

# Serbian History and Western Kosovo Mythology

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## **A National trauma**

*A national trauma which the Serbs after the fall of the Serbian national state and the Ottoman occupation experienced after June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1459[i] can be compared with that felt by Judea's Jews after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.[ii] Since Serbia soon found herself well within the Ottoman Sultanate and the European Christian states were on defense from the victorious Muslim Ottoman Turks, no light at the end of the historical tunnel was seen and the whole nation sank into deep despair for the next four centuries. In a sense, the nation may be regarded as an extended individual, with similar suffering from wounds and defeats.[iii] And as an individual compensates for its personal defeats by pushing his/her traumatic memories into the subconscious, so a nation builds up a fictitious history, trying to justify his/her failures and construct a fictitious world without unpleasant reality. Subjugated Serbs were no exception, as the Jews, Germans, Albanians, Lithuanians,[iv] etc. were neither. This is evidenced mostly from folk epic poetry.[v]*

The latter was resting, as far as the 1389 Kosovo Battle was concerned, on two principal pillars, one ideological, the other quasi-historical. The essence of the Kosovo cycle epic poems centers on the so-called "Prince (Lazar)'s Supper". This is composed, in its turn, mainly on the New Testament myth of the "(Christ's) Last Supper", with an admixture of the Homeric plot from the *Iliad*.

On the ideological side, the 1389 Kosovo Battle against the Muslim Ottoman Turks is presented in Serbian epic poems as a collective crucifixion. Being aware of the superiority of the Ottoman army, Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović of Serbia was put before two alternatives:

1) To surrender and to enjoy the "Earthly Kingdom" or

2) To fighting and to deserve the "Heavenly Kingdom", with the obvious allusion to the choice of Jesus Christ. Of course, the Christian Prince chose the second alternative.[vi]

Hence, it was just God's will, an inevitable outcome of the choice, which resulted in the

bloody defeat during the battle. As for the very plot, the scenario at the epic poem “Prince’s Supper” had Jesus in the image of Lazar, while the role of Judah was allotted to Kosovo’s nobleman Vuk Branković.[vii] The latter accused Miloš Obilić of treacherous intentions, and it was for that reason that the latter decided to kill Sultan Murad I (1360–1389) as proof of his loyalty.[viii] The parallel with Achilles before the Troy is conspicuous.

Nevertheless, even ignoring the ideological religious background mentioned, it was this treacherous behaviour of Vuk Branković, who allegedly passed during the very battle on the Ottoman side, which turned out fatal for the Christian and Serbian cause. However, this betrayal has never been proven by historical sources and it was in all probability invented later on, for a number of political and other reasons. But as a result, a Kosovo nobleman and feudal lord Vuk Branković remained in the popular Serb memory as an epitome of a traitor.

Apart from the folk epic cycle mentioned above, many Serb poets used to make use of the 1389 Kosovo Battle as poetic inspiration. A cycle by poet Dragoljub Filipović about Serb Kosovo heroes can move anybody except the Serbophobs. A renown Serb poet from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Milan Rakić, wrote a poem entitled *On Gazimestan*.<sup>[ix]</sup> When in October 1912 Serbian army reached Kosovo Field during the 1912–1913 First Balkan War, a commander lined up his unit at the spot on Gazimestan and asked if somebody could recite the poem before the line. A soldier stepped ahead and did it, in a solemn silence of moved comrades. Then another soldier stepped ahead and asked the commander if he is aware that the author of the poem is present in the line. The surprised commander then asked Milan Rakić to step ahead, but the latter was so timid that he did not obey the order. The commander then ordered the unit to salute their comrade, what they did proudly.

A historic place of Gazimestan means to the Serbs the same as Golgotha to the Christians, and the West Wall to the Jews. There is no Serb kid who has not read some parts from the collection of the Kosovo cycle poetry, folk or otherwise. Kosovo-Metochia (KosMet)<sup>[x]</sup> may be torn out from Serbia (and the Serbs), just as the Temple has been destroyed and the Jews left Judea. But just as after every feast meal Jews hit glasses after a toast onto the floor and cry: “Jerusalem, let my right arm dry up if I forget you!”, so Serbs will yearn for the lost homeland. The Jews have returned to Judea (today Israel) and recover Jerusalem and the West Wall (with fundamental support by the US’ administration and the Zionist lobby in the USA).<sup>[xi]</sup>

