

The Yugoslav wars of disintegration: Graveyard Humor in Belgrade

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Global Research, May 23, 2012

[Counterpunch.org](#) 23 May 2012

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Since graveyard humor is a Serbian specialty, it seems appropriate that Serbs just played a little joke on everybody by electing a former undertaker as President.

In the May 20 runoff, affable former funeral home manager Tomislav Nikolic won slightly over 50% of valid votes cast against the incumbent, Boris Tadic, who had spent his eight years in office doing everything possible to please the Western powers that have in return done all they could to keep Serbia alone and humiliated. Constantly compared to Nazi Germany, Serbs have been subjected to a sleazy imitation of the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal, but no Marshall Plan billions to revive the economy. Conditions are increasingly desperate.

More than half the electorate, perhaps considering the election itself a joke, did not bother to vote. Nikolic promised change, but there is no sign that he has either a plan or the means to bring it about. Earlier in the month, parliamentary elections were tainted by evidence of massive ballot rigging in favor of the ruling coalition. Even before the presidential runoff, the Socialist Party leader made a deal to form a coalition with Tadic's Democratic Party – the coalition favored by Western embassies. So Nikolic may find himself only a figurehead, with the government run by a prime minister from the same old Tadic majority.

Still, voters at least get a chance from time to time to say “no”, and saying “no” to Tadic brought a fleeting illusion of freedom.

For Western media and politicians, Serbia serves only one purpose: to be the bad example of “nationalism” that enhances the virtuous anti-nationalism of the EU and NATO. In an era when in EU countries a mere disparaging remark against any ethnic or religious group may lead to lawsuits for “incitement to racial hatred”, the Serbs are there to allow cartoonists, editorialists and film-makers to stigmatize the pariah group to their heart's content. Serbia's most prized export to Europe is its “genocidal war criminals”, sent to The Hague to feed Europe's pride in its humanitarian values. So the best thing Serbia could do for Western media was to elect “an extreme nationalist” – well, not exactly – only a “former extreme nationalist”, or “a former ultranationalist”, or “a former strident nationalist”. In The Guardian, Ian Traynor fretted that “Serbia's hopes of fast-track integration into Europe suffered a severe setback” with the defeat of the endlessly accommodating Tadic.

This “fast track” is another sour joke. After eight years of giving in to EU pressure, all Tadic got this spring was grudging permission for Serbia to become an “official candidate” to join

the EU. To join when? Only when Serbia makes some more “reforms” and above all, when Belgrade accepts the “independence” of Kosovo, stolen from Serbia by NATO bombing in 1999 and handed over to Albanian gangsters with friends in Washington.

That is something no Serbian government dares to do. At least not openly. Like Tadic, Nikolic has promised to pursue two mutually exclusive policy aims: EU membership, and refusal to recognize that the historic Serb province of Kosovo is now an “independent State”.

The election of Nikolic probably shows that enthusiasm for joining the EU is waning, which would make sense considering the current crisis of the euro zone. But even a sinking ship may look like salvation to a drowning man.

Ever since the 1999 NATO war, Serbia has been a semi-occupied country, surrounded by NATO. Its politicians must seek approval of Western embassies and pro-Western media. Many have been groomed in the United States. Nikolic is an exception, but to compensate, he has turned to former U.S. Ambassador William Montgomery for advice on how to improve his image in the West.

As a “former extreme nationalist”, Nikolic may be called upon by EU gatekeepers to do even more (if such is possible) to prove his conversion to “Western values”. He started off with the rather astonishing statement that he was eager to meet Angela Merkel, his “best ally in Europe” – astonishing since everyone knows that Germany and Austria, as Serbia’s historic enemies (Sarajevo 1914) were first to sponsor Croatian and Slovenian secession from Yugoslavia and have vigorously pursued their century-old vendetta against Serbs ever since.

Nikolic has modified his former vow to pursue closer relations with Russia into a suggestion that Serbia must “have friends all over the world”. The “former extreme nationalist”, who left the Serbian Radical Party to form his own Progressive Party, does not appear to be the man to defy Serbia’s Western tormentors.

