

Whose Myth? Which Nation? The Serbian Kosovo Myth Revisited

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Flying hawk, grey bird,
out of the holy place, out of Jerusalem,
holding a swallow, holding a bird,
That is no hawk, grey bird,
that is Elijah, holy one;
holding no swallow, no bird
but writing from the Mother of God
to the Emperor at Kosovo.
He drops that writing on his knee,
it is speaking to the Emperor:
'Lazar, glorious Emperor,
which is the empire of your choice?
Is it the empire of heaven?
Is it the empire of the earth?
If it is the empire of the earth,
saddle horses and tighten girth-straps,
and fighting-men, buckle on swords,
attack the Turks,
and all the Turkish army shall die.
But if the empire of heaven
weave a church on Kosovo,
build its foundation not with marble stones,
build it with pure silk and with crimson cloth,
take the Sacrament, marshal the men,
they shall all die,
and you shall die among them as they die.'
And when the Emperor heard those words,
he considered, he considered and thought,
'Kind God, what shall I do, how shall I do it?
What is the empire of my choice?
Is it the empire of heaven?
Is it the empire of the earth?
And if I shall choose the empire of the earth,
the empire of the earth is brief,
heaven is everlasting.'
And the Emperor chose the empire of heaven
above the empire of the earth.

'The Downfall of the Serbian Empire', Serbian epic song¹

As he was being escorted to a military helicopter on 28 June 2001, about to be extradited to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at The Hague, Slobodan Milošević, the former Serbian and Yugoslav president, allegedly asked his guards: 'Do you know it's St Vitus' Day today?'² St Vitus' Day, or *Vidovdan* is the anniversary of the medieval Battle of Kosovo. On 28 June (15 June

O.S.) 1389, Christian armies under the command of Prince Lazar of Serbia clashed with Ottoman troops led by Sultan Murad I; both sides suffered heavy casualties, including the two leaders.³ The cult of the Holy Martyr Lazar provides a key element of the Serbian⁴ Kosovo myth, which is in turn central to the Serbian national ideology. The significance of 28 June in the Serbian and Yugoslav ‘national calendar’ is further reinforced by the fact that it is also the anniversary of several other key events: the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914; the promulgation of the first (and controversial) Constitution of Yugoslavia in 1921; the expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform in 1948; and the date that symbolises the rise (in 1989) and fall (in 2001) of Milošević. Indeed, it is possible that no other national history is so strongly connected with a single date.⁵

Milošević was of course well aware of the mobilising power of the myth when on 28 June 1989 he triumphantly flew to Kosovo, in another helicopter, in order to address a crowd of around one million mostly Serbs and Montenegrins from all parts of Yugoslavia and from abroad who gathered to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the battle. Because Milošević had just assumed the presidency of the Socialist Republic of Serbia (part of the then Yugoslav federation) the previous month the whole event seemed like a coronation of a new Serbian ‘Emperor’.⁶ In an atmosphere of high tensions between Serbs and ethnic Albanians and across former Yugoslavia, when it was becoming increasingly difficult to separate myth from reality, Milošević probably appeared to some Serbs as a resurrected Lazar (Lazarus).⁷ Indeed, large pictures of Lazar and Milošević predominated among pictures of historical figures and nationalist slogans carried by many of those who attended the commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the battle.⁸

As a prelude to the anniversary, Prince Lazar's remains 'toured' Serbian monasteries across Yugoslavia, with Serbs coming to pay homage in their thousands.⁹ Although Milošević's 1989 Kosovo speech does not sound overtly nationalist, especially when placed in the context of the discourse(s) which accompanied the dissolution of Yugoslavia, it nevertheless contains the following lines:

The Kosovo heroism does not allow us to forget that, at one time, we were brave and dignified and one of the few who went into battle undefeated...Six centuries later, again we are in battles and quarrels. They are not armed battles, though such things should not be excluded yet.¹⁰

The role of Kosovo, both symbolic and real, in the rise and fall of Slobodan Milošević is well documented,¹¹ while the battle, its legacy and the myth have been subjects of a number of studies.¹² It was thanks to a visit to Kosovo in April 1987, at the time when Kosovo's Serb minority protested against alleged discrimination by the province's Albanian majority, that Milošević first became widely perceived as a protector of Serbian rights, although initially more by a set of circumstances than his own design. However, he made the most out of the 600th anniversary of the battle two years later, cementing his position as the undisputed Serb leader. The war against NATO and ethnic Albanians over the status of Kosovo in 1999 would mark the beginning of Milošević's fall. Ironically, it was during the Kosovo war that Milošević was indicted by the Hague Tribunal. He lost presidential elections in September 2000 and was forced by a popular revolt to resign the following month. In March 2001 the former president was arrested by Serbia's authorities before eventually being transferred to The Hague on 28 June. He died in his prison cell of a heart attack in March 2006, before the trial could be completed.

During the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s some authors sought to explain the Serbian-instigated violence by a nationalist mythology at the centre of which lies the myth of Kosovo.¹³ According to this argument, the genocide committed by Serbian forces was not caused by ‘the pathology of the individual organizing and committing the genocide, but the pathology of the ideas guiding them’.¹⁴ In this article, I argue that history of the Kosovo myth does not offer a straightforward narrative that links the Serbia of 1389 with events of the last two decades in former Yugoslavia. Myths, like nations, have their own history – history that is seldom linear and predetermined – and are an essential ingredient of nation-building.¹⁵ Just as it may be argued that the process of nation-building is never fully completed, so national myths evolve and gain new interpretations over time. As another scholar of the Serbian Kosovo myth has argued, ‘[i]t would be quite misleading to assume that the Kosovo myth has remained unchanged in the course of the past centuries’ – to assume this ‘would be to fall prey to the anti-historical pretensions of the nationalist myth-mongers, who assert that myth, historical events and subsequent interpretations are congruent.’¹⁶

The Serbian Kosovo myth does not differ fundamentally from other national myths.¹⁷ National myths are usually linked to key historical events which are perceived as turning points in the collective destiny of the nation. Therefore, they are not wholly invented or imagined, but, as a historian of East Slavonic national myths has suggested, ‘must also resonate in a plausible past and find an appropriate place in the mainstream of popular memory in order to take root’.¹⁸ But, how important is it to distinguish between the fictional and factual in order to understand the significance of a myth? It may be argued that understanding the interplay between the ‘truth’ and the ‘myth’ of Kosovo would be more productive than emphasising differences between the history and the myth.¹⁹ Dismantling the Kosovo myth and separating the historical

from the mythical proved significant for the birth of the critical historiography in Serbia in the nineteenth century (as is suggested below). However, for a historian today to engage in proving that the legend of Kosovo is not based on historical truth would be an unnecessary exercise, not least because the history and the myth of Kosovo are inseparable in Serbian popular culture and imagination.²⁰

Because I am particularly interested in the myth of Kosovo as a *national* myth, the analysis concentrates on the last two centuries, during which modern nationalist ideologies emerged and developed. In particular, I address the following three issues: a) the significance of the Kosovo myth during the emergence of modern Serbian national ideology in the nineteenth century; b) the Kosovo myth as a pan-Yugoslav myth; and c) the use of the Kosovo myth by the West. First, however, it is necessary to explain briefly the background to and the origins of the myth.

Background and origins

In the Middle Ages Kosovo referred to a geographic plain, much smaller than the territory of present-day Kosovo. *Kos* in Serbian means ‘black bird’, and Kosovo Polje, the site of the battlefield, means ‘the field of black birds’. German chronicles refer to the battlefield as *Amselfeld*, and sources in Latin as *campus merulae*. The territory to the west of Kosovo was known in the Middle Ages as ‘Metohija’ (after the Greek word *metohi*, meaning ‘dependence of a monastery’) because large portions of land were owned by Serbian monasteries and the Mt Athos. Present-day Kosovo was not a single administrative unit in medieval Serbia, but was divided between the districts of Lab and Sitnica. It should not be confused with the Ottoman *vilayet* (province) of Kosovo which included in addition to what today is Kosovo, parts of present-day Macedonia, south-western Serbia, as well as parts of Montenegro. In fact,

borders of present-day Kosovo were not drawn until 1946, when it was established as Autonomous Region of Kosovo and Metohija within the People's Republic of Serbia, one of the six republics of the Communist-led Yugoslav federation. 'Metohija' was dropped from the name of the province in 1968 by the Yugoslav authorities, before it was officially reintroduced by the Serbian government in 1989. Serbs prefer to call the province by its full name – Kosovo and Metohija (sometimes Kosmet for short), while ethnic Albanians never use the word Metohija, possibly because of its Serbian Orthodox connotations. The Albanian spelling for the province is Kosovë, pronounced, and sometimes spelled, as Kosova. The spelling 'Kossovo' may also be found in older English-language texts.²¹

The Kosovo myth emerged not long after the fourteenth century battle between the predominantly Serbian Christian forces (Bosnians, Bulgarians, Albanians and Vlachs as well as some Hungarians are believed to have joined the Serbian army) led by Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović of Serbia and Ottoman Turkish forces, which also included Serbian, Albanian and other Christian vassals and mercenaries, led by Sultan Murad I.²² Not much is known about the battle except that it took place near Priština, at Kosovo Polje (the Field of Blackbirds) on 28 (15 O.S.) June 1389. Even the outcome was inconclusive, although it is known that both sides suffered heavy casualties, and that both the Serbian Prince and the Ottoman Sultan were killed. In the Serbian 'collective memory'²³ the battle is remembered as a fateful defeat which led to the loss of independence and the 'five century-long Turkish yoke'.²⁴ In reality only some parts of southern Serbia were under Ottoman control for five centuries. The last independent Serbian city, Smederevo, fell to the Ottoman armies in 1459. Serbia re-emerged as an autonomous principality in 1829, before becoming *de facto* independent from the Ottoman Empire at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, exactly 419

years after the fall of Smederevo. As part of the same mythical discourse, Prince Lazar is erroneously referred to as ‘Emperor’ (Tsar), despite being only one of several nobles who took over various regions of medieval Serbia following the death of the last Emperor, Stefan Uroš V, in 1371.²⁵

First reports after the battle claimed the Christian victory, but the outcome was most probably a draw. Nevertheless, if the Ottomans did not necessarily win in 1389, it may be argued that in the long-term the battle could be seen as a Serbian defeat. Serbia never fully recovered despite surviving for another seventy years before finally capitulating to the Ottoman Turks in 1459. Post-Kosovo Serbia even prospered, buoyed by the flood of refugees from the Byzantine, Bulgarian and southern Serbian territories taken by the Ottomans. The survival, let alone relative prosperity and stability of the Serbian state for another seventy years after the Kosovo battle is often overlooked, even though it was no small achievement and seventy years is by no means a short ‘life-span’ for a state in East-Central Europe. Former Yugoslavia, for example, existed for seventy years (between 1918 and 1941 and between 1945 and 1992).

Central to the Kosovo myth is the cult of the Holy Martyr Lazar. According to legend, on the eve of the battle the Holy Prophet Elijah offered Prince Lazar a choice between an empire in heaven and an empire on earth. Lazar’s choice – a heavenly empire – would mean defeat by the Ottomans but it would secure a kingdom in heaven for the Serbian nation. The sacrifice that Lazar and his knights made at Kosovo turned a military defeat into a moral victory. That Kosovo was a place where Serbian medieval rulers built some of the most important churches and monasteries, and where the Serbian Patriarchate, established in 1346, was based, further contributed to the special place the region and the medieval battle occupy in Serbian

collective psyche. (In fact, the Patriarchate was based in the town of Peć in Metohija). Kosovo is frequently described by Serbs – and sometimes by non-Serbs²⁶ – as the ‘Serbian Jerusalem’, while the Serbs are often compared to the Israelites. The analogy with Jerusalem is above all meant to emphasise that Kosovo is the cradle of the Serbian civilisation. However, it has also served to send another message, namely that Serbs share the Jews’ destiny as a nation forced out of its original homeland, now ‘occupied’ by a hostile Muslim population.²⁷ During the rise of Serbian nationalism in the 1980s – which preceded the rise of Milošević and was a phenomenon that initially at least developed independently of him – Serbian intellectuals often made parallels between the fate of Jews and Serbs. In the mid-1980s the Serbian writer (and later politician) Vuk Drašković even claimed that ‘Serbs are the thirteenth, lost and the most ill-fated tribe of Israel’.²⁸ Drašković’s metamorphosis from a nationalist writer to a nationalist leader of the opposition to Milošević before becoming a moderate Foreign Minister of Serbia and Montenegro following the fall of Milošević may have been remarkable, but his fascination with the apparent similarities between Jews and Serbs apparently has remained. In October 2004 he asked in Belgrade a visiting delegation of the World Jewish Congress to support Serbia’s position on Kosovo, adding that should this predominantly Albanian-populated province become independent ‘[a]ll Serbians will leave Kosovo and we will take the position of European Jews starting to dream about...our spiritual home.’²⁹ Members of other Yugoslav nations – Croats, Slovenes, but in particular, paradoxically perhaps, the Bosnian Muslims and predominantly Muslim Albanians of Kosovo – have also made analogies with the Jews in order to strengthen their claims to victimhood. In this they were often backed by their supporters abroad, including intellectuals of Jewish background. NATO leaders often compared events in Kosovo during the bombing

campaign against Serbia in 1999 to the Holocaust, no doubt in order to secure public backing for the military intervention.³⁰

The cult of Prince Lazar has a strong biblical undertone, no doubt because the Serbian Orthodox Church, which acknowledged Lazar as a saint soon after the battle, played a central role in the emergence and the preservation of the Kosovo myth. The myth makes a direct analogy between Lazar and Jesus Christ; like Jesus, Lazar died so that his people could live. According to the legend, the night before the battle Lazar hosted a last supper during which he told his knights that one of them would betray him the following day. A young knight named Miloš Obilić, suspected by Lazar of being the traitor, killed the Ottoman Sultan during the battle, determined to prove his loyalty to the Prince. The Judas-like figure is to be found in the person of Vuk Branković, the lord of Kosovo, who survived the battle. Historians cannot establish the identity of the Sultan's assassin; it seems very unlikely that Branković (or anyone else for that matter) was a traitor. However, as myths generally tend to appeal to a wider public significantly more than complex, scholarly interpretations, the legends of Lazar's sacrifice, Miloš Obilić's heroism and Vuk Branković's treachery still survive as an integral part of Serbian collective discourse. Indeed, many Serbs today understand their history as a series of tragic defeats due to the lack of national unity and acts of treason, but also they often believe their defeats represent moral victories.

In addition to these male characters, there are three key female figures among the *dramatis personae* of the Kosovo mythology: 'Empress' Milica, the Mother of the Jugovići, and the Kosovo Maiden. Princess Milica, usually referred to in the popular tradition as 'Carica' (or 'Tsaritsa', i.e. 'Empress'), was Lazar's wife.³¹ In the epic song 'Tsar Lazar and Tsaritsa Militsa', Milica successfully pleads with Lazar to allow

her youngest brother Boško Jugović to stay behind, so that at least one of her nine brothers survives the battle. Milica is heartbroken when Boško refuses to not go to Kosovo, and when her other brothers and her father Jug Bogdan all reject her plea. The epic song ‘The Mother of the Jugovići’ translates the national disaster into a tragedy of a mother who dies of a broken heart when two ravens bring her the arm of her youngest son Boško. The third chief female character is a young anonymous girl referred to as the Kosovo Maiden. In ‘The Kosovo Maiden’ the girl comes to Kosovo Polje the morning after the battle to nurse the wounded Serbian soldiers. Surrounded by countless dead bodies, the Kosovo Maiden, like ‘Tsaritsa’ Milica, symbolises a sense of an enormous loss and isolation in which many Serbs, but particularly Serbian women, found themselves during and after the Ottoman conquest.³² Unlike Milica, the Mother of the Jugovići and the Kosovo Maiden were not historical figures.³³ Interestingly, the songs about the latter two as well as perhaps the main song on the Kosovo theme, ‘The Downfall of the Serbian Empire’, were noted down from *female* singers by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, the nineteenth-century Serbian language reformer and oral historian.³⁴

The Kosovo myth and the emergence of modern Serbian nationalism

Although the memory of the Battle of Kosovo was preserved in the rich epic poetry and in church chronicles and sermons throughout the Ottoman period, the myth only assumed today’s significance in the nineteenth century, when modern Serbian nationalism emerged. Like other European nationalisms, the Serbian one looked back to the glorious past, or ‘golden age’, seeking to recreate the independence for the nation it had once enjoyed; like other nationalisms, it needed a ‘usable past’.³⁵ The Kosovo myth offered several ‘convenient’ themes.

First, defeat at the battlefield may have led to the loss of medieval statehood, but it had been turned into a moral victory which promised the state's resurrection. In that respect, the emphasis of defeat is central to the Kosovo myth, regardless of the actual outcome of the battle. As Thomas Emmert argues,

[To Serbs] the theme of defeat at Kosovo was necessary for the companion themes of hope and resurrection. Lazar and Serbian people gave their lives freely for the faith and for the land; and because of this martyrdom at the hands of the heathen enemy the Serbs knew that God would protect His people and return them one day from their captivity...any impression of a Serbian victory and even an indecisive outcome was lost in the emerging legendary tradition of Kosovo.³⁶

Second, the explanation of defeat due to treachery at Kosovo offered a convenient if not necessarily historical interpretation of the decline of medieval Serbia. The Serbian Empire had already begun to disintegrate before the battle took place, chiefly due to the internal struggle for succession, following Emperor Stefan Dušan's death.³⁷ Finally, the Kosovo myth fitted into another, more universal myth of *antemurale christianitatis*, common to several other east-central European peoples. Although this myth is usually associated with Roman Catholic nations such as the Croats, Hungarians, and Poles, the Serbs' self-perception as bulwark of Christianity should not be overlooked. As Milošević declared at Kosovo Polje on 28 June 1989:

Six centuries ago, Serbia heroically defended itself in the field of Kosovo, but it also defended Europe. Serbia was at that time the bastion that defended the European culture, religion, and European society in general. Therefore today it appears not only unjust but even unhistorical and completely absurd to talk

about Serbia's belonging to Europe. Serbia has been a part of Europe incessantly, now just as much as it was in the past, of course, in its own way, but in a way that in the historical sense never deprived it of dignity.³⁸

References to the medieval past, including the Battle of Kosovo, were frequent in Serbia during the anti-Ottoman uprisings of the early nineteenth century. Once the First Serbian Uprising (1804-1813) turned into a struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire (as opposed to the rebellion against local Ottoman officials it had been initially), the Serbian revolutionaries believed they were fighting for the restoration of the medieval statehood lost at Kosovo. A rallying call by Karadjordje Petrović, the leader of the First Uprising, illustrates this well: '[Let us] throw off, in the name of God, the yoke which the Serbs carry from Kosovo to this day.'³⁹

If the cult of Prince Lazar was central to the early history of the myth, the cult of Miloš Obilić, the knight who allegedly killed the Sultan, became just as important to the Kosovo mythology in the nineteenth century. The legendary heroism of Miloš Obilić had a particular appeal in Montenegro, where the Kosovo tradition was in the past perhaps even stronger than in Serbia. As a nineteenth-century Serbian traveller to Montenegro observed: 'when you talk to these people [Montenegrins] you have the impression that the Battle of Kosovo took place yesterday.'⁴⁰ Similarly, Milovan Djilas, the late Yugoslav dissident and writer, wrote in a historical study of nineteenth-century Montenegro that 'Obilić and Kosovo were not something that happened some time ago and far away, but they were here – in daily thoughts and feelings and life and struggle with the Turks.'⁴¹ Even today some Montenegrins believe that they are the direct descendants of Serbian knights who survived the battle.⁴² Prince-Bishop of Montenegro Petar II Petrović Njegoš (1830-1851) was one

of the advocates of this understanding of Montenegro's origins. In order to strengthen further the symbolic presence of the myth in everyday life in Montenegro he altered the traditional Montenegrin cap, to emphasise more directly the links with medieval Serbia.⁴³

Njegoš is best remembered as the author of *The Mountain Wreath* – a long poem first published in 1847, about a fictional struggle to extermination against Slav Muslim converts, which makes frequent references to Kosovo and especially to Miloš Obilić, and is dedicated to Karadjordje Petrović.⁴⁴ The Prince-Bishop is widely considered the greatest poet Montenegro and the Serbs have ever had and many Serbs and Montenegrins know *The Mountain Wreath* by heart.⁴⁵ Among them was Gavrilo Princip, who clearly identified with Miloš Obilić while firing revolver shots at the unfortunate Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914.⁴⁶ Indeed, his fellow revolutionaries regarded him as a modern-day Miloš. One of them wrote after the war to Luigi Albertini, historian of the First World War: 'The Serbs carry on a hero cult, and today with the name of Milo Obilić they bracket that of Gavrilo Princip; the former stands for Serbian heroism in the tragedy of the Kosovo Field, the latter for Serbian heroism in the final liberation.'⁴⁷

One of Njegoš's successors, Prince (later King) Nikola of Montenegro, who had hoped that Montenegro (rather than Serbia) would emerge as the 'Piedmont of Serbdom', also wrote a well-known poem 'There, over there', which lamented the loss at Kosovo.⁴⁸ Both Serbia and Montenegro declared war on the Ottoman Empire in 1876, following the rebellion by Herzegovinian and Bosnian peasants (most of whom were Orthodox Serbs). Serbia's declaration of war referred to the 'mission of Kosovo', while Prince Nikola believed the time to 'avenge Kosovo' had arrived. 'Under Murad I the Serbian empire was destroyed – now during the reign of Murad V

it has to rise again!’ the Montenegrin ruler declared.⁴⁹ When Serbia became a kingdom in 1882, Milan Obrenović was hailed as ‘the first Serbian king since Kosovo’, although, like other similar references to the past, this one was based on a historical untruth.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, it was only at the time of the 500th anniversary of the battle that St Vitus’ Day truly became the national holiday.⁵¹ In 1889 the Serbian Royal Academy, the Court, and the Church all commemorated the 500th anniversary of the battle. The Academy’s president Čedomilj Mijatović, gave a special lecture in the Academy on 11 June. He argued that the memory of Kosovo was the main component of Serbian nationhood, even above language and religion. ‘An inexhaustible source of national pride was discovered at Kosovo. More important than language and stronger than the Church this pride unites all Serbs in a single nation’, Mijatović told his audience, before summarising both the significance of the Kosovo myth for the Serbs and the way they perceive(d) their history:

There was never a [Serbian] war for freedom – and when was there no war? – in which the spirit of the Kosovo heroes did not participate. The new history⁵² of Serbia begins with Kosovo – a history of valiant efforts, long suffering, endless wars, and unquenchable glory...We bless Kosovo because the memory of the Kosovo heroes upheld us, encouraged us, taught us, and guided us.⁵³

Mijatović may have really believed in the ‘spirit of the Kosovo heroes’, given his participation in spiritualist séances in Victorian England, where he lived first as Serbian minister to London and where he remained following his resignation in 1903,⁵⁴ but he was not alone. Serbian troops marching into Kosovo during the First Balkan War of 1912 appeared to believe not only that they were avenging the defeat

of 1389, but that they were joined by the Kosovo heroes. Instances of collective hallucination were reported, some Serbian soldiers apparently convinced they saw silhouettes of medieval knights marching alongside them.⁵⁵ As one of the soldiers wrote in his diary in October 1912, just as his unit was about to enter Kosovo:

The single sound of that word – Kosovo – caused an indescribable excitement. This one word pointed to the black past – five centuries. In it exists the whole of our sad past – the tragedy of Prince Lazar and the entire Serbian people...

Each of us created for himself a picture of Kosovo while we were still in cradle. Our mothers lulled us to sleep with the songs of Kosovo, and in our schools our teachers never ceased in their stories of Lazar and Miloš...

When we arrived on Kosovo and the battalions were placed in order, our commander spoke: ‘Brothers, my children, my sons!’ His voice breaks. ‘This place on which we stand is the graveyard of our glory. We bow to the shadows of fallen ancestors and pray God for the salvation of their souls.’ His voice gives out and tears flow in streams down his cheeks and grey beard and fall to the ground. He actually shakes from some kind of inner pain and excitement.

The spirits of Lazar, Miloš, and all the Kosovo martyrs gaze on us. We feel strong and proud, for we are generation which will realize the centuries-old dream of the whole nation: that we with the sword will regain the freedom that was lost with the sword.⁵⁶

Indeed the whole campaign was in many respects perceived by Serbs as a holy war. Veterans of the Kosovo campaign were awarded with specially coined medals inscribed with ‘To the Avengers of Kosovo, 1912-1913’. The author of the design of

the medal was Ivan Meštrović, a pro-Yugoslav Croatian sculptor who was inspired by the Kosovo mythology (see below).

During the First World War, in late 1915, before the Serbian army's epic retreat towards the Greek island of Corfu through the mountains of northern Albania, Marshal Živojin Mišić suggested that the Serbian army make a last stand against the overwhelming Austro-German-Bulgarian enemy at Kosovo. The suggestion essentially to repeat Lazar's heroic but ultimately suicidal choice of heavenly Serbia was rejected by other Serbian leaders.⁵⁷ The significance of the Kosovo myth among Serbian soldiers fighting in the First World War was also recorded by the American journalist John Reed in his classic account *The War in Eastern Europe*.⁵⁸

Were the high emotions attached to Kosovo the reason why Serbs failed to notice that although most medieval monasteries and churches remained, there were not many Serbs left in Kosovo by the early twentieth century? According to the population census of 1921, the first to be carried out in the new Yugoslav state, there were some 439,000 people on the territory of what would become Kosovo and Metohija after the Second World War, only around 21 per cent of whom were Serbs.⁵⁹ The majority of the rest were ethnic Albanians.

The Kosovo myth, however, should not be exclusively linked with nationalist rhetoric of the nineteenth century. Serbian Liberals in the 1860s and the Radicals in the 1880s used the Kosovo theme to champion freedom and democracy, while the ruling Conservatives and the Court used it to compare the opposition with the treacherous Vuk Branković.⁶⁰ On the eve of the 500th anniversary of the battle, Serbian archimandrite and historian Ilarion Ruvarac published a critical study on Prince Lazar, which led to a fierce polemic between the new generation of critical historians and the older, romantic one. Another historian, Ljubomir Kovačević,

showed, independently of Ruvarac, that there was no evidence that Vuk Branković had been a traitor.⁶¹ It may be argued that the debate about the fictional and historical in the myth of Kosovo led to the birth of Serbian critical historiography. Ruvarac was regarded as the founder of the critical school of history by a whole generation of Serbian historians of the late nineteenth century, while at the same time he was fiercely criticised for his ‘unpatriotic history’ by national ideologists and by the church.⁶²

The Yugoslav Kosovo myth

The powerful message that the Kosovo myth carried was recognised by advocates of Yugoslav unity, especially Croats (among whom the Yugoslav idea first emerged in the 1830s). Thus, the 500th anniversary of the Kosovo battle was commemorated in Croatia, despite restrictions imposed by the Habsburg authorities. *Obzor*, a leading Zagreb daily, had several issues seized by the authorities for publishing articles about Kosovo, but on 27 June 1889 it managed to publish the following lines:

Whenever the Serbs rose up to lead whatever part of their people to freedom, they always appeared with the wreath of Kosovo around their heads to say in unison: This, o people, is what we are, what we want, and what we can do. And we Croatians – brothers by blood and by desire with the Serbs – today sing: Praise to the eternal Kosovo heroes who with their blood made certain that the desire for freedom and glory would never die. Glory to that people who gave them birth.⁶³

Because united Serb-Croat nationalism was seen as a threat to the Dual Monarchy in Budapest and Vienna, public manifestations marking the 500th anniversary were

banned by the *ban* (governor) of Croatia Károly Khuen-Héderváry. A play about the Battle of Kosovo staged in the Dalmatian town of Split was interrupted by the police, but a leading Croatian actor travelled to Belgrade to play Prince Lazar in another play on the theme.⁶⁴

The authorities could not prevent the Yugoslav Academy of Arts and Sciences in Zagreb from holding a symposium commemorating the anniversary. Two lectures – by Franjo Rački, the Academy's president, and Toma Maretić – were held and later published in a special issue of the Academy's journal. In his introductory remarks Rački explained that the commemoration of the Kosovo battle was in line with the Academy's mission to study 'all important developments from the past of the Croatian and Serbian *people*'.⁶⁵

The 500th anniversary of the battle attracted interest from pan-Slav groups, as well. A Czech pan-Slav organisation sent to Belgrade a wreath across which the following was written: 'The Czech nation. 1389. +27/6 1889. From ashes to greatness.', while a Russian newspaper wrote: 'Not to praise the memory of Kosovo in Russia means treason to Slavic ethnic feeling.' At the same time, the Russian embassy in Vienna commemorated the anniversary with the help from Serbian and Croatian cultural organisations.⁶⁶

The fascination with the Kosovo mythology survived the 500th anniversary celebrations. Ivan Meštrović, the famous Croatian sculptor and a leading proponent of Yugoslavism, was also inspired by it. He saw the 1389 battle as *the* symbol of South Slav suffering and struggle for freedom against the foreign oppression. His major, though never completed work, was entitled 'The *Vidovdan* Temple'. It was a monument to the Kosovo myth and the South Slav epic tradition and represented Meštrović's belief in the national unity of the South Slavs, combining Serbian

Orthodox with Croat and Slovene Catholic traditions, and bringing together Yugoslav 'eastern' and 'western' civilisations.⁶⁷ Fragments of this monumental work were exhibited at the World Exposition in Rome in 1911 at the Serbian pavilion, causing considerable controversy. Meštrović, a citizen of Austria-Hungary, refused to exhibit at the Habsburg pavilion, because a separate pavilion for the Empire's South Slav artists was not provided.⁶⁸

