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Balkan Barbarians Against European Civilization

Abstract: The article examines the concept of Balkan barbarism as articulated by Yugoslav and Bulgarian avant-garde movements in the 1920s. Through the works of Ljubomir Micić, Branko Ve Poljanski, Geo Milev, Lamar, and other artists, the avant-garde sought to redefine the Balkans' position within European cultural and political hierarchies. Drawing on Nietzschean philosophy, Expressionism, and Constructivism, these artists rejected Western cultural imperialism and bourgeois decadence, embracing instead a vision of creative barbarism rooted in humanism, pacifism, internationalism, and radical artistic renewal. Central to this vision was the figure of the Barbarogenius – Micić's archetype of the Balkan artist-revolutionary who would overturn Europe's cultural stagnation and inaugurate a new era of artistic and social transformation. The study explores how *Zenit* and Bulgarian avant-garde journals such as *Vezni*, *Plamāk*, and *NOVIS* reimagined the barbarian as both a destructive and regenerative force, responding to the traumas of World War I, the rise of authoritarian regimes, and the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. By positioning barbarism as a counter-hegemonic discourse, the Balkan avant-garde offered an alternative cultural paradigm – one that remains relevant in discussions of periphery, identity, and artistic resistance today.

Keywords: avant-garde, barbarians, the Balkans, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria

Let us destroy civilization through new art!

Ivan Goll
“Manifest zenitizma”

1. Introduction: From Stigma to Strategy

In the 1920s, at the heart of the Balkan Peninsula's aesthetic battle for cultural autonomy, a provocative concept was created: cultural barbarism as a synonym for creative freedom. Through artistic practices that subverted the Western label of primitiveness and reappropriated the term, barbarism became a badge of honor for Balkan poets and artists – a powerful declaration of independence from Europe's cultural hegemony. This defiant self-identification as cultural barbarians resonated not only in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes but also in Bulgaria, forming a unifying outcry across the Balkans. By embracing the term, the artists from these countries sought to reinterpret and redefine their cultural identities, denouncing Eurocentric norms, and asserting their freedom to shape their own artistic paths. This process involved both aligning local artistic expression with European movements and cultivating a distinct Balkan culture that resisted Western influence, balancing integration with a quest for cultural independence. This duality in the search for cultural identity among Balkan avant-garde artists is described by Irina Subotić, who speaks of the “dual impulse” behind these efforts: “[...] to contribute to the mainstream of world civilization as a full partner without relinquishing the nation's distinctive individuality, history, and culture” (Subotić 1990: 21). The endeavors of Balkan avant-garde artists often reflected a concern that adopting European influences could lead to the subjugation of native culture within its own confines (ibid.). The concept of barbarism emerged in this context as a deliberate act of defiance, an assertion of a raw, vital, untamed creative force that stood in opposition to Western aesthetic and ideological hegemony.

The present article builds on ongoing scholarly discussions of Balkan primitivism, the Barbarogenius, and the cultural tensions between Europe and its imagined periphery, which have been examined from various perspectives in recent scholarship, particularly in the work of Iva Glišić, Tijana Vujošević (Glišić/Vujošević 2016, 2021 and 2015), Dijana Metlić (Metlić 2021) and Vesna Kruljac (Kruljac 2013). These themes have been a focus of scholarly inquiry for decades, with important new perspectives emerging in the context of the 2021 centenary of the *Zenit* magazine, which inspired a wave of academic interest and yielded significant contributions, especially those included in the collection *Sto godina časopisa Zenit 1921–1926–2021*, edited by Irina Subotić and Bojan Jović (2021).

The Yugoslav and Bulgarian avant-gardes of the 1920s, particularly the movements surrounding the magazines *Zenit*, *Vezni (Libra)* and *Plamāk (Flame)*, articulated a distinctive form of perceptual (or unconscious) primitivism – a radically intuitive and anti-academic mode of creation, grounded in lived historical experience and geopolitical marginality. Unlike the stylistic primitivism of Western artists like Gauguin or Picasso, who approached non-Western forms to refresh exhausted artistic vocabularies while retaining the position of privilege, the artists from the Balkans inhabited primitivism as a condition of being (Glišić/Vujošević 2016: 731). This study examines how Ljubomir Micić, Branko Ve Poljanski, Geo Milev, Lamar and others mobilized primitivism as both aesthetic and political resistance to European decadence, subverting the stereotypes of cultural “backwardness” of the Balkans. While Zenitism has been extensively analyzed in the context of primitivist poetics by the aforementioned authors, this article examines the shared primitivist logic in the Bulgarian avant-garde, particularly shaped as expressionist revolt, Neo-Primitivism, and the anti-imperial ethos identified by scholars such as Rhodes (1994) and Todorova (2009).

The Bulgarian and Yugoslav avant-gardes, while united by their embrace of cultural barbarism as a form of creative autonomy, exhibited some variation in their approaches to this concept. In Yugoslavia, the Zenitist movement under Ljubomir Micić framed barbarism as a cultural force capable of “Balkanizing” Europe, promoting a radical anti-European stance through the figure of Barbarogenius the Decivilizer. Micić’s barbarian was not only a destroyer of bourgeois culture but also a creator of a new civilization, advocating for a spiritual and artistic revolution. In contrast, the Bulgarian avant-garde expressed cultural barbarism through a blend of Expressionism and local revolutionary fervor. Milev’s journal *Plamāk* echoed Zenitist ideals but maintained a stronger focus on the Bulgarian sociopolitical context, particularly the aftermath of the September Uprising of 1923¹. Both Zenitism and the Bulgarian avant-garde engaged directly with social realities, using barbarism as a tool of political critique against both Western imperialism and the emerging authoritarian movements in the region.

1 The September Uprising is an armed insurrection against the government, led by the Bulgarian Communist Party and leftist agrarians, which was violently suppressed, resulting in mass executions and political repression.

As a methodological lens, this article draws on Walter Benjamin's theses on historical materialism, particularly his conception of cultural heritage as both an aesthetic construct and a product of violence. Benjamin's insight that every document of culture is simultaneously a document of barbarism serves as a framework for reassessing the Balkan avant-garde not as a derivative of European modernism, but as a subversive counter-narrative. The concept of the barbarian in this paper aligns with Benjamin's vision of the historical materialist who rejects the myth of civilizational progress (Benjamin 2006a: 389–400).

2. *Zenit* and *Plamák* as Resistance in Print

At the beginning of 1921 in Zagreb, the Yugoslav poet Ljubomir Micić launched the *Zenit* magazine, an international review focusing on art and culture. The magazine became the programmatic and aesthetic platform of the Zenitist movement, encompassing all branches of art and presenting relevant works and trends within international avant-garde culture. The contributors to *Zenit* included artists from the Balkans, Europe, Asia, South and North America, and the idea to publish poems from all countries in their original form (Golubović/Subotić 2008: 17), along with the idea that “there are no boundaries for man and art”² (Micić 1921a: 2), further emphasized the radical internationalist orientation of this artistic magazine and movement.

Due to the scandal caused by Micić's text “Papagaj i monopol ‘hrvatska kultura’” (“Parrot and the Monopoly of ‘Croatian Culture’”) in issue 24 in 1923, which was a reaction to Stjepan Radić's statement “we want to remain Europeans – even if it means sitting in the last row of European civilization”³, *Zenit* was relocated to Belgrade, where it continued to be published from February 1924 until December 1926. That year, the 43rd and final issue was banned by the authorities because of the publication of the article “Zenitizam kroz prizmu marksizma” (“Zenitism Through the Prism of Marxism”), which celebrated the October Revolution and hinted at the possibility that the cultural “revolution of the spirit”, which Zenitism had carried out artistically, could become a precursor to a future social revolution in the Balkans (Rasinov 1926).

2 “Za umetnost i čoveka nema granica.” Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are mine, O. S.

3 “Hoćemo da ostanemo Evropejci, makar i u poslednjoj klupi evropske civilizacije”.

The Zenitists' and the Bulgarian avant-garde artists' position of layered marginalization not only shaped their critical stance toward the West but also empowered their vision of an emancipatory, barbaric culture rooted in the periphery. Their respective cultural mainstreams emphasized the importance of assimilation and synchronization with Western European norms and rejected the idea of a barbaric cultural revolution in the Balkans. In Yugoslavia, as in Bulgaria, artists who refused to "parrot" European models were often targeted, dismissed or ridiculed. Micić, for instance, was triply excluded: as a Serb in Croatia, as a non-native Serb in Serbia, and as a Balkanite in Europe (Glišić/Vujošević 2016, 2025). Similarly, in the Bulgarian periodicals, avant-garde artists like Geo Milev, Lamar and the Yambol circle were threatened, denigrated, and mocked – as in Lyudmil Stoyanov's hostile article "Zenitizam i zenitisti" ("Zenitism and the Zenitists"), published in 1924 in *Hiperion* magazine.

During *Zenit* magazine's relocation to Belgrade, the Bulgarian poet Geo Milev launched his second literary magazine, *Plamäk*, following the closure of his first journal, *Vezni*. Revolutionary ideas shaped the rebellious attitudes in *Zenit*, *Vezni*, and *Plamäk*, all of which had a leftist orientation and challenged bourgeois culture⁴. They critiqued not only the European civilization but also the injustice in their own countries, as seen in poems, manifestos, and articles that exposed the ties between church and state, criticized oppressive laws, as well as the police for serving the ruling classes rather than the people. Geo Milev's article "Policeiska kritika" ("Police Critique") is later referenced by Micić in *Zenit* to highlight the extent of censorship and brutality in Bulgaria. In the article, Milev points out:

Забранено е –
 да се говори
 да се мисли
 да се пише
 да се чете
 а най-сетне и
 да се живее.
 (Milev 1924b: 235)

4 On the broader context of Bulgarian avant-garde and its intersections with Zenitism, see also Saveska 2021.

It is forbidden –
 to speak
 to think
 to write
 to read
 and, above all,
 to live.

The artists' uncompromising critique was not without consequence, which was tragically confirmed in the context of the Balkan avant-garde. Milev's magazine *Plamāk*, like *Zenit*, faced severe repression – its final 11th issue was censored and confiscated by A. Tsankov's fascist regime, which later sentenced Milev to death. He was brutally tortured and murdered, his body discarded in a mass grave after publishing the poems "Ad" ("Hell") and "Septemvri" ("September"), which became solemn monuments to the suffering of the Bulgarian people and the atrocities committed during the September Uprising of 1923. In the 36th issue of *Zenit*, the Zenitist poets published fragments of the poem "Septemvri" in the Bulgarian language and mourned the death of their comrade, protesting "before the grimly smiling face of adorned Europe, who watches this act of cannibalism with indifference, arms crossed"⁵ (Micić 1925). In 1926, Micić only narrowly managed to escape a fate similar to Milev's by emigrating to France.

3. Defying Europe: Barbarism as a Counter-Narrative

In the manifestos, artistic texts, and articles of the Balkan avant-garde artists, Europe is frequently depicted as a "predator", a "squealing old hyena", whose culture is "executioner-like" and "anemic", whose civilization is "stolen" and "cannibalistic", and whose wars have forcibly stolen the youth and psyche of an entire generation. Rather than merely describing reality, the avant-garde artists sought to change it, adapting to a new world where there was no longer any place for the old culture and art (Benjamin 2005: 733). This adaptation meant "beginning anew and with few resources"; it meant relying on "men

5 "[...] pred mrkim nasmešenim licem našminkane Evrope, koja ravnodušno gleda ovo ljudožderstvo, skrštenih ruku".

who have adopted the cause of the absolutely new and have founded it on insight and renunciation” (ibid.: 735), as well as on the desire to erase the boundaries between life and art.

In Bulgaria, Geo Milev was one of those men, with contemporaries reporting that he had intended to create a “school of barbarism in art”⁶ (Krästev 1988: 86). This concept was explicitly articulated in Milev’s manifesto “Poeziyata na mladite” (“The Poetry of the Youth”) in second issue of *Plamäk* magazine. Pointing to Nikolay Marangozov’s “Nula, Huliganski elegii” (“Zero, Hooligan Elegies”) as an example of barbaric creativity, Milev asserts that “Bulgarian poetry needs barbarization. It needs raw juices, infused with primordial life – to breathe life into it”⁷ (Milev 1924a: 70). He and his associates envisioned a radical renewal of poetry: “We want to see barbarians, hooligans, Pechenegs – with flames in their eyes and iron teeth. Barbarians, a new race – to bring new blood into Bulgarian poetry”⁸ (ibid.).

The Bulgarian avant-garde was significantly influenced by the poetics of Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism, and Constructivism, adopting an eclectic approach towards their esthetic tendencies. In Yugoslavia, Zenitism, as a syncretic artistic movement, also incorporated elements of Expressionist poetics – hence their ideological impulse for a “revolution of the spirit” – as well as some tendencies of Futurism and Constructivism. Similarly to the Bulgarian avant-garde, Zenitism was based on the principles of humanism, pacifism, and internationalism, aiming to create an international brotherhood of artists: “We are comrades of all barbaric poets on all continents”⁹ (Micić 1926a). Declaring the death of pre-war avant-garde movements, “Manifest zenitizma” (“The Manifesto of Zenitism”) proclaimed that Zenitism was their synthesis, surpassing them and continuing the vertical trajectory of cultural and artistic progress (Micić/Gol/Tokin 1921: 7).

The humanist and pacifist slogans of Balkan artists were driven by the horrors of war and its devastating consequences: “Man – that is our first word.

6 “[...] школа на варваризма в изкуството [...]”.

7 “Българската поезия има нужда от оварваряване. От сурови сокове, в които има първобитен живот – за да й дадат живот”.

8 “Ний желаем да видим днес варвари, хулигани, печенеги – с пламък в очите и железни зъби. Варвари, нова раса – която да влее нова кръв на българската поезия”.

9 “Mi smo drugovi varvarskih pesnika na svim kontinentima”.

Our first commandment: In the name of man – thou shalt not kill!”¹⁰ This was proclaimed in the programmatic article “Čovek i umetnost” (“Man and Art”) in the first issue of *Zenit*. It declared that the artist’s struggle would be “a struggle against crime – for Man” (Micić 1921a: 1–2). The crime they spoke of was, of course, the First World War; as they issued passionate calls to humanity to end all wars and sought to ensure that the senseless deaths of millions, as well as the shattered lives of countless disabled war veterans and their families – who perished in poverty – would never be forgotten.

Glišić and Vujošević have insightfully situated Micić’s wartime experience within a broader historical pattern of Balkan subjugation and instrumentalization. As a recruit of the Austro-Hungarian army in 1915, Micić was deployed to Galicia to fight against Slavic populations – an experience that resonated with the long-standing role of his ancestors who had, for generations, defended Europe’s borders from the Ottoman incursions. This recurring positioning of Balkan peoples as expendable guardians of European civilization profoundly shaped Micić’s political and aesthetic outlook. As Glišić and Vujošević note, he became acutely aware of the “fate of barbarians as cannon fodder”, condemning the ways in which Europe is “always fighting for some imaginary ‘salvation of civilization’ and for the ‘good’ of some imaginary ‘humankind’”, while routinely casting Balkan populations in the role of *sirovina* – a word denoting “raw material”, but which also carries the derogatory connotation of primitiveness (Glišić/Vujošević 2025: 233–234). This dual meaning encapsulates the dehumanizing logic at the heart of Europe’s civilizational rhetoric and lays the groundwork for Micić’s celebration of barbarism as a form of resistance.

