

Serbia and the Balkans Wars: The Future Belongs to Those Who Do Not Surrender

Interview. Compared to our ancestors, we are really distinguished by cowardice, fatalistic passivity and laziness. All this, however, can change quickly.

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Global Research, June 03, 2017
[Zurnalists.rs](#) 2 June 2017

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [History](#),
[Police State & Civil Rights](#), [US NATO War](#)
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How accurate is the theory that there are tragic events of exceptional strength that really shape the identity of a nation? How is this happening and what if we do not learn a lesson out of those experiences?

– The prominent French writer Renan wrote in his lecture “What is a Nation?” that people are often connected by memories of shared suffering, and Serbs are no exception. Today, when Yugoslavia is no more, there is no reason why Jasenovac should not be brought back to the center of the Serbian identity, just like the Jews did with Auschwitz.

During the Balkan wars and the First World War, we had a great victory, but also a lot of suffering. We were always criticized for building our identity on suffering, defeat, and therefore, for hardly looking towards the future.



Milos Kovic

– When Americans ask you a question like that, then they should be reminded of the Hollywood spectacle “300” about Leonidas, that they filmed and earned a great amount of money. What are the ethics taught in this film? It’s not about celebrating only defeats. Battles are fought to be won. Nobody wants to die. War ethics require courage, wisdom and victory. And defeats teach us lessons and they should make us wiser.

If we draw a parallel between the behavior of the Allies in the First World War and what happened in the nineties, we can see that in both cases the Serbian interests were crushed and betrayed, but despite all harmful decisions for us, we still walk persistently toward the European integration.

- In 1914, the Austro-Hungarian Empire had a stick in one hand, and in another it had a bag, and they offered Serbia integration, better roads, better health care, better schools. The only condition was to give up independence. The EU today is having the same behavior, even worse. The stick is thicker and the carrots are thinner. It is interesting that, after all, at present a large percentage of Serbs are ready to plunge the country into the EU and to give up sovereignty and freedom, and in 1914 it was unthinkable.

Why was it unthinkable?

- The answers are within ourselves. We are subject to special treatment by the great powers who applied similar methods in Hawaii, the Philippines, the Wild West, in India. But we cannot always blame someone else. The Serbian honor was famed by Serbs from the Republika Srpska and the former Republic of Krajina (in Croatia). Just look at the unfortunate Montenegro, the former Serbian Sparta. Or our desolate Belgrade, which is still acting as if it was the capital of Yugoslavia. Compared to our ancestors, we are really distinguished by cowardice, fatalistic passivity and laziness. All this, however, can change quickly. **Vladislav Petković Dis** (Serbian poet) lamented in the same way over the Serbian vices, on the eve of the big victories 1912-1918. We only need determination, intelligence and courage.

Nowadays many people believe that our defeats from the end of the 20th century are somehow rooted in victories from the Balkan wars and the First World War, because at that time we got a new State?

- I would say that this kind of debate relates only to the nineties. The generations fleeing the military mobilization and protesting against their own country, at a time when the Serbs across the Drina river were fighting for survival, are now running from their own weakness and are accusing their grandfathers and great-grandfather. Those fathers plunged a mighty sword into the hard stone, and their sons, not being able to pull out that sword, are accusing their fathers for of it. Our grandfathers left us a great Yugoslav State. We, our generation, we were not able to preserve it. It is easy to blame the dead for our own weakness. Let's look in the mirror and answer the question about where we were and what we did in the nineties when Yugoslavia was broken down and what we are doing today when they are trying to break down our Serbia.

What actually happened to the Albanians in 1912, 1913, 1914, and after 1941?

- It was offered to the Muslim Albanians, who were a privileged class in the Ottoman Empire, to live in a relatively well-ordered and modern Yugoslav State instead of the Ottoman Empire. As equal citizens with their former serfs. Unfortunately, most of them refused. The hostility of Albanians towards the new State was based on class and religious grounds. That is why in the forthcoming World War, the majority sided with the occupiers and enemies of the Serbian people and they again committed genocide against the Serbian people in Kosovo and Macedonia, but also against the Macedonians.

To what extent is the issue explored in the Serbian historiography? Were there any punishment and reprisals in the Serbian army?

- Yes, there were. There are preserved commands from officers during the retreat across Albania stating that any robbery of Albanian civilians would be severely punished. In the short story "Resimić the drummer" Dragisa Vasic describes one such case, when the starving Serbian recruits, while crossing Albania, steal fowl in an Albanian village, and at the request of peasants, the Serbian officer shoots dead those kids. It was a real historical event.

Simon Sebag Montefiore in his "Jerusalem", considers the Albanians very seriously and notes that they have grown as a strong ethical group since the beginning of the 19th century. By what means did we underestimate them as a group and a political power?

- It must be said that Belgrade really underestimated the Albanian nationalism and that it was generally despised. We were unable to encourage professionals for Albanian studies. There were some, but not enough. It is still difficult to find one who would deal with this important question. Unlike Albanians who, at least in Kosovo and Metohija, were learning Serbian, we were not learning Albanian. So, there has been some underestimation, especially of the Albanian nationalism, and we paid the price. Nevertheless, we must not waste time on blaming ourselves, we must not lose faith in our own strength and we should not forget that the future belongs to those who do not surrender.

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Original:

Source: ZURNALIST.RS 31.05.2017.

[The Duran, English](#)

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