During the interwar period, the Kosovo myth was used by champions of the Yugoslav ideology as a pan-Yugoslav myth. For example, the organ of a group of Yugoslav nationalists, supporters of King Aleksandar's dictatorship, was called *Vidovdan*. The assassination of King Aleksandar in Marseilles in October 1934, organised and carried out by Macedonian and Croatian revolutionaries, prompted one of the leading ideologists of 'integral' Yugoslavism, a Croat Juraj Demetrović, to compare Aleksandar with Lazar. Demetrović argued that Serbs, Croats and Slovenes all had their Kosovos and their Lazars, but that Aleksandar, who gave his life for Yugoslavia, was the first Yugoslav martyr, the 'Yugoslav Lazar'.⁶⁹ In fact, not unlike Lazar, Aleksandar became posthumously known as the King-Martyr. Such a close connection between Yugoslavism and the main Serbian national myth did little to change the perception that interwar Yugoslavia was a Serb-dominated state. Nor did it help that a Serb-preferred centralist constitution, opposed by many Croats, was promulgated on 28 June 1921 and was known as the *Vidovdan* Constitution.⁷⁰

The Western Kosovo myth

During the First World War, at the time when Serbia was a 'plucky little ally' of the West, the Kosovo myth proved useful to pro-Serbian western propaganda. Thus, in France in 1915 schools were instructed by the government to offer lessons on Serbia

and Serbian history, while in June 1916 Paris was covered with posters to mark '*La Journée Serb*'. Similarly, posters which praised 'brave Serbia' and urged prayers for Serbia on 'the Kossovo Day' could be seen that same June in London and other British cities.⁷¹ The same year the Kossovo Day Committee was formed in London. It was chaired by Dr Elsie Inglis, and its members included R.W. Seton-Watson. Seton-Watson was a leading British expert on East-Central Europe alongside Arthur Evans of the London *Times*, who worked closely with the Committee, as did the Oxford-based historian Charles Oman and his Cambridge counterpart R.G.D. Laffan. Seton-Watson's essay 'Serbia: Yesterday, To-day, To-morrow' was read aloud in schools across the country.⁷²

'The Kossovo Day' in fact turned into a 'Kosovo week'. On 2 July 1916, which was made the 'Serbian Sunday', Anglican priests prayed for Serbia and its dynasty; the Serbian priest Fr Nikolaj Velimirović officiated at a service in an Anglican church in London's Soho – the first time a Serbian Orthodox priest had done so in an Anglican church. Five days later Fr Velimirović and the Archbishop of Canterbury held a joint service in London's St Paul's cathedral. The event was advertised with posters all over London, with the heading: 'Think of Serbia, Pray for Serbia, Restore Serbia'.⁷³

Eminent historians such as Laffan and Oman contributed to the pro-Serbian discourse in Britain that used the Kosovo myth to emphasise Serbia's centuries-long heroic struggle against not only the Ottomans but also Germans and Hungarians – all of course Britain's enemies at the time. The title of Laffan's 1918 book on Serbian history – *The Serbs: The Guardians of the Gate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) – shows that others too saw Serbs as the defenders of Christianity in Europe. 'The title, "the Guardians of the Gate", is borrowed from a phrase applied to the Serbs by several

speakers, in particular by Mr. Lloyd George', Laffan wrote in the book's preface. 'It is a summary of the services which the Serbs have always done their best to render to Christendom: for their country is, indeed, one of the gateways of civilized Europe.' In an essay on the 1389 battle published in 1917, Oman blamed Hungary's alleged failure to support Serbia in 1389 for the defeat of Lazar's army. With the Hungarian King Sigismund of Luxemburg playing the role of Vuk Branković, Oman wrote:

In 1389 he [Sigismund] was at peace with Lazarus, but he was not at his side in arms against the Turk, as any Hungarian King who saw the danger of the coming storm should have been. On hearing of the unhappy day of Kossovo his first act was to make his private profit out of disaster of Christendom. His armies at once crossed the Danube and seized Belgrade and the surrounding district along the Danube [...] It was a true instance of Nemesis that for three hundred years Hungary was to pay for her treachery to Christendom in the fourteenth century: first by facing a hundred and thirty years of Turkish invasions, then by enduring a Turkish conquest, after Mohacs (1526) – the Hungarian equivalent for Kossovo – and finally by seeing Buda the seat of a Turkish pasha for a hundred and seventy years more.⁷⁴

Pro-Serbian events were also organised in the United States in June 1918, with New York the centre of the commemoration. In the city's church of St John the Divine a special service to mark 'the Kossovo Day' was officiated by Rev. Robbins, who compared the Serbs to the Israelites.⁷⁵ The main commemoration took place on 17 June in the Waldorf-Astoria, where James Beck, a former Assistant Attorney General of the US, stated in a keynote speech:

It is true that we commemorate defeat, but military defeats are often moral victories. If Serbia is now temporarily defeated, she has triumphed at the great bar of the public opinion and she stands in the eye of the nations as justified in the quarrel. Serbia was not only the innocent, precipitating cause in this world war, but it is the greatest martyr, and I am inclined to think, in many respects its greatest hero.⁷⁶

Reminding his audience of Lazar's choice Beck argued: 'The war is a great expiation for the failure of civilized nations for centuries to recognize the duty that...Lazar assumed on the eve of Kossovo.'⁷⁷

Concluding remarks

Eighty years after Beck uttered those words, another western politician gave a speech on the anniversary of the battle, albeit under different circumstances and with a different message. Robin Cook, the late British Foreign Minister and an enthusiastic advocate of a military intervention against Serbia, chose 28 June 1999 to address 'the Serb people'. Cook pointed out that ten years previously Slobodan Milošević used the anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo 'not to give a message of hope and reform', but instead 'threatened force to deal with Yugoslavia's internal political difficulties', thus launching 'his personal agenda of power and ethnic hatred under the cloak of nationalism.' Cook then called on the Serbs to break with the Milošević era and face their recent past: 'When he [Milošević] goes, the Serb people will once again have their chance to take their rightful place in modern Europe...This will involve facing up to the truth of what Milosevic and his regime have done across former

Yugoslavia.⁷⁸ More remarkable than the content of the speech is the date on which Cook chose to deliver it. While calling on the Serbs to make a break with their recent past, during which their leaders exploited the anniversary of the battle and the myth of Kosovo, the former Foreign Secretary had also, in his own way, (mis)used St Vitus' Day. The war between NATO and Serbia ended on 11 June 1999 and there was no obvious reason why the speech could not have been delivered on another date. Cook, of course, was not the only public figure to exploit the symbolic importance of 28 June among Serbs, as this article has shown.

Milošević was at last overthrown on 5 October 2001, by his own people, in a remarkably bloodless revolution. As the historian Stevan Pavlowitch noted, on 5 October the Orthodox church celebrates the Holy Prophet Jonah, 'the one who had been swallowed by a big fish, and who spent three days and three nights in its belly.'⁷⁹ The Serbs finally had a chance – which at the time of the writing of this article does not appear to have been seized fully – to 'release' St Vitus. In Pavlowitch's words:

Saint Guy – he of Vidovdan, 15/28 June, and known as Vitus in Latin, Guido in Italian, Vid in Slavonic languages – was a third-century martyr from southern Italy. He is invoked as the patron of those who suffer from epilepsy and nervous disorders, and from the bites of mad dogs and snakes. Through no fault of his own, he has been burdened for too long with the fate of Serbia. Few Serbs even knew that he could help with nervous disorders and the bites of mad dogs. And they had forgotten that they had once believed he could help them see better. It is time to release him from his bondage. The Prophet Jonah can take over. On his day Serbia emerged from the years spent in the belly of the Milošević regime. It is free to face its problems in stark daylight.⁸⁰

However, St Vitus continues to be haunted by – or to haunt? – Serbian history. As mentioned at the beginning of the article, Milošević was extradited to The Hague Tribunal on 28 June 2001. Did the Serbian government of the late prime minister Zoran Djindjić thus wish to break symbolically with the past? (Djindjić himself was assassinated in March 2003 for attempting to make a clear break with the Milošević years). It is tempting to suggest the date of the extradition was not a coincidence and that Milošević was not extradited on *Vidovdan* (only) because an aid donors' conference was taking place the following day.⁸¹ Although Djindjić and his circle claimed the choice of date was coincidental,⁸² the Prime Minister's address to the nation of 28 June 2001 is worth citing because it shows, if nothing else, that he was aware of the continued significance of the myth among the Serbs:

Respected citizens of Serbia,

Exactly twelve years ago, on St Vitus' Day, one of the most important Serbian national holidays, Slobodan Milošević issued a call to our people to follow the ideals of what he described as heavenly Serbia. That led to twelve years of wars, catastrophe and devastation of our country. The government of Serbia has today taken upon itself to follow the ideals of the earthly Serbia, not so much for our own sake, but for the sake of our children. By making this decision we are securing the future of our children. I ask you to understand this difficult, but the only right decision.⁸³

Do developments surrounding Kosovo in recent years mean that the Kosovo metaphor has finally come true? As Bakić-Hayden pondered: 'will [the Serbs] have to accept literally (i.e. in historical reality) the symbolic meaning of their epic poems, which

they carried down through the centuries, that in order for them to be spiritually redeemed they have to lose Kosovo physically?’⁸⁴ Only time will tell. Kosovo, backed by the US and UK, declared independence from Serbia in February 2008, but Belgrade, supported by Russia among other countries, refuses to recognize it. At the time of the writing this article, no compromise solution is in sight, and new chapters in the history of the Serbian Kosovo myth are likely to follow.⁸⁵

Notes

¹ Ann Pennington and Peter Levi, *Marko the Prince: Serbo-Croat Heroic Songs*, London, 1984, pp. 17-18.

² As reported by the regional press; for example: ‘Poslednje reči koje je Slobodan Milošević izgovorio pri ulasku u helikopter: Znete li da je danas Vidovdan?’, *Glas javnosti* (Belgrade), 29 June 2001. St Vitus is St Guy in English, but the Latin form is used more commonly in English-language texts.

³ There was also a less known, second Battle of Kosovo of October 1448, between Christian forces led by the Hungarian King János Hunyadi and the Ottoman-led troops under the command of Sultan Murad II. Ironically, fighting alongside the Ottomans was Despot Djurdj Branković, an Ottoman vassal and son of Vuk Branković, the alleged traitor at the time of the original Battle of Kosovo (see below). The second battle also took place at Kosovo Polje.

⁴ The use of adjective ‘Serbian’ in the title and throughout the article when referring to the Kosovo myth is intentional as there are also Albanian national myths related to the region of Kosovo. See Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History*, London, 1998, passim, and Aleksandar Pavković, ‘Kosovo/Kosova: A Land of Conflicting Myths’, in Michael Waller, Kyril Drezov and Bülent Gökay (eds.), *Kosovo: The Politics of Delusion*, London, 2001, pp. 3-11.

⁵ Florian Bieber makes a comparison with the importance of 9 November for German history – the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923, the *Reischkristallnacht* in 1938, and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 – but admits that the date has no mythical connotations. Bieber, ‘Nationalist Mobilization and Stories of Serb Suffering: The Kosovo Myth from the 600th Anniversary to the Present’, *Rethinking History*, vol. 6, no. 1, (2002), pp. 95-110, p. 107n.

⁶ Among those present at Kosovo Polje on 28 June 1989 was late Janez Drnovšek, then president of the Presidency of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and later president of the Republic of Slovenia (2002-2007). Ironically, Drnovšek caused a diplomatic stir when on the eve of his visit to Belgrade in October 2005 he publicly stated that the solution to the Kosovo crisis was to grant the ethnic Albanian majority’s wish for independence. Belgrade’s invitation to Drnovšek was promptly withdrawn.

⁷ The Kosovo myth has a strong Biblical undertone, as is explained below.

⁸ For a brief account of the anniversary and an analysis of the context in which it took place see Bieber, ‘Nationalist Mobilization’, op. cit., pp. 100-103.

⁹ This was not the first time Lazar’s mortal remains were on the move. Buried in Priština after the battle, the Prince’s body was moved to Ravanica monastery in 1390/91, than to Szentendre near Budapest in 1690; in 1697 the remnants moved to Vrdnik monastery in Srem; during the Second World War they were moved to Belgrade, while in 1989 they were sent back to Ravanica, via Gračanica in Kosovo. ‘Together with these holy bones Serbian migrants carried two important items: the legacy of Kosovo and the idea of an integral national identity’, historian Dimitrije Djordjević wrote (‘The Tradition of Kosovo in the Formation of Modern Serbian Statehood in the 19th Century’, in Wayne Vucinich and Thomas Emmert (eds.), *Kosovo: Legacy of a Medieval Battle*, Minneapolis, MN, 1991, pp. 309-330, p. 312). See also Tim Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, New Haven, CN, 1997, pp. 38-39. On the ‘life after death’ of historical figures in post-socialist Eastern Europe see Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*, New York, 1999.

¹⁰ Cited in Judah, *The Serbs*, op. cit., p. 164.

¹¹ See for example Alan Little and Laura Silber, *The Death of Yugoslavia*, London, 1995 (and the accompanying multi-part BBC television documentary), as well as Lenard J. Cohen, *Serpent in the Bosom: The Rise and Fall of Slobodan Milošević*, Boulder, CO, 2000, Aleksa Djilas, ‘The Profile of Slobodan Milošević’, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3 (Summer, 1993), pp. 81-96, Judah, *The Serbs*, op. cit., Malcolm, *Kosovo*, op. cit., pp. 341-47, and Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Serbia, The History Behind the Name*, London, 2002, ch. 10.

¹² To mention but a few: Milica Bakić-Hayden, ‘National Memory as a Narrative Memory: The Case of Kosovo’, in Maria Todorova (ed.), *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory*, London, 2004, pp. 25-40, Bieber, ‘Nationalist Mobilization’, op. cit., Sima Ćirković, *The Serbs*, Oxford, 2004, pp. 82-91, Thomas Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo, 1389*, Boulder, CO, 1990, Malcolm, *Kosovo*, op. cit., ch. 4, Miodrag Popović, *Vidovdan i krst časni: Ogledi iz književne arheologije*, Belgrade, 2nd ed., 1977, Vucinich and Emmert (eds.), *Kosovo*, op. cit., and Olga Zirojević, ‘Kosovo u kolektivnom pamćenju’, in Nebojša Popov (ed.), *Srpska strana rata*, Belgrade, 2nd ed., 2002., vol. 1, pp. 234-64.

