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SOFT POWER AND NATIONAL MYTH MAKING IN VELJKO BULAJIĆ'S KOZARA

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Abstract

This article focuses on ways of establishing, maintaining and furthering national identity by means of film. The hypothesis is that film is an essential tool of soft power and can, therefore, be analysed as means for spreading both (state formulated and practised) soft power and national identity. The article will focus on the case of the partisan film Kozara (dir. Veljko Bulajic, 1962). This work is to be analysed as a perfect example of using soft power for the creation of national identity; one that is aimed both outwards and inwards. Kozara depicts an episode from WW2 when the resistance forces are simultaneously fighting against both the occupying forces (the Nazi) as well as against their 'internal' helpers and collaborators, the Ustasha. In this regard, the film spreads its soft power outwards, depicting resistance against a foreign invader, but also inwards, as it deals with the conflict between different sides Yugoslav people took in the war, and the crimes they committed against each other (in this case, the Ustasha pogrom against the mostly Serbian inhabitants of the Kozara mountain region. The article intends to elaborate further on the notion that this particular usage of soft power had in the creation of the second Yugoslav national identity, and in establishing second Yugoslavia internationally, as a communist, anti-fascist country. Furthermore, perhaps more importantly, the article also deals with the trauma of the civil war waged between the Yugoslav resistance forces and the Yugoslav Nazi collaborators.

Key words

soft power, nation, national identity, film, Kozara

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Soft power as such

This essay attempts to interpret Veljko Bulajić's *Kozara* as the means of soft power. To properly address this topic, we need to differentiate soft from hard power.² The latter refers to army, police force, and other forms of monopoly over violence. Broadly speaking, hard power can also refer to economy, specific forms and means of production of one country, and the economic basis from which hard power can be created. On the other end of the spectrum is soft power. It refers to culture, often different arts and works of art in particular. Thus, we analyse a film, a work of art, as a cultural product and as example of soft power.

Two generic agents or catalysts of group formation and maintenance are obviously crucial: will, voluntary adherence and identification, loyalty, solidarity, on the one hand; and fear, coercion, compulsion, on the other. These two possibilities constitute extreme poles along a kid of spectrum. A few communities may be based exclusively or very predominantly on one or the other, but they must be rare. Most persisting groups are based on a mixture of loyalty and identification (on willed adherence), and of extraneous incentives, positive or negative, on hopes and fears. (Gellner 1983: 53)

If we are to follow up on the premise that cultural products are instrumentalized into serving as soft power, we can extend it so that all works of art can be thus contextualised. While that may be so – one can speak of paintings, novels, music pieces etc., as legitimate vehicles of soft power, and within the context of the 20th century, film has a special and prominent place. This is not only due to its interdisciplinary, synthetic and approachable nature. It is not even primarily connected to the popularity of the medium, though we can safely say that it is the art form that has marked the 20th century like no other, especially in the field of soft power projection. Film as an art form is connected to the changing climate of the XXth century, and the new demands that the industrialisation of the society has presented. In the words of Ernest Wilson:

With the steady spread of secondary and higher education and the availability of more media outlets, populations in Asia, Africa, and Latin Ameri-

2 The author of the essay already analyzed films of this author in the key of nationalistic myth making – this article is an extension of that work, contextualising Veljko Bulajić's myth making process within the frame of soft power.

ca have grown much more affluent, more sophisticated and knowledgeable about their own and other societies, and less easily influenced by the exercise of soft or hard power. These newly educated populations demand to be treated differently than in the past; as their world becomes more urban and more middle class, individuals are becoming more assertive. (Wilson 2008: 112)

The main reason why we address film as particularly important, especially in the context of post world war II Yugoslavia, is the topic of the following paragraph.

Soft power and film with regards to industrialisation and emancipation

In this regard, having a film production is in itself a testament of country's industrial character and also, most importantly, stage of development. Film speaks, by its very existence, and then by its quality, of the level of industrialisation and therefore of emancipation of a particular country.

While this may seem obvious and plain from today's perspective, it was certainly not so in the years following the World War II in Yugoslavia. Country was broken apart during the occupation into different zones, and then reassembled after the conflict was won – it was war torn, de-industrialised (not that it was fully industrialised before the war, either), bombed out and heavily set back by war destruction. Factories, infrastructure and structure were damaged and, in some cases, non-existent. The new communist government followed the example of the Soviet Union and made it one of its major goals to industrialise, emancipate, and electrify the country; to build infrastructure and raise the rate of literacy. The government invested heavily into development and it made it one of its priorities.

With respect to this, the communist government sought to show, as soon as possible, its success in the field of industrialisation and emancipation. Having a successful film industry speaks of the high level of development of a certain culture, and, by default, of the successful economy (material base), government and state ideology. It speaks of a country that is not only able to harness enough resources as to create a film industry, but is also able to educate enough highly skilled and sophisticated professionals who partake in the creation of this art form. For a country which, due to a complex set of internal and external pressures sought to legitimise its ideological, economic and

cultural model, this was an important point to be made. The development brought forth by industrialisation creates new audience with new, expanded and more sophisticated demands. Joseph Nye points out:

As we share intelligence and capabilities with others, we develop common outlooks and approaches that improve our ability to deal with the new challenges. Power flows from that attraction. Dismissing the importance of attraction as merely ephemeral popularity ignores key insights from new theories of leadership as well as the new realities of the information age. (Nye 2004: 261)

During the creation of First (royalist, monarchical) Yugoslavia, that lasted under that name between 1929 and 1941, especially and infamously during World War II, and then, before the breaking up of the Second (socialist) Yugoslavia, that lasted under that name between 1945 and 1991, during the 1980s, the country in question was riddled and heavily troubled with social, ethnic and religious tensions. These tensions did not trouble Yugoslavia until the second half of 1980; they were not a dominant trend, 'brotherhood and unity worked in practice and except isolated incidents of ethnic based hostilities, were not of grassroots origin. We are not going to open that question here, as the academic consensus on the origin, influence and scope of these issues is yet to be achieved – we shall but address its existence. While brotherhood and unity worked in practice, the burden of inter-ethnic hostilities inherited from the war needed to be addressed. We therefore posit that this was one of the most important, if not the most important, usage of the soft power projection made via the film – one that is oriented inwards. This is the crux of our article. We address not only the usage and spread of soft power outwards, towards other countries and the international community, but also inwards, towards one's own culture.

Soft power and the national myth

We argue that post World War II Yugoslav cinema in general, especially partisan film, and *Kozara* in particular, carry the goal of projecting soft power inwards; this is close to (but not the same as, and not to be confused with) the goal of creating a culturally cohesive nationalist myth. Yugoslavia was constituted out of different peoples, of different ethnicities, that constituted different states and were a part of different (also multi ethnic, multi confessional and multi lingual) empires; Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman. The

new country was created out of sections that were, for decades and even centuries prior to the events that took place in the two world wars, parts of these very different empires and cultures – Slovenia, Croatia and parts of Bosnia, as well as Vojvodina, were under the dominion of Austria, Hungary, or the Austro-Hungarian Empire; on the other end, central and south Serbia, Bosnia and Macedonia were occupied by the Ottoman Empire (although the liberation from it started at the beginning of the XIXth century, various cultural traces and influences lingered on, as they still do); Montenegro was in constant touch and under the considerable influence of it as well. Bringing those sections together into a singular state entity, making the culture that would reflect its existence, and making a special kind of nation, justified and substantiated by the appropriate national myth, was a very challenging task – especially if the new creation was going to be secular in nature. The secular character of the nation building process is of considerable importance, especially in this particular case, where one of the major sources of hostilities of the Ustasha regime against the Serb population was religious in nature (the Serbs being predominantly Christian Orthodox and the Ustasha Croats being dominantly Christian Catholic). In the words of Ernest Gellner:

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once observed that to be a gentleman one does not need to know Latin and Greek, but one must have forgotten them. Nowadays, to be a Bosnian Muslim you need not believe that there is no God but God and that Mohamed is his Prophet, but you do need to have lost the faith. (Gellner 1983: 72)

The position we seek to substantiate is that soft power projected inwards was meant to culturally and nationally cohere a diverse, war torn country, riddled both with substantial material damage and deep inter-ethnic and inter-religious divisions. In this particular regard, *Kozara* is a very important film, as it addresses the pogrom of the Serbs committed by the Croatian Ustasha. Serbs and Croats were the two major, most numerous constitutive peoples of Yugoslavia; likewise, two largest and most populous states were Serbia and Croatia. The pogrom over Serbian, Jewish and Roma peoples, committed by the Ustasha regime during the World War II, was a heavy burden for the state who sought to exist on the premise of *brotherhood and unity (bratstvo i jedinstvo)*. The Ustasha regime, being collaborationist in nature, and aligned with the Nazi agenda, committed pogroms not only of the Serbian, but also of the Jewish and the Roma population. However, this film in particular addresses the Ustasha hostility against the Serbian population, as the Serbs were the most numerous population of Yugoslavia, and as the unity between Serbs and

