

# UNDER THE HOLY LIME TREE: The Inculcation of Neurotic & Psychotic Syn- dromes as a Serbian Wartime Strategy, 1986-1995

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## Abstract:

*This article looks at some of the recurrent themes in Serbian propaganda 1986—95, examining their operation in inculcating collective neurotic and psychotic syndromes and noting the relevance of those syndromes for the war against Croatia and Bosnia, 1991—95. Six pivotal themes in Serbian propaganda are examined:*

**1. Victimization**, in which Serbs were constructed as collective victims first of the NDH, then of Tito's Yugoslavia, and more specifically of Croats, Albanians, Bosniaks, and other non-Serbs. **2. Dehumanization of designated 'others'**, in which Croats were depicted as 'genocidal' and as 'Ustaše', Bosniaks were portrayed as 'fanatical fundamentalists', and Albanians were represented as not fully human. These processes of dehumanization effectively removed these designated 'others' from the moral field, sanctifying their murder or expulsion. **3. Belittlement**, in which Serbia's enemies were represented as beneath contempt. **4. Conspiracy**, in which Croats, Slovenes, Albanians, the Vatican, Germany, Austria, and sometimes also the Bosniaks as well as the U.S. and other foreign states, were seen as united in a conspiracy to break up the SFRY and hurt Serbia. In this way, the Belgrade regime's obstinate disregard for the fundamental standards of international law was dressed up as heroic defiance of an anti-Serb conspiracy.

**5. Entitlement**, in which the Serbs were constructed as 'entitled' to create a Greater Serbian state to which parts of Croatia and Bosnia would be attached, under the motto, 'All Serbs should live in one state.' **6. Superhuman powers and divine sanction**. The Serbs were told that they were, in some sense, "super". They were the best fighters on the planet, they could stand up to the entire world, they were sanctioned by God himself, because of Tsar Lazar and the fact that Lazar had chosen the heavenly kingdom. Moreover, since Lazar had chosen the heavenly kingdom, the Serbs, encouraged to view themselves as Lazar's heirs, were entitled to the earthly kingdom which Lazar had repudiated, as their patrimony.

**Key words:** Victimization, Dehumanization, Belittlement, Conspiracy, Entitlement, Superhuman powers, Divine sanction, Libido, Propaganda, War, Serbia

## INTRODUCTION

Were we to construct a psychological profile of an *individual* who viewed himself as a perennial victim of various contemptible 'others' who had sought to overcome their inferiority by uniting in a conspiracy against him and who considered himself 'entitled' to vastly more than was his lot, and who was determined to punish the conspirators and take their possessions, we would say that the person in question was a paranoid schizophrenic with neurotic or psychotic delusions. We would also conclude that he could be dangerous to those coming into contact with him. Where individuals are concerned, aggressive behavior is generally dysfunctional, but for nations going to war, heightened aggressiveness may be all too functional. It is for this reason that nations setting out on premeditated wars of conquest – and what wars of conquest are not premeditated? – are apt to adopt a calculated policy of inculcating mass paranoid schizophrenia in the public. The media can readily be used to make paranoia mainstream, and as paranoia becomes mainstream, it becomes ever harder for citizens to resist its snares, temptations, and over-simplifications.

A further conclusion may also be inferred, viz., that if one can define collective syndromes which reveal a society's lapses into mental illness, then one can define what characteristics are constitutive of a society's good mental health and outline at least the rudiments of such policies and structures as are conducive to such health.

## A THEORY OF LIBIDINAL POLITICS

I find myself intrigued by the possibility of placing Max Weber's ideal types of legitimate authority alongside Sigmund Freud's theory of the human psyche. I shall take it for granted that my readers are familiar with these respective theories and shall not waste any space explaining what should be common knowledge. Rather, on the basis of this assumed acquaintance, I wish to suggest that one might posit three sets of pairs: traditional authority + the superego (understanding that both appeal to sacred and/or bequeathed moral codes), bureaucratic authority + the ego (viewing this as the 'secular' domain, in which the bureaucracy, like the ego, replicates patterns it has established over time), and charismatic authority + the libido (viewing both charisma and the libido as reservoirs of trans-rational energy, and independent motivation, which may unleash creative and destructive drives alike). In the case of an individual, psychological health entails a balance among these three facets; when balance is lost, psychological health suffers. A parallel claim may be registered in terms of sources of authority *in a modern state*, which is to say that in a modern state, there must be a balance among traditional authority, the secular state, and libidinal values, with the former two working to keep the latter in check, without, however, extinguishing them. The particular power of a charismatic leader or a leader appealing to charismatic/libidinal values (such as

national expansionism) is to tap into the collective libido, pushing society into an excited state. This is the realm of pain and pleasure, in which the pains of the past are the most keenly felt and in which fantasies of national “salvation” and triumph – those two being often equated – are the most pleasurable. When a society is at the height of libidinal fever, it is like a man driven wild with sexual frenzy: rational judgment is suspended, cost-benefit analysis is held in contempt if it is regarded at all, and all that remains is the collective lust for satisfaction.

