

Marian Apparitions in Međugorje in the Dissolution of Yugoslavia

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In the dusk of 24 June 1981, the day when the Catholic Church celebrates Saint John the Baptist, a group of four girls and two boys ranging in age from twelve to seventeen years, announced that they had seen and talked with the Virgin Mary on the Crnica Hill near Međugorje in Herzegovina, Yugoslavia. Soon after, Međugorje became one of the world's major sites of Marian pilgrimages, second only to Lourdes and Fátima. Yet in the chronology that marked the 1980s as a decade of crisis with the breakup of Yugoslavia, the events in Međugorje have remained largely overshadowed by symbolically more recognizable and politically more palpable historical events like Tito's death in 1980 or the mass protests of the Kosovo Albanians earlier in 1981. In scholarly literature the "apparition" of Gospa (as the Virgin Mary is locally called) was most often interpreted as being provoked by an internal crisis within the Catholic Church.¹ This paper however follows the approach of anthropologist E. A. Hammel, who distinguishes at least three levels of inquiry in the Međugorje events – one that focuses on the apparition itself, one that looks at people's sightings, and one that explores the differing perceptions of these events.² Focusing on the last level, this paper hopes to contribute to the study of Međugorje's conflict potential within the context of the Yugoslav crisis in the 1980s by analyzing the various perceptions of the alleged

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- 1 The common belief is that the alleged apparitions have been used by the local Franciscans to challenge the authority of the diocese of Mostar-Duvno to which Međugorje belongs. The events followed a century of rivalry between members of the Franciscan Order, which run the parish, and the diocesan hierarchy which has tried to gain control of parishes in Herzegovina and replaced friars with ordinary clergy. MARKLE, Gerald E./McCREA, Frances B.: Međugorje and the Crisis in Yugoslavia. In: *Politics and Religion in Central and Eastern Europe*. Ed. by William H. SWATOS, Jr. Westport, Ct. 1994, 197–207, trace the conflict potential of Međugorje's apparitions and offer a bibliography of primary sources up to the beginning of the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Other studies thereafter include BAX, Mart: *Međugorje: Religion, Politics, and Violence in Rural Bosnia*. Amsterdam 1995; JONES, Michael E.: *The Međugorje Deception: Queen of Peace, Ethnic Cleansing, Ruined Lives*. South Bend, Ind. 1998; CLAVERIE, Elisabeth: *Les guerres de la Vierge*. Paris 2003; FOLEY, Donal Anthony: *Understanding Međugorje: Heavenly Visions or Religious Illusion?* Nottingham 2006; SKRBIŠ, Zlatko: From Migrants to Pilgrim Tourists. *Diasporic Imagining and Visits to Međugorje*. In: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33/2 (2007), 313–329. A different angle is JURKOVICH, James M./GESLER, Wilbert M.: Međugorje. *Finding Peace at the Heart of Conflict*. In: *Geographical Review* 87/4 (1997), 447–467, and BERRYMAN, Edward: Međugorje's Living Icons. *Making Spirit Matter (for Sociology)*. In: *Social Compass* 48/4 (2001), 593–610.
 - 2 HAMMEL, E. A.: *Lessons From the Yugoslav Labyrinth*. In: *Neighbors at War. Anthropological Perspectives on Yugoslav Ethnicity, Culture, and History*. Ed. by Joel M. HALPERN and David A. KIDDEKEL. University Park, Penn. 2000, 19–38.

apparitions and their transformation over time, without considering the actual veracity of the apparitions or people's sightings.

The scope of this analysis is threefold. First, I want to show how the apparitions of Međugorje "reintroduced" religion in a major way into Yugoslav society in the 1980s.³ For almost four decades, Yugoslavia's authorities judged religious feelings and manifestations as irrational, foreign, and hostile throwbacks historically destined for extinction. However, because the regime's authority was waning, it could do little to stem the nascent popular interest in religion. After attempts at repression failed to stop further "apparitions" and deter many thousands of worshippers from visiting Međugorje, the authorities belatedly changed their anti-religious attitude in the 1980s and endorsed a "vision" of their own: the apparition site was promoted as a tourist destination that would miraculously solve the Yugoslav economic crisis.

My second aim is to show that events in and around Međugorje served as one of the principal catalysts in the process of the resurgence of nationalism in Yugoslavia. Ethnic and religious homogenization processes were reinvigorated in the 1980s not only by nationalist myths and propaganda, but also by a range of beliefs in supernatural miracles, redemption and redeemers, with Međugorje featuring most prominently among the Catholic Croats. On the other hand, the proximity of the apparition site to a mass grave of Serbs massacred by Croatian fascist Ustašas during World War II motivated Serbian historians, media, and the Serbian Orthodox Church to claim that the whole affair was directed against Serbs. Thus, Međugorje also acquired a role in the victimization rhetoric that was a moving force and justification behind the resurgence of Serbian nationalism.

My final goal is to furnish a case-study on the ways in which the numerous factors deemed detrimental to Yugoslavia's stability and existence intersected. At the outset, the failure of the Yugoslav state and its ruling party to respond adequately to the challenge posed by Međugorje exposed their vulnerability. Later, Međugorje offered churches and segments of elites an issue with which to promote their nationalist agenda and open up historical events to new interpretations. I will attempt to illustrate this grossly condensed view of the multitude of implications proceeding from Međugorje's apparitions by examining the coverage they received in the press. More than any other medium, the press in Yugoslavia had a lasting influence on public opinion. This was because the government's control over the way in which information was collected and distributed was liberalized in the 1960s and became de-centralized at the level of the individual republics rather than centrally structured, as in the Soviet Union.⁴ Nevertheless, the press reflected the basic orientation of the ruling party in each of Yugoslavia's republics and often revealed competing political ideas and trends. In this decentralized country, the press was a forum for debate between the

3 For church and state relations in Yugoslavia see ALEXANDER, Stella: *Church and State in Yugoslavia since 1945*. Cambridge 1979, and especially PERICA, Vjekoslav: *Balkan Idols. Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*. Oxford 2002, for the period under consideration in this article.

4 Cf. ROBINSON, Gertrude Joch: *Tito's Maverick Media*. Urbana, Ill. 1977.

local party elites since it was possible for these media to present and back the different views of their respective political centers. By now it is widely recognized that the Yugoslav media in the late 1980s played a crucial role in the reformulation of politics along ethno-nationalist lines. They did this in part by inviting the masses to consider issues that were previously reserved for party and intellectual elites, thus fostering ethno-religious homogenization and stirring inter-ethnic conflict.⁵ Reporting about Međugorje is a case in point and provides insight into a process that lasted for a whole decade.

The Revival of Clericalist-Nationalists?

As soon as the first rumors of the apparitions spread, the press raised doubts about their spontaneity. One early article asked why the “Virgin has deemed to choose a flat, spacious hill capable of receiving several tens of thousands of the devout, and not one of the numerous other, neighboring hills quite unsuitable for the purpose.”⁶ Very soon, various doubts were put into their proper perspective by the local authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Socialist Front organization of the nearby city of Mostar judged the apparitions “a clear clericalist-nationalist ploy with the intent of manipulating people.”⁷ The high Bosnian-Herzegovinian dignitary, Branko Mikulić, stigmatized the Međugorje events in the same way, whereas the local Čitluk county official coined the term “Ustaša Virgin,” an assessment that was enthusiastically picked up by the Bosnian and the Serbian media.⁸ The correspondent of the official daily newspaper “Borba” was certain that “behind these séances there lies someone’s unseen hand, someone’s clever set-direction meant to manipulate religion and misuse it for nefarious purposes.”⁹ Under the headline “An Attack on the Heritage of the Revolution” “Borba” soon reported an incident involving a group of young men who, returning from Međugorje, sang Ustaša songs, causing consternation among passersby. This was seen as proof that the apparitions are “only an excuse for open pro-Ustaša manifestations meant to fan inter-ethnic and inter-religious hatred, to set various peoples and nationalities against each other and to disparage the attainment of socialist development and self-management.”¹⁰ Blame was laid squarely at the feet of the local

5 Cf. SLAPŠAK, Svetlana: *The War Started at Maksimir. Hate Speech in the Media*. Belgrade 1997; THOMPSON, Mark: *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Luton 1999.

6 SKIBA, Milorad: *Glorija’ na kršu* [“Gloria” on Limestone]. In: *Večernje novosti*, 6.7.1991. All the translations are mine.

7 Socialist Working People Alliance of Yugoslavia: *Manipulisanje vjerskim osjećanjima ljudi* [Manipulations of Peoples’ Religious Feelings]. In: *Borba*, 9.7.1991.

8 CVIČ, Christopher: *A Fatima in Communist Land?* In: *Religion in Communist Lands* 10/1 (1982), 4–9. Ustašas are notorious World War II Croatian fascists.

9 ŠANTIĆ, B.: *Bijela gospa iz tame* [The White Lady of Darkness]. In: *Borba*, 12.7.1991.

10 N. A.: *Napad na tekovine revolucije* [An Attack on the Heritage of the Revolution]. In: *Borba*, 15.8.1981.

Friar Jozo Zovko and the Bishop of Mostar Pavao Žanić. Sarajevo's political establishment and its daily newspaper "Oslobođenje" introduced yet another argument for the theory of an Ustaša ploy, asserting that Međugorje's apparitions were "a clericalist-nationalist setup less than a few miles away from the location where, during World War II, the Ustašas had murdered over 2,500 people of various nationalities because of their communist views or pro-communist sympathies."¹¹ Belgrade's press followed by accusing Friar Zovko in a series of articles of offending one million and seven hundred thousand Yugoslavs who had paid with their lives for the freedom of their country and for provoking new bloodshed.¹² It was yet another example where the number of fascist victims in general, and around Međugorje in particular, was greatly exaggerated and their political sympathies fully invented. Spreading the fear of new bloodshed, journalists in the fully state-controlled media only reiterated slogans of the ruling Communist party, which had based its legitimacy for almost four decades on its World War II anti-fascist struggle and the ideology of the so-called brotherhood and unity. In order to be persuasive, these two ideological pillars required a significant distortion of the past. Namely, the number of partisan war victims was inflated in order to magnify the significance of the anti-fascist struggle, while the civil war dimension was denied, and fratricidal and interethnic massacres were played down or interpreted within the simple fascist-antifascist binary.¹³

According to the journal of the politically influential Yugoslav Veterans' Association, the hill of the apparitions had been chosen because it was there in 1961 that the Veterans Association built a twelve-meter high obelisk to commemorate the victims of Ustaša massacres in the summer of 1941. The proof of the Ustaša ploy was also seen in the fact that one of the seers was the granddaughter of an Ustaša executioner who was caught twelve years after the war and shot. His hands were said to be "stained by the blood of 2,500 victims" who found death in the Šurmanci pit on the other side of the apparition hill.¹⁴ What this article and similar press coverage implied was that western Herzegovina was still an Ustaša stronghold and that the Catholic Church had chosen this specific region to revive the Ustaša movement with whom it

11 ŠAGOLJ, M.: Prikazanje Gospe [The Virgin Apparitions]. In: *Oslobođenje*, 14.8.1991; KARABEG, M.: Energična osuda neprijateljskog ispada [Strong Condemnation of Hostile Action]. In: *Oslobođenje*, 14.8.1991; Kleronacionalisti zaigrali čudne i opasne igre [Strange and Dangerous Games of the Clericalist Nationalists]. In: *Oslobođenje*, 18.8.1991.

12 ĐURIĆ, Muharem: Gospa' seje nacionalizam [The Virgin Spreads Nationalism]. In: *Politika*, 15.8.1991; MANDIĆ, M.: Fra Zovkov psalam mržnje [Friar Zovko's Psalm of Hate]. In: *Večernje novosti*, 20.8.1991; KLINČAR, Mirko: Šta je vaskrsla Čitlučka gospa? [What Did Čitluk's Virgin Revive?]. In: *Novosti* 8, 22.8.1991; KOLUKČIJA, DŽ.: Mračni ciljevi neprijatelja [The Dark Goals of Our Enemies]. In: *Ekspres politika*, 19.8.1991; NIKČEVIĆ, F.: Zloupotreba vjere [Abuse of Religion]. In: *Borba*, 23.8.1991; VESNIĆ, Milenko: Božija majka na mestu zločina [Mother of God at the Crime Scene]. In: *Večernje novosti*, 22.8.1991.

13 PAVLOWITCH, Stevan K.: *The Improbable Survivor: Yugoslavia and Its Problems, 1918–1988*. London 1988, 137–142.

14 MATIĆ, Jovanka/RUŽIĆ, Miodrag: Izgubljene bitke "svetog rata" [The Lost Battles of a "Holy War"]. In: *Četvrti jul*, 8.9.1981.

had “cordially cooperated” during the war. Thus, the theory of the Ustaša conspiracy under a religious guise became a conventional topos, the (Serbian) ethnicity of the victims was never spelled out.¹⁵

Tying apparitions to Ustaša crimes and spreading accusations against the Catholic Church hierarchy in fact only indicated the regime’s failure to produce a viable response to the problem at hand. Moreover, attacking clergy at a time when the ruling ideology and its proponents were increasingly seen as incapable of solving the country’s growing economic and political crisis only boosted the potential appeal of churches, the sole alternative institutions allowed. For the authorities Herzegovina proved an exceedingly sensitive region. Economically backward, the source of numerous emigrant workers and political émigrés, it boasted a long history of ethnic conflict and strong Church influence among the Catholic population. At the end of World War II, the Partisans had killed twenty-nine Franciscan monks accused of hiding Ustašas at the Monastery of Široki Brijeg, not far from Međugorje.¹⁶ This incident placed an insurmountable block between the local Catholic Church and the Communist authorities who came to regard the murdered friars as martyrs and as war criminals respectively. In the decades after World War II, the event was largely hidden from public knowledge and efforts were made to end the animosity between the Church and the Communist regime. Notwithstanding mutual official recognition at the highest level, including the agreement between Yugoslavia and the Holy See signed in 1969, reconciliation at the local level was not at all evident in the reactions of local party functionaries. One of them, Zdravko Dujmović, was reported as saying that

“In the past our men knew well how to square their accounts with enemies much worse and more terrible than the ones facing us today [meaning the apparitions], but still we do not underestimate the danger posed by them. For these enemies are treacherous and strike unexpectedly, drawing additional strength from under the robes of monks and from among terrorists and from wherever they can exploit our lack of vigilance and determination. In order to establish a foothold, they manipulate the people’s religious feelings, using whatever rusty weapons they have in their unsavory arsenal of the past, with the intent of destroying our road to a happier and better future.”¹⁷

From today’s perspective some of the charges made by local functionaries seem even comical – for example: “Our enemies, who declare themselves believers, often hang chains with oversized crosses around their necks so that everyone can see them and display them even outside their turtle-necked shirts. Some of them are walking bare-

15 The only exception was the article of BUBREŠKO, Draško: Otkud je došla Gospa? [Where Did the Virgin Come From?]. In: *Ilustrovana politika*, 15.9.1981.

16 RAMET, Sabrina Petra: Catholicism and Politics in Socialist Yugoslavia. In: *Religion in Communist Lands* 10/3, (1992), 256–274.

17 KARABEG, M.: Nacionalističke strasti i sablasti [Nationalist Passions and Ghosts]. In: *Oslobođenje*, 19.8.1981.

foot, while groups passing by the homes of local party functionaries loudly sing religious songs.”¹⁸

In addition, when faced with the apparitions, the Sarajevo media applied the hallowed principle of equal guilt for all ethnic and religious groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding whatever political problem arose. Members of each group were condemned for engaging in illegal public activities, with “illegality” meaning the mere assembly of oversize crowds to celebrate various religious holidays. The weekly “Svijet” went on to tie all of them together under the label of “clericalist, nationalist and counterrevolutionary” organized by “groups that have been discredited in the past for having served as a recruiting ground for various people’s outcasts and quislings,” concluding “Just as they did then, so do our enemies today receive their support from their cohorts in the sundry fascist Ustaša and Četnik organizations abroad, as well as from some intelligence agencies and some foreign reactionary circles.”¹⁹

Nevertheless, condemnations and insults did not succeed in discrediting mass religious gatherings, which in fact continued, and eventually set the stage for the mass political rallies that were at the core of the nationalist mobilization of the late 1980s.²⁰ This happened even though local authorities went on to assure everyone that all “honest religious people had seen through this dirty and dangerous game of our enemies” and that “the working people and all the citizens of this small Herzegovinian community, and especially its religious people, have censured all attempts to manipulate their religious sentiments in this manner.”²¹ Ivo Jerkić, a Croatian member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and thus one of the most competent to judge the whole affair, described it within the wider context of “worsening international relations [...] determined by the social character and the economic and political goals of the Great Powers, whose aim is to increase the gap and the antagonisms between the industrially developed countries and the developing ones, as well as to worsen the conditions of social, political, and economic inequality prevalent in the world today [sic].”²² For the sake of truth Jerkić also admitted that “[t]his does not mean that everything happening in Kosovo [where the political crisis was the most acute] is solely the result of the foreign factor. We are partly to blame as well. Domestic enemies have always raised their heads when outside pressures upon our country increase. That has been

18 OSMOVIĆ, Mensur: Maske skinute – čud ista [Shedding the Masks But Not the Intent]. In: Večernje novosti, 13.9.1981, bold in original.

19 Politički, a ne verski skupovi [Political, Not Religious Gatherings]. In: Večernje novosti, 12.7.1981, carried over from Svijet, July 1981.

20 PROŠIĆ-DVORNIĆ, Mirjana: Apocalyptic Thought and Serbian Identity: Mythology, Fundamentalism, Astrology, and Soothsaying as Part of Political Propaganda. In: Ethnologia Balcanica 4 (2000), 163–181, at 169.

21 Socialist Working People Alliance of Yugoslavia: Manipulisanje vjerskim osjećanjima ljudi [Manipulations of Peoples’ Religious Feelings]. In: Borba, 9.7.1981.

22 KARABEG, M.: Kleronacionalisti zaigrali čudne i opasne igre [Strange and Dangerous Games of the Clericalist Nationalists]. In: Oslobođenje, 18.8.1981.

proved by past events, starting with the 1948 crisis, to 1971,²³ all the way to the present incidents [in Međugorje], though these internal forces are always in the function of the foreign factor.” Finally, addressing the Međugorje apparitions, Jerkić said, “We have given no cause for this situation, but we are well able to evaluate and judge what it means. It is well known what is acceptable in this country and what is not, what is in open collision with our laws, and in what manner the perpetrators of unlawful acts must answer for their misconduct.”²⁴

Sanctions soon followed. On 12 August 1981, the police prevented further gatherings in Međugorje and arrested Friar Jozo Zovko. The press reported:

“The Council of the Community of Međugorje and the local Committee for People’s Defense and Communal Self-Protection perfected a plan of operational measures and activities under the extraordinary conditions caused by the evidence of hostile activity. Since August 25 the local community has taken over the control and defense of its territory. Eleven checkpoints with 24-hour shifts have been established and units of Civil Defense and Communal Self-Protection have been engaged. Through the exemplary determination of the population to resist the misuse of religion for political purposes and through the exhibited readiness to defend the fruits of the revolution and guard brotherhood and unity, the Virgin Mary has, in short, been abolished.”²⁵

On 22 October 1981, Friar Zovko was sentenced to three and a half years in prison for having insulted the religious feelings of the citizens and having smeared the socialist political system of Yugoslavia in his sermons. Soon after that, two more Franciscans, the editors of a Franciscan magazine, were sentenced to eight and five and a half years respectively. In court, Friar Zovko defended himself by claiming that when preaching on wrong teachings and false teachers he had actually meant Pavao Žanić, the Bishop of Mostar, and not Marxist science nor the policies of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia.²⁶ Many other people received short-term sentences for misdemeanor offences.

Some foreign observers attributed such a harsh official reaction at the very beginning of the Međugorje apparitions to the regime’s fear that the outbreak of Kosovo Albanian nationalist demands would be followed by an eruption of nationalism among the Croats, deemed politically the most sensitive Yugoslav nation.²⁷ Still, several thousand people continued to congregate daily at the place of the “incident” despite the authorities’ censure. Franciscans, the largest and most influential of the Catholic Church orders, stood behind the gatherings and drew support through its international ties where the disapproval of the Church hierarchy mattered little. Some important Church leaders in Croatia also independently supported the growing Marian movement as an instrument of anticommunist struggle and Croatian national homogenization.²⁸ Soon

23 In 1948, Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito made a break with Stalin, and in 1971, Tito quashed a Croatian nationalist revival.

24 KARABEG (cf. n. 21).

25 MATIĆ/RUŽIĆ (cf. n. 14).

26 BEŠKER, Inoslav: Što krije međugorska “snimka”? [What Does the Međugorje “Snapshot” Hide?]. In: *Vjesnik*, 10.12.1981.

27 CVIČ (cf. n. 8).

28 PERICA (cf. n. 3), 118–120.

after, the Serbian Orthodox Church also “raised its head”, filing a series of petitions and creating another problem for an already shaken regime.²⁹ The petitions of Serbian clerics were described in Zagreb as the apotheosis of Great Serbian nationalism, whereas Belgrade media proved much more lenient admitting some problems and the responsibility of the authorities. Unable to repress the Church activities and rising religious sentiments, the authorities in Serbia, long before Milošević’s rise to power, began to shift their stance. In a bid to regain some of their lost legitimacy, they began to change their strategy by offering a hand to churches. In a matter of years churches all over Yugoslavia would overtake the role of nominal representatives of various ethnic groups. In multinational Bosnia and Herzegovina, faced with the most pronounced manifestation of religiosity, change was slow but on the horizon as well.

A Tourist Mecca

After initial repression the party leadership realized that they not only failed to banish the problem domestically but attracted even more unwanted attention abroad. Accordingly, they instructed the media to avoid the issue and relegated it to the police and local authorities, intentionally leaving the rest of the Yugoslav and foreign public out of the unresolved affair. It was only in 1985, following an almost three-year hiatus in media reporting, that Međugorje was rediscovered and then began to receive entirely different press coverage. The change came as a result of growing tolerance for religion and implicitly meant accepting the public display of religious sentiment. In the meantime, the alleged apparition site became a center of attraction for foreign pilgrims and simple tourists, and foreign tour operators began doing a brisk business bringing in these visitors. The Croatian press was the first to criticize the political hostility towards the apparitions, pointing that at the root of the Međugorje apparitions there is indeed a conflict, but not with the Church as much as within it.³⁰

The turning point in the Yugoslav media coverage of Međugorje and religion in general came with the popular *Kino-oko* television special in October 1985. Aired from Belgrade in the then single Serbo-Croatian language, it was not accessible to viewers from Bosnia and Herzegovina in a move lamely explained as a need to save electrical power by showing a shorter program. The official position toward religion

29 Two petitions by Serbian clergy concerned with the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo, the ban on religious instruction and on the building of new churches, especially the Church of Saint Sava in Belgrade, were followed by a Declaration by the Holy Assembly of Bishops held in June, which raised the same issues. Cf. ALEXANDER, Stella: The Serbian Orthodox Church Speaks Out in Its Own Defense. In: Religion in Communist Lands 10/3 (1982), 331–333.

30 BEŠKER, Inoslav: Čudno Gospino “čudo” [The Strange “Miracle” of the Virgin]. In: Vjesnik, 18.12.1984; IVANKOVIĆ, Nenad: Gospa protiv biskupa [The Virgin Against the Bishops]. In: Danas, 20.12.1984. Mostar’s Bishop Žanić described the whole Međugorje affair as a collective hallucination, and the Bishops’ Conference of Yugoslavia and the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith called on the clergy to discourage the pilgrimages.

had relaxed to the point where it became publicly acceptable to allow several clergyman to take part, in addition to the usual experts, with all of them stressing the importance of religion in the human makeup. A Franciscan theologian, Ljudevit Rupčić, was given an opportunity to remark wittily: “All of us believe in something: in God or in an idea, only our gods have gotten into something of a scrap.”³¹

In the meantime, inflation in Yugoslavia had reached 100 percent annually, and the foreign debt reached 20 billion dollars, prompting the authorities to pay ever-increasing attention to the development of tourism as a source of hard foreign currency necessary for servicing the debt. And so it came to pass that those who had been the most vociferous fighters against clericalist nationalism in Međugorje began writing about the benefits of pilgrim tourism. The press easily found new objects to attack such as the inertia of Yugoslav tourist agencies, their reluctance to exploit religious tourism, and the inexplicable hesitation of the government to initiate a no-holds-barred advertising campaign to promote the Međugorje Virgin. The articles bore titles such as “The Virgin is ‘Working’ for the State”, “Herzegovinian Economic Miracle”, “Apparitions of Tourism in Međugorje”, “Virgin of Gold”, and “Dollars in the Valley of Tears”.³² One journalist wrote that “[a]theists start believing only when they meet their materialist God head on.”³³

Criticism was now directed elsewhere. Since this was the time of the AIDS hysteria, the media noted that AIDS patients were pouring in searching for a cure, whereas the local authorities had done little or nothing to ensure proper sanitation and hygiene.³⁴ Others criticized the fact that the local authorities allowed Roma to spread their tents and sell their kitschy souvenirs.³⁵ But the money was the greatest concern. In 1987, enthusiastic journalists estimated that the number of pilgrims had reached eight million and profit was claimed at one billion dollars. These figures were never really calculated and no serious study was ever undertaken to raise doubt about the figures, whose inflated ratio justified the new “Tourist Mecca” cause. There were more taxis in Međugorje, one newspaper claimed, than along the whole of the Adriatic

31 Print media continued discussions initiated in the program. MEĐEDOVIĆ, Borislav/MARKOVIĆ, Nataša: *Gospa sa pojačalima* [Virgin Amplified], *Sukob u krilu crkve* [Conflict Within the Church], *Gospa bira prosečne* [The Virgin Picks Out the Average], and *Veruje ko veruje* [Whoever Believes Believes]. In: *Večernje novosti*, 17.–20.10.1985.

32 MLIVONČIĆ, Ivica: *Gospa “radi” za državu* [The Virgin is “Working” for the State]. In: *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 30.6.1985; ZDJELAR, Radmila: *Hercegovačko privredno čudo* [Herzegovinian Economic Miracle]. In: *Start*, 28.12.1985; GUTIĆ, R.: *Gospa, devize i džeparoši* [Virgin, Hard Cash, and Pickpockets]. In: *Večernje novosti*, 8.12.1986; ZVIŽDIĆ, Salih: *Ukazanje turizma u Međugorju* [Apparitions of Tourism in Međugorje]. In: *Vjesnik*, 14.12.1986; MEĐEDOVIĆ, Borislav: *Gospa od zlata* [Virgin of Gold] and *Gospa sa dna čaše* [Virgin From the Bottom of a Glass]. In: *TV Novosti*, 3. and 10.6.1987; VUJASINOVIĆ, Dada: *Dolari u dolini suza* [Dollars in the Valley of Tears]. In: *Duga*, 26.12.1987.

33 JAUKOVIĆ, Milovan: *Bože blagi* [My Dear God]. In: *Večernje novosti*, 1.8.1987.

34 KOVAČEVIĆ, Slobodan/PEKIĆ, Milan: *Bolest oko Gospe* [Disease Around the Virgin]. In: *Oslobođenje*, 6.2.1988.

35 MARJANOVIĆ, Višnja: *Oči u oči sa Gospom* [Face to Face with the Virgin]. In: *Ilustrovana politika*, 7.7.1987.

Coast. This dramatic change of official sentiment was best illustrated by a joke of the time: “Those who until a year ago said that the Virgin Mary appeared in Međugorje got two months in jail; today those who say she did not risk getting the same.”³⁶

As press began writing about Međugorje as the tourist attraction of the century, another “finding” occurred. Mexican amateur historian Robert Salinas Price claimed he had discovered the true site of ancient Troy in the village of Gabela, near Međugorje.³⁷ Cultural anthropologist Svetlana Slapšak saw this “discovery” and the ensuing frenzy orchestrated by state media as an official authorization of charlatanism, and in her essay “How It All Began” she considered this event one of the possible points of crystallization of nationalism and irrationality in the Yugoslavia of the 1980s.³⁸ Though merely a second-rate phenomenon, the mass enthusiasm for the “discovery of Troy” and especially the authorities’ support for it, became indicative of the public acceptance of the Međugorje apparitions as well. It inaugurated a time of prophets, miracles, and redemption, best illustrated by the immense but short-lived popularity of one Dragan Marjanović, called “the Messiah from Mali Mokri Lug”.³⁹ Newspapers were now bombarded with texts attempting to substantiate the veracity of the Međugorje phenomenon. Belgrade’s periodical *Ilustrovana politika* for example published an exclusive story on how Swami Vishnu Devananda, a Hindu guru, confirmed first-hand the special energy possessed by Međugorje and its youthful Virgin Mary seers.⁴⁰ The Italian Catholic press was regularly quoted when it reported the supernatural reactions of the young seers and special telephone lines were established carrying messages from the Virgin.⁴¹ The apocalyptic and supernatural acted as “media in disguise” and, as anthropologist Prošić-Dvornić noted, became chief tools for the dissemination of political propaganda in later Yugoslav conflicts. Admitting that the so-called apocalyptic mode of thinking can be found anywhere, Prošić-Dvornić insisted that it was the question of balance and intention that distinguished it and became so politically powerful in the Yugoslav context, aiding regimes established in the late 1980s in sustaining power for an extended length of time in spite of all their disastrous failures.⁴²

The new enthusiastic wave of reporting on Međugorje paid little attention to the statement of the officially appointed church commission that there was nothing supernatural in the Međugorje apparitions. More importantly, the references to neigh-

36 ČAUŠEVIĆ, Enver: Nepriznata Gospa [Unrecognized Virgin]. In: Večernje novosti, 14.7.1987.

37 SOHA, ĐAVOR: Kad neće Odisej hoće Gospa [If Odysseus Won’t, the Virgin Will]. In: Borba, 16.8.1986.

38 SLAPŠAK, Svetlana: Ogledi o bezbrižnosti [Essays in Mindlessness]. Belgrade 1994, 57.

39 Dragan Marjanović, called the “Messiah from Mali Mokri Lug,” was a supposed miracle healer who claimed that he was Jesus Christ himself. In 1986 and 1987 he was extremely popular and then he suddenly disappeared. Cf. RAMET, Sabrina Petra: Social Currents in Eastern Europe. Durham 1991, 145.

40 MILOŠEVIĆ, Snežana: Međugorske vibracije i Himalajska studen [Međugorje Vibrations and Himalayan Cold]. In: Ilustrovana politika, 23.6.1987.

41 OSTOJIĆ, Stevo: Blažena na vezi [Blessed Virgin on the Line]. In: Politika, August 17.8.1986; VUKOVIĆ, Manjo: Gospa na ultra-kratkim talasima [Virgin on Short-Wave]. In: Večernje novosti, 12.8.1986; Priviđenje iz kasete [Apparitions from a Tape]. In: Večernje novosti, 14.8.1986; KACURIĆ, Vojin: Gospa na telefonskoj vezi [Virgin on the Phone]. In: Nada, 30.5.1987.

42 PROŠIĆ-DVORNIĆ (cf. n. 20), 178 f.

boring pits and wartime massacres disappeared. Yet the absence of such commentary was short-lived. Religion and church were too important to be equated with tourism, especially in a country where religious affiliation or background acted as a principal dividing factor among its constitutive ethnic groups. Empirical studies undertaken in the mid-1980s testify to an intense renewal of religiosity throughout Yugoslavia, evidenced through both an increased denominational affiliation and church attendance and practice.⁴³ The “return to faith” among Orthodox Serbs was the most spectacular since they had previously counted as the least devout among Yugoslavia’s major ethnic and religious groups. The growing interest in religion in Serbia, however, went hand in hand with an ever growing curiosity about the past, or rather, the hidden version thereof. At issue was the suffering of Serbs during World War II, especially the alleged criminal role of the Catholic Church and its prelates in massacres of Serbs. This issue gained prominence with the appearance of two books, a reprint of Viktor Novak’s book “Magnum Crimen” in 1986, and Vladimir Dedijer’s “The Vatican and Jasenovac” in 1987, which quickly came to color the Serbian perception of Marian apparitions in Međugorje. At the same time, a different shift was taking place in Croatia, where new religious freedoms saw the Catholic clergy claim moral leadership over the Croat people. Whereas the official Communist regime in Serbia increasingly adopted nationalist views, the Croatian leadership allowed for the mobilization and homogenization of Croats by the Church and dissident nationalists.⁴⁴ Accordingly, the reporting of the semi-autonomous press of Yugoslavia’s constitutive republics became ethnically colored if not fully biased.

The Pit under Our Lady's Cloak

In May of 1988, Belgrade’s most popular and taboo-breaking magazine *Duga* published a long story that was to change the way the Serbian press covered the Međugorje phenomenon. Relying on press coverage from 1981, the Međugorje apparitions were unambiguously equated with the endorsement of war crimes committed against the Serbs. With that thesis in mind, facts were distorted, dates falsified, and the already enormous number of victims overstated many times over. The authors of this particular report did not deliver their charges outright but released them through the words of the people in their story, that is, through the accounts of the surviving villagers of the neighboring village of Prebilovci, and then tagged their comments onto them. The conclusion ended with a rhetorical question: “How did the Virgin Mary manage to

43 FLERE, Sergej: Denominational Affiliation in Yugoslavia 1931–1987. In: *East European Quarterly* XXV/2, (1991), 145–165, at 146.

44 PERICA (cf. n. 3), 56–73.

turn Međugorje, a notorious Ustaša stronghold of the last World War, into a holy sanctuary – only the Devil can explain.”⁴⁵

Such rhetorical questions, however, were not left unanswered for long. Milan Bulajić, the self-proclaimed leading Serbian expert on World War II genocide⁴⁶, claimed that the Virgin Mary played a crucial role in Ustaša propaganda and that a significant number of Catholic clergy had wholeheartedly supported the genocide against the Serb population. Catholic clerics, in his opinion, had seen a chance to create a *civitas dei*, that is, God’s state, by helping Ustašas to cleanse “the Croat land” from the Orthodox. Bulajić illustrated his argument with the case of the friar Bono Jelavić, the prelate of Ripnik, who in his sermon of 22 June 1941, called on every faithful Roman Catholic “who had killed a Serb to come to him and be absolved of sin.”⁴⁷ What was going on in Međugorje was only a continuation of such satanic plans, Bulajić warned. The characterization of Serbs as victims was supported by a claim that injustices towards the Serbs had never been understood or publicly admitted. In this view the peoples of Yugoslavia whose members had committed crimes against Serbs had never adequately distanced themselves as a whole from these crimes. Even those nations and individuals who had never done the Serbs any grave wrong had failed to recognize that these massacres took place and to commemorate them, and therefore belittled them. Furthermore, the perpetrators had never been adequately punished for their crimes, nor had the places of slaughter been adequately marked; the blame for all of this was laid at the feet of the Yugoslav authorities. This thesis was echoed in the complaints of the survivors in a *Duga* article: “We had wanted to speak out a long time ago, but there was no one to listen ... They wouldn’t let us!”⁴⁸

Yet, as we have seen, the massacres had been widely spoken about only a few years before when apparitions at Međugorje had immediately been tied to the neighboring pits and gravesites. Bulajić and Belgrade journalists with no new evidence merely repeated the statements from 1981.⁴⁹ The only difference lay in the fact that previously the domestic press, while duly naming the fascist Ustaša perpetrators, had failed to assign an ethnic identity to the victims, which were simply dubbed “anti-fascists”. Creating an image of World War II as a clear-cut conflict between fascists and antifascists in which antifascists were only Communist-led partisans, the official propaganda had indeed suppressed an important segment of the truth of World War

45 MALIŠIĆ, Vesna/VUKOTIĆ, Višnja: Jama pod gospinim skutom [The Pit Under Virgin’s Cloak]. In: *Duga*, 14.5.1988.

46 Due to his outspoken engagement, Bulajić, a former judge, was rapidly promoted to the position of director of the newly founded Museum of Genocide Victims in Belgrade and became author of publications such as *Ustaški zločini genocida i suđenje Andriji Artukoviću 1986* [Ustaša Crimes of Genocide and the Trial of Andrija Artukovic 1986]. Vol. I–IV. Belgrade 1988–1990; IDEM: *Never Again: Genocide of the Serbs, Jews, and Gypsies in the Ustashi Independent State of Croatia*. Belgrade 1991; IDEM: *The Role of the Vatican in the Break-up of the Yugoslav State*. Belgrade 1993.

47 BULAJIĆ, Milan: Došla sam namerno [I Came with a Purpose]. In: NIN, 18.9.1988.

48 MALIŠIĆ/VUKOTIĆ (cf. n. 45).

49 BULAJIĆ, Milan: Interview. In: NIN, 17.6.1988; RAKIĆ, Zoran: Gospin izbor [The Virgin’s Choice]. In: NIN, 14.8.1988.

II, with detrimental consequences. As we have seen, the story of Partisans killing 29 friars in Široki Brijeg was similarly suppressed as it was difficult to uphold the image of clerics as fascists.

The new coverage of Međugorje in the Serbian press caused immense anger in Bosnia. After years of reaping profits from tourism, the local authorities now found themselves defending an entirely different position. Međugorje was proclaimed an example of religious freedom and tolerance. The antifascist history of the region was stressed and the security situation was praised denying any controversy over the apparitions. Šimun Toma, the new president of the local Socialist Front denounced the “Duga” article as “pouring salt onto the still bleeding wounds.” In his view “Duga” journalists were inciting the peoples of Yugoslavia to new ethnic and religious conflicts, vengeful remembrance, and the revival of the “worst crimes of the nationalists, in order to have the conflicts continue indefinitely.”⁵⁰

The difference in the tone of the articles written by journalists who had previously only copied each other is striking but understandable once decentralized media fell under the complete domination of local political elites. The Serbian press lessened its interest in the Međugorje tourist boom, whereas the Bosnian official “Oslobođenje” increased its positive coverage of the same phenomenon. On the occasion of the ninth anniversary of the apparitions’ first appearance, “Oslobođenje” ran an enthusiastic spread claiming that over one hundred thousand pilgrims had gathered in Međugorje without regard to color, race, social or religious affiliations, cultural or educational status, age, social position or world view.⁵¹ This idyllic vision of Međugorje combined the “Brotherhood and Unity” ideology of Communist Yugoslavia with the newly launched Western ideal of multiculturalism. Contrary to this picture, a correspondent of Belgrade’s “Večernje novosti” described Međugorje as shadowed by the leader of the newly formed nationalist Croat party, Franjo Tuđman, and the Croat checkerboard flag.⁵² “Politika’s” journalist Muharem Durić saw two different columns of people. The first was a sad procession which,

“with its wooden cross, greatly clashed with the glittering automobiles, especially since the dresses of the mourners were vastly different from the shorts of the foreign female tourists. Thus two entirely disparate columns of people could be seen in a single moment and at the same location. One group was made up of the villagers of Prebilovci, near Čapljina, on their way to the slaughter pit of Šurmanci, to pay respect to their relatives who, half a century ago, had perished from Ustaša knives, whereas the other column trudged up the limestone hill to visit the site of the apparitions.”⁵³

50 KARABEG, M./KRNDIJE, M.: Mračni spektar “Duginih” poruka [The Dark Specter of Duga Messages]. In: Oslobođenje, 8.6.1988.

51 KRNDIJE, M.: Međugorje. In: Oslobođenje, 26.6.1990.

52 GUTIĆ, R.: Teskoba u gospiinom hladu [Anxiety in the Virgin’s Shadow]. In: Večernje novosti, 5.5.1990.

53 DURIĆ, Muharem: Razdor i među fratrima [Dissension Among the Friars]. In: Politika, 12.8.1990.

Evoking personal traumatic memories of World War II and mythologizing the events that caused them, the Belgrade press forged an image of collective victimization. Furthermore, by constructing narratives around a traumatic experience where Serbs were singled out as the sole victims, these stories inevitably raised the question of what had caused them, and Međugorje offered the most visible opportunity to speculate on this matter. In Međugorje, according to Serbian press coverage, the “heirs” of the unpunished perpetrators of World War II crimes perpetuated their crime by orchestrating the Marian apparitions. The press was soon joined by the Serbian Church. In a letter from 26 June 1989 regarding relations with the Catholic Church, the Holy Assembly of Serbian Bishops stated that the existence of numerous pits and execution grounds around Međugorje, together with the Jasenovac concentration camp, were obstacles in the reconciliation process. Moreover, it insisted on the Catholic Church’s responsibility for demonizing Serbs during World War II and the subsequent concealment and minimization of the mass killings. A bitter polemic arose on the pages of “Pravoslavljje” and “Glas Koncila”, their official newspapers, concerning the number of victims of Jasenovac and the massacres in Herzegovina, with sharp accusations coming from both sides.⁵⁴ In 1989, the nationalist squabbles of historians and writers were extended to other media and joined by former dissidents and now leaders of the newly allowed political parties. In a predictable move, the exhausted communist nomenclature also accelerated its production and “consumption” of enemies of all stripes in order to overcome its crisis of legitimacy. In 1990, the Serbian Orthodox Church embarked upon a mass cycle of commemorations for the Serbian victims of World War II, including those from the vicinity of Međugorje. A chapel was built in Prebilovci to hold the remains of over eight hundred murdered men, women, and children exhumed from the Šurmanci Pit, with the Serbian cultural and political elite attending the proceedings. Participating in what was promoted as a proper burial for the martyred members of the Serbian nation bolstered the moral and political legitimacy of the new nationalist authorities.⁵⁵ The leader of the newly founded Serb party in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Radovan Karadžić, theatrically descended into the pit during the exhumation.⁵⁶ The commemorative (re)burial of the exhumed bones led by the Patriarch and several bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the following year was transmitted by electronic media, and a special TV program entitled “Here are our Children” was aired on Belgrade TV on 19 April 1991. The underlying message of speeches delivered by political leaders at the commemoration was that Serbs, descendants of victims, cannot live together with Croats, descendants of slaughterers. A statement of one of the participants, Božidar Vučurević, the Serb mayor of the nearby town of Trebinje, sounds prophetic in retrospect: “This time the dead will start the war; the victims are finally

54 RADIĆ, Radmila: The Church and the Serbian Question. In: *The Road to War in Serbia*. Ed. by Nebojša POPOV. Budapest 2000, 247–273, at 255.

55 DENICH, Bogdan: *Ethnic Nationalism. The Tragic Death of Yugoslavia*. Minneapolis, Minn. 1997, 30–33.

56 Ispit iz humanosti [Exam in Humanity]. In: *Borba*, 29.7.1990.

awake and the executioners fearing punishment.”⁵⁷ The broadcast images included a row of coffins that stretched for one and a half kilometers with bags of exhumed bones passing down a long line of survivors or descendants of victims.⁵⁸ Speleologists who undertook the exhumation, and pathologists from the Belgrade Military Hospital who conducted the examination of the remains later received the highest decoration of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In doing this, the Church insisted it sought neither revenge nor bad blood but a search for the truth necessary to prevent the rise of new evil. However, the timing, the iconography, and the speeches accompanying the reburial of victims’ bones pointed to a quite different conclusion. The contemporary situation of Serbs in Croatia was compared to the one during World War II and described as a mere continuation of their past victimization.

