

# Mujo, Haso, and the Ghost of Tito: Reflection through Humor in Former Yugoslavia

## First Author

Jon Jonoski

## Second Author

Jennifer Lamphere

## Third Author

Liliana Zambrano

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## Abstract

The Yugoslavian wars of the 1990's have left lasting scars on the region. More than 20 years after the end of the conflict, the atmosphere in Yugoslavia's successor states remains one of mutually excluding truths and the fragmentation of society. Despite various transitional justice activities and the successes of the ICTY, dealing with the past continues to be a sensitive subject in this region. Its inhabitants tend to self-censor or to develop nationalistic mindsets that impede their ability to engage in critical (self-) reflection and discussion. Humor, which has historically played an important role in Yugoslavia, is the one binding factor. Everyone knows and loves the jokes about Mujo & Haso, the lazy Montenegrins and the cheap Slovenes. This is why the game *The Ghost of Tito* can be a valuable reflective tool. By combining humor with historical and cultural references, the game enables its users to confront complex social issues that they find hard to address in a direct way.

## Introduction

"Many commentators argue that [the Balkans] have always been wracked by ancient hatreds. Others argue that today's strains are artificial, manufactured by cynical post communist demagogues looking to legitimate their rule. Neither school is right" (Hagen 52). So says historian William Hagen in his writings on nationalism and the historical roots of the Balkan crises in the 1990s. As Hagen points out, the geographic region that once held the former Yugoslavian state has long been characterized by the West as an area of political instability fed by rampant ethnic and religious tension. Such a reputation is not completely unjustified, nor is the image of the Balkans as a "cauldron of ethnic hatred" to be taken without qualification (ibid). Lethal nationalisms have indeed resulted in widespread violence, economic collapse, and significant civil strife. But these lethal nationalisms may also be seen as the product of the manipulation and misappropriation of historical memory by political elites, packaged and then disseminated from the top down for public

consumption. In such a way, the Balkan states have suffered from the construction of collective memories that relied on narratives from the past as political instruments for the present. Or, as scholar Maria Todorova writes, "discourse on the Balkans as a geographic/cultural entity is overwhelmed by a discourse using the construct as a powerful symbol conveniently located outside historical time" (Todorova 460). Especially with regard to the lands that made up the former Yugoslav republic, the instrumentalization of history has played a leading role in the shaping of society.

In their historic narratives, Yugoslavia's successor states used binary oppositions to differentiate themselves. They created a dichotomy in which they presented themselves as civilized and cultured, as opposed to the barbaric, backward others (Razsa & Lindstrom 630). This Balkanist discourse has contributed heavily to the fragmentation of post-Yugoslav society (Todorova 3). Although the region is peaceful now, the issues that led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and the ensuing conflicts, still linger on in the region. There is continuing distrust among the various ethnicities, some cities are still heavily segregated, and in many schools the history curriculum presents a very one-sided view of history. Consequently, many find it very hard to discuss and reflect on their culture, history and even daily life, in an open, critical way. The Post-Conflict Mind Check project, a collaboration between Creative Court and MediaLab Amsterdam addressed these issues. Its research question was 'How can Creative Court facilitate reflective thinking on current preconceptions in former Yugoslavia? In order to answer this question, we had to first understand the historical context which allows these preconceptions to take shape. During our research we recognized that humor was an important binding factor in the region. This realization directly influenced our end product, *The Ghost of Tito* card game.

### **Historical Context**

Historically the biggest markers of difference in the Yugoslav region have been language and religion. In Yugoslavia the official language was a combination of Serbian and Croatian, and was appropriately called Serbo-Croatian. The differences between the two languages were mostly insignificant, and linguists of both ethnicities encouraged 'linguistic secessionism' (Farkas 25). When Yugoslavia dissolved, the Croatian parliament constitutionally adopted Croatian as the official language of the new nation. Moreover Croatia decided that its language should be substantially different from Serbian or Bosnian, and make it more European. Consequently 'they eliminated 'Orthodox' (Serbian), Arabic and Turkish (Bosnian) lexical elements. The missing lexical items were replaced by neologisms, or old native Croatian words were revived' (ibid 26). The transformation of the Croatian language continues to this day, although most people speaking Serbian still understand Croatian, as well as Bosnian, and Montenegrin. Although these are now seen as four distinct languages, they have all developed from Serbo-Croatian, and for many 'they are more dialects, than different languages' (ibid 24).