But the more the libido is fed, the larger it grows in proportion to the ego and the superego, until the latter two are either subverted or reduced to marginality – or both. The charismatic leader, thus, serves up a libidinal fare and enjoys what might, alternatively, be called ‘libidinal authority’. Because his authority is libidinal, rather than based on sacred or secular-bureaucratic legitimation, it is more dependent upon producing sensations of pleasure (triumph, expansion, defiance of stronger powers, the infliction of suffering on ‘enemy’ nations and groups, etc.). When a libidinal leader ceases to be able to serve up the promised pleasures, his power crumbles. The speed with which it crumbles is, of course, a contingent fact, which depends on various factors, including the level of economic deterioration of the society, the magnitude of his gamble (and hence of his failure), and the loyalty of the army and police forces. The last mentioned factor cannot be underestimated; indeed, as long as the army and police are loyal, a libidinal leader can weather many storms (Libya’s Qaddafi, for example, survived the missile attack on his palace authorized by US President Reagan in the mid-1980s and even cut back on his support to international terrorism after that, without losing his grip on power). But a libidinal leader unable to pleasure his society is a leader utterly without authority of any kind.

What should be stressed is that a society which has been mobilized along libidinal lines develops symptoms of collective neurosis or collective psychosis. This concept is well known in psychoanalytic and psychological literature. Quite apart from Freud’s use of the concept of collective neurosis in *The Future of an Illusion*, one can also point to theories about collective psychosis developed by Robert Waelder<sup>1</sup> and to the work on collective paranoia carried out by Roderick Kramer and David Messick.<sup>2</sup> For that matter, collective mental states were also elaborated by Emile Durkheim.<sup>3</sup> Societies, like individuals, do not develop psychoses or paranoias spontaneously;

<sup>1</sup> Samuel A. Guttman, “Robert Waelder and the Application of Psychoanalytic Principles to Social and Political Phenomena”, in *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (1986), pp. 835—862.

<sup>2</sup> Roderick M. Kramer and David M. Messick, “Getting by With a Little Help from Our Enemies: Collective Paranoia and Its Role in Intergroup Relations”, in Constantine Sedikides, John Schopler, and Chester A. Insko (eds.), *Intergroup Cognition and Intergroup Behavior* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), pp. 233—255.

<sup>3</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of the Sociological Method* (New York: Free Press, 1964), as cited in William W. Bostock, “South Africa’s language policy: Controlled status enhancement and reduction”, in *Mots pluriels*, no. 13 (April 2000), posted at [www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP1300wban.html](http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP1300wban.html) [accessed 13 May 2002].

there are always histories, situations, triggers, and the like. In the case of societies, the role of intellectuals<sup>4</sup> and political leaders cannot be ignored.

What occurred in Serbia in the years 1981—87 could be described as a massive tectonic shift in which perceptions, values, and expectations changed dramatically, preparing the way for Slobodan Milošević's seizure of power within the Serbian party apparatus and his launching of his abortive 'anti-bureaucratic revolution'. Even the terminology here is significant: a libidinal leader inevitably finds himself at war with the quasi-rationalism of bureaucracies. But the 1980s were also years in which Serbs increasingly revisited the past, raising questions about the prison camps at Goli Otok and Lepoglava, about Tito's establishment of Kosovo as an autonomous province, about the removal of factories from Serbia to the highlands in Slovenia and Croatia at the height of the Stalin-Tito conflict, and about the denigration of Draža Mihailović and his Chetniks by Tito-era historiography, and parading the bones of Tsar Dušan in a macabre clerical demonstration of national commitment. Particularly poisonous was Vasilije Krestić's 1986 article, "On the Origin of the Genocide of Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia", which argued that the "genocide against the Serbs in [Ustaša] Croatia is a specific phenomenon in our [Serbian] centuries-old common life with the Croats. The protracted development of the genocidal idea in certain centers of Croatian society...[which] did not necessarily have some narrow – but rather a broad – base, took deep roots in the consciousness of many generations [of Croats]."<sup>5</sup> Where Tito-era historiography had vilified both the *Ustaše* and the Chetniks, Serbian historiography after 1983 increasingly sought to rehabilitate the Chetniks, while ignoring the roles played by Ljoti and Nedi and exaggerating the numbers of Serbs dying during World War Two.<sup>6</sup> The result was that the Croatian fascists took on ever darker hues in the thinking of both Serbian intellectuals and the Serbian public at this time, while corresponding Serbian renegades were either whitewashed or disappeared from view. This phenomenon is known to psychologists as *dysphoric rumination*, which is defined as "the tendency for individuals to unhappily reimagine, rethink, and relive pleasant or unpleasant events...[resulting in an] increase [in] negative thinking about those events and contribut[ing] to a pessimistic explanatory style when trying to explain them."<sup>7</sup> Dysphoric rumination is considered a contributory factor to paranoid cognition.