Staging exhumations and reburials in these circumstances turned into powerful emotional events that, as Katherine Verdery has shown, were capable of bonding the families of the victims in anger against the enemy – in this case, the entire ethnic group to whom the perpetrators belonged.⁵⁹ The fact that an accounting was demanded fifty years after the crime had taken place allowed for fluidity in assigning guilt to the perpetrators’ entire community, or to their Church. Furthermore, the ritual exhumations in Herzegovina, together with the help of media and the officials and intellectuals present, acted to bond all members of the nation as victims, including Serbs in Serbia whose ancestors did not have any negative experience with Croats.⁶⁰ The internalization of the trauma and the pervasiveness of the victimization discourse prepared the Serbian public to conceive of a right to preventive defense. Once the conflict erupted in the fall of 1991, the Serbian Orthodox Church eventually declared in its communication with international mediators that “the victims of the genocide cannot live together with their past and perhaps future executioners.”⁶¹

In Croatia, allegations of the Ustaša war crimes and the ceremonial exhumation of the victims’ remains were regarded as aggressive attacks of a politically-motivated Serbian Orthodox Church. The Croatian daily “Slobodna Dalmacija”, wrote:

“Međugorje is an oasis of peace and a place of gathering for unarmed people whose only weapons are their faith and hope. [...] [I]n Međugorje, of all the Christians in the world, the only ones missing are the pilgrims of Serbian Orthodox faith. The Serbian Orthodox Church has pronounced Međugorje an ‘Ustaša ploy,’ since, in its belief, the only reason for the events there is the proximity of a burial pit of Serb victims of the Independent State of Croatia. Orthodox Serbs are thus proving themselves the only religious confession gathering – in the vicinity, or elsewhere – not for religious reasons but exclusively with the aim of achieving their concrete politi-

57 VUČUREVIĆ, Božidar: *Ovako je bilo* [This is How It Was]. Užice 2000, 9.

58 HAYDEN, Robert M.: *Recounting the Dead: The Discovery and Redefinition of Wartime Massacres in Late- and Post-Communist Yugoslavia*. In: *Memory, History, and Opposition Under State Socialism*. Ed. by Rubie S. WATSON. Santa Fe, N.M. 1994, 167–184, at 179.

59 VERDERY, Katherine: *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*. New York 1999, 110.

60 DENICH, Bogdan: *Dismembering Yugoslavia: Nationalist Ideologies and the Symbolic Revival of Genocide*. In: *American Ethnologist* 21/2 (1994), 367–390, at 382.

61 RADIĆ (cf. n. 54), 262.

cal goals. Moreover, they never come weaponless, but always armed to the teeth. Međugorje and other religious gatherings are proof that all confessions in Yugoslavia are capable of attracting masses of devout believers except for the Serbian Orthodox Church. That church is religiously inferior and politically obsessed. These are indisputable facts that speak volumes to all those men and women who desire to understand the roots of the Yugoslav crisis."⁶²

The denunciation of the Serbian victimization campaign in the Croatian media was soon replaced with the insistence on Croatia's own victims of previously unmentionable World War II massacres, whose exhumations were similarly used to establish new moral authorities and political legitimacy. The gruesome narratives of Partisan massacres against Ustašas and other defeated forces killed in the last days of the war paralleled Serbian descriptions of Ustaša massacres of Serbs, with the two sides waging what Denich termed "rival exhumations".⁶³ Similar to the Serb victims, the murdered friars of Široki Brijeg were exhumed, and attempts were made to turn them into new Herzegovina martyrs. Leading the processes of victimization of their respective peoples, both the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church eventually succeeded in establishing the status that they claimed to have held historically, namely the sole protectors and vanguards of the national interests of their faithful.

Epilogue and Conclusion

In the summer of 1992, immediately after the armed conflict began in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatian soldiers from nearby Čapljina blew up the Orthodox Prebilovci chapel. Dutch anthropologist Mart Bax, who analyzed the existence of mass burial pits in the immediate neighborhood of the apparition site as one of the points of conflict that the apparitions had attempted to address, concluded that they only caused a new round of violence.⁶⁴ Another researcher, Vjekoslav Perica, in his book on religion and war in former Yugoslavia claimed that Međugorje's apparitions resulted in fashioning Međugorje into a bastion of new Croat nationalism and contributed to a critical worsening of relations between the Croatian Catholics and the Serbian Orthodox Christians. In no way did it represent a "movement for peace and prayer" as some Western media had put it, but rather an introduction of division, war, and genocide to Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶⁵ Examining ties between religion and war in Bosnia, Michael Sells brought an additional charge of the apparition promoters' anti-Muslim background, asking:

62 PERICA, Vjekoslav: Novo čudo u Međugorju [New Miracle in Međugorje]. In: Slobodna Dalmacija, 30.6.1990.

63 DENICH (cf. n. 60), 378.

64 BAX (cf. n. 1), 119–126.

65 PERICA (cf. n. 3), 122 and 171–173.

“If the Virgin of Međugorje prayed for peace with her apparitions, why did not those who listened to her messages prevent the incarceration of Muslims in the concentration camps of Gabela, Čapljina, Dretelj, Ljubuško, and Rodoč, all quite near Međugorje? Did the buses full of pilgrims radiant with the light of their faith ever hear the cries and laments from the other side of Međugorje’s hills?”⁶⁶

Ten years after the first apparition, the ill-omened warnings of Mate Bencun, the president of the local village community of Međugorje, seemed to have come true. Back in the summer of 1981, Bencun warned that in Međugorje “someone has begun a dance macabre of the kind that may have a dire ending.”⁶⁷ Despite all the assurances to the contrary, the Yugoslav peoples and/or their political leaderships did not find the right answer to the challenge of the apparitions, the related inter-ethnic conflicts, and the burdensome legacies of the past. Strategies of repression and a “tourist mecca” proved ineffective. As the ruling ideology weakened, its doctrine of “Brotherhood and Unity” suffered the most drastic defeat. The slogan revealed an empty mantra, contributing little towards promoting and preserving inter-ethnic cooperation. Once the political apparatus to which it was directly tied began to lose legitimacy, the principle of “Brotherhood and Unity” succumbed to churches and segments of the national elites, which converted popular frustrations into nationalism.

Finally, the mass character of Međugorje’s apparitions and their location provided the Yugoslav press in the late 1980s with an ideal means for the transmittal of nationalist messages into the sphere of mass politics, where religious symbols and history were easily manipulated. Press reports, replete with fantasy or trauma, intensified already existing feelings of insecurity in a country ridden with crisis. The transformation of the old official discourse, hostile to religion, into a nationalistic one, whether celebrating or condemning the apparitions, transpired through a process of substituting new stereotypes and formulas for old versions, including the revival or adaptation of symbols from the past for contemporary purposes. The press coverage placed Međugorje’s apparitions high on the list of tumultuous events which, either real or fictitious, were shaking Yugoslavian society during the 1980s and heralded its eventual collapse. In the 1990s Međugorje became synonymous with dissension, while the conflicts inside and over Bosnia and Herzegovina rose anew.

66 SELLS, Michael: *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*. Berkeley, Calif. 1998, 113.

67 BUBREŠKO (cf. n. 15).