Rethinking History **6:1** (2002), pp. 95–110

Nationalist Mobilization and Stories of Serb Suffering

The Kosovo myth from 600th anniversary to the present

Florian Bieber
European Centre for Minority Issues, Belgrade

> On the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, we have to announce that Kosovo is Serbian and that this fact depends on neither Albanian natality nor Serbian mortality. There is so much Serbian blood and so many sacred relics in Kosovo that Kosovo will remain Serbian land, even if not a single Serb remains there.
>
> (Bećković 1989: 45)

Most nations look at their past and identify particular events as defining moments in their national development. More often than not, these events lie well beyond the confines of what most scholars view as the actual beginnings of modern nations in the nineteenth century. In the case of Serbian nationalism, the battle of Kosovo on 28 June 1389 emerged throughout Ottoman rule and increasingly in the late nineteenth century as the fundamental mythical moment in the national past. The date on which the battle took place, Vidovdan (St Vitus's Day), subsequently became a key marker on the Serbian national calendar.[1] On this day in 1914, the Bosnian Serb student Gavrilo Princip fired the shots that killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand on the embankment of the river Miljacka in Sarajevo, precipitating the First World War. Seven years later the newly founded first Yugoslav state, the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, received its earliest centralist constitution enshrining Serb dominance on Vidovdan. Stalin chose this date in 1948 for Comintern to expel Yugoslavia from the eastern bloc, leading to the independent development of Yugoslav communism. The wars of Yugoslav succession began only a few days prior to Vidovdan 1991 and finally the surrender of Slobodan Milošević to the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague coincided with Vidovdan in 2001. Conscious human choices to position these events in relation to a quasi-mystical national framework obviously determined their timing, but their cumulative effect has none the less been to reinforce and reaffirm the national significance of Vidovdan.

Before examining the myth in detail, three separate dimensions of its relationship to Serbian nationalism should be noted. First, as noted above, the myth became part of the commemorative calendar of the nation, an event ritually remembered in particular ways once a year; in this respect, the contrasts between the historical record of the battle and its mythical representation are not without interest. A second aspect of the myth is the claim to Kosovo. The insistent remembrance of the battle, in conjunction with the

Rethinking History ISSN 1364-2529 print/ISSN 1470-1154 online © 2002 Taylor & Francis Ltd
http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals
DOI: 10.1080/13642520011011213 7

importance of Kosovo for the medieval Serbian kingdom, serves to ground a territorial claim irrespective of the facts of population distribution in the region and impervious to subsequent historical developments (as exemplified by the assertive claims of Matija Bećković, a prominent Serbian nationalist writer, in 1989). Third, the myth establishes a historical continuity between the contemporary Serbian nation and the 'Serbs' of the Middle Ages, suggesting a perennial nation. These different dimensions will be considered here while analysing the myth and its political instrumentalization during the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

1389 in history and myth

The Kosovo myth itself is a complex construct comprising ideas, images, interpretations and purposes centred on a single event – the battle on June 28 1389 between the Christian armies under the leadership of the Serbian Knez Lazar Hrebeljanović and the Ottoman armies led by Sultan Murad (Mihaljčić 1989).[2] Both the Knez and the Sultan died at the time of the battle – almost all the other facts attributed to the battle within the myth either cannot be verified or have been dismissed outright. The myth interprets the outcome of the battle as a conclusive victory for the Ottoman forces but historical research suggests that it in fact ended much more ambiguously with stalemate, since it took nearly another century for the Ottomans to subdue the remnants of the declining medieval Serbian state and consolidate their control of the Balkans (Redjep 1980: 135). However, it is crucial to the myth that it involves celebrating a defeat: the Ottoman army was the winner on the battlefield but, at the same time, the Serbian/Christian side emerged as the ultimate spiritual victor (Lauer 1994: 141).

According to the myth, on the eve of the battle, Knez Lazar was offered the choice between establishing either a heavenly or an earthly kingdom. Lazar chose the former, which prevented his victory the following day but ensured the creation of a perpetual heavenly realm for the Serbian people. Unsurprisingly, the Serbian Orthodox Church particularly celebrated this divine and spiritual dimension of the myth (Redjep 1980: 134). Lazar's heroism was supplemented by that of a Serbian knight – originally anonymous though later becoming known as Obilić or Kobelić – who pretended to betray the Serbian army, joined the Ottoman camp and killed Sultan Murad after the battle. The historical existence of this assassin-hero is highly disputable, but he served as an archetypal national martyr figure, sacrificing himself for Serbia, and through the myth became an exemplary benchmark against which Serbian leaders had to justify their own accomplishments and rule.[3] These two embodiments of heroic virtue are contrasted with a traitor

figure. In the myth, one Vuk Branković is supposed to have betrayed the Serbian army before the fateful battle, this treason contributing to the subsequent defeat. It has been convincingly demonstrated that the historical figure of Vuk Branković did not in fact betray the Christian forces (Redjep 1980: 138-9), but nevertheless perfidy sits alongside self-sacrificial heroism as one of the principal themes of the myth.

While the battle of 1389 is not the only mythologized event constituting what has been termed the matrix of Serbian fate (Ćosić 1994: 33), the rich and diverse stories surrounding it have lent themselves peculiarly well to explain, contextualize and justify a multitude of developments since the emergence of the Serbian national movement in the early nineteenth century. It was only most recently, for example, that the battle was ever present during the 1998–9 conflict in Kosovo when its disproportionate prominence in Serbian political discourse misled many casual observers to conclude that the contemporary ethnic cleansing of Albanians by the Serbian army and police was a continuation of an ancient tribal conflict dating back to 1389 or even earlier. The importance of the battle thus lies much less in the historical facts comprising and surrounding it than in the manner in which it has subsequently been interpreted throughout the centuries up to the present day (Kaser and Halpern 1998). The Serbian ethnologist Ivan Čolović aptly remarked that '[t]hese myths are not part of some already overcome moments of European history, which are no longer current, and they are no delayed echo, rather they form part of the context of contemporary Europe' (Čolović 1994a: 100).

Myths are historical and anti-historical at the same time. They are historical in content, being based on real past events, and in reception, since they evoke the past for their various audiences. National myths, including the Kosovo myth, are also deeply historical in that they themselves have a history: they have been a crucial element in the intellectual development of nations throughout the centuries and have consequently undergone historical evolution and adaptation to new circumstances. It would be quite misleading to assume that the Kosovo myth has remained unchanged in the course of the past centuries or even within the past decade. Indeed, this would be to fall prey to the anti-historical pretensions of nationalist myth-mongers, who assert that myth, historical events and subsequent interpretations are congruent. Čolović has pointed out that contemporary nationalist ideology in Serbia, as elsewhere, has displaced historical and linear temporal conceptions and instead stopped time and 'transformed it into the eternal present or the eternal return of the same. In time conceived in such a way, the current wars which Serbs lead are merely the continuation of their previous history or, to be more precise, its mere repetition' (Čolović 1994a: 91).

Myths are an essential element in such a nationalist conception of time,

eliminating the historical separation between past and present by contemporizing the past or historicizing the present. In blurring the distinction between the past and the present, they equate current leaders such as Slobodan Milošević with previous Serbian rulers and group current enemies together with past ones. It is thus largely irrelevant to ask about the historical reality of such myths, since the version of the past that they proffer is determined by their contemporary social and political usage. Given its suppleness and malleability, it would also be misleading to seek to categorize this myth as inevitably and inherently justifying particular political programmes and national conceptions. In 1990, Thomas Emmert interpreted it as essentially 'democratic, anti-feudal, with a love for justice and social equality' (Emmert 1990: 141). Only nine years later, in the light of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, Branimir Anzulović sought to reinterpret the Kosovo myth as being essentially 'genocidal' and explored parallels between recent conflicts and the perception of the battle through the centuries, thus re-affirming the ahistorical conception of history proposed within the myth itself (Anzulović 1999).

Both interpretations, especially that of Anzulović, do not distinguish sufficiently between the content and the instrumentalization of the myth. In his biting criticism of the Kosovo myth, German Slavicist Reinard Lauer correctly notes that 'the danger lies in the fact that it can made an *instrument* of a fascist policy of violence and expansion' (Lauer 1995: 145). Neglecting the role of the myth as instrument and the agency of those using it risks conceiving of it as the quintessential embodiment of the Serbian nation; this of course is precisely the conception of Serbian nationalist ideology itself, as reflected in texts such as 'For a Heavenly Kingdom' by the Serbian historian Radovan Samardžić:

> Nations have their metaphysical core, with some this is impulsive and with others it is hidden, sometimes even powerless. . . . The Kosovo orientation is not [only] a national idea, but also a trait of character which makes a Serb a Serb.
>
> (Samardžić 1991: 14)

The history of the myth

The first legends surrounding the battle emerged during the century after the event itself, but the Kosovo myth as it is known today began to form only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first written variants emerged in the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, at the beginning of the Serbian national movement (Redjep 1980: 153–4; Locke 1997: 167–201). The commemoration of the myth acquired an important role in the political development of Serbia only in the late nineteenth century, when Serbian

nationalism was beginning to encompass broad segments of the population and the territorial expansion of the state was one of the prime goals of national policy (Dragović 1995: 46–8). In 1889, the quincentenary celebrations followed the recognition of Serbia as an independent state eleven years earlier, which had marked the formal end of that Ottoman rule whose inception the myth commemorated. Only in 1892 did the Serbian Orthodox Church recognize the date of the battle as an official religious holiday. The liberation/conquest of Kosovo itself followed in 1912 during the Balkan Wars, and the myth then gained a new prominence and utility in bolstering the legitimacy of the ruling Karadjordević dynasty (only enthroned as a consequence of a bloody coup in 1903).

After the founding of the first Yugoslav state following the First World War, efforts were made to reinterpret and rework the Serbian myth to serve a pan-Slav purpose. The next major anniversary in 1939 thus witnessed an attempt to transform an essentially Serb event into a pan-Yugoslav celebration, enfolding Croats and Slovenes into the commemoration; these festivities were not particularly successful and were in any event rather overshadowed by the looming European war. With the institution of communist rule in Yugoslavia after the Second World War, the myth did not entirely disappear but it declined in significance in relation to other, more contemporary, foundational myths, such as the numerous tales surrounding the wartime communist partisans. The divisive potential of a specifically Serbian nationalist discourse within a federal and multiethnic state prevented the myth from being widely instrumentalized in communist Yugoslavia; its religious underpinnings militated in the same direction and so remembrance of the Kosovo battle in the post war period was mostly cultivated by the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose general influence was marginal until the 1980s (Emmert 1990: 126–41).

Kosovo, both as a place and as a national idea, re-entered Serbian public consciousness in the aftermath of the protests of Kosovo Albanians in the spring of 1981. These originally non-political demonstrations evolved into the first major challenge for the post-Tito Yugoslav leadership, as a significant portion of the Albanian population demanded the status of full republic for the autonomous province of Kosovo. In the aftermath of the suppression of these protests, the Serbian media for the first time reported extensively on the emigration of Serbs and Montenegrins from the province. Simultaneously, the Serbian Orthodox Church took up the cause of defending Serb national identity in Kosovo. An appeal signed by 21 priests demanded an improvement in the status of Serbs in the province:

> The Serbian nation has been struggling from the Kosovo Battle 1389 up to this day for remembrance and to protect its own identity, to protect the meaning of

> its existence from its enemies. It is ironically at the point in time at which one might have thought that the battle is won that Kosovo ceases to be ours and we stop being what we were. And all this without war, during a time of peace and freedom!
>
> (quoted in Yelen 1989: 133–4; Buchenau 1999: 20–1)

Although relations between the church and the leadership of the Serb republic before the ascent of Milošević remained cool, this common cause contributed to the emergence of a new nationalist atmosphere in Serbia where the supposed and real persecution of Serbs in Kosovo was construed as part of a long history of national suffering, beginning in 1389. In later years, the term 'genocide' came into more frequent use to describe the fate of these Kosovan Serbs. A number of Serbian writers in the early 1980s, including Danko Popović and Vuk Drašković (Lauer 1995: 142–3), incorporated elements of the Kosovo myth into their novels, further invigorating Serb nationalism. The playwright Naum Panovski characterized the motives of this new literature as promoting 'the . . . syndrome of self-pity, national pride, and martyrdom' (Panovski 1996: 4–5). Historians similarly began to draw on historical myths to justify Serbian claims to Kosovo (Bieber 2001: 136–44). In 1986 in a controversial book published by the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Dimitrije Bogdanović attributed unparalleled historical significance to the battle of Kosovo as 'one of the greatest armed confrontations in Europe', which he considered not 'a myth, but a historical idea which helps a nation to forge a link with its real historical past'. The implications for the present were made explicit when Bogdanović connected the battle to the contemporary tensions in Kosovo, as Slobodan Milošević would only three years later: 'Kosovo is not some imaginary legend of the past, but a real historical destiny that continues today' (Bogdanović 1986: 286).

The 600th anniversary

The revival of the Kosovo myth was an integral part of increased Serb nationalist mobilization in the course of 1988. Organized mass rallies drew hundreds of thousand of Serbs to the streets across Yugoslavia to demand that the Albanian leadership in Kosovo accord increased protection to the Serb population; this agitation contributed substantially to consolidating Milošević's recently acquired hold on power. After the so-called 'happening of the people' demonstration in Belgrade in November 1988, the symbolic culmination of this process of mass mobilization took place with the sexcentenary of the battle in 1989. This occasion provided the new Serbian leadership with the ideal opportunity to adjust the myth to its contemporary needs. On 28 June 1989, what were by some estimates a million spectators gathered

to join the celebrations in Gazimestan, just outside Priština (Kaser and Halpern 1998). This meeting organized by the Serbian League of Communists was attended by high-ranking members of the party from the other republics and the Turkish ambassador to Yugoslavia; it purported to be a Yugoslav celebration, but in reality it was essentially directed against the very 'brotherhood and unity' that it claimed to be preserving, as exemplified in the hierarchy in the closing remarks of Milošević's speech:

> Long live the eternal remembrance of the heroism in Kosovo!
> Long live Serbia!
> Long live Yugoslavia!
> Long live peace and brotherhood between the people!
>
> (Milošević 1990: 315)

In March 1989, Kosovo had been stripped of its autonomy in the course of controversial constitutional changes introduced by Milošević in order to increase Serbian dominance within Yugoslavia. Milošević's predominant role and manner at these celebrations seemed to confirm his intention to push ahead with a Serbian nationalist agenda that would also increase his personal power (Silber and Little 1995: 75–7). Representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose interests were at this point broadly aligned with those of the Serb political leadership, attended the gathering but began to harbour some doubts about Milošević. Thus Hieromonk Sava, the spokesman of Bishop Artemije who was responsible for the diocese of Kosovo for most of the 1990s, remarked:

> In the late eighties we felt the national change and thought it would be a good thing. But I was at the meeting in Gazimestan in 1989 and then I saw it was the wrong way. We thought he would come to Gračanica to bow down to the ideals of the past, the good, spiritual, moral traditions, but he did not. He appeared like an antique god by helicopter. I saw at that moment that the change was going in the wrong direction.
>
> (Judah 1997: 164)[4]

In discussions about the preparations for the commemoration within the Yugoslav presidency – already beset by tensions between the representatives of the different republics – the Montenegrin representative Nenad Bućin had criticized the predominance of specifically Serb rhetoric and symbolism surrounding the projected event and emphasized the participation of Albanians and other Balkan nations in the battle on the Serbian side. Borisav Jović, the Serbian representative in the presidency and a close aide to Milošević, had audaciously replied that in '1389 the Kosovo battle was fought by the Serbian and the Turkish (sic) army and we have no intention of falsifying history' (Jović 1996: 26). The symbiosis of myth and politically

mobilized nationalism thus actually rendered historical facts irrelevant, as Milošević himself intimated during his speech at the commemoration: ‘it is difficult today to separate the legend from the history of this battle’, but, he continued, ‘now this is no longer important’ (Milošević 1990: 310). The myth had transcended history because of its instrumentalization in a specific nationalist cause. Milošević presented his ‘successes’ in extending Belgrade’s control through his constitutional amendments as ‘late justice’ to the sacrifices made for Serbia by Miloš Obilić 600 years earlier. Simultaneously, the public’s growing regard for his worthiness as a national leader and successor to Knez Lazar was exemplified by one of the many slogans praising him during the mass demonstrations in 1988: ‘Knez Lazar, you did not have the luck of having Slobo[5] at your side’ (*NIN* 1992; Čolović 1994b: 11–26).

While the main themes in the commemoration of the battle in 1989 were the aggrandizement of Serbia and the rectification of past injustices, the motif of treachery (a recurring trope in Serbian nationalist discourse over the subsequent eleven years) also figured. In his speech, Milošević noted that the battle was susceptible to diverse interpretations, either as a defeat that condemned the Serbian people to slavery or, in the long term, as a prelude to victory because of their subsequent survival under and self-emancipation from the Turkish yoke; similarly, the battle ambiguously embodied both ‘the shame of treason and the magnificence of heroism’ (Milošević 1990: 310). The commemoration of the battle of Kosovo was preceded by the aforementioned ‘anti-bureaucratic revolutions’ during which Milošević had directed mass demonstrations against the communist leaderships in Vojvodina, Montenegro and Kosovo, leading to their resignation and the installation of more appropriate and more ‘national’ figures. While the Albanian Kosovo elite could be accused of neglecting Serbian interests for their own national motivations, the Montenegrin elite and mostly Serbian leadership of Vojvodina were styled as traitors. Once more, the myth of Kosovo could be contemporized to equate the old Serbian communist elite with the traitors of 1389.

The trope of betrayal figured extensively in the countless books and boundless media coverage devoted to the battle. The most important Serbian daily *Politika*, for example, carried the headline on 28 June 1989: ‘the Serbian people has glorified and still glorifies its heroes and recognizes its traitors’ (Zirojević 2000: 207). Evoking betrayal, treason and unity in the context of the sexcentenary of the battle served a concrete political purpose: ‘by invoking an external conspiracy with its connections to internal traitors, the latent function of this theory is to assist the internal mobilization and unification of the population’ (Zupanov *et al.* 1996: 404). Reality, then, was represented through the prism of the Kosovo myth. The Serbian leader Milošević could be viewed as the new Knez Lazar, the Montenegrin and

Vojvodinan leaderships and all other domestic opponents were modern day Vuk Brankovićs, while the Albanians were the Turks, threatening the Serb people in Kosovo.

The myth and the Milošević era

While the Kosovo myth reached its peak of visibility with the sexcentenary and the annulment of the province's autonomy in 1989, it did not disappear from political discourse in subsequent years. One of the tragedies of Serbian political life through the 1990s was the inability of groups opposing Milošević to articulate truly puissant political positions outside the emerging nationalist framework (Stojanović 2000). Thus, the opposition parties that emerged in 1990 frequently appropriated the myth of the Kosovo battle as they propagated political programmes just as firmly rooted in Serbian national traditions as that of Milošević. Several leaders of the national opposition, for example, evoked the myth in 1991 by pledging an oath to the Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Pavle in the same manner as the Serbian nobility had to Knez Lazar on the eve of the Kosovo battle (*Danas* 1991).[6] Even those groups sceptical of the nationalist and chauvinist orientations of government and opposition made use of the symbolism associated with the Kosovo battle. In 1992, vociferous student protests lasting for nearly a month between mid-June and mid-July criticized the undemocratic policy of the regime and its war in Bosnia (Popadić 1993: 123). Eric Gordy noted a poster during these protests, which encapsulated the students' critique of excessive nationalism: 'the world is not anti-Serbian, Slobo is anti-world' (Gordy 1999: 207). Nonetheless, these protests became known as the Vidovdan Assembly (*Vidovdanski Sabor*), indicating how the students too were unable to step outside of the symbolic universe of Serbian nationalism (Popadic 1993; Popov 2000: 320–5).

The use made by the regime of the Kosovo myth and nationalist rhetoric generally depended upon its immediate political priorities, and it had other weapons in its ideological armoury including ideas of social equality and appeals to a more diffuse traditionalism. While nationalism proved to be instrumental during the ascent to power, the party utilized nationalist ideas rather less in 1990–1 than did most opposition parties. Then, it presented itself effectively as both a defender against nationalist demagogues such as Vuk Drašković and yet a more resolute protector of Serb interests than consistently anti-nationalist forces such as the reform movement of Yugoslav prime minister Ante Marković. By carving out a space between extreme nationalists and strong opponents of nationalist mobilization, the Socialist Party maintained the pretence of political moderation while at the same time preparing the wars in Croatia and Bosnia. With the onset of war in 1991–2,

nationalist mobilization on behalf of the ruling Socialist Party resumed and lasted until the regime broke with the Serb Democratic Party of Radovan Karadžić in Bosnia during the course of 1994. During this phase, it allied itself with extreme nationalist forces such as the Serbian Radical Party and narrowed down the range of possible political identities in Serbia to 'patriot' and 'traitor'. After the end of the patron-client relationship with Radovan Karadžić in Bosnia until the beginning of the Kosovo conflict in the spring of 1998, the regime propagated a 'pro-peace' line, which criticized the opposition for being either traitors or 'irresponsible' nationalists, while seeking to position the ruling party as a 'progressive' force (Bieber 2001: 351–79). The Serbian regime during this phase had difficulties utilizing the Kosovo myth, not only because of its supposed support for peace but also because the church was now politically allied with the nationalist opposition and the myth retained strong religious connotations. The Kosovo myth thus did not feature prominently in the regime's rhetoric during phases in which it professed peaceful aims, but once conflict in Kosovo erupted the regime returned again to imagery from the mythical battle and engaged in renewed mobilization on the 'national question' (Pančić 1998).

If anything, the Serbian Orthodox Church in its support for Serbian 'nationhood' actually utilized the myth more consistently than the regime through the 1990s. Although the church was ostensibly anti-violence, during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia significant elements within its hierarchy, especially some of the more nationalist bishops, actually criticized Milošević and the regime for failing to pursue Serb national interests – especially as regards the protection or liberation of Serbian nationals beyond the boundaries of Serbia proper – with sufficient vigour (Buchenau 1999: 29–31). Since this critique focused on the situation in the two western former Yugoslav republics, it did not depend to any great extent on symbolic reference to Kosovo. As regards Kosovo proper, the church was caught in something of a dilemma through the first half of the 1990s. On the one hand, Milošević had apparently succeeded there, where he had failed in Croatia and Bosnia, in securing total Serbian control over so-called 'Serb lands'. On the other hand, the church and many other observers could not fail to notice the continuing emigration of Serbs from the province and the failure to reverse the demographic dominance of the Albanian population. This contradiction made it somewhat difficult for the church to establish a secure institutional or rhetorical foundation for involvement in the province through the earlier part of the 1990s (Radić 2000). But in its general ideological discourse, especially in the support of parts of the church for the extreme nationalism embodied by individuals such as Radovan Karadžić, the church drew heavily on the myth of Serbian suffering and heroism connected with the Kosovo cycle (Gredelj 1999: 143–64).

