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Re-Inventing Skenderbeg

Albanian nationalism and Nato neo-colonialism

Skenderbeg as a national hero of Albania is just one sign of "history-making" in Albania and Serbia. Fatos Lubonja writes on how the creation of national myths and memories over the centuries has provided the seedbed for the conflicts in the Balkans, but that such memories can also show the way to an open society and provide hope for the future.

In the centre of Tirana stands a monument to the Albanian national hero. At the centre of the Albanian collective awareness, this man was the son of an Albanian prince; he was taken away by the Ottomans as a child, and brought up and trained by them to become a powerful Ottoman general. However, according to the myth as it is always retold, he did not forget his origins and when he grew up he turned against the Turks and liberated his fatherland, fighting in 1443 for her freedom for 25 years until his death.

Skenderbeg represents a climax in Albanian historical memory just as the Serbs consider the battle of Kosova in 1389 in which Prince Milos killed the Turkish Sultan, one of the most important myths in the Serbian collective awareness.

Despite centuries of repetition, both these myths increasingly "forget" two historical truths, that the mother of Skenderbeg (Vojsava) was a Slav, and that Albanians also fought alongside the Serbs against the Ottomans at the Battle of Kosova under the flag of Christianity.

After six centuries, this historical "oversight" has also produced its own anti-climax: Albanians and Serbs are now killing each other, and hate each other as never before in their history, convinced not only that they are fighting for the sake of the injustices perpetrated against them, but that they are settling the accounts of their forebears.

History Shorn of Myths

Writing in the 19th century about nationalism, Engels made a distinction between "historical" and "non-historical" peoples. According to him, the first, among whom he counts the larger states of western and central Europe, have been able to construct viable states. The second, among whom Engels counts the southern Slavs (without even mentioning the Albanians), lack the necessary ability and energy. Hence, in Engels' view, these nonhistorical peoples were to be banished from the stage of history in order to facilitate the development of the historical peoples. This reflects one of the concepts of Hegel, who wrote that annexation is a crime against which one has a right to

revolt only if the annexed people equally represents as large, fertile, and viable an IDEA as the IDEA personified by the occupier. There are nations which represent no IDEA and have lost their reason for existence; these nations are doomed ultimately to disappear.

Yet since that time, history has shown that the nations which, according to Engels, were to disappear as peoples "without a history" have survived.

During this time, some of these nations have liberated themselves and have made their own history (to a greater or lesser extent, earlier or later in time). It appears that "history-making" has been the main factor in forming these nations. However, the Serbs and the Albanians have pursued different paths of forming nations, and these different paths have created a widening gulf between the Serbs and the Albanians both split from the body of the Ottoman Empire about a century ago. Yet Albanian nationalism began later than Serbian nationalism. At the beginning of the 19th century, when Greeks began to aspire for political freedom, nationalism was seen as the harbinger of a movement of mankind toward a better and fairer world. These views impelled Byron to fight for Greek independence. A similar movement had taken place in Serbia; guerrilla wars and uprisings by Serbs brought them limited autonomy in 1815. Meanwhile, the Albanian nationalist movement was as yet unborn. The largely Islamicised Albanians still felt themselves to be a part of the Ottoman Empire, which secured high offices and privileges for their leaders.

It is very important to realise that Albanian nationalism took root later, and in a different historical context. It appeared at the close of the Russian–Turkish war (1878) and subsequently in the course of the Ottoman Empire's rapid decay, in response to the need to preserve Albanian territories from the Slavs and Greeks. Note the contrast: on the one hand, the nationalism of Albania's neighbours began as part of the need to achieve liberation from Ottoman rule by those with a shared Christian religious identity; on the other hand, Albanian nationalism, at this time largely Muslim, started first in response to the need to be free from the dangers posed by the Albanians' neighbours, who were Christians. Turkish support was an important factor in this. However, those who are today known as the leaders of the Albanian national rebirth, who conceived the spirit of romantic nationalism, have felt the need for separation from Turkey, and began to appeal to history and legends evoking the pre–Ottoman period. It was in this way that they came across and retrieved the national hero of Skenderbeg, who had fought against the Turks. This dualism in Albanian history is reflected in the very name of this hero. He has two names, and it is hard for Albanians to say which is the most important: Gjergj Kastrioti, which is his Christian name, or Skenderbeg, which is his Turkish title.

The historical hatred of the Serbs for the Albanians is rooted in the latter's links to the Turks. For Serbs, Albanians conquered their lands by means of Turkish expansion. Albanian hatred for the Serbs is linked to the fact that after the Russo–Turkish war and later – after the Balkan wars (1912) – the better organised and more powerfully allied Slavs of the south ("Yugoslavs"), took the land where Albanians had lived for centuries. According to their own myths, Albanians claim themselves descendants of the Illyrians who lived in the north of Greece since the times of antiquity; hence, in their view, Albanians had inhabited this land for centuries prior to the Serbs. Kosova is the biggest part of that land.

Why Have There Been Recurrent Ethnic Cleansings of Albanians?

Contending Albanian and Serbian nationalisms have been territorially hungry for a long time. Since 1878 and throughout the twentieth century, Albanian nationalism has been fed by a desire to defend inhabited territories and aspirations for a union of separated lands. Meanwhile Serbian nationalism, which never really regarded the consolidation of their own nation state as complete, has been nourished by a recurrent yearning to ethnically cleanse their own territories inhabited by the Albanians as well as a ravenous racism towards Albanians. Throughout these conflicts, Serbs have almost always been in the position of the strongest and of the aggressor while Albanians were typically victims who often tried unsuccessfully to defend themselves. These territorial longings became more and more complex as each group gradually became more regionally dispersed (especially the Serbs).

The first ethnic cleansing of the Albanians happened in 1878 (after the Russo–Turkish war) when Serbs had their independent state and took a part of the Ottoman Empire inhabited by Albanians. "The more Albanians you kick out of our land the more patriotic you are" was the slogan of their king Obrenovic at that time. It was successful. More than 100,000 Albanians were removed at that time from the surroundings of the city of Nish to other parts of the Ottoman Empire.¹

The second ethnic cleansing dates from the year 1913 just after the Balkan wars, when the Serbs took Kosova and that part of the Ottoman Empire which is now Macedonia. This second wave of cleansing was stopped by the explosion of the First World War.

In the 1920's, agricultural reform gave the Serbs another pretext to expel more Albanians by claiming that the land was given to them unjustly by the Turks.

In the 1930's, Serbia made an agreement with Turkey to accept Albanians. During this time many Albanians left for Turkey.

In 1937, a Serbian academic named Vaso ÇubriloVIC, presented a memorandum to the Serbian fascist prime minister Stojadinovic entitled *For the Ethnic Cleansing of the Albanians*. It's a long document with several chapters. After one chapter on the history, a second describes the Serbian need for more vital space, only to be followed by chapters that portray how the Albanians had to be removed and were; then, how the colonisation of this area with Serbs had to be organised.² The project never materialised because one year later the troubles of the Second World War began. (During Tito's time Çubrilloviç became first a Serbian then Yugoslavian academic and member of the Yugoslavian Communist League).

During the Second world war, Albanians thought that their moment of revenge had finally arrived, when the Italians and then the Germans created a "greater Albania". The Kosova Albanians even created a military division named "Skenderbeg" which fought alongside with the Germans (against Serbs). But this moment would be short-lived.

Even during Tito's time in the 1950's, when an effort to disarm the population was made, many Kosova Albanians found it easier to go to Turkey (as permitted by the pre-war treaty), than to relinquish their weapons or remain undefended.

Nevertheless, generally speaking, we can say that communism somehow stopped the ethnic cleansing of Albanians from Kosova. In order to remain at

the centre of power in a multiethnic Yugoslavia with careening ethnic tensions, Tito was forced to juggle ethnic balances with the internationalism of the communist ideology. That's why he gave autonomy to Kosova in 1974. Another factor that helped the Albanians to survive ethnic cleansing has been their demographic explosion, which Serbs have always regarded as very threatening.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia

It has often been simplistically remarked that fifty years of communism were like a long sound sleep which froze the memory of a people, who, after waking up, found themselves back in the pre-communist period. But the memory of the communist period is much more complex, like history itself. A half century of communism in Tito's Yugoslavia revealed that different ethnic groups can live together without hate. This is only a part of that history, yet it is precisely that aspect which manipulators of history want us to forget. Another part of that history disclosed a strong nationalist substratum under the communist ideology; this substratum started to appear more and more with the failure of communism as an economic system and as a hope for a better future. Even worse, the communist regime did not allow the development of some of the key elements of civil society, such as the pluralism of parties and values as well as the acceptance of diversity. Thus, new struggles for power (which in the Balkans means the manipulation of crowds without individuals) were based on nothing other than a nationalist substratum.

If there was a crucial moment for the outbreak of evil, that was the year 1989, when Milosevic, realising the end of the magic power of communist symbols as instruments of power, turned to nationalist symbols, promising the Serbs that he would repair all the injustices done to them during Tito's time. That promise was made in Kosova Polje during the six hundredth anniversary of the lost battle against the Turks. The first concrete action to emerge from his promise was the removal of the autonomy of Kosova. This event marks the beginning of the disintegration of Yugoslavia. There were prophets who, at that time, predicted that the process of disintegration would come full circle to return to where it started, in Kosova.

In the Yugoslavia of that time a crack began to deepen and widen – a crack that had remained invisible and silent under the ice and iron of the Cold War and the communist principles of internationalism. That was the stress fracture caused by the crushing opposition between the principle of self determination on the one hand and that of unchangeable borders on the other hand. One ideal way for resolving such powerfully opposing forces was shown by the experience of Western Europe. But the problem was: Are the people of the Balkans mature enough to follow that example or not? The disintegration of Yugoslavia showed that they were not. The solution of that widening split in Yugoslavia offered three models: the clean separation, like the separation of Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia; the imposition of connivance by the international community like in Bosnia and, what the Serbs had applied till the beginning of the war in Kosova, the domination of the strongest over the weakest combined with gradual ethnic cleansing. During that period, the Albanians of Kosova fooled themselves. By comparing themselves to Slovenia which had achieved independence with only 1 million inhabitants, these Albanians naively pretended that because they were two million in number, they had twice as much of a right to live separately from the Serbs than those in Slovenia. To this fantasy, the Albanians of Kosova even added the argument that they should be independent because they were quite different from the

Slavs; indeed, they maintained, they were not members of the Slavic family of peoples (such as Serbians, Croatians, Slovenes, Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Belo–Russians, Czechs, Poles, etc.); indeed, they would reassure themselves, Albanians spoke quite a different language and had a different religion. Or again, these Albanians of Kosova would remind themselves, they started their movement for independence as a peaceful movement. Their leader, Rugova, in keeping with the times, was increasingly referred to as the Gandhi of Kosova.

Meanwhile, the growth of the Serb repression created a new and more frustrated generation. Most young Kosova Albanians had no chance to be well educated so that they might support a peaceful movement respecting new Western myths like those of human rights, etc. Especially after the Dayton Accords of 1995, during which the Kosova issue was taken completely off the agenda, the Albanians of Kosova became convinced that their issue would be considered by the international community only if they would start fighting with arms for their cause. It goes without saying that the Albanians started their rebellion knowing their military inferiority, but having in mind that the main protagonists of the division of borders in the Balkans: those who made the Congress of Berlin in 1878 and that of London in 1913 today have another relationship with each other and another vision for the world. These Albanians of Kosova were convinced that the powers that be would not let the Serbs carry out their ongoing ethnic cleansing. They were right, at least partially.

