation, they sought to find and detect their origins and to understand what characterises their people and makes it special. This more often than not resulted in a romantic transfiguration and idealisation of rural or village value patterns, as seen from an urban, intellectual perspective. These patterns, as it were, should be “characteristic” of the nation and serve as models.

The processes of industrialisation and urbanisation in the Southern Slavonic societies fundamentally changed and influenced the existing traditional society. This “modernisation”, however, did not only include the one-sided influencing of the villages by urban, “Western” values. In spite of the growing economic and social differences between the urban and the rural world the influence of village culture in the development of the nation and its society must not be underestimated.

The goals and ideals of the agrarian and nationalist parties in inter-war Yugoslavia which dominated the political stage at the time were not put into practice in the socialist post-war state. Even so, they remained an important factor. This became evident at the beginning of the nineties during the collapse of the Yugoslav state, when nationalist movements seized power in the former republics by emphasising the “threat to the own people as a nation” and the “history of the own nation”, thereby at the same time also strongly addressing the “traditional” values of their society.

The historical background of some characteristic features of these traditional values shall be presented and commented on here. At the same time this article looks into the question as to why these traditional values, despite the processes of modernisation in the socialist society, still enjoy strong presence. Furthermore, we seek to place some traditional value patterns into the context of the war in Croatia and Bosnia. The focus of these reflections will be on two regional areas which shall be discussed in greater detail later on.

A rurally oriented value system:

It is not possible to reduce the modernisation of various societies in Croatia and Serbia in the 19th and 20th century exclusively to the penetration of village life by modern urban influences. These changing influences had their effects in the opposite direction as well. Rural traditions also had their impacts on the way of life in the cities and strongly contributed to shaping it. These influences were directly connected with the mass migration from the villages to the growing cities, away from agriculture on to industry or other urban working options. As to coin a catch-phrase: these aforementioned developments could be described as “the urbanisation of the villages” and, at the same time, as “the ruralisation of the cities”.

The Serbian history in particular richly illustrates this specific development. Almost all Serbian cities, owing to centuries under Turkish domination, developed only in the last 150 years from small villages and market communities to larger towns. Thus, until into our century there existed no specific Serbian urban tradition whatsoever. The attachment to the village roots remains strong, and mutual obligations between the family in the city and the kin in the country further strengthen these ties. There is, for instance, a very close relationship between the brother who has moved over to the city and the other brother who has chosen to stay in the home village. The former sends his children to the village for their holidays, while the children of the latter naturally live with their uncle when they go to school in the city.

The great process of urbanisation began very late in former Yugoslavia. It was not until the beginning of this century that the populations of the cities began to grow more rapidly and, in particular after World War II, this process experienced a further acceleration. The Serbian town of Aradjelovac in Šumadija, south of Belgrade, illustrates these developments very well.

In the year 1961 73 per cent of the 9.837 inhabitants were not born in the town itself. Almost three quarters of the population had at some stage moved to Aradjelovac, a process which then was still in full flow.

The population increase in the big cities such as Belgrade and Zagreb also reflects the aforementioned development, the population of Belgrade nearly doubled in a period of twenty years, and in Zagreb, too, the population increase is quite staggering. This process of urbanisation is by far not concluded as yet, as is shown by the example, again, of Zagreb, where the total number of inhabitants rose from 650.000 in 1981 to 706.770 in 1991.

Naturally, nowadays in most cities, notably the very big ones, there is a Western-oriented society, comparable to our own, which comes to the major part of the population.
These statistics, however, show society to be in the middle still of a strong process of transformation, a process in which traditional value patterns can get a significant role too.

**Roots in pastoralism?**

As to be in a position to compare characteristic traditional value systems of rural societies in various regions of Serbia or Croatia to each other it is absolutely necessary to put them into a deeper historical context and examine the following questions: Which development influenced and shaped village life and the traditional values in this area, and what exactly constitutes the historical background of these societies?

Characteristic of the early development of the social structure in many Balkan societies was – and this is illustrated in particular by Jovan Cvijić’s work – the constant interrelation of transhumant pastoralism and settled forms of agriculture which was caused by the series of Ottoman conquests and, following which, the time of Ottoman domination. The Turkish conquest of Southeast Europe was accompanied by a massive process of migration which lasted quite long. The main direction of these population shifts was from the south to the north, in line with the advances made by the conquerors. Another important process of migration took place from the plains to the mountains. Parts of the plains became completely deserted. The mountain areas, in contrast, were more densely populated again. Generally, however, the inhabitants of the mountain regions were hardly integrated at all into the Ottoman state and so developed social structures and survival strategies of their own. In this process the already existing older patterns grew stronger and stronger. All these strategies were based on the “complex family”, usually referred to as “zadruga” in the literature, as the foundation of the organisation of life. This type of family structure developed in the mountains under the circumstan-

![A shepherd with his donkey, an indispensable pack-animal on the narrow and stony paths of the Southern Pindos. The shepherd's crook with the hook on the upper end helps the shepherds catch the sheep. The Vlachs or Armeanis in this part of Greece had their permanent winter residences in the Thessalian lowland plains, where they spent the winter with their herds. In the summer they moved up into the mountains to the summer pastures with their families, the herds, domestic animals and all tools and utensils. (Lida Micek-Jahn ©)](image)

Vlach shepherds from Métsovo, a small town at 1200 metres altitude in the Pindos, east of Ioáinína. For centuries Métsovo has been the cultural and economic centre of the Vlach population. (Lida Micek-Jahn ©)
ces and conditions of a pastoral society. Life in this family form was based very strongly on patriarchal principles which became fundamental laws for family and society.

The principal aim of this patriarchal organisation was to provide for the protection of family groups in a hostile environment. The Ottoman Empire was founded on Islamic principles, and the Christian population, even though it had its own ecclesiastical organisations, was merely tolerated in this system. Under these circumstances and in the face of a situation of almost permanent threat the man and his weapon came to be the dominant symbols of these patriarchal mountain societies.

A further characteristic of these Balkan societies was a continual interrelation of pastoralism and settled forms of stock-breeding and farming. Until into the 19th century time and time again there occurred changes in either this direction or the other. This process of fluctuation only came to an end with the emergence of the modern states.

In reference to which the American anthropologist Philip Mosley has defined three areas in which the typical patriarchal patterns of familial organisation prevailed. According to him the central regions of the patriarchally organised zadruga were the mountain areas in Montenegro and the north of Albania in which this pastoral form of life with its inherent laws is most pronounced. With the resettlement of the plains around this central region two more zones developed in which the traditional family organisation for a long period of time represented the determining social pattern. These two zones, however, became less important the farther they were from the central area. They included Bosnia, Serbia, parts of Bulgaria, Macedonia, the rest of Albania, the northernmost parts of Greece as well as the southern and the eastern regions of Croatia (primarily the areas at the former Austrian Militärgrüne – literally, “military frontier” – in Croatia and Slavonia.)

**Family forms and the ability to defend oneself – two examples:**

Serbia had been settled as late as the end of the 18th century by shepherds from the Dinaric Alps. Until the beginning of the first revolt against the Turks in the year 1804 these pastoral communities preserved their specific form of life, they adapted skillfully, however, to their new environment. In the huge, almost impenetrable woods of this area – at that time the largest part of Serbia was covered with dense forests – they bred pigs instead of sheep and grazed them in the nearby woods. Here, much the same as in the mountains, society was also strictly agnatically organised, with lineages and zadrugas. This form of organisation proved to be very effective, in particular in wartime. This was evidenced not only by the repeated revolts against the Turks but also by the entire tradition of hayduke and marauders, a common facet of pastoral life. The almost permanent military conflicts with the Ottoman state after the settlement of the plains were closely connected to a scarce economic basis, a patriarchal organisation, marauding raids and a very deep-rooted ideology of heroism.

When one regards the war in Bosnia against this historical background many events during the war can be seen as marauding and looting of lineages in the old pastoral tradition. Nowadays, quite as in the time of the revolts against the Turks, small armed groups resort to hayduke-like warfare, albeit in “modernised” form. This war, however, as in the era of the revolts, is also a war between the rural and the urban sphere. Then, the few cities were well and truly dominated by the Turks. This traditional anti-urban behaviour became particularly obvious during the siege of Sarajevo. These are of course only partial explanations for the current problematic situation which is immensely complex and depends on various factors; nonetheless, historical parallels come to the fore time and time again.

The course of the further development of the societies in the two outer zones of settlement produced different results. If the external conditions were favourable for the complex families these forms were preserved for quite some time, if, however, conditions were unfavourable they would disappear fairly rapidly. The whole system of the zadruga gradually broke down, not though many of the characteristic behaviour patterns that had been developed in the pastoral societies and had existed for centuries. The interrelaton of pastoral and martial ways of living was at the beginning of most Balkan societies. A closer examination of this interrelation which finds strong expression also in literature generally and in folklore literature especially can certainly contribute to a better understanding of many characteristic features of today’s problems.

What circumstances the traditional organisation of life in the Balkan societies was confronted with in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century shall be illustrated with the help of the example of Šumadija in Central Serbia and then also of the area at the former Croatian-Slovenian Militärgrüne in Southern Croatia.

In the first half of the 18th century central Serbia, then the Pashaluk of Belgrade, was very thinly populated only. The resettlement of the area in the 18th and 19th century, therefore, was accompanied by the gradual disintegration of Ottoman power in Europe. Under these prevailing conditions, characterised by a multitude of conflicts, the Serbian nation and the Serbian state began to emerge, and this sphere of conflict influenced all phases of the process of becoming a
nation and forming a state. The aforementioned fighter’s ideal was very strongly present at that time. As to how the situation of everyday life was caught up with the events of war in these times shall be illustrated by the example of Karadjordje, the founder of the Serbian and later Yugoslav royal house. In 1781, his family came to Šumadija, then an area almost entirely covered with wood. Karadjordje later lived with his zadruga in a house similar to the other houses of this particular era, that is to say, not much more than a long, rectangular hut. In view of his active role in the armed resistance against Ottoman domination he equipped his house with several gun ports for the purpose of defence. The eastern side of the house directly faced the woods to which he and his family often managed to flee in great danger. Karadjordje, like the other richer settlers in this region, lived on livestock trade with Vojvodina and other areas of the Habsburg Empire. This source of income enabled him to gradually increase his estates and acquire considerable wealth.

The first half of the 19th century for the people of Šumadija was a period of almost incessant battles against Turkish domination in the wars of independence. Parallel to these events a dramatic change took place in the 19th century as regards the economic and demographic situation. At the beginning of the resettlement of Šumadija there was plenty of land for the small number of new settlers. Soon, however, the influx of new settlers to this area grew stronger and stronger, and the region became more and more densely populated. From 1834 to 1910 population density in Serbia increased from a mere 18 to 60 inhabitants per square kilometre, the number still steadily climbing. The country was soon densely populated, the level of emigration to overseas was low and the process of industrialisation only marginal. The cities were growing only very slowly at that time. In 1834, 94 per cent of the total population of Serbia lived in the rural areas, and a very high percentage of people lived on agriculture and stock-breeding. In the course of the 19th century little changed. In 1910, approximately 87 per cent of the population still lived in the rural areas. There were changes, however, in the economic day-to-day realities for the peasants, brought about by the decline of livestock breeding in favour of the strongly increasing forms of farming. The last years of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century were a period of stagnation in terms of economic productivity and the potential development of the economic standard of living. The pioneering phase of the resettlement of the region had long passed, the huge woodlands had been cleared for the most part and industrialisation had not quite got under way as yet. Small scale agriculture, minimal class differences and small landownership were characteristic of the social structure at the time. The further development of society in Šumadija and the whole of Serbia was shaken by a series of wars and similar experiences in this century.

I shall refer to them and their results later in this article.

The second example is that of the Croatian-Slavonian Militärgrenze. The Militärgrenze was organised as a militarised defence zone against the Ottoman Empire by the Austrian authorities during the 16th century. The Austrian military administration offered the settling colonists land and exemption from feudal tax burdens in return for their participation, that is to say active service, in the battles against the Turks. Each family was guaranteed land-ownership. These families were self-sufficient, living on extensive farming and pastoralism and, additionally, also on thieving sprees across the border into Ottoman territory.

Boško Bošković was the last chieftain of the Polje clan. The Poljani realized that his death marked the end of the last living trace of their history, the uprising, the long and bitter border struggles, and the campaigns in the great wars. The whole region came to the funeral, and many from other parts of Montenegro. Honor was done not only to a hero, but to a heroic district, to a family that had achieved leadership by the sword, and to a clan that was vanishing. Suddenly everything was forgotten – he internecine feuds, Boško’s violent pacification of these very Poljani in 1919, and all his weaknesses and faults. There remained only his heroism and glorious name, which personified the heart and soul of the clan.

The murder had taken place in the Sandžak, that is, on the other side of the Tara – long a bloody border between two creeds. Consequently, it was not difficult for the mourners, the keeners, and the eulogists to incite the masses to a punitive massacre against the Moslems ...

Never was there such a campaign, nor could one ever imagine that this was hidden in what is called the national soul. The plundering of 1918 was an innocent game by comparison with this. The majority of the crusaders were themselves later ashamed of what happened and what they had done. But – they did it. My father, too, who was not particularly given to cruelty, at least not more than any other Montenegrin, never liked to talk about it. He felt shame for taking part in those events, like a drunkard who sober up after committing a crime.

The police officials in the little town across the Tara as well as the civil authorities in the communities were mostly Montenegrins, and in the hands of the aroused mobs. In Sahovic the authorities informed the vigilantes that a group of Moslems, taken under protective custody on the pretext that their lives were in danger, were being moved to
Bijelo Polje. The Montenegrins lay in wait for them in a likely spot, and massacred them near the cemetery at Sahovici. Some fifty very prominent Moslems were killed. A similar attempt was made on the Moslems of Bijelo Polje, a peaceful and industrious people. They, too, were to be convoyed by way of Sahovici under a safe conduct. However, at the last minute a Serbian army officer prevented the treachery and crime.

The destruction of Moslem settlements and massacring of Moslems assumed such proportions and forms that the army had to be sent to intervene; the police authorities were passive and unreliable. The incident turned into a small-scale religious war, but one in which only one side was killed. If, as rumour later had it, Belgrade wished to exert some pressure on the Moslem party, which is not very likely, the whole affair certainly got out of hand. Neither Belgrade nor the leaders of the mob could keep it in hand.

Despite all this, no one was massacred. Holding to the tradition of their fathers, the mob killed only males above ten years of age – or fifteen or eighteen, depending on the mercy of the murderers. Some three hundred and fifty souls were slaughtered, all in a terrible fashion. Amid the looting and arson there was also rape, unheard of among Montenegrins in earlier times.

As soon as the regular army appeared, the lawless mob realized that the matter was serious and immediately withdrew. After that the Moslem villages slowly withered. The Moslems of that region began to migrate to Turkey, selling their lands for a trifle. The district of Sahovici, and in part, also, Bijelo Polje, were emptied, partly as the result of the massacre and partly from fear. The Moslems were replaced by Montenegrin settlers.

The affair produced general horror, even among most of those who had carried it out. My older brother and I were shocked and horrified. We blamed Father for being one of the leaders of the mob. He himself later used to say that he had always imagined the raid was intended only to kill a few Moslem chiefs. Expressing abhorrence at the crimes, Father nevertheless saw in it all something that my brother and I neither would nor could see – an inevitable war of annihilation, begun long ago, between two faiths. Both were fated to swim in blood, and only the stronger would remain on top.

Although Yugoslavia at that time had a parliamentary government, the whole crime was hushed up. Had anyone conducted even the most superficial investigation, he might have exposed those who had committed the crimes and their leaders. But there was no investigation of any kind. Two or three guards were given a light jail sentence in Sahovici because they had agreed to hand over some prisoners to the mob. A general investigation was announced, but it turned out to be a travesty of justice.

What especially upset the established mores was not so much the murders themselves, but the way in which they were carried out. After those established in Sahovici were moved down, one of our villagers, Sekula, went from corpse to corpse and severed the ligaments at their heels. This is what is done in the village with oxen after they are struck down by a blow of the ax, to keep them from getting up again if they should revive. Some who went through the pockets of the dead found bloody cubes of sugar there and ate them. Babes were taken from the arms of mothers and sisters and slaughtered before their eyes. These same murderers later tried to justify themselves by saying that they would not have cut their throats but only shot them had their mothers and sisters not been there. The beards of the Moslem religious leaders were torn out and corpses were carved into their foreheads. In one village a group was tied around a haystack with wire and file set to it. Some later observed that the flames of burning men are purple.

One group attacked an isolated Moslem homestead. They found the peasant skinning a lamb. They intended to shoot him and burn down the house, but the skinning of the lamb inspired them to hang the peasant by his heels on the same plum tree. A skilled butcher split open the peasant's head with an ax, but very carefully, so as not to harm the torso. Then he cut open the chest. The heart was still pulsating. The butcher plucked it out with his hand and threw it to a dog. Later it was said that the dog did not touch the heart because not even a dog would eat Turkish meat.

It may seem, if one reasons coldly, that it hardly matters, after all, how men are killed and what is done with their corpses. But it is not so. The very fact that they treated men like beasts, that they invented ways of killing, was the most horrible of all, that which cast a shadow on the murders and exposed the souls of the murderers to their lowest depths, to a bottomless darkness. In that land murders themselves are not particularly horrifying; they are too common for that. But the cruel and inhuman way in which these were committed and the lust that the murderers frequently felt while going about their business are what inspired horror and condemnation, even though Moslems were involved.

