Searching For a Serbian Havel

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Serbian intellectuals must answer for their role in elevating nationalist hatred to the preferred language of cultural and political discourse in Yugoslavia. The Serbian people need to see contrition from the compromised before they will embrace their role in the destruction of Yugoslavia in all of its complexity.
The 1986 Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (excerpts)

Over the past two decades, the principle of unity has become weakened and overshadowed by the principle of national autonomy, which in practice has turned into the sovereignty of the federal units (the republics, which as a rule are not ethnically homogeneous). The flaws that from the very beginning were present in this model have become increasingly evident. Not all the national groups were equal: The Serbian nation, for instance, was not given the right to have its own state. The large sections of the Serbian people who live in other republics, unlike the national minorities, do not have the right to use their own language and script; they do not have the right to set up their own political or cultural organizations or to foster the common cultural traditions of their nation together with their co-nationals. (pp. 116-17)

Many of the troubles bedeviling the Serbian nation stem from conditions that are common to all the Yugoslav nations. However, the Serbian people are being beset by yet other afflictions. The long-term lagging behind of Serbia's economic development, unregulated legal relations with Yugoslavia and the provinces, as well as the genocide in Kosovo have all appeared on the political scene with a combined force that is making the situation tense if not explosive. These three painful questions, which arise from the long-term policy taken toward Serbia, are so dramatic that they are threatening not just the Serbian people but the stability of the entire country. For this reason they must be given due attention. (p. 118)

The expulsion of the Serbian people from Kosovo bears dramatic testimony to their historical defeat. In the spring of 1981, open and total war was declared on the Serbian people, which had been carefully prepared for in advance in the various stages of administrative, political, and constitutional reform. This open war has been going on for almost five years. It is being waged with a skillful and carefully orchestrated use of a variety of methods and tactics, with the active and not just tacit support of various political centers in Yugoslavia, which they are taking no pains to conceal and which is more ruinous than the encouragement given by our neighbors. Moreover, we are still not looking this war in the face, nor are we calling it by its proper name. (p. 126)

The physical, political, legal, and cultural genocide of the Serbian population in Kosovo and Metohija is a worse defeat than any experienced in the liberation wars waged by Serbia from the First Serbian Uprising in 1804 to the uprising of 1941. The reasons for this defeat can primarily be laid at the door of the legacy of the Comintern, which is still alive in the Communist Party of Yugoslavia's national policy and the Serbian communists' adherence to this policy, but they also lie in costly ideological and political delusions, ignorance, immaturity, or the inveterate opportunism of generations of Serbian politicians since World War II, who are always on the defensive and always worried more about what others think of them and their timid overtures at raising the issue of Serbia's status than about the objective facts affecting the future of the nation which they lead. (p. 127)

Except for the time under the Independent State of Croatia, the Serbs in Croatia have never been as jeopardized as they are today. Solution of their national status is a question of overriding political importance. If solutions are not found, the consequences might well be disastrous, not only for Croatia, but for the whole of Yugoslavia. (p. 132)

Source: Kosta Mihalović and Vasilije Krestić, Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts: Answers to Criticisms (Belgrade: SANU, 1996).

Inventing a Discourse of Serbian Humiliation

There are good reasons to seek signs of introspection, if not remorse, from Serbian intellectuals following the wars in Yugoslavia. A generation of Serbian intellectuals, including historians, philosophers, writers, poets, and economists, invented the discourse of Serbian humiliation: the narcissistic and novel interpretation of Serbian history that Serbs have always been persecuted by their neighbors. This discourse prepared Serbs for war. I do not intend to accuse the entire Serbian intellectual and political elite of barbarism. But leading intellectuals and cultural institutions in Serbian society, including the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (SANU) and the Association of Serbian Writers, bear much responsibility for lowering the standards of public debate and introducing aggressive nationalism into political discourse.

Beginning as early as the 1968 Albanian demonstrations in Kosovo, this group of dissidents conceived of its own activity as more pure and more enlightened than politics. They imagined themselves to be the conscience of a Serbian nation that had been betrayed by bad leaders and bureaucrats. They claimed to be purveyors of something akin to the antipolitics of the dissident intellectuals in the rest of Eastern Europe, yet their activity became political in a critical sense: They roused apathetic Serbs to oppose the Tito regime, which they claimed had ignored or persecuted them. The most infamous example of Serbian nationalist discourse was the 1986 Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences. (See box.) The memorandum was produced by a SANU committee. Although never finished or officially published, it was leaked to the Yugoslav press and has since been the single most cited example of the growth of Serbian nationalism in Yugoslavia. Many Serbs (mostly from the nationalist orientation) have lately insisted that the memorandum was nothing more than a suggestion for discussion and the fact that it was unpub-
lished made it irrelevant. But until the ideas contained in the memorandum are repudiated by its formulatores, who include many leaders of the nationalist revival, its status as an "unpublished proposal" is meaningless.

Dobrica Ćosić, the Serbian novelist most often accused of leading the nationalist awakening in Serbia after 1968, recently evaluated his own actions: "In my life I have tried to serve my people, but in which way? By serving it as a writer, serving it by interpreting and speaking some truth about its existence. If I somehow helped in that way, then I have fulfilled my human duty." The "truth" he spoke was that the Serbs were persecuted, and the solution to Serbian suffering that he offered was to reinvigorate the Serbian nation and effect its reunification (specifically referring to Serbia, Kosovo, and Vojvodina)—an intensely political project, and one that fueled the wars in Yugoslavia after 1991. In the 1980s, Serbian intellectuals led the way in the demonization of Albanians. Then, later, after 1988, they added Croats to their list of enemies, and finally, after 1991, they widened the scope of their hostility, including Bosnia's Muslim Slavs. Today, at some level, in some way, these intellectuals must answer for their role in elevating national hatred to the preferred language of cultural and political discourse in Yugoslavia. Until humanistic influential leaders step forward, people such as Dobrica Ćosić will remain respected in Serbia, not as living testaments to the disaster to which they contributed, but instead in the role that brought them to prominence—that of prophets of a mythical Serbian heritage of suffering.

Peter Handke's Justice for Serbia

Since the December 1995 Dayton peace accords were signed, intellectuals in Serbia have been torn between an inner struggle to understand and an external effort to justify their role in Yugoslavia's collapse. In the process of defending their own dignity, however, they often jeopardize what is left of it by grasping at straws. This is illustrated clearly in the recent travelogue, A Winter Trip Along the Danube, Sava, Morava, and Drina Rivers: Justice for Serbia (1996), by Austrian writer Peter Handke. Handke wrote A Winter Trip following travels through Serbia accompanied by Serbian acquaintances and friends. His intent was to understand how the war came about and to determine whether the hope for gathering Serb-populated lands into a "Great Serbia" was ever real. "I was drawn erotically," he said later, "to go to that country which stood despised before the world public, not to observe and inspect, but to allow it to affect me." He went in the tradition of the travel writer, moving about in an unknown land, enlightening outsiders. Of course, he did in fact have an agenda, and it is not at all clear that Serbia has been misrepresented. Handke's contribution is simply a collection of vignettes, often moving but usually naive, that attempt only (and patronizingly) to evoke pity for Serbs by critiquing hostile Western (especially German) media coverage. But because the notion that Serbs are misunderstood has been a passion in Serbian culture and politics for generations, most of Belgrade's journalists and its cultural elite greeted Handke's travelogue with enthusiasm. His banal ramblings were a godsend to Serbs smarting from foreign criticism.

Excerpts from the book were published in the new
Serbian President Slobodan Milošević (left) and Dobrica Ćosić (right) during the Pan-Serbian parliamentary session, May 14, 1993, in Belgrade to pressure Bosnian Serbs to accept the Vance-Owen peace plan. Courtesy of Reuters/Petar Kujundzic/Archive Photos.

Feeding suspicions that he cared little for different perspectives, Handke made comments about Slobodan Milošević in a Naša Borba interview: “I think that all that Milošević said was that, with Serbs in Kosovo as a minority under pressure, they need not tolerate blows, defeat, and degradation. I understand that well. That does not mean that he supported ‘Great Serbia.’ ... But about the power-holders in Serbia I cannot say anything. I do not want to say anything negative. I won’t!” Handke and his supporters further appealed to time-honored Serbian convictions and conspiracy theories when they suggested that the true story about the wars has been banished from German newspapers and that, in Handke’s own words: “Germany is a land of darkness. Germany has always been a land of darkness.” While one logically wonders whether Handke exploits Serbs to get at more important targets, such as Germany, its media, and its culture of “darkness,” many journalists and intellectuals in Belgrade have embraced him as a lone beacon of light in their search for understanding.

Serbian press commentaries critical of Handke were limited to the usual suspect sources, mostly Vreme, the weekly news magazine widely viewed as treasonous because of its critical attitude toward the war and the Serbian government. Sonja Biserko, president of the Belgrade section of the Helsinki Committee, said: “[Handke’s] text is missing balance, any sense of what really happened in the war. ... The text serves those who refuse to see Serbia as the main guilty party for the war. However, [Serbian guilt] is a fact. It helps no one to point out distorted reporting in the media.” Others thought that Handke’s tract would ultimately harm Serbia more than help it. Svetlana Slapsak, a veteran human rights activist, offered, “Handke did more harm to Serbian culture by refusing to hear what the opponents of the Serbian regime think.” For Slapsak, Handke simply lacked information: “It is just too bad that he did not read the Serbian press from 1987 onward.” Republika, Nebojša Popov’s scarcely read biweekly associated with the Civic Alliance, noted: “To find his ‘deep truth,’ Handke pried around a little, incognito, in Serbia. But the least appropriate place to find out the truth about Serbia is Serbia itself, sunk hopelessly in the fog of its self-deception and self-confessed ‘truth.’ ... Danke Handke! Your writing is not to the good of Serbia but to its detriment.”

These lonely voices in Serbia are preaching to the converted. Anyone writing for Vreme or Republika is considered by Serbian nationalists (and thus most of the old-guard intellectuals) to be a traitor to the Serbian cause; their readership, and therefore their influence, is exceedingly small. To focus on the negative responses to Handke’s book is to ignore the fact that it is one of the few lifeboats in a very stormy sea for Serbs who are convinced that they are misunderstood. Pavić’s remarks, noted above, reflect the mainstream attitude toward Handke. The book has nurtured the Serbian belief that they are victims of conspiracies of all sorts.

Accusations from Slovenia

While Handke helped to delay the Serbs’ reconciliation with their own recent past, an intellectuals’ polemic il-
illustrated why Serbian (and for that matter Slovenian) literary figures might not contribute to such a settlement for some time. The polemic between the Slovene poet Aleš Debeljak and several Serbian writers began with Debeljak’s interview with Vreme in November 1995. Debeljak’s comments were generally complimentary to his contemporaries throughout Yugoslavia: “[Yugoslav writers] succeeded in resisting the inflammable sirens of politics, nations, parties, states.” In Slovenia, Debeljak blithely asserts, writers adopted a “sort of Joycian ‘non serviam’ [I shall not serve] where the state is concerned.” However, the war in Slovenia changed things: “That does not mean that we were apathetic and stood passively by when those ten fateful days [of war in 1991] happened, when our responsibility did not allow us to remain apolitical.” Whereas Debeljak believes that the Slovenes only responded to the nation’s sirens when confronted with evil, he implies that Serbian writers made their state fascist and warlike. He sees “no possibility for any sort of cooperation with Serbian writers who were in the cradle of Serbian national socialism.” Never explicitly condemning all Serbian writers, he implies that support for the Milosević regime or the nationalist upsurge in Serbia was widespread in Belgrade. Most importantly, he posits an essential moral difference between his own political activism and that of his Serbian counterparts. He served good, the Serbs evil. When a storm from Belgrade broke after his interview, Debeljak professed surprise at the intemperate response of some of his Serbian colleagues.