These sentiments were reflected by the circle of artists surrounding Geo Milev, who himself was a permanently disfigured war veteran. In 1917, Milev was discovered among the corpses of fallen soldiers, his skull was crushed, he lost his right eye and one of his ribs. This literal fragmentation of the body became mirrored in the aesthetic fragmentation of his poetry and prose, where the physical and metaphysical violence of war was translated into a radical literary form. His profound disillusionment with civilization was expressed in a letter to the Bulgarian poet Nikolay Liliev, where he wrote:

10 “Čovek – to je naša prva reč. Naša je prva zapoved: U ime Čoveka – ne ubij!”

Онези големи идеалисти, които бягат от реалността и искат да държат душата си постоянно пияна, да убият смисъла, съзнанието – нека дойдат тук: пълнейшо убийство на съзнанието [...] по най-прост и груб физически начин, тъй както беше с мене – шест дена без съзнание! Никакви изкуствени раеве – просто естествени адове...
(Milev 2007: 125)

Those great idealists who flee from reality and want to keep their soul constantly intoxicated, to kill meaning and consciousness – let them come here: here is the complete annihilation of consciousness [...] in the simplest and crudest physical way, just as it happened to me – six days without consciousness! No artificial paradises – only natural hells...

Milev's experience of war is depicted through the metaphorical representation of battle in his prose poem "Pri Doiranskoto ezero" ("By Lake Doiran") and in the grotesque, fragmented image of a human being as an "immobile human ball", whose "sleeves hang empty: without arms", whose "trousers are short sacks: without legs", whose head is "without eyes, without a nose, without ears", and to whom the doctor applies with a red marker "ears on the temples, eyebrows on the lips, legs on the head"¹¹ (Milev 2006: 190). The grotesque image of the human in Milev's prose poem "Invalidi" ("Invalids") closely resembles the figures that Otto Dix and George Grosz painted at the time.

This generation of artists, emerging in the aftermath of the war, sought to create a more humane culture after experiencing a total rupture with the past. They attempted to artistically and philosophically make sense of this experience, much in the way Walter Benjamin described in his essay "Experience and Poverty": "Experience has fallen in value, amid a generation which from 1914 to 1918 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world" (Benjamin 2005: 731). Since people's experience of life had changed irreversibly, Benjamin writes that they "returned from the front in silence", "poorer in communicable experience" (ibid.: 732). This is why the artists of this generation no longer sought value in past experience – their

¹¹ "[...] неподвижна човешка топка [...] Ръкавите висят кухи: без ръце. Панталоните са къси торбички: без крака. [...] глава без очи, без нос и уши. [...] бързо нанася с червен молив пръсти върху ушите, вежди върху устните, крака върху главата".

experience of war was incommunicable, and the psychological rupture was absolute, as Geo Milev describes in his prose poem “Pri Doiranskoto ezero”:

Ти чувствуваш, че си сам, че си откъснат, че не можеш и не трябва да си спомняш нищо; нито старите твои мисли, нито някогашните усмивки на отдалечени жени, нито книгите, които си чел...

(Milev 2006: 153)

You feel that you are alone, that you are cut off, that you can neither remember nor should remember anything; neither your old thoughts, nor the former smiles of distant women, nor the books you have read...

This passage intensifies the sense of radical interior emptiness – a deliberate break with memory, culture, intimacy, and even personal identity. It evokes the kind of existential disorientation that Benjamin describes in “Experience and Poverty” as the modern subject’s weariness with inherited culture and meaning. The individual is no longer enriched by experience, but alienated from it, even compelled to renounce it. The aesthetics of the Balkan avant-garde emerges from this void, not in search of transcendence, but as a confrontation with a world that no longer permits redemption.

Milev’s artistic response to the war fully aligns with Benjamin’s notion of poverty of experience:

This should not be understood to mean that people are yearning for new experience. No, they long to free themselves from experience; they long for a world in which they can make such pure and decided use of their poverty – their outer poverty, and ultimately also their inner poverty – that it will lead to something respectable. [...] They have ‘devoured’ everything, both ‘culture and people’, and they have had such a surfeit that it has exhausted them.

(Benjamin 2005: 734)

The idea that modern individuals no longer sought to accumulate experience but to be rid of it resonates profoundly with Milev’s rejection of idealist escapism and his embrace of what he called “natural hells”. His postwar writing, with its visceral depiction of bodily and metaphysical ruin, does not seek to reconstruct a lost order, but to testify to its collapse. His refusal of symbolic

consolation and his aesthetic of direct, disjointed confrontation with violence exemplify a politicized art that resists the beautification of catastrophe. In this sense, Milev's poetics become a site where experience is not merely represented, but disassembled, exposing the cultural and moral bankruptcy of civilization that had claimed to defend humanity.

"Manifest zenitizma" further emphasizes this condition: "In our souls, brothers, black flags flutter, for everywhere man is dying"¹² (Micić/Goll/Tokin 1921: 4–5). Just as art could no longer convey an authentic sense of the world through traditional means, so too the artist no longer could affirm European culture in their work, as it had become meaningless and incoherent in the postwar context – stripped of authentic human experience.

Like Benjamin, the avant-garde artists from the Balkans arrived at the same realization: "What is the value of all our culture if it is divorced from experience?" (Benjamin 2005: 732). Their works frequently exposed the hypocrisy of European culture: on the one hand, it proclaimed slogans of *liberté, fraternité, égalité*, while on the other, its reality was war, hunger, brutal assassinations, and censorship. What was once considered valuable no longer corresponded to the experience of life of the postwar individual, who now needed a fresh start. This is why avant-garde artists – especially in the Balkan context – embraced the notion of a "new kind of barbarism" – a "positive concept of barbarism", and were compelled to "start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further" (ibid.: 732). Benjamin wrote that "among the great creative spirits, there have always been the inexorable ones who begin by clearing a *tabula rasa*" (ibid.: 733). The avant-garde artists saw their role in precisely this way: they sought to establish a *tabula rasa* in order to construct a new, more humane culture and art, by destroying the old one first. According to Benjamin, these artists required "a drawing table" as "they were constructors" (Benjamin 2005: 733).

This idea was reflected in many literary texts throughout the Balkans. In "Manifest zenitizma", Ivan Goll called for: "Let us destroy civilization through new art!"¹³ (Micić/Goll/Tokin 1921: 11). Branko Ve Poljanski captured this dialectic of creation and destruction in his "super-fantastic, high-speed love novel" *77 samoubica* (*77 Suicides*): "I created in order to destroy. I destroyed in

12 "U dušama našim braćo vijore zastave crne / jer / svuda umire Čovek".

13 "Uništimo civilizaciju pomoću nove umetnosti".

order to create”¹⁴ (Poljanski 1923: 19). Similarly, in the Ljubljana-based magazine *Tank*, edited by Ferdo Delak, the opening page of the first issue featured a quote from the Hungarian artist Lajos Kassák: “Here you have the heroes of destruction, and here you have the fanatics of construction”¹⁵. These artists demonstrated, in Benjamin’s words, “a total absence of illusion about the age and at the same time unlimited commitment to it” (Benjamin 2005: 733).

