
THINKING WITH A PURPOSE: SERBIAN AND FRENCH INTELLECTUALS AT THE END OF THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY

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Book review

Mladen Lišanin*

Institute for Political Studies, Belgrade



Aleksandra Kolaković:
For the Homeland:
Cooperation of French and Serbian Intellectuals (1894-1914),
Institute for Political Studies, Belgrade, 2016, 461 p.

*mladen.lisanin@ips.ac.rs

Last two decades of the “long nineteenth century” have proved to be particularly significant for European history, including domestic and international politics of both Serbia and France. The world was becoming increasingly interlinked and interdependent in the years leading up to the Great War, and relations between Serbian and French intellectuals, academics and cultural workers were a vivid example of these dynamics. French aspirations to spread its diplomatic prestige and influence and Serbian endeavors to sustain and strengthen its political independence and social development converged during this era, which led to the establishment of strong and complex networks of formal and informal links social, political and academic elites of France and Serbia. These developments culminated in a strong Franco-Serbian alliance during the First World War and continued long into the inter-war period. And while the links after the First World War were dominantly of political nature, and pursued by the members of political elites, the relations during the two decades that preceded the war were the most dynamic, and the most obvious, in the sphere of academia, science and culture – which is not to say that they had no relevance in the sphere of politics.

The book *For the Homeland: Cooperation of French and Serbian Intellectuals (1894-1914)*, written by Aleksandra Kolaković, research fellow at the Institute for Political Studies in Belgrade, Serbia, is surely the most detailed, nuanced and versatile assessment of these developments to date. It aspires – quite successfully, it must be added – to encapsulate the key episodes of Franco-Serbian academic, cultural and political links from 1914 to the First World War. The study is based upon rich archival material from Serbian and French institutions, some of it previously unavailable to the public, as well as the author’s minutious use of relevant studies and articles from the field, while the ideas have been tested prior to the publication, at numerous scientific conferences and discussions in Serbia and abroad.

What we have got, thus, is a highly competent assessment of an important episode, not only of Serbian and French, but also, arguably, wider European history. The study is segmented into four central chapters, in addition to the introduction and concluding remarks. The first chapter, titled “French and Serbian Intellectuals (1894-1914)”, lays ground and provides important context for understanding of international and domestic political and social circumstances in which initial interest for establishing cultural ties has been expressed. It explores the roots of French curiosity about the Balkans region, and Serbia in Particular, from the beginning of the Serbian uprisings against the Ottoman Empire, to the Eastern Crisis, to the overthrow of the Obrenović dynasty and the return of the Karadorđević family to Serbian throne in 1903. It is highly successful in demonstrating how incentives from

various fields of social interaction (academic, scientific, cultural, economic, and [geo]political), all provided key contributions to the development of French “discovery” of Serbia in the nineteenth century. The interest expressed by academics and cultural workers was usually followed by the interest of politicians and diplomats. The French governmental arrangement was particularly attractive as a model during Serbian struggle for democracy and self-government in the second half of the century. By the end of the century, France was arguably the most important destination for Serbian students and scholars, which was especially obvious in the field of law and military education. This created a strong foundations for the future Serbian-French connections that would stretch long into the twentieth century.

The second chapter, under the title “The Network of Contacts and Cooperation of French and Serbian Intellectuals” demonstrates vividly how the contacts have developed over the years, to cover areas of journalism, social and natural sciences, economy, and even freemasonry. But most importantly, it demonstrates (illustrated by episodes such as those of Milenko Vesnić and Jovan Žujović), how academic, cultural, or even personal ties between the Serbs and the French, had their way of spilling over to the political sphere. This contributed significantly to further strengthening of Franco-Serbian ties, culminating with the notion of “the eternal friendship” forged during the last year of the First World War.

Chapter number 3 bears the title “Serbian Elites and France – Hopes and Expectations”. By the beginning of the XX century, it was perfectly clear that many of the most prominent members of Serbian political elite have put their most significant stakes on France. Activities of Stojan Novaković, Andra Nikolić and Milenko Vesnić, under the auspices of Serbian mission in Paris, testify to the fact that proclivity towards strong ties with France was a phenomenon that transcended traditional rifts of party politics in Serbia. Franco-Russian alliance which was formalized in 1894 and the change at the head of Serbian government with Stojan Novaković as the new prime minister in 1895 gave new political incentives to the further strengthening of ties. As it became increasingly clear that relying on Austrian support is unsustainable as a means to achieve national goals, it was only logical for Serbia to redirect its geopolitical aspirations to the Franco-Russian alliance. And just like, in previous years, scientific and cultural cooperation had spilled over into the political sphere, it was now the political dimension of relations that perpetuated comprehensive social and cultural ties between the two countries and their peoples.

The fourth chapter of Dr. Kolaković’s book, under the title “The Serbs and French Interests in the Blakans” grasps the ways in

which members of the French intellectual elite have dealt with Serbian-Austrian quarrels, the Balkan Wars, and the emerging idea of Yugoslavism which was beginning to gain significant ground in Serbia and the region. At first, the writings of many French intellectuals usually struggled to differentiate between proper records and information from the region and political propaganda of key regional players, such as Bulgaria or Greece. As they got to know the local circumstances better (and Victor Bérard is quite a good example of this point), their works became less influenced by propaganda, which – coincidentally – opened them further to more sympathetic views towards Serbian causes and positions. Thus, the positions of key French intellectuals gradually moved (in most but not all instances) to those of Serbia. By the time the Great War broke out, Serbia already had significant understanding and support of many important parts of social and political elites of France – as well as its own, French-educated political elite. This proved to be of utmost importance in the crucial years of the war, when French domestic debates on alliance with Serbia played a pivotal role with regard to the way the war played out in the Balkans in the last year. All the networks and connections that Serbian intellectuals have been building with the French for two decades have thus proved to be a key asset in securing Serbian survival and upheaval in 1918. Such connections lived on even until the Second World War, while a lot of them persist – although to a far lesser extent – to this day.

Dr. Kolaković's book fills an important gap in Serbian historiography and social sciences. Although there have been some quite successful assessments of Serbian-French relations over the last several decades, *For the Homeland: Cooperation of French and Serbian Intellectuals (1894-1914)* stands out in two distinctive aspects: its comprehensiveness followed by attention to detail and nuance, and its focus on a particularly important period in European history (and Serbian history in particular). It also serves as a means of a much needed French-Serbian re-discovery in the XXI century, after decades of underdeveloped communications. Although it is published in Serbian, the book is equipped by extensive resumes in French and English, so it is relatively approachable to foreign audiences. The style of Dr. Kolaković's writing manages to curb the complexities of the monograph's substance, so it is a suitable read for the wider public and not just scholars and academics. It is our hope that it might be translated into French and presented to French audience in its entirety, thus resuming the fine tradition of Franco-Serbian academic and cultural links.

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