

## THE EMERGENCE OF ANTISEMITIC CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN YUGOSLAVIA DURING THE WAR WITH NATO\*

### Nastanak antisemitskih teorija zavere tokom NATO bombardovanja

APSTRAKT *Byford i Billig proučavaju nastanak antisemitskih teorija zavere u jugoslovenskim medijima za vreme intervencije NATO-pakta. Analiza se usmerava prvenstveno na Politiku, vodeći dnevni list koji nema istoriju antisemitizma. Za vreme vojne intervencije za kratko vreme se pojavio veliki broj konspirativnih »objašnjenja« politika zapadnih zemalja kako u uticajnim medijima u Srbiji, tako i u izjavama jugoslovenskog političkog vrha. U najvećoj meri ove teorije zavere nisu bilo otvoreno antisemitske nego više usmerene na navodne ciljeve organizacija kao što su Bilderberška grupa, Savet za spoljne odnose i Trilateralna komisija. Međutim, ove teorije zavere nisu stvorene »ni iz čega«; autori u jugoslovenskim medijima oslanjali su se na ustanovljenu tradiciju »zavereničkih« objašnjenja. Navedena tradicija ima snažnu antisemitsku komponentu koja je uticala na pojedine napise u štampi. Byford i Billig analiziraju antisemitske teme u knjizi Trilateralna komisija Smilje Avramov, kao i u nizu članaka objavljenih u Politici. Autori ističu da je proliferacija teorija zavere tokom vojne intervencije dovela do prelaska granice između prihvatljivih i neprihvatljivih političkih objašnjenja, i da, kao rezultat toga, ranije neprihvatljive antisemitske teme postaju poštovane. Navedeno se može videti u delima Nikolaja Velimirovića, vladike Srpske pravoslavne crkve, čije su mistične antisemitske ideje ranije bile van granica politički prihvatljivog. Tokom intervencije NATO-pakta njegove ideje su zadobile širu pažnju, što svedoči o slabljenju političkih prepreka za takve teme.*

KLJUČNE REČI *antisemitizam, Bilderberg grupa, teorija zavere, Nikolaj Velimirović, Ratibor Đurđević, Srpska pravoslavna crkva, Smilja Avramov, Jugoslavija*

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\* This article has been published in *Patterns of Prejudice* in 2001. The reprint was approved by authors and editorial of *Patterns of Prejudice*.

**ABSTRACT** *Byford and Billig examine the emergence of antisemitic conspiracy theories in the Yugoslav media during the war with NATO. The analysis focuses mainly on Politika, a mainstream daily newspaper without a history of antisemitism. During the war, there was a proliferation of conspiratorial explanations of western policies both in the mainstream Serbian media and in statements by the Yugoslav political establishment. For the most part such conspiracy theories were not overtly antisemitic, but rather focused on the alleged aims of organizations such as the Bilderberg Group, the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission. However, these conspiracy theories were not created de novo; writers in the Yugoslav media were drawing on an established tradition of conspiratorial explanations. The tradition has a strong antisemitic component that seems to have affected some of the Yugoslav writings. Byford and Billig analyse antisemitic themes in the book The Trilateral by Smilja Avramov and in a series of articles published in Politika. They suggest that the proliferation of conspiracy theories during the war led to a shifting of the boundary between acceptable and non-acceptable political explanations, with the result that formerly unacceptable antisemitic themes became respectable. This can be seen in the writings of Nikolaj Velimirović, the Serbian bishop whose mystical antisemitic ideas had previously been beyond the bounds of political respectability. During the war, his ideas found a wider audience, indicating a weakening of political constraints against such notions.*

**KEY WORDS** *antisemitism, Bilderberg Group, conspiracy theory, Nikolaj Velimirović, Ratibor Đurđević, Serbian Orthodox Church, Smilja Avramov, Yugoslavia*

With the fall of Communism, a number of far-right movements have emerged in the post-Communist world. These movements often espouse extreme nationalist, xenophobic, anti-Gypsy and antisemitic ideas. The best-known example of this development is the rise to prominence, in the early 1990s, of Vladimir Zhirinovskij's Liberalno-demokratskaja partiya Rossii (Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia). Organizations promoting similar ideas have been identified throughout Eastern Europe<sup>1</sup>

The emergence of antisemitism as a feature of the post-Communist shift to the right in Eastern European countries requires further examination. Most existing analyses in this area focus on the historical origins of contemporary antisemitism and attempt to assess the significance and prominence of antisemitic discourse in different countries.<sup>2</sup> However, as well as looking at the historical dimension of anti-Jewish ideology, it is also necessary to look in detail at specific circumstances or events that give rise to its public display.

It has been suggested that conspiratorial explanations of historical and political events tend to flourish in response to unusual, unforeseen or traumatic events.<sup>3</sup> Old explanations break down in the face of some dramatic, unexpected development, making people more susceptible to causal explanations based on the existence of a hidden and deliberate plan, formulated in secret by powerful enemies.<sup>4</sup> Often these conspiratorial explanations are not created *de novo*, but rather draw on a long tradition of conspiratorial accounts. This tradition has been evolving

ever since the end of the eighteenth century, when reactionary writers such as Barruel and Robison blamed the success of the French Revolution on clandestine machinations of Weishaupt's Illuminati.<sup>5</sup> For instance, as Daniel Pipes has shown, conspiratorial accounts are common in Middle Eastern countries, where explanations of international relations often draw upon this established tradition.<sup>6</sup> The present article examines how the same conspiratorial tradition emerged in Yugoslavia in the wake of the NATO bombing in the spring of 1999, and how explanations that might have previously been seen as extreme or paranoid were disseminated in the respectable media.

The conspiratorial tradition has long been linked with antisemitism as conspiracy theorists have often identified Jews as secretly plotting world domination.<sup>7</sup> Since the Second World War, this tradition of explanation has been resoundingly discredited in mainstream western politics. No major western political party has sought power using an ideology based on the thesis of a Jewish conspiracy. In consequence, ideologists who have continued to peddle such ideas have been confined to the outer reaches of the political spectrum.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the antisemitic conspiracy theorists have found themselves on the wrong side of the boundary that divides the politically respectable from the discredited. Yugoslavia, for the most part, has been no different.

According to a number of recent analyses of antisemitism in Yugoslavia, anti-Jewish ideology – which so often takes the form of Jewish conspiracy theory – is a marginal phenomenon in contemporary Serbia, without a strong institutional or ideological foothold.<sup>9</sup> Antisemitic conspiratorial notions are mainly disseminated by a relatively small number of activists who belong to the 'stratum of half educated intelligentsia' as well as by isolated members of the right-wing Orthodox clergy.<sup>10</sup> The principal exponent of the antisemitic conspiracy theory in contemporary Serbia is Dr Ratibor Đurđević, a prolific writer with over thirty titles to his name, all of which are published by Ichtus Press, a publishing house that Đurđević himself owns. Đurđević's work includes mystical and quasi-religious interpretations of current events and world history, based primarily on antisemitic conspiracy literature produced in the United States and the teachings of Nikolaj Velimirović, a mid-twentieth-century Serbian Orthodox bishop. Bishop Velimirović is a well-respected theologian who is revered by some believers as the most important Serbian religious figure since the medieval Serbian Saint Sava.<sup>11</sup> However, among Velimirović's religious writings are a number of extreme antisemitic texts, some of which will be referred to below. Velimirović's bigotry has been criticized in the past by the Serbian-Jewish author Filip David and by Laslo Sekelj, who referred to Velimirović as a 'notorious antisemite'.<sup>12</sup> At the same time it is important to note that Velimirović's antisemitism has never been officially condemned by the church authorities. Acknowledgment of the antisemitic aspect of his work appears to be

taboo in Serbian theological circles, and the ideological implications of his teachings are largely ignored. Consequently, most Orthodox believers appear to be unaware of the controversy surrounding Velimirović's writing.

The fact that Đurđević has to publish his own work illustrates the extent to which his antisemitic ideas have been considered beyond the bounds of respectability. Similarly, antisemitic material is generally absent in the mainstream press. This is especially true of *Politika*, Serbia's oldest newspaper, which was for many decades the most widely read and trusted daily publication.<sup>13</sup> Although the credibility of *Politika* has suffered since the late 1980s, when it became an 'ideological weapon' of the Serbian regime and political establishment, the paper often provided a forum in which liberal intellectuals and mainstream institutions could voice their concerns regarding the re-emergence of antisemitism in other less reputable publications.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, *Politika* was certainly not a medium for the wilder versions of the conspiracy tradition. However, in June 1999, at the end of the war with NATO, a number of articles containing references to antisemitic ideology appeared in *Politika*. The emergence of antisemitic themes in a reputable newspaper arguably occurred as a disturbing by-product of a more general proliferation of (mainly non-antisemitic) conspiratorial accounts in the mainstream Serbian media, which brought into the open the less acceptable aspects of the conspiratorial cultural tradition.

### ***Politika* and the Bilderberg Conspiracy**

In the spring of 1999 the Belgrade daily *Politika* published several articles that dealt with the activities of the Bilderberg Group—including 'Cunning plan of the Bilderberg Group'<sup>15</sup> and 'Europe remains under US guardianship'<sup>16</sup> – claiming that this organization lay at the heart of a western conspiracy against Yugoslavia. The article 'Cunning plan of the Bilderberg Group' was provided by the Yugoslav state news agency Tanjug. It was in fact a summary of a longer piece that had appeared in the Yugoslav army's publication *Vojska*.<sup>18</sup> The article analysed the causes of the conflict with NATO. Its conspiracy theory was apparent right from the start: 'The plan to provoke a new "Balkan Vietnam", according to the magazine *Vojska*, was plotted secretly as early as 1996, and was subsequently reactivated in 1998 at the meeting of the so-called Bilderberg Group . . .' The article cites the Bilderberg Group as the force behind the conspiracy, describing it as consisting of 'members of the mondialist elite, financial moguls, owners of multinational companies, political leaders, crowned heads and world famous scientists'. The Group's involvement in the Balkans is seen as part of a global conspiracy:

We are talking of a self-proclaimed world super-government that is making money out of crises and wars, which, and this is the saddest part, it itself produces. In

addition, explorers emphasize, they keep the press and television under control on a global scale.<sup>19</sup>

The idea of a western conspiracy for world domination is not particularly remarkable in the context of Serbian pro-government media discourse. Even before the war with NATO, the idea that the Yugoslav predicament was caused by deliberate and essentially anti-Serbian policies of powerful Others was already an established feature of government rhetoric. Ever since the early 1990s, the Serbian political establishment and government controlled media (including *Politika*) actively disseminated the idea that western involvement in the Balkans was motivated by a hidden agenda aimed at subjugating Serbia and its people. However, one aspect of the article in *Politika* is noteworthy. In elaborating the theme of an anti-Serbian conspiracy, it drew upon the ‘classics’ of conspiracy literature. The author of ‘Cunning plan of the Bilderberg Group’ talked of the ‘third Balkan war’ that the Bilderbergers were allegedly trying to provoke in Kosovo. In support of this claim, the author suggested that the same idea was ‘indirectly hinted at by Gary Allen in his 1986 bestseller *Say No to New World Order*’. Gary Allen is one of the principal exponents of world elite conspiracy theory in the United States. His bestselling books – *None Dare Call It Conspiracy* is said to have sold over five million copies world-wide – have been endorsed and distributed by the John Birch Society and other far-right organizations ever since the late 1960s.<sup>20</sup> By citing his work, the article in *Politika* was presenting Allen as a reputable political source.

Conspiracy theories referring to the activities of the Council on Foreign Relations, the Bilderberg Group and the Trilateral Commission have also been advanced by certain segments of the Serbian intellectual establishment. The year before the war with NATO, Professor Smilja Avramov (b. 1918), a retired professor of international law at the Belgrade Law Faculty and former president of the World Federation for Disarmament and Peace, published the second edition of her book *The Trilateral*.<sup>21</sup> In this work, Avramov claimed to expose the conspiratorial machinations of the Bilderberg Group, the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission in the context of both global international relations and Balkan politics. Professor Avramov is not only a well-established academic but also a public figure with strong connections with the Serbian regime. In the early 1990s, she was one of President Milosević’s advisers on matters of international law and foreign relations. In 1992 she was part of the Serbian negotiating team at the Geneva peace talks chaired by Lord Carrington. Many arguments put forward in *The Trilateral* are based on western, primarily US, conspiracy literature, including the work of Gary Allen, John Coleman and Richard Gaylon Ross.<sup>22</sup>

The conspiratorial triad of the Council on Foreign Relations, the Bilderberg Group and the Trilateral Commission also featured in the explanation of the war in Yugoslavia offered by another established academic, Professor Mihailo Marković, an eminent Serbian philosopher and dissident during the 1960s and 1970s. In the late

1980s, however, Marković had become a high-ranking official and ideologue of Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia. During the war with NATO, *Politika* reported a lecture given by Marković at the 'Europe at a crossroad' conference held in the Kolarac cultural centre in Belgrade.<sup>23</sup> In this lecture, Marković reflected on the Bilderberg conspiracy theories and concluded that they 'contain a lot of truth'. He went on to argue that, like Austro-Hungary, Hitler's Germany and Stalin's USSR before it, this 'kind of "secret world government"' was trying to 'introduce dictatorship into the sphere of international relations', and ultimately 'rule the world in the name of the so-called New World Order'.

### **Links with the Antisemitic Tradition**

A distinction can be made between the conspiracy theories of Gary Allen or Avramov, that concentrate on organizations such as the Bilderberg Group, and more mystical, quasi-religious theories, such as those being propounded in Yugoslavia by Đurđević. The former have a more 'reasonable' appearance: they cite existing organizations as the hub of the world conspiracy. They do not necessarily see these organizations as ciphers for the hidden esoteric workings of Jews, Freemasons or the Illuminati. Most crucially, Gary Allen and others have not identified an ethnic group as being in control of organizations like the Bilderberg Group. In contrast, for writers such as Đurđević or other antisemitic theorists, groups like the Bilderbergers and the Trilateral Commission are merely instruments for a deeper, hidden Jewish plot. In this regard, the Bilderberg conspiracy theory need not be linked to a longstanding tradition of antisemitic conspiracy theories.

Although it might be possible to make a theoretical distinction between the two sorts of theory, in practice the boundaries can be blurred. The conspiracy theorist is operating in an ideological space with a long antisemitic tradition that cannot be easily discarded. Avramov's work illustrates this linkage between the more 'reasonable' face of conspiracy theorizing and the less respectable ideological tradition of conspiracy notions. In *The Trilateral*, she makes an explicit attempt to distance herself from the wilder theories, arguing against the 'mystification of secret societies' and the placing of 'all secret organizations in the same basket'.<sup>24</sup> She claims to favour careful 'evaluation' and 'observation'.<sup>25</sup> Avramov's style is closer to a mainstream analysis of international politics than to Đurđević's classical conspiracy literature, which has strong quasi-religious, mystical and esoteric overtones.

However, on closer examination, the differentiation between nonantisemitic, 'reasonable' conspiracy theories and antisemitic theories is not hard and fast, especially as the 'reasonable' writer attempts to understand the present political

situation in terms of a longer history of conspiracies. To do this, that writer often draws on earlier theories, including those belonging to the antisemitic tradition. For example, in the introduction to *The Trilateral*, Avramov links the conspiracy behind the current western involvement in the Balkans to a whole chain of conspiracies that have shaped the history of Serbia and the rest of the world:

It used to happen, not at all infrequently, in the history of not only small but also large countries, that politicians who found themselves at the head of these states were not the persons who directed their political and economic trends, but were merely the communication links between invisible governments; so the people inevitably became the object of manipulation. The former high-ranking CIA official Dr John Coleman says the following about his country: 'We are not an independent nation, and we will not be one as long as our country is ruled by the invisible government – Committee [of] 300.' Yugoslavia too has been faced with similar problems: three times in its seventy-year-long history, it has found itself in the hands of secret and semi-secret organizations.<sup>26</sup>

Her conclusion is that there has been a chain of conspiracies and that the Trilateral 'is neither the first nor the last in that chain'.<sup>27</sup>

In outlining the nature of this chain, Avramov mentions the influence on Yugoslav history of Freemasons, 'functioning continuously for three centuries',<sup>28</sup> the Comintern, 'that vanguard organization of the world proletariat',<sup>29</sup> and, most recently, the Bilderberg Group. She briefly mentions conspiratorial organizations such as the Illuminati, the Skull and Bones Society and finally the Elders of Zion, 'an elitist Judaic organization . . . with missionary aims, that still functions through various organizational forms'.<sup>30</sup>

In this way, Avramov not only refers to the antisemitic version of the conspiracy, but she repeats one of the major themes of the notorious *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* by referring to a Jewish group of conspirators called the 'Elders of Zion'.<sup>31</sup> Although she notes that this group may have taken part in past conspiracies and, indeed, may have been more important in former times, she nevertheless asserts that it is still operating. In doing so, she links her present 'reasonable' conspiracy theory directly to the antisemitic conspiracy tradition. In addition she incorporates these themes into her analysis of the contemporary conspiracy. For instance, chapter 7 of *The Trilateral*, entitled 'Yugoslavia caught in the net of conflicting interests', discusses an alleged conspiratorial collaboration between the Vatican and the Trilateral Commission. She describes this as 'an unusual, informal, Catholic-Jewish united front'.<sup>32</sup> By equating the US establishment and the Trilateral Commission with the Jewish community, the author effectively attributes to the Jews a key role in the anti-Serbian conspiracy, thus drawing upon the antisemitic tradition. In consequence, her conspiracy theory, while apparently distancing itself from the antisemitic tradition of the *Protocols of the*

*Learned Elders of Zion*, is at the same time a continuation and refinement of that tradition.

### **Emergence of the Antisemitic Tradition**

Avramov's work illustrates how the Bilderberg-type conspiracy theory can make reference to an older antisemitic tradition, while not seeming, at first glance, to situate itself within that tradition. A further example of such work appeared in *Politika* on 4–6 June 1999, when the newspaper published a three-part series of articles entitled 'Are the creators of the New World Order inventing a New Age Religion?'. The author, a young journalist called Gordana Knežević, explored the hidden powers supposedly lying behind the 'new geo-political map of the world'. Knežević did not present the views in the articles specifically as her own, but rather claimed to be reproducing the opinions of various 'experts', such as Pavle Matić, editor of the fringe quasi-religious and mystical publication *Nostradamus*, and Spasoje Vlajić, author of a number of volumes in the field of pseudo-science and para-psychology. The fact that Knežević explicitly presents these fringe sources as 'experts' is itself significant. Moreover, she describes them as 'tireless explorers of so-called conspiracy theories and interpreters of hidden symbols in crucial world events'.<sup>33</sup> As important as what Knežević says is what she omits. She offers no word of warning to readers that the 'tireless explorers' might belong to the discredited fringes of politics. Quite the reverse: she presents her sources as credible ones.

The first article in the series, entitled 'Invisible clique rules the planet', outlines the basic idea that the war in Yugoslavia was part of a wider conspiracy:

Creators of New World Order leave nothing to chance. The great religious and esoteric war over spheres of interest and power that has been fought for years, is just the final crusade that brings us into the era of the New Age, into the new kingdom of humanism without God.<sup>34</sup>

The theme of hidden manipulators is elaborated. Knežević writes that 'visible world politicians, such as Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, are just "toys" in the hands of secret forces such as powerful world bankers, who spread their tentacles, power and influence via a hierarchical web of public and secret organizations'. The article outlines the familiar themes of the Bilderberg-type conspiracy theory. The group of seven most developed countries (G-7), the Trilateral Commission, the Council on Foreign Relations and the Bilderberg Group are some of the institutions that are said to belong to the myriad of 'public and secret organizations' implicated in the conspiracy. Significantly, the author also includes the Illuminati in this list.

From the Illuminati to the wilder reaches of conspiracy theorizing is a short step. Knežević describes the organization cited as the most important and the most

secret of all conspiratorial forces: the Committee of 300, 'a gigantic, oligarchic supra-national octopus with a grip on the whole planet', whose members are also known as the 'Olympians'. The Committee is seen as the highest ruling body of the New World Order, consisting of 'ancient oligarchic families from Venice, Europe's Black nobility, the British royal family, representatives of Wall Street's largest financial institutions and liberal politicians from the East Coast of the United States'. At the head of this supreme ruling body is 'David Rockefeller (who holds the title of the Emperor of Davidian stock) and twelve of the world's most powerful financial moguls'.<sup>35</sup>

The reference to David Rockefeller is not an unusual occurrence in the context of classical conspiracy theory. The Rockefellers are in reality a Protestant family and some conspiracy theorists, wishing to distance themselves from a charge of antisemitism, sometimes make a point of emphasizing their non-Jewish origin (as Gary Allen does in *None Dare Call It Conspiracy*). Nevertheless, the antisemitic tradition of the conspiracy theory, which links all powerful financial forces into a Jewish network, have often 'Judaized' the Rockefellers. This is certainly the case amongst Yugoslav antisemitic conspiracy theorists. For example, in one of his books, Đurđević claims that 'Rockefellers are Portuguese Jews – and only a few Americans are aware of this'.<sup>36</sup>

The description of Rockefeller in the *Politika* article as the 'Emperor of Davidian stock' is revealing. The term 'Emperor' suggests something more than merely a financial mogul: an emperor possesses supreme political power. The term 'Davidian' is particularly interesting. It is a code-word referring to the Jewish aspect of the alleged conspiracy. To have used 'Jewish' would have run the risk of introducing the key theme too blatantly. Many of *Politika*'s readers might then have dismissed the piece as 'antisemitic'. Instead a code-word is used whose significance might pass unnoticed by the majority of the readers of *Politika*. What matters is not whether the readers recognized what was being asserted but that the writer used an unusual term whose rhetoric suggests a tactic of partial concealment. Knowledgeable readers – especially sympathizers well versed in the conspiracy theory and its rhetoric – would recognize the code-word. Moreover, they would pick up a further reference. The choice of the number of Emperor Rockefeller's 'deputies' was not hap-hazard. The writer mentions the 'twelve financial moguls' who work with Rockefeller. Those versed in the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* would recognize a thematic link with the twelve Jewish Elders of that alleged conspiracy. In this way, the most notorious themes of the conspiracy tradition are signified.

Another interesting feature of Knežević's three articles is their mystical element, including numerology. For example, the presence of the number 666 in the bar-code of the Schengen Visa is cited as significant in the context of the conspiracy,

while François Mitterrand is revealed to be the first of the 'seven bald-headed rulers of the world' whose arrival was prophesied by Nostradamus. This mystical-religious aspect places the conspiracy theory articulated by Knežević closer to Đurđević's work than to the more 'rational' style of Avramov's *Trilateral*.

Knežević at times distanced herself from the views that she was reporting by attributing them to specific individuals (Matić or Vlajić) or by qualifying them with phrases such as 'it is alleged' or 'they say'. However, such distancing is limited within the context of the article. The main thrust of the argument is to suggest that there might be something in these views: they are not to be dismissed as fanciful. Thus, the author claims that one does not have to be either 'paranoid' or a 'fanatic for hidden symbolism' in order to see 'the contours of the new kingdom that erases all national and religious sovereignties that stand in its way'.<sup>37</sup> Knežević also made a reference to the 'great esoteric war', and repeatedly alluded to the number 666, which is seen as underlying the whole New World Order. In such references there was no distancing. Quite the reverse: she was suggesting that the views of the 'tireless explorers' should be taken seriously.

