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Balkan Historiography – Ranke and his Legacy

The existence of the Montenegrins, so long precarious, was beginning to acquire stability: the prolonged conflict between the Balkan mountain and the Porte was attracting the attention of Civilised Europe ... blessings were showered on the heroic mountaineers by their Christian neighbours.

*Leopold von Ranke History of Servia
(1829)*

In addressing this question it is necessary to think clearly about how the history of the Montenegrin region and people was written in the past, and how it has been seen and understood both inside and outside Montenegro. It is a truism to say that until the twentieth century most Balkan history was oral, in societies where mass literacy was not achieved in most places until after the Second World War. In countries like Bulgaria and Serbia where in the nineteenth century there had been greater progress in establishing a modern national primary education system, oral tradition nevertheless still played (and plays) a very major part.

It is clear that the major external cultural relationship between the emerging history of Serbia and Montenegro in the first period of nation building in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was with German-speaking central Europe,

and above all the heritage of German Romanticism, particularly that of Johann Gottfried von Herder. As Robert Wilton has pointed out, "Herder did articulate ideas that were of particular relevance to the development of identity in the Balkans, and he serves as an appropriate representative of the body of Western philosophy and influence."¹

Few people read Herder nowadays. His ideas of the purity of national popular cultures where a culture is a unique and unchangeable essence of a community sit uneasily in a world of globalization and multiculturalism, as does the concept of a *Volksgeist* in a century that saw German and Italian fascism occupy the Balkans. Herder nevertheless provided a theoretical model for Serbian folksong and poetry collector and lexicographer Vuk Karadžić's work. It was the collaboration between Karadžić and Ranke that led to the writing of Ranke's *History of the Serbian Revolution*. Herder saw the role of the poet in nation formation in a dramatic way, exemplified by his phrase:

A poet is the creator of the nation around him; he gives them a world to see and has their souls in his hand to lead them to that world.²

- 1 See Robert Wilton's important article "Writing the Nation, Writing the State: Compromise and Conflict in 19th Century Balkan Cultural Identity", *The South Slav Journal*, 25 (Spring-Summer 2004), 3 ff. Wilton's claim that ideas of national awakening based around cultural identification had been articulated in time for the first Serb uprising in 1804 is perhaps questionable. This is what the Serbs have always wished the world to think, but evidence is mostly lacking and the whole idea is essentially one of transference from the modern Greek experience when the Greek diaspora intellectuals had achieved this for Greek nationalism by 1821 with great success. Serbia did not have a similar intellectual diaspora until much later, as the lonely prominence of Vuk Karadžić in the heroic Byronic period for Greece indicates.
- 2 From J.F. Herder (1744–1803), *Auszug aus einen Briefwechsel uber Ossian and die Leider alter Volker* (Weimar, 1773). For background see G. Iggers, *The German Conception of Historical Thought: From Herder to the Present* (Chicago, 1983).

The main recent mediator of Herder's ideas with the English-speaking and reading world in the twentieth century was the Oxford philosopher and cultural historian Isaiah Berlin, who is also studied less now than in his working heyday.³ Berlin's Herder is predictably idiosyncratic. The Prussian philosopher and aesthete is seen as a pluralist and precursor of cultural relativism in historical understanding, as opposed to the moral and practical certainties of the ironclad rationalism of the Enlightenment theorists. This was also the case with the Marxist philosopher G.A. Cohen, who wrote

Montesquieu and Herder found it necessary to insist on what for us is obvious. Their assertion of the existence of different coherent ways of being human opposed that tend within the Enlightenment which conceived of men as fundamentally alike across space and time, and which looked to a science of man whose generalizations would be as free of reference to particular ages and places as were the laws of the modern science of nature.⁴

Herder and those who thought like him in the central tradition and articulation of German Romanticism were major influences on Leopold von Ranke, the Prussian historian and author of *Die Serbische Revolution* which was published in Berlin in 1829, and translated into English as *A History of Servia and the Servian Revolution* (1847).⁵ Ranke's *History* fulfills all the main Herderian criteria for a national epic story of a self-sustaining ethnos, with the sub-section on Montenegrin history a complement to the main narrative. The genesis of this book is very interesting, if unclear in some details. It embodies transference from oral tradition as mediated through Vuk Karadžić

- 3 See I. Berlin's essay, "Vico and Herder", in id., *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* (London, 2000); and Wilton, "Writing the Nation".
- 4 See G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A defence* (Oxford, 1978). In the chapter on "Images of History in Hegel and Marx", Cohen rightly emphasizes the novelty of many of Herder's ideas.
- 5 Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886). For a cogent modern discussion of Ranke and his importance, see Felix Gilbert, *History: Politics or culture? Reflections on Ranke and Burckhardt* (Princeton, 1990).

in personal dialogue with Ranke, who then wrote a history that mediated Serbian oral tradition further into the mainstream of European academic historiography. This process took place very soon after Ranke had effectively abandoned classical studies and teaching for writing "modern" history. He finally gave up classics in the Gymnasium at Frankfurt an der Oder in 1825, during the period of his interchanges with Karadžić. The *Serbische Revolution* book was widely read and translated into several languages. It remained in print throughout the nineteenth century, and played an important part in helping to establish Serbia as the central state in the Balkans in outside perceptions. It was the foundation for Ranke's later study, *Serbien und die Türkei im Neunzehnten Jahrhundert* (1879). Vuk Karadžić had got to know the young Ranke in Germany, at a time when Ranke was in most senses still primarily a classical scholar, and Karadžić gave Ranke most of the material for this book. They spent some time in the Imperial capital of Vienna together, but Ranke is not thought to have ever visited the Balkans then, or later, and was a Brandenburg classical scholar seeing Serbia and Montenegro through the eyes of a local folklorist while still saturated in the works of classical Roman historians like Tacitus and Livy.

Prussian education and culture then was a heady mixture of neo-classicism inherited from the Enlightenment period under Fredrick the Great and his predecessors, with a wash of Romanticism from the turn of Goethe and his contemporaries away from neo-classicism. Karadžić had met Goethe in 1823–24 on more than one occasion and had made a good impression on the ageing Olympian of Weimar. Goethe admired the lyrical Serbian songs Karadžić had collected, but did not rate the warrior epics as highly. This was not a general perception. The development of the Greek revolution against the Ottomans after 1821 had produced a new impetus of interest in "national literatures" celebrating military virtues embodied in revolt against external oppressors from which Karadžić's work benefitted. The collaboration with Ranke on a publication of a history of Serbia and

Montenegro could not have been more timely. In Ranke's Berlin circle, the warrior virtues of the Serbs were important. Like the Prussians and the Greeks, they appeared to Ranke to be committed opponents of the Hapsburg Empire as well as of the Ottomans. Although in the debates in Berlin University in which Ranke participated after he gained a post there in 1825 Ranke took the anti-Hegelian side and rejected the great philosopher's view of history as an unfolding universal story. He in many ways found such a story in the Serbian epics, and used it to construct his own master narrative.

The self-determination of the *ethnos* from the transnational Ottoman Empire was then (as now) a liberal agenda but it could also appeal to a moderate conservative such as Ranke with his view of the task of the historian in tracing the unfolding of the work of God in human history. Ranke's God was a very Prussian Protestant God and the Serbian and Montenegrin Orthodox churches (as *Volkskirche*) could find a respected place in his narrative by comparison with the decadent transnational religions of the Roman Catholic Venetians and Muslim Ottomans. Ranke saw the Serbian uprisings as legitimate, not only because they were anti-Ottoman but as a step toward religious freedom for an oppressed people, the workings of God in human history. In this he made the working model for the thought of a later statesman like the English Prime Minister Gladstone and his espousal of the anti-Ottoman cause of the Christian Balkan people, particularly that of Bulgaria after the Batak massacres⁶.

The shadow of Tacitus's *Germania* also falls heavily over the *History of the Serbian Revolution*. The writing of Ranke echoes Tacitus's observations of what in essence are depicted as often

⁶ In 1876 a massacre of about 3,000 Bulgarian Orthodox insurgents took place at Batak in the Rhodope Mountains of southern Bulgaria. It was famously reported in a British paper by J.A. MacGahan. His account played a major role in turning public opinion against the Sultan's attempts to repress Bulgarian nationalism. The article was "The Turkish Atrocities in Bulgaria: Horrible scenes at Batak", *The London Daily News*, 22 Aug. 1876.

virtuous and rational barbarians, but they are for all their virtues, barbarians nonetheless. This is shown at a subjective level in the famous note in Ranke's diary in 1828, saying that "Of all the barbarians I have known, Vuk is the only one who has never taken the wrong direction intellectually."⁷ The Serbs and Montenegrins are seen by Ranke as virtuous primarily because of their successful attempts to have a parliament, a national church and to escape the Ottoman system. He also admired their fighting spirit, noting that

I got to know a people which has been living in subjection, with patriarchal customs and a poetic way of thinking, capable of transforming these into the hard reality of war, when the time came to liberate itself – the Serbs whose poetry you will certainly have seen.⁸

The travails of the contemporary rulers of the Obrenović dynasty, which Ranke depicts in gripping detail, do not affect this general narrative structure at all, and are clearly a product of Karadžić's own serious difficulties with the crude and semi-dictatorial nature of Belgrade rule under them, and the rulers' concessions to and deals with the Sultans. Their government was a denial of all the values of the high thinkers of the post-Congress of Vienna optimists on new and emerging "liberal" states, and gave rise to the image of Serbia as a country ruled by brutish and unscrupulous pig keepers in the heart of south-east Europe. It was convenient for Karadžić to have Ranke named as author, only, even if Ranke regarded the Serb as an equal co-author, in view of the relatively objective treatment in the *History* of Miloš Obrenović's gangsterish repression of his Karadjordjević dynastic political rivals. Karadžić needed to find financial support for his research work from the Obrenović rulers in Belgrade. Ranke's inherited classicism shows through clearly here, where

⁷ See Duncan Wilson, *The Life and Times of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, 1787–1864: Literacy, literature and national independence in Serbia* (Oxford, 1970), 228.

⁸ Letter from Ranke to his brother Heinrich in 1828.

a *Volk* might be poetic and theoretically virtuous but where its rulers remained barbarian at heart.

Little is known in detail about the later relationship between the Serbian folklorist and ethnologist and the Prussian classicist, except that they remained in lifelong contact and mutual esteem. Ranke always paid Karadžić half of the royalty earnings from the book, and later noted in his papers that he had worked "from Vuk's papers."⁹ But the book bears out Karl Marx's caustic view of Ranke that he was in his own output very frequently at odds with the theories of historical writing he put forward in his later life. There is no evidence of a principled objectivity, the "noble dream" of the historian or any significant (or insignificant) use of historical documents at all in the book, and it is unashamedly partisan toward the national aspirations of the Serbs and Montenegrins.

Vuk Karadžić was the only source in most respects, although Ranke later claimed that he had also checked all the facts himself, but there can be no doubt Karadžić saw what now would be called an "advocacy role" for the book, to advance the national cause of the Serbs and secure him favour from the Obrenović dynasty and the Russian Tsar. Was Ranke duped by the Serb, and was the publication perhaps one of the first examples of a Western intellectual love affair with a small Balkan country where the outside intellectual was not fully or well informed? This seems unlikely. Ranke was a keen and often disrespectful student of Hapsburg politics and would have been happy to offend Vienna. The same was the case with Ottoman issues. The structure of the "Eastern Question," the ultimate future of the dying Ottoman Empire had not yet been consciously articulated in Germany in a way it was in Britain after the Congress of Berlin, but the outline of what it became was certainly present in the mind of a supremely intelligent man like Ranke at the centre of Prussia's dynamic intellectual life.

⁹ Wilson, *Life and Times*, 228.

Some Ranke scholars have seen the *History* as a young man's experiment and tend to exclude it from discussion of his main corpus but there can be no doubt that it was and remains one of his most practically influential works. It legitimized a view of Serbia and Montenegro in western culture for a century, and its English publication, in 1847 in London and subsequently in New York was a symbol of the respectability of the new Serbian state in intellectual life in Europe and the United States. Ranke effectively manufactured an academic historical tradition for Serbia where none really existed before him (outside the Church). Karadžić was fortunate in his choice of historian made nearly thirty years before, as by the time of the English publication Ranke was at the height of his fame and influence in the increasingly important nineteenth century Pan-European cultural context of German universities and historical scholarship in general.

How does this relate to issues of later Montenegrin national historiography? In the *History* Ranke presents the Montenegrins as like the Serbs but further removed from "civilization" in their mountain fastnesses and bound by codes of immutable tradition. They are in a sense the "true" Slavs with a fixed inner *ethnos* identity, whereas the lowland Serbs have had to adapt more to the pressures of their neighbours. In cultural terms, if Herder's and Hegel's ideas lived on in the historian's subconscious as far as the Serbs are depicted, with the Montenegrins the "natural man/noble savage" of Rousseau is also present in the background. Or in modern historical terminology, the Serbs had a more transnational existence whereas the Montenegrins did not. Their main activity was in removing themselves from the rule of two transnational powers, that of Venice, and the Ottomans. As a critic of decadent modern empires, Ranke clearly admired the Montenegrins' emancipation from Venetian rule, and particularly their warrior virtues. Ranke saw Venice in the Adriatic as an antiquated and obsolete construct, and thus the Homeric virtues of the Montenegrin warriors who ejected it from their coast as a force for modernization as well as construction of a new society.

It is perhaps significant that the long section of the *History* about Montenegro has always received much less attention than the main Serbian section. This is not simply because Serbia is a larger and more populous nation than Montenegro, but the writing on Montenegro embodies the radical side of Ranke in this work, his clear endorsement of what nowadays would be termed a guerilla war of liberation. He sees the Serbs as having staged a successful revolution, but much more at a political and constitutional level, whereas the Montenegrins had waged a guerilla military insurgency. It is also significant that a scholarly commentator of the last generation from the main British Yugophile and Serbophile tradition like Duncan Wilson gives little consideration to the Montenegrin aspects of Karadžić's corpus in his otherwise authoritative study of the latter's work even though some of Karadžić's most fruitful folksong and legend collecting took place in Montenegro.¹⁰ Wilson does not discuss the Montenegrin part of the joint Ranke volume at all either, an illustration of how British Yugocentrism often elided Montenegro from historical perception. This elision was also sometimes the case with the nineteenth century historians. After Ranke, serious consideration of Montenegrin history almost died in Europe, only to revive in England after the Congress of Berlin. An amateur historian like the late-Victorian cleric Denton draws heavily on Ranke for his even more developed view of the "virtuous barbarians" with their Victorian moral probity in matters of sex and marriage and disinterest in money.¹¹

10 This made possible the major volume published in Stuttgart in 1837, *Montenegro und die Montenegriner: Ein Beitrag zur Kenntniss der europäischen Türkei und des serbischen Volkes*. Karadžić had published an important earlier paper in 1834, "A View of Montenegro", in which he sought to counter the prevailing view in the German-speaking world that Montenegro was only a brigand society, as expressed in the *Brockhaus Encyclopedia* and elsewhere. The resemblances with contemporary debates about the influence of "organised crime" in the Balkans are unavoidable.

11 See W. Denton, *Montenegro: Its People and their History* (London, 1877).

There are in fact several "histories" of Montenegro. There is the strong oral and poetic tradition, with its heroic ballads of resistance to outside invaders and oppressors, principally the Ottoman Turks. These are the songs of love and war. Then there is the Ottoman history itself, for although Montenegro was not conquered or integrated into the Empire in an orthodox manner, many of its main trade, cultural and external relationships for hundreds of years were with the imperial lands. The Venetian coast was indeed just that and with the decline of Venice in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries more and more links developed with the growing urban centers of semi-independent *pashliks* like that of the Bushatis in Skadar/Shkodra. Much of this Ottoman history is still little known or researched, although the very welcome full opening of the Ottoman archives under the current Turkish government should change this over time. There is also the history merged with geographical exploration in the numerous travelers narratives that started to emerge mentioning Montenegro after about 1830.

Another narrative is that of the Montenegrin Orthodox church with its transnational origins in Byzantium and the medieval Serbian Empire. It is this latter story that was most influential in the twentieth century. The rulers of the post-Congress of Berlin Montenegrin state with its micro-capital in Cetinje were priest-kings and operated a paternalist theocracy. The poetic tradition of the Romantic generation represented by Karadžić had merged with the Christian traditions of Orthodox belief and a "national" church was necessary to embody it. The current travails and schisms in the Montenegrin church illustrate how much this is still a live and very difficult issue at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The formation of the new Montenegrin state after 2006 has brought the need for a unified national church that can embody the spiritual *ethnos* of the new political unit. Montenegro also continues to face the issue of transnationality, now embodied in the European Union, which the Montenegrin government wishes to join. Joining the Euro-

pean Union would involve a loss of sovereignty much greater than Montenegro had given up within either Royalist or Communist Yugoslavia.

