
Comment

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Much has been written about the role of intellectuals in the Serbian nationalist movement of the last two or three decades. The quantity has generally been more noteworthy than the quality. Recently, however, some excellent work has appeared, notably by these three authors. Each is making important and original contributions to our understanding of the cultural and ideological context of Yugoslavia's demise.

Their work here and elsewhere is marked by meticulous research and a deep knowledge of their subjects. They do not rely on a handful of obvious texts or preconceived models. All are committed to considering the full context in which individual choices were made, but never at the expense of detached and critical judgment: to understand is not to forgive. Budding refers to 'a failure of political imagination' on Dobrica Ćosić's part, and all three papers reach similar conclusions about large segments of the Serbian intelligentsia.

The papers make a compatible trio, covering some of the same individuals, periods and issues without much overlap; their different emphases and approaches instead complement one another. There are few obvious conflicts of opinion, although each at times serves as a corrective to aspects that are under- or overplayed in the others. I will try to bring this out as I identify some of the more compelling and provocative issues raised. Where I am critical, it is less of these articles taken on their own than of problems they bring to mind in the literature and the topic more generally.

States and structures

Overall the papers serve to 'restore an important sense, missing in much of the popular literature, of the dynamic interactions of agency, structure, and historical contingency' – the task Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen set out for the student of multinational states.¹ Of the three essays, that by Dragović-Soso places the most emphasis on structure: 'The "Serbian question" was not "imagined" or "invented", but represented a structural reality of the Serbs' dispersal throughout Yugoslavia and the inherent interconnectedness of all the "national questions" in the region.' Examining these structural constraints, both she and Budding stress the contrast between the Serb and Slovene questions. This is certainly appropriate and revealing, given the crucial role this tension played in intellectual and political life. I do, however, miss discussion of the good old Serb(ia)–Croat(ia) dynamic, which lay at the heart of the matter from beginning to end of the Yugoslav project.

The Croatian question has faded from the picture somewhat in discussions of Yugoslavia's final years. Part of the reason is Croatia's 'silence', as it was known, in the

¹ In the conclusion to their edited volume, *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building: The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 184.

1970s and 1980s, following Tito's anti-nationalist, anti-liberal purges of its political and cultural leaderships. Kosovo became the most pressing nationalist conflict, while Slovenia became the standard-bearer of republican autonomy (and, later, Bosnia's war came to overshadow Croatia's). But the purges and the silence did little to check the growing hostility and distrust between Serb and Croat intellectuals. Čoišić's published notebooks, for instance, reveal a growing conviction that anti-Yugoslav and anti-Serb sentiments united Croats across the political spectrum, a conviction that was key to his views on the national question.²

There are also structural factors to consider in the international arena. Dragović-Soso refers to the pursuit of a Greater Serbia during the First World War being discouraged by diplomatic realities, but overall, international context does not receive its due, in these articles and in the literature more generally. The nature of the interstate system, the ideological climate, the policies of the powerful – as these are perceived as well as in reality – are crucial constraints on the direction of nation- and state-building.

International affairs today confront Serbs with a form of statehood that has played a minor part in their national ideologies (except as foil to the more ambitious concepts outlined by Dragović-Soso): that of Serbia proper (its 'proper' borders subject of course to various interpretations and continuing contestation). It will be interesting to see how this concept of the state takes hold, how its political and intellectual lineages are promoted or challenged, and how scholarly understanding of Serbian nationalism develops as a result.

Thinking in nations

Dragović-Soso begins her piece with the reminder that 'the cultural sphere has often acted as a surrogate for politics' in central and eastern Europe. This manifests itself not only in intellectuals' explicitly political engagement, which she and Budding discuss, but also in the political import of their cultural work and social thought – a subject on which Miller contributes valuable information and insight. His research also suggests avenues for further inquiry: into other individuals; alternative national traditions; the nature of continuities, resonances and appropriations central to an 'ethn-symbolic' approach to nationalism; and so on.

What emerges most conspicuously from Miller's discussion of theory, I think, is how little in fact the grand debates illuminate the subject of his research. One reason is that although they almost invariably receive pro forma reference in any study remotely connected to nationalism, the works in question (Anderson, Gellner, *et al.*) are concerned largely with the initial rise of modern nations and nationalisms, and they do not always have much to say about later developments. In turn, it is not clear that his study can add much to their theoretical discussions. The cruder versions of 'modernism' and 'perennialism' – even if they are, as he points out, trotted out with

² *Piščevi zapisi* (Belgrade: Filip Višnjić, 2000 [1951–1968], 2001 [1969–1980], 2002 [1981–1991]).

depressing regularity whenever the former Yugoslavia comes up – do not really need more debunking.

Miller highlights an important phenomenon in demonstrating the links between nationalist thought and broader visions of politics and society. His intellectuals' disappointment with lack of social progress becomes conflated with, and eventually subordinated to, their strident protests against national humiliation and division. Such adoption of nationalist vocabulary to express a whole range of concerns is common enough, even where such vocabulary is less powerfully entrenched than in Serbia and its neighbourhood. But in the kind of all-encompassing crisis atmosphere that characterised Yugoslavia in the 1980s, a consuming sense of the need for moral renewal can make airy notions of the nation and its regeneration seem especially compelling. I am reminded somewhat of 'the spirit of 1914', when intellectuals across Europe of all political persuasions welcomed conflict as 'an antidote to anomie', driven 'above all [by] a desire to rejoin the national community in order to repair the divisions of a fragmented, sundered society'.³

I would not want to push that comparison too far. Sticking to Serbia, there are similarities worth exploring among the Belgrade coups d'état of 1903 and 1941 and Milošević's series of coup-like triumphs in the late 1980s. In all three cases, large segments of the intelligentsia supported successful revolts and characterised them as triumphs of the nation, against regimes that had indeed long been seen as indifferent to the national interest, but also as unable to cope with domestic and international crises, out of touch with the needs of the common people, and morally and politically corrupt.

In its turn, Milošević's fall in October 2000 may bear enough similarities to be added to this list. It is, however – as Mao's prime minister Zhou Enlai is famously said to have replied when asked to evaluate the French Revolution – too early to tell. Lack of historical distance also makes me more comfortable considering Djindjić's description of Koštunica as a 'bridge between traditional and reformist Serbia' as political rhetoric, rather than as intellectual analysis (whether the bridge is taken as an ideological or a temporal metaphor). Budding notes that anti-nationalist politicians outlasted Koštunica, implying that he served his bridging role, but it remains to be seen whether that state of affairs will last. Moreover, it is a state of affairs brought about more *despite* than *because of* any great 'commitment to democratic norms and legal means' in the new Serbia, not least on Djindjić's part – calling into question, perhaps, whether his political methods are best categorised as reformist. Budding is clearly aware of the many different aspects of 'reform' and 'tradition', but foreign and domestic observers of the Serbian scene are not always so nuanced, and there is a marked tendency to reduce such labels to the national question: one way in which anti-nationalists sometimes mirror their opponents' preoccupations.

³ Roland N. Stromberg, *Redemption by War: The Intellectuals and 1914* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1982), 198.

So what?

This standard provocative question seems appropriate. What exactly was the relationship between these intellectuals and their ideas, on the one hand, and politicians and their policies, on the other? How much can be laid at their door in explaining the actual course of events? And, importantly, which events? Among the many reductive tendencies in analyses of the Yugoslav break-up are failures to differentiate among the various conflicts, to distinguish between the *fact* that the state failed and the *manner* in which it failed, between the outbreak of war and its conduct, and so on.

There may ultimately be few rigorous and satisfying answers to such questions, but they are worth asking. In addressing them, directly or indirectly, all three papers benefit from a careful attention to chronology, showing individuals changing over time and responding to events as they unfold, without the benefit of hindsight (and often without much foresight). Dragović-Soso demonstrates how Serbia's intelligentsia could come together around a political platform for a 'third' Yugoslavia in 1988 before dividing, sharply if not evenly, as the state disintegrated. Budding plots the evolution of Ćosić's and Koštunica's politics, stressing their greater flexibility in power than in opposition. Miller looks at an earlier and opposite trajectory, from the 1960s to 1980s, as his subjects' opposition to the regime became less grounded in universal principles and increasingly ethnocentric.

Emerging notably from the authors' research is Ćosić's role as an organiser, able and willing to bring together diverse groups of colleagues behind various projects. We see this from the 1950s Sima Street gatherings, through his leadership in the Serbian Literary Guild in the early 1970s and rights committees in the 1980s, to his work with Serb parties in Bosnia and Croatia in the early 1990s. Perhaps this kind of activity will come to be seen as his most distinctive and influential, more so than his articulation of national images and political views that were, after all, part of mainstream thought. In any case, such activity has the advantage of being sufficiently concrete that its importance may be reasonably ascertained through careful historical reconstruction.

Budding and Dragović-Soso stress the significance of certain specific political proposals: national referenda to determine any new international borders, and the federal model of the 1988 'Contribution', respectively. I am not sure, however, that the real problem lay in the national bias or internal contradictions of this or that proposal from any quarter. Almost any proposal could be and was seen as a belligerent provocation by one side or another in the tense, chaotic months of the late 1980s and early 1990s. More significant was the phenomenon Dragović-Soso notes in her conclusion: Serbs, Slovenes, Croats, Albanians – too few, even among their liberal intellectuals, ever got beyond insisting on 'non-starters' as minimum demands.

This 'classic dialogue of the deaf', to use Budding's neat description, is one of the most difficult but crucial puzzles of the former Yugoslavia. It can and must be approached from various angles. Realpolitik played a role: the unsettled state of affairs and balance of forces both domestically and internationally led many on all sides to reasonably believe that they could achieve their goals without serious compromise. In

addition, insular and conflicting national cultures produced mutual misunderstandings even among the well-meaning.

Nor should one forget the political and intellectual culture of socialist Yugoslavia as a whole. Miller persuasively argues, for instance, that the apostate could retain much of the true believer's mindset, which is hardly geared for compromise.⁴ More broadly, I would offer the following list, taken from another prominent student of contemporary Serbian nationalism, the sociologist Veljko Vujačić. Pondering how it was that so many Yugoslavs could have turned against each other so suddenly and violently, he wrote that

much blame must be placed on the Titoist legacy with its dogmatic treatment of history, its conspiracy theories, its endless search for internal enemies, its substitution of slogans for policies, . . . its brazen lies about brotherhood and unity, its sterile political rituals, its narrow intellectual horizons, and its simple lack of a plain liberal education.⁵

One could imagine numerous dissident intellectuals and 'nonconformists' writing something similar. Too many of them, however, were not only critics of this legacy, but also its heirs.

⁴ This is not necessarily a truism, naturally; otherwise, would Milovan Djilas have become so reasonable and pragmatic in old age? On the subject of the outlook of the disillusioned, I recently came across an interesting and relevant piece by the late Serb writer Slobodan Selenić, who merits more attention as a popular and critically acclaimed author and engaged intellectual in the 1980s. Speaking in June 1990, he noted that 'most of the important novels written in Serbian literature of the last decades are obsessed with political and historical aspects of the national existence'. He attributed this largely to reaction against 'rigid ideological indoctrination', to a 'painfully intense need to differentiate historical lies and plain truth'. A writer's desire for intellectual freedom 'becomes obsessively meaningful. Once he has managed to free himself from the devastating effects of the unnatural self-censorship; once he has acquired the skill of independent judgement, he uses (sometimes – misuses) it with the lust unknown to those who have never been denied the right to think and speak unobstructedly.' Thus, 'Bolshevik ideology has steered writers to their crusade expedition, undertaken to recover the Holy Land of truth and freedom' ('History and Politics as a Fate: A Comment on the Mainstream of a Contemporary Serbian Novel', in Predrag Palavestra, ed., *Responsibility of Contemporary Science and Intelligentsia* (Belgrade: SANU, 1992), 227–31. I have left 'as is' the book's sometimes awkward English.) Selenić mentions only Ćosić by name, but he is also referring to his own work and is clearly sympathetic to the trend he describes – but with a certain ironic distancing often absent from Ćosić, an implied discomfort with the potential for excess and zealotry inherent in an obsessive crusade. This stance – affirmation of a 'Serb' take on controversial aspects of recent history, leavened with a nuanced approach to varying viewpoints and an aversion to angry or celebratory nationalist revisionism – can be seen in the two Selenić novels that have been translated into English: *Fathers and Forefathers* (*Očevi i oci* [1985]), trans. Ellen Elias-Bursac (London: Harvill, 2003), and *Premeditated Murder* (*Ubistvo s predumišljajem* [1993]), trans. Jelena Petrović (London: Harvill, 1996). The latter was made into a film of the same name, for which Selenić wrote the screenplay.

⁵ Vujačić, review of John Lampe's *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country*, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 4, 1 (2002), 122.