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Composing An Identity: How Musicians and Scholars of the Mid-Twentieth Century Utilized the
Sevdalinka to Establish a Modern Bosniak Identity

Department of History
University at Albany, State University of New York
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Abstract

This paper explores how musicians and scholars contributed to the development of a modern Bosniak identity during the mid-twentieth century through their utilization of the sevdalinka. Many historians and scholars have studied the relationship between the sevdalinka and the Bosniaks and recognized its significance but have overlooked the impact sevdalinka musicians and scholars of the mid-twentieth century had in ushering in a modern Bosniak identity. This paper discusses how the growth of the music industry elevated the status of sevdalinka musicians in society and within the Bosniak community, deepening the Bosniak community's tie to the sevdalinka through their musical work which came to be representative of their cultural heritage. Scholars of the period further deepened this tie by rapidly publishing scholarship that directly tied the origin of the sevdalinka back to the Bosniaks, providing the Bosniak community with the literary evidence to legitimize their claim to the sevdalinka. Drawing upon interviews, music videos, and twentieth century scholarship, I argue that without the work of both musicians and scholars of the mid-twentieth century the relationship between the sevdalinka and the Bosniaks would not exist within as profound or strong a manner, nor would the modern Bosniak identity be established and sustained as effectively.

Key Words: Sevdalinka, Bosniak, identity, musicians, artists, scholars, ethnomusicologists

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Introduction

“Ima noći kad mi duša pati	“There are nights when my soul suffers
I kad moram pjesmu zapjevati	And when I must sing a song
Bez sevdaha ne živi Bosanac	A Bosnian does not live without sevdah
I kad svijetom luta kao stranac”	Even when he wanders the world like a stranger”

Much can be expressed through a single lyric, and even more through a single song. The above lyrics taken from a *sevdalinka* by Safet Isović stand as a testament to this. Considered to be one of the most renowned singers of the *sevdalinka* genre to have lived, Isović has become an icon of the genre, as his nickname “king of sevdah” indicates.¹ So strong and effective was the work of musicians like him, as well as that of contemporary scholars, in connecting the *sevdalinka* to the modern Bosniak identity that emerged in the 1950s that the even now they remain inextricably tied to one another within Bosnian and Hercegovina and the diasporic communities across the world which continue to sustain the relationship and its significance.

Isović’s repertoire was characterized by the *sevdalinka*. Unknown to most outside the Balkans, this music genre existed in various forms across the region for centuries, first emerging within Bosnian and Hercegovina, as one of many cultural legacies left behind by the Ottoman Empire.² The genre’s widespread and enduring presence in the region has made it a cultural

¹Biografija, “Safet Isović,” *Biografija*, accessed November 20, 2021, <https://www.biografija.org/muzika/safet-isovic/>.

² Miha Kozorog and Alenka Bartulović, “Sevdah Celebrities Narrate Sevdalinka Political (self-) Contextualization of Sevdalinka Performers in Bosnia-Herzegovina - Sevdah Slavne Osebnosti Pripovedujejo Sevdalinka Politična (samo-) Kontekstualizacija Izvajalcev Sevdalinki v Bosni i Hercegovini,” *Traditiones* 45, no. 1 (2016): 164, <https://doi.org/10.3986/Traditio2016450111>.

hallmark for a number of ethnic groups, a commonality among their many differences that was explored and documented by filmmaker Adela Peeva in her documentary “Whose Is This Song?”³ Yugoslavia and its multiethnic makeup constituted the diverse participation of ethnic groups within sevdalinka performance and production, with individuals of varied backgrounds holding personal experience and memory with the genre. Miroslav Illić, a popular Serbian folk singer from the 1970s and 80s, often spoke of his mother’s singing of Bosnian sevdalinke as his “first exposure” to music and his first recorded song was considered to be a “simple sevdalinka.”⁴ Safet Isović, a Bosniak, was well-known for singing sevdalinke with friends during gatherings, the activity which sparked his musical career. Both examples showcase the centrality of the genre in the lives of those who experienced it.⁵

From these childhood memories and life experiences of Illić and Isović, memories shared among many Yugoslavs, one can begin to recognize how the sevdalinka contributed to the construction of personal self-identity and collective group identity, by connecting memories, ideas, and emotions to music and using it as a means of representation. Isović’s line, “A Bosnian does not live without sevdah,” identifies a Bosnian identity expressed through the sevdalinka, directly linking the two concepts together. The Bosnian here is someone who lived within the geographical location of Bosnia and Hercegovina, but this territorially defined identity was not

³ Eleni Elefterias-Kostakidis, “‘Whose Is This Song?’ Nationalism and Identity through the Lens of Adela Peeva,” *Modern Greek Studies (Australia and New Zealand)* (2016): 22-26, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/%27Whose-Is-This-Song%27-Nationalism-and-Identity-the-Elefterias-Kostakidis/8a617692b409027bf20feb70bca384888cf11731>.

⁴ Ljerka V. Rasmussen, *Newly Composed Folk Music of Yugoslavia*, *Current Research in Ethnomusicology: Outstanding Dissertations* (Hoboken: Routledge, 2013), 109, <https://libproxy.albany.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=606812&site=ehost-live>.

⁵ Sevdalinka, “Safet Isović,” *Sevdalinka* (blog), accessed November 10, 2021, <https://sevdalinka.info/en/performers/doyens-of-sevdah/safet-isovic/>.

one recognized in Yugoslavia at the time of its recording.⁶ The political powers of the 1950s up to the eruption of civil war in the nineties limited the establishment of such a territorial defined identity for the peoples of Bosnia and Hercegovina, but in its place permitted a religiously affiliated identity to develop. For Bosnians who were of the Islamic faith, such as Isović, the term Muslim and later Bosniak came to represent them. This is not to say that Bosniaks wanted to distinguish themselves from their fellow Bosnians which included those of the Orthodox Christian, Catholic, and Jewish faiths, but during the mid-twentieth century as nationalistic sentiments were rising among the multitude of ethnic groups within Yugoslavia, and political power limited within the socialist structure of the nation, the Bosniaks actively chose and were implicitly forced by their environment to use their religion as a means of establishing a distinct identity to call their own.

Historian Smail Balić and scholar Mirsad Krijestorac have both discussed and analyzed the role of Islam in the development of Bosniak identity formation but neither explored the role or contribution music such as the sevdalinka played in relation to religion and the identity building process.⁷ Risto Pekka Pennanen, an ethnomusicologist, has discussed the sevdalinka and its centrality in creating and preserving a Bosniak identity and other scholars such as Miha Kozorog and Alenka Bartulović have highlighted musicians' roles in shaping the meaning of the sevdalinka over the twentieth century.⁸ These scholars have however, overlooked the important

⁶ Matjaž Klemenčič, Mitja Žagar, and Elliot Robert Barkan, *The Former Yugoslavia's Diverse Peoples: A Reference Sourcebook*, (United Kingdom: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 113.

⁷ Smail Balić, "The Cultural Achievements Of Bosnian Muslims," *Islamic Studies* 36, no. 2/3 (1997): 137–75; Mirsad Krijestorac, "Nationalism as a Process for Making the Desired Identity Salient: Bosnian Muslims Become Bosniaks," Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences (ProQuest Information & Learning (US), 2018), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2054494419/AA1643CA098D4204PQ/1>.

⁸ Miha Kozorog and Alenka Bartulović, "Sevdah Celebrities Narrate Sevdalinka Political (Self-) Contextualization of Sevdalinka Performers in Bosnia-Herzegovina - Sevdah Slavne Osebnosti Pripovedujejo Sevdalinka Politična (Samo-) Kontekstualizacija Izvajalcev Sevdalinki v Bosni i Hercegovini," *Traditiones* 45, no. 1 (2016): 161–79, <https://doi.org/10.3986/Traditio2016450111>; Risto Pekka Pennanen, "Melancholic Airs of the Orient – Bosnian

role the most popular sevdalinka musicians of the 1950s held in ushering a modern Bosniak identity, as well as the work of scholars from the period in helping to legitimize the sevdalinka as the cultural heritage of the Bosniaks. Ethnomusicologists both in Yugoslavia and abroad, for example, played a crucial role in the formation of a meaningful longstanding relationship between the sevdalinka and the Bosniak community through the publication of multiple works during the socialist period. The scholarship from these scholars as well as others brought the relationship to the forefront of public knowledge and popular culture, legitimizing and solidifying its existence within Yugoslav society. It was then through the efforts of sevdalinka musicians like Isović, as well as the scholarship of numerous native and foreign ethnomusicologists, during the mid-twentieth century that propelled the development and establishment of a modern Bosniak identity within Yugoslavia in a capacity that had not existed prior.

What significance does the sevdalinka hold for the Bosniak community to have made it so central an element in the conceptualization of themselves? What effects has this relationship had on the Bosniak community? How did such a profound relationship between music and identity come into being in the first place? These were the questions that arose in my head as I listened to the lyrics of Isović's sevdalinka that serve as the epigraph to this paper, and they are the questions that I now seek to examine.

My thesis begins with a background section that provides a brief history of identity-building and religion within Bosnian and Hercegovina from the time of Ottoman rule to the formation of the socialist state of Yugoslavia. The next section discusses the significance of music in creating connection among local communities in the early twentieth century and how its

Sevdalinka Music as an Orientalist and National Symbol," COLLeGIUM: Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences vol. 9 (2010): 15.

growth provided artists a means to gain prominence and authority within the nation as cultural and political figures. The following section further discusses how the elevation of artists in society permitted them the ability to help construct ethnic identities such as the Bosniak one through the utilization of the *sevdalinka*, focusing closely on the activism of Himzo Polovina. In addition to the work of artists, I explore the contribution of scholarly work, particularly from ethnomusicologists, to demonstrate how their work helped legitimize the *sevdalinka* as an integral part of Bosniak history, culture, and identity, just as is implied within Isović's lyrics. I also analyze the role of the audience in absorbing and perceiving the work of both the artists and the scholars is also analyzed to show their part in the identity formation process. In the following section, I discuss the utilization of music during the outbreak of war in Bosnia and Hercegovina, and how the conditions of wartime deepened the Bosniaks attachment to the *sevdalinka* and their determination to preserve their identity. The final section analyzes how the Bosniaks utilized the *sevdalinka* as a means of communal connection between those at home in Bosnian and Hercegovina and those dispersed across the world within the diasporic communities that emerged in the aftermath of the civil wars. Taken together, these sections highlight the significance music held in Bosniak identity development and how it remains the central cornerstone of that identity today.

A Political Overview of Early Bosnian Identity Formation

A significant part of Bosnia and Hercegovina's history has been characterized by its conquest and rule by outside powers, with the Ottomans being perhaps the most notable. This passage of control from one authority to the next has had a lasting impact on the development of a solid Bosnian identity, impeding its growth by confining it to the boundaries set by the prevailing powers of each historical period. The Ottomans, the Austro-Hungarians, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, each maneuvered around the subject of Bosnian identity differently, but all ultimately failed to establish it concretely politically, socially, or culturally. In other words, no sense of what may be called Bosnianhood was ever firmly established to unite the multiethnic people within the territorial borders of Bosnian and Hercegovina.

Ottoman conquest of Bosnia and Hercegovina occurred during the mid-fourteenth century and endured for roughly four centuries. With Ottoman conquest came the introduction of Islam to the Balkans which took the strongest hold within Bosnia and Hercegovina. The population of Bosnia and Hercegovina had been primarily Christian prior to the arrival of the Ottomans, but conversions occurred rapidly, presumably because of the implementation of the millet system which favored Muslims in terms of social status and privileges. These Bosnian converts began to form an elite Muslim landowning class within the Ottoman Empire that distinguished them socially and economically from their fellow Christian Bosnian counterparts. The millet system organized society along religious lines which awoke the national consciousness of the religious groups present and left a major impact on how national identities

developed as religious affiliation became the central source of difference within the region.⁹ The structure of the millet system became the basis for later ethnic and national identity formation, as seen within socialist Yugoslavia.¹⁰ For the time being though, these distinctions did not have extreme ramifications.

When the Austro-Hungarians took over administrative control of Bosnia and Hercegovina in 1878, they, unlike their predecessors, chose to actively foster a sense of Bosnianhood. Benjamin Kállay was the Austro-Hungarian governor of Bosnia and the main political figure to push for the establishment of a Bosnian identity in the hopes of gaining a political stronghold within the region that would combat the growing power of the neighboring states of Serbia and Croatia. His ultimate goal, as articulated by the writers of *Central and South-Eastern Europe*, was to “isolate Bosnia and Hercegovina from Serb and Croat nationalism, and establish a unifying Bosnian identity, according to which there would be no Serbs and Croats, just Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Muslim Bosnians [Bosniaks].”¹¹ Within this era of foreign rule, the religious distinctions among the Bosnian population were acknowledged but not seen as an obstacle and instead an advantage to establishing a unified ethnic identity that could match and even challenge the intensity of the older and better-established Serb and Croat identities perceived as threats by the Austro-Hungarians. Author Andrea Feldman elaborated that Kállay was “set out to shape a new unitary Bosnian nation through an aggressive policy of historical and identity education, standardization of language, and the use of common symbols.”¹² Though

⁹ Soeren Keil, *Multinational Federalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 1st ed. (United Kingdom: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 57-58. <https://books.google.com/books?id=6igHDAAAQBAJ>.

¹⁰ Soeren Keil, *Multinational Federalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina*.

¹¹ Europa Europa Publications, *Central and South-Eastern Europe*, 4th ed. (United Kingdom: Europa Publications, 2003), 110,

https://www.google.com/books/edition/Central_and_South_Eastern_Europe_2004/5J_gAU8c9NIC?hl=en&gbpv=1.

¹² Andrea Feldman, “Kállay’s Dilemma On the Challenge of Creating a Manageable Identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1882-1903),” *Review of Croatian History*, no. 1 (2017): 107, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/190943>.

determined in his efforts, they proved too ambitious to achieve and his death in 1903 marked the end of any further efforts by the Austro-Hungarians to establish a unified Bosnian identity.

While the Ottomans had awakened national consciousness among the peoples of Bosnia and Hercegovina, and the Austro-Hungarians had attempted to utilize this consciousness to form a unified identity, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes decided to halt any notions of a Bosnian identity and outright ignored the emerging Bosniaks as an ethnic group. King Aleksandar I's reorganization of the kingdom into nine *banovine* (provinces) in 1929 and Prince Pavle's creation of a 'united' Croatian *banovina* in 1939 fractured Bosnia and Hercegovina.¹³ The Orthodox Bosnian population was absorbed by the Serbs and the Catholic population by the Croats, leaving the Muslims in limbo as to where they fit politically and socially within this new realm.¹⁴ Establishing any sense of Bosniahood during this period of the Kingdom was difficult when geographically and socially the population was divided, and the Muslims were left entirely without political representation.

The establishment of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1945 did little to alleviate Bosnians, and Bosniaks in particular, of their uncertain position within yet another power structure where they held questionable authority and their identity was once more subjected to the boundaries set forth by the larger state apparatus. Bosnians were once more limited in their possibilities of identification, having to either identify with one of the two ethnically well-established groups, the Serbs or the Croats, or choose to be recognized on a religious basis with which only Muslims were identified.¹⁵ Thus, from at least the mid-fourteenth century notions of a Bosnian identity had been floated but did not materialize into a cohesive

¹³ Europa Europa Publications, *Central and South-Eastern Europe*.

¹⁴ Europa Europa Publications, *Central and South-Eastern Europe*.

¹⁵ Europa Europa Publications, *Central and South-Eastern Europe*.

form that was inclusive of all three major religious groups of Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and Muslims. Nor did any identity based solely on territorial affiliation receive political recognition.

Throughout these centuries of failed identity formation, the role of the *sevdalinka* was minimal. Having come to the region of Bosnia and Hercegovina in the fourteenth century with the arrival of the Ottomans, it spread across the Balkan region quickly, integrating itself within numerous cultures and ethnic groups. Its attachment with the Bosnian Muslim community stemmed from their shared Ottoman heritage but it did not appear to hold any critical importance in efforts to establish Bosniak or Bosnian identity. Indeed, some of the first recorded *sevdalinke* were performed by Christian Serb singers such as Sofka Nikolić and not Bosniaks themselves.¹⁶ Furthermore, the record of authorship of the oldest *sevdalinke* is almost nonexistent, making it difficult to attribute any one group to the creation or dominance of the *sevdalinka* for much of its history prior to the twentieth century.

