Abstract

The paper explores the political rehabilitation, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, of the recently-canonized Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, a controversial early 20th-century Serbian Orthodox Christian philosopher who, having been vilified by the communist authorities as a "Nazi collaborator," "antisemite" and "Fascist," is today revered by the majority of Orthodox Serbs as the greatest Serbian religious figure since medieval times. The rehabilitation of Nikolaj Velimirović will be shown to have involved continual suppression and sidelining of a number of controversial aspects of his biography, most of which are related to his antisemitic views and right-wing political activism in the 1930s and 1940s. Drawing on the work of Irwin-Zarecka (1994) and Michael Billig (1997a, 1999a, 1999b), it will be suggested that embarrassing aspects of the bishop's life were "repressed" by substituting a "replacement myth"—namely the portrayal of Velimirović as a martyr and a victim of Nazi persecution. A look at specific rhetorical and discursive dynamics demonstrates how the transformation from traitor to saint took place.

Recent years have seen increased interest in the topic of collective memory among historians, sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists (Kansteiner 2002; Olick 1999; Wertsch 2002; Irwin-Zarecka 1994; Maier 1997; Middleton and Edwards 1992). Although the precise meaning and the scope of terms such as "collective memory," "social memory," "social remembering," and "national" or "public" memory, remain a matter of debate (Wood 1999), there appears to be general agreement that shared, non-consensual, and frequently-contested representations of the past—which define social identities and delineate boundaries between

social groups—constitute a topic worthy of academic consideration.

One factor which contributed to the renewed interest in collective memory in the past fifteen or twenty years were the radical changes in the representations of the past which accompanied, and were in many ways constitutive of, the post-communist transition in Eastern Europe (Muller 2002; Wertsch 2002, Jedlicki 1999). The fall of communism in the region was accompanied by the extensive rewriting of history aimed at overturning communist interpretations of the past, which had dominated national historiographies and collective memory since the end of the Second World War. In many cases, this process led to misguided instances of historical revisionism and the rehabilitation of a number of contentious historical figures, some of whom, forty years earlier, had attained notoriety for their antisemitism, and fascist and pro-Nazi leanings. Since the late 1980s, biographies of the likes of Cardinal Stepinac and Ante Pavelić in Croatia, Antonescu in Romania, Tiso in Slovakia, and Horthy in Hungary were subjected to a comprehensive makeover as their public status was transformed from villains to heroes, from perpetrators to victims (Shafir 2002; Ramet 1999; Volovici 1994).

The wave of historical revisionism which swept Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall did not bypass Serbian society (Kuljić 2002). Although for the duration of Milosević's quasi-socialist regime historical revisionism was by and large devoid of official backing from the state, and remained the provenance of right-wing political organisations (the Serbian Renewal Movement, Radical Party, etc.) and various influential national(ist) institutions (the Serbian Orthodox Church, Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences, Serbian Union of Writers), over the years the country witnessed a significant change in the perceived status of a number of Nazi collaborators and World War II nationalist leaders including General Milan Nedić, Dimitrije Ljotić, Draža Mihajlović, Momčilo Đujić and Pavle Đurišić (Popov 1993).

A specific example of historical revisionism in Serbia after the fall of communism concerns Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. Once vilified by the communist authorities as a Nazi collaborator, traitor, and Fascist, this controversial early 20th-century Serbian Orthodox philosopher has recently been canonized. The process of

transformation from traitor to saint involved a considerable process of forgetting and social repression of his antisemitic views and his support for right-wing political activists in the 1930s and 1940s.

Nikolaj Velimirović: A Controversial Life

Nikolaj Velimirović (1882–1956), the Bishop of Žiča (1919–1920; 1934–1956) and Ohrid (1920–1934) was one of the best known and highly esteemed Serbian religious figures of the early 20th century, famous for his nationalism and clericalism as much as for his personal charisma, oratorical skills, and erudition (Đorđević 1998; Bigović 1998; Radosavljević 1986; Janić 1994; Janković 2002a).

In the early stages of his clerical career, Velimirović was a progressive theologian, widely perceived as a liberal force within the Church, and as a person who might be able to guide Serbian Orthodoxy down a modernist path. He was believed to be an anglophile with an affinity towards Protestantism acquired during his studies in Bern, Geneva, and Oxford. The renowned Serbian historian and literary critic Jovan Skerlić, a contemporary of Velimirović, once compared him to Ernest Renan, and praised him as a "cleric with the courage to challenge religious deceptions with reason" (cited in Bogdanović 1931).

Velimirović's reputation as a liberal was relatively short-lived, however. In 1920, he was ordained bishop of Ohrid and placed in charge of the Devotionalists (Bogomoljci), a reactionary evangelical movement founded by the Serbian Church in the aftermath of the First World War.[1] Over subsequent years, in the

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[1] The Devotionalists were established by the Church with the purpose of "counteracting the growing religious indifference in Serbia, thwarting the increasingly aggressive propaganda by the Adventist Church and hindering the rise of Bolshevism" all of which were seen as undermining the influence of Orthodox Christianity in the aftermath of the First World War (Subotić 1996).

company of the devout common people who were the mainstay of the Devotionalists, and under the spiritual guidance of monks from the nearby Holy Mount Athos, Velimirović underwent a profound personal transformation (Bigović 1998; Radosavljević 1986; Stanišić 1976). The progressive young scholar and theologian—once known for his tidy hair, silk cassocks, and a confidence that bordered on arrogance—became a recluse, ascetic, and somewhat conservative figure, whose philosophical outlook was deeply affected by the conversion. The admiration for Western Europe and sympathy for the ecumenical movement that he had harboured in his youth gave way to a xenophobic strand of Serbian clerical nationalism and populism (Popov 1993; Đorđević 1996). Velimirović began to advocate the union of Church and State, and the establishment of a society founded on the principles of Orthodox Christian tradition, and a uniquely Serbian form of Christian nationalism and monarchism (e.g., Velimirović 2001; Subotić 1996, Popov 1993). He also advocated the rejection of individualism, equality, religious tolerance, democracy and other values of Modernity and the Enlightenment (Subotić 1993). By the mid-1930s, anti-Westernism had become Velimirović's obsession: the bishop devoted his life to warning the Serbian people about the dangers posed by "foreign customs and superficial Western traditions" (Radosavljević 1986, 14).

In his writings of the late 1920s and 1930s, Velimirović also glorified Serbs and the Balkans as "a specific cultural civilization and national 'entity' which is fundamentally different from other peoples, races and tribes" (Đorđević 1996). By the end of the 1930s the view of the Serbian people as the symbol of the authentic, Christian view of the world attained overtly racist overtones. In the 1939 essay, *Whose are You, Little Serbian People?,* Velimirović spoke of Serbs as "God's children and people of Aryan race, who have been granted the honorable role of being the main pillar of Christianity in the world" (Velimirović 1939/2001, 40). He asserted that "we are Aryan by blood, Slavs by surname, Serbs by name, Christians in heart and spirit" (ibid.). Serbs were also said to be the guards at the gates of "Aryan Europe," who protect its purity from "inferior tribes."

Velimirović's supporters, past and present, view the conversion at Ohrid as an unequivocally positive development, one that

allowed him to emerge as the true representative of the Serbian national and religious spirit (Radosavljević 1986, 22). Bishop Artemije Radosavljević, for instance, described this development as the moment when, "graced by the warm currents of Orthodoxy (Radosavljević 2003, 336), Nikolaj the genius became Nikolaj the Saint" (Radosavljević 1986, 23). Similarly, archimandrite Jovan Radosavljević explains that at Ohrid, Nikolaj emerged as "a spiritual and national leader and the true father of his nation" (J. Radosavljević 2003, 116).

For Velimirović's critics, the Ohrid period marks the Bishop's demise as a religious philosopher and political thinker. In the 1930s, literary critic Milan Bogdanović described Velimirović's later work as "nothing but aphoristic paraphrasing of the strictest canonical dogma" by a conservative who "glorifies the church as an institution, openly championing the Orthodox ceremonial" (Bogdanović 1931, 78). More recently, sociologist of religion Mirko Đorđević (1996) noted that Velimirović's later writing "brought nothing new to theology," but merely reproduced, and applied to the Serbian cultural context, the ideas of Russian Slavophile thinkers such as Dostoyevski, Leontiyev, and Homyakov. More controversially, Đorđević contends that Velimirović's nationalist and increasingly politicised rhetoric of the 1930s reveals the influence of the notorious French nationalist philosopher and fascist, Charles Maurras (Đorđević, in the Belgrade daily *Danas,* Saturday/Sunday, 20–21 July 2002).

The personal and philosophical conversion which Velimirović underwent in the 1920s is also noteworthy, first of all because antisemitic ideas became prominent in his thought. Numerous anti-Jewish and anti-Judaic references are evident in his writings, consisting of a blend of religious antisemitism (which has a long history in Orthodox Christianity [see Poliakov 1974]), and the "Jewish conspiracy" tradition which had emerged in western Europe in the mid-19th century, and became increasingly popular across the continent in the 1930s (e.g., Cohn 1957; Pipes 1998).

