

## **Borderlands, Cross-Cultural Exchange and Revenge in the Medieval and Early Modern Balkans: Roots of Present Regional Conflicts or Merely a Historical Case-Study?\***

### **Abstract**

The Medieval and Early Modern Balkans was an area of passage, of transition, of multiple borders. We could claim that the entire region was one huge borderland, a war zone or, better put, a buffer zone between areas of interest of various empires, such as the Habsburg lands, Hungarian kingdom, Venetian Republic and, last but not least, the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, this territory was a meeting place of several opposing cultural, political and confessional entities. Therefore, it represents a privileged area for the research of border history and coexistence, intercultural exchange, religious dialogue and intertwining of different civilizational patterns, as well as of specific local contexts, that nevertheless exercise a global meaning. In such a context the research on revenge in the Medieval and Early Modern Balkans rises to a new and to a large extent fundamental importance, although the reasons, consequences and forms of revenge have thus far not yet received appropriate research attention. Namely, revenge was arguably one of the most important factors of social and cultural interactions within and across the Balkan borders, while its 'legitimacy' was undisputed. Both lay and Church authorities have manipulated with individual and collective forms of revenge to fit their own purposes, thus granting it official approval. Acts of revenge could be carried across generations, considering the local institution of blood feud (a form of 'vendetta'), forcing the relatives of a slain individual to escape humiliation and shame by embarking on a never-ending journey of vengeance and retaliation. However, there were also episodes of mercy, forgiveness and pardon, as was the case with the specific inter-personal, cross-cultural, often even cross-religious social mechanism of blood-brotherhood. Could one argue that the same mentality has survived until the present and that atavistic urges have once again broke loose only recently, reaching new heights during the so-called 'Yugoslav wars'? While it is true that certain similarities between concepts and actions, as well as cognitive images of the 'Enemy' in the area, have persisted throughout later historical periods (Habsburg-Ottoman wars, Balkan Wars, WW1, WW2), we should not however succumb to tendency of over-generalizing. The local context, nesting in what we could call the 'culture of revenge', undoubtedly contributed to tragic events occurring in the 1990s, but this was in its essence nevertheless a process with specific diachronic dimensions, where rather different circumstances and factors coincided in an inopportune manner to produce disastrous results.

**Key Words:** Revenge, Medieval, Early Modern, Present, Balkans, Regional Conflicts, Case-Study

The Medieval and Early Modern Balkans was an area of passage, of transition, of multiple borders. We could claim that the entire region was one huge borderland, a war zone or, better put, a buffer zone between areas of interest of various empires, such as the Habsburg lands, Hungarian kingdom, Venetian Republic and, last but not least, the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, this territory was a meeting place of several opposing cultural, political and confessional entities. Therefore, it represents a privileged area for the research of border history and coexistence, intercultural exchange, religious dialogue and intertwining of different civilizational patterns, as well as of specific local contexts, that nevertheless exercise a global meaning.

### 1. The downward spiral of revenge

It is possible to argue that revenge was the main motivator of cross-cultural interactions in all of the numerous borderlands in the Balkans. However, the study of different facets and forms of revenge in the entire peninsula would demand a much wider volume of research that would have to be undertaken by a collective initiative over a longer period of time. Therefore, it is perhaps better to focus particularly on a single borderland region that could be regarded as a zone reflecting all the characteristics and peculiarities of a wider *locus*. Such symptomatic area in the heart of the Western Balkans is the *Triplex Confinium*, a region spreading along the triple Habsburg-Ottoman-Venetian frontier, where three biggest and most important empires staged their struggle for power, domination and control that would set in motion a *perpetuum mobile* of revenge amongst the local population, regarded to be a mere pawn in the hands of the mighty.

