

# Belgrade between the Wars: Imperial Shadows on the Screen

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The aim of this article is to analyse the TV series *Black Sun/Shadows over the Balkans* (*Senke nad Balkanom*, 2017, Dragan Bjelogrić), understood as a reflection of the ways in which diverse imperial legacies, persisting differences and contrasting pasts shaped the (ambivalent) post-imperial traumatic history of the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918. The burden of imperial legacy – mostly manifested in ethnic, political, cultural and economic tensions among diverse nations in the new multi-ethnic state – kept brewing under the surface and came to represent a constant threat of balkanization i.e. further fragmentation of the multicultural kingdom. In this article I claim that the same danger of balkanization – traced back to the years after the Great War – continued to haunt all successor states of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (and Yugoslavias ensuing from 1943 until 1992) eventually resulting in the break-up of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) in 1992. The irreconcilable differences and competing ambitions of different national, social and geopolitical identities define the structure, characters and their relations in the TV narrative, and are also reflected in the cityscape of Belgrade – the capital of the Kingdom and paradigmatic Balkan metropolis – in the late 1920s. The series is read against the theories of Dominique Moisi's *Geopolitics of Emotions* (2010) and *La géopolitique des séries/ Geopolitics of TV Series* (2016), and his assertion that TV series have become crucial in understanding our world in its many aspects – from domestic politics to geopolitics. The story of Belgrade between the two World Wars reveals the traumatic imperial legacy as determining the emergence of a 'culture of fear, hope and humiliation', tensions of balkanization and search for identity in the city suspended between an Ottoman *casaba* and a European metropolis. On the other side – in terms of narrative, genre, and visual style – the series itself is seen as the acculturated version of both the novel *Der nasse Fisch* (Volker Kutscher, 2007) and the TV series *Babylon Berlin* (2017), illustrating the rise of cultural imperialism in post-imperial times.

## 1. Balkanization as Post-Imperial Trauma

The end of the Great War in 1918 brought the dissolution of four great empires and the emergence of smaller states on the liberated territories that had been part of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. The newly founded Kingdom of Serbs,

Croats and Slovenes, renamed as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929, was built – unlike nation states – as a multi-ethnic project that brought together territories with radically different histories. Slovenia, Croatia and the Vojvodina had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; Macedonia and Bosnia were on the fringes of the Ottoman Empire for centuries; while Montenegro and Serbia came in as already independent states. The multicultural and multi-confessional state faced a turbulent interbellum period characterized by continued poverty, uneven economic development, political and ethnic conflicts, corruption and tensions that occasionally gave rise to the demands for independent nation states and the ‘balkanization’ of the newly formed unitary state. Balkanization is a term coined at the end of the Great War and refers to the geopolitical division or fragmentation of a state or region into smaller, ethnically similar states that are often hostile to each other. As such, it continued to linger over the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (CSC) due to interethnic tensions transferred from the previous empires, and was seen as one of the strongest symptoms of post-imperial trauma. Due to a Piedmont-like role played in the creation of the Kingdom, Serbia assumed the central, privileged and dominant position, while the other nations strongly resisted the established asymmetrical rule. Such a state of affairs resulted in constant threats of ‘balkanization’ with the aim of bringing independence to individual nations, or – at least – leading to more balanced power relations within the Kingdom.

The instability of the country, underpinned by a constant danger of balkanization, argues further for its paradoxical position. The country that was founded by way of balkanization, soon became endangered by the very same process that allowed its birth. Furthermore, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1918–1929) as a unitary kingdom is thus both an example of balkanization and an exception to the rule. Together with other Balkan (Bulgaria, Romania) and Central European countries it is, most certainly, one of the new states that emerged after the dissolution of the empires. However, unlike nation-states, the Kingdom of SCS made a number of ethnically different regions coalesce into one state. Its multi-ethnic and multinational character meant the continuation of the same interethnic conflicts and riots that characterized the vanished empires. Comparing political atmospheres between the dissolved empires and the newly founded Kingdom reveals their significant similarities. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes became the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929 and in this – as well as in all other Yugoslavias (DFY/Democratic Federal Yugoslavia 1943–1945, FNTY/Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia 1945–1963, SFRY/Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia 1963–1992, FRY/Federal Republic of Yugoslavia 1992–2003) – the same ambitions and national animosities continued to broil. Revived and resurrected in their fullest scope and force during the 1990s, the period that can be recognized as a new wave of balkanization, the tensions led to the break-up of SFRY.