Debeljak should have known better. Author of a literary indictment of Serbia and its intellectuals as the sole cause of the wars in Yugoslavia (Twilight of the Idols: Recollections of a Lost Yugoslavia), Debeljak is a pure distillation of the sort of Slovenian self-righteousness that Serbs will not suffer. As he wrote, “The obsession of the Serbian intellectual, political, and military leadership—not to mention the vast majority of the Serbian populace—with the megalomaniacal dream of a Greater Serbia may well cause the present genocidal war to be perceived as a feat of patriotic greatness [by Serbs].” He continued, “Shamelessly exploiting the inherited fear of persecution and massacre . . . most, though not all, Belgrade poets sang in sync with populist ideology, ignoring Serbian belligerence.” Those Belgrade poets react most strongly to the short memories of such people as Debeljak, who seems to have forgotten that the floodgates of war were opened when Slovenia, with the active support of its own poets, seceded from Yugoslavia in June 1991. Further on, Debeljak seems to miss his own irony when he notes, “It appears that the history of the former Yugoslavia was, in fact, just a history of waiting for the right moment, when each nation would slam the door shut on its erstwhile neighbors.” The unwitting author seems to have turned his own equation of Slovenes with good and Serbs with evil on its head. One can only imagine his Serbian opponents laughing aloud at Debeljak’s naïveté.

Serbs could not find a better personification of Slovenian sanctimony than Debeljak. His Vreme condemnation of Serbian writers provoked denials from some Belgraders who were never in the “cradle of Serbian national socialism” at all. Dragan Velikić and Mileta Prodanović responded quickly and aggressively. But instead of arguing the importance of Belgrade writers in the Serbian antiwar movement or in supporting alternatives to the Milosević regime, they lashed out at Debeljak. Prodanović pointed out Debeljak’s hypocrisy: “It is not clear to me how Debeljak’s non serviam and his participation in territorial defense go together.” Velikić, at least, concentrated on his own behavior since the wars began, noting how he has been marginalized for his anti-nationalist views by a Belgrade taken over by “paid Serbian patriots.” But, most interestingly, Prodanović and Velikić both claimed to have no interest in the state, which they assert is not a part of the artistic realm they inhabit—a position that sets them apart from many of their elder colleagues in Belgrade.

Debeljak responded in kind, illustrating the inability of intellectuals in this region to overcome their national loyalties in spite of verbal commitments to civil society. “[My interview] probably upset them,” Debeljak wrote, “because . . . they obviously recognized themselves in
my description of existential disappointment in my Serbian writer colleagues." To his adversaries' claims that they wished distance from the state, he advised Serbian writers who say that the state simply does not interest them to “find their literary equivalent in Klaus Mann's Mephisto. There too the hero constantly asserts that politics and aesthetics have nothing in common. Really, a simple but morally exhausted position.” To that, Velikić responded indignantly: “[My business is] to write books as well as possible. . . . I am not like that because of the war, I have been that way as long as I have been a public figure.” Prodanović also reaffirmed, “[I have] more interest in culture than the state. I want to have as little as possible to do with the state, let others worry about it.” Debeljak might have responded that this generation of Serbian writers, if truly apolitical, has utterly rejected the activism of its predecessor, which produced Ćosić and others who helped remake Serbian politics in the late 1980s. But then, it seems likely that the example of that generation is precisely what has driven Velikić and Prodanović into the sanctuary of their writing cubicles.

A breath of fresh air in the atmosphere of mutual recrimination was offered by Belgrade writer Milan Djordjević. Djordjević admitted the obvious—that Serbian writers did in fact support the regime or the war in startling numbers: “The readiness of these intellectuals and writers to serve, be employed by, minister to, be ministers, write programs, and interpret official policy, and, with that, stop really being intellectuals and writers, is amazing.” Having readily acknowledged the existence of the collaborationist intellectual/writer in Serbia, Djordjević then asks the single logical question: “Why didn’t the Belgrade polemicists leave the vicious circle of their narcissism and, instead of condemning Debeljak, speak of the instinctive antiwar convictions and support for civil society here?” One reason might be that support for civil society in Serbia was so muted (even though antiwar efforts were present) that the value of such a response would have been minimal.

Unquestionably, the most important theme in this polemic is the relationship between culture and politics, or intellectuals and power. Here Debeljak and his Serbian counterparts disagree, and one is hard pressed to ignore the logic of self-interest at work; after all, it is Serbian writers who have been most widely condemned for their active participation in the nationalist movement of the pre-war period and for their implicit rejection of cultural pluralism. Velikić and Prodanović’s rejection of politics makes sense (even if it is misguided), whether their goal is to evade responsibility or to sidestep the mistakes of their predecessors. But Debeljak’s position is equally self-serving: Of course he believes in the politicization of the intellectual—he conceives of his own activity as being in the service of good. But one of many reproaches of Slovene intellectuals is that their own self-heralded move toward civil society in the 1980s and 1990s was really a cloak for Slovenian nationalism and that their purity as intellectuals was sacrificed in the national interest in 1991, when Slovenia seceded from Yugoslavia. Thus, Debeljak has no simple task when rounding the corners off his argument that his own support for his state was qualitatively different than the support Serbian writers gave their own state. But it is the younger Serbs who are hiding from the golden opportunity that stands before them: Having watched their forebears make Milošević possible, might they not play an active role in cleaning up the mess? Apparently not; their business is writing better books.

The Old Guard Since the War.

The old guard that Debeljak probably intended to attack as the true tribunes of “post-communist Serbian” nationalism is hardly dead and buried, even though its authority in Serbian politics and culture has waned in the past year. It has become trendy to dismiss them, as though their time has passed. As if to remind us that there were once Serbian intellectuals who willingly mixed in politics and in fact viewed it as their prerogative and duty to effect political change when necessary, in June 1996, twenty-four members of SANU affixed their signature to the “Declaration on the Protection of the Person and Work of Radovan Karadžić.” Dignifying Karadžić as the “authentic leader of all Serbs,” these intellectuals demanded that all attempts to remove the Bosnian Serb political leader to The Hague Tribunal be stopped, given his contributions to the Dayton peace agreement and the
high repute he enjoys among Serbs. The list of signatories’ names reads like a who’s who of late-1980s mythologizers of Serbian history and culture—philosopher Mihailo Marković, historians Milorad Ekmečić and Vasilije Krešić, linguist Pavle Ivić, professor of law Smilja Avramov. While literary critic Nikola Milošević explained that his signature reflected his belief that The Hague was picking on the wrong man—Mišošević, Franjo Tudjman, and Ilija Izetbegović were the real criminals—others insisted that their actions were simply patriotic. Although the declaration found critics in Serbia, complaints came from isolated writers with well-established antinationalist résumés.

Perhaps more to the point, the press in Serbia in recent months has published scattered interviews, meeting notes, and other articles relating to relations between Serbian and Slovenian intellectuals throughout the 1980s. As if meant to re-emphasize the fact that the Debeljak polemic did not occur in a void, writers such as the Serbians Mihailo Marković, Dobrica Čosić, and Nebojša Popov and the Slovenian Taras Kermuñer reviewed their own shared past in an attempt to define exactly who had condemned Yugoslavia to death first: Had the Serbs formulated a genocidal program of Great Serbianism with the infamous 1986 SANU memorandum? Or had the Slovenes, in fact, decided as early as 1985 to leave Yugoslavia if it did not reform in a fashion acceptable to them? In the case of the older generation, which includes intellectuals clearly culpable for the growth of an aggressive nationalist movement in Serbia (including Čosić and Marković, but not Popov), the debate is both more important because these intellectuals must bear the burden of their own behavior rather than that of others (unlike Velikić and Prodanović) and pointless since they obviously will not do so.

Older intellectuals are lost to the cause of introspection in Serbia. Others might not be lost causes, however, and it is to them that one might turn for an indication that the peculiar guilt of the Serbian intellectual will ever be addressed. Unfortunately, their imaginary wall of separation between politics and litera-

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politics to their book writing? No one can accuse Velikić and Prodanović of having contributed to the warlike atmosphere in Yugoslavia in the late 1980s, but if young writers refuse to address the phenomenon openly, who will? Dobrica Ćosić? Mihailo Marković? Debeljak’s smugness can be only weakly challenged without the active engagement of Serbia’s new intellectual leaders, who would face up to the responsibility of their predecessors for the aggressive nationalism of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Intellectual Opposition Emerges

