

## **Marian Apparitions and the Yugoslav Crisis**

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### ***ABSTRACT***

In the chronology of events that marked the decade of crisis and breakup of Yugoslavia, the “apparition” of the Virgin Mary in Međugorje has remained largely overshadowed by symbolically more recognizable and politically more palpable historical events. My article traces the conflict potential of the events in Međugorje by analyzing their press coverage. At the beginning they were met with outright hostility, which changed in the mid-eighties when the Marian apparitions were officially transformed into a miracle destined to save Yugoslavia from ravaging economic crisis. However, the fact that the apparitions appeared near the site of a WWII-era massacre soon changed the whole issue into a site of contestation between Yugoslavia’s major ethnic groups, illustrating the heavy burden that the unresolved past played in the fate of Yugoslavia. Međugorje is also an example of how the already on-going conflicts in the area were nurtured by belief in supernatural miracles as well as the manipulation of the cult of dead in order to bring redemption.

In the dusk of June 24, 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 Fatima. In the chronology of events that marked the nineteen eighties as a decade of crisis and breakup for 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. The “apparition” of *Gospa* (as the Virgin Mary is locally called) can be and indeed was interpreted to be a largely religious phenomenon that illustrated an internal crisis within the Catholic Church. Yet, as anthropologist E.A. Hammel pleads, there are at least three levels of inquiry to be distinguished in the Međugorje events – one that focuses on the apparition itself, one that looks at people’s sighting, and one that explores the differing perceptions of these events (2000: 20). This article 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 apparitions and their transformation over time,

without considering the actual veracity of the apparitions or people's sighting.<sup>1</sup>

The aim 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.<sup>2</sup> For almost four decades, Yugoslavia's authorities judged religious feelings and manifestations as irrational, foreign, and hostile throwbacks historically destined for extinction. At first, the Međugorje Virgin met a similar fate and was treated as the new "enemy," since the ruling Communist regime had no other response to a revival of religion but to repress it. However, because the regime's authority was waning, caused by its inability to solve a host of political and economic problems and its continued insistence on out-dated ideological clichés, 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 nationalist resurgence in Yugoslavia. Ethnic and religious homogenization processes were reinvigorated in the 1980s not only by nationalist myths and propaganda, but also a range of beliefs in supernatural miracles, redemption and redeemers, with Međugorje featuring most prominently among the Catholic Croats. On the other side, the proximity of the apparition site to a mass grave of Serbs massacred by Croatian fascist ustašas during World War Two motivated Serbian historians 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 contribute to the understanding of factors that caused the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the eruption of violence that ensued.<sup>3</sup> I focus on the controversies over the Međugorje apparitions in order to furnish a case-study of how 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 "independent" intellectuals an issue with which to promote their nationalist agenda and open up historical events to new interpretations that challenged the position of the Yugoslav authorities. I will attempt to illustrate this grossly condensed view of the multitude of implications of 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 how information was collected and distributed was liberalized in the 1960s and became decentralized to the republic level rather than centrally structured, as in the Soviet Union (Robinson 1977). 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 local party elites, since it was possible that these media 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.<sup>4</sup> 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”*

The first press reports described the initial apparitions scientifically and relatively impartially, and offered explanations such as those of Dr Mulija Džudža, a psychiatrist from Mostar:

In the period of adolescence, especially under circumstances where religion is dominant, this phenomenon is fairly common, and accompanied with feverish images or incorrect visual perception of real objects and events in the form of impaired perceptive production, above all in the sphere of visual perception. In highly religious communities such unexpected perceptive impulses may acquire a mass scenic character and be successfully incorporated into irrational religious images (Skiba 1981).

At the same time, these reports also wondered 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” (Skiba 1981).<sup>5</sup> Further doubts were raised regarding the speed and spontaneity with which the news of the apparitions had spread. In the beginning, no one, including the church press, wrote anything about the events. But they continued to take place with theatrical regularity in front of thousands of spectators.

Very soon, however, these various doubts were put in 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” since “the region has been well known for our enemy’s previous attempts to inaugurate such places of worship, all of them in contravention of our positive laws and the Constitution” (Socialist 1981). High Bosnian-Herzegovinian dignitary Branko Mikulić in his July 4 speech (held to mark Veterans’ Day) stigmatized the Međugorje events in the same way, whereas the local Čitluk county official coined the term “Ustaša Virgin,” a qualification that was enthusiastically picked up by the Bosnian and Serbian media (Cviic 1982). The correspondent of the official daily *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,” adding that “all the children who have seen the “apparitions”

come from handicapped families, where the parents have objectively proved themselves incapable of fulfilling their parental responsibilities and tasks” (Šantić 1981).

Under the heading “An Attack on the Heritage of the Revolution” *Borba* soon reported an incident when a group of young men returning from Međugorje sang ustaša songs, causing consternation among the 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 attainments of socialist development and self-management” (*Borba*, August 15, 1981). Blame was laid squarely at the feet of local Friar Jozo Zovko and the Bishop of Mostar Pavao Žanić. Sarajevo’s political establishment and its *Oslobodjenje* daily newspaper introduced yet another argument for the theory of 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 Two, the ustašas had murdered over 2,500 people of various nationalities, because of their communist views or pro-communist sympathies” (Šagolj 1981, Karabeg 1981a, 1981b). Belgrade’s press followed by accusing Friar Zovko in a series of articles of offending a million and seven hundred thousand Yugoslavs who had paid with their lives for the freedom of their country and for provoking new bloodshed (Durić 1981a, 1981b, Kolukčija 1981, Mandić 1981, Nikčević 1981, Klinčar 1981, Vesnić, 1981). 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 controlled media only reiterated slogans of the ruling Communist party, which had based its legitimacy for almost four decades on its WWII anti-fascist struggle and the ideology of “brotherhood and unity.” In order to be persuasive, these two ideological pillars, enforced in the aftermath of the war, required a significant distortion of the past. Namely, the number of partisan war victims was inflated in order to magnify the significance of the antifascist struggle, while the civil war dimension was denied and fratricidal and interethnic massacres were played down or interpreted within the simple fascist-antifascist binary (Pavlowitch 1988: 137-142).

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 (Matić, Ružić 1981). The proof of the ustaša ploy was also seen in the fact that one of the seers was the granddaughter of the 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” that found death in the Šurmanci pit on the other side of the apparition hill. 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 had “cordially cooperated” during the war. Thus, while the theory of the ustaša conspiracy under a religious guise

became a conventional topos, the (Serbian) ethnicity of the victims was never spelled out.<sup>6</sup>

Tying apparitions to ustaša crimes and spreading accusations against the Catholic Church hierarchy, which was meant to discourage political opponents, 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 crisis and political conflicts only boosted the potential appeal of churches, the sole alternative institutions allowed. Economically backward, the source of numerous emigrant workers and political émigrés and with a history of ethnic conflict and strong Church influence among the Catholic population, Herzegovina proved an exceedingly sensitive region. At the end of World War Two, Partisans had killed twenty-nine Franciscan monks accused of hiding ustašas at the Monastery of Široki Brijeg, not far from Međugorje. This placed an insurmountable block between the local Catholic Church and the Communist authorities who came to regard the murdered friars as martyrs and war criminals respectively (Ramet 1982). In the decades after WWII, the event was largely hidden from public knowledge and efforts were made to end the animosity between the Church and Communist regime. Notwithstanding the mutual official recognition at the highest level, including the agreement between Yugoslavia and Holy See signed in 1969, reconciliation at the local level was not at all evident in the reactions by local party functionaries to the apparitions, such as the following statement attributed to Zdravko Dujmović:

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 Virgin], 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 toehold, 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 (Karabeg 1981c).

From today's perspective some of the charges seem even comical, like the following "provocations":

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 barefoot, **while groups passing by the homes of local party functionaries loudly sing religious songs** (Osmović 1981, bold in original).

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 these celebrations and other events together under the label of “clericalist, nationalist and counterrevolutionary” gatherings of precisely those “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” (Politički 1981). Nevertheless, such condemnation and insults did not succeed in discrediting such mass gatherings, which in fact continued, and eventually set the stage for mass political rallies, which were at the core of nationalist mobilization of the late eighties (Prošić-Dvornić 2000: 169).

In the early eighties, however, the authorities and their press outlets were certain that “the Yugoslav peoples have an answer for every challenge besetting them” (Socialist 1981). 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” (Socialist 1981). 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 relations in the world (sic), which have occurred in almost all fields of international endeavor and which are an expression of a longtime crisis in the entire system of international relations” (Karabeg 1981b). In turn, these deteriorating international relations were “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” (Karabeg 1981b). Following the party line, Jerkić admitted

This 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 proved by past events, starting with the 1948 crisis, to 1971,<sup>8</sup> all the way to the present incidents [in Medugorje], though these internal forces are always in the function of the foreign factor (Karabeg 1981b).

The way out of the crisis according to Jerkić would be “a decisive implementation of the measures of economic stabilization,” stressing that “in the situation of Comrade Tito’s absence we must double our efforts at daily stabilization and economic production” (Karabeg 1981b). Focusing on the Medugorje 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 (Karabeg 1981b).

Eventually, sanctions against the mass religious gatherings were enforced. On August 12, 1981, the police prevented further gatherings in Medugorje and arrested Friar Jozo Zovko. The press reported on the measures:

The Council of the Community of Medugorje and the local Committee for People's Defense and Communal Self-Protection perfected a plan of operational measures and activities in 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 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 (Matić, Ružić 1981).

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

Such harsh official reaction at the very beginning of the Medugorje apparitions was attributed by some foreign observers 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 (Cviic 1982). Still, several thousand people continued to congregate daily at the place of the "incident" despite the authorities proclaiming a censure. Franciscans, the largest and most influential of the Catholic Church orders in Herzegovina, 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 (Perica 2002: 118-120). In 1982, according to the most thorough observer of state and church in Yugoslavia, Stella Alexander, the Serbian Orthodox Church also “raised its head” with a series of petitions, creating another problem for an already shaken regime.<sup>9</sup> The petitions of Serbian clerics were described in Zagreb as the apotheosis of Great Serbian nationalism, whereas Belgrade media proved much more lenient in its description of the petitions, admitting some problems and the responsibility of the authorities. Unable to repress such church activities and rising religious sentiments, the authorities in Yugoslavia, beginning in Serbia, began to shift their stance. In a bid to regain some of their lost legitimacy, they gradually began to change their strategy by offering a hand to churches. They ended up yielding to the churches the role of nominal representatives of various ethnic groups. In multinational Bosnia and Hercegovina, faced with the most pronounced manifestation of religiosity, change was slow but on the horizon as well.

*“A Tourist Mecca”*

Several months after having undertaken severe measures against the apparitions, the party leadership realized that their condemnations in political speeches and hostile press coverage 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 be handled by the police and local authorities, intentionally leaving the rest of the Yugoslav and foreign public out of the unresolved affair.

Following an almost three-year hiatus in media reporting, in 1985 Medugorje was rediscovered and began to receive entirely different press coverage. The change came as a result of growing tolerance for religion and an implicit change of official policies from opposing the public display of such sentiments to accommodating them. 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 in accommodating these visitors. The Croatian press criticized the initial political hostility towards the apparitions, claiming that “at the root of the Medugorje apparitions there is indeed a conflict, but not with the Church as much as within it” (Bešker 1984, Ivanković 1984). A longtime disagreement between the Hercegovinian Franciscans and the Bishop of Mostar concerning the transfer of parishes from Franciscan to ordinary clergy, which many claimed prompted local Franciscans to “invent” the pilgrim site, came into the open. Bishop Žanić described the whole Medugorje 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.

The turning point in the Yugoslav media coverage of Medugorje and religion in general came with the popular Kino-oko (Kino-eye) television special devoted to the Virgin apparitions shown in October 1985.<sup>10</sup> Aired from Belgrade in the then single Serbo-Croatian language, Kino-oko gathered the most renowned experts to share their views on some pressing political, social or cultural issue in the country. However, viewers from Bosnia and

Herzegovina were unable to see the program on Međugorje and were offered instead an American movie on the pioneers of aviation, a move lamely explained by a need to save electric power by showing a shorter program. The official position toward religion had relaxed to the point where it became publicly acceptable to allow several clergymen to take part in addition to the usual experts, with all of them stressing the importance of religion in the human makeup. Thus, a Franciscan theologian, Ljudevit Rupčić, was given an opportunity to remark wittily: "All of us believe in something: in God or an idea, only our gods have gotten into something of a scrap" (Međedović, Marković 1985).

By the mid-1980s, inflation in Yugoslavia had reached 100 percent annually and the foreign debt reached \$20 billion, 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 "Virgin is 'Working' for the State," "Herzegovinian Economic Miracle," "Apparitions of Tourism in Međugorje," "Virgin of Gold," and "Dollars in the Valley of Tears" (Mlivončić Zdjelar 1985, Gutić 1986, Zvizdić 1986, Međedović 1987, Vujasinović 1987). It became possible to publish comments like "[a]theists start believing only when they meet their materialist God head on" (Jauković 1987). The Italian Catholic press was regularly quoted when it reported the affidavits of various medical doctors confirming the supernatural reactions shared by the young seers. Since that 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 (Kovačević, Pekić 1988). Others criticized the fact that the local authorities allowed Roma to spread their tents and sell their kitschy souvenirs (Marjanović 1987).

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 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" (Čaušević 1987).

Even *Borba* wrote of Međugorje as the tourist attraction of the century, after they had previously been unable to adequately substantiate the findings of the Mexican amateur historian, Robert Salinas Price, who claimed that by strange coincidence he had discovered the true site of ancient Troy in the village of Gabela, near Međugorje (Soha 1986). 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” considered this event one of the possible points of crystalization of nationalism and irrationality in Yugoslavia of the 1980s (1994: 57). 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” (a village near Belgrade).<sup>11</sup> Newspapers were soon bombarded with texts attempting to substantiate the veracity of the Međugorje phenomenon (M.P. 1985). *Ilustrovana politika* 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 (Milošević 1987). Special telephone lines carrying messages from the Virgin were soon established (Ostojić 1986, Vukotić 1986). 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. Pointing out that the so-called apocalyptic mode of thinking can be found everywhere, 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 eighties to sustain power for an extended length of time in spite of all their disastrous failures (2000: 178-179).

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 (Perica 2002: 112). Furthermore, the references to neighbouring pits and wartime massacres almost totally disappeared, except among some foreign journalists (Turk 1986). 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-eighties were showing an intense renewal of religiosity throughout Yugoslavia, evidenced through both an increased denominational affiliation, and church attendance and practice (Flere 1991: 146). The “return to faith” among Orthodox Serbs was the most spectacular since they 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 Two, especially the alleged criminal role of the Catholic Church and its prelates in massacres of Serbs (Vujatović 1986, Mlakar 1996). 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 going on 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 policies, the Croatian leadership allowed for the mobilization and homogenization of Croats by the Church and dissident nationalists (Perica 2002: 56-73). The reporting of the semi-autonomous press of Yugoslavia's constitutive republics became characterized by the ethnic compartmentalization in its content and the orientation of its audience.

*"The Pit under Our Lady's Hem"*

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 (Mališić, Vukotić 1998). Relying on press coverage from 1981, the Međugorje apparitions were unambiguously equated with the endorsement of war crimes committed against the Serbs of the region. 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 turn Međugorje, a notorious Ustaša stronghold of the last World War, into a holy sanctuary - only the Devil can explain" (Mališić, Vukotić 1998).

Such rhetorical questions, however, were not left unanswered for long. Milan Bulajić, the self-proclaimed leading Serbian expert on World War Two genocide,<sup>12</sup> 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 June 22, 1941 called on every faithful Roman Catholic "who had killed a Serb to come to him and be absolved of sin" (1988b). 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. Furthermore, 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 thereby 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 *Duga's* article: "We had wanted to speak out a long time ago, but there was no one to listen...They wouldn't let us!" (Mališić, Vukotić 1998).