## **The 1389 Kosovo Battle**

The battle which took place north of KosMet’s administrative center Priština on the early morning of June 28th on the Kosovo Field<sup>[xii]</sup> is of focal ideological and patriotic importance to the Serbs during the last 600 years. A ruler of Serbia Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović (1373–1389), allied with his compatriot from Bosnia King Tvrtko I Kotromanić (1353–1391), made the last attempt to preserve his independence from rapidly expanding Ottoman Empire.<sup>[xiii]</sup> In 1388 they succeeded to defeat an Ottoman army in three successive battles of which the Bileća Battle (August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1388) was of the crucial significance.<sup>[xiv]</sup> The Ottoman Sultan Murad I, who had been occupied by pacifying Anatolia (Asia Minor), returned to the Balkans and brought together a huge coalition of forces among his vassals, many of whom were Christians including and ethnic Albanians, Bulgarians, and Serbs. The opposing army under Prince Lazar and King Tvrtko I was composed by the coalition of Central Serbia’s forces, Bosnian troops under Vlatko Vuković, the Vlach (Romanian) contingent of Voyvode

Mircea, the troops of Lazar's son-in-law Vuk Branković (feudal lord of KosMet) and some other detachments.

More numerous Ottoman army won the battle but both leaders, Prince Lazar and Sultan Murad I, lost their lives. According to very popular Serbian legend, Sultan Murad I was assassinated by Serbian knight Miloš Obilić or Kobilić who was before the battle taunted and insulted by Kosovo's landlord Vuk Branković. The assassinator slipped bravely into Sultan's tent and stabbed the Sultan Murad I by a long knife to death, before being killed by Sultan's guards. Prince Lazar was at the last stage of the battle taken as the prisoner with his knights and was decapitated by the Ottomans.[xv]

Nevertheless, the 1389 Kosovo Battle became very soon a focal element of Serb patriotism and national mythology over the centuries. For sure, no other single historical event has had more psychological influence and mental impact on the Serbs as a nation up today. The crucial element in his mythology is a tradition that before the battle, Prince Lazar was offered by Sultan Murad I the choice between the Earthly Kingdom and a Heavenly Empire, and he chose the latter what meant in practice the battle and national tragedy followed by the Ottoman yoke for centuries. As a matter of fact, because of such kind of covenant with God, the Serbs are understanding themselves as a collective identity as a Heavenly People for the very reason they chose in 1389 freedom in a Heavenly Empire over serfdom and humiliation in a temporal world (the Earthly Kingdom). The same happened in 1999 when NATO's gangsters gave the ultimatum to the Government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) to hand over KosMet's province to them but the ultimatum was rejected followed by NATO's aggression on Serbia and Montenegro for 78 days (March–June 1999).[xvi]

Historically, the 1389 Kosovo Battle accelerated the disintegration of the medieval Serbian state and opened the way to five centuries of the Ottoman yoke in KosMet and South Balkans.

## **The Western Kosovo meta-mythology**

In political practice, Kosovo-Battle memory, both historical and poetic, has been used by those Serbian politicians who referred to national sentiments, as an easy means to achieve Serbian collective support for their running politics. However, in fact, this refers mainly to Serbian quasi-intellectuals, who were educated in traditional manners. Nevertheless, this instance has been vastly and successfully exploited by those who found their interests in tearing KosMet from Serbia.[xvii] It concerns both Albanians (from Albania and KosMet) and their (Western) patrons. Since this instance appears of great importance for the propaganda war going on about KosMet, it deserves particular attention here.

It is known that one of the main strategies in winning a case has always been to attack an adversary at the point one feels to be the weakest with him/herself. It is obvious, for instance, how the mythology about the quasi Illyrian origin of the Albanians has been developed by Albanian historians and politicians, what should lend support for their claims on almost any West Balkan territory, including that of a present-day Austria. Therefore, the principal target of the same circles has been to convince the world public opinion that Serbs' claims on KosMet are a product of pure phantasy, an irrational construction of Serb history regarding their presence on KosMet. If they prove that a part of this construction is a false one, a pure myth, then it should be much easier to convince people that the rest is false as well. Their strategy is simple and it goes like this: Serbian claims regarding KosMet's history

are as realistic as their poetry is historically supported.[xviii]

In order to illustrate the point, let us turn for the moment to Israel, his ancient and recent history. We know from the *Old Testament* that the Jewish clergy has claimed the historicity of the ancient fables including Exodus, plagues sent on Egypt by Jehovah, parting the Red Sea, slaughter by Joshua of Canaanites, etc.[xix] Since we are aware these are but irrational fancies, it follows that nothing in the *Bible* has historical support. Hence, the claims of the Jews that they used to live in present-day Israel, including Palestine, are mere fictions, not worthy serious considerations. And, as the logical consequence, the existence of the state of Israel is the result of European colonization of the Arabic national territory, a pure act of aggression and violence.[xx]

Likewise, due to Zeus's interventions at Troy, the Trojan War never took place, since we know that the Olympian Gods were Greek inventions.[xxi]

The Kosovo meta-mythology has been, therefore, contrived like this: Serbs claim that their poetic memory is history, and since it is untrue, any further claims from their side appear likewise false. Nevertheless, the trouble with this construct is that Albanian Western patrons, like the USA, have accepted this meta-mythology and do not hesitate to express this in public. It is the background of their frequently repeated demands that Serbs should be realistic, to accept the reality (that KosMet is gone), etc. It never occurred to them that it is exactly one may have expected from them to give the advice to the Albanians, Albanian and non-Albanian likewise, to accept the reality that not all Albanians live in the same state, as not all Kurds, Serbs, Roma, Armenians, Jews or Basques do. However, of course, it is no matter of logic or morality, but rather of geopolitical interest and military power.[xxii]

If one may forgive those involved who are trying to secure their geopolitical and other interests, national or otherwise, by referring to the irrationality of their adversaries, as ethnic-Albanians do, the behaviour of some others self-appointed advisers and/or referees can provoke dismay only. Indeed, those who go around and talk about somebody's obsessions at microphones or in front of TV cameras, and then go to church and listen to Judeo-Christian myths, (not to mention those of the Islamic provenience) deserve nothing but compassion. To call historical facts myths and kneel at the same time before religious effigies deserve the attention of a particular branch of human professions, indeed.[xxiii]



Here it is interesting to note that the Vidovdan cult (the cult of the 1389 Kosovo Battle) was introduced much later from the time of the battle. Even more interesting is the fact that it came from the West, albeit in an indirect way. Namely, the original cult was that of the

Roman Catholic saint St. Vit (Vitus), who was executed on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 303 AD. His day was celebrated on that date, together with the seer Amos. Vit's name entered the Serbian Orthodox ecclesiastic books via Roman Catholic and Russian sources and he was never considered as a Serb saint. On the other hand, the Old-Slavic god Vid (Svevid)[xxiv] was venerated by ancient Slavs as the God of light and welfare, but a God of war as well.[xxv] Sacrifices to Vid were carried out at the end of the yearly harvest, in shrines dedicated to him, all over the Slavic world. Only after the famous Kumanovo battle in October 1912, when the Serbian army decidedly defeated the Ottoman one, at the very beginning of the First Balkan War,[xxvi] the slogan was launched "For Kosovo Kumanovo", and Vidovdan (The Day of Vid) came into prominence and entered the Serbian Orthodox Church's calendar by red letters, as one of nine most important state's official festivities.[xxvii]

The irony of history is that the visit of the Habsburg Prince Ferdinand to Sarajevo was deliberately scheduled for Vidovdan on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1914 and was experienced by the Serb part of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian secret patriotic and anti-Habsburg organization *Mlada Bosna* (Young Bosnia) as a direct provocation to the Serbs, their national feelings and ethnohistory (as it was in fact) but above all the provocation to their Kosovo cult.[xxviii] Whether the conspirators were aware that it could have been interpreted in another way, as linked with the Roman Catholic St. Vit, is not known. Whether the occurrence of the Great War depended on the (wrong) interpretation of the significance of June 28<sup>th</sup> could be a matter of speculation, but the historical reality remains the only certain fact at present.[xxix]

The collective memory on the 1389 Kosovo Battle has produced some other side effects, which will play a remarkable role in the subsequent Balkan history. Two points are to be made here, as two sides of the same coin:

1. The frustrating feeling of the (national) defeat of the Serbs.
2. The heroic assassination of Sultan Murad I by the Serbian knight Miloš Obilić.