Just as there is an identifiable consensus of nationalists among Serbian intellectuals and politicians, there is a discernible opposition to that consensus that has existed in Serbia since the nationalist movement began. Were the Serbian Havel to embody the moral authority of the Czech one, he or she would have to emerge from this contingent—composed of Serbian liberals, anti-nationalists, pacifists, and old-guard Yugoslav socialists. Its leader today is Nebojša Popov, a member of the old socialist–humanist Praxis group (which included Mihailo Marković, who now represents the nationalist consensus). The Civic Alliance is its political arm, and related civic, antivar organizations include the Belgrade Circle. The opinions of these people can be most easily found in the biweekly magazine Republika (edited by Popov). Naša Borba and the weekly Vreme also present their views, although without the idealism of the Republika crowd. While it would be unfair not to point out that this group of Serbs attempts to do exactly that which this article requests—to face their past squarely, acknowledging the excesses that Serbs have sponsored and rationalized away—it would be similarly misleading to act as though these organizations and individuals have great influence in Serbia today. In fact, they have long been considered virtual traitors to Serbia, agents of foreign powers, and therefore fundamentally irrelevant. They have resolutely resisted the demands of their society to respond to the threat to the nation, but their voices are unheard. Regular features in Republika point out the flaws in the Serbian body politic and among its leaders. A recent large collection of essays addressed precisely the phenomena that are the subject of this article.27 But these are not the people who need to come clean; only those who led the movement rather than resisted it from the start have the credibility to produce a real self-examination among Serbs.

Then there are those individuals who have the political prospects but lack the humanism and moral author-

ity to be a Serbian Havel. Unfortunately, if Serbian writers are incapable of challenging the self-pity of Serbia’s intellectual elite, Serbia’s opposition politician-intellectuals appear even less likely. Vuk Drašković, the head of the nationalist Serbian Renewal Movement, was last relevant in his atavistic nationalist-warrior phase before the wars began in 1991. Vesna Pešić’s rhetoric and ambition seem to annoy Serbs more than inspire them, even if her Civic Alliance speaks the language of West European liberalism and appeals to Americans. Zoran Đinđić, whose Democratic Party has consistently espoused the same nationalist rhetoric as all other parties but the Civic Alliance, may have the only real chance to challenge Slobodan Milošević. But neither Đinđić nor Drašković could qualify as the Serbian Havel: Their pasts are too compromised by aggression and intolerance. As Slobodan Inić, a Belgrade political analyst, recently noted, Vuk Drašković helped invent the warlike nationalist politics of Slobodan Milošević, and until recently Zoran Đinđić led the attacks on Milošević for selling out the Bosnian Serbs. As tempting as it is today to hope for real change from the current crop of political leaders in Serbia, the fact is that they do not have the moral authority necessary to provoke introspection among Serbs who are exhausted by nationalist hysteries but are incapable of seeing past the wrongs they have suffered.

Regardless of the fact that Zajedno gained power in some Serbian cities as a result of the demonstrations, Serbia faces real problems that require a firm commitment to civic values: integrating refugee populations from Croatia and Bosnia, coming to terms with the existence of large Hungarian populations in the north and Albanian populations in the south, and mediating the inevitable conflict between the various hostile political factions (led by those described in this article as well as Vojislav Šešelj, the leader of the extreme nationalist Serbian Radical Party, who has publicly disavowed the demonstrations and attributed them to pernicious foreign influences). Serbia must be led by more than ambitious politicians who shed their skins as needed. Serbia requires something better than the cynical, winking dismissal of the old guard of Dobrica Ćosić, Milorad Pavić, Mihailo Marković, and the others guilty of convincing Serbs of their own modern martyrdom. Serbs need to see contrition from the compromised before they will embrace their role in the wars of Yugoslavia’s destruction in all its complexity.

Notes

5. Handke claimed in A Winter Trip that he had been to Belgrade only once, years before, for an afternoon, and implied that he had no real conception of Serbia or Serbs. Yet, in an interview in Vreme (May 18, 1992), he noted, among other confident assertions about Serbia, Slovenia, and Yugoslavia, “It is a fact that in Serbia, in Belgrade, there was a European openness that in Ljubljana simply did not exist.” It appears that Handke did come with a few preconceptions.


7. Vreme (February 24, 1996).
10. Naša Borba (March 5, 1996); and NIN (March 8, 1996).

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