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## REFLECTIONS

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# Yugoslavia Mon Amour

Abuse of cultural memory rules the day in the war-torn remnants of Yugoslavia. Thomas Butler here tells how the manipulation of ancient and often invalid grievances by groups aiming to obtain present-day advantage is threatening the future in the Balkans.

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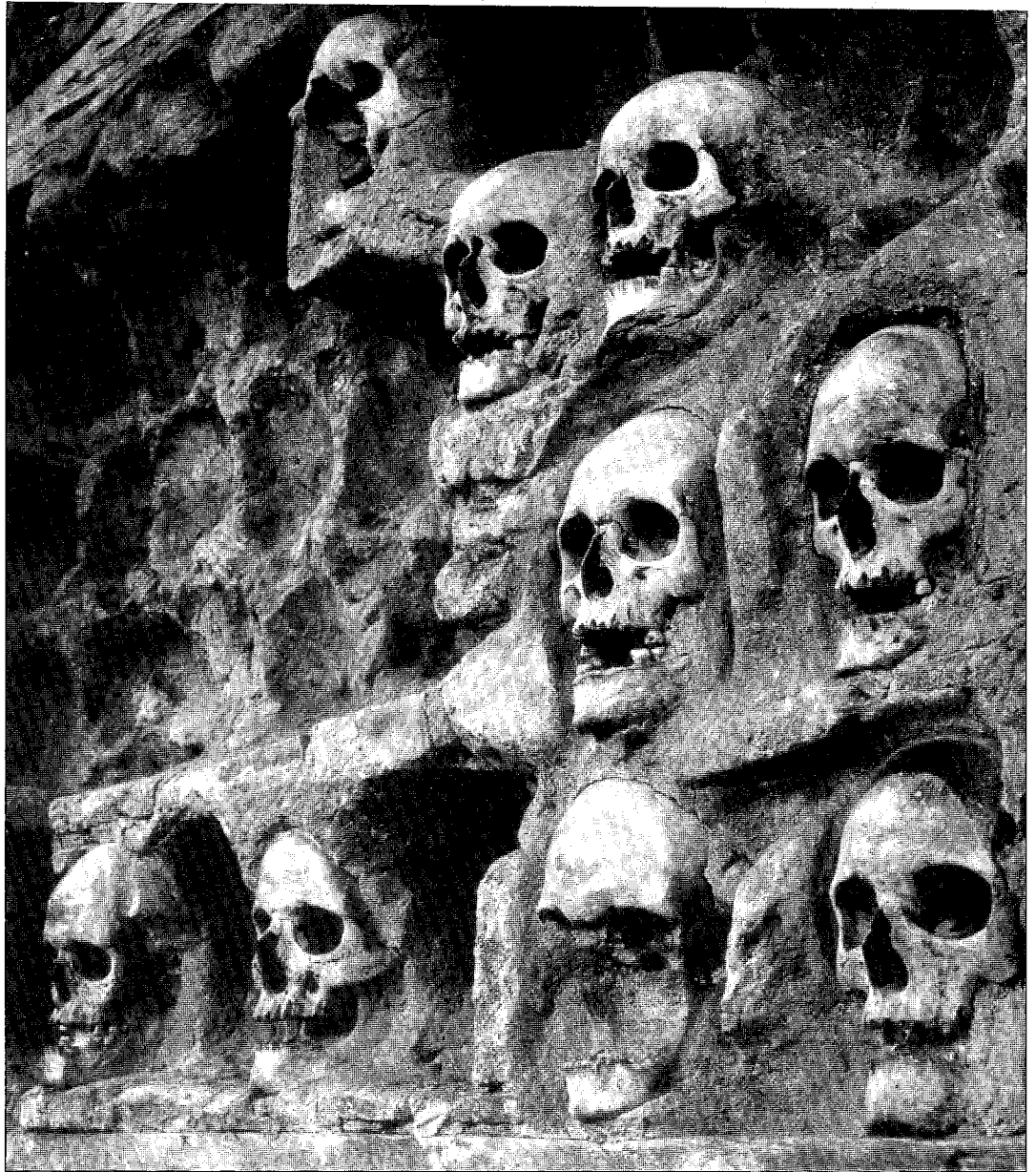
*by Thomas Butler*

