

# *Balkan Idols*

Religion and Nationalism  
in Yugoslav States

Vjekoslav Perica

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## PREFACE

Yugoslavia, that ethnically diverse country . . . began the 1990s with the brightest future in Eastern Europe. It boasted a literate, well-trained population that traveled frequently abroad, and had an unusually large number of companies that had evaded the inefficiencies of the communist economy and could compete on the international market . . . food shortages and lines at stores commonplace in the rest of the Eastern bloc were virtually unknown in a land blessed with fertile soil and a breathtaking coastline that attracted billions of dollars in foreign tourism.

*New York Times*, 13 April 1992

If you take all guns out of Yugoslavia, they would kill themselves with knives. Then they would use their teeth. . . . The historic controversies that Europe thought it had put behind it—nationalism, religious hatred—have blossomed and now drive the fighting. . . . Some Europeans fear that the war in Yugoslavia may represent the beginning of a new division of Europe—this time along religious lines.

*Boston Globe*, 28 October 1991

Religion is one of the major forces of conflict in our world today. Six months after Islamic radicals' deadly terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C.; as Hindus and Muslims clash anew in India; Jews and Muslims fight a bloody civil war in Palestine; and religion fuels conflicts and wars elsewhere in Asia and Eurasia, in Africa, in the Balkans and Northern Ireland; as religious organizations thwart democratic

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Reporting from the heartland of Yugoslavia in the 1970s, *Washington Post* correspondent Dusko Doder described "a landscape of Gothic spires, Islamic mosques, and Byzantine domes." A quarter century later, this landscape lay in ruins. In addition to claiming tens of thousands of lives, the former Yugoslavia's four wars ravaged over a thousand religious buildings, many purposefully destroyed by Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and Muslims alike, providing an apt architectural metaphor for the region's recent history.

Rarely has the human impulse toward monocausality—the need for a single explanation—been in greater evidence than in Western attempts to make sense of the country's bloody dissolution. From Robert Kaplan's controversial *Balkan Ghosts*, which identified entrenched ethnic hatreds as the driving force behind Yugoslavia's demise, to NATO's dogged pursuit and arrest of Slobodan Milosevic, the quest for easy answers has frequently served to obscure the Balkans' complex history. Perhaps most surprisingly, no book has focused explicitly on the role religion has played in the conflicts that continue to torment southeastern Europe.

Based on a wide range of South Slav sources and previously unpublished, often confidential, documents from communist state archives, as well as on the author's own on-the-ground experience, *Balkan Idols* explores the political role and influence of Serbian Orthodox, Croatian Catholic, and Yugoslav Muslim religious organizations over the course of the last century. Vjekoslav Perica emphatically rejects



*Advance praise for*

BALKAN IDOLS

"This vivid account of tragic events in the former Yugoslavia is truly unique among numerous recent books on the subject because it digs deep to examine the role of religious faiths and their collaboration with secular nationalists. The conclusions are shockingly provocative. Not only were ethnic conflicts and mass crimes rooted in religion, Perica argues, but the local religious hierarchies remain the major impediment to building peace in the Balkans. An excellent, tightly-argued work by a Croatian-American scholar with deep knowledge of the region and written with verve and humor. It is an indispensable contribution to an understanding of multiethnic societies."

—Dusko Doder, co-author of *Milosevic: Portrait of a Tyrant*

"Perica has written an outstanding book, based on archival research, interviews with key figures, and extensive experience in the field, among other sources. This book sheds new light on the escalation of tensions leading up to the outbreak of war in summer 1991, and on the role of the major religious organizations in the politics of the region."

—Sabrina P. Ramet, author of *Balkan Babel:*

*The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to the War for Kosovo*



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