In his post-1920 literary output, Velimirović frequently invoked the image of Jews as murderers of Christ and a satanic people who betrayed God. In his most controversial book *Words to the Serbian People through the Dungeon Window,* written in the final years of the Second World War, Jews are said to have tried and murdered

Christ, "inspired by the stinking breath of Satan." Velimirović also claimed that "the Devil taught [Jews] how to stand against the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The Devil taught them through the centuries how to fight against the sons of Christ, against the children of Light, against the followers of the Gospel and eternal life" (Velimirović 1985/1998, 193). Similarly, condemnations of Jews as Christ-killers and enemies of Christianity appear in other writings, such as *New Sermons under the Mountain*, *Ohrid Prologue*, *Indian Letters,* as well as in the allegorical sermon *The Story of the Wolf and the Lamb,* which provoked a bitter reaction from the Belgrade Rabbi Dr. Isaac Alkalai when it was first published in 1928 (*Vreme,* 15 January 1928, 3).

Anti-Jewish slurs in Velimirović's writing were also assimilated into his broader anti-Western and anti-modernist ideology. Behind modernity and secular European values, which were an anathema to him at the time, lay a Satanic, Jewish conspiracy, the aim of which was to "place a Jewish Messiah on Christ's throne" (idem, 1985/1998, 194).[2] One of his first overtly antisemitic works, *Indian Letters,* written in the mid-1920s, includes an allegorical story in which Satan is portrayed as an evil Jewish seductress and leader of a communist uprising. The character of the Jewish woman

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[2] The Devotionalist Movement, which operated under Velimirović's auspices and propounded his philosophy, also played an important role in the dissemination of antisemitic conspiracy theories in Serbia in the late 1920s. As early as 1926, and therefore more than ten years before Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion was first published (and banned) in Serbia, the Devotionalist publication *Hrišćanska Zajednica* (The Christian community) printed extracts from the Protocols in the text "Bloody foundations, or the Protocols of the Elders of Zion" (No. 2–3 [March 1926]: 6–9). In the same year, the magazine published extracts from the 19th-century German pamphlet "Religious Teaching of the Talmud, or the Mirror of Kike Honesty" which was first translated into Serbian in 1882 by the well-known publicist Vasa Pelagić (No. 4 [April 1926]: 8–11). In spring 1927, the Devotionalists, who maintained strong links with the Serbian Diaspora in the United States, published the article "Enemies of Christianity, according to Henry Ford" in *Hrišćanska Zajednica,* in which socialism and Freemasonry were identified as two "darlings of the Jew" (No. l–2 [January 1927]: 4–9). Similar texts conveying an antisemitic, antimasonic, and anticommunist message were a regular feature of Devotionalist religious publications at the time (see Subotić 1996).

symbolises what Velimirović saw as the destructive, immoral, antireligious, and revolutionary aspect of Western culture and civilization (Janić 1999). Similarly, in *Words to the Serbian People through the Dungeon Window,* Bishop Nikolaj asserted that all "modern ideas including democracy, and strikes, and socialism, and atheism, and religious tolerance, and pacifism, and global revolution, and capitalism, and communism" are inventions of "Jews, or rather their father, the Devil" (Velimirović, 1985/1998, 194).

The second contentious aspect of Velimirović's biography—regularly flagged by his critics—concerns the fact that in 1935 the German Chancellor, Adolf Hitler, awarded him a civilian medal, in gratitude for his contribution to the 1926 restoration of a First World War German military cemetery in the Macedonian town of Bitolj. As Velimirović's supporters rightly point out, the medal was awarded for an honorable act of Christian charity that did not in itself demonstrate any ideological or political affiliation with the Nazis (e.g., Atanasije Jeftić, "Regarding the attacks on Bishop Nikolaj," *Pravoslavlje,* 1 September 1986, 11). Moreover, in an attempt to play down the significance of this episode, Velimirović's followers insist that the bishop was profoundly embarrassed by the award, and never showed it to anybody. Such attempts at distancing are undermined by the fact that shortly after receiving the award from the German Ambassador in Belgrade (at a high-profile ceremony attended by then-Patriarch Varnava Rosić), Velimirović publicly cited Nazi Germany as being on the way toward the realization of his own nationalist ideal. In a speech entitled *The Nationalism of St. Sava,* Velimirović praised Hitler and even compared him, in terms of importance, to the founder of the Serbian Church, the medieval Saint Sava. Referring to Hitler's apparent ambition to create a national church, Bishop Nikolaj suggested that

> One must commend the current German Leader, who, as a simple craftsman and a common man, has realised that nationalism without faith is an anomaly, a cold and insecure mechanism. In the 20th century he has arrived at the idea first introduced by St. Sava, and, although a lay person, he has taken upon himself that most important of all missions,

> one that is only worthy of a Saint, a genius, a hero (Velimirović 1935/2001, 36).

A third area of controversy relates to the links which Velimirović maintained in the 1930s and 1940s with the Serbian fascist movement Zbor and its founder, the pro-Nazi politician, Dimitrije Ljotić. During the German occupation of Serbia (1941–1945) Zbor was the country's most zealous collaborationist organization, whose military wing, the Serbian Volunteer Corps (Srpski Dobrovoljački Korpus, SDK) fought alongside the Germans against Partisan and Chetnik insurgents. Moreover, during the occupation, Ljotić's Volunteers were actively involved in the organization of retaliatory executions of civilians and the rounding up and murder of Serbia's Jews (Martić 1980; Stefanović 1984). In one of his last interviews, given to a Serbian emigrant newspaper in the United States in 1953, Velimirović asserted that he was the spiritual leader and *eminence grise* of Serbian religious nationalism epitomised by Zbor (Popov 1993). This claim is supported by the fact that in the years preceding the Second World War there was a significant overlap between the membership of Zbor and that of the Devotionalists which operated under Velimirović's patronage. According to some sources, from 1935 onwards, leaders of Zbor were the "backbone" of the Devotionalist movement (Subotić 1996, 195), while according to others, the Devotionalists collectively joined Ljotić's organisation in the late 1930s (Stefanović 1984, Cohen 1996). Velimirović is known to have held Dimitrije Ljotić in high esteem. When the Yugoslav authorities outlawed Zbor in 1940 and arrested Ljotić and his henchmen (including one of Velimirović's disciples, Dimitrije Najdanović), the bishop wrote a letter of protest to Serbian Prime Minister Dragiša Cvetković in which he referred to Ljotić as a man of "great character" and a true Christian (cited in Janković 2003c). Similarly, at Ljotić's funeral in April 1945, Velimirović spoke of the deceased—by that time an undisputed Nazi collaborator and war criminal—as "a politician bearing a cross," and an "ideologue of clericalist nationalism" whose importance "transcends the boundaries of Serbian politics" (cited in Kostić 1991 and Subotić 1996).

The controversial nature of Velimirović's political involvement in the 1930s and 1940s and the presence in his writings of

reprehensible antisemitic and pro-Nazi comments were cited by the communist authorities in the postwar years to discredit and accuse him, among other things, of Nazi collaboration. And yet, certain facts of his life both before and during the Second World War would appear to go against such accusations. For instance, in March 1941, together with a number of prominent members of the Serbian Orthodox Church (including then-patriarch Gavrilo Dožić), Bishop Nikolaj came out in support of the British-led putsch which deposed the Yugoslav regent, Pavle Karađorđević, and annulled the treaty between Yugoslavia and the Axis Forces which the regent had signed a few days earlier. The putsch, which attracted considerable public support in Serbia, provoked the invasion of Yugoslavia by Nazi Germany in April 1941. The famous patriotic speech in favor of the putsch, which Serbian Patriarch Gavrilo Dožić read out on national radio shortly after the fall of Pavle Karađorđević, is widely believed to have been written, or at least inspired by, Velimirović (J. Radosavljević 2003; Jevtić, "The Kosovo Creed in Bishop Nikolaj's Writing," *Glas Crkve* 3 [1988]:19).

Because of his support for the March 1941 coup, the German occupying forces in Serbia treated Velimirović with suspicion. There are indications that before the war the German authorities regarded the bishop — a committed nationalist and anticommunist — as a potential candidate for collaboration.[3] However, after the events of March 1941, he was seen as essentially pro-British, and an influential figure among the Chetnik insurgents in central Serbia who fought against the German troops in the early summer of 1941.[4] Thus, in July 1941, he was arrested on suspicion of links with the Chetniks and was interned at the

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[3] In January 1969, *Politika*'s Bonn correspondent reported a trial which was taking place in Germany at the time, in which a former German agent in Serbia named Gerstenmeier testified how in the 1930s Velimirović was Germany's favourite candidate to take over leadership of the Serbian Orthodox Church, in spite of his known anglophile leanings and links with the Anglican church. See "How Gerstenmeier attempted to recruit Nikolaj of Žiča," *Politika,* 16 January 1969, p. 4).

[4] Ljotić's Zbor was the only relevant political organisation in Serbia to oppose the March coup. Velimirović's involvement in the events provoked a break in relations between him and Ljotić which lasted until spring 1945.

monastery Ljubostinja in central Serbia. Eighteen months later, he was transferred to another monastery in Vojlovica near Belgrade where, together with Patriarch Gavrilo Dožić, he was kept under house arrest for eighteen months. During their internment in Vojlovica, the two senior Serbian clerics resisted frequent pressure to collaborate with the Germans. They repeatedly refused to sign a public statement against Tito's partisans, and declined to participate in the creation of a pro-German government of national salvation with which Nazis intended to replace the quisling administration of General Milan Nedić (Džomić 2003, Radosavljević 2003).


Velimirovic during internment in the monastery Vojlovica in 1941

In September 1944, as the German troops began to lose ground in the war against the partisans, Velimirović and Dožić were transferred abroad, first to Austria and then to Germany. Eventually, they ended up in the notorious concentration camp at Dachau. Velimirović and Dožić were held there as "honorary prisoners" (*Ehrenhaftling*) for just under three months. The reason for their release in December 1944 remains a matter of dispute. However, historical evidence appears to suggest that the German authorities used the two church dignitaries as bargaining chips in the negotiations with the Serbian nationalists and collaborators, such as Dimitrije Ljotić and Milan Nedić. Velimirović and Dožić are said to have been released from Dachau as part of a deal struck between Ljotić, Nedić, and the German envoy Hermann Neubacher (Petranović 1983, Kostić 1949, Parežanin 1971).[5]

[5] According to Petranović (1983), in 1945 the German authorities in Yugoslavia proposed the establishment of a Serbian-Montenegrin federation which would be governed by pro-German nationalist forces. Ljotić, Nedić, and others, who had been hoping for a "Greater Serbia" that would include parts of Bosnia and Croatia, claimed that in order to get their forces to accept the new, and less appealing, state borders, they needed the support of Velimirović and Patriarch Gavrilo, who at this point had already been taken to Dachau. The clearance for the release of Velimirović and the Patriarch came from Herman Neubacher, the German emissary for Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, and Greece.

Upon their release, the two were sent under German escort to Slovenia, where Ljotić and other Serbian nationalist warlords were preparing a final offensive against Tito's partisans. During the stay in Slovenia, Velimirović gave his blessing to Ljotić's volunteers, as well to other collaborators and war criminals such as the Chetniks of Momčilo Đujić and Dobroslav Jevđević (Kostić 1949; Parežanin 1971).

Velimirović left Slovenia after Ljotić's death in a car crash in April 1945. He emigrated to the United States via Austria, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. In America, he was actively engaged, together with dissident émigré organisations, in subverting the communist authorities in Serbia. However, embittered by his declining influence in his homeland, Velimirović spent the final years of his life resentful and disheartened, living a solitary existence in a Serbian monastery in Libertyville, Illinois. He died on March 18, 1956 at the age of 76. In 1991, Velimirović's remains, originally buried in the gardens of the monastery in Illinois, were brought back to Serbia and laid to rest in a chapel in his native village of Lelić.

Velimirović's status in postwar Yugoslavia

In postwar Yugoslavia, the Communist authorities went to considerable lengths to sideline and marginalize right-wing elements within the Serbian Orthodox Church—especially the 1930s populist tradition epitomised by clerical nationalism (Sekelj 1997, Perica 2002).

In line with this broader objective, Velimirović was dismissed as a clerical-nationalist, traitor and enemy of the socialist revolution. His citizenship was revoked and his name included on an unofficial list of authors whose work could not be openly published in the country. Even some institutions within the Serbian Orthodox Church denounced Velimirović. The Union of Orthodox Priests (UOP), a state-sponsored association of Orthodox clergy, was at the forefront of the public campaign aimed at the bishop's denigration. Articles regularly appeared in the Union's publication, *Vesnik,* accusing Velimirović of treason and dismissing him as a "lackey of the Germans" (*Vesnik,* 25 June 1950, 4).

Until the mid-1980s, he was regularly subjected to attacks in the national press. He was portrayed as a fascist ("Political Incense," *NIN*, 8 October 1972), a representative of "classic fascistic anticommunism and antisemitism" (Pero Simić, "Carbon-copied Treason," *Novosti,* 21 September 1986,8), "the darkest individual in the history of Serbian people," "Ljotić's ideologue, admirer of Hitler" and a "virulent antisemite" (Ljotic's and Velimirović's Followers, Old and New, *Novosti,* 6 October 1986). In 1980, the Sarajevo daily, *Oslobođenje,* went so far as to brand him a war criminal. In an editorial condemning the emerging clericalist tendencies within the Serbian Orthodox Church, the newspaper accused the clericalists of following the "ideology of the war criminal, the bishop of Žiča Nikola [*sic*] Velimirović" (*Oslobođenje*, 7 July 1981).

Apart from these periodic attacks, Velimirović was by and large confined to oblivion. His contribution to theology was ignored and his work excluded from the teaching programs at Orthodox seminaries. Nikolaj's legacy was kept alive surreptitiously among only a small circle of admirers on the fringes of the Serbian Orthodox Church, who had gathered around his former associate and disciple, the dissident monk Father Justin Popović. Other supporters in the church included four of Justin's disciples: Atanasije Jevtić, Artemije Radosavljevic, Amfilohije Radovic and Irinej Bulović, as well as Nikolaj's nephew, Jovan Velimirović, who was the bishop of Šabac and Valjevo between 1974 and 1990 (Tomanić 2001).[6] Nevertheless, except for his admirers at the margins of the Serbian church, Nikolaj Velimirović was for the most part forgotten by the largely secularised Yugoslav public. Postwar generations knew little about his life or religious philosophy other than what was said about him in the sporadic attacks in the national media.

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[6] Velimirović also had considerable support among nationalist organizations in the Diaspora. The publishing company *Iskra,* based in Munich, published Velimirović's work throughout the 1960s and 1970s. *Iskra* was run by Dimitrije Najdanović and Đoko Slijepčević, both former associates of Dimitrije Ljotić and officials in the Serbian collaborationist government of Milan Nedic (1941–1945) . In the early 1980s, Lavrentije Trifunović, then Bishop of Western Europe published—in Germany—the first edition, and still the definitive version, of Velimirović's collected works.

Velimirović's Status Today

The condemnations of Velimirović in the mainstream press during the Tito era, and his marginal status in Serbian society after the Second World War, stand in stark contrast to the bishop's reputation in present-day Serbian society. Today, he is widely regarded as the most respected Serbian religious figure since the medieval Serbian St. Sava. In religious circles, Velimirović is routinely compared—to St. John the Baptist and St. John Chrysostom. Bishop Amfilohije Radović recently referred to him as a "prophet and missionary of the rarest kind" (cited in *Politika,* 26 May 2003, 22). The Bishop of Šabac and Valjevo, Lavrentije Trifunović, has called him "the greatest Serbian son, cleric and thinker since St. Sava" whose work is a "spiritual skyscraper, a mountain of natural wealth yet to be discovered and explored" (Trifunović 2002). The adulation of Velimirović within the church culminated in May 2003, when the Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church voted unanimously to canonise him and include his name as the 77th entry in the roll call of Serbian national saints.

Just as importantly, Velimirović's popularity in Serbia extends beyond the circles of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Multiple editions of his books, including the controversial titles such as *Words to the Serbian People through the Dungeon Window*, *The Nationalism of St. Sava,* and others are widely available in Serbia's bookshops. Deacon Ljubomir Ranković, editor of *Glas Crkve,* a publishing house that has been putting out Velimirović's work since the early 1990s (today it is only one of many publishers who have titles by Velimirović in their catalogues) claims to have sold over a million copies of his books over the years. If true, this makes him by far the best-selling Serbian author of the past decade. The bishop's influence has even penetrated the traditionally cosmopolitan and progressive elements of Serbian culture such as rock music. In 2001 the compilation album containing rock renditions of Velimirović's religious poetry performed by some of Serbia's leading rock bands, was released by a state-owned record company, in conjunction with the Serbian Orthodox Church (*Songs above East and West,* PGP-RTS, 2001).

The widespread regard for Velimirović extends also to members of the Serbian political establishment. In 2001, the Serbian Justice Minister, Vladan Batić, asserted that Bishop Nikolaj was an indisputable moral and intellectual authority in Serbia. In January 2003 a similarly favourable stance was expressed on the popular television chat show "Impression of the Week," by the acting Serbian ambassador in Athens, the historian and politician Dušan Bataković (TV Studio B; January 5, 2003). More importantly, in an open letter to the symposium on Velimirović held at the Žiča Monastery in April 2003, Serbia's most popular politician, the leader of the Democratic Party of Serbia and former Yugoslav president, Vojislav Koštunica, referred to Velimirović as "our guide" and cited his nationalist dogma as a suitable blueprint for a post-Milošević version of Serbian nationalism (cited in Jevtić 2003; "Patriotism is Not Hatred," *Večernje Novosti,* 1 April 2003, 3).

It is also noteworthy that endorsements of Velimirović by leading Serbian politicians and church leaders are seldom counterbalanced by critical voices from among the liberal circles of the country's political establishment. It appears that criticism of the bishop is viewed as potentially damaging, particularly as it would alienate the influential Serbian Church. Thus, any questioning about his past is confined to the liberal media (*Danas, Vreme, Republika, Radio B-92*), a relatively small circle of Serbian liberal intelligentsia (Nebojša Popov, Mirko Đorđević, Radmila Radić, Olivera Milosavljević, Filip David and Ivan Čolović), and a number of civil rights organisations, the most outspoken being the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia.

Collective Remembering, Collective Forgetting

Bearing in mind the controversies surrounding Velimirović's life, it can be argued that the maintenance of the overwhelmingly positive memory of Nikolaj Velimirović in Serbia today actually involves a significant amount of forgetting—of things such as his association with Nazi collaborators, his antisemitism, or the positive evaluation of Hitler that appears in his writing.

The emphasis on "forgetting" is not new in scholarly work on collective memory. Burke (1989), for instance, argues that the study of social remembering necessitates the exploration of the

"organisation of exclusion, suppression and repression." The means by which uncomfortable, troubling, and traumatic episodes from the past can be kept away from popular consciousness is also considered by Henri Rousso's *Vichy Syndrome* (1991), Peter Novick's *Holocaust Remembered* (2001), and Iwona Irwin-Zarecka's *Frames of Remembrance* (1994).

In literature on collective memory, the notion of social forgetting is frequently alluded to as "repression," drawing on the vocabulary of Freudian psychoanalysis. According to Freud, repression or "willed forgetting" (Bower 1990) refers to the driving away of troubling thoughts and impulses from conscious awareness (e.g., Freud 1914, 1916, 1933, 1940). It is a mechanism that protects the conscious part of the self, the ego, from threatening and potentially damaging unconscious drives and desires. The use of the concept of repression in the literature on collective memory stems from the possibility that "groups, like individuals, may be able to suppress what is inconvenient to remember" (Burke 1989).

However, recent years have seen a reaction against the reliance on psychological terminology in the study of social remembering (Wood 1999, Novick 2001, Wertsch 2002; Kantsteiner 2002). Kantsteiner (2002), for instance, argues that, when considering collective phenomena, psychological terminology—including words such as repression, amnesia, or trauma—is "at best metaphorical and at worst misleading" (p. 185). He contends that "we are best advised to keep psychological or psychoanalytical categories at bay and to focus, rather, on the social, political and cultural factors at work." (p. 186). The objection to the drawing of parallels between individual and collective memory rests on the belief that the former is regulated by various "laws of the unconscious" (Wood 1999, 2) and specific mental processes (including repression), the ontology of which is in the human brain. Collective memory, on the other hand, is seen as "disembodied," and devoid of an "organic basis" (Kansteiner 2002), and in that sense as more abstract and elusive. Collective memory is thought to consist of "texts" or representations originating from "shared communications about the meaning of the past that are anchored in the life of the world of individuals

who partake in the communal life of the respective collective" (p. 188).

Because of the assumed ontological difference between collective and individual memory, Irwin-Zarecka (1994) argues that, in the domain of social remembering, there can be no "unexpressed memories" stored in the unconscious, and therefore no "repression" as such. For aspects of the past to be preserved in public consciousness, they must be continuously present in the life of the community through the "full information base of remembrance": commemorations, celebrations, monuments, museums, publications, etc. (also Terdiman 1993). Put simply, only that which is "publicly known and spoken about" is committed to memory (Irwin-Zarecka 1994, 195). Conversely, for something to be forgotten, its recollection in public discourse must be suspended. Memories are confined to oblivion by not being invoked, spoken about, and remembered in public.

In exploring what it is that determines what will and what will not be socially remembered, studies of collective memory often focus on the role of intentionality and power in the creation, maintenance, and transformation of shared representations of the past. Wood (1999) argues that collective memory always "testifies to a will or desire on the part of some social group or disposition of power to select and organise representations of the past" and as such it "[embodies] the intentionality—social, political, institutional, and so on—that promotes or authorises its entry [into the public domain]" (p. 2). Similarly, studies in the sociology of reputation often emphasise that a fundamental component of "reputational dynamics" is the "strategizing and political maneuvering" by a figure's representatives through which his or her image is constructed and managed (Lang and Lang 1988, Taylor 1996). The focus on intentionality assumes that "memory entrepreneurship" always involves a manipulation of representations of the past by structures of power, for specific contemporary political and ideological purposes (Olick and Robbins 1998, 126). As Burke (1989) notes, a pertinent question in the study of collective memory is "who wants whom to remember what and why?" (p. 107).

The rehabilitation of Nikolaj Velimirović over the past 15 years, and the transformation of his image from traitor to saint can

indeed be explored from the perspective of intentionality and instrumentalism. In the late 1980s, as nationalism gradually began to replace communism as the dominant ideology of Serbian society, the previously marginal clique of Velimirović supporters in the Serbian Orthodox Church became a prominent force within the ecclesiastical establishment. Riding on the waves of patriotic euphoria in Serbia, the likes of Amfilohije Radović, Artemije Radosavljević, Atanasije Jevtić, and Irinej Bulović emerged as front-runners in the campaign aimed at Serbia's national and spiritual revival (Tomanić 2001, Radić 1996/2002, Perica 2002). Together with other nationalist institutions such as the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Serbian Union of Writers, the four clerics became the principal voice of Serbian ethnic nationalism. Jovan, the former Metropolitan of Zagreb and Ljubljana once lamented that the four "young professors, future bishops,... abandoned their theological work and embarked on a cheap political adventure" which helped drag the country into civil war (cited in Tomanić 2001, 17). By 1991, Radović, Radosavljević, Jevtić, and Bulović had all been ordained as bishops, and since then have been wielding considerable influence in the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The newly-acquired status of these Velimirović supporters within the Serbian Church enabled them to embark on an aggressive public campaign aimed at ending almost forty years of vilification and marginalization and a necessary means of exorcising the ghost of communism from the Serbian national corpus. Atanasije Jevtić once interpreted the rehabilitation as a manifestation of the "forthcoming revitalization of the whole of the Serbian people" and the rebirth of a nation that would once again be "deeply conscious of its ethnic and spiritual identity" ("Lamp before the Candle," *GC* 3 [1987]:26). Nationalist politician and poet Milan Komnenić saw it as a way of "removing all traces of the absurd, of things vulgar and anti-Serbian, of fraud and humiliation from the spiritual horizon" ("A Pensive Word about Bishop Nikolaj," *GC*, 3 [1988]:30).

A variety of measures were taken to provide the public with a positive interpretation of his life. In 1985, Velimirović's nephew, Bishop Jovan of Šabac and Valjevo, founded the journal *Glas Crkve* which endeavoured to "offer its contribution to the objective

evaluation of Bishop Nikolaj [Velimirović]'s character" and bring the "harmful campaign [against him] to an end" ("Journalism or…" *Glas Crkve* 1 [1987]:72). A large proportion of each issue of the journal—with a circulation of some 10,000 copies—was devoted to the popularization of Velimirović's writings; *Glas Crkve* was also the first to publish his books in post-Communist Serbia. Around the same time, Atanasije Jevtić published privately *The New Chrysostom* by Artemije Radosavljević, the first affirmative biography of Velimirović since the Second World War. In addition to the various publishing activities, the Diocese of Šabac and Valjevo organised regular commemorative ceremonies dedicated to Velimirović, including the transport of his remains from the United States to Serbia in May 1991. All of these events were endorsed, attended, and publicized by the likes of Jevtić, Radović, and Radosavljević as well as by the country's nationalist elite, including Vuk Drasković, Matija Bećković, Danko Popović, Milić od Mačve, Radovan Karadžić, and others.

Without doubt, these conscious efforts by Velmirović admirers within the church and among the country's nationalist elite have played a crucial role in the transformation of the bishop's image over the years. Significantly, these activities have also included deliberate attempts at suppressing the controversy surrounding Velimirović. There is evidence, for instance, that in some editions of his writings published in the past decade, compromising sections, such as the praise of Hitler, or the reference to Serbs as members of the Aryan race, were furtively censored by the publishers (see Tomanić, "Forgery with the Bishop's Blessing," *Danas,* 15–16 March 2003; Čolović, "Strange People," *Danas,* 2–3 February 2002).

