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## St. Vitus' Day Among Slovenes

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National holidays play an important role in the formation of common memories of the past, as they are the very sign that marks historical events and figures that must be known to all citizens, thereby establishing the symbolic unity of all the members of the nation. The holidays of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes emphasized the national unity of the ‘three tribes’, and St. Vitus’ Day was thus added to the otherwise short list. At the beginning of December 1919, the Minister of the Interior of the newly formed national state of the ‘nation with three names’ declared three new national holidays: 1 December as the ‘day of the unification of our „nation with three names”’; St. Peter’s Day on 12 July as the birthday of King Peter I.; and St. Vitus’ Day on 28 June as a ‘day of commemoration for those who had died fighting for the faith and the homeland’. The use of Serbian symbols and cultural forms in commemorations in the new nation-state meant that the commemorations in the state of the ‘nation with three names’ glorified the Serbian sacrifices and suffering, but denied the contribution of Croats and Slovenes to the establishment of the state community. Together with the provisions and spirit of the St. Vitus’ Day Constitution, the glorification of Serbian mythology as the national mythology of the ‘nation with three names’, which was meant to be the foundation stone for the bright future of the unified nation, became more and more of a stumbling stone with each passing day.

**Keywords:** Nation with Three Names (Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes); National holidays; the Politics of Commemoration; Religion and Nation-State; St. Vitus Day; St. Vitus Day’s Heroes and Villains

National holidays play an important role in the formation of common memories of the past, as they are the very sign that marks historical events and figures that must be known to all citizens, thereby establishing the symbolic unity of all the members of the national. The special significance they have for the community is expressed through mass gatherings, by hanging flags and by playing the national anthem. Holiday festivities are

held in the central squares of capitals or in front of public monuments, emphasizing the unity of the nation and strengthening national pride (Elgenius 2007: 79).

The holidays of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes emphasized the national unity of the „three tribes”, and St. Vitus’ Day was thus added to the otherwise short list. At the beginning of December 1919, the Minister of the Interior of the newly formed national state of the „nation with three names” declared three new national holidays: 1 December as the „day of the unification of our «nation with three names»”; St. Peter’s Day on 12 July as the birthday of King Peter I.; and St. Vitus’ Day on 28 June as a „day of commemoration for those who had died fighting for the faith and the homeland”. In accordance with the Ministerial Declaration, schools were to be closed and all work was to be halted on these days (Anon. 1919e: 444). Among the new national holidays, St. Vitus’ Day held the most emotional and shocking historical memory. St. Vitus’ Day had long been considered to be a particularly fateful day in Serbian history: in 1389, it had been the day on which the fateful Battle of Kosovo had taken place; in 1914, in Sarajevo, Gavrilo Princip had assassinated the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Franz Ferdinand, and his wife, which had led to the First World War<sup>1</sup> in 1919, the Treaty of Versailles was signed; and on 28 June 1921, King Alexander I had promulgated the new constitution of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, known later as the Constitution of St. Vitus’ Day. In the years between the two World Wars, tens of thousands of St. Vitus’ Day celebrations were held throughout the Kingdom, with King Alexander himself attending numerous ceremonies (Bokovoy 2001: 251).

St. Vitus’ Day was originally an Orthodox religious holiday celebrated in remembrance of St. Prince Lazar and the Serbian martyrs who had given their lives defending the faith in the Battle of Kosovo. According to Dušan Nikolajević, St. Vitus’ Day was the Serbian „Great Friday” (Nikolajević 1939: 26). It retained its religious significance even after becoming a national holiday. In Ljubljana, requiems (parastos) „for the fallen heroes of

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<sup>1</sup> That it is no coincidence that the assassination had been carried out on this date is proved by the fact that Nedeljko Čabrinović, one of the accomplices, was later found to be in possession of copies of the Serbian *Narod*, including a holiday issue on St. Vitus’ Day (Anon. 1914b: 3).

Kosovo and all those who fought for the liberation and unification of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes" were first held at the Orthodox chapel of the Duke Mišić Barracks until 1937, when they were moved to the new Saint Cyril and Methodius Orthodox Church.

The solemn requiems also took place in Catholic churches in remembrance of all those „from our midst" who

sacrificed their lives while defending our religious and patriotic ideals between the long-past Turkish times and the last World War, when our boys and our men died on Calvary Hill, the Karst Plateau, Holy Mountain and Saint Gabriel, standing of their own free will not in the service of imperialists and capitalists, but in the service of their homeland, which they defended against the invasion of the Italian „sacro egoismo". St. Vitus' Day begins in our villages with a prayer, so this day is dear and sacred to our people (Anon. 1922a: 1).

The close intertwinement of secular and (Christian) religious authority was also noticeable in the fact that religious ceremonies were attended by representatives of military and civil authorities, even in Catholic and Evangelical churches throughout the country of Slovenia. In Ljubljana, the ceremonial requiems were conducted on many occasions over a period of twenty years by Prince Bishop Dr. Gregorij Rožman with the assistance of a number of priests.

The Muslim religious community was excluded for most of the time. In 1923, the State Minister of Religion, Dr. Vojislav Janić, issued an edict in accordance with which Muslims were not obligated to perform „any sort of prayers in their mosques (Turkish churches), but need only to close their stores and not send their children to school" on the 24 May holiday of St. Cyril and Methodius and on St. Vitus' Day, as Muslims cannot hold requiems for non-Muslims (Anon. 1923c: I).

After 1929, when King Alexander signed and promulgated the law on national holidays for civil servants, St. Vitus' Day was no longer a national holiday. In addition to the religious holidays, the new law recognized only two national holidays, namely the King's Birthday and Unification Day. The law stipulated that services be held in churches on St. Vitus' Day in remembrance of the fallen war heroes and also that national flags be flown on the buildings of all state and self-governing bodies as well as all public sector buildings, including town and city halls (Anon. 1929: 2).

### **The Nation State of the „Nation with Three Names”**

In the period before the World War, the Kingdom of Serbia had participated in two Balkan Wars (1912 and 1913), emerging victorious from both and nearly doubling its territory (from a surface area of 48,000 km<sup>2</sup> to a surface area of 87,000 km<sup>2</sup>), so that it encompassed a good third of the later established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Of even greater value than the territorial gains, however, was the „satisfaction that the entire nation felt having, after more than 500 years, finally avenged Kosovo and freed the last Serb from Turkish rule” (Kranjec 1927: 248). Its success in the Balkan Wars and its glorious victory in the World War greatly improved the reputation of the Kingdom of Serbia among the Slavic population of southern Austria-Hungary; they saw in it a hope for attaining their national freedom:

And therefore, we Slovenes, were also set free, not so much due to our own efforts, but mainly owing to the triumphant arms of the allies – the glorious arms of Serbia and the martyr-like self-sacrifice of the Serbian nation and the work of the „Yugoslav Committee in London” (Zupanič 1922: 2; see also Govekar 1922: 1).

As the unification of the „nation with three names” was predominantly the result of Serbian heroism and selflessness, it was somehow logical for Serbs to contribute their symbolic national holiday, which was to support „our developing unified Yugoslav, i.e. Serbian, Croatian and Slovene, national consciousness” (Anon. 1934: 1).

Upon the establishment of the Italian nation state, Massimo d’Azeglio said: „Ora che l’Italia è fatta, bisogna pensare a fare gl’Italiani!” („Now that Italy has been made, we must make Italians!”). What he had meant by this, as Aleš Ušeničnik explained in his essay on the Yugoslav question, is that the difference between the north and the south of Italy had been „so great in every respect that multiple nations could have been formed” (Ušeničnik 1914: 296).

Around half a century later than Germany and Italy, the nation state of South Slavs was formed as the first common state of „the nation of one blood and language, one soul and one heart”, as it was described by the National Council of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs in a statement published on 21 October 1918 (Korošec, Pavelić and Pribičević 1918: 1). The estab-

lishment of the nation state of the „nation with three names” raised the question of the identity of the citizens. The first obstacle on this path was the very name of the unified nation. Two points of view were formed on this subject. The Serbian government, headed by Nikola Pašić, „our Cavour”, as Franjo Supilo called him (Kazimirović 1990: 446), supported the view that the countries of the former Austria-Hungarian Empire had been annexed to the Kingdom of Serbia, just as six *nahiyas* had been annexed during the time of Prince Miloš, the Province of Niš in 1878 and Old Serbia (Kosovo) and South Serbia (Vardar Macedonia) in 1913 (Trumbić 1923: 6–7; prim. Kazimirović 1990: 434–43; Suppan 2003: 116). According to this view, the new country was to be named Serbia (Zrnić 1927: 4). As reported in „Jutro”, Pašić explained at the assembly of the trustees of the Radical Party in Belgrade on 14 February 1923, that upon the establishment of the new nation state, he had thought it appropriate for the country to be named Serbia, „because the Serbian tribe is the strongest and had fought for freedom for centuries, finally emerging victorious through the help of its allies, which led to the unification of all three tribes” (Anon. 1923a: 2). Still others wanted to use the name Yugoslavia and refused to adopt the name of the „big brother” as their own, and thus the new nation state received its triple name (Dulibić et al. 1921: 3; Anon. 1923a: 2; Trumbić 1923: 6–7).