The traumatic (imperial) past and equally traumatic imperial legacy, both determining the present and the future of the entire Balkan region can be interpreted from the perspective of Dominique Moisi’s ‘geopolitics of emotions’. In his book *The Geopolitics of Emotions* (2010), Moisi explores how cultures of fear, humiliation

and hope have characterized and modelled the world. Following the success of the book, he expanded his research into the realm of popular TV series, arguing that *political fiction* is the new dominant genre. According to Moisi, the elements of the new genre mix a balance of power and victory of fear in such a way that a belief in the triumph of hope over everything else is intricately woven into the subject matter of TV fiction. Furthermore, ongoing political and cultural debates of our societies are broadly referenced in TV series, making them a mirror and a reminder of our hopes and fears. This paper aims to show that *Black Sun* is one such narrative, a narrative about a post-imperial era in a state modelled as an empire, and troubled by all sorts of ethnic, political, cultural, and economic tensions it inherited from the empires it used to be a part of. In a way, *Black Sun* is Moisi's new historical and political fiction about fears, hopes and humiliation invested in national and ethnic relations in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. With that in mind, *Black Sun* is compared with the TV series Moisi takes as case studies in his *La géopolitique des séries: ou le triomphe de la peur* (2016), most notably *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), *Downton Abbey* (2010–2015), and *Occupied* (2015–). Furthermore, the critique emphasizes striking similarities between the past and the present, political situations, opposing parties, and conflicting identities – all of which speak about and testify to a permanent identity crisis haunting the generations and the nation.

By following exciting criminal and controversial historical events in post-imperial, modernist and urban Belgrade on the eve of 1929, *Black Sun* traces the transgression of its many identities (trans-, multi- and inter-cultural). Belgrade is identified as a liminal city in search of its unique identity, a city on the crossroads of empires and bridging the epochs. This is reinforced by the fact that Belgrade is a city built on the confluence of the rivers Sava and Danube, and that until 1918 it had been the city separating and uniting the two empires. All of this is reflected in and projected onto the city's topography, which in the TV series is revealed as a palimpsest of images of the actual city and its recorded history.

## 2. Imperial Shadows

The first season of *Black Sun/ Shadows over the Balkans* was broadcast in 2017. It was greeted in the whole region as one of the best and most ambitious TV projects that helped return TV Serbia to the top of the best TV stations list in the region. It was created and produced by Dragan Bjelogrić, and the series' skilfully written script, featuring good cliff-hangers, a great whodunit and gangster saga tone, is signed by Danica Pajević, Dejan Stojiljković and Vladimir Kecmanović. The main genre narrative is that of a historical thriller and it is based upon a short story by Stevan Koprivica. For his story Koprivica relied on historical records of arresting and thrilling destinies of White Russians who emigrated to Belgrade after the Russian Revolution. Approximately 100,000 White Russians – among them 15,000 Cossacks – sought refuge in Belgrade. Russian artists who found their new home in Belgrade played an important role in the development of local arts and

culture (ballet, fine arts, theatre, literature, architecture and cinema) as well as in other areas of social life (politics, economy and diplomacy). General Wrangell, the commanding general of the anti-Bolshevik White Army in Southern Russia was buried in a local Russian Orthodox Church, and the Cossacks formed a para-army ready to work for anyone who paid well. Writers Dejan Stojiljković and Vladimir Kecmanović used these historical details skilfully while at the same time imbuing the plot with a mythical past, Orthodox mysticism and urban legends.

The plot is set in motion by a brutal murder – ritual decapitation – during a costume party attended by the *crème de la crème* of Belgrade's society. Inspector Tanasijević (Dragan Bjelogrić), put in charge of the case, realizes that a string of horrifying murders is related to an ancient relic believed to have mystical powers. The relic was most probably stolen from the Russian Orthodox Church in Belgrade. With the help of his young and inexperienced colleague, Stanko Pletikosić (Andrija Kuzmanović), one of the first forensic examiners and a graduate from Switzerland, inspector Tanasijević discovers more than he ever wanted to. The unravelling of the murder mystery involves a gallery of picturesque characters from high society, members of the royal family, White Russian immigrant circles, communists, and a secret society called Thule. The plot interlaces paths of historical figures (from Archibald Reiss (Nikola Ristanovski), Mustafa Golubić (Goran Bogdan) to Ante Pavelić (Bojan Navojac)) with those of fictional characters (the controversial officer and leader of the White Hand, Petar Živković (Nebojša Dugalić), and the cunning double player and mastermind of the crime Kaluđer/Alimpije Mirić (Gordan Kičić)). Together with prostitutes, assassins, drug dealers, characters of the criminal underworld and members of various (historical) secret services/societies (NKVD, Black Hand, VMRO, Komintern), they are all on the quest for the Longin spear, with a head made of crucifixion nails. In the course of the series, Belgrade becomes a fierce battlefield on which fractions and characters of different ethnic origin fight for power, money and dominance. On this battlefield everyone is either a potential assassin or a likely victim. Meanwhile, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia is sinking rapidly into political chaos and anarchy, and no one knows how to stop it. The dictatorship of the 1929 Yugoslavia and the political turn toward rising Nazism and fascism are revealed as yet another and the biggest of all threats. In this meticulously elaborated plot, fiction rubs imaginatively against the facts and myths mix with popular culture, while the topography and images of the city become an index of juxtaposed past, present and future events. The striking similarities between all three time dimensions instil the feeling that the series creates a 'surrogate identity' of present day Serbia and speaks about the Balkans' cursed destiny.

Imperial past's long shadows are looming over the Balkans and Belgrade as its paradigmatic metropolis, determining the destiny of Balkan nations, people and states. For the people living there, the Balkans is not simply a geographical or geopolitical term, a cultural and civilizational space, a historical entity, collective memory and spiritual legacy. For every one of us it is much more than that – it is the destiny, the identity, our everyday life full of problems and troubles, excesses

and extremes. It is a way of life and survival under the shadows and tempestuous clouds always gathering on the horizon (cf. Daković 2008, 11).

This is present in every detail of the TV series, from the title and the opening credits to the music score and set design. The Balkan curse is visualized persuasively in the clear semantics of the opening credits, very much like those in *Game of Thrones*. A stream of deep red, almost black, blood floods scattered dead bodies, a red star, spears and swastikas, signifying the remnants of imperial, Balkan and Yugoslav histories. Finally, the swirl of blood fills the mystical symbol of the Black Sun, announcing the onset of occult times and the rule of the far right.

The portrayal of Belgrade as the melting pot of the troubled 1920s and 1930s fits the traditional image of the lively and picturesque spirit of Balkan cities during imperial times, when

the cities were identified with Austrians, Magyar or Ottoman ruling elites, and typically also with commercial and financial interests which were differentiated on ethnic grounds, such as Jews, Cincars, Greeks, Ragusans or Germans. (Allcock 2002, 102)

Although ethnic differences remained visible after the Great War, the capital was no longer perceived as foreign and oppressive but rather as a cosmopolitan, European-like space where the battle for power is raging between different nations, political factions and financial groups. Historical frustrations of ethnically different social groups that saw a chance for the fulfilment of their own ambitions in the new state are smoothly transferred into the plot of ethical and political conflicts. A member of the (Serbian) Royal family, Prince Đorđe (Žarko Laušević), imprisoned in an asylum and infected with Nazi ideas, tries to escape and get back to the capital. His paintings, done as part of his art therapy and dominated by the mysterious symbol of the Black Sun, are found on the crime scenes around town and eventually lead to the discovery of the prince's illegitimate son. The baby boy is found by inspector Tanasijević who gives the child to his sister to be raised in a safe place, since the knowledge of his existence might endanger the line of succession to the throne. Even worse, it might raise the question of the Serbian Royal family's legitimacy of being on the throne of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

A Macedonian nationalist rebel, Hadži Damjan Arsov (Toni Mihajlovski), who was inspector Tanasijević's subordinate during the Great War and the one who saved the inspector's life, is held in prison by the Belgrade police. During his imprisonment, a gang of Macedonian drug dealers kills a police patrol somewhere in southern Serbia. Desperately wanting to save his friend – already labelled a terrorist – inspector Tanasijević tries to persuade him to help the police in the newly opened investigation and to reveal the names of his compatriots who are linked to the recently committed crimes. Hadži Damjan refuses honourably, and the lawyer who is summoned to defend the prisoner is Ante Pavelić from Zagreb – in reality, the head of the soon to be Quisling state, the Independent State of Croatia. Once again, the plot intertwines the historical (Ante Pavelić) and the fictional (Hadži Damjan in Belgrade prison), and translates existing and real animosities into the TV narrative via witty plot solutions. This is most visible when Ante Pavelić, as a young and

ambitious representative of Croatian nationalism, hesitates over whether to buy the Serbian dairy delicacy kajmak, promptly recommends his client to read Goethe's *Faust* (indicative of Croatia's inclination towards Germany and all things German) and declares the state to be a 'freak-like creation' (the Kingdom of Yugoslavia uniting several quarrelling nationalities). Moreover, through their ethnic portrayal, the trio of characters epitomize the tense relations between the Balkan and Central European parts of the country or, in other words, between the Oriental and the Occidental imperial legacies. Croatia is willing to help anyone – even Macedonian rebels – in order to undermine Serbian dominance. The friendship between Serbia and Macedonia forged in the Great War against the common enemy – epitomized in inspector Tanasijević's and Damjan's friendship – cannot survive the nationalist tensions of the late 1920s. However, as a man of principles and high moral codes, inspector Tanasijević pays his debt and helps Damjan escape. They part hoping to meet in better circumstances when they will be able to be friends again. The irony of their parting is that such circumstances have not presented themselves, yet – either fictionally or historically.

The destructive European influence is epitomized in the character of Marija Davidović (Marija Bergman), a spoiled and promiscuous heiress of Central European descent, who inherits the bank run by a mysterious Cincar (Voja Brajević). Deeply dissatisfied Croatia and Slovenia – both had been former territories of the Habsburg Monarchy before they were forced to become parts of the tripartite Kingdom – are represented in the figures of dodgy business mediators. A former servant of the Empire, a con man from Slovenia, establishes the contact between Marija and an enigmatic business partner, an Austrian Jew, Gabriel Maht (Sebastian Cavazza). Further disruption and turmoil are brought to Belgrade by the members of the secret society, Thule, coming from the West and North of Europe. Circling around, but also in the centre of the conflicts, are general Wrangel (Aleksandar Galibin) and his Cossacks who are trying to save the Orthodox Christian relic – a part of the Romanovs' plundered treasure – and take over the drug trafficking business at the same time. All of these characterizations reflect real life events and the attitudes of conflicting ethnic groups living in any and all Yugoslavias, or, today, in its successor states.

In terms of various national and ethnic tensions of the past, the TV narrative alludes directly to the situation leading to the breakup of the last Yugoslavia, the SFRY. The mixture of narrative elements offers noticeable parallels with the 1990s, and the present time is seen as their worrying revival. In the film *The Crime that Changed Serbia (Vidimo se u čitulji, Janko Baljak, 1995)*, the very first documentary daring to analyse its emerging underworld, Belgrade is described as the city that 'unites Chicago of the 1920s, the depression of the 1930s, spy plots and Casablanca games in the 1940s, and the disastrous hedonism of Vietnam in the 1960s' (Daković 2011, 136). The comparison suggests that post-socialism dwells in much the same problems as post-imperialism – the essentially unresolvable.

Read against Moisi's geopolitics of emotions, the series interlaces hope, humiliation and fear. Humiliation is seen in the lost chance of independence for Slovenia,

Croatia and Macedonia in the new state with Belgrade as its capital and the Serbian Royal family on the throne; in the lack of international and state-wide recognition of the heroism, martyrdom and sacrifice of Serbia in the Great War, and in the absence of respect for its tradition as a sovereign state. The epitome of the victorious yet degraded Serbia is, of course, inspector Tanasijević who after being falsely proclaimed killed in battle, returns bearing a big scar on his back and finds out that his wife has re-married, so he sinks into alcoholism. Traumatized and disappointed, he lives on the meagre salary of an honest policeman who is trying to do his best despite everything. The ignoring of Serbia's past power and glory lies in meticulous details, such as the portrayal of the state's relation toward the heroes of the Great War. The war veterans are humiliated and neglected by the new state, very much as in Laza Lazarević's great short story *Sve će to narod pozlatiti* (1882), which describes how war veterans were left to make ends meet instead of being rewarded for their bravery and sacrifice. Walking along the streets of Belgrade, inspector Tanasijević asks a crippled beggar 'Kajmakčalan? Kolubara?' implying the question 'Which of the great battles were you injured in?' The beggar simply answers 'Belgrade!' alluding that he is the victim of brutal post-war city life – poverty, unemployment, inflation and depression. The humiliation is also written in the characters of Russians émigrés and their desperate attempts to restore their position of wealth and power, this time in the country of their orthodox brothers. The constant fear evident on the characters' faces is more the result of the worse times ahead than of the irrevocable losses they have suffered. The fear of the eternal stigma of being the uncivilized barbarians living on the fringes of the empire, is now transferred into the 'empire' within the borders of the Kingdom of SCS. The non-Balkan parts of the Kingdom project onto their Balkan compatriots the same stigma they carried while in the Habsburg Monarchy. The Slovenians and the Croats look upon the Serbs, the Macedonians and even the White Russians as eastern savages, and deeply despise their Slavic mentality and traditions.

