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A TRIBUTE TO DUŠAN T. BATAKOVIĆ
(1957–2017)

*This volume is dedicated to the memory of Dušan T. Bataković,
Director of the Institute for Balkan Studies SASA*



DUŠAN T. BATAKOVIĆ

(1957–2017)

Historian and Diplomat

It is often said that one's true and long-lasting friends are those made at university. I did not meet Dušan T. Bataković at the Faculty of Philosophy while I was a history student, but I was hearing a lot about him. He was considered to be one of the brightest students, and one with a personality of his own. I first met him in a stressful situation, during my first job interview. The fact that he was present at the job interview of a colleague only slightly younger than him, along with the Director of the Institute of History who was twice his age, led me to believe that he already was an accomplished historian. It was his personality, his unshakeable confidence and his professional authority that brought him to the forefront, be it in history or, much later, in politics. But the first time that we spoke, during that interview, it was he who asked questions, who tried to put me at ease and, eventually, who put in a good word for me. Little did I know that, from that day on, Dušan would be the kind of friend you make at university, one that walks by your side along the path of life.

Dušan, I learned during the thirty odd years that I had the privilege of knowing him, was an unusual man. He was a Serbian patriot, proud of his Montenegrin origins and his Serbian family, a royalist, and a religious man who in the early 1990s wore a Rastafarian bonnet while looking for Led Zeppelin CDs and old books about the Balkans in the streets and shops of Paris. He liked neither Tito nor the country he had created, but in a way he and his generation perhaps represented the best that came out of that political experiment in the distinctive atmosphere of Belgrade of the late 1970s and '80s. In the relative political liberty of the end of Tito's reign, Dušan spoke his mind without fear or favour, first as a rock musician, then as a rock critic and, finally, from the mid-1980s, as a historian. However the period is called, the New-Wave age or a prelude to the breakup of Yugoslavia, it was a time for people with strong principles, creative minds and assertive personalities. Dušan surely was one. Looking back from the distance of all these years, he was first and foremost a leader, one that shows the way to others.

Perhaps because he had the misfortune to lose his father very early, Dušan had to open doors for himself, the doors that were supposed to give answers to

his insatiable curiosity. His lifelong journey through literature, art and music, created a man who was also endowed with what he thought to be inexhaustible energy. In the noblest of ways, Dušan was his own creation, built on the deep-rooted values he inherited from his family, both maternal and paternal. He took in the values of his maternal grandfather, a royalist and a Serbian patriot, and he was no less proud of his father's Montenegrin origins, and his faith was his companion and beacon throughout his life. To these foundations, Dušan, with his immense intellectual curiosity and open-mindedness, added a European perspective, as a way of life and, most importantly, as an intellectual horizon.

History and, later, politics were an ideal scene for a man who had a message or, as he put it later in life, a mission. He turned to history after a brief excursion into the field of science, and, as he said himself, knew almost immediately that he found his calling. His fellow students remember him as the one who not only asked pertinent questions, but was set apart as the privileged interlocutor by the professors who sensed that, to Dušan, history was a passion, not a trade. Looking for answers, he inadvertently crossed the boundaries of official communist historiography more than once, and was so very proud of the freedom thus won, and in some cases, gained respect of his professors.

His career as a historian began in the Institute of History, but historical research with its slow pace and measured expressions soon became too rigid a setting for a man of Dušan's interests and energy. While working on his first thesis Dušan became one of the editors of a youth weekly, *Književna reč*. Interestingly enough, he was responsible both for the pages devoted to history and for those devoted to rock music. He wrote about the friends he met when he had a band of his own and, at the same time, interviewed his professors, now asking in a professional capacity the inconvenient questions he had once asked as a student. His energy enabled him to pursue two careers, under the watchful and benevolent eye of his professors, Radovan Samardžić and Andrej Mitrović.

His first major work, on the late-nineteenth-century history of the monastery of Dečani, combined his values and his research, creating what he called a mission. The situation of the Serbian minority in Kosovo, even though it officially was part of a Serbian communist republic, to Dušan, was the very image of the collapse of Serbia under communist rule. To him, being first and foremost a man of firm principles sure of his life path, Kosovo became the essence of his mission. Throughout our many discussions, he maintained that people should choose their profession in accordance with their profound inner beliefs as that is the only way in which their work can have its full meaning. His most profound inner belief was his patriotism, a term and a concept that nowadays, in the era of globalisation, tends to have a negative connotation. Dušan sincerely and profoundly loved his country and its nation. Serbia that he loved and for which he worked all his life both as a historian and as a diplomat, in his opinion should be

a democracy based on the legacy of the golden age of the Serbian parliamentary system (1903–1914) and a part of the Europe of sovereign nations.

But the decay of Yugoslavia, especially after Tito's death, stuck in the quagmire of artificial national balance, imposed on Dušan the duty to state his opinions on politics and history clearly and publicly, putting aside all consideration for the established views both in politics and in historiography. He believed it to be his duty to speak up against wrong political decisions and to point out the unpleasant truths and inconsistencies in the national narrative. His assessments and opinions were always based on scrupulous respect for the methodology of historical research. His mission as he understood it was to oppose the tendency to project the artificial national balance of Tito's Yugoslavia onto the historical narrative. The tendency to intentionally ignore facts in order to enable the nation-building process in all Yugoslav republics and even autonomous regions, such as Kosovo, was unacceptable to Dušan since it was an affront to historical research, first of all the one concerned with the history of Serbia.

Following the path traced by his professors Radovan Samardžić and Dimitrije Djordjević, Dušan thus chose as the first great theme of his research the history of Kosovo in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, one of the most challenging topics in Serbian history. While working on the history of Kosovo the concern for the Serbian population living there and the medieval Serbian cultural heritage became for Dušan a genuine calling. His books, *The Dečani Question; Kosovo and Metohija in the Relations between Albanians and Serbs; The Kosovo Chronicles; Kosovo: la spirale de la haine: les faits, les acteurs, l'histoire; Kosovo and Metohija: History and Ideology*, published in Belgrade and Paris between 1989 and 1998, remain as testimonies to his effort to provide a new and well-documented history of the Serbian southern province.

The second important subject of Dušan's work was the history of Serbia from the First Serbian Uprising to the end of the Great War. The authentic Balkan revolution that began in 1804 made Serbs and the state they were building a part of the European process of national awakening in which they singled out themselves as a society that knew no nobility, where land belonged to those that worked it and where political parties mobilized the majority of the male working population, not only the elites. That was the Serbia that Dušan wrote about in his books and articles, always underlining the importance of its European models, which, he concluded, were mostly French. In his doctoral thesis, written under the guidance of Professor George-Henri Soutou at the Sorbonne: *Les sources françaises de la démocratie serbe: (1804–1914)*, in his numerous articles on the Serbian intellectuals who followed the French intellectual lead and became opinion-makers in Serbia as ministers and university professors known as "Parisians" at the time, in his book on the nineteenth-century programme of Serbian national policy, the famous Nachertanie, Dušan created a structured narrative about an autonomous and original democratic path of Serbia that had

its culmination in the epic victory in the Great War. The Yugoslav state created in the aftermath of the great victory was, in Dušan's opinion, a great delusion for the Serbs. He made a clear distinction between the Kingdom of Yugoslavia as an honest broker of relations between the nations that composed it and the communist one that imposed a foreign ideology on the Yugoslav nations, as he pointed out in his book *L'histoire de la Yougoslavie*.

While working on his doctoral thesis in Paris in the 1990s, he courageously sought to challenge the predominant narrative that portrayed Serbia and Serbs as the only culprits for the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia. I remember a conversation we had in Paris after he took his PhD. He told me he had no doubts about what he should do next. The prospect of teaching at French universities he was offered had no real appeal to him. His decision was made: he will return to Serbia because it is there that his work can really make a difference. Once back in Serbia in the late 1990s, he immediately joined the opposition to the Milošević regime, putting in practice his beliefs that Serbia should be a true democracy based on the European model. He took up a post at the Faculty of Philosophy and, after only a few months, spearheaded resistance to a governmental decree that required an oath of allegiance to the Milošević regime.

During these last years of Milošević's "reign", Kosovo became the focal point of the Yugoslav crisis that had been going on for years. In his capacity as a historian who had long been concerned with the history of the Serbian southern province and as a consultant to the Serbian Orthodox bishopric for the region of Kosovo and Metohija, Dušan proposed a project of dividing the province into cantons, each with a clear ethnic majority, thus trying to ensure viable governance while maintaining the overall constitutional framework. The Kosovo issue brought Dušan into the political arena not only on a national but also on an international level during a series of initiatives that looked for a compromise acceptable to both the Albanian and Serbian communities in Kosovo.

Dušan wrote his scholarly papers and pursued his political engagement with the same passion. He would write for long hours, mostly at night, convinced that he should do his best to rectify the unjustified but dominant narrative which made Milošević the personification of Serbian contemporary history. His relentless efforts took a toll on his health, but after the fall of Milošević and the democratic turn in Serbia, he accepted to serve as ambassador, first in Athens, and then in Ottawa and Paris. He spent much of his career of a historian reading diplomatic correspondence and now he found himself in a position to write one himself, only to conclude that it necessarily represents only an incomplete picture of the reality. He wrote his correspondence with the utmost attention of a historian who was fully aware that it would be read not only by his superiors but also by the generations of historians to come, knowing that the most important information cannot and must not be put in writing. His encounter with the diplomatic world was a cause of disillusionment for Dušan,

since he found that bureaucratic complaisance was more common than personal initiative. A man of Dušan's temperament and convictions could not feel at ease in such a setting, but his stay in Athens, Ottawa and Paris was considered a success both by his hosts and the Ministry in Belgrade.

As ambassador in Paris (2009–12) Dušan was able to continue and wrap up his research on bilateral relations and on French influences in Serbia while working hard to foster closer cooperation between two societies. This work made it possible for Serbia to figure prominently in the museum devoted to the memory of the Great War in France. He organised what his predecessors could not or would not do: a commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia in Marseilles. As ambassador in Paris, with the authority of an expert on Kosovo, Dušan defended the territorial integrity of Serbia.

In a way, the time Dušan spent in Paris as ambassador was the high point of his career and an undeniable satisfaction for him personally. A man of many interests as he was, he transformed the ambassador's residence in a gallery of modern Serbian art, owing to his personal ties with the generation of Serbian artists who had chosen to leave communist Yugoslavia in the 1950s and '60s. While fulfilling his duties as ambassador, Dušan was able to continue his search for old and rare books, which was his passion and something of a legacy to his children and his students, and to write, as always, in the small hours after a long day of diplomatic work. In Paris, he was truly happy and, as one of his superiors said, he was the right man in the right place.

At the end of his diplomatic career Dušan rejoined the Institute for the Balkan Studies, where he spent the major part of his working days and which he led as director from 2005 to 2007 and again from 2012. Dušan's firm conviction that Serbia is an integral part of Europe and that therefore its history and culture are an integral part of European heritage inspired him to do his best to demonstrate it by putting in place in the Institute, from 2005 onwards, a programme of publications in French and English. Its journal *Balkanica* has been published in English and French since 2006. Until 2017, during the period that he was the editor-in-chief, even while serving as ambassador, the Institute for Balkan Studies published fifteen collections of papers from different conferences in English and French. He considered it necessary to acquaint the international public with the work done in the humanities in Serbia, largely unknown abroad because publication is almost exclusively in Serbian. In the same period the Institute under his guidance published thirty-four books in Serbian. At his initiative the Institute began the process of developing international cooperation on a regional and a European level. He was also vice-president of the International Association of South-East European Studies.

Even if he seemed to be strict, sometimes severe, unafraid to state harsh truths and undisturbed by the effect it might have on his interlocutors, Dušan

was a warm person, deeply empathetic to his colleagues and friends. He generously helped whoever he could and encouraged and supported younger colleagues in their scholarly efforts.

Dušan believed that life can only have meaning if lived fully. He devoted his life to Serbia as he believed it should be: Serbia that cherishes its Orthodox roots and respects its history, Serbia that upholds its democratic traditions and takes care of the wellbeing of its citizens in the homeland and in diaspora. As a historian, he sought in his lectures and writings to contribute to the present generations not losing national consciousness, and as a diplomat, he fought to prevent Serbia from losing parts of its territory and, above all, its self-esteem.

The immense and generous effort Dušan put into achieving his various academic and patriotic objectives, the battles he fought to defend the integrity of the historian and historiography and those he fought as a historian in politics, took a serious and irreparable toll on his health. His departure left an immense and irreplaceable void for his family, friends, colleagues, and for those who respect his life's work, but he left us richer for the moments we had the privilege to share with him.

Vojislav G. Pavlović