True, there was an already established opinion that one religion must do evil to another, and man must do evil to man. But these crimes surpassed everything that had come down from the past. It seemed as if men came to hate other humans as such, and that their religion was merely an excuse for that monstrous hatred. The times had unnoticeably become wicked, and the men with them. After all, it is the men who make the times. As a final injustice, it was not Moslems who had killed Bosko in the first place, but Montenegrins, chieftains from Kolašin.

(Milovan Dijilas, Land without Justice, p. 209ff.)

The here depicted events took place in the year 1924. In his interpretation the author stresses that on one hand this was not random murder but all "holding to tradition", on the other hand he asserts that the way in which the murderers had taken place "especially upset the established mores". He formulates his model of explanation for the society of blood revenge in the transitional stage of the process of modernisation even more clearly in another passage: "The heroic hatred of his ancestors was turned by different circumstances in to a criminal urge".
On the Ottoman side there also was such a militarised defence zone, similarly organised. In the beginning of its foundation both frontier zones were populated for the most part by Vlachs, transhumant shepherds from the mountain areas. The chaotic situation created by the Turkish conquests had caused an immense process of migration. In this respect the Vlachs in particular have to be mentioned who left their mountain homes and settled in the newly conquered Ottoman areas. The new areas of settlement of the Vlachs lay in Serbia, Dalmatia and Bosnia, especially though in the regions on both sides of the border between the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empire.

Most of the Vlachs were orthodox in terms of religion, some, however, were also Catholic. In the process of the forming of nations the orthodox Vlachs became Serbs and the Catholic Vlachs - together with immigrants from other parts of Croatia (their number increased steadily over the century and they became the largest group in the area) who also settled in the area of the Habsburg Militärgräzen - became Croats. This distinction was fairly irrelevant then since there were hardly any differences with regard to the way and organisation of life between the Catholic and the orthodox Vlachs. Here, it is important to stress that only in the last 150 years have the “national” differences gained in significance. Therefore, it would be quite wrong to project such modern differences and definitions into the historical past, as national historians tend to do again and again.

The society of this Croatian-Slavonian Militärgräze was based on the strictly patriarchal principles of the organisation of life in the zadruga. These complex households in the militarised defence zone in exceptional cases could even consist of up to fifty members, although as a rule they were considerably smaller. It has to be stressed that the size and structure of the households changed in the course of the family cycle and time and time again adapted to the economic, social and demographic conditions. The Habsburg monarchy was interested in keeping the households large since after all they formed the basis of recruiting new soldiers. Moreover, the absence of one or more of the male workers was on no account to cause the ruin of farming and stock-breeding and thereby jeopardise the entire system. This Militärgräze existed until the year

![Shosha warriors from the north of Albania who fought against the Turks. Photo taken in a photographic studio in 1912.](Gjurme te historisë kombetare ne fotoken e Shkodres, Tirana 1982, p. 126)
1881 and primarily served the purpose of producing enough soldiers for the military undertakings of the monarchy. The state of economic development was very low compared to other regions of Austria-Hungary, but also in relation to the neighbouring areas in Croatia. The society of the Militärgrenze, which has once been described as the “largest barracks in Europe”, was made a part of Croatia after the disbandment of the military system. The process of integrating the “frontier people” into civilian society entailed massive problems and led to much unrest and several uprisings which time and time again took their tool of lives. The heavily increased tax burdens and the relinquishment of privileges played an important part in this development. The high taxation of the possession of firearms was – apart from the economic difficulties – one of the reasons for massive unhappiness. In the course of time things seemed to fall into place; even so, the area of the former Krajina remained the poorer part of Croatia.

Heroic traditions and the experiences of war in the 20th century:

The wartime experiences in this century were of decisive importance for the further development of the societies in Šumadija and Krajina. These events proved to be highly influential in the social development but were of effect also on the preservation of traditional value systems.

The Balkan wars of 1912/13, World War I and World War II, all of these were dramatic times for the population of Šumadija. The example of the village of Orasac in Šumadija shall serve as a model, illustrating the sort of wartime experiences and their impacts on this region. In peace-time the economic situation of the villagers of Orasac was not exactly easy, but in wartime the state of things quickly deteriorated even more and led to great poverty and hardship. The participation in a war to most men of the village was the most important time in their lives, and they frequently spoke about it. Workaday clothes and traditional costumes borrowed heavily from the military uniforms. This goes from the “Čakšire”, the riding breeches, which were well-liked and remained in fashion until the sixties even though the peasants hardly owned horses any more, to the “šajkača”, a cap similar in design to the uniform caps (today, the uniforms of the Bosnian Serbs imitate the style of the Serbian uniforms during World War II).

The pride taken in military service and the participation in a war were also important for the men of Orasac as early as the 19th century, then with reference to the struggle for independence in the clashes with the Turks. This pride has to be seen in close context also to the heroic ideals of the traditional stories and tales which will be dealt with later in this article.

How the population of Orasac felt the impacts of the Balkan wars and World War I, this shall be illustrated by the following extracts from two autobiographies:

I was born in 1880 in the village of Orasac. I spent my childhood in my birthplace. At that time my parents were poor, so they rented some fields and we cultivated them. (...) I lived on our land with my uncles who were together with us in the same household. I was the oldest child so I began to help them very early. (...) In 1889 my father registered me at the school.

I married when I was eighteen, to a girl from my own village, and in a few years after that I had a son and a daughter. I joined the army in 1905 and was put in the infantry. This was during the reign of King Peter I. (...) When I returned home I felt myself to be a mature man. Up to 1912 I worked as a farmer with my brothers and uncles. When the Turkish war broke out I was mobilized in the reserves in the Šumadijan division. We met the Turks at Prepolac, drove them back, and reached Scutari in Albania ... In 1913 I fought against the Bulgarians, and this war lasted about a year. (...

In 1914 I was released, so once again I continued my work at home.