To elucidate on this claim we should take a closer look at a case study, hiding in the final report or *Relatione* of Vincenzo Morosini, the rector or *capitano* of Zadar (*Zara*), the capital of the Venetian Dalmatia, written in 1589.<sup>1</sup> In his report, Morosini states that the town's municipal territory is constantly under the attacks of the Ottomans. After one such attack on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1582 Venetian cavalry, called the *Stratioti*, managed to eliminate two commanders of local paramilitary predatory groups, who captured two boys on the Venetian territory and were leading them along to the Ottoman side of the border. Their perishing stirred great turmoil on the borderland, as their comrades intended to avenge their deaths by launching a retaliation campaign of predatory raids directed against the Venetian subjects. They succeeded in taking numerous captives, together with their cattle and crops,

which represented the very base of their existence, while many others were either ‘brutally slain’, as Morosini vividly depicts, or mutilated. The Venetians managed to retrieve most of the cattle, while only few of the captives returned home, although Morosini strived to that effect, ‘in all possible ways and with outstanding diligence’, if we use his own words.<sup>2</sup>

The circle of revenge turned into a downward spiral at the very moment when the outraged Venetian subjects decided to disobey the Venetian authorities and take the matters into their own hands. They took the initiative by kidnapping the Ottomans, killing a certain number of them in the process. The Venetian subjects understood their actions as a counter measure against the unpunished Ottoman attacks and as a means of forcing both the Ottoman and Venetian authorities to step up their pressure on the local Ottoman commanders to diminish the frequency of their raids. The question of incursions as such was not really an issue. Both the Venetians and the Ottomans were accustomed to looting expeditions across the border and such activities were not actually regarded as a state of war or even extraordinary circumstances. The same was also true for the Ottoman-Habsburg borderlands, where pillaging along the border was known under the name *Kleinkrieg* or ‘small war’.<sup>3</sup>

However the ever-growing scale of pillaging eventually tipped the fragile balance between conflict and co-existence, with disastrous consequences. Thus, the privateering actions of the Venetian subjects in Dalmatia proved unsuccessful and they were soon forced to leave their homes and retreat behind the town walls, either in Zadar or in nearby Nin (*Nona*), while seriously contemplating, due to the lack of means of survival, to emigrate to foreign lands, where they could secure their families better chances of a worthy existence.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. ‘Revenge bloody revenge’

Acts of revenge could be carried out across generations, forcing the relatives of a slain individual to escape humiliation and shame by embarking on a never-ending journey of vengeance and retaliation. In this regard, we need to consider the importance of local institution of blood revenge, called *krvna osveta*, basically a form of *vendetta* that persisted throughout the twentieth century and is still present in certain backwater villages. Blood revenge is namely most typical for remote, detached regions with poor communications, where central state or regional authorities never managed to exert control over the local population. The territory of the Balkans is ideal for the spread of such social mechanisms that

in essence constitute forms of self-government, available to the populace mostly originating from the lower social classes. Blood revenge was most present and persistent in clan societies in the remote and mountainous southern most parts of the Balkans, above all in Montenegro, Kosovo and Albania, where revenge could be regarded as a way of life.<sup>5</sup>

The appeasement is extremely hard to achieve, usually only decades or later after the beginning of the feud between two families. It needs to be 'officially' sanctioned by the 'council of the elders', the highest decision making social institution in certain village or clan. The elders, as a neutral and unbiased party with absolute authority, start painstaking and lengthy process of negotiations with both families involved. Their main intention is to achieve that the family that 'drew blood' gives financial compensation to the relatives of the slain. Only after this is fulfilled formal ritual of appeasement can take place. It is performed in front of the entire clan, and the oldest member of the family that received the money is obliged to shake hands with the oldest member of the other family and to publicly announce that the dispute is resolved.