At the same time however, explanations which display an over-reliance on intentionality seldom tell a complete story with regard to transformations in collective memory. The focus on the power and intent of individuals and institutions translates into a rather unflattering picture of modern society. The reliance on the "simplistic, tacit assumption that collective memory work can be reduced to human agency" (Kansteiner 2002, 195) implies that the public readily accepts communication from relevant power-structures—without challenging, doubting, or disputing ideological claims. In other words, such approaches imply that "facts of

representation coincide with facts of reception" (ibid.) and what we are left with is the image of an "unthinking society," easily hoodwinked by propaganda and spin. In contrast, recent post-structuralist theories of culture and communication suggest that people are not passive recipients of ideology, but agents engaged in a "free play of signification," able to create their own readings of dominant ideas, as well as to challenge, dispute and undermine ruling ideologies (Billig 1997b, Thompson 1984). As Irwin-Zarecka recognises, "individuals are perfectly capable of ignoring even the best told stories, of injecting their own, subversive meaning into even the most rhetorically accomplished 'text'" (1994, 4). This suggests that the process of social remembering involves a strong argumentative component. To remember is not just to represent, but also to conduct an implicit argument against competing representations that coexist in the public domain. Thus, when examining why and how, in a specific context, one version of the past is "remembered" and another is "forgotten," it is important not just to explore the machinations of the human and social agency behind it, but also to look at the relevant "textual dynamics," the rhetorical and argumentative skills by means of which a particular version of the past is made to be seen as preferable to others. A related question is also how the practice of remembering a version of the past "represses" the competing accounts and sidelines them by pushing them away from popular consciousness.

Repression as Replacement

As already noted, Irwin-Zarecka (1994) suggests that in collective memory, aspects of the past are forgotten by *not* being invoked, spoken about and remembered in public. They become "repressed" by being ostracised from commemorative ceremonies, museums, and books. Significantly, in narratives of the past, because of their chronological order and organization, it is impossible merely to omit an embarrassing episode or period of history. Silences have to be "dressed up in words" (p. 120). That which is "willfully forgotten" must be replaced by a suitable substitute:

> [W]hen we speak of forgetting, we are speaking of displacement (or replacement) of one version of the past by another. To use different imagery, when we set out to listen to historical silences, we are forced to listen to a great deal of noise (Irwin-Zarecka 1994, 120).

In that sense, social forgetting involves the creation of alternative memories, which suppress the material which is to be forgotten by replacing it with more innocuous and harmless content.

More recently, rhetorical psychologist Michael Billig (1999a) has also argued that the replacement of troubling memories underpins the process of willed forgetting:

> Repression demands replacement, as a dangerous topic is replaced by another.... If one successfully represses an experience the result should not be amnesia—or a gap in the remembered stream of consciousness. A replacement history needs to be found, so one possible memory story is supplanted by another, which suppresses the former (pp. 168–69).

Billig (1999a, 1999b, 1997a) maintains that replacement plays a key role in repression both on individual and collective levels. He suggests that contrary to the assumption of traditional psychology and psychoanalysis, individual repression need not be conceived as some "mysterious inner event" which takes place in the human brain and whose working is observable only indirectly, through psychoanalytic practice. Instead, repression constitutes a discursive and, ultimately, a social activity. We repress, both as individuals and as collectives, by developing, or acquiring through communication, a set of discursive and rhetorical strategies for avoiding having to talk, or think about uncomfortable topics. The skills of repression are essentially the rhetorical skills of effective topic change, through which attention is diverted away from the material that needs to be repressed.

Billig also (1999a, 1999b) argues that one of the key features of repression, as a subtle form of willful forgetting, is that it occurs outside conscious awareness: This unconscious or unmindful nature of repression lies in the fact that skills involved become weaved into the routine of talk and everyday social interaction:

> Sets of routines, because of their habitual and unmindful nature, draw attention away from other possible thoughts and thus can maintain [a] sort of social amnesia (Billig 1999b, p. 321).

One example of the way in which routine facilitates forgetting is through the standardization of specific memories. When standardized memories are constructed, i.e., once specific ways of talking about an event become habitual, then what was originally omitted becomes "even more forgotten" (Billig 1999a, 169). As psychological research has demonstrated, the entrenchment of particular memories ensures that alternative stories are less likely to be produced (Roedinger et al. 1997; Schacter 1995). As Billig puts it, "a well remembered anecdote functions to obviate the need for further memory work. It offers its own proof that past has been remembered" (p. 169).

This principle functions on the social level, where "cultures and groups celebrate their pasts by creating histories which simultaneously involve remembering and forgetting" (Billig 1999a, p. 170). Billig quotes Renan's dictum that "forgetting…is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation." Forgetting is therefore accomplished "not by general amnesia, but by the formulation of historic myths which only recount a gloriously unshadowed past" (ibid.):

> The more we claim to remember the past—or the more the group claims to know its history—the more that the self-serving account is preserved. The end result is that personal or collective forgetting is accomplished by means of remembering, which becomes solidified into a rehearsed story" (ibid.).

Recent literature on collective memory offers numerous examples of such solidified replacement myths in representations of the national past. Martyrological interpretations of Austria's World War II history, which proliferated in the postwar years, played an important role in repressing the alternative and uncomfortable versions of the country's Nazi past. Similarly, Polish society's resistance to accepting its share of the moral responsibility for the Holocaust was made possible by the presence of the replacement myth that Poland was in fact "a victim of history," specifically of

Nazism and Communism (Irwin-Zarecka 1994, 120). In France, too, the emphasis on the activity of the resistance movement in representations of the Second World War helped repress the legacy of Vichy and keep the memory of collaboration away from public consciousness (Rousso 1991).

As the following section will show, the presence of a suitable replacement myth, which facilitated repression of the controversy surrounding his life, was instrumental in the rehabilitation of Nikolaj Velimirović in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Moreover, it will be suggested that the persistence of this myth continues to play an important role in maintaining a positive image of the bishop in Serbia today. The myth in question is the portrayal of Velimirović as a martyr and victim of Nazi persecution during the occupation of Yugoslavia between 1941 and 1945.

"Martyrdom" as a Replacement Myth

Throughout the initial stage of Velimirović's rehabilitation—at commemorative ceremonies organized in the diocese of Šabac and Valjevo, and in sermons and speeches by religious leaders, intellectuals, and men of letters, as well as in articles published in the religious press—words such as "martyrdom" and "suffering" routinely accompanied the evocation of the bishop's name. Velimirović was referred to as "the great Serbian martyr, sufferer, preacher and cleric" (Zeljajić, *GC,* 2 [1988]:25); "great cleric, sufferer and martyr for the physical and spiritual salvation of his people" (D.S. *GC,* 2 [1989]:16), "the Martyr of Dachau, the Hermit of Ohrid, the Archshepherd of Žiča, the holy Peasant of Lelić" (Jevtić, *GC* 3 [1991]:29), "holy martyr Bishop Nikolaj of Žiča" (Dragan Terzić, *GC,* 3 [1991]: 51), "holy martyr and hero" (Vojvodić in *GC,* 3 [1991]: 49; Milan Komnenić, *GC,* 3 [1991]:48).

On the occasion of the reburial of Velimirović's remains in his native Lelić in May 1991, the announcement posted in churches across Serbia mentioned nothing about the bishop's life and work other than that he "was arrested by the Gestapo in 1941" and that he was "taken to Dachau together with Patriarch Gavrilo." Similarly, in the official sermon at the ceremony, the first thing that Bishop Amfilohije Radović said about Velimirović was that he

was "Prisoner at Ljubostinja and Vojlovica, an intern at Dachau" ("Lover of God and His People," *GC* 3 [1991]:39).

Velimirović's alleged martyrdom during the Second World War was also emphasised in religious art at the time. A 1989 fresco in the Church of St. Constantine and St. Jelena in Voždovac, Belgrade—painted by the controversial artist Milić od Mačve—portrays Nikolaj Velimirović in the company of two canonized Serbian martyrs, Archimandrite Pajsije and Deacon Avakum, both of whom were impaled by Turkish authorities in 1817. Moreover, the painting shows Velimirović, Pajsije, and Avakum among dozens of emaciated and nameless Serbian victims of Ustashi concentration camps in Croatia. Another fresco, found in the Serbian Monastery Nova Gračanica near Chicago, Illinois, entitled "The new martyrs of Jasenovac and Glina, and Bishop Nikolaj at Dachau" shows Velimirović as a prisoner in Dachau, surrounded by a column of Serbian victims of Ustashi war crimes, represented as Serbian peasants with halos above their heads. In both cases, the commemorative art involves the inclusion of Velimirović in representations of Serbian suffering, reflecting the view of the Bishop as a martyr and a symbol of the torment endured by the Serbian nation throughout history.

