

# Serbs and Croats united in brotherly hate

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IN THE CITY of Novi Sad, when I was very young, I met a shy girl with dark hair who never went out of the house. Her two cousins, pretty and gregarious young Serbs, used to take me walking each summer evening for the *corso* — the promenade which allowed everyone to stare at everyone else.

Before the *corso*, we would call on the shy girl and talk a little. One day, puzzled, I asked why she never came with us. The two cousins glanced at each other, and then one of them put her hands behind the shy girl's neck and lifted up her silky black hair. She had no ears. "The *Ustashe* did that. When she was only 12. The Croats did that."

I spent the whole of that summer drifting around Serbia: partly in Belgrade, and partly in those borderlands where Serbs and Croats are now lodging one another. In Belgrade I was lodged with a poor Serbian family. When I went travelling, my family provided me with a shoe box of apple charlotte and the addresses of their relations. All were Serbs, of course. Even when I stayed in Zagreb, it was in a Serbian household. I would be all right there, they said. No guest of ours should be forced to sleep in a Croat house.

A few tram-stops down the street in Belgrade was "Vuk's monument". Vuk Karadzic (1787-1864) was a hero from the great age of romantic nationalism: the grammarian who stabilised the Serbian language, the scholar who collected songs, the patriot who fought for independence. Serbs revere him (partly, I am sorry to say, because he once remarked: "Young widows are best!"). But one of the important things about Vuk is that he died, and largely lived, in Vienna.

Today, pundits talk importantly about how south-eastern Europe must inevitably split along the ancient line separating Catholic from Orthodox, Rome from Byzantium. They talk as if Croat and Serb were doomed by their genes to hate one another. But Vuk's life said something else.

In his time, most of Serbia was under Turkish control. But a minority, many of them refugees, lived in the Habsburg Empire alongside the Croats, and it was in those borderlands — where the killing is now — that Vuk did most of his work. In the 1840s, he joined the "Illyrian" movement, named after the Roman province which united the tribes of the eastern Adriatic shore. Vuk co-operated with Croat intellectuals to build up a common South Slav language and culture which would lead on to political independence. In 1850, the "Literary Agreement" was signed in Vienna between Serbian and Croatian nationalists, establishing one dialect (a version of south Serbian) as the future Serbo-Croat language.

So Vuk was a herald of "The Yugoslav Idea". The Serbs already had a magnificent semi-tribal identity. Vuk gave them a modern national identity. But he designed this national culture in exile, and he taught that neither Croats nor Serbs could be free unless they accepted a brotherhood which transcended differences of religion. This view split Serbian patriots. Some worshipped him as "father of the nation". Others cursed him as an agent of Vienna and the Vatican, paid to turn Serbian eyes away from their true kinsmen and liberators — the Russians. But Vuk's argument triumphed more than 50 years after his death, when Yugoslavia was created.



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Everybody predicted that the first European crisis after the Cold War would be Yugoslavia, and they were right, and Serbia is the centre of the Yugoslav crisis. Serbia is currently regarded with pious horror by Germans and Austrians (always greedy for the collapse of Yugoslavia), by Americans who are shocked by the survival of communism in Serbia, and by the British, who adore federations as long as they are not asked to join one. The Russians are more understanding, but for the wrong reasons.

It is true that Serbian arrogance can be monstrous. When the prince asked his father for leave to go abroad and study languages, the king roared: "Speak Serbian, so the whole world can understand you!" It is true that their tribalism can be absurd, and it is also true that Serbian nationalism is that dangerous kind which is self-pitying. I remember hearing a grandmother

weeping as she recited Serbia's enemies: "The Germans hate us, the Italians hate us, the Croats hate us, the Magyars ... Bulgarians ... Turks ... Albanians ..."

At the same time, Serbs have a superb vision of themselves, and they try to live up to it. Their generosity is as reckless as their romantic instinct, an eye always alert for cliffs to leap off. One night, as we sauntered on our *corso* in Belgrade, a woman came up from behind me, seized me by the elbow and said: "Tell me the most beautiful thing in the world!" Song and conversation were drenched in allusion: to the symbolism of widows and ravens which was about Serbia's defeat by the Turks at Kosovo in 1386; to the bulbuls and grazing hinds of Moslem love lyrics; to Turk-slaying epics like the song of Prince Marko.

It was a tough, harsh country. I once saw a train of cattle wagons draw up on a collective farm, somewhere on the plain north of the Danube: the doors were heaved open, and a stream of men and women began to clamber down and form up in column. Suddenly there was a twinkle — I was a long way off — and another, and I realised that they were all in chains. Yugoslavia had broken with Stalin five years before, but this was still a police state driven by slogans and fear.

At first I took at face value Serbian praise of the new Yugoslavia, in which Tito was urging the peoples to dissolve past hatreds in "brotherhood" and "unity". Much later, at the time of the failed Croatian uprising in 1970, I understood this magnanimity better. The Serbs believed that they had carried the main burden of resistance to fascism. Although on paper Croats and

Slovenes were their equals in the post-war federation, Tito's communism seemed a guarantee that Serbia would in practice be more equal than the others. The disasters of July 1991 have come about because there has been no revolution in Serbia — because the communism of Slobodan Milosevic has disguised itself in the uniform of Great-Serbian chauvinism.

Vuk Karadzic never meant the relations between Serbs and Croats to be like that — victor and vanquished. His "Illyrianism" was about a single cultural family. Instead, Serbs and Croats alike have acquired that invincible certainty of being culturally superior which disfigures both communities in Northern Ireland.

Nobody can pretend that there is some Illyrian path back to Yugoslavia. The Slovenes, even in the 1840s, felt so separate that they stood aside from those debates. And nothing in the Illyrian idea can be used, now, to stave off the next and probably more terrible stage of Yugoslavia's dissolution as the Muslims of Bosnia, the Albanians of Kosovo and finally the Domsday Machine of the Balkans — Macedonia — are heated to the point of explosion.

But when the big bang is over and the fragments of the rest of Yugoslavia have hit the ground, Serbia and Croatia will remain. They are too big to vanish; too small to conquer one another; too close — in geography and culture — to go on fighting in a new Europe where they will prosper or starve together. Vuk in his old age said: "Do not hate each other like mortal enemies, but love each other like brothers." Brothers can also hate. But they can find a taste for uniting against the rest of the world.