


3-1995

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### Recommended Citation

Stres, Anton C.M. (1995) "The Mission in Former Yugoslavia- Post-Communist and at War," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 39 : No. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol39/iss2/8>

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# THE MISSION IN FORMER YUGOSLAVIA - POST-COMMUNIST AND AT WAR

*by Anton Stres, C.M.*

Among post-communist countries, those of the former Yugoslavia have had, for the past three years, the unfortunate privilege of attracting world attention to themselves because of the war that rages on their soil. What a war it is! It has been marked by extreme violence which continually transgresses the most fundamental human rights. The consequences, both material and spiritual, will be terrible. And yet, very few people know what it is all about. Even major political leaders do not really understand the roots and the causes of this war.

## **The historical background to the war**

Yugoslavia was founded immediately after the First World War in 1919. It was made up of two parts. One, the South, corresponded to the Kingdom of Serbia, augmented by territory won during the Balkan wars of 1912-13. All this part of the Balkans had been occupied by the Turks for five hundred years, since the 14th century. That period left deep marks on the mentality and the culture of the region.

The second part, the North, belonged until the "*Great War*" to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Slovenia and Croatia had belonged to that empire for centuries, and Bosnia, formerly part of the Turkish Empire, had been a protectorate of Austria-Hungary since 1870. Bosnia was, however, claimed by Serbia at that time. This led to the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand and his wife by a member of the "*Young Serbia*" movement in 1914. The assassination resulted in the First World War. The problems of the region, then, are not recent ones.

The peoples of Slovenia and Croatia had freely opted to become part of the "*Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes*," which was the country's original title. Their hope was that their ethnic and cultural identity would be more secure in a state consisting of all the Southern Slavs. But this was not how the Serbs saw the new state, in which they formed a relative majority. They considered the Slovenes and the Croats as their recompense for supporting the Allies, that is, the French and the English, during the war. The outcome was that the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was very quickly transformed into a totalitarian state, with King Alexander I suppressing the constitution and declaring a dictatorship in 1920. Shortly afterwards, the new name "*Yugoslavia*" was given to the country so as to express more clearly its unitary character under Serbian dominance. With some slight changes, things remained like this until 1941.

When the Nazi army invaded the country, it met no resistance. The non-Serbian sections of the population had no wish to fight for it. When Tito, after the Second World War, reconstructed a new Communist Yugoslavia, he (a non-

Serb) understood one thing: Yugoslavia would be strong if Serbia was weak. The dictum is attributed to him, but in any case it was he who made Yugoslavia into a federation with a high degree of autonomy for the six republics and the two autonomous regions. What had been considered between the two wars as Serb territory was divided into three republics and two autonomous regions. The effect was to limit Serbia both geographically and politically, and significantly to lessen Serbian influence. Not surprisingly, this left the Serbs with a sense of deep frustration.

The death of Tito in 1980 provided the Serbs with the opportunity they had been waiting for. Six years later, the Academy of Arts and Sciences of Serbia published a memorandum on the state of the Serbian nation which stated that "*Serbia is wherever Serbs live.*" In that same year, Slobodan Milosevic came to power in Serbia and began putting this programme into effect. First Serbia suppressed the autonomous regions, which raised the Albanian question. Then it set about having the constitution modified with a view to the centralisation of the country and the suppression of the republics' autonomy. In this way Serbia laid the groundwork for the Yugoslav crisis. The other countries reacted, and took the view that complete independence was the only guarantee of their identity and their future existence. The present war is simply the Serbs' attempt to realise their dream: Greater Serbia. It would unite in a single state all the Serbs in the Balkan Peninsula, even in places where they only form a very small minority. In the territories of Croatia and Bosnia, these minorities have existed for three hundred years. They came into existence when Serbs fled from their own country where the occupying Turks were persecuting the Christian population. The Austrian authorities installed them in border areas so as to defend the Empire, thus producing Serb communities in the middle of Croatia and in western Bosnia.

Our Congregation has not been immediately affected by the war which the Serbs are waging in pursuit of their expansionist dream of Greater Serbia. But our confreres in the house of Zagreb are concerned about the consequences of the "*ethnic cleansing*" which the Serbs practise in the territories they occupy. In the district of Zagreb where the Confreres live, almost every family has welcomed relatives forced to flee from the affected regions. For the most part, these are families which are already poor and they have need of help and support in order to survive. The parishes of our confreres have become important centers for the distribution of supplies. This aid would not be possible without the Vincentian solidarity of the Confreres and Sisters in Austria, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Ireland and other places.

### **Ecumenism the Vincentian way**

Providence has wished our Congregation and that of the Daughters of Charity to experience the tortured history of the Balkans from close at hand. The French Vincentians of the former Province of Constantinople were the pioneers of the Balkan apostolate. After the First World War the young Province of Yugoslavia continued their work. The Sisters went into the Serb territories where the Confreres followed. The Vincentian presence increased when a member of the Congregation,

Mgr. Janez F.Gnidovec, was made Bishop of Skopje in 1924 His cause for beatification has already been introduced. Since that time we have had two parishes for Catholics living in the Orthodox diaspora, one in Belgrade and one in Bitola. The Confreres worked with their confrere Bishop in a mainly Albanian diocese which had no priests and whose people, especially because they were Catholics, were at risk from the machinations of the Serb authorities. At that time, ecumenism was still unknown. When the central government in Belgrade concluded a concordat between the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Holy See in 1939, the Serbian Orthodox Church organised street protests and demonstrations to such effect that the concordat was never ratified.

The period after the Second World War saw ecumenical developments which were due precisely to the Vincentian presence. For this purpose, Providence chose means which were initially painful.

The Communist revolution affected the two Vincentian families in Slovenia in a particular way. At that time all the Confreres were Slovenes. They were expropriated and the great majority were put in prison from where they went into exile: to Argentina, and to other countries of the Americas including Canada. The only house which the Confreres retained was that of Belgrade. Thus it came about that for thirty years the Internal Seminary of the province was situated in an entirely Orthodox country. As a result all the young confreres were open to the ecumenical dimension from their earliest moments in the Congregation. At the same time the Vincentian family was increased by the entry into the Congregation of Croatian and Macedonian confreres of the Oriental Rite.

Nevertheless it was the Sisters who were the main workers for ecumenism. In 1948 there were more than a thousand of them, working in hospitals and other establishments in Slovenia. On March 8th of that year, the country dominated by the new Communist ideology celebrated Women's Day, and all the Sisters were ejected from their houses. They had nowhere to go. So they set out for the Orthodox South. There they were received with open arms, not because they were Sisters or Catholics, but because of their professional qualifications which were much needed in those less developed areas. That Orthodox world was full of prejudices against Catholics, and found in the Sisters another image of Catholicism of which it had never heard. If the period between 1950 and 1990 was a period full of ecumenical promise, the credit goes largely to the Slovenian Daughters of Charity, in distant exile from their own country. Unfortunately, that already belongs to past history. Still, although the Catholic Church in Serbia is now reduced to a quarter of its size ten years ago, it continues to be present and the two families of St.Vincent are part of that presence.

### **The post-Communist moral desert**

The Congregation of the Mission was founded in Slovenia in 1852. It was the first foundation of the Congregation in what was then the Austrian Empire. The principal work of the missionaries was that of popular missions and retreats of different kinds, to such an extent that the Confreres were called simply "*the*

*missionaries.*" This work of the missions has lost none of its relevance in this post Communist period. On the contrary, it is more important than ever.

One of the characteristics of the spiritual situation in the former Communist countries which are now undergoing what is called "*the transition period*" is the discovery of a great cultural and spiritual desert. The results at the level of people's mentality of a half-century of Communism are more serious and more negative than had been thought. The Communist school system educated people in a total absence of moral and religious values. Family life was ruined because the totalitarian system was not favourable to the family: women had to become "*workers*" in order to have social status in socialist society. The state was content to undertake the complete education of children so as to inculcate into them from their earliest years the official ideology and to withdraw them from what was considered the dangerous influence of tradition and especially of religion. Christian culture, to which these countries in general have owed the maintenance of their identity and their spiritual development down the centuries, is almost non-existent and religious ignorance is astonishing. What is not astonishing in the circumstances is the flourishing state of the sects. Moreover, anti-religious propaganda was centred on the systematic denigration of the Church. This has created a mass of prejudices against the Catholic Church and deep mistrust of the clergy. On the more secular level, a disturbing lack of political and social culture can be seen. The people formed by Communism are in general passive, without personal initiative, and expect the state to provide everything. Among the many definitions of Communism, the one which states that it is at once both a prison and a children's playground is very appropriate. Where the Party knows everything and does everything, human beings do not have to be responsible. This lack of initiative and of a sense of responsibility is one of the consequences of every totalitarian system and so Bolshevik totalitarianism has produced negative results not only at the level of personal moral development but also at the level of economic, social and political behaviour.

### **Moral renewal**

Confronted with this situation, the Church in Slovenia feels itself called and challenged to undertake a new evangelization which should take the form of general moral and spiritual renewal. The Congregation shares this concern and its recent efforts form part of the pastoral orientation of the whole Church.

Apart from traditional methods, the Province of Slovenia intends to contribute to this renewal by the formation of different small groups of Christians who are ready to commit themselves, but who often lack spiritual, moral and professional preparation. For this reason we have opened our houses to provide centers of formation for lay-people. The house at Miren has for two decades been a house for retreats and other meetings for different groups of priests and lay-people. Recently, the two houses of Celje and Ljubljana, which the state took over in 1946-48, have been given back to us by the state. The Celje house, which needs to be completely restored, can become an important regional centre for formation. The former Provincial House of Ljubljana has already been transformed into a centre for Catholic students. The centre not only provides accommodation for some seventy

students but also offers the possibility of taking part in meetings, conferences and other different activities (for example, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul) which are based at the centre and are open to the residents. As well as this, we have decided not only to make our premises available for different functions organized by others, but also to set up our own formation programmes so as to give them a Vincentian slant. None of this work could even be envisaged without the very fraternal support of the provinces of Toulouse, Paris, Belgium, Germany and Saragossa, and of the General Curia at Rome.

### **A test of patience and confidence**

The period of post-Communism is for the Church and for the Congregation established in these countries a time of great frustration. What has happened is that on the one hand every possibility for pastoral work had been reopened. There are no more of the legal and administrative obstacles which for four decades prevented or obstructed Vincentian missionary activity from being carried out in all its vigour. But on the other hand, because during that period all the material, organizational and personal infrastructure needed for full and many-sided pastoral activity has been gradually destroyed, men and women of the Church in general and of the Vincentian family in particular feel themselves powerless to respond in an adequate way to the demands being made on us by all sectors of the population. This poverty of our human, material, professional and spiritual resources, especially in comparison to the immensity of the task, is for us at the present time the greatest interior trial of our patience and our confidence. It is for this reason that all the many signs of our Vincentian solidarity which we have received are a source of great comfort for us and inspire us with the deepest gratitude.

translation: Myles Rearden, cm