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BLOOD AND BELONGING

MICHAEL IGNATIEFF is a distinguished author of both fiction and non-fiction. His novel *Scar Tissue* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, while *The Russian Album*, a family memoir, won the Governor General's Award and the Heinemann Prize from Britain's Royal Society of Literature. His work on ethnic nationalism in the 1990s resulted in a television series and the book *Blood and Belonging*, which won the Lionel Gelber Prize. Until August 2005, he was Carr Professor of the Practice of Human Rights and director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

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# **BLOOD AND BELONGING**

*Journeys into the New Nationalism*

Michael Ignatieff



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CANADA

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# THE LAST REFUGE

## WARLORDS

The UN checkpoint was a sandbagged Portakabin manned by two Canadian infantrymen guarding a road barrier between the Croat- and Serb-held sections of Pakrac, in central Croatia. The road to the checkpoint wound its way between pulverized bungalows, upended cars in the ditches, waist-high grass in abandoned gardens. Just visible in the grass, as we approached the checkpoint, were two teenage Croatian spotters with their binoculars trained on the Serbian side.

The UN had just waved us through into Serb-held territory when fifteen armed Serbian paramilitaries surrounded our van. They had been drinking at a wedding in their village. The drunkest one, with dead eyes and glassy, sweat-beaded skin, forced the van door open and clambered in. "We watching you," he said, making binocular gestures with his hands. "You talk to Ustashe," and he pointed back at the Croatians hiding in the grass. Then he took the pistol out of his belt. "You fucking spies," he said. He ordered the driver out at gunpoint, took the wheel, and began revving the engine. "Why can't I shoot this?" groaned the cameraman in the seat behind. "Because he'll shoot *you*," someone in the back of the van muttered.

The Serb put the van into gear and it was moving off when one of the UN soldiers yanked open the door, grabbed the keys, and shut off the ignition. "We do this my way," the UN soldier said, breathing heavily, half puffing, half cajoling the Serb out of the driver's seat. Another young Serb in combat gear pushed his way into the van and shook his head. "I am police. You are under arrest. Follow me."

This was the moment, in my journeys in search of the new nationalism, in which I began to understand what the new world order actually looks like: paramilitaries, drunk on plum brandy and ethnic paranoia, trading shots with each other across a wasteland; a checkpoint between them, placed there by something loftily called "the international community" but actually manned by just two anxious adolescents; and a film crew wondering, for a second or two, whether they were going to get out alive.

The writ of the "international community" ran no farther than 150 meters either side of the UN checkpoint. Beyond that there was gun law. The paramilitaries took us to the police station in the village, where the chief spent an hour establishing to his satisfaction that because our translator's grandfather had been born on the Croatian island of Krk, he must be a Croatian spy. But then a telephone call arrived, instructing the chief to release us. No one would say who had given the orders. It appeared to have been the local Serb warlord. This was

my first encounter with a warlord's power, but it was not to be my last.

I am a child of the Cold War. I was born in the year of the Berlin Airlift of 1948 and my first political memory of any consequence is of being very afraid, for one day, during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Looking back now, I can see that I lived through the last imperial age, the last time when the nation-states of the world were clearly allocated to two opposing spheres of influence, the last time when terror produced peace. Now terror seems only to produce more terror.

If the twenty-first century has already begun, as some people say it has, then it began in 1989. When the Berlin Wall came down, when Václav Havel stood on the balcony in Prague's Wenceslas Square and crowds cheered the collapse of the Communist regimes across Europe, I thought, like many people, that we were about to witness a new era of liberal democracy. My generation had almost reconciled itself to growing old in the fearful paralysis of the Cold War. Suddenly a new order of free nations began to take shape—from the Baltic republics to the Black Sea, from Tallinn to Berlin, from Prague to Budapest, Belgrade, and Bucharest: In August 1991, when Muscovites defended the Russian Parliament against the tanks, we believed that the civic courage which had brought down the last twentieth-century empire might even be strong enough to sustain Russia's transition to democracy. We even thought, for a while, that the democratic current in the East might sweep through our own exhausted oligarchies in the West.

We soon found out how wrong we were. For what has succeeded the last age of empire is a new age of violence. The key narrative of the new world order is the disintegration of nation-states into ethnic civil war; the key architects of the new order are warlords; and the key language for our age is ethnic nationalism.

With blithe lightness of mind, we assumed that the world was moving irrevocably beyond nationalism, beyond tribalism, beyond the provincial confines of the identities inscribed in our passports, toward a global market culture that was to be our new home. In retrospect, we were whistling in the dark. The repressed has returned, and its name is nationalism.

## CIVIC AND ETHNIC NATIONALISM

As a political doctrine, nationalism is the belief that the world's peoples are divided into nations, and that each of these nations has the right of self-determination, either as self-governing units within existing nation-states or as nation-states of their own.

As a cultural ideal, nationalism is the claim that while men and women have many identities, it is the nation that provides them with their primary form of belonging.

As a moral ideal, nationalism is an ethic of heroic sacrifice, justifying the use of violence in the defense of one's nation against enemies, internal or external.

These claims—political, moral, and cultural—underwrite each other. The moral claim that nations are entitled to be defended by force or violence depends on the cultural claim that the needs they satisfy for security and belonging are uniquely important. The political idea that all peoples should struggle for nationhood

depends on the cultural claim that only nations can satisfy these needs. The cultural idea in turn underwrites the political claim that these needs cannot be satisfied without self-determination.

Each one of these claims is contestable and none is intuitively obvious. Many of the world's tribal peoples and ethnic minorities do not think of themselves as nations; many do not seek or require a state of their own. It is not obvious, furthermore, why national identity should be a more important element of personal identity than any other; nor is it obvious why defense of the nation justifies the use of violence.

But for the moment, what matters is that nationalism is centrally concerned to define the conditions under which force or violence is justified, in a people's defense, when their right of self-determination is threatened or denied. Self-determination here may mean either democratic self-rule or the exercise of cultural autonomy, depending on whether the national group in question believes it can achieve its goals within the framework of an existing state or seeks a state of its own.

All forms of nationalism vest political sovereignty in "the people"—indeed, the word "nation" is often a synonym for "the people"—but not all nationalistic movements create democratic regimes, because not all nationalisms include all of the people in their definition of who constitutes the nation.

One type, civic nationalism, maintains that the nation should be composed of all those—regardless of race, color, creed, gender, language, or ethnicity—who subscribe to the nation's political creed. This nationalism is called civic because it envisages the nation as a community of equal, rights-bearing citizens, united by patriotic attachment to a shared set of political practices and values. This nationalism is necessarily democratic, since it vests sovereignty in all of the people. Some elements of this ideal were first achieved in Great Britain. By the mid-eighteenth century, Britain was already a nation-state composed of four nations—the Irish, the Scots, the Welsh, and the English—united by a civic rather than an ethnic definition of belonging, i.e., by shared attachment to certain institutions: the Crown, Parliament, and the rule of law. But it was not until the French and American revolutions, and the creation of the French and American republics, that civic nationalism set out to conquer the world.

Such an ideal was made easier to realize in practice because the societies of the Enlightenment were ethnically homogeneous or behaved as if they were. Those who did not belong to the enfranchised political class of white, propertied males—workers, women, black slaves, aboriginal peoples—found themselves excluded from citizenship and thus from the nation. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these groups fought for civic inclusion. As a result of their struggle, most Western nation-states now define their nationhood in terms of common citizenship and not by common ethnicity. One prominent exception is Germany.

Napoleon's invasion and occupation of the German principalities in 1806 unleashed a wave of German patriotic anger and Romantic polemic against the French ideal of the nation-state. The German Romantics argued that it was not

the state that created the nation, as the Enlightenment believed, but the nation and its people, that created the state. What gave unity to the nation, what made it home, a place of passionate attachment, was not the cold contrivance of shared rights but the people's preexisting ethnic characteristics: their language, religion, customs, and traditions. The nation as Volk had begun its long and troubling career in European thought. All the peoples of nineteenth-century Europe under imperial subjection—the Poles and Baltic peoples under the Russian yoke, the Serbs under Turkish rule, the Croats under the Habsburgs—looked to the German ideal of ethnic nationalism when articulating their right to self-determination. When Germany achieved unification in 1871 and rose to world power status, Germany's achievement was a demonstration of the success of ethnic nationalism to all the "captive nations" of imperial Europe.

Of these two types of nationalism, the civic has a greater claim to sociological realism. Most societies are not mono-ethnic; and even when they are, common ethnicity does not of itself obliterate division, because ethnicity is only one of the many claims on an individual's loyalty. According to the civic nationalist creed, what holds a society together is not common roots but law. By subscribing to a set of democratic procedures and values, individuals can reconcile their right to shape their own lives with their need to belong to a community. This in turn assumes that national belonging can be a form of rational attachment.

Ethnic nationalism claims, by contrast, that an individual's deepest attachments are inherited, not chosen. It is the national community that defines the individual, not the individuals who define the national community. This psychology of belonging may have greater depth than civic nationalism's, but the sociology that accompanies it is a good deal less realistic. The fact, for example, that two Serbs share Serbian ethnic identity may unite them against Croats, but it will do nothing to stop them fighting each other over jobs, spouses, scarce resources, and so on. Common ethnicity by itself does not create social cohesion or community, and when it fails to do so, as it must, nationalist regimes are necessarily impelled toward maintaining unity by force rather than by consent. This is one reason why ethnic nationalist regimes are more authoritarian than democratic.

They may also prove authoritarian because they are, in essence, a form of democracy conducted in the interests of the ethnic majority. Most of the new post-Cold War nation-states give lip service to the idea of a society of civic equality and provide safeguards for minority rights. In reality, new nations like Serbia and Croatia, the Baltic states, the new Asian republics, have institutionalized ethnic majority domination. Ethnic nationalism is a particular temptation for those ethnic majorities—like the Baltic peoples and the Ukrainians—formerly ruled by the imperially backed Russian minority.

It is sometimes argued that authoritarian ethnic nationalism takes root only where civic nationalism has never established itself. On this account, ethnic nationalism is flourishing in Eastern Europe because forty years of Communist single-party rule effectively destroyed whatever civic or democratic culture there once had been in the region. If so, it ought to be true that ethnic nationalism does

not sink deep roots in societies with extensive democratic tradition. Unfortunately, this is not the case. European racism is a form of white ethnic nationalism—indeed, it is a revolt against civic nationalism itself, against the very idea of a nation based on citizenship rather than ethnicity. This revolt is gaining ground in states like Britain, Italy, France, Germany, and Spain with ample, if varying, degrees of democratic experience.

There is also a host of examples—Northern Ireland, India, and Canada, to name three—where ethnic nationalism flourishes within states formally committed to civic democracy. In Northern Ireland, between 1920 and 1972, the Loyalist Protestant majority used the British parliamentary system to maintain a comprehensive form of majoritarian tyranny against the Catholic minority. Being steeped in the British democratic and legal tradition did nothing to stop Loyalists from bending democracy to nationalist ends. In India, forty-five years of civic democracy have barely contained the ethnic and religious nationalisms that are currently tearing the country's federal system apart. In Canada, the picture is more optimistic, but the analytical point is the same. Full inclusion within a federal democratic system has not abated the force of Quebecois nationalism.

In all these places, the fundamental appeal of ethnic nationalism is as a rationale for ethnic majority rule, for keeping one's enemies in their place or for overturning some legacy of cultural subordination. In the nations of Eastern Europe, ethnic nationalism offers something more. For when the Soviet empire and its satellite regimes collapsed, the nation-state structures of the region also collapsed, leaving hundreds of ethnic groups at the mercy of each other. Since none of these groups had the slightest experience of conciliating their disagreements by democratic discussion, violence or force became their arbiter. Nationalist rhetoric swept through these regions like wildfire because it provided warlords and gunmen with a vocabulary of opportunistic self-justification. In the fear and panic which swept the ruins of the Communist states, people began to ask: So who will protect me now? Faced with a situation of political and economic chaos, people wanted to know whom to trust, and whom to call their own. Ethnic nationalism provided an answer that was intuitively obvious: Only trust those of your own blood.

## BELONGING

If nationalism legitimizes an appeal to blood loyalty and, in turn, blood sacrifice, it can do so persuasively only if it seems to appeal to people's better natures, and not just to their worst instincts. Since killing is not a business to be taken lightly, it must be done for a reason that makes its perpetrator think well of himself. If violence is to be legitimated, it must be in the name of all that is best in a people and what is better than their love of home?

Nationalists are supremely sentimental. Kitsch is the natural aesthetic of an ethnic "cleanser." There is no killer on either side of the checkpoints who will not pause, between firing at his enemies, to sing a nostalgic song or even recite a few lines of some ethnic epic. The latent purpose of such sentimentality is to imply that

one is in the grip of a love greater than reason, stronger than the will, a love akin to fate and destiny. Such a love assists the belief that it is fate, however tragic that obliges you to kill.

Stripped of such sentimentality, what, then, is this belonging, and the need for it, which nationalism seems to satisfy so successfully? When nationalists claim that national belonging is the overridingly important form of all belonging, they mean that there is no other form of belonging—to your family, work, or friends—that is secure if you do not have a nation to protect you. This is what warrants sacrifice on the nation's behalf. Without a nation's protection, everything that an individual values can be rendered worthless. Belonging, on this account, is first and foremost protection from violence. Where you belong is where you are safe; and where you are safe is where you belong. If nationalism is persuasive because it warrants violence, it is also persuasive because it offers protection from violence. The warlord is his people's protector; if he kills, he does so in defense of the noblest cause: the protection of the innocent.