The Kosovo war

The inception of renewed conflict in Kosovo, beginning in 1998, refocused Serbian nationalist discourse on the province. First and foremost the activities of the Kosovo Liberation Army against Serbs mobilized popular opinion against Albanians and behind the regime. Although the regime relied internationally on a legalistic justification for continued dominance in Kosovo, for domestic audiences it combined such arguments with appeals to the mythical underpinnings of Serb claims to the region. At the same time, significant portions of both the national and the democratic opposition in Serbia accused Milošević of contemplating a loss of Kosovo, somewhat ironically invoking the motif of betrayal that Milošević himself had continuously and assiduously cultivated since the late 1980s.[7]

The war in Kosovo and the bombardment of Serbia by NATO in the spring of 1999 marked a dramatic resurgence in the self-perception of Serbs as victims within Serbian nationalist discourse (Jansen 2000). Official discourse emphasized the victimization of Serbs by neighbouring nations and the international community, while the opposition also emphasized its oppression at the hands of the regime: thus Serbs were suffering helplessly both as Serbs and as citizens. This self-perception was cultivated by government-organized protests during the war, and it contributed to denial of the crimes being committed in Kosovo. This sense of collective victimhood lingered after the war: 'revenge' attacks and the persecution of Serbs by the victorious Kosovo Liberation Army impacted heavily on public opinion in Serbia, apparently confirming the fears that had motivated repressive policies against Albanians in the previous decade and reinforcing the nationalist self-perception of Serbian suffering.[8] The church in Kosovo also fuelled this tendency. Although since 1997 Bishop Artemije and other church leaders had adopted a more conciliatory line towards the Albanian population, this shift was primarily rhetorical and did not herald any substantive change in the church's position towards Serb nationhood (Buchenau 1999). The church documented the destruction of Serbian cultural markers in the province at great length (Serbian Orthodox Church 1999) and correctly identified extreme Albanian nationalists as the perpetrators, but failed to contextualize these events within a larger framework of responsibility.

Government support naturally waned after the war, not least as the loss of Kosovo confirmed the fear among nationalists of 'betrayal' by the Milošević regime, but the oppressive state apparatus frustrated broad public displays of opposition in Serbia until the summer of 2000. In the aftermath of the war and in the midst of western sanctions, social and economic considerations came to dominate the political agenda and the 'Kosovo question' became less prominent in both official and opposition discourse. The commemoration of

28 June in Kosovo since 1999 stands in stark contrast to the mammoth celebrations of 1989. The monument on the Kosovo battlefield itself was partially destroyed in the months following the end of the war, and very few Serbs now gather at Gazimestan to celebrate at Vidovdan (Serbian Orthodox Church 1999; *Danas* 2000). But the very fact of the (renewed) loss of Kosovo by Serbia has been identified by some as potentially marking the beginning of a new 'Kosovo cycle' linking the battle in 1389 with the exodus of Serbs in 1999 in a continuous nationalist tradition of Serb suffering (Knežević 1999: 180–3).

Conclusion

The myth of the Kosovo battle resurfaced in mainstream Serbian political discourse from the mid-1980s. Until 1989, it served to highlight Serbian suffering in Kosovo, to provide a (pseudo-)historical context for Serbian migration from the province and to legitimize the emergence of new nationalist political leaders. The celebrations of 1989 marked the brief moment at which Serbian nationalism appeared to have reached self-fulfilment in achieving its goal of total national unity and the myth was accordingly reworked to bolster Serbian triumphialism. In the first half of the 1990s, the myth was only of indirect relevance for the political programme of nationalists in Serbia. With attention turned to Croatia and Bosnia, myths and remembrance of Serb suffering during World War II at the hands of the fascist Ustaša regime in the 'Independent State of Croatia' provided a more powerful ideological underpinning for Serbian aggression and warfare in the two countries. With the re-emergence of Kosovo as a site of conflict between Serbs and Albanians in 1998, however, the Kosovo myth regained relevance. Until the loss of the province after the NATO war in June 1999, it served to compensate for the weakness of contemporary ethno-political and legal arguments for Serbian control of Kosovo. With Kosovo as an international protectorate, the expulsion of Serbs from the province coupled with the persecution of Serbs remaining *in situ* and the destruction of Serbian symbols such as churches and monasteries ensured that the Kosovo myth became again what it was in the 1980s – a symbol of Serbian suffering in the province.

The myth of course is not an independent political agent with a life of its own; rather it is animated by contemporary political actors who in using it through these years have reinforced two powerful premises of Serbian nationalism. First, it helped to ensure that there was little room for compromise with Albanian claims in Kosovo. Thus in the early 1990s some Serbian nationalist intellectuals such as Dobrica Ćosić and Branislav Krstić did begin to contemplate a historic 'compromise' between 'historical and ethnical

rights' (Bieber 2001: 247–52, 546–8). But this purported compromise would have rested upon a partition of Kosovo that would have granted Serbs a disproportionately large part of the province. Second, the myth with its celebration of loss proved instrumental for *ressentiment*-based nationalism. The self-perception of victimhood in Serbian nationalism provided a forceful motivation for mobilization for the wars. As Liah Greenfeld has pointed out '*ressentiment* not only makes the nation more aggressive, but represents an unusually powerful stimulus of national sentiment and collective action, which makes it easier to mobilize collectivistic nations for aggressive warfare than to mobilize individualistic nations, in which national commitment is normally dependent on rational calculations' (Greenfeld 1992: 488). This phenomenon has been skilfully studied in the case of Serbia by sociologist and long-time opposition politician Vesna Pešić (Pešić 1995).

