

PATHS OF GLORY

HOW MARGINAL PEOPLE FORCE THE NATION'S ATTENTION ON THEMSELVES

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A time of political crises and wars can offer people from the margins an opportunity to surface and attract public attention. Such examples of promotion were numerous in Yugoslavia during the 1990s, when war raged in the former country and marginalised individuals rose to fame. One way was by participating in the war. Many criminals took this path and became war heroes or, if nothing more, at least known among the people. Another way open to ambitious individuals was politics, where they could serve political elites and their leaders. During the war it soon became evident that even the world of sport, especially the world of sports fans or supporters, can be well-suited for the promotion of people from the lowest social depths.

Keywords: war heroes, sport, criminal, Yugoslavia

Čas političnih kriz in vojn ljudem z družbenega dna nudi priložnost, da pridejo na površje in pritegnejo pozornost javnosti. V devetdesetih letih 20. stoletja je bilo v nekdanji Jugoslaviji veliko takšnih primerov samopromocije. Na območju je divjala vojna, med njo pa so prišli na dan mnogi dotlej marginalizirani posamezniki. Eden od načinov, da so zasloveli, je s sodelovanjem v bitkah. Mnogi kriminalci so izbrali to pot in postali prepoznani kot vojni junaki. Druga pot, ki je bila odprta za nekatere ambiciozne posameznike, je politika, v kateri so lahko služili političnim elitam in njihovim voditeljem. Med vojno na območju Jugoslavije pa je postalo jasno še, da sta tudi svetova kulture in športa lahko učinkovita za nagovarjanje ljudi iz najnižjih družbenih globin.

Ključne besede: vojni junaki, šport, kriminalce, Jugoslavija

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Times of great political crises and wars offer a chance to people living on the margins of society to rise to the surface and to focus public attention on themselves. Examples of such promotions were abundant in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, while armed conflicts were being waged on the territory of the former state, but they still exist even today, because the consequences of these conflicts continue to make this region unstable. In terms of the professions they practised before the wars of the 1990s, it is possible to single out several groups of figures that became famous in these wars. The first group is a small one and it consists of professional soldiers and police officers. Among Bosnian Serbs these were, for example, Ratko Mladić, an officer of the Yugoslav National Army (YNA), and Milan Martić, a policeman from Knin; among Bosniaks, Naser Orić also became famous as a war hero, while before these wars, he was a policeman in Belgrade and a member of a special unit of the Serbian Ministry of Interior. Veselin Šljivančanin was also an officer, one of the commanders of the YNA units that laid siege to Vukovar and wreaked destruction on it in 1991, at the beginning of the war in Croatia. This group can also be said to include Franjo Tuđman, a former YNA general who, during the crisis and war in Croatia, soared to the highest position, having become president of the new Croatian state and commander-in-chief of its armed forces.

People of various civil professions, who had possibly been known only in their local communities, can be classified in the second group, comprising previously more or less unknown individuals who became famous during the war. For instance, Goran Hadžić, who was a warehouse worker in the village of Pačetin, near Vukovar before the war, became president of the so-called Republic of Serbian Krajina during the war, and since 2011 he has been awaiting verdict of the war crimes tribunal in The Hague. Tomislav Merčep, by profession a civil engineer from Vukovar, Branimir Glavaš, a legal officer from Osijek and Mirko Norac, a waiter from the vicinity of Sinj, who became a general of the Croatian army during the war, were all celebrated as war heroes in Croatia. All three of them, during and immediately after the war, became influential people close to President Tuđman, while more recently – when facts about their responsibility for crimes committed during the war were revealed – they got to be among those who were arrested and who are currently undergoing trials in Croatia for those crimes. Among Serbs from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Božidar Vučurević managed to attract public attention during the war. He was a truck driver and a folk poet from Trebinje, and he became the wartime mayor of the city, at the time when all Bosniaks were banished from it, and when the YNA, with his logistic support, laid siege to Dubrovnik.

A special group of those who did not resist the temptation to get hold of fame in the whirlwind of war is comprised of ambitious intellectuals. These were largely content to take part in war propaganda from a safe distance, to be, as journalist Stojan Cerović called them, “voluntary donors of someone else’s blood”.

