
Serbia and its Intellectuals:

Introduction

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The role of Serbia's intellectuals in the post-Tito revival of Serbian nationalism and the eventual disintegration of Yugoslavia has been a subject of discussion and analysis by both scholars and journalists for more than a decade. The now infamous 1986 draft Memorandum of the Serbian Academy in Belgrade has been elevated by some observers to represent a coherent statement of Serbian national interests that was shared by most intellectuals and quickly captured the imagination of Serbia's political leaders and people alike. Unfortunately, such an interpretation appears too facile, and the relationship between Serbia's intellectuals and the national movement presents itself as a complex phenomenon without a coherent thread.

The following articles and discussion result from a desire to examine this complexity more closely and to do so by bringing together scholars whose recent work has examined Serbian intellectuals and the national question. This material was first presented as a panel at the annual conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in November 2002. The authors of the three articles – Nick Miller, Jasna Dragović-Soso, and Audrey Helfant Budding – represent a new generation of historians of south-eastern Europe. Each of them has a particular interest in twentieth-century Serbian history and culture.

The commentators represent two distinct generations of Balkan historians. Dusan Djordjevich is preparing to join the growing number of Western scholars trained in south-east European studies as he finishes his dissertation at Stanford University. Dennison Rusinow, Professor Emeritus at the University of Pittsburgh, is celebrated for more than forty years of scholarship devoted to the history and politics of the former Yugoslavia after the Second World War. His *The Yugoslav Experiment, 1948–1974*¹ has become a classic in the field. In late January 2004, only days after submitting the final version of his commentary, Professor Rusinow was killed in a traffic accident in St. Petersburg, Florida, where he and his wife had recently retired. We, his colleagues, are deeply saddened by his passing, and we dedicate this collaborative effort to his memory.

¹ Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.

The work that follows demonstrates that the activities of Serbian intellectuals in the 1980s must be considered within a broad historical and political context. We have to move beyond simply acknowledging that many of Serbia's writers and intellectuals encouraged a discussion of the Serbian national question in the 1980s, and then supported leaders anxious to replace the old regime with one dedicated to protecting Serbian national interests. It is important first of all to place the discussion in the context of historical efforts by Serbian intellectuals to conceptualise the modern state. That intellectuals might have an inordinately influential voice in the political life of Serbia should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the region's history. As pointed out by Jasna Dragović-Soso, the absence in Serbia of a large educated class throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries meant that intellectuals both served the political authorities and acted as their critics. Understanding these dual roles, both historically and in the more contemporary setting, is critical to assessing the ideas and actions of Serbia's intellectuals as Tito's Yugoslavia collapsed and Slobodan Milošević prepared to fill the vacuum. It is also important to consider the context of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in which the political philosophies of leading Serbian intellectuals evolved in the 1980s. Both Audrey Helfant Budding and Nick Miller offer an analysis of Dobrica Ćosić, the so-called 'father of the Serbian nation'. The example of his life and work during the decades of socialist Yugoslavia demonstrates how any discussion of Serbian intellectuals and the revival of Serbian nationalism in the 1980s defies simple analysis and demands broader contextualisation.

Certainly the recent presidency of Vojislav Koštunica is proof enough that Serbian intellectuals will continue to play an important role in the political life of the state. What kind of role will it be? Audrey Helfant Budding in her article argues that 'without preaching national hatred prominent intellectuals helped to set Serbian nationalism on a course both destructive and profoundly self-destructive'. One can only hope for a more positive alternative to this legacy.