As Iva Glišić and Tijana Vujošević point out, Balkan culture was free from the colonial, imperial, and intellectual legacies that had shaped the brutality of First World War. Rather than longing for traditions they lacked – and did not need – Balkanites were encouraged to embrace “the absence of any real proprietary culture, and celebrate the polyphonic and fragmentary profile of the region” (Glišić/Vujošević 2021: 33). To belong to the Balkans was to possess the rare opportunity to begin from a true *tabula rasa* in Benjaminian terms. The idea to infuse Europe with the bold, rebellious energy coming from the Balkans thus presupposed a potential for genuine cultural transformation of Europe – a type of a radical new beginning that was unavailable to the Western avant-gardes. In this context, the Zenitists reframed the Balkans not as a periphery to be civilized, but as the center of a counter-civilizational project – one that would Balkanize Europe and subvert its hegemonic narratives (ibid.).

In the Bulgarian avant-garde, the idea of a new beginning was envisioned primarily as a return to simplicity – “that one should suddenly feel oneself to be simple” (Krāstev 1922: 5–7). This return to simplicity reflects an affinity for the “primitive” and presupposes a fundamentally different way of seeing and experiencing the world. In the context of widespread disillusionment following the Balkan Wars and World War I, Bulgarian artists emphasized that life must still be lived, even if all meaning has been lost, and only the fact of living itself remains (ibid.). Their role as cultural barbarians is often defined indirectly (they do not always use the word “barbarian” explicitly when formulating their poetics), but in their acceptance of pervasive meaninglessness, they exemplify Walter Benjamin’s concept of the constructive barbarian and his interpretation of the postwar condition. In his manifesto “Neblagodarnost” (“Ingratitude”), Kiril Krāstev articulates the Dionysian poetics of the Yam-bol circle of artists, where he was a leading figure: “Tragedy has given birth

14 “Stvarao sam da uništım. Uništavao sam da stvorım.”

15 “Da habt ihr die Helden der Vernichtung, und da habt ihr die Fanatiker des Aufbaues.”

to laughter. To laugh means to forget everything and begin again; to invent something new – simple in its novelty, and perfect in its simplicity” (Krăstev 1922: 5–7). These ideas are in line with Benjamin’s idea that humankind has become impoverished after having surrendered “one portion of the human heritage after the other”, but that “in its buildings, pictures, and stories, mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be” (Benjamin 2005: 735). Benjamin insists that “the main thing is that it does so with a laugh”, and welcomes the fact that “this laughter may occasionally sound barbaric”. The philosopher concludes with the hope that “from time to time the individual will give a little humanity to the masses” (ibid.), a gesture that could be understood as the principal aim of the Balkan avant-garde.

4. Reversing the Civilizational Hierarchy

The Balkan artists’ shared project, that has been described as “the struggle for humanity through art”¹⁶ (Micić 1921a: 1–2), strongly conveyed hostile sentiments toward European civilization. In the “Manifest varvarima duha i misli na svim kontinentima” (“Manifesto to the Barbarians of Spirit and Thought on All Continents”), the Zenitists proclaimed: “Down with Europe – down with wars”¹⁷. Opposing the deceitful and contradictory heritage of European culture, they upheld the values of the “ancient cradle of culture” – the Balkans – exclaiming: “Anti-culture, Anti-Europe!”¹⁸ (Micić 1926a). It is in this context that Micić’s brother Branko Ve Poljanski announces that “Zenitism is driving Europe out of the Balkan peninsula” in his collection of poems *Panika pod suncem* (“Panic underneath the Sun”) (Poljanski 2024: 15), which is popularized in Bulgaria through the recurring rubric “Knigopis” in Geo Milev’s magazine *Plamäk*, alongside *Zenit* magazine and Micić’s publication *Proletkult* by A. Lunacharsky. That same issue of *Plamäk* (7–8) offers a Bulgarian translation of Micić’s foreword titled “Lunacharski i proletkulta” reflecting the enthusiasm for the results of the October Revolution and the growing interest in “the cultural creativity of the Russian brothers, destined by history to be

16 “[...] borba za čovečnost kroz umetnost [...]”

17 “[...] dole Evropa – dole ratovi [...]”

18 “Mi sa Balkana urličemo iz prastare kolvke kutlure. Mi sa Balkana urličemo: antikultura!... antievropa!...”

the forerunners of a new spirit on Earth, of a new love among humankind”¹⁹ (Micić 1924a: 242–243).

Milev’s and Micić’s exchange of texts and ideas testifies to a shared ideological horizon, grounded in a belief in humanism and cultural renewal through revolutionary art. In the foreword, Micić is calling for a stronger cultural affirmation of the South Slavs and the mobilization of creative forces in the face of historical marginalization and civilizational delay (Golubović/Subotić 2008: 192). He celebrates the idea of collective participation in cultural creation, where art would cease being the plaything of individuals and become a common good. This concept resonates with Walter Benjamin’s theory of the aura of the artwork and his belief in aesthetic politics which are rooted in collective engagement and social transformation.

Milev promoted Russian culture in both his magazines by publishing and interpreting the works of Russian artists like Kandinsky and Goncharova, alongside Mayakovsky’s and Blok’s revolutionary poetry. His critique directly challenged the anti-Soviet propaganda prevailing in Bulgaria by presenting Russian literature, theatre, and music as vital and innovative. While both Milev’s and Micić’s magazines shared this ideological enthusiasm, *Zenit* stood out due to its closer and more direct contacts with Russian avant-garde artists. In 1922, with El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg as co-editors, Micić published the double issue 17–18 of *Zenit*, known as “*Ruska sveska*” (“The Russian Notebook”), which featured poetry by Mayakovsky, Esenin, and Khlebnikov, theoretical writings by Malevich and Tairov, as well as reproductions of works by Lissitzky, Rodchenko, and Tatlin, including Tatlin’s famous design for the Monument to the Third International. Through these transnational artistic connections, *Zenit* positioned itself as a key Balkan platform for avant-garde exchange and contributed to disseminating Russian revolutionary culture across the region.

The rhetoric of collective creation, futurity, and Slavic cultural revolution forms a powerful Eastern counterpart to Western decadence – a theme deeply embedded in *Zenit* and further developed in the Bulgarian context through *Plamăk* and *NOVIS* magazines. Through their emphasis on shared cultural creation, revolutionary purpose, and Slavic solidarity, these artists enact what

19 „[...] културното творчество на руските братя, предопределени от историята да бъдат предтечи на нов порядък в света, на нова любов между хората“.

Walter Benjamin saw as a revolutionary counter-response to fascist aesthetics: the politicization of art. They reclaim aesthetics as a space for historical intervention and cultural reconstitution.

Within the framework of cultural barbarism, Balkan artists aimed to reverse the Europeanization of the Balkans in favor of the Balkanization of Europe (Golubović/Subotić 2008: 19). In line with Nietzsche's and Benjamin's interpretations of cultural barbarism, they believed that from ancient times to the present, "culture rests on the shoulders of barbarians"²⁰ (Micić 1926a). They identified as "rebel-poets, anti-cultural outlaws"²¹ fighting for freedom from cultural oppression and tyranny (ibid.). Thus, the Balkan avant-garde rejected the glorification of Western civilization, along with the rejection of the "traditional, solemn, noble image of man, festooned with all the sacrificial offerings of the past" (Benjamin 2006a: 391–392).

Their critique of European civilization aligns with Benjamin's argument that every cultural triumph carries a legacy of oppression: "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (ibid.). The radical manifestos of the Balkan avant-garde artists aimed to expose the barbarism embedded in European cultural artifacts. They were "brushing history against the grain" (ibid.: 392), by championing the voices of the oppressed. Their vision of renewal was not founded on the ideals of European modernity but on an anti-civilizational impulse that sought to dismantle the structures of inherited cultural power.

