

THE SERBS AND CROATS: THEIR IMAGES FROM A SLOVENE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Peter Vodopivec

I

At the end of 1913 a novel entitled *Gospodin Franjo* was published in Ljubljana. It was written by Fran Maselj Podlimbarski, a retired officer of the Austrian army. Its readers greeted it with great approval. But two months after the beginning of the first World War, the authorities banned it and even began criminal proceedings against the author. In the book, Maselj described conditions in Bosnia before the anti-Austrian revolt of 1882 and expressed sympathies with the Serbian insurgents. There are numerous, usually antagonistically-described characters of different nationalities, but one hero is the Slovene forestry engineer Franc Vilar, who came to Bosnia as the Austrian overseer of forest cutting. The other is Jovica Milošević, a Serbian Orthodox monk, a daring fighter against the Turks, and an enlightened anti-Austrian rebel, who becomes one of the spiritual leaders of the revolt.

In the novel, Vilar and Milošević become friends even though their mentalities are quite different, as are their evaluations of the path to 'Serbian,' 'Bosnian,' or 'Slovene' freedom. The Slovene Vilar believes in reforms and judiciary battles, the Serb Milošević in revolution by force and radical settlement. Yet their personal likes are based on a common feeling about social and national injustice. It is stronger than their differences of thought and will always link their lives. After the unsuccessful revolt, both depart to Serbia and further on to the Yugoslav South where each continues to work. Vilar is married to Milošević's sister and builds railways in Macedonia-South Serbia, while Milošević continues his work as an enlightener of his people and a national fighter. As a gray haired old man, in 1912 he joins the Serbian Army which after the first Balkan War advances into Kosovo.¹

Of course one should not generalize Podlimbarski's admiration of the Serbs before the first World War: the great majority of

¹ Fran Maselj-Podlimbarski, *Gospodin Franjo* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1913); Janez Rotar, *Socialna in politična misel Podlimbarskega* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1969).

Slovenes had no direct contact with the Serbs and only knew what journalists wrote about them and Serbia in Slovene newspapers. But his enthusiasm in 1913-14 was nothing new to the Slovenes. In 1872, a good forty years prior to this, another Slovene writer, Josip Jurčič, had visited Belgrade for the coming-of-age celebrations of the Serbian prince Milan Obrenović. He too had reported in the Slovene liberal newspaper *Slovenski narod* of seeing the Serbian capital and had been full of enthusiasm, enchanted by the "heroic figures of Serbian peasants in their national costumes," "the intelligent Serbian soldiers," and particularly "the beautiful maidens" — he had seen none more beautiful, not even in the Slovene provinces of the Habsburg Empire.²

In the second half of the 19th century, particularly among the younger liberal intellectuals, the Serbs had a high reputation and Slovene newspapers and magazines carefully followed the Serbian events. In 1870s and 1880s especial attention was paid to the situation in Bosnia and Montenegro. The Serbs and Montenegrins were mostly presented as daring fighters or tragic victims of Ottoman oppression.³ The growing number of the reports on the Serbian and Croatian disagreements and conflicts in 1890s was therefore a great disappointment as much for the Slovene liberal and 'Panslav'-oriented leaders and intellectuals as it was for the followers of the Catholic party. In their relatively rare public comments they condemned Croatian and the Serbian 'chauvinism,' proclaiming it for a consequence of a personal 'selfishness' of the leading politicians. Some of them even maintained that the Croats "made bigger mistakes," rejecting with the Serbs also what was good and what was important not only for the further Serbian, but also Slav and South Slav 'development' in general.⁴ At the same time detailed descriptions of the Serbian geography, history and ethnology, written by Slovene authors and in the Slovene language, were published in a book form. One of the first, a book by Anton Bezenšek, was in 1897 published by the Catholic St.

² Marko Štuhec, "Poskus umestitve odnosa Slovencev do Srbije 1872 v razmerju med protiaustrijstvom in nacionalno radikalnostjo," *Zgodovinski časopis* 39/4 (1985) 339-353.