It was also in the mid-1980s that Vladimir Dedijer and others began to ruminate about a Vatican-Comintern conspiracy, to which various other states were said to have subscribed. This increasing tendency to treat the Vatican, Germany, Austria,

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Nicholas J. Miller, "The Nonconformists: Dobrica Cosic and Mica Popovic Envision Serbia", in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (Fall 1999), pp. 515—536.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Ivo Banac, "The Dissolution of Yugoslav Historiography", in Sabrina Petra Ramet and Ljubiša S. Adamovich (eds.), *Beyond Yugoslavia: Politics, Economics, and Culture in a Shattered Community* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 55—56.

<sup>6</sup> On the exaggerations of casualties, see Vladimir Žerjavić, *Population Losses in Yugoslavia 1941—1945* (Zagreb: Dom i svijet and Hrvatski Institut za Povijest, 1997), pp. 53—113.

<sup>7</sup> Kramer and Messick, "Getting by With a Little Help", p. 246.

and other states as enemies, even before the breakup of 1991, culminated in Milošević's claim in a public speech in November 1988 – astounding some of his listeners – that “Serbia’s enemies outside the country are plotting against it, along with those in[side] the country.”<sup>8</sup> To the extent that such claims became part of the public discourse of Serbian society in the late 1980s, one may say that Serbia was increasingly given to *exaggerated perceptions of conspiracy*. As Kramer and Messick note, this tendency involves the overestimation of “...the extent to which [the group’s] perceived outgroup enemies or adversaries are engaged in coordinated and concerted hostile or malevolent actions against them.”<sup>9</sup>

In the latter half of the 1980s, Serbs were also repeatedly hearing (and believing) reports of Albanian rapes of Serbian women, the revival of *Ustaša* mentality among Croats, and the like, with not only Croats and Kosovar Albanians, but also the Hungarians of Vojvodina and the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina cast as villains in rumors. What interests me here is not the question of the extent to which one or another rumor had some truth to it, but rather the composite character of the deluge of rumors which – seemingly uniformly – attributed ill intentions to the non-Serbs of Yugoslavia. This syndrome, known as *sinister attribution error*, involves the “...tendency...to overattribute hostile intentions and malevolent motives to others.”<sup>10</sup>

And, given the foregoing, Serbs increasingly felt the need to be vigilant about their co-ethnics in Kosovo and Croatia especially. These concerns were effusively articulated in the infamous Memorandum drafted by members of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Art and leaked to the press in September 1986; according to the ‘Memorandum’, the federal system had been designed by Tito specifically to weaken Serbia, neither Bosnia-Herzegovina nor Montenegro had any legitimate claim to republic status, and the threat then posed to the Serbs of Croatia by their Croatian neighbors (in what was still communist-ruled Croatia) could only be compared to the fascist depredations of the NDH! The Serbian Writers’ Association on the Francuska ulica in Belgrade began to host weekly meetings to discuss the tribulations of the Serbs, and books and special issues of magazines were published detailing the situation of Serbs in Kosovo. Serbia, thus, slid into a habit of *hypervigilant social information processing*, a dangerous habit, in which every move taken by Croats, Albanians, and Muslims, was subjected to scrutiny and given potentially enormous significance.

One more element is needed in the equation – the *belief in a just world*. This belief, hypothesized by M. J. Lerner,<sup>11</sup> involves people’s need to believe that the world is basically just and that people get what they deserve. In the late 1980s, this belief fueled nationalist Serbs’ confidence that they would get what they thought they deserved – a Greater Serbia, in which few non-Serbs would remain. As the

<sup>8</sup> Belgrade Domestic Service (19 November 1988), trans. in Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), *Daily Report* (Eastern Europe), 21 November 1988, pp. 72–73.

<sup>9</sup> Kramer and Messick, “Getting by With a Little Help”, p. 247.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>11</sup> M. J. Lerner, *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion* (New York: Plenum Press, 1980).

nationalist discourse became dominant, justice was increasingly understood in terms of the national program.

The aforementioned reactions – dysphoric rumination, exaggerated perceptions of conspiracy, sinister attribution error, and hypervigilant social information processing – are associated, according to Kramer and Messick, with collective paranoia, manifested in social alienation, heightened antagonism toward others, and an attitude of hostility toward the outside world.<sup>12</sup> To the extent that Serbian society already manifested these symptoms by the late 1980s, it was already susceptible to the themes of Serbian war propaganda and vulnerable to manipulation. Fearful of the gathering conspiracies which it fancied were being concocted by its enemies and ever more troubled by the evolving memories of the national past, and perhaps especially of the sufferings associated with World War Two, Serbian society was receptive to a libidinal leader who would lift the weight from their shoulders and give Serbs what they “justly” deserved.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps Serbs might even experience the fulfillment of their historical aspirations, once associated, by Serb followers of Slovak Ljudevit Štúr and Czech Jan Kollár, with the unification of Slavs “under the holy Slav lime-tree.”<sup>14</sup>

## REDESIGNING THE EGO

How does a nation view itself and its place in the world? To the extent that one may speak of a national ‘ego’ or self-identity of the nation, that ego may become the subject of conscious manipulation, aiming at the redefinition and redesigning of the national ego itself. Insofar as the national ego, the self-identity of a nation, includes concepts of its relationship to other nations and its attitude toward those living within its territory, any redesign of the national ego will have consequences for issues of democracy vs. authoritarianism.

In the course of the 1980s and 1990s, Serbia’s myth-makers, whether literary figures such as Dobrica Ćosić or ordinary propagandists, painted Serbia in ever grander hues. Here was a Serbia existing beyond time and space,<sup>15</sup> a Serbia simultaneously non-European and the most European of all,<sup>16</sup> a Serbia standing guard over the most important spiritual values against the shallow materialism “of the extortionist-

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<sup>12</sup> Kramer and Messick, “Getting by With a Little Help”, pp. 245—248; and John Mirowsky and Catherine E. Ross, “Paranoia and the Structure of Powerlessness”, in *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 48, Issue 2 (April 1983), p. 236.

<sup>13</sup> See N. T. Feather, “Deservingness, Entitlement, and Reactions to Outcomes” and John H. Ellard, Christina D. Miller, Terri-Lynne Baumle, and James M. Olson, “Just World Processes in Demonizing” – both in Michael Ross and Dale T. Miller (eds.), *The Justice Motive in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Ivan Čolović, *The Politics of Symbol in Serbia: Essays in Political Anthropology*, trans. from Serbian by Celia Hawkesworth (London: Hurst & Co., 2002), p. 91.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14—15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

atheistic and demonic international community,"<sup>17</sup> a Serbia which, in its dreams of "complete separation" from this decadent world, went into orbit as the tenth planet of the solar system – "the Serbian planet".<sup>18</sup> As Ivan olovi has recounted in a brilliant work first published in 1997, the Serbian national political myth – which is to say, the set of propositions in wide circulation in Serbia – holds that Serbia is the oldest nation in the world, the nation from which all other nations developed, so that, as Relja Novakovi has urged, the peoples inhabiting states "from Great Britain to India" may ultimately trace their national origin back to the Serbian *Urvoik*.<sup>19</sup> Serbs were wont to boast about their martial prowess and about their fierceness in battle,<sup>20</sup> but also claimed some special advantage in the sexual realm as well. As Danilo Kiš put it, in a gloss on a poem written by Jan Kollár, "[O]ther peoples have good fortune, tradition, erudition, history, *ratio*, but genitals are ours alone."<sup>21</sup> And hence, the Serbian Insurrectionary War (1991—95) offered the prospect of the dawn of a new age for all of Europe, if not for the entire world. Serbia, compared variously (in the pages of *Pravoslavlje* and *Književne novine*) to Job, to the Jewish people, even to Christ himself, offered itself as the new savior. And just as Christ had to die on the cross, in order to rise again after three days, to claim his place in the Kingdom of Heaven, so too Serbia, whose tsar, Lazar, had renounced the earthly kingdom for a heavenly one in 1389, had to wait for six centuries before rising again, to claim its earthly kingdom, earned through long suffering. This grandiose redesign of the national ego was, at the same time, libidinal in nature in that it began the process of unleashing the energies of the libido and bringing about the conquest of the national ego by the nationalist libido. The claim that "All Serbs should live in one state" was, moreover, not universalizable, because it was premised on the notion that lands with mixed populations (Serbs and non-Serbs) should be assigned to the Serbian national state rather than to the national state of one or another non-Serb nation. This claim was, thus, a claim to unique entitlement, a claim which could be registered only in the realm of the libido.

As the national myth gained in strength, Serbian society became convinced of its unique role in history, its special suffering, and its entitlement to realize "heavenly Serbia" on earth. As Lerner noted in 1987, this *entitlement* "...is experienced affectively and motivationally as an imperative, a sense of requiredness between the actor's perceived outcomes and the person's attributes or acts."<sup>22</sup> Or, to put it another way, as the 1980s wore on, Serbia was reaching the point that Raskolnikov reached in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* as he reflected on whether he

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9, see also p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 67—68.

<sup>20</sup> A boast not without some foundation, judging by the terror which Serb forces fighting for Austrian Empress Maria Theresa struck into the hearts of their adversaries.

<sup>21</sup> Čolović, *Politics of Symbol*, p. 92n.

<sup>22</sup> M. J. Lerner, "Integrating societal and psychological rules of entitlement: The basic task of each social actor and fundamental problem for the social sciences", in *Social Justice Research*, Vol. 1 (1987), as quoted in Feather, "Deservingness, Entitlement", p. 335.

occupied some unique niche in the moral universe. But for Serbia, as for Raskolnikov, there were moral reservations to the fateful breach of the moral order – expressed by the Serbian students who bravely marched on the streets of Belgrade on 9 March 1991 or by the anti-war protestors led by Patriarch Pavle on 14 June 1992, who demanded that Milošević resign. But these reservations, though significant, did not carry the day. The Super-Ego would be stilled.

## THE STILLING OF THE SUPER-EGO

The processes of instilling in Serbs feelings of victimization and of entitlement to grandeur, and of their uniqueness, and of fears of various sorts of conspiracies against them were not all orchestrated. Neither the Serbian Church's "Appeal on Behalf of the Serbian Residents of Kosovo and Their Holy Shrines" (of 1982) nor the SANU Memorandum (of 1986) was part of a strategy orchestrated by the political establishment; the former came on the initiative of some of the priests in the Church, while the latter was the result of the autonomous decision taken by the Academy at a time when the ruling party of Serbia (a branch of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia) was still holding to the line that "every nationalism is (potentially) dangerous." But after Milošević's seizure of power in the Serbian party in late 1987, that party quickly took up the tasks dictated by that Memorandum and at that point, the continuation of these processes of 'neuroticization' or even 'psychoticization' of the Serbian public became a matter of official policy. Not only were the Serbs unique among the peoples of the planet, even constituting in some extra-spatial sense, their own planet, but they enjoyed the special favor of God. In talking of 'heavenly Serbia', the clerics of the Serbian Orthodox Church laid claim to divine sanction for the program of Serbian territorial expansionism<sup>23</sup> and, in the pages of *Pravoslavljje*, offered historical arguments for Serbian annexation of portions of eastern Slavonia. Later, it would even be claimed that God had specifically bequeathed Bosnia to the Serbs.<sup>24</sup> Karadžić himself claimed to be doing God's work and was, in turn, described by Dragan Nedeljkovi as "one of the heroes of this end of the twentieth century."<sup>25</sup>

But in spite of these changes to the national ego, which – as is well known – came at a time of shrinking economic capacities and general economic crisis, the collective 'super-ego' remained, as already mentioned, an obstacle even though, by early 1990, if not before, Milošević had decided on war against Croatia and perhaps also other republics.<sup>26</sup> To convert an already fearful population into soldiers prepared

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<sup>23</sup> Milorad Tomanić, *Srpska crkva u ratu i ratovi u njoj* (Belgrade: Medijska knjižara krug, 2001), p. 73.

<sup>24</sup> Čolović, *Politics of Symbol*, p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> Borisav Jović, *Poslednji dani SFRJ. Izvodi iz dnevnika* (Belgrade: Politika, 1995), p. 131 (entry for 26 March 1990). However, the demonization of Croats began in earnest in mid-summer 1989, at a time when Ivica Račan was generally expected to remain in power. The

to fight against their former neighbors and friends (often in a literal sense), they had to be released from moral constraints and infused with hatred for the target peoples. As osi noted in a widely read work of fiction, “[D]riven by hatred, all men will fight...; hatred is the force which gathers and unites all energies.”<sup>27</sup> Moral disengagement, as Albert Bandura, a widely respected expert on the subject, noted in a 1999 article, can be achieved through a combination of displacement of responsibility (with, in this case, the Milošević government assuming moral responsibility for the war), diffusion of responsibility (so that harm can always be attributed to the agency of others or to peer pressure), distortion of the consequences (aptly represented by the Bosnian Serb newspaper *Javnost*’s representation of the massacre at Srebrenica as the “cleansing of a blot on the map”), and, perhaps above all, dehumanization and demonization.<sup>28</sup> In Serbian war propaganda, as is well known, Croats were routinely described as fascistic and genocidal by nature, referred to as “*Ustaše*”, and accused of wanting to revive the NDH (a charge which was true of some Croats, to be sure, but not of the majority of Croats). In the eyes of Serb propagandists, all Bosnian Muslims were “Islamic fundamentalists” and all Albanians were “rapists” and secessionists. Demonization specifically makes it possible for perpetrators of atrocities to maintain a positive self-image even while victimizing innocent civilians – on the argument that “no one is innocent.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, paradoxically, Serb nationalists engaged in the war typically upheld two contradictory theses: that they themselves were innocent victims of Croats, Albanians, Bosnian Muslims, et al., and that all sides were guilty and no one innocent! Since they never uttered these sentences sequentially, the blatant absurdity of this belief system was never, as far as I am aware, exposed by the media of any nation. Even the demonization of Germany for its alleged responsibility in plotting the dismantlement of socialist Yugoslavia and for its alleged culpability in starting the war in the first place through its advocacy of the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia (after the outbreak of hostilities) played a useful role in Serbian war propaganda.<sup>30</sup> As Voltaire

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later Serbian claim that the tensions between Croats and Croatian Serbs began only after the election of Franjo Tuđman to the Croatian presidency is therefore contrary to fact.

<sup>27</sup> Dobrica Ćosić, *South to Destiny*, Vol. 4 of *This Land, This Time* [the English title provided for the translation of *Vreme smrti* ], trans. from Serbian by Muriel Heppell (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 145.

<sup>28</sup> Albert Bandura, “Moral Disengagement in the Perpetuation of Inhumanities”, in *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1999), pp. 196–200; and *Javnost* (22 July 1995), as quoted in Čolović, *Politics of Symbol*, p. 42. See also Herbert C. Kelman, “Violence without Moral Restraint: Reflections on the Dehumanization of Victims and Victimizers”, in *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (1973), pp. 25–61; and David M. Bersoff, “Why Good People Sometimes Do Bad Things: Motivated Reasoning and Unethical Behavior”, in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (January 1999), pp. 28–39.

<sup>29</sup> Ellard, Miller, Baumle, and Olson, “Just World Processes”, p. 352; and Carolyn L. Hafer, “Why We Reject Innocent Victims”, in Ross and Miller (eds.), *Justice Motive*, esp. pp. 109–110, 113, 116.

<sup>30</sup> For a corrective, see Sabrina P. Ramet and Letty Coffin, “German Foreign Policy Toward the Yugoslav Successor States, 1991–1999”, in *Problems of Post-Communism*, VI. 48, No. 1 (January–February 2001), pp. 48–64.

once said, "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities."<sup>31</sup>

We know that the process of moral disengagement was still far from complete at the time the war broke out (it was, in fact, never complete as such), because many of the JNA soldiers expressed confusion as to why they were suddenly fighting their fellow 'Yugoslavs', while many others went AWOL, even fleeing the country, rather than serve in the subsequent war against the Zagreb government. But several processes contributed to further stilling the stirrings of the Super-Ego. First, as the violence continued, it became part of the daily routine, it became unsurprising and many people ceased to be as shocked and outraged as they were when the fighting first broke out. Second, the role of some of the hierarchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church in sanctioning the violence first in Croatia and later in Bosnia-Herzegovina made a significant contribution toward moral desensitization. After all, if some of the official guardians of spirituality and morality have no qualms about supporting the war, why should ordinary Serbs worry about it? Moreover, insofar as the Church placed itself, thus, in alliance first with the Miloševi regime and then with Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić, the classic syndrome of *the agentic state* came into play. Experiments conducted by S. Milgram more than 30 years ago demonstrated that the desire of individuals to obey and please authorities is often sufficient to override moral reservations, *even in the absence of any feelings of having been victimized by those on whom the experimental subject was prepared to inflict harm.*<sup>32</sup> In the agentic state, individuals do not abandon their moral principles. Rather, they engage in moral rationalization, thereby convincing themselves that their actions are, in spite of appearances to the contrary, consistent with their core moral standards.

Other processes used to dull the moral sense include(d) the use of *euphemistic language* (in which mass murder and the forcible expulsion of non-Serbs were prettified by the term 'ethnic cleansing'), *advantageous comparison* (in which Muslims and Croats were said to have behaved far worse than the Serbs: for example, Patriarch Pavle joined Karadžić in claiming that there had been no rape camps operated by Serbs and no systematic rapes carried out by Serbs, even while accusing Croats and Muslims of having done precisely those things), *diffusion or displacement of responsibility*, and instances of *blaming the victim*. The last mentioned tactic was employed not only in the obvious sense of claiming that, for example, Tudjman's firing of Serbs from positions in the police justified an insurrection against Zagreb, but also in the more brazen sense of actually blaming the victims for the atrocities which they suffered. Thus, in Serbian propaganda, it was the Croats themselves who had rocketed Tudjman's presidential palace in 1991, it was the Croats themselves who had laid siege to the port city of Dubrovnik and were shelling the Croatian seaside town of Šibenik, it was the Muslims themselves who had fired upon their

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Bandura, "Moral Disengagement", p. 195.

<sup>32</sup> S. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), as summarized in Jo-Ann Tsang, "Moral Rationalization and the Integration of Situational Factors and Psychological Processes in Immoral Behavior", in *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (March 2002), pp. 27–28.

own co-ethnics in the Pirkala marketplace in 1994, and it was the Muslims themselves who had carried out the massacre at Srebrenica with the help of German and American operatives.<sup>33</sup> The Serbs even had an explanation for the alleged, consistent idiocy of their antagonists: they did these things in order to make the Serbs look bad.<sup>34</sup>

These various methods of moral rationalization and disengagement had some unintended side-effects. The first was that the habituation to violence led to an escalation of violence within the family, with husbands beating wives and fathers beating children.<sup>35</sup> Second, moral disengagement made it impossible to return to the behaviors and patterns of the pre-war days. As Jo-Ann Tsang explains, in an article published in the *Review of General Psychology*, "...the commission of immoral behavior makes it more costly [in terms of self-image] to act morally in the future, increasing the likelihood of further evil."<sup>36</sup> After all, to take pride in subscribing to an ethic of, let us say, non-violence, is virtually impossible for someone who has established a persona based on killing large numbers of "enemies of the nation."

## UNLEASHING THE LIBIDO

If modern warfare may be thought of as a libidinal state, then mobilizing people for war requires more than redesigning the national ego and stilling the super-ego. It also involves and requires an unleashing of the energies of the libido in the service of the national fantasy. As I have already noted, the process of unleashing the libido began simultaneously with the redesigning of the national ego, indeed was, from the beginning, an essential part of the Serb nationalist strategy of transforming the mood, values, expectations, hopes, ambitions, and thinking of ordinary Serbs. Sometimes the libidinal character of Serbian war propaganda was implicit, for example when Vuk Drašković said of the Serbian Army, "This is an army with the soul of a girl, the behavior of a priest, and the heart of Obilić."<sup>37</sup> At other times, sexuality was made explicit, whether through the use of highly attractive young women dressed in uniform to beguile young men into associating war with sex or by explicitly advising young men that soldiers were sexually attractive to young women or through

<sup>33</sup> See Zdravko Tomac, *The Struggle for the Croatian State...through Hell to Democracy*, trans. by Profikon (Zagreb: Profikon, 1993), pp. 417—418; and Mark Thompson, *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina*, completely rev. & expanded ed. (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1999), passim.

<sup>34</sup> The displacement of responsibility is scarcely unique to Serbs. In Kosovo in 1986, local Albanians blamed a local Serb for the fact that a glass bottle ended up in his arse. See the detailed discussion in Julie A. Mertus, *Kosovo: how myths and truths started a war* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), passim.

<sup>35</sup> Lepa Mladenović, "Beyond War Hierarchies: Belgrade Feminists' Experience Working with Female Survivors of War", in *Women and Therapy*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1999), pp. 84—85.

<sup>36</sup> Tsang, "Moral Rationalization", p. 44.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Čolović, *Politics of Symbol*, p. 51. Miloš Obilić is traditionally credited, in Serbian epic poems, with having sacrificed his own life in 1389 in order to stab the Ottoman sultan, Murad.

the sublimation of sexuality into the fetish of weapons, as in the refrain, "My companion is my rifle,...My bride is now my cartridge belt."<sup>38</sup>

But, as Freud knew, the libido embraces much more than just sexuality, and war finds its libidinal character not just in sex, but in violence itself. Richard Morrock notes how "in lynch mobs...[t]he killers do not look like people forced to take unpleasant measures in order to protect their communities from criminals – their own rationalizations for their sadistic acts. Instead, they look like they are having a good time."<sup>39</sup> The positive pleasure experienced in violence is reinforced by *moral inversion* (in which the Serbs imagined themselves as "remnants of a slaughtered people", as Serbian writer Matija Bečković put it) and by *the belittlement of one's antagonists*. Again this results in paradox: if one's enemies are threatening demons, how can they be fools? Or if they are fools, how can they be taken seriously as demons? But propaganda does not have to be consistent to be effective. On the contrary, by playing on contradictory themes, propaganda may actually be more effective than if it were entirely consistent.

Here the psychiatrists of both Belgrade and Zagreb played their part in creating belittling national stereotypes. Zagreb psychiatrists E. Klein and M. Jakovljevi both portrayed Serbs as suffering from a collective inferiority complex, with the latter attributing patterns of "pathological possessiveness" to the Serbs as a nation.<sup>40</sup> Belgrade psychiatrist J. Marić, for his part, found (in a work published in 1998) that Serbs were well-meaning and pacifist and had "never resorted to bad-mouthing or vilifying other peoples," while Croats were allegedly "egoistic" and were "not keen on giving themselves to other human beings" having been "enslaved by objects" (unlike the Serbs).<sup>41</sup> Jovan Rašković, at one time professor of psychiatry at the University of Belgrade and the later co-founder of the Serbian Democratic Party in Croatia, famously discovered that Croats were, as a people, suffering from a castration complex, living in fear that "something terrible" was going to happen to them and irrationally "afraid of being deceived." Judging that Serbs had "aggressive oedipal traits," Rašković concluded that "people who have a castration type of personality structure are obsessed by a fear of those who have aggressive oedipal traits."<sup>42</sup>

But belittlement need not be confined to national groups, as proven by the Serbian propaganda machine's charge that Tudjman had tried to kill himself "in order to spite Serbia."<sup>43</sup> Of course, this portrayed Tudjman simultaneously as self-destructive and as a bungler unable even to kill himself; in combination, this suggested that Tudjman was an unworthy adversary. Moreover, it is well known

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Čolović, *Politics of Symbol*, p. 53.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Morrock, "The Genocidal Impulse: Why Nations Kill Other Nations", in *Journal of Psychohistory*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Fall 1999), p. 159.

<sup>40</sup> Extracts quoted in Dušan Kecmanović, "Psychiatrists in times of ethnonationalism", in *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (June 1999), p. 310.

<sup>41</sup> Extracts quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 311.

