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KOSOVO

Legacy of a Medieval Battle



edited by

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INTRODUCTION

Six hundred years ago a fateful battle took place on the field of Kosovo in southern Serbia between the Ottoman Turks and a coalition of Christian forces led by the Serbs. Its outcome and its legacy would prove to have a profound affect on the subsequent history of the Serbian people. Despite its importance, contemporary sources for the battle are few and tell us with certainty only where and when it occurred and the fact that both the Turkish Sultan Murad I (1362–89) and the Serbian Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović (1371–89) perished in it. There is even confusion as to the outcome of the battle. While some contemporary sources speak of it as a Serbian victory or at least do not mention a Serbian defeat, later sources show clearly that the Battle of Kosovo was a Turkish victory. Medievalists Mihailo Dinić in 1962 and Rade Mihaljčić in 1989 were obliged to echo the words of the historian Ljubomir Kovačević, who, on the eve of the five-hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo in 1889, after intensive study of sources available to him, concluded that the Battle of Kosovo “remained covered with a heavy darkness of uncertainty.”

Nevertheless, where authentic documents fell short of explaining the historic drama of the Battle of Kosovo, the imagination of the people took over. As a result, the foundation was laid for what was to become the Kosovo legend. This legend evolved in the centuries following the battle and was built around three motifs: the martyrdom of Prince Lazar; the heroism of Miloš Obilić who assassinated the Turkish sultan; and the alleged treason of Vuk Branković.

It took a long time for sources to make a clear distinction between Prince Lazar, the leader of the Christians, and the “hero” warrior, who murdered the sultan. Soon after the Battle of Kosovo, Prince Lazar, who had been beheaded by the Turks, was proclaimed a martyr for the Christian faith and made a saint. Hagiographic sources tell us that Prince Lazar won “a spiritual victory” on the Plain of Kosovo by choosing the “eternal” kingdom of heaven in place of the “temporary” kingdom of earth. Prince Lazar was portrayed as a Christ figure and lauded for sacrificing his life so that the Serbian nation could live. His cult spread widely and in the eighteenth century became a powerful inspiration for the Serbs’ unrelenting struggle for freedom and state sovereignty.

It was necessary to wait until the end of the fifteenth century to identify the “noble warrior” who murdered the sultan. Miloš Obilić came to personify the power and bravery of all the Serbs in the Battle of Kosovo. Tradition transformed him from a historical figure into a mythical hero. The part Miloš played in the Battle of Kosovo became the center of attention at home and abroad. The cult of Miloš, however, emerged only in the nineteenth century when it was officially recognized by the Serbian Church and when his haloed portraits appeared on the walls of some churches. Thus, four centuries after the Battle of Kosovo, the Serbian Church began to venerate Miloš. Bishop Peter II Petrović Njegoš (1813–51), the ruler of Montenegro, extolled the heroic attributes of Miloš in his epic “Mountain Wreath” and instituted the Obilić medal for valor.

At the end of the fifteenth century, one encounters the first reference to treason at the battle in the memoirs of Konstantin Mihailović from Ostrovica. Mavro Orbini, a Dubrovnik historian at the turn of the seventeenth century, was the first to identify Vuk Branković as the traitor. Orbini and others after him accepted the legend of treason as fact without explaining its implications. Thus, the motif of treason found a place in the Kosovo legend and enriched it.

In the absence of more reliable sources, chroniclers, historians and hagiographers long used legend and epic poetry as their sources of information. Epic poetry was more important for a study of the “national soul” and its system of values than for rigorously documented historiography. Yet, the epic poems are not without merit as historical sources. Apart from their artistic and literary value, the epic poems mirror the times in which they were born. When used critically, the epics yield much factual data—historical, ethnographic and social. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century, with the establishment of the critical school of history, that the veracity of the contents of national epics was put to the test and much of fiction separated from fact.

It is certainly understandable that Serbs and eventually Serbian scholars should be preoccupied with the Battle of Kosovo. The outcome of the battle profoundly affected the nation which lost a large number of its nobility and a generation of fighting men needed for further resistance to Turkish expansion. Even though the Serbian state survived Kosovo for another seventy years, in the Serbian popular mind the defeat on the Plain of Kosovo marked the end of the Serbian medieval state and the beginning of enslavement by the Turks. The collective mind, tenaciously kindled throughout the centuries of oppressed existence, remembered Kosovo both as a tragic break in the continuity of national history and as a living link between the heights of medieval greatness and the depths of the ensuing enslavement.

But while the Serbs grieved over the loss of the Nemanjić state, they focused their attention on its rebirth. For the Serbs the Battle of Kosovo became the mainspring of national unity, religious identification, and cosmic

outlook. It shaped their history, influenced their literature and art, and supplied the spiritual energy needed to resist the Turkish rule. The legacy of Kosovo, the examples of sacrifice and bravery, inspired the Serbian struggle for freedom from the Turks, the goal which they achieved with the victory at Kumanovo in 1912.

By subjecting the Kosovo legend, epic poetry, and early historical writings to close examination, the modern historians of the critical school at the end of the nineteenth century went a long way in establishing the authenticity of reported events. These historians published several fine monographs, such as those by Ilarion Ruvarac on Prince Lazar and Ljubomir Kovačević on Vuk Branković, both appearing in 1888. The two works were eminently successful in refuting myths that could not be supported by reliable historical documentation. By contrast, the first general study of the Battle of Kosovo which was written by General Jovan Mišković, and published in 1890, concentrated on the military aspects of the Battle of Kosovo and was marred by a careless and uncritical use of data as well as by patriotic fervor. The author could not free himself from the influence of the Kosovo legend. Yet, despite its inadequacies, Mišković's book continued to be in demand and was republished in 1933 without change, ignoring the results of research during the preceding decades.

In the interval between the 1880s and 1930s, a number of distinguished Serbian historians (Stojan Novaković, Stanoje Stanojević, Vladimir Ćorović, N. Radojčić, Dj. Sp. Radojčić and others) made important contributions to Kosovo historiography with their specialized studies and brief syntheses. Among the number of foreign historians who wrote on topics dealing with the Battle of Kosovo, the most prominent was the Czech historian Konstantin Jireček, who, in his two-volume *History of the Serbs* (Gotha, 1911–18), allotted considerable space to a perceptive discussion of Serbia on the eve of, during, and after the Battle of Kosovo.

The Second World War disrupted historiographic work in Yugoslavia and it took several years after the end of the war before it could be fully resumed. Despite communist control, overly intellectual pursuits, and the uncongenial political environment after the war which discouraged investigation of subjects closely linked to Serbian nationalism, two short histories were published on the Battle of Kosovo. The first of the two books was written by Gavro Škrivanić and the second by Petar Tomac. Both authors came from a military background and both emphasized the military aspects of the Battle of Kosovo. They used sources critically, consulted a vast quantity of literature, and offered valuable bibliographic comments.

In more recent years Sima Ćirković and Rade Mihaljčić, both medievalists at the University of Belgrade, have made particular contributions to the history of fourteenth-century Serbia and the Battle of Kosovo. Of special value is Mihaljčić's trilogy which covers medieval Serbia on the eve of the Battle of Kosovo, developments during and after the battle, and the

evolution of the Kosovo legend. Most valuable are his insights on the cult of Lazar, the heroism of Miloš, and the treason of Vuk Branković.

The two best books on the Battle of Kosovo appeared after the conference at Stanford, the proceedings of which constitute the subject of the present volume, and both are in English. In his book, *The Battle of Kosovo*, Rade Mihaljčić discusses the end of the Nemanjić rule and the unified medieval Serbian state, the rise of Prince Lazar, the Battle of Kosovo, and the heroes of Kosovo. The most fascinating section of the book examines the genesis of the Kosovo legend, a “history in legend” and a “legend in history.” Mihaljčić’s book offers an up-to-date summary of the research on the Battle of Kosovo and contains many penetrating observations. The author, however, slights the military and political side of the Battle of Kosovo.

The second book, written by Thomas A. Emmert, focuses on the Battle of Kosovo itself, the role of Prince Lazar, and the Kosovo legend and legacy. He also discusses the events preceding the battle and the Kosovo cult and ideology. Emmert enriches his book by providing English translations of pertinent fragments of several sources for the battle. This book is beautifully written, extensively documented, amply illustrated, and well-served by a long bibliography. Emmert has consulted voluminous literature systematically and critically.

Even though much has been written on the Battle of Kosovo and its consequences, more research is needed before answers can be found to many questions. The diplomatic and military preparations by the Serbs as well as the military organizations, armaments, tactics, commanding personnel, armed formations, allies and collaborations, and the battle itself need to be reexamined. All of this will continue to prove difficult, of course, because the sources on the size and the organization of the Turkish and Serbian armies are scanty, and those available are unreliable and contradictory.

Individual participants in the battle also need further study. Many details concerning the murder of Sultan Murad and the execution of Prince Lazar are still unclear. It has not been established when Murad was murdered, nor has it been ascertained what kind of weapon was used. Little is known about Miloš Obilić, the assassin. Because relevant documentary sources on him are lacking, the popular imagination made him an “unsurpassed hero,” a hero of “superhuman mythic power,” and endowed him with the power of “all the Kosovo warriors.” Much additional historical research is needed to explain the emergence of the cult of Miloš in the nineteenth century and his particular reverence in Montenegro.

The connections of Prince Lazar and his Hrebeljanović family with the Nemanjić dynasty, his contacts with the Turks, and his relations with the church, the Zečani, King Tvrtko of Bosnia, King Sigismund of Hungary, the Bulgarians, the Albanians, and the Vlachs require more study. The same is true about the ambiguity surrounding the death and canonization of the prince. And although Vuk Branković, traditionally accused of having betrayed Prince

Lazar, was cleared of this charge by historians in the late nineteenth century, the question remains alive.

The development of the cult and legend of Kosovo and the transformation of the Kosovo cult into the ideology of Kosovo are also fundamental questions that require further examination. This is true as well for the cycle of Kosovo epics—both for their factual content and literary and aesthetic value, and for the origin of the legend of Kosovo and the various stages in its evolution. These and other questions guarantee that the subject of the Battle of Kosovo and its important legacy will continue to engage scholars for generations to come.

The purpose of the Stanford Conference was to examine and assess the Kosovo problematics, to point out the main historiographic trends, and to make suggestions for further research. Hopefully, the richness and diversity of the conference proceedings make this volume a comprehensive study of the Kosovo legacy which sheds new light on old questions and encourages further research.

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