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The Serbian Orthodox Church in Western Historiography: Maria Falina, *Religion and Politics in Interwar Yugoslavia: Serbian Nationalism and East Orthodox Christianity*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023)

Abstract: This essay is a review of Maria Falina's book, which investigates the complex interaction between the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), nationalism, and politics in Yugoslavia during the interwar period. It delves into Maria Falina's ideas, historical context, and various perspectives that she offers. Falina questions commonly held beliefs about the natural relationship between religion and Serbian nationalism, and digs into the SOC's changing role as a political actor during a period of profound social and political change. Falina investigates the influence of people such as Nikolaj Velimirović and Justin Popović, the Church's reaction to the Yugoslav state, religious competition, and modernity issues.

Keywords: Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), interwar Yugoslavia, nationalism, religion and politics, historiography

During a debate in 2007, Professor John R. Lampe outlined five key barriers to the study of Balkan history. The wars of the 1990s prompted some Western scholars to label combatants as either guilty or innocent, evaluating their decisions in terms of historical Balkan or non-Balkan patterns of behaviour. Western historians, drawn to such a moral narrative, have frequently exonerated Croats, Slovenes, and Bosnian Muslims because of their Habsburg ancestry, while attributing Serbian guilt to Balkan origins. Regional scholars, on the other hand, highlight their moral narrative about the fundamental responsibility of Western, particularly American, intervention in order to evade domestic responsibility, according to Lampe. They relied on an antiquated model

of great power influence in the affairs of emerging Balkan republics in the nineteenth century. Lampe suggests that this view may have been sustained during and after the two World Wars, but it is otherwise questionable.¹

From 1991 until 1995, the conflict in the former Yugoslavia rekindled unfavourable debate about the Balkans and Orthodox Christianity. Regional and Western media both presented an ahistorical, unchanging East, influenced by Samuel Huntington's deterministic theory of civilizational clashes. According to this viewpoint, Byzantine culture and the Orthodox Church are not synonymous with Europe.² According to Bojan Aleksov, much of the present scholarly research on Serbian Orthodoxy is viewed through the prism of the 1990s hostilities, resulting in negative judgements.³ The Orthodox and Protestant-Catholic cultural circles frequently clashed, generating in dichotomies such as freedom vs dictatorship, civilization versus savagery, and supremacy versus inferiority.⁴ The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), as a "Byzantine institution", is principally criticised in this discourse for fostering a "culture of violence" throughout history. Orthodox Christianity is frequently connected with violence and division, making peaceful coexistence difficult. The Orthodox Church's dominance is perceived as impeding practical decision-making, adding to the perception of Orthodox societies as anti-democratic and hostile.

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- 1 Aleksa Djilas, "The Academic West and the Balkan Test," *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans* 3/2007, 323–332; John R. Lampe, "Responses to Aleksa Djilas, 'The Academic West and the Balkan Test'," *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans* 3/2007, 113–120.
 - 2 Jelena Jorgačević Kisić, "The Serbian Orthodox Church in the German Press: How far is Byzantium", *Schein and Sein: Sichtbares und Unsichtbares in den Kulturen Südeuropas*, hrsg. Wolfgang Dahmen, Gabriella Schubert, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 199–211. See: Milica Bakic-Hayden, Robert Hayden, "Orientalist variations on the theme 'Balkans': Symbolic geography in recent Yugoslav cultural politics", *Slavic Review* 1/1992, 1–15; Milica Bakic-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia", *Slavic Review* 4/1995, 917–931; Peter H. Liotta, "Religion and War: Fault Lines in the Balkan Enigma," *Yugoslavia unraveled: sovereignty, self-determination, intervention*, ed. Raju G. C. Thomas, (Lanham and Boulder: Lexington Books, 2003), 87–116.
 - 3 Bojan Aleksov, Nicholas Lackenby, "Orthodoxy in Serbia: between its public image and the everyday religiosity of its believers," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 3/2022, 214–229.
 - 4 Jorgačević Kisić, "The Serbian Orthodox Church in the German Press", 206–207; Radu Preda, "Orthodox Social Theology as a Task for the Orthodox Engagement in Ecumenism," *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism*, eds. Pantelis Kalaitzidis, Thomas FitzGerald, Cyril Hovorun, Aikaterini Pekridou, Nikolaos Asproulis, Guy Liagre, Dietrich Werner, (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 843–864; Paul Valliere, "Introduction to the Modern Orthodox Tradition," *The Teachings of Modern Orthodox Christianity: On Law, Politics and Human Nature*, eds. John Witte Jr., Frank S. Alexander, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 1–32.

These inclinations are strongly ingrained in the “mutilated Byzantine heritage” that may still be seen in Orthodox Church practises today. The SOC and its leaders are usually viewed as traditional and conservative by secular analysts. This is because they are closely associated with the nationalist renaissance that happened after communist government ended and the transition to neoliberal capitalism, which contained authoritarian features. In public speech, the SOC also projected a self-image that reinforced these characteristics.⁵

According to Vladimir Cvetković, Yugoslavia is frequently portrayed as an artificial entity with the unrealistic goal of unifying two different cultural groups: civilised Westerners and barbaric Easterners. The SOC plays a detrimental role in the most, if not all, of the region’s troubles. A review of German media articles published since 2014 demonstrates an increasing interest in the Russian Church and the Orthodox Church as a whole. The fundamental, assertive, and destructive aspects of Orthodoxy are highlighted in particular. In addition, when attempting to understand the theological traditions of the Balkan churches, the German scientific community frequently resorts to nationalism and anti-Westernism.⁶ It is usual to write that Russian émigré priests and European right-wing conservative thought strongly influenced the SOC’s political stance during the interwar period.⁷

Maria Falina has just released a new book that takes a similar approach. Her profile emphasises her expertise in modern and contemporary European history, with a focus on Eastern Europe. Her research interests include intellectual history, nationalism, and the confluence between religion and politics. In 2011, she received her PhD in comparative history of Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe from Central European University in Budapest.⁸ From 2016 to 2023, she worked as an assistant professor of European history at the University of Dublin. She joined Utrecht University in August 2023. She held positions as a postdoctoral fellow and lecturer in the School of History and Archives at

5 Jorgačević Kisić, “The Serbian Orthodox Church in the German Press“, 206–207; Dimiter G. Angelov, “Byzantinism: the imaginary and real heritage of Byzantium in Southeastern Europe,” *New Approaches to Balkan Studies*, eds. Dimitris Keridis, Ellen Elias-Bursae, Nicholas Yatromanolakis, (Dulles, Virginia: Potomac Books Inc., 2003), 3–23

6 Vladimir Cvetković, “The Reception of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the 21st Century German Academia,” *Philosophos – Philotheos – Philoponos: Studies and Essays as Characteria in Honor of Professor Bogoljub Šijaković on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Mikonja Knežević, (Belgrade: Gnomon; Podgorica: Matica srpska, 2021), 993–1004.

7 Aleksov, Lackenby, “Orthodoxy in Serbia: between its public image and the everyday religiosity of its believers,” 214–229.

8 The title of the PhD dissertation is “Pyrrhic Victory: East Orthodox Christianity, Politics, and Serbian Nationalism in the Interwar Period.”

University College Dublin from 2013 to 2016. She was also a Postdoctoral Fellow with the Irish Research Council at the Centre for War Studies.⁹

The book is chronologically arranged, beginning with an examination of the relationship between religion and the establishment of the Serbian state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and continuing with an epilogue on the Second World War events. It finishes with an epilogue that discusses the Second World War events. [Introduction: Religion, modernity and secularisation; Religion and nationalism; Historiographical overview; 1 Religion and Serbian state- and nation-building before 1918 (Before the nation-state: Serbs under Habsburg and Ottoman rule; Working together: Church and state in independent Serbia; The Serbian Church and Serbian nationalism before the First World War); 2 New Church for the new state: ‘Liberation and unification’ of lands, people and institutions (The new state: Where does faith come in?; Yugoslavism and religion; Incomplete separation: Regulation of religious life and legal status of religious communities; Unification of the Serbian Orthodox Church and (re-)establishment of the Serbian Patriarchate; A happy coexistence? The Yugoslav state and the Serbian nation in the view of the Serbian Orthodox Church: 1918–mid-1920s; Community of the Church and nation; Reform movement from the outside and from within; The Serbian Orthodox Church and symbolic legitimization of power); 3 The Serbian Orthodox Church faces the challenge of modernity (Royal dictatorship and integral Yugoslavism; Responses to new challenges; How to operate in a religiously diverse society); 4 Climax: The Serbian Orthodox Church enters politics (Political Orthodoxism; After the assassination; 1935–7: The Concordat crisis; 1939–41: The breakup; Theorizing the nation; The national-religious synthesis; Epilogue: The war; The memory of the Second World War; The end of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia; Resistance or collaboration? The continuation of the interwar Serbian Orthodox political thought in the war; After the war); Notes, Bibliography, and Index.

M. Falina mentioned that she initially visited Serbia while studying history at Moscow State University in the early 2000s. Following that, her interest in Serbian Orthodox Church studies intensified. She based her book on

9 Among other things, Falina has published “Svetosavlje: A case study in the nationalization of religion,” *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte* 101/2007, 505–527; “Between ‘Clerical Fascism’ and Political Orthodoxy: Orthodox Christianity and Nationalism in Interwar Serbia,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 2/2007, 247–258; “Narrating democracy in interwar Yugoslavia: From state creation to its collapse,” *Journal of Modern European History* 2/2019, 196–208; “Religious Diversity and Equality in Interwar Yugoslavia,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 4/2021, 539–559, etc.

her PhD dissertation and spent the next ten years performing substantial archive research to strengthen its narrative. She completed her book with the assistance of Dublin City University's School of History and Geography and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

The monograph mainly relies on Serbian historiography, although with a few exceptions, the author is typically dissatisfied with the current findings. She argues that academics, politicians, and the Serbian public have incorrectly thought that the historical relationship between the Serbian people and Eastern Orthodox Christianity, as well as the institutions of the Serbian Orthodox Church, is natural. There has been a lack of critical examination of the role of religion and religious organisations in the establishment of the state in Serbian national historiography. The exploration's primary focus was religion, specifically the historical structure of the church. It also emphasised the Church's crucial role in the national liberation war, along with the clergy's vital role in education and other nation-building endeavours. Falina conducted some archival research in the Ministries of Religion and Justice in the Yugoslav Archives in Belgrade, though it was limited. She acknowledges that the research is "interesting and important", but claims that it played only a minor effect in the development of her arguments. She primarily relied on religious periodicals and other written materials, in addition to literature. Indeed, accessing the SOC archives (most likely the Archives of the Synod of the SOC) is difficult for a variety of reasons. However, the author did not attempt to explore the SOC Archives, which recently organised interwar documentation. Not to mention that she passed up the option to work in archives outside of Serbia, such as in Moscow.

M. Falina assesses her objectives and what she hopes to accomplish. In her analysis of religion's role in Yugoslav and Serbian history, she focuses on nationalism as a modern political and societal phenomenon. She acknowledges that nations are a product of modernity and comprise a wide range of beliefs and practises. The book, according to Falina, provides a complex and comprehensive account of the Balkans' connection to religion, nationalism, politics, state creation, secularisation, and modernity. The SOC example is used to bring into question the widely accepted belief that religion and nationalism have an inherent or historical connection. Falina argues that Orthodox Christianity is not intrinsically opposed to modernity by delving into the complex relationship between Orthodox Christianity and Serbian nationalism, and also the failed efforts at nation-building in Yugoslavia during the interwar period. She emphasises how numerous participants imagined, built, and investigated the links between the Serbian people, nationalism, and religion at the begin-

ning of the twentieth century. The interwar construction of Orthodox priests and laity evolved later into radical political use. This vision arose in reaction to the challenges of political modernity, such as the foundation of a multi-religious Yugoslav state, Yugoslav ideology, concerns about secularisation, and the development of communism and fascism in Europe. SOC backed Yugoslavia in 1918, but its political ideology linked Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Serbian nationalism from the mid-1930s to 1941. Following the Concordat conflict in 1937, the SOC adopted an autonomous political stance and, in 1941, affiliated itself with the Serbian national movement.

The first chapter investigates the relationship between religion and the formation of the Serbian nation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Contrary to the belief that Serbian historians that the Orthodox Church was the primary institution responsible for preserving national identity during Ottoman rule, Falina contends that the Serbian clergy used this narrative to advance their goals. The main objective was to develop cults for national saints and to legitimise the clergy by highlighting the church's support for the national cause.

The origins of Nikolaj Velimirović's late 1930s rhetoric, according to Falina, can be tentatively traced back to the beginning of the century. She goes on to say that at the turn of the twentieth century, the Serbian clergy did not seem to be interested in defining the precise borders of the Serbian nation or developing a sophisticated intellectual framework to substantiate claims of a strong connection between Eastern Orthodox Christianity and national identity. However, in his ground-breaking study of the Nazarenes, Bojan Aleksov established that the origins of the connection between religion and nation can be traced back to the 19th century in the territories of the Habsburg Monarchy, especially the Karlovac Metropolis. The conversion of many Serbs to Nazarenes during the Habsburg Monarchy in the nineteenth century, according to Aleksov, was a strong indication that the Orthodox Church was losing control over the spiritual sphere. This prompted the Church, albeit late and strongly, to embrace nationalism.¹⁰ He explains how conservative church ideologues have relied on pre-existing conceptions of the Serbian people's sacrifice throughout Serbia's history. As a result, historical continuity was established. The intentional use of the Uniate or Nazarene danger functioned as an important weapon in emphasising the Orthodox Church's position as an institution in preserving and upholding the nation and its identity against any potential threats. "That's why, brother Serbs, love your faith as you have loved it to this day because your

10 Bojan Aleksov, *Nazareni među Srbima*, (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike, 2010), 264–301.

faith is pure and heroic; it has saved you from the flood of foreigners to this day”, Aleksov quotes a parish priest from Southern Hungary as saying. “Know that our nationality is so closely tied to the Orthodox faith that a Serb without his religion is no longer a Serb”.¹¹ There were many similar examples.¹² According to Aleksov, these movements represent the SOC’s modernization, in which Orthodoxy came to be recognised as a separate cultural embodiment of the Serbian people. The nation’s discourse became confessionalized, and a long-standing symbiotic relationship was developed between the Serbian nation and the Orthodox Church.¹³

Furthermore, in 1775, the Synod of Karlovac designated Sava Nemanjić a Serbian national saint. In 1812, a school fund was established in Zemun, with the statute specifying that Saint Sava shall be honoured as the patron saint of Serbian schools. This was the first time Savindan was designated as a school honour. After its foundation in 1826, Matica Srpska started commemorating Savindan as its patron’s day in addition to the name day of its benefactor, Sava Tekelija.¹⁴ In the Principality of Serbia, this process begins later.

The second chapter examines at how the newly formed state interacted with religious communities in Yugoslavia during the first decade after unification. M. Falina contends that during the 1917 Corfu Declaration, proponents of Yugoslavia overestimated the power of religious figures. They erroneously believed in the idea of religious equality and the ability of religion to ensure the success of the Yugoslav endeavour. They expected religion to fade

11 *Isto*.

12 Milan Kostić, „Slovo na sv. Savu govorio 14. januara 1869. u dvorani Srbskog učiteljišta u Somboru“ [Letter to St. Savu spoke on January 14, 1869, in the hall of the Serbian teacher’s school in Sombor], *Školski list* (Sombor), 31. 1. 1869, 22–25; „Književni prikazi. M. Petrović, Srpske besjede koje je sastavio i govorio u srpskoj pravoslavnoj crkvi Nikola Begović, proto Karlovački“ [Literary representations. M. Petrović, Serbian Sermons composed and spoken in the Serbian Orthodox Church by Nikola Begović, priest of Karlovac], Volume II, (Beograd: Štamparija zadruge štamparskih radenika, 1880), *Školski list* (Sombor), 15. 4. 1881, 106–109; „Listak u ravnicima na Vidovdan“ [A leaflet in the plain on Vidovdan], *Zastava*, 24. 6 / 6. 7. 1886, 3; “Bratska pisma. XVI. Svetosavlje Pravoslavlje“ [Fraternal letters. XVI. Svetosavlje Pravoslavlje], *Ženski svet* (Novi Sad), 1. 2. 1900, 19–20; Dimitrije Ruvarac, „Govor na parastosu Dimitrija Davidovića, u smederevskoj crkvi 18. septembra 1888.“ [Speech at the memorial service of Dimitrije Davidović, in the Smederevo church on September 18, 1888], *Godišnjica Nikole Čupića*, 1. 1. 1889, 239.

13 Aleksov, *Nazareni među Srbima*, 264–301.

14 Prince Miloš designated *Savindan* a non-working day in 1823, and Saint Sava was declared the patron saint of all schools in Serbia in January 1840. Saint Sava’s first official celebration in Serbia took place in Kragujevac the same year.

away and be replaced by scientific rational thought. They were also optimistic about the Yugoslav nation's prospects. Religious leaders in Yugoslavia did not believe that comprehensive secularisation of politics was the only solution to the country's multi-religious issues. According to the author, misconceptions about how to differentiate and maintain a balance between the secular and religious sectors, as well as vague notions about church-state separation, have hampered SCS Kingdom's ties with religious organisations.

The SOC faced the challenge of reconciling its old narrative with the new political reality during the interwar period. Despite their optimism and euphoria, the SOC hierarchy did not fully comprehend the weaknesses of the political compromise reached between Serbian and Croatian political elites, or the implications of integral Yugoslavia for the "fraternal nations" during the first years of Yugoslavia. The SOC used biblical motifs to unite the national society with the newly constituted state's religious organisations. Falina does, however, point out that there is no proof that the SOC purposefully undermined the Yugoslav democratic project after the war. Despite the birth of Yugoslavia, the Serbian Church maintained its conviction in the national church's absolute superiority. The Roman Catholic Church, as represented by its institutions and hierarchy in Croatia, has long been a rival in this conflict. Falina also argues that the early twentieth-century SOC modernization programmes did not receive adequate support from church leadership. This lack of support was caused by the church's focus on reform and unifying concerns.

Several theses in the book should be discussed. The notion that the majority of the SOC displayed a lack of comprehension or inclination to engage on an ecumenical agenda is, however, inaccurate. In addition to mentioning Nikolaj Velimirović, several bishops, priests, and even patriarchs were involved, including Patriarch Dimitrije, Patriarch Gavrilo, Irinej Ćirić, Dositej Vasić, Milo Parenta, and others.¹⁵

15 Priit Rohtmets, Radmila Radić, "The World Alliance for International Friendship through the Churches and Religious and Political Rapprochement between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia in the 1920's and 1930's," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 4/2015, 583–605; Radmila Radić, „Saradnja SPC sa ekumenskim organizacijama i Anglikanskom crkvom u prvoj polovini 20. veka” [Cooperation of the SOC with ecumenical organisations and the Anglican Church in the first part of the twentieth century], *Osam vekova autokefalije Srpske pravoslavne crkve I–II*, Zbornik radova sa Međunarodnog naučnog skupa, Beograd, 10–14. decembar 2018. godine, (Beograd: Pravoslavni bogoslovski fakultet, 2020), 397–418; Radmila Radić, Neven Vukic, "Ecumenism Divided. Christian Churches at the Fault Lines," *Balkan Contextual Theology: An Introduction* (1st ed.), ed. S. Odak, Z. Grozdanov, (London: Routledge, 2022), 45–78.

The third chapter discusses the difficulties that the Serbian Church faced as it established a major social and political position, such as atheism and the spread of rival Christian denominations. Following 1929, Yugoslavia's dictatorship opened new opportunities for religious congregations to participate in politics, leading in the establishment of youth organisations. Restrictions in the public sphere forced Yugoslav religious institutions to approach the national question in more difficult ways, culminating in the birth of new political ideologies that merged nationalism and religion. The Serbian Orthodox Church remained the Serbian people's guardian and legitimate representative. It was, nevertheless, required to create positions and a clear action plan in response to perceived threats to the Church and the nation. They were opposed to the imposition of an integrated Yugoslavia from the start of the dictatorship, which became a key source of tension between the Yugoslav state and the church in the early 1930s, according to the author. Proponents of Integral Yugoslavia were ardent supporters of disconnecting religion from the public arena without imposing atheistic and militantly anti-clerical ideals and practises. The state distrusted and sought to control religious actors, but it was forced to rely on religious communities in its efforts to promote the Yugoslav cause. Religion, on the other hand, remained a cause of disagreement within the unified "Yugoslav nation".