But belonging also means being recognized and being understood. As Isaiah Berlin has written in *Two Concepts of Liberty*, when I am among my own people "they understand me, as I understand them; and this understanding creates within me a sense of being somebody in the world." To belong is to understand the tacit codes of the people you live with; it is to know that you will be understood without having to explain yourself. People, in short, "speak your language." This is why, incidentally, the protection and defense of a nation's language is such a deeply emotional nationalist cause, for it is language, more than land and history, that provides the essential form of belonging, which is to be understood. One can, of course, be understood in languages and in countries other than one's own; one can find belonging even in exile. But the nationalist claim is that full belonging, the warm sensation that people understand not merely what you say but what you mean, can come only when you are among your own people in your native land.

## COSMOPOLITANISM AND PRIVILEGE

Anyone whose father was born in Russia, whose mother was born in England, whose education was in America, and whose working life has been spent in Canada, Great Britain, and France, cannot be expected to be much of an ethnic nationalist. If anyone has a claim to being a cosmopolitan, it must be me. I wish I spoke more languages than I do, I wish I had lived in more nations than I have, and I wish that more people understood that expatriation is not exile: it is merely the belonging of those who choose their home rather than inherit it.

For many years, I believed that the tide was running in favor of cosmopolitanism like me. There seemed so many of us, for one thing. There were at least a dozen world cities—gigantic, multi-ethnic melting pots that provided a home for expatriates, exiles, migrants, and transients of all kinds. For the urban professional populations of these major cities, a post-national state of mind was simply taken for granted. People in these places did not bother about the

passports of the people they worked or lived with; they did not care about the country-of-origin label on the goods they bought; they simply assumed that in constructing their own way of life they would borrow from the customs of every nation they happened to admire. Cosmopolitans made a positive ethic out of cultural borrowing: in culture, exogamy was better than endogamy, and promiscuity was better than provincialism.

There was nothing new in itself about this cosmopolitan ethic. We have lived with a global economy since 1700, and many of the world's major cities have been global entrepôts for centuries. A global market has been limiting the sovereignty and freedom of maneuver of nation-states at least since Adam Smith first constructed a theory of the phenomenon at the outset of the age of nationalism in 1776. A global market in ideas and cultural forms has existed at least since the Enlightenment republic of letters. Rootless cosmopolitans have existed as a social type in the big imperial cities for centuries.

Two features, however, distinguish the big-city cosmopolitanism of our era from what has gone before. First of all is its social and racial diffusion. Twentieth-century democracy and unprecedented postwar prosperity have extended the privileges of cosmopolitanism from a small white moneyed male elite to a substantial minority of the population of the nation-states of the developed world. Suddenly, there are a lot of us about, and our sense of sharing a post-nationalist consciousness has been mightily reinforced by cheap air travel and telecommunications.

The second obvious change is that the global market we live in is no longer ordered by a stable imperial system. For two hundred years, the global expansion of capitalism was shaped by the territorial ambitions and policing authority of a succession of imperial powers, the British, French, German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the Soviet and American joint imperium after the Second World War. Since 1989, we have entered the first era of global cosmopolitanism in which there is no framework of imperial order.

There have been three great reorderings of the nation-state system of Europe in this century: at Versailles in 1918, when the new nations of Eastern Europe were created from the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian, Turkish, and Russian empires; at Yalta in 1945, when Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill allocated the nation-states of Western and Eastern Europe to two spheres of influence; and between 1989 and 1991, when the Soviet empire and the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe collapsed. What distinguishes the third of these is that it has occurred without any imperial settlement whatever. No treaty exists to regulate the conflict between the territorial integrity of nation-states in Eastern Europe and the right to self-determination of the peoples within them. For every resolution of this conflict by civilized divorce, Czech-style, there have been a dozen armed conflicts. The basic reason is obvious enough: the imperial policemen have departed.

The Americans may be the last remaining superpower, but they are not an imperial power: their authority is exercised in the defense of exclusively national

interests, not in the maintenance of an imperial system of global order. As a result, large sections of Africa, Eastern Europe, Soviet Asia, Latin America, and the Near East no longer come within any clearly defined sphere of imperial or great-power influence. This means that huge sections of the world's population have won the "right of self-determination" on the cruelest possible terms: they have been simply left to fend for themselves. Not surprisingly, their nation-states are collapsing, as in Somalia and in many other nations of Africa. In crucial zones of the world, once heavily policed by empire—notably the Balkans—populations find themselves without an imperial arbiter to appeal to. Small wonder, then, that unrestrained by stronger hands, they have set upon each other for that final settling of scores so long deferred by the presence of empire.

Globalism in a post-imperial age permits a post-nationalist consciousness only for those cosmopolitans who are lucky enough to live in the wealthy West. It has brought chaos and violence for the many small peoples too weak to establish defensible states of their own. The Bosnian Muslims are perhaps the most dramatic example of a people who turned in vain to more powerful neighbors to protect them. The people of Sarajevo were true cosmopolitans, fierce believers in ethnic heterogeneity. But they lacked either a reliable imperial protector or a state of their own to guarantee peace among contending ethnicities.

What has happened in Bosnia must give pause to anyone who believes in the virtues of cosmopolitanism. It is only too apparent that cosmopolitanism is the privilege of those who can take a secure nation-state for granted. Though we have passed into a post-imperial age, we have not moved to a post-nationalist age, and cannot see how we will ever do so. The cosmopolitan order of the great cities—London, Los Angeles, New York, Paris—depends critically on the rule-enforcing capacities of the nation-state. When this order breaks down, as it did during the Los Angeles riots of 1992, it becomes apparent that civilized, cosmopolitan multi-ethnic cities have as great a propensity for ethnic warfare as any Eastern European country.

In this sense, therefore, cosmopolitans like myself are not beyond the nation-state, and a cosmopolitan, post-nationalist spirit will always depend, in the end, on the capacity of nation states to provide security and civility for their citizens. In that sense alone, I am a civic nationalist, someone who believes in the necessity of nations and in the duty of citizens to defend the capacity of nations to provide that security and the rights we all need in order to live cosmopolitan lives. At the very least, cosmopolitan disdain and astonishment at the ferocity with which people will fight to win a nation-state of their own is misplaced. They are, after all, only fighting for a privilege cosmopolitans have long taken for granted.

## SIX JOURNEYS

There is only so much that can be said about nationalism in general. It is not one thing in many disguises but many things in many disguises; nationalist principles can have dreadful consequences in one place, and innocuous or positive ones in another place. Context is all. I wanted to see nationalism in as many of its guises



as possible. But where was I to go?

The itinerary I chose was personal, but, I hoped, not arbitrary. I chose places I had lived in, cared about, and knew enough about to believe that they could illustrate certain central themes.

I began my journey in Yugoslavia, because I had lived there for two years as a child and knew it well enough in Tito's heyday to be astonished that it should have been the place where the infamous phrase "ethnic cleansing" was coined. The thirty-five years of Tito's rule did not seem to me just an interlude of peace in an interminable history of Balkan inter-ethnic warfare. In the Yugoslavia I had loved Croats, Serbs, and Muslims had lived as neighbors. What, then, had turned neighbors into enemies? How exactly had nationalist paranoia torn apart the structure of inter-ethnic accommodation and produced the new order of partitioned, ethnically homogeneous states?

My next journey was to Germany, the nation which both invented ethnic nationalism under the Romantics and then disgraced it under Hitler, and which now is struggling to contain ethnic nationalism in its modern Western European form: the white racist youth gang. Postwar Germany thinks of itself as a civic democracy, yet its citizenship laws remain defined by ethnicity. It is the society in Europe most tormented by the choice between succumbing to its ethnic nationalist past and building a civic nationalist future.

Of the fifteen successor states of the Soviet empire, Ukraine is the largest: a nuclear superpower getting its first experience of national independence and discovering how difficult it is to dig itself out of centuries of Russian rule. It was a natural choice of destination for a journey into the ruins of the former Soviet empire. But there was a personal reason for choosing Ukraine. My grandparents and great-grandparents were Russian landowners who owned an estate in Ukraine. What better way, I thought, to explore the deep interpenetration of Ukrainian and Russian identity than to return to that estate and to see how my ancestors were now remembered in a new state.

The same personal agenda led me to choose Quebec, where those same Russian grandparents ended their lives in exile. The nationalism I know best, the one that has torn my country—Canada—apart for thirty years, is Quebecois. Here is a nationalism in a modern, developed, and democratic society, a demand for cultural and linguistic self-determination that raises a fundamental issue—equal relevant to Scotland and Catalonia—if you already are a nation and enjoy substantial autonomy, why do you need an independent state of your own?

