

BOOK REVIEW

Nick Miller, *The Nonconformists. Culture, Politics, and Nationalism in a Serbian Intellectual Circle, 1944–1991*, Central European University Press, ISBN: 978-963-7326-93-6

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This book is the best entrance/introduction to understanding the Serbian nationalism which was linked very closely to the Serbian intellectual elite, here presented in a very sensitive period of time.

In Miller's capable hands, the four-decade cultural and intellectual journey they took to nationalism is understandable and explainable, and their embrace of Slobodan Milošević was a predictable outcome of 'their perceptions of the nature and the needs of the Serbian nation' (p. 359) (*American Historical Review*).

Miller is showing us what was the position of the Serbs in Yugoslavia, and that turning to nationalism was provoked by unfulfilled promises made by the Communist Party and that it was direct response to it. One of that promises was extermination of nationalism in Yugoslavia, but, while only a hint of nationalism in Serbia was sanctioned, that was not the case in Croatia and Slovenia. This book explains that the revival of nationalism among intellectuals in Serbia, and among Serbs in general, was a process, not a sudden appearance. As Miller strongly argues, Serbs were pushed towards this process. (*Balkan Academic News*)

With tightly woven prose and dry humour, Miller shows how the genuine and sincere intellectuals who inspired unscrupulous politicians like Milosevic evolved from humanists 'willing to let communism have its chance' into committed nationalists. As we enter their psyches, and learn their individual backgrounds and experiences, we begin to see why their message was so effective and the masses so easily manipulated. Thus, Miller's work connects politics to the realm of culture in a way that is critical to understanding the events of the last decades (*Carol Lilly, University of Nebraska*).

Miller's book is rich in analysis of literary works and paintings; these analyses along give many worthwhile insights into Serbian thought and politics, and most have been absent from previous analyses in the West. (*Slavic and East European Journal*).

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The discussion of the Rankovic affair and its role in catalyzing Coci's sense of Serbs being victims of national discrimination is among the best literature (Vladimir Tismaneanu, University of Maryland).

The book is comprised of 11 chapters and each chapter is designed in a way so it could be a specific book itself, chapters altogether give the best picture of nationalism in Serbia, which indeed is not something to belong to only communist era. Reading each chapter one can easily see the capabilities of the author to search the past, develop in the present and prediction of the future. Analyzing Serbian nationalism, especially during the covered period, professor Miller deals specifically with the work of three Serbian popular intellectuals. Here author deals specifically with Dobrica Ćosić, Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz and Mića Popović including in some aspects the work of a dozen other Serbian intellectuals who discovered an identity for Serbs getting out from the communist era. They engaged in a project which Coci may have referred as a projector of spiritual renaissance. Miller analyses the changes within the personality of these intellectuals that hold various positions in the Yugoslav era and with the engagement in their field of specialization. Thus he analyzes the novels of Dobrica Ćosić, the pictures and the art of Mica Popovic and the work of theatre and drama developed by Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz. Hence, Dobrica Ćosić became one of the greatest Serbian writers, Miodrag (Mića) Popovic became the most influential painters and Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz became an outstanding art critic and a director of innovation theatre in 1960.

Undoubtedly the key figure of interest is Dobrica Cosis, who in some moments of Serbian history was considered as the father of Serbian nation. But he was also considered as a very controversial political figure in one side and, as a strong member of communist party who stayed close to former Yugoslav communist leader President Tito. Author cites Ćosić regarding Tito which goes: "To follow Tito it means to have his attitudes towards life, to think as Tito, to fight as Tito in your time, today, forever". Author in a brilliant way describes and explains most of his work selecting best novels Dobrica Ćosić wrote, without leaving aside the activities he has developed in strengthening the communist party of Yugoslavia, party which he left transforming himself from a left internationalist to one of the strongest nationalists. Indeed, Dobrica Ćosić was the most important intellectual figure to revive the Serb nationalism. Even more, he as an intellectual in his political engagement supported former Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic whose ending was seen at the Hague Tribunal.

Mica Popović was not the first artist to apply informel art (*L'art informel*) in Serbia/Yugoslavia. Through his paintings *Gvozden* is the main personage. Using *Gvozden*, Popović with his paintings describes discontent of the population with the communism. Guest workers, capture a big part of pictures where one case see unsatisfied Yugoslavs (Serbs) leaving country and becoming guest workers. One of Popović's exhibitions attacked real socialism in three fronts: its idea (notion) from the topic, the issue of incorporation of heritage from the past and acceptance of a

research for a personal form of expression. His attack sometimes was covered and sometimes open.

Author describing the work of Mihiz, describes the dramatization of especially two medieval epics which were “modernized” by being put in stage. Banović Strahinja and Kralević Marko present heroism in one side and division on the other side as characteristics of Serbs in the past. Kralević Marko in the same was as Banović Strahinja update the historical epic. In Banović Strahinja, Mihiz humanizes and modernizes the mediaeval tragedy, whereas in Kralević Marko, he tries to simply give a logical explanation of a clear paradox of an extreme defective hero. Obviously, Kralević Marko is less important as a story and it is more important as something being hidden in modern Yugoslavia with the abuses of Tito regime. Reading the words of Tzar Dusan (Middle Age) in his testament it comes: “Vukasin and Uglesa are described precisely with the same terms used by Lenin while describing his possible successors, Stalin and trocky.” The main issue of the entire book is nationalism of Serbian intellectuals. In order of comparison between nationalisms of intellectual under the same circumstances in the Eastern Europe we can see that they started with the same path, but those from Eastern Europe ended in the human and universal positions. According to the author,

what differs the trajectory of Ćosić and for example Adam Michnik and Vaclav Havel, is not their start. They all accepted unpleasant realities of Stalinist governance in their environments. They all have identified the lack of sincere communication as a key problem in the way of governing. (“Truth” will be their separated goal). But at the last days of Stalinism, Michnik and Havel were humanistic, whereas Ćosić a nationalist thirsty of blood. Why? I suggest that circumstance under which they acted determined their end. They all have requested the truth. But Michnik and Havel were free of the need to tell the story of the truth, simply from the fact that their societies did not suffer from the burden of ethnic lies. Promises of Czech and Polish communists had nothing in common with the nationalism: betrayals of their regimes were betrayal of simple people, workers. Could this be said in the same way for Serbia and Yugoslavia? Sorely. Tito’s regime promised an end of nationalism and it failed. The origin of Serb intellectuals in exclusivist nationals was predetermined structurally. We cannot say that under other circumstances Ćosić, for example would have been Havel...

Novels, dramas, paintings, important political moments, tendencies of unifying language, initiatives for creating something that would be known as Yugoslavs rather than specific nations and units of federation, blame the others for own misfortunes, political processes, transformation of personalities form communists into nationalists, etc., are described using a language which can be

understood not only by academicians. Author has clearly made the best selection for analyzing and presenting in the book. However, author himself says that

I am afraid that my story has left many open questions, because simply, all cannot be solved easily. Here we have an effort for generalization: Dobrica Ćosić, Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz and Mića Popović and a dozen of other Serb intellectuals discovered a new identity of Serbs getting out of communist era.

Thus, the work of these intellectuals was limited at

- 1. describing in works and with paintings of a portrait of a divided (fratricidal) Serb nation;*
- 2. arguing that “bolshevism” degraded Serb Nation by using the essential division;*
- 3. preparing Serbs for the birth of a leader, who would overcome both last inheritances: usual and magnificent.*

At the end, it is very important to underline that once starting to read the book, one cannot stop until finishes it. Reader, researcher, scholar, etc., enjoys while learning a lot from Serbian history of nationalism which is unfortunately continues to be present nowadays. The nationalism that was one of the main causes of the dissolution of Yugoslavia that ended with the terrible atrocities which were not seen in Europe since the WWII.

Book is a unique fortune for researchers and all types of readers, whereas it also serves as a great resource to be used for further exploration.