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Modern Serbian Historiography between Nation-Building and Critical Scholarship: The Case of Ilarion Ruvarac (1832–1905)

In the process of the construction of the Serbian nation, the discipline of history had a prominent role, as was true in the case of other European nations. Especially reinforced after recognition of the independent Principality of Serbia at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, this process led gradually to the building of a Serbian bourgeois society with all its modern institutions. A year later, an important controversy began, which was not limited to the academic circles, but strongly influenced all of Serbian culture over the course of the next 15 years. The controversy was marked by the dispute between supporters of a Romantic view of history and the supporters of the modern historical scholarship embodied in the work of Leopold von Ranke and his successors. The Romantics were ardent nationalists who, though they lacked an adequate knowledge of the relevant methods, used the past for the legitimation of their own nationalistic ideologies and were trying to demonstrate the continuity of the Serbian nation from Antiquity to modern times. Ilarion Ruvarac (1832–1905) played the key role in the refutation of this nationalistic para-historical ideology. Ruvarac accepted Ranke’s methodology, and he insisted on the “scientific character” of historical knowledge and its objectivity. He therefore insisted that “historical science” had to be based on critical assessments of archival sources, which could lead historians to the “historical truth.” According to this principle of historical scholarship, he researched different topics concerning the history of the Serbian and Balkan peoples from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century. Emphasizing the methods of philological criticism, Ruvarac focused on resolving individual chronological and factual problems, which is why “contribution” and “article” were his favorite forms for the presentation of the results of his research. From this standpoint, he often engaged in polemics with the followers of the so-called “Romantic school” in Serbian historiography, demonstrating their “unscientific practice of history” and their lack of essential knowledge. After acrimonious debates with Pantelija-Panta Srečković and his supporters, which at the same time reflected the power distribution in the Serbian academic fields, by the end of the nineteenth century Ruvarac succeeded in establishing Serbian historiography on scientific grounds.

Keywords: Serbian historiography, Ilarion Ruvarac, nationalism

In the informative obituary on Ilarion Ruvarac’s death in 1905, Vatroslav Jajić, a professor at the University of Vienna, wrote that Ruvarac, led by his love of scholarly work, had achieved “most magnificent results and had been recognized
for decades as the most important, most critical and most learned Serbian historian and commander of Serbian historiography during the second half of the nineteenth century.”¹ The illustrious Slavist’s assessment of Ruvarac as a “great critical historian in the field of Serbian history”² was shared by scholars in Saint Petersburg, Budapest, and Zagreb, who emphasized his love of truth, his “outstanding erudition, and [his] rare methodological exactness.”³ The young generation of Serbian historians that emerged at the turn of the century considered Ruvarac their “spiritual father” and the founder of scholarly or, as was said at the time, “critical” Serbian historiography, a man who, in the age of “great national self-deception,” had managed “with great success to turn on the lights of truth […] in the darkness of ignorance.”⁴ As the founder of a “scientific” approach to the past, Ruvarac was a distinctive figure in the history of modern Serbian historiography. The aim of this paper is to examine the particularities of his work and his historical scholarship in the context of the main currents of historical thought in the nineteenth century and the specific social and political circumstances which determined the development of Serbian historiography at the time.⁵

**Serbian Historiography and National Renewal during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century**

The rebuilding of the Serbian state (which began with uprisings against Ottoman rule at the beginning of the nineteenth century and reached partial fulfillment with the international recognition of Serbia’s independence at the Congress of Berlin in 1878) was the main achievement of the “Serbian revolution” (1804–1830), as Leopold von Ranke called it in his work of the same name. As part of the revolution, an encompassing process of social and cultural modernization took place. Over the course of the long nineteenth century, Serbian agrarian

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² Ibid.
society was thoroughly transformed, the institutions of bourgeois society were gradually established, and the foundations were laid for cultural development by the standardization of the language, the founding of the educational and cultural institutions, and the adoption of European intellectual ideas. In this process of modernization of Serbian society, the Serbs in the Habsburg Monarchy, who began to establish cultural and scholarly institutions in the 1820s, had an important role. Stimulated by a series of Serbian uprisings, the Serbian intellectuals in Hungary adopted a Serbian nationalist program. The Hungarian Serbs considered the restored Serbian principality as the embryo of future national liberation and unification.

As of the middle of the nineteenth century, liberalism was the prevailing ideology among the Serbian bourgeoisie. In addition to its claims for the establishment of constitutional order and civil rights, liberalism was inseparably linked to nationalism and claims for the creation of nation states which would encompass all compatriots. Since the past constituted one of the essential elements of nationalistic ideologies, Serbian intellectuals shared an increasing interest in their past, trying to find legitimacy for their political projects in the traditions of the Serbian medieval kingdom.

