

Dejan Djokić, *A Concise History of Serbia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023, 542 pp.

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The book by historian Dejan Djokić ambitiously, yet in an accessible fashion, covers the history of Serbia and Serbs from the earliest days of South Slavic migrations to the Balkans up to the contemporary period. The book is a part, and probably one of the longest, in the Cambridge Concise Histories series which up until now covered various geographies including Poland, South Africa, Bosnia, and others. The authors' choice to cover history before the early modern period was motivated by the existence of multiple English language titles covering mostly XIX and XX or XXI century history. In dealing with his topic, the author covers various aspects ranging from traditional statecraft, warfare, and economics all the way to culture, sports or women and minority history.

Considering the earliest period before the Slavic settlement in the Balkans, Djokić describes possible but unconfirmed links between the Serbs and the tribe of Serboi which had lived in the areas between Volga and Caucasus where they were mentioned in the 1<sup>st</sup> century by Pliny the Elder and 2<sup>nd</sup> century Ptolemy's texts. There they were intertwined or a part of Soubeni (potentially early Slavs) in Sarmatia of the northern Black Sea region. Djokić approaches this period with an appropriate level of scepticism and cautiousness while entertaining the plausibility of certain links. Such scepticism is needed considering how often today similar historical artifacts are abused by fringe and racialized theories about Serb or Croat Iranian origin, aimed at pushing their history as far into antiquity as possible.

Following the settlement in the Balkans author considers the development of early Serb entities and their relations with surrounding Italic Adriatic and Hellenic Aegean cultural, political, economic, and religious influences. Djokić warns us against anachronistic contemplations of the Serbian position between the Latin West and Byzantine East questioning the prominence of such divisions and categories. The author argues that as far as the issue would have been considered, early Serb elites would perceive themselves as being to the west of Constantinople, the city admired for its glory. Important cultural influences came from medieval Hungary as well, especially as the short-lived Serbo-Greek Empire dissolved into a prolonged period of retreating and diminishing enclaves of the Byzantine Slavic civilization conquered by the Ottoman Empire. This is the stage at which Djokić questions the origin of the story about Vuk Branković's treason at the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, the treason prominently described in the Kosovo Myth, a central Serbian national myth. There were at least two prominent medieval battles of Kosovo, the first one in 1389 and the second one in 1448, and it was in the second one that the defeated Hungarian military and political leader János Hunyadi (known in Serbian folklore as a folk hero Sibirjanin

Janko) was captured by Vuk Branković who requested ransom for his liberation. Djokić explains how two battles may have been united in the folkloristic stories of the Kosovo Myth.

Ottoman history of the Balkans is covered in the subsequent part explaining complexities in relations both between the Empire and its non-Muslim communities, but also within different communities. Djokić rejects romantic nationalist interpretations of the Ottoman period as an era of centuries of oppression and suffering yet warns us against the romanization of the period as well as acknowledging inbuilt systemic inequalities and occasional and brutal state-led or intercommunal violence. Wars between the Ottomans and the Habsburg Empire even led to the consequential Great Migrations of the Serbs to southern Hungary (Vojvodina, Slavonia, Croatia) in the 17th and 18th centuries. Djokić highlights the resulting depopulation and resettlement waves in Serbia which partially contributed to the development of regional ethnic patchwork. Movement contributing to polycentric development, both within and beyond various imperial borders, is in fact one of the rare common places that the author identifies throughout history. Serbian Orthodox Church, an institution established in 1219, itself divided into different centres (Cetinje, Sremski Karlovci, Belgrade, Istanbul or even Dalmatia nominally linked with the Ukrainian town of Chernivtsi), preserved many traditions of the Serbian medieval state in Ottoman, Venetian, and Habsburg territories and peripheries. Considering the Ottoman period, the author notices how even anti-nationalist Serbian historiography, often focused on modernization as a process of catching up with Europe, fails to pay appropriate attention to modernization efforts led by the Ottoman elites. Those elites themselves often faced similar resistance and obstacles to their efforts from the local Muslim population. In the early post-revolutionary Serbia, which was still nominally linked to the Empire, Ottoman representatives sent from Istanbul were among the most educated and cosmopolitan members of Belgrade's nascent urban elite which developed around new revolutionary leadership, traders as well as educated administrators from the Habsburg Serb communities.

This was the period Djokić describes as the dual Serbian-Ottoman administration which lasted between the Serbian Revolution and 1829 when the direct Ottoman rule in the land was abolished. Soon after, in 1835, serfdom was abolished with the urban population becoming more and more Christianised and often violent departure of nearly the entire rural Muslim population. Djokić describes challenges of modernization visible among the others in the work on language reform done by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787–1864) who was recognized in Serbia only after a long period of rejection and after achieving recognition in Germany and Austria. Part of his work is today uncritically problematized or glorified by some commentators in Serbia and neighbouring countries, but the author warns us against anachronistic attribution of meaning. The new Principality of Serbia combined elements of autocratic rule by most often actually illiterate revolutionary leadership and despotic Obrenović rulers with almost counter-intuitive support for the modernizing vision of enlightened civil servants coming from Habsburg Serbs in what is now Vojvodina, Transylvania, Croatia, or Hungary.

In the following chapters, Djokić describes dramatic history of Serbia and Serbs in 20<sup>th</sup> century which started with 1903 May Coup and assassination of King Aleksandar Obrenović and Queen Draga, 1908 annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary, followed by the First and Second Balkan Wars in 1912–1913 which brought significant southward territorial expansion to Kosovo and Macedonia. All of this was significantly overshadowed by World War I after the Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. Taking enormous casualties Serbia resisted military expeditions by significantly more powerful Central Powers for a surprising period. Ultimately the country was occupied with last-moment evacuation over Albania known today in Serbian historiography as the Albanian Golgotha. Government-in-exile on the Greek island of Corfu coordinated heroic military efforts at the Salonica front with political work including the signing of the Corfu Declaration between the prime minister of Serbia and the president of the Yugoslav Committee on the future common Yugoslav state. This declaration was only the beginning of a nonlinear and often volatile process of Yugoslav state and nation-building in the interwar period.

Repeatedly and clearly stating his modernist orientation Djokić is particularly authoritative when dealing with the Yugoslav period of Serbian history. The author addresses enormous inner regional diversity in development and conceptual or constitutional misunderstandings in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (known also as First Yugoslavia), World War II Yugoslav government in exile and the resistance movement. The trauma of the Genocide of Serbs in the Nazi puppet Independent State of Croatia and the parallel internal civil war situation between different groups (including the internal Serb bitter struggle between Chetniks and Yugoslav Partisans) left a particularly strong mark and social rifts up to the present day. While Yugoslav Partisans will develop into the most effective resistance movement in occupied Europe and with royalist Chetniks postponing resistance or progressively engaging in direct collaboration, the first group is today often rejected by nationalists for their alleged insufficient patriotic credentials. This narrative often ignores basic facts (Djokić for example highlights the post-war patriotic stance of Moše Pijade or official socialist republican symbols such as flags or coats of arms) and presents the story of nominally two resistance movements in which Chetniks are mistakenly, but de facto recognized as the only real Serbian resistance movement. Djokić nevertheless also repeatedly warns his reader about the complexity of Chetnik's history and organization, their prewar and pre-Yugoslav role, and the fact that during the war there was no strong central command controlling brutal local leaders, all of which may somewhat complicate any simple picture of the group.

The author further comments on the remarkable reconstruction of the Yugoslav state in the immediate aftermath of World War II which probably resulted in ten times more victims than the Yugoslav War of 1990s. New Yugoslavia was now a federal socialist republic instead of a prewar kingdom. The Socialist Republic of Serbia will in this new framework develop into a federation within the federation as it was the only constituent republic with two autonomous provinces. Djokić describes how at least

initially Serbia seemed satisfied with its new position. Its capital Belgrade served as a federal capital city, while significant postwar reconstruction, and development, 1948 split with the Soviet Union and with subsequent Yugoslav central role among the Non-Aligned countries all contributed to the new confidence. New technologies and factories were open not only in the largest cities with the average standard of living and public services higher than ever before. Culturally, Yugoslavia was much more open than other socialist states with Belgrade developing into a lively and exciting large European city easily bringing together the West, East, and Global South. Djokić describes how the so-called national question, a burdensome issue up to the present day, will not reappear at least until the late 1960s and the 1967 declaration of independence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church (other Orthodox churches will recognize it only after the Serbian Orthodox Church did so in 2022). From the 1970s tensions in Kosovo turned into lasting elements of politics at Serbian and federal Yugoslav level feeding under stream nationalist opposition to the regime.

