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The Enlightenment and the Beginnings of Modern Serbian Culture

The age of Enlightenment found Serbs divided between two vast empires – Ottoman and Habsburg. At the end of the eighteenth century approximately the same number of Serbs, 600,000, lived in each of the two states. Namely, always opting for the Christian side, several hundred thousand Serbs had moved in mass migrations to Austria and Hungary in the wake of Turkish-Austrian wars at the end of the seventeenth and during the eighteenth century. Neither the Serbs nor other Christians in the Pashalik of Belgrade were in a position to develop national culture. There were hardly any literate persons, with the exception of few priests, themselves literate at a pretty basic level. Medieval churches were abandoned or derelict, and the construction of new ones was prohibited. There were no schools or cultural establishments, and it was only after 1830, following the First and Second Serbian Uprisings, that the Ottoman authorities allowed restoration or construction of churches and opening of vernacular schools. In brief, until the beginning of the nineteenth century the Serbs in the Pashalik of Belgrade remained largely illiterate and on the margin of European cultural development, maintaining oral literature and customs as their only cultural tradition.

By that time the centre of Serbian culture had moved to Southern Hungary, where Serbs, as imperial soldiers, mainly frontier guards, lived through a difficult period of adjusting to a different culture and foreign civilization. They differed from other citizens in being Orthodox Christian and in using Cyrillic script. The ideas of the Enlightenment that spread across the Habsburg Empire helped the Serbs to obtain some measure of religious and school autonomy from 1779. In the reign of Maria Theresa and Joseph II they succeeded in organizing their primary education and established a high school of their own, at first in Sremski Karlovci (Karlowitz) in 1791, then also in Novi Sad in 1810, as well as a teachers training school in Serb-inhabited Szentendre near Buda. In 1770 they were granted

a 20-year licence for a Serbian printing shop. It operated from that year in Vienna, and it was there that the first Serbian paper began to be printed in 1792. The Serbs enjoyed religious autonomy through the Metropolitanate of Karlovci. However, since they had no religious books of their own, they had to use Russian ones. As a result, the Serbian cultural elite adopted the Russian recension of Old Church Slavonic as their own.

It was in such a state of cultural backwardness that Serbs entered the age of Enlightenment. Their struggle for religious and school autonomy coincided with the development of the Habsburg Enlightenment, and they became acquainted with the original French ideas in a roundabout way, as they reached them already modified in Pest and Vienna. Direct contacts with French civilization were scarce, although the French language was spreading in Serbian high society in the Habsburg Monarchy. Personal contacts were rare and mainly limited to French immigrants from Lotharingia and Luxembourg who settled in Bačka and the Banat (today's Vojvodina, northern Serbia) between 1769 and 1771, and to French prisoners of war. During the French Revolution, many Serbs in the Austrian army sent to Belgium to suppress the revolt expressed their sympathies for this popular uprising with the words that they "cherish the French principles of liberty".¹ Closer contacts with French culture were hampered by Austrian censorship under Maria Theresa, prohibiting all anti-Catholic books. A *Catalog librorum prohibitorum* (1765) listed books by Rousseau and Voltaire, and from 1793 included all books expressing positive opinions about the French Revolution. The order of 1801 prohibiting "the works detrimental to religion, ethics and state" was also addressed to the Serb Metropolitan of Karlovci Djordje Stratimirović. In spite of the prohibition, these books by Enlightenment authors found their way to private libraries of many Serbian intellectuals. We know that Voltaire's works could be found in Zemun, the last Habsburg town on the border with Ottoman Serbia, and they even feature in the catalogue of the first Serbian bookstore started by Emanuel Janković. Sava Tekelija, a Serbian benefactor, wealthy feudalist and art patron residing in Budapest, had the complete works of Rousseau, Voltaire and the French encyclopaedists, and such books were not uncommon in the libraries of other Serbs such as the Russian general of Serbian descent Simeon Zorić, the bishop of Temesvar Petar Petrović and so on. Marmontel's *Bélisaire* was the first French novel translated into Serbian and published by Pavle Julinac in 1776/7.²

¹ M. Kostić, "Nekoliko idejnih odraza francuske revolucije u našem društvu krajem 18. i početkom 19. veka", *Zbornik Matice srpske* 3 (1953), 1.

² For more, see N. Gavrilović, "Littérature pédagogique française chez les Serbes à l'époque des Lumières" in *Les relations entre la France et les pays yougoslaves du dix-huitième au*

The French philosophers were rarely translated, and if they were, it was often from German translations. In the early nineteenth century they were only known to Serbian readers from translated excerpts of their works. One of the first translators of Rousseau's *Social Contract* was Stevan Živković, who studied, among other things, French literature in Vienna, and in 1805 joined the Serbian insurgents. Only later did some of their works become available as separate editions. Voltaire's novel *Zadig* (1826) and his tragedy *Zaira* (1843) were among his first books that were published.³ Rousseau's *Émile* was integrally translated from the original in 1864, but remained unpublished; the integral text was first published in Pančevo in 1872, but as a translation from German, while the *Social Contract* was translated and published integrally in 1892.⁴ Although translated relatively rarely, the French philosophers were often quoted and considerably written about. A thought of Voltaire's was chosen for the motto of the first French grammar in the Serbian language (written and published by Joakim Vujić in Buda in 1805), while Božidar Petranović, an outstanding Serbian author and journalist of the first half of the century, wrote a very interesting article on Rousseau, Voltaire and Bell in *Srpske novine* (Serbian Newspaper) in 1838.

As a result of their needs as a people deprived of their religious and national rights and quite poorly educated, the Serbs opted for the ideas of the Enlightenment. They embraced it in its Austrian form – Josephinism – as a movement prone to enable their development because, besides schools, the Tolerance Patent of 1781 proclaimed all religions equal. Through Josephinism they were also introduced to other ideas of the European Enlightenment. Initially, they accepted them selectively, choosing ideas which supported their national and cultural development. Therefore they first embraced Voltaire's stands on the protection of persecuted persons from his *Treatise on Tolerance*. From Rousseau's *Social Contract* they took sections about political institutions. Research shows that Sava Tekelija was the first Serb to discuss the French philosophers; he had all their books in his library and, in his doctoral thesis *De causa et fine civitatis* (1784), described Rous-

vingtième siècle (Ljubljana, 1987), 12-25; S. Kostić, "Kulturorientierung und Volksschule der Serben in der Donaumonarchie zur Zeit der Kaiserin Maria Theresia" in *Österreich im Europa der Aufklärung*, vol. II (Vienna, 1985), 847-866; D. Medaković, "Das historische Bewusstsein bei den Serben zur Zeit der Kaiserin Maria Theresia" in *Österreich im Europa der Aufklärung*, vol. II (Vienna, 1985), 867-882; M. Pavlović, *U dvostrukom ogledalu. Francusko-srpske kulturne i književne veze* (Belgrade, 1996); M. Kostić, *Prve pojave francuske kulture u srpskom društvu* (Sremski Karlovci, 1929)

³ M. Kostić, "Volter kod Srba", *Glas SAN CCXL* (Belgrade: SAN, Odeljenje literature i jezika 5, 1960), 65.

⁴ See Lj. Monev, *Žan-Žak Ruso kod Srba* (Belgrade, 1990).

seau as the greatest philosopher of the time. He embraced their views of natural life, criticized despotism and wondered how a free people could possibly submit to the authority of one man... Under the influence of these ideas, the Serbs assembled in 1790 for an ecclesiastical and national diet at Temesvar (present-day Timisoara, Romania) demanded their privileges and the right to have representatives in the Hungarian Diet, but their request was declined because “they do not have political existence as a people [and] because they are foreigners in Hungary”.⁵ At the same assembly, Jakov Sečanac protested against the privileges enjoyed by the nobility, and at his proposal a commission was appointed with the task of finding “possible ways to live in liberty”.⁶ The ideas about liberty, expounded in the *Social Contract* and given further impetus by the French Revolution, were also advocated by the Serb Ignjat Martinović, who became the leader of Hungarian Jacobins. In his *Oratio pro Leopoldo II* he is explicit that only the authority that follows from a social contract should be recognized, while seeing the aristocracy as the enemy of mankind, because they prevent people from becoming educated. In another of his works, *Catechism of People and Citizens*, he argues that citizens tend to oppose any repression and that sovereignty resides with the people. These ideas led to his execution in 1794, together with other 40 Jacobins. Inclined to the same ideas was also Božidar Grujović (Teodor Filipović), doctor of law and professor at Harkov University in Russia, who came to Serbia in 1805, during the First Serbian Uprising, and wrote *Slovo* (Speech) in the spirit of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*. His guiding idea was the rule of the people, sovereignty and individual liberties. His paraphrase of Rousseau – better not to live than to live in slavery, is followed by the stand that common will rather than the will of one man should be the foundation of law. He thought that freedom is where laws are well worked out and where those in power abide by them. His stand on lawfulness is best expressed by a comparison between state and individual – law is for a state what food, air and housing is for a man. Maintaining that every citizen’s personal happiness and well-being depended on laws, he rejected any self-will and advocated a legislation that would ensure the natural right to equality and freedom, which was inspired by the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*.⁷

The French philosophers’ tendency to rely on knowledge and science for liberating the minds and reducing the impact of the church was not

⁵ Quoted from Kostić, “Nekoliko idejnih odraza”, 3.

⁶ D. J. Popović, *Srbi u Vojvodini* (Novi Sad, 1966), 25.

⁷ G. Vukadinović, “Shvatanje prirodnog prava Božidara Grujovića” [B. Grujović’s notion of natural law] in *Pola veka nauke i tehnike u obnovljenoj Srbiji 1804–1854* (Kragujevac, 1996), 79–83.

welcomed among all Serbs. Namely, at the time the church was the most important custodian of national consciousness, as evidenced by the statement that “the words church, school and literature ... stand for the salvation of the soul and people in this world and the next”.⁸ Circles close to the church tended to keep education attached to it as a guarantee that religion, language and Cyrillic script should be preserved. On the opposite side were rationalists, who advocated modern education as necessary for the Serbs to become integrated into modern social processes. In their view, language was a more important marker of national identity. The enlightened stream gradually prevailed over the conservative, mostly owing to Dositej Obradović. When during the First Serbian Uprising he was entrusted with the task to engage in virtually nonexistent education and schooling in Serbia, he demanded that schools be opened in every municipal community, and when he was appointed minister of education in 1811, education was formally separated from the church and became a responsibility of the state.

Jovan Muškatirović (1743–1809), the first Serbian lawyer, better known as a writer, not quite original but important as a promoter of an education for the people, had a prominent place in the struggle against traditionalism and superstition. In 1786 he published a treatise *Kratkoe razmišljenje o prazdnici* (A Short Deliberation on Holidays), advocating a reduction in the number of religious holidays, an increase in the number of working days and, hence, an improvement of the economic power of the nation. Namely, at the beginning of the eighteenth century the Serbs in Serbia observed 170 religious holidays, while those living in the Habsburg Monarchy had, in addition, to celebrate all Catholic and public holidays. This seriously affected productivity, particularly in agriculture. Although Serbs tended to perceive some of these ideas as an attack on the Orthodox Church, the ideas of Enlightenment made it easier for the number of holidays to be reduced. He also wrote about health hazards of excessive fasting (at the time, fasting was prescribed for 200 days a year) and, inspired by the physiocratic theories, about the need to boost agricultural production. Another significant Serbian educator, Zaharije Orfelin, saw his mission not only in literature but also in the promotion of the education of the people. In *Iskusni podrumar* (Experienced Wine Producer) he wrote about vine growing, and in his paper *Zrcalo nauke* (Mirror of Science) discussed the issue of economic development. One of the greatest educators of the period was Uroš Milanković (1800–1849), a rationalist and mercantilist, who advocated a state-controlled economy as a way of safeguarding independence. His principal stand was that there could be no freedom without economic

⁸ Quoted in S. Gavrilović, “Srbi u Habsburškoj monarhiji od kraja XVIII do sredine XIX veka” in *Istorija srpskog naroda*, vol. V-2 (Belgrade: SKZ, 1981), 40.

independence, and in his book *Naše vreme* (Our Time, 1847) he advocated agricultural development based on the use of modern technology and the imperative of industrial development, which required an educated people.

Serbian educators' notion of education was a broad one, and they, much like the encyclopaedists, were creative in several fields of culture or science. Living under foreign rule, they did lag behind Europe, but within these few decades they wrote some books of paramount importance for the development of national culture. Jovan Rajić authored the first history of the Serbian people – *Istorija razni slovenskih narodov naipače Bolgar, Horvatov i Serbov* (History of Various Slavic Peoples, Notably Bulgarians, Croats and Serbs) – published in Vienna in 1794, as well as the first law textbook for the Lyceum of Belgrade *The Theoretical Foundations of Rhetoric: Elementary Principles*, where, quite in the spirit of the Enlightenment, he stresses that it is the duty of the state to reduce poverty, to provide employment for every citizen, and to prevent the accumulation of wealth in the hands of few. It is interesting that he proposes public works – construction of roads, canals, drainage of swamps, etc. – as one of the possible ways a state may undertake to increase employment.⁹ Atanasije Stojković, with Ph.D. from Göttingen University, is not only the author of the first novel in Serbian literature, but also of *Fisika* (Physics), the first book in Serbian offering a systematic presentation of natural sciences. Adjusting his style to the level of his readers' education, he makes use of interesting stories to explain natural phenomena. Although the first Serbian laws were based on Austrian modifications of French laws, direct French influences may be detected as well. Thus, the first Serbian expert in civil law Jovan Hadžić accepted Montesquieu's stand that the lawmaker must take into account the place and time to which a law applies. Therefore, the Serbian Civil Code (1844) introduced elements of Serbian common law rather than provisions contained in similar laws in Europe. The first textbook on natural law, written by the professor of the Belgrade Lyceum Jovan Sterija Popović, better known and still highly respected as a playwright, is also full of Enlightenment ideas. "His understanding of the freedom of thought, his view on the limits of state power, the responsibility of employees, the right of defence, international relations, parental power..." is notable.¹⁰

Radicalism towards the church and tradition among the early Serbian followers of the Enlightenment subsided after the death of Joseph II and writers restricted themselves to offering lessons and moral advice.

⁹ L. Pejić, *Jugoslovenski merkantilisti* (Belgrade, 1988), 237-238.

¹⁰ Quoted from M. Karanovich, *The Development of Education in Serbia and Emergence of its Intelligentsia (1838-1858)* (Boulder, Colorado: East European Monographs, 1995), 122.

Literary authors were mostly influenced by two Rousseau's works – *The New Heloise* and *Émile*, the former as a story about human rights, passion and emotions, and the latter as a model for modern education. Both works had an exceptional response in Europe, and among the Serbs as well. Instead of Julie and Saint-Preux, Atanasije Stojković writes in 1801 *Aristid i Natalija* (Aristide and Natalie), the first original novel in Serbian literature, quite in the spirit of late eighteenth-century ideas. It is a sentimental love story, but full of moral lessons, attractive descriptions of nature and idyllic pictures of rural life. Milovan Vidaković modelled his three-volume book *Ljubomir u Jelisijumu* (Ljubomir in Elysium) after *Émile*, but the events take place in a medieval setting, with his heroes being first educated in Greece before coming to Serbia. In the second and third volumes of the novel the author was inspired by some parts of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, notably those explicating the necessity of laws in society. This is the gist of advice a student gives to the medieval Serbian emperor Dušan in an imaginary conversation, in which the principle of equality before the law is requested for the nobility and the common people alike.¹¹ Both authors place the action of their books in Elysium – the same setting as the one chosen by Rousseau.

Joakim Vujić, founder of the first theatre in Serbia, in his plays written in the first years of the nineteenth century, e.g. *Fernando and Jarika*, uses an Enlightenment stereotype contrasting the purity and naturalness of savages with the corruptness of city people. Although most of his plays were a far cry from authentic creations, they had significant impact on the audience in their time.

Secularization made itself felt in eighteenth-century art. Portraits of saints and rulers assumed new, laicized forms. The major role in this was played by the *Stemmatography* (1741) of Hristofor Žefarović, where the medieval Serbian rulers are depicted as citizens after the current European fashion. The book emerged for political reasons – to demonstrate the antiquity of Serbian tradition to the court in Vienna. Besides artistic, its other and very important role was in awakening Serbian national consciousness.

Dositej Obradović is a paradigm of the Serbian Enlightenment. His work is a symbiosis of literature and philosophy, and his goal to teach the Serbian people to think freely and to adopt the results of contemporary science. Anticlericalism and antitraditionalism, ethic and scientific lessons characterize his works. Although borrowed from the cultural tradition of the Enlightenment, his ideas also contained Serbian cultural traditions. His life was similar to the lives of his ideal models, Rousseau and Voltaire. He came the way from a monk to the first Serbian minister of culture, he toured almost all of Europe, from the Black Sea and the island of Chios to London

¹¹ Monev, *Žan-Žak Ruso kod Srba*, 82.

and Leipzig, he lived poorly but also received honours. His *Autobiography* is a typical pedagogic novel of the age of Enlightenment in that it describes the futility of his years spent in a monastery and the benefits of his commitment to science. Although below the French models in quality, it was with this first Serbian educator that modern Serbian culture and its integration into the European cultural space began.

Although the Serbs did not draw on the sources of the Enlightenment directly, they did not remain altogether outside this European movement. Sometimes they took from it what they needed for their specific national development, and sometimes simply borrowed topics epigonically, following the Enlightenment models and their Austrian supporters. This is particularly noticeable in literature, with themes often copied from other literatures, which is typical of an emerging culture such as Serbian was at the time. Perhaps the most striking among many examples was the acceptance of Rousseau's view of the relationship between natural and urban man and his sympathy for the former. However, this concept could hardly be of relevance in Serbia, where the urban population accounted for only a few percents until the mid-nineteenth century. On the other hand, it should be noted that some of the ideas of this period helped the Serbs to recognize their own distinctive features and essential values as a nation, which in turn helped them to hold down the foreign spiritual legacy and to found a modern culture on their own values, suppressed by the centuries of foreign rule.

In its early years the Enlightenment produced manifold effects on the Serbs both in the Habsburg Empire and in the Principality of Serbia. First, its emphasis on the value of knowledge and science raised the awareness of the importance of education and contributed to its development. At the same time, religious tolerance and anticlericalism placed Orthodox Serbs side by side with representatives of other nations and religions and helped them to liberate themselves from the strong traditionalist impact of their church. Both education and a new awareness of their own rights strengthened national consciousness, eventually leading to the creation of a nation state and modern national culture. The period of Enlightenment also helped in moving the Serbian cultural centres from the north, where they had been dislocated in previous centuries, back to the south.