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KONSTANTIN NIKIFOROV, *SRBIJA NA BALKANU U XX VEKU* [SERBIA IN THE BALKANS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY]. BELGRADE: FILIP VIŠNJIĆ/IGAM, 2014, 236 p.

Reviewed by Dušan T. Bataković*

Histories of modern Serbia in general and of twentieth-century Serbia in particular are quite rare and mostly written by foreign experts. For the most of the “short twentieth century” the history of Serbia was by default integrated into the history of three Yugoslavias – royal (1918–1941), communist (1945–1991), and post-communist (1992–2006). Attempts at writing a history of the Serbs in this period were sporadic: they tended to look at the past of the whole nation and its destiny before and after three Yugoslavias. A notable exception are two monumental histories: *Istorija Srba* (History of the Serbs) by Vladimir Ćorović,¹ covering the period up to 1941, and *Istorija srpskog naroda* (History of the Serbian People) in six volumes and ten books covering the period until the formation of Yugoslavia in 1918.² Among the most recent efforts are *Nova istorija srpskog naroda* (A New History of the Serbian People), which covers the period until the outbreak of the civil war in Yugoslavia in 1991, and *The Serbs* by Sima M. Ćirković.³

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¹ Vladimir Ćorović, *Istorija Srba*, vols. I–III (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1989). The manuscript of this book completed in 1941 shortly before the author’s death was banned from publication in Titoist Yugoslavia for almost fifty years.

² *Istorija srpskog naroda*, vols. I–VI, R. Samardžić, editor in chief (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1981–1992).

³ *Nova istorija srpskog naroda*, ed. D. T. Bataković, co-authored by D. T. Bataković, M. St. Protić, A. Fotić and N. Samardžić (Belgrade: Naš dom/Laž dom, 2000; 2nd. revised edition 2002); Korean edition: Seoul 2001; French edition: *Histoire du peuple serbe*, ed. D. T. Bataković (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme,

Among the latest endeavours to identify, interpret and explain the major features of the twentieth-century history of Serbia is a synthesis by Konstantin Nikiforov, Director of the Institute for Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Science and Professor at the Lomonosov State University in Moscow. His main predecessors (Stevan K. Pavlowitch, Holm Sundhaussen) were under the strong impression of the tragic effects of the violent disintegration of Tito’s Yugoslavia, which inevitably shaped their perspective on previous periods to a lesser or greater extent. In keeping with major trends in Western historiography, St. K. Pavlowitch strove, however, to offer a balanced account with an emphasis on recent events.⁴ In contrast to Pavlowitch, Holm Sundhaussen

2005). *The Serbs*, translated by Vuk Tošić (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Pub., 2004); Serbian edition: *Srbi među evropskim narodima* (Belgrade: Equilibrium, 2004; Russian edition: Moscow 2009. Some efforts to open the way for new interpretations are made by Ljubodrag Dimić, *Srbi i Jugoslavija : prostor, društvo, politika (pogled s kraja veka)* (Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 1998); Ćedomir Antić, *Kratka istorija Srbije 1804–2004* (Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 2004), a collection of essays; Ljubodrag Dimić, Dubravka Stojanović and Miroslav Jovanović, *Srbija 1804–2004: tri vidjenja ili poziv na dijalog* (Belgrade: Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2005).

⁴ Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Serbia: The History behind the Name* (London: Hurst & Co., 2002); Serbian edition: St. K. Pavlović, *Srbija. Istorija iza imena* (Belgrade: Clio, 2004). A less successful and often biased approach is offered by John K. Cox, *The History of Serbia* (Westport, Conn. & London: Greenwood Press, 2002) and Yves Tomić, *Serbie du prince Miloš à Milošević* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2003).

used a widespread German prejudice and presented Serbia as an allegedly doomed, failed state since the nineteenth century and its undeveloped society, haunted by the ghosts of the civil war in the 1990s which he describes as the “Serbian aggression”.⁵

Konstantin Nikiforov, a witness of the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–1995) on the ground and author of an important monograph on this issue (*Between Kremlin and Republika Srpska*),⁶ offers a more cautious analysis of the major phenomena that shaped contemporary Serbian identity. His book under review here, originally published in Moscow in 2012 and emerging from the courses he taught at the Lomonosov State University, takes a wider Balkan perspective in order to explain how the unstable geopolitical framework, marked by changing frontiers, waves of ethnic strife and national rivalries, ideological rifts, and regional rivalries influenced both the political and social position of Serbia in the twentieth century.⁷ Offering a panoramic view of various trends and schools of interpretation in Serbian historiography, as well as the results of his Russian predecessors, Nikiforov sheds light on several controversial questions that should be properly answered.

When writing on internal strife in Serbia before and after 1903, Nikiforov stresses that the influence of military circles on politics was both a guarantee of stability and a tangible threat to the parliamentary system. Due to the fact that some periods of Serbian history are understudied and

interpretations often ideologically biased, Nikiforov does not appreciate too highly the democratic evolution of Serbia and her “golden age” (1903–1913) which, despite a fragile democratic system stifled by the autocratic rule of two last Obrenović monarchs, saw an unprecedented cultural rise, economic stability, unrestricted political liberties and spectacular military successes in the Balkan Wars (1912–1913) making Belgrade the Piedmont of the Balkan Slavs (short of Bulgarians). While analysing the interwar period, Nikiforov explains that king Alexander I Karadjordjević (1921–1934) believed that a decade of living together in a common state would be sufficient to proceed to the next stage: the creation of a single Yugoslav nation. This ambitious project was thwarted by the assassination of king Alexander in Marseille in October 1934 by Italian-sponsored Croat and Bulgarian terrorists, which opened the way for the establishment of *Banovina Hrvatska* in August 1939. Nikiforov sees the establishing of this *corpus separatum* within Yugoslavia as a “total defeat of Serbian parties” which woke up too late and did too little for the forgotten Serbian question (p. 53). Nikiforov shares the opinion of M. Ekmečić that the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, had there been no Nazi invasion in 1941, would have survived and evolved into a federal state.

The post-war establishment of communist rule in restored Yugoslavia after the decisive support of Stalin’s Red Army was a giant step backward, as stressed by Nikiforov, followed by the abolishment of political freedoms and of the multiparty system and by the persecution of political opponents as the “enemies of the people”. He also underscores that not even the introduction of self-management in 1964 changed much: the iron fist of Tito’s communist dictatorship remained in place in spite of frequent constitutional changes and decentralisation along the lines of six federal republics. The Yugoslav post-1945 experiment reproducing the Soviet model for at least two decades

⁵ Holm Sundhaussen, *Geschichte Serbiens: 19.–21. Jahrhundert* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2007); Serbian edition: Belgrade: Clio, 2009.

⁶ Konstantin Nikiforov, *Mezhdū Kremlem i Respublikoi Serbskoi (Bosniiskii krizis: zavershaiushchii etap)* (Moscow: Institut slavianovedeniia, 1999).

⁷ K. V. Nikiforov, *Serbiia na Balkanakh: 20. vek* (Moscow: Indrik, 2012).

was doomed to fail due to the inefficient economy and the authoritarian political regime, further complicated by rising national rivalries. Despite ethnic proximity of Yugoslavs, the different levels of economic and cultural development among the republics made the country unsustainable in the long run. Nikiforov is of the view that despite all her shortcomings, Yugoslavia was by no means an accidental phenomenon. Nikiforov is somewhat ambivalent on the issue of Titoist policy and its impact on Serbia and the Serbian interest, highlighting Tito's controversial decisions motivated by the need to maintain his unchallenged dictatorial rule in the early 1970s.

Within this unfavourable context, Serbia experienced three failed modernizations – in the interwar period, after the Second World War, and after the fall of the communist regime in 1991. Nikiforov qualifies its post-2000 modernization, marked by a stepped-up privatization programme, as a “catching-up” and “imitating” modernization with mixed results.

The Kosovo crisis which enabled the rise of the populist and authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević from the late 1980s was fatal for liberal forces in Serbian society, and contributed largely to the disillusionment of the Serbian democratic elite and common people with Yugoslavism and Yugoslavia as the best political framework for the protection of Serbian vital interests.

Nikiforov dubs the post-Milošević period, marked by the October 2000 change, as the last “velvet revolution” in South-Eastern Europe, with pro-European governments and ambiguous policy towards NATO (pp. 152, 174). Looking favourably at Serbia's neutral policy towards all military alliances, Nikiforov warns that at least three national questions in the Balkans remain unsolved – the Serbian, Albanian and Macedonian, and he does not rule out new conflicts over these issues. Entering NATO or EU for all these nations, according to Nikiforov, as a long-term solution to the unresolved ethnic

rivalries over disputed territories would be rather naive. As far as Russia is concerned, Nikiforov stresses that Moscow pursues a pragmatic foreign policy in the Balkans, including Serbia, based on economic interests in the region and energy projects regarding the supply of Serbia and neighbouring countries. Another important element of Russia's attitude towards the Balkans are the strong cultural and religious (Christian Orthodox) ties with Serbia, seen in the post-Soviet period as an important element of Slavic solidarity and Russian responsibility to maintain and foster Slavic culture and Slavic solidarity (p. 227).

Nikiforov's overview of the history of contemporary Serbia makes quite useful reading which offers the Russian and international readership the author's own well-grounded interpretation as well as a general Russian perspective on the problems in the Balkans. In this book, the author sums up the views of contemporary Russian historiography on Serbia, interethnic problems in the region and aspects of geopolitical changes within a wider European and Eurasian context.