

Vladimir Ćorović: The Last Polyhistor

Abstract: This essay portrays Vladimir Ćorović (1885–1941), the distinguished Serbian historian of Herzegovinian origin, who made a distinct mark in the field with his prolific and wide-ranging writing. Given his vast array of interests, both in terms of topics and historical eras, Ćorović has been dubbed the last polyhistor, following in the footsteps of Stojan Novaković and other historians of similar calibre.

Keywords: Vladimir Ćorović, historiography, polyhistor

I

Vladimir Ćorović is a historian who should not be judged by world standards. He learned and took over much from the Viennese Slavists. But not because he found himself, by force of circumstance, under their influence during his education and could not shake off that influence afterwards. With endless energy, passionate in his work, one of those creative people who pile up their inner strength by spending it, maturing at a time which self-importantly offered different models and influences, Ćorović had many opportunities to emulate, to search for himself while observing others, to plant the offshoots of great world role models into Serbian culture. He was even able to do that in some accordance with the actual state of his field: the oversaturation with philological-critical consideration of historical questions, the predominance of primary analytical works, the lack of more daring conceptions in shedding light on the dead landscapes of the past — all that, at the time of Ćorović's rise, produced the seemingly reliable impression that the way had been paved for different ventures. However, he kept such temptations at arm's length although he worked for few; he only remained attached, fairly loosely, to the traditional methods of the Viennese philological school, and that, no doubt, because they seemed to him to be,



for much of the work he was doing, the least intrusive, sufficiently varied, most suitable, briefly such as to determine to a great extent the result of the work at hand.

II

The number of undertakings Ćorović accomplished is all but countless; the areas of study in which he tried himself ranged from prehistoric to the most recent times, from medieval and traditional to modern literature, from philology to popular political writing; he published editions of old writers, archival material and anonymous literary heritage; he wrote historical studies based on thorough analysis, exhaustive monographs, broad syntheses, and patriotic books and articles intended for the broadest readership; he was a museum curator, national revolutionary, Austrian prisoner, university professor, Academy member, journal editor; he was engaged in every major scholarly and literary undertaking; he wrote all the time, several hours a day, and sometimes read out proofs of his latest work to his students instead of teaching. When he was unfortunately killed in 1941 he was still in his prime, closer to the middle than the end of his fruitful career; moreover, he left behind so many manuscripts, some already prepared for print, that, for some other scholar, these alone would make a decent lifetime contribution to historiography.

Ćorović belonged to the generation of Serb scientists, writers, artists, politicians and merchants of Herzegovinian origin who assumed, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a very prominent and quite distinctive place in their nation. They were noted for their level-headedness, honesty, moderate realism, sound and perceptive reasoning and various creative abilities; it seems, however, that their sense of defining themselves and their work in accordance not only with their people's needs but also with their own abilities has not been stressed enough. If intellectuals with useless smartness can often be seen amongst the Serbs, if they expire too soon, waste too much and grow old too fast, if their scientific or literary oeuvre can be subsumed under the category of misconceived utilitarianism which serves ephemeral petty causes, the Herzegovina-bred authors can seldom be described as such: they are peculiarly marked by the virtues typical of Herzegovinian merchants for ages — they keep the best stock, they are more concerned about their good reputation than about their wealth, they do well because they know themselves and their market, they consider their profession commendable from the national point of view, they are good heads of the household, and not misers, they always see men of learning as a social stratum above themselves. This rationality without rationalist pettiness, this pragmatism without pragmatic slavery to everyday needs

of others, this broadness in defining and playing one's own role, dignity in self-effacement, composure in endeavour, this way of finding beauty in self-sacrifice, in work, in perfecting oneself — all this was a basis for authentic and harmonious creation and for expressing one's own individuality. So every individual in this ever-renewing group of great Herzegovinians, from Sava Vladislavić to Jovan Dučić, made it in his own, and very distinct, way, as if shaped in a vacuum, while remaining quite similar to one another. Among them, Ćorović was a bearer of energy, of indestructible creativity, a man of balanced mind and disciplined thought, steady in his tremendous ambitions; and he judged himself quite accurately: that he can and should work in as many fields of historiography, philology and literary history as possible because all of the job is sorely needed by Serbian scholarship and he is able to do it in his own manner. That is why he remained completely poised, completely focused, void of all vanity, true to himself and the work he intended to accomplish even in choosing the method of accomplishing it. The absence of any risk-taking in his approach to primary sources and historical conceptions should not be attributed to a lack of knowledge, narrow-mindedness or ill-preparedness to try something different: his main concern was the extent and primary criticality of the work done because he believed that the only indispensable thing to do — and that he was the most suitable to do it — was to restore, broaden and strengthen once again the foundations of Serbian historiography which had not yet had enough effort of true masters of the trade built in them.

III

Ćorović became a polyhistor owing, among other things, to the bases laid by Serbian historiography before him. The polyhistor had been a phenomenon of long standing, recurring at steady intervals; and it gave the best results on the occasion of its recurrence associated with Stojan Novaković. The writers of Serbian history and antiquarians who arose in the age of Baroque and erudition were each daring enough to take another look at that history in its entirety and to fit it, each in his own way, in the framework of the common past of all South Slav or Balkan nations. It had been so from the time of Mauro Orbini and Jaketa Lukarević to Pavle Riter Vitezović and Count Djordje Branković and it saw a renewal during the eighteenth century in those Serbian historiographical writings which largely stemmed from the genres of hagiography, genealogy and annals of the older Serbian historical literature. In the age of the Enlightenment and rationalism, Jovan Rajić emerged as a polyhistor with his broad historical perspective, his treatment of the entirety of Serbian history and his fitting it in the framework of a history composed of the histories of the other South Slav peoples; but he

was even more of a polyhistor for his varied use of sources, for the number of questions he raised and his efforts to provide answers, and for his search for methods which would vary rather than stick to a single pattern. Vuk Karadžić can be considered a polyhistor for the mere fact that he sought to write a history of the Serbs on a philological basis not just in his critical approach to sources but also in his conceptions of historical development; which then compelled him to review Serbian history in its entirety and cover as fully as possible the internal workings of the life of the people. If those synthetists of Serbian history who, like Dimitrije Davidović, Jovan Hadžić, Danilo Medaković or Alimpije Vasiljević, did not have proper historical education or genuine scholarly interest cannot be regarded as polyhistorians, still less can the participants of the decisive clash between pseudo-romanticists and realists in Serbian historiography, Panta Srećković and Ilarion Ruvarac, who can practically be seen as the obverse and reverse of the same phenomenon insofar as both tended to be too preoccupied with details of medieval history. A renewal of polyhistoric ambitions was heralded by Čedomilj Mijatović in a talented, imaginative and occasionally brilliant manner, but he lacked the patience and critical approach to sources to sort out and wrap up his work. Prior to Ćorović, such a renewal was carried out best, in a reliable and trustworthy manner, by Stojan Novaković. With his vast work, he became a polyhistor not just because he was engaged in historical philology studies, because he studied and published a great deal of sources, dealt with many aspects of literary history, worked on Serbian history from Slav settlement in the Balkans to his own times. Novaković was a polyhistor above all because in every of his various fields of interest he relied on a method which was appropriate for the subject under study.

Not many saw Stojan Novaković as an inspiring example. Some claimed to be followers of Ruvarac, remaining within the narrow confines of analytical solving of medieval chronological or genealogical puzzles; others departed from Ruvarac, deeming that archival material offered the only possibility for historiographical work. To many, Novaković's work seemed to be the closing stage of an epoch in which it was still possible to be a polyhistor and which was bound to give way to an era of improved and more complex work in narrower fields. Contrary to the majority, Ćorović mustered the strength and courage to follow Novaković's suite and make the same effort.

There is a link between these two fearless explorers and immeasurably prolific writers of Serbian history, a link that stems from the similar attitude they had towards that history: over time, they looked into the history of their nation in such detail and learnt about it so profoundly that their earnest interest must have pulled them in various directions, into different fields, into topics which, every time, required different source materials and

different methods. And that nicely corresponded with their understanding of the profession of the historian — it is not just a professional obligation, a mere fulfilment of duty, it is a total creative endeavour with which one identifies completely and makes it one's lifelong pursuit.

IV

As a polyhistor, Vladimir Ćorović looked up to Novaković because of his attitude towards contemporary Serbian historiography and his understanding of the role he should play in it. But, once again much like Novaković, what also lay at the core of this attitude of his was the nature of his education, his scholarly preparedness, his actual ability for research, the breadth of his knowledge which constantly prodded him to move in different directions and, finally, his unusual interest in the entirety of the Serbian past. In keeping with the well-established tradition of his predecessors, he studied in Vienna, with Vatroslav Jagić, Konstantin Jireček and Milan Rešetar, in the seminar where, in the early twentieth century, Slavic philology was perhaps best studied and taught, and with historians whose historiographical method was still, at least partly, attached to the historical-philological school. Besides, Ćorović found himself in a Vienna where one could avail oneself of a hundred years of philological study of South Slav antiquities, from Jernej Kopitar to Jagić; most of the important monuments had already been discovered, examined and published, and the method of approaching these monuments had been developed, tested and established from one undertaking to another, and so had the realistic and scholarly expectations from such undertakings. At the same time, what Ćorović was able to witness in Vienna was an increasingly open revolt of historians against the tutelage of philologists (who had informed their method for too long) and their quest for their own way in approaching new archival material, in writing new works increasingly based on such material and in temporarily narrowing the historical method even to the point of avoiding any conception, in order to isolate and deaden its philological core.

Without a shred of impatience, intolerance or bias in assessing this situation, Ćorović chose the profession and calling of a historian, but he did not neglect his philological education and he made a very good use of his knowledge in that field. As if he had another personality inside himself, he conducted, along with historiographical work, philological and literary-historical enquiries, occasionally dwelling on medieval Serbian hagiographies, on the traditional and written heritage of the Ottoman period and on a number of more recent phenomena, from eighteenth-century Serbian urban lyrical poetry and Lukijan Mušicki to his own contemporaries. A crucial role in his decision to become primarily historian was inevitably

played by his reliable and rational recognition of his own inclinations, his creative temperament which required a boundless field of work and his perception of what the pressing need of the culture and national situation of the Serbs was. Thus Ćorović the historian was not too susceptible to philological influences. If the object of study required it, he would embark on a philological critique of sources; other times he would conduct archival research, comprehensive and hasty so as to cover and master the material from different periods, from the thirteenth to twentieth century.

The road that Ćorović travelled was not much different or divergent from the one travelled by many of his contemporaries, particularly those from Herzegovina. And yet, he was exceptional in many respects. Although formed as a scholar, he did not go through life jealously protecting his time working time and his work from external influences: he was not afraid to interact with wider intellectual circles, to join movements, to live though his people's drama, to take on new responsibilities, to open his mind to unexpected discoveries — and to translate all that, very quickly, into his work, his scholarly profession, his new writings belonging to new areas of interest.

While serving, before the First World War, at the National Museum (*Zemaljski muzej*) in Sarajevo he once again came closer to his native land and remained forever engrossed with all that testified about its past and up to the most recent forms of his people's life and struggle. His book *Historija Bosne* [History of Bosnia] published shortly before his death was written exhaustively and with the obvious intention to include all that was known and remembered, in whatever form, about that land in medieval times. Although this work followed after a series of his studies about medieval Bosnian history (e.g. on Ban Kulin in 1921; on King Tvrtko Kotromanić in 1925), it was nonetheless supposed to be just an antechamber of Ćorović's building which was going to be built from the dreary ruins of his native land's past. His noted studies on Luka Vukalović (1923), on Mostar and its Serbian Orthodox Christian community (1933) or on relations between Dubrovnik and its neighbours in the early eighteenth century (1941) seem to have been but preparatory work for the erection of that building. A participant in the revolutionary movement of the Yugoslav youth in the years preceding 1914, Ćorović joined, straight from Austrian prison, the editorial board of the *Književni Jug* [Literary South], a journal published in Zagreb which, by 1917, had considered the demise of Austria-Hungary and the formation of Yugoslavia a foregone conclusion. True to himself, however, he could not be so naive as to see in the Habsburg Monarchy's becoming a fact of the past the demise of the fragmented and multiplied proponents of its idea. Nothing of Austria-Hungary, Ćorović argued, should be forgotten. His *Crna Knjiga* [Black Book], purposely put together as a collection of documents of various provenances, memoirs and questionnaires in particu-

lar, brought forth the trials and tribulations of the Serbian people in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war when the Monarchy, hungry for vengeance, said its last word in the form of malevolent abuse carried out through local authorities. Years of sustained work resulted in his comprehensive, and perhaps most important, study *Odnosi između Srbije i Austro-Ugarske u XX veku* [Relations between Serbia and Austria-Hungary in the Twentieth Century, 1936]. This towering work, which piled up stacks of documentary material in order to clarify, as profoundly as possible, the events followed almost day by day, challenged all conceptions — be they of German origin or coming from the Habsburg legacy, suspiciously benevolent Britons (Seaton-Watson), the Vatican or the remaining Austrian-type Social Democrats — which still praised the Habsburg tutelage over South-East Europe or signalled the aspiration to re-establish similar tutelage through the involvement of new factors. The purpose of this book of Ćorović was not only the stereotypical one: to defend the thesis about the inevitability of the clash between an obsolete aggressive empire and the national aspirations of Balkan peoples and thus to defend Serbia from the allegations that she had caused the war. Its purpose was also to expose a historical legacy which, found in its final formative stage, remained productive of unhealthy offshoots. Having become, through his own evolution, a proponent of the idea of Yugoslav unity which, according to him, was not the result of an agreement but rather of a long-term historical process, Ćorović shaped his voluminous *Istorija Jugoslavije* [History of Yugoslavia, 1933] in accordance with that idea, and the strength of the method in this book primarily depended on the strength of his Yugoslav conceptions. In writing it, Ćorović relied on all that had carried some weight in previous Yugoslav historiography; he did his own research for some sections; his is also the structure of narrative since he had no predecessor to look up to. Except for the last part, the book is well thought out and organized, written in a style that remains within the boundaries of scholarship while being as adjusted as possible to the capacities of a less informed reader. In fact, it was the only complete history of Yugoslavia that far exceeded the requirements of a textbook.

V

Today's historians tend to criticise Ćorović, apart from for what falls outside his scholarly endeavour, for not having been careful and accurate enough in his criticism of sources and facts due to his work overload and constant haste. If we carefully consider these objections, Ćorović seems to have made several breaches of method perhaps for the simple reason that he did more than others: on average, the mistakes made by those who pour scorn on Ćorović are not fewer than his. More serious are the objections concern-

ing his expression. Ćorović was an eloquent, highly literate, almost literary gifted historian. But he was not able to write much and fast and, at the same time, to cultivate his style, chisel his phrase, avoid bumps and inaccuracies. At times, instead of striving for a power of expression or an elegant word order, he slides into familiarity which can bother the reader and, for a moment, reveal an incomplete and undeveloped thought. His exposition in *Istorija Jugoslavije* is free from the kind of redundancies which are supposed to be dropped from a history finally shaped and follows an almost natural sequence of events. Ćorović also authored several, mostly literary-historical, essays which together make a perfect whole. Yet, in most of his works he drew his scholarly expression closer to artistic, mainly through his flamboyant sentence and deliberately suggestive narrative. Unwilling to sacrifice the source material to a distilled depiction of the historical moment he was dwelling on or to its sophisticated description, he could not even get to elevate his expression, through narration or discussion, to the noblest of qualities. Parenthetical analytical diversions and, to put it bluntly, a certain overload of information lead Ćorović's reader astray from the clear image that could have emerged after all: the reader stops at some details and tries, together with the writer, to make them clear. The greatest writers of history make up for the shortcomings in their critical approach to detail by offering a critical review of the whole, i.e. the final process of reconstruction and, in doing so, they wrap up their endeavour with a work which corresponds to life architecturally and is close to art outwardly. Ćorović could have accomplished that in a number of his works had he not chosen a different method to achieve a different goal, thereby leaving his work open and visible, vulnerable to objections for which he has been more rarely forgiven than anyone else.

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