Croats, and Serbia and Croatia, was seen as the most important aspect of the 'brotherhood-unity' agenda. In this regard, it was of particular importance to address this issue, both monumental and delicate, and to attempt to resolve it with any and all means necessary. One of those means was film, and its internal projection of soft power.

The pogrom of the Serbs committed by the (mostly) Croatian Ustasha that *Kozara* addresses, as the rest of the World War II in former Yugoslavia (similar, then, to the wars of dissolution of Yugoslavia led in the 90's) was framed as fratricidal, coming from the premise that the Croats and the Serbs are united by common tongue, mostly shared culture and history, and divided by religion and different occupiers from the times that preceded the World War II. The intent of the movie, especially in regards to the soft power it is projecting, is to address both the notions of ethnic and civic nationalism.

To present these types of nationalism, we shall address the popular division of this phenomenon into two major categories – civic and ethnic. In the seminal Ernest Gellner study *Nations and Nationalism*, the author mentions an essay written by professor John Plamenatz (Gellner 1983:100), where these types of nationalism are broadly addressed as Western (civic) and Eastern (ethnic). Professor Plamenatz addresses the Western type of nationalism as one that has to do with democracy, values derived from the philosophical school of liberalism, humanism, respect of the rule of law, to name just a few. On the other end is the Eastern type, which has to do with tribalism, ethnicity, blood ties – Ernest Gellner explicitly names one type as 'nice' and the other as 'nasty'. The notions of civic and ethnic nationalism therefore play a major role in the interpretation of *Kozara*, in understanding its historic, cultural, ethnic and religious context; also, in understanding the type of soft power this oeuvre sought to project, as well as the audience towards which it was aimed at.

Kozara presents a pogrom where the victims and the perpetrators spoke the same language, and, essentially, came from the same cultural space. The Croat Ustasha sided with the Nazi occupier and sought to eradicate the Serbian community. In the film, the persecuted local population is at first presented as apolitical, primarily interested in preserving their lives and livelihood. As the film progresses, and the locals are faced with the extent and horror of the pogrom being committed, personal losses, even the staunch sceptics, at the beginning entirely disinterested in warfare, decide to take up arms and join the partisan army. The situation the film is referring to, the ethnic and

religious tension between peoples occupying the same space, using the same language, is a perfect example of the difference between the ethnic and civic nationalism. The film is situated within the broader agenda of the creation of the second Yugoslavia's culture, national identity and ideology (socialist and communist); especially given the difficult situation and traumatic history of this region.

The pogrom being represented on screen is one of the examples referred to by Ernest Gellner's quote presented earlier, mentioning a professor of Montenegrin origin John Plamenatz. It is committed as a part of an attempt of NDH (the Ustasha state created during the World War II on the territory of today's Croatia, parts of today's Bosnia and Serbia). This pogrom is fuelled by the far-right wing nationalistic regime of Ustasha – the type of nationalism they espouse is ethnic. Religion is an important component of ethnicity, and the local Serb population is mostly Orthodox, whereas most of the Croats (and most, but not all of the Ustasha) are Catholic. The eradication of the Serb population is therefore driven by ethnic motivation. Clearly, this type of nationalism is represented as negative and openly villainous. The local population is being exterminated for no reason other than belonging to the 'wrong' ethnicity and religion.

On the other end is the initiative led by the partisans. The goal of the NOB (*Narodno Oslobodilacka Borba – The People's Liberation Front*) was two-fold, to liberate the country from the occupying Nazi on one hand, and to perform a communist revolutionary change of regime on the other. If we consider that the royalist Yugoslavia was divided into different sections by the occupying forces, we can say that the NOB goal was, in fact, trifold, with an added initiative of bringing the country back together. National myth making done by films of Veljko Bulajic served this purpose, to culturally and ideologically cohere the country broken up by occupation as much as it was (if not more) torn apart by the civil war led by the collaborationist forces against the partisan liberation army. This particular facet of soft power was therefore oriented inwards. The goal was to mend the wounds and traumas left by the collaborationist regimes, and to contextualise the extensive crimes they committed.