The first constitution of the unified state, passed on St. Vitus' Day in 1921, adopted the triple name of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. With it, the „unification of all three Yugoslav tribes into a unified state entity” gained its legal foundations, and „Serbian-Croatian-Slovene” was declared as its official language. Supporters of the national unity of the „nation with three names” welcomed the adoption of the constitution enthusiastically. Upon its adoption, the daily „Jutro” reported enthusiastically that with it, St. Vitus' Day, for the first time, appeared as „a milestone marking an important period in the lives of the Yugoslav people”: „Today, the Kosovo St. Vitus' Day of 1389 is avenged and the Sarajevo St. Vitus' Day of 1914 is rewarded” (Anon. 1921: 1). The oldest Slovene daily, *Slovenski Narod*, supported a similar view, writing on the first anniversary of the adoption of the St. Vitus' Day Constitution as follows: „A year ago, the noblest form of vengeance for the first St. Vitus' Day was carried out with

the promulgation of the St. Vitus' Day Constitution, the Magna Carta of the final unification of our complete nation, the beginning of a new Yugoslav history" (Anon. 1922b: 1).

The triple name of the newly formed state was therefore adopted as a compromise, one the political opposition was unwilling to accept, saying that the St. Vitus' Day Constitution established Serbian hegemony within the nation-state (Anon. 1924: 1). In his speech at the National Assembly on 7 June 1923, Ante Trumbić expressed his opinion that „a special concept of the national unity of S-C-S" has formed within the state of the „nation with three names" „with the political aim and principle of the state being governed by the majority, which the minority must obey". In practice, this meant: „Because Serbs constitute the majority, they must run the state, and Croats and Slovenes, as the minority, must submit" (Trumbić 1923: 19).

The political opposition therefore saw the St. Vitus' Day Constitution in an entirely different light. For the „Slovenec", the adoption of a constitution that did not recognize the national individuality of Slovenes, was a day of national tragedy: „On St. Vitus' Day in 1389, Serbs lost their freedom on the Plain of Kosovo. On St. Vitus' Day in 1921, Slovenes and Croats lost their freedom in Belgrade. There is now all the more reason for all three tribes to celebrate St. Vitus' Day" (Anon. 1921: 295).

After the March Revolution in 1848, when the position of the emperor of Austria had weakened, the Catholic Church successfully established its autonomy and strengthened its position as the leading force in the empire (Kovačič 2012: 148–50). The St. Vitus' Day Constitution had taken away the Church's position of privilege, and therefore it strongly opposed the constitution and openly declared that it would fight to regain its former status.

### **Villains of Yesterday, Heroes of Today**

After 1918, the celebration of St. Vitus' Day spread across „the entire unit with three names from Triglav to Ohrid; from the Adriatic to the Timok" (Anon. 1925a: 1). The creators of the nation-state of the „nation with three names" had therefore taken the foundation stones for the formation of a common national consciousness from Serbian images of the past. „Our

tribe has a duty”, ceremonial speaker Fran Saleški Finžgar said, „to celebrate St. Vitus' Day – a duty of gratitude towards our Serbian brothers” (Saleški 1919: 1).

Before the First World War, St. Vitus' Day, „this great Serbian holiday”, was „all too little known” among Slovenes. It was only celebrated by members of Sokol, who had organized their trips on this very day even before the Great War, and 28 June 1914, for example, had been the date of the grand Sokol outing to Ruše (Anon. 1919c: 1). The geopolitical reconfiguration of post-war Europe also brought substantial changes to this. When the pre-war revolutionary slogan of the Yugoslav Youth, „Do Vidova!” (Till St. Vitus'!), turned from a political fantasy into „live flesh”, it was time to form a new country and give it an internal shape. The revolutionary slogan then grew into a „symbol of unity” (Anon. 1925b: 1).