But in 1914, when Austria attacked Serbia, I was mobilized again (...) I fought near Šabac and Smederevo, and later we were driven out of our country. I retreated through Montenegro and Albania to Skadar, Drac, and Valona. (...) In Valona I boarded a ship and went ashore on Corfu. From there I went to Salonika, where we were engaged in a battle with the Bulgarians in 1916. In 1917 I was in Africa on a rest leave, (...) where I spent six months and was sent back to the war. I was always in the first ranks but I was never wounded. After a few big battles we broke through Bulgarian lines, as well as the Austrian lines, and headed toward home.

I returned home in 1920, and with my brothers I continued my work in the fields. We divided the zadruga in 1921, when I was elected a member of the County Council of Jasenica ...


Another villager describes the impressions of his childhood in Orasac as follows:

“At this time our zadruga consisted of twelve people. The wheat bread which we can enjoy nowadays was a rarity in those days, we had it three times in a year at most. 1912 was the year when we fought against the Turks, so the school was closed. My father and my grandfather had to go off to war and the five of us, four brothers and a sister, stayed at home alone. Until then we cultivated the land with our bullocks, but now, in wartime, the bullocks were taken away from us,
On April 6th, 1941, the Second World War hit Yugoslavia, as the Germans began to bomb the city of Belgrade, and soon their war machine had brought the whole of Serbia under its control. From 1915 to 1918 Orašac was under Austro-Hungarian occupation, and not quite thirty years later the village was occupied again, this time by German troops. Immediately after the Yugoslav army had surrendered to the enemy the two rival resistance groups, the Partisans and the Četniks, were formed. Šumadija became the scene of bitter and fierce fighting between the German occupying troops, the Četniks and the Partisans. The German army soon began to “avenge” their losses and casualties by shooting civilians (a ratio of 1:100 for each killed and of 1:50 for each wounded German soldier or ethnic German). In Kragujevac, the largest town of Šumadija, thousands of civilians were shot in a reprisal for a Partisan attempt on a German patrol.

Orašac, too, suffered heavily from the period of the occupation. At the beginning of the occupation hostages were taken by the German troops because of the slow, in the opinion of some German commanding officers too slow, provision of grain and other food. They were released, however, later on. In another incident some peasants were shot because they were too close to the street when a German military convoy rolled on. The population had been ordered with the threat of death penalty to keep out of sight.

There were, however, also intense fights between Partisans and Četniks in Orašac. In one of these encounters a part of the village burnt down in 1943 and hundreds of people were made homeless. In the aftermath of this event the majority of the villagers fled to other villages to their kith or kin. In Orašac Partisan and Četnik groups were supported, and more then 100 people were killed in the war. The hostilities within the village remained, even in the time after the war. In most cases these hostilities were the same as between lineage groups. At the end of 1944 the Četnik units were defeated and Orašac and the surrounding area came under Partisan control. At the end of the war a large part of the men who by then did not already belong to the Partisans was mobilised for the final battles against the Germans. This struggle against the Germans occupied a central place in the ideology of postwar Yugoslavia and, holding to the tradition of the wars of independence, was glorified as a “heroic” fight.

In which brutality the war had been waged the following example of a peasant might illustrate. Ever since the end of the Second World War this man could not bear watching as his wife took their chicken and slaughtered them by cutting their throats. When he was asked why he could not look on the man answered that only too often during the war had he seen how people’s throats were slit in the same way.

In Krajina the wartime events were hardly less dramatic. In the First World War the soldiers of the former Militär grenze had for one last time fought on the side of Austria-Hungary. Many of these former “frontier men” lost their lives in this war, and their home region also suffered heavily from the consequences of the war.

The following biographies of two men from the town of Bobovac at the former Militär grenze, on the right side of the river Sava, southeast of Sisak, were written down in 1962 and give us an impression of life in this time:

“My name is Mijo Filar, and I was born in 1888. Today, my family consists of seven members. Apart from me, my son, his wife, and his children live in our house. We are peasants, and our house was built in 1883... On our farm there are two more one-storey buildings. In the smaller one lives my brother Josip(65) with his son and his son’s wife, and in the other lives my second son Nikola with his wife and their two children. In this part of the village live six families by the name of Filar. They all come from the same zadruga which split in 1936.

My brother Josip and I were in the war since 1914. First, we were transferred to Serbia, where we fought at Crnı Vrh. In 1915, we were transferred to the Russian front, where I was injured. In the year 1916 I was in the military hospital and was then sent home. During the war I also was in Galicia and in Russia, but I did not get to know the Russians.”

“I am Alojz Klarić and I was born in 1899. Until the First World War I worked on my father’s farm. At that time my family owned six “jutari” land (approximately 6 hectares), and the family consisted of 18 people (brothers, children, kin). In 1917, I went off to war. First, I was stationed in Karlovac, but then I was transferred to Požega and Debrecen in Hungary... I was in the Austrian Army for one and a half years. After the war I was in the Yugoslav Army for one more year... After the war I worked as a seasonal worker on the side of the river Sava while my wife worked on the farm. In 1937, our zadruga broke up, and I shared the possessions with my two brothers.”

(Autobiography-collection of the “Halpern Collection” at the Department of Southeast European History, University of Graz.)
In the interwar period the demographic revolution which started very late in the southern Slavonic areas began to yield strong effects on the economic situation of the rural population. The traditional organisation of life in the zadruga rapidly crumbled.

In 1941, World War II hit Krajina. From 1941 to 1945 the former Militärzonen became a part of the fascist Croatian Ustaša state. This “Independent State of Croatia” (NDH: Nezavisna Država Hrvatska), set up and supported by the German military command, after the take-over quickly implemented a policy of expulsion and eradication of the Serbian population in Krajina. In the same year the excesses directed against the Serbian population were beginning. The concentration camp of Jasenovac, close to Sisak in Krajina, was built. The number of Serbian victims of the Ustaša terror is heavily disputed today and, according to the respective political stance, varies between 100.000 and 700.000 people killed. The harmful consequences of this genocide for the Serb-populated area of Krajina are beyond imagination. Entire villages were destroyed and an enormous wave of refugees followed. A high proportion of the men joined the Partisans and fought against the NDH state and the Germans. Interestingly, most Serbs joined the Partisans and not the Četniks. The experiences of the Second World War were traumatic for the Serbian population of Krajina and today are of crucial importance still in the conflict between the Krajina Serbs and the Croatian state. The end of the war and the victory of the Partisans entailed a series of massacres of the defeated camp. Some estimates show up to 100.000 killed soldiers and sympathisers with the NDH state who had fled to Carinthia, but were turned away there and forced to return by the British troops.

The events in both World Wars forced the former “frontier men” to resort again to the fighter’s role. But this had also been one of the fundamental elements in the development of their society right from the beginning. In the current war, too, they were once again forced to take arms. On a visit to Bobovac in May of 1994 one felt taken back to the era of the Militärzonen. Today, Bobovac lies directly at the border to the “Republika Srpska Krajina” on the Croatian side, the UN restriction zone begins right at the end of town. The majority of the men constantly wear uniforms, even while working on the farms, and carry arms. Every evening the military units of the village gather fully dressed in combat uniforms, and the commands are issued for military assignments (at present for the most part guard or patrol duty) in the town centre. Meanwhile working life on the farmsteads – Bobovac has escaped destruction – just goes on.

**New values in the process of modernisation after 1945**

After World War II the Communist government began to transform Yugoslavia into a socialist state. The programme of modernisation was designed to reorganise the predominantly agrarian into a “socialist” society. (In 1931, 73.3 per cent of the male workers in Yugoslavia had still worked in the agricultural sector.) As to reach this goal a series of “five year plans” was implemented in order to massively promote and push forward above all the industrial development. The building of industrial production in the cities triggered massive migration to these new industrial centres growing at a lightning speed. In the sixties alone in Yugoslavia more than 400.000 new jobs were created in the industrial sector. Private forms of agriculture, in stark contrast to the former, were strongly restricted on account of the collectivisation of agrarian property. After Yugoslavia’s break with Moscow in 1948 a policy of setting up agrarian co-operatives was initiated. The limitation of the scale of private land-ownership and a structure of taxation which strongly favoured gainful employment in comparison with self-supporting, private forms of farming and stock-breeding led to massive migration from the land to the cities. The level of education provided by the schools also made an important contribution to this development. The entire system of school education was geared towards stressing and conveying the benefits and also the attraction of industrial employment in the city. This was strongly connected to the Communist ideal of a socialist society that was to follow the model of the “progressive” industrial worker instead of the “conservative and retrograde” peasant. Parallel to the building of an extensive system of education, health and, above all, infrastructure which made the urban centres far better reachable the wish, in particular among the young generation, to “break out of this mess” grew more and more urgent. A steadily rising share of the rural population began to combine village life with employment in the city. For many this was the first step towards a permanent residence in the city. Many others, however, stayed commuters and kept a small farm in their home village – a long-term adaptation that was supported by the state, since then the effort of having to provide additional infrastructure for these new workers could be spared.

A factor which increased the attraction of the urban areas were the better educational facilities and prospects offered to the children. In order to take advantage of this opportunity one did not necessarily have to move over to the city. Therefore, a large number of pupils from the rural areas lived with their relatives in the cities during the phase of their education. In return, the family from the land would provide the relatives in the city with food from the own farm.
Another characteristic feature of modernisation in Yugoslavia was the extremely high number of Yugoslav migrant workers in the West. At the beginning of the seventies more than 800,000 Yugoslav guest workers with 250,000 relatives worked and lived in Western Europe, and this number has steadily risen over the past two decades.

The regional disparities in the economic development were enormous. The social transformations accompanied by the economic development were also very different from one region to the other. In the big cities many people lived a life according to Western standards, while in some areas there still existed the traditional forms of the organisation of life.

The relation to war

How does this traditional world of values of the societies in Serbia and Croatia look like? Were some of the elements preserved despite the modernisation in postwar Yugoslavia, and if indeed, how are they connected to the current wars?

When one examines the connection of traditional values in a society and its relation to war, it is necessary to proceed extremely cautiously and be rather sceptical. One of the foremost lessons to be learnt from the Nazi holocaust is that never again can one make simplifying comments on the characteristics of one specific society and its relation to violence. It is certainly permissible, however, to speak about types of violence, and in this respect there is a clear distinction between the legitimised, bureaucratic eradication of a minority in a civilian society, as has happened in the Third Reich from 1939 to 1945, and the victims of a conflict in which both sides seek to harm each other, as is the case in the context of the war in Ex-Yugoslavia. It is also possible to relate the historical development of a society, its notion of heroism, as finds expression in the heroic epics and poems as well as in the traditional stories, to behaviour patterns in the time of a crisis.

For the Serbs in Šumadija individual heroism plays an important part in the traditional stories and tales. This is manifested in the adoration of the hayduke – they were seen as “just” bandits – as well as in the stories about the great wars against Turkish oppression. The feats achieved by the heroes appearing in these stories were, and still are, glorified in the traditional folksongs and folk-tales and also in literature and historiography. The ideal hero for the most part is a strong and courageous fighter who is utterly fearless in the face of death and sacrifices his own life fighting for his people. The struggle against a superior opponent and the hero’s death are at the heart also of the most popular Serbian legend, the depiction of the battle on Kosovo polje in 1389. What importance and relevance these myths still possess in the political and social reality of today is illustrated compellingly by Slobodan Milošević’s speech on the 600th anniversary of the battle on Kosovo polje which strengthened his position in the quest for political dominance in Serbia.

