

# REFLECTIONS ON SERBIAN NATIONALISM AND THE POLICY OF ETHNIC CLEANSING

ENVER HASANI

## INTRODUCTION

Is ethnic cleansing, this old phenomenon with a new name, a typical Balkan creature? What about the Serbs? Are they destined by nature to lead a forceful removal of non-Serbs from disputed lands, a phenomenon that they themselves named 'ethnic cleansing' more than hundred years ago?

To be clear from the outset, we consider that the phenomenon of ethnic cleansing of the non-Serbs in the Balkans and the destruction of their cultures cannot be explained anthropologically but rather by socio-political arguments: the birth and development of Serbian-type nationalism (an expressly popular-egalitarian type of nationalism) and the social structure of Serbian society (mainly rural) have regenerated brutal social forces from anti-feminism to ethnic cleansing. This fact, among others, has been elaborated by Sabrina P. Ramet in 'Nationalism and the 'Idiocy' of the Countryside: the Case of Serbia', published in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* No. 1/96, pp. 76-87. We have in the main points followed Ramet's logic since it offers the best explanation of Serbian behaviour within the Balkan context.

*Enver Hasani is a research assistant in the Department of International Relations, Bilkent University, Ankara.*

Another anthropological argument that fails to explain Serbian nationalism is the so-called 'Balkan mentality'. This has never existed among Serbs or among the other Balkan nationalities. Some Western circles have formulated this notion to avoid their responsibility for stopping Serbian expansionism in the Balkans. Its corollary is: Balkan wars are innate to the Balkan 'tribes' and that nothing can be done to prevent them from 'self-carnage'. The present regime in Belgrade has promoted this concept since it fits its expansionist interests. The lack of a unique 'Balkan mentality' can be explained very easily if one looks at the daily life and administration of the Balkan peoples before the nineteenth century. The Ottoman *millet* system made no distinctions other than religion between Muslims and Christians. The differences based on nation grew up, as in Europe, only with the birth of nationalism and its ideology.<sup>1</sup>

We will examine four aspects of the phenomenon of ethnic cleansing to give a clear picture about the two aspects of Serbian nationalism and its consequences. One aspect deals with Serbian nationalism before the creation of former Yugoslavia in 1918, while the other is mostly state-centric and was especially apparent after former Yugoslavia's formation up to its dissolution in 1992.

#### **A BRIEF HISTORIC OVERVIEW OF THE PHENOMENON OF ETHNIC CLEANSING**

The phenomenon of ethnic cleansing can be viewed in two ways. First, it is comprised of all forceful population removals intended to weaken, destroy or eliminate certain segments of the subjugated population. Second, ethnic cleansing includes the same actions but directed only against certain national groupings. The first form is as ancient as humanity itself, while the second is closely connected with the birth of the nationalist movements of the seventeenth century onwards.

<sup>1</sup> P.M. Kitrimilides explains this Balkan route of nationalism and its ideology in "Balkan Mentality": History, Legend, Imagination', in *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 2, No. 2/96, pp. 163-191.

## *Reflections on Serbian Nationalism and the Policy of Ethnic Cleansing*

Forceful removals of populations within state borders go as far back as the eighth century BC. The Assyrian ruler, Tiglath-pileser III (745-727BC), forcibly displaced the indigenous population to replace it with his own subjects. The Babylonians, ancient Greeks and Romans also applied this practice, but not always with the same intensity or to the same degree and it was done mainly for the economic enslavement of their adversaries.<sup>2</sup>

During Medieval times, since religion was the principal basis for individual and collective identity, religion served as a pillar for forceful removal of entire populations, especially Jews and Muslims.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, while religion was still a reference point for the forceful removal of populations, England was the first country to commit cleansing based on nationality. In the years 1640-50, it 'cleansed' almost half of the Irish nation from their lands. This practice was later pursued against the indigenous tribes in North America.<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Balkans would be a new European theatre for the obscure game of ethnic cleansing. An unprecedented level of brutality followed the birth of independence movements among the Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire. Although non-Christian sufferings and cleansing has, until recently, been hidden in the literature on the subject, ethnic cleansing of non-Christians, committed during the last hundred years of the Ottoman Empire, overrides the figures of the forcefully relocated Christian subjects of the Empire. Justin McCarthy, in his study *Death and Exile: the Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims: 1821-1922* (1995), presents detailed evidence of this. McCarthy's study, apart from the Report of the International Commission of

2 Cf. Andrew Bell-Fialkoff, 'A Brief History of Ethnic Cleansing', *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, Vol. 72, No. 3, pp. 111-12; Eric Kolodrer, 'Population Transfer: the Effects of Settler Infusion on a Host Population's Right to Self-Determination', *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*, Autumn 1994, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 163-65; Alfred de Zayas, 'The Right to One's Homeland: Ethnic Cleansing and the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia', *Criminal Law Forum*, 1995, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 261-66.

3 Andrew Bell-Fialkoff, op. cit., p. 112.

4 Andrew Bell-Fialkoff, op. cit., pp. 112-13.

Inquiry into the Causes of the Balkan Wars, published in 1994 by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Washington DC, 1994), with a foreword by George Kennan under the title 'The Other Balkan Wars', represents a thorough analysis of the tragic phenomenon of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans.

The Second World War culminated in the forceful removal and extermination of a people, committed entirely on an ethnic basis. This was due to the rise of paranoiac German nationalism that saw others as a threat to 'racial purity'.

Population removal, be it forceful or through agreement, had been abandoned and forgotten for a long time in Europe after World War II. The Cold War 'froze' the borders of Europe and, consequently, the phenomenon of ethnic cleansing was being treated as something of the past. After the Cold War ended, however, a new and tragic chapter of European history opened. In this sad and separate chapter, ethnic cleansing in both former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union was a premeditated policy and the very aim of war and not its result. In the former Yugoslavia's case it has not been and is not an anti-social anomaly based on old hatreds among the Balkan nations, but a logical consequence of nationalism and a political culture cultivated for half a century.

#### **THE PHENOMENON OF ETHNIC CLEANSING: A BASIS FOR THE PROJECT OF GREATER SERBIA**

Analysis of the practice of ethnic cleansing committed by the Serbs starts with their project for a Greater Serbia, which is enshrined in the Serbian national programmes starting from the *Nacertanije* (The Outline) of Ilija Garasanin (1844) and continuing to the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (1986). As a mere notion, though, ethnic cleansing is a brainchild of the father of the Serbian 'enlightenment', Vuk Karadjic.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Vuk Karadjic in 1860 used the term 'ethnic cleansing' to describe the retaking of Belgrade from the Ottomans in 1805 when all the non-Serbs were expelled and their culture destroyed. Cf. Patric Cabanel, *Nation, Nationalites et Nationalisms en Europe: 1850-1920*, Editions Ophrys, 1996, p. 213.

The wars the Serbs waged in recent centuries served this Greater Serbia project. When successful, like after 1870 and especially after the Balkan Wars (1912-13), it has necessarily caused the forceful removal of non-Serbs and the destruction of their culture. The international regime during those times played a special role in the success of this policy.

Serbian nationalist leaders thought that the way to establish the national will was through war. Furthermore, their focus has been on territories in which Serbs were never in the majority. Occupying territories in which they were not in the majority in recent years has determined the methods used to achieve these aims, that is, the forceful removal of non-Serbs and the destruction of their culture. This remains the dominant feature of Serbian nationalism to the present. Its perpetrators and their social structure, mainly rural, explain its brutality and consistency. Serbian nationalism has been and remains a 'popular' (egalitarian) nationalism. The Serbian egalitarian approach weakened and become partly aristocratic only when Belgrade tried to dominate Zagreb and Ljubljana, this, in turn, cultivated mainly aristocratic and bourgeois nationalism. Why has Serbian nationalism been and remained egalitarian in nature? The answer to this question is found in the history of the rise and development of Serbian nationalism itself.

The Ottoman conquest in Serbia had an equalising effect; that is, it entirely put an end to the class of landowners (the nobility). Slav landowners existed only in Bosnia-Herzegovina and partly in Macedonia where they converted to Islam. But, their impact on the formation of Serbian nationalism was too little, as was the case in Bulgaria. This was because the position of Slav landowners differed little from that of Ottoman landowners. Also, a trader class did not exist in Serbia and the modest development of a trader-class during the nineteenth century had negligible impact on the birth of Serbian nationalism. At the same time, the hatred and contempt harboured by the Serb peasantry were directed against these landowners. On

the other hand, this peasantry managed to preserve its traditional institutions and language owing to the *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire, an administrative system that offered a basis for future Serbian nationalism of an egalitarian nature.

The leaders and promoters of this sort of nationalism within Serbian society were the village priests and some of the traders who lived outside Serbia. The discontent and goals of the clergy were the same as that of the peasantry, from which the clergy itself originated. Within the Serbian context, dioceses claimed control over the land. Serbian intellectuals, both inside and outside Serbia, offered a theoretical and sophisticated framework for this sort of nationalism, which formulated and channelled domestic ingredients in a form of egalitarian nationalism as described above. Under these socio-economic circumstances, it was the only form of nationalism that could breed in Serbian society: neither a bourgeois nationalism (like the Czechs), nor an aristocratic one (like in Poland and Hungary), nor a bureaucratic form (as in Turkey and Greece) could have developed there.<sup>6</sup>

This social structure underpins Serbian national programmes and explains the brutality of the ethnic cleansing committed by the Serbs in last hundred years. During the Balkan Wars, as well as the recent conflicts in former Yugoslavia, paramilitary units composed of ordinary rural Serbs were the main perpetrators of ethnic cleansing and the destruction of the non-Serbian cultures in the territory of former Yugoslavia.<sup>7</sup> The drafters of the Serbian national programmes originated mostly from this social structure, a fact that renders the full democratisation of Serbian society very difficult even today. Despite all the tragic events in Kosovo during the seventy

6 Peter Sugar, 'Nationalism in Eastern Europe', in John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (eds.), *Nationalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 176-77.

7 Cf. Ivan Vekovic, 'Prilog razumevanju etnickih sukoba na Balkanu i Kavkazu', *Republika*, No. 174, Beograd, 1997; See also Philip J. Cohen, *Serbia's Secret War: Propaganda and the Deceit of History*, 1996, where the author provides a chronology of and reasons for the successful implementation of the Greater Serbia project.

eight days of NATO air strikes against Yugoslavia (March-June 1999) and the heavy damage caused to Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic's power base, the opposition in Serbia remains weak and unable to seriously challenge the regime in Belgrade.

**THE DECISIVE ROLE OF SERBIAN NATIONALISM IN THE  
DESTRUCTION OF FORMER YUGOSLAVIA**

An analysis of the role of Serbian nationalism in the dissolution of Yugoslavia must invariably answer two questions: what was the role of Serbia in the creation of Yugoslavia and was the former Yugoslavia an artificial creature or a normal one for its time, like the other states of the international community?

Yugoslavia's creation in 1918 was not at all an artificial act but in accord with the will of the South Slavs to live within one state and in the interests of the then Great Powers (France, Great Britain and the United States) to set up a barrier against German penetration.

The desire to live within the same state existed among the South Slavs for almost the whole of the nineteenth century. It was evident in the national programmes of the Croat and Slovene nationalists, but the Serbs rejected it since it ran counter to the very idea of a Greater Serbia. The idea of Yugoslavia intensified by mid-World War I through the work of the Yugoslav Committee residing in London and its contacts with the Serbian King in exile on the Greek Island of Corfu. Immediately after the War, Italian forces, although on the Allied side, landed on the Dalmatian coast so the Slovenes and Croats had little choice but to ask for help from the Serbian Army, the only regular army among the South Slavs. The Yugoslav Committee, which represented the Austro-Hungarian subjects of South Slavic origin, was aware that this was a prelude to a state totally dominated by the Serbs and that this would definitely shatter their dreams of a federal structure for the future state. On the contrary, the Great Powers' sympathies towards the Serbian concept

of Yugoslavia—in fact, Greater Serbia—stemmed from their conviction that the Serbs had given a great contribution during the War and had been the victims of the Central Powers.<sup>8</sup>

Such a context, both internal and international, provided the Serbs with the opportunity for a *de facto* revival of the medieval empire of Tsar Dusan, totally dominated by the same political class that ruled Serbia before the war. This fact and the favourable international environment, where Woodrow Wilson himself believed that Yugoslavia represented a great solution for the South Slavs, allowed the Serbs unhindered opportunities to continue their policy of ethnic cleansing against non-Slavs. Later, the policy was pursued even against those who were not constitutionally defined as the founders of that state.<sup>9</sup> The Serbian nation, nourishing the belief that they were the dominant nation and Serbia a centre of the South Slavs, throughout Yugoslavia's existence strove to preserve the centralist structure of the state. The consequences of this Serbian stance were seen during the Second World War and again repeated in the years 1991-95 and in Kosovo during 1998-99. At a time when all former communist countries were heading towards democratisation, Serbian society and its political class struggled for new legitimacy to maintain power. The political class in Serbia sought to integrate ordinary Serbs into the Project of Greater Serbia, not to defend their private property but 'the sacred lands and Serbdom'. The 1986 Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts outlined this strategy precisely. The slogan 'All Serbs in One State' excluded all possibilities for ordinary Serbs to make an individual choice.

