

*the*  
**Serbs**

Sima M. Ćirković

Translated by Vuk Tošić



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**Serbs**

# The Peoples of Europe

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# Preface and Acknowledgments

The development of the Serbs, to whom this book is dedicated, has been similar in many respects to the histories of the other nations included in the *The Peoples of Europe* series. As well as the combination of ancient and Slav components analogous to the Roman and Germanic ingredients of Western Europe's development and integration, the Serbs possessed similar cultural and intellectual traits in the development of their group consciousness that kept the group together and provided its identity and longevity.

The Serbs also have a legend about their origin (*origo gentis*), about the separation of the people and their migration from the north under the leadership of the ruler's son. Following their Christianization, the notion that they were a *chosen people*, whose origin was at the very beginning of Genesis, strongly influenced the Serbs. They remained in a direct relationship with the Creator through which all conceptions of divine providence were fulfilled. This idea of a direct relationship with God served many nations in Christian Europe as a way of understanding themselves and their place in the world. The notion of a chosen people was taken from the Hebrews of the Old Testament and transferred to Christians in general, and then to the universal Christian Empire, and later to the individual parts of this Empire. As with other nations, the people who form the subject of this book perceived themselves as God's people, the "New Israel" to whom God Himself had appointed leaders, "some equal to the apostles, others the myrrhobletes and miracle-workers, and yet others great teachers and renowned arch-priests." The Serbs did not seek deeper roots or a firmer footing until the eighteenth century.

When secular views became prevalent it was accepted that European and world history had been created by nations formed long ago, each one immutable and possessing a specific spirit. As peoples opposed one another or made alliances, rose to power or fell from grace, became more

or less dominant, they themselves were the protagonists of historical events. It took a long time for critical thought to impose a different point of view, under the influence of the social sciences, and question whether history also molds nations, whether historical circumstances and changes affect the conditions for creating and maintaining social groups. This view did not become firmly established among Serbs; even until recently, prevailing opinion held that the nation had been created in distant times and that it had fought for its individual survival and progress.

In the long history of tribes, peoples, nations, and social groups, regardless of what they were called, many facets were transformed along with more permanent elements as the social and economic context within which the group existed experienced change. During the period of the “great migrations” many peoples spread out in an amorphous mass, whose different components overlapped and merged into one another. Greater population density, along with better communications and a higher degree of self-awareness, allowed for something like solidification to occur in which the group achieved durability and took on the shape of the mold that held it at the time. This metaphor might be used to describe what happened during the Middle Ages and focus attention on those frameworks (political, ecclesiastical, and cultural) that acted as the mold. Modern egalitarian societies, with their enormous ability to influence the consciousness of their members through education, propaganda, and the mass media, might be compared to durable and rigid materials that are brittle and break at their weakest point.

When observed in historical perspective, nations lose the complete and integral nature, the secular immutability, which popular opinion has tacitly given them. Closer analysis reveals that the ethnic community brought together different parts and fused them within itself, changing not only its social structure but the culture, beliefs, and symbols that held the nation together and secured its durability. The criteria for distinguishing members of the group and differentiating them from those outside it also changed. The dynamics, even the content, of these changes differ from one nation to the next, depending on the particular circumstances of its development. In any case, the individuality of nations is reflected not only in their position, neighborly relations, struggles, and mutual influences, but also in the specific features of the paths they took in reaching the level of integration that they had achieved by the eighteenth century and the beginning of the modern age.

This book is an attempt to shed light on the development of the Serbs and on the factors pertinent to their creation, development, and preservation as a social group. Since there is no theory to direct such research, these factors are taken from concrete historical circumstances that have already been studied and recognized. The origins of the Serb people are

sought not in Pliny and Ptolemy, nor among the ancient Slav or Indo-European community, but among the Serbs and other Slav tribes that migrated to the territories of the northern Roman provinces in the sixth and seventh centuries. This does not imply that the formation of the people was completed during the Dark Ages following their settlement; on the contrary, this book seeks to show the level of integration by carefully tracing its history. It goes without saying that this integration was not completed in the Middle Ages or even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In addition to the obvious parallels with the development of Western Europe, primarily the role of the classical heritage and the Slavic component as analogous to the Germanic, there is also the type of social and political organization and resistance to the universal claims of the two Christian empires. Furthermore, the nations that developed in the Balkans have a number of particularities that are also manifested in the case of the Serbs. The primary characteristic is certainly the discontinuity with regard to their geographical distribution and political and social structure that resulted from being conquered by the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century.

The process of differentiation is also specific, with objective differences between the neighboring populations playing as important a role as the subjective perception of these differences. In the past, differences between nations were mostly attributed to linguistic differences, to the extent that the ethnic community was the equivalent of the community that spoke one language. The people whose history is presented here used the word *jezik* (language) as a synonym for *people*. They were familiar with the legend that 72 nations were created when languages were confused during the construction of the Tower of Babel. However, in the Balkans, among the Serbs and their South Slav neighbors, it was proved that more than one ethnic community may emerge from the basis of a single language, a one-dialectic continuum, and that separation according to other criteria (religious or political) can affect the differentiation and delineation between languages.

The confessional border that separated the Catholic Croats from the Orthodox Serbs turned out to be highly significant, as observed long ago, as was the border between both these Christian groups and their Islamic compatriots, whom for a long time they labeled "Turks." The confessional border was imposed less because of differences in dogma and more because of complex cultural features that formed around a certain religion. A Serb or Croat remaining in the same language community, but accepting Islam, would significantly change his way of life and environment. Differences then were not comparable to confessional differences in modern societies.

A lasting political framework within which life evolved, serving the same ruler or dynasty, unity in loyalty, all created a feeling of connection and led to integration within the state. However, the history of the Serbs shows that this factor cannot be considered decisive. For more than 350 years, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the Serbs did not have their own state. They were dispersed over a large area and lived in the empires of foreign rulers and dynasties for centuries. But still they survived.

It was Serbian statesmen and intellectuals who claimed the state played a crucial role during the period of struggle for autonomy and independence. Thus in December 1830, Prince Miloš Obrenović, announcing an act by which the sultan granted him hereditary power in the vassal principality, declared, "Thus, brothers, yesterday we became a nation." It is interesting that two-thirds of the Serbs, with their consciousness, church, and culture, lived across the border, under the rule of the Habsburg emperors. In the next generation, influential politician Ilija Garašanin claimed that "outside of the state a person has no life or history."

Such exaggerated exaltation of the significance and role of the state cannot be justified by facts from Serbian history. They show that the periods without a state and those when parts of the people remained outside the state during its existence were highly significant for the fate of the nation. In both cases the state was the core of historical consciousness that was maintained both through the church, in the form of the cult of native ruler-saints, and through folklore, in the form of epic poetry with heroes and rulers from the distant past.

Due to the discontinuity mentioned above, there was a great discrepancy between the actual course of events and those recited in the episodes that replaced learned history. The significance of portraying history was emphasized because of the continual struggle to reestablish the state, kingdom, empire, and former fame and glory. As has been said many times, the future was envisioned as the restoration of the past. This is why this book pays more attention to notions and depictions of the past.

In an effort to keep in focus the development of the nation as a whole, and given the space limitations of this book, it has been necessary to leave out many details, primarily concerning persons, the institutions of states where the Serbs lived, and especially the foreign policies of those states. Interested readers should consult the extensive and critical literature on Serbian history that deals with periods, events, persons, and phenomena. The bibliography included at the end of the book provides a useful guide.

The bibliography reveals only partially the author's debt to his predecessors who have conducted research in Balkan and Serbian history, since it is limited to European-language works, while the bulk of the



scholarly literature is in Serbian and other South Slavic languages. The author is equally indebted to all those who have helped transform the Serbian manuscript into an English book. Alice Coople-Tošić carefully read each page and her assistance is acknowledged by both translator and author. Thanks are also due to the copy-editor, Brigitte Lee, for seeing the book through its final stages.

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# Introduction: Time, Space, and People

Ever since the loss of belief in a “spirit of the nation,” in origin and language as an essential and enduring characteristic of national identity, it has become more difficult to shed light on the creation and destiny of a nation. When the nation is observed as a social group, it is constantly susceptible to change and movement. At no time is it ever so complete that it can neither grow nor decline; its cohesion may increase or contract, the essence of its individuality and difference from others may undergo change, and some of its symbols may be discarded while new ones are adopted.

Changes important for the preservation and development of a group occur over centuries, and thus it is not just the oldest or the most recent period that is significant, as is sometimes thought. There are no privileged spheres of life, such as demographic growth or decline, or linguistic change. Alterations in ecological circumstances, social structure, or culture may have far-reaching consequences for the development of a people. The search for an essential identity has revealed an entangled assortment of numerous historical strands instead of one single factor that can be traced through many centuries.

In the case of the Serbs and other Balkan nations (with the exception of the Greeks), the region of their development was relatively unknown outside their group and their immediate neighbors. This fact has additionally obscured the process of understanding the Serbs’ long, complex, changeable, and visibly unfinished history. This introductory chapter is intended to place small, local, and specific phenomena in the context of general and more familiar historical trends. It outlines the major epochs and the dominant powers that long influenced a large region, the geographic space that formed the Serbian historical stage, and the peoples among whom the Serbs developed.

## The Epochs of Serbian Development

The name Serb links today's Serb people with the Slav tribe from the time of the ancient Slav community and the period of migrations. During this period, part of the great tribe moved far south, settling in the territory of the Roman Empire. Early Serb traces exist even today in place-names in Poland, and in a vast area that is now Germany, where the *Limes Sorabicus* existed along the Elbe and Saale rivers and where the principalities of the Serbs (Surbi, Sorabi, Zribia) existed up to the twelfth century. Lusatian Serbs (Sorbs), the distant descendants of the Serbs, still live in part of this territory.

No accounts survive from this period about how the Slav tribes differed among themselves or what Serb individuality involved. Does anything apart from their name link the members of these groups who are so far removed in time and space? During the Romantic period it was believed that every nation had a "national spirit," reflected in its language, customs, and folklore. It is difficult to assume that a common "national spirit" existed for the Lusatian Serbs, descendants of the Serbs in the north, and the Balkan Serbs in the south. Serbian linguists have claimed that "within the group of Slav language types, the Lusatian and Štokavian dialects are among the most distant in character" (P. Ivić). Therefore language does not confirm a possible genealogical link between the Serbs from the Balkans and the Serbs from the Elbe River, unless we assume that in the centuries following the migrations, the language changed so fundamentally that even the most stable elements were altered.

In any case, the great distance separating them eventually severed and prevented further ties and mutual influences between the northern Slavs and southern Slavs, whose recollection of their northern origin lingered for some time. In contrast to the great spatial and chronological discontinuity with their northern ancestors, the spatial and chronological continuity of the Serb tribe that migrated to the Balkans and the Serb people who developed in this area in the following centuries is indisputable. Thus a justifiable starting point for the history of this people can be taken to be its migration to the Balkans in the sixth or seventh century AD.

However, such a late and modest beginning failed to satisfy patriotic publicists. Authors emerged in the mid-nineteenth century disputing the migration, and portraying the Serbs as the indigenous population not only of the Balkans, but also of a significant part of Europe and Asia Minor. In the opinion of some authors, it was the Slavs who were the descendants of the Serbs, whose roots in turn could be traced back to

the Tower of Babel. Such pseudo-historical literature has not died out; in its recent wave it sought to shift the focus of Serbian history to even more ancient times where there was much scope for unrestrained fantasy.

There is no doubt that the Serbs brought their Slav heritage to the Balkans, including language, material culture, the Slavic pagan religion, and origin legends. There is little information on the earliest material culture because archeological findings are uncharacteristic and difficult to differentiate. Villages of the Slav settlers from the early centuries are archeologically “invisible” and unrecognizable. The names of pagan deities, preserved in present-day toponyms and later literary works, provide clues to religious notions and testify to the link with the religion of other Slavs, but they are not sufficient to differentiate the religious beliefs of individual tribes. Despite scholarly efforts, there is no reliable identification of the supreme Serbian deity.

Legends about their northern origins and migration existed not only among the Serbs but also among their neighbors the Croats, surviving among them until the tenth century. They became widely known due to the scholarly writings of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus. The first few centuries following the Serb migration truly represented the Dark Ages, where no single recognizable element of individuality existed aside from the name and legends of the origin of the ruling clans, and information about them was preserved by outsiders.

The first milestone was Christianization (around 870 AD) and the adoption of the religion of the Book, accompanied by the creation of special alphabets adapted to suit the Slav languages (Glagolitic and Cyrillic). This laid the foundation for the development of culture and literature, which expanded from liturgical books to educational religious subjects, and later to documents and literary works. Christianized Serbs had gained an important instrument for preserving their consciousness and thus also their survival.

Early Christian missionaries suppressed pagan customs, traditions, and beliefs, abolishing and eradicating differences that were rooted in paganism. On the other hand, the advance of Christianization produced new differences, which were imposed by the church centers from which the missions came. Differences in the language of the church service and the alphabet extended to spiritual culture in general, and strongly influenced the process of differentiation and integration of the Balkan ethnic groups.