Similarly, in the poem, *The Return of Bishop Nikolaj,* published in 1993, Dušan Vasiljević (*GC*, 1 [1993]: 23) describes the return of Velimirović's remains to Serbia as follows:

> Archdeacon Stefan
> and deacon Avakum,
> walked backwards,
> with the serenity of martyrs;
> from the thurible of Saints
> they poured fire
> along every step
> of the bishop's way.

Again, the choice of Velimirović's helpers in this allegorical poem is not haphazard. "Archdeacon Stefan" is St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr [Acts 6.8–8.2]. By association with two canonized martyrs, the image of Nikolaj as one of their number is once again imposed.

Fig. 1 Fresco at the Church of St. Constantine and St. Jelena, Voždovac, Belgrade.

Fig. 2 [nikolaj2] "New Martyrs of Jasenovac and Glina, and Bishop Nikolaj at Dachau," Serbian monastery Nova Gracanica, near Chicago, Illinois.

The tendency to represent Velimirović as a victim of Nazi persecution persists to the present day. The formal proposal for his canonization submitted to the Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church by a number of high-ranking Serbian clerics in December 2002 emphasized that his cult among the Serbian people had been reinforced by his "suffering for Christ in German prisons and concentration camps" (reprinted in Jevtić 2003). A similar theme runs through the *kondak,* a short hymn dedicated to Velimirović, approved by the Assembly of Bishops on the occasion of his canonization in May 2003:

> On the throne of St. Sava in Žiča you held court,
> You enlightened God's people and taught them the gospel;
> You helped them repent and feel the love of Christ;
> For Christ you endured suffering at Dachau,
> For this we celebrate you, Saint Nikolaj, our new Man of God.

The status of Nikolaj Velimirović as a modern "martyr" is highly contestable. Although a comparison of photos of Velimirović taken in 1941 and 1945 reveals significant signs of aging during the war years, there is no evidence to suggest that in the two-and-a-half months spent at Dachau as "honorary prisoners," Velimirović and Patriarch Gavrilo Dožić endured suffering or torture comparable to that to which other, ordinary interns at Dachau were routinely subjected.[7] A testimony by Branko Đorđević, a fellow prisoner at the camp, published by the Serbian Orthodox Church in the summer of 1946, states that Velimirović and Dožić did not suffer physical abuse while at the camp *(Glasnik,* July 1946, pp. 66–67). Patriarch Gavrilo Dožić confirmed this in memoirs published in France in the 1970s.

And yet, it is repeatedly suggested that at Dachau, Nikolaj and Patriarch Gavrilo "endured all the horrors of this hell on Earth," underwent "enormous suffering and agony" (Radosavljević 1986, 31), were "tortured and humiliated" by their captors (Marjanović, "A Traitor—Yet in Dachau!," *Ilustrovana Politika,* 16 October 1990,

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7 "Honorary prisoners" at Dachau lived in privileged quarters and ate the same food as German officers. As was the case with other honorary prisoners, Velimirović's and Dožić's cells were kept unlocked, and they had free and unlimited access to a separate camp courtyard. Also, as men of the cloth, they were allowed to wear their priest's attire and did not have their heads shaved.

45) and "survived all the horrors of war" (Janković, *GC* 3 [1991]:9). Artemije Radosavljević even claims that "as a consequence of the suffering and torture at the Camp," Velimirović suffered chronic "pain in his legs and back," and that bruises on his body obtained at the hands of the Nazis, remained visible until his death twelve years later (Radosavljević 2003, 339). Bishop Amfilohije Radović went as far as to compare Velimirović's suffering at Dachau with the crucifixion ("Lover of God and His People," *GC* 3 [1991]: 39), while Ranković compared it with Christ's experience at Golgotha ("Bishop Nikolaj in the Service of God and His People," *GC,* 3 [1991]: 7).

Accounts of "torment" and "torture" are conspicuously absent from descriptions of the internment at the camp. Although Bishop Artemije Radosavljević (1986) claims that "numerous witnesses" testified to Nikolaj's and Patriarch Gavrilo's "suffering," and that the two clerics themselves recounted their experiences both "in writing and privately," practically the only publicized detail regarding "hardship" in Dachau, of which there are multiple versions, refers to an incident when Velimirović allegedly slipped and grazed his knees while carrying a bucket of water across the camp courtyard (Marjanović, "A Traitor—Yet in Dachau!," *Ilustrovana Politika,* 16 October 1990, 45; Janković 2002, 674; Bishop Jovan *GC,* 2 [1991]:24). This anecdote is usually accompanied by descriptions of a verbal interchange between Velimirović and a German prison guard, in which the bishop outwits his collocutor. Crucially, none of these accounts come anywhere close to allegations of "torture" or "agony." Instead, most biographers resort to systematic vagueness. Bigović (1998), for instance, mentions in passing that "[Nikolaj and Patriarch Gavrilo] know best what they had to endure [at the camp]" and that Velimirović used to describe Dachau as the place where "the living envied the dead" (p. 43). Similarly, Bishop Jovan Velimirović merely notes that "it is superfluous to speak about the kind of existence that the Patriarch and Nikolaj lived in Dachau...." ("Notes on the Life of Bishop Nikolaj," *GC,* 2 [1991]:24). The absence of detail thus fosters the impression that the unsaid is so dreadful that it cannot be adequately captured in words. Specific information is obscured, without diminishing the overall claim of martyrdom.

"Martyrdom": Myth and Repression

One of the reasons why, despite the lack of historical or material evidence, the concept of martyrdom played such a strong role in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the representations of Velimirović's life, lies in the fact that, at the time, the theme of suffering and victimization dominated Serbian nationalist rhetoric both in political and ecclesiastical discourse (Radić 1996/2002; Tomanić 2001).

In their attempt to whip up nationalist sentiments among Serbs throughout Yugoslavia, the Serbian nationalist elite, including representatives of the church, regularly emphasized the suffering of Serbs throughout history, especially under the Croatian Ustashi regime during the Second World War. Church publications in particular regularly drew parallels between Serbian victimhood in the past and the present-day plight of Serbian minorities in Croatia and the province of Kosovo (Radić 1996/2002).

Also, in the late 1980s, Serbia witnessed the revival of the Kosovo myth—actively encouraged by the Serbian Orthodox Church (Judah 2000, Bieber 2002, Radić 1996/2002). In 1988, the holy relics of the Serbian saint and martyr Lazar—the medieval prince who led the Serbs into battle against the invading Ottoman army at Kosovo in 1389—were taken on a widely-publicized pilgrimage through Orthodox dioceses in Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina. The saintly Prince Lazar was flagged as the symbol of Serbian martyrdom and the ruler of "Heavenly Serbia," an empire in heaven reserved for righteous Serbs who lived and died for the Cross and their country. Inherent in the theme of "Heavenly Serbia" was of course the notion of collective suffering. In 1988, Bishop Jovan Velimirović, who is credited with reintroducing the term into contemporary nationalist rhetoric, wrote that

> Since Prince Lazar and [the Battle of] Kosovo, the Serbs, above all, have been creating heavenly Serbia, which today must certainly have grown to become the largest state in heaven. If we only think of those innocent victims of the last war, millions and millions of Serbian men, women and children killed or tortured in the most terrible way or thrown

> into pits by Ustasha criminals, then we can understand that today's Serbian empire is in heaven (cited in Judah 2000, 47).

Bearing in mind the presence of the theme of martyrdom in Serbian nationalist discourse around the time of Velimirović's rehabilitation, it may be argued that accounts of Bishop Nikolaj's life were simply assimilated within this broader ideological perspective. This process was facilitated by the fact that individuals involved in the Church's nationalist project—Bishop Jovan, Atanasije Jevtić, Amfilohije Radović, Artemije Radosavljevic and others—were also leading the campaign for Velimirović's rehabilitation. Some of them even elevated Nikolaj Velimirović to the status of the greatest symbol of Serbian martyrdom in the 20th Century. In an editorial published in *Glas Crkve* in 1987, it is suggested that

> It has become impossible to imagine the suffering of the Serbian people and the Serbian church, without reference to the suffering [of St. Sava and Nikolaj Velimirović]. In all the suffering of their people, they emerge as the heart of that suffering. They are the symbol of Serbian martyrdom. ("Journalism or...," *GC* 1 [1987]:73).

Four years later, Bishop Amfilohije Radović offered a similar argument when he drew a parallel between Velimirović's life and Serbia's tragic history in the 20th century:

> Bishop Nikolaj is a whole epoch, and we can safely say that all that happened to the [Serbian] people since the beginning of the century reflects the path of Bishop Nikolaj's life' (Amfilohije, *GC,* 3 [1991]: 40).

While the emerging memory of Nikolaj Velimirović as a martyr undoubtedly echoed the prevailing mood and nationalist sentiment of the late 1980s, the issue of suffering and victimhood at Dachau, and the way in which it was articulated in accounts of Velimirović's life, had an additional, very significant purpose, namely to repress the controversy surrounding the Bishop's political views. "Remembering" the suffering helped to sideline the contentious elements such as his apparent admiration for Hitler, his antisemitism, and the association with Dimitrije Ljotić.

