

The Denial Syndrome and Its Consequences: Serbian Political Culture since 2000

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Abstract: Since the outbreak of the War of Yugoslav Succession in 1991 and the subsequent atrocities, a significant portion of Serbian society, including the upper echelons of the government, has displayed symptoms of the denial syndrome, in which the guilt is transposed onto the Croats, Bosniaks, and Kosovar Albanians. This syndrome is also associated with a veneration for the victimized hero, with sinister attribution error, and with tendencies toward dysphoric rumination. In the Serbian case, it has also been associated with efforts to whitewash the role played by Serbs such as Milan Nedic and Draza Mihailovic during World War Two and has reinforced feelings of self-righteousness in Belgrade's insisting on its sovereignty over the disputed province of Kosovo.

Social scientists and lawyers alike have long been aware of the tendency of parties who have committed crimes, especially heinous crimes, to deny their own guilt, even blaming the victim. Stanley Cohen notes three forms of denial: honest declarations based on what the person making the denial believes to be the truth; outright lying in order to avoid admitting what the person in question knows to be the truth; and something in between, in which a combination of selective perception, selective recollection, and selective interpretation all combine in order to block the recognition of information which the person in question cannot bear (Cohen, 2001, 5; see also Riddy, 1997, 322—323). It is this third form of denial which I am calling here “the denial syndrome” and which figures both as a way of coping with guilt which may be comprehended at the unconscious level, and as a means to assert one’s own superiority over one’s accusers. An accused person in denial insists on his own innocence, declares that he has been wrongly accused, and may even want his victim to

make amends to *him*. What I wish to accomplish in this article is to sketch out behaviors which could usefully be described as constituting a "denial syndrome" and to identify the factors which lead to its development, its ramifications, and its consequences. Although drawing upon literature from psychology and sociology, I shall connect the denial syndrome to Serbian political culture since the fall of Milosevic, identifying that culture as one of escapism and denial.

Cohen warns that "whole societies may slip into collective modes of denial" and adds that this result need not presuppose blatant forms of "thought control" (Cohen,, 2001, 10). But there such denial may operate at any of a number of levels, including denial of knowledge of an atrocity, denial that one can be held responsible for an atrocity, denial that the event should be interpreted as an atrocity, and denial that the event even took place. To this list one may add denial of the victim (Cohen, 2001, 96), in which the perpetrator blames the victim and endeavors to acquire the status of victim for himself. To the extent that large numbers of people in a society come to see themselves collectively as "the victim", then those who criticize them for crimes are false accusers, dissemblers, the real villains. This, in turn, feeds into feelings of collective national solidarity, which is to say a fierce nationalism which those imbued with it believe to be a defensive form of nationalism. In the Serbian case, the nation has been compared with Job, with the Jewish nation, even with Christ crucified, and, in a recent Christmas homily, the Serbian Orthodox patriarch advised Serbs that they could become again like innocent children, cleansed of all guilt.

Since it is widely understood that xenophobic nationalism is a vital part of Serbian culture today, perhaps we may begin by noting that not every occurrence of the denial syndrome should be assumed to have nationalistic dimensions. As will be shown,

however, the addition of xenophobic nationalism to the denial syndrome creates a powerful concoction in which the society is able to escape into a mythic reality in which Serbs are portrayed as simultaneously heroic and victimized. The place of the anomalous victimized hero in this scheme is crucial, and will be critical to understanding the resulting syndrome.

THE DENIAL SYNDROME – LESSONS FROM PSYCHOLOGY

In the lead-up to and during the war years (1991—95 and 1998—99), Serbs were subjected to a propaganda barrage which fostered and reinforced dysphoric rumination (the tendency to reinterpret events from the past in a negative way), exaggerated perceptions of conspiracy, sinister attribution error (attributing sinister intentions to others), and hypervigilant social information processing, in such a way as to produce in Serbian society patterns of thought, speaking, and behavior with marked neurotic and/or psychotic characteristics (Ramet, 2005, 130; Kramer and Messick, 1998). While only a minority of Serbs actually perpetrated atrocities, few Serbs remained unaffected by the barrage of propaganda and the deepening culture of victimization. To be a Serb was, in the Milosevic era, to be a victim. And this sense of victimhood aroused feelings of anger and seemed to many to justify Serb military operations in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo as “self-defense”, when they were patently acts of aggression (see Lukic and Lynch, 1996). But as the 1990s wore on, few Serbs could have been unaware that their nation was being sharply criticized in foreign media, in foreign journals, and among foreign governments. While Sanford Levinson is quite correct in thinking that citizens do not necessarily share responsibility or culpability with their governments for war crimes or atrocities (Levinson, 1973, 244, 255), the tendency

of citizens to identify with their government can produce feelings of shame even where the citizens in question did not personally take part in atrocities. There is, moreover, a direct connection between anger and shame and, again, between shame and denial, as will become clear.

Helen Lewis, a research psychologist and psychoanalyst who published many studies, wrote one of the classic works on shame, *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis* (1971). In this work, she argued that anger may figure as the way in which an individual (or, by extension, a community) deals with and masks shame. But one may be ashamed of being ashamed and ashamed of being angry, resulting in a vicious loop which only magnifies both shame and anger (As summarized in Scheff, 2000, 95; and Scheff, 1988, 396). While shame may have multivarious sources, one of them is a feeling that one is considered *guilty* of something terrible in the eyes of others. In other words, there is, in some cases, a strong link between guilt and shame. Shame is a powerful force which tortures those it affects. But shame may be repressed, giving rise to the phenomenon of *unacknowledged shame* in which a person might seem "...not to be in pain, revealing an emotional response only by rapid, obsessional speech on topics that seemed somewhat removed from the dialogue" (Scheff, 2000, 94). In this case, repression, a psychological process well known to psychiatrists and psychologists alike, becomes operative. As S. Freud and J. Breuer noted about one case in their *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), "[The ideas that were being repressed] were all of a distressing nature, calculated to arouse the affects of shame, self-reproach and of psychical pain and the feeling of being harmed" (As quoted in Scheff, 2000, 85).

Reactions to shame, whether acknowledged or repressed, differ. Once one feels ashamed of what has been done in the name of one's nation, it is too late simply to

blame one's leaders. One can, of course, do that, but that will not suffice to still the furious scourge of conscience and shame. The danger to avoid is the slide into psychopathy, since failure to deal with feelings of shame can induce psychopathic reactions. One possible response, according to Thomas Scheff, is to embrace "rigid conformity"; if one accepts what the mainstream thinks, says, and does, at least one fits in (Scheff, 1988, 395). An alternative is amorality, in which norms are either repudiated or simply ignored. A study conducted by psychologists Lazar Stankov and Goran Knezevic, comparing the social attitudes of groups of Serbs and Australians, found tangible levels of amorality among Serbs. They also found that Serbs scored significantly higher than Australians on "toughmindedness", which they explained as involving "individuality, hedonism, being on guard, negative attitudes towards global social events" and "haria", which they described as being "indicative of hard realism" as epitomized in the attitude, "I can't stand people who are weak or dumb" (Stankov and Knezevic, 2005, 120). Significantly, they also reported that Serbs scored high on "Uncertainty Avoidance", meaning that they tended to feel "...threatened by uncertain, unknown, ambiguous, or unstructured situations" (Stankov and Knezevic, 2005, 125). That feelings of uncertainty could fuel anger, giving rise to further shame, and feeding into the vicious loop of shame and anger seems to follow.

But there is another possible response to shame, and that is *denial*. As Miceli and Castelfranchi note, "denial is...distinguished from both repression and biased interpretation" (Miceli and Castelfranchi, 1998, 139). In the case of repression, one actually has no conscious knowledge of an event or interpretation, while in the case of denial, one is aware, at a minimum, of reports of an event (or, if one prefers, alleged event) or of an interpretation, and one responds by denying it. As Shale and Shale point

out, “[d]enial is a very common, perhaps universal, defense mechanism in combat” and conflict situations (Shale, 2003, 729). Denial involves a refusal to confront facts and evidence and an insistence, against reason, on an alternative script, in support of which myths and alleged conspiracies may be summoned as evidence.

But the denial syndrome is not without its consequences. While its manifest function is to soothe the individual or collective ego and to attribute culpability to others, it has several latent functions. The first is that, by attributing culpability to others for actions committed by one’s own side (as for example, in Milosevic’s assertion that the Muslims exterminated their own people at Srebrenica with the help of the Germans), it contributes to a view of the world as uncertain and threatening, thus reinforcing both the tendency to sinister attribution error and the need for uncertainty avoidance, as well as the apparent need for hypervigilance. Second, this effort to “export” shame stirs a critical response among those who are expected to “import” the unwanted shame. This critical response in turn reinforces the victimization complex, including feelings of justification in defying others’ rules and tendencies toward perceptions of conspiracy. And finally, by constructing a false narrative, the denial syndrome creates a condition which Jean Paul Sartre called “bad faith” or what Václav Havel might have called “living in falsehood” or sheer cowardice – with all of the consequences thereof.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A GUILT-FREE NATION

Serbs are (or, at least, were, prior to 1999) fond of saying that they win their wars but lose the peace – a slogan popularized in the 1990s by Dobrica Cosic. This maxim is especially often applied to World War Two. In reality, the truth is more mixed: Serbs have sometimes lost the war, but won the peace. World War Two is a classic

example of this. Many Serbs were supporters of local quisling Milan Nedic or of Serbian fascist Dimitrije Ljotic or of Serbian collaborator Draza Mihailovic, and although Serbs made up a hefty proportion of Tito's Partisan Army, many Serbs were on the Axis side, at least until 1944 (see Hoare, 2000, 7—17). At the close of the war, as Philip Cohen has noted, many Chetniks crossed over into Partisan ranks (Cohen, 1996), where they constituted one of a number of internal opposition groups within the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (in 1952 renamed the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, or LCY). While the communist party developed its own official historiography, emphasizing the Partisan struggle, the collaborationism of the Chetniks, and the importance of brotherhood and unity, the Serb nationalists within the party maintained their own distinct point of view, emphasizing the allegedly pro-Allied stance of the Chetniks, downplaying the heroism of the Partisans, and underlining the importance of Serb unity under the slogan "Solely solidarity saves the Serbs!" (in Serbian: Samo sloga Srbina spasava!) A parallel process has occurred as regards the outcome of the twin wars, the War of Yugoslav Succession (1991—95) and the War for Kosovo (1998—99). In a territorial sense, of course, only Bosnia could be counted as having lost the War of Yugoslav Succession, although it may be pointed out that Serbia did not attain its publicly announced war aims. But in the War for Kosovo, the Serbian side was decisively defeated by force of arms, and, after 78 days of bombardment by NATO's forces, Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic was compelled to agree to peace terms which seriously compromised Serbian sovereignty in Kosovo. The establishment of KFOR (the Kosovo Protection Force) and the appointment of a high commissioner to oversee Kosovo's administration were accompanied by the withdrawal of Serbian army and police from the province. Moreover, the transfer of personnel from the Kosovo Liberation Army into the new mostly-Albanian police force

set up in Kosovo after summer 1999 was both symbolically and politically important. And yet, in spite of all of this, Belgrade has continued to insist that it retains sovereignty in Kosovo, and has been willing to entertain, at the most, partition plans which would assign the northern strip of the province to Serbia while leaving the economically poorer southern regions of Kosovo to the Albanians.

The Chetnik orientation remained, however, largely underground for as long as Tito was at the helm, although it surfaced from time to time.ⁱⁱ But after Tito's death, what had been a trickle of Serb nationalist revisionism quickly became a flood. An early portent of things to come was *Novi prilozi za biografiju Josipa Broza Tita* [New Contributions to the Biography of Josip Broz Tito], written by Vladimir Dedijer, Tito's official biographer who had helped to create the Tito myth in the first place, and published in Rijeka in 1981. The book outraged much of the Yugoslav public by portraying Tito as "a leader and schemer, dissembler and master of craftiness, bon vivant and tyrant" (quoted in Dedijer, 1981, 322). The repudiation of Tito was, of course, the precondition for the rehabilitation of the Chetniks, although Dedijer himself was not a party to the latter project. Two years later, Branko Petranovic, at that time widely considered the dean among Serbian historians, brought out his revisionist *Revolucija i kontrarevolucija u Jugoslaviji* [Revolution and Counterrevolution in Yugoslavia]. Petranovic turned his back on nearly 40 years of official Yugoslav historiography as well as on such Western research as had been published up to then (especially Milazzo, 1975; and Tomasevich, 1975), to paint the Chetniks as important actors in the anti-fascist resistance (see discussion in Bieber, 2005, 117). Although Petranovic conceded that there had been also some collaboration between the Chetniks and the Axis, this was an important first step toward the full rehabilitation of the

Chetniks and, thereby, the denial of one of the wartime manifestations of pro-Axis collaboration on the part of Serbs.ⁱⁱⁱ

Veselin Djuretic's *Saveznici i Jugoslovenska ratna drama* [The Allies and the Yugoslav War Drama] followed much the same lines as Petranovic. Likewise rejecting official Yugoslav historiography, Djuretic cast the Chetniks "...in a positive light. He argued that the Chetniks were at least equal to the Partisans as agents of the anti-fascist resistance and that, in the case of Serbia, they constituted the more representative resistance movement" (Bieber, 2005, 117). Djuretic was subjected to criticism, of course. For example, Zarko Papic, a leading figure in the Serbian scholarly community, declared that what Djuretic had written was not a work of history at all, but a bare-faced effort to rehabilitate the Chetniks.

In Tito-era historiography, accounts of the negative role played by the Chetniks during World War Two were balanced by accounts of the negative role played by Croatian Ustase, allowing the communists to present their Partisan movement as opposed to extremes on both (or even all) sides. But Serb nationalist revisionism recognized no such balance. On the contrary, the Ustase were now given exclusive stress as veritable homegrown demons par excellence. Moreover, in 1986, Serb revisionist historian Vasilije Krestic published an influential article in which he claimed that Croats had a long-standing "tradition" of genocide (Banac, 1992). Milorad Ekmecic, a Bosnian Serb historian, brought a religious dimension to the revisionist wave by casting the Catholic Church as the greatest obstacle to the unification of Yugoslavia in 1918 and the Vatican as an "enemy" of the Serbian nation (Bieber, 2005, 119). It was, then, within this context that some of Serbia's most prominent intellectuals formed a committee in 1985 to draft a memorandum outlining their concerns about the situation

in Yugoslavia. The resulting document, never actually finalized but eventually leaked to the press, was a shrill jeremiad, in which Serbs were represented as having been victimized by the CPY/LCY, by Croats, by Albanians, and, indeed, by almost all non-Serb groups in Yugoslavia.

After Milosevic assumed power within the Serbian party apparatus via a coup (in 1987), revisionism became the official historiography of Serbia. History textbooks in use in Serbia's schools in the Milosevic era accepted the revisionist equation of the Partisans and Chetniks as equally "anti-fascist" (Kuljic, 2004), while a schoolbook in use at that time cited the revisionist claim that some 700,000 Serbs (i.e., not counting non-Serb victims there) died at the Jasenovac camp alone (Blahovic and Mihajlovic, 1997, 57) -- a claim out of all proportion to reality.^{iv} In fact, inflated estimates of the number of Serbian war casualties became common parlance among Serbia's nationalist revisionists who, over time, were able to drown out more level-headed Serb scholars such as Bogoljub Kocovic, a demographer who estimated the total number of wartime casualties in Yugoslavia as a whole at 1,014,000 (Kocovic, 1985) -- a figure which excluded the notion that 700,000 Serbs might have been liquidated at Jasenovac alone.

This historical revisionism, thus, cast Serbs as victims and Serbs' neighbors -- especially Croats and Kosovar Albanians -- as Serbs' oppressors. This, in turn, fed a certain kind of nationalism, indeed a most dangerous kind, in which the solution to present difficulties could only be sought in the arrival of a Serbian messiah. Needless to say, it was Slobodan Milosevic, an opportunistic banker-turned-politician who presented himself as the most qualified to play that role, and throughout his years in power it was never the Serbs who were at fault. When, for example, Tudjman's presidential palace was rocketed in 1991, Belgrade's line was that it was not the Serbian side which was

responsible for the attack; on the contrary, the Croats had done this to themselves. Or again, when Dubrovnik came under siege, the foreign ministry in Belgrade expressed its remorse that Croatian (!) forces were laying siege to their own city and pledged assistance from the Yugoslav Army to save the Croats from themselves! And of course, when a mortar attack struck Sarajevo's central marketplace in August 1995, killing at least 37 persons, it was not the ever-innocent Serbs who were to blame; rather, the Muslims had done this to themselves. The same line was inevitably extended also to the massacre of 8,000 Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica in July 1995 as well as to subsequent events in Kosovo (Tomac, 417—418; Thompson, 1999, *passim*; Eisermann, 2000, 335).

A few months before being voted out of office, Milosevic gave a speech to the Fourth Party Congress SPS (17 February 2000) in which the official victimology was stated in its boldest terms. Here Milosevic asked how the Jews would have felt if, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, their persecution had been justified by charges that they had been perpetrating genocide against the German people. He then suggested that this is how the Serbs, the "Jews" of the current generation, felt when hearing Western spokespersons accuse them of genocide against the Albanians (Bieber, 2005, 262). But the analogy was not a symmetrical one, since the Milosevic regime had been equating not the Albanians of Kosovo but NATO with the Nazis, comparing American President Bill Clinton to Hitler.

Westerners (and others) may be forgiven for having hoped that the fall of Milosevic in October 2000 would lead to a more moderate political climate. But several factors have worked against such a trajectory. First, the most popular political party (according to the results of the parliamentary elections in 2003) is the neo-fascist

Serbian Radical Party, whose founder, Vojislav Seselj, earlier organized a paramilitary force to expel Muslims from Bosnia and whose current leader, Tomislav Nikolic, has openly called, even after Dayton, for an enlarged Serbia. Second, while there was a certain balance in Serbia for the first 2+ years after the fall of Milosevic, between the more moderate Zoran Djindjic (who served as Serbia's prime minister) and the more nationalistic Vojislav Kostunica (who served as Yugoslav president at the time), with the assassination of Djindjic in March 2003, the nationalists have triumphed – at least for the time being. And third, school textbooks in the post-Milosevic era have not only embraced the revisionist line established in Milosevic's time, but have in fact radicalized it even further. In 2002, for example, a new textbook was introduced in Serbian schools; written by Kosta Nikolic, Nikola Zutic, and Momcilo Pavlovic, the book glorifies the collaborationist Chetniks and defends Milan Nedic! (see Stojanovic, 2003)

WAR CRIMINALS AS NATIONAL HEROES

The glorification of indicted war criminals as heroes has gone hand in hand with the rehabilitation of Draza Mihailovic's Chetniks of World War Two. But the effort to rehabilitate the Chetniks preceded the outbreak of the War of Yugoslav Succession, especially in intellectual circles, and was carried forward during the war years, and indeed throughout the 1990s, by the pro-monarchy Serbian Renewal Party (SPO), led by the so-called "king of the streets", novelist Vuk Draskovic. During these years, the SPO organized annual pilgrimages to Ravna Gora, the mythic birthplace of Mihailovic's Chetniks, and continued to demand the official rehabilitation of the "Ravna Gora Chetniks". Mihailovic, whose forces slaughtered Muslim civilians only because they were

Muslims (See Ramet, 2006, chap. 4) and who had been executed by the victorious communists after the war, was now said to have been a “hero” and a martyr. He was, in fact, said to have been the ultimate “victimized hero”, who had fought for the Serbian nation (note: not for all Yugoslavs nor for social justice), had wanted to expand the territory of the Serbian state, and who had been sentenced to death under the regime of the half-Croat, half-Slovene Tito.

Draskovic continued to pay homage to the deceased Chetnik leader, even after becoming foreign minister in Vojislav Kostunica’s cabinet in 2004. Moreover, soon after the latter became prime minister of Serbia (in March 2004), the National Assembly passed a law equating the Chetniks and Partisans as equivalent anti-fascists (“Cetnicki zakon”, 2005). It was, furthermore, probably as the result of hints from the government in Belgrade that, on 9 May 2005, on the 60th anniversary of the Allied victory over fascism, a delegation of U.S. veterans handed over to Gordana Mihailovic, the Chetnik general’s daughter, an award originally announced by U.S. President Harry S Truman in 1948. The award – the Legion of Merit – had been awarded to the leader of the Ravna Gora movement for his role in saving the lives of more than 500 American pilots.^v The delivery of the award provoked angry protests from the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and from the Bosnian Party of Democratic Action. In Belgrade, there were also protests – from the Helsinki Committee headed by Sonja Biserko and from the liberal monthly, *Republika* (see “Cetnicki su gori deo”, 2005).

Meanwhile, under the impact of the long propaganda campaign portraying Serbs as victims of a broad international conspiracy, of continued economic malaise,^{vi} and of an inability to come to terms with the failure of the ‘Greater Serbia’ project, manifestations of anti-Semitism, neo-Naziism, and more diffuse xenophobia increased in

the first five years following the fall of Milosevic (Boarov, 2005; Nikolic-Solomon and Ivanovic, 2005). Although the 2002 census recorded the presence of only about 1,200 Jews in this country of 8 million inhabitants, graffiti sprayed on public walls in Serbia shrieked messages of hate such as "Juden Raus" (in German) and "Death to Jews and Gypsies". In the 1990s, as already noted, the Milosevic regime had tried to identify the fate of the Serbs, archetypically, with that of the Jews, reversing its stance during the NATO air strikes in 1999; at that point, the regime-controlled media started to accuse Jews of being behind the air campaign (Nikolic-Solomon and Ivanovic, 2005, 1—2). The Serbian Defense League, a particularly virulent extremist group, has gone further, alleging that Jews have "stolen the Serbian holocaust" because "the biggest genocide in World War II was committed against the Serbs in Nazi Croatia, and not against the Jews in Germany" (quoted in Nikolic-Solomon and Ivanovic, 2005, 2).

Among the right-wing opposition groups is *Obraz* (which means Honor), led by Mladen Obradovic. While swearing allegiance to the Serbian nation and to the Serbian Orthodox religion, *Obraz* is also committed to a struggle against those groups which it views as enemies of the Serbian people, viz., "Zionists, converts to Islam, Ustashe, democrats, false pacifists, perverts, criminals, and drug addicts" (*Obraz* website, as quoted in Nikolic-Solomon and Ivanovic, 2005, 4). The foregoing groups, the website promises, "shall be justly punished, because they should not be allowed to ruin the health of Serbian youth" (*Obraz* website, as quoted in Nikolic-Solomon and Ivanovic, 2005, 4).

The aforementioned Serbian Defense League sees itself as being on the front lines of the defense of Serbia. Its website includes the following tribute to indicted war criminals Mladic and Karadzic:

We salute the last of Serb heroes! Gen. Ratko Mladic...and Dr. Radovan Karadzic...led Bosnian Serbs in their fight for survival; we thank the great men for their sacrifices with a hope that our pages will strike a spark of inspiration for future generations (quoted in Serbian Defense League, N.D.).