Are Ranke and his writing still relevant to this new agenda? Some of the modern historians of Montenegro would appear to think not. The *History of the Serbian Revolution* is not mentioned or cited at all in Elizabeth Roberts's *Realm of the Black Mountain*, or in the Italian historian Antun Sbutega's *Storia del Montenegro dalle origini ai giorni nostri*.¹² When it appeared in Britain, Roberts's work was praised extravagantly by ex-European Union foreign policy representative Christopher Patten in the *Times Literary Supplement* in London. Patten clearly did not like Montenegrin independence movement leader Milo Djukanović, describing him as

A Prime Minister before he was thirty, he is tall, good looking, charming and no more trustworthy than you would expect of a survivor of the breakup of Yugoslavia.

This might perhaps be read as fair comment from a negotiator who strove mightily for some years to prevent, as he puts it, "Montenegro's escape from Serbia." But Patten does not escape the spell of Ranke's tradition, even if he appears to be unaware of it, when he goes on to say

Perhaps those from whom so much heroism has been expected find it difficult to countenance moderation. The courage has never been in doubt... In the Partisan struggles against the German and Italian occupiers in the Second World War, Montenegrins – Djilas prominent among them – played more than their proportionate part in that heroic fight against the odds. More than a third of the Partisans generals came from Montenegro. Djilas – Tito's leading dissident critic – is the nearest person in Robert's book to a real hero. Should we now add to his the name of Milo Djukanović, the guileful Prime Minister and President who maneuvered Montene-

12 E. Roberts, *Realm of the Black Mountain: A history of Montenegro* (London, 2007); and A. Sbutega, *Storia del Montenegro dalle origini ai giorni nostri* (Rome, 2006).

gro through the shoals of Serbian and European politics to the achievement of Independence?¹³

The civilized man – Christopher Patten – as a moderate humanist, the “European,” is counterpoised to the Balkan man – Milo Djukanović – the product of the *ethnos*, who is untrustworthy and difficult to deal with, as Tacitus’s disciple Ranke describes Miloš Obrenović and other Serbian leaders two centuries ago. The barbarian, heroic in war but untrustworthy in peace is always there in some European eyes in the Balkans, whether in nineteenth century Prussia or twentieth century Brussels. For Milo Djukanović read Miloš Obrenović, the flawed descendant of heroic resisters who destroyed Venetian and Ottoman power, just as Milo Djukanović is the “descendant” of the heroic Montenegrin Partisan generals who Tito sent to Goli Otok forced labour camp.

The modern Montenegrin state was constituted on the basis of the Versailles treaty borders. Although Versailles was disastrous for Montenegro in many ways, it did bring one clear gain, the recognition of the modern borders which in turn formed the borders of the Montenegrin socialist republic within the first Yugoslavia and now the modern independent state. Yet in another sense the Versailles borders were a confidence trick – for there were no internal borders within interwar Yugoslavia that mattered, except the northern borders of Kosova in periods of tension and crisis there. Montenegro was open for settlement from other Yugoslavs, as Croatia was and the proportion of the population that was born outside Montenegro grew with industrialisation and most of these immigrants were from Serbia.

The real question about Ranke and his inheritance ultimately goes back to Herder, and as Isaiah Berlin saw him, as a critic of the Enlightenment. Ranke was not very interested

13 *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 June 2007, 13. Patten does not face the issue of supercessionism implied in the European Union policy, that the EU itself represents a transnational ideal that ‘supersedes’ ordinary national feelings and identities.

in borders and writes little about them. In his time the *ethnos* seemed always to have been there. The *ethnos* is at the heart of Montenegrin nationalism, and always has been, while the European Union is a child of the Enlightenment, and looks forward to a borderless Europe. As has been written about the post-communist history of the important archaeological site at Svac/Shesh near the border with Albania

The plethora of new states will all need new historical definition. No less than seven new countries, Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and probably soon Kosova, will have emerged from what was the former Yugoslavia, and in most cases local historians see themselves as “rescuing” a lost national narrative from the distortions and illegitimacy of communist history.¹⁴

So, Montenegrin historical authors now find themselves working against the pressures of the Europeanist Union on their fluid and robust *ethnos* traditions.¹⁵

14 A. Cameron and J. Pettifer, “The Enigma of Montenegrin History: The example of Svac”, *The South Slav Journal*, 28: 1–2 (July 2008), and *Botashqiptare*, Tirana, 2008.

15 An interesting example of this are the changes in school textbooks being demanded by the European Union before Montenegro can become a member. An earlier draft of this paper first appeared in the *Journal of the Montenegrin Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Winter 2012, Podgorica,