Since nationalism is so often called a form of tribalism, Quebec also offered an opportunity to observe how tribal and national consciousness interact among an aboriginal people of northern Quebec, the Cree, who have adopted the language of national self-determination to confront Quebec's plans for economic development in the north. How, in turn, do Quebec nationalists confront a nationalist challenge within?

As a Crimean Tatar nationalist told me in Ukraine, only a man who has no mother knows what a mother means. Only a man without a state knows what a nation-state means. Of the many stateless peoples in the world—from the Crimean

Tatars to the Palestinians—the most numerous are the Kurds. The creation of the Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq, by the Gulf War armies of the West, allowed me to see for myself how limited autonomy and self-rule have transformed a people who have never had a home of their own. In the Kurdish struggle for a homeland they have had to fight against four of the most virulent secular and religious nationalisms of the twentieth century: Kemal Ataturk's Turkey, the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and Hafez Assad's Syria. Can their own national struggle finally bring the Kurds together? In other words, can nationalism create a nation?

My final journey took me back to consider the fraying national identity of my adopted country, the British Isles. Where better to observe this identity under stress than in the streets of Belfast, where for seventy-five years the Protestant Loyalist community has been defending its right to be British against the most violent nationalist movement in Western Europe, the IRA? What exactly is Loyalism loyal to? Is it a cargo cult of Britishness, or is it a mirror in which the British can see the distorted image of who they really are? Coming home to the fierce Britishness of Ulster allowed me to confront the central conceit that cosmopolitans everywhere, and the British in particular, have about the tide of ethnic nationalism destroying the fixed landmarks of the Cold War world: everyone else is a fanatic, everyone but us is a nationalist. If patriotism, as Samuel Johnson remarked, is the last refuge of a scoundrel, so post-nationalism and its accompanying disdain for the nationalist emotions of others may be the last refuge of the cosmopolitan.

# SIX JOURNEYS

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# CROATIA AND SERBIA

## THE ANCIEN REGIME

Wild strawberries were served in a silver cup at breakfast, I remember, followed by hot rolls with apricot jam. The dining room looked over the lake, and when the window was open you could feel the mountain air sweeping across the water across the white linen tablecloth and then across your face.

The hotel was called the Toplice, on the shores of Lake Bled, in Slovenia. The diplomatic corps spent the summer there, in attendance upon the dictator who took up residence across the lake. My father, like the other diplomats, came to gossip and take the waters. Every morning, he bathed in the heated pool beneath the hotel. I played tennis, ate wild strawberries, rowed on the lake, and conceived a passion for an unapproachable Swedish girl of twelve. Such are my *ancien régime* memories, and they are from Communist Yugoslavia.

I remember an evening listening from the bottom of our dining room as the then foreign minister, Koča Popović, suavely smoked cigarettes in an ivory holder and told how his partisan unit had “liquidated the Chetniks,” the Serbs who had fought on Hitler’s side at the end of the war. I had never heard the word “liquidated” used like that before.

It was obvious, even to me, that the Communist elite had won power not merely by defeating a foreign invader but by winning a vicious civil war. The reality of Tito’s police state was just as obvious. We lived in Dedinje, a hillside suburb overlooking Belgrade, only several hundred meters from Tito’s residence. Wherever you walked, there were men in plain clothes, strolling about and whispering into walkietalkies. Tito himself was the hidden god of the whole system. With his sleekly groomed hair, permanent suntan, shiny silk suit, and black onyx ring on his finger, he resembled nothing so much, my father said, as a prosperous south German refrigerator salesman.



Obviously, he was more imaginative and sinister than that. I remember how, on a cruise in the Adriatic, my parents kept hiding a book from the crew, stowing it under their bunk, locking it in their luggage. The book turned out to be Milovan Djilas's *The New Class*. Djilas, Tito's companion in arms, was still in Tito's jail for denouncing his dictatorial tendencies.

We traveled everywhere in the Yugoslavia of the late 1950s—through Bosnia's hill villages, where children swarmed up to the car, barefoot and in rags; to the great mosque of Sarajevo, where I removed my shoes and knelt and watched old men pressing their foreheads on the carpets and whispering their prayers; to the Dalmatian islands and beaches, then unvisited by Western tourists; to Lake Bled in Slovenia. Parts of southern Serbia, central Bosnia, and western Herzegovina were so poor that it was not clear how ordinary people survived at all. Ljubljana and Zagreb, by contrast, were neat, prosperous Austro-Hungarian towns that seemed to have nothing in common with the bony, bare hinterlands of central Yugoslavia.