It was within the first few decades of the 1900s that the relationship between the *sevdalinka* and the Muslim communities began to solidify, particularly among the Muslims of Bosnia and Hercegovina. The history of the genre and its relation to the peoples of the Balkans had been discussed sparsely prior to this time, but a sharp increase in the number of works and publications on the *sevdalinka* began emerging that directly articulate a connection between the *sevdalinka* to the Bosniak community.¹⁷ The growth of the music industry in the following decades aligned with increased efforts of identity formation among the various ethnic groups of

¹⁶ Miha Kozorog and Alenka Bartulović, “Sevdah Celebrities Narrate Sevdalinka Political (Self-) Contextualization of Sevdalinka Performers in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” 166.

¹⁷ Nirha Efendić, “The Sevdalinka as Bosnian Intangible Cultural Heritage: Themes, Motifs, and Poetical Features,” *Narodna Umjetnost: Hrvatski Časopis Za Etnologiju i Folkloristiku* 52, no. 1 (2015): 97–119, <https://doi.org/10.15176/vol52no105>.

Yugoslavia, bolstering the attention and study given to the relationship between the sevdalinka and the Bosniaks.

The Music Industry as A Catalyst for Identity Building

The post WWII era in Yugoslavia brought about many new changes which included the growth of the music industry and its domination of society, a significant development that increased the centrality of music in everyday lives and elevated the status of musical artists within society. Prior to the 1950s, the music industry was vastly decentralized and disorganized. Ethnomusicologist Risto Pekka Pennanen, who has done extensive work on the history of music within the regions of the former Yugoslavia, specifically Bosnia and Hercegovina, has discussed the presence of a licensing system for musicians implemented by the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy that required musicians to register information such as their name, place of residence, ethnic background, and performance details in order to receive a license to perform.¹⁸ However, aside from this short-lived system, no real structure existed to regulate or guide music production and artists experienced little widespread fame or popularity outside their local communities.

Within these small local communities, *kafane*, or coffeehouses, acted as the main facilitators of music production and consumption, reflecting the cultural and ethnic background of their respective community. These spaces saw the mixing of various music styles among the diverse populations they existed within which is why scholars Miha Kozorog and Alenka Bartulović described *kafane* as being “ethnically blurred social milieu[s].”¹⁹ Blurred ethnic lines meant blurred identities, which, while somewhat counterintuitive, worked well to establish a

¹⁸ Risto Pekka Pennanen, “Immortalised on Wax: Professional Folk Musicians and Their Recordings Made In Sarajevo, 1907 and 1908,” *Notes on the Balkans*, (2007): 109-110, https://www.academia.edu/27997883/Immortalised_on_Wax_Professional_Folk_Musicians_and_Their_Gramophone_Recordings_Made_in_Sarajevo_1907_and_1908.

¹⁹ Miha Kozorog and Alenka Bartulović, “Sevdah Celebrities Narrate Sevdalinka Political (self-) Contextualization of Sevdalinka Performers in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” 166.

sense of community among the extremely mixed populations of Yugoslavia, with artists and music standing at the center of this community building process.

The sevdalinka was one of the many genres performed and enjoyed by all within the walls of the kafana. It, much like the other genres, was not exclusive to any particular ethnic group and indeed was often played by Roma performers who most readily filled the lineup of singers to be found within the local coffeehouse.²⁰ The Bosniaks thus had no significant association with the sevdalinka within the early decades of the twentieth century. Literary historians of the time such as Pavle Popović and Dragutin Prohaska had done some work on classifying the sevdalinka, and writer Hamza Humo wrote a piece discussing the power of the “Bosnian” sevdalinka and its effectiveness in passing on Bosnian tradition over generations, but for the most part scholarship on the sevdalinka was limited and often did not denote a significant link to the Bosniak community.²¹ It was known that the sevdalinka emerged from within the region of Bosnia and Hercegovina, but that was not a detail many emphasized, and the further link to Muslim communities was not as central to the understanding of the genre among the population. Thus, people continued to engage freely with all musical genres regardless of the ethnic ties tethered to them, permitting music production and consumption to remain at the local level until the aftermath of World War II brought about change.

One critical change brought about with World War II was the spread of division among the population of Yugoslavia. Unified support for either the Axis or Allied powers did not exist leading to the emergence of multiple paramilitary groups and organizations that turned neighbor against neighbor. The Croatian Ustaše was a fascist organization which allied itself with the Axis

²⁰ Miha Kozorog and Alenka Bartulović, “Sevdah Celebrities Narrate Sevdalinka Political (self-) Contextualization of Sevdalinka Performers in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” 167.

²¹ Nirha Efendić, “The Sevdalinka as Bosnian Intangible Cultural Heritage: Themes, Motifs, and Poetical Features,” 98.

powers, the Serbian Chetniks were an anti-Axis nationalist group, and the Yugoslav Partisans were yet another anti-Axis group that arose amidst the conflict of WWII.²² Each group was made up of varied ethnic groups and each committed grave atrocities upon one another that were seared into their historical and personal memories, leaving major rifts between them that impacted the development of their relationships and identities for decades to come. In the end, the Yugoslav Partisans, lead by future president of Yugoslavia Josip Broz Tito, came to dominate the WWII landscape and a new era of socialism was ushered in.

With the establishment of a new Yugoslav state, the music industry entered a stage of rapid economic growth, becoming a central focus of the new governing parties. The fresh economic and cultural policies rolled out by the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) following the establishment of the socialist state entangled politics into the development of music, fueling its evolution. By funding music festivals, expanding record companies, and broadening radio and television services across the state, the government was able to nurture a popular music industry that brought considerable economic prosperity to the region, working well to demonstrate Yugoslavia's new move toward modernization and industrialization following the war. Communist leaders came to see the music industry as more than just a means of great economic prosperity. Music, they realized, was the perfect tool through which they could establish a centralized Yugoslav identity, exactly what was needed to welcome in a new nation and a new era of socialism. Historian Dean Vuletić is an expert on the relationship that came into existence between socialism and popular music in the former Yugoslavia. He noted how, "popular music...was ... being harnessed by the LCY as never before to unite Yugoslavia's

²² Sabrina Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavias: State-Building and Legitimation, 1918–2005* (United States: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006).

citizens. The party's leaders were putting into practice what they had increasingly come to understand during the 1950s: that popular music was an effective medium for the construction of cultural, political and social identities...."²³ The government recognized the power music had upon its population and felt that if they could enter the world of the kafane and expand it to encapsulate all of Yugoslavia, there was real progress to be made in the creation of a united citizenry. They understood in order to further their newfound political, cultural, and economic agendas they needed to be able to insert themselves directly into the lives of their constituents and what better way to do so then through music, the heart of communities across the land. The actions of the government demonstrate the rise in significance of music as a means of connection, community and now identity building, as it moved from the local level to the national level. In addition, the government set the perfect example for how ethnic groups could utilize music within their own attempts at identity formation in the years to come with the development of new technologies that could spread music, and the ideas and messages behind it, only making it a more appealing, accessible, and effective tool for them to employ.

The gramophone had made for greater dissemination of music at the start of the century, and now the invention of the radio allowed music to further penetrate into the life of every household in the state and promote the desired goal of government. The involvement of the state within music production and consumption now meant greater control and regulation of it, allowing the state to use its own discretion in determining what genres of music to promote and which to repress. Kozorog and Bartulović write that “radio as an instrument of state ideology reinforced two kinds of songs, nurturing two kinds of identification among citizens. First,

²³ Dean Vuletić, “The Making of a Yugoslav Popular Music Industry,” *Popular Music History*, no. 3 (2011): 269–285, <https://doi.org/10.1558/pomh.v6i3.269>.

partisan and revolutionary songs portraying the partisan struggle and aspirations for Yugoslav socialism ... Second, genres of popular ethnic music, based on selected folk styles and designed as music for mass audiences, ... developed and promoted their respective ethnic genres.”²⁴

Technology gave the government greater presence in and influence of everyday life permitting them to have more direct control over the development of the unified Yugoslav identity they were hoping to achieve, one that was patriotic but also seemingly inclusive of the multiethnic makeup of the nation. However, the government was not the only presence to increase in the lives of the populace. Technology also thrust musicians directly into the homes of the Yugoslav citizenry, their voices filling rooms, making them as significant as the state in shaping society and identities motivated by their own personal goals and intentions.