The development of Serbian historiography in the nineteenth century was tied up with the renewal of the Serbian state and the fashioning of a nationalistic ideology, as was the case not only in the Balkans but in most of Europe. However, in the first half of the nineteenth century Serbian historiography did not make any significant progress. It was still marked by the work of Jovan Rajić (1726–1801). A typical representative of the Enlightenment, in his work The History of Various Slavic Peoples, Particularly the Bulgarians, Croats and Serbs, which was written in the middle of the eighteenth century and published in 1794/95, Rajić gave an overview of the history of the South Slaves from the Middle Ages till his times based on limited evidence and without drawing a clear distinction between historical and literary sources. Rajić wrote his History under the influence of Enlightenment ideas about the progress of humankind through the accumulation of rational knowledge about men and their past. At the same

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time, his work had a distinct didactical purpose. At a time when no Serbian state
existed, Rajić aimed with his *History* not only to inform literate Serbs about their
past, but also to help preserve and strengthen national consciousness among
his compatriots by pointing out the historical continuity with the traditions of
the Serbian medieval state. Rajić’s work had a very strong influence on the next
generations of educated Serbs, and it remained the main source of knowledge
about Serbian history.  

Jakov Ignjatović, editor of the leading Serbian literary magazine *Letopis Matice srpske*, pointed this out in the middle of the 1850s. Appraising the trends in Serbian historiography that were current at the time, Ignjatović concluded that it had not made any progress since Rajić’s times. He substantiated this contention with the observation that Rajić’s monumental work had not been outdone and that “we—his descendants—either imitate or simply glean” insights based on the material he had gathered. The very fact that Ignjatović had considered historiography part of literature indicates that Rankean methodology had not gained a foothold among Serbian intellectuals yet.

This judgment about Serbian historiography might seem pretty severe. However, it is accurate, taking into consideration that no important historical work had been published since the end of the eighteenth century and that the writers of Serbian history were Rajić’s epigones. Using the data from his voluminous *History*, they interpreted the Serbian past according to their national-Romantic viewpoint, and they tried to strengthen the nationalism of their compatriots with narratives about “the glorious past.” Hence, these amateur historians from the first half of the nineteenth century (Dimitrije Davidović, Aleksandar Stojaković, Danilo Medaković, Milovan Vidaković, Jovan Sterija Popović and Jovan Subotić, to mention only the most prominent among them) considered history a useful tool of “national pedagogy.” As journalists, writers and politicians, they approached history from a pragmatic standpoint. Accenting the traditions of the medieval Serbian kingdom, they were trying to give historical legitimacy to the new Serbian state and kindle aspirations for national unification.

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Serbian People from Ancient Times till 1850 is illustrative.\textsuperscript{11} Influenced by the idea that history is the most eloquent testimony to a nation’s character and that “only wild, unhappy and neglected people do not have their own history,” Medaković aimed to “nurture feelings for and worthy knowledge of our historical heroes and all the glorious deeds of our earliest ancestors.”\textsuperscript{12} The substantial growth of interest in the past, however, was not followed by professionalization of historical studies. In the middle of the nineteenth century, there were no educated Serbian historians who possessed the necessary professional background. Neither was there any critical editing of sources on Serbian history, nor were there specialized historical journals. Although some Serbian periodicals, such as \textit{Letopis Matice srpske}, had begun to publish Serbian medieval sources unsystematically (chronicles, genealogies, and charters) and translations of works by some foreign historians, such as Ranke, František Palacký, and Pavel Jozef Šafárik, in the middle of the nineteenth century Serbian historiography was dominated by writers and journalists. Without appropriate training, they were retelling Rajić’s \textit{History} and uncritically accepting information about the past preserved (or fashioned) in Serbian epic poetry.\textsuperscript{13}

A change came in Serbian historiography in the 1860s with the founding of the Higher School (Velika škola) in Belgrade in 1863, the first institution of higher education in Serbia, and with the coming of a generation of Serbian intellectuals educated at universities abroad, mostly in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and Heidelberg. Politically, they were liberal, and they accepted positivism as a scientific paradigm and worldview. Guided by the ideas of Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Henry Thomas Buckle, John Stuart Mill, and John William Draper, Serbian intellectuals were trying to apply the “general laws” of social and historical development to narratives of the Serbian past.\textsuperscript{14} Some of them, such as Alimpije Vasiljević and Stojan Bošković, were professors at the new Higher School, and they tried to apply positivistic methods to the study of Serbian history by establishing the physical, geographical, and social laws which had shaped it. However, since they were not trained as historians, their efforts yielded only modest results, limited


\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 1: v, xxxvii.

\textsuperscript{13} Samardžić, \textit{ Pisici srpske istorije}, 1:69–70 and 2:234.

\textsuperscript{14} Branko Bešlin, \textit{Evropski uticaji na srpski liberalizam u 19. veku} (Novi Sad, Sremski Karlovci: IKZS, 2005).
essentially to the interpretation of a few known facts about the Serbian past according to the principles of positivistic philosophy.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Ruvarac’s Intellectual Formation}

These social and intellectual circumstances dominated Serbian historiography when, at the end of the 1850s, Ilarion Ruvarac appeared with his first historical works. Born as Jovan Ruvarac in a Serbian clergyman’s family in 1832 in Sremska Mitrovica (then part of Slavonian Military Frontier in the Habsburg Monarchy), he grew up in Stari Slankamen and Novi Banovci, small villages in Srem, where his father served as an Orthodox priest. He attended the gymnasium in Sremski Karlovci, a small town on the hillside of the mountain of Fruška Gora, which since the time of the Great Migrations of the Serbs at the end of the seventeenth century was the religious and cultural center of Serbs in the Habsburg Monarchy. Enthusiastic about the poetry of Goethe, Heine, and Schiller, Ruvarac began to read very carefully the writings of leading Serbian journals of the time, \textit{Letopis Matice srpske} and \textit{Srpski narodni list}, which devoted considerable attention to historical topics. Already interested in the past, Ruvarac was strongly influenced by Jakov Gerčić, his history teacher in the gymnasium. Although he did not pursue significant historical research, Gerčić was considered the best expert in general history among the very few educated Serbian citizens.\textsuperscript{16}