Although most of Mladic's exploits were at the expense of unarmed civilians or underarmed U.N. peacekeepers and included massacres and mass expulsions, among other things, he quickly came to be seen as a kind of hero by Serbs in both Serbia and the Republika Srpska. In 1995, for example, shortly before the war ended, an admirer crooned, "[Mladic] is a god. I would follow him anywhere, through the woods or across rivers. He is our savior and the greatest man in the world" (as quoted in Block, 1995, 7). At war's end, Mladic was the most popular figure among Bosnian Serbs, and polled just 0.9% behind first-place Milosevic in Serbia, according to a 1995 survey (Vucinic, 1995), while, according to an opinion poll conducted in 2004, almost two-thirds of Bosnian Serbs said that they regarded Karadzic as a hero, and not a war criminal (Onasa News Agency, 2004). For his part, Karadzic could bask in the knowledge that he had more supporters than detractors. During the decade which followed Dayton, Mladic and Karadzic were fugitives – but until 2001, they lived more or less openly, with Mladic, for example, repeatedly seen at some of Belgrade's more fashionable restaurants. There were songs and poems composed to celebrate these "Serbian heroes" (*Glas javnosti*, 2005a), websites posted in their honor, and children named after them. Mladic continued to draw his pension until November 2005 (*Glas javnosti*, 2005b), and has enjoyed the protection of the army, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and sections of the Serbian secret service, and probably also of Kostunica and his staff (*Vjesnik*, 2005; and

Münchener Merkur, 2005). Karadzic, for his part, has enjoyed the protection of the government of Republika Srpska and the benefit of a retinue of hired protectors, whose salaries he has been able to pay thanks to the private wealth he built up through smuggling and racketeering during the war years (Ramet, 2006, chap. 16). He may also have enjoyed protection from offices in the government in Belgrade.

This government/army/secret service protection not only is inconsistent with Belgrade's pledge to cooperate fully with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) but also reflects the official perception of these "heroes". The way in which the Serbian government treated General Vladimir Lazarevic in February 2005 is a case in point. Lazarevic was indicted for war crimes committed in Kosovo, but when the day came for him to fly to The Hague, he was given an audience with Serbian Prime Minister Kostunica and Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Pavle, in a transparent show of solidarity with the indicted war criminal, and then escorted to the plane by two government ministers. As Natasa Kandic, director of the Humanitarian Law Center in Belgrade, noted at the time, this ceremonious send-off sent a clear message that "for the government, General Lazarevic and three other generals whose extradition is demanded by the tribunal are not individuals indicted for the most serious crimes, but rather heroes who fought for the rights of the Serbian people" (Kandic, 2005, 1).

Meanwhile, additional bodies of the war dead continued to be found, so that, by November 2005, forensic teams had exhumed some 16,500 bodies from more than 300 mass graves in Bosnia (*The Guardian*, 2005). The number of men and boys killed at Srebrenica on General Mladic's orders is now generally estimated at between 7,000 and 8,000. And, by late 2005, it was reliably reported that the ICTY and the Office of the Prosecutor were losing patience with the Serbian government (*Agence France Presse*,

2005). At this writing, there are only five indicted war criminals still at large – all of them Serbs, and all five allegedly within reach of the government in Belgrade. (A sixth Serb, Dragan Zelenovic, had been taken into custody by Russian authorities in August 2005 and was turned over to the ICTY in June 2006.) Yet, in November 2005, the Serbian Cultural Institute, perhaps unknowingly, included recordings of poems praising Karadzic and Mladic in a set of “masterpieces of oral heritage” which it was submitting to a UN-funded arts project. When the ill-considered poems were discovered, embarrassed officials at the institute withdrew the submission altogether (B92 News, 2005; and BBC News, 2005b). Moreover, the literary Karadzic has continued to turn out novels and plays – among them, the semi-autobiographical novel, *Miraculous Chronicles of the Night*, which deals with the romantic adventures of a psychiatrist, and a play called “Situation”, premiered in Belgrade at the end of the year, which includes among its dramatis personae a UN peacekeeper, a Muslim translator, and a gay waiter (BBC News, 2005c).

Even today, however, in spite of the broadcast on Serbian television of video documentation of Serb atrocities, many Serbs remain in denial. “Serbs think of themselves as the victims,” explained Liljana Smajlovic, a journalist working for the weekly magazine *NIN*. “[They are] the people standing meekly in line in 1941 waiting for the Ustase to kill them during World War II” (quoted in BBC, 2005a). They are the “remnants of a slaughtered nation” (Silber and Little, 1995). But by combining victimology with misinformation, the result is an inversion in which “those indicted for war crimes are glorified, while their victims are repeatedly denied the right to be treated as victims” (Kandic, 2005, 2).

