
Comment

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The contributors to this section have produced three authoritative vignettes or ‘side-bars’ that enhance and add important corrective nuances to our understanding of Yugoslavia’s disintegration and civil wars and especially the positions and roles of varieties of Serbian nationalism and nationalist intellectuals in the background to and the course of those events. Drawing on their previous work, which has established each of them as respected specialists on their respective and overlapping subjects, the authors also make use of more recently published and unpublished sources to offer fresh or revised perspectives and evaluations of the personalities, ideas and consequences of their subjects. The result is a coherent, conjoined triune analysis, with emphasis on individual and collective internal incoherencies and contradictions that constructively confound efforts to ascribe some kind of evolving consistency, continuity and coherence to the ideas, role and consequences of these intellectuals and the Serbian national ideas and programmes they shaped and often initiated.

Jasna Dragović-Soso contributes an overview that focuses on divergent and changing ‘concepts of statehood’, rightly chosen as a concise yet all-encompassing issue, from the genesis of Serb intellectuals’ engagement with the ‘Serb national question’ in the early nineteenth century to their final, near-consensus ‘Contribution’ of 1988 and again divergent reactions to the reality of Yugoslavia’s disintegration in the following months. Her rendering of this *longue durée* perspective is complemented and elaborated for the period since the Second World War by Nick Miller’s and Audrey Helfant Budding’s focus on individuals and their circles and influence in parallel analyses of the ‘Simina 9a’ group and of similarities and differences between the ideational and career ‘trajectories’ of Dobrica Ćosić and Vojislav Koštunica.

If a corresponding ‘trajectory’ of sorts does emerge from Dragović-Sosa’s overview of Serbian intellectuals’ engagement with the Serb national question, it is a circular one, from classic national irredentism in the nineteenth century (‘all Serbs in one state’, in principle exclusively their own) to varieties of Yugoslavism (Serbs and Serbia embedded in a state shared with non-Serbs and acknowledged as such) and back again to irredentism by the late 1980s. As she describes them, these two basic concepts of the state have sequentially constituted a dominant current that always confronts one or more minority currents. Her attention to the latter – for example, advocacy of a Balkan federation or ‘United States of Yugoslavia’ by Serbian socialists and ‘another smaller but prestigious group of scholars’ in the nineteenth-century heyday of ‘Greater Serb’ irredentism – is also an important contribution. The tendency to ‘marginalise’ such minority perspectives in much recent (Western?) literature on the subject as well as politically in each period has not been limited to the case, noted by Budding in her essay on Ćosić and Koštunica, of Serbs who were willing to accept republican borders as the borders of post-Yugoslav states in 1990–2.

One of Dragović-Sosa's most original contributions is her analysis of the 'incoherent' and contradictory nature of the 'Contribution to Public Debate on Constitutional Changes', drafted by Ćosić and others and endorsed by Serbia's main cultural and academic institutions in March 1988, that she describes as the Serbian intellectuals' last and almost consensual concept of the state prior to Yugoslavia's disintegration. The basic contradiction she identifies is that it 'concurrently advocated both a departure from the "confederal" elements in the constitution and their confirmation, a re-centralisation of the federation and the demand for republican statehood'. There is no way of knowing how many, if any, of its authors and endorsers were fully aware of this contradiction at the time, or alert to its implications and what these said about the dead-end reached by Serbian national intellectuals concerning the nature of the state they wanted and considered achievable. That dead-end is Dragović-Sosa's persuasive final point.

Dobrica Ćosić looms large in the latter part of Dragović-Sosa's narrative. Miller's discussion of three members of the 'Simina 9a' group – Ćosić, Miša Popović and Borislav Mijailović Mihiz – and Budding's comparison of Ćosić and Koštunica 'from dissidents to presidents' put Ćosić centre stage, a place he clearly merits as a singularly influential intellectual and then intellectual-in-politics in those years. Perhaps not in all senses was he the 'father of his country', but Miller and Budding both make the important point that his ideas and the movements and organisations he fathered or to which he made major contributions preceded Milošević's adoption (co-option?) and manipulative use of these ideas, movements and Ćosić himself.

Budding, who carries the Ćosić story on through his short presidency of the FRY and growing dissent from and removal by Milošević, ruminates over Ćosić's apparent abandonment as president of positions he had promoted at the height of his influence in 1989–91 for a position she describes as his increasing willingness 'to sacrifice the pursuit of self-determination [for Serbs throughout Yugoslavia] to that of peace'. It strikes this reader of both papers that the underlying explanation for this (and perhaps earlier) turn-arounds in his positions may be that this communist-become-nationalist intellectual and writer simply never had the *political* intelligence to foresee the consequences of his ideas; and that when these consequences materialised, in devastating wars and brutal 'ethnic cleansing' in 1991–2, his fundamentally humanist values led him to recoil.

Miller's and Budding's examinations of both similarities and differences between the protagonists of their essays are also suggestive. Miller compares Ćosić, Popović and Mihiz in terms of their initially very different ideological starting points – Ćosić as a Partisan/communist, Popović as a man whose early commitment to socialism was circumscribed at best, and Mihiz as consistently anti-communist and a regime critic – and their very similar positions by the end of the period he is examining: classic if not to say 'romantic' Serb nationalist. (His attempt to build a critique of both 'modernist' and 'perennialist' or neo-'primordialist' theories of nationalism is less successful than his analysis of the significance of the different starting points of his three 'Siminovci' and their coming together in their contributions to Serbian nationalism in the 1980s.) For Budding, both Ćosić and Koštunica 'are undoubtedly

nationalists in Gellner's sense', but Ćosić began as a communist, which Koštunica emphatically never was. This difference illuminates differences in the nature and consequences of Ćosić's later and Koštunica's consistently 'dissident' thought and action and other aspects of 'trajectories' that ultimately led to the presidency of the FRY for both, but in very different circumstances. These in turn permit Budding to use both, very effectively, 'to trace some of the parameters of contemporary Serbian nationalism', their one certified ideological meeting point.

By coincidence, another panel (at which I was also a commentator) convened on the same day at the 2002 annual meeting of the AAASS as the panel at which the original versions of these papers were presented was devoted to same theme for Slovenia. The two panels offered highly interesting points for comparison, which in fact came up in discussion at each of them. It became obvious that a more systematic set of such comparisons, broadened to include other parts of former Yugoslavia, could prove even more productive and useful than these two already highly productive, useful panels. It is to be hoped that this will occur.¹

¹ This is in fact already happening. Two panels at the 2003 AAASS national convention, inspired by these two, examined and compared historiography since Yugoslavia's break-up in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia.