Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne
An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

Uncle Radovan

(This text is a slightly modified version of an article written toward the end of the war in Bosnia and first published in the Boston daily The Christian Science Monitor, July 19, 1995)

Radovan Karadžić is a Montenegrin who claims he is a Serb, a psychiatrist who tries to be a poet, and a war criminal who insists that he is a politician. He bears a last name derived from Turkish, a sadly ironic commentary on both his pretense to Serb ethnic purity and his hatred of everything Turkish or Muslim. The Sarajevo prewar phone book lists ten Karadžićes, most of whom are Muslims, one a Croat, and two or three Serbs or Montenegrins—including Radovan. (But as a Serbian humorist once said about somebody else, ridiculing paranoid Communist propaganda: “He is a nationalist of all hues.”)

Radovan Karadžić heads the self-proclaimed Serbian Republic within Bosnia and Herzegovina. He has, for more than three years now, presided over the destruction of multiethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina. So, he is a president of sorts. He is a linguist, too. He has banished the name “Bosnia” from the vocabulary of Bosnian Serbs. There is nothing Bosnian in his domain. The name of his para-state is “Republika Srpska,” which is a violation of the language as it is of the land and the people. It sounds absurd and unnatural in Bosnian/Serbo-Croatian as it does in English: “Republic Serbian.” Karadžić’s people have Serbianized all the geographic names in the territory they control. Some names have been completely changed, like the name of the central Bosnian town of Donji Vakuf, where I grew up. After it had been taken by the Serbs in 1992 and its non- Serb population expelled, the Turkish-sounding name was changed to “Srbobran”— literally, where Serbs defend themselves.

A month or so before the Serb extremists launched the attack on Sarajevo, in the spring of 1992, Karadžić called the Sarajevo TV station in the middle of the news program and said (everybody could hear him) that the Serbs in Alipasino polje (a large high-rise residential neighborhood) were being slaughtered wholesale by the Muslims. What he said then had nothing to do with reality. What was real was that at that very moment his army of Serb nationalists was advancing on the Bosnian capital and surrounding it on all sides. Soon after that, Karadžić issued repeated calls to Serbs in Sarajevo to follow him to the mountains around the city and fight for Serbdom. (“Let’s get down to the cities and beat up the bastards,” says a line in a pre-war poem by Karadžić.) But most Serbs either stayed on in Sarajevo or simply fled the conflict. Those who stayed earned the curious and contemptuous epithet from Karadžić, one

more descriptive of his own rural roots and preferences than of them: “skyscraper Serbs.” These urban Serbs did not want to play the role-model that Karadžić, in his obsession with history and myth, assigned to them—that of outlaws or “free-lance” fighters for freedom, or “freedom,” as their predecessors did during Turkish or Austrian rule, guarding the “Serb hearths.” The word “hearth” has been dredged up from linguistic disuse and much exploited in the current war, especially by the Serbs. In order to guard Serb hearths, Karadžić began to kill and ethnically cleanse non-Serbs.

His and Serb nationalists’ retreat into history and myth usually finds its mental anchorage in the Battle of Kosovo of 1389, and the Serb defeat by the Turks. Although a defeat, Kosovo is perceived as the ultimate and perennial heroic moment in Serb history and fixed as such in the Serb collective consciousness. It has been used and misused for ideological and political purposes; particularly, it seems, during this war. In the spring of 1993 I listened to a live broadcast of one of many sessions of the self-styled Bosnian Serb Parliament. Karadžić and his “MPs” were deciding on whether or not to accept one of the peace plans (they did not) but spent much time analyzing why the Serb army of 1389 lost to the Turks. They concluded that the Turkish cavalry was more mobile, whereas the Serb knights wore too heavy armor. They decided that today’s Serbs have to draw important conclusions from that … I recently found a startling sentence in The Native’s Return, a book by the Slovenian-American Louis Adamic, published in 1934: “It can be said that, were it not for Kosovo and the strange inspiration that the Serbs and other Yugoslavs drew from it, there would have been no Sarajevo and possibly no Great War as Europe and America experienced it between 1914 and 1918.” Adamic might have been speaking about Sarajevo in 1992, as well as 1914.

I knew Radovan Karadžić slightly, through literary people and mutual friends in Sarajevo. He did not strike me as a potential politician then – or as a future war criminal. I once called him on behalf of a young woman, an alcoholic, who needed a psychiatrist; I asked him if he would admit her in his therapy group. Radovan was more than ready to oblige, saying, yes, by all means, anything for you, professor. But when he heard her name (a Serb name), he said, no, he knew her, she was “incurable.”

On another occasion, as I was standing one day in front a bookstore in Sarajevo with my younger daughter, then less than three, Radovan Karadžić ran into us and, in an outburst of civility (“how nice to see you, professor”), magnanimity, and megalomania, pushed us both inside and bought Dina one of his books. He inscribed it for my daughter: “For Dina, with love, Uncle Radovan.” The book, published in Sarajevo in the Cyrillic script in 1982, contains a number of children’s poems, most of them innocuous enough, written in the Ekavian dialect and in the tradition of Serbian humorous poetry for the young. But two or three poems, especially “War Boots,” is darkly prophetic of the events that would happen in Bosnia a decade later, and of the “splendid role” to be played by Uncle Radovan. He dreamed his future into being. Or, as Serbian sociologist Zoran Avramović has recently written, “the whistle of a bullet is first heard in thought.”

WAR BOOTS [1982]

Radovan Karadžić

When you put on your hard shoes,
Your brave boots,
Your manly shoes,
Your war boots,
You just automatically
Reach for your gun
And set out
Down muddy roads.

When the time comes for gun barrels to speak,
For heroic days, valorous nights,
When a foreign army floods your country,
And wreaks havoc and causes damage in it,
That condition must be righted:
Then you roam your homeland on foot,
And your boots fight side by side with you.

They help you a lot in war,
To play your splendid role:
To drive half away,
To take half prisoner,
Like a hunter when he finds good game,
To defend your mom, to defend your dad,
Your Dragana, Anka, Jovanka, Sonja,
Zorica, Rada, to defend your school,
And your playgrounds,
And your picnic grounds,
In a word, to defend your fatherland.

Now, there's nothing to do about it.
No foreign threat.
The war boots – wasting their days.
One feels like yawning, the other like drowsing..

They wait for you, like faithful doggies,
Till an enemy bullet comes whistling by
Till you set off on a campaign.

(Ima čuda—nema čuda, Svjetlost, Sarajevo, 1982, pp. 12-13, translated by Omer Hadžiselimović) – © 2008 Omer Hadžiselimović

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