Religion and the politics of identity in Kosovo

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CHAPTER 7
The Kosovo Epic: Religion and Nationalism in Serbia.

In the previous chapter I pointed to Naim Frashëri’s fruitless attempts to inject a religious element into Albanian nationalism. Through the use of the (Shi’ite) Kerbela myth, Frashëri attempted to give a religious underpinning to the liberation struggle from Ottoman (Sunnite) domination. However, his endeavours had no lasting influence on mainstream nationalist thinking. Most intellectuals active in the Albanian national movement were determined to eliminate religion as a factor in the politics of national identity, because it divided instead of united the Albanians. Since then, Albanian nationalism has evolved into one of the most secular nationalisms of South-Eastern Europe.

Serbian nationalism has followed a different path: since the early nineteenth century, (Orthodox) religion and (Serb) national identity have fused, moving the Kosovo myth, a profoundly religious myth, to the centre of Serbian nationalist discourse. During the nineteenth century, when Serbian identity was formulated, Orthodoxy became central to Serbianness, even though in the past the religious allegiances of the Serbs had occasionally shifted, some Serbs adopting Catholicism (for instance in Dalmatia), others Islam (Bosnia). The central importance of Orthodoxy was the outcome of the Orthodox church’s crucial role in preserving a kind of rudimentary Serbian identity during Ottoman times (Petrovich 1976:10-14; Petrovich 1980:386-391).¹ When, therefore, in the nineteenth century modern concepts of nationhood developed, religion (or rather the religious imagery of Serbian Orthodoxy) became crucial in defining Serbian national identity instead of language, a trait Serbs shared with other South-Slavs (Croats and Muslims).² This merger between national and religious identity was reinforced by the creation of

¹ The reinstatement of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate of Peć (1557-1766) was particularly important for the preservation of Serbian or Slav identity within an Orthodox millet increasingly dominated by Greeks.

² Although throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century it was possible to be a Serb without being Orthodox (but for instance Catholic, Muslim, or Jew), there were always strong social, political, and church pressures to closely
several autonomous and autocephalous ('national') Orthodox churches in the newly established Balkan national states.³

During the nineteenth century, ever since the First Serbian Uprising against Ottoman rule (1804-1813), the infant Serbian state and the Serbian church developed a relation of close cooperation and symbiosis. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, many Serb Orthodox priests were actively and militantly involved in the Serbian insurrections against the Turks (Petrovich 1980:399). A rump Serbia acquired autonomy within the Ottoman empire in 1830, and in 1831 the Serbs acquired the right to choose their bishops. The now autonomous Serbian Orthodox Church became autocephalous in 1879, one year after Serbia’s independence (Amakis 1963:135-6). Then, under the Serbian constitution of 1903, Orthodoxy was proclaimed the official state religion and all state and national holidays were celebrated with church ritual (Ramet 1988:233). This intimate link between state and church has induced the Serbian Orthodox Church to adopt a direct political role, especially in times of crisis.

The fact that Serbian nationalism is grounded in religious mythology and symbolism has led some observers to explain the recent Serbian assault on the Bosnian Muslims and other non-Orthodox populations in the former Yugoslavia in religious terms. As Michael Sells states in his book on religion and genocide in Bosnia (1996), religion has been used as a justification for genocide and ethnic cleansing:

"Those organising the persecutions (...) identified themselves and their cause through explicit religious symbols. The symbols appeared in the three-fingered hand gestures representing the Christian trinity, in the images of sacred figures of Serbian religious mythology on their uniform insignia, in the songs they memorised and forced their victims to sing, on the priest’s ring they kissed before and after their acts of persecution, and in the formal religious ceremonies that marked the purification of a town of its Muslim population" (Sells 1996:15).

³ This process of compartmentalisation along ethnic lines met strong opposition from the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople, who was the head of the Orthodox millet. The creation of autocephalous churches among the Orthodox nations of the Balkans was labelled as *filetism* or *ethno-filetism* (a term derived from the Greek file or tribe) (Radić 1996:269).
The thrust of his argument is that Bosnian Muslims, or Turci ('Turks') as they are called by Bosnian Serbs, have been singled out for genocide by Serbian nationalists because of their role as 'Christ killers' (i.e. killers of the Serbian prince and martyr Lazar during the Kosovo battle). Although in my view Sell's analysis is flawed because historical events are explained exclusively in culturalist terms, I think it is important to look at this level of religious and nationalist discourse. I want to repeat here that the 'cultural stuff' with which nations mark themselves off and define their identities is not irrelevant to an understanding of ethnic processes (Jenkins 1997:107). We should be prepared to acknowledge that ideologies, religious doctrines and myths indeed shape people's cognition and perception and that they to some extent indeed motivate or mould action, although any analysis of specific events always needs to take the economic, political and historical dimensions into account as well. Through the manipulation of myths and symbols, political programs may be transmitted from the intellectual sphere to that of mass politics, inducing people to think, feel, and act collectively according to the political premises (Denich 1994:369). Myths and symbols can even help in breeding collective violence, through the creation of an ideological context in which violent acts are made thinkable.

The theme of suffering

Not unlike Shi'ism, Serbian Orthodoxy is imbued with a strong sense of victimisation and suffering, which is traced back to the Kosovo battle which the Serbs lost against the Ottoman Turks (1389). The Serbian Orthodox Church sees itself as a suffering church (Ramet 1988:232), an idea which was brought to its apogee in the first half of the twentieth century by the Serbian bishop and theologian Nikolaj Velimirović (Bremer 1992:112-160). Velimirović (together with the other major Serbian theologian of this century Justin Popović) adapted this mindset of Serbian suffering to the modern conditions of the nation state, transforming the suffering of the church

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4 I am particularly inspired by the work of Stanley Tambiah (1986), who provides a combination of social, economic, political and cultural explanations for the violence in Sri Lanka, and Bruce Kapferer (1988), who demonstrates how myths are invoked to create environments in which ethnic violence, including murder, becomes acceptable.
into the suffering of the Serbs as a nation. World War Two reinforced the notion of Serb suffering, with the destruction of hundreds of monasteries and churches, the liquidation of hundreds of Serbian Orthodox priests (including six of the church’s top hierarchs), and an enormous number of civilian casualties. As the losses were huge both in human, material and in psychological terms, the war had a traumatic effect on the Serbian Orthodox Church as well (Ramet 1988:236-8). After the war, the church’s agony did not stop: during communism, it was severely punished by the Communists for its nationalist and reactionary stands in the pre-war period. It was marginalised in social and political life, its possessions were confiscated and Serbian Orthodox clerics were severely harassed (Ramet 1988:238-241).

In the early 1980s, in the wake of growing ethnic unrest and nationalism in the former Yugoslavia, the Serbian Orthodox Church made a come-back on the political scene. It started to revive the notion of a suffering Serbian nation in the first place focusing on the Kosovo Serbs. The growing conflict between Serbs and Albanians was presented as a clash between two opposing civilisations, a renewed battle between Christianity and Islam, in which Serbs were being threatened with extinction and ‘genocide’. It was alleged that Albanian ‘fundamentalists’ were embarking upon a Jihad attempting to ethnically cleanse Kosovo of its Serbian inhabitants. By making use of the Kosovo issue, the Serbian Orthodox Church saw chance to regain much of its political influence after forty years of forced submission to communist rule. It reclaimed its national role, exploiting its centralised pan-Serb church structure in a federalised Yugoslav state where the Serbian nation had been divided among several republics and autonomous provinces. It said that during communism it had been the only institution that had not betrayed the Serbian nation, unlike most Serbian communists who had ‘sold out’ Kosovo to the Albanians. It was

5 In 1985 the Kosovo mindset was epitomised by the case of a Djordje Martinović, a Serb peasant from Kosovo who claimed to have been raped and abused by two Albanians with a broken beer bottle. He immediately acquired the status of a martyr, an “archetype of Serb suffering and Albanian (Muslim, Ottoman...) evil.” (Thompson 1992:129).

6 Church dissent with communist policy in Kosovo was for instance openly expressed in April 1982, when 21 priests signed an appeal to the authorities “for the protection of the spiritual and biological existence of the Serbian nation in Kosovo and Metohija”. The letter is reprinted in Stojković (1987:838-840). An English translation can be found in South Slav journal, 5(3), 1982, pp.49-54.
particularly the theologian (and later bishop) Atanasije Jevtić, a tough nationalist and prolific writer, who contributed most to the reactivation of this discourse of the ‘suffering Serbian nation’ (Jevtić 1987, 1990). He developed an entire Serbian theology out of Serb suffering in the centuries-old struggle for Kosovo (van Dartel 1997:145). Another major advocate of this idea is the controversial Montenegrin bishop Amfilohije Radović.

The cultivation of this theme of Serbian suffering, however, did not remain confined to the church. In the second half of the 1980s, it became a leitmotif in politics and academic life as well as in the mass media. The Kosovo problem, which had initially been presented as a human rights issue, was now being redefined as a Serbian national issue, a new Kosovo battle fought between the old enemies, the Orthodox Serbs and the ‘Turks’ (i.e. Muslim Albanians). Eventually, this discourse was adopted by leading communist politicians as well. Slobodan Milošević sky-rocketed to power when he stood up to protect the Kosovo Serbs against further suffering, speaking his famous sentence “nobody should dare to beat you …” during a visit to Kosovo in April 1987 (Magaš 1993; Dragović 1997).

In politics, the notion of Serb suffering (in a more secular version) was for the first time expressed in the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (1986), which presented the predicament of the Serbs in Kosovo in almost apocalyptic terms: “The physical, political, legal, and cultural genocide of the Serbian population in Kosovo and Metohija is a worse defeat than any experienced in the liberation wars waged by Serbia from the First Serbian Uprising in 1804 to the uprising in 1941” (Mihailović & Krestić 1995:128). The document compares the ‘genocide’ in Kosovo to the extermination of Serbs during World War Two. It also claims that the Serbs were discriminated against and under existential threat in other parts of Yugoslavia, particularly in Croatia and Bosnia, drawing a picture of a humiliated nation whose cultural and spiritual integrity is trampled upon (Mihailović & Krestić 1995:134). The document claimed that the Serbs are subjected to “physical annihilation, forced assimilation, conversion to a different religion, cultural genocide, ideological indoctrination, denigration and compulsion to renounce their own traditions because of an imposed guilt complex. Intellectually and political unmanned, the Serbian nation has had to bear trials and tribulations that are too severe not to leave deep scars in their psyche…” (Mihailović & Krestić 1995:138; see also Dragnich 1989).
In 1989, at the eve of the sixhundredth anniversary of the Kosovo Battle, there was a further outburst of publications in which Serbian history was portrayed as a succession of defeats and losses. In the mass media too, Serb suffering — particularly under the Ottoman Turks and in World War Two— moved to the centre of attention (Marković 1996). In the next two years, before the outbreak of the war, counting the dead became a kind of “national hobby” (Marković 1996:647), while nationalist politicians (like leader of the Krajina Serbs Jovan Rašković) started to refer to their nation as “the slaughtered people” giving another more sinister meaning to the notion of “heavenly Serbia”. The dead bodies of Serbian World War Two victims were exhumed and reburied in ceremonies led by the church and frequented by nationalist politicians (Denich 1994; Hayden 1994; Bax 1997). Yet some nationalists underlined the fact that suffering made the Serbs what they are and that they should somehow to be grateful for that: “We are a lucky people... yes, we really are in a special way. The Turks hate us. Thank God. (...) Everything of us that has any value came into being when they oppressed and hated us most. Thanks to them we exist and we know who we are. (...) Had they not existed, we would not have had our Kosovo.....” (Danilo Radomirov, member of the Serbian nationalist party Srpska Narodna Obnova, ‘Serbian National Renewal’, quoted in Vreme, 8 May 1995, p.39).

The Kosovo myth

Central to this obsession with suffering is Kosovo, where a defeat by the Turks in 1389 led to the downfall of the Serbian medieval empire and the ‘enslavement’ of the Serbs for the next 500 years. It is this lost battle between the Christian (mainly Serbian) and Ottoman forces which has gained mythical proportions in Serbian history. Although the first reports of the battle proclaimed a Christian victory, in the next few decades the Christian armies failed to halt the Ottoman advance

7 The obsession with suffering and death is present in many literary works, for instance in the works of writers-politicians like Vuk Drašković (Nož, ‘Knife’, 1983), Dobrica Ćosić (Vreme smrti, ‘Time of Death’ 1977-78), but also in the poetry of Radovan Karadžić (see also Blagojević & Demirović 1994). For similar tendencies in academic historiography see for instance Dimitrije Bogdanović’s Knjiga o Kosovu (1986), Le Kosovo-Metohija dans l’histoire serbe (Samardžić et al 1990), and Bataković’s The Kosovo Chronicles (1992) - which can all be read as chronicles of Serb suffering in Kosovo since the Middle Ages, under Ottoman, Albanian and communist hands.
and almost all of the Balkans fell under Turkish hands. During the battle both army leaders died: Sultan Murad was killed by Miloš Obilić (so the legend goes), while the leader of the Christian forces, Lazar, was captured by the Turks and beheaded.

Almost immediately after the Kosovo battle, the writing of ecclesiastical sermons and hagiographies began, commemorating the battle and Prince Lazar’s death (Zirojević 1995:9). Lazar was proclaimed a martyr who sacrificed himself for the Christian faith; his military defeat had been the consequence of his choice for an heavenly kingdom over an earthly one. Thus his downfall was turned into a moral and spiritual victory. Later, these monastic texts about Kosovo became the substance of songs, which were composed and sung in the courts of the Serbian aristocracy (Koljević 1980). With the advance of the Ottoman Turks and the destruction of Serbian feudal society, however, this oral poetry became mainly the property of peasants. Since the (Serbian) Orthodox church enjoyed a privileged position within the Ottoman millet system, it was compelled (at least officially) to suppress the memory of Kosovo (Skendi 1954:76). It was however kept alive in epic songs performed by guslars (folksong singers) to the accompaniment of their gusle (one-stringed instruments played with a bow), who retold the tragic events of Kosovo and also sung about their own heroes and fights with the Turks.