The first element of the memory has resulted in the impulse for retaliation, as already mentioned in connection to the above-mentioned slogan. The second aspect is an almost archetypal link of the Vidovdan day to the "heroic assassination" within the patriotic impulse in the Serbian nation. The assassination in Sarajevo was but one instance of the "Vidovdan mythology". When on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1921 the Regent Alexander Karađorđević (practically the absolute ruler of Yugoslavia at the time, born in Montenegrin capital Cetinje on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1888[xxx] and Montenegrin by his own determination[xxxi]) declared the so-called "Vidovdan Constitution" of the interwar Yugoslav state, on the Vidovdan day, the same day an attempt was made to assassinate him and the Prime Minister Nikola Pašić (who was accompanying the Regent in a coach). Nikola Pašić was the target of another attempt of assassination in 1923 (on the Vidovdan day as well).[xxxii]

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## Notes

[i] Јованка Калић, *Срби у позном Средњем веку*, Друго издање, Београд: ЈП Службени лист СР], 2001, 221; Чедомир Антић, *Српска историја*, Четврто издање, Београд: Vukotić Media, 2019, 96–105. About the last years of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Serbian Empire, see in [Раде Михаљчић, *Крај српског царства*, Београд: БИГЗ, 1989].

[ii] Михаил Ростовцев, *Историја Старог света: Грчка и Рим*, Нови Сад: Матица српска, 1990, 403; Џон Бордман, Џаспер Грифин, Озвин Мари (приредили), *Оксфордска историја Грчке и хеленистичког света*, Београд: СЛИО, 1999, 541; Дејвид Џ. Голдберг, Џон Д. Рејнер, *Јевреји: Историја и религија*, Београд: СЛИО, 2003, 94–101.

[iii] About the national identity, see in [John Hutchinson, Anthony D. Smith, eds., *Nationalism*, Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, 17–131]. In essence, the nation is a large number of people of mainly common descent or believed to be, language, culture, and history. The nation is in majority of cases associated with some specified territory [Susan Mayhew, *A Dictionary of Geography*, Third Edition, Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 344]. In the case of Serbs, it is undoubtedly Kosovo-Metochia (KosMet). About the importance of KosMet in Serbian history, see in [Радован Самарџић и други, *Косово и Метохија у српској историји*, Београд: СКЗ, 1989].

[iv] In the case of Lithuanians, see, for instance [Zigmas Zinkevičius, *Lietuviai: Praeities didybė ir sunykimas*, Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos centras, 2013].

[v] Folk is a term used in ethnology and anthropology to refer loosely to traditional rural peasant societies in which an oral tradition predominates. The oral tradition is that part of a folk society's cultural knowledge or traditional culture which is passed on orally rather than in written form, and, therefore, it is in the opposition to the literate tradition. In principle, oral tradition is a source of information not only about contemporary cultural and social systems but as well as about the history of the group (ethnohistory) [Charlotte Seymour-Smith, *Dictionary of Anthropology*, New York: Palgrave, 1986, 120, 212].

[vi] About Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović, see in [Раде Михаљчић, *Лазар Хребељановић*, Београд: БИГЗ, 1989].

[vii] As a matter of fact, the very battle was fought on his feudal land at the Kosovo Field.

[viii] See more in [Раде Михаљчић, *Јунаци косовске легенде*, Београд: БИГЗ, 1989].

[ix] Gazimestan is a place where the decisive Ottoman cavalry charge took place during the battle.

[x] KosMet is an abbreviation for South Serbia's autonomous province of Kosovo-Metochia. The term was in official usage in the early years after WWII. It was replaced in December 1968 by the term Kosovo in order to more please ethnic Albanians. Today, terms KosMet and Kosovo-Metochia are widely used by the Serbs while the Albanians are using the term Kosova for the same province. The place-name Kosovo is of the Slavonic-Serb origin but not of Albanian.

[xi] About the creation of the Zionist Israel, see in [Giedrius Drukteinis (sudarytojas), *Izraelis, žydu valstybė*, Vilnius: Sofoklis, 2017, 247–350]. About the Jewish history, see in [Paul Johnson, *A History of*

*the Jews*, London: Orion Books Limited, 1993]. About the Jewish-Zionist lobby in the USA, see in [Alfonas Eidintas, Donatas Eidintas, *Žydai, Izraelis ir palestiniečiai*, Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos institutas, 2007, 247–298].