However, a number of intellectuals decided to stand out in the nineties by getting directly involved in political and war-related events. For instance, previously less well-known writer and journalist Vuk Drašković, became famous almost overnight, owing to the fact that he founded a political party, the Serbian Renewal Movement, which was, for a certain period of time, one of the biggest parties in Serbia. His example was followed a year later by Vojislav Šešelj, a doctor of law, namely Drašković’s godfather, when he founded the Serbian Radical Party in 1991, which soon surpassed in popularity and number of supporters his godfather’s Serbian Renewal Movement and Milošević’s Socialist Party.

Intellectuals among Bosnian Serbs stood out in terms of the willingness to become famous in war, thus, the most important political offices in the administration established during the war by the Serbian side were held by psychiatrist and poet Radovan Karadžić, biology professor of the Sarajevo University Biljana Plavšić, philosopher Aleksa Buha, writer Miroslav Toholj and literature professor from Banja Luka, Nikola Koljević. Few knew before the war who these people were. I only knew who Nikola Koljević was, because he was a fellow student of the so-called world literature in Belgrade. He was the only one who condemned himself, not waiting to see if The Hague Tribunal would be interested in him: he took his own life in 1997.

Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church Amfilohije Radović, Atanasije Jević and Filaret Mićević cannot be said to have been unknown before the nineties, however, owing to

the active role in the promotion and expansion of Serbian nationalism, their names became known to the general public in Serbia, as well as other countries that were once parts of Yugoslavia. They were not reluctant to bless military and paramilitary units that were going to ravage Croatia and Bosnia, including those led by notorious Željko Ražnatović Arkan.

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The most interesting and one of the largest groups of marginal people and mediocrities who got hold of fame in the wars in Yugoslavia in the nineties and got promoted into national heroes in the media of warring parties were criminals and the so-called “dogs of war”. They attracted my attention, more than people of other professions who took advantage of the chaos of the breakup of Yugoslavia to gain fame and money, because I have realized that studying their case also gives answers that are valid for the others – that criminals/war heroes are a promising topic for anthropology, that, as Lévi-Strauss would say, they are “good to think”. Therefore, here I offer a summary of my observations about a few people from the so-called criminogenic environment who turned into glorious warriors in the nineties.

Among Muslims (Bosniaks), the prestige of heroes in the fight for the national cause during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995) was acquired by pre-war criminals Ramiz Delalić Ćelo, Mušan Topalović Caco and Jusuf Prazina Juka. According to sociologist Ozren Žunec, they stood out as the leaders of “a sort of gangster guerrilla”, composed of a mixture of armed resistance to the enemy and organized crime; they combined “intimidation and crimes” with “grand Robin Hood-like gestures” (Žunec 1997: 24). According to an account by a journalist from Sajarevo, the new Bosnian authorities looked upon Topalović’s actions in besieged Sarajevo with approval, accepting them as ‘a non-institutional medicine for the treatment of institutional diseases of blocked Sarajevo: war profiteering, unjust distribution of the burden of defending the city and growing crime’. Delalić also enjoyed the same support of the officials. Both of them had a brigade of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina under their command until September 1993, when, after Izetbegović’s government assessed that Caco and Ćelo had got out of control, a real military-police operation was organized against them and their men, in which the former was killed and the latter arrested.

In the same year, 1993, Jusuf Prazina died in Belgium, under mysterious circumstances. At the beginning of the war, this criminal from Sarajevo was “officially appointed as commander of special troops”, but the public knew him far better as a hero of the songs and stories that talked about his wartime and other exploits. As Ivo Žanić writes,

“His people hijacked cars and beat ordinary people up, and they took from stores whatever they wanted, sometimes leaving written confirmations in order to give all this a form of legality. From time to time, with a lot of pomp, he would donate part of the loot to hospitals, children and the powerless. When he was in the city, he drove hijacked dark red Audi whose license plates read Juka, and when

he went to Igman in early autumn 1992, with the regular troops of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the village of Šehbegovići, he bought a white horse on which he planned to ride into liberated Sarajevo, obviously already completely submerged in the character of a romantic hero.” (Žanić 1998: 359)

Mladen Naletilić Tuta became the most famous of all the heroes of war in Bosnia originating from the mafia underworld on the Croatian side. Just like many other criminals who emerged at the beginning of the war in former Yugoslavia as leaders of various paramilitary groups, before all this, Naletilić also lived and “worked” abroad. He returned to Yugoslavia in 1990, and he stood out in war as the leader of the Convicts’ Battalion of the Croatian Defence Council, which is considered responsible for grave war crimes in Mostar and the surrounding area, because of which Tuta is included in the list of war crime suspects. The Croatian police arrested him in 1997, and he was then transferred to The Hague Tribunal, which sentenced him to several years in prison, a sentence which he is now serving somewhere in Italy.