There is clear evidence of continuous transmission and development of Kosovo songs from the earliest years after the battle (Malcolm 1998:78). These songs focus however on the principle characters of the Kosovo legend (such as Prince Lazar and Miloš Obilić), their martyrdom and the

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8 For early samples of hagiographic work on Prince ('Tsar') Lazar, see: Holton & Mihailovich 1988:22-28. The central theme of the Kosovo myth, Lazar’s choice for the heavenly kingdom (“Better a praiseworthy death than a life in scorn”) was formulated soon after the battle in the poem “Narration about Prince Lazar” (1392) (Holton & Mihailovich 1988:25).

9 By the seventeenth century, the monastery of Ravanica (Lazar’s burial place) was the only location where the cult of St Lazar was celebrated (Malcolm 1998:78).

10 The heartland of epic songs seems to be the mountainous terrain of Bosnia, the Sandžak, Montenegro and northern Albania. One of the major functions of these songs has been to make important historical events known, or to spread the news about recent events among an illiterate population. Ugresić has aptly called it ‘gusle journalism’ (Ugresić 1994).
downfall of the Serbian kingdom and feudal society, not on the destiny of the Serbs as a nation. This shift in meaning occurred only in the nineteenth century, when the Kosovo theme evolved into a national myth, providing a source of inspiration to avenge its loss, to resurrect the nation and to recover the national homeland. Prince Lazar developed into a national saint and martyr, whose živo telo (living body) became by far the most important Serbian national relic.

Instrumental in retrieving the Kosovo songs from Serbian popular tradition, and standardising them into a coherent story, was Vuk Stefanović Karadžić. Between 1814 and his death in 1864, he collected numerous epic songs, of which the songs about the Kosovo battle formed a major part. By collecting and compiling them into a whole he ‘canonised’ the Kosovo myth and thus provided Serbian national ideology with its mythical cornerstone. In taking the popular Kosovo songs as his source, he also made a great step forward in bridging the gap between the nationalist intelligentsia and the common people’s culture (Ekmečić 1991:335). Perhaps the most important episode of the Kosovo cycle (which consists of a number of songs describing the events before, during and after the battle\(^{12}\)) is Prince Lazar’s choice of a heavenly kingdom, as a

\(^{11}\) Vuk Karadžić was a pivotal figure in this formative period of the Serbian national idea: among other things he was responsible for the standardisation of the Serbian vernacular language and the development of the Serbian Cyrillic script, both key steps in the process of Serbian nation-building. In 1815 he produced a Serbian grammar, and three years later he published a Serbian dictionary. He published his first collection of Serbian poetry in 1814. His famous six volume edition Srpske narodne pjesme, published between 1844 and 1866, became the classic anthology of traditional Serbian oral poetry.

\(^{12}\) Of special importance are the episodes that predict or announce the coming battle and its tragic outcome (such as dreams or quarrels between Serbian knights), the events at the eve of the battle —especially Prince Lazar’s supper which is modelled on Christ’s Last Supper (Zirojević 1995:10)—, as well as the aftermath of the battle seen through the eyes of the women that remain behind. The main characters are Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović, Miloš Obilić, and Vuk Branković. While Lazar embodies devotion to the Christian faith (figuring even as a kind of Christ reincarnated), Miloš Obilić primarily represents the virtues of loyalty and bravery: according to the Kosovo legend he infiltrates in the Ottoman camp and kills Sultan Murad. Vuk Branković is the third main figure, the traitor or Judas figure. He enters into an agreement with the Sultan in return for the preservation of his position. He is basically blamed for the loss of Kosovo. The most important women are the Kosovo girl who tends the dying warriors with wine and water, and the mother of the Jugovići who looses all her nine sons in the battle. All these figures have become “the archetypes of Serbian virtue and villainy” (Thompson 1992:144).
result of which the Serbian army lose the battle against the Turks. It is dealt with in the poem *The Fall of the Serbian Empire*, which I will reprint here in full because of its centrality in Serbian national ideology.

From that high town, holy Jerusalem,
There comes flying a grey bird, a falcon,
And in his beak a small bird, a swallow.
Yet this grey bird is not just a falcon;
It is our saint, the holy Saint Elijah.
And the swallow is not just a swallow,
But a message from the Holy Virgin.
The falcon flies to Kosovo’s flat field.
The message falls in the lap of the Tsar;
For Tsar Lazar is the message destined:

"O Tsar Lazar, Prince of righteous lineage,
which of the two kingdoms will you embrace?
Would you rather choose a heavenly kingdom,
Or have instead an earthly kingdom here?
If, here and now, you choose the earthly kingdom,
saddle horses, tighten the saddles’ girths,
let all the knights put on their mighty swords,
and launch you then assault against the Turks.
Then their army, all the Turks, shall perish.
But if, instead, you choose the heavenly kingdom,
Then you must build a church at Kosovo.
Do not build it upon a marble base,
But on pure silk and costly scarlet cloth,
And give your host orders to Holy Mass.
For every man, all soldiers, will perish,
And you, their prince, will perish with your host."

When Tsar Lazar has heard the whole message,
Lazar is vexed; he ponders, he thinks much:
"O my dear Lord, what shall I ever do?
And of the two, which kingdom should I choose?
Shall I now choose the promised heavenly kingdom,
Or shall I choose an earthly kingdom here?
If I do choose, I embrace the latter,
If I do choose the earthly kingdom here,
Then what I choose is but a transient kingdom;
The eternal one is that promised in heaven."

Poletio soko tica siva
od svetinje od Jerusalima,
iz on nose tica lastavicu.
To ne bio soko tica siva,
vece bio svetitelj Ilija;
iz on nose tice lastavice,
vece knjiga od Bogorodice;
iz odnese je car na Kosovu,
spista knjigu caru na koleno,
sama knjiga caru besedila:

"Care Lazo, cesemo koleno,
kome ces se privoleti carsvu?
Ili volis carsvu nebeskome,
ilis carsvu zemaljskome?
Ako volis carsvu zemaljskome,
sedlaj konje, pritez kolane!
Vitezovi sablje pripasujte,
pa u Turke juriš užinite:
sva će turska izginuti vojska!
Ako ć volis carsvu nebeskome,
a ti sakroz na Kosovu crkvu,
ne vodi joj temelj od mermera,
već od čiste svile i skerleta,
pa pričestni i nared vojsku;
sva će tvoja izginuti vojska,
ti ćeš, kneže, s njome poginuti."