After the turmoil caused by the revolution of 1848/49, Ruvarac continued his education in Vienna in 1850. After graduating from the gymnasium, he enrolled in the University of Vienna in 1852 and began to study law. He completed his university studies in 1856. During his time as a student in Vienna, the capital of Habsburg Monarchy was a meeting place of the intellectual elites of the South Slavs, where the leading figures of Serbian culture were Vuk Karadžić, the reformer of the Serbian language and creator of modern Serbian orthography, and his pupil, the philologist Đura Daničić. “All nationally minded Slavs” gathered regularly in the famous café \textit{Slavisches Kafeehaus},\textsuperscript{17} and Ruvarac socialized among the members of this circle.\textsuperscript{18} After having returned to his homeland, Ruvarac

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Alimpije Vasiljević, \textit{Istorija narodnog obrazovanja kod Srba} (Belgrade: Državna štamparija, 1867).
\textsuperscript{17} Oskar Donath, “Siegfried Kappers Leben und Wirken,” \textit{Archiv für slavische Philologie} 30 (1909): 420.
completed his theological studies, and he entered a monastery in early 1861. As the monk Ilarion, he was the rector of the Orthodox theological seminary in Sremski Karlovci and clerk of the Ecclesiastical Court, and he was appointed to the archimandrite of the Grgeteg monastery of Fruška Gora. Ruvarac remained there until his death on August 8, 1905.19

During his studies, Ruvarac continued to deepen his knowledge of history, attending lectures by Albert Jäger, one of the most distinguished Austrian historians, who taught Austrian history at the University of Vienna from 1851.20 At the same time, Ruvarac read a great deal of historical literature, in particular works by the German liberal historians Friedrich Christoph Schlosser and Georg Gottfried Gervinus. Finally, the most decisive influence came from Leopold von Ranke. After having been familiarized with the works of the “father of modern historiography,” Ruvarac accepted his understanding of history and of the historian’s task, summarized in the famous sentence “to show how it actually happened” (wie es eigentlich gewesen). In addition to this principle of objectivity in historical research, Ruvarac also accepted the clear difference between historical evidence and literature, as well as the insistence on the importance of documentary, i.e. “primary sources” in the reconstruction of the past. This conception Ruvarac applied to the study of Serbian history when he wrote his first article, Review of Native Sources of old Serbian History (1856), following the example of Ranke’s early work Critique of Modern Historians (Zur Kritik der neuerer Geschichtsschreiber, 1824). Accenting the importance of documentary sources21 and accepting the crucial distinction between primary and secondary sources, Ruvarac classified published sources for Serbian medieval history. In doing so, he followed the model given by the famous German source edition Monumenta Germaniae Historica. His next article, Contribution to the Examination of Serbian Epic Poems (1857/1858),22 was strongly influenced by comparative linguistics and religion which, based upon the findings of Franz Bopp and Adalbert Kuhn, had undergone extraordinary development. Ruvarac analyzed the contents of Serbian

19 In addition to the abovementioned articles of Radojčić and Radonić, for the newest and most comprehensive insight into Ruvarac’s biography see: Boško Suvajdžić, Ilarion Ruvarac i narodna književnost (Belgrade: Institut za književnost i umetnost, 2007), 11–37.
epic poetry, determined its main motifs (common to all Indo-European poetry), and concluded that it could not be used as a historical source. Recognizing the “esthetic,” i.e. artistic value of folk poetry, he rejected its usefulness for historical research. Remaining extremely critical, Ruvarac announced his “crusade” against the representation of the Serbian past on the basis of epic tradition and a historical consciousness rooted in myths and legends. Ruvarac’s “student’s treatise” caused a great stir in the Serbian milieu, which, influenced by the spirit of national Romanticism, approached the folk epic traditions uncritically, considering them a credible representation of the “glorious Serbian past.” The importance of this treatise is pointed out by Nikola Radojčić, undoubtedly the best expert on Ruvarac’s work, who considered it “the deepest earlier historical treatise on Serbs.”

“Objectivity and Historical Truth:” The Fundamentals of Ruvarac’s Approach to History

In his first article, Ruvarac pointed out that Serbian historiography amounted to little more than retellings of Rajić’s History and neglect for historical evidence, “which, selected by clear eyes and clever thoughts, is the only way to arrive at the plain truth.” In his assessment, this was why it “actually has been not changed for fifty years, and it is very hard to observe signs of any progress in the examination of a people’s history.” Ruvarac devoted himself to the collection and careful study of historical sources over the course of the next decade (1858–1868). In addition to medieval charters and church chronicles, Ruvarac studied works by Byzantine writers published in the series of Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, and he also familiarized himself with the history of Hungary by reading István Katona’s voluminous work Historia Critica Regnum Hungariae (I–XLII, 1779–1817) and the collection of documents Codex diplomaticus Hungariae ecclesiasticus ac civilis, edited by György Fejér. Both Katona and Fejér had been representatives of the Hungarian late Enlightenment historiography and had published a great deal of primary documents. Based on such historical evidence, Ruvarac began to research the history of Serbs in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Era in the vast area of the Balkans and Central Europe.

