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Part One: The Former Yugoslav States

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Part One

The Former Yugoslav States

The Serbian satirical magazines *Zmaj* [Dragon, 1864-1871], *Jazavac* [Badger, 1872] and most importantly *Neven* [Marigold, 1880] figure among the earliest appearances of comics-like material combining word, image and sequential narrative in the South-eastern Slavic lands under the Austro-Hungarian empire. Comics' popularity grew in the post-1918 Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, with translated US material especially prominent.

The first serialized work appeared in 1925 in *Kopriva* [Nettle]: Sergije Mironović Golovčenko's adventures of Maks and Maksić, two mischievous boys. Children's illustrated journals proliferated, with *Veseli Četvrtak* [Happy Thursday, 1932-1935] the first to bring Disney characters to market. But one event above all proved catalytic for the country's widespread acceptance of comic strips: the 1934 publication of Alex Raymond and Dashiell Hammet's *Detektiv X-9* (original English title *Secret Agent X-9*) in the Belgrade journal *Politika*, which launched many competitors, imitators, and a public zeal for genre material. This demand was met by, among others, *Oko* [Eye] (1935), the nation's first comics magazine (co-founded by Andrija Maurović, the acknowledged "father of Croatian and Yugoslav comics"), *Strip* (1935) and *Politikin Zabavnik* [Politika's Entertainment] (1939).

Another major, long-lasting development in comics was the emergence of the "Belgrade Circle" (made up in part by White Russian émigrés after the 1917 revolution), which introduced a new level of artistry and sophistication into comics. In the years before World War II, artists such as Đorđe (Yurii) Lobačev; Nikolai Tishchenko; Nikolai Navojev; Konstantin Kuznetsov; Sergei Solovyov and Ivan Šenšin revolutionized the scene, owing a particular stylistic debt to US artists Raymond, Hal Foster, Burne Hogarth, and other adventure strip artists, as well as to Italian and Franco-Belgian influences. In Zagreb, Croatia, Maurović and another important figure, cartoonist/ animator Walter Neugebauer, published *Miha Miš* [Mickey Mouse, 1935-1941] and *Mikijevo Carstvo* [Mickey's Empire, 1935-1941]. In all, the Yugoslav industry produced over 15,000 pages of comics between the mid-1930s and the invasion of the country during World War II.

Following the war, now as the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia under communist rule, the country fitfully revived its comics industry. Though at first subject to increased censorship due to their perceived associations with the capitalist West, comics experienced a new acceptance during the Informbiro Period (1948-1955), when a split in relations between Yugoslavia, the Eastern bloc countries and the Soviet Union (and in particular the severing of Tito's ties with Stalin) led to greater openness towards Western popular culture. The renewed publication in Belgrade of *Politikin Zabavnik* in 1952 exemplified the change. Reflecting the new geopolitical realities, Yugoslav comics saw a renewed "Golden Age" from the 1960s to the 1980s. Highlights of this era include the launch of the journal *Stripoteka* (1969); the enormous popularity of the Italian satirical spy series *Alan Ford* by Max Bunker and

Magnus (translation 1972); and the debut of *Dikan* by Ninoslav Šibalić and Lazar Sredanović (1969), a humorous adventure series originally set among the ancient Slavs of the 6th century CE.

With the violent break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the Serbian mainstream comics market largely collapsed, while alternative comics began to flourish, as exemplified by artists such as Wostok (Danilo Milošev) and Grabowski, overlapping with the music and art scenes, and other elements of the counterculture. Aleksandra Sekulić's chapter examines how Wostok, inspired by the Soviet avant-gardes' literature of absurd, used similar techniques to satirize the dominant political discourse of Serbian national mythomania, as well as the colonial gaze upon the "uncivilized" Balkans. Given how inexpensive and easy it was to produce DIY comics, the medium proved well-suited to distribute under the radar of the state. Aleksandar Zograf (Sasha Rakezić), with work published in *Zero* and *Weirdo* and books such as *Regards from Serbia* (2007), became the most well-known and widely-translated cartoonist from the Balkans, and arguably all of Central/Eastern Europe, in the 1990s/early 2000s. In his chapter, Max Bledstein continues with the theme of the absurd by analyzing Zograf's use of highly subjective and surreal imagery in autobiographical depictions of his traumatic experiences in war-torn Serbia, and the NATO bombings in particular. And in the third and final chapter of this section, Dragana Obradović shifts our attention to trauma in another form through the predicament of Serbian exiles in the work of Serbian-Canadian artist Nina Bunjevac (*Fatherland*, 2014).

Other influential artists from the region include the graphic novelist Enki Bilal (Bosnian/French) and Bosnian Mirko Ilić (*Heavy Metal, Epic*); the Croatians Igor Kordey (Dark Horse, Marvel), Danijel Žeželj (Marvel, DC), Darko Macan, Dunja Janković, Igor Hofbauer and Ivana Pipal; and the Slovene Tomaž Lavrič (*Red Alert: Dark Days*, 1996), who emerged from the "Mladina circle," centered on the weekly *Mladina* [Youth] in the mid-1980s. Major arts/comics collectives such as the Kosmoplovci in Belgrade (a collective including Radovan Popović, Aleksandar Opačić, Lazar Bodroža, and Danijel Savović, among others) and Komikaze in Zagreb (founded in 2002 by Ivana Armanini, Janković and Hofbauer, and others), along with arts festivals such as *GRRR!* (founded by Zograf in Pancevo, 2002) *Novo Doba* [New Era], *Crtani roman šou* [Comic Strip Show] in Croatia, and the seminal journal *Stripburger* in Slovenia (founded 1992) make the former Yugoslav comics scene among the most vibrant in Europe.

In the 21st century the scene has taken great strides onto the internet, with platforms such as Kosmoplovci, Komikaze, and Modesty Comics (founded in 2013 by Zika and Tijana Tamburić) showcasing hundreds of classic and contemporary works and artists. As Armanini notes:

[On the internet, f]ree comics travel freely in all directions, they are accessible to anyone at any time, they are interactive; at the same time, they attract new

authors from all over the world, so the network of interesting people is constantly expanding and intensifying. Paper editions are a fetish, a thing of the past, an *homage* to all the paper that we have flipped through from our childhood to the present day. When fresh, it smells good, but it also gathers dust on the shelves. If I could bet on the future, I would place all the money on the digital, its virtual ease and fluidity. It is publishing greed alone that hinders the progress and bright future of comics.

Academic attention has also intensified, with major publications such as *The Comics We Loved: Selection Of 20th Century Comics & Creators From The Region Of Former Yugoslavia* (2011), a landmark lexicon co-authored by the late Yugoslav comics historian Zupan Zdravko and a team of specialists, and *The Invisible Comics: Alternative Comics in Serbia 1980-2010*, edited by Aleksandra Sekulić, Radovan Popović, and Lazar Bodroža, an anthology of comics published in Serbian, English, and German.

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