A kad car sasluša reči,
misli car, misli svakojake:
"Mili Bože, što ću i kako ću?
Kome ću se privoleti carsvu:
da ili ću carsvu nebeskome,
da ili ću carsvu zemaljskome?
Ako ću se privoleti carsvu,
privoleti carsvu zemaljskome, 
zemaljsko je za malena carsvo, 
av nebesko uvek i doveka."
Lazar chooses the promised heavenly kingdom; he refuses the earthly kingdom here. So he has built the church of Kosovo. He does not build upon a marble base, But on pure silk and costly scarlet cloth. He calls to him the Serbian patriarch; Beside him stand twelve great Serbian bishops. The whole army comes to take communion. (Holton & Mihailovich 1988: 95-96)

Car volede carstvu nebeskome, a negoli cartsvu zemaljskome, pa sakroji na Kosovu crkvu: ne vodi joj temelj od mermera, već od čiste svile i skerleta, pa doziva srpskog patrijara i dvanaest veliki vladika, te pričести i naredi vojsku. (Arsenijević 1989:257)

The stanza *Prince Lazar’s oath* (first published in 1815, and part of the poem *Music Stefan* in the Kosovo cycle), in which Lazar curses those Serbs who refuse to join him on the Kosovo battlefield, became a battle cry of the national movement:

Whoever is a Serb of Serbian blood,  
Whoever shares with me this heritage,  
And he comes not to fight at Kosovo,  
May he never have the progeny  
His heart desires, neither son nor daughter;  
Beneath his hand let nothing decent grow  
Neither purple grapes nor wholesome wheat;  
Let him rust away like dripping iron  
Until his name shall be extinguished!  
(Sells 1996:39)

Ko je Srbin i srpskoga roda  
i od srpske krvi i kolena,  
a ne doš'o na boj na Kosovo:  
ne imao od srca poroda,  
ni muškoga ni devojačkoga!  
od ruke mu ništa ne rodilo,  
rjuno vino ni šenica bela!  
Rdom kap'o dok mu je kolena!"  
(Stojković 1987:204)

These two poems became central to the *Vidovdan* cult, the first in presenting the Serbs as a chosen nation which has signed a Covenant with God, the second in appealing to all Serbs not to forsake their duty of defending their nation in times of crisis.

**Kosovo in the active mood**

Vuk Karadžić collected the Kosovo songs and other heroic songs at a time when the first Serbian uprising against Ottoman domination was in full swing (1804-1813). The ideological underpinnings of Serbia’s liberation struggle, i.e. the revenge for the loss of Kosovo and the resurrection of the medieval Serbian empire, were already emerging at that time (Judah 1997:51). Already in the first half of the nineteenth century Serbian literary writers, especially those living in areas under Habsburg control, took the Kosovo battle as the subject of their work,
for instance Zaharija Orfelin (Holton & Mihailovich 1988:62-64) and Jovan Sterija Popović (Holton & Mihailovich 1988:72). In 1828, Popović wrote *Boj na Kosovu* (The Battle of Kosovo) and a drama based on the same theme, *Miloš Obilić*, which were performed for many decades in small towns all over Serbia (Ekmečić 1991:334). Serbian romantic poets wrote poems that vilified the Turks and praised the joys of Serbian peasant life, whereas forms borrowed from oral traditions and epic songs came to be almost mandatory in style.

In politics, the Kosovo myth was harnessed to a program of territorial expansion and the recovery of the great mediaeval Serbian kingdom. The figure who combined both elements (the poetic and the political) was Petar Petrović Njegoš, who ruled over Montenegro in the middle of the nineteenth century. The work that is most relevant to our theme is his epic drama *Gorski Vijenac* (The Mountain Wreath) which is considered a masterpiece in Serbian and Montenegrin literature. This work is interesting not only because of its unusual combination of genres, but also because of the wider political context in which it was written, at a time when Montenegro and Serbia were involved in a struggle for independence against the Ottoman empire. The play is dedicated to leader of the first Serbian uprising, Karadjordje, who “roused people, christened the land, and broke the barbarous fetters, summoned the Serbs back from the dead, and breathed life into their souls (Njegoš 1989:2)”. Its overriding theme is the struggle against the Turks, and as such *Gorski Vijenac* can be read as Njegoš’s answer to the tragedy of Kosovo (Ekmečić 1991:335). Holton and Mihailovich have named it “Serbia’s epic”, and “the emblem of her identity” (1988:147). Borrowing Fischer’s terminology with regard to the Kerbela myth, I would like to call Njegoš’s Mountain Wreath the first major example of ‘Kosovo in the active mood’, i.e. to use the myth to trigger off revolutionary (political) action and to avenge Kosovo.\(^\text{13}\)

The Mountain Wreath, which is an epic play written in verse, is based on an (pseudo-)historical event, known as the extermination of the Turkish converts, which is said to have taken place at the beginning of the eighteenth century on Christmas Eve. The basic theme of the work is

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\(^{13}\) Some have presented this work as a blueprint for genocide (Sells 1996:51; see also Judah 1997:241; Mojzes 1995:38). Although the poem can certainly act as a source of inspiration for those who want to start a ‘holy war’ against Islam and want to expel Muslims from the Balkans, I would like to advocate some degree of caution in drawing a straight line of causation from a literary text to the occurrence of genocidal practices.
the fight against those Montenegrins who turned Muslim and whose allegiance is therefore with the occupier. The main plot of the play—the extermination of Muslims who refuse to convert back to Christianity—expresses Njegoš’s main ambition: to free Montenegro from Turkish domination and Islam. Kosovo takes a central position in the Mountain Wreath: Njegoš refers several times to the Kosovo tragedy, cursing the figure of Vuk Branković, and depicting Miloš Obilić as the only true Serb, “a mighty military genius, a terrific thunder that shatters crowns”. Although the contempt for the Muslims, these “Turkish turncoats”, “loathsome degenerates”, “filthy breed of dogs” (to mention only a few labels applied in the poem) is tremendous, they are offered the choice of reconversion to Christianity. As Vojvoda Batrić (one of the main heroes) says:

“Turkish brothers—may I be forgiven!—
we have no cause to beat around the bush.
Our land is small and it’s pressed on all sides.
Not one of us can live here peacefully,
What with powers that are jiving for it;
for both of us there is simply no room!
Accept the faith of your own forefathers!
Guard the honor of our fatherland!
The wolf needs not the cunning of the fox!
Nor has the hawk the need for eyeglasses.
Start tearing down your minarets and mosques
Lay the Serbian Christmas-log on the fire,
Paint the Easter eggs various colors,
Observe with care the Lent and Christmas fasts.
As for the rest, do what your heart desires!
If you don’t want to listen to Batrić,
I do swear by the faith of Obilić,
And by these arms in which I put my trust,
That both our faiths will be swimming in blood.
Better will be the one that does not sink.
Bairam cannot be observed with Christmas!
Is that not so, Montenegrin brothers?”
(Njegoš 1989:31)

The Montenegrin ‘brothers’ who became Muslims, however, refuse to reconvert. Since they do not want to be baptised with water, they have to be baptised with blood, as the expression in the Mountain Wreath goes, and the long awaited battle with these Montenegrin ‘Turks’ ensues. After the victorious battle, which has brought revenge for the loss of Kosovo, Abbot Stefan (an Orthodox priest) calls upon all Montenegrins to commemorate the heroes of the Kosovo battle, saying: “This
day will be the most priceless to them; since Kosovo there’s never been such day” (Njegoš 1989:96). Kosovo and the martyrs of Kosovo have been avenged, their souls can rest, and the honour of the Montenegrins has been restored. At the end of the epic messengers bring the good news of other Montenegrins following the example of the uprising, killing and slaughtering Turks and levelling mosques and Turkish buildings to the ground.

The notion of avenging the Kosovo tragedy and ‘liberating’ Kosovo once and for all became a main preoccupation of Serb politicians, especially in the middle of the nineteenth century. The Kosovo cycle evolved into an ideological instrument of a nation under construction and an expanding Serbian state, justifying the reconquest of ‘Serb’ lands from the ‘Turks’. It was especially Ilija Garašanin, prime minister and minister of foreign affairs in Serbia’s government in the 1860s, who made Kosovo an integral part of Serbian national thought (Judah 1997:58-59). In his Načertanije (‘Draft’, 1844) he justified the recovery of Serb lands from the Ottoman empire as a restoration of the medieval Serbian empire; this document aimed primarily at the annexation of Bosnia and Kosovo, union with Montenegro, and an outlet to the Adriatic sea (Jelavich 1983-1:331). Since then, the liberation of territories under Ottoman control became a kind of sacred duty, an obligation to avenge and reverse the injustices of Kosovo.

Although the Kosovo myth came under attack in the late 1860s, in particular by Serbia’s main socialist thinker Svetozar Marković (1846-1875), it nevertheless became a crucial element in justifying Serbian aims for territorial expansion. This period marks the beginning of the Vidovdan (St. Vitus Day) cult which was fostered by the state (Ekmečić 1991:336). It provided ideological ammunition for the numerous wars Serbia fought after 1876, and it was constantly revitalised by writers, poets, politicians and ecclesiastics. In the second half of the nineteenth century it showed its mobilising power during the Bosnian peasant insurrection (1875): Ekmečić states that “[a]n invitation sent to villages to join the rural uprising was almost a carbon copy of Prince Lazar’s oath in verse” (Ekmečić 1991:337). Then on St. Vitus Day (28 June) 1876, Serbia declared war on Turkey which would finally lead to Serbia’s independence. During these years the reconquista of

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14 It is the patriarchal Montenegrin moral concept of vengeance — “Vengeance is holy” (Osveta je sveta), and “Only the avenger can be consecrated” (Ko se ne osveti, taj se ne posveti)— which is at work here (Brkić 1961:147).
Kosovo became a Serbian obsession, and when the Serb armies conquered and temporarily occupied parts of Kosovo in January 1878 euphoria was great.\footnote{One of the places which the Serbs took was the monastery of Gračanica.}

At the end of the nineteenth century, the day was integrated into the calendar of the Serbian Orthodox Church as the commemorative day of the battle of Kosovo (Malcolm 1998:78). Special efforts were then made by the Serbian government to turn the 500th anniversary of the battle into a huge national commemoration, the first of this kind in Serbia. Indeed in 1889, Vidovdan was massively celebrated, with the main commemoration ceremonies in Kruševac (Lazar’s former capital) and Ravanica (the monastery where Lazar’s remains were kept). As Ekmečić writes: “It was a day of national mourning with black flags on roofs, the national standard at half-mast, and invitations for the evening commemorations printed with black margins” (1991:338). In 1890, one year after the 500th anniversary of the Kosovo battle, Vidovdan became a state holiday (Zirojević 1995:16). At the beginning of the twentieth century, with the advent of mass nationalism, it became a festival on an even grander scale with commemorations under the open sky and gatherings at churches (Ekmečić 1991:334).

During the First Balkan War (1912) Kosovo was finally avenged: the Serbs ‘liberated’ Kosovo, making an end to the long period of humiliation under Turkish and Albanian hands. When the Serbian army marched into Kosovo, illiterate soldiers knelt and kissed the soil (Thompson 1992:145). Two years later, in 1914 on Vidovdan, the First World War was triggered off with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by Gavrilo Princip. Again the Kosovo heroes served as a model for this new generation of freedom fighters. Princip, and most of the members of the Young Bosnia group who carried out the assassination, had been inspired by the heroic deeds of Miloš Obilić, literally reenacting the Kosovo myth (Judah 1997:64,97; Ekmečić 1991:340).

There are other historical events in which the Kosovo myth played a role. In March 1941, the ‘spirit of Kosovo’ ideologically shaped the military coup against the Serbian government which had succumbed to Hitler’s threats and signed up to the Axis Tripartite Pact. Patriarch Gavrilko, who had been staunchly against the signing, clearly saw the coup in terms of the Kosovo ethic. On the radio he said: “Before our nation in these days the question of our fate again presents itself. This morning at dawn the question received its answer. We chose the heavenly kingdom – the kingdom
of truth, justice, national strength, and freedom. That eternal idea is carried in the hearts of all Serbs, preserved in the shrines of our churches, and written on our banners” (Judah 1997:113; Stojković 1987:782). Even under communism Vidovdan kept its emotional appeal. According to Djilas, the reception of the Cominform Resolution against Yugoslavia on 28 June 1948, “cut into the minds and hearts of all us Serbs. Though neither religious nor mystical, we noted, with a certain relish almost, this coincidence in dates between ancient calamities and living threats and onslaughts” (Djilas 1985:201).

**Folk poetics and populist politics**

Like the Kerbela myth in Shi’ite Islam, the Kosovo myth is about a lost battle between the righteous forces of good against the victorious forces of evil. In both cases the main heroes of the story refuse to surrender and they know this will inevitably lead to their defeat and death. In both examples, the main hero’s sacrifice is the founding event of the legend, providing a powerful and emotional theme of martyrdom and resistance. And in both cases the myth ordains people to accept suffering and patient endurance as a necessary step towards redemption, but it also induces them to rise up in revolt against tyranny even in the face of overwhelming odds.