8 Cf. Dusko Sekulic., 'The Creation and Dissolution of the Multinational State: The Case of Yugoslavia', *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 3, Part 2, July 1997, pp. 165-179; Aleksa Djilas., *The Contested Country: Yugoslavia and Communist Revolution, 1919-1953*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1991, pp. 3-34; Aleksandar Pavkovic., *The Fragmentation of Yugoslavia: Nationalism in a Multinational State*. London: Macmillan 1997 pp. 3-24; Mark Almond, *Europe's Backyard War. The War in the Balkans*, London: Hienemann 1994 pp. 115-120.

9 Cf. Rexhep Qosja, 'The Albanian National Question in Serb Political Programmes during the Years 1937-1944', *International Journal of Albanian Studies*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, fall 1997. This article describes the international factors that determined the monstrous projects for the ethnic cleansing of the Albanians and the Bosniacs.



*Reflections on Serbian Nationalism and the Policy of Ethnic Cleansing*

The 1986 Memorandum marked the beginning of this discourse and of Serbian society's emotional preparation for committing ethnic cleansing and destroying other cultures. It was the first national programme in Yugoslavia that was based on the standardisation of nationalistic rhetoric with a view to eliminating other cultures. The Memorandum set in motion the terminology that reflected the intentions of its drafters—phrases such as 'genocide against Serbs', the 'Serbian Holocaust', 'martyrisation' of the Serbs, the 'Serbian tragedy of Kosovo', the 'sacred land where the Serbian graves lay', 'Serbian honour', 'enemies of Serbia', 'anti-Serbian coalition', etc. With this action, the Serbian Academy opened a Pandora's box that in the years to come would prepare the terrain for the violent removal of the non-Serbs and the territorial enlargement of Serbia to the detriment of others.<sup>10</sup>

The closure of the Memorandum speaks of a "readiness to be in the service of the realisation of the tasks outlined in it and for the sake of the dictates of history and future generations". This shows how the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts paved the way for a certain policy—that of territorial expansion, with agreement or *manu militari*, as Dobrica Cosic himself put it—and gave Serbian discourse an additional argument in the future fight for Greater Serbia.<sup>11</sup> From then onwards, it remained only an issue of the redefinition of the identity of ordinary Serbs for the achievement of a certain social function.<sup>12</sup> This social function for the ordinary Serbs had already been designed—the unconditional realisation of the Project of Greater Serbia. The transformation of the collective identity of the Serbs in realising this function was speedy, as it had been at other times

10 Slavko Curuvija and Iran Todorov, 'The March to War: 1980-1990', in Jasmina Udovicki and James Ridgeway, *Yugoslavia's Ethnic Nightmare*, copyright 1995 by Jasmina Udovicki and James Ridgeway, pp. 84-85.

11 See more on this in Philip J. Cohen., *The Complicity of Serbian Intellectuals in Genocide in the 1990s*. In Thomas Cushman and Stjepan G. Meshtrovit (eds.) *This Time We Knew*, New York: New York University Press 1996, pp. 39-64.

12 For the variable nature of the collective identity and its social function depending on the circumstances, see Virginia Tilley, 'The Terms of Debate: Untangling Language about Ethnicity and Ethnic Movements', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3, July 1997, pp. 497-522.

during their modern history. The rural structure and egalitarian nature of Serbian nationalism explain this. But the Memorandum did not foresee the international environment that, by the end of the Cold War, changed rapidly to the detriment of the Serbs. It was the same world, albeit different in its content, that protected Yugoslavia during all the time of its existence and, consequently, enabled the Serbs to rule the others and commit ethnic cleansing with impunity.

**THE MAIN FEATURES OF ETHNIC CLEANSING COMMITTED BY THE SERBS DURING THE RECENT WARS IN YUGOSLAVIA**

As can be seen from this title, we speak here only of the features of the ethnic cleansing committed by Serbs in the territory of former Yugoslavia in recent wars and not of those committed earlier. For those cases, we have already mentioned the Report of the International Commission of Inquiry, which substantiates the facts about the excesses committed earlier by the Serbs.

It is not rare to hear that all sides in the Bosnian conflict and elsewhere in Yugoslavia have committed excesses. That being said, however, it is still true that the Serbs committed most of the crimes. The planned and premeditated expulsion of the non-Serbs and the destruction of the other cultures represent the first and most basic characteristic of the excesses committed by the Serbs. That this is so, it can be seen from Serbia's preparation for war, which had military, political, propagandistic, economic and diplomatic dimensions.<sup>13</sup> This preparation, at the same time, speaks of the fact that ethnic cleansing was not a result of war, as Serbs would like it to claim but the war's very aim. That ethnic cleansing was orchestrated by the Belgrade regime has been proven in a very competent way by former UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Yugoslavia, Tadeush Mozovietzcki.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed and substantiated analysis of these preparations, see Slaven Letica, 'The Genesis of the Current Balkan War', in Stjepan G. Meshtrovic (ed.), *Genocide after Emotion*, New York & London, 1996, pp. 91-108.

<sup>14</sup> Alfred de Zayas, *op. cit.*, pp. 295-296.

Another feature is that ethnic cleansing of all non-Serbs was a function of Serbia's programme of territorial expansion for the project of Greater Serbia. In this sense, the wars in Yugoslavia should be seen as typical Clausewitzian schemes pursued by Serbia only when other political attempts for hegemony over non-Serb populations failed. This means that the political project of a centralised federation, that is, of a Greater Serbia could not be achieved by political means and were pursued through violent ones.

The last feature of Serbian ethnic cleansing is the short time-span allotted for its execution. Two factors determined Serbian hopes that they could achieve territorial expansion in a short period—the huge military arsenal concentrated in Serbian hands and the lack of manpower for the effective use of their military machinery. These factors determined the way military force was used for achieving of the Serbs' main strategic goals, that is, the creation of Greater Serbia through ethnic cleansing of all non-Serbs and the destruction of their culture.

#### CONCLUSION

Ethnic cleansing, as a means of forcefully removing a population, appeared only when nationalism became a leading idea and the driving force of the socio-political redefinition in Europe after the seventeenth century. From the beginning of this century, the Balkans witnessed most of this obscure crime and the newly formed Orthodox-majority states (Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro) have been the main locations of the crime.

The Project of Greater Serbia set up by Garasanin (1844) through to the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts of 1986, prepared the ground for the Serbian crime of ethnic cleansing. It was planned and, at certain times, put into effect against those territories where Serbs were not in the majority. After

the end of Cold War, though, the Project of Greater Serbia was shattered but not defeated once and forever.

The first feature of the ethnic cleansing committed by Serbs during recent wars in Yugoslavia is that it was planned long before it was carried out. The 1986 Memorandum marks the decisive turning point in the collective redefinition of Serbian identity. This time as well, it was done in conformity with the social structure of Serbian society and its élite, that is, it was a function of the Project of Greater Serbia, as was the case over last hundred years of Serbian history.

The second feature of the crime is that it was planned as a short-term campaign, a fact determined by two factors. First, the Serbs forcefully took possession of the armaments of former Yugoslavia to direct them against the other populations and achieve the creation of Greater Serbia. Second, Serbian soldiers, regular and paramilitary forces, committed the crime in the belief that the occupied nations and international community would stay by idly and watch them.

Lastly, the ethnic cleansing committed by the Serbs is a continuation of the policy of the Memorandum of 1986 but by violent means. This means that it has been and remains a typical Clausewitzian war. From this stems the fact that the ethnic cleansing is not the result of War, but its very aim. Serbian movements in Kosovo at the beginning of 1998 proved exactly this and the international community could not continue to maintain any longer that the causes of tragedy lie somewhere other than in the policy of the Belgrade regime. The international community, NATO especially, was this time determined to recall the lessons from the past. From now onwards, Serbian society has to face the bitter reality of being isolated to tackle the root causes of its own irrationality. Without the help of the international community, though, the prospects for democratisation of Serbia remain very bleak indeed.