Among Serbian heroes and masters of war with a rich mafia biography, during the armed conflicts in Yugoslavia, the one that was most talked and written about was Željko Ražnatović Arkan. Ražnatović was the leader of a volunteer paramilitary unit (Serb Volunteer Guard), whose characteristic was that its core was comprised of a group of fans of Red Star Football Club. Before becoming their military boss, Arkan was the leader of those fans. His name was also included in the list of persons against whom The Hague Tribunal issued an indictment, but Ražnatović was killed on 15 January 2000 in a gunfight at Intercontinental Hotel, Belgrade, so he answered for his actions at different court.

At the beginning of armed conflicts in Croatia, the Serbian media also paid a lot of attention to a military instructor of rebelling Serbs in Kninska Krajina, who presented himself as Captain Dragan, refusing to fully reveal his identity. What was known is that before the work he did at the Knin Fortress – where, as evidenced by the photographs published by the Belgrade press in summer 1991, he taught some military skills to a volunteer unit, the so called Knindže (Knin ninjas) – he was in Australia and Africa, earning a living doing jobs usually referred to as “shady”. His military exploits are described in a series of newspaper articles, but also in the form of a comic strip. In the past few years, Croatia has taken proceedings at the courts in Australia, where Captain is located, requesting his extradition for the purpose of a war crime trial.

Today, Captain, as well as other figures similar to him that rose to the surface in the nineties, is the subject of posts on the internet, on internet forums. There are articles about all of them in Wikipedia, usually in several languages, and for some of them, their admirers created profiles on Facebook. A plethora of videos about these characters on YouTube adds to the stories about them a new, *reality* dimension. Combing through that material, I notice that the narratives about the heroes that are found in it have greater evocative power now, that they can leave a stronger impression than before, in other words, that the medium

of the internet is very suitable for epiphanic depiction of a hero. It was exciting for me to meet once again the characters that I have written about in the past, and who come to me today more alive and seem closer than at the time when I first met them.

One of the criminals with a rich file in the Yugoslav police and the police of several European countries, whose participation in the latest wars has led to him being talked and written about as a new war hero, was Đorđe Božović, nicknamed Giška. At the beginning of the war in Croatia, he became a commander of the Serbian Guard, a volunteer unit which was formed in June 1991 under the auspices of the political party Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO). In the autumn of the same year, Giška died in battles near Gospić. In the speeches at his funeral, in newspaper articles and a book, which was published soon after his death, Giška was described as “a new knight in the sky of Serbianness”. A speech at his funeral was also delivered by Bishop Atanasije Jeftić, who described him as a penitent from whom virtuous human and Serbian character spoke up (Čolović 2004: 260).

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How can one explain the fact that the criminal past of these people, not even their violent traits, which were also manifested in war, did not hinder their heroisation, which is evidenced by the fact that in the stories about the exploits of these national heroes, their criminal past and their violent traits are not obscured? There is no doubt that the crucial role in this was played by the traditional image, still alive in this part of Europe, of national saviours and avengers, who do not belong to the ruling elite, and who often live outside the law, the image on which, as Hobsbawm established, the widespread phenomenon of “social banditry” is based (Hobsbawm 1969). The emergence of people outside the law as popular national avengers is common, as Christian Giordano explained, in Mediterranean societies, where long-time foreign rule created permanent mistrust of the authorities and the law, and thus paved the way to admiring all those who resist them (Giordano 1996: 52). The cult of *hajduks* has remained unquestionable even nowadays, and it is reproduced by, among others, literature and history study programmes as early as in elementary school.

It was, therefore, expected that the appearance of criminals in the role of heroes in the wars of the nineties would be legitimized in the media in Serbia and Croatia by invoking the hajduk tradition. Were not hajduks, those legendary national avengers and protectors, people outside the law, were they not fighting on their own, deciding about life and death based on their, more than cruel, “law”? It did not prevent them from becoming acknowledged as heroes that indebted the nation and the state, it did not stop the story about them from becoming an important episode of the holy history of the nation.

Croatian criminals – heroes in the war in Bosnia – are depicted as people through whose veins the blood of old Herzegovina’s hajduks circulated. Tuta experienced the fame of epic poetry written in decasyllabic verses being dedicated to him and being hailed by the media as a modern offshoot, even as a distant descendant of famous hajduk Mijat Tomić. The stories about Caca also said he was continuing the hajduk tradition. He himself talked

about growing up listening to “epic poetry accompanied by the gusle” and noted that he learned from them that Muslims were Islamised Croats, who “gave up on their faith and their nation”. In other words, Caco saw his own participation in the conflict between Bosnian Croats and Muslims as a national task, i.e. fight for eliminating the last remnants of the slavery of the Croatian nation to Turks.

Similarly, Serbian mobsters turned into war heroes were presented in the stories about their exploits as descendants of hajduks. The authors of a book about Giška made an effort to create his alleged genealogy chart, to highlight that he originated from a tribe that produced famous hajduks. “For hundreds of years,” say the book’s authors, “this warrior tribe has been fighting battles. At that time, they survived by hijacking Turkish caravans and cattlemen, so even these exploits were considered as bravery.” Among the hero’s ancestors, the authors singled out certain Mićko as the one whom Giška resembles most by his heroic character. However, Mićko was not a hajduk, but he did “on one occasion”, as a 95-year-old man, kill a Turkish standard-bearer, after which he himself was killed.

Another explanation, frequently provided, for the paradox that undoubted mobsters are glorified as devoted protectors and heroes of their nations, lies in presenting these criminals-heroes as, deep in their hearts, sincere believers, God’s men, who discovered their deep religiousness only in war, when, as penitents, they happily laid their lives on the altar of their faith and church. The spectacular scale of the fall at the time when they were engaged in mafia activities, indicates the height of the ascent of these penitents at the time of war. The deeper they fall – the higher they fly! Đorđe Božović Giška, according to the authors of the book about him, “tempted life much more than others, sinking as low as it was possible, but also climbing a lot higher and a lot farther than those uninformed know” (Čolović: 260).

Finally, he atoned for the depth of his fall by the magnitude of his sacrifice, by dying for Serbianness. This atonement is not only patriotic, but also religious, or, in his case, Christian. Because, according to his biographers, he “felt the warm hand of the living God and embraced it with the well-experienced God’s warmth”. That is why, for them, Giška “was only a God’s man, man of Jesus Christ. Everything else is malicious and untrue.”

Željko Ražnatović also tried to be accepted as a fighter for the Orthodox cause. Arkan liked to say that his only commander was Patriarch Pavle. He chose a monastery (Pokajnica Monastery, near Velika Plana) as the place where the Serb Volunteer Guard was founded, and the host of the ceremony that was organized to mark the event was the hegumen of the monastery. When members of his army were enlisted, in addition to taking an oath, the following prayer was read,

“Son of God! Thou gave your soul to save us. Thou commanded us to give our souls for our fellow soldiers. I happily go to fulfil thy will, fighting for homeland and my faith. Arm me with strength and heroism to resist our enemies. If, however, it is thy will that I give my life in today’s battle, mercifully allow me to die

with firm faith and hope of eternal blissful life in thy kingdom. Mother of God! Save me under thy shroud. Amen!" (Čolović 2004: 263)

Willingness to talk about new war heroes originating from the mafia underworld with approval, and even special reverence was also demonstrated by Islamic religious authorities in Sarajevo, during Topalović's *janazah* (funeral), held three years after his death. According to the reports in the Sarajevo press, in front of twenty thousand people gathered at the event, the imam declared him *ghazi* (warrior) and *shahid* (martyr for faith), saying that he "impressed the whole world with heroism" and that his funeral was "a defeat of all *kafirs* (infidels, non-Muslims) and *munafiqs* (hypocrites)".

