

# The Little Box that Contains the World

## Serbia after the Death of Milošević

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**I had taken them** for hookers, but they were just ordinary smugglers. Mid-thirties, peroxide hair, tight counterfeit Levi's and pink blouses: the two women eyed me with suspicion as I settled back in the shabby carmine plush of my seat. The Sofia-Belgrade train was not to leave for another ten minutes, but the air in the compartment was already so thick with cigarette smoke that I felt as if I were submerged in a fish tank that hadn't been cleaned for months. The windows were almost greenish with dirt, both inside and out; the floor was littered with stubbed-out cigarette butts. I was left with no alternative but to light up myself. Join them if you can't beat them. My cigarette seemed to reassure my blondish fellow travelers and they resumed their Serbian chitchat. It was then I noticed the cheap duffel bags with the stenciled ILIENZI logo – the biggest wholesale outdoor market in Sofia, Bulgaria. Smugglers, of course.

Everything was quiet for a while, the train listlessly trundling along. I drifted in and out of sleep, my senses dulled by the iambic dimeter of the wheels, but was suddenly lifted out of my stupor when one of the women in the compartment got up from her seat and began to fran-

tically search for something. It took me a minute to realize what was happening. She was looking for a place to hide the contents of her duffel bag. After a short, futile investigation, every nook and cranny apparently rendered useless, her eyes finally rested on me while she spoke in sputtering Serbian, half of which I barely managed to understand. Yes, she actually asked me if I minded her using my suitcase. My suitcase! No way, I thought, no fucking way. But she looked so panicked that I relented.

I pulled down my clunky suitcase from the rack and unzipped it. It was half-empty; I always travel strategically light. The woman opened her duffel bag and started taking out clothes with their original price tags still on – I was more than relieved (and somewhat disappointed) to find out she was simply trafficking clothes – and stuffed them between my own T-shirts and socks. “No narcotics, right?” I inquired halfheartedly. My question elicited just a quick, condescending smile. “No narcotics,” she said.

At the Bulgaria-Serbia border, when the train sighed to a halt between high prisonlike fences with crooked chicken wire running on top, our compartment received two official visits – first from Bulgarian customs officers and later on, a few hundred meters down the railroad, from their Serbian counterparts. Luggage was carefully probed, including the bags of the two women, but no one bothered to check mine. “What’s inside the suitcase?” a corpulent guy with beads of sweat on his upper lip demanded to know. “Personal items,” I answered, and that

was that. In the ensuing silence the thump of the entry stamp fell on my passport, shattering the tension in the car. The sliding door slammed shut, and in a few more minutes the train jerked forward bearing me westward, deep into Serbian territory.

**“How long have you been** in this kind of business?” I asked delicately.

Jasmina’s clothes, the merchandise I’d just helped smuggle into Serbia, were back in her duffle bag and my suitcase was, thankfully, half-empty once again.

“Thirteen years,” she said. Now that I had won her trust, she seemed quite willing to confabulate, temporarily ignoring her more sullen and reclusive companion. She went on to tell me that she used to work as a seamstress in a textile factory in Kruševac, a town in central Serbia, before the factory closed in 1993, like so many other factories during that period. The other woman, who didn’t give her name but would interject now and again, told me she had been a high-school chemistry teacher, but the circumstances had forced her to go into the more innocuous strains of trafficking. “We resell the clothes in our hometown,” the gregarious Jasmina chimed in again. “Unfortunately, at customs they allow us to import only a certain number of articles, so we need to find ways to smuggle in the rest.” She described her job with strange enthusiasm. “Otherwise, we’d either have to pay duty or bribe the customs officers, which would significantly reduce our profits.”

How often did they travel back and forth between Serbia and Bulgaria? Jasmina passed me her blue passport. On its front cover I could read Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, in spite of the fact that the country's name had been constitutionally changed to the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro more than three years ago. Official documents, it seems, always remain the most durable repositories of the past, circulating in day-to-day life long after their issuing governments turn to ashes. The pages inside Jasmina's passport were densely covered with exit and entry stamps. I took a closer look, trying to make out the dates. For the previous week alone, I could count at least four round-trips across the border. This meant she probably spent around 300 hours on the train each month. Quite the Willy Loman.

As I handed back her passport, I felt a new kind of itinerant intimacy – peculiar to strangers who find themselves thrown together on trains for long hours – so I ventured a question: “What do you think about Slobodan Milošević, now that he is dead?”

In a calm, completely disinterested tone of voice Jasmina said: “Only my grandmother and my grandfather cried. His death didn't touch me at all. My life didn't change with his death, nothing changed.” Jasmina's nameless friend nodded in agreement. “We're still just as poor and don't have regular jobs.” I waited for them to take on the subject of politics, but they fell quietly into thought. Jasmina conceded that there was a nostalgia for the old

Yugoslavia, for the time before the country disintegrated into ethnic war. “Our salaries were very high and we could travel wherever we wished without visas. It used to be that Bulgarians and Romanians would come over to Yugoslavia to shop, instead of the other way around. And look at us now.”

What I saw were two young women striving to eke out a living who didn't give a damn about politics. Despite the apparent hardships, they were putting in every effort to dress well, to be attractive, to belong to the consumer culture they were daily trafficking in. It was very difficult for me to conceive how these people, or their compatriots, had entered an internecine war that killed so many. Was it the slow poison of history? Or the swift dagger in Milošević's deadly hand?

**Serbia is a beautiful** country. As the train was ponderously making its way northwest, toward Belgrade, I stood up in the narrow corridor, taking in the racing landscape (and fresh air, finally) through the wide-open windows. Rolling green hills, much like Pennsylvania's, bobbed up and down; broadleaf woodlands were gradually replaced by orchards, vineyards, and farmland, every plot perfectly planned out and plowed. Small herds of cattle grazed the first tufts of grass; sheep methodically mowed a rural football stadium. The villages we passed through consisted mostly of one- or two-story bare redbrick houses huddled together, square as shoeboxes – all on the same architectural blueprint. Adjacent to almost every house

was a barn and a coop, although many people had let their chickens and geese roam freely in the streets. Yes, the signs of poverty were visible everywhere, people subsisting mostly on small-scale agriculture, but, like an old coat mended and kept clean by its fastidious owner, the Serbian villages I observed were outwardly pleasant and perhaps even comfortable to live in. Their well-kept April gardens bespoke an inordinate love of flowers and fruit trees: daffodils, tulips, hyacinths, wild geraniums, and lilacs growing next to blossoming cherries and plums and apples. It was as if war had never visited here.

But this was a mistaken impression. Though the countryside bore no literal battle scars, the economic toll suffered by the country in the last fifteen years was obvious – dilapidated factories with toppled chimneystacks and broken windows like missing teeth; farms turned into junkyards for scrap iron; fields were strewn with bottles and garbage bags. The environmental impact, however, was far greater than the mere debris of economic collapse. Several locals later told me that fruit and vegetable crops had started to fail after the NATO bombings, and cancer rates had increased – a consequence most commonly attributed to the depleted uranium used in some NATO munitions. In his 2001 report titled “Environmental Impacts of the NATO War in Yugoslavia,” Vukašin Pavlović, director of the Belgrade-based ECOCenter, warned, “Depleted uranium is just one page in a very thick book of the ecological and health catastrophe caused by the

NATO bombing.” He claimed that the deliberate targeting of petrochemical plants, refineries, and other highly hazardous industrial sites had caused significant damage to the environment of the Balkans and beyond. Genocide, ecocide – oftentimes it is hard to tell the difference.

**When I returned** to the compartment, another man had taken a seat next to mine. Unlike the chic smugglers I’d spoken to earlier (who had already made off with their illegal cargo), his appearance suggested something altogether different and slightly unsettling. White hair grew sparsely on his balding pate. His face looked gaunt and weather-worn, the color of tanned leather, but still taut and defiant in its expression, the brash face of someone who knows he has survived. I peered into his eyes – brown, rimmed by colder blue – and couldn’t decide if they were in the process of freezing or thawing. Rough and callused, his hands seemed accustomed to hard, menial labor, and he wore a tattered jacket concealing a fraying woolen vest. There was no telling his age. For all I knew, he might have been on the crew of the *Pequod*.

It turned out that Sando Ganchev was my countryman, a Bulgarian, but had been residing in Serbia for almost thirty years. What did he do for a living, I asked him. He showed me the things he carried – two burlap sacks stuffed with vine grafts. “I sell these,” he said, “but I also keep a little vineyard myself.” So my new companion was nothing more than a viticulturist after all, not a tough sea dog. I told him I was a journalist. For a couple

of minutes we engaged in small talk about Bulgaria, and everything was going well, until I made the error of asking about his family. “Do you have children?” In an instant his face darkened, hardened like a nut. “I have no family,” he said. “I have no one.” Then, after an edgy pause, he continued: “You are a journalist. Write this down: ‘Sando Ganchev from Bulgaria made his home for thirty years in Serbia, married a Bosnian wife, and fought as a volunteer on the Serbian side in Bosnia. His son was killed in the war, his wife died, his son-in-law died, and his daughter died. He himself was wounded three times in the stomach, but lived.’”

What does a person do in such moments? Express condolences? Ask more questions? Keep silent and stare ahead in the distance? I chose the last, and it became obvious that our conversation was over.

As a kid I’d watched the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina on TV, but I didn’t give a damn back then, though Sarajevo was barely 250 miles from Sofia. The death of 100,000 people had touched me less than the death of Winnetou, protagonist of the eponymous novel by Karl May. Now it was different. That man next to me, buried alive in his grief, was solid proof that the horrors of the war were still stalking people’s memories here, more than ten years after the Dayton Peace Agreement had put an end (temporarily) to hostilities.