A decade of 1990s was a particularly tragic period of Serbian history marked by the breakup of Yugoslavia, multiple lost wars, economic collapse, and deep estrangement with a big part of the world. Djokić is therefore appropriately naming this chapter as a *Ruin and Recovery (after 1990)*. The so-called anti-bureaucratic revolution abolished the autonomies of Vojvodina and Kosovo in many ways marked the move of dissident nationalist narratives into the political mainstream of Socialist Serbia. Djokić explains how the new campaign was part of efforts to rectify the supposed injustice of what was perceived as excessively decentralizing (effectively con-federalizing) the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution. Serbian relations with two of the neighbouring republics (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia) were complicated by the fact that in both there were large Serb communities with first-hand World War II genocide memories, which were apprehensive of minorization and separation from Serbia. A mismatch between socialist-era republican boundaries and very complex ethnic distribution resulted in the fact that out of 9.8 million people in socialist Serbia 6.4 million were Serbs with large Albanian, Hungarian, and other communities. At the same time, there were 2.1 million Serbs in other republics, mostly Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Djokić explains additional confusion caused by potentially deliberately ambiguous provisions on the right to self-determination which belonged either to republics or constituent nations, or potentially even both. Following the failure of democratic opposition and escalating interethnic violence Djokić is justifiably lamenting about missed opportunities and counterfactual scenarios including the ideas on how, just maybe, 80 years old and marginalized Milovan Djilas could have helped fragile Serbian democratic transition. Djokić probably imagines how Djilas as one of the best-known dissidents could have played the role of Serbian Václav Havel (in that case maybe even reverse comparison would be imaginable). However, while both were born as Slavic federations built on ruins of Austria-Hungary, the vanishing Yugoslavia only served as a bad lesson for Czechoslovakia while at the same time elites in Belgrade and Zagreb had different visions of the future from their peers in Prague

and Bratislava. Still, Djokić description of the 1990s shows how a failed state may still have a powerful civil society with the decade being marked by unprecedented civic, antiauthoritarian and antiwar movements and demonstrations. Understanding why so many Serbs, not only in Serbia, strongly rejected both Milošević and nationalist forces, will help us understand not only recovery after 2000 but also the lasting contradictions and complexities of Serbian society. The last subchapter deals with what the author calls Serbia in a populist world in the period between 2012 and 2022. This period began with the electoral defeat of Boris Tadić and the Democratic Party in presidential and parliamentary elections in 2012. Serbian current leader Aleksandar Vučić and his populist big tent Serbian Progressive Party, created by a split from the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party, evolved into a dominant and often hegemonic political power in the country with marginalized, disunited and often demonized opposition. The new government's big tent tactics ranged from the appointment of Ana Brnabić as the first female, ethnic Croat, and first openly gay prime minister and COVID solidarity diplomacy towards the region on one side, to almost permanent nationalist tensions with Kosovo Albanian leadership or revisionist interpretations of Serbian role in Yugoslav Wars on the other.

This rough summary and commentary of the already nominally concise history of Serbia certainly cannot do the full justice to the book but shall in fact motivate a reader to engage further with it and with various aspects of often fascinating Serbian history. While Djokić clearly underlines that continuity between the pre-modern and modern periods cannot be established, he the same time successfully manages to follow common themes over centuries when dealing with cross-imperial mobilities, intercultural cooperative and conflictual relations, undefined and moving land boundaries or lasting inner societal cultural diversity. Djokić skilfully and elegantly enriches the main narrative with often marginalized stories about women, sexual, religious, and ethnic minorities, sports, music, education, or medical history. The book will probably challenge some existing stereotypes and will contribute to a better understanding of Serbian past, present and future prospects. As such, it will be of use both for the international academic community and for anyone professionally or personally interested in learning about Serbia. Such a comprehensive and accessible work was recognized locally as well with quick translation and publication of the book in Serbian aimed at local readers. Care to detail is visible in every part of the book be it with heartwarming dedication at the end of acknowledgements or carefully selected maps and images or further reading recommendations. This book will therefore be of interest for many readers of 'Balcanica Posnaniensia. Acta et studia' to whom we are strongly recommending it.

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