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However, these explanations and excuses for the presence of mobsters among war heroes, by linking them with the hajduk tradition or a parabola of the prodigal son, do not question their main character trait – their extreme propensity for violence. It still remains even after their heroic metamorphosis. The story of this metamorphosis does not avoid, but rather accentuates what is thuggish, cruel and extremely violent in them. Heroisation of pre-war mobsters is not a process in which something unacceptable, disgusting, bad, alien to a normal person is turned into something acceptable, exemplary, good, understandable and familiar to everyone. What makes contemporary mobsters – and in the past hajduks and other bandits – a suitable template for the fabrication of heroes is not their readiness to transform into champions of moral and nobleness, but quite the opposite, it is their striking and indelible propensity for violence.

Even Captain Dragan, whose character is based on the model of the "officer and a gentleman", is capable of turning into a man-beast, of expressing the "strength of a thug", of "seriously losing his temper". Giška's unrestrained might is also depicted similarly. When he was angry, "his face would change, it would become of an unspecific colour, and his eyes would gleam like those of a wild animal. At such moments, he was merciless..." That is why Giška, just like other bandits-heroes, stirred in the people with whom he had contact confusing, ambivalent feelings, admiration mixed with fear. In any case, their relation to hero Giška is that of subordination, retreating from someone who is more than just a man or at least different from an ordinary man. "Even when he was the calmest, with his muscles relaxed, and joyful", his biographers say, "Giška exuded some strange power and invisible rays that always put his interlocutor in an unfavourable position, somehow through his own understanding" (Čolović 2004: 260).

This example, and other similar ones, point to the conclusion that the character of a hero – I mean any hero – is not created by making his crude and wild traits more noble, by legitimizing illegal behaviour, re-educating a morally and socially neglected criminal. It is more likely that a heroic character is created as a result of the need – which appears in times of great crises and wars – to offer the characters of those people that are strong enough to

protect us. They must have the traits that ordinary normal people do not have – because the times are not ordinary and normal either – therefore, our strong protectors do not act in accordance with our peacetime customs and norms. Quite the contrary, their wantonness is pronounced, emphasized as a sign that we have found the right people. We need to believe that they will successfully defend us from our horrific enemy, precisely because they use violence, because they do things that are unacceptable for us mere mortals, respecters of law and moral considerations. Heroes – when such time comes – emerge from the world outside the law and without moral restraints. We are called on to admire them and be scared of them at the same time, to live hoping that they will protect us and in fear of their extreme violence. That is why, in the wars of the 1990s, criminals and bandits could serve as suitable material for the fabrication of war heroes, better than any other.

The other type of people that were turned into heroes at the time – or that turned themselves into heroes – namely soldiers, people of various civil professions, intellectuals and priests, in order to seem believable in the roles of heroes, had to undergo some kind of narrative building, they had to be presented as cruel enough and capable of doing anything. And it is possible that the crimes some of them committed can be explained by the desire to fulfil the basic prerequisite – showing readiness to have blood on one's hands – which must be met by anyone who wants to be a hero of the stories about war heroism.

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POTA SLAVE. KAKO SI OBROBNI LJUDJE PRIDOBIIJO POZORNOST JAVNOSTI

Politične krize in vojne ponujajo priložnost, da ljudje z družbenega dna pridejo na površje in pritegnejo pozornost javnosti. V devetdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja smo številne takšne primere spremljali na območju nekdanje Jugoslavije, ko je to trpelo zaradi vojaških spopadov, regija pa je bila zelo nestabilna. V kriznem času je bilo več načinov, kako so nekateri posamezniki zasloveli. Prvi je bil udeležba v vojni. Na ta način se je izpostavilo veliko kriminalcev in tako imenovanih »psov vojne«, ki so med bitkami in poboji zasloveli kot vojni junaki. Drug način, kako so ambiciozni posamezniki priplavali na površje, je bilo sodelovanje s političnimi elitami in njihovimi voditelji, ki so se znašli v siju medijskih žarometov. Mediji so bili posebej pozorni na častihlepne ljudi, ki so javnosti sporočali svoja nacionalistična mnenja in tako v devetdesetih letih prispevali k vojni propagandi. Odmevno je bilo tudi javno delovanje kulturnikov za »našo stvar«, ki je omogočilo uveljavitev številnih marginalnih umetnikov in intelektualcev. Med vojno pa se je pokazalo še, da je svet športa, posebej pa športnega navijaštva, v kriznih pogojih učinkovit prostor za promocijo ljudi z družbenega dna. Prav ta svet se je v primerjavi z devetdesetimi leti prejšnjega stoletja do danes najmanj spremenil..

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