Some years ago, I received an article from Belgrade, Yugoslavia, entitled "Banja Luka Mon Amour." It was written on the occasion of an earthquake that destroyed much of that mixed Serb, Croat, and Muslim town on the Vrbas River in northern Bosnia. Its author, Nada Curcija-Prodanovic, was a well-known translator of Serbo-Croatian folklore into English. Her article consisted mainly of childhood reminiscences, but what I remember most was its title. It seemed to me at the time that there was a touch of megalomania in the implicit comparison of Banja Luka to Hiroshima (whose suffering was memorialized in the movie *Hiroshima Mon Amour*), as well as something bizarre in its juxtaposition of Serbo-Croatian and French. It was as though my ear were telling me that these fraternal Indo-European languages did not belong on the same line.

I relate my reaction to this title because it illustrates the prejudice and impatience that Westerners bring to the Balkans, a region they tend to view simultaneously as the end of Europe and the beginning of the East. The confusion caused by this conjunction of so-called Western ("civilized") and Eastern ("fanatical, devious") elements

may help explain the slowness of the European Community and the United States to take the extraordinary measures necessary to stop the bloodshed in that unhappy region. A Dutch diplomat closely involved in the Community's attempts to effect a ceasefire in Croatia last year voiced his sense of futility: "When they run out of ammunition they will use their knives, and when their knives are gone they will use their teeth." The implication was that Serbs and Croats have a savage blood lust and that there will be no end to the fighting until both sides have had their fill. Or as the 19th-century Montenegrin poet, Prince Bishop Petar Petrovic Njegos, once wrote concerning his Muslim Slav enemies: "Human blood is an awful food./It has begun to spurt out of their noses."

As a specialist in the field of Serbo-Croatian language and literature, I have followed the tragic events in the former Yugoslavia with the same pain that moved Nada Curcija-Prodanovic to write about her native Banja Luka. I could pen a nostalgic "Dubrovnik Mon Amour" to commemorate that walled medieval town, heavily bombarded by Serbian field guns and warships. I cringe when I picture the damage to its 13th-century Franciscan monastery,



*The Tower of Skulls in the Serbian city of Niš. The memorial to the 952 Serbians who died fighting the Turks in 1809 attests to one of the fiercer Balkan rivalries.*

which I visited in 1987, guided by its aged abbot. We had met in Belgrade at a conference to honor the bicentennial of Vuk Karadzic (1787–1864), the great Serbian language reformer and collector of folklore. The Croatian abbot, whose monastery has a long tradition in the field of pharmacy, had come to the conference to present his analysis of Vuk's physical afflictions, which the abbot had deduced from apothecary notations in the Serb's diary.

I remember that the Serbian scholars were respectful but cool toward the Fran-

ciscan. I'm sure that today, if I were to remind them of his visit, one of them would toss off a wry joke or a pun on the manner in which they have repayed the abbot's courtesy. (Last year, during the various shellings of Dubrovnik, according to the *New York Times*, the monastery took 37 direct hits.)

Although the damage to Dubrovnik may distress many of my Serbian friends—who are neither Catholic nor Muslim but Orthodox—I suspect that deep down some of them derive quiet satisfaction from it. To

them Dubrovnik is a symbol of what they see as a revived fascist movement (*Ustasha*) in Croatia, as well as of the eternally corrupt West and the papacy. But such a view fails to take into account that "the Jewel of the Adriatic" was also once a haven for Serbian nobility fleeing the Turks after the fall of Serbia in the 15th century. Those who would applaud the damage to the Franciscan monastery are likewise ignorant of the role the Franciscan order played in keeping Christianity alive in Bosnia during the four centuries of Turkish rule.