In Ljubljana, public ceremonies in celebration of St. Vitus' Day were first held in 1919 as „a sign of the liberation and unification of the entire Yugoslav nation and therefore, as a national holiday of the entire state of SCS” (Anon. 1919b: 1; 1919d: 3). In the newly formed nation-state, these ceremonies served as a sort of history lesson intended for the widest masses of the members of the „Slovene tribe”. On the night before the holiday, there was an assembly of all the cultural associations of Ljubljana in front of the City Hall, which members attended „to the greatest possible extent dressed in uniforms and carrying flags”; the speaker at the ceremony was a professor of the University of Zagreb, Dr. Fran Ilešič. He spoke of the importance of St. Vitus' Day and its idea,

which has been passed down from generation to generation ever since the defeat of the troops of Prince Lazar on the Plain of Kosovo, encouraging people time and again to take action to realize the great national ideal. The idea that everything, possessions as well as lives, must be sacrificed for the national ideal has been passed on through folk songs to each and every Serb, rooting itself in the very core of his being. It has become the soul of Serbian life and, personified by Prince Marko, has lived on for centuries. Cruel fate has taken Serbian lives and souls, but it has been unable to kill the idea of St. Vitus' Day (Ilešič 1919: II).

Press reported that Ilešič's speech had been met with enthusiastic approval. After the speech, a choir sang the Serbian anthem, *Bože pravde* (*God of Justice*), which the audience listened to with uncovered heads.

After the ceremony was over, the people parted with enthusiastic cries to King Peter and his army.

Because creating citizens is, „to a significant degree, a process of institutionally organized impersonation” (Luke 2002: 13), it was necessary to invent historical events and figures which best represented the „imagined community” as the result of long-standing historical efforts. In the „nation with three names”, the St. Vitus’ Day mythology became such a symbol and was given the task of strengthening social and cultural cohesion through its semantic content and its interpretation. Alexander Karadorđević (heir to the throne and regent 1918–1921, and king 1921–1934) himself was actively involved in the formation of the post-war memory of the Serbian role in the Great War. He personally attended numerous St. Vitus’ Day celebrations and similar commemorations, often appearing as the main speaker. In his addresses, Alexander predominantly spoke of the history of Serbian sacrifice for the establishment of the Yugoslav state (Bokovoy 2001: 248). After the bloody Great War, the people, veteran groups and the nation-state of the „nation with three names” tried to interpret both the people’s heroism and their sacrifice through the images and symbols of the Kosovo myth (see e.g. Anon. 1919a: 1).

The formation of memories of the „common” past of the members of the imagined community of the historical events and figures is an important connecting element. The very selection of the events and personalities that were important for the formation of the common past was closely connected to forgetting, as public forgetting promotes or enacts a dramatically new communal perspective on the past in which former works, words, and deeds undergo radical alteration, losing their previous meaning and authority (Vivian 2010: 59). This means that the villains of yesterday can become the heroes of today, and the heroes of yesterday can turn out to be the villains of today.

The most illustrative example of such a dramatically changed view of the past after 1918 is the image of the Serbian hero, Gavrilo Princip (1894–1918), who was labelled unanimously by Slovene press after the Sarajevo assassination on 28 June 1914 as a criminal who had „lost all reason and human feeling” (Anon. 1914a: 1). At the condolence ceremony organized by the Slovene People’s Party in Ljubljana on 5 July 1914, the Provincial Governor of Carniola of the time, Dr. Ivan Šušteršič, said that „the heavy

fist of the Slovene soldier, the Slovene lad will crush the skull of the megalomaniac Serb" (Lončar 1921: 92). The governor's view was evidently shared by a great majority of the population. After mobilization was ordered, the „Slovenec" reported about „our nation's tremendous enthusiasm for war" (Anon. 1914b: 1).

After the end of the Great War and the defeat of the Central Powers, the Sarajevo assassination grew from a crime into an act of heroism not only in Serbia but throughout the state of the „nation with three names", and Gavrilo Princip and his collaborators became „St. Vitus' Day Heroes". The beginning of 1920 saw the formation of the Committee for the Return of the Bones of the St. Vitus' Day Heroes, which set itself the task of returning the mortal remains of Princip and his colleagues to Sarajevo and bury them ceremoniously with the highest honours. (Committee for the Transport of the Return of the St. Vitus' Day Heroes 1920: I)

### **Symbolic Integration**

With the commemorative ceremonies on national holidays, ruling elites endeavour to shape the symbolic vocabulary of their nation; this process is termed „symbolic integration" (Dabrowski 2004: 215). The goal of the commemorations on St. Vitus' Day anniversaries was therefore the symbolic integration of the members of the „nation with three names". To the greatest extent possible, the symbolic integration of the „nation with three names" drew on the rich treasury of Serbian historical mythology, which, in practice, meant that the public commemorations glorified the Serbian view of the past and disparaged the Slovene (and Croatian) view, thereby exalting Serbs above their „equal brothers", Slovenes and Croats; members of national minorities felt even more underprivileged.

Initially, their discomfort at the recent change, if not their actual opposition to the new political reality, was expressed by not displaying the national tricolour by members of the former German „ruling nation", who had found themselves in the new country in the position of a national minority. Although most of the country celebrations of St. Vitus' Day were „heartfelt", those paying closer attention saw that some regions were „in-

different and in quiet opposition to the Yugoslav nationhood, the inner yearning for freedom and a nation-state which is the essence of St. Vitus' Day. As reported by the „Slovenski Narod” in 1923, there was not a single flag in the whole of Zagreb „adorning the city's exterior and testifying to the holiday of unification and freedom”. Nor was there any form of expression of inner conviction and enthusiasm for St. Vitus' Day activities to be seen in Bosnian towns, „where Spaho rules”, or in the „rural and clerical” part of Slovenia (Anon. 1923b: 1).

### Conclusion

In the state of the „nation with three names”, St. Vitus' Day mythology was given an important national task: to connect the new national citizens into an imagined community. Its contents and their interpretation were to strengthen the social and cultural cohesion of the citizens and encourage them to sacrifice themselves for the common goals. St. Vitus' Day mythology, established by Prince Bishop Petar Petrović Njegoš and perfected by Prince Nikola, was a product of the pre-modern age (see e.g. Jezernik 2004: 105–6). The sacrifice of the individual for the community was concordant with tribal society ethics, and it was also possible to address the people on the basis of these ethics during the times of expansionist nationalism, when people were still able to believe „that every year on St. Vitus' Day, the Sitnica, the Morava and the Drina run bloody and that this will continue until Kosovo has been avenged and until the shackles of slavery have been completely removed” (Bogosavljević 1897: 99). But it was not possible to build a modern society on it.

Prior to the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, South Slavs never lived in a common state, and thus their „national awakening” had begun decades before the unification into a nation state; on top of that, they had fought in the Great War that had just ended as members of opposing armies on opposing sides of the front. Therefore, the triple name was perceived by many as a mechanism supporting the efforts of the nationalist Serbian Radical Party to turn peasants into Serbs.

After Serbia had annexed the districts of Niš, Pirot and Vranje (with their Bulgarian-speaking population) in 1878, the Serbian government began to turn peasants into Serbs. They did this by changing surnames, namely by substituting the Serbian affix *-ić* for the Bulgarian *-ov*, by carrying out an agrarian reform and introducing Serbian schools and subordinating the Church to the Metropolitan of Belgrade. The result was that in the space of less than twenty years the people forgot their Bulgarian identity and beginning to identify as Serbs. When Vasil Vodovozov visited these counties in 1894 there were no signs of national or religious discontent, for the „uncompromising Bulgarian elements who in any case constituted but an unimportant part of the population” had moved away; the remaining Slavs had already become reconciled to the fact that they were „Serbs” (Vodovozov 1917: 76, 90).

The Serbian government attempted to reuse the formula for the population of South Serbia, as was the official name of the territory of Macedonia, which the Kingdom of Serbia had conquered after the Balkan Wars and regained after the end of the Great War. But the idea of being Serbs was no longer acceptable to the Macedonian population. They were supporters of national unity, „which is not odd at all, for Yugoslavism is here an idea that gathers together, unites, that calms passions and raises faith in the future of the nation”, as Fran Tučan learned during his travels across Macedonia. Someone from Kavadarci explained to Tučan that Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were „old men at their last gasp, as a powerful, strong Yugoslav is being born” (Tučan 1920: 96).

The situation was additionally complicated in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes by the fact that the Croatian and the Slovene national consciousness had been shaped before the establishment of the nation-state of the „nation with three names”. In opposition to the Serbian hegemony, the Catholic Church radically insisted on the equation of nationality and religious affiliation (Kovačič 2012: 157).

The use of Serbian symbols and cultural forms in commemorations in the new nation-state meant that the commemorations in the state of the „nation with three names” glorified the Serbian sacrifices and suffering, but denied the contribution of Croats and Slovenes to the establishment of

the state community. Together with the provisions and spirit of the St. Vitus' Day Constitution, the glorification of Serbian mythology as the national mythology of the „nation with three names”, which was meant to be the foundation stone for the bright future of the unified nation, became more and more of a stumbling stone with each passing day.

The citizens of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes who were unable to identify with the name, such as Albanians, Hungarians, Germans, as well as Bosniaks and Macedonians, were in an even worse position. The position of citizens belonging to the Muslim faith, i.e. „Turks”, was particularly untenable.

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