It is in this context that the avant-garde artists from the Balkans turned toward what Benjamin describes as "the naked man of the contemporary world who lies screaming like a newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present" (Benjamin 2005: 733). This figure, stripped of historical pretensions and false grandeur, emerges as the embodiment of an alternative modernity, in which the artists experienced themselves as "naked and pure". In "Manifest zenitizma", this figure is heralded in bold capital letters: "NAKED MAN BARBAROGENIUS"²². Micić's naked and pure Barbarogenius is not a passive product of history, but a force of radical becoming – a disruptive and untamed energy that seeks to overturn the establishment.

20 "Oduvek, samo na plećima varvara počiva stara i savremena kultura".

21 "[...] buntovnik-pesnik, antikulturni ajduk-komita [...]"

22 "GOLI ČOVEK BARBARO-GENIJ"

In contrast to the pure and unadorned Balkan barbarian, the European man is “clothed” in cynicism, hiding behind fig leaves and the mask of capitalist carnival, which the Zenitists aimed to strip away²³. In “Manifest zenitizma”, Ivan Goll declares that the true barbarian is, in fact, the Western man. He portrays Europeans as “born beasts, born criminal types, born militarists, nations grown great through war songs from Homer to Marinetti, and a civilization shaped by the Bible, grammars, and pragmatic books”²⁴ (Micić/Goll/Tokin 1921: 10).

Together, these views crystallize the Balkan avant-garde’s strategy of cultural inversion: by embracing the perceived barbarism of the Balkans as a source of creative authenticity, the artists exposed the West’s own latent savagery, masked by civilization and corrupted by capitalism, imperialism, militarism, and moral hypocrisy.

In his analysis of Friedrich Nietzsche’s revaluation of barbarism, Markus Winkler explores how barbarism “becomes an essential attribute of culture’s heroic past and as such may be vindicated as the force bringing about culture’s future renewal” (Winkler 2018: 279). Furthermore, in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche describes a constructive type of barbarian, one whose untamed spirit serves as the foundation of cultural rebirth: “It is the noble races that have left behind them the concept ‘barbarian’ wherever they have gone; even their highest culture betrays a consciousness of it and even a pride in it” (Nietzsche 1989: 41). This mythicized archetype closely parallels Micić’s vision: just as the Zenitist naked man, Barbarogenius, stands atop Šar Mountain, the Ural Mountains, and across the globe (Micić/Goll/Tokin 1921: 3), Nietzsche’s barbarian emerges from the heights as “a species of conquering and ruling natures in search of material to mold” (Nietzsche 1968: 478–479). Nietzsche claimed that Prometheus exemplifies this barbarian²⁵ – a defiant

23 “Ali mi ćemo vam razderati na licu maske kapitalističkog karnevala. Mi skidamo sa tela vaša cinička odela, skidamo smokvino lišće...”

24 “[...] rođene životnje, rođeni kriminalni tipovi, rođeni militaristi, narodi velikonaraasli usled ratnih pesama od Homera do Marinetija i civilizacije određene Biblijom, gramatikama i pragmatičkim knjigama”.

25 In *The Will to Power* Nietzsche wrote: “I point to something new: certainly for such a democratic type there exists the danger of the barbarian, but one has looked for it only in the depths. There exists also another type of barbarian, who comes from the heights: a species of conquering and ruling natures in search of material to mold. Prometheus was this kind of barbarian” (Nietzsche 1968: 478–479).

Dionysian figure who seizes fire from the gods “on account of his Titanic love for mankind” (Nietzsche 1999: 27), much as Micić’s Barbarogenius seeks to seize the course of history from the stagnation of Europe.

Historian Maria Todorova, who analyzes the reductionism and stereotyping of the Balkans in her seminal work *Imagining the Balkans*, observes that the Balkans have long been portrayed as the “other” of Europe, with its people stigmatized as those who refuse to “conform to the standards of behavior devised as normative by and for the civilized world” (Todorova 2009: 3). In this Eurocentric narrative, the idea of Balkanization became synonymous with a “reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian” (Todorova 2009: 3). Yet in the context of the cultural and artistic struggle between the East and the West during the historical avant-garde, the non-Western cultures were not considered inferior but held in high regard and were deemed synonymous with true authenticity. This is why Micić declared a Zenitist break from Europe in his article “Savremeno novo i slućeno slikarstvo” (“Contemporary and New Surmised Painting”), advocating for the Balkans to develop a “superior stance towards the former protégée, Madame Europe”²⁶ (Micić 1921c: 11).

A subsequent text, “Nova umetnost” (“New Art”), redefined the Eurocentric perception of the Balkans, long marginalized as the “other”, by asserting that Europe is “merely an extension of the Balkans”, which should be Balkanized by all means²⁷ (Micić 1924b). This idea appears in Micić’s poem “Aeroplan bez motora. Antievropska poema” (“Aeroplane Without an Engine. An anti-European poem”), published in 1922, and reprinted in *Zenit* 40: “Let the Balkans be in all places that you consider Europe”²⁸ (Micić 1926a). In response to Europe’s cultural oppression, Micić reversed the cultural hierarchy: Europe was now becoming the marginalized “other” that needed to accept corrective measures from the Balkans for its regressive cultural and civilizational standards. Branko Ve Poljanski echoed this sentiment, recognizing the transformative force of Balkanism in the face of European artistic stagnation: “Zenitism has entered Europe. Europe is amazed by Balkanism, which provides new and positive results”²⁹ (Poljanski 2024: 15). As Vesna Kruljac explains:

26 “[...] superiorni stav prema dosadašnjoj šticićenici Madame Evropi [...]”

27 “Evropa nije ništa drugo nego produženje Balkanskog poluostrva. Naša je istorijska, kulturna pa i politička misija da Balkanizujemo Evropu svim raspoloživim sredstvima.”

28 “Neka bude svuda Balkan što vi zovete Evropu [...]”

29 “Zenitizam je ušao u Evropu. Evropa se čudi Balkanizmu, koji pruža nove i pozitivne rezultate”.

The motivation behind launching the magazine was the idea that, following the traumatic experiences of the First World War, a new, authentic, and socially engaged art should be created and promoted on the margins of the Old Continent – one that would challenge the negative stereotypes about the cultural inferiority of the South Slavic peoples and establish a new, revolutionary cultural paradigm based on the unconscious primitivism and inherent barbarism of the people from the Balkans.³⁰

(Kruljac 2023: 25)

5. Dialectics of the Primitive and Primitivism as Lived Condition

Building on the dialectical framework identified by Dijana Metlič in her study which explores Zenitism in the context of the oppositions between Balkan and Europe, and the primitive and the civilized (Metlič 2021), a parallel structure emerges in the Bulgarian avant-garde. It, too, articulated a powerful dialectic between opposing cultural principles – what critics such as Botyo Savov and Nikolay Raynov conceptualized as the antinomies of East and West, Scythian and Slavic, Dionysian and Apollonian. These oppositions were not merely aesthetic categories but represented ontological and civilizational paradigms, deeply rooted in both mythic time and historical trauma.