The end of the Milošević era in Serbia and the beginning of democratic and economic transformations – delayed for over a decade – hold out some promise that the Kosovo myth may be removed from the political sphere and restored to the realm of cultural heritage. But the unresolved status of Kosovo and the plight of its Serbs, as well as the surrender of Slobodan Milošević to the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague on Vidovdan 2001, could equally lend the myth a new lease of life as part of a metanarrative of Serb persecution if the underlying socio-economic and political motivations behind recent Serb nationalism are not addressed in the near future (Bakić-Hayden 1999).

Notes

1 It could be compared with 9 November on the German calendar (the coup attempt by Ludendorff and Hitler in 1923, the *Reichskristallnacht* in 1938 and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989), although that date lacks any mythological significance.

2 The historical fact that Serbs and other Balkan Christians also fought on the Ottoman side, while Muslim Albanians fought together with the Serbian armies, is obviously elided in the myth. On the relations between the myth, historical interpretations and recent events, see Malcolm (1998: 58–80).

3 While the death of the Sultan during the battle is historically confirmed, Miloš Obilić only begins to feature in the myth in the early sixteenth century (Redjep 1980: 133).

4 The Serbian intellectual Ljubomir Simović came to a similar conclusion:

> the visit of the president to Kosovo was a good opportunity to redefine relations with Albanians, to move these relations in to a rational direction. I personally expected that the Serbian president [Milošević] would make use of this special date in Serbian history to address Albanians, to show that he recognizes them, that he wants to understand them, to offer them cooperation and dialogue. . . .

> But what did he do instead? . . . He flew in with a helicopter, held a short, arrogant and threatening speech in which he did not only not address Albanians, but didn't mention them in one word! As if they did not exist! Then he returned to his helicopter and flew away! With such a speech and behaviour any opportunity for communication came to an end.
>
> (*Vreme*, 1998)

5 Slobo is of course the widely used nickname for Slobodan Milošević.
6 The parties obviously overlooked the fact that in the myth the oath was followed by betrayal. The modern day candidate for the role of 'traitor' would be Vuk Drašković, who deserted the opposition and briefly joined the ranks of the government until he was expelled from office in April 1999.
7 The opposition was torn between support for some aspects of Milošević's Kosovo policy in 1998–9 and attempting to criticize him for his failure to protect Serb interests there; again, few in Serbia could countenance opposing the regime on utterly anti-nationalist grounds by advocating autonomy or independence for Kosovo (Ilić 2000).
8 This line of argument obviously neglected the fact that these fears, in precipitating the earlier repression of Albanians and the crimes committed in the conflict of 1998–9, had acquired the character of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

References

Anzulović, B. (1999) *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide*, New York and London: New York University Press.

Bakić-Hayden [Bakić-Hejden], M. (1999) 'Kosovo: Vanvremena Metafora Sred Vrementog Prizivanja', *Nova Srpska Politička Misao* 6: 185–200.

Bataković, D. T. (1999) 'The Serbs in Kosovo-Metohija', *Eurobalkans* 36–7: 23–38.

Bećković, M. (1989) 'Speech held at the Extraordinary Assembly of the Association of Serbian Writers on March 4, 1989' in 'Kosovo 1389–1989. Special Edition on the Occasion of 600 years since the Battle of Kosovo', *Serbian Literary Quarterly* 3–4: 43–5.

Bieber, F. (2001) 'Serbischer Nationalismus vom Tod Titos zum Sturz Miloševićs', PhD dissertation, Department of Political Science, University of Vienna.

Bogdanović, D. (1986) *Knjiga o Kosovu*, Belgrade: SANU.

Buchenau, K. (1999) 'Verspätete Ernüchterung: Die Serbisch Orhodoxe Kirche im Kosovokonflikt', *Arbeitspapiere Geschichte und Kultur, Osteuropa Institut, FU Berlin* 2: 5–43.

Čolović, I. (1994a) 'Die Erneuerung des Vergangenen', in Nenad Stefanov and Michael Werz (eds) *Bosnien und Europa. Die Ethnisierung der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt: Fischer, pp. 90–103.

Čolović, I. (1994b) *Brodell der Krieger. Folklore, Politik und Krieg*, Osnabrück: Fibre.

Ćosić, D. (1994) *L'Effondrement de la Yougoslavie. Positions d'un Résistant*, Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme.

Danas [Zagreb] (1991), 16 July.