- ¹³ Branimir Anzulović, *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide*, London, 1999, Malcolm, *Kosovo*, op. cit., Michael Sells *Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*, Berkeley, CA, 1996, and the same author's chapter 'Kosovo Mythology and the Bosnian Genocide', in O. Bartov and P. Mack (eds.), *In God's Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, New York, 2001, ch. 8.
- ¹⁴ Anzulović, *Heavenly Serbia*, op. cit., p. 4. Anzulović, like authors such as Sells, are in no doubt that Serbs committed genocide in Bosnia. For counter-arguments see Steven L. Burg, 'Genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina?', in S. Totten et al. (eds.), *Century of Genocide: Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Views*, New York, 1997, pp. 424-33, and Robert M. Hayden 'Schindler's Fate and the Balkan Tragedy of the 1990s: Genocide, Ethnic Cleansing, and Population Transfers', *Slavic Review*, vol. 55, no. 4, (Winter, 1996), pp. 727-48.
- ¹⁵ Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, 1983, and Eric J. Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge, 1990, are arguably two best studies among numerous, often very insightful, works on nations and nationalism published over the last twenty five years.
- ¹⁶ Bieber, 'Nationalist Mobilization', op. cit., p. 97.
- ¹⁷ See Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpflin (eds.), *Myths and Nationhood*, London, 1997, for several interesting examples of the relationship between national mythologies and nation-building, mostly, though not exclusively, in Eastern Europe.
- ¹⁸ Andrew Wilson, 'Myths of National History in Belarus and Ukraine', in Hosking and Schöpflin (eds.), *Myths and Nationhood*, op. cit., pp. 182-197, p. 182.
- ¹⁹ Bakić-Hayden, 'National Memory', op. cit., pp. 26-27; Bieber, 'Nationalist Mobilization', op. cit., p. 98.
- ²⁰ Bakić-Hayden, 'National Memory', op. cit., p. 27.
- ²¹ *Amselfeld, campus merulae*: Malcolm, *Kosovo*, op. cit., p. 3; Kosovo not a single administrative unit: Sima Ćirković, 'The Cradle of Serbia', in Ranko Petković et al. (eds), *Kosovo: Past and Present*, Belgrade, ca. 1989, pp. 21-31, p. 21; Kosovo *vilayet*: Malcolm, *Kosovo*, op. cit., pp. 191-92.
- ²² The best short summary of the battle in English is provided in Ćirković, *The Serbs*, op. cit., pp. 82-85. Ćirković, a leading medievalist, has written an excellent and balanced account that concentrates on the medieval and early modern periods. The book should be read together with Pavlowitch's equally authoritative *Serbia*, op. cit., which provides a more detailed analysis of the modern history of Serbs. Early histories of Serbia written in the west devote much attention to the Kosovo Battle and its legacy. See for example Leopold von Ranke, *The History of Servia, and the Servian Revolution, with a Sketch of the Insurrection in Bosnia*, London, 1847, and Harold Temperley, *History of Serbia*, London, 1919.
- ²³ Although the existence of 'collective memory' is debatable, the myth of Kosovo survived throughout centuries among a largely illiterate people. This was only partly due to the activities of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The rich Serbian epic tradition preserved the legend of Kosovo, often adding new elements. The myth of Kosovo thus formed the central part of the Serbian collective tradition in the early nineteenth (and most probably in earlier centuries, too) when epic songs were collected and noted down by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić. For more on Serbian and South Slav epic tradition see Svetozar Koljević, *The Epic in the Making*, Oxford, 1980, the special issue of the journal *Oral Traditions, Serbo-Croatian Oral Traditions*, guest edited by John S. Miletich, vol. 6, no. 2-3 (May-October, 1991), and Pennington and Levi, *Marko the Prince*, op. cit.
- ²⁴ In reality only some parts of southern Serbia were under Ottoman control for five centuries. The last independent Serbian city, Smederevo, fell to the Ottoman armies in 1459; Serbia re-emerged as an autonomous principality in 1829, before becoming *de facto* independent from the Ottoman Empire at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, exactly 419 years after the fall of Smederevo.
- ²⁵ Lazar's title was in fact 'Knez', for which there is no direct English translation. However, 'Knez' is commonly translated as 'Prince'.
- ²⁶ See below on the speech by Rev. Robbins at the commemoration of the battle of Kosovo in New York in June 1918.
- ²⁷ See Marko Živković, 'The Wish to be a Jew: The Power of the Jewish Trope in the Yugoslav Conflict', *Cahiers de l'URMIS* (Paris), no. 6, March 2000, pp. 69- 84.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- ²⁹ Hilary Leila Krieger, 'Jewish Leaders Visit Serbia to Build Ties', *Jerusalem Post*, 11 October 2004.
- ³⁰ Živković, 'The Wish to be a Jew'.
- ³¹ After her husband's death Milica acted as a *de facto* regent for her young son and Lazar's successor Stefan Lazarević. Her daughter Olivera was sent to Sultan Bayezid's harem following the battle of Kosovo, indicating Serbia's status of a tributary state.

³² For the texts of these three songs and brief background information see Pennington and Levi, *Marko the Prince*, op. cit., and Milne Holton and Vasa D. Mihailovich (translators and editors), *Songs of the Serbian People: From the Collections of Vuk Karadžić*, Pittsburgh, 1997.

³³ Yet, somewhat intriguingly, the Mother of the Jugovići made, alongside four other women, a list of 45 five historical figures among whom the Serbian public was asked to chose the greatest Serb of all time in 2005. The only other Kosovo personality on the list was Prince Lazar. The Mother of the Jugovići was close to the bottom of the list with 0.1 per cent of the vote received. Lazar was doing only marginally better, with 0.6 per cent of the vote.

³⁴ See Celia Hawkesworth, *Voices in the Shadows: Women and Verbal Art in Serbia and Bosnia*, Budapest, 2000, p. 58.

³⁵ Terms ‘golden age’ and ‘usable past’ are discussed by Anthony Smith in his ‘The “Golden Age” and National Revival’, in Hosking and Schöpflin (eds.), *Myths and Nationhood*, op. cit., pp. 36-59.

³⁶ Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha*, op. cit., pp. 77-78.

³⁷ See Ćirković, *The Serbs*, op. cit., pp. 75-80.

³⁸ ‘Slobodan Milošević’s 1989 St Vitus Day Speech, Gazimestan, June 28, 1989’, available at <http://www.slobodan-milosevic.org/spch-kosovo1989.htm> (last accessed on 9 February 2009). The second half of the citation most probably represented Milošević’s reaction to then frequently made claims in Slovenia and, increasingly, Croatia that these two republics were ‘European’, meaning ‘western’ and ‘democratic’, unlike the rest of Yugoslavia, including Serbia, which was ‘Balkan’, and by implication ‘communist’.

³⁹ Cited in Djordjević, ‘The Tradition of Kosovo’, op. cit., p. 313.

⁴⁰ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 314.

⁴¹ Milovan Djilas, *Njegoš: Poet, Prince, Bishop*, New York, 1966, p. 11.

⁴² Zirojević, ‘Kosovo u kolektivnom pamćenju’, op. cit., p. 245.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁴⁴ *The Mountain Wreath of P.P. Nyegosh, Prince-Bishop of Montenegro, 1830-1851* (Rendered into English by James W. Wiles, with an introduction by Vladeta Popović), [unknown place], 1930.

⁴⁵ For more on the Prince-Bishop, his life, poetry and his understanding of Montenegro’s place in Serbian history see Djilas, *Njegoš*, op. cit.

⁴⁶ Vladimir Dedijer, *The Road to Sarajevo*, London, 1967, pp. 259-60.

⁴⁷ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 260. Chapter XI of Dedijer’s book offers an analysis of the influence of the Kosovo myth on members of the ‘Young Bosnia’ organisation, whose member was Princip. The author of the letter was Vaso Čubrilović (1897-1990), a well-known Yugoslav historian and member of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences. He was one of only two academicians who publicly rejected the infamous ‘Memorandum’ of the Academy leaked to the press in 1986 (Pavlowitch, *Serbia*, op. cit., 191n). The best analysis of this controversial document, in which a group of Serbia’s academicians complained about their nation’s position in socialist Yugoslavia, and especially about the alleged mistreatment of Kosovo Serbs by Kosovo Albanians, is offered in Jasna Dragović-Soso, ‘Saviours of the Nation’: *Serbia’s Intellectual Opposition and the Revival of Nationalism*, London, 2002, pp. 177-89.

⁴⁸ Zirojević, ‘Kosovo u kolektivnom pamćenju’, op. cit., pp. 247-48. Partly because Nikola was never allowed to return to Montenegro after it united with Serbia only days before both became parts of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes on 1 December 1918, Nikola is today celebrated by those Montenegrins who emphasise the small republic’s own tradition and identity separate from the Serbian one.

⁴⁹ Djordjević, ‘The Tradition of Kosovo’, op. cit., pp. 317-18.