As music production and consumption increased, artists became representatives of the music they were creating and of the ideas and messages within the music, garnering them greater power and responsibility than they had experienced prior. They shifted from being small town kafane entertainers to national superstars performing at large concerts across Yugoslavia. The image musicians cultivated and presented to the public had great influence in the popularity of music, attributing to them additional power that the LCY made sure to check with the creation of unions which provided structure and organization to the music industry in accordance with the LCY’s ideas. Membership in these unions was made “compulsory for professional popular music artists, with jobs and benefits being arranged through them, they were also used to remedy the problem of musicians and singers who worked without approval of the authorities and operated a black market for entertainment....”²⁵ The creation of the unions was done as a means of checking

²⁴ Miha Kozorog and Alenka Bartulović, “Sevdah Celebrities Narrate Sevdalinka Political (self-) Contextualization of Sevdalinka Performers in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” 168.

²⁵ Dean Vuletić, “The Making of a Yugoslav Popular Music Industry,” 278.

musicians and as such their influence, attesting to the argument that artists were gaining considerable power within society as the music industry continued to thrive. In an attempt to further control the influence musicians were beginning to exert, while also continuing to promote their idea of a Yugoslav identity, the government created music festivals.

The music festivals were meant to reflect the multiethnic makeup of Yugoslavia, the state's commitment to inclusion, and promote feelings of unity, but it would not be long before grievances among various ethnic groups arose. The most successful of these festivals included the Opatija Festival held in Opatija, Croatia, the Ilidža festival in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Hercegovina, and the 'Beogradski sabor' festival in Beograd, Serbia.²⁶ These festivals often brought together artists and musicians from across the Yugoslav republics and autonomous regions under one roof, resembling the natural diversity exhibited in small town kafane, but the presence of the state hindered such a semblance to fully form. The festivals proved successful for a time and further established the role of musicians as intermediaries between the government and the general public. However, groups soon felt unequally represented within the musical repertoire of these festivals and across radio broadcasts. The linguistic differences among the republics became a point of contention with Vuletić stating, "Serbo- Croatian programmes in Macedonia and Slovenia undermined the principle of 'brotherhood and unity'... as it privileged Serbo-Croatian, which was spoken in all of the other republics, above Macedonian and Slovenian, even though all of them were officially equal in the constitution."²⁷ Music, initially appearing as the strongest tool to instill an inclusive, singular identity that upheld the idea of "brotherhood and fraternity," appeared instead to breed disunity and conflict that had been common during the days of WWII. The unequal representation of ethnic music by the state

²⁶ Ljerka V. Rasmussen, *Newly Composed Folk Music of Yugoslavia*, 109.

²⁷ Dean Vuletić, "The Making of a Yugoslav Popular Music Industry," 281.

implied a dismissal of their identity in Yugoslav society, a marking of their culture as undesirable in comparison to the culture of their fellow “brothers.” In response to this lack of representation Slovenian participants began pulling out of festivals, undermining the pan-Yugoslav character the festivals were supposed to promote and signaled a rift among the populace that artists took note of.²⁸

The entrance of government into the production and consumption of music had disrupted the cultural equilibrium that the kafana had encouraged, and musicians, acting as the common thread between the local and national music scenes, were now further enveloped in the politics of identity. Seeing the grievances emerging within the music industry over representation and identity, singer Miroslav Illić commented that “a parting of singers into ‘yours’ and ‘ours’ has begun.”²⁹ The growth of the music industry and its utilization by the Yugoslav government to create a unified national identity had backfired and now ethnic groups were beginning to take music into their own hands in order to create individual identities. A rise in ethnonational sentiments was what Illić had sensed lurking in the shadows. Desires for political recognition by ethnic groups had been transferred over to the music industry as a result of government involvement in music. The Bosniaks were but one group of many looking to establish their own identity within Yugoslavia, and with the rise in cultural and political power of musicians generated by the music industry, finding the right sound would be a crucial piece of actualizing that goal whether they realized it at the time or not. With a burgeoning music industry as a catalyst, the *sevdalinka* provided the perfect pitch to finally establish a Bosniak identity in a nation that was being redefined in more ways than one.

²⁸ Dean Vuletić, “The Making of a Yugoslav Popular Music Industry,” 281.

²⁹ Ljerka V. Rasmussen, *Newly Composed Folk Music of Yugoslavia*, 116.

The Socialist Period: Redefining Relationships

The arrival of socialism to Yugoslavia brought about the redefining of multiple relationships from the new nation's place between East and West, to its interaction with a large multiethnic population, to the status of musicians in society, and perhaps most importantly, to the role of the *sevdalinka* within the Bosniak community. The advent of socialism coincided with the growth of the music industry and the status promotion of musicians in society, making the 1950s and 60s a dynamic period in the nation's history. It was during this time that the *sevdalinka* entered the new popular music scene through the work of artists such as Safet Isović who began this story. The musicians of this period created what is considered to be the golden standard of the *sevdalinka*, a fitting designation given their new positions within Yugoslav society, but one which assigned them the even greater responsibility of representing the community behind the music as honorably as the music itself.

Before artists became influential members of their community though, they needed to establish themselves within the music industry and across radio waves. For the artists who came to dominate the genre of *sevdalinka* which included the likes of Safet Isović, Zaim Imamović, Himzo Polovina, Emina Zečaj, and Beba Selimović, that recognition came rather quickly. A short anecdote provided by Kozorog and Bartulović on Zaim Imamović demonstrates just how famous and cherished he became. They write that “he was so respected as a vocalist that demands for radios in parts of Yugoslavia increased with his popularity: people buying in shops were asking for those radios ‘that played Zaim.’”³⁰ The invention of the radio was grand, but it was Imamović and his skill that produced the demand for radios not the technology itself! This

³⁰ Miha Kozorog and Alenka Bartulović, “Sevdah Celebrities Narrate Sevdalinka Political (self-) Contextualization of Sevdalinka Performers in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” 168.

anecdote speaks volumes to the level of influence musicians held and how their role in society went beyond that of being mere entertainers. More importantly however, it speaks to the significance of the public in elevating the position of musicians who without the support of the public would not be able to assume the roles they did.

The music industry boom had elevated the status of artists as cultural and political figures within society, but it was the public that wielded the power to maintain and determine the specifics of their positions. Korozog and Bartulovic stated that “as performers [sevdah singers] have been publicly perceived as persons with knowledge about *sevdalinka*, and therefore their narration of it has had a certain public weight, which is why it has been reflected by themselves and by various publics.”³¹ The more acclaim and popularity artists gained, the more knowledge and expertise was attributed to them of their genre. Imamović, Isović, and the others were not simply singers, they were essentially scholars of the *sevdalinka*, “interpreters” as some said because it involved more than just singing, it required the artist to tap into deep emotion and convey such emotion to listeners, connect with them and pass on the understanding, history, and meaning of the *sevdalinka* to others. This role of *sevdalinka* singers is further expanded by Korozog and Bartulovic when they state that “the most celebrated performers were invited to participate as double agents, both providing entertainment and contributing visions of unspoiled *sevdalinka*. Respected performers were therefore public personas not only as singers or musicians, but also as connoisseurs of the music’s “cultural essence...”³² The phrase ‘cultural essence’ captures the importance of music and the role artists held in preserving the cultural integrity of the group it stemmed from. For many outside the former Yugoslav region, very little

³¹ Miha Kozorog and Alenka Bartulović, “Sevdah Celebrities Narrate Sevdalinka Political (self-) Contextualization of Sevdalinka Performers in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” 163.

³² Miha Kozorog and Alenka Bartulović, “Sevdah Celebrities Narrate Sevdalinka Political (self-) Contextualization of Sevdalinka Performers in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” 169.

may be discerned from reading and looking at the names of the artists mentioned above, but the names are key in understanding the ethnic makeup of the performers. Every one of those artists were part of the Bosnian Muslim community. They were all Bosniaks. As identity became an increasingly important subject to the peoples of Yugoslavia, something in part fueled by the LCY actions, the ethnic background of performers also became an increasingly important aspect of music.

Music is a tool of expression, and these Bosniak artists were expressing a distinct identity by performing the *sevdalinka*. The choices these artists made in terms of the production and performance of the *sevdalinka* spoke volumes to the ideas and values they held. Some like Himzo Polovina and Emina Zečaj chose to wear traditional Ottoman clothing in their music videos, album covers, and live performances which demonstrated their association and embracement of past Ottoman cultural heritage as their own. They were actively making the decision to attach themselves, and thus the Bosniak community they were apart of, to this cultural past. This choice was influenced by their Islamic faith, a direct connection to the presence and sway of the Ottomans, and the main distinguisher from the other ethnic groups of Yugoslavia.

The connection between the *sevdalinka* and the Islamic faith of the Bosniak artists that dominated it can be observed readily within the 1971 interview conducted by the Bosniak newspaper *Preporod* (Rebirth) with the musician Himzo Polovina. The news source prefaced the start of the interview with a short explanation of the *sevdalinka*'s specific place within Muslim history in Yugoslavia/Balkans and Polovina throughout the interview referred to the *sevdalinka* as an Islamic art form that sustained and passed on the cultural and historical integrity of

Muslims. The following exchange from the interview demonstrates the relation the sevdalinka had to Bosnian Muslims and the desire by Polovina to establish a sense of identity through it:

Preporod: Do the new conditions of recognition for Muslims as a people provide new possibilities for the affirmation of our cultural heritage as well as our folk song [the sevdalinka]?

Himzo: Of course! And not only do they provide but also oblige it! I believe that my children must have a better insight into the Muslim past and culture than I have. Who will give it to them? Whether our new textbooks will be enriched by the city from our past or it will be gained in some other way, I do not know.

Anyhow, this period was preceded by a time of calm in which people restrained their feelings, fought against themselves and suppressed their desires. Now they are expressing it in a new form, in a new quality, and I think that this is the beginning of a new renaissance of our people.³³

Polovina's words radiate a sense of nationalistic pride in his Muslim community and exhibit his desire for that community to take action to build an identity of their own which they felt they couldn't before. Furthermore, Polovina is attaching concepts of nation and identity building to the sevdalinka, linking them together and elevating the significance of the sevdalinka to the community in the process by recognizing its critical role in educating future generations of Bosniaks.

The same year that this interview took place was also the year in which Bosnian Muslims were officially recognized as a secular Muslim nation within the federal census with the addition

³³ "Himzo Polovina, Intervju 'Preporodu', Godište II, Br. 20, 1971," Sevdalinka, accessed September 29, 2021, <http://www.sevdalinke.com/2008/04/himzo-polovina-intervju-preporodu-br-20.html>.

of the category “Muslim in the national sense.”³⁴ Just ten years prior in 1961, Bosnian Muslims were given the right to identify as being “Muslim under ethnic qualification,” constituting them as a distinct ethnic group within Yugoslavia.³⁵ Religion was thus evidently the central component of Bosniak identity even more so than it was or had been for other ethnic groups of the region. This emphasis on the Islamic faith of the Bosniaks was perceived as the key element in gaining political recognition within the socialist state by politicians. The Bosniak politician Atif Purivatra stated that “religion was only the first step to Muslim national identity, as was the case with the Serbs and the Croats,” while Avdo Sućeska, another Bosniak politician, saw “Islam as only the foundation on which socialism enabled the development of national awareness.”³⁶ Polovina’s emphasis of religion within his discussion of the *sevdalinka* was an effort to reinforce the sentiments made within the statements made by his fellow Bosniaks in the government. Polovina’s reference to Islam, to the Ottomans, was echoed by his fellow *sevdalinka* musicians. Zaim Imamović recorded his music videos in front of mosques while Emina Zečaj wore elaborate Ottoman dresses in her own, both doing so while singing *sevdalinka* that told stories of ancient agas and begs, the feudal titles of Muslim lords and officers. These musicians utilized the *sevdalinka* to the fullest capacity to exhibit their ‘Muslim-ness’ in order to help usher in and maintain the Bosniak identity that politicians were succeeding in advancing.

It was during this time of great political progress of Bosniak identity that a surge in scholarship discussing the *sevdalinka* and its history came into being. Scholar Nirha Efendić

³⁴ Brenna Caroline Miller, “Between Faith and Nation: Defining Bosnian Muslims in Tito’s Yugoslavia, 1945-1980,” PhD diss., (The Ohio State University, 2018),

https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_olink/r/1501/10?clear=10&p10_accession_num=osu1532003889562038.

³⁵ David A. Dyker, “The Ethnic Muslims of Bosnia: Some Basic Socio-Economic Data,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 50, no. 119 (1972): 238–56, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4206528?seq=1>

³⁶ Mitija Velikonja, *Religious Separation and Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, (United States: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 223.

dived into the history of the sevdalinka and how it came to be defined, categorized, and interpreted over the years with sources from the 19th and especially 20th century being the basis of her discussion of the genre's evolution. Efendić states that Muhsin Rizvić provided the first “comprehensive theoretical description” of the sevdalinka in his paper *Ogled o sevdalinci* (An Essay on the Sevdalinka).³⁷ A doctoral dissertation examining the sevdalinka by Wolfgang Eschker was published in 1971, while Hatidža Krnjević provided another theoretical definition of the sevdalinka in their 1976 work *O poetskoj prirodi sevdalinke* (About the Poetic Nature of the Sevdalinka), and scholars Munib Maglajlić and Ivan Lovrenović compiled collections of the sevdalinka during the same time. These works and others developed the scholarly basis on sevdalinka that contributed to the first encyclopedic definition of the genre which was published in 1969 by the Miroslav Krleža Institute of Lexicography.³⁸ Another encyclopedic entry was made in 1971 within the *jugoslovenski književni leksikon* (Yugoslav Literature Encyclopedia by Dragiša Živković and again another was published in 1984 within the *Narodna književnost* (Folk Literature) by Nada Milošević-Dordević, and yet another entry was written by Hatidža Krnjević and published in 1985 within the *Rečnik književnih termina* (Dictionary of Literature Terminology).³⁹ As is quite obvious from the dates, there was a plethora of scholarly work being produced in the 60s through the 80s on the sevdalinka showing an increased interest in the genre and how to better define and understand it along with its history and development.

There are multiple common elements exhibited within these excerpts from various different authors and publications that need to be highlighted. The most significant one is the designation of the sevdalinka as a form of Muslim artistic expression because it directly asserted

³⁷ Efendić, “The Sevdalinka as Bosnian Intangible Cultural Heritage,” 99.

³⁸ Efendić, “The Sevdalinka as Bosnian Intangible Cultural Heritage,” 99.

³⁹ Efendić, “The Sevdalinka as Bosnian Intangible Cultural Heritage,” 100.

a connection between the Bosnian Muslim community and the genre, leaving no ambiguity that the sevdalinka originated from the Bosniak community. The literature was legitimizing the sevdalinka's place as a cultural hallmark of the Bosniak community and in doing so aided its place as a central component of Bosniak identity, something representative of this particular ethnic group and its history. Another key element within these definitions of the sevdalinka is the emphasis of the deep emotion attached to the genre in terms of feelings of love, pain, melancholy. This element demonstrates the genre's perceived power as a tool of connection among its participants and observers that later diasporic communities would reference as a powerful characteristic of the sevdalinaka.

Himzo Polovina made sure to underscore this power of connection found in the sevdalinka within his own scholarly work. Polovina was educated and trained as a psychiatrist in addition to his illustrious sevdalinka career and he applied his knowledge of psychology to the concept of music to demonstrate the power it had in forming communities, providing a means of expression, and disseminating ideas and opinions that could not be expressed as openly within the political sphere of society. In 1977, he and his colleagues published a short article titled "Tuga - Kreativni izraz emocija narodnih pjesnika u sadržajima i melodijama malogradskih („varoških“) pjesama Bosne i Hercegovine," (Sadness - The Creative Expression of Emotions by Folk Poets In Content and Melodies of Small Town Songs from Bosnian and Hercegovina), where they demonstrated their immense knowledge of how folk music, such as the sevdalinka, affects society.⁴⁰ This work by Polovina further cemented the notion presented by Kozorog and Bartulović of musicians being perceived as in essence scholars of their genre. Musicians and

⁴⁰ Himzo Polovina, "Himzo Polovina et al., "Tuga – Kreativni Izraz Emocija Narodnih Pjesnika u Sadržajima i Melodijama Malogradskih („varoških“) Pjesama BiH," Rad XIX kongresa Saveza Udruženja Folklorista Jugoslavije, (1977): 125-132, <http://www.sevdalinke.com/2008/02/himzo-polovina-et-al-tuga-kreativni.html>.

scholars were thus interacting with the *sevdalinka* in various forms from the actual musical production of it to the written and published scholarship discussing it, all of which contributed to its growing connection to the Bosniak community during the mid to late twentieth century.

The relationship between the *sevdalinka* and the Bosniak community was further legitimized with the work done by ethnomusicologists over the course of the twentieth century. Ethnomusicologists, more so than any other types of scholars, had a great deal of impact on this relationship because they wielded the ultimate authority in understanding and presenting the relationship between music, culture, and people. Ethnomusicological as a field did not exist prior to 1950, so the work of these scholars was some of the first of its kind, making them leading experts in the field and giving them a level of great influence in determining the dialogue surrounding the *sevdalinka* and the Bosniaks. A prominent ethnomusicologist from the Yugoslav region was Vlado Milošević. Born in Banja Luka, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Milošević dedicated much of his life to the study of music, publishing numerous papers and books on the various genres found throughout the Balkans.⁴¹ One of these books, considered his seminal work, titled *Sevdalinka* was published in 1964 and provides a thorough analysis and history of the *sevdalinka*. His work places the *sevdalinka* as arising from Bosnia and Hercegovina's Muslim communities who came to dominate its production with *agas* and *begs* writing the original *sevdalinka* texts being sung by the likes of Safet Isović and Himzo Polovina. In the opening section of his book, he discusses the ill form of study and writing done in regard to the *sevdalinka* prior to his own, underscoring how scholars had failed to accurately interpret and present the *sevdalinka* as a musical phenomenon brought about by the Bosniaks.

⁴¹ Ljiljana Radić, "Istaknute Istorijske Ličnosti Banjaluke (IV): Vlado Milošević - Radni Vijek Posvećen Muzici," *Nezavisne*, April 27, 2014, <https://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/banjaluka/Istaknute-istorijske-licnosti-Banjaluke-IV-Vlado-Milosevic-radni-vijek-posvecen-muzici/242361>.

Another ethnomusicologist from the region was Ankica Petrović. Born in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Hercegovina in the year 1943, Petrović went on to gain degrees from the Music Academy of University of Sarajevo in 1968 and 1973 with an orientation in ethnomusicology.⁴² Petrović went on to study aboard in America and produced a number of works such as the one discussed here titled “Paradoxes of Muslim Music in Boznia and Herzegovina.”⁴³ Published in 1988, her work emphasized the sevdalinka’s relation to Islamic culture and heritage, which marked it as a distinctive style from other musical genres of the region and linked it to the emergence of a Bosniak national identity.⁴⁴ Barbara Krader was an American ethnomusicologist who did work on the sevdalinka at the same time as Petrovic. Within her 1977 work titled “A Bosnian Urban Love Song: The Sevdalinka,” she too comes to define the sevdalinka within the context of its relationship to the Bosnia and the Muslim community in particular much like Milošević and Petrović did.⁴⁵

The work of these three ethnomusicologists helped aid the legitimization of the sevdalinka as a strong, enduring cultural product from the Bosnian Muslim community, and thus solidifying public perception and understanding of the sevdalinka and the right of the Bosniak community to claim and utilize it within their national identity building process. The intention of these scholars may not have been to establish such legitimization, but they nonetheless did, and they contributed to the development of the significant relationship between the sevdalinka and the Bosniaks during the 60s and into the 80s.

⁴² Ankica Petrović, “Ankica Petrović – Introducing the Collection,” *Ethnomusicology: Global Field Recordings*, accessed February 01, 2022, <https://www.ethnomusicology.amdigital.co.uk/Explore/Essays/Petrovic>.

⁴³ Ankica Petrović, “Ankica Petrović – Introducing the Collection.”

⁴⁴ Ankica Petrović, “Paradoxes of Muslim Music in Boznia and Herzegovina,” *Asian Music* 20, no. 1 (1988): 128–47, <https://doi.org/10.2307/833858>.

⁴⁵ Barbara Krader, “A Bosnian Urban Love Song: The Sevdalinka,” *Sevdalinka*, 1977.

The redefining of musicians' place within Yugoslav society converged with the rapid increase in research and scholarship being published on the sevdalinka and the Bosniaks allowing for the genre's overhaul that made it a pivotal tool in Bosniak identity formation. The relationship between the sevdalinka and the Bosniaks had become well known as a result of the work by musicians in the social sphere and scholars in the academic one. The significance of their relationship and the sevdalinka's role in sustaining Bosniak identity only increased as Yugoslavia dissolved, and war broke out. The sevdalinka became a source of strength and community as change and conflict threw the peoples of Yugoslavia into a similar turmoil to that of WWII.

Sevdalinka During the War

The importance of the sevdalinka to the Bosniak community deepened as whispers of war grew louder. The death of Tito in 1980 meant the death of any remaining sense of “brotherhood and fraternity” among the republics, and it ultimately brought about the end of Yugoslavia. Over the course of the 1980s tensions between the republics increased sharply, especially over ethnic affiliation, and without the presence of a strong central leader to soothe over nationalistic sentiments, a dissolution of the country was underway. The 1990s brought in a series of referendums and successions that took place across the republics, and in June of 1991 Slovenia and Croatia became the first two republics to declare independence from the socialist state, marking the start of one of the most turbulent and violent decades of all time in the Balkans.

As the political landscape was heating up, the need for each ethnic group to (re)assert their identity grew. A sense of “us” needed to be established in order to establish a “them,” an enemy, that would allow the justification of certain political and military actions. Music was once again utilized to bring about a sense of connection and unity for each ethnic group, much as it had been in the decades prior, but this time the music was tinged with patriotic undertones to suit the circumstances of war. Austrian scholar Petra Hamer noted the significant relationship between music and war in her research of the sevdalinka during the Yugoslav civil wars stating that, “from 1992 to 1995 music was often used as a ‘cultural weapon of choice by all warring parties in Bosnia but also as a fuel for the war machine. It was crucial in strengthening moral and maintaining group cohesion as well as in providing justification for war and perpetuating

violence.”⁴⁶ It was thus both a common and effective practice to employ music to achieve the goals held by each of the respective groups involved within the conflict.

The Bosniaks, having established the *sevdalinka* as a strong marker of their cultural heritage and as such a major pillar of their identity during the socialist period, understood it had the real potential to assert that identity more firmly and aggressively now that war was imminent. As Peters put it so clearly:

Sevdalinka played a significant role in the lives of Bosnians during the four years of war in B-H in the early 1990s, particularly for those of a Muslim background. Opančić explained that the “*sevdalinka* carried people psychologically and morally... especially Muslims because Serbian and Croatian politics were dividing the people into new national identities” (Opančić, interview, 6 April 2006). A new type of patriotic *sevdalinka* arose which played an important role for a short period but is not heard today. This particular strand of *sevdalinka* is considered significant as a memorial which witnessed a certain time in history but is no longer needed (interviews: Opančić; Pobrić). These songs expressed both a struggle for visible cultural survival during the horrific period of “ethnic cleansing,” as well as a struggle to maintain an inner Bosnian identity of a more inclusive nature.⁴⁷

The threat of possible cultural destruction motivated the Bosniak community to enhance their efforts of identity formation and protection. To secure a solid core of “us,” the Bosniaks

⁴⁶ Petra Hamer, “Patriotic Songs as a Means of Mobilisation in Besieged Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995,” *Lied Und Populäre Kultur/ Song and Popular Culture* 63 (2018): 8, https://www.academia.edu/38184518/Patriotic_songs_as_a_means_of_mobilisation_in_besieged_Sarajevo_Bosnia_Herzegovina_from_1992_to_1995.

⁴⁷ Heather Laurel Peters, “Song of *Sevdalinka*: Cultural Anthem of Bosnia-Herzegovina,” PhD diss., (York University, 2007), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/304783193/abstract/56C4515B46274D0APQ/1>.

decided to once again emphasize their Islamic faith as the major distinguisher from the “other” during the war. This focus on Islam was reflected in the performance and production of *sevdalinke*, both old and new, acting as a primary source of patriotic sentiment among the Bosniaks. Peter sheds a light on the emphasis on religion with the discussion of Omer Pobrić’s collection of *sevdalinke* during the war. Omer Pobrić was a *sevdalinka* performer who supported the independence of Bosnia and Hercegovina and undertook the process of writing and collecting *sevdalinke*, in order to represent the genre as a means of resistance by the Bosniaks during the war. Peters states that the “*sevdalinka* was an ideal forum for producing an inner identity that represented all those who were the ‘true and faithful’ Bosnians. The imagery and traditional history represented in songs of *sevdalinka*... contained associative symbolism with which a Muslim ‘us’ could identify, and it is therefore not surprising that many of the songs in Pobrić’s collection most closely represent the Bosniak.”⁴⁸ By highlighting Islam as a unique characteristic of Bosniak identity, a more narrowed and unified collective emerged which increased Bosniak community’s attachment to the *sevdalinka*, which additionally fueled a need to produce new *sevdalinka*.

This need for *sevdalinke* tinged with greater patriotic elements arose as a result of the instable and violent environment that had encapsulated the regions of former Yugoslavia. Peters writes that “Bosniaks looked to their roots which represented stability and social cohesion, and to the morals found there (for many, their Islamic faith), to define and consolidate a “true” Bosnian identity.”⁴⁹ No better source of perhaps a glorified, but at the time seen as dignified, history and heritage could be found than the *sevdalinka*. Having been so integrated into Bosniak culture in the previous decades, the *sevdalinka* was inundated with lyrical, visual, and emotional references

⁴⁸ Heather Laurel Peters, “Song of *Sevdalinka*: Cultural Anthem of Bosnia-Herzegovina,” 171.

⁴⁹ Heather Laurel Peters, “Song of *Sevdalinka*: Cultural Anthem of Bosnia-Herzegovina,” 175.

to a Bosniak past that brought much needed comfort and stability to a people under constant attack. Hamer discusses how the *sevdalinka* provided a means of therapeutic release by allowing people to harken back to a period of perceived peace and tranquility that gave them the strength to deal with the hardships placed upon them from war. The *sevdalinka* thus became deeply imbedded into the minds of Bosniaks as its role was transformed from a form of cultural preservation and means of group connection to a mechanism of self-awareness and self-conceptualization that made it more personal to individual members of the community. This forged a greater bond between the Bosniaks and the *sevdalinka* as individual emotional and traumatic experiences, that all suffered from, could be expressed within the music, intensifying the need for its existence and centrality to Bosniak identity.

The *sevdalinka* thus became fully and inextricably tied to the Bosniaks. As Pobrić explained in the year following the end of the war in Bosnia, “*sevdah* [is] a way of life for the Bosniak.”⁵⁰ This assessment of the *sevdalinka* demonstrates its transformation during the war to represent not just the history and culture of the Bosniak, but to embody the very essence of what being a Bosniak was. The *sevdalinka* became an essential fiber in the being of a Bosniak, not simply a form of musical expression. It encapsulated the entirety of the Bosniak experience and was inseparable from it which helps to explain its necessity as a pillar of Bosniak identity. Pobrić continues his explanations stating that, “when its [*sevdalinka*’s] freedom is taken, results in war, and from this crisis ‘true Bosnian identity is extracted and crystallized.’”⁵¹ In threatening the cultural and historical existence of a people, in threatening the destruction of the *sevdalinka*, the “others” in the conflict threatened the survival of Bosniaks themselves as a people. The need to assert one’s identity, one’s very existence, thus became a top priority, and in fact the only

⁵⁰ Heather Laurel Peters, “Song of *Sevdalinka*: Cultural Anthem of Bosnia-Herzegovina,” 166.

⁵¹ Heather Laurel Peters, “Song of *Sevdalinka*: Cultural Anthem of Bosnia-Herzegovina,” 166.

priority. This desire to survive among the Bosniak community is articulated within a statement given by Hasiba Agić in an interview conducted by Hamer. Agić is a *sevdalinka* singer who was trapped within the besieged city of Sarajevo during the war. Reflecting on her experiences of the war, Agić states:

I am a professional *sevdalinka* singer. When the aggression on my culture and my people started, I couldn't just watch and do nothing. In war everything disappeared, even *sevdalinka*. I think the aggressor deliberately wanted to destroy our culture, our heritage, and our people. So, I did what I knew best, I sang *sevdalinka* and even *novokomponovana narodna muzika* (newly composed folk music) for the wounded in hospitals and soldiers on the front line, because I knew how important this was for them. Music kept us alive. The patriotic songs were mostly so vivid, full of passion, while *sevdalinkas* are calm, peaceful and romantic. Lyrics were singing about our beautiful B-H, about our people, how we must not surrender and how things will change, and the war will stop. Our songs were full of sadness, suffer, pain, they were not hostile, or nationalistic, like Serbian songs. Just when you listen to [the] *sevdalinka* “Šehidski rastanak” (The Martyr's Departure) by Safet Isović, you want to cry. Don't you?⁵²

The *sevdalinka* represented life. It became an incredibly important source of strength for the Bosniak community throughout the war and as a result became as critical a part of Bosniak identity as Islam had been in the years prior. The gravity of the situation pushed the *sevdalinka* further into the everyday life of the Bosniaks and it was the *sevdalinke* sung by the golden age musicians of the 1950s and 60s that made the greatest impact upon the Bosniak community. Agić

⁵² Petra Hamer, “Patriotic Songs as a Means of Mobilisation in Besieged Sarajevo,” 10.

and others in the diaspora cited Isović's sevdalinka as the ones that reconnected them to their Bosniak heritage and reminded them of who they were. The work of sevdalinka singers like Isović, like Polovina, impacted the conceptualization of Bosniak identity even decades after they had come onto the music scene, with Agić's account standing as a testament to their power and importance to the community. Isović commented that the "the smell of Ramadan in our markets... our old songs, the voice of the muezzin, and our white mosques," was what the Bosniaks had fought for in the war.⁵³ The right to be themselves, to embrace their identity as deeply in reality as they had done within their sevdalinka was the backbone of their will to fight.

⁵³ Stephen Schwartz, "Bosnian Leader Championed Religious Pluralism." *Forward*, Oct 24, 2003, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/bosnian-leader-championed-religious-pluralism/docview/367804665/se-2?accountid=14166>.

The Diasporic Community and the Solidification of a Bosniak Identity

The relationship between the sevdalinka and the Bosniak community intensified during the civil wars as music was utilized by the various ethnic groups to further establish their respective communities and distinguish themselves from the ‘other’ they were fighting, and the Bosniaks were no exception to this practice. It was in the aftermath of this extremely violent and intense time that the true solidification of a Bosniak identity and the sevdalinka’s role as an integral part of that identity came into being both within the minds of Bosniaks themselves and those of their former Yugoslav ‘brothers.’ The association of the sevdalinka and the Bosniaks with Islam during the war had inextricably linked these concepts together, with the sevdalinka being interpreted by some as a Muslim patriotic song, showcasing just how connected the music was to the ethnic group.⁵⁴ With such perceptions of the genre floating around it is no wonder why the diasporic communities which came into existence as a result of the conflict came to fully embrace the sevdalinka as their own.

Having been displaced from their homeland and as such feeling detached from their community, their history and their culture, the Bosniaks turned to the sevdalinka as a means of establishing a connection among themselves. Music had the ability to transcend borders making it easily accessible to most community members regardless of their location. This quality allowed music to be an effective tool in restrengthening a Bosniak identity that had been attacked severely during the civil wars. An even greater quality of music was its ability to establish a deep emotional connection among Bosniaks, a quality that the sevdalinka specifically was well

⁵⁴ Vesna Ivkov, “Sevdalinka as Perceived by Music Performers in Belgrade,” *Musicological Annual*, no. 1 (2018): 89–106, <https://doi.org/10.4312/mz.54.1.89-106>.

understood to possess, allowing it to transmit a profound sense of nostalgia among those in the diaspora, reconnecting them to the idealized history, culture, and life.

Heather Laurel Peters dived deeply into the topic of nostalgia within the diasporic Bosniak communities in Canada when writing her graduate thesis. Her research included interviews with actual members of the Bosniak diaspora community and the description of the sevdalinka's power to convey certain emotions, themes, and memories provided by Omer Pobrić demonstrates just how strong a force the music was in connecting the community. Pobrić states:

We in Bosnia are [extremely] tied to our country... If we have to move, leave our ambience (for example, can no longer eat stuffed peppers), we are very unhappy...we prefer our own poverty to the fortune of a foreign place... Sevdalinka always depicts every segment of life, and that man in Hamilton, when he hears that song, pictures Bosnia, for in that song, much is depicted.⁵⁵

The profound effect of the sevdalinka to tap into the emotions and resonate with individuals is thus clear, and we can start to see how it acts as a bridge between the homeland and those dispersed outside it. The ideas attached to this homeland, to Bosnia, and as such to the sevdalinka, is then where we can see the identity being transmitted. Another one of Peters' interviewees, Dušenka Brujić, begins to hint at this identity as she plays a sevdalinka for Peters, explaining:

Sevdalinka talks about a situation, in a location, or about love, or something historical.

There are special decorations [pointing to the display projected on the video] of Turkish

⁵⁵ Heather Laurel Peters, "Song of Sevdalinka: Cultural Anthem of Bosnia-Herzegovina," 161.

people... Muslim people like to adopt and maintain Turkish culture - you see so many songs have Turkish words...be quiet and see? [as the song begins]...He is talking from the heart, and that is it...[she begins translating the story].⁵⁶

Brujić's echos Pobrić's when speaking of the sevdalinka as something which stems from the heart, showcasing once more the emotional aspect of the music, but her comment regarding the reference and preservation of Turkish culture by Muslim people within the sevdalinka demonstrates the identity Bosniaks were promoting.

It is the identity which they and the Yugoslav society of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s so actively and strongly built up. An identity that recognized and centered around their Ottoman heritage and their Islamic faith, and which visibly still did so as Brujić's explanation suggests. However, the ease and nonchalant manner which Brujić speaks with when discussing the presence of Ottoman influence in the sevdalinka is a slight, but significant indicator of the progress made in the development of Bosniak identity since the mid-twentieth century. While many members of the Bosniak community like the greatly renowned sevdalinka singer Himzo Polovina were proud to boast of the long and direct relationship between the Ottomans, Islam, and the Bosniaks, other members of the community like.

Major strides had been made in the decades prior to the outbreak of war in the development of the Bosniak identity, but there was a certain lack of pride one might say, among the whole Bosniak community in fully embracing the Ottoman heritage and Islamic faith. There was a hesitation, a slight unspoken fear among the community that prevented them from

⁵⁶ Heather Laurel Peters, "Song of Sevdalinka: Cultural Anthem of Bosnia-Herzegovina," 163.

solidifying their identity as Bosniaks. The political, social, and cultural effects of asserting an identity that so clearly distinguished them from the rest of their society must have been daunting to think of. The *sevdalinka* had in a way allowed the Bosniaks to tiptoe around the action of fully asserting their identity by allowing an artistic and creative outlet through which they could express their faith, beliefs, and ideas, but do so in a way that still conformed to the societal structure in place within Yugoslavia. Bosniaks could and did establish a sense of their history and culture through the production, discussion, and consumption of the *sevdalinka*, but they could never truly do the same within the political sphere because they had less control of the narrative and image that would be promulgated. In other words, the freedom they enjoyed within cultural production of the *sevdalinka* did not transcend into world of politics.

So, what happened to spark the shift in Bosniak identity assertion as demonstrated by Brujić? The unimaginable. Mass sexual assault, ethnic cleansing, and genocide of the Bosniaks occurred as a result of their identity.⁵⁷ My mention of these atrocious attacks against the Bosniak community is not meant to portray them as the sole victims of the conflict that engulfed the regions of former Yugoslavia, nor is it meant to absolve Bosniaks of their own violent acts of discrimination and persecution against other ethnic groups. My mention of these crimes is to pinpoint the moment in which a shift occurred within the Bosniak community, the moment their worst fears in asserting their identity were realized.

These events are what inspire such deep nostalgic feelings for the Bosniaks when listening to *sevdalinke*. The Islamic and Ottoman identity and all which is encapsulated within that identity - the history, culture, and memories of a people – is expressed through the

⁵⁷ Cindy S. Snyder, Wesley J. Gabbard, J. Dean May, and Nihada Zulcic. “On the Battleground of Women’s Bodies: Mass Rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” *Affilia* 21, no. 2 (2006): 184–195.

sevdalinka. It allows Bosniaks to harken back to a time in their history when they felt prosperous and content, void of the pain and harsh experiences that now haunted them both in their homeland and in the new diasporic communities they formed. Peters writes that “It became easier to identify with the past when living far from that which has compromised one’s whole personal history and identity.”⁵⁸ Bosniak identity was thus reinvigorated and solidified as a result of the diasporic communities that turned to the sevdalinka as a source of happy, joyous memories, even if idealized ones, and as a means of therapeutic release that allowed Bosniaks to process emotions of sadness, grief, and loss that were contained within its melodies and lyrics.

This action by the diasporic community is another one of those internal processes undertaken by the Bosniaks to establish their identity, and to now maintain it. In the decades prior to the war, Bosniaks were focused on establishing and asserting politically and socially their identity within Yugoslav society. Following the war, with the realization that the chances of Yugoslavia reemerging were almost nonexistent and the community they had spent decades building was now devastated physically, emotionally, and mentally, the Bosniaks turned to the sevdalinka once more to reunite and rebuild themselves. Again, they linked their cultural and historical roots within the music with perhaps even more fervor and confidence than before.

The sevdalika’s ability to link individual community members with a collective history and culture became a critical component of its effectiveness in sustaining Bosniak identity outside the geographical borders of Bosnia and Hercegovina. Peters writes that “Age and life experience are significant variables influencing the degree and type of nostalgic experience, but since sevdalinka is a traditional form of music and based on true stories from a collective past,

⁵⁸ Heather Laurel Peters, “Song of Sevdalinka: Cultural Anthem of Bosnia-Herzegovina,” 161.

the participant can often identify with the songs in the present and be transported into a past whether he or she has actually lived through similar experiences or not.”⁵⁹ The war had affected all generations of people within the Bosniak community, leaving them all with similar experiences of pain, sorrow, and longing, feelings and emotions that were encapsulated within the very essence of the sevdalinka from its conception. The sevdalinka thus provided the perfect means to treat the fresh scars and wounds left among the Bosniak community by acting as a means of connection among those left within a broken homeland and those now scattered outside it. Feelings of disorientation and confusion were soothed over with a listen of Safet Isović “Bosno Moja” or Himzo Polovina’s “Emina,” as they reminded individuals of their shared strength, beliefs, and identity. They were not just victims, they were Bosniaks. They were not just displaced persons, they were Bosniaks.

⁵⁹ Heather Laurel Peters, “Song of Sevdalinka: Cultural Anthem of Bosnia-Herzegovina,” 164.

Conclusion

The sevdalinka played a crucial role within the identity formation process of the Bosniaks. Starting from the mid-twentieth century, sevdalinka musicians became increasingly important actors in the development of Bosniak identity. These musicians were aided in their efforts by contemporary scholars whose scholarship provide academic support to their attachment of the sevdalinka to the Bosniak community. The common Ottoman heritage shared by the sevdalinka and the Bosniaks formed the foundation of their relationship, a connection both the Bosniaks and the forces around them used to create an identity that both empowered the community but also limited their influence and development.

Through the efforts of Bosniak artists and scholars, the community was able to overhaul the genre of sevdalinka and employ it in their efforts at identity formation. Artists like Himzo Polovina expounded and reinforced the significance of the sevdalinka within the Bosniak community time and time again by speaking of the genres power in retaining their Islamic culture and historically tethering them to the land of Bosnia and Hercegovina. The work of ethnomusicologists allowed for the legitimization of the sevdalinka as an integral component of Bosniak culture and identity. Scholarship published by ethnomusicologists Vlado Milošević, Barbara Krader, and Ankica Petrović, all defined the sevdalinka within the terms of Bosniak cultural heritage, cementing the sevdalinka's place within the community.

By looking more closely at the relationship between the sevdalinka and the Bosniaks, by analyzing the relationship as something which was actively pursued by the community rather than having always existed, we gain great insight in understanding the history and progression of Bosniak identity. Scholarship on the sevdalinka has noted the importance of the sevdalinka

within Bosniak identity, but it has failed to recognize that this relationship was revitalized and utilized successfully during the 1960s by musicians and scholars. Bosniaks were not merely passive bystanders, they were active participants in the process of association between themselves and the sevdalinka and the employment of the music in the development of their identity in post-WWII Yugoslavia. Though not the intention of the scholars that have delved into this topic before I did, in overlooking the efforts undertaken by musicians and scholars to establish a connection between the Bosniaks and the sevdalinka, they undermine the hard work and power of a people who have long been perceived as the underdogs of the Yugoslav region. The Bosniaks wanted to build and assert an identity for much the same reason as any of us do: to be seen, to be heard, and to be recognized. The sevdalinka forged a strong bond among the Bosniak community that will continue to connect them for generations to come, but the music has also given them the power to fully establish themselves and their place within not only their nation but within the world.

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