According to M. Falina, the 1929 government altered the aspirations of religious organisations for "public involvement" in Yugoslavia. Catholic activism was considered as a threat to the SOC's authority and influence in ethnically diverse regions, particularly Croatia and Bosnia. The SOC's rhetoric towards Roman Catholics became increasingly harsh as the Catholic movements gained power. In the mid-1930s, the SOC also faced substantial opposition to governmental policies and rhetoric. Religious institutions have grown into natural transmitters of tribal identities, leading political actors to rely on religious groups to counter governmental propaganda. In their mass mobilisation operations, they also use religious language and symbolism. As public dissatisfaction with the rulers grew, religious communities began to see the advantages of such collaboration, encouraging the Serbian hierarchs to develop an Orthodox public opinion that would advocate for the Church's interests. The SOC sought to bring together Orthodox Christians who were opposed to materialism, atheism, Marxism, and communism. They invested in religious education and founded seminaries and academies in order to build a religious elite. The strategic goal of the church was to build a social group that shared and supported Christian spiritual and political beliefs. As a model, the Roman Catholic Church was used.

The fourth section of the text examines the period from the assassination of King Aleksandar Karadjordjević to the outbreak of the Second World War, with a focus on the SOC's political activity. The Church steadily switched its allegiance away from Yugoslavia and towards the Serbian nation in order to protect itself from threats such as religious rivalry, governmental regulation, and secularisation. In response to modernism, the SOC established *svetosavlje* in 1935 during the national feast of Saint Sava. Svetosavlje's philosophy indicates that modern nationalism is not restricted to secular politics and culture. By reducing borders between national and religious groupings, it enables a nation to acquire the attributes of a sacred institution. Falina refers to the SOC's involvement in public politics as "political orthodoxy", a term established in Romania during the interwar period to describe the Eastern Orthodox community's struggle to adapt to modern life. According to the author, Dimitrije Najdanović, a prominent advocate of this viewpoint, argued that Christianity was under attack and needed to be protected. He used Carl Schmitt's concept of "political theology" to support his view on Christianity's modern political underpinning.

Under the Concordat, SOC renounced Yugoslav political support, but its purpose was not Serbian nationalism. Instead, the aim was to embrace secular ideas. Church journals now provide a platform for educated theologians to debate religion's place in society. The division between religious and secular politics began to disintegrate as a result of the events of 1937. By the end of the 1930s, the SOC saw Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the nation, and the state as indivisible parts of the same whole. The SOC's animosity towards Roman Catholic missionary efforts in Yugoslavia was motivated by a fear of religious rivalry. The clergy underlined the significance of state unity as a result of the challenges faced by religious competition. By 1937, the majority of the lower clergy and archbishops had withdrawn their support for Yugoslav nation-building and denounced the Concordat, arguing that it infringed the religious rights of Serbian Orthodox Christians. For the first time, Serbian national interests were openly opposed to those of the Yugoslav state.

Since the nineteenth century, Eastern Orthodox churches have been dealing with the issue of nationalism. It used to be seen as a threat because of its association with liberal secularism and materialism. Despite this, there was no universal nationalist doctrine, and each religious institution took decisions based on its own circumstances. As early as 1872, the Patriarchate of Constantinople rejected nationalism. As Orthodox churches gained independence or semi-independence within nation-states, nationalism grew linked with national sovereignty and church-state relations. Serbian Orthodox intellectuals began to

examine the concept of country and nationalism from an Orthodox perspective, motivated by the Russian emigrant community in Belgrade and theological discourse in adjacent Orthodox countries. According to Falina, the most radical proposal for state-church relations argued that the country could continue to exist without the SOC's assistance.

The book's epilogue discusses the collapse of the Yugoslav state in 1941 and its tragic consequences for the SOC. According to Falina, the SOC's participation in the March coup symbolised its resistance to the Yugoslav state. It's unclear where this claim comes from. The SOC was displeased with the evolution of the nation's relations and political actors, but there must be credible evidence to support the conclusion that it played a critical part in the coup to destabilise the Yugoslav state. If no other sources are found, this conclusion looks to be the same as the charges levelled against the SOC during the war by Ljotić supporters and the occupation authorities. The SOC supported the coup plotters, but its participation was insignificant. It is necessary to distinguish between the coup and the ensuing Yugoslav demonstrations. The SOC was aware of the overall atmosphere in society, and the protests were not limited to the Serbian people. It's worth remembering the experience of an American journalist in Belgrade.¹⁶ Sometimes critics forget that the First World War ended only twenty years ago, and the Serbs recalled it vividly. In that conflict, almost every family in Serbia lost someone. The same opponent was to be allowed to return unopposed. Could anyone involved in the coup and demonstration, even if they were aware of the repercussions, have predicted such a devastating outcome? Furthermore, can anyone argue that if March 27 had not