In Savov's 1924 essay "Skitsko i slavyansko v bălgarskata literatura" ("Scythian and Slavic in Bulgarian Literature"), the Bulgarian poetic tradition is cast as a tension between two elemental forces: the wild, violent, chaotic Scythian impulse, identified as both barbaric and generative – and the contemplative, sorrowful, and sacrificial Slavic principle. "The Scythian element", Savov writes, "is the primordial element, the origin of all origins, the primitive intoxicated with its own power [...] anarchy is the freedom of the barbarian"³¹. In contrast, the Slavic element is "gentle. It is the sadness of something that

30 "Motiv za pokretanje časopisa bila je ideja da se posle traumatičnih iskustava Prvog svetskog rata na marginama Starog kontinenta kreira i afirmiše nova, autentična i društveno angažovana umetnost, koja će izmeniti negativne stereotipe o kulturnoj inferiornosti južnoslovenskih naroda i uspostaviti novu, revolucionarnu kulturološku paradigmu, zasnovanu na nesvesnom primitivizmu i izvornom varvarizmu ljudi sa Balkana".

31 "Тя е първобитната стихия, началото на началата, примитивът, който се опиянява от собствената си сила. Нейните първични, могъщи прояви са разрушението в злото, анархията на варварина".

has passed, the dream of something that never was”³² (Savov 2009: 190–191). These dual impulses mirror Nietzsche’s conception of the Dionysian and the Apollonian, which Savov explicitly references. For him, Scythian violence is not merely destructive, it is a form of creative chaos, an ecstatic rupture from cultural suppression, much like Nietzsche’s ideal of Dionysian intoxication as a force beyond good and evil.

Nikolay Raynov’s treatise “Iztochno i zapadno izkustvo” (“Eastern and Western Art”) complements this framework by articulating a civilizational dichotomy in artistic worldviews. Western art, he argues, is rational, anthropocentric, and linear, grounded in mimesis. Eastern art, by contrast, aspires toward mythic transcendence, collective symbolism, and ontological harmony with the cosmos (Raynov 2009b: 53–66). Rather than being “backward”, the East, for Raynov, embodies a different metaphysical foundation, one that is potentially closer to the ambitions of modernism and the avant-garde.

Together, these texts reframe Bulgarian avant-garde art as a site of productive tension, in which cultural barbarism and spiritual introspection coexist. The poetic work of Geo Milev and Lamar exemplifies this synthesis: their texts unleash Scythian violence while gesturing toward Slavic sorrow; they invoke Dionysian frenzy yet bear traces of Apollonian clarity. In this sense, Bulgarian avant-gardists do not entirely reject tradition but rework it through the prism of Balkan marginality, asserting a cultural autonomy that resonates with Walter Benjamin’s vision of the barbarian as the historical materialist who breaks with the triumphal narratives of civilization.

Through the convergence of Nietzschean and Benjaminian thought, we see that the figure of the barbarian – whether in philosophy or avant-garde manifestos – functions as a dialectical force, one that simultaneously negates and reconstitutes culture, in line with Nietzsche’s claim that “every higher culture has barbarous beginnings”³³ (Nietzsche 2002: 151–152). This reframing of bar-

32 “Другата стихия е славянската стихия. Тя е кротка стихия. Тя е тъгата за нещо минало. Тя е мечтата за нещо, което не е било”.

33 Nietzsche made this claim in *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*: “Let us not be deceived about how every higher culture on earth has *begun!* Men whose nature was still natural, barbarians in every terrible sense of the word, predatory people who still possessed an unbroken strength of will and lust for power threw themselves on weaker, more civilized, more peaceful races of tradesmen perhaps, or cattle breeders; or on old and mellow cultures in which the very last life-force was flaring up in brilliant fireworks of spirit

barism as a generative force inspired many Balkan avant-garde artists to turn to primitivism as a more immediate and radical mode of creation.

The dichotomy between stylistic and perceptual primitivism, as articulated by Colin Rhodes (1994), offers a productive framework to understand how the Zenitists and their Bulgarian counterparts engaged with the concept of the primitive. While stylistic primitivism refers to a conscious appropriation of non-European forms (such as African masks or Oceanic motifs) as a means of formal experimentation, perceptual primitivism, by contrast, seeks to channel a more immediate, vital, and intuitive mode of expression – an unconscious, lived primitivism, often rooted in local cultural and existential conditions.

Zenitism and the Bulgarian avant-garde were fundamentally aligned with this second model. Rather than mimicking non-European art forms, they articulated a primitivism born of their own condition as Eastern, Balkan, and marginal within the European hierarchy. As Dijana Metlič argues, “Micić does not seek the primordial in extra-European cultures, like many modernist colleagues, because he knows that this source is within him, in the Balkans” (Metlič 2021: 55).

Ljubomir Micić’s critique of Western primitivism was scathing; he rejects it as retrograde and fundamentally mimetic in nature (ibid.: 51). In his 1921 text “Savremeno novo i slućeno slikarstvo”, he argues that “the West consciously forces primitivism (new imitation)”, mistaking modern naturalism for innovation. For Micić “old unconscious primitivism” was rooted in “nature and man’s naivety”, whereas “the new conscious primitivism” stemmed from cultural refinement: “Culture is thus used to refine primitivism – regression. Very naive is this conscious simplicity of satiated and impotent Westerners, for this return to fundamental and primitive form (which was once immediate) is not an event of great scope, for it is a return (Progress is only forward!)” (Micić 1921c: 11–12).

The Zenitist barbarogenius embodied perceptual primitivism, as a cultural outsider who possessed an innate, existential relationship to the primitive. As Micić put it in his text “Protiv sentimentalne politike” (“Against Sentimental Politics”), published in 1922 in the special issue of *Zenit*: “We do not wish to

and corruption. The noble caste always started out as the barbarian caste. Their supremacy was in psychic, not physical strength, – they were *more complete* people (which at any level amounts to saying ‘more complete beasts’ –)” (Nietzsche 2002: 151–152).

be Europeans. We are Balkanites – Easterners! We create Balkan art for Balkan culture. We demand the Balkanization of Europe!” The Zenitists want “wild primitive poetry, unworn languages and feelings”³⁴, wrote Ivan Goll (Golubović/Subotić 2008: 97).

This vision had strong parallels in the Bulgarian avant-garde. Geo Milev reportedly declared: “We are a healthy and primitive people. I dream of waging war for a raw, masculine aesthetic and literature” (Krăstev 1988: 86). Nikolay Raynov called for a radical break with the West in his manifesto “Izkustvo i stil” (“Art and Style”), proclaiming that “the West is finished” (Raynov 2009a: 33–34), while Lamar employed the Orthodox icon as a symbol of anti-European resistance and unconscious primitivism in his collection of poems *Zhelezni ikoni* (*Iron Icons*). Orthodox icons, as he implied, were not created by mimicking the Western canon or academic painting; rather, they represented an unbroken link to a collective, sacred, and pre-modern artistic consciousness.

Sirak Skitnik’s manifesto “Tainata na primitiva” (“The Secret of the Primitive”) likewise offered a powerful Bulgarian articulation of perceptual primitivism, though the author did not criticize stylistic primitivism. He argued that to liberate art, the artist must return to the “primordially of the immutable Earth”, that is, to the “life of antiquity”, following the example of Gauguin in Tahiti, so that through the “primitivism of life” they may attain the “primitivism of art” and recover “the original significance of line and color, which their European counterparts had destroyed” (Skitnik 2009: 129). Skitnik’s understanding of primitivism might be described as stylistic in form, but perceptual in intent, as he seeks to recover vitality and immediacy and the primordial meaning of line and color, rather than to just appropriate non-Western motifs.

The important difference here is that while Western artists like Gauguin or Picasso turned toward the primitive as an exotic escape, Micić, Milev, and their Bulgarian contemporaries lived it as a condition. As Glišić and Vujošević argue, the Zenitist barbarogenius was not a privileged onlooker slumming among primitives, but a “real” barbarian who could not shed his social position at will (Glišić/Vujošević 2016: 731). A Balkan barbarian was not a role to be tried on and discarded, but an existential, political and cultural identity.