Danas [Belgrade] (2000), 29 June.

Dragović, J. (1995) 'Serbian nationalism in the 19th century', *Dialogue* 4: 41–59.

Emmert, T. A. (1990) *Serbian Golgotha: Kosovo, 1389*, New York: East European Monographs.

Gordy, E. D. (1999) *The Culture of Power in Serbia. Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Gredelj, S. (1999) 'Klerikalizam, ethnofiletizam, antiekumenizam i (ne)tolerancija', *Sociologija* 41: 143–64.

Greenfeld, L. (1992) *Nationalism. Five Roads to Modernity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ilić, V. (2000) 'The Serbian Opposition during and after the NATO Bombing', *Helsinki Files* 2. Available online: http://www.helsinki.org.yu/hcs/HCSfiles2vilic2.htm

Jansen, S. (2000) 'Discursive practices of resistance: Two waves of protest in Serbia', *Intergraph* 1. Available online: http://www.intergraphjournal.com/enhanced/vol1issue2/resistance/stef1.htm

Jović, B. (1996) *Poslednji Dani SFRJ*, Kragujevac: Prizma.

Judah, T. (1997) *The Serbs. History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Kaser, K. and Halpern, J. M. (1998) 'Historical Myth and the Invention of Political Folklore in Contemporary Serbia', *The Anthropology of Eastern Europe Review* 16. Available online: www.depaul.edu/~rrotenbe/aeer/aeer16_1.html

Knežević, M. (1999) 'Ciklus Kosovskog mita', *Nova Srpska Politička Misao* 6: 171–83.

Lauer, R. (1995) 'Das Wüten der Mythen. Kritische Anmerkungen zur serbischen heroischen Dichtung', in R. Lauer and W. Lehfeldt (eds) *Das jugoslawische Desaster. Historische, sprachliche und ideologische Hintergründe*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, pp. 107–48.

Locke, G. N.W. (trans.) (1997) *The Serbian Epic Ballads. An Anthology*, Belgrade: Nolit.

Malcolm, N. (1998) *Kosovo. A Short History*, New York: New York University Press.

Mihaljčić, R. (1989) *The Battle of Kosovo in History and in Popular Tradition*, Belgrade: BIGZ.

Milošević, S. (1990) *Les Années Décisives*, Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme.

NIN (1992), 8 May.

Pančić, T. (1998) 'Patriotic Mobilisation – For the Second Time', *AIM*, 29 March.

Panovski, N. (1996), 'Prelude to War', *Performing Arts Journal* 18(2): 2–12.

Pešić, V. (1995) *Serbian Nationalism and the Origins of the Yugoslav Crisis*, Washington: US Institute for Peace.

Popović, D. (1993) 'Stranačka Opredeljenja Studenata', in B. Kuzmanović (ed.) *Studentski Protest 1992*, Belgrade: Institut za psihologiju, pp. 111–30.

Popov, N. (2000) 'The University in an Ideological Shell', in N. Popov (ed.) *The Road to War in Serbia. Trauma and Catharsis*, Budapest: Central European University Press, pp. 303–26.

Radić, R. (2000) 'The Church in Politics and Politics in the Church', *Helsinki Files* 1. Available online: http://www.helsinki.org.yu/hcs/HCSfiles1church.htm

Redjep, J. (1980) 'Die Erzählung von der Kosovo-Schlacht', *Münchner Zeitschrift für Balkankunde* 3: 127–67.

Reljić, L. (1989) *Kosovoska Legenda u Narodnom Stvaralaštvu*, Belgrade: Ethnographic Museum.

Samardžić, R. (1991) 'Für das himmlische Reich', in V. Djuretić (ed.) *Kosovska Bitka i Posledice*, Belgrade: SANU, pp. 9–14.

Serbian Orthodox Church (1999) *Raspeto Kosovo. Uništene i oskrnavljene Srpske Pravoslavne Crkve na Kosovu i Metohiju (Jun–Oktobar 1999)*, Belgrade: Glas Kosova i Metohije.

Silber, L. and Little, A. (1995) *The Death of Yugoslavia*, London: BBC and Penguin.

Stojanović, D. (2000) 'The Traumatic Circle of the Serbian Opposition', in N. Popov (ed.) *The Road to War in Serbia. Trauma and Catharsis*, Budapest: Central European University Press, pp. 449–78.

Vreme (1998), 11 April.

Yelen, A. (1989) *Kossovo 1389–1989*, Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme.

Zirojević, O. (2000) 'Kosovo in the Collective Memory', in N. Popov (ed.) *The Road to War in Serbia. Trauma and Catharsis*, Budapest: Central European University Press, pp. 189–211.

Zupanov, J., Sekulic, D. and Sporer, Z. (1996) 'A breakdown of the civil order: the Balkan bloodbath', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 9: 401–22.