At the time, all expression of economic resentment, together with nationalistic consciousness itself, came under Tito's ban. The society marched forward willingly or unwillingly, under the banner of "brotherhood and unity." To call yourself a Croat or Serb first and a Yugoslav second was to risk arrest as a nationalist and chauvinist.

I had no idea how complicated and ambiguous the division between national and Yugoslav identity actually was. I knew, for example, that Metod, my tennis coach in Bled, always called himself, first and foremost, a Slovenian. I remember him saying bitterly that he hated serving in the Yugoslav National Army, because both he and his brother were ragged by the Serbs for being Slovene.

Was that the only time I saw the cracks that were to become fissures? I think so. For everywhere else I remember people who told me, happily, that they were Yugoslavs. In retrospect, I see that was there at the most hopeful moment. Tito was still lionized for having kept the country out of Stalin's empire; there were the first signs of the economic boom of the 1960s; soon to come was the liberalization of travel, which allowed millions of Yugoslavs to work abroad and for a time made Yugoslavia the freest of all the Eastern European Communist countries.

I hold on to my *ancien régime* memories. Everyone now says the descent into hell was inevitable. Nothing seemed less likely at the time. My childhood tells me that nothing is inevitable: that is what makes what did happen tragic.

## THE NARCISSISM OF MINOR DIFFERENCE

As Balkan nationalists tell it, their history is their fate. Croats will explain, for example, that the root cause of the bloodshed in the Balkans is that they are “essentially” Catholic, European, and Austro-Hungarian in origin, while Serbs are “essentially” Orthodox, Byzantine, and Slav, with an added tinge of Turkish cruelty and indolence. The Sava and Danube Rivers, which serve as borders between Croatia and Serbia, once demarcated the boundary between the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires.

If this historical fault line is emphasized often enough, the conflict between Serbs and Croats can be read off as inevitable. Yet it is not how the past dictated to the present but how the present manipulates the past that is decisive in the Balkans.

Freud once argued that the smaller the real difference between two people, the larger it was bound to loom in their imagination. He called this effect the narcissism of minor difference. Its corollary must be that enemies need each other to remind themselves of who they really are. A Croat, thus, is someone who is not a Serb. A Serb is someone who is not a Croat. Without hatred of the other, there would be no clearly defined national self to worship and adore.

In Croatia, Franjo Tudjman’s ruling HDZ (Croatian Democratic Alliance) party presents itself as a Western-style political movement on the model of the Bavarian Christian Democrats. Actually, the Tudjman state resembles the Serbian regime of Slobodan Milošević much more than either resembles anything on the Western European parliamentary model. They are both post-Communist one-party states, democratic only in the sense that their leaders’ power derives from their skill as manipulators of popular emotion.

An outsider is struck, not by the differences between Serbs and Croats, but by how similar they seem to be. They both speak the same language, give or take a few hundred words, and have shared the same village way of life for centuries. While one is Catholic, the other Orthodox, urbanization and industrialization have reduced the salience of confessional differences. Nationalist politicians on both sides took the narcissism of minor difference and turned it into a monstrous fabrication according to which their own side appeared as blameless victims, the other side as genocidal killers. All Croats became Ustashe assassins; all Serbs became Chetnik beasts. Such rhetorical preliminaries, needless to say, were an essential precondition of the slaughter that followed.

Yet what remains truly difficult to understand about the Balkan tragedy is how such nationalist lies ever managed to take root. For ordinary people know that they are lies: all Croats are not Ustashe; all Serbs are not Chetniks. Even as they use these phrases, people know they are not true. It cannot be repeated too often that these people were neighbors, friends, and spouses, not inhabitants of

different ethnic planets.

A nationalist minority on both sides went to work on their deeply intertwined common past, persuading all and sundry, including outsiders, that Serbs and Croats have been massacring each other since time immemorial. History has no such lesson to teach. In fact, the protagonists were kept apart for much of the past, in separate empires and kingdoms. It was only the assassination of Croatian politicians in the Parliament in Belgrade in 1928 that set off the slide into ethnic warfare during the Second World War. While the present conflict is certainly a continuation of the civil war of 1941-45, this explains little, for one still has to account for the nearly fifty years of ethnic peace in between. It was not merely a truce. Even sworn enemies on either side still cannot satisfactorily explain why they broke down.

