

Yugoslavia, My Homeland

Jugoslavija, moja dežela

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Goran Vojnović's novel *Yugoslavia, My Homeland* (*Jugoslavija, moja dežela*) represents one of the most significant literary engagements with the legacy of Yugoslavia's breakup, employing personal family history to examine the political and ideological landscape of the post-Yugoslav space. The political nature of the novel lies not in direct commentary on historical events, but in its demonstration of how grand politics: nationalism, war, and state violence, permeate the private sphere, individual biographies, and everyday language, shaping identity, memory, and family relationships.

The lens through which the consequences of the breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia are viewed is the main character, Vladan Borojević, the son of a Serb and a Slovenian, who represents the "last pioneers," born between 1974 and 1982 (Milica Popović). His fate is known from a pivotal moment, the end of a carefree childhood spent in Pula, Croatia, where his father served as an officer in the Yugoslav People's Army. Just before the outbreak of armed conflict in the summer of 1991, his father was withdrawn from Pula and sent to the front in Eastern Slavonia (Croatia). After the sudden, forced departure from Croatia, without receiving a new official apartment, the wife and her eleven-year-old son initially stayed in the Bristol Hotel in Belgrade, where they both experienced extreme loneliness. They then spent some time at the husband's Serbian family's home in Novi Sad, in an overcrowded small apartment, among supporters of Milošević's politics, who blame the Slovenes and Croats for the country's breakup. From a city that symbolizes Yugoslav diversity, openness, and multi-ethnicity, the protagonist is moved to a nationalist environment. From the perspective of the chauffeur transporting the family and explaining to the boy where they were headed, it was a land of darkness: "the lights on the left are Hungary, on the right Bosnia, and ahead of us, where there are no lights, lies Serbia and Vojvodina." Ultimately, the mother decided to return to her home, her roots, in Slovenia, to her parents, with whom she had lost contact. Deprived of his father, reportedly missing at the front, and increasingly estranged from his mother, the boy found himself displaced into foreign environments shaped by unfamiliar socio-political realities and language. He initially lived in a patriarchal, traditional Slovenian village before moving to the Ljubljana district of Fužine, a "post-Yugoslav ghetto" for immigrants from Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia.

Sixteen years later, Vladan, now an adult, undertakes the same journey (Pula – Serbia – Bosnia – Slovenia) in reverse, prompted by the accidental discovery that his father is alive and sought by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. He set out to find his father, Nedeljko, who was hiding under the Croatian name and surname Tomislav Zdravković – confronting previously non-existent borders and their guardians, representing different administrations and state narratives. This is a physical and mental journey to a past that he thought had been effectively erased from memory, as well as to the present of new states and their versions of recent events: "In some village near Bijeljina [BiH – K.P.M.], relatives and friends (along with a priest) warmly

welcomed the local hero returning after eight years, guess where from, straight from The Hague, where he had served a prison sentence for war crimes that the evil and demoralized international community had proven against him, although his uncles and distant relatives swore on their deceased mothers that their dear Milan wouldn't hurt a fly and that he loved every person" (PL, 68).

The search for a father accused of war crimes and the quest for one's own identity are the central themes of the novel. The father figure is a representation of central authority in a state of disintegration: unreflective, loyal to ideology, yet morally compromised. Vojnović illustrates how nationalist mechanisms produce a moral alibi, where crime becomes a "defence," and responsibility transforms into "loyalty to the nation." The war does not end with the signing of peace; its consequences persist in the form of silences, denial, and shifting responsibility. The novel exposes a mechanism that deposits collective responsibility into the private sphere, with the burden of guilt falling on the children. Vladan grapples with "generational trauma," which encompasses his father's crimes against Croats but also the testimonies of atrocities committed in Herzegovina in 1942 by the Ustaše or people disguised as the Ustaše from the ravaged Herzegovinian neighbourhood" (PL 107). The sole survivor of the massacre of the village and the family was Vladan's grandfather, who discovered the bodies of his loved ones burning on a pyre in the yard. This scene is repeated in 1991 in a Slavonian village, but this time the perpetrators are soldiers of the Yugoslav People's Army, led by Nedeljko Borojević. The writer challenges the politics of forgetting, arguing that without ethical work on memory, a stable political future cannot be achieved. Instead of proposing simple solutions, he draws attention to the individual psychological costs this entails.

Yugoslavia appears as a lost (though not idealized) space, impossible to recount in new national categories, as well as a space of illusory brotherhood and unity (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*), a space of silences and unresolved crimes from World War II, waiting to be brought to light and avenged. The state may have disappeared, but its ideological remains persist in the language, memory, and fears of the characters. These remnants of the country, political system, family, official narratives, and personal experiences are layered with both truths and silences concerning the wars of the 1990s. Vladan could neither find nor wished to find his place in the new reality and its language. He learned Slovenian while concealing this fact from his mother, refusing to speak to her in Slovenian, which ultimately led to a divergence in their paths. The only community - illusory and one from which he was also distanced - was the large group of refugees from the former Yugoslavia living in Ljubljana, with whom he communicated "in our way" (in Serbo-Croatian). This was a "community" viewed with reluctance by Slovenians. Vojnović skilfully handles linguistic and nominative proximity and diversity to foreground national differences. The "Janezs" are juxtaposed with the "Jovans," "Ivans," "Suljes," and "Muljes." Janez, Ivan, and Jovan are variations of the name John in Slovenian, Croatian, and Serbian, respectively, while Suljo and Muljo are the most popular Bosnian names. These names are used as colloquial substitutes to denote nationality. In mutual perceptions, stereotypes prevail, and language becomes a tool of segregation – ethnic, emotional and moral. An essential political aspect of *Yugoslavia, My Homeland* is also the demystification of the language of nationalism and symbolic violence; the war does not begin with gunfire but with words: labels, simplifications, and exclusion. Literature becomes a space of resistance against simplified national myths, allowing for questions about the boundaries of loyalty, guilt, and responsibility. However, it does not express a longing for a lost community; instead, it reveals its illusory nature and impossibility. This refusal of nostalgia also unveils the political aspect of the novel.

LANGUAGE: Slovenian/Slovenščina

CENSORSHIP STATUS: