

SERBIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE SOCIETY IN THE 1980s

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The year 1980, when president Tito died, marks a turning point for Serbian and Yugoslav society, and consequently, for its historiography. Yugoslav society lost its supreme political authority embodied in the person of its late president, being already in the process of disintegration, shaken by global debt crisis, and even more thoroughly, by a generalised internal crisis. The non-conflicting, balanced and controlled image of the past was questioned too. New historical approach to Tito's person caused an important revision of the recent past. Before 1980 facts of Tito's life have been a taboo. After his death, propagandistic books about his life were published in abundance. But at the same time, the audience was in need for more true facts about Tito. The book called *Josip Broz Tito – Autobiografska kazivanja (Autobiographic tales)* was sold in 195,000 copies.¹ Djilas's book *Druženje s Titom (In Company with Tito)* (first edition in 1980) and Dedijer's *Novi prilozi za biografiju Josipa Broza Tita (New contributions to the biography of J. B. Tito)* in three volumes (1981-1984) form landmarks in the gradual deconstruction of Tito's personality cult. The latter was especially popular, for Dedijer's partly exposing the "unknown", more or less compromising facts, and his partly indicating numerous mysteries and secrets that were not yet to be "revealed". Such a discourse was carried out with enthusiasm by journalists and publicists in the next two decades. An admirer of Dedijer has claimed that "Novi prilozi" definitively marked the end of illusions that our history can be written by traditional methods, based on documents. "Our true history... is still exclusively oral", as Ivo Banac said². That rather widespread attitude had two consequences: it lent support to the already existing disdain for academic historiography, and on the other hand, it gave the green light to the writing of all kinds of "alternative" and "secret" histories.

¹ P. Damjanović, N.B. Popović, M. Vesović, *Josip Broz Tito – autobiografska kazivanja*, Beograd, Narodna knjiga, 1982.

² Milomir Marić in *Duga* magazine 1984. The quotation comes from Ivo Banac, *Historiography of the countries of eastern Europe: Yugoslavia*, in "American Historical Review", October, (1992), p. 1094.

In general, the ideological heritage of the Tito's regime has been challenged in the 1980s, especially the official representation of the Second World War. Five major developments occurred in Serbian historiography and even more in public opinion, which reshaped the image of the recent past. These developments continued and reached their climax in 1990s. These are as follows: **a)** re-evaluation of the Chetnik movement; **b)** change of approach to pre-Communist Yugoslavia; **c)** reinterpretation of Serbian casualties in WWII; **d)** rediscovery of Communist repression and its victims after 1944.

a) Redefinition of the Chetnik movement

This process in official historiography (notwithstanding history writing of the Serbian emigration) was initiated by a famous Yugoslav historian Branko Petranović. In his book *Revolucija i kontrarevolucija (Revolution and Counter-revolution)* (1983), he implied that the Chetnik movement was also a kind of Anti-Fascist Resistance, which was quite a revolutionary statement at the time. But, it was done only implicitly, so that the public opinion and Party structures would not be disturbed (The only reaction came from Slovene historian Dušan Biber)³. The case of Veselin Đuretić and his book *Saveznici i jugoslovenska ratna drama (The Allies and the Yugoslav military drama)* (1985) was quite different. This book reversed the prevailing image of the civil war, depicting Chetniks as victims of "British betrayal", of the conspiracy among Soviet spies in the ranks of British intelligence services. The book was officially forbidden for a while, and thereafter sold in 8000 copies. Otherwise, very few people would have read that voluminous book written in a not very readable style. The Chetnik rehabilitation trend was to be continued during 1990s.

b) Different approach to pre-Communist Yugoslavia

As Ivo Banac noted, a new approach to pre-Communist Yugoslavia was announced at the Ilok conference on the very eve of the 1980s.⁴ However, in the 1980s historians from different Yugoslav centers, expressed opposing views of the history of Yugoslav state. Namely, up to the 1980s, the only source of common Yugoslav identity was seen in the revolutionary tradition (Partisan resistance, Tito, Self-management), which was undermined since 1980. Two paths were opened for Yugoslav historians, as to the question of legitimacy of the federal state. The one was to search for the roots of state-building process of each federal unit, understanding that each people within its own federal republic, forms a political community, a nation with its own history. The other was to find a common historical heritage that was not the Communist one. That was easy to say, but difficult to accomplish. Even though a Party leadership

³ B. Repe, *Jugoslovenska historiografija po drugi svetovni vojni*, in "Tokovi istorije", 1:4, (1999), p. 312-325.

⁴ Ivo Banac, *Historyography*, p. 1084-1085.

officially strongly supported at the 13th Party Congress continuation of the project *History of peoples and ethnic minorities of Yugoslavia*, the project was never brought to fruition.⁵ Ironically, at the historians' conference in Neum (February 1985) organized by the Central Committee Presidium, historians were divided as to their opinion along federal and ethnic lines: Bilandžić, a Croatian historian, had previously criticized Serbian colleagues for attempts to rehabilitate the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Branko Petranović, a Serbian historian, argued the opposite. Janko Pleterski, a Slovene historian, contributed to the disputable topics. He argued that Yugoslav revolution was not a single achievement, in other words that every nation (i.e. every ethnic group) within Yugoslavia fought its own socialist revolution.⁶ In the same year, three important books on Yugoslav history were published: Pleterski's book about alleged "federal" character of Yugoslav revolution, Bilandžić's general survey of the Yugoslav history, and a collection of documents edited and commented by Petranović and Zečević.⁷ A year before, in 1984, Đorđe Stanković published a book about Nikola Pašić (1845-1926), famous politician of the Kingdoms of Serbia and Yugoslavia.⁸ The book was sold in 35,000 copies, and that public interest for an "old regime" politician also indicates a change in the attitude toward pre-Communist Yugoslavia.

Marxist theoretical magazines organized public discussion about these books both in Belgrade and Zagreb. Historians from Belgrade (Zečević, Stanković, et al) mainly argued against "local perspective" in history and "artificial symmetry", and claimed that positive sides of the Yugoslav Kingdom should be taken into account. Slovenes (Prunk) argued that, since the peoples of Yugoslavia have become nations (having their own political units), they should be allowed to have their national historiographies as well. Serbian historians were also criticized for being too reluctant to condemn centralism of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and the Chetnik movement (Pleterski).⁹ However, the discussion between Slovenian and Serbian historians did not cause such havoc, as disputes between Serbian and Croatian historians did, especially those about casualties of WWII.

A new trend of reprints in the 1980s was another sign of the changed attitude towards the pre-Communist Yugoslav and even more Serbian tradition. Dozens of books written at the beginning of the 20th century or in the inter-war

⁵ B. Repe, *Jugoslovenska historiografija*, p. 314.

⁶ B. Petranović, *Istoriografske kontraverze o Jugoslaviji*, in *Istoriografija, marksizam i obrazovanje*, Beograd: Izdavački centar Komunist, 1986, p. 57-75; J. Pleterski, *Pitanje nacije i revolucije u jugoslovenskim zemljama u XIX i XX veku*, Ebenda, p. 76-102.

⁷ J. Pleterski, *Nacije, Jugoslavija, Revolucija*. Beograd: Komunist, 1985; D. Bilandžić, *Historija Socijalističke Federativne Republike Jugoslavije-Glavni procesi, 1918-1985*. Zagreb, Školska knjiga, 1985; B. Petranović, M. Zečević, *Jugoslavija 1918-1984, Zbirka dokumenata*, Beograd, 1985.

⁸ Djordje Dj. Stanković, *Nikola Pašić: jugoslovensko pitanje*, Beograd, BIGZ, 1985.

⁹ Discussions are published in "Naše teme", Zagreb, 12, 1986, p. 1907-2027; "Marksistička misao", Beograd, 4: (1986), p. 189-263.

period were republished which helped the public to become acquainted with “forgotten historians” and to learn about different methodological approaches. This trend was politically motivated with the rise of nationalism in ex Yugoslavia. Most of the reprinted books were dealing with history of Yugoslav peoples, especially with relations between Serbs and Croats. Most of them were written during the First World War and Paris Peace Conference. They reflected problems regarding relations between different Yugoslav peoples and were used at the end of the eighties to argue that relations between those peoples were “always the same, and therefore, beyond repair”. This trend of reprinting helped the revival of historiography but it also showed how history could be misused for political purposes. One of the greatest public scandals in the 1980s was the ban of reprint of Slobodan Jovanović’s *Collected Works*. Ironically, Slobodan Milošević as the Head of the City Committee, was among those who were against reprinting of “nationalist” and “reactionary” works of Slobodan Jovanović, whose extensive work on Serbian 19th century history (12 volumes) was finally republished at the end of eighties in spite of many political obstacles¹⁰.

c) Reinterpretation of Serbian casualties in WWII

In Tito’s time, civilian casualties were not subject to debate. The ideological accent was on resistance fighters, while civilian casualties were not so much emphasized. They were ascribed either to foreign invaders, or, proportionally, to “forces of collaboration”. During the 1980s, the name of Jasenovac (the Ustasha concentration camp) became a symbol of Serbian martyrdom during the Second World War. The initial estimate of the number of victims in this camp was 700,000 people, mostly Serbs. Some Croatian historians (like Tadjman) tried to diminish the number of victims, stating that a “Jasenovac myth” had been created in order to create a guilty conscience among Croats. On the other side, some Serbian historians argued that the casualties in Jasenovac numbered over 1 milion, and that the real estimate was made inaccessible, in order to keep Serbo-Croat relations in order.¹¹ The echo of such polemics was far from purely academic.

d) Rediscovery of Communist repression and its victims after 1944

During 1980s hitherto “taboo” themes were for the first time discussed in public. Oddly enough, the first publications to challenge old ideological image of the past were not history books, but fiction. So, in the early 1980s dozens of books dealt with the breach with Stalin in 1948 and the “Goli otok” prison.¹² A

¹⁰ S. Djukić, *Kako nam se dogodio vodja*, Beograd, Filip Visnjic, 1992; Slobodan Jovanović, *Sabrana dela. I-XII*, Beograd, Srpska književna zadruga, 1989-1990.

¹¹ Velimir Terzić, *Slom Kraljevine Jugoslavij 1941: uzroci i posledice*, Beograd-Ljubljana-Titograd, 1983; M. Bulajić, *Ustaški zločin genocida I-IV*, Beograd, Rad, 1988-1989; F. Tadjman, *Bespuća povijesne zbiljnosti*, Zagreb, 1989, especially p. 316.

¹² Antonije Isaković, *Tren 2*, Beograd, Prosveta, 1982; Slobodan Selenić, *Pismo glava*, Beograd, Prosveta, 1982; Dušan Jovanović, *Karamazovi*, Beograd, 1984.

book dealing with oppression of peasants after 1945 had three editions, from 1984 to 1986.¹³ Even some films (a very successful Emir Kusturica film *Otac na službenom putu* (*Father on a business trip*), Stole Popov's *Srecna nova 1949 godina* (*Happy new 1949*) dealt with 1948. Some other scholars contested the legitimacy of the Communist seizure of power (Koštunica and Čavoški).¹⁴ A shortened edition of that article was published in the historical review "Istorija 20. Veka" in 1983.¹⁵

Conclusions

As we have seen, the disproportionate role of non-academic history writing (and thinking) in public life was a feature of the 1980s. Unfortunately, academic history was lagging behind. The problem lied in the communication between the "academic community" and the society that "consumed" all kinds of history books. As K.E. Fleming notes, the field of Balkan studies has long been characterized by a "bifurcation" between a small group of academic specialists and a larger number of "semi-scholarly" authors who dominate public discussion whenever a crisis brings attention to the otherwise obscure region.¹⁶

Secondly, the attempt to "reinvent common tradition" went through desintegration, just like other integration projects in the country. Therefore, not only the political, cultural and economic life was fragmented, but also the image of the communist resistance movement. Such a constellation had some devastating effects, both on methodology and on the respectability of the entire profession, in spite of the fact that only a minority of academic historians participated in these dealings. As for methodological development, some of the most promising innovations (oral history, everyday life history, micro-history) could have been encouraged by the local initiative. A growing distrust towards "official" history as a kind of fact-forging and regime-praising discipline has created a void in historical consciousness. To make things worse, false notions of history were suppressed into the "historical subconsciousness" of the nation, to nourish hidden, often hideous political and national passions.¹⁷ As a result, books about "secret" organisations and their role in history, especially free-masons, became very popular.¹⁸ Such an "alternative historiography" would have a bright future in the 1990s.

¹³ Mladen Markov, *Isterivanje boga*, Beograd, 1984-1986.

¹⁴ Vojislav Koštunica and Kosta Čavoški, *Stranački pluralizam ili monizam: Društveni i politički sistem u Jugoslaviji 1944-1949*, Maribor, 1983. See about that Ivo Banac, *Historiography*, p. 1096.

¹⁵ V. Koštunica, K. Čavoški: *Opozicione političke stranke u Narodnom frontu Jugoslavije (1944-1949)*, in "Istorija 20 veka", 1, (1983), p. 93-116.

¹⁶ K.E. Fleming, *Orientalism, the Balkans, and Balkan Historiography*, in "American Historical Review, 105: (2000), p. 1218-33.

¹⁷ A. Mitrović, *Raspravljanja sa Klio*, Sarajevo, 1991, Quotations comes from the Belgrade 2001, edition: Čigoja štampa, p. 97.

¹⁸ Zoran D. Nenezić, *Masoni u Jugoslaviji (1764-1980)*, Beograd, Rad, 1984.