THE CONSEQUENCES OF DENIAL

If Serbia's war crimes indictees are wrongly accused heroes and if Serbia is "the real victim", then it follows that a policy of cooperation with the ICTY and with the European Union (EU) on their terms is wrong. Rather, the ICTY and the EU should take Serbia on the latter's terms and stop pressuring Belgrade to arrest the indictees. Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica articulated this line of thinking in June 2006, when he told the FoNet New Agency that the EU's "policy of a permanent setting of conditions, that has been conducted for a while towards Serbia, is deeply wrong....From our point of view and by any reasonable standard [partnership] means one neither sets conditions nor puts pressure on a partner but cooperates with him..." (Agence France Presse, 2006a). What Kostunica ignored was that all of the other nations seeking admission into the EU had been required to comply with fixed conditions and that Croatia and Bosnia had also been required to cooperate with the ICTY and to surrender indictees. The case of Croatian General Ante Gotovina, whose arrest provoked deep resentment and outrage among Croats, is a case in point. Kostunica, in essence, has been demanding not equality for Serbia, but special treatment.

The same thinking has characterized Belgrade's insistence, against the express wish of the EU, the United States, and the vast majority of the population of Kosovo, that it will not renounce Kosovo but will, rather, insist on a "compromise" solution, for which Belgrade's preferred formula is "substantial autonomy" short of independence and compromised by an internal autonomy for Serbs living within the autonomous jurisdiction to be run by local Albanians (*Vecernje novosti*, 2006; *Serbian Government Website*, 2004a; *Serbian Government Website*, 2004b; *Serbian Government Website*, 2006). Rejecting local Albanian demands for independence, Kostunica told an audience

of Kosovar Serbs on 28 June 2006, "Nobody has ever been more right than Serbia nowadays in discussions on the future of Kosovo" (Agence France Presse, 2006b), while Bishop Artemije of Raska and Prizren said that self-determination for Kosovo would be tantamount to "occupation" of Serbian land (SRNA News Agency, 2006). Yet the EU has not given Belgrade any encouragement to continue with this approach. On the contrary, the EU has, if anything, used a combination of incentives, warnings, and penalties, such as the suspension of negotiations on admission to the EU, to impress upon Belgrade that it will be held to the same standard to which Zagreb was held.

As for the surrender of General Ratko Mladic, there have been persistent rumors over the past few years, variously suggesting that he had surrendered, that he was negotiating his surrender with the Serbian government, that he was not negotiating anything with anyone but was being protected by the Serbian army in one of its barracks, that he was not in Serbia at all but in Bosnia, that his whereabouts were not known, that he would be in detention by the end of May 2006, that he was dying (as of June 2006), and so on. There was even a report at the end of June 2006 that Prime Minister Kostunica would summon officers of the Serbian security services to berate them for their failure to capture Mladic (Serbianna, 2006). Finally, that same month, the Serbian government invited British and American agents to join them in the search for Mladic – perhaps in the endeavor to make the British and Americans co-complicitous for any continued failure to arrest the indicted general.

Serbia shows all the signs of a neurotic, even psychotic society. In Serbia today, the collaborationist general, Draza Mihailovic, is celebrated in church frescoes, members of the Serbian parliament ostentatiously honored Milosevic, after death, with not one, but two homages (two separate occasions on which members of the Serbian Radical

Party (SRS) and of the Socialist Party of Serbia rose for a minute of silence for the deceased former president), and, in April 2006, SRS deputies came to the parliament wearing T-shirts decorated with the image of Hague indictee Vojislav Seselj, just ahead of a scheduled speech by Terry Davis, Secretary-General of the Council of Europe. Moreover, in line with the denial syndrome, few Serbs are prepared to dwell on the suffering their nation caused others, and dwell rather on their own suffering and the suffering of their heroes. Karadzic, the quintessential "hero-victim", was said at one point to be "suffering psychological difficulties" and to have become "paranoid about his own safety". He was also described as suffering from insomnia and as being "haunted by nightmares" in such sleep as he can catch in which he relives the horrors of the war (Agence France Presse, 2000). He has also been described sympathetically as "misunderstood" (as cited in Dekleva and Post, 1997, 486). Mladic has allegedly been suffering from poor health, and, in spite of his role at Srebrenica (a role still denied by the majority of Serbs), some 75% of Serbs view the general as a genuine war hero, according to Aleksandar Tijanic, the director of the state-run television network in Serbia (*Chicago Tribune*, 2006).