**T**he destruction and loss of life in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo is even more tragic. In bombarding the city, it would seem, the Serbian army in the hills is trying to obliterate the memory of a composite civilization that arose over five centuries. For these Serbs, Sarajevo—founded by a Turkish advance party in the 15th century (*saraj* originally meant "palace of the local ruler")—symbolizes more than 400 years of harsh Ottoman control, a rule which in the opinion of Ivo Andric, the Nobel Prize novelist, "destroyed the fiber of Bosnian society and fatally wounded its spirit." Andric's fundamentally negative portrayal of Ottoman rule has led Bosnian Islamic cultural leaders (who are also Slavs) to decry his works. Last year, one local Muslim leader blew up the monument to Andric in Visegrad, his boyhood town and the setting for his best-known novel, *Bridge on the Drina* (1945).

Despite tensions between Serbs and Muslims, which have their roots in cultural memory, one doubts that many of the Serbs who have been bombarding Sarajevo are from the Bosnian capital itself. For over a century, since at least the time of Austrian rule (1878–1914), the city has been known for its rich cultural life, shared by Muslim Slavs, Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs, and Sephardic Jews. While for centuries the Ottoman policy had been to discourage and suppress education among the non-Muslims, thereby keeping them illiterate and

passive, the Austrian approach had been just the opposite. The Hapsburg rulers chose to educate their new Slavic subjects so that they might become productive contributors to the empire. (One ironic result was that the Austrians educated the generation of revolutionaries that plotted the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914.)

Another Austrian policy was to encourage a separate Bosnian cultural identity, tied neither to Serbia nor Croatia. The interwar monarchy (1918–1941) managed the separatist impulses of the Bosnians, particularly Muslim Bosnians, with a policy of benign neglect and cooptation. After World War II, the Communist regime of Marshall Tito (born Josip Broz, of a Croat-Slovene marriage) created the separate republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina and established a broad network of Bosnian cultural institutions, including a university, publishing houses, theaters, and an opera.

Until the recent outbreak of hostilities, Sarajevo offered the world a model of the coexistence of multiple ethnic groups. Perhaps this is another reason why Serbian extremists are trying desperately to destroy it—it presented a creative alternative to the ethnically pure environment they are planning. Thus the cellist who came out each day at noon, for 22 straight days, to play in a Sarajevo square, played not only for the 22 civilians who died in a single shelling but for the city's lost cultural life as well.

**M**y own memories of Sarajevo are tinged by retrospective irony. During my first visit to the city, in 1952, I saw the pair of brass footprints in the sidewalk near the Milacka River marking the spot where the Bosnian Serb Gavrilo Princip stood while firing his pistol at Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914. At the time I found it difficult to imagine that from such a peaceful backwater the horror of World War I had been unleashed. Nor was there any reason for me to suspect that violence would ever again

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rule that city. The Yugoslavia of Marshall Tito was a quiet place in the 1950s, governed by tough, experienced political operatives who knew well the history of past ethnic disputes and were not about to allow them to be rekindled.

Tito's goal was a new Yugoslavia, a nation whose citizens would regard themselves as Yugoslavs, not as Serbs or Croats or Muslims. He was willing, however, to allow the country to pass through an intermediate federal stage, with six republics and the two autonomous provinces of the Vojvodina and Kosovo-Metohija, with their large Hungarian and Albanian minorities. The Slovenes, Macedonians, Hungarians, and Albanians were permitted to have their own media, including newspapers and journals in their own languages. It was assumed that Croats and Serbs spoke the same language (Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian), and so no distinction was made between them in official publications, except in the choice of alphabet—Cyrillic for the Serbs, and *latinica* for the Croats.

The Belgrade government encouraged ethnic mixing among the young. Army draftees were forced to serve outside their native republics, and major summer work projects, in which students receiving stipends were required to participate, brought together youths from all over Yugoslavia. (I remember how the departure of young Serbian girls to work in Macedonia occasioned much anxiety among their parents, who worried that their daughters would lose their virginity to hot-blooded Balkan lads.)