⁵⁰ The main Serbian ruler at the time of the battle of Kosovo was a Prince, not King (though, as already explained, Lazar is referred to in the popular tradition as ‘Tsar’ [Emperor]). The last Serbian King, Vukašin Mrnjavčević, was killed by Ottoman troops at the battle of Marica, which took place in 1371, the same year when Emperor Stefan V died. Serbia became an Empire during the reign of Uroš’s father Stefan Dušan (1331-55), who proclaimed himself Emperor of Serbs and Greeks in 1346, when the Serbian Archbishop was raised to the rank of Patriarch. Following Dušan’s sudden and premature death in 1355, Vukašin assumed the royal title, taking advantage of the situation.

⁵¹ Although it was institutionalised as early as 1849. Milorad Ekmečić, ‘The Emergence of St Vitus Day as the Principal National Holiday of the Serbs’, in Vucinich and Emmert (eds.), *Kosovo*, op. cit., pp. 331-342, p. 331.

⁵² More than a hundred years later I witnessed a Serbian Orthodox priest describe frescoes in a monastery in central Serbia as being of ‘more recent origin’, since they were painted some time after

the Kosovo battle. Even today some Serbs see their national history as clearly divided to the pre- and post-1389 periods, the post-1389 history being regarded as ‘new’, even ‘recent’.

⁵³ Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha*, op. cit., p. 129.

⁵⁴ See Count Chedomille Miyatovich, *The Memoirs of a Balkan Diplomatist*, London, 1917.

⁵⁵ Judah, *The Serbs*, op. cit., p. 71.

⁵⁶ *Vojnički glasnik*, no. 13, 28 June 1932, pp. 186-87, cited in Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha*, op. cit., p. 133-34, and in Judah, *The Serbs*, op. cit., pp. 71-72.

⁵⁷ Djordjević, ‘The Tradition of Kosovo’, op. cit., p. 322. See also C.E.J. Freyer, *The Destruction of Serbia in 1915*, Boulder, CO, 1998, pp. 88-89.

⁵⁸ London and New York, 1916.

⁵⁹ Pavlowitch, *Serbia*, op. cit., p. 84n.

⁶⁰ Djordjević, ‘The Tradition of Kosovo’, op. cit., p. 323.

⁶¹ Zirojević, ‘Kosovo u kolektivnom pamćenju’, op. cit., p. 257.

⁶² Ruvarac’s study on Prince Lazar: *O knezu Lazaru*, Novi Sad, 1887. On Ruvarac and his work see: *Zbornik Ilariona Ruvarca*, Belgrade: Srpska kraljevska akademija, 1934, *Spomenica Ilarionu Ruvarcu*, Novi Sad, 1955, and, *Zbornik radova naučnog skupa: Braća Ruvarac u srpskoj istoriografiji i kulturi*, Belgrade, 1997. For an example of criticism of Ruvarac’s ‘unpatriotic’ approach to the past see Jaša Tomić, *Boj na Kosovu, Seoba Srba, Crna Gora. Kritika Ruvarčeve škole*, Novi Sad, 1908.

⁶³ Cited in Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha*, op. cit., p. 128.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 208n.

⁶⁵ My emphasis; note the singular form. Franjo Rački, ‘Boj na Kosovu. Uzroci i posljedice (Čitao u sjednici filologičko-historičkoga razreda jugoslavenske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti dne 15/27 lipnja 1889.)’, *Rad JAZU*, knjiga XCVII, razredi filologičko-historički i filozofičko-juridički XXVI, Zagreb, 1889, pp. 1-68.

⁶⁶ Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha*, op. cit., pp. 129-30.

⁶⁷ Meštrović was apparently inspired by Franz Metzner’s work, notably his 1913 monument commemorating the centenary of ‘The Battle of Nations’ (Das Völkerschlachtdenkmal) at Leipzig. Ekmečić, ‘The Emergence of St Vitus Day’, op. cit., pp. 339-40.

⁶⁸ For Meštrović’s Yugoslavism (and that of another famous former Yugoslav intellectual, the Nobel prize-winning writer Ivo Andrić) see Andrew Wachtel, ‘Ivan Meštrović, Ivo Andrić and the Synthetic Yugoslav Culture of the Interwar Period’, in Dejan Djokić (ed.), *Yugoslavism: Histories of a Failed Idea, 1918-1992*, London and Madison, WI, 2003, pp. 238-51.

⁶⁹ Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha*, op. cit., p. 138.

⁷⁰ The Croatian grievances in the Yugoslav kingdom are best expressed in Ivo Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics*, Ithaca, NY, 1984. For an alternative interpretation of interwar Yugoslavia see Dejan Djokić, *Elusive Compromise: A History of Interwar Yugoslavia*, New York and London, 2007.

⁷¹ Pavlowitch, *Serbia*, op. cit., p. 98n.

⁷² For more on the activities of the Kossovo Day Committee and text of Seton-Watson’s lecture see *Kossovo Day (1389 – 1916). Report and Two Lectures*, London, 1916.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Charles Oman, ‘An old treason against Christendom’, *The Lay of Kossovo: Serbia’s Past and Present (1389-1917)*, London, 1917, p. 10.

⁷⁵ Visitors to the cathedral, the largest one in north America, will find today in the Missionary Bay on the right hand side as they enter the church, three memorials: ‘to the Victims of Genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1992 – ’, ‘to the Victims of the Ottoman Empire’s Genocide of the Armenians, 1915 – 1923’, and ‘to the Victims of the Holocaust, 1939 – 1945’. Thus at the end of the twentieth century, less than eighty years after the anniversary of the battle of Kosovo was commemorated in the same cathedral, the Serbs and the Turks found themselves on the same side within the walls of the cathedral: as perpetrators of a genocide.

⁷⁶ Cited in Emmert, *Serbian Golgotha*, op. cit., p. 136.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ ‘Statement by Robin Cook to the Serb people on Vid’s [sic] Day (28/06/99)’, available at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office web site

(<http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029391629&a=KArticle&aid=1013618398785>), last accessed 9 February 2009).

⁷⁹ Pavlowitch, *Serbia*, op. cit., p. 236.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Tim Judah, 'Tyrant's Defeat Marks Serbs' Day of Destiny', *The Observer*, 1 July 2001. For an account of events surrounding the extradition, which makes no speculation on whether the date was chosen intentionally, see Miloš Vasić, 'Slobodan Milošević pred Haškim sudom: Pritvorenik broj 039', *Vreme* (Belgrade), no. 548, 5 July 2001.

⁸² See the transcript of an interview with Čedomir Jovanović, one of Djindjić's closest aides, at Belgrade's B92 TV, 'Kako je uhapšen i izručen Milošević', 19 April 2005, available at http://www.b92.net/info/emisije/insajder.php?nav_id=166741&yyyy=2005&mm=04 (last accessed on 9 February 2009).

⁸³ Cited in *ibid.* Jovanović claims that Djindjić had realised the date was 28 June only once the decision to extradite Milošević that day had been made. Djindjić then apparently quickly scribbled down the text of the speech.

⁸⁴ Bakić-Hayden, 'National Memory', *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁸⁵ This article originated as a short paper, first presented at a conference on the use and abuse of medieval myths in modern times, held at Central European University, Budapest, between 30 March and 2 April 2005. The paper formed the basis of a lecture given by invitation of the Njegoš Endowment for Serbian Studies at Columbia University, New York, on 22 April 2005. I thank participants of those two events for their questions and comments. I would also like to thank Wendy Bracewell, Celia Hawkesworth, Stevan K. Pavlowitch, and Slavica Ranković for their encouragement and help while the original paper was being turned into this work. Needless to say, I bear the sole responsibility for the content of the article especially any errors and shortcomings.