Moreover, just as a neurotic individual may not be able to confront certain facts about his own past, so too with a society, its own misdeeds constitute a subject to be avoided. The history textbooks introduced in Serbia after the overthrow of Milosevic are a case in point. In one such textbook, Milosevic is not even mentioned, let alone assessed. The final chapter of the book recounts the wars of 1991—1999, but avoids any mention of the man who had been taken to the ICTY to face charges of genocide and other war crimes (*Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 2002). Indeed, through the one-sided treatment of the Ottoman era, the aforementioned glorification of Mihailovic and

Nedic, the exaggeration of Serbian casualties at Jasenovac, and the studied amnesia both about the sufferings of non-Serbs during World War Two and during the wars of the 1990s and about Milosevic, the Serbian history textbooks have woven a tapestry of national patriotism in which the country's minorities are either ignored or portrayed "only in terms of conflicts and as 'eternal' opponents" (Höpken, forthcoming). Not everyone in Serbia is prepared to accept such representations of the nation's history, however, and in 2002, publication of one particular textbook provoked protests from liberal historians.

CONCLUSION

Students of comparative history will have recognized that the denial syndrome as I have described it has also been characteristic of other societies. Although the denial syndrome may manifest itself in alternative variations, it was operative in the United States after the genocide of the Amerindian population, in Turkey after the massacres of the Armenians, and in Germany, Austria, and France among others after World War Two. The case of Serbia, thus, is not unique, although every case has its own unique nuances and permutations.

What I have endeavored to show in this article is that the various Serbian denials, instances of braggadocio, defiance of the world, and self-characterization of Serbia as a great victim in history are not random and unrelated facts. They are, rather, threads in a tapestry known as the denial syndrome. Dysphoric rumination, in which the past is remembered darkly and in which brooding displaces any ability to come to terms with the past, is also associated with the denial syndrome, insofar as the accusations of others, ever denied, may nonetheless occasion such rumination. As Lyubomirsky and

Tkach have noted, "repetitive rumination about the implications of one's depressive symptoms actually maintains those symptoms, impairs one's ability to solve problems, and ushers in a host of negative consequences" (Lyubomirsky and Tkach, 2003, 21). Among these consequences one may mention, in particular, the tendency for a person or society trapped in dysphoric rumination to retrieve additional negative memories from the past, even if not directly related to the original source of the dysphoria.

Dysphoric and depressogenic thinking is also associated with a preference for certain types of heroes. Among such heroes would be the "hero-as-victim" (best personified by Tsar Lazar who chose the Heavenly Kingdom and was slaughtered in battle in 1389 but also by Draza Mihailovic, who fought for an ethnically cleansed Greater Serbia, only to be put on trial by Tito in 1946 and executed). Another suitable hero type is the hero-as-fighter-against-the-odds. The latter type of hero was archetypally embodied in Ratko Mladic when, in May 1995, he chained more than 300 UN peacekeepers to bridges and public buildings in an act of defiance against the entire world. It is also reflected in Vuk Draskovic's novel, *Noz* (The Knife), where the hero muses,

Our people have a device which they can handle better than anyone else in the world, and a word that they can pronounce better than anybody else. This uncomplicated device and single word constitutes our seal, our symbol, our historical legitimacy...it is the word noz, the knife, and when we hear it our eyes fill with fire, in those three letters our whole history is squeezed (Quoted in *The Times*, 1999; see also Carmichael, 2002).

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NOTES

ⁱ . This article was written as a result of the time I spent at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England, in October 2005, as a Visiting Professor of the British Academy. I am grateful to Cathie Carmichael of UEA for obtaining the grant which made my visit possible, for commissioning this piece, and for her feedback on an earlier partial draft. I also wish to thank the University of East Anglia and the British Academy for their support.

ⁱⁱ . For example, in 1968, novelist Dobrica Cosic and historian Jovan Marjanovic denied that Bosnian Muslims constituted a distinct nationality, calling the declaration of a Muslim nationality "senseless"; for this, they were expelled from the party. For context and discussion, see Ramet, 2006), 287–288.

ⁱⁱⁱ . For extensive documentation of the Chetniks' collaboration with the Axis, including with Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, irredentist Bulgaria, and even with the Ustase, see Latas, 1999. For documentation of Chetnik collaboration with the Ustase in military campaigns against the Partisans, see Jelic-Butic, 1986. For extensive documentation of Chetnik collaboration with fascist Italy, see Milazzo, 1975.

^{iv} . According to Ivo and Slavko Goldstein, the total number of people of all nationalities liquidated at Jasenovac during World War Two came to between 80,000 and 90,000 persons. See Goldstein, 2001, 342.

^v . "Gen. Mihailovic built an airfield in the mountains near Pranjane, from which US planes took pilots back to their bases in Europe." -- FoNet news agency 2005.

^{vi} . As of late May 2006, some 924,450 persons in Serbia were officially registered as unemployed. See *Eastbusiness.org*, 2006.