However, there were also episodes of mercy, forgiveness and pardon, as was the case with the specific inter-personal, cross-cultural, often even cross-religious social mechanism of blood-brotherhood or *pobratimstvo*.<sup>6</sup> Blood-brotherhood allows us to focus both on social institutions that enabled such communication and on the ways that individuals negotiated its possibilities. Forms and meanings of ritual brotherhood give us an alternative model of the frontier that reveals a fundamental disjunction between imperial and ecclesiastical projects, as well as popular values and behaviour. *Pobratimstvo* served to regulate public affairs or private economic interests. However it could also consecrate a tie of affectionate friendship. The phenomenon of blood-brotherhood suggests that frontier society was influenced by at least two different and to a large extent opposing sets of referents. On the one hand religious and political divisions separated the people of the frontier; on the other hand common values and institutions drew them together. But the people of the frontier were not just prisoners of their environment. They had the possibility of manipulating the rules or exploiting expectations about how they should behave, while at the same time turning them to their own advantage.<sup>7</sup>

### **3. Revenge as a political and social tool of the elites**

In such a context the research on revenge in the Medieval and Early Modern Balkans rises to a new and to a large extent fundamental importance, although the reasons, consequences and forms of revenge have thus far not yet received appropriate research attention. Namely, revenge was arguably one of the most important factors of social and cultural interactions within and across the Balkan borders, while its 'legitimacy' was undisputed. Both lay and Church authorities have manipulated with individual and collective forms of revenge to fit their own purposes, thus granting it official approval. However, revenge had to be formally regulated by an official institution, usually in form of municipal statutes or the canon law, especially in the Middle Ages, while later in the Early Modern period state decrees were at the forefront of formulating and dispensing of revenge, above all by sanctioning which vengeful actions are acceptable and which are not.<sup>8</sup>

The local Christian officials, be it Habsburg, Venetian, Hungarian or Croatian, had strict orders from the central authorities not to provoke the Ottomans in any way. This was even formulated officially, in the form of commissions granting them different public functions with great political, military and administrative powers. The constant fear of authorities in the neighbouring Christian countries was that the Ottomans would use a petty incident on the border to launch a full-scale attack under the guise of avenging deeds against their subjects and with the real purpose of eradicating the few remaining Christian possessions in the Western Balkans. The only tool the local Christian representatives had was to try and appease the Ottomans by endowing highest provincial dignitaries, called the *sanjak beys*, with lavish gifts, while at the same time requesting they control their subordinates. However, as one contemporary Venetian report claims: 'They never did anything against their evil practices'.<sup>9</sup>

It is therefore obvious that revenge was not only understood as a spontaneous action or even a private matter imbued in dark and to a great extent uncontrollable emotion. It was also, and above all, a political and social tool, detached from the actual reason for its creation, thus gaining a strong symbolic meaning. In this respect it is interesting that the same rhetoric was used by the Serbian authorities in the beginning of the 1990s, when searching for a reason to strike against social groups or nationalities that were perceived to be obstacles on the path towards a 'Greater Serbia'.

#### **4. Revenge-the trigger effect behind the Yugoslav wars?**

Could one argue that the same mentality has survived until the present and that atavistic urges have once again broke lose only recently, reaching new heights during the so-called 'Yugoslav wars'? While it is true that certain similarities between concepts and actions, as well as cognitive images of the 'Enemy' in the area, have persisted throughout later historical periods (Balkan Wars, WW1, WW2), we should not however succumb to tendency of over-generalizing. The local context, nesting in what we could call the 'culture of revenge', undoubtedly contributed to tragic events occurring in the 1990s, but this was in its essence nevertheless a process with specific diachronic dimensions, where rather different circumstances and factors coincided in an inopportune manner to produce disastrous results.<sup>10</sup>

Yugoslavia collapsed and descended into war for a number of reasons. According to Sabrina Ramet, human agency must be stressed at the outset, but there were also factors which made it simpler for ambitious nationalists to attribute the country's problems to one or another 'out-group' and to promise to raise the given nation (i.e., Serbs or Croats, in this case) to new heights of rapture.<sup>11</sup> Among those factors, one may mention (1) economic decay, (2) the political illegitimacy of the communist system, (3) structural factors (in particular, the dysfunctional federal system), and (4) the failure to develop a common historical narrative, which had the result that the diverse peoples of Yugoslavia had different understandings of some important aspects of their past history, both in the remote and the more proximate past. What we are less certain about is the underlying shocking mystery: why do human beings take such great pleasure in killing each other? So far, analyses of the Yugoslav war have not moved us very far in grappling with that basic issue.<sup>12</sup>

But what is the chance of nations and individuals, living on the territory of former Yugoslavia, to transcend the 'bad blood' of animosity, hatred and deep-rooted mistrust that leads straight to new action-reaction cycles of vengeance? The identities in post-Yugoslav countries can be understood as a balanced game of inner centripetal forces such as ethnicity, religion, myths and language; and external centrifugal ones aiming to keep those nations together. Only after the end of the war new identities were formed on the basis of cultural factors, while the conflict itself started as a consequence of much broader set of issues. The problem of reconciliation as one of the most important in post-conflict societies is possible only by systematic, persistent, long-lasting confrontation with the past in order to create a democratic environment.<sup>13</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

The main characteristic of the Balkans in the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern period was that it was composed by a conglomerate of borderlands constituting a triple frontier between Habsburg and Hungarian lands, Venetian Republic and the Ottoman Empire. Due to the constantly troubled political situation and often adverse living conditions on the border, revenge obtained a privileged, even fundamental meaning for the local population. The multifaceted concepts and forms of revenge that prevailed in the Balkans account for attitudes, preferences and actions that would otherwise be hard to explain, including animosity, bitter rivalry and savagery, but also cross-cultural alliances, mutual cooperation and religious dialogue. Indeed, it could be argued that a common 'culture of revenge' existed in the entire region, even though its manifestations could acquire specific shapes. Vengeance namely became a way of life enduring through generations and extending across a vast territory. It could eventually detach itself from the reasons of its creation and thus perpetuate hostilities among the parties involved even after the actual cause for quarrel was long forgotten. Certain features of vindictive behaviour formed patterns that persist until the present, facilitating outbursts of accumulated aggression and hindering the effectiveness of conflict management, thus partly enabling the emergence of recurrent confrontations which on several occasions escalated into total war, ultimately during the 'Yugoslav wars' in the 1990s. However, it is not possible to claim that the mentality of the people in the Balkans is more prone to revenge or that their actions have proved to be more disruptive than that of any other population around the world.

## Notes

\* This is a draft version of the paper. Please do not quote without approval by the author.

<sup>1</sup> Grga Novak, ed., *Mletačka uputstva i izvyještaji: Svezak IV. Od 1572 do 1590 godine* (Zagreb: JAZU, 1964), 444.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Regarding the Kleinkrieg phenomenon, see Jan Paul Niederkorn, *Die europäischen Mächte und der 'Lange Türkenkrieg' Kaiser Rudolfs II. (1593–1606)* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1993); Géza Pálffy, ed., *Gemeinsam gegen*

*die Osmanen: Ausbau und Funktion der Grenzfestungen in Ungarn im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert. Katalog der Ausstellung im Österreichischen Staatsarchiv 14. März – 31. Mai 2001* (Budapest–Vienna: Österreichisches Staatsarchiv-Collegium Hungaricum Wien, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Novak, *Mletačka uputstva i izvještaji*, 443. Thus, under the rule of the *sanjak bey* of Lika Mehmed the Ottomans, in the villages of Dračevac and Grusi alone, killed 17 women and children, enslaved further 57 persons, while burning all the houses and confiscating 20 oxen, 520 cattle and 1 550 small cattle. *Ibid.*, 444.

<sup>5</sup> See Christopher Boehm, *Blood Revenge: The Enactment and Management of Conflict in Montenegro and other Tribal Societies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987); Islam Qerimi, *Mejreme Berisha: Criminal Offences, Sentences and Its Enforcement Under the Albanian Customary Law* (GRIN Verlag, 2011), 1-18. On blood revenge in Arab lands that possibly affected the Balkan forms of *krvna osveta* by mediation from the part of the Ottomans see Joseph Ginat, *Blood Revenge: Family Honor, Mediation and Outcasting* (Brighton-Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 1997). Blood revenge is a theme that reoccurs regularly in literature, the most famous example being Ismail Kadare's *Prilli i Thyer*, first published in 1978. See the English version Ismail Kadare, *Broken April* (London: Saqi Books, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Wendy Bracewell, 'Frontier Blood-Brotherhood and the Triplex Confinium', in *Constructing Border Societies on the Triplex Confinium*, eds. Drago Roksandić and Nataša Štefanec (Budapest: CEU Press, 2000), 29-45; Maria Pia Pedani, 'Beyond the Frontier: the Ottoman-Venetian border in the Adriatic context from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries', in *Zones of Fracture in Modern Europe: the Baltic Countries, the Balkans, and Northern Italy*, ed. Almut Bues (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 59-60.