16 In 1939, Chicago journalist Robert William St. John moved to Europe to report for the Associated Press. He spent two years in the Balkans and later published his first bestseller, *From the Land of Silent People*, in 1942. St. John wrote about the bombing of Belgrade, the evacuation of the city's population, and his escape. He also wrote about the coup and demonstrations on March 27. In every country, the story followed the same pattern: "weeks of writing daily to keep the story alive while waiting for the inevitable". In Yugoslavia, the news was about capitulation, with Yugoslavia giving Hitler the green light. St. John chose Turkey as his destination and waited for permission from the Associated Press to continue. However, a strange development occurred in Belgrade, which contradicted the old patterns of other countries that capitulated. Despite public speeches, and controlled radio, and a poor Yugoslav press, St. John believed that Prime Minister Cvetković had only 20% of the population behind him when he joined Yugoslavia in the Axis. He expected that the same pattern would be in Yugoslavia, but none considered the possibility of a "Children's Revolution." This event led to Belgrade being proud of its young people, who spoke out against the government's policies. Robert St. John, *From the Land of Silent People*, (London, Toronto, Bombay, Sydney: Doubleday, George G. Harrap and Co. Ltd, 1942).

occurred, the subsequent events in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (civil war, revolution, etc.) would not have been as devastating?

Falina further observes that Yugoslav socialist historiography made broad accusations of fascism and accused all churches and religious organisations of complicity. She goes on to say that the wartime history of Yugoslav religious groups is “unfortunately under-researched,” which is undeniably true. She continues on to explain that, where applicable, new post-communist national historiographies retained socialist ideological thinking. Nonetheless, would this book exist if Serbian historiography on religious groups was indeed so dire?

She describes Nikolaj Velimirović as “an exceptional theologian and thinker” and “the most acclaimed and renowned Serbian theologian of the twentieth century.” However, she adds, his association with the Serbian fascist movement and anti-Semitism made him a controversial figure for many. Falina reiterates statements about his “most controversial book,” *Govor srpskom narodu kroz tamnički prozor* (Talk to the Serbian People through the Prison Window). Falina believes the “allegations of his inner circle” that he wrote the book during his imprisonment at Dachau. This book’s authorship has long been debated, not because of the opinions contained in it, but because of the circumstances and date of its publishing. Furthermore, no one who remarked on it had access to the original copy, which was supposedly scribbled on camp toilet paper. A new study, which Falina did not consult, calls this into question.¹⁷ It is also exceedingly doubtful that Velimirović and Dožić were delighted at the collapse of the Yugoslav state. Falina did not provide any sources to back up her claim, and it would be interesting to see when this satisfaction was stated.

Maria Falina reiterates the theses already voiced multiple times in other works regarding the sacralization of the Serbian people and the theological anti-Westernism of Nikolaj Velimirović and Justin Popović, as well as their relationship with the fascist movement “Zbor” and Dimitrije Ljotić. Justin Popović was not particularly close to Ljotić, and in the article “Svetosavsko svestenstvo i političke partije” [St. Sava’s Clergy and Political Parties], he harshly criticised a faction of the SOC’s lower clergy who supported “Zbor”. Popović argued that their political engagement went against the fundamental principle

17 Vladimir Cvetković, “The Freedom from Passions and the Freedom for All St Nikolaj Velimirović on Democracy,” *Nikolaj Studies* 1/2021, 53–80; Srećko Petrović, “Is Nikolaj Velimirović the author of the book Words to the Serbian People Through the Dungeon Window?”, *Philotheos* 2/2020, 260–303; Radmila Radić, “Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović as an Enemy of the People”, *Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović: Old Controversies in Historical and Theological Context*, ed. Vladimir Cvetković, Dragan Bakić, (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies, Los Angeles: St. Sebastian Press, 2022), 255–292.

of St. Sava, which states that one person cannot be an enemy of another person.¹⁸ Although she underlines that this movement lacked genuine political power and earned fewer than 1% of votes in Yugoslav parliamentary elections in 1935 and 1938, she never disputes the degree of “Zbor” and Velimirović’s and Popović’s actual impact on the interwar Yugoslav state. And there is abundant evidence that neither of them enjoyed unanimous support in the SOC. Falina continues on to note that when the SOC became a prominent political actor in the national arena again, it preserved the relevant components of the original teachings of Velimirović, Najdanović, and others to meet its new political requirements. The issue is that, in the mid-1980s, during a severe crisis in the Yugoslav state, characters and works from the SOC’s past resurfaced, gaining increasing significance due to current needs. This was motivated by their anti-communist feelings as well as a new need for the nation’s sacralization. That does not necessarily suggest that their significance was the same fifty years ago, but it may show that the author purposefully or unintentionally projected historical events from a given era into the past.

Despite its limited contribution to interwar Yugoslav and SOC history studies, this book will surely be of interest to Serbian historians. Despite the repetition of already established patterns in Western historiography, this study has the potential to serve as a methodological model.

Summary

In recent decades, a part of Western scholarship has adopted a critical rhetoric about the Orthodox Church in general, and, following the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, against the Serbian Orthodox Church as well. This negative discourse reaches back into the country’s past in certain circumstances. Maria Falina’s most recent book follows a similar pattern. Falina examines the subtle interactions that occurred in the relationship between religion, nationalism, and politics, using the SPC’s position in the Kingdom of SHS/Yugoslavia during the interwar period as a case study. The author criticises Serbian historiography’s claims about organic historical links between the Serbian people and Orthodoxy. In this regard, the book may be valuable to domestic scholars as an incentive to turn to theoretical concerns and examine this topic from multiple perspectives. Despite her harsh criticism of the creation of Ser-

18 Justin Popović, „Svetosavsko sveštenstvo i političke partije”, *Žički blagovesnik* 12/1940, 2/1941); Čvetković, “The Reception of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the 21st Century German Academia,” 993–1004.

bian historiography, Falina rests her conclusions only partially on the finding of new sources; their scope is based on previously published works and materials. Although there is a scarcity of data on the history of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the international period, this should not be used to justify reaching certain debatable conclusions that fit into the developed model. A more comprehensive and precise understanding of the studied issue can be offered by adding new sources and further research.

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Резиме

Радмила Радић

СРПСКА ПРАВОСЛАВНА ЦРКВА У ЗАПАДНОЈ
ИСТОРИОГРАФИЈИ: MARIA FALINA, *RELIGION AND POLITICS
IN INTERWAR YUGOSLAVIA: SERBIAN NATIONALISM
AND EAST ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY*,
(LONDON: BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC, 2023)

Апстракт: Овај текст представља преглед књиге Марије Фалине која истражује сложени однос Српске православне цркве (СПЦ), национализма и политике у југословенској држави између два светска рата. У њему се анализирају и преиспитују аргументи ауторке, историјски контекст и различите перспективе које она нуди. Фалина оспорава уврежене претпоставке о природној вези између религије и српског национализма и бави се развојем улоге СПЦ као политичког актера током дубоких друштвених и политичких промена. Фалина испитује и утицај личности попут Николаја Велимировића и Јустина Поповића, као и одговор СПЦ на настанак и распад југословенске државе, верску конкуренцију и изазове модернизма.

Кључне речи: Српска православна црква (СПЦ), међуратна Југославија, национализам, религија и политика, историографија

Део западне историографије усвојио је последњих деценија негативни дискурс православне цркве уопште, а после ратова у Југославији деведесетих година 20. века и Српске православне цркве. Тај негативан дискурс шири се у извесним случајевима и на њену ранију историју. Најновија књига коју је написала Марија Фалина делимично прати овај образац. Фалина разматра замршене интеракције до којих је дошло у односима између религије, национализма и политике, узимајући као пример положај СПЦ у Краљевини СХС/Југославији током међуратног периода. Ауторка доводи у питање тврдње српске историографије да између српског народа и православља постоје органске историјске везе. У том смислу, књига може бити корисна домаћим истраживачима, као подстрек да се окрену теоријским преиспитивањима и сагледају ову тему из различитих перспектива. Међутим, упркос критици остварења српске историографије, Фалина само делимично заснива своје закључке на истраживањима

нових извора; већина њих почива на претходно објављеним радовима и материјалима. Мада су доступни подаци о историји СПЦ у међуратном периоду ограничени, то не би требало да буде оправдање за доношење извесних дискутабилних закључака који се уклапају у креирани модел. Уграђивањем нових извора и даљим истраживањима може се обезбедити свеобухватније и тачније разумевање обрађене теме.