“Take Him to The Hague!”

Since only “former extreme nationalists” are left in Serbia, whatever happened to the real thing? Whatever happened to Vojislav Seselj?

Nikolic’s political mentor, the lawyer and Serbian Radical Party leader Vojislav Seselj, has been in prison in the Netherlands for over nine years, as his trial for belonging to an alleged “joint criminal enterprise” gets nowhere.

On February 24, 2003, learning that the Prosecutor’s office of the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) had issued a secret indictment against him, Seselj booked his own regular flight to the Netherlands to give himself up before the indictment could be issued. He announced boldly that he was “convinced that I’m capable of winning against The Hague tribunal and refuting these Western allegations against the Serbian people.” A farewell rally was held in Belgrade.

He has been in the ICTY prison in the Netherlands ever since.

The ICTY chief Prosecutor at that time, Ms. Carla Del Ponte, wrote in her memoirs “The Hunt” that the indictment was issued at the request of the authorities in Belgrade. At a meeting on February 17, 2003, Zoran Djindjic, who owed his position as Serbian Prime Minister to support from NATO powers, and was assassinated shortly thereafter, allegedly told her: “As far as Vojislav Seselj is concerned, we have only one request –take him away, never to bring him back again!”

The reason for getting Seselj out of Serbia was obvious. He was a popular politician who had lost elections to Milosevic, but with Milosevic out of the way, he might be a formidable opponent for the pro-Western politicians sponsored by the NATO powers. Or so they might worry.

The Seselj case illustrates an original purpose of the Hague tribunal, as described by one of its designers, Michael Scharf, a State Department adviser who took part in the creation of the ICTY. In an August 2004 Washington Post column, Scharf recalled: “In creating the Yugoslavia tribunal statute, the U.N. Security Council set three objectives: first, to educate the Serbian people, who were long misled by Milosevic’s propaganda, about the acts of aggression, war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by his regime; second, to facilitate national reconciliation by pinning prime responsibility on Milosevic and other top leaders and disclosing the ways in which the Milosevic regime had induced ordinary Serbs to commit atrocities; and third, to promote political catharsis while enabling Serbia’s newly elected leaders to distance themselves from the repressive policies of the past.”

To put it in slightly different terms, the purpose of the Tribunal was to oblige the Serbian people to accept the NATO version of events in their country.

Already in 1992, U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger called for a war crimes tribunal as an instrument to force the Serbian people to see things our way: While “waiting for the people of Serbia, if not their leaders, to come to their senses, we must make them understand that their country will remain alone, friendless, and condemned to economic ruin and exclusion from the family of civilized nations for as long as they pursue the suicidal dream of a Greater Serbia. They need, especially, to understand that a *second Nuremberg* awaits the practitioners of ethnic cleansing, and that the judgment, and opprobrium, of history awaits the people in whose name their crimes were committed.”

In reality, the Tribunal, precisely because it intervened in a complex civil war against the Serb side, has never been credible among most Serbs, but instead has served to strengthen the NATO countries’ own view of the conflict as caused solely by Serbian nationalism. The enemies of the Serbs, nationalist leaders of the Albanians, Bosnian Muslims or Croats, use the Western anti-Serb bias for their own purposes, first of all to portray themselves as pure innocent victims with no responsibility for the mayhem that tore Yugoslavia apart. That version is far too simplistic to convince Serbs who are aware of the complexities, even when they admit that crimes were indeed committed by Serbs during the bloody conflicts. Far from fostering reconciliation, the Tribunal has cemented divisions and made eventual reconciliation all but impossible.

Seselj, however, is a special case. There is no evidence that he ever took part in combat, much less in war crimes, or that he exercised any command responsibility. He joined a national unity government briefly during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, but for the rest of the time was an often bitter and vehement political opponent of President Slobodan Milosevic.