<sup>7</sup> Wendy Bracewell, 'Blood Brothers and Frontier Divisions in the Adriatic Hinterland, 16th-18th centuries', *Paper presented at the Eleventh Mediterranean Research Meeting, Florence and Montecatini Terme 24-27 March 2010, organised by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute*, 1, 24-25.

<sup>8</sup> An important example of revenge codification is the *Libro d'oro* of the town of Split (Spalato) in Dalmatia, a *diplomatarium* containing the collection of several hundred documents, reflecting the gradual modification of the Split statute between 1420 and 1797,



when the commune was under Venetian rule. See the published version: Ivan Frangeš, et al., eds., *Zlatna knjiga grada Splita, vol. 1* (Split, Književni krug, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Simeon Ljubić, ed., *Commissiones et Relationes Venetae. Tomus III. Annorum 1553-1571* (Zagrabiae: Sumptibus Academiae Scientiarum et Artium, 1880), 191.

<sup>10</sup> There is a vast bibliography on recent history and the collapse of Yugoslavia, including the Yugoslav wars. As an entrance in the study on the matter see Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans, vol. 2* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Ivo Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Mark Thompson, *A Paper House: The Ending of Yugoslavia* (New York: Pantheon, 1992); Robert J. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History* (New York: St. Martins, 1993); Misha Glenny, *The Fall of Yugoslavia: The Third Balkan War* (London: Penguin, 1995); Laura Silber and Allan Little, *The Death of Yugoslavia* (London: Penguin/BBC Books, 1996); John Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There was a Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); David B. Macdonald, *Balkan holocausts? Serbian and Croatian victim-centred propaganda and the war in Yugoslavia* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002); Sabrina P. Ramet, *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to the Fall Of Milosevic* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2002); James J. Sadkovich, 'Argument, Persuasion, and Anecdote: The Usefulness of History to Understanding Conflict', *Polemos* 5 (2002): 33-49; Miroslav Hadžić, ed., *The Violent Dissolution of Yugoslavia: Causes, dynamics and effects. Collection of Papers* (Belgrade: Centre for Civil-Military Relations, 2004); Lenard J. Cohen and Jasna Dragović-Soso, eds., *State Collapse in South-Eastern Europe: New Perspectives on Yugoslavia's Disintegration* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2008); Charles W. Ingrao and Thomas A. Emmert, eds., *Confronting the Yugoslav Controversies: A Scholars' Initiative* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Sabrina P. Ramet, 'The Dissolution of Yugoslavia: Competing Narratives of Resentment and Blame', *Südost Europa* 55 (2007): 26–69.

<sup>12</sup> John Lampe, et al., 'Instant History: Understanding the Wars of Yugoslav Succession (review essay)', *Slavic Review* 55 (1996), 160.

<sup>13</sup> Ana Ljubojević, 'Tomorrow people, where is your past? Mapping of post-war national identities in new Yugoslav states', *Paper presented at the ECPR Graduate Conference, Dublin City University 2010, 24-25.*

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**Klemen Pust**, is a RS Postdoctoral Researcher attached to the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. He gained his Ph.D in History, dealing with Ottoman-Venetian interactions in the Eastern Adriatic in the sixteenth century, at the University of Primorska, Koper/Capodistria, Slovenia (2009). His research is devoted to forms, characteristics and cross-cultural consequences of the Ottoman presence in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Balkans.