The repressive aspect of the martyrdom myth can be examined by looking at the way in which each element of the replacement

myth contributed to diverting public attention away from the controversy. Just like any other tale, the narrative of the bishop's martyrdom, as told by his supporters, has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It starts with accounts of Velimirović's arrest by the Germans in 1941, continues with descriptions of his stay at the camp, and ends with the Bishop's release in 1945.

Accounts of Velimirović's arrest, as told by his supporters, usually contain an element of drama, and few of them mention that the Germans arrested Velimirović because of suspected links with the Chetnik insurgents in central Serbia. Instead, the Bishop is presented as a great, if not the greatest threat to the Third Reich. In a sermon by Father Justin Popović which was first published in the late 1980s, it is alleged that "The Germans, who were then our enemies, knew well what Bishop Nikolaj meant for them. His mouth had to be silenced. If you silence that mouth, you have silenced the Serbian stock" (*GC,* 2 [1987]:24). Velimirović's nephew Bishop Jovan even suggested that the Germans were so threatened by Velimirović's influence that they attempted to assassinate him shortly after his arrest (Jovan Velimirović, "Notes on the Life of Bishop Nikolaj," *GC,* 2 [1991]:23). Most frequently however, it is suggested that the order for the arrest came directly from Adolf Hitler. For instance, in 1990, *Ilustrovana Politika* claimed that "Hitler pointed out to General von Löer that the greatest enemy of Germany was the leadership of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and he singled out Gavrilo Dožić, Metropolitan Zimonjić, and Bishop Nikolaj" (p. 46; the same claim is made also in "6th April: A Personal Testimony," *Nin,* 5 April 1987; "Hitler personally ordered the liquidation of Episcope Nikolaj Velimirović," *GC* 2 [1987]:35; Danko Popović, "Sinan Pasha's in Serbian history," GC 3 [1988]:21; Ranković, "Bishop Nikolaj in the Service of God and His people," *GC* 3 [1991]:7).

Frequently reproduced in religious publications, this dramatic account of the bishop's arrest misleads by implying that Velimirović was perceived by the Germans as a thorn in Hitler's side and an enemy of Nazism. The bishop's earlier praise of Hitler is conveniently left aside.

In accounts of the time at Dachau, the references to suffering and "torture" also helps to enhance the image of Velimirović as a victim of Nazism. More specifically, the emphasis on his

victimization helps to repress an embarrassing detail associated with his time at the camp—the fact that some of his most virulent antisemitic works were written while interned. Between September and December 1944, Velimirović wrote a collection of essays first published in the 1980s under the title *Words to the Serbian People through the Dungeon Window*. Practically every critical article or commentary about him published in recent years offers quotations from this book, frequently mentioning it had been written in Dachau, and therefore being well aware of the real face of Nazism and the true consequences of its ideology (e.g., Filip David, "Bishop Antisemite," *Vreme,* 29 July 1991; Đorđević 1996; Byford and Billig 2001; Aleksandar Lebl, "Pleasure of the Father, the Devil," *Danas*, 29 April 2003).

Favorable accounts of Velimirović's life seldom mention his creative endeavors while at the camp, and when they do, the act of writing the book is presented as a subversive activity. Velimirović is said to have written it on "scraps of paper" using abbreviations when referring to Germany, in case the manuscript should be discovered by the guards (Bishop Lavrentije, preface to Velimirović, 1985/1998; Amfilohije Radović, "Lover of God and his People," *GC* 3 [1991]:45; Jovan Velimirović, "Notes on the life of Bishop Nikolaj," *GC* 2 [1991]:23). Velimirović's most antisemitic and anti-European work is presented as a "moving, apocalyptic account of that era" and essentially an indictment of Nazi Germany, because "Hitler is also Europe" (Amfilohije Radović, "Lover of God and his People," *GC* 3 [1991]: 43). Such constructions, embedded in the overall motif of martyrdom, help obscure and sideline the otherwise indefensible antisemitic rage articulated in the book.

Finally, descriptions surrounding Velimirović's release also reveal elements of suppression. Accounts found in the religious press show considerable ambiguity regarding how long the "martyrdom" in Dachau lasted. For instance, after noting that Velimirović and Dožić were taken to Dachau in 1944, Radosavljević's book, *The New Chrysostom,* claims that "both were finally released only on 8th May 1945, by the 36th American division' (1986, 18). A virtually identical version of events is provided by Ljubomir Ranković who suggests that "they were the only two Church leaders in Europe who were imprisoned by the

Fascists [*sic*]. They went through Dachau and survived the hell of the concentration camp. They were released only on 8th May 1945, by the 36th Allied division" ("Notes on the Life of Bishop Nikolaj," *GC* 3 [1991]:9). Bishop Stefan writes that Velimirović and Dožić were "taken to Dachau, the place of horrific torment and suffering, where they stayed together until the end of World War II" ("Greatest Serb and Husband of Our Recent History," *GC* 3 [1991]:33). An article published in the journal *Jefimija* in 1993 argues that "Velimirović was taken from Vojlovica to Dachau. At the end of the war he left first for England and then America" (Miloš Petrović, "Reading Bishop Nikolaj," *Jefimija* 2–3 [1993]:112). Most recently, a serialized biography-published in the Belgrade daily *Glas Javnosti* alleges that "in September 1944 the Germans transferred Nikolaj and Patriarch Gavrilo to the Dachau camp, where they remained until they were released by the American troops" ("Teacher to a Whole people," *Glas Javnosti,* 1 August 2003, 17).

This version of events seems to suggest that the two clerics stayed in Dachau until May 1945 and the arrival of the American army. Given that they were actually freed in December 1944, this is a striking example of dissimulation. Velimirović did encounter the U.S. troops on May 8, 1945, but it was in Kitzbuhel, a small resort town on the Austro-German border. By that time he was on his way to Switzerland accompanied by a number of Serbian nationalists and German officials who, like him, were fleeing Yugoslavia.[8] The failure to mention the actual date of the bishop's release preserves his image as a victim of Nazism. The true victims

[8] Velimirović was traveling in the company of General Milan Nedić, Prime Minister in the Serbian collaborationist government (later executed by Tito's government as a war criminal) and Hermann Neubacher, a high-ranking German official in Nazi Occupied Serbia (from 1943) and the first NSPD mayor of Vienna (1938–1939) who was subsequently sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment by the Yugoslav authorities. According to a recently-publicized account of their days in Kitzbuhel, Herman Neubacher and Velimirović maintained cordial relations during their travels, and even shared an air raid shelter during the allied bombardment of the border town (*Iskra,* 1 October 1996; cited in Janković 2002b, p. 645*)*. An anonymous testimony quoted in Janković (2002b) alleges that, before they were separated, Neubacher gave Velimirović 35 gold coins "just in case" (p. 670).

of Nazi persecution were seldom freed by their tormentors, especially not as a result of negotiations between Germany and Nazi collaborators, as was the case for the two clerics. Moreover, the suggestion that Velimirović and Dožić remained in Germany until the end of the war omits any reference to an important and controversial period of Velimirović's life, namely his stay in Slovenia, where he offered his blessing to the collaborationist forces and spoke favorably of Dimitrije Ljotić at his funeral in April 1945.

Bearing in mind the extent of concealment, forgetting, and replacement involved in the construction of the martyrdom myth, it might be tempting to suggest that the myth is merely the product of an intentional and well-calculated campaign of propaganda and deception by those who wanted to see Velimirović rehabilitated. For instance, *The Serbian Church during the War and the Wars within It*, by Milorad Tomanić (2001), refers to the narrative of martyrdom as a collection of "cover-ups, lies and half-truths" forced upon the Serbian public by those who subsequently brought Serbia to the "edge of destruction" (p. 50). On the other hand, it might be argued that a more subtle and more complex process is involved. As noted earlier, Velimirović was largely marginalized by state authorities before the mid-1980s, and even within the Serbian Orthodox Church itself. As a result, detailed historical records relating to his life and work were scarce. What was known about him was largely based on hearsay, anecdotal evidence, and an oral culture circulating among his admirers within the church. These accounts were subject to distortion through constant repetition. The inevitable alterations reflected the aims (often hagiographical) and desires of those who told them, and mirrored the social and cultural context in which they developed, and not necessarily the consequence of deliberate manipulation. Thus, the content of the myth of Velimirović's martyrdom and its persistence in contemporary Serbian society is likely to be the outcome of a more complex social and ideological dynamic of "social repression," one that takes place at the level of discourse and communication, and as such is irreducible to individual motivations and machinations.

The Continuity of Repression

In writing about the rhetorical aspects of repression, Billig argues that the practice of remembering is always situated within a specific argumentative context. Those who are doing the remembering must always position themselves in relation to alternative viewpoints and memories. As Billig (1999a) puts it:

> [M]emory work is rarely neutral, as if speakers are recalling the past for its own sake. Instead, speakers, in talking about the past, are often conducting the business of the present. Memory talk contains what some discursive psychologists have called "rhetorical stake." Points are being made, arguments conducted, as the past is invoked (p. 159).