Only occasionally does the series allow for feelings of hope of really belonging to Europe and for the possibility of Belgrade, a former European *limes*, becoming a metropolis in New Europe. This hope is written in Belgrade's embellished image of a city which, despite difficult times, is developing into a modern and urban European capital. Portraying the city through its many controversies, the series manages to write a wishful, romanticized version of its history and offers a nostalgic view of Balkan society as it is striving to close the gap separating it from Europe. Because of its fetishization and idealization of a rich historical legacy and its popularization of an important historical era, *Black Sun* is often labelled as the Serbian *Downton Abbey*.

### 3. Post-Imperial Metropolis and Imperial Limina

The tagline of the series – 'the history we have never learned about, at least not in school' – implies that interbellum history is (re)discovered and (re)told in a multi-

perspectival and novel way. Belgrade of the time, the late 1920s, is a growing urban centre, with its rapidly rising crime rates taken to be the measure of the transformation of a city into a metropolis. It is becoming the city of military, police and financial power; of gambling, drugs and drinking; and of glamorous and enthusing social life. Its periphery, its 'Deadwood', is ruled by pimps, smugglers and gangsters. The political thriller, gangster and noiresque overtones of the TV series paint Belgrade as the *cloaca maxima* of Europe, but also a prosperous European-like capital of the new kingdom that cannot break free from its imperial legacy. Likewise, this Janus-faced urbanization is placed between two cultural poles – sophisticated West and exotic Orient; traditional patriarchy and modernity. This eternal ambivalence argues in favour of the claim that urbanity and identity formation are inseparable from the times of interbellum modernity. In the case of Belgrade, they remain unfinished, shaped by an array of influences coming from Central Europe (the Austro-Hungarian Empire) and France (owing to the close links Serbia and France established during the Great War) on the one side, and on the other from minor German and Italian influences, and from, although fading but strongly felt, a Slavic and/or Russian presence.

These diverse influences are mirrored in the expanding territory of the city that, in 1929, included both banks of the rivers Sava and Danube – the rivers that from the fourth-century division of the Roman Empire until the mid-twentieth-century Third Reich remapping of Europe used to be Belgrade's geographical and political borderline. The encircled territory of the city, geopolitically and metaphorically, represented a sort of no man's land between the shifting borders of conflicting empires. The road to urbanity, meandering between imperial legacies, is neatly projected onto the cityscape. On the one side, there is a patch of an ottoman casaba, a shanty town and its population of criminals, prostitutes, Gypsies, Macedonians, White Russians, etc., a sort of a proto-ghetto of ruthless outlaws where even the police seldom dare to tread. Its name, Jataganmala (Yatagan-town), after the Ottoman short sabre *yatagan* signifies multiple limina: mostly a social one and ways of life, but also of the capital undergoing Europeanization; of Serbia and the Balkans seen as the limina of the First World. Jataganmala and the events placed there, most notably the birth of the prince Karađorđević's illegitimate son, show that despite all efforts Belgrade and Serbia have not moved away from their dark, oriental past. On the other side is the city centre, built like those of Vienna and Paris. It is the space of high society, prosperous finances and thriving commerce. It is the metropolis of secessionist edifices, baroque churches, classicist ball rooms, sexy cabarets and sophisticated opium dens. The glamour and the splendour are a clear indicator of modernity sweeping over the Balkans. The main street is named after the first prince of independent Serbia – Prince Mihajlo from the Obrenović dynasty. The dynasty and its vision of a strong nation state (established after the Berlin congress) are symbolically placed in the European-like centre of the city. However, the wave of progress was abruptly interrupted by a brutal coup d'état in 1903 after which the Karađorđević dynasty seized the throne. It was the Karađorđević dynasty that founded the Kingdom of SCS and was known for its strong European orientation.



It is also the dynasty synonymous with bringing decay and devastation to the country. King Aleksandar Karađorđević I (1921–1934), who proclaimed royal dictatorship and renamed the state into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, was determined that Serbian, Croatian or Slovene nationalism should be resolved through the wider concept of Yugoslav ('South Slav') identity and patriotism. In reality, the new model brought by a modern, pro-European dynasty confirmed the opposite. Try as one may, one cannot run from one's Balkan roots nor escape the temptation of dark National Socialism. These opposed spaces, linked by two rival dynasties, reflect the deep division within the very being of Serbian society, a society forever marked by those pro the Obrenovići and contra the Karađorđevići, and vice versa, and their respective visions of national identity and state governance.

A rapidly stratifying urban society of white-collar workers, blasé intellectuals, Oscar Wilde-like dandies, labourers and unions, is also one of emerging consumer and leisure culture. The latter is immersed in the visual, popular culture, the dynamic presence of various media (film, photography, radio, newspapers, popular theatre and entertainment) all of which are prominently featured in the TV series and constitute its visual text. The paintings of Tamara de Lempicka are found on the walls of the bank where the characters are dancing at a costume ball. This new class readily adopts various novelties of the period, adores going to the cinema, and practices all sorts of photography – from erotic to newspaper. Regardless of their class standing, the characters belong to the 'lost generation' deeply shattered by the Great War. They are longing for oblivion – in drinking, driving, celebrating, fighting; anything that helps them drown and forget the frustrations, disappointments and depressions that cannot be overcome by money and/or power.

#### 4. After All, Cultural Imperialism

With reference to the style, the mise en scène and the genre of the TV series, the authors reach for internationally recognizable narrative and genre formats in order to 'redesign' the turbulent past, perennial myths and imperial shadows into an en vogue TV series full of pop cultural eclecticism (*Boardwalk Empire*, 2010–2014; *Game of Thrones*, 2011–2019; *Peaky Blinders*, 2013–). Instead of being simply post-imperial, the copycat style confirms Edward Said's (1977) definition of cultural imperialism – the limina unconditionally assimilate the models of art production imposed by the centre and the metropolis; while the metropolis maintains influence and dominance over the limina through the firmly established rules and models in the domains of art and culture.

Still, in all its lavishness and dynamism, *Black Sun* is more than just a compilation and a paraphrasing of the HBO list and other popular titles. More than anything, it is a cleverly reworked and acculturated take on *Babylon Berlin* (2017/2018, Tom Tykver), an adaptation of Volker Kutscher's (2007) novel *Der nasse Fisch*. The German connection directly links the world of *Black Sun* with the vanished Prussian empire and the Third Reich. Instead of being in Berlin at the time of the Weimar Republic, the Serbian story is set in Belgrade at the time of the

Dictatorship. The political players – the Nazis, the Communists, the White Russians, the unions, the anarchists – and the criminal figures – drug dealers, corrupt policemen, prostitutes – are the same. Dragan Bjelogrić – the creator and one of the producers of the series – denies any similarities with the German original by noting that *Black Sun* was shot before *Babylon Berlin*. He is, however, neglecting (or maybe omitting on purpose) the fact that the Serbian translation of the book was published in 2010, giving the *Black Sun's* authors plenty of time to get the inspiration, appropriate motives and themes from Kutscher. Bjelogrić names *Peaky Blinders* and *Boardwalk Empire* as his role models, because, respectively, they similarly depict brutality among criminals and portray corruption. Although both series take the same historical period as their subject matter, they do not achieve the same nuances with respect to political ambiance and history. (In this respect the *Boardwalk Empire* narrative has a clear advantage.) Critics recognized the Serbian heroes as variations of the pair of 'true detectives', and the overtones of splendour, dandyism, and Europeanism as a tribute to *Downton Abbey*. The series' graphic violence and historical thriller plot interlaced with fantastic and mysterious elements, along with the opening credits, clearly point to *Game of Thrones*. Dominique Moisi argues that *Game of Thrones* is the fictional equivalent of the game of power and bloodshed of the new world empires (the USA, Russia, North Korea, rich states of the Middle East) and their respective leaders. In such company, *Black Sun* is just a small-scale model mirroring the everlasting political games in the Balkans.

The series also resonates with a number of regional projects. The Macedonian gang and the final showdown echo Milcho Manchevski's film *Dust* (2001) – a Balkan western about the wild, wild east. Bjelogrić in the role of a down-beaten, downtrodden police inspector and a Balkan macho man is allusive of the role he played in the series *Vratiće se rode* (*The Storks Will Return*, 2007–2008), and Nenad Jezdić (as Milan 'Krojač') continues the parodic tone from the sitcom *Crni Gruja* (2003) inspired by *Blackadder* (1983–1989).

## 5. Conclusion

The first season of the series ends in a final showdown, i.e. Damjan's escape from the prison and the Thule members' ominously raised right arms, much the same as in the Nazi salute. The identity of the mastermind behind all the crimes is revealed, thus bringing a bitter realization that he alone stands for the triumph of evil. At that moment, King Aleksandar I proclaims the dictatorship and changes the name of the state. The newly imposed identity of 'Yugoslavs' brings more troubles, fragmentations and conflicts among the nationalities whose names (i.e. identities) have disappeared overnight from the official name of the Kingdom. The burden of troubles, problems, and conflicts inherited from the empires no longer existing promises to become even more traumatic, eventually leading to the final rupture.

The destiny of the Kingdom of SCS/Kingdom of Yugoslavia was sealed by the very fact that it came to life contrary to the nation-state principle of post-imperial

times. As a multinational kingdom – similar to the multinational tradition of the Habsburg Monarchy – it continued to be endangered by the principle of national self-determination, or, in other words, by the right of every nation in the Kingdom to establish its own autonomous state. Failure, for whatever reason, of this right to be effectuated meant the continuation of the process of balkanization.

The geopolitical portrait of the Balkans sketched in *Black Sun* is the image of a traumatizing imperial legacy and its further escalation in post-imperial times. It is the image that evokes Moisi's trinity of emotions of fear, humiliation and hope as these are projected onto the cityscape of Belgrade – the centre of the Balkans – and the complex historical thriller plot of the TV series *Black Sun*. The series emphasizes everyone's constant humiliation resulting from unattained political and historical ambitions, and the fear of losing one's national identity because it is threatened by asymmetrical power relations as well as the fear of Serbia's leadership. The uncertain future is heralding more hard times, but still leaving a tiny opening for hope. The TV series uses that small opening to paint Belgrade as an exciting metropolis at the moment of intertwined modernity, urbanization and Europeanization, all in collision with the country's Ottoman and Balkan past. The evoked nostalgia echoes the hope that once again, sometime in the future, Belgrade might regain its European image and place.

In the TV series, characters epitomize nations and their interests, while Belgrade's cityscape is seen as torn between the polarized identities of East and the West, the Balkans and Europe, imperial and post-imperial times. By telling a tale of the past, *Black Sun* also foresees the belligerent times of the Yugoslavias to follow, those from 1943 until 1992, the wars of the 1990s, and the hostilities of the present and future. By creating such a 'surrogate identity' of present-day Belgrade – in a country still facing fragmentation – *Black Sun* more than just confirms Moisi's thesis that TV series are indispensable if we are to gain a thorough understanding of the world we live in. The answers to questions concerning identity problems, modelling of the state, and events in the future all lie in a past that is seen and told from a novel perspective. The style of *Black Sun* and of the past it tells is characterized by citations, reworkings, allusions and appropriations. It is a style symptomatic of cultural imperialism, prevailing popular culture, and post-times such as post-modernism and/or post-socialism. Being a term of post-colonial discourse, cultural imperialism connects firmly with post-imperial times and carries its connotations into them. The traumatic post-condition is recognized on the level of media texts, thus confirming that an imperial legacy in its various forms determines a traumatic post-(imperial) condition in its many disguises.

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**Nevena Daković** is a professor of Film Studies (Department of Theory and History, FDA, University of Arts, Belgrade). She is the author and editor of numerous books, most notably *Film Studies: Essays in Film Texts of Memory* (2014); *Balkan kao filmski žanr: slika, tekst, nacija* (2008); *Graničnici sećanja: jevrejsko nasleđe i Holokaust* (2018); *Media Archaeology*, (2016); and *Representation of the Holocaust in the Balkans in Arts and Media* (2015). Nevena Daković has published widely in national and international journals (UK, Turkey, Slovakia, Italy, Austria, France, and the USA). She is a guest lecturer at European and American universities, participates in conferences and is a committee member of international project groups (COST TEMPUS, HORIZON projects). She is a member of Academia Europaea. Her main research topics include: nation, representation, the Balkans, the Holocaust and cultural memory.