

Nationalistic Discourses in Serbian Historiography: Kosovo as a Historical Topics since the Modernizing Era¹

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Eric J. Hobsbawm, a prominent historian of present times, prospected how the destiny of ‘nations’ and ‘nationalism’ could be as following in his work:

[T]he very fact that historians are at least beginning to make some progress in the study and analysis of nations and nationalism suggests that, as so often, the phenomenon is past its peak. The owl of Minerva which bring wisdom, said Hegel, flies out at dusk. It is a good sign that it is circling round nations and nationalism.³

In spite of his comments, which sound like a prediction, nationalism seems still alive all over the world, although it might be weakened someday in future. Nationalism issues are crucial also in the Balkans. Among those that have happened in Balkan since 1991, recent events regarding Kosovo have been heavily influenced by nationalism; if we follow Hobsbawm in regard to the definition of nationalism, the case of Kosovo could be an illustrative example of it⁴. The Constitutions of Republic of Kosovo advocate equality of consisting peoples of the new-born state, but its route to the independence could be regarded as a nation-state-building process.⁵ The case of Kosovo illustrates that achievement of the nation state could be still one of the prime goals for the Balkan nations to pursue.

In this sense, the Kosovo problems have attracted attentions from researchers.

The declaration of the independence as the Kosovo republic in 2008 seems to have ended a cycle of the Kosovo problem. It should be necessary ample time for more objective analyze into the issues, but now is a good opportunity to launch researches dedicated to why and how the issues emerged. This tendency has already appeared in the works that are mentioned in the precedent paragraph. To understand origins of the issues should contribute to understand the problems fundamentally.

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³ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge University Press, 1992(1990), p. 192.

⁴ Referring to definition of Ernest Gellner, another important figure in the study on nationalism, Hobsbawm describes that nationalism is ‘a principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent.’(cited by the author) *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵ It should be another theme to be examined how the equality among peoples in Kosovo is actually ensured.

When the focus is directed to the origins, historical arguments of the Kosovo problem would appear, because it was heavily influenced by a clash of historical interpretations regarding Kosovo. When the Kosovo problem emerged inside the Serbian society at the beginning of the 1980s, it was dealt with not only by politicians and journalists, also by historians who sought to show the Serbian historical rights to that area. History played a crucial role as an authorizing idea behind the issues.

From this point of view, this article attempts to illustrate a relationship between the rise of nationalism and the role of historiography in Serbia during 1980s, focusing on the Kosovo issues.

1. Nationalism and History

Nationalism or national identity seems to be one of the common themes shared by many specialists on this region. This is reflected in the contents of a series of volumes that were published in recent years to reflect back the situation of the research on the Yugoslav wars during the 1990s or Yugoslavia in general.⁶ For example, a book edited by Dejan Djokić and James Ker-Lindsay, which is one of the newest review publications, shows concern openly for nationalism issues. According to them, the volume tries to tackle the crucial questions such as the emergence of Yugoslavia, its development and its failure by addressing the topics to which less attention has been paid so far. Meanwhile, in the introduction to the book, they took up the issues of nationalism and national identity as a common theme shared with authors of almost all chapters of the book. The question of nationalism and national identity was paraphrased in the introduction: “How were the people of Yugoslavia told to see themselves? And how did they actually see themselves?”⁷

A substantial number of works has been written on nationalism, but first of all, a classical volume on nationalism of Eastern Europe, which was edited by Peter F. Sugar and Ivo John Lederer, is referred here. In the introduction to the volume, which was published in 1969 as the first version, Sugar argues characteristics of the nationalism in the region. Citing arguments of George Weill, Sugar points out that an approach to nationalism from “historic rights” was common in Eastern Europe and Germany. This way of approaching was intended to revive the “good old days” of a nation, during which significant institutional factors such as constitutions

⁶ For example, Sabrina Ramet, *Thinking about Yugoslavia: Scholarly Debates about the Yugoslav Breakup and the Wars in Bosnia and Kosovo*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005; Lenard J. Cohen and Jasna Dragović-Soso (eds.), *State Collapse in South-Eastern Europe: New Perspectives on Yugoslavia's Disintegration*. West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 2008; Charles Ingrao and Thomas A. Emmert (eds.), *Confronting the Yugoslav Controversies: A Scholars' Initiative*. West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 2009; Dejan Djokić and James Ker-Lindsay (eds.), *New Perspectives on Yugoslavia: Key Issues and Controversies*. London and New York, Routledge, 2011. These works in English were referred by Japanese scholars to publish review works also in Japanese. They also referred concise history books of Yugoslavia, which were written in Japanese after the turn of the century, concentrating its interest on the wars in the 1990s.

⁷ Dejan Djokić and James Ker-Lindsay (eds.) *op. cit.*, p. 3.

and religion developed into its integral form. This process proved that the nation had their own creative potential, though it had been suppressed by foreign regimes. In order to fulfill the potentiality of the nation, therefore, nationalists in Eastern Europe claimed that the external influence ranging from language to politics should be eradicated, and then people should be cognizant of their integrity and past brilliance to make certain they had that potential. Being reminded of the brilliant past and reviving the nation as a symbol for the future, in other words, linking the past and the future through revival of the nation, their century-long backwardness could be overcome. As a result of this assertion of the nationalists, according to Sugar, “xenophobia, historicism, and a forced feeling of superiority emerged as decisive forces in eastern Europe⁸.”

Here, historicism represents only one of the three key elements for the nationalism in Eastern Europe. As Sugar argued referring to Weill’s idea, however, the nationalists in Eastern Europe regarded “historic rights” as its fundamental element and their ideas were inspired by the past golden ages, which would mean that historicism, or history itself, could trigger the rise of nationalism. In this sense, it could be rather important to discuss the role of history when examining the nationalism in Eastern Europe. Sugar also makes comments on the role of history as following:

... [P]leas and hopes for a future justified by past greatness and services were addressed by all [people]... [T]he eastern Europeans did not think of themselves as simply the men of the future, they were also those of the past, and the place they claimed was theirs by historic right. For this reason, history served not only as the proof of the validity but also as the justification of their claims. Soon it became a weapon...Almost every nationality discovered its own “civilizing mission” through historical studies and based certain rights on this activity⁹ (Emphasizing italics added by the author).

History was not only mere *weapon* when the nationalists yearned for their nation, but it could be one of the absolutely essential one for them.

2. A Concise History of Historiography in Serbia

According to Stallaerts, Serbian historiography has been evolved through roughly four phases¹⁰. The first one was the early-modern historiography before the beginning of the 19th century. It was established on records of Kings and Saints, and local folk songs about events and heroes. As

⁸ Peter F. Sugar, “Introduction” in Peter F. Sugar and Ivo J. Lederer (eds.) *Nationalism in Eastern Europe*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1994(1971), pp. 34-35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁰ Robert Stallaerts, “Historiography in the Former and New Yugoslavia,” *Revue belge d’Histoire contemporaine*, 29, 1999. p. 326.

the first modern historian in Serbia, Jovan Rajić should be referred. He was trained in the Kiev Theological Academy, and then worked as an archimandrite in the Kovilj monastery, Vojvodina. He worked also as an educator, historian, and philosopher. As a historian, he wrote a four-volume history titled as *The History of Various Slavic Peoples, especially of Bulgars, Croats and Serbs*¹¹. This work, as the de facto first history of Serbs, had been influencing historical studies in Serbia through modernizing era. Like as Rajić, in the dawn of the modern historiography in Serbia, clergymen took important part both in educating and writing history.

The forerunner was followed by some successors, one of which was Pantelija Srećković. He was also trained as a clergyman in Kiev, but worked as a history teacher in higher education through almost all his career. He clearly claimed that history should be utilized for the state and nation; in this sense, it can be proper to say that he was a typical romantic historian. He was appointed the first professor of history in Velika škola, a predecessor to the University of Belgrade, and had class of “History of Serbian people.” Not only as academics or professor, he also worked as a politician. He contributed to the institutional establishment and development, but it is his rival, Ilarion Ruvarac, who are highly evaluated to open the second phase of Serbian historiography. Ruvarac also studied theology and became a professor in Karlovac seminary. While working as the professor, he had keen interests in historical studies. As a historian adopting critical methods, he challenged Srećković’s Romantic school. The clash between Srećković and Ruvarac regarding methodology for historical studies could be depicted as a battle between those who admitted the utilization of history to contribute to political or ideological intentions, and those who denied it and tried to preserve professional morality as historians. This framework can be extremely simplified one, but it can be seen as a tradition in the Serbian historiography¹². Finally, this battle resulted in the win by the Ruvarac side, the critical school. The post in Velika škola had been occupied by Srećković for more than 30 years, but on his retirement, it was handed to Ljubomir Kovačević, one of the Ruvarac’s disciples. Under the influence of the critical school, the historical methodology progressed in Serbia. They dealt with even Serbian national history with the full academic rigour, so that they sometimes revealed historical facts which could be inconvenient to the new developing nation state. Ruvarac shed light on the fictitiousness of the Kosovo Legend, demonstrating that some legendary “facts” were not true historically. His strict attitude like this was often harshly criticized by contemporary intellectuals as non-patriotic¹³.

The third phase began after the Second World War: its feature was Marxist influences on historical perspectives¹⁴. During this era, historical studies were expected to serve for the Socialist

¹¹ Jovan Rajić, *Istorija raznih slovenskih narodov, najpače Bolgar, Horvatov i Serbov*, 1794-1795.

¹² Predrag J. Marković, Miloš Ković and Nataša Milićević, “Developments in Serbian Historiography since 1989,” in: Ulf Brunnbauer (ed.) *(Re)Writing History: Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism*. Studies on South East Europe, Vol. 4, Munster, LIT Verlag, 2004. p. 277.

¹³ Dejan Djokić, “Whose Myth? Which Nation? The Serbian Kosovo Myth Revisited”, in: Janos M. Bak, Jörg Jarnut, Pierre Monnet and Bernd Schneidmueller (eds.) *Uses and Abuses of the Middle Ages: 19th-21st Century*. Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 2009, pp. 16-17

¹⁴ This paper deals with the four phases according to the above mentioned Stallaerts’ periodization, but the period between the second and third phases should be paid attention. For example, Marković, Ković and Milićević concisely demonstrated the circumstances during the inter-war period. According to them, there were several attempts to introduce newer perspectives which were adopted in Western Europe at that time, but it was hard to make progress

regime, more or less. In this period, especially between the 1960s and the 1970s, research institutions were established in order to conduct historical research which was ideologically suitable to the Communist authorities. Since the time of modernization, the universities had taken leading role in developing the historical studies in Serbia, but most institutions were set outside the universities at this time. The representative examples were Institution for History of Workers' Movement, which was founded in each republic, or Institution for Social Sciences¹⁵.

There were also attempts to form a pan-Yugoslav and trans-republic historical society, but it was not so easy. Under the Yugoslav workers' self-management system, most organization functioned within the borders of the republic in which the organization is located. This can be mentioned in historical studies too. Most institutions, including universities, many institutions, Academy, had been developed within the framework each republic. The League of Historical Association of Yugoslavia was organized in order to demonstrate united historical view which could be shared with all citizens in every republic, but it looked like only a cluster of the Historical Association which had been set in all component republics¹⁶.

As far as methodology concerned, there was influence of Marxist historical materialism, but its impact was not so decisive, in comparison with other Socialist states in Eastern Europe. Socialist Yugoslavia was expelled from Cominform due to quarrel with Stalin in 1948. As a result, this clash favored historians in Yugoslavia, because they were able to keep their distance from direct "mentorship" of Soviet Union. The historians were able to enjoy relative freedom of historical methodology, but they developed no innovations. Many historians, therefore, still adhered to their old-fashioned historicism¹⁷.

Regarding topics, during the third phase, Kosovo was not dealt with as one of the main topics which historians should pay attention, because the National Liberation War was the most important topic in the post-war Yugoslav or Serbian historiography¹⁸.

