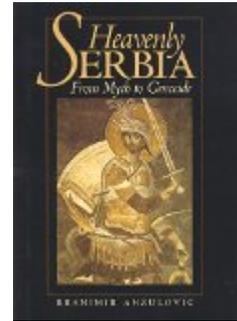


Branimir Anzulovic. *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1999. xiv + 233 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-0671-8.

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Searching for the Roots of Modern Serbian Aggression

In a recent article in the *New York Times*, Michael T. Kaufman wrote that the conduct of ordinary Serbs is starting to attract the kinds of questions raised in Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners, Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*.^[1] In his controversial book, Goldhagen asserted that certain deeply embedded myths made ordinary Germans willing to sanction and participate in genocide against Europe's Jews. Serbia was bound to be subjected to the same type of analysis, given the involvement of Serbian society in three violent wars in the past eight years (Croatia, Bosnia, and now Kosovo). Perhaps the only surprise is that so few writers have taken the plunge and defined Serbian behavior as genocidal and then attempted to trace the historical sources of that genocide. Notable exceptions include *The Bridge Betrayed*, by Michael Sells, and *This Time We Knew*, edited by Stjepan Mestrovic and Thomas Cushman.^[2] Although some of that earlier work offered grand interpretations of the relationship of Serbia's past to its present, Branimir Anzulovic's *Heavenly Serbia* is the first book to examine that relationship in any depth.

Anzulovic focuses on the role of ideology in guiding genocidal actions: "the primary force leading to genocide is not the pathology of the individual organizing and committing the genocide, but the pathology of the ideas guiding them." (p. 4) He believes that the roots of Serbian genocidal behavior—and he accepts as given that Serbian actions have been genocidal—can be found in the mythology that arose to explain the battle of Kosovo of 1389. Although he distances himself rhetorically from accusations of reductionism ("It would be an error to assume

that the memory of the Serbian medieval empire necessarily led to the latest war for a Greater Serbia ..." [p. 2]), in the body of his book Anzulovic does in fact interpret virtually every event in Serbia's history following 1389 through the prism of the Kosovo myths. Following an analysis of that mythology, the author proceeds to a discussion of Serbia under the Ottoman empire, a chapter on the genesis of the nineteenth-century romantic epic *The Mountain Wreath* by Petar Petrovic Njegos, an examination of the development of nineteenth-century Serbian nationalism, a discussion of the modern relevance of the Kosovo cycle in Serbia, and finally a chapter on the way that outside observers have been seduced by the heroic Serbian self-image. Throughout, Anzulovic asserts that the key to unlocking the collective Serbian psyche and to understanding Serbia's behavior in the 1990s can be found in the traditional, oral narratives about Kosovo.

Anzulovic's discussion of the origins, content, and meaning of the Kosovo poetry convinced me, but I am admittedly a friendly witness whose expertise is entirely in the modern era. He acknowledges that the function of the legend of Prince Lazar's choice of the heavenly kingdom was to transform an alleged military defeat into a moral victory. (p. 12) But Anzulovic believes that the legend of Lazar's choice is only as important as the stories involving Kraljevic Marko, whose cunning and extraordinary strength made him the most popular hero of Serbian legendary (p. 14). But Marko's deceitfulness and brutality against the weak serve Anzulovic as examples of the most important lesson of the various oral poetic cycles among Serbs: that Serbs have been taught to re-

vere violence. Anzulovic then proceeds to a discussion of the Serbian Orthodox church, which was the institution most responsible for the establishment and interpretation of the various Kosovo myths and heroes. The author describes the Serbian church as particularly subservient to the Serbian state (or its memory), even in the context of Orthodox caesaro-papism: “the difference between Byzantium and Serbia in this regard is that the Byzantines regarded the emperor and his court as heavenly, whereas the Serbs conferred heavenly status on the nation as a whole. The earthly Serbia is holy Serbia.” (p. 22) To complete the picture, Anzulovic describes *Svetosavlje* (Saint Sava-ism) as “a common Serbian term for the peculiar blend of church, state, and nation that was established by Saint Sava [the founder of the Serbian Orthodox church] in the early thirteenth century” (p. 30).

Following the discussion of the origins of Heavenly Serbia, Anzulovic devotes a chapter to the violence of the Dinaric highlands and the literary masterpiece the region produced, *The Mountain Wreath* of Njegos, the nineteenth-century Montenegrin prince-bishop. Here Anzulovic further develops his assertion that violence is an integral part of the Serbian cultural heritage. Njegos’s work provides solid evidence for that assertion, as it concerns the slaughter of Muslims by Orthodox Montenegrin tribesmen. Anzulovic focuses on the fact that neither Njegos nor his poem are really a part of the Christian tradition. He quotes the Serbian cleric Nikolaj Velimirovic: “Njegos’s Christology is almost rudimentary. No Christian priest has ever said less about Christ than this metropolitan from Cetinje” (p. 55). Anzulovic himself asserts that the theme of *The Mountain Wreath* “... is not the cosmic struggle between good and evil but the struggle for a homogeneous Orthodox theocracy” (p. 56). The author closes this chapter with an examination of some of Milovan Djilas’s writings about the violence of his and Njegos’s Montenegrin homeland, as well as of Djilas’s own evaluation of Njegos, which was positive: “Njegos was the first to experience passionately and to give expression to a massacre as an aspect of human destiny, as a higher ordinance. Herein lies its originality and its greatness” (p. 64). Djilas himself of course becomes evidence for Anzulovic of a predisposition to communal violence among Serbs.

