

# Serbian Dreambook: National Imaginary in the Time of Milošević

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In this part of the world, in almost every elderly woman's bedroom, there is a book. It is a *Sanovnik*, a dream book that serves to interpret the dreams of the night before. It contains an alphabetical index of objects, animals, feelings, and colors. It is a book that is often consulted even before the first morning coffee. While consulting it, one deliberates about the possible outcomes of the day ahead and understands the past events in a new light.

By compiling the leitmotifs of the Serbian popular ethnopolitical imaginary of the Milošević era with all the characteristics of a national dream work—as dreams about and for the nation—Marko Živković has embraced the role of dream interpreter who helps us, anthropologists, to understand what happened behind the scenes of the Greater Serbian war machinery.

The role of the ethnopolitical myths—or the repertoire of the “national imaginarium” during the armed clashes of the former Yugoslavia—has already been exploited in the works

of Ivo Žanić (2007), Ivan Čolović (1993, 2000), and others. Such authors have blissfully demonstrated how historical events and mythical and pseudohistorical personages taken as symbols were used as propaganda material in political narratives about the “nation and its destiny” and served as mobilization strategies in the bloody decomposition of the federation.

At first glimpse, Živković adds just another pebble to this construction of how nationalist discourses are born, raised, and sustained during a warmongering regime. His goal to create a repertoire seems to be modest for a reader who has experience in the subject—the book seems to be *nihil novi*. But the narrative voice of the author skillfully retains readers' attention and guides them through a complex cosmology with ease. The reader can understand more about a topic that still appears to be a definitional puzzle in anthropology after more than two decades since the armed clashes of the former Yugoslavia highlighted the role of narrational patterns in the creation of conflictual identities. What exactly are those ethnopolitical myths and narratives, how they are propagated, and how do they endure for so long?

The author's effort to explore the answers to these questions is summarized by cataloging the types of narratives and representations. Made as a clumsy bricolage of historic (in)accuracies, stereotypes, ethnomylths, conspiracy theories, and social (gender?) frustrations, Živković finds these "bugs" as a passionate entomologist of nationalist venoms in the most unusual places as shining examples of the most flamboyant specimens of Serbian nationalism: in taking a ride in a Belgrade taxi, at a market, or traveling by train from Budapest to Belgrade with a perfect stranger who doesn't know how to shut up. Fragments and pieces reappear incessantly in the small talk between strangers, among friends and relatives, and in contemporary literature, public speech, and publicities—even via astrological forecasts on a TV channel. (I do not intend to repeat these "bugs" here—such as the mythical "cradle of the Serbian nation" [Kosovo] and "the Serbs as the most ancient people." It was sickening enough to grow up with them.)

What Živković promises, he delivers, and successfully too: he has prepared a collection of ethnonational myths that led Serbia to the edge of fascism. As some sharp-eyed Gwynplaine whose insight is distant enough yet familiar too, Živković embraces irony to cope with and analyze the topic. His position as native ethnographer—his dual identities of Belgrade citizen and U.S. scholar—give him a privileged insight. He stands with his smile of irony, collecting recurring dreams (hallucinating?), returning nightmares and obsessions, and provides us with a very accurate image of those years.

Taking Belgrade as the hotbed, the epicenter of an arena that mirrors well the events that occurred during those years

all across Serbia, Živković gives us a detailed landscape of urban myths, movies, Serbian literature, rock music lyrics, national sciences, and pseudoscience of those times, which perpetuated those dreams. He takes us on a ride with his style as a fantastic vessel. But to this "feast" one must come prepared: one should be familiar with more than a few titles in his bibliography, which summarizes all that is relevant on the topic of Serbia in the 1990s.

Reading between the lines, however, one gets the feeling that the author paid the price for his privileged insight into such a national dreamtime: the ever-present smile of irony is as carved as Gwynplaine's. One cannot remain unafflicted by the Serbian dreamtime while knowing the suffering it caused and still does.

*Serbian Dreambook* is a must-read for all—graduate students and scholars in social sciences, even political scientists and journalists—interested in European identities, particularly southeastern European identities: how they are created, perpetuated, and sustained. It also contributes to the further understanding of present-day political realities in Serbia.

#### REFERENCES CITED

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