The following verses from a heroic poem shall illustrate these epics. The strong attachment to this tradition in everyday life is evidenced by the fact that in the sixties almost all inhabitants of Orasac, whether children or adults, could recite these verses from memory. They describe the first Serbian revolt against the Turks which began here in this village in 1804:

"O Lord, what a great miracle, When in the Land of the Serbs the time had arrived, That great change was about to take place. That others be the rulers of the country. The prefect did not want the fight, And neither did the Turkish looters, But this is the struggle of the poor peasants, Who no longer can stand the burden Who no longer can bear Turkish oppression. And the saints, they will it so. Enough blood has been poured onto the earth. The time for fighting has come, For shedding blood for the holy cross, And every man shall avenge his ancestors".

(from: "Početak Protiv Dahiija", in: Stani (ed.): Srpske Narodne Peseeme, Prvi Ustanak, p. 3)

The following extract from "Starac Vujadin" (literally, the old Vujadin) depicts the hayduke as symbols of challenge to the Turks and of heroism to the Serbian people. It is translated here from the form in which it was chanted by an Orasac villager, accompanying himself with his "gusle".

Oh my eyes, that you hadn’t seen All that you saw last night, When the Turks from Lijevno passed by Leading the hajduke down from the mountains Leading the old man Vujadin, Old Vujadin and both his sons. When they neared wretched Lijevno Old man Vujadin spoke out, “My children, my own two sons, Do you see the cursed Lijevno? There they will torture and beat us. Do not reveal the young maidens at the inn Where we drank red wine And where we spent the winter.” With these words, they reached Lijevno, And the Turks threw them in a dungeon. They remained in the dungeon for three days, And when the fourth morning dawned The Turks led the hajduke from the mountain And started to beat and torture them And break their legs and arms.

"Tell us, you scoundrel, Old Vujadin, Tell us, scoundrel, who your young helpers are, Tell us, scoundrel, the names of the young maidens, Where you drank red wine, And where you left your treasure!” They crushed his legs and arms, And when they began to poke out his eyes.
The old man Vujadin spoke out, "Don’t be fools, you Turks of Ljemo – I didn’t reveal them to spare my heroic legs, I didn’t reveal them to spare my white arms. And shall not reveal them to spare my treacherous eyes. These eyes which led me to misfortune!"


It has to be stressed that in contrast to the murderous ethnic conflicts in Bosnia and Croatia the Turks in these heroic epics were portrayed as an enemy of honourable standing that feels sympathy also with the adversary. The following passage from the Kosovo epic illustrates this very well. Both Prince Lazar of Serbia and the Turkish sultan Murad fall in battle, and the dying sultan speaks to his men:

“You Turkish brothers, advisers and vezirs, I am dying, and I leave the empire to you. Now, listen intently to what I have to say, That for a long time the empire may last: Don’t be hard on the peasants. Treat them in a kindly manner. They shall pay fifteen denars of poll tax, Or let them pay thirty denars at the most. Don’t burden them with punishments and taxes And don’t make their lives bitter with hardship. Interfere neither with their churches, Nor with their laws and honour.”


Not only the Serbs, however, are deeply committed to this tradition of heroism, but also the other peoples in the Balkan area. In Croatia for instance – similar to the hayduke tradition – the heroic deeds of the Uskoke are celebrated in song who are depicted as brave defenders of Christianity against the Turks. What is admired again about these heroes is their daring, their aggressiveness, their capacity for the endurance of great suffering and their preparedness to die in the fight against a superior enemy.

The settlers around the former Militärgrenze also have their historical past as defenders of the Habsburg Empire, respectively the Christian Occident, who sacrificed themselves for their task and had to suffer greatly. This historical role, as one is frequently told in Croatia, has now repeated itself for the country in the present conflict.

The fostering of heroism was very important also in the Communist era. Generations of Yugoslav children grew up with the stories about the great deeds of the legendary heroes (junaci). The Communist state tied on to this old tradition. The heroic Partisan was celebrated as model and seen to be endowed with the same qualities as the ideals in former times, that is to say for instance with a great capacity for the endurance of suffering and sorrow, so as to liberate the people from brutal heteronomous domination. The glorification of the heroic Partisan war became one of the pillars of the ideology of socialist Yugoslavia under Tito.

Breakdown – orientation crisis – recourse to the past

The breakdown of socialism in Yugoslavia, respectively the ever-increasing acceleration of the decline of this system after Tito’s death, led to an orientation crisis in the Yugoslav society. And with the break-up of the political system the world also crumbled in which people – albeit reluctantly – were used to living in. The political infantilisation of the citizens – for that was what the state had ordered – increased the general desire for a different ideology which was to take the place of the failed Communist ideology. These developments were accompanied by a steadily deepening economic crisis whose effects became palpable more and more dramatically at the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties. This situation formed the background to the differences of opinion about the question of who was going to control what resources. At the same time a nationalist stance took the upper hand more and more with regard to the entire complex of Yugoslavia’s problems, tying on to a tradition of national confrontation which already existed since the interwar period. After the miserable failure of various attempts at reforms one started to blame the crisis with increasing vehemence on the respective other nation. Beginning with Milošević, who used the “Serbian people under threat” as a vehicle to power the nationalist movements succeeded in steadily gaining influence until eventually seizing political power in the respective republics. They leaned on a propaganda which was aimed strongly at people’s fears. This nationalism, however, could never have led to war without conscious steering “from above”. This war was preceded by a media war which “prepared” people for the real war. The media permanently picked up and referred to the “great and heroic history of the own people”, the historical myths, legends and the national tradition which “for so long had been oppressed by the enemy”. Such, the battle on Kosovo polje, for example, was filmed in a bombastic style and shown on Serbian TV as a national spectacle. History was and is misused to get a nationalist point of view widely accepted. Thus, the mutual demonisation of the enemy which later followed is hardly surprising. Here, the adversary was portrayed solely in role images from the time of World War II. The Serbs regarded the Croats as Ustaše, and the Croats saw the Serbs as Četniks. It is interesting that both the Serbian as well as also the Croatian side use the symbolism of these groups. This is
shown for instance by the introduction of the new Croatian currency, the “kuna”, in May of 1994 which had last been used as a currency by the fascist state of Croatia. The uniforms and insignia of the Serbian and Croatian armed forces also borrowed from this symbolism. Worn as symbols of identity and pride on one side, they signified death and destruction to the other side.