As a witness at the Milosevic trial in The Hague, Seselj surprised the prosecution by insisting that he, Seselj, was the real champion of “Greater Serbia”, while Milosevic was always opposed to the concept and instead wanted to preserve multi-ethnic Yugoslavia. Milosevic died in his cell before the end of his trial.

In short, Seselj is spending years on trial for what he said, not for what he did.

The Crime of the “Rusty Spoons”

Some twenty years ago, Seselj became notorious in Western media for having allegedly boasted of “tearing out the eyes of Croats with rusty spoons”. This was one of the main horror stories that built the reputation of Serbs as genocidal maniacs.

Vojislav Seselj was never one to be concerned with political correctness. He gained a certain prominence in the early 1980s as one of Yugoslavia’s best-known political prisoners. Internationally known intellectuals of the Praxis group rallied to his defense on grounds of free speech, even though they disagreed with him on just about all major questions, as they tended to be reformist Marxists and Seselj was strongly anti-communist. But even his adversaries acknowledged his courage and intelligence.

Under Milosevic, political prisoners were released, and in the early 1990s Seselj became leader of the Serbian Radical Party, a revival of Serbia’s main historic political party from Serbia’s democratic heyday in the early 1900s, before World War I and the creation of Yugoslavia at the Versailles conference. As Yugoslavia began to break up under the pressure of Croatian and Slovenian secessionism, Seselj became the leading champion of Serb nationalism, meaning roughly the idea that if Yugoslavia were to break up into its component nations, Serbia should revert to the nation it could have been as a victor in World War I before the creation of Yugoslavia, World War II, and the Communist division of Yugoslav territory – in short, “Greater Serbia”. Milosevic never endorsed this idea.

In 1991, conflict was brewing between ethnic Serbs and nationalist Croats in regions of Croatia with a large Serb population. Some Serbs fled to Serbia, fearful of a return of the Nazi-backed Ustasha movement that massacred Serbs after Nazi Germany invaded and broke up Yugoslavia in 1941. While the conflict aroused Serb fears of Ustasha, it also aroused Croat fears of Chetniks – the name for Serb guerrillas in wars against the Ottoman Empire or against the Nazi occupation.

That year, Seselj was guest on a satirical television show called Minimaxovision that made fun of the accusations against Serbs. “So you Chetniks are slaughtering people again?” Seselj was asked. He replied deadpan: “of course, only we have changed our methodology. Now, instead of knives we use shoe horns. And rusty ones at that, so that it cannot be established whether the victim died because of butchering or from tetanus.” The talk show participants laughed at the absurdity of using shoe horns. This was graveyard humor in a tradition understood perhaps in Belgrade, but not everywhere.

Urged on by their Croat friends, Western reporters took the whole thing seriously. The tasteless joke became a testimony to the fact that Seselj had boasted that his men slaughtered Croats with rusty spoons (the word *kasika* means both spoon and shoe horn in Serbian).

Since then, Seselj has explained repeatedly that he was joking. But the story lives on. The May 22 report on Nikolic’s election in the International Herald Tribune included a background reference to Vojislav Seselj who “said he would like to gouge out the eyes of Croats with a rusty spoon. He is now in The Hague for war crimes.”

An unmentioned aspect of this story is that in a paradoxical way it echoes the Italian author Curzio Malaparte, who wrote in “Kaputt”, his autobiographical account of Italy’s role in World War II, that when he visited the Leader of the fascist Independent State of Croatia, Ustasha chief Ante Pavelic, he was shown a basket of what looked like oysters and was told they were “human eyes... gouged from Serbs”.

Personally, I have never been able to take Malaparte’s story literally, and tend to think that it, too, is an illustration of a certain Balkan humor.

The simplistic belief that the Yugoslav wars of disintegration were caused solely by evil Serbs, imitating Hitler, is necessary to justify NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in order to “save the Kosovars”. This myth must be upheld as precedent for further “humanitarian intervention” whenever the United States and NATO decide to overthrow another recalcitrant government somewhere. Until NATO goes broke, or Western citizens wake up and oppose endless war, the Serbs have no chance of achieving truth or justice. They can only console themselves with graveyard humor.

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