³ Janko Pleterski, *Jugoslovanska misel pri Slovencih v dobi Taafjejeve vlade. Študije o slovenski zgodovini in narodnem vprašanju* (Maribor: Obzorja, 1981) 28-38.

⁴ "Hrvati pa Srbi," *Slovanski svet* (Vienna) 8/40 (1895) 373-374; "O jugoslovanski neslogi," *Slovanski svet* 8/44 (1895) 411-12.

Hermagoras Publishing House in Klagenfurt.⁵ In 1910 Rasto Pustoslemšek, a pro-Serb and pro-Yugoslav oriented journalist, wrote (for the Ljubljana choir, which visited the capital of Serbia) the first Slovene guide to Belgrade.⁶

The enthusiastic descriptions of "Serbian heroes and maidens" in Slovene newspapers and travelogs however in no way meant a liking for the Serbian State. The Obrenovići were considered to be prisoners of the Vienna and Budapest policy and therefore mostly treated with regret. Thus in 1880s Bulgaria served as an example of successful liberation and independence.⁷ The change of the dynasty in Belgrade in 1903, when the Karadjordjevići replaced the Obrenovići, enhanced the reputation of the Serbs among Slovene political and intellectual élites, but those with a more or less open adherence to a union with the Serbian Kingdom were in a definite minority. At the end of the 19th century, when Slovenes who were disappointed with the German conservative parties and Czech policy started to look for new allies, the thought that Slovene people "together with the Croats and the Serbs must seek their freedom" and, therefore, "forever give up thoughts of their own independence" (as written in some of the Slovene newspapers of the time) was not related to a possible tie to the Kingdom of Serbia. The Slovene need before the first World War was graphically described by Fran Milčinski, who compared the Slovene territory with a somewhat larger family tomb.⁸ In his opinion, given the conditions where an independent path was closed in all directions towards the West by Austria, Italy, and Germany, the Slovenes could only turn to their brothers in language: the Croats and Serbs. Only with them would they be great — the Yugoslavs. Melik has convincingly shown that an extremely important role was played by the German example. The Germans, despite numerous dialects and differences, were unified into a single nation; why shouldn't this be possible for the Southern Slavs?⁹ The idea of such an alliance or union was however very

⁵ Anton Bezenšek, *Bolgarija in Srbija* (Klagenfurt: Družba sv. Mohorja v Celovcu, 1897).

⁶ "Rasto Pustoslemšek," *Slovenski biografski leksikon* (Ljubljana 1933-1952) II: 602.

⁷ Pleterski, 28.

⁸ *Veda, Dvomesčnik za znanost in kulturo* 3 (1913) 508-516.

⁹ Vasilij Melik, "Leto 1918 v slovenski zgodovini," *Zgodovinski časopis* 42/4 (1988) 525-532.

abstract, and thoughts on what a Yugoslav cooperation and its results would be like in practice varied greatly. Even at the time of the so-called Declaration Movement, which in 1917-18 advocated the union of South Slavs in the Habsburg Monarchy and 'Yugoslavia' under the Habsburg scepter, and won massive popular support, the called-for 'Yugoslavia' and the Slovene position in it were not precisely defined. Most of the population expected it to become a 'national state' that would realize Slovene aspirations for 'self determination' and solve the problem of the relations among Slovenes, Croats and Serbs without difficulties.¹⁰ The possible union of this 'Habsburg Yugoslavia' with the Kingdom of Serbia was, before October 1918, more seriously taken in consideration only by a tiny political élite and a small group of pro-Serbian young intellectuals.

Yet Slovene enthusiasm over 'Serbianism' before the first World War was not only a sign of 'Panslavism' or of 'Yugoslavism' among the Slovene political élites and liberal intellectuals. The Belgrade correspondent of *Slovenski narod* reported in 1905 that "The Serbian people are the only true revolutionaries in the Slav South, who not only knew how to escape from foreign but also from home oppressors."¹¹ The Serbian people, and not only those in Serbia but also those in Bosnia legally under Austro-Hungary from 1878, were in the eyes of many Slovenes great Slav and Southern Slav rebels. The image the Slovene (particularly) liberal journalists and intellectuals had of the Serbs before World War I was characterized by a series of elements, which persist until today as part of the mythical Serbian self-stereotype: they pointed to the Serbian Robin Hood-like rebellion, their persistent, spontaneous and unremitting apostasy, the century-old battle against spiritual and religious assimilation, all of which showed the authentic Serbian character, unspoiled by Western temptations. Finally, Serbia though limited in its territory, had its own State. All these factors in the eyes of Slovene liberals and national enthusiasts before the first World War were virtues not to be easily found in other Slav peoples. From their viewpoint, in contradistinction to the Western or German culture, Serbia was the embodiment of an original, independent, and free culture, unsullied by

¹⁰ Peter Vodopivec, "Pred ponovno odločitvijo," *Nova revija* 9 (1990) 364-371.

¹¹ "Belgrajska pisma," *Slovenski narod* 48 (1 Jul. 1905).

Western influences. "From the East comes the light and soon we shall see the great day!" one of the Slovene liberal admirers exclaimed during the years before World War I when writing of the Slovenes' own national future.

The Slovene pro-Serbian sympathizers before the first World War were not bothered in the least by the Serbian Orthodox Church, something which to Slovene Catholics and Catholic party members represented a significant difficulty in their dalliance with Serbia. On the contrary, the most fiery supporters of Serbian-Slovene friendship thought that the Orthodox Church was less tyrannical than the Roman Catholic one and therefore had closer ties to its faithful. The Slovene Catholic intellectuals, particularly the priests, held of course a very different opinion, although only a few of them travelled to Serbia and to the Balkans. Josip Marinko, professor of religion at the secondary school in Novo Mesto, who visited Bosnia in 1890s, reported in his "Sketches from Bosnia," published in the Catholic magazine *Dom in svet*, of the Serbo-Croatian antagonism which made the Serbs and their "indescribable arrogance" guilty for the split among the Cristian population. The Serbs, wrote Marinko, "speak and act like God created the Church only for them and not for all the peoples of the world" and accused them of equating Orthodoxy and the Serbian national cause.¹²

The differences between the liberal and conservative Catholic standpoints were only smaller in their comments on the Serbian-Moslem and particularly the Serbian-Albanian contrasts. Even the conservative Catholics then defended the Serbian Orthodox. "The injustice which the Aranavti, or Albanians, committed against the Serbs are terrible," appeared in 1912 in a Slovene Catholic paper. "And now they (the Austrians!) demand autonomy for the Albanians! Who is to believe that such love will lead to peace?"¹³

Of course one can ask if such views of the Serbs and Serbia before the first World War could have influenced the Slovene lower classes, and what they knew about Serbia before the formation of Yugoslavia in 1918. But one thing is clear: so many

¹² Vasilij Melik, *Slowenische Reisebeschreibungen uber die Balkanlander gegen Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts, Wirtschafts und Kulturbeziehungen zwischen dem Donau und Balkanraum seit dem Wienerkongress* (Vienna 1991) 211-217.

¹³ "Boj med slovanstvom in germanstvom," *Gorenjec*, 46 (16 Nov. 1912).

enthusiastic words about 'Hajduks, maidens, and heroes' were never written in Slovene newspapers and magazines after 1914.

II.

Slovene relations with Croats before the first World War were more difficult and shifting. Statements and articles calling attention to the Slovene and Croatian kinship were not lacking in enthusiasm, as Slovene authors and orators turned to "the sons of Zvonimir, the knightly Croats, our brothers," but enthusiastic political speeches and national festivities were usually followed by silence. Slovene reporters in Zagreb always discovered anew that Croats and Slovenes "did not know each other" and that Slovenes did nothing to improve the situation. Slovenes and their political leaders had difficulties evaluating events in Croatia, particularly Serbo-Croatian relationships. Only one example: in 1905 Slovene singers at a concert in Zagreb added Serbian songs to the Croatian and Slovene program; much to their amazement this caused great excitement and an interruption of the concert. The Slovene liberal press then sadly decided that some Croatian politicians were not particularly liberal and consoled themselves that the anti-Slovene and anti-Serbian riot had been caused by an impatient minority.¹⁴

The principal difficulty in Slovene-Croatian relations in the second half of the 19th century were the hostile attitude of Starčević's Party and later the Party of Right against the Serbs on the one hand on the other its thesis that Slovenes were basically Alpine, Noric Croats. All the Slovene press wrote about this after 1870s, in part treating it as a joke, in part seriously; it divided the political public into Strossmayer's camp, acceptable to the Slovenes with its 'Southern Slavism,' and that of the Party of Right, unacceptable through its Greater Croatia concept. Thus, particularly the Slovene Catholic (People's) Party, which supported Slovene-Croatian ties since the end of the 19th century calling them 'the Yugoslav alliance,' found itself in an adverse situation. There was no Catholic political party in Croatia and its only possible partner in Zagreb was the Party of Right, so that willy-nilly it had to find a compromise with the Croatian view of Serbs and Slovenes. In this sense from the late 19th to the early 20th century, it enthusiastically talked of the unity of the 'Slovene-

¹⁴ "Pisma iz Hrvatske," *Slovenski narod* 48 (1 Jul. 1905).

Croatian' nation fatally separated by their enemies, called attention to the 'Slovene-Croatian' unity in the battle against the Turks, and using the Croatian legal system determined that the Slovenes were historically part of the Croatian kingdom and, therefore, belonged by right to the desired Yugoslav 'Slovene-Croatian' community. But such arguments, adapted to the Party of Right, were not even convincing to all the leaders of the Slovene Catholic camp. The highest Church dignitaries, such as the Ljubljana Bishop Jeglič, viewed Slovene-Croatian cooperation with a good deal of skepticism. After the blessing of the Kamniški Dom in 1903, also attended by representatives of the Party of Rights, Jeglič wrote in his diary: "I only came at two to be present at the toasts. I drank to the Emperor, and was afraid that our and Croatian unity would be excessively stressed because of the presence of the Croats. Well, the talk was fairly dispassionate. I don't particularly care for this Slovene-Croatian unity as the Croats understand it to mean that we must become Croats..."¹⁵

Before the first World War Slovenes of different views bewailed the fact that "some Croatian parties" had abandoned Strossmayer's spirit, but at the same time persistently repeated that Slovenes and Croats can only ensure their future by mutual solidarity. As a matter of fact, Slovene-Croatian political and cultural cooperation became more intensive only after the 1890s. In 1892 the Slovene and Croatian deputies from Istria and Dalmatia formed a joint 'Slovene-Croatian' deputy club in the Austrian parliament in Vienna, two years later the Slovene liberals and in 1898 also the Catholics established contacts with the Party of Right, trying to define the common Slovene-Croatian political goals. Several Slovene-Croatian political meetings and demonstrations, which took place after 1900, pointed out the Slovene-Croatian aspirations to form an union on the basis of the 'national principle' and Croatian 'historical law.' In the last years before 1914 the liberals drew closer to the Croatian-Serbian Coalition, but the Catholics maintained their alliance with the Mile Starčević group of the Party of Right. In autumn 1912 they even proclaimed the joint "Croatian-Slovene Party of Right" and Ivan Šušteršič, the Slovene Catholic Party leader, maintained during the de-

¹⁵ Boris Radosavljević, "Katoliška narodna stranka in Hrvati v letih 1897-1903," *Zgodovinski časopis* 48/3 (1994) 349.

monstration in Ljubljana that "the Croatian-Slovene nation is one body, one heart, one soul."¹⁶ The Slovene Catholic philosopher Aleš Ušeničnik was in 1913 less euphoric, but basically of the same opinion. He affirmed that Slovenes, Croats and Serbs were in reality different nations, was however persuaded that the Slovenes were too weak to resist German pressure alone, and was ready to accept the idea of the possible Croatian-Slovene assimilation in one nation in the future. "It is easier to create one nation of Slovenes and Croats as of Croats and Serbs," wrote Ušeničnik. "It is true the Serbs and the Croats have the same language... But we believe the spiritual culture is far more important than the language. And this divides the Serbs and Croats and unites the Croats and Slovenes..."¹⁷

In 1927 Anton Korošec determined that Slovenes before 1914 and 1918 had "politically hung on to the Croats more than was necessary." But the portrait of the Croats provided by the Slovene press before World War I was undoubtedly, despite the views and statements quoted, much more colorless, pale, and indefinite than that of the Serbs.

III

The Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs did not know each other well at their unification in 1918. Their expectations were great; their disappointments also. We still do not have a critical historical analysis of how they experienced each other after 1918 and how they formed their images, but from literature and, in particular, newspapers it can be seen that the majority of negative stereotypes of all three arose soon after unification. In the 1920s the Serbs thought of not only Slovenes and Croats but also all the former Austrian Serbs as foreigners who did not show the true Serbs the appropriate gratefulness for their freeing them from Austro-Hungarian dominion. The Slovenes and the Croats accused the Serbs of inadequate democracy and a tendency towards economic and political domination. Accusations of a 'Greater Serbia' thus flew from the very beginnings of the common life in Yugoslavia from the West to the East, to return in the opposite direction as the Serbs complained of the Croats and Slovenes being nostalgic for Habs-

¹⁶ "Hrvatska," *Enciklopedija Slovenije* (Ljubljana 1990) 4: 69.

¹⁷ Aleš Ušeničnik, "Slovenci in Hrvati, *Čas, znanstvena revija Leonove družbe Letnik* 7 (1913) 432.

burg Austria. Slovene newspapers reported on the squandering of Slovene money, the irrationality of Belgrade in obtaining and spending foreign loans, the catastrophic foreign currency politics of the middle class, the so-called "Belgrade čaršija." The Serbs wrote about the Slovene egoism and separatism. In these conditions, a part of the Slovene intellectuals and political élite already spoke in the 1920s of Slovenia's need for closer ties to Central Europe. This was greeted in Belgrade by suspicion and lack of understanding. But in the same breath, Slovene delegates accused the Belgrade government of "an extreme tendency to militarism" and too little democracy when incorporating Slovenes into the Yugoslav Army. In 1927, the Slovene Catholic leader Anton Korošec first declared in the Belgrade parliament that "Unfortunately, in Yugoslavia the Serbs rule, the Croats debate, and only the Slovenes work." With this, he defined a particularly popular stereotype in Slovenia which ruled the Slovene viewpoint on Yugoslavia for decades, and for most people remains an integral part of their memories even since Yugoslavia fell apart.¹⁸

But of course it would be quite untrue if we judged relationships after 1918 only on the basis of mutual conflicts and misunderstandings. The Slovene Parties with the major Catholic (People's) Party at their head were continually seeking allies among the other Parties in Yugoslavia, particularly the Serbian ones. The liberals, supporting Belgrade centralist policy, were linked tightly together with the Serbian parties as well. On the other side the Slovene-Croatian relations lost their pre-War intensity. The strongest Croatian Party was Radić's Farmer's Party, the later Maček party. But there was never any strong sympathy between it and Korošec's People's Party and neither Radić nor Maček found great political support among the Slovenes. According to Slovene historians, this was due to Radić's radicalism and anticlericalism on one hand, and to the patronage shown to the Slovenes and the rivalry between the two leaders, Radić and Korošec, on the other.¹⁹ In the twenties and thirties, particularly, intellectuals and Slovene cultural workers bewailed the lack of cooperation between the three capitals, Belgrade, Zagreb, and

¹⁸ Peter Vodopivec, "Slovenes and Yugoslavia 1918-1991," *East European Politics and Societies*, 6/3 (1992) 220-241.

¹⁹ Janko Prunk, "Radić in Slovenci," *Zgodovinski časopis* 39/1-2 (1985) 25-34.

