

The Culture of Lies

1

Dark Beginning

1950s
I.

I was born in the fifth decade of the twentieth century, four years after the end of the Second World War. I was born in Yugoslavia, in a small industrial town not far from Zagreb, the main city of the Republic of Croatia. Many children were born in those years. The country which had been devastated by war was rapidly building its future. According to my mother, in my second year I developed vitamin deficiency. However, in my fifth year I tasted my first orange and was given my first doll, which I myself remember quite clearly. From that first orange on, with each day life confirmed its unstoppable march into a better future.

2.

When I went to school, I learned that Yugoslavia was a country which consisted of six republics and two autonomous regions, six national communities and several national minorities. I learned that there were in Yugoslavia several linguistic communities, and that in addition to Slovene and Macedonian, and the languages of national minorities – Albanian, Hungarian, Romany, Italian and others – there was Croato-Serbian or Serbo-Croatian, or just Croatian and Serbian, the language spoken, in different variants, in Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia. I learned that Yugoslavia had three large religious communities – Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim – and a lot of smaller ones. I learned that Yugoslavia was a small, beautiful country in the hilly Balkans. I learned that I must preserve brotherhood and unity like the apple of my eye. This was some kind of slogan, whose true meaning I did not really understand. I was probably confused by the poetic image *apple of my eye*.

Dialects

3.

When I was a little older, everything I had learned was shown to be true, especially the beauty of the country in the hilly Balkans. In my first documents, where I had to fill in 'nationality' I wrote

'Yugoslav'. I grew up within an ideological framework which historians and political scientists call 'Titoism'.

Titoism presupposed (false or real) *internationalism* (even when he, Tito, went travelling and we looked in wonder at the newspaper photographs of his distant travels). On the level of ordinary life, this ideological notion had such a powerful effect that my parents agreed to adopt two children from the Congo. I remember how impatiently I awaited the arrival of my 'brothers' from the Congo, who for some reason I no longer remember never arrived.

Then, Titoism meant (false or real) *brotherhood and unity* (that was the most popular Yugo-ideologeme), which resulted in a common Yugoslav cultural space. On the level of everyday life, things were far simpler: the first boy to kiss me was called Bobo, he came from Zaječar, and the kiss occurred on the bank of a river whose name I no longer remember, but it was in brotherly Serbia.

In addition, Titoism meant (real or false) *anti-Stalinism*, which on the level of culture meant a break with the in any case short-lived socialist-realism, and on the level of life and death for a time Goli Otok, the Yugoslav Gulag. On the level of daily life things were simpler: my childhood culture consisted of Greek myths, stories about brave partisans and Hollywood films. My childhood idol was Audie Murphy, the hero of American Westerns. American films were the most effective and cheapest propaganda support for Tito's famous NO to Stalin.

4.

I grew up in a culture that quickly adopted values: from Italian shoes to cult writers. Once I attended a literary evening where there was a well-known American writer. The collective complex of a small nation was immediately activated in the home-bred audience. 'Do you know Ivo Andrić, Miroslav Krleža, Danilo Kiš,' my countrymen asked with the cordial politeness of good waiters. 'No,' said the American writer calmly. 'What about Milan Kundera?' asked someone in the audience hastily. 'Of course,' said the American writer. The audience sighed contentedly. At that moment they were all prepared to swear that Kundera was *our* writer. They were all ready to swear that our country was called *Yugoslovakia*, just so long as Kundera could be that. *Our* writer.

5.

I grew up in a culture that was proud of keeping step with the Western world, although – however unlikely it may sound to a Western reader, and to our own countrymen, suffering from collective amnesia – some things at home could be artistically more interesting than what was happening abroad. That is why I listened with the deep understanding of an 'Easterner' and the benign scepticism of a 'Westerner' to a Russian colleague who told me a few years ago with sincere 'perestroika' enthusiasm: 'Come, you'll see, we've got postmodernism till it's coming out of our ears! It's only soap we're short of!'

6.

I grew up in a multinational, multicultural and monoideological community that had a future. I was not interested in politics. My parents taught me nothing about it. The words 'religion', 'people', 'nationality', or even 'communism' and 'the party' meant nothing to me. I only ever wrote one 'political' sentence (and I stole that from a child): 'I love my country because it's small and I feel sorry for it.'



7.

I lived surrounded by books and friends. I simply could not understand my mother who, about ten years ago, for some unknown reason, began sighing: 'If only there isn't a war, everything will be all right, if only there isn't a war.' I was irritated by that sighing without evident cause, I attributed her anxiety to old age. The only associations that the word 'war' could conjure up in my head were the popular children's cartoons about Mirko and Slavko, boy-partisans. 'Watch out, Mirko! There's a bullet. Thanks, Slavko!'

8.

That is presumably why, in the autumn of 1991, when I first found myself in a bomb shelter, I felt like an extra in a war film. 'What's on television tonight?' my neighbour, a senile eighty-year-old, asked her daughter. The daughter replied: 'A war has started, mother.' 'Absurd, the film has started,' said the old woman, settling herself comfortably in her chair.

9. Time rolled up into a circle, and exactly fifty years later, in the ninth decade of the twentieth century, a new war began. This time there were no 'wicked Germans, black fascists', the local participants divided the roles between themselves. Thousands of people lost their lives, homes, identity, children, thousands of people became émigrés, refugees and homeless in their own country. The war raged on all fronts, permeated all the pores of life, spilled out of the screens of televisions which were permanently on, out of newspaper reports and photographs. In the fragmented country both real and psychological wars were waged simultaneously. Mortar shells, psychological and real, wiped out people, houses, cities, children, bridges, memory. In the name of the present, a war was waged for the past; in the name of the future, a war against the present. In the name of a new future, the war devoured the future. Warriors, the masters of oblivion, the destroyers of the old state and builders of new ones, used every possible strategic method to impose a collective amnesia. The self-proclaimed masters of life and death set up the coordinates of right and wrong, black and white, true and false.

10.

And everything existed simultaneously: some were dying for their homeland, others were killing and looting in its name; some were losing their homes, others acquiring them; some were losing their identity, others maintained that they had at last found theirs; some became ambassadors, others cripples; some died, others began at last to live. Everything fused in one moment, everything became blatantly and shamelessly simultaneous. At the same moment life and death took on the most varied forms.

11.

Some soldiers asked to be sent back to the front: they claimed that, for all the shelling, life in the trenches was more peaceful. Others, who had escaped from Sarajevo, sought ways of returning: they maintained that life was more human in Sarajevo. Peaceful cities have lived an invisible hell. Out of their brittle confidence, they have produced hatred without realising that their hatred prolongs the real war. The quantity of evil heaped on the innocent in Sarajevo has spilled over like radioactive poison.

Without realising it everyone has received a dose of radiation. Cities, towns, villages have been like laboratories. Without realising it people were participating in an invisible experiment.

12.

If they are denied food, after a while rats begin first to eat their own young, and then each other. We have all been deprived of food: our past, present and future. There was no future because it had already happened. It happened because, in its own way, the past had repeated itself.

13.

In the spring of 1993, when I was sitting with some friends in a restaurant in Antwerp, a little Gypsy girl came up to our table selling bunches of roses. 'Where are you from?' I asked. 'I'm Yugoslav, a Gypsy,' replied the little girl. 'There's no more Yugoslavia,' I said. 'You have to be from somewhere, maybe you're from Macedonia.' 'I'm a Yugoslav, I'm a Gypsy,' repeated the little girl tenaciously.

The Yugoslav Gypsies who have scattered all over Europe are the only remaining Yugoslavs today, it seems, and the left-over ex-Yugoslavs have in the meantime become homeless, exiles, refugees, countryless, excommunicated, new nomads, in a word – Gypsies.

14.

'I don't know who I am any more, or where I'm from, or where I belong,' said my mother once as we ran down to the cellar, in panic at the air-raid warning. Although I now have Croatian citizenship, when someone asks me who I am I repeat my mother's words: 'I don't know who I am any more ...' Sometimes I say: 'I am a post-Yugoslav, a Gypsy.'

15.

In September 1993, when I myself joined the new European nomads, a journey late at night in the local Munich–Tutzing train threw up a scene, the real author of which could have been Milan Kundera. At one of the stations a man battling with a large framed picture got into the compartment and sat down opposite me. The man was a little tipsy, he was muttering something, fiddling with the picture, not knowing how to put it down. On

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the picture was a portrait, or touched-up colour photograph, of an important man in uniform.

'Who's that?' I asked.

'Someone . . . who played an important part in my life . . .' mumbled my companion.

'A general?'

'Someone . . . from Chile . . .'

'He looks more like a Russian general to me . . .'

'He's not Russian . . .'

'Then who is it?'

'Klement Gottwald,' said my companion resignedly. The resignation referred to his absolute conviction that I, a passenger in the late night Munich-Tutzing train, wouldn't know who Klement Gottwald was.

'Oh, Klement Gottwald!'

'How do you know about Klement Gottwald?' said my companion in amazement.

'From a novel by Kundera!' I cried, remembering the episode with the photograph of the communist leader Klement Gottwald on the balcony.

'The one with Clementis's fur hat on his head . . .' I added, sinking further into my own foolish associations. But my fellow passenger livened up. He was a Czech, of course. He had been living in Germany for twenty-five years already, he had got the picture, he said, for his children, he had to explain the history of his emigration to them.

'And then we'll spray over him . . . We'll spray him!' he called gaily as he got off the train.

As I watched the man battling with his picture on the empty platform, it occurred to me that some cruel insults do not fade even after twenty-five years. From the perspective of the one insulted, of course. From the perspective of the observer, they are simply a barely comprehensible quotation from a novel read long ago.

16.

The texts in this book have grown out of a similar, deep sense of insult, even when they do not mention its origin. My fellow passenger's twenty-five-year-long personal nightmare is over, named and framed. My nightmare is still going on, it is different in kind and it cannot be put in a frame.

From the perspective of a distant reader (a passenger in a night

train on some European line), my texts do not exceed the significance of a small footnote to events in Europe at the end of the twentieth century. But even when they are read from the closest possible perspective these texts still do not exceed the significance and extent of a personal footnote to a time of war in a country which no longer exists. My texts do not speak of the war itself, they are rather concerned with life on its edge, a life in which little is left for the majority of people. For writers – insofar as they do not become presidents, warmongers, patriot-profiters and sales agents of other people's misfortune – the only thing left, it seems, is self-defence by footnote.