<sup>42</sup> Jovan Rašković, *Crazy country* (Belgrade: Acquarius, 1990), as quoted in Kecmanović, "Psychiatrists in times", p. 312.

<sup>43</sup> Tomac, *Struggle for the Croatian State*, p. 418.

that in rape situations, it is common for the rapist to insult and disparage his victim, thereby communicating to her that she “deserved” to be raped.

Nationalism does not have to assume a libidinal form, perhaps not even in war. But in order to conduct an *offensive* war it is a huge advantage if those engaged in it, first, actively, even passionately, deny the fact of the war's being offensive, and second, succumb to a libidinal fever in which the murder of one's adversaries becomes both pleasurable and the object of cult worship. One need only think of the cult which grew up around Serbian war “hero” Željko Ražnjatović ‘Arkan’ to see the point. And yet, this embrace of Thanatos and Libido – death instinct and life instinct – at one and the same time banishes the nation to a “spectral” world occupying the twilight between life and death. Indeed, in the species of “eroticism”, if that is the word, represented by a well-known (to Serbs) poem by Desanka Maksimović,

Love exists only if it is deprived of touch, only in some sentimental, trashy suffering, from a distance, which is, however, the condition of [the] possibility of love, since [the] very closeness, every touch, deadens love; the body is the death of the life of love, the other is loved only as apparition, only as the spectre that is held at a distance: “Oh no, do not approach, I want from [a] distance to love and kiss these two eyes of yours”; in fact, we are not bodies at all, we are not alive either, we are somehow un-dead (to say nothing about the fact that the dead themselves can also approach us)...[O]ur bodies are not alive, or [rather], they are living graves; they are not in any way a source of enjoyment, and that is why the love relation should be spectral, un-dead.<sup>44</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Serbian society began to stray down the path to war more or less unwittingly. Already in the years 1981—86, long before the other republics experienced anything like a ‘national awakening’, Serbia (and here one may include Kosovo too) was already sliding into a syndrome in which myths, threats, the allure of victory, and belligerent rhetoric filled the public discourse, giving Serbs a sense of common destiny but also separating them, psychologically, from the other peoples of socialist Yugoslavia. That this was an unhealthy state of collective mind is clear from the prominence of the themes of victimization, conspiracy, national entitlement, and divine sanction of the Serbian national project, as well as from the insistent campaigns of dehumanization, demonization, and belittlement of Croats, Bosnian Muslims, and Albanians, as well as other peoples and states, which began at this time. This syndrome, in an individual, would be considered psychotic; to the extent that it permeated much of Serbian society, perhaps especially in the countryside, one may speak of Serbia having been sucked into a kind of collective psychosis. And to the

<sup>44</sup> Branka Arsić, “On the Dark Side of the Twilight”, in *Social Identities*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (December 2001), p. 562.

extent that Serbian war propaganda aimed at reinforcing and stimulating this state of mind, we may say that it aimed at inculcating and reinforcing neurotic and psychotic syndromes in Serbian society. This psychosis had its cultic saints – portraits of Milošević and Chetnik leader Draža Mihailović were often displayed alongside those of saints canonized by the Church – had its bards (such as Simonida Stanković and Ceca Ražnjatović), and even had its official music – “turbo-folk”, a pop mixture of folk-ethnic style with a rhythmic pounding beat. Moreover, this psychosis could even transport those infected to a state of consciousness which they mistook for a better world. Milošević, for example, arriving dramatically at Kosovo polje in a helicopter on 28 June 1989, told those gathered for the six hundredth anniversary of Serbia’s mythic confrontation with its national destiny, that in that 14<sup>th</sup>-century battle, Serbia had defended not just herself but all of European culture and civilization. Fine oratory might even be called the elixir of national psychosis. Here, one may recall what Socrates said to Menexenus on the subject:

O Menexenus! Death in battle is certainly in many respects a noble thing. The dead man gets a fine and costly funeral, although he may have been poor, and an elaborate speech is made over him by a *wise man* who has long ago prepared what he has to say...In every conceivable form they [the speakers] praise the city, and they praise those who died in war, and all our ancestors who went before us, and they praise ourselves also *who are still alive*, until I feel quite elevated by their laudations, and I stand listening to their words, Menexenus, and become enchanted by them, and all in a moment I imagine myself to have become a greater and nobler and finer man than I was before. And if, as often happens, there are any foreigners who accompany me to the speech, I become suddenly conscious of having [the experience of] a sort of triumph over them, and they seem to experience a corresponding feeling of admiration at me, and at the greatness of the city, which appears to them, when they are under the influence of the speaker, more wonderful than ever. This consciousness of dignity lasts me more than three days, and not until the fourth or fifth day do I come to my senses and know where I am – in the meantime, I have been living in the Islands of the Blessed.<sup>45</sup>

Or, one might say, under the holy lime tree.

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<sup>45</sup> Plato, *Menexenus*, 235 B-C, as quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 555.