During that first stay in Yugoslavia, as a student at Belgrade University, I recall being puzzled by the official sponsorship of the national folkloric groups and by the variety of publications in various languages. Local cultural groups that featured native dancing and singing were encouraged to travel to other republics and even abroad. "How," I asked myself, "do they expect to create a Yugoslav nationality when they emphasize differences in this way?"

When I returned to Yugoslavia as a Fulbright scholar in 1967–68, I was reminded of my earlier skepticism. Worsening economic conditions had led to an inevitable search for culprits. The Slovenes and Croats were claiming, justifiably, that too much of the foreign currency earned in

their coastal resorts and businesses was being diverted to projects in the less-developed parts of Serbia and Macedonia. Of course, their impatience with the economic situation could not be expressed safely in the media or in a public forum—those who did protest received stiff jail sentences—but it manifested itself in the realm of culture. Croat intellectuals began to insist publicly that their language was different from Serbian. Serbs, on the other hand, maintained that "Croatian" and "Serbian" were only variants of the same language.

**O**n this point I was in agreement with the Serbs. No matter where I traveled in inner Croatia or on the Dalmatian coast, I never had trouble being understood by Croats, even though I had learned my language in Serbia. The basic difference between the two dialects involved the pronunciation of one syllable, the Croats pronouncing it as *je* or *ije* and the Serbs in Serbia as *e*. (For example, Croats say *mlijeko* for milk and Serbs say *mleko*, although the Serbian minority in Croatia may also pronounce it *mlijeko*.)

I remember talking with a young woman at a ski lodge in Bohinj, Slovenia, in the winter of 1967–68. A Croat, she lectured me on the superiority of Croatian speech to Serbian, fixing on the *ijekavian/ekavian* distinction and declaring that the former was more musical than the latter, which it is. Trivial as her argument at first sounded, it reminded me that the language question carried a heavy political-cultural load.

Around this time, a dictionary project aimed at the publication of a joint Croatian-Serbian dictionary came sputtering to a halt after the publication of the first two volumes. Everyday Croatian usage had been excluded from the tomes, or termed "dialect," while Serbian usage had been presented as standard. As a result the Croats discontinued their collaboration and began work on a new Croatian orthography and dictionary, which were to be purified of Serbian influence. Two leading Yugoslav linguists, Dalibor Brozovic of Croatia and Pavle Ivic of Serbia, took part in the increasingly acrimonious discussion.

In a very real sense, the ideological roots of much of the violence in Yugoslavia

over the past two years can be traced to the linguistic quarrel of 25 years ago. What the Croats were really saying at the time—although they did not dare say it directly—was that they wanted to separate; the Serbs, replying equally indirectly, were saying that they could not. Indeed, in August 1971, with the publication of the *Croatian Orthography*, the Belgrade magazine *Nin* warned that the new Croatian orthography would only aggravate divisiveness between Serbs and Croats. The growing linguistic dispute heralded the collapse of Tito's Yugoslavia.

Two years ago at an international conference on cultural memory organized by social anthropologists in Boston, I argued with an American scholar about the causes of the then-unfolding Yugoslav crisis. She felt that everything was traceable to 1941 and the *Ustasha* killing of thousands of Serbs at the concentration camp of Jasenovac. (Many of these Serbs were from the Krajina area of Croatia, which is trying to merge with Serbia.) I, on the other hand, felt that the roots of the current conflict between Serbs and Croats ran much deeper, at least as far back as the schism between the Catholic and Orthodox churches in 1054, and perhaps even beyond that to the ninth century.

It appears we were both right. She, in that the immediate cause of the fighting between Serbs and Croats in Croatia was Serbian fear of another Jasenovac. When Franjo Tudjman, author of a book which stated that Serbian losses were only one-tenth what the Serbs claimed, became president of Croatia in 1990, Serbs in Croatia (some 14 percent of the population) concluded that they were not likely to receive fair and unbiased treatment in the new state. Nor did Tudjman at the time offer concrete guarantees that would have allayed their worries. (He has since done so.)

Although it was the Serbs in Krajina who provoked the outbreak of hostilities, the fighting between Serbs and Croats in Croatia has been fueled over the long run by animosities between Orthodox and Catholic Christians. Orthodox-Catholic prejudices are powerful. A few years ago, I vis-

ited the monastery of Iviron on Mount Athos, Greece. While I was attending the early morning liturgy, a monk approached and asked whether I was Orthodox or Catholic. When I replied "Catholic," he told me to "go outside and pray."

The Greek Orthodox Church, like the Roman Catholic Church, has a long memory. In the young monk's mind, I was excommunicated. The Schism in 1054 and the plundering of Constantinople in 1204 by the Fourth Crusade are alive in the Orthodox mind and continue to affect Orthodox-Catholic relations, including those between Serbs and Croats. Some of the doctrinal differences between the two churches seem ludicrous today. Take for example the *filioque* controversy: According to the Roman Catholic Creed, the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son" ("*ex patris et filioque procedit*"), whereas the Orthodox Church claims that according to the original Nicæan Creed (A.D. 325), the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone. This difference had threatened to split Christianity as early as the ninth century, with pope and patriarch hurling anathemas at each other. This is not to say that Serbs felt justified in shelling Dubrovnik because they believed its inhabitants were schismatics, but the residue of ancient disputes made the action more acceptable. The sense of "otherness" is further exacerbated by the fact that the two peoples were ruled by different and opposing empires: the Croats by the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Serbs by the Ottoman.

As for Croatian and Serbian relations with the Muslim population in Bosnia, no one will deny that until recently the Croats had the more harmonious dealings with their Islamic brethren. This may be because they see the Muslims merely as heretics, who can be saved if they will only be baptized. In fact, Franjo Tudjman was photographed more than a year ago smiling benignly at the baptism of a group of Muslim children, a picture that drove Bosnian president Alija Izetbegovic into such a frenzy that he actually made a very short-lived treaty with archenemy Serbia. The Serbs, by contrast, have a different view of Muslims. They see them as traitors as well as heretics. Scratch a Muslim, they believe, and you will find a Serb whose ancestor



*Bogomil tombstones. Many Bosnian Muslims are descendants of the heretical Christian sect.*

went over to the Ottoman side 500 years ago, in order to keep his land.

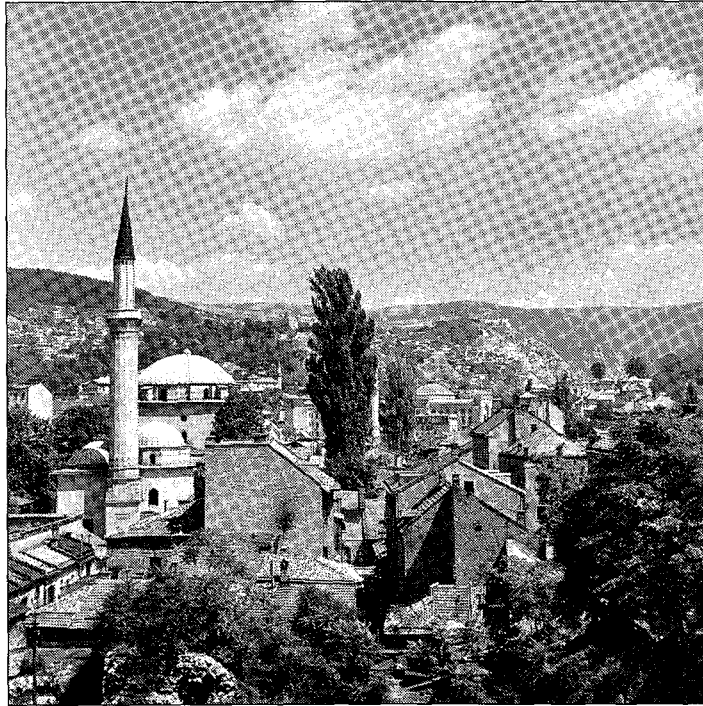
In his autobiographical *Memories* the late novelist Mesa Selimovic, who was born and raised a Muslim but considered himself a Serbian writer, referred to himself and other Yugoslav Muslims as "renegades." In a later edition he mentions that the lexicographer Abdulah Skaljic, a representative of the *Reis-ul Ulema*, the highest Islamic religious authority in Bosnia, objected to his use of the term "renegade" for those who had "taken the right road and the right faith."

In the Bosnian case the situation is further complicated by the fact that great numbers of those who converted to Islam were members of a heretical Manichean Christian sect called "Bogomils" ("pleasing to God"). Threatened by the Inquisition, they are said to have invited the Ottomans to conquer their land in 1463, rather than face invasion by a Hungarian army blessed by the pope. From all this came the saying:

"Bosnia fell with a whisper."

The Bogomils and other Slavic converts to Islam formed their own ruling class in Bosnia, sending their sons to Adrianople (Jedren) and later to Istanbul to be trained for military or civil service. Nine Bosnians rose to be grand viziers between 1544 and 1612, including the famed Mehmed Pasha Sokolovic (d. 1579), who served Suleiman the Magnificent and paid for the building of the bridge at Visegrad. A folk ballad about Mehmed's building of the bridge begins with these lines:

Mehmed Pasha served three sultans,  
And he earned three castles full of  
treasure.  
Then he sat down and began to ponder  
What he could do with all that treasure:  
Either he could give the treasure to  
the poor,  
Or he could pour the treasure into  
the Drina,  
Or he could build charitable works  
throughout Bosnia.  
The more he thought, the more he came



*Sarajevo in quieter days, when Serbs, Croats, Muslims, and Jews lived in neighborly harmony. Today, many of the city's old buildings have been reduced to rubble by indiscriminate artillery fire.*

to the same idea:  
 "I shall build charitable works  
 throughout Bosnia,  
 And first of all a bridge over  
 the Drina . . ."

Ivo Andric, who grew up in Visegrad in the home of an Austrian civil servant, used elements from this ballad in his novel *Bridge on the Drina*. Nor was he the only Christian writer to use Muslim themes in his works. One thinks right off of Branko Copic's stories about the Islamic wise fool, Nasradin Hodja. For the most part such cultural blending occurred largely in the oral tradition, since those Bosnian Muslims who became deeply involved in Islamic intellectual life wrote mainly in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Some of their works—histories as well as theological and philosophical tracts of a speculative tendency—were known throughout the Muslim world. Some Bosnians became skilled poets in Persian and Arabic, the favored languages for *belles lettres*. Their accomplishments

are listed—almost too humbly—by Dr. Smail Balic in *The Culture of the Bosnians: The Muslim Component* (Vienna, 1973). Balic's book contains hundreds of Muslim names—not only those of writers, but also those of calligraphers and miniaturist painters.

This Bosnian Muslim accomplishment was largely ignored in Yugoslavia until after Tito came to power. The Yugoslav Communists came to see that the Muslim cultural "component" provided them with a convenient bridge to the Middle East, Indonesia, and Africa. In a very real sense Tito's Muslim ambassadors, with names that combined Turkish and Slavic elements—Dizdarevic, for example (*dizdar* is the Turkish word for a fortress commander)—brought Yugoslavia prestige and economic benefit among nonaligned

nations. (Of course, that good will is gone today, as the struggle in Bosnia has taken on the aspect of a religious war or crusade, with Turks and Iranians offering to fight on the side of their Bosnian Muslim brothers.)

