

On being Yugoslav without a Yugoslavia

The Ministry of Pain

By *Dubravka Ugresic*;
translated by *Michael Henry Heim*

ECCO/HARPERCOLLINS; 257 PAGES;
\$22.95

Reviewed by *Elizabeth Gold*

"The Ministry of Pain," a novel about Yugoslav emigres in Amsterdam, gets its title from a Dutch sex shop, but it could just as easily have been called "Exile on Main Street," for the Orwellian rewriting of history that accompanied the Yugoslav civil war ensured that there would be no place where its refugees would really feel at home. They are strangers in Amsterdam, a city, as the narrator, Tanja Lucic, notes, that is built on sand.

But they are also strangers within their own memories. What does it mean to be a citizen of a nation that no longer officially exists? To speak Serbo-Croatian, a language disappearing from the lexicons? And most of all, to be tormented by "Yugonostalgie," a longing for the homely trivia of youth — pop songs, TV shows, snack foods, train rides through a united country — when that cozy nation of memory was already sliding, though they didn't know it, toward its own dissolution? What can these stranded people trust, and where do they belong?

When Tanja, a young professor from Zagreb, is given a one-year



JERRY BAUER

Dubravka Ugresic

post teaching what is still (though uneasily) called Serbo-Croatian at the University of Amsterdam, she finds that the class is filled with her fellow refugees, all of whom need student visas. Her students and their stories become her world. Who else could possibly understand their situation? Not the folks back home, immersed in their own story. Not the Dutch either, whose famous tolerance, it turns out, sometimes just masks indifference. The very fact of their departure from Yugoslavia and their subsequent scrambling for jobs, apartments and a sense of the future unite them at first. Tanja, like a noncommunist Tito, encourages that unity, eliciting from her students stories and essays about their shared past.

For a while, it works. The conversation is lively and the essays the students write are heartbreaking, haunting and funny. Selim, a Bosnian whose father was mur-

dered by Serbs, might needle Boban, a Serb who even Selim knows had nothing to do with it. But his ribbing is pretty mild compared with what the racists have done back home. Even the students' attempt at explanation for the cause of the war spreads the blame around:

"There's something fundamentally f— wrong with a language that instead of saying 'The child is sleeping soundly' or 'sleeping deeply' says 'sleeping the sleep of the butchered.'"

"That's what brought the war on."

"What do you mean?"

"If you think your kid's about to be butchered, you pack a gun and fire at the drop of a hat."

But things fall apart. War trials at The Hague reawaken old pain. A student commits suicide. Another complains anonymously to the department about Tanja's freewheeling teaching style, and suddenly she finds herself besieged by all the paranoia and self-pity she thought she had left at home.

Afraid of losing power she didn't even know she wanted, she begins to wield it autocratically, even irrationally. Not for nothing, it turns out, is this book named after a shop specializing in sadomasochistic sex garb. Tanja's most intelligent student, the mysterious, sardonic Igor, tracks her down to her apartment, and in a scene that manages to be both sexy and terrifying, suggests that Tanja might not, after all, be as innocent as she

would like to believe. "Tell me, has it occurred to you that all that time you may have been torturing us? Has it occurred to you that the students you forced to remember were yearning to forget?"

Dubravka Ugresic, a Yugoslav emigre herself, has written more than 10 volumes of essays and fiction. Her last was "Thank You for Not Reading," a bitterly witty collection of essays about the state of literature and publishing today. "The Ministry of Pain" is also concerned with literature — Tanja, after all, is a literature professor — but also language itself. "Language was our common trauma," says Tanja. "Language was a weapon, after all: it branded, it betrayed, it separated and united."

This is not a novel for those who prefer their war stories simplistic and full of snazzy exploding bombs. With its multitude of voices (the student essays inserted throughout the text), its canny vignettes of Dutch and emigre life, its bits of poetry, its jokes and wordplay, "The Ministry of Pain," too, is built on sand, the narrative constantly shifting and keeping Tanja (and the reader) off balance. Only the war criminals have the luxury of feeling no guilt. In an era when bombastic warspeak emanates daily from Washington, it's something to think about. ■

Elizabeth Gold is the author of "Brief Intervals of Horrible Sanity," a memoir published by Tarcher/Penguin.