Christianization also influenced changes in social organization and established a new view of the world and of the people's position within it. The new faith legitimized the ruling class, which was comprised of the ancient ruling families, and included them in the Christian

*oikoumene*, embodied in the Roman Empire headed by Christ's emissary on earth. Local rulers were reduced to imperial governors, and the development of political relations shows that they were not always satisfied with this status, that they rebelled and sided with the Empire's enemies.

The period following Christianization, up until the twelfth century, was also the period of absolute domination by the Byzantine Empire. Three hundred years of continuous Byzantine influence left lasting traces on the Slavs in the eastern and central part of the Balkan Peninsula. The Bulgarians and Serbs took on Byzantine traits that would characterize them for centuries. These traits grew and accumulated in subsequent centuries.

Following the rapid decline of the Byzantine Empire (after 1180 AD) and its temporary collapse (1204 AD) came the epoch during which the eastern and central Balkan Slavs gained independence (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries). This period was crucial in establishing important attributes of individuality and identity. Byzantium's withdrawal created space for the development of vast and permanent states, which provided the framework for early and unfinished integration processes. The Bulgarian and Serbian rulers governed their people by "the grace of God," the former using imperial and the latter using royal titles. Their subjects were members of the church, which had local elders and synods. These states were both secular and religious communities, as was the case with Byzantium, and their rulers were appointed by God and directly responsible to Him. The ruling Serbian dynasty included saints, primarily the founder Simeon Nemanja (1166–96) and later his son Sava (1175–1236), the first Serbian archbishop. Their cults offered an opportunity for the development of a specific Serbian tradition as a continuation of the general Christian tradition. Serbian historical personalities were depicted in icons and frescoes and were included in the church calendar and liturgical texts. Since the ruling dynasty was at its source, this was considered to be the beginning of Serbian history and everything prior to it was suppressed and forgotten. Thus the profile of the Serbs was completed and enhanced: the foundation consisting of the Slav language was coated with a layer of eastern Byzantine Christianity, whose particular traits were graven on the collective self-consciousness and passed down through the centuries.

New borders were created, separating the Serbs not only from those who spoke other languages (Greeks, Hungarians, Albanians), but also from those who spoke understandable dialects but whose church services were held in Latin (Slavs in coastal towns and neighboring territories under the jurisdiction of the Catholic bishops). In later epochs Catholic and Orthodox affiliations were crucial for differentiating between the Serbs and the Croats. The unification of the language and

orthography of church books within the Serbian autocephalous archbishopric stressed linguistic differences within the Church Slavonic heritage. Serb copyists complained of the difficulties of translating books not only from Greek, but also from Bulgarian.

The longer the Serbian state maintained its political independence, the more its specific history became durable, its society more stable, and its culture more homogenized. Faced with the Ottoman conquest in the mid-fourteenth century, the Balkan Christian states began to grow closer and overcame their former rivalry with the Byzantine Empire. Christian solidarity developed within the framework of Byzantine Orthodoxy, without jeopardizing the distinctiveness of the individual peoples.

The epoch of “Turkish slavery” (fifteenth to eighteenth centuries) interrupted the integration process, and the Serbs as an ethnic group experienced enormous change with the abolition of their state and their complex social structures, nobility, and local institutions. Only the Serbian Orthodox Church, which operated under difficult conditions, remained a symbol of continuity. The theocratic organization of the Ottoman state emphasized religious differences through a system of unequal rights and obligations of its subjects, which in turn resulted in religious affiliation becoming crucial for identity. Those who left the Orthodox community were forsaken by the Serb people; they no longer shared their tradition, they had a different attitude toward the Ottoman Empire and its authorities, and completely changed their way of life. All that was left of the Serb people were the dependent peasants (*reaya*) and the significantly more autonomous herders. Both groups maintained their collective consciousness within the home and family, while the Orthodox Church preserved the memory of their rulers, saints, and glorious past. Heroes and warriors were evoked in epics – an important element of folk culture.

The early eighteenth century opened a new epoch of modernization and Europeanization, one that has still not been completed but extends into the future. It included several important events, two of which were the beginning of the struggle to establish the Serbian state (1804), which then became the motherland of the dispersed and divided nation, and the abolition of feudal privileges and remaining class structures (1848), which led to the affirmation of the nation based on linguistic unity and equality and to the tension between religious and secular views as a characteristic of Serbian identity. The epoch of modernization initially included only that part of the Serbian people in Hungary who were freed of Ottoman rule. In the beginning Europe was represented in the Balkans by the Habsburg Empire and Russia, which itself was taking the first steps toward modernization, and later by the “guarantor” powers and the entire developed world, which the Serbs joined.

## Shifting Serbias

Most European peoples settled in their present territories after significant migrations and frequent struggles over shifting borders. In the case of the Serbs, mobility was so incessant that for centuries people did not establish lasting links with a definite territory, causing their development to be pithily characterized as *shifting Serbias* by St. K. Pavlowitch. This mobility hindered integration of the entire ethnic community, and also made it difficult to trace and understand Serbian history since the settings changed so often. The vastness of the area and diversity of the environments covered become apparent when surveying the territories relevant to Serbian development.

South of the Sava and Danube rivers lay plains, the continuation of the Pannonian Basin, an open space that was suitable for colonizing, communications, and an economy based on agriculture. Even though both rivers formed natural obstacles and served as borders for long periods of time, they were still overcome during state expansions: first from the north (eleventh to thirteenth centuries) when the Hungarian Kingdom established a belt of administrative units south of the rivers in present-day Bosnia and Serbia (as far as Vidin in Bulgaria), and later from the south when the Ottoman army crossed the rivers in the sixteenth century and conquered a large portion of the Pannonian Basin. At that point the territory colonized by the Serbs extended far to the north and the west.

The next region inhabited by the Serbs was the Dinaric Alps, a wide range of mountains extending northwest to southeast, expanding to the east but also becoming lower and more gentle. The mountains separate the interior of the Balkan Peninsula from the Adriatic coast and act as a barrier against the climatic influences of the sea. For centuries they made the passage of people and goods difficult, resulting in significant economic and cultural differences between the coast and the interior. Only a small number of corridors allowed for the movement of people and pack animals, and these caravan routes were replaced by railroads and paved roads in the nineteenth century.

Up until the nineteenth century the Adriatic coast was separated from the hinterland along its entire length, from Istria to Albania: initially the coastal cities were under Byzantine rule until the mid-twelfth century, then they were ruled by Venice from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Even when the coast was under the control of the states from the hinterland, Hungary in the north and Serbia in the south, their power was always indirect because they had to rely on the town communes, whose autonomy had gradually increased. The coastal region was more

urbanized than the interior. There the remains of Roman cities were preserved, where people who had to make their living from the sea through sailing and trade, fishing and salt production found shelter. Karst basins provided a suitable living environment between the coast and the mountains in the hinterland. There was little arable land in the mountains of the continental climate zone, but plenty of pastureland and forests, which provided good conditions for cattle breeding. Semi-nomadic herding, with herds alternating between valleys and mountains, existed for centuries and continued until the modern industrial era.

The main east–west communication lines, as well as those running from north to south, traversed part of the mountain range where the Pannonian plain penetrates furthest to the south along river valleys with rolling hills. Land routes followed the Southern, Western, and Great Morava rivers. The most important route was along the Great and Southern Morava rivers, to the Vardar river valley, which extended to Thessalonika and Thessaly. The route to Sofia and central Bulgaria branched east, up the Nišava River. The mining potential of the land inhabited by the Serbs offered a considerable advantage. Ore was discovered and excavated in three waves: during the Roman period, between the mid-thirteenth and late seventeenth centuries, and during the modern industrial era.

Interest in the little understood original arrangement of Slav tribal territories increased during the struggle for national states and their borders during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The “historical rights” of certain nations were based on these tribal territories and the early medieval states, even though objective historical research revealed that these territories had very little in common with the ethnographic maps of the nineteenth century.

According to the earliest layout, the Croats were to the west, from the foothills of the Alps to the Livno and Imota *župas* (regions around the present-day towns of Livno and Imotski in western Herzegovina), and Pliva (around the present-day town of Jajce in western Bosnia). The Serbs were their adjoining neighbors to the east and their territory spanned as far as the town of Ras (present-day Novi Pazar), which was where the Bulgarian state began, covering what is today Serbia. Other tribes were included in the Bulgarian state: Severci (Severjani) between the Danube River and Mt. Balkan, and the Druguviti (Dragoviči) in the Aegean hinterland and Macedonia, who were last mentioned in the early thirteenth century.

The oldest territory bearing the name of the Serbian tribe, “Baptized Serbia,” differed considerably from the territory of the later Serbian state. It included much of what is present-day Bosnia but did not incorporate present-day Serbia, which was part of the Bulgarian state at the



time. The first significant Serb drift was to the east toward territories that came under direct Byzantine rule after the fall of the Bulgarian Empire (1018). The obvious result of this penetration to the east was the establishment of the Serbian political center in the town of Ras, extending the name to the surrounding territory: Raška land.

