

RESEARCH REPORT IREX STG

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Research Report

1. The topic of my research is the development of Serbian nationalism between 1945 and 1991, with a focus on the intellectual, cultural, and political life of three Serbian figures: Dobrica Ćosić (novelist), Mića Popović (painter), and Borislav Mihajlović Mihić (literary critic and theater director). My purpose in choosing these three men is threefold: first, they were close friends and members of a loose-knit "circle" in cultural life after 1945; second, they were decidedly dissimilar in intellectual and cultural orientation in the beginning of the period; and third, none were nationalists in 1945, but all were by the early 1980s, and all participated in (and even led) the nationalist revival in Serbia in that decade. Thus they provide an excellent opportunity to study the intellectual, cultural, and political trajectories of influential men who became nationalists. To date in western analyses of Serbian nationalism, there had been a tendency to attribute nationalism to a somewhat mystical realm beyond rational understanding. My study will demonstrate that the reverse is true: Serbian nationalism can be understood as a product of cultural and political conditions in the twentieth century.

2. The impact of my research on the field (which is, in my case, modern Serbian intellectual/cultural history) will be the following: it will be the first historical study of modern Serbia in a western language which examines events from a cultural perspective, and it will be one of the first studies of a topic from modern Serbian history which rejects the prevailing mystification of Serbian history (which would have us believe that Serbs are fundamentally nationalistic, paranoid, and aggressive). As such, it will be an important contribution in general to a historiography of Serbia which has been to date overwhelmingly political, and it will be a critical contribution to policy-makers, insofar as they are interested in nuanced rather than heavy-handed interpretations of the history of the people with whom they are concerned.

3. My approach and methodology are typical of historians: I worked in the Archive of Yugoslavia to establish the institutional approach to the role of culture in postwar Serbia and to the work of my principals in particular. I then moved on to a thorough reading of all that they had written (which was an enormous amount). Thereafter, I read "around" them, meaning that I read the vast criticism of their work. Finally (and along the way), I read as much of the work of their contemporaries as possible, in order to be able to provide a context for my study. It goes without saying that I also read political history to provide a basic historical foundation for my work.

I have been working on this project for approximately six years. My first trip to Belgrade came in the spring of 1996, when I used the Arhiv Jugoslavije, the Narodna Biblioteka, and the library of the Institut za savremenu istoriju in Belgrade during a six month stay in the city. During the research trip which just concluded (July 2002), I used the same facilities, but with a more manageable goal: I needed to find a long list of articles that were not available in the United States, I needed to visit two Belgrade art museums (the Narodni muzej and the Muzej savremene umetnosti) to discuss the work of Mića Popović, and I needed to interview Dobrica Ćosić. In other words, my first trip consisted of intensive research; this trip, lasting twelve days, consisted of last-minute work that I could not accomplish at home.

4. At this point, my research findings/conclusion could be summarized as follows: Dobrica Ćosić, Miha Popović, and Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz were all leaders of the Serbian national movement in the 1980s. As such, they shared a love of their nation and ultimately a willingness to aggressively defend that nation from perceived enemies. However, they began their public lives as non-nationalists: Ćosić was a loyal member of the Titoist hierarchy until 1968; Popović a self-defined “leftist” who was not a member of the party; and Mihiz a classic parliamentary liberal and cultural traditionalist. Their turn to nationalism came as a result of events in Serbia and Yugoslavia in the 1960s: Ćosić became alarmed by communist policies relating to Kosovo; Popović disgusted by social inequality in Yugoslavia; and Mihiz frightened by the reappearance of Croatian nationalism. Thereafter, they developed initially sophisticated but eventually simplistic and accessible critiques of Titoism in Yugoslavia which emphasized the conspiratorial, anti-Serbian nature of Tito’s communism. Their contributions to the national movement of the 1980s were varied, but I would suggest could be reduced to this: they were for the most part not politically active, but as cultural and intellectual figures they produced a vision of “Serbianness” that emphasized the (alleged) mortal danger into which the Serbian nation had fallen or been pushed by the communist regime of Josip Broz Tito. This vision was then dispersed throughout Serbian society, where it resonated profoundly among a population that was in economic distress.

5. I would simply suggest that historians begin to move away from the study of pure politics in the Serbian case. There are rich and virtually untouched archival holdings that concern events and processes in cultural, social, and intellectual life that could be tapped to produce a richer and more sophisticated understanding of Serbian (and Yugoslav) history.

6. Move beyond the most accessible and visceral images of Serbs and their history.