Yet, as we have seen, the massacres had been widely spoken about only a few years before when apparitions at Međugorje had immediately been connected to the neighboring pits and gravesites. Tying the apparitions to the genocide of the Serbs in ustaša Croatia and laying blame on the Yugoslav Communists for the way they had treated the legacy of the War, Bulajić and Belgrade journalists with no new evidence merely repeated the statements from 1981 (1988a and Rakić 1988). 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 “antifascists.” Creating an image of World War Two 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 WWII 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. The Bosnian reactions made a point of stating that in addition to the Serbs, victims of other nationalities, especially Partisan sympathizers, had also found their deaths in the pits, which were all marked with monuments (Karabeg 1988). The names of the victims were left out because, as the local authorities insisted, they would demand large tablets of stone or bronze whose cost would be exorbitant. The mechanical tying together of the massacre of Orthodox monks from the Žitomisljić Monastery near Međugorje in 1941 and the first Marian apparition in 1981, along with the claims that apparitions were preplanned and preconceived to “bless and sanctify the fascist genocide,” were condemned as benefiting reactionary clericalist circles (*Oslobodjenje*, June 16, 1988). After years of reaping profits from tourism, the local authorities now found themselves defending an entirely different position from the one of only a few years before. 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” (Karabeg, Krndelj 1988). 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” (Karabeg, Krndelj 1988).

The difference in the tone of the articles written by journalists who had previously only copied each other became striking. Decentralized media and Communist party organization made the interpretation of events in Yugoslavia open to the domination of local political elites. The Belgrade press lessened its interest in the Međugorje tourist boom, whereas the Bosnian official *Oslobodjenje* increased its positive coverage of the same phenomenon. On the occasion of the ninth anniversary of the apparitions’ first appearance, *Oslobodjenje* 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 (Krndelj 1990). This idyllic vision of Medugorje 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 Medugorje as shadowed by the “charismatic” leader of the newly formed nationalist Croat Democratic Union party, Franjo Tuđman (Gutić 1990). Similarly, Belgrade’s *Politika* described all approaches to the village bedecked with the Croat checkerboard flag and pictures of Franjo Tuđman, and pointed out that one could see 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 on the same location. One group was made up by 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 (Durić 1990).

Evoking personal traumatic memories of WWII 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 Medugorje offered the most visible opportunity to speculate on this matter. In Medugorje, according to Serbian press coverage, the “heirs” of the unpunished perpetrators of WWII crimes perpetuated their crime by orchestrating the Marian apparitions. In a June 26, 1989 letter regarding relations with the Catholic Church, the Holy Assembly of Serbian Bishops stated that the existence of numerous pits and execution grounds around Medugorje, 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 WWII and the subsequent concealment and minimization of the mass killings. A bitter polemic arose on the pages of *Pravoslavlje* and *Glas Koncila*, their official newspapers, concerning the number of victims of Jasenovac and massacres in Herzegovina, with sharp accusations coming from both sides (Radić 2000: 255). The nationalist squabbles of historians and writers were extended to other media and joined by former dissidents and leaders of the newly founded “democratic” 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.

A year before the outbreak of the war in the 1990s, the Serbian Orthodox Church embarked upon a mass cycle of commemorations for the Serbian victims of WWII, including those from the vicinity of Medugorje. 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 (Denitch 1997: 30-33). The leader of newly founded Serb national party in Bosnia and Hercegovina, Radovan Karadžić, theatrically descended into the pit during the exhumation (*Borba* July 29, 1990). 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 TV on April 19, 1991 (*Borba* April 19, 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 nationalist mayor of the nearby town of Trebinje, sounds prophetic in retrospect: “This time the dead will start the war; the victims are finally awake and the executioners are fearing punishment” (2000: 9). 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 (Hayden 1994: 179). Speleologists who undertook the exhumation, and pathologists from the Belgrade Military Hospital who conducted the examination of the remains both 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 WWII and described as a mere continuation of their past victimization. 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” (Radić 2000: 262).

Staging exhumations and reburials in these circumstances turned into powerful emotional events that, as Katherine Verdery showed, 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 (1999: 110). 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 negative experience with Croats (Denich 1994: 382). The internalization of the trauma and the pervasiveness of the victimization discourse prepared the Serbian public to conceive of a right to preventive defense.

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. (...) in Međugorje, of all the Christians in the world, the only ones missing are the pilgrims of Serb 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 political 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 (Perica 1990).

Nevertheless, 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 Two massacres. In Croatia, too, exhumations were 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” (1994: 378). Similar to the Serb victims, the murdered friars of Široki Brijeg were also 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.

### *Conclusion*

According to the Serbian Orthodox Church sources, the Prebilovci chapel was blown up in the summer of 1992 immediately after the armed conflict began in Bosnia and Herzegovina, carried out by Croatian soldiers from nearby Čapljina (Mileusnić 1987). 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 (1995: 119-126). Observing the events around Međugorje and the war activities of apparition promoters in the nineties, Vjekoslav Perica

claimed in his recent book that Međugorje's apparitions resulted in a critical worsening of relations between the Croatian Catholics and the Serbian Orthodox Christians, and in fashioning Međugorje into a bastion of new Croat nationalism, under the immediate control of neo-ustašas (2000: 172). For Perica, Međugorje in the eighties in no way represented a "Movement for Peace and Prayer" as the Western media had it, but an introduction of division, war, and genocide to Bosnia and Herzegovina (2002: 122).

Examining ties between religion and war in Bosnia, Michael Sells brings the additional charge of the apparition promoters' anti-Muslim background, asking:

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 (1998: 113)?

Ten years after the first apparition, the ill-omened warnings of Mate Bencun, the president of the local village community of Međugorje, seem 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" (Bubreško 1981). 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 interethnic 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 Brotherhood and Unity slogan contributed 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 fell before 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 nineteen eighties 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 to contemporary purposes. The press coverage placed Međugorje's apparitions high on the list of tumultuous events which, either real or fictitious, were shaking Yugoslav society during the eighties and heralded its eventual collapse. In the 1990s Međugorje became synonymous with dissension, while the conflicts inside and over Bosnia and Herzegovina rose anew.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Gerald E. Markle and Frances B. McCrea (1994) trace the conflict potential of Međugorje's apparitions and offer a bibliography of primary sources until the beginning of wars in the former Yugoslavia. Other studies thereafter include Mart Bax (1995), Michael E. Jones (1998), Vjekoslav Perica (2002) and Elisabeth Claverie (2003).
- <sup>2</sup> For the complexity of church and state relations in Yugoslavia see Stella Alexander (1979) and especially Perica (2002) for the period under consideration in this article.
- <sup>3</sup> For an overview of various theories in the vast literature developed to address the issue of Yugoslav dissolution see Dejan Jović (2001), pp. 101-120.
- <sup>4</sup> Most studies concentrate on reporting during the war itself. See James Gow, Richard Paterson, and Alison Preston (1996), Svetlana Slapšak (1997), Mark Thompson (1999), and Stjepan Malovic and Gary W. Selnow (2001).
- <sup>5</sup> In the Croatian/Bosnian/Serbian language(s), Međugorje means "between the hills."
- <sup>6</sup> The only exception was Draško Bubreško (1981).
- <sup>8</sup> In 1948, Yugoslav leader Tito made a break with Stalin, and in 1971 Tito quashed a Croatian nationalist revival.
- <sup>9</sup> In the spring of 1982, the 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 with a Declaration by the Holy Assembly of Bishops held in June which raised the same issues. See Stella Alexander (1982).
- <sup>10</sup> Print media continued discussions initiated in the program. See four texts by Borislav Međedović and Nataša Marković in *Večernje novosti* between October 17-20, 1985.
- <sup>11</sup> Dragan Marjanović, called the "Messiah from Mali Mokri Lug," was supposedly a miracle healer who claimed that he was Jesus Christ Himself. During 1986 and 1987 he was extremely popular and then he suddenly disappeared (Ramet 1991: 145).
- <sup>12</sup> Thanks 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 official publications such as *Never Again: Genocide of the Serbs, Jews and Gypsies in the Ustashi Independent State of Croatia* (1991) and *The Role of the Vatican in the Break-up of the Yugoslav State* (1993).

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