A significant part of present-day Serbia including Kosovo and Metohija as far as Mt. Šar, the natural barrier in the south, came under Serbian rule even before the fall of Byzantium in 1204. The northern border of the Serbian state reached the banks of the Sava and Danube rivers only toward the end of the thirteenth century, when Serbs occupied Hungarian territories, which was the cause of many wars during the fourteenth century as the Hungarians refused to renounce their claim.

A second mountain range, extending north–south as a continuation of the Carpathian Mountains, separated the Serbian state from the Bulgarian Empire in the east. The Nemanjid kingdom included what is today Herzegovina and Montenegro, part of the Adriatic coast from the Neretva River to the Bojana River, with the exception of the city of Dubrovnik and its territory. What had been the center of the state during the eleventh and twelfth centuries was now the periphery, since the main direction of expansion of the Serbian Nemanjid kingdom was to the south, toward regions controlled by Byzantium. The seat of the rulers and of the archbishops moved from Ras to courts next to the lake in southern Kosovo, Prizren, and Skopje; and from the border monastery of Žiča to Peć, which was to be the seat of the Serbian patriarchate for centuries to come. This reorientation was brought about by prevailing conditions of development and backwardness. The south was developed, urbanized, and relatively wealthy, while the north was neglected, impoverished, and scarcely populated.

The greatest expansion toward Byzantium was during the reign of Stefan Dušan, “Emperor of the Serbs and the Greeks” (1331–55), when the Serbian state included Epirus and Thessaly as well as Macedonia and Albania. Vast territories began to be lost to breakaway rulers during the rule of Dušan’s son, marking the beginning of the pressure on Serbian borders from the south and the east, and the shift to the north. This lasted until the Ottoman conquest, and was continued as Serbs migrated to territories controlled by Christian rulers.

“Baptized Serbia” of the ninth and tenth centuries was replaced by the Nemanjid Serbia of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which included Macedonia and part of Albania, and later in the early fifteenth century by the much smaller Serbia ruled by the despots. It assumed the characteristic shape of a rectangle after the territory of present-day Herzegovina seceded and joined the Kingdom of Bosnia. From 1421 the Serbian state also included most of what is today Montenegro.

After the fall of the Serbian state in 1459, its borders and name disappeared and its people were dispersed throughout a large region without boundaries until the reestablishment of the Peć patriarchy in 1557, which provided the Serbs with a framework for a religious community. Serbia was briefly restored by the Habsburg Empire between 1716 and 1739, with a modest territory between the Western Morava River and the Sava and Danube rivers. A century later (after 1815), this territory became the core of the restored Serbian state, which included an additional four districts in 1878, and part of Macedonia in 1913.

However, the Serbian state encompassed only part of the Serb people, less than half in the beginning, although its population quickly increased, as did its territory, and with it the proportion of the Serb people who lived in their mother country. The Serbs outside of Serbia were divided in several ways: Montenegro had gradually gained independence starting in the eighteenth century and established itself as a separate state. A substantial number of Serbs remained under Ottoman rule. Those who lived in the Habsburg monarchy came under different regimes in Hungary, Croatia, Dalmatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina (following the occupation of 1878).

Serbia as a whole, along with its ethnic name, again vanished in 1918 when the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was formed (renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929). The federal constitution imposed by the Communists in 1944 restored Serbia along borders that were very similar to those of the early fifteenth-century state of the despots, but it was enlarged by the former Hungarian comitats in the north, territories east and north of the Danube that had become part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes following demarcation from Hungary and Romania. The latest Serbia had two autonomous territories, Vojvodina in the north and Kosovo and Metohija in the south. As of 1999, Kosovo has been under international administration, in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.

## **The Serbs and Others**

There is no single period when the Serbs alone inhabited a large territory, without the presence of other nations. Members of other nations had always lived in border regions and adjacent areas. The Serbs fostered multiple relations and connections with their neighbors, some of whom they accepted and assimilated, while also being absorbed by others.

At the very beginning two components were clearly differentiated: the recently settled Slavs and the native inhabitants they encountered.

Neither group was united or homogenized. The Slavs consisted of several tribes, one of which was the Serbs, and the territory inhabited by one tribe included parts inhabited by other tribes. As has been shown, there is no direct connection between the region where the Serbs settled and the territory where the later Serbian state developed. In the karst valleys in the Adriatic hinterland, the principalities of the Neretljani, Zahumljani, and Travunians later took shape from Serbian foundations. These