[xii] Kosovo Field is a geographical region in East Kosovo. This is a plateau running from Kosovska Mitrovica southward past Priština and Uroševac almost to Kačanik on the border with North Macedonia. It has an elevation of up to 600 meters. In the middle of the field there is a town of the same name, today, in fact, a suburb of Priština [Robert Elsie, *Historical Dictionary of Kosova*, Lanham, Maryland–Toronto–Oxford, 2004, 96].

[xiii] See more in [Joseph von Hammer, *Historija Turskog/Osmanskog Carstva*, knjiga 1, Zagreb: Nerkez Smailagić, 1979; Фјодор И. Успенски, *Источно питање*, Београд–Подгорица: Службени лист СЦГ–ЦИД, 2003].

[xiv] Владимир Ћоровић, *Историја Срба*, Београд: БИГЗ, 1993, 257.

[xv] See [Ратко Пековић, избор текстова, *Косовска битка: Мит, легенда и стварност*, Београд: Литера, 1987, 43–55; Чедомир Антић, *Српска историја*, Четврто издање, Београд: Vukotić Media, 76–79].

[xvi] See [Пјер Пеан, *Косово: „Праведни“ рат за стварање мафијашке државе*, Београд: Службени гласник, 2013].

[xvii] One of them, for example, is Noel Malcolm (b. 1956) – a British scholar and historian. He is the author of one of the first and most influential in the West book of KosMet's history: *Kosovo: A Short History*, London, 1998, which is a classic example of falsified propaganda material for the very political purpose to separate this province from the motherland of Serbia. He is a President of the Anglo-Albanian Association in London. His wife is Albanian.

[xviii] See [Tim Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth & Destruction of Yugoslavia*, New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1997].

[xix] About the Biblical legends, see in [Zenon Kosidovski, *Biblijske legende*, Podgorica: Narodna knjiga–Miba books, 2013].

[xx] About the history of Israel, see in [Ahron Bregman, *A History of Israel*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003].

[xxi] See [Gustav Schwab, *Gražiausios antikos sakmės*, Vilnius: Tyto alba, 2004].

[xxii] About contemporary geopolitics, see in [Klaus Dodds, *Global Geopolitics: A Critical Introduction*, Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2005].

[xxiii] Psychological anthropology is the field that includes the study of the individual's relationship to culture and society as well as the broader area of the interrelationship between psychology and anthropology. Psychoanalysis includes theories of the functioning and nature of the human personality, methods for the investigation of the personality, and therapeutic techniques relating to abnormal personalities or mental illness. Anthropology of religion is as well as a separate field of research. See more in [Arthur S. Reber, *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, London: Penguin Books, 1985].

[xxiv] One who sees everything.

[xxv] See [Драгољуб Драгојловић, *Паганизам и хришћанство у Срба*, Београд: Политика–Службени гласник, 2008].

[xxvi] See [Борислав Ратковић, Митар Ђуришић, Саво Скоко, *Србија и Црна Гора у Балканским ратовима 1912–1913*, Београд: БИГЗ, 1972].

[xxvii] It has to be noted that there is very confusion in the literature with the Slavic God Vid and the Roman Catholic saint Vit/Vitus.

[xxviii] See [Mira Radojević, Ljubodrag Dimić, *Serbia in the Great War 1914–1918*, Belgrade: SKZ, 2014; Миле Бјелајац, *1914–1918. Зашто ревизија: Старе и нове контроверзе о узроцима Првог светског рата*, Београд: Одбрана, 2014].

[xxix] The Western historiography is calling young Gavrilo Princip who assassinated the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian-Hungarian throne in Sarajevo on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1914 as “a young Bosnian fanatic” [Marcel Dunan (General Editor), *Larousse Encyclopedia of Modern History from 1500 to the Present Day*, New York: Crown Publishers, Inc, 1964, 347].

[xxx] Бранислав Глигоријевић, *Краљ Александар Карађорђевић, I, Уједињење српских земаља*, Београд: БИГЗ, 1996, 24.

[xxxi] Клод Елан, *Живот и смрт краља Александра I краља Југославије*, Београд: Ново дело, 1988, 15.

[xxxii] About Nikola Pašić, see in [Ђорђе Ђ. Станковић, *Никола Пашић и Хрвати 1918–1923*, Београд: БИГЗ, 1995].

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