Having established his framework for understanding Serbian behavior (a cult of violence, interwoven with a belief in the essential sanctity of the Serbian people), Anzulovic proceeds to analyze nineteenth- and twentieth-century Serbia within that framework. In “The Dilemmas of Modern Serbian National Identity” he dis-

cusses the role of the Enlightenment and the Romantic movement in identity formation as well as the expansionist impulses of the new Serbian state. In “A Vicious Circle of Lies and Fears,” Anzulovic outlines the moral decline of Serbian intellectual and political life as the Tito regime gave way to its pseudo-nationalistic heir, the regime of Slobodan Milosevic. Finally, in “The Outsiders’ Myth-Calculations,” the author describes how non-Serbs came to accept Serbs’ self-image, and how that acceptance influenced policy during the wars in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia.

In these final three chapters, Anzulovic often loses sight of his thesis. His narrative serves as a short history of modern Serbia rather than as a directed analysis of the role of the Kosovo mythology in Serbian life. Thus some of the material seems superfluous. In other cases, the author discusses critical issues in modern Serbian history but can only tenuously link them to the Heavenly Serbia motif. One example is the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, whose formulators, Anzulovic asserts, “saw themselves as the nation’s saviors who will, after destroying evil enemies, realize the old promise of a prosperous and glorious Second Serbian Empire as the dominant power of the Balkans” (p. 118). The Memorandum and its creators were many dangerous things, but it takes imagination to find in it or them any promise of a Second Serbian Empire, and the Kosovo mythology left hardly a trace on its pages (even if Kosovo—the province—was central to it). But Anzulovic’s discussions of the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in modern Serbian cultural life are enlightening, and his examination of some of the most hostile and provocative literature produced in Serbia in the 1980s (novels by Dobrica Cosic, Vuk Draskovic, Slobodan Selenic, and Vojislav Lubarda) is arresting.

A book such as this, which proposes to provide a grand explanation of a culture’s predisposition to violent, and finally genocidal, action, opens itself to many potential criticisms. I can offer two. First, the fundamental problem with this book is the author’s unsupported assertion that Serbia has been responsible for genocide. While I believe that the allegation that the Serbian state has acted genocidally towards the Bosnian Muslims and the Albanians is tenable, such an accusation is far too important to offer as a given. And if one concludes that Serbs have not committed genocide, the book loses its thesis at the outset.

Second, the author’s choice of evidence is on occasion careless, belying the fact that he felt compelled to

demonstrate the pervasiveness of his motif rather than simply its frequency. One example among many that stood out as I read this book: an article entitled "Struggle to Extermination, Ours or Yours," by Nikola Stojanovic, a young Bosnian (not Croatian, as Anzulovic says) Serb, which appeared in the *Srpski knjizevni glasnik* in 1902. Anzulovic claims that this article "would lead to many ... murders," and he obviously believes that it expressed a genocidal intent (pp. 87-88). But in fact the article did nothing of the sort: the title is certainly blood-curdling, as Anzulovic writes, but Stojanovic wrote of the inevitability of the nonviolent cultural assimilation of Croats by Serbs, not of the murder of Croats. Only in the Serbia of the 1980s would assimilation be characterized as genocidal (for instance, in the Memorandum) and I feel certain that Anzulovic would have condemned such a usage by Serbs. There were several other points in the book where I felt that Anzulovic stretched his evidence, but I believe that this example makes my point.

In *Heavenly Serbia*, Branimir Anzulovic proposes to elucidate the ideology underlying Serbia's allegedly genocidal behavior since 1991. He has constructed a compelling argument for the importance of the Kosovo cycle and some other attendant phenomena in creating a genocidal mentality among Serbs. But Anzulovic's desire to provide an all-encompassing explanation ultimately weakens his own argument. Much of the evidence he musters in support of his thesis can be explained in other ways. But that may reflect an inherent weakness in any examination of ongoing genocide, which, it seems to me, points out just how difficult it would be to give Serbia the Goldhagen treatment (which is not Anzulovic's purpose, although he does strongly imply that the myth of *Heavenly Serbia* was pervasive). It is only too easy (as Goldhagen's work demonstrates) to look into the distant or not-so-distant past and find evidence of a generalized procliv-

ity to commit genocide. But can we do that with people whom we have right before us, with all of the ambiguities of their personal positions and public statements in full view? Is it possible to conclude that all Serbs harbor genocidal desires, or might our proximity to the people and events involved make it impossible to avoid the conclusion that, rather than being Milosevic's willing executioners, today's Serbs are really Christopher Browning's ordinary men,[3] people who would commit, sanction, or ignore genocide only under specific conditions? The debate on Serbia in the 1990s has only just begun, and these are all questions that will be asked.

Notes:

[1]. Michael T. Kaufman, Looking for the Line Between Patriotism and Guilt, *New York Times* (April 11, 1999); Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996). H-German's discussion of the Goldhagen book is archived at <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~{ }german/discuss/goldhagen/>.

[2]. Michael A. Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Thomas Cushman and Stjepan G. Mestrovic, eds., *This Time We Knew: Western Responses to Genocide in Bosnia* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

[3]. Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

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