

ST. VITUS DAY: A CONFLICTED NATIONAL HOLIDAY

Božidar JEZERNIK

University of Ljubljana

Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology

Zavetiška 5, Ljubljana, Slovenia

E-mail: bozidar.jezernik@ff.uni-lj.si

Abstract: When a new nation-state of Southern Slavs was established they had to introduce new state symbols and cultural forms in commemorations of historical personalities and events. As the Kingdom of Serbia played such an important role, Serbian symbols and commemorations were adopted for the purpose. This meant, that in the state of the 'nation with three names', they glorified the Serbian sacrifices and suffering, but denied the contribution of Croats and Slovenes to the establishment of the state community. Together with the provisions and spirit of the St. Vitus' Day Constitution, the glorification of Serbian mythology as the national mythology of the 'nation with three names,' which was meant to be the foundation stone for the bright future of the unified nation, became more and more of a stumbling stone.

Keywords: Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes; National Holidays; the Politics of Commemoration St. Vitus Day; Yugoslavia.

The Serbian church and national holiday, St. Vitus' Day, is relatively new. It was only in *Šematizam za 1864 (the 1864 Schematism)*, that 15 June was recorded for the first time as St. Vitus' Day, instead of a holiday devoted to Amos the Prophet and Prince Lazar. It became a holiday only in 1889, the 500th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo. After the Battle of Kumanovo, in 1912, it was added to the calendar of the Kingdom of Serbia as one of the nine holidays officially celebrated every year. Since 1919, the day has been devoted to remembering the soldiers who fell in the First World War.³²

During the First World War, the holiday began to spread among the South Slavs. In the spring of 1916, the Yugoslav Committee in London declared St. Vitus' Day as a national holiday of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.³³

The Committee used the so-called 'Kosovo Day' as an opportunity to familiarize the British public with the position of Serbia and other South Slavic countries in order to gain its support in the battle for the liberation of a nation which had lived for centuries under 'Turkish' supremacy, enabling the Christian nations of Western Europe to be free and to develop.

³² POPOVIĆ 2007. 157-158; ZIROJEVIĆ 2002. 251.

³³ ŽUPANIĆ 1917. 9.

National Holiday

In 1916, the members of the Yugoslav Committee and all their British supporters organized a series of meetings, lectures and concerts in London and other British cities and printed flyers, published newspaper articles and sent letters to editorial boards. As part of the Kosovo Day celebrations, Bogumil Vošnjak, a member of the Yugoslav Committee, gave a lecture on Kosovo and national unity at the University of Leeds. Vošnjak began his lecture with these ambitious words:

Kosovo is the past, the present, and the future of the nation. It is the dream of the shepherd, the political ideal of an unquiet student and the intellectual, the action of the man. Kosovo is more than a battle – it is a programme, a political ideal; it is the state of the morrow; it speaks of resurrection and national happiness.¹

National holidays play an important role in the formation of common memories of the past, as they are the very sign that marks historical events and figures that must be known to all citizens, thereby establishing the symbolic unity of all the members of the nation.² The holidays of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes emphasized the national unity of the ‘three tribes’, and St. Vitus’ Day was thus added to the otherwise short list.

At the beginning of December 1919, the Minister of the Interior of the newly formed national state of the ‘nation with three names’ declared three new national holidays: 1 December as the ‘day of the unification of our “nation with three names”’; St. Peter’s Day on 12 July as the birthday of King Peter I.; and St. Vitus’ Day on 28 June as a ‘day of commemoration for those who had died fighting for the faith and the homeland’.³

Among the new national holidays, St. Vitus’ Day held the most emotional and shocking historical memory. St. Vitus’ Day had long been considered to be a particularly fateful day in Serbian history: in 1389, it had been the day on which the fateful Battle of Kosovo had taken place; in 1914, in Sarajevo, Gavrilo Princip had assassinated the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Franz Ferdinand, and his wife, which had led to the First World War;⁴ in 1919, the Treaty of Versailles was signed; and on 28 June 1921, King Alexander I had promulgated the new constitution of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, known later as the Constitution of St. Vitus’ Day. In the years between the two World Wars, tens

1 VOSNJAK 1916. 7.

2 ELGENIUS 2007. 79.

3 ANON 1919. 444.

4 That it is no coincidence that the assassination had been carried out on this date is proved by the fact that Nedeljko Čabrinović, one of the accomplices, was later found to be in possession of copies of the Serbian *Narod*, including a holiday issue on St. Vitus’ Day. ANON 1914b. 3.

of thousands of St. Vitus' Day celebrations were held throughout the Kingdom, with King Alexander himself attending numerous ceremonies.⁵

The Muslim religious community was excluded for most of the time. In 1923, the State Minister of Religion, Dr. Vojislav Janić, issued an edict in accordance with which Muslims were not obligated to perform 'any sort of prayers in their mosques (Turkish churches), but need only to close their stores and not send their children to school' on the 24 May holiday of St. Cyril and Methodius and on St. Vitus' Day, as Muslims cannot hold requiems for non-Muslims.⁶

In the period before the World War, the Kingdom of Serbia had participated in two Balkan Wars (1912 and 1913), emerging victorious from both and nearly doubling its territory (from a surface area of 48,000km² to a surface area of 87,000 km²), so that it encompassed a good third of the later established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Of even greater value than the territorial gains, however, was the 'satisfaction that the entire nation felt having, after more than 500 years, finally avenged Kosovo and freed the last Serb from Turkish rule'.⁷

Its success in the Balkan Wars and its glorious victory in the World War greatly improved the reputation of the Kingdom of Serbia among the Slavic population of southern Austria-Hungary; they saw in it a hope for attaining their national freedom:

And therefore, we Slovenes, were also set free, not so much due to our own efforts, but mainly owing to the triumphant arms of the allies – the glorious arms of Serbia and the martyr-like self-sacrifice of the Serbian nation and the work of the 'Yugoslav Committee in London'.⁸

As the unification of the 'nation with three names' was predominantly the result of Serbian heroism and selflessness, it was somehow logical for Serbs to contribute their symbolic national holiday, which was to support 'our developing unified Yugoslav, i.e. Serbian, Croatian and Slovene, national consciousness'.⁹

The Yugoslav Piedmont

It seemed for centuries that Montenegro would take over the role of the Serbian Piedmont; the 'first Serb', Prince Nikola, in particular was considered as the controller of Serbian national politics.¹⁰ In this period and in this spirit, a romantic story emerged in Montenegro which spoke of a handful of Serbian noblemen who had taken refuge in Montenegro after the defeat on the Plain of Kosovo in

5 BOKOVY 2001. 251.

6 ANON 1923b. I.

7 KRANJEC 1927. 248.

8 ZUPANIČ 1922. 2; see also GOVEKAR 1922. 1.

9 ANON 1934. 1.

10 ČORVIĆ 1924. 58–60.

1389. There, these 'children of freedom' had defied the inhospitable environment and their hereditary enemies, the 'Turks', on their own for five hundred years. Although the story was widely accepted, it was but a work of fiction shrouded in folklore, whose purpose was to strengthen Montenegrin patriotism in support of Prince Nikola, who dreamt of restoring the former Serbian Empire.¹¹ How good Prince Nikola was at drawing out the Montenegrin patriotism and selflessness using the Kosovo myth is more than apparent in the proclamation he issued in Cetinje on St. Vitus' Day in 1876. In his proclamation, the Prince called for vengeance for the lost Kosovo as follows:

Montenegrins! The flag of freedom and independence which stood proudly and exclusively on our ruins even after Kosovo was not only the flag symbolizing the freedom and independence of Montenegro, but also a symbol of the future freedom and independence of all people. Our enslaved brethren have always looked at Montenegro as a sun which would one day enliven and revive them with its warm rays.

I will not embolden you further, as I know that your courageous chests already swell with the desire to fight the Turks, the desire to avenge Kosovo and resurrect from it the long-buried freedom of the Serbian nation.

Nor will I remind you of the order and obedience associated with soldiership, as you have demonstrated them to me excellently on every occasion. Nor will I tell you like Prince Lazar: Whoever comes not to Kosovo to fight! ... There is no need for me to do so, as I know: you will all follow me!

There was once disunity, but now there is unity!

Murat has taken our empire – it must be taken back from him!¹²

The Kosovo myth proved to be a very successful motivator even after the role of Piedmont had been taken over from Cetinje by Belgrade. Wanting to avenge the lost Kosovo, Serbian soldiers fought selflessly from 1912 to 1918. Kosovo became nothing short of a 'sacred word', the role of the Yugoslav Piedmont was definitively taken over by Serbia:

The role of Serbia in this great effort for national unification was always the most active and the most difficult. Everything depended on it, in fact. Within its state structure, the foundation was laid for the creation of the national idea. This idea developed and grew ever stronger with it. After the Kosovo disaster, the mythical flower of *gusle* music, which, with its tragic heroic ethics, raised entire generations of the nation and has had a great influence even up to our current times, sprouted up from its blood.¹³

The establishment of the nation state of the 'nation with three names' raised the question of the identity of the citizens. The first obstacle on this path was represented by the very name of the unified nation. Two points of view were

11 See e.g. JEZERNIK 2004. 105–106.

12 NIKOLA 1876. 2.

13 ĆOROVIĆ 1924. 92.

formed on this subject. The Serbian government, headed by Nikola Pašić, supported the view that the countries of the former Austria-Hungarian Empire had been annexed to the Kingdom of Serbia, just as six *nahiyas* had been annexed during the time of Prince Miloš, the Province of Niš in 1878 and Old Serbia and South Serbia (Vardar Macedonia) in 1913.¹⁴

According to this view, the new country was to be named Serbia, 'because the Serbian tribe is the strongest and had fought for freedom for centuries, finally emerging victorious through the help of its allies, which led to the unification of all three tribes'.¹⁵ Still others wanted to use the name Yugoslavia and refused to adopt the name of the 'big brother' as their own, and thus the new nation state received its triple name.¹⁶

The first constitution of the unified state, passed on St. Vitus' Day in 1921, adopted the triple name of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. With it, the 'unification of all three Yugoslav tribes into a unified state entity' gained its legal foundations, and 'Serbian-Croatian-Slovene' was declared as its official language.

When the first Southern Slav nation-state was established, nobody spoke Serbo-Croatian-Slovene language, and the leading political parties had not strived to make Yugoslavs, but Slovenes, Croats and Serbs.

Supporters of the national unity of the 'nation with three names' welcomed the adoption of the constitution enthusiastically. Upon its adoption, the daily *Jutro* reported enthusiastically that with it, St. Vitus' Day, for the first time, appeared as 'a milestone marking an important period in the lives of the Yugoslav people': 'Today, the Kosovo St. Vitus' Day of 1389 is avenged and the Sarajevo St. Vitus' Day of 1914 is rewarded'.¹⁷

The triple name of the newly formed state was therefore adopted as a compromise, one the political opposition was unwilling to accept, saying that the St. Vitus' Day Constitution established Serbian hegemony within the nation-state. In his speech at the National Assembly on 7 June 1923, Ante Trumbić expressed his opinion that 'a special concept of the national unity of S-C-S' has formed within the state of the 'nation with three names' 'with the political aim and principle of the state being governed by the majority, which the minority must obey'. In practice, this meant: 'Because Serbs constitute the majority, they must run the state, and Croats and Slovenes, as the minority, must submit'.¹⁸

The political opposition therefore saw the St. Vitus' Day Constitution in an entirely different light. For the *Slovenec*, the adoption of a constitution that did not recognize the national individuality of Slovenes, was a day of national tragedy:

14 TRUMBIĆ 1923. 6-7; cf. KAZIMIROVIĆ 1990. 434-443; SUPPAN 2003. 116.

15 ANON 1923a. 2.

16 DULIBIĆ 1921. 3; TRUMBIĆ 1923. 6-7.

17 ANON 1921. 1.

18 TRUMBIĆ 1923. 19.

On St. Vitus' Day in 1389, Serbs lost their freedom on the Plain of Kosovo. On St. Vitus' Day in 1921, Slovenes and Croats lost their freedom in Belgrade. There is now all the more reason for all three tribes to celebrate St. Vitus' Day.¹⁹

In France, in the process of creating the nation-state, they turned—in a famous phrase of Eugene Weber (1977)—‘peasants into Frenchmen’.

When, in 1866, Italy was unified less than 2.5% of the population used Italian as their first language, the vast majority employing a wide range of dialects. This accounts for Massimo d'Azeglio's call at the time of Unification: ‘Ora che l'Italia è fatta, bisogna pensare a fare gl'Italiani!’ (‘We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians!’).²⁰

By the contrast, in the nation-state of Southern Slavs the respective (national) elites continued to regard the peasants as Slovenes, Serbs, and Croats.

Because creating citizens is, ‘to a significant degree, a process of institutionally organized impersonation’,²¹ it was necessary to invent historical events and figures which best represented the ‘imagined community’ as the result of long-standing historical efforts. In the ‘nation with three names’, the St. Vitus' Day mythology became such a symbol and was given the task of strengthening social and cultural cohesion through its semantic content and its interpretation. After the bloody Great War, the people, veteran groups and the nation-state of the ‘nation with three names’ tried to interpret both the people's heroism and their sacrifice through the images and symbols of the Kosovo myth.

The formation of memories of the ‘common’ past of the members of the imagined community of the historical events and figures that led to its formation, is an important connecting element. The very selection of the events and personalities that were important for the formation of the common past was closely connected to forgetting, as public forgetting promotes or enacts a dramatically new communal perspective on the past in which former works, words, and deeds undergo radical alteration, losing their previous meaning and authority. This means that the villains of yesterday can become the heroes of today, and the heroes of yesterday can turn out to be the villains of today.

The most illustrative example of such a dramatically changed view of the past after 1918 is the image of the Serbian hero, Gavrilo Princip (1894–1918), who was labelled unanimously by Slovene press after the Sarajevo assassination on 28 June 1914 as a criminal who had ‘lost all reason and human feeling’.²² At the condolence ceremony organized by the Slovene People's Party in Ljubljana on 5 July 1914, the Provincial Governor of Carniola of the time, Dr. Ivan Šušteršič, said that ‘the heavy fist of the Slovene soldier, the Slovene lad will crush the skull of the megalomaniac Serb’.²³ The governor's view was evidently shared by a great

19 NIKOLA 1921. 295.

20 UŠENIČNIK 1914. 296.

21 LUKE 2002. 13.

22 ANON. 1914a. 1.

23 LONČAR 1921. 92.

majority of the population. After mobilization was ordered, the *Slovenec* reported about 'our nation's tremendous enthusiasm for war'. The enlisted had arrived at the meeting point 'happy and ready for battle'.²⁴

After the end of the Great War and the defeat of the Central Powers, the Sarajevo assassination grew from a crime into an act of heroism not only in Serbia but throughout the state of the 'nation with three names', and Gavrilo Princip and his collaborators became 'St. Vitus' Day Heroes'. The beginning of 1920 saw the formation of the Committee for the Return of the Bones of the St. Vitus' Day Heroes, which set itself the task of returning the mortal remains of Princip and his colleagues to Sarajevo and bury them ceremoniously with the highest honours.²⁵

The exaltation of the St. Vitus' Day assassins into heroes was not accepted with the same enthusiasm by all.

With the commemorative ceremonies on national holidays, the ruling elite endeavours to shape the symbolic vocabulary of the nation; this process is termed by Dabrowski²⁶ 'symbolic integration'. The goal of the commemorations on St. Vitus' Day anniversaries was therefore the symbolic integration of the members of the 'nation with three names'. To the greatest extent possible, the symbolic integration of the 'nation with three names' drew on the rich treasury of Serbian historical mythology, which, in practice, meant that the public commemorations glorified the Serbian view of the past and disparaged the Slovene (and Croatian) view of the past, thereby exalting Serbs above their 'equal brothers', Slovenes and Croats; members of national minorities felt even more underprivileged.

Conclusion

In the state of the 'nation with three names', St. Vitus' Day mythology was given an important national task: to connect the new national citizens into an imagined community. Its contents and their interpretation were to strengthen the social and cultural cohesion of the citizens and encourage them to sacrifice themselves for the common goals. St. Vitus' Day mythology, established by Prince Bishop Petar Petrović Njegoš and perfected by Prince Nikola, was a product of the pre-modern age. The sacrifice of the individual for the community was concordant with tribal society ethics, and it was also possible to address the people on the basis of these ethics during the times of expansionist nationalism, when people were still able to believe 'that every year on St. Vitus' Day, the Sitnica, the Morava and the Drina run bloody and that this will continue until Kosovo has been avenged and until the shackles of slavery have been completely removed.'²⁷ But it was not possible to build a modern society on it.

24 ANON 1914c. 1.

25 ODBOR ZA PRENOS KOSTI 1920. I.

26 DABROWSKI 2004.

27 BOGOSAVLJEVIĆ 1897. 99.

Prior to the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, South Slavs had never before in history lived in a common state, and thus its 'national awakening' had begun decades before the unification into a nation state; on top of that, they had fought in the Great War that had just ended as members of opposing armies on opposing sides of the front. Therefore, the triple name was perceived by many as a mechanism supporting the efforts of the nationalist Serbian Radical Party to turn peasants into Serbs.

The use of Serbian symbols and cultural forms in commemorations in the new nation-state meant that the commemorations in the state of the 'nation with three names' glorified the Serbian sacrifices and suffering, but denied the contribution of Croats and Slovenes to the establishment of the state community. Together with the provisions and spirit of the St. Vitus' Day Constitution, the glorification of Serbian mythology as the national mythology of the 'nation with three names', which was meant to be the foundation stone for the bright future of the unified nation, became more and more of a stumbling stone with each passing day.

The situation was additionally complicated in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes by the fact that the Croatian and the Slovene national consciousness had been shaped before the establishment of the nation-state of the 'nation with three names'. In opposition to the Serbian hegemony, the Catholic Church radically insisted on the equation of nationality and religious affiliation.²⁸

The citizens of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes who were unable to identify with the name, such as Albanians, Hungarians, Germans, as well as Bosniaks and Macedonians, were in an even worse position. The position of citizens belonging to the Muslim faith, i.e. 'Turks', was particularly untenable.

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²⁸ see KOVAČIČ PERŠIN 2012. 157.

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