If we confine ourselves to the content and ‘messages’ of the Kosovo myth, it teaches the Serbs lessons about themselves, their identity, and the moral principles they have to live up to. Let me give just a few major messages that the myth provides: 1. God required Lazar to make a choice for either the earthly or the heavenly kingdom. Lazar’s choice for the heavenly kingdom created a special bond between God and the Serbian people; 2. The Serbs are no ordinary nation but a ‘chosen’ people, whose destiny flows from this Covenant with God. He is on our side and our cause is a divine and righteous one; 3. Because we are a chosen people, we should never compromise our dignity and principles for the sake of earthly benefits; 4. We should defy our

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16 Some Serbian nationalists have gone as far as declaring God to be a Serb, e.g. a recent song of turbo-folk star Baja-Mali Knindža where he sings: “Bog je Srbin, ne boji se Srbine” (God is a Serb, so do not be afraid, Serb) (song ‘Neće biti granica na Drini’ - ‘There will be no border on the Drina river’, tape Pobedite istina - ‘The truth will win’, 1994).
enemies and never give in to foreign domination, even if defeat is inevitable; 5. This requires personal sacrifices: one needs to be prepared to die for these principles; 6. The inevitable consequence is loss and suffering, but that is central to Serbian identity - only through suffering do we achieve moral perfection. 6. This is the fate of a small nation like the Serbs which is surrounded by powerful enemies and empires, but it also comprises its greatness; 7. In the end, there is the final prospect of justice and liberation: God will reward the Serbs, the kingdom that was lost will once be resurrected and the account with the Muslim enemy will be settled.

The Kosovo epic offers Serbs a mental framework; it clearly fits Durkheim’s notion of collective representations, which are sanctioned and enacted in rites, which figure prominently in public debate and are used for demarcating the boundaries of the group (Durkheim 1925:13-14). As in other national myths, the Kosovo myth establishes continuity with the past and it projects a certain future which is predestined. Apart from that, as a narrative it formulates certain values and oppositions which are fundamental to the community and are personified in the main characters of the story. The Kosovo myth is therefore a kind of ‘enacted ideology or philosophy’, and because of this it is of ‘transcendental’ importance (Allcock 1993:162).

Another important aspect of myth is its a-historical character. As Evans-Pritchard has put it: “[Myth] is not so much concerned with the succession of events as with the moral significance of situations, and is hence allegorical or symbolic in form. It is not encapsulated, as history is, but is a re-enactment fusing present and past. It tends to be timeless, placed in thought beyond, or above historical time; and where it is firmly placed in historical time, it is also, nevertheless, timeless in that it could have happened at any time, the archetypal not being bound to time or space” (1961:8). The past, the present and the future are fused, and “there is a sense that centuries are no more than a few years; the distant past is like yesterday” (Mojzes 1995:50). The pan-chronistic character of myth makes myths play havoc with historical truth. Not only do events of different periods merge, but also do many folk epic characters from different periods mingle. As I will demonstrate later with a few examples, there are constant and direct equations made between the main protagonists of the Kosovo legend and present-day political and military players.

What has made the Kosovo myth so extremely powerful is its rootedness in popular culture, which has made it possible to translate moral concepts, ‘higher’ values, and political principles into the language of ordinary people. Serb nationalist politicians have ‘plugged in’ into
this electrifying world of popular culture, in order to mobilise the masses, to legitimate political actions, or to explain the puzzling political landscape in simple and understandable terms (i.e. in terms of ‘we’ against ‘them’). They are usually assisted by gusle singers or their modern counterparts of (turbo-)folk singers, who put both historical and current events into a meaningful mythical context. This already happened in Vuk Karadžić’s times, when epic folk singers not only sang heroic songs about Kosovo but also about contemporary battles against the Turks.17 Dubravka Ugrešić has aptly called these songs “the glue of the nation”, and a “collective remembrance reduced to sound”; because of their mass appeal, “they are the most potent means of sending political (war) messages” (1994:12-16).

One of the main functions of a myth is to create order out of chaos, especially in times of crisis and war. During the First World War epic ballads could be heard from the lips of Serbian soldiers, as a British contemporary noted:

“Thus the Serbian soldier of to-day has a rich store of national history in his songs and knows far more of the tradition, the triumphs, and the struggles of his own people than does his English brother-in-arms. (...) To the Serbs the old heroes are familiar characters, some of whom, like St. Sava and Kraljevitch Marko, will appear in moments of national crisis to lead their people to victory. In the hour of disaster and trial, too, these chants are the solace of the long-martyred race. A French doctor, who went through the terrible retreat in 1915, describes how the last act of some Serbian soldiers, before retiring from Kralyevo towards exile and probable death, was to gather round a blind gousla-player and to listen once more to the national epic. Nor are all the pesme by any means ancient. The Serbs have sung the story of this war, of their retreat, of Corfu, and of the present campaign. Unsophisticated, primitive folk find it natural to express themselves in poetry. Lieut. Krstitch tells me that during the campaign many of his soldiers write home to their wives or parents in song and describe the details of their lives in verse” (Laffan 1989:23-24).

Within this epic context, every Serb can feel himself a living link in a great drama that is being played out across the centuries (Laffan 1989:24-25). The strength of this epic literature is its strong moral overtones and its powerful story lines, which have had a great impact particularly among the (illiterate) peasant masses.

17 As Malcolm has noted: “It has long been the practice of Serb folk-poets to turn events almost immediately into poetry (...). One memorable example of this was the poet-peasant Ante Nešić, who was a member of the Serbian National Assembly in 1873-4. He would emerge each day from the Assembly and convert the entire debate into blank verse for an admiring audience...” (Malcolm 1998:69).
The ethno-linguist Ivan Čolović has extensively written about recent Serbian war propaganda, not in its direct political forms, but rather in its folklorised and ‘popular’ forms (slogans, proverbs, songs). He has shown how contemporary Serbian nationalism is markedly populist in character, borrowing from folk culture and using epic formulas to mobilise and homogenise the masses (Čolović 1993). The Kosovo myth is also expressed through ‘para-literary’ forms (in slogans, songs, etc.) which explicitly or implicitly refer back to the original myth. Nationalist politicians, church leaders and other self-appointed defenders of the Serbian nation embellish their militant speeches with quotations from national songs and proverbs and references to those past national heroes and enemies who provide models of patriotic and treasonous behaviour. Čolović has also pointed at the ‘sacral’ or ‘religious’ character of the political mass meetings at the end of the 1980s, where nationalist myth was expressed and acted out. The social-psychological function of these meetings was to produce a feeling of solidarity among participants, to be absorbed by the collective and speak in one voice (1995:27). This folklorism in politics is effective because its very form suggests that these messages are in harmony with the deepest feelings of the people, representing the *vox populi* instead of *his master’s voice* (1994:8-9). It creates the illusion that the specific interests of warlords and political leaders are identical with the interests of the nation, and that war is part of an eternal mythical conflict between good and evil, an extra-temporal conflict that stands outside the sphere of politics, economics and history. Through the ages, the heroes and enemies have been the same: behind their current incarnations hide the ancient figures of Car Lazar, Miloš Obilić, and Vuk Branković (1994:9).

The recent political use of the myth

In the last 15 years, Serbian nationalist propaganda has interpreted events according to the narratives provided by folk epics. By using traditional epic materials, Serbian nationalist politicians constructed a ‘story’ which was constantly repeated and rehearsed before the war broke out, and then, as soon as the violence started, helped to create order out of the chaotic reality of war,

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18 Another major contribution to the study of Serbian populism is Nebojša Popov’s *Srpski populizam* (1993).
imbuing it with a higher national or transcendental meaning. The realities of war were forced into a strict epic and mythic straitjacket, and actors and events were ‘edited’ according to the logic of myths. The main protagonists of the Kosovo epic were resurrected. Reality was simplified, messages were sharpened and nuances pruned away, content was polarised and contrasts were emphasised.

As I said before, it was the Serbian Orthodox Church which took the lead in revitalising the Kosovo myth after Tito’s death (1980). Church dignitaries started to criticise Serb communists for selling out Kosovo to the Albanians, and they later gained the support of Serbian intellectuals and eventually also of communist hard-liners. In the middle of the 1980s, when Kosovo had become a major item on the political agenda, communists (!) started to talk about Serbia as the defender of ‘Europe’ and ‘Christianity’ against Islam. The explosive language used by Serbian ecclesiastics, intellectuals and nationalists, and the adoption of the same rhetoric by the mass media (as soon as Milošević came to power), was starting to produce a dangerous atmosphere.

“In the late ‘80s a collective hysteria about Kosovo gripped Serbia and Montenegro. It was an official hysteria, disseminated by politicians, intelligentsia, and media. The Kosovars were accused of every imaginable crime. Mass rallies of Serbs and Montenegrins, transported with grief and yearning for Christian vengeance, demanded a day of judgement. Scholars did their bit by extolling the medieval Serbian empire that allegedly (not actually) met its end here at the battle of Kosovo in 1389, and praising the glorious Serbian monuments that still stand here. The clergy called for Orthodox churches and nuns to be saved from the Muslims.” (Thompson 1992:129).

After years of propaganda, Serbs finally ‘understood’ that they were the ‘victims’. The only thing that was left was somebody to bang on the table and say: “This can’t go on like this!” (Marković 1996:653). That is how Milošević came to power, promising the Serbs an end to their humiliation. Immediately, a personality cult developed around him, accompanied by suitable songs and jingles. As Čolović writes, he became a figure who stands outside historical time, who is blessed with supernatural power and is the last in a long series of heroes such as Obilić, Dušan, and Karadjordje (1994:25-26). New songs were composed about Milosevic as the saviour and unifier of the holy Serbian lands, who would liberate the country from Turks and Ustaše:
In this period (1988-89), relations between state and church improved considerably, noticeable in church dignitaries being present during important political meetings and ceremonies, inconceivable only a few years before. The Serbian Orthodox Church organised a big Lazar procession, which started on Vidovdan 1988 in Belgrade where Lazar had been buried in the Orthodox Cathedral in 1942 (Zirojević 1995:10). His remains were carried around Serbia and Eastern Bosnia, along churches and monasteries, ending up in the monastery of Gračanica where they were welcomed at the eve of the sixhundredth anniversary of the battle. It was during this parade that the concept of a ‘Heavenly Serbia’ was reiterated by bishop Jovan of Šabac-Valjevo. In his message at the arrival of Lazar’s remains in his diocese, he wrote: “From the times of prince Lazar and Kosovo, Serbs have first of all built Heavenly Serbia, which nowadays has surely grown into the largest heavenly state. If only we take together all the innocent victims of the last war, millions and millions of Serbian men and women, children and the weak, those killed and tortured in most appalling pains or thrown into caves by Ustaše criminals, then we can comprehend how large the Serbian empire in heaven is” (Radić 1996:278).

Nationalist hysteria was at its height during the early summer of 1989, with an avalanche of books, films, and plays commemorating the battle. At the end of June, hundreds of thousands of Serbs (Serbian estimates even run up to two million) gathered on the Kosovo battlefield and in Gračanica. It was the first time since communism that Vidovdan was celebrated as a Serbian public holiday. ‘Slobo’ was revered by the masses as a hero and a saint, and in tune with his new role of a modern-day saviour he was flown in to the ceremony with a helicopter, literally descending from Heaven. His portrait could be seen on thousands of buses, next to images of Serbia’s other heroes from the past (like Karadjordje and Lazar). For some people the adoration of ‘Slobo’ took the form

19 For other examples see Pavković (1995:29-31).
of outright veneration: they made crosses in front of his portrait before kissing it (Grémaux 1990:228). Serbia was reborn and the defeat of six centuries ago had been avenged. Milošević had a clear message for other Yugoslav nations: “Six centuries after the battle of Kosovo Polje we are again engaged in battles and quarrels. These are not armed battles, but the latter cannot be ruled out yet”.

It is in this period that (turbo-)folk singers started to produce new epic and popular songs about present-day ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’. Among the contemporary politicians besides Milošević, it was especially the leader of the Bosnian Serbs Radovan Karadžić who was made the subject of these new songs.

Radovan, you man of iron
Our first leader after Karadjordje
Defend our freedom and faith
On the cold Geneva Lake...

Radovanc, čovječe od gvožđa
Prvi vođe posle Karadorda
Odbrani nam slobodu i vjeru
Na studenom Ženevskom jezeru²⁰

In many of these songs present-day politicians and (para-)military leaders are compared and identified, implicitly or explicitly, with the primary characters of the Kosovo myth. Thus, it has become a habit to use the label ‘Vuk Branković’ for those Serbs who are believed to have betrayed the Serbian interests during the war. One who received this label, at a time when he was advocating an anti-war stand, was Vuk Drašković (Pavković 1995:87). Also the numerous young Serb men who left Serbia at the beginning of the war because they refused to fight, were labelled the ‘descendants’ of Vuk Branković.²¹ Women who lost husbands and sons during the war were

²⁰ Similar to the surrogate truths produced by this turbo-folk culture, Radovan Karadžić claims to have common blood and genetic traits with ‘the most famous’ Karadžić, Vuk Karadžić. He is proud of being a poet himself, of being born in a famous hajduk and guslar family where he absorbed the Kosovo myth as the “ideal model for practical life and behaviour”. See the documentary Serbian Epics by Paul Pawlikowski, Bookmark, BBC 2, 16 December 1992.

²¹ See the poem Pesma srpskim dezerterima by Simo Bozalo, which was first published in the Serbian Oslobodjenje, and was again published in Vreme (26 June 1995, p.38). Throughout the war the independent weekly journal Vreme published samples of new ‘heroic’ poetry and songs, written by self-appointed poets, soldiers, businessmen, politicians, and academics, under the rubric ‘pesnici’ (poets). A selection of these poems was published by Vasa Pavković (1995).
glorified by comparing them to the Mother of the Jugovići, the epic heroine whose nine sons died at Kosovo. Through this image present-day mothers are called upon to accept their sons’ deaths as a sacrifice for Serbia. As Wendy Bracewell has noted, “Even efforts to reward and encourage motherhood that are not overtly linked to the imperatives of war carry dark undertones of the sacrifice that will eventually be expected. In a ceremony in Priština on Vidovdan, 28 June 1993 (…), dignitaries of the Serbian Orthodox Church honoured Serbian mothers of more than four children with medals called after the Mother of the Jugovići, the mother who raised nine sons only to see them die in battle — presumably without intending any irony” (Bracewell 1996:29-30).

The main heroes of the Kosovo epic have been resurrected in ‘super-Serbs’ like the paramilitary leader, nationalist politician and suspected war criminal Arkan (Željko Raznjatović). In songs and poems he has been restyled the new Miloš Obilić. An example is the poem Srbin samo Arkanu veruje:

I pray to God and Obilić
Oh Serbia, give birth to a younger Bird
So he can go and help the Serbs in Bosnia
Oh, Serbia, is there somebody like him

Suddenly from the heavenly heights
God sent us Arkan, his son
With a Serbian heart and a sky-high bravery
He is in the war where we need him most
(…)
One can hear the Serbian bugle again
Serbs only believe Arkan
Oh Kosovo, since the time of the battle
You did not have such a great hero

Molim Boga, molim Obilića
Oj Srbijo rodi mlađeg Tiča
Da pomogne u Bosni Srbima
Oj, Srbijo, da li takvog ima

Iznenada s nebeskih visina
Bog nam posla Arkana svog sina
Srce srpsko a hrabrost do neba
U ratu je gde najviše treba
(…)
Srpska truba ponovo se čuje
Srbin samo Arkanu veruje
Oj Kosovo od Kosovskog boja
Takvog nisi imala heroja

22 Dubravka Ugresić has called this process gusle laundering, i.e. the transformation of murderer into hero through epic songs: “After gusle laundering, contemporary Serbian war criminals gleam with the pure glow of national heroes!” (1994). After the war Arkan founded his own football-team named after the main Kosovo hero Obilić.

23 The poem was previously published in Vreme (6 September 1993, p.56). Other Serb paramilitary leaders were also compared with Miloš Obilić, e.g. Šešelj (see Vreme 6 March 1995, p.43). Some of these leaders, like Dragoslav Bokan, identify themselves with medieval Serbian historical figures. Bokan is an intellectual and cineast who was the commander of the paramilitary group Beli Orlovi (White Eagles), very active in ethnic cleansing operations in Bosnia.
It is significant in this context that Arkan has close links with the Serbian Orthodox Church, particularly with bishop Amfilohija (a nationalist hard-liner); during the war Arkan stated that for him the Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Pavle was his main commander. The high point of the adulation of Arkan came in February 1995 when he married Ceca, Serbia’s most popular turbo-folk diva, thus wedding politics and folklore in the most direct manner. The wedding, which was directly broadcasted by Serbian state television, was presented as a wedding of mythic and epic dimensions. The nationalist magazine *Duga* wrote that the bond between Arkan and Ceca is not an ordinary bond, “but a mythical bond, the roots of which lie in Kosovo! The bond between Ceca and Arkan is the bond between the Kosovo Girl and the Kosovo hero...” (quoted in *Vreme*, 27 February 1995:41).

**Republika Srpska as the realm of the Kosovo spirit.**

When Milošević came to power, relations between church and state were cordial for a while. But this did not continue for long, as the church started to be agitated by Milošević’s arrogance and persistent ‘socialist’ posture. As early as the Kosovo festivities of 1989 Serbian ecclesiastics were disappointed with Milošević’s failure to turn up at the memorial service of the Serbian Orthodox church in Gračanica, which caused much resentment among circles close to the Patriarchate (Radić 1996:285). In 1992 criticism by the church against Milošević’s policy became more and more open and frequent, and in 1994 relations cooled down to a low point when Milošević broke his ties with the Serbs in Republika Srpska. Nationalists in Republika Srpska and Serbia started to call him a traitor (a reincarnation of *Vuk Branković*).

Since then, Republika Srpska is the only place where the Serbian Orthodox church has been recognised as an important moral force, where state symbols like the flag and the hymn are clearly Orthodox, where leading politicians go to church, and where religious education has been

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He has presented his ‘White Eagles’ as the present-day incarnation of mediaeval crusaders for a Greater Serbia. The Dutch journalist Frank Westerman wrote: “He murders in the name of prince Lazar, no: he thinks he is the reborn Lazar himself” (Westerman 1993:26).
introduced in schools (Radić 1996:296). Nowadays the traditional symbiosis between Orthodoxy and Serbian statehood has been realised most extensively in Republika Srpska (Radić 1996:295-300). From the very beginning, the Kosovo mythology has played a role in legitimating war, presenting the Serbian war efforts in Bosnia as an attempt to avenge Kosovo and turn the clock of history back. Although the experiences of World War Two have filled the imaginary space of Serb suffering in Bosnia much more than Kosovo, Muslims have been persistently labelled Turci, the direct descendants of the Turkish oppressors, while the war was constantly understood in terms of a battle between Christianity and Islam. As Judah has noted “[w]hen Serbian peasants from villages surrounding Sarajevo began to bombard the city they did so confusing in their minds their former Muslim friends, neighbours and even brothers-in-law with the old Ottoman Turkish viziers and pashas who had ruled them until 1878” (Judah 1997:XII).

The important role of the Kosovo myth as a force of legitimisation in Republika Srpska is expressed most poignantly in the adoption of Vidovdan as the Bosnian Serb Army’s official holiday and patron’s day at the beginning of the war (1992). It is also reflected in the fact that general Ratko Mladić was and still is seen by many ordinary Bosnian Serbs as a modern-day Lazar, as their saviour who led his troops against the Turks. During the war his popularity acquired almost mythical dimensions. When Mladić gave acte-de-présence at the Vidovdan ceremony of the Bosnian Serbian Army in the Serbian Orthodox church of Bijeljina, on 28 June 1995, “he was mobbed by adoring fans. Old women cried and tried to hug him. Babies were held up for him to touch” (Block 1995). There in Bijeljina, days before the Army of the Republika Srpska would open the attack on the safe area of Srebrenica, he spoke to his soldiers about the importance of the Battle of Kosovo: “Prince Lazar gave his army Communion, and bowed for the Heavenly Empire, defending fatherland, faith, freedom and the honour of the Serbian people. We have understood the essence of his sacrifice and have drawn the historical message from it. Today we make a winning army, we do not want to convert Lazar’s offering into a blinding myth of sacrifice” (Bulatović 1996:154). Srebrenica was taken, thousands of ‘Turks’ were killed, and a huge cross was carved out in the forests on a hill behind Srebrenica. In a park in the centre of Srebrenica two old plaques were placed (taken away after World War Two) commemorating a famous Chetnik officer who had been killed during World War One. On the second is written:
Osvetnici hrabri Kosovskoga polja počivajte mirno
Jei vremena bolja nastala su nama
Slobode zraci griju nas sada sa sviju strana
Nema više bolnih Kosovskijeh rana

Brave avengers of Kosovo rest in peace
Because better times have come to us
Sunrays of freedom warm us from all sides
The painful wounds of Kosovo are no more

I wonder whether there will be ever better times if the painful wounds of Kosovo are not forgotten. Once and for all.