Moreover, it is a fallacy to regard either this war or the civil war of 1941-45 as the product of some uniquely Balkan viciousness. All the delusions that have turned neighbors into enemies are imports of Western European origin. Modern Serbian nationalism dates back to an impeccably Byronic style of national uprising against the Turks. Likewise, the nineteenth-century Croatian nationalist ideology Ante Starčević derived the idea of an ethnically pure Croatian state indirectly from the German Romantics. The misery of the Balkans stems in part from a pathetic longing to be good Europeans—that is, to import the West's murderous ideological fashions. These fashions proved fatal in the Balkans because national unification could be realized only by ripping apart the plural fabric of Balkan village life in the name of the violent dream of ethnic purity.

Likewise, even genocide in the Balkans is not a local specialty but an importation from the grand Western European tradition. Ante Pavelić's wartime Ustashe regime, which Serbs mistakenly regard as the true face of Croatian nationalism, couldn't have lasted a day in office without the backing of the German Nazi regime, not to mention the tacit approval of that eminent European authority the Catholic Church.

In sum, therefore, we are making excuses for ourselves when we dismiss the Balkans as a sub-rational zone of intractable fanaticism. And we are ending the search for explanation just when it should begin if we assert that local ethnic hatreds were so rooted in history that they were bound to explode into national violence. On the contrary, these people had to be transformed from neighbors into enemies.

Thomas Hobbes would have understood Yugoslavia. What Hobbes would have said, having lived through religious civil war himself, is that when people are sufficiently afraid, they will do anything. There is one type of fear more devastating in its impact than any other: the systemic fear that arises when a state begins to collapse. Ethnic hatred is the result of the terror that arises when legitimate authority disintegrates.

Tito achieved the national unification of each of the six major south Slavic peoples. He understood that a federal state was the only peaceful means to satisfy the national aspirations of each people. For each ethnic group to unify on its own they would each have had to initiate the forcible deportation of populations. A

much as a quarter of both the Croat and Serb populations have always lived outside the borders of their republics. Tito created an intricate ethnic balance which, for example, reduced Serbian influence at the heart of the federal system in Belgrade, while promoting Serbs to positions of power in Croatia.

Tito's containment of nationalism, built as it was on a personal dictatorship, could never have survived beyond his death. Even by the early 1970s, his socialist rhetoric of "brotherhood and unity" was falling on deaf ears. In 1974, he compromised with nationalism, allowing the republics greater autonomy in the new constitution. By the end of his reign, the League of Communists, instead of counterbalancing the ethnic clientism among the elites in the republics, was itself fragmenting along ethnic lines.

This fragmentation was inevitable given Tito's failure to allow the emergence of a civic, rather than ethnic-based, multi-party competition. Had Tito allowed citizens' politics in the 1960s or 1970s, a non-ethnic principle of political affiliation might have taken root. Tito always insisted his was a Communism with a difference. In the end, his regime was no different from the other Communist autocracies of Eastern Europe. By failing to allow a plural political culture to mature, Tito ensured that the fall of his regime turned into the collapse of the entire state structure. In the ruins, his heirs and successors turned to the most atavistic principles of political mobilization in order to survive.

If Yugoslavia no longer protected you, perhaps your fellow Croats, Serbs or Slovenes might. Fear, more than conviction, made unwilling nationalists of ordinary people. But most people did not want it to happen; most people knew, they drew back for a second, that rushing to the protection of their ethnic group would only hasten the disintegration of their common life.

Ethnic difference per se was not responsible for the nationalistic politics that emerged in the Yugoslavia of the 1980s. Consciousness of ethnic difference turned into nationalist hatred only, when the surviving Communist elites, beginning with Serbia, began manipulating nationalist emotions in order to climb to power.

This is worth emphasizing, since most outsiders assume that all Balkan people are incorrigibly nationalistic. In fact, many people bitterly lament the passing of Yugoslavia, precisely because it was a state that once gave them room to define themselves in non-nationalist ways. In a poignant and bitter essay, "Overcome by Nationhood," the Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulić describes how, until the late 1980s, she had always defined herself in terms of her education, profession, gender, and personality. It was only the maddened atmosphere of the Croatian-Serbian war of 1991 that finally stripped her of all of these defining marks of identity except simply being a Croatian. What is true of an intellectual cannot be less true of village people. The nationalist language games of the elite only appeared to give a voice to their fear and their pride. In reality, nationalism ended up imprisoning everyone in the Balkans in the fiction of "pure" ethnic identity. Those with multiple identities—for example, from mixed marriages—were forced to choose between inherited and adopted families, and thus between two fused elements of their own selves.



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