It is clear that the argumentative nature of remembering manifests itself in the affirmative representations of Velimirović's life. The reinforcement of the martyrdom myth in biographical narratives has helped to repress and keep away from conscious awareness the contentious aspects of the bishop's work. Importantly, however, the practice of wilful forgetting is more than simply concealment through replacement. This is because the alternative—critical interpretations, the "counter-memories"—can never be fully replaced. Instead they continue to feature in the public domain, manifested as challenges to Velimirović's credibility from the independent media, liberal intellectuals, and human rights organizations, or as remnants of the older communist critiques. Therefore, repression of critical versions of Velimirović's life, through the enforcement of the replacement myth is a practice that needs to be undertaken continuously. The practice of remembering, of invoking the past, has to be organized in a way that provides the rhetorical resources by which thinking or talking about controversial matters can be actively avoided and routinely and continuously kept away from conscious awareness.

One way in which this is done is through the inhibition of memory work. Billig (1999a) argues that

> If we humans possess the rhetorical skills to open up matters for discussion, then so we are equipped with the abilities to close down matters discursively. For every rhetorical gambit to push the debate forward, so there must be analogous

> rhetorical devices which permit the discursive exploration to be curtailed. Routinely, we are able to change the subject, pushing conversations away from embarrassing or troubling topics (p. 51).

Thus, an important aspect of repression as a continuous practice is the "active avoidance" of memory work which threatens to "disturb the sovereignty of the accepted account of the past" (Billig 1999a, 171). This is accomplished primarily by diverting attention away from potentially embarrassing or damaging topics, in the direction of the preferred themes, i.e., the replacement myth.

The way in which such active avoidance is accomplished can be illustrated with a number of examples. The following extract is from a speech delivered in 1988 by the nationalist writer Danko Popović, in which the speaker remembers Velimirović's suffering, especially that which occurred in Dachau.

> 'The Bishop beside whose grave we stand was held prisoner by the Germans during the occupation of Serbia, and was taken to the notorious concentration camp at Dachau. After the war, the prisoner of Hitler's concentration camp was declared an enemy of the people. Not *their* enemy, the enemy of communism, which he naturally was, but an enemy of the people. There, a prisoner from Dachau—yet an enemy of the people?…how is it possible—Hitler, the greatest enemy of the Serbian people, declares the Bishop to be his greatest enemy, the same bishop who spends the whole duration of the war as a prisoner at Dachau, in the end is declared a public enemy?" (Danko Popović, "Sinan Pashas in Serbian history," *GC* 3 [1988]:24).

Unsurprisingly, the paragraph constructs the image of Velimirović as a victim of Nazi persecution, and the "greatest enemy of Hitler." In that sense it outlines all the basic features of the familiar martyrdom myth. On this occasion however, the author hints at the existence of an alternative interpretation of Velimirović's life, one that has been used to portray him as an enemy of the people. Yet the counterarguments which are alluded to are never articulated. We are not told why Velimirović was branded a traitor. Instead, each time the invitation for further memory work is made ("how is it possible?" "a prisoner from Dachau—yet an enemy of

the people?") the answer is simply to repeat the principal claims of the replacement myth. The very existence of the myth "obviates the need for further memory work."

Similarly, on other occasions when the reference to his status during the communist years is hinted at, this is done in the context of the safe and comforting narrative of his suffering. Deacon Ljubomir Ranković, for instance suggests that "Velimirović was declared a traitor and an enemy of his people. He who survived all the horrors of war, who was the prisoner of the most notorious Fascist concentration camp, was declared a collaborator" ("Bishop Nikolaj in the Service of God and His People," *GC* 3 [1991]:9). Serbian philosopher and literary critic Nikola Milošević similarly noted that "he who spent time in the notorious camp at Dachau, was declared nothing less than a war criminal!" ("A Victim of Nazism and Communism," *GC* 3 [1991]:47). In neither of these cases are arguments against Velimirović laid out in full. Instead, criticisms are merely cast aside and the martyrdom myth is offered instead.

Even on occasions when the nature of the controversy is revealed, the alleged martyrdom is used to undermine it. In 1990, the magazine *Ilustrovana Politika* published a two-part article on Velimirović which contained a favorable interpretation of his life. The article aimed to answer the following question: "Why was Bishop Nikolaj, who was declared by the Germans to be their worst enemy and was kept locked away in the worst prisons including the camp at Dachau, declared after the war to be the enemy of the people?" ("Bishop Nikolaj, Traitor or Saint?," *Ilustrovana Politika,* 9 October 1990, 45). In providing the answer, the article reflected on just one aspect of the controversy regarding Velimirović, namely the eulogy he delivered at Ljotić's funeral in April 1945. Crucially however, the incident is dealt with in a single sentence. It is casually set aside with a statement from Velimirović's nephew Tiosav, who is quoted as saying simply that "the Bishop was an antifascist…that is why he suffered so much." Again the notion of suffering is offered as the alternative to the controversy. Shifting the topic onto the suffering in the camp resists the remembrance of the embarrassing details. The title of the second article in the series echoes this strategy: "A Traitor—Yet in Dachau!" (*Ilustrovana Politika,* 16 October 1990, 45).

Similarly, avoidance of the topic is evident in the context of spoken dialogue. In May 2003, shortly after Velimirović's canonization, Deacon Ljubomir Ranković took part in Radio Free Europe's regular show *Radio Bridge*. When the show's host Omer Karabeg, asked Ranković about the controversies surrounding Bishop Nikolaj's work, including his antisemitic writing at Dachau, the latter replied:

> The life of every saint should be the subject of dialogue and debate, and it can be examined from different aspects. With regards to the Holy Bishop Nikolaj, he and his work should also be put to the judgment of the public. But, the examination of his life must be devoid of all prejudice and bias, of emotion and superficiality. It must be an objective judgment, which any serious critique demands. Of course, *Words to the Serbian People* is somehow the most controversial work by the Holy Bishop Nikolaj. However, one should bear in mind that this work came about in the greatest hell in history known to man, in the concentration camp at Dachau. Bishop Nikolaj was taken to that camp after three years under German guard. There are many written testimonies. I was lucky enough to be secretary and Deacon to Bishop Jovan Velimirović, who accompanied Bishop Nikolaj during the imprisonment in Žiča, Ljubostinja and Vojlovica. From his story I know of their suffering, and that when they arrived at Dachau, hell began, in the true sense of the word.

Ranković's response consists simply of a reiteration of the martyrdom myth which diverts the conversation away from the controversy.

Finally, it is important to reflect briefly upon the broader ideological and political implications of the continuous repression of controversy surrounding the life and work of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. As has been demonstrated, social repression played a crucial role in his rehabilitation in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It contributed to the popularization of his writing to the point where he has become one of the most popular Serbian authors of the past decade. As a result, today we have a curious discrepancy between the representations of Velimirović in mainstream Orthodox culture, which forgets and seeks to downplay his

controversial political views; and the bishop's literary output—available in practically every bookshop in Serbia—in which his objectionable viewpoints are openly propagated. It might be argued that the adulation of Velimirović in contemporary Serbia and the reluctance—on the part of the mainstream ecclesiastical, academic, and political institutions—to address the contentious elements of his work perpetuates an uncritical stance toward his books, and in so doing implicitly, and often inadvertently, facilitates the promulgation and legitimization of anti-Jewish prejudice and other objectionable views inherent in Velimirović's populist ideology.

For instance, this year *Glas Crkve* plans to publish 100,000 copies of an affordable, pocket-size edition of *Words to the Serbian People through the Dungeon Window*. The volume is currently being promoted daily on a Christian radio station based in Valjevo owned by *Glas Crkve*. In a live broadcast every morning between 10 and 11 a.m., the station director and main presenter, Deacon Ljubomir Ranković, reads out one of the 88 short chapters of this book. Neither the new edition of this work nor the daily readings provide any critical reflection on the controversy surrounding *Words to the Serbian People*. Instead, in line with the prevailing martyrdom myth, readers are introduced to the book as to the work of a saint and victim of Nazi persecution. Such a presentation gives the book an importance and credibility it does not warrant, and moreover, serves to normalize antisemitic sentiment and beliefs. By being attributed to a saintly authority, the anti-Jewish rhetoric in the book obscures the boundaries between what can and what cannot be considered politically acceptable. In addition, by perpetuating the martyrdom myth, the popularization of Velimirović's work on radio or in the press supplies the audience with the necessary skills of repression. Remembering the bishop as a martyr provides the public with argumentative resources required for casting aside the embarrassing questions, to be used should anyone ever cast doubt on Velimirović's integrity or question the respectability of his writings from the days at Dachau.

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