The Serbian "purification" of Bosnian villages of their Muslim inhabitants calls to mind a similar action, described by the poet Njegos in his "Mountain Wreath." The Montenegrin sings of the events leading up to a late 17th-century extermination of Muslims in Montenegro, motivated by fear of contamination from within. Such fears have persisted. More than 20 years ago, my Belgrade landlady told me that the Albanians (*Shiptars*), who are mainly Muslim, were lighting bonfires at night on the hills around the city, signaling to each other. She spoke nervously about their high birthrate, warning that they would inundate the Serbs, as they had already done in Kosovo, the "holy ground" of the Serbian medieval empire.

In more recent years I heard worried talk about how Islamic fundamentalism

was sweeping Bosnia and about Saudi Arabian money being used to rebuild mosques and Muslim schools. I used to smile at such stories, dismissing them as the usual Serbian anxiety about Muslims. But I was wrong to have underestimated the Serbian alarm.

The oppressive Serbian preoccupation with Muslims—Albanians in particular—is vividly illustrated in the war diary of a Serbian reservist from Valjevo, named Aleksandar Jasovic, published in a Belgrade journal in 1992. Jasovic, who in civilian life is an emergency medical technician, served as a medic in the Serbian ranks in the fighting for Vukovar in Croatia in 1991. While his battery was shelling the Croats (whom he calls *Ustasha*) in the northeast, he recounts in his diary, he was in fact preoccupied with fears about Kosovo far to the south—the cradle of the Serbian medieval kingdom and the scene of the Serbs' fatal loss to the Turks in 1389.

Jasovic writes of the Albanian Muslims, who because of a high birthrate and immigration from neighboring Albania now are a huge majority in Kosovo, "Their Sarajevo mother supports them!" Westerners may find the phrase obscure, but it illuminates what in the medic's mind seems the powerful, irrefutable, and threatening connection between the Muslims of Bosnia and those of Kosovo.

Is there any way out of the ever-widening gyre of death and destruction in the Balkans? There may be, but the failure of diplomatic efforts up to now has shown that without more active U.S. participation, nothing will happen. Western Europe's leaders seem incapable of seeing that they should act forcefully—with military power, if needed—to force a cease-fire. When and if the fighting is ever stopped, negotiators may look at Yugoslavia as the victim of a disaster no less devastating than the earthquake that destroyed Banja Luka or the bombing that leveled Hiroshima. Attention will have to be given to healing, to prevent a repetition of the present calamity. The United Nations should sponsor an ongoing

conference of Serbian, Croatian, Muslim, and other historians, to derive a core of mutually agreed-upon statements regarding each group's history. Ideally, this multicultural convocation would confront shibboleths concerning "enemy" ethnic groups, examine national memories for their accuracy and rationality, and separate truth from prejudice. The mediation of outside specialists would be vital, because Balkan scholars always seem biased in favor of their own group.

In examining the more documented history of the 20th century, the peoples of the Balkans will have to accept responsibility for the crimes they committed against one another. Serbs will have to admit their nation's guilt for the dictatorship of King Alexander during the late 1920s and '30s, which undermined the prewar Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Likewise, Croats will have to acknowledge the holocaust of Serbs at Jasenovac and elsewhere. Only the admission of guilt and the granting of forgiveness can start the healing process.

The same is true for the Christian relationship with the Muslims (the "Turks"). The Muslims need to admit that their ancestors abused and lorded it over the Christians for centuries. The Serbs especially, while granting Muslims forgiveness, must ask in turn for their pardon for recent savagery. We have precedents for such national confessions of guilt, including the West German acceptance of responsibility for Nazi crimes against Jews and the French intellectuals' fairly recent call (June 21, 1992) for their government to condemn, in the name of "the French collective memory," the Vichy government's persecution of Jews.

If such a healing process is to take place in the Balkans, it will be best to keep it out of the hands of religious leaders and politicians. The liturgy of reconciliation should be written by the poet, aided by others of good will. Thus the Yugoslavia that many of us in the West truly loved for its diversity may pass peacefully into history.