Marinetti’s view of Bulgarian society offers a striking confirmation of this. In his poem “Zang Tumb Tumb”, he praises Bulgaria not despite but *because*

34 “Mi hoćemo divlje prapesništvo, neistrošene jezike i osećanja”.

of its lack of cultural institutions: “no higher culture, no university, few libraries, few professors... peasants who can read without nostalgia, without tradition, without sentimentality – MEN” (Marinetti 1914: 42). For Marinetti, who referred to himself as a barbarian (Glišić/Vujošević 2025: 230), the absence of tradition embodied a Futurist ideal. However, for the Balkan barbarians this same lack was not a void to be filled with European models, but a space of originality, resistance, and renewal.

The admiration for barbarism and the search for the primitive thus went hand in hand with the rebellion against the Western canon. Both the Yugoslav and Bulgarian avant-gardes aimed to create art that was not derivative but foundational. The cultural barbarian, then, was not an isolated invention but part of a broader avant-garde reimagining of the primitive – not as the opposite of civilization but as its revolutionary potential. As Christian Moser observes, avant-garde artists were drawn to primitivism because “the art of the primitives is always anti-art, an art that does not want to be (high) art, but part of the practice of everyday life”, a principle that defined the ambitions of the avant-garde as a whole (Moser 2023: 12). Zenitism’s and the Bulgarian avant-garde’s primitivism was neither stylized nor simulated: it was lived, strategic, and revolutionary.

In the context of the Slavic avant-garde, such ideas were primarily rooted in Russian Neo-Primitivism, which rejected Western artistic tradition and emphasized the study of the cultural and artistic values of the East and Russia. Artists like Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov paralleled the concept of the barbarous creator, celebrating the “primitive” as a source of authenticity. Dijana Metlič points out that “Micić embraces Neo-Primitivism by offering the European avant-garde his own concept, forged through a fusion of Balkan barbarism and Zenitist art”³⁵ (Metlič 2021: 51).

6. Barbarians at the Gates

In the first Zenitist manifesto Micić proclaims the arrival of Balkan barbarians and adopts a confrontational stance toward Europe:

35 “Micić prihvata neoprimitivizam nudeći evropskoj avangardi vlastiti koncept kroz spoj balkanskog varvarizma i zenitističke umetnosti”.

Zatvori vrata Zapadna – Severna – Centralna Evropo –
Dolaze Barbari!
Zatvori zatvori ali
Mi ćemo ipak ući.
Mi smo deca požara i vatre – mi nosimo dušu Čoveka.
(Micić/Goll/Tokin 1921: 3)

Close your gates Western – Northern – Central Europe –
the Barbarians are coming!
Close them, but
we will enter nonetheless.
We are the children of arson and fire – we carry the soul of Man!

Similarly, the Bulgarian poet Lamar contrasted the motif of the barbarian with the image of Europe, positioning the former as a vengeful force poised to dismantle the decadent structures of Western civilization. His poetry brims with violent proclamations, where the barbarian is not merely a threat but an inevitable force of reckoning:

Върху тлъстия гръб на Европа
Разпъваме кръстната мъка
И сръчно опъваме лък
В сърцето на стара Европа
(Lamar 1926)

On the fat back of Europe
We crucify the cross
And deftly we draw the bow
In the heart of old Europe

The violence here is not mindless but retaliatory, a direct response to the oppression and imposed barriers of the European order. In Micić's words: "We want to take human revenge: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!"³⁶ (Micić 1926a). The barbarians of Lamar's vision, much like those of Micić's,

36 "Mi hoćemo da se ljudski osvetimo: oko za oko, zub za zub!"

are insurgents rising from the periphery, disrupting the cultural and political hierarchies that sustain the West. Lamar's lyrical subjects often issue fierce threats, as in the poem „Към Европа“ („To Europe“):

Твоите рожби ще хвърлят в краката ни
динамита и телени мрежи,
но ние сърцата им с нож ще прорежем
и пики над теб ще размятаме!
(Lamar 2005: 30)

Your offspring will throw dynamite
and barbed wire at our feet,
but we will cut through their hearts with knives
and brandish pikes above you!

For the Balkan avant-gardists, violence against inherited forms was not a destructive frenzy but a conscious strategy. Concerning the violent genealogy of culture and the moral ambivalence of inherited traditions, their project aligns with Benjamin's historical materialist view of art as inseparable from violence: “cultural treasures” must be viewed “with cautious detachment” for they carry a lineage “which [the historical materialist] cannot contemplate without horror” (Benjamin 2006a: 392). Recognizing their marginal position within the European order, the Balkan barbarians projected a form of vengeance that closely echoes Nietzsche's diagnosis of modern culture and its suppressed underclasses. Nietzsche wrote:

It should be noted that Alexandrian culture needs a slave-class in order to exist in the long term; as it views existence optimistically, however, it denies the necessity of such a class and is therefore heading towards horrifying extinction when the effects of its fine words of seduction and pacification, such as ‘human dignity’ and ‘the dignity of labour’, are exhausted. There is nothing more terrible than a class of barbaric slaves which has learned to regard its existence as an injustice and which sets out to take revenge, not just for itself but for all future generations.

(Nietzsche 1999: 86–87)

This image of a barbaric uprising, born from centuries of ideological pacification and aestheticized injustice, resonates deeply with the revolutionary aesthetics of the Balkan avant-garde. In the poem “Vik na robite” (“Cry of the Slaves”), Lamar articulates precisely this kind of violent awakening:

Моите братя безбройни
разбойни
юнаци!
[...]
Ний сме последните жители
на прогнилата Земна Империя
[...]
а с бели коне прокопихме
тишината на хлебни полета
и с вили събаряме
и диви се спущае
през ветровете;
Елате!
Слънцето кърваво свети...
(Lamar 2005: 31–33)

My brothers – countless,
outlaws
heroes!
[...]
We are the last inhabitants
of the rotting Earthly Empire.
[...]
but on white horses we thunder
through the silence of grain fields,
with pitchforks we tear down,
and wildly we descend
through the winds.
Come!
The sun burns blood-red...

Here, Lamar's poetic voice channels the fury of a "slave class" no longer content to serve as the expendable material of civilization. His invocation of a decaying empire and a brotherhood of rebels is in line with Nietzsche's vision of the Dionysian as an apocalyptic, liberatory force that emerges when the rhetoric of progress and dignity collapses under the weight of its own hypocrisy. Lamar's "Varvari" („The Barbarians“) further intensifies this violent liberation:

Тогава – о, ние сме варвари,
 на глада ви ще хвърляме татул
 и с удара на овни матори
 ше ви счупим гърба и ребрата.
 (Lamar 2005: 20)

Then – oh, we are barbarians,
 we will throw poisonous weeds into your hunger
 and with the blows of battering rams
 we will break your back and ribs.

Despite the ferocity of Lamar's barbarians, they wield neither sophisticated weapons nor the gilded symbols of power. Instead, they carry iron icons – an inversion of the traditionally golden Orthodox icon, transforming sacred imagery into a raw, militant aesthetic. This motif resonates deeply with the Eastern Orthodox tradition, in which the icon is not mimetic but symbolic, stripped of linear perspective, naturalism, and academic illusionism characteristic of Western art. It represents pure creation and embodies the sense of unconscious primitivism; it is unburdened by authorship and often created anonymously, which aligns with the collectivist ethos of Eastern culture, in contrast to Western individualism and artistic ego.

In Lamar's poetry, the substitution of iron for gold signals not only a rejection of Western materialism, but also a claim to spiritual immediacy rooted in the East. The icon, once a sacred object of veneration, is transformed into a weapon of aesthetic and political revolt, and this reimagining exemplifies Walter Benjamin's notion of politicized art: the aura of the sacred image is shattered and repurposed in service of historical consciousness.

Here we can evoke Walter Benjamin's concept of the angel of history (2006a: 392), which shows that true progress emerges not through linear advancement but through confrontation with catastrophe. As in Benjamin's interpretation of Paul Klee's painting "Angelus Novus" – the angel of history, propelled forward by the storm of progress while staring at the wreckage of the past – the iron icon does not promise redemption. It stands instead as a memorial to collapse and an instrument for future transformation. The storm that Benjamin calls *progress* drives the angel forward, and this same storm animates the barbarian: the iron icon becomes the object Benjamin envisioned – no longer a site of contemplation but a site of confrontation – commanding action, not awe.

7. "No God! No Master!"

This transformation also signals a deeper rupture: a total rejection of religious authority and spiritual consolation. Balkan barbarians' rejection of Western values included a sharp opposition to organized religion, with atheistic views predominant in both Yugoslav and Bulgarian avant-gardes. These artists were particularly antagonistic towards the hypocrisy of European Christianity. The critique of Christianity was predominant in Zenitist manifestos, but it also appeared as a frequent motif in Micić's poetry, for example, in the poem "Reči u prostoru" ("Words in Space"):

Krstovi su kolovođe stoletnih grehova
 Zlatom okovani
 krvi poprskani.
 (Micić 1921b: 10)

Crosses are the leaders of centuries-old sins
 Gilded in gold
 sprinkled with blood.

Micić, Poljanski, Milev, Lamar and other poets criticized institutionalized Christianity, seeing it as an instrument of oppression. Micić articulated these views with a fierce declaration:

Mi nečemo više da budemo pretvorni hrišćani. Zlotvorno hrišćanstvo je zabluda u krvi, koju vekovima loču idioti i puzavci. [...] U ime novog tvoračkog varvarstva, dole antiljudsko hrišćanstvo!

(Micić 1926a)

We no longer wish to be hypocritical Christians. Malignant Christianity is a blood-soaked delusion that idiots and sycophants have been drinking for centuries. [...] In the name of a new creative barbarism, down with anti-human Christianity!

This rejection of Christianity was not merely rhetorical but deeply intertwined with the artists' revolutionary and anarchist beliefs. Their opposition to institutionalized religion mirrored their defiance of all hierarchical structures. In a 1925 performance in Ljubljana, organized with the support of Slovenian artists Ferdo Delak and Avgust Černigoj, Branko Ve Poljanski outraged the members of the clerical circles by calling upon the transformation of churches into cinemas (Kruljac 2023: 45) – a provocative gesture meant to liberate spaces of institutional authority and repurpose them as sites of modern, collective cultural experience. Balkan poetry, manifestos, and performances did not simply challenge religious dogma but called for an all-encompassing social and spiritual upheaval – an absolute negation of the existing order.

In his poem “Septemvri”, Milev echoes Zarathustra's preachings and calls on humanity to “bring down heaven to the sorrowing, blood-soaked earth” and live harmoniously in the here and now, exclaiming, “DOWN WITH GOD!”, and “No God! No master!”³⁷ (Milev 2006: 127–148).

Lamar reflects the same anarchist defiance in his poem “Razpyatie” (“Crucifixion”) from the collection *Zhelezni ikoni*, where the lyrical subject rejects Christian doctrines, identifying himself as a “great-grandson, an anarchist outlaw”³⁸ (Lamar 2009). In his poem “Prolog” (“Prologue”) from the collection *Arena*, the poet heralded the coming of “THE GREAT ANARCHY”

37 „ДОЛУ БОГ! По небесните мостове / високи без край / с въжета и лостове / ще снемем блажения рай / долу / върху печалния / в кърви обляния / земен шар. [...] – Без Бог! Без господар!“

38 “– аз – / правнук – / разбойник-антихрист”. In the Bulgarian language the word “pravnuk” (great-grandson) contains the prefix “pra-“, which can be used to denote that something is primeval.

(“VELIKATA ANARKHIIA“), which would tear down republics and monarchies alike. Zenitists, too, openly declared their anarchist beliefs, claiming to be led by the mystical demigod Anarch. For these artists, the rejection of Christianity was inseparable from their revolutionary project. By rejecting God, they rejected not only the church but the entire European order it upheld, advocating instead for a world in which the barbarians would reclaim their rightful place as the true creators of a new civilization.

This stance reached its culmination in the complete rejection of Europe’s existence in “Manifest varvarima duha i misli na svim kontinentima”. In this manifesto Micić denounced the “noble gallows of the *so-called* European continent”³⁹, reimagining the Balkans not as a peripheral or marginalized space but as a dynamic “bridging and transitional space that mediates between East and West” (Moser 2023: 38).

This ambition was shared by their Bulgarian comrades, who were persecuted, censored and ultimately silenced. However, in 1929, a few years after the brutal murder of Geo Milev and Micić’s emigration to Paris, Lamar founded the constructivist magazine *NOVIS*, which stood for a creative and humanist transformation of the world and would carry on the impactful legacy of the Balkan barbarians and the aesthetic pursuits of *Vezni* and *Plamāk*. Likewise, in 1927 the Slovenian avant-garde artist Ferdo Delak continued *Zenit*’s legacy through his magazine *Tank*, which promoted radical artistic experimentation and engaged with the avant-garde currents of the time, reinforcing the transnational reach of the movement’s revolutionary ideals.

8. The Balkan Barbarian Method

The Balkan avant-garde artists sought not merely to produce art but to build a new civilization – one that would emerge, as Benjamin wrote, “with a laugh” (Benjamin 2005: 735) from the wreckage of the old world, carrying forward the spirit of a renewed, liberated humanity. The artists of *Zenit*, *Plamāk*, and other Balkan avant-garde platforms understood that the role of the artist in a fractured postwar world was not to provide aesthetic consolation but to confront history and cultural hegemony directly. In this sense, their project constituted a radical aesthetic politics, one that resonates with Benjamin’s call

39 “[...] otmenim vešalima evropskog nazovi-kontinenta [...]”. Italics in translation are mine, O. S.

for the historical materialist to intervene in the mythic continuum of history and “brush it against the grain” (Benjamin 2006a: 392). Balkan “barbarian” art was not an escape, but a form of resistance. As Benjamin warned: fascism aestheticizes politics by transforming destruction into spectacle. The avant-garde responds by politicizing art, using the shock of barbarism to rupture historical myth and awaken new consciousness (Benjamin 2006b: 122). Through physical and metaphysical fragmentation, iron icons, raw language, and revolutionary visions of *Zenit*, *Plamāk* and *Vezni*, these artists enacted what Benjamin called the constructive principle of barbarism: dismantling the aura of the old world in order to forge a new, more humane world.

In the face of repression, exile, and even execution, these avant-garde artists left behind more than manifestos or poems. They left a method: a cultural and political stance that challenged the hegemony of tradition, the complacency of aesthetics, and the violence of historical amnesia. As the specters of authoritarianism and cultural homogenization return in contemporary Europe, the voices of the Balkan barbarians remain hauntingly urgent. While their artistic and ideological projects may not have provided a definitive solution, they offered something arguably just as important – an alternative face of humanity: one that insists that art must be lived, not commodified; that culture must disrupt, not pacify, and one that, like Benjamin’s angel of history, refuses to look away from the wreckage.

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