The war in Krajina began with a Serbian insurrection and in the second half of 1991 turned into a real campaign of conquest of the Krajina Serbs in Croatia, massively supported by the Yugoslav Army with the delivery of arms. This war which then spread into Bosnia was accompanied by horrible atrocities, by massacres, “ethnic cleansings” and plundering and looting, thus gradually creating a new reality. In this context we would like to stress that according to reports by various international organisations such as the United Nations, Amnesty International and Helsinki Watch the major part of the violations of human rights in the crimes against the civilian population in Croatia and then in Bosnia was committed by Serbian troops. In these reports, however, similar violations of human rights from the Croatian and Muslim side are also documented.

**Patriarchal traditions in the war**

The horrible events of the war transformed many people involved to a strong degree. Groups of “soldiers” began to live in a “warrior reality” all their own which was shaped by the old heroic ideals. Thus, in the reality of these “warriors” the old heroic myths and patriarchal notions attained a level of importance which ought not to be underestimated. This war was an organized military conflict but also a confrontation of armed groups attacking the civilian population.

The plundering and looting, the rapes, massacres and mutilations perpetrated by this marauding mob are reminiscent in time and time again of characteristic elements already appearing in earlier conflicts in the Balkans (in the massive “ethnic cleansings” for example in the two Balkan wars of 1912/13) and also related to historical patterns of reacting in war situations.

In this specific situation of ethnic conflict many young men turned into warriors who fought not only against the enemy warriors but also against the entire population of the disputed territory. The method of the cruelties was to drive people away from their homes in such a traumatizing way that they would never want to come back again.

A further characteristic of this war are the atrocities perpetrated against women. How better to give expression to one’s firm hold over the enemy and hurt his honour more deeply in a patriarchal world than to

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**It would be better if she were dead**

Samir’s horny hands are trembling when he talks about his wife. She is in the sixth month of pregnancy and he has not heard of her family in three weeks. The family lives in the village of Vragolja near the town of Pristina. “If she is still alive”, Samir says, who works as a mechanic in Slovenia, with a forced smile on his lips. He simply could not stand the uncertainty any more, the man who is just short of his thirtieth year explains to me in good German, he had to go home. So, for a fare of 2100 schillings Samir had obtained a place on the “Hornbeam”, a ferry which twice per week leaves the Slovenian town of Koper and heads east for the port of Durres in Albania...

The ferry is scheduled to arrive at Durres on Monday at lunchtime. Samir is sitting in the ship’s bar together with other Kosovo-Albanians, they exchange all the latest news about the NATO bombings, the men try to keep each other’s spirits up. The young ones in particular, their hearts invigorated by a fair amount of slivovitz, act belligerently and defiantly. In a corner of the bar they hang up a poster with the letters “UCK” on it and give themselves Dutch courage. What they want to do is take revenge, the Serbs, they say, should not go unpunished for all their horrible crimes. If NATO was to hand them the arms they would surely settle the score with their own hands. Horrible news is passed on, there is talk of tortures and executions by the Serbian militias. Rumours circulate and eventually become factual reports.

Samir does not feel like joining in. He only worries about his relatives, he says. Slowly, he fumbles with his wallet and produces a crumpled photo of his wife. On the photo there is a dainty, young girl with a headscarf. “Her name is Bojana”, Samir tells me. It was only in last October that they got married, and Bojana is the great love of his life, the tall man says with tears in his eyes.

He had left her with his parents and his brothers, in the belief that she would be safe and protected there. “It’s Bojana’s first pregnancy, she is so delicate, so gentle, so fragile”, Samir worries, and then falls silent again for minutes. The village of Vragolja by now has probably been overrun by the Serbs. He does not even know about the whereabouts of his wife. It is a few minutes past midnight. All of the sudden Samir erupts with emotion: “What shall I do if my Bojana has been raped by the Serb swines?” Despairingly he adds: “Shall I leave her then?” His honour, the honour of his entire family would of course be shattered to pieces in this case. I object carefully that after all Bojana alone and not the whole family would have become the victim of such an attack, but all I get is an uncomprehending stare and the reply: “That’s the way things are over here, Bojana would remain dishonoured for the rest of her life. It would be better if she were dead”. Samir does not say anything else that night, he bites his nails until they start bleeding.

Self-testimonies such as this one are a clear reference to the cultural specific of violence, at least in the subjective perception of those affected. The cultural difference existing in reality is evidenced by the reporter’s lack of understanding.
rape the women of the enemy and thereby prove to him that he is unable to protect “his” women? In patriarchal ways of thinking the expectations are that men fall in battle, but the rape, torture and sometimes even the brutal murder of a woman are beyond this world and its notions. Brutal violence against women is aimed also at the male family members as well as at the extended circle of a woman’s male kin. The emphasis of this aspect of violence against women is certainly not about establishing sex-specific violence as a particular characteristic of this war. Violence against women and mass rapes are, as many studies could show, unfortunately documented from many contexts of war, not least also from the Second World War on the part of the German/Austrian soldiers. It is conclusive, however, to reflect this reading as well, presented above, in a patriarchal context.

Generally, it should be stressed that the fighter’s ideals which were very strongly propagated in the public in the process of the escalation of this war – shaped by scenarios of threat – clearly represented only one aspect in the intricate and complex process of the escalation of violence. That they are neither the reasons nor an explanation for the war is just as obvious as it is clear that the traditional notions of fighting and honour in a society – as is evidenced not least by the many forced recruitments and desertions – are often also repudiated. Nonetheless, the aforementioned patriarchal backgrounds have undoubtedly been not without relevance for the male-dominated reality of crisis escalation of the soldiers and participants in this war. For a process-oriented understanding though of how particular traditions have in effect become points of reference in the reality of the war for the soldiers’ actions further extensive research work will undoubtedly be needed.

**English Version:**

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