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LAUGH, NOT WAR: HUMOR, SATIRE AND THE DISSOLUTION OF YUGOSLAVIA

Abstract: The article presents a concise review of political criticism through the medium of humor and satire, at the time of ex-Yugoslavia and during its dissolution. It covers several important magazines and individual authors from ex-Yugoslav republics that, in difficult times for the freedom of speech, have shown dignity and courage to describe, criticize and warn regarding existing nationalisms and the futility of wars.

Today their works have not only artistic but also historical and anthropological importance since they speak, more fluently than the official and often censored history, about the time in which they were created, and the circumstances in which the voices of reason were suppressed.

Keywords: ex-Yugoslavia, humor, satire, political caricatures, socialism, Feral Tribune, Osten

On the 7th of January 2015, 11:30 am., two attackers have violently entered the offices of the French satirical weekly “Charlie Hebdo” in Paris. Carrying firearms and other weapons, they have killed 12 people and wounded 11 more. They identified themselves as members of the Islamic terrorist group Al Qaeda, its Yemen branch, that took upon itself the responsibility for the attack. It was motivated by controversial cartoonist depictions of the prophet Mohamed that the magazine has published previously.

On the 11th of January, a few days after the massacre, two million people, including 40 world leaders, gathered in Paris on a rally for national unity, and 4 million more demonstrated throughout France. *Je Suis Charlie* became a global

slogan for support of the magazine, whose following edition sold 8 million copies in six languages.

One of the persons killed in the massacre was Georges Wolinski, the 80-year old legend of the French satirical tradition, and one of the best European political cartoon artists. Among the numerous information that appeared in the aftermath of the tragic event, there was one saying that in 1994, in the middle of the war in Croatia, he and a few of his collaborators visited their colleagues - satirists - in Split, as a symbolic gesture of support.

The Croatian magazine's name was "Feral Tribune." It was first published in 1983, as a supplement of Weekly Dalmatia. From 1993 it became a separate satirical weekly, declaring itself as an "independent weekly magazine for Croatian anarchists, protesters, and heretics." Its name is an association to the famous Herald Tribune (today The New York Times International Edition), but also a word game - "feral" in Dalmatian dialect, meaning a lamp, and the English "feral," wild or untamed.

The magazine usually included a parodied photo-montage on its cover, sections on book and music, as well as a weekly editorial, interviews, a satirical part named "Feral Tromblon", and last but not least, a section titled "Greatest Shits" - collection of "pearls of wisdom" of Croatian politicians and other celebrities. Founded by three young journalists from Split, Viktor Ivančić, Predrag Lucić, and Boris Dežulović, known under the acronym created as a combination of their family names, Viva ludež ("Long live madness"), they have immediately attracted the attention of the governing structures.

In 1985, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Croatia issued an opinion according to which two aphorisms published in the magazine are marked as "contra revolutionary." Those are: "Our revolution was born in the forests, and thus many trees have used it," and "This is the end of the party, said the gambler and threw the cards on the table."

The controversial nature of the published satiric and other texts drastically increased after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, in the 1990-ties. Feral was one of the first Croatian newspapers that has openly commented upon these topics, that the state-controlled newspapers did not dare to cover, including war crimes made by Croatian soldiers, the participation of the Croatian army in the Bosnian war, the relation between government and the Catholic church, political corruption, etc. A crucial moment in the history of the magazine was the publication of the cover that included digitally manipulated images of Franjo Tuđman, then President of Croatia, and Slobodan Milošević, President of Serbia, depicting the war adversaries as gay lovers. The cover's intention was to criticize the politics that led to the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Photo No. 1: Three cover pages of Feral Tribune during the 1990-ties

The trio Viva Ludež continued its uncompromising journalistic work writing columns for several ex-Yugoslav media. Boris Dežulović and Predrag Lucić have also performed a live satiric cabaret all over the ex-country, including in Skopje, Macedonia. The texts published in “Feral” are considered by many a classic, a chronic of difficult times, but also a lecture for younger generations on how to use humor for political criticism.

This is solely one of the most impressive and radical examples of the utilization of satire and laughter as tools for political commentary, protest, and condemnation in ex-Yugoslavia, and during the turbulent times of its dissolution. During the existence of the “Tito’s country,” which certain historians and commentators describe as “a dictatorship,” there was a higher number of satirical newspapers in the ex-Yugoslav republics than there is today. Among them are Serbian “Jež” and “Čik,” as well as the Macedonian “Osten” with the legendary character Pecko, created by Darko Marković. During these times, there were a number of active cartoonists and authors of satirical texts, such as Pjer Krizanić, Zuko Đumhur, Predrag Korsaksić, Korax (that even today is active as a cartoonist for the Belgrade magazine “Danas”), Dušan Petričić (Belgrade’s “Politika”), Sabahudin Hođić etc. These cartoonists did not have a problem portraying the politicians of the time, including Tito and his nearest collaborators. It seems that freedom of speech, besides the party control, at least in the sphere of satire, was on a high level.



As an illustration of the development of satirical ideas in ex-Yugoslavia, we will use the Macedonian example of the magazine “Osten.” Its publication started by the end of the Second world war, as a satirical supplement of the bulletin of the First Macedonian People’s Liberation Brigade, under the name “Sred pole dzundzule” (“A Flower In the Middle of the Field”). The pioneers of “Osten” during this period were distinguished individuals from the People’s Liberation Army and the later political life of the country, such as Lazar Mojsov, Blaze Koneski, Vlado Maleski, Kiro Hađivasilev and others, that have obviously understood the potential of humor in strengthening the morale and dissemination of the new state’s ideology in the post-war period.

From 1951-1966 “Osten” evolves as a newspaper with sections for humor, satire, and cartoons, but also appears on a new medium - Radio Skopje. During this period, the Association of journalists of Macedonia provides its support for the newspaper, while editor-in-chief is the writer Vlado Maleski. The further development of the newspaper is assisted by many volunteers, among which important writers and intellectuals, such as Slavko Janevski, Pande Jarevski, Vasilie Popović-Cico, Cvetan Stanoevski, Darko Marković, Mile Poposki, Aco Šopov, and others. Until 1968 it forms its professional team, and its first editor-in-chief is Darko Marković.

The team of “Osten” establishes and organizes the World cartoon gallery, a manifestation that, as per December 2018, is still being organized annually.

“Osten”’s form, content, many pages, and frequency varied. First, it was a monthly magazine printed on 100 pages, but often it was a bi-weekly published on the 1st and the 15th of the month. On the 1st of May 1990, it became a weekly magazine, published four times a month. Almost all important names regarding humor, satire, and cartoons in Macedonia appear on the pages of “Osten” during this time. Also, the number of people collaborating on each issue was around 40.

In 2014, as a result of the longitudinal research of political cartoons at the territory of ex-Yugoslavia, an exhibition was organized under the title “Art in dark times.” It included 101 journalistic cartoons that relate to the topic of Yugoslav conflicts, created by authors from different parts of Yugoslavia. Unfortunately, there was no participant from Macedonia. It covered three historical periods: pre-war (1990-1991), the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia (1992-1995), and the conflict in Serbia and Kosovo (1996-2001). The exhibition was mobile and presented in Sarajevo, Zagreb, and Belgrade. The message of its organizers was a protest against nationalistic militarism and political repression.

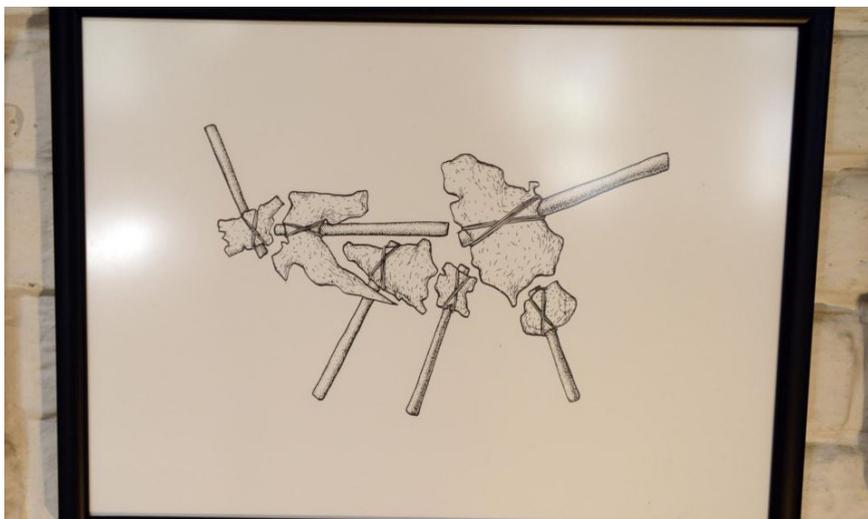


Photo No. 2: Yugoslav Vlahović, cartoon from Nin magazine, Belgrade, 1990

(source, Balkan Insight <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/belgrade-hosts-cartoons-from-dark-times/1463/6>, last visited 14.10.2018)



Photo No. 3: Hasan Fazlić, Nebelsplater, Zurich, 1993

(source, Balkan Insight <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/belgrade-hosts-cartoons-from-dark-times/1463/6>, last visited 14.10.2018)

The included authors have tried, through absurd humor, to warn against the consequences of wars in general, especially of the one that first threatened and then destroyed Yugoslavia. In 1990-ties, in most of the ex-Yugoslav republic, this was also the only way to criticize the governing regime, having in mind all the problems that the authors faced, among which censorship and other forms of pressure.

In an interview with above mentioned Charlie Hebdo cartoonist given before his death, Wolinski says: “According to me, the best satirists in history are always left-wingers. It seems that the lucidity of satire, of humor, is not compatible with any rigid doctrine and fanaticism”.

It is precisely through humor that people during thousands of years have stated truths that their contemporaries, especially the one in power, did not want to hear, or could not hear. Jorge de Burgos, the monk from the Umberto Eco’s novel “The Name of the Rose” and its movie version, who is responsible for the covering up and then the destruction of Aristotle’s second “Poetics” that speaks about the merit of laughter, explains his censorship in the following way: “Laughter kills fear, and without fear there is no faith. Because without fear of the Devil, there is no need of God”. In response, the noble William de Baskerville says: “But you cannot eliminate laughter eliminating the book.”

A part of this article was presented at the international spring school “Ethnography of Socialism,” held in Kriva Palanka, Macedonia, May 2016

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