Ljubljana, repeating: "We don't know each other." They wanted closer cultural and professional ties. It is probably not unfair to say that before the World War II, the liberal Slovene intellectuals looked towards Belgrade with greater sympathies than towards Zagreb. But even individual Croatian events and artists were highly regarded and admired in Ljubljana, such a one being Miroslav Krleža in his controversies and conflicts with the Communists in the 1930s.²⁰ At the same time Zagreb was between the World Wars for many Slovenes the most most important cultural center next to Ljubljana. Slovene students studied at Zagreb University and a considerable number of Slovene intellectuals and artists lived and worked in the Croatian capital. On the end of 1930s around 20,000-25,000 Slovenes lived in Zagreb.²¹

Since 1945, Slovene-Serbian and Slovene-Croatian relations have not been studied in detail. Thus, we can only say hypothetically that there were swings of the pendulum, advances and retreats, just as in the first Yugoslavia — insofar as Communism allowed it. In some particularly critical moments in the second (Communist) period, Belgrade and Ljubljana were even closer than Zagreb and Ljubljana; for example, at the end of 1960s and the beginning of 1970s during the time of the so-called "mass movement" in Croatia. On the other hand a part of the democratic opposition in Ljubljana still in the mid-1980s believed that the solution for a peaceful democratization of Yugoslavia could be found in a cooperation with the opposition intelligentsia in Belgrade. In 1985 the editors of *Nova revija*, which had become a focal point for a conspicuous number of Slovene opposition intellectuals, met in Ljubljana with some of the most prominent Serbian intellectuals, among them Dobrica Čosić, to discuss the possibility of a "Third and Democratic Yugoslavia."²² The meeting was a failure: the viewpoints were too diverse and the Slovene participants had an impression that their Serbian colleagues were talking only about Serbia while the Slovenes themselves addressed the future prospects of a reformed Yugoslav federation.

²⁰ Marko Jenšterle, *Skeptična levica* (Maribor : Obzorja, 1985) 29-94.

²¹ *Enciklopedija Slovenija*, 4: 70.

²² Peter Vodopivec, "Seven decades of unconfronted incongruities: The Slovenes and Yugoslavia," 23-46 in Jill Benderly and Evan Kraft, eds., *Independent Slovenia, Origins, Movements, Prospects* (New York NY: St. Martins, 1994) 40-41.

Despite this disappointment *Nova revija* made another effort in 1988, inviting Serbian intellectuals to comment on the Slovene opposition's and their own views of the future Yugoslav in the Slovene constitution, and publishing their comments.²³ The comparison of the Slovene and Serbian viewpoints showed again clearly, however, that no compromise was possible any more: the Serb idea was a "strong, centralized and one-man-one-vote democratic" Yugoslavia, the Slovene idea a loose and democratic confederation of autonomous republics.

IV

I have tried to show how Slovene relations toward the Serbs and Croats did not originate in the historical animosities so beloved of Western European and American commentators. The 'Balkan pot syndrome' historically never reached Slovenia. The main reason for the conflicts from the very beginnings of Yugoslavia lay in different views of joint life. The Croats and the Slovenes had very strong feelings for true federalism, while Serbs were and are in favor of a French *état-nation*. Thus, this was and is the real basis of the Slovene-Croat alliance in late 1980s and at the beginning of 1990s and the real reason for the ensuing antagonisms.

Univerza v Ljubljani

POVZETEK

SRBI IN HRVATI - NJIHOVE PODOBE IZ SLOVENSKE ZGODOVINSKE PERSPEKTIVE

Avtor opozarja na slovenski pogled na Srbe in Hrvate pred prvo svetovno vojno, med obema vojnama in po letu 1945. Srbi so bili zlasti v liberalnem tisku deležni pozornosti in občudovanja zaradi svojega uporništv, vendar to občudovanje ni bilo namenjeno Kraljevini Srbiji. V obeh slovenskih meščanskih strankah je od devetdesetih let 19. stoletja rastlo tudi navdušenje za povezovanje s Hrvati. Vsekakor pa je slika Hrvatov v slovenskem tisku pred 1914 precej bolj blede kot slika Srbov.

²³ *Nova revija* (Ljubljana) 78/79 (1988) 1509-1571.