Out of the corner of my eye I watched Sando take from a plastic bag a loaf of bread and some sausage. Using his jackknife, he proceeded to slice a few bits, chewing on each and every morsel with absent-minded deliberation. While he ate, I couldn't help wondering whether he had also killed somebody's son, or daughter, or wife. Did he think the war had been worth it? I didn't dare ask.

**For three days** the rain wouldn't stop – cold April rain that washed the streets of Belgrade completely clean of people. For three days I stayed in my room in a downtown hostel, the Belgrade Eye, trying to ward off the depression that seems to flourish in the rain. For three days I walked Belgrade vicariously: tracing streets and sights on the map with my finger, reading books, but venturing out into the real world only to buy myself a sandwich or pizza from the nearest food stand. “The little box that contains the world / Fell in love with herself / And conceived / Still another little box.” In the box of my room, in the box of my head, I'd open the box of Vasko Popa's poetry only to enter another box, and then another, and another. His honest Serbian surrealism made for the best guide to his homeland and illustrated the surreal boxed-in fate of the whole region. One could put anything into that box, take anything out. “Throw in your head / You'll take out two,” wrote Popa. There, myth suddenly bloated into history, and vice versa. The line between victims and victimizers blurred, and what had once been a chest full of fantastic treasures was now Pandora's stinking dumpster.

To understand what led to the most devastating war in Europe since 1945, one must imagine such a Chinese box – little boxes nested one inside the other, in ever-descending sizes. Yugoslavia was the large box containing six smaller, identical versions of itself: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia (with Kosovo and Vojvodina – two more boxes – as autonomous provinces). In a sense, Yugoslavia was the European Union before the European Union, boasting a multiethnic, cosmopolitan community that thrived socially and economically from its inception at the end of the First World War. The ride was bumpy at times, no doubt, with nationalistic potholes scattered here and there (most notably the Nazi-sponsored Ustaše regime in Croatia, which, according to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, brutally exterminated over 500,000 Serbs, as well as 72,000 Jews and Gypsies, between 1941 and 1945), but for a while at least the utopian pan-Slavic idea, which in the nineteenth century had sought to bring together the Slavic peoples of the Balkans under a single banner (so as to resist the colonial clamp of the bigger empires), seemed to have worked. After the Second World War, when the Communist-cum-reformer Josip Broz Tito took control of the country and exchanged the iron curtain for a velvet one, Yugoslavia experienced a period of relative political stability and economic growth, despite the fact that Tito's rule was far from democratic. Each box had its own government and, after 1974, received the right to self-determination and even secession. The constitutional

and administrative reforms introduced by Tito, however, unwittingly laid the groundwork for what was to ensue. Immediately after his death in 1980, Yugoslavia's federalism quickly began to unravel, leading to a period of political instability, economic recession, resurgence of nationalism, and – ultimately – war.

What happened afterward is common knowledge: Every republic contained its own jack-in-the-box – a sinister face forcefully held under the lid for so many years, while a secret hand had been winding its spring. And when one popped forth, it set off a chain reaction. The subsequent process of balkanization – the term coming back to its origin – prompted a series of painful and bloody conflicts across the region. The most publicized atrocities were, of course, the siege of Sarajevo, which resulted in more than 10,000 casualties, and the Srebrenica massacre, when 8,100 Muslim men were executed by the Serbian paramilitary groups of General Ratko Mladic while the UN Dutch contingent stood passively by. But certainly, all sides were implicated, and the violence only perpetuated itself. When fighting ended with the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, no party could claim victory: a total of 250,000 people had perished and more than 3,500,000 had become refugees. “Don’t bow down to the little box,” Popa warned his readers. “If you do / You’ll never straighten yourself out again.”

The little box of Kosovo was next. Kosovo, the southernmost province of Serbia, once had been the cultural

center of Serbia's medieval empire, and many Christian-Orthodox monasteries (Gracanica Monastery, Decani Monastery) still attest to that greatness. At the end of the twentieth century, however, it was rated the poorest, most economically backward region in the country. From being Serbia's heart, Kosovo had gradually turned into its asshole. (Indeed, one of the most publicized and galvanizing events of the '80s, which indirectly contributed to subsequent wars, was the rumor that a Serbian man had been sexually assaulted with a bottle by a group of Albanians; the man later retracted his claim and said he had been pleasuring himself.) The violence, however, continued. Despite their ethnic predominance – roughly 90 percent of the population – Albanians were not given a separate republic in Tito's time the way Bosnians were, although they enjoyed significant autonomy within Serbia under the 1974 constitution. Nevertheless, political tensions steadily grew and finally came to a head in 1998, when full-scale violence between Albanians and Serbs broke out.

The last jack was out of the box. Slobodan Milošević deployed the Serbian army to rein in the Albanian separatists from the terrorist-led Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), but his campaign soon slipped into thinly veiled ethnic cleansing of ordinary Albanians. This time around the international response was swift. After several failed rounds of negotiations, NATO proceeded to bomb major government buildings in Belgrade and strategic positions of the Serbian army, forcing Serbia's withdrawal from Kosovo and placing the area under UN protection. Several