In this regard, a different kind of nationalism was offered – civic. This is directly opposed to the ethnic variety that was previously discussed. The crimes committed during the war were mostly motivated by religion and ethnicity, therefore, by ethnic nationalism. Its antithesis was therefore a different type of nationalism, one not rooted in 'blood' (notion of belonging to a particular

ethnic group) but one rooted in the 'contract'; nationalism of civic variety. The idea behind usage of this type of nationalism was that the creation of the (mythical) narrative that can both address the trauma of the committed pogrom and at the same time cohere the peoples who found themselves on the different sides of the war – the culprits and their victims. A different kind of nationalism was needed, as the first (ethnic) led to catastrophic results; the second (civic) was to correct all the wrong doings of the first. The idea was also, clearly, that the first type of nationalism cannot be used, as too many people were killed under its guise.

Therefore, the social contract needed to be just that – a contract based on mutual understanding, rather than on family, tribal or ethnic connection. This was to be the contract based not in blood, but in agreement. The peculiarity of this contract is that it was made in a communist country. In geopolitical terms of its time, Yugoslavia was not seen as a part of the 'West'; it was certainly not the part of the capitalistic centre, of the 'First world'. This is an issue, as, in words of Simeon Mitropolitiski:

Hence, there are objective laws that produce a linguistic community, which is the cornerstone for the modern national identity. Thus, for Gellner and Anderson, there is no nationalism without capitalism. (Mitropoloski 2013: 114)

Quite the opposite. As a communist country, Yugoslavia could not pretend to any of these statuses usually connected with the notion of civic nationalism, as explained by Ernest Gellner and John Plamenatz. The specificity of this situation is that Yugoslavia was the third world country (the term coined specifically to designate the countries belonging to the Non Aligned Movement, of which Yugoslavia was one of the principal founders) attempting to create its own type of civic nationalism, a notion created for, if not reserved for, the first world countries. Also, in doing so, Veljko Bulajic was using the imported aesthetics and narrative structures of the western, film genre coming from per excellence capitalistic country of origin, in this regard, from a very clear ideological context.

Ethnic versus civic nationalism and how it relates to *Kozara*

Kozara is not an overtly ideological film, or, rather, is not that way in a direct, obvious manner. While film depicts partisans as heroes, they do not

engage in open discussion of communist ideology, nor they speak about the party, workers' rights, the international, or other aspects of the communist worldview. The accent is on the partisans helping the endangered Serbian population, their solidarity and shared suffering with the people. The people who are persecuted by the Ustasha are presented as initially reluctant to join the partisans (and their two-fold agenda of liberating the country on one end, while performing a communist revolution on the other), and are only driven to do so by the set of circumstances they found themselves in. Likewise, the type of nationalism the film auteur creates is not the one rooted in the ideology of socialism or communism, but rather in the anti-fascist struggle. This is a more common and one could say broad brush, one that can include even the people who are not communist sympathisers. The countries of the west who partook in World War II as Allied Forces were anti-fascist, but were at the same time liberal-democratic, with the economic base in industrial capitalism. In a different Veljko Bulajic film, *Bitka na Neretvi* (*Battle of Neretva*, 1969), the partisans are seen shouting praises to Stalin and the USSR, but also shouting praises to the allies United States of America and England (*Bitka na Neretvi*, Veljko Bulajic, 1969:00:01:29); capitalist countries par excellence, something one hardly sees in an overtly communist film. This is because Veljko Bulajic's films are anti-fascist rather than communist.

The positioning of the civic type of nationalism within the anti-fascist front, rather than with institutions, democracy, rule of law or other liberal notions; or communist ideology, addresses the other important aspect of this endeavour. As it was stated at the beginning of the article, soft power in this particular case is both aimed inwards and outwards. Inwards, it served to mend the trauma and the scars left by the civil war, and all the atrocities committed in it. Outwards, it dealt with what projections of soft power usually deal with, the rendering of a certain culture, nation, state, more appealing and attractive to others. This was particularly important for second (communist) Yugoslavia, a country with considerable international ambitions (a prominent position within the Non Alignment Movement, for example). The purpose of this facet of soft power was to show the liberation forces as being with the people; the people, except for the collaborationist forces, not supporting the fascist agenda, but rather, suffering terribly from it; finally, the extent and scope of sacrifice, terrible high price that was paid for the success of the liberation.

The anti-fascist type of civic nationalism may appear to be at odds with the official communist ideology of second Yugoslavia. Communism is often regarded as being above all international, ideologically speaking more invested

in the question of class than the question of nationhood or ethnicity. Addressing this issue in *Kozara* was an important part of the soft power projection aimed both inwards and outwards. The film presented members of different ethnicities and peoples working together as partisans, trying to protect the local Serbian population from the Ustasha. This is evident from the names (Ahmed, a typically Muslim name, for example) and from their speech patterns (Joja, a Croat partisan fighting against the Ustasha Croats so as to protect the local Serbian population). The key notion is this – the film represents the coming together of different ethnicities, gathered by a common anti-fascist struggle, not by blood ties and ethnicity. The film does not seek to annul or deny every particular ethnicity or nationality. In this regard, the agenda is not a-national, nor anti-national, but inter-national, especially if we consider Serbians and Croats of this period as separate nationalities. The type of nationalism this film presents and projects is therefore inclusive of people of different ethnicities, gathered around a common goal, the anti-fascist initiative. In this regard, the soft power projected inwards and outwards show a creation of the meta-nation, meta-identity, and indeed, meta (civic) nationalism – Yugoslav. It includes Serbs and Croats equally, as it also includes the people of different confessions.

Conclusion

Soft power projected via the films of Veljko Bulajic, especially *Kozara*, was of a complex and layered character. It dealt with a concept of nationalism, developed, as Ernest Gellner suggests, primarily for the purposes of the industrial capitalistic societies and the interest of large capital; further, it dealt with civic nationalism, also called liberal, that derived its character from the philosophical and political school of classical liberalism, all the while taking place in a socialist country, led by a communist party. It was projected at a diverse assembly of nations and ethnicities, out of which the constitutive majority was involved in a bitter civil war, as the perpetrators and victims of a pogrom. It both sublimated and dealt with many of the internal rifts, traumas and problems inherited from World War II. The wars of Yugoslav dissolution from the 90's lead us to believe that some of these problems were not entirely resolved by this projection of soft power.

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MEKA MOĆ I GRAĐENJE NACIONALNOG MITA: KOZARA VELJKA BULAJIĆA

Abstrakt

Članak će biti usmeren na pitanje pravljenja, održavanja i širenja nacionalnog mita putem filma. Glavna hipoteza je da je film esencijalno sredstvo stvaranja i održavanja meke moći. U tom kontekstu, analiziraćemo ovaj medijum kao savršeno sredstvo za stvaranje i održavanje državne meke moći jednako kao i nacionalnog identiteta. Članak je usredsređen na partizanski film *Veljka Bulajića Kozara* (Veljko Bulajić, 1962). Ovo delo će biti analizirano kao savršen primer upotrebe meke moći u svrhu stvaranja i održavanja nacionalnog identiteta, usmerene kako spolja tako i ka unutra. Kozara predstavlja epizodu iz drugog svetskog rata gde se partizanska vojska jednako bori protiv „spoljašnjeg” okupatora (nacista) kako i protiv njihovih „unutrašnjih” pomagača, ustaša. Na ovaj način, film projektuje meku moć ka spolja, prikazujući borbu protiv stranog okupatora, ali i ka unutra, prikazujući unutrašnji konflikt između jugoslovenskih naroda, različite strane koje su zauzimali u ratu, kao i zločine koje su počinili jedni protiv drugih (u ovom slučaju, pogrom koji su ustaše počinile protiv stanovništva Kozare, mahom srpskog etniciteta). Članak za nameru ima da razradi hipotezu kako je ovaj film napravljen sa ciljem da u međunarodnim okvirima pozicionira Jugoslaviju kao komunističku, antifašističku zemlju, ali da je jednako, i možda važnije, film napravljen sa ciljem da pomogne rešavanju problema traume koja je preostala iz građanskog rata koji su jugoslovenski narodi vodili jedni protiv drugih, na strani partizanske oslobodilačke vojske sa jedne strane i nacističkih kolaboracionista sa druge.

Ključne reči

meko moć, nacija, nacionalni identitet, film, Kozara

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