The leitmotif of Ruvarac’s methodology was the critical examination of the historical sources which constituted the basis of his scholarly work.\(^{26}\) He was less inclined to consider theoretical questions and instead devoted himself to the critical editing of sources, the identification of falsifications and interpolations based on philological criticism, and the establishment of historical facts. Resolving chronological, genealogical, and geographic problems, he did not go into historical processes, and this ultimately determined the character of his scholarly works. Ruvarac’s dominant form of presentation was treatises and articles. According to Nikola Radojčić, “he became a researcher of sources and a writer of treatises, contributions, and small contributions.”\(^{27}\) At the same time, one of the distinctive features of Ruvarac’s method is his narrative style. Almost all of his works were characterized by many digressions, frequently appeals to the reader, and signs of anxiety and mental tension. Writing in a polemical style and not hesitating to ridicule his opponents, Ruvarac led his pitched battles with “war cries” against the misapprehensions and ignorance of his contemporaries. In his polemics, he challenged not only amateurs but also some prominent scholars, such as the Croatian historian Franjo Rački and the Hungarian Lajos Thallóczy. In a polemic about the origins of Pavle Bakić, the last Serbian despot in Hungary, Ruvarac sent word that he would have fought with Thallóczy, and he concluded that “if he is a hero, he should make this heroic competition possible himself.”\(^{28}\) However, Ruvarac was deeply aware that he frequently was not capable of overcoming his emotions, which led him when, in his search for historical truth, he deconstructed the historical myths fashioned by his contemporaries. He himself confirmed this in his own words:

I have never begun to sing, and as I was 40 years ago, I am the same today: somber and dissatisfied, restless and upset; and I look for something and explore permanently, and in this eternal search I forget myself and lose my balance, so that even I do not care, and I hate soulfully the squabbles and quarrels in which I find myself, suddenly on the stormy waves of angry squabbles and in the muddy lake of heated quarrel […] and I quarrel with such vehemence, as if the solution of the Eastern Question depended on it.\(^{29}\)

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26 Jagić, “Ilarion Ruvarac,” 635.
Finally, the extensiveness of his work and the many quotations he offers from numberless sources in order to prove his hypotheses make Ruvarac’s writings tiring and demanding. Hence, it has been astutely observed structure was the greatest weakness of Ruvarac’s methodology, which otherwise was distinguished by “brilliant heuristics and undeveloped hermeneutics.”

The features of Ruvarac’s style were the results of his striving for historical truth, which, having been given a kind of religious sanctification, constituted the main aim of his historical work. Considering that only artists (“poets and painters”) do not have to follow historical truth, Ruvarac’s opinion was that the search for historical truth was the basic principle of “historical science.” His scholarly ideal and the meaning of historical scholarship for him meant historical truth determined by the precisely developed methodology of historical research. Sharing the conviction of his university mentors that history should be a science (in the sense of the German term Wissenschaft), Ruvarac repeatedly acknowledged that he had been “ready to die rather than to say that a lie is the truth.” He did not care about “what people say and what the mob will say,” and from the silence of his monastery he struggled persistently to meet his scholarly ideal. Judging the past “shortly, objectively, coldly,” he confronted nationalistic interpretations of the past with the principle of objectivity, arguing that “one could not write more objectively than I write, and I am not interested in persons and subjects, but in matter and objects, and my every bend and digression, every question and shout, my every touch have their cause not in me, but in the object.” From this scholarly standpoint, Ruvarac formulated his understanding of the aims of future Serbian historians. Stressing the substantial difference between a scholarly approach to the past and representations of the past in Serbian epic poetry, Ruvarac asserted decisively that

30 Čedomir Popov, “Ilarion Ruvarac i Jovan Ristić,” in Braću Ruvarac u srpskoj istoriografiji i kulturi (Novi Sad, Sremska Mitrovica: SANU, 1997), 182.
31 Ilarion Ruvarac, Montenegrina: Prilozi istoriji Crne Gore (Sremski Karlovci: Srpska manastirska štamparija 1898), 107.
a future Serbian historian with entirely different goals from the goals of folksong singers and poets, laudators and mourners should restrain himself, and when he has written the history of the Kosovo battle, he should listen neither to these poems and stories, nor to the narratives about them, but he should ask about and study what is said on this question in the first, oldest, and best sources and historical evidences, and he should ask if the information they provide is consistent or not.35

He defined his own aim as a historian in a similar way:

I will explain the records and facts that I was able to discover; I will not hesitate to tell my opinion as well, if I have been able to arrive at one and answer the question … on the question; but it is not appropriate for me to present judgment, because I’m the minor among my brothers—that judgment […] I will leave to those who are more competent, more impartial and more objective than I am.36

Ruvarac’s political views were conservative. During the 1848/49 revolution, which caused interethnic conflict in the multinational Habsburg Monarchy, as a young man Ruvarac was suspicious of the nationalistic demands of his compatriots, arguing that “the entire business will remain without visible results.”37 Sharing a strong sense of loyalty to the Habsburg dynasty, he consistently rejected the liberal and democratic aspirations of Serbian citizens in Hungary.38 Hence, he was radically pessimistic about the future of the Serbian people, considering that the entire nation, addicted to a seductive ideology, “is sick.”39

The social function of nineteenth-century historiography was to legitimize the great transformation of the social and political order and establish continuity with earlier times, collecting historical material necessary for the (re)construction of the (fictional) tradition and determining a desirable value system in the form of grand narratives about the national past. In both cases, historiography endeavors either to challenge or to confirm the roots of modern institutions in the recent or distant past, thus giving scholarly legitimacy to conservative or liberal political

35 Ilarion Ruvarac, O knezu Lazaru (Novi Sad: Srpska štamparija S. Miletica, 1887), 191.
38 Cf. Jovan Grčić, Portreti s pisama (Novi Sad: Štamparija Jovanović i Bogdanov, 1939), 5:86.
Ilarion Ruvarac tried to avoid value judgments and interpreting the Serbian past in the form of historical narratives, and he used neither the motif of “the golden epoch of the Serbian medieval kingdom” nor the motif of “the centuries-old Serbian struggle for liberty.” However, unlike many nineteenth-century historians all over Europe (for instance, Johann Gustav Droysen in Germany, František Palacký in Bohemia, and Mihály Horváth in Hungary), Ruvarac was not a national ideologue. Rather, he deconstructed historical myths, which were seen as the foundation of the collective consciousness by his contemporaries. Hence, it is hardly surprising that he did not pay any attention to the question of “ethnogenesis,” one of the favorite research topics of nineteenth-century historians. Finally, Ruvarac did not search in the past for the “ideal” social or political order, as he did not believe that there had ever been a “golden age of Serbian history.”

However, he did not manage to escape the Zeitgeist, which was strongly influenced by nationalism. Like most nineteenth-century historians, Ruvarac concentrated on the past of his own nation, devoting himself mainly but not exclusively to the study of Serbian history. In doing so, he was led by his governing belief that historical knowledge had an emancipatory function, i.e. that the material and cultural development of any nation would be possible only if its own past was approached objectively, without any kind of nationalistic exaggeration. In Ruvarac’s view, objective historical knowledge was a prerequisite for any progress of the nation.

The Historian as a Critic

Many of Ruvarac’s historical works are still relevant. Among them, the works in which he deconstructed misapprehensions of his contemporaries were particularly important for the development of Serbian historiography. He focused his sharp criticism on some of the most common motifs in Serbian epic poetry, which offered “a heroic picture” of the Serbian past, assigned responsibility for the downfall of the medieval Serbian empire, narrated the Great Migration of the Serbs into Hungary at the end seventeenth century, and emphasized the “centuries-old independence” of Montenegro. In the treaty Chronological Questions about the Time of the Battle of Marica, the Death of King Vukašin, and the Death of

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Emperor Uroš (1879), Ruvarac demonstrated the falsehood of the assertion that king Vukašin, the incarnation of an unfaithful lord in epic poetry, had killed emperor Uroš (1355–71), the last member of the Nemanjić “dynasty of sacred roots,” in order to usurp legitimate rule. A decade later, on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the battle of Kosovo, Ruvarac criticized the central idea of epic poetry, according to which the Serbian medieval empire had fallen as the result of a betrayal. Ruvarac devoted On Prince Lazar (1887), one of his most comprehensive treatises and successful monographs, to the refutation of the widespread opinion concerning Prince Lazar’s reign. He demonstrated that Lazar had never held the title of emperor (he thus contradicted the epic tradition) and that the Serbian empire came to an end with the death of the last ruler of the Nemanjić dynasty, emperor Uroš, in 1371.

After having deconstructed these legendary views of the Serbian medieval past, Ruvarac moved to the key problems of Serbian history in the early modern period. In the book On the Patriarchs of Peć from Makarije to Arsenije III 1557–1690 (1888), he examined the history of the Serbian Orthodox church in the Ottoman Empire, and on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the migration of the Serbs in Hungary he published a series of articles republished later in the book Excerpts on Count Đorđe Branković and Patriarch Arsenije Čarnojević, with Three Digressions About the So-called Migration of the Serbs (1896). First, he established that during the migration in 1690, between 70,000 and 80,000 Serbs arrived in the territory of Hungary, while the Serbian public tended to claim that the number was more than half a million. Furthermore, Ruvarac challenged the view according to which the Serbian people migrated to Hungary after an official invitation by the Vienna court, and that, as a national community, they had been given a degree of autonomy, including rights and privileges, by the Habsburg emperor. Having analyzed all available sources, Ruvarac concluded

44 Ilarion Ruvarac, Odlomci o grofu Đorđu Brankoviću i Arseniju Čarnojeviću patrijarhu, s tri izleta o takozvanoj velikoj seobi srpskog naroda (Belgrade: Srpska kraljevska akademija, 1896).
that the Serbs had come as refugees, fleeing their homeland in fear of Ottoman revenge: “The Roman emperor and Hungarian king Leopold never invited the Serbian patriarch or the Serbian people to move from the Serbian lands and come to Hungary and Slavonia […] Hence, in the years 1691–1699, the Serbs were only guests, and because nobody had called on them to come to Hungary, they were uninvited guests.” At the same time, Ruvarac pointed out that Count Đorđe Branković, a prominent person among the Serbs in Hungary at the end of seventeenth century and the self-proclaimed “Despot od Illyricum,” was not a descendant of the family of late medieval Serbian rulers. Rather, according to Ruvarac, he was “a good-for-nothing, a liar, and an imposter, in other words, a swindler with a grand style.”

Finally, Ruvarac also analyzed the thesis concerning the allegedly centuries-old independence of Montenegro, which played a particularly important role in Serbian nationalism in the nineteenth century. Much as Hungarian nationalists have ascribed mythic importance to Transylvania, the Serbian nationalistic-minded bourgeoisie glorified and admired Montenegro as the “homeland of liberty” and “Serbian Sparta,” famous for the bravery and rebelliousness of its inhabitants, who were considered the best representatives of “Serbianhood.” Ruvarac questioned these notions in his work Montenegrina: Small Contributions to the History of Montenegro. He demonstrated that Montenegro had been part of the Ottoman Empire in the Early Modern age.

The Great Dispute in Serbian Historiography

Although later research refuted some of Ruvarac’s conclusions, such as his thesis according to which the Serbs had come to Hungary as “uninvited guests,” in the abovementioned works he showed that epic poetry was not reliable and that it could not be accepted as a historical source. In doing so, he initiated the most important controversy in Serbian historiography. The controversy between the supporters of the “critical” approach and the “Romantic” approach to the folk epic tradition lasted for the next 15 years (1879–1894), and the victory of the “critical orientation” led to the making of the modern Serbian historiography. The historians of Romantic orientation considered epic poems authentic.

46 Ibid., 144–45.
representations of Serbian history, while the historians lead by Ruvarac had a critical approach towards the folk tradition and denied its plausibility and use as a source for historical research. Romantic historians were usually amateurs without an appropriate education, who praised the Serbian past by quoting epic poetry. According to Radovan Samardžić, this “terminological confusion” in Serbian historiography was the result of the fact that the term “Romantic historians” is used to describe amateur historians who were “too seriously occupied by patriotism” and who, without actually pursuing study of or research on the past, offered interpretations which were intended to legitimize a policy of national liberation and unification.\(^{50}\) Accepting epic poetry as the only reliable evidence about the past and rejecting the rational core of the discipline of history, these “late and salient Romantics” presented “a dangerous regression to the beginnings of intentional and organized historical memory, which had merged with the oral tradition.”\(^{51}\) Having started in 1879 with Ruvarac’s article about chronological facts, the dispute involved how to deal with the past. The dispute concerned fundamental questions regarding the methodology of historical research. Furthermore, the controversy possessed a latent dimension as well regarding the function of rational knowledge. Did Serbian society need rational knowledge about its past, or should history be functionalized for the realization of desired political goals? In that sense, the erudite judgment of Stojan Novaković, who shared Ruvarac’s views, was typical. Novaković asserted that “the correction of the year and the way emperor Uroš had died is far more important for Serbian history than is usually accepted; merit for that correction is particular.”\(^{52}\) Hence, the debate between Ruvarac on one side and Miloš S. Milojević (1840–97) and Pantelija-Panta Srečković (1834–1903) on the other, the main supporters of the “Romantic orientation” in Serbian historiography, was extremely bitter. It went well beyond the frameworks of the historical profession and was met with considerable interest among members of the Serbian public.

A man of liberal political views and strong nationalistic feelings, Miloš Milojević took part as a volunteer in the Serbian–Ottoman wars (1876–78). After this episode he continued to work as a national propagandist, spreading the idea of national liberation among Serbs who were living in the areas of so-called Old Serbia (Kosovo, Macedonia), provinces that remained under Ottoman rule. Milojević understood the power of historical notions in the

\(^{50}\) See Samardžić, _Pisci srpske istorije_, 2:231.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 235.

\(^{52}\) Stojan Novaković, _Istorija i tradicija_ (Belgrade: SKZ, 1982), 5.
collective mobilization of the masses, so he put his entire historical work in the service of the anticipated political aims. In his *Excerpts From the History of Serbs and Serbian-South Slavic lands in Turkey and Austria* (1872) he was guided by nationalistic ideas about greatness and the distinctiveness of his people. Hence, he claimed that the history of the Serbs began in ancient times, when they had left their ancient homeland in India and settled all over the Middle and Near East, Asia Minor, Africa and Europe. In spite of the somnambulistic character of his conceptions, based on his nationalistic imagination and lack of historical knowledge, because of his “patriotic merits” he was made a member of the most important scholarly institution in the Principality of Serbia, the Serbian Learned Society, which also published his works. Provoked by the rise to prominence of a man whose concept of historical scholarship contrasted so radically with his, Ruvarac analyzed his works and concluded that Milojević was guided by fantasy and his own worldview in writing history. Ruvarac stated bluntly that Milojević was “a charlatan” who “fabricates folk poems and invents inscriptions and records.” Not without bitterness, Ruvarac emphasized that the “Serbian Learned Society in Belgrade accepted such a charlatan as a member.”

Ruvarac’s critique gave rise to a bitter quarrel, not only about historical research, but also about his relationship to the Serbian nation. Milojević accused Ruvarac of being a “traitor of Serbian nationality” and announced that Ruvarac “should be executed.”

The conflict between Ruvarac and Milojević indicates the passions that influenced the development of Serbian historiography. However, Ruvarac’s dispute with Pantelija-Panta Srećković was more important. As a theologian, Srećković was appointed professor at the Belgrade Lyceum (the predecessor of the Higher School) in 1859, where he taught first general and then Serbian history until his retirement in 1894. As an active politician and a lifelong member of the Liberal Party, he had been a member of the Serbian parliament for almost 20 years, during which time he had engaged in national propaganda, organizing

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56 Ibid., 67.

the Serbian school system in the Ottoman Empire. His devotion to these issues was crowned by his appointment as a member of the newly established Serbian Royal Academy in 1887. As a professor, he published a *History of Serbian People* (1884), in which he attempted to give an overview of Serbian history in the early Middle Ages. In his review of Srečković’s work, Ruvarac noticed some crucial shortcomings, which were the result of insufficient erudition and ignorance of historical methodology. Since in Srečković’s work there were many errors and incorrectly translated passages from medieval sources, Ruvarac asserted that Srečković did not possess the elementary qualifications for scholarly work. He concluded that “he does not know as much Latin as even a student in the fourth grade gymnasium should know.” The main objection Ruvarac made to Srečković’s work was that he did not use the published collections of historical documents, but rather uncritically compiled facts contained in the Russian historical literature. Furthermore, Ruvarac astutely concluded that, as a “patriotic historian or historical panegyrist,” Srečković was guided in his “method” by nationalist conceptions, and thus exaggerated the size of the territory of Serbian medieval state and wrongly glorified Serbian rulers of the early Middle Ages as the “greatest Serbian patriots.”

Srečković rejected Ruvarac’s objections, not by replying with scholarly arguments, but rather simply by describing Ruvarac as a “lunatic and ignoramus,” who “destroys Serbian nationality and helps the enemies of the Serbs.” Ruvarac answered with a detailed critique of Srečković’s method (1885/86), beginning with the assertion that Srečković was “a pale imitation” of Miloš Milojević, who “had looked for the Serbs and had found them in tropical Africa.” Furthermore, Ruvarac repeated his observation that Srečković had written his book using Russian scholarly works and that he had presented somebody else’s findings as his own. Emphasizing that Srečković “writes badly, incorrectly and confusingly,”

61 Ibid., 95.
62 Ibid., 95–97.
63 Ibid., 98–113.
65 Ibid., 127, 130.
Ruvarac accused him of plagiarism, arguing that “anything else is taken and stolen.”\(^{66}\) He considered Srećković a “charlatan,” unskilled in historical criticism, who interpreted the past from the viewpoint of “exaggerated patriotism, letting emotions and wishes prevail over intellect and reason.”\(^{67}\) Hence, Ruvarac concluded that Srećković’s *History* “is not valuable, in fact, it is worthless, and it is a great shame for Serbia and Serbianhood that it was published.”\(^{68}\) At the same time, Ruvarac claimed that, as a “Pan-Serb […] who is engaged in the propagation of the idea of Serbian unification […] [Srećković] is trying to make all Slav tribes, clans and languages Serbian,” and that “he proved that in the Slav South there have never been any Slav tribes apart from the noble Serbian tribe.”\(^{69}\) Noting Srećković’s bias and politically motivated approach to history, Ruvarac compared him to Ante Starčević, the founder of the nationalist Croatian Party of Rights. Ruvarac considered them both chauvinists and “offspring and emanation of the same spirit, […] which spreads the seed of discord among similar and closest brothers, among the Slav tribes in the South.”\(^{70}\)

Assaults on Ruvarac lasted till the end of his life, and they were fundamentally ideological. Because of his critical attitude towards nationalist narratives of the Serbian past and his deconstruction of widely spread myths about “glorious Serbian history,” the propagandists of Serbian nationalism regarded Ruvarac as a destroyer of epic tradition and therefore a destroyer of “Serbian ideals.”\(^{71}\) The judgment of Aleksandar Protić, a colonel in Serbian army, is typical of the reception of Ruvarac and his followers in these nationalistic circles. He thought that they neglected the interests of national policy in their search for “historical truth.” Consequently, he accused Serbian historians led by Ruvarac of being “excessively skeptical in their attempt to serve the truth, and this begins to be harmful to the interests of Serbian nation.”\(^{72}\) However, it is obvious that some of Ruvarac’s conclusions had clear political implications, in spite of his lack of interest in political issues and his devotion to the principle of objectivity. For instance, questioning the constitutional character of the Privileges Granted to the Serbs by Emperor Leopold I, which were issued in 1690, Ruvarac denied

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66 Ibid., 138.
67 Ibid., 158.
68 Ibid., 182.
69 Ibid., 200.
70 Ibid., 200–01.
implicitly the main argument of Serbian politicians in southern Hungary, who founded their claims for autonomous territory on this imperial legal document.73 Similarly, arguing that Montenegro was a part of the Ottoman Empire in the Early Modern era, Ruvarac indirectly denied the historical legitimacy of the modern state of Montenegro, which grounded its self-understanding on precisely the deeply rooted idea of a centuries-old tradition of freedom.

With regards to the reception of his work in the Serbian nationalistic public, Ruvarac was aware that “it was dangerous to struggle against deeply rooted prejudices and folk tradition.”74 Considering himself an “element of destruction,”75 Ruvarac defined his relation to the Serbian nation and its history in the following way: “And I remain alone […] leading quarrels and wars against all the supporters of the people’s glory, even if that glory is sometimes false and futile […] [B]eing constantly at war and in quarrel, I am always longing and aspiring for peace, tranquility and truth.”76 At the same time, in spite of the fact that he had “destroyed more than he had built,” Ruvarac asserted his commitment to his nation, which found manifestation in his efforts to liberate it “from ignorance and misapprehensions”: “I know […] that I loved and I still love my Serbian people like folk poets and famous orators love their nation […] We all think that we serve and repay our nation in our own way.”77

Ruvarac’s Legacy and Modern Serbian Historiography

In the dispute between the “Romantics” on the one hand and Ruvarac and his followers on the other, there was also an intergenerational conflict. Ruvarac was supported by the younger historians, like Stanoje Stanojević (1874–1937) and Jovan Radonić (1873–1953), who both admired his work. In one of his first articles, the former praised Ruvarac as a “first rank scholar […] and the greatest Serbian historian,”78 while the latter devoted his first book to Ruvarac, considering

75 Ruvarac, Odlomci o grofu Đorđu Brankoviću, 21.
76 Ibid., vii.
77 Ibid.
him the “founder of the critical orientation of Serbian historiography.” Belgrade scholars Stojan Novaković (1842–1915) and Ljubomir Kovačević (1848–1918) shared Ruvarac’s understanding of the historical discipline. They insisted on a rational approach to the past, governed by the rules of methodological historical research. With Ruvarac, who enjoyed their professional and friendly support, they contributed decisively to the rejection of the “Romantic school” in Serbian historiography. At the same time, Franjo Rački (1828–94), a leading Croatian historian of the time, and the aforementioned highly influential Slavist Vatroslav Jagić appreciated Ruvarac’s historical work. Ruvarac’s election to the Serbian Royal Academy in Belgrade in 1888 and the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts in Zagreb in the same year demonstrate the recognition he was given for his scholarly work.

However, the decisive victory of Ruvarac’s concepts came up after the retirement of Pantelija Srećković in 1894, when the latter was succeeded by Ljubomir Kovačević as professor of Serbian history in the Higher School in Belgrade. The institutionalization of historical studies continued in the subsequent years, with the founding of departments of ancient, medieval, and modern history (which previously had not existed) and the appointment of the first Serbian historians who had received their professional education at European universities abroad. Almost all of them, for instance Stanoje Stanojević, Ljuba Jovanović, and Jovan Radonić, were followers of Ruvarac, and they were elected to serve as professors in the Higher School at the beginning of the twentieth century. This meant not only the defeat of the “Romantics” by representatives of Serbian “critical historiography,” but also the professionalization of historical studies and acceptance among Serbian historians of the dominant historiographical paradigm of the time.

In comparison with the main currents of the European historical scholarship of the nineteenth century, after a delay of a few decades Ruvarac and his followers carried out activities such as the collection and publication of critical editions of sources, establishing auxiliary historical disciplines and determining historical facts that were prerequisites for the emergence of a modern historical profession. Taking into consideration these facts, although he was not educated as a historian, Ilarion Ruvarac contributed decisively to the professionalization of

79 Jovan Radonić, Zapadna Evropa i balkanski narodi prema Turcima u prvoj polovini XV veka (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1905).
of Serbian historical studies and their transformation into a scholarly discipline. Accepting Rankean methodology, particularly the principle of objectivity, Ruvarac became the founder of modern Serbian “scientific” historiography and “almost a symbol of historical criticism the only aim of which is (establishing) facts.”

This judgment is confirmed by the statement of Jovan Radonić, who observed that “Ruvarac’s merit is that he accepted completely the currents of modern German historiography, that as a young man he arrived at his own understanding of history and its tasks, that as a student he completely mastered the method of historical research, and that, starting from a Romantic [view of history], he became a representative of a new, realistic direction [in Serbia].” Therefore, Ruvarac’s works, including his reviews and critiques, “are important and informative documents on the dramatic development of modern [Serbian] historiography.” At the same time, it should be noted that the establishment of “Serbian critical historiography” had some inherent limitations. Among them, the most important was the rejection of the wider approach to the past initiated by positivistic historiography, which would have included not only political but also social and cultural questions. Therefore, this rejection determined the lasting concentration in the scholarship on individual problems, mostly from the field of political and diplomatic history. Unlike Ruvarac’s liberally oriented opponents, who lacked the knowledge to give a “Whig interpretation” of the Serbian past, Ruvarac did not intend to become a “great writer,” and he never wrote a complete overview of Serbian history.

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