Written language is a bigger marker of difference between Croatia and Serbia. In Serbia, the Cyrillic alphabet is used, which is a great source of pride for Serbians. It is what makes Serbian language special to Serbians. Because most of the former Yugoslav languages are very similar, Serbians believe their language stands out, because of its special script, feeling it 'links them to other Orthodox Slavic people' (ibid 29). In Croatia they use the Latin script, seeing the Cyrillic one

as 'a marker that has to be avoided as it is Eastern, Orthodox and Serbian' (ibid 30). For many Croats Cyrillic is a rallying call for Serbian nationalists, and a way to preserve Serbian identity. Consequently, in 2013 tensions rose, when the Croatian government allowed ethnic minorities, in towns where they constitute of more than one third of the population, to use their own script for official purposes. As 35 percent of the population in the city of Vukovar consists of Serbs, signs in Cyrillic were put up all over the city, angering the Croatian population. They argued that the signs remind them of the 1991 Serbian siege of the city (ibid 29-30).

Besides language, religion is an important marker of difference, especially with regard to Bosnia-Herzegovina. Bosnia is still a very ethnically divided nation, with the Bosnian Serbs, the Bosnian Croats and the Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) all having their own president. Furthermore 'only Bosniaks support the national football team and identify with the national flag, while Bosnian Serbs support the Serbian one and fly the Serbian flag and Bosnian Croats the Croatian ones' (Judah 27). As such Bosnian Muslims are unique in Europe, as they are not only a religious community, but also an ethnic group and a nationality (Bringa 81). Since 1971 Bosnian Muslims in Yugoslavia could in fact officially declare them of 'Muslim' nationality, even though that was not accepted, or needed, by all. In Serbia and Croatia, Muslims were still often seen as Serbs/Croats of Islamic faith.

While the Bosniaks, the Catholic Croats and the Orthodox Serbs lived together relatively peacefully in former Yugoslavia, the differences between the religions were very much visible. Many villages had clearly defined areas for each group; based on the architecture it was possible to determine which area belonged to which group. Muslim houses are square, with the short side facing the village, while Catholic houses are rectangular with the long side facing the village (ibid 82). The various religions respected each other's traditions, but hardly interacted. When they did, they mostly communicated by pointing out their differences. Through these differences they shaped and defined their (own) identities. As Bringa puts it 'there was an acknowledgement that the formation of cultural identity was dependent on the presence of the others who do things differently. In other words, the presence of the other ethnic group was needed to construct cultural identity, since it is mainly through its presence that a person is taught awareness of his or her own ethnic identity' (ibid 83).

### **The role of humor in Yugoslavia and its successor states**

*Why does a Montenegrin put two glasses, a full one and an empty one, by his bedside in the evening? Because he is too lazy to decide if he will be thirsty during the night".*

Jokes like this were made about all ethnic groups in Yugoslavia, and each group was lampooned based on a different (negative) characteristic. While Montenegrins were lazy, Bosnians were fools, and Slovenians were cheap (Zizek 22). For Zizek, these jokes were evidence of a very healthy discourse between the different peoples of Yugoslavia. These jokes were not just used to 'stigmatize' the 'other', but also to show that the Yugoslav people shared a certain kinship, which these jokes also helped define. This is why in many of these jokes, it is clear that the people representing the different ethnicities are somehow related to each other (Vucetic 1). Besides that these jokes were often self-deprecating, which enabled the nations to show that they were aware of

their own imperfections, and that it was fine to satirize them. Furthermore the stereotypes used were so overstated that it was impossible to take them too seriously. It made people aware that while there may have been some truth in the preconceptions they held, these preconceptions could not define the various Yugoslav republics. Thus, the constant repetition of these jokes brought people together, rather than drive them apart.

As discussed earlier, these stereotypes were used in a much less innocent way during, and after, the Yugoslav wars in the 1990's. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia the newly independent nations sought to construct a national identity that would maximally differentiate them from each other and from Yugoslavia as a whole. In doing so they often overstated minor cultural and linguistic differences, which were then used to justify nationalistic, exclusionary ideals. Consequently many of the core norms and values of these newly formed nations were imbued by these preconceptions. These preconceptions also influenced government policies, as in virtually all former Yugoslav nations; politicians successfully built political platforms, exploiting these once relatively innocent stereotypes.

Nonetheless humor did not lose its important function during the war. In many ways these jokes became only more relevant; for many the only way to cope with the horrific circumstances was through humor. Now, more than twenty years after the end of the conflict, everyone still knows, tells, and laughs at the jokes about Mujo and co. That is not special in itself. Yugoslavia's successor states have much more in common than these jokes, yet these commonalities are often denied. The connection they share through humor on the other hand is accepted. This is why humor may be one of the few truly binding factors in the region.

### **Reflection through humor: *The Ghost of Tito***

The Ghost of Tito is a multiplayer card game about culture, history and social stereotypes in the six countries that once made up the former Yugoslavian state. Using irreverent word combinations, drawings, and verbal hints the game aims to subconsciously poke players into personal reflection as they confront complex social issues softened through the lens of humor. The game has references to aspects of daily life familiar to anyone from the Yugoslav region, as well as references to many Yugoslavian heroes, such as musician Djordje Balasevic, novelist Mesa Selimovic and scientist Nikola Tesla. Yet the game also acknowledges the dark sides of Yugoslavian history. Many find it hard to address subjects such as Milosevic's presidency or the Siege of Sarajevo head-on. Through its use of humor the *The Ghost of Tito* aims to make people more comfortable in discussing these topics.

The game consists of four decks of cards. It starts when one player selects a grey card with a question or a 'fill-in-the-blank' phrase. The other players answer the question, or fill in the blank, with one of the five blue cards they have in their hand. The person who drew the grey card then chooses the funniest answer, and whoever played it gets a point. After each full rotation through the players the entire group participates in a bonus round. The player who began the game draws a bonus card, and using either verbal hints or drawing describes the word written on the card to the rest of the players. The person who guesses it first wins the bonus card. The 'Something is Bothering me cards' comprise the final deck. If players feel they need to discuss a reference or word

combination they can use this card to show it to the rest of the group, and discuss what is bothering them.

According to the influential game theorist James Coleman, when playing a game, 'the players have goals towards which they act, and their actions are governed by a set of rules that specify which actions are prescribed, which are permitted, and which are proscribed' (Coleman 2). The basic rules of *The Ghost of Tito* are a major reason for its effectiveness. The players here can only win if someone considers them the most funny. Moreover, each round this is decided by someone else. Because of this, the players are constantly forced to reflect on the meaning and the implications of the card combinations they are making. They are forced to think why certain references may be funny or hurtful to them, but not to others. This is an important reason why we choose to create a physical game instead of a virtual one. We wanted to ensure that the players are at all times aware of their 'opponents' and their behavior.

Coleman believes that playing a game can be a learning experience. He argues that players learn by observing the behavior of the others and comparing it to their own, and by observing the changes in behavior under different circumstances. It is especially important to note that 'the players in a game do not respond to the person who has established the game; they respond to each other' (ibid 4). *The Ghost of Tito* allows plenty of room for subjectivity. We did not want to guide the players reactions, or steer them towards a certain position. The dynamics of the game are largely influenced by the group of people playing it. What card combinations are considered funny, offensive, reflective or dull, depends entirely on the individuals creating these combinations. What may be offensive to one Serb for example, may be funny to another. As such *The Ghost of Tito* could help people reflect on the value of generalizations, by showing that not everyone from a certain ethnicity can be thrown in the same pot. In other words, the game could help players realize that people should not be judged on preconceived notions about their ethnicity/nationality, but on their own personal characteristics.

## **Conclusion**

We have tested the Ghost of Tito with some people from the region, but we need a much larger sample size to reflect on the game's functionality and usefulness. We believe the game can be a valuable educational tool. Schools in former Yugoslavia could use it as part of their history curriculum. At the same time we are aware that we are walking a tightrope. We tried to make the game provocative, but not hurtful. Yet as we discussed we cannot control the player's reactions to it. The game may not work for everyone. Some might find it too offensive, while others too dull. In both cases discussion would be stifled. Lastly, we realize there may be many other valuable approaches towards facilitating reflection in former Yugoslavia. Some scholars have, for example, claimed popmusic has a similar role as humor in the region (Pogacar 215). We very much welcome further research on this topic.

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