Controversy of the war

In Kosova there have been simultaneously two wars and three protagonists: the protagonists were the western world, the Serbs and the Albanians. The two wars were: a nationalist war between the Serbs and the Albanians and the war of the western world against the Serbs in the name of human rights and multi–ethnicity. In fact, the Serbs and Albanians have been and still are in an anachronistic situation towards modernity. The mainstream of their politics, based on ethnic nationalism, goes against the actual western mainstream which supports peace rather than war, democracy rather than dictatorship, multi–ethnicity rather than ethnic nationalism and integration rather than separatism. This mismatch between the times and the spirits of the peoples who live in them was especially evident even in the old medieval castle of Rambouillet during the failed negotiations in February 1999. The Albanian and Serb representatives remained in separate halls while the three negotiators, the American Hill, the Austrian Petrish and the Russian Majorski were running from one's team hall to the other in order to convince them to sign the agreement. The failure of Rambouillet through the signature of only Albanian representatives was essentially an expression of the conflict between these two spirits of time.

Despite interpretations which claimed that the declared goals of the war of Nato against Serbia were not its true goals and despite the fact that the Albanians were forced to sign that agreement because they needed western help, Serbs bear great responsibility for opposing the aspirations of humanity for more peace, integration and human rights. It is true that neither Serbs nor Albanians were fighting for multi–ethnicity in Kosova. "Non–historical peoples" fight for different myths. As has been the case several times in this century, these myths and their battles change the history of the so–called "historical peoples." Yet now is the time when Albanians have the opportunity to embrace the better myths of universal human rights than the earlier myths of nationalism and communism.

To paraphrase the Prussian Karl von Clausewitz's definition of war as "a continuation of politics by other means," bombardments were the continuity by military means of what the West tried to realise peacefully in Rambouillet.

Now there exists an especially intractable situation. Historical events have created a horrible memory for these so-called nonhistorical peoples. Albanians and Serbs are forced to live together at a time when they hate each other more than ever in their history. There is no sign that Serbs feel guilty for the atrocities they committed towards Albanians. On their side, Albanians have never been less ready to forgive the Serbs. The west has to impose its civilisation through its army. It's a new form of colonialism that has its good and bad sides.³ We are being called to a wider and deeper history, but exactly what will come next is very unpredictable. Perhaps some future Albanian savant will rediscover Skenderbeg's shifting allegiances (like his father's conversion from Orthodoxy to Catholicism) as prototypically Western and worthy of emulation; hence Skenderbeg can be retrieved as a champion of a multiethnic Albania/Kosova! Anything is possible, but don't hold your breath; one of the essential things the recent conflict has taught us is that we nonhistorical peoples have historical memories and myths, not just changeable allegiances and preferences. But therein also lies our hope. Today Albania remains a fascinating illustration of the kind of existential questions about the necessity and harm which myths bring to the creation of a community and its transition toward a civil society—a society in which some of the most important values are the acceptance of diversity, a critical spirit, and consciousness that to err is an essential part of being human.⁴

¹ The city of Nis is in current day eastern Serbia.

² Vaso Cubrilovic was one of the Bosnians who participated in the plot to kill the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. The language of "vital space" echoes wartime Nazi language of *Lebensraum* ("living space") used as a pretext for expansion and aggression. According to Judah, in 1937 Cubrilovic invoked the examples of German expulsions of Jews and forced population movements by Russians; during and after the war, Cubrilovic again suggested (then to communist authorities) that Albanians (and others) be expelled from Yugoslavia. See Tim Judah, *The Serbs* (Yale, 1997), 149–150.

³ The author clarified that he favors a presence of the west, in the name of the myths of human rights, as long as it is a "wise presence". He has further developed these themes in an article entitled *Neocolonialism and Responsibility*.

⁴ This concluding sentence paraphrases a similar claim in another essay by the author on the role of the national–communist myths in Albania entitled, *Between the Glory of a Virtual World and the Misery of the Real World*.

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