Historiography in Isolation
Serbian Historiography Today

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When a society becomes preoccupied with its past to the point that contemporaries start to take notice and speak of 'a surfeit of history', it is only natural to wonder about the state of its historiography, its contributions, if any, and its responsibilities. However, there is no basis for a tacit assumption that a universal preoccupation with history is directly linked or correlated in some way with what is happening in history as a science. Neither can we expect to elucidate or explain what we are experiencing in public and scientific life by the current state of affairs and balance of power, as everything has roots of varying depth and change is slow and gradual.

Firstly, scientific historiography, as represented by professional historians, is not the only or even the most important aspect of the confrontation of a society with its past. There are innumerable ways in which people occupy themselves with their historical dimension, from oral etiological legend — universal and ineradicable — historical themes in literature, the visual arts and films to scientific disciplines dealing with individual aspects of culture in the past. In the present century, the study of historiography represents only the most exact wing of a general and universal study coming to terms with the past; it results from the handing down of a scientific and critical spirit, whose origin lies in both the natural sciences and philosophy, in the field of culture and tradition.

The position of historiography today is determined by two kinds of coordinates. Its subject and content place it within a national framework, surrounded by a wide belt of national culture with which it keeps up an uninterrupted dialogue and exchange, sometimes in an active and sometimes in a passive role. In method and universal principles, it is part of the world represented in international organizations and collaboration with historians in other countries. Serbian historians, like all the rest, are in constant dialogue with learning in the world, mostly with neighbouring countries, linked to them by the subject of research, and with leading countries from which they receive encouragement, forms and methodological paradigms. Contact and exchange of information mean much more to small peripheral countries than to major ones, who have always had a leading role in the development of humanist learning.

One of the important features of the study of history in the twentieth century is the tremendous improvement in communications, as reflected by the flow of information and discussion, cooperation among institutions and in publishing, the creation of regional international bodies, of which the most important in these parts is the International Association for Southeast European Studies (iASEES). Collaboration was on the rise before the crisis evoked by the outburst of nationalism in Serbia-Montenegro and their immediate surround-
Serbian historiography has now been torn out of its international context, with a consequent interruption of dialogue and a return to the autarkic national historiography of the beginning of the century, resulting in a weakening of its position in dialogue with the national cultural environment.

This is a major departure and one with the gravest long-term consequences. How much of it is due to political antagonism, self-isolation or the isolation imposed by the closing of borders and trade, and how much to general impoverishment and stagnation of communications is of secondary importance. Inertia will predominate for a while before individual and institutional enterprise begin to act to diminish direct damage. The gaps that appear on library shelves, however, will be such that later efforts will be unable to fill them: the ‘years of travel’, familiarization with developed and successful environments, will be lacking in the development of young professionals; difficulty of access to archives and documentation centres will be reflected in a plunge in the quality of expert work. Although it is hard to foresee all the consequences and difficulties caused by isolation, sight must not be lost of the fact that the reduction of the former Yugoslavia to its present size has increased the number of its contacts for international cooperation; it may indeed turn out that it will perhaps be most difficult to re-establish links in places where until quite recently, they were closed.

From its inception, historiography in Serbia developed as a study of national history. It was not until the middle of this century that attempts were made to systematically develop individual disciplines such as Byzantine Studies or the Study of the Ottoman Empire, the only supranational history being that of the Classical period. Even these fields of general history had a Serbian core. Contrary to expectation, the socialist period, instead of seeing a decline in the national character of Serbian and other historiography in Yugoslavia, served only to strengthen it.

The revolutionary regime of the Yugoslav Communist Party nourished grandiose ideological pretensions, but for a period too short to change the direction of scholarship. Change was inevitably reduced to the assimilation of Soviet forms and patterns of methodology, viable only between 1945 and 1948. With the political break, the flow of Marxist influence ceased and with it any prospect that historiography would deviate from the path it had pursued hitherto. Its development depended mainly on professionals whose formative years had passed before 1941, and who were in charge of training the next generation. Tension in relations with the USSR and socialist neighbours, together with the ever present danger of armed conflict, compelled the regime to adopt a cautious and lenient attitude towards the intelligentsia, which facilitated maintaining continuity. International cooperation with both western and non-aligned countries eased contacts with international organizations and the historiography of developed countries. The custom of completing one’s study at Western centres of learning was revived. France led the field, later followed by universities in West Germany and the USA. Thanks to its openness