A particularly important aspect of Knežević's articles, which link them with Đurđević's conspiracy theories, is their portrayal of the conspiracy as having an anti-Christian and Satanic character. The titles of the second and third articles in the series set the scene: 'Who's who in the anti-Christian conspiracy'<sup>38</sup> and 'Men with the mark of the Beast'.<sup>39</sup> The destruction of Christianity is seen as the ultimate aim of the conspiracy. For example, Spasoje Vlajić, an 'expert in the field of parapsychology', is quoted in the final article:

The web of dark symbols from the planners in the shadows and their demonic influence are hanging over the whole of humanity, threatening to poison it materially, mentally and spiritually, and code it in accordance with the requirements of the new Empire that threatens to replace the two-thousand-year-old Christian civilization.<sup>40</sup>

References to the Satanic and anti-Christian aspects of the alleged plot have been a common feature of extreme Orthodox antisemitic writings in Serbia, where the terms 'Satanic' and 'Judaic' are integrally linked. For instance, Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović (1881–1956) portrayed Jews as representatives of Satan:

[Jews] had risen against Christ, and had trodden on Him and killed him . . . Blinded by Satan just like Judas, they did not see God in Christ. Inspired by the stinking breath of Satan, they tried and killed Christ. And on top of everything, they proved to be worse enemies of God than the godless Pilate . . . The Devil taught them how to rise against the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The Devil taught them throughout all the centuries up until today how to fight against the sons of Christ, the children of light, the followers of the Gospels and eternal life.<sup>41</sup>

Velimirović's teachings provided an ideological basis for a number of antisemitic conspiracy theorists, including Đurđević. Although Knežević's articles contain no explicit antisemitic references comparable to those found in the writings

of Velimirović or Đurđević, the constant emphasis on the Satanic and anti-Christian nature of the conspiracy provides a thematic link with the antisemitic tradition of Serbian ultra-Orthodoxy. As was already noted, Knežević's second article 'Men with the mark of the Beast' quotes Professor Spasoje Vlajić. While those quotations in *Politika* contained no outwardly antisemitic references, in other writings Vlajić directly implicates Jews in the anti-Christian conspiracy. For instance, in his book *The Torch*, published in 1994, Vlajić blames the Jews for the war in Bosnia.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, in a recent interview in *Duga*, Vlajić expands on the idea of Satanic influence in western culture and ponders its manifestation in the development of the Internet:

The code for entering the Internet is WWW. According to the numerical coding of the Jewish alphabet, WWW corresponds to 666. One should also bear in mind that computer technology was invented and developed by the military industry with the aim of mastering our lives.<sup>43</sup>

The numerical symbol of the Devil, the presence of which was mentioned and elaborated upon in *Politika*, was on this occasion explicitly linked with Jewish culture. As a result, although Knežević's articles in *Politika* do not directly mention the role of the Jews in the Satanic, anti-Christian conspiracy, they nonetheless lead the reader on a sort of 'paper chase' towards the kind of antisemitism that cannot be openly expressed in a mainstream daily newspaper.

### **Antisemitism and the Serbian Orthodox Church**

Despite the coded references to the antisemitic elements of the conspiracy tradition that appeared in the mainstream Yugoslav press during the war with NATO, a boundary was still maintained. A notoriously antisemitic writer such as Đurđević was not given space, at least not in *Politika*. However, Đurđević can be seen to have benefitted from a general widening of the boundaries. At this time, he was able to publish openly in *Pravoslavlje*, the official publication of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The issue of July 1999 carried his article 'Serbs in Europe – Yes, Europe in Serbs – God forbid'. In the article, Đurđević offered a conspiratorial explanation for the western intervention in Kosovo, as well as depicting the overall 'moral and spiritual pathology' of western civilization: 'Satanic Forces – conspiratorial, political, cultural, liberal, leftist – these forces gained the upper hand over the healthy, spiritual Christian traditions. They led to the New World Order, which is in fact disorder and decay inspired by Satan.'<sup>44</sup>

On this occasion, Đurđević's habitual crude and explicit antisemitism was carefully concealed and he made no reference to Jews. The reasons for his moderation here can probably be found in the fact that explicit antisemitism would not have been tolerated by the editors and readers of *Pravoslavlje*, nor by the

Orthodox mainstream in general, which has in the past frequently distanced itself from expressions of anti-Jewish prejudice in Christian theological writings. However, in the article Đurđević linked the values of western civilization – materialism, liberalism, secularism and so on – to Satan. This reflects a theme prominent both in Đurđević's overtly antisemitic writings and in the anti-Jewish aspects of the teachings of Nikolaj Velimirović, who refers to Europe as 'Death, eternal Death',<sup>45</sup> to science, industry, politics and individualism as 'four walls of the new Tower of Babel',<sup>46</sup> and argues that:

All modern European ideas were invented by Jews, who crucified Christ: democracy, and strikes, and socialism, and atheism, and religious tolerance, and pacifism, and global revolution, and capitalism, and communism. All of them are the inventions of Jews, or rather their father, the Devil.<sup>47</sup>

Consequently, even if an unequivocal reference to Jewish involvement in the conspiracy is missing in Đurđević's article, the inferred connection between Satanic forces, the development of western civilization and an anti-Christian conspiracy constitutes a legacy of the semantic link between Satanism and Judaism inherent in classical conspiratorial discourse. Similarly, by providing Đurđević with column space, the editors of *Pravoslavlje* offered one of Serbia's most notorious antisemites an opportunity to promote his ideas and to continue the ideological tradition of his teacher Velimirović.

### **The legacy of the Conspiratorial Culture**

These examples of conspiratorial discourse from the Yugoslav mainstream press reveal the persistence of the conspiracy theory in contemporary Serbian culture. Also, they suggest that themes associated with conspiracy theory tend to gain ground during moments of crisis, especially in situations in which a country, or a whole culture in the case of the Arab world,<sup>48</sup> feels itself persecuted by the so-called New World Order. Closer examination of conspiratorial accounts in the Serbian media also reveal the continuing presence of antisemitic themes in this type of conspiracy explanation. This is surprising bearing in mind that there was no evidence, at the time, of any drastic political and ideological shift towards the right that might account for the appearance of ideas typically associated with far-right movements. Similarly, in Serbia, unlike in the Middle East for example, there is no Jewish dimension to the crisis, and therefore no visible political gain to be had from an allegation of Jewish involvement. In fact, reference to anti-Muslim or anti-Catholic themes would have been politically more relevant considering the religious affiliation of Serbia's 'enemies', namely Bosnian Muslims, Albanians and Croats. Yet, conspiratorial explanations involving Serbia's neighbours are relatively rare. The heart of the conspiracy is typically located in the western world, in Europe and

the United States, most frequently implicating organizations that feature prominently in conspiratorial literature world-wide, namely the Bilderberg Group, the Trilateral Commission and the Council on Foreign Relations.

However, conspiratorial explanations that focus on these elite international organizations are neither historically nor ideologically distinct. Instead, they belong to the established cultural tradition of the conspiracy theory, which in the past – from the mid-nineteenth century up to the end of the Second World War – was dominated by the notion of a Jewish plot to rule the world. Antisemitism became firmly embedded in the conspiratorial culture and remains a continuing aspect of its ideological heritage. Consequently, the proliferation even of outwardly innocuous versions of conspiratorial discourse (such as the Bilderberg-type conspiracy) brings into the open the darker, antisemitic aspects of the conspiracy tradition. Antisemitic themes are therefore not invoked because of their political relevance, but they emerge, often inadvertently, as the legacy of the conspiratorial culture. In addition, the dissemination of the more ‘reasonable’ versions of conspiracy theory, such as that of Avramov, leads to a wider acceptance of the overall interpretative framework of a conspiracy theory based on the idea that the world is, and always has been, ruled by a ‘hidden hand’.

Once this idea achieves the status of common sense, the more extreme and prejudicial versions of conspiracy theory, like those promoted by Đurđević and the Orthodox right, become more credible, and are gradually promoted to the realm of acceptable, albeit not always normative, explanatory discourse. Therefore, in Serbia the more general proliferation of conspiratorial discourse arguably contributed to the gradual shifting of boundaries between what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable explanations in a way that enabled classical antisemitic conspiracy theory to appear, relatively unnoticed, in a Serbian mainstream newspaper such as *Politika*.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> S. P. Ramet (ed.), *The Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press 1999).
- <sup>2</sup> L. Volovici, 'Antisemitism in post-Communist Eastern Europe: a marginal or central issue?', *Analysis of Current Trends in Antisemitism*, no. 5, 1994; L. Sekelj, 'Antisemitism and Jewish identity in Serbia after the 1991 collapse of the Yugoslav state', *Analysis of Current Trends in Antisemitism*, no. 12, 1997.
- <sup>3</sup> S. M. Lipset and E. Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-wing Extremism in America, 1790–1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1978); M. Fenster, *Conspiracy Theory: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1999).
- <sup>4</sup> D. Groh, 'The temptation of conspiracy theory, or: Why do bad things happen to good people? Part I: Preliminary draft of a theory of conspiracy theories', in C. F. Graumann and S. Moscovici (eds), *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy* (New York: Springer-Verlag 1987).
- <sup>5</sup> M. Billig, 'Antisemitic themes and the British far left: some social-psychological observations on indirect aspects of the conspiracy tradition', in Graumann and Moscovici (eds); J. M. Roberts, *The Mythology of the Secret Societies* (St Albans: Paladin 1974).
- <sup>6</sup> D. Pipes, *The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1996).
- <sup>7</sup> N. Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (London: Secker and Warburg 1957).
- <sup>8</sup> Billig, 'Antisemitic themes and the British far left'.
- <sup>9</sup> Sekelj; Institute for Jewish Policy Research, *Antisemitism World Report 1997* (London: JPR 1997), 303–5 ([www.axt.org.uk/antsem/countries/yugoslavia/index.html](http://www.axt.org.uk/antsem/countries/yugoslavia/index.html)).
- <sup>10</sup> Sekelj.
- <sup>11</sup> D. Najdanović, 'Vladika Nikolaj', *Glas Crkve*, no. 3, 1991. Velimirović has also been compared to St John the Baptist and St John Chrysostom (R. Bigović, 'Slovo o vladici Nikolaju', *Glas Crkve*, no. 3, 1993; A. Radović, 'Beseda ep. Banatskog Anfilohija', *Glas Crkve*, no. 3, 1987).
- <sup>12</sup> F. David, 'Vladika kao antisemita', *Vreme*, 29 July 1991; Sekelj.
- <sup>13</sup> M. Thompson, *Forging War* (Luton: University of Luton Press 1994). Before the Second World War, *Politika* was an independent and centre-left newspaper. During Tito's Communist regime, it was under the control of state institutions such as the People's Front and the Socialist Alliance of the Working People. In spite of the influence of the state apparatus, in the context of the Serbian media *Politika* was widely regarded as a fairly liberal newspaper.
- <sup>14</sup> See Sekelj.

- <sup>15</sup> 'Pakleni plan grupe Bilderberg', *Politika*, 30 May 1999, 15.
- <sup>16</sup> 'Evropa ostaje pod tutorstvom SAD', *Politika*, 9 June 1999, 4.
- <sup>17</sup> 'Rat unosan biznis', *Vojska*, war edition no. 27, 1999, 22–3.
- <sup>18</sup> 'Pakleni plan grupe Bilderberg'.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid. 'Explorers' is the term used for those engaged in uncovering the conspiracy.
- <sup>20</sup> M. Billig, *Fascists: A Social Psychology of the National Front* (London: Academic Press 1978); see also Lipset and Raab.
- <sup>21</sup> S. Avramov, *Trilaterala* (Belgrade: Ldij 1998).
- <sup>22</sup> G. Allen, *None Dare Call It Conspiracy* (Rossmoor, CA: Concord 1968); J. Coleman, *Conspirators' Hierarchy: The Story of the Committee of 300* (Carson City, NV: America West Publishers and Distributors Paperback 1992); R. Gaylon Ross, *Who's Who of the Elite: Members of the Bilderbergers, Council on Foreign Relations, Trilateral Commission and the Skull and Bones Society* (San Marco, TX: RIE 1995).
- <sup>23</sup> 'Četvrti pokušaj osvajanja sveta', *Politika*, 30 May 1999, 16.
- <sup>24</sup> Avramov, 12.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 10.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 9.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 140.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 10.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., 9.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 10.
- <sup>31</sup> Cohn.
- <sup>32</sup> Avramov, 128.
- <sup>33</sup> G. Knežević, 'Nevidljiva vrhuška upravlja planetom', *Politika*, 4 June 1999, 15.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> R. Đurđević, *Masonerija – Zavera protiv čoveka i Boga kroz vekove i danas* (Belgrade: Ichtus Press 1996).
- <sup>37</sup> Knežević, 'Nevidljiva klika upravlja planetom'.
- <sup>38</sup> G. Knežević, 'Ko je ko u antihrišćanskoj zaveri', *Politika*, 5 June 1999, 15.
- <sup>39</sup> G. Knežević, 'Ljudi sa žigom zveri', *Politika*, 6 June 1999, 15.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> N. Velimirović, *Poruka Srpskom Narodu Kroz Tamnički Prozor* (Belgrade: Svetosavka Književna Zajednica 1998), 193.
- <sup>42</sup> S. Vlajić, *Luča* (Belgrade: Miroslav 1994).
- <sup>43</sup> 'Teslina tajna u službi naroda', *Duga*, April 1999, 39.
- <sup>44</sup> R. Đurđević, 'Srbi u Evropi – da, Evropa u Srbiji – nedaj Bože', *Pravoslavlje*, no. 775, July 1999.
- <sup>45</sup> Velimirović, 182.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>48</sup> Pipes.