The fourth phase was the 1980s, which beginning was marked with the death of Yugoslav great leader. In contrast to the preceding third phase, this phase was extremely abundant with various discourses about Kosovo.

3. Brand-new Historiography during the 1980s

After Tito died in 1980, consequences for historical research were radically changed; roughly speaking, no taboo subjects existed any more. The most symbolical violation of taboos

because of damages by the wars. (Marković, Ković and Milićević, *op. cit.*, pp. 277-278) Addition to that, regarding the historiography about Kosovo, the period around the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) was also crucial. This topic will be discussed in my forthcoming paper "The Kosovo Discourses in Serbian Historiography around the Balkan Wars."

¹⁵ Ђорђе Станковић и Љубомир Димић, *Историографија под надзором: прилози историји историографије*, књ. 1. Београд, Новинско-издавачка установа Службени лист СРЈ, 1996, стр. 240.

¹⁶ Вођо Репа, „Jugoslavanska historiografija po drugi svetovni vojni“ *Tokovi istorije*, br. 1-4, 1999, str. 312-313.

¹⁷ Мирослав Јовановић и Радивој Рајић, *Криза историје: српска историографија и друштвени изазови краја 20. и почетка 21. века*, Београд, Удружење за друштвену историју, стр. 49.

¹⁸ Marković, Ković and Milićević, *op. cit.*, pp. 280-281

was committed against Tito himself. For example, a book of Vladimir Dedijer divulged several undisclosed aspects of their late charismatic leader¹⁹. He was one of the Tito's nearest comrades and wrote his biography, but parted ways with his leader in the 1950s due to a sort of "ideological clash."

As private aspects of Tito became one of focal points after his death, "brand-new" discussions broke out in the 1980s. It is partly because the mighty leader passed away, of course, but another reason was instable economic conditions of the state. Yugoslav society was shaken by financial crises from both inside and outside. It resulted in change of existing values, including historical perspectives. Serbian historians began to focus on the following topics: the Četnik movement²⁰, pre-communist Yugoslavia, the Serb casualties during the Second World War, and communist repression after 1944²¹. These topics, which related to the relatively recent past, had been cautiously kept away historical research until then. Another trait common to them could be that they related to evaluation or re-description of Serb national identity.²²

The Kosovo issues can be also considered in this context. The Kosovo issues were problems about the status of the province and the Albanians who lived there. Meanwhile, they were also related to historical perception regarding the region. Including the historical rights to the province, Serb-Albanian relation in Kosovo were re-examined during the 1980s.

From the Serb side, it was necessary to legitimize their historical and ethnic rights to Kosovo, because the province was inhabited by Albanians as majority. As the historians in modern Serbia did so, the Serb historians during the 1980s also took model after the Medieval Kingdom; they focused on ethnic component in the medieval era and Islamization and Albanization under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. For further understanding Kosovo, the Special Department for Research of Kosovo was established in the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in 1982. This Department was organized mainly by historians, but other specialists also participated in it, such as philologists, linguists, forensic scientists, archeologists, and so on. They were encouraged to demonstrate linkage between Serbs in medieval Kosovo and contemporary Serbs through comprehensive inter-disciplinary study.

From the Albanian side, the most important point which they claimed was demonstration of continuity between ancient Illyrians and medieval Albanians. Like as the Serb counterparts, they also launched inter-disciplinary research on the continuity. According to them, the Great

¹⁹ See. Vladimir Dedijer, *Novi prilozi za biografiju Josipa Broza Tita*, 1-2, Beograd, Udruženi izdavači, 1981.

²⁰ Četnik is a movement during the World War II, which was conducted by a officer in Yugoslav Kingdom, Draža Mihailović. They advocated Karađorđe dynasty, which had exiled to London when Nazi Germany attacked the Kingdom, They gradually transformed into Serbian nationalistic movements and fight against both the Ustaša forces, which was a Croatian extreme right organization, controlled present-day Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina at that time and undertook genocidal operations there against Serbs, Jews and Romas, as well as the Communist Partisan forces, which were to establish Socialist Yugoslavia. When the war was over, Mihailović was sentenced to death by the Communist court. His rehabilitation has also been one of historical controversial themes in Serbia since the 1980s.

²¹ Marković, Ković and Milićević, *op. cit.* pp. 281-286.

²² In addition, Marković at el. describe that "historic-centered" writings by non professional historians, like the Dedier's work, came to attract wider public attention in this decade. It was another characteristic of historical studies at that time.

Serb Migrations never happened, but Serbs just sporadically and voluntarily migrated instead. In addition, they claimed that the Albanian territory should be expanded to Niš at least, and the decision in the Berlin Congress, 1878, was cession of their land to Serbia. They also insisted on their “victimless” especially in the context of modern era. The arguments from both sides are very typical for nationalist discourses, and quite similar each other in that both of them affirmed their indigenoussness and victimless²³.

It was Dimitrije Bogdanović who took leading part in Serbia on the formation of historical discourses about Kosovo. He studied languages and literature of medieval Serbs as jurist or Slavist, but started to deal with the Kosovo issues from the early 1980s. He was one of the founders of the Special Department for Research of Kosovo, then he published *Knjiga o Kosovu* (A Book about Kosovo) in 1985, as the first complete history of the region. According to the contents of the book, the Illyrian theory was refuted from historical, linguistic and archeological viewpoints. There is no continuity between Illyrians and Albanians; rather Albanians never form any type of collectivity until they made the first contact with Slavs, who immigrated into the Balkan Peninsula in the 7th century²⁴. After the contacts, Serbs and Albanians coexisted since the beginning of the medieval centuries, but after the Albanian migration into Serb lands, including Kosovo, violence became committed by Albanians against Serbs, and such situations have continued until now²⁵.

His book seemed to be widely received by society, as it was re-published several times after the first publication. That book was highly evaluated as one of very important works which attempted to present history of Kosovo²⁶. While it was highly evaluated by some contemporary historians and the Serbian Orthodox Church, it provoked arguments even among Serb historians. Some historians severely criticized his work, pointing out that some data were even misused in several parts²⁷. He stated in an interview that he was not professional historians and his book was not history book²⁸. But his view on Kosovo supported a stereotype which existed behind the Kosovo problem, as an academic authority, resonating with discourses of ideologues from the Serbian Orthodox Church. His work might not be written by professional historians, but –or because of that—it was supported by the public.

Conclusion: As Important Questions for Further Research

The historiography in Serbia has been developed with the positivistic methodology since the 19th century. Meanwhile, it has been also expected to serve for the nation or the state, and it was actually utilized by authorities several times. Just as Predrag Marković said, the conflicts

²³ Коста Николић, *Прошлост без историје: Полемике у југословенској историографији 1961-1991*, Београд, Институт за савремену историју, 2003. стр. 174-178.

²⁴ Димитрије Богдановић, *Књига о Косову*, Београд, Српска академија науке и уметности, 1986, стр. 8-16.

²⁵ Исто, стр. 111-118.

²⁶ *Косово и Метохија у српској историји*, Београд, Српска књижевна задруга, 1989, стр. 435-436.

²⁷ Николић, н. д., стр. 183.

²⁸ „У прошлости увек има тајни,“ *Књижевне новине*, 1. јануар, 1985, стр. 10.

between these two attitudes toward history may be a kind of tradition in Serbian historiography. A typical of romantic view upon history can be seen in the Kosovo example.

Actually, discourses of the romantic historians can be evaluated worthless from the purely academic viewpoint. It would be easy to judge the discourses as not-academic ones, especially for outside watchers. This evaluation could be valid, but such kind of discourses have been supported sufficiently many citizens in Serbian society. This fact should not be underestimated. What is important, therefore, should not be to dismiss their discourses, saying that they are non-productive for scholarly discussion, but to examine the intrinsic logics in the discourses: in other words, to try to answer to following questions: why did the romantic historians advocate such a perspective?; what kind of problems did they think to be asked?; and what elements in the discourses have been supported by public? Looking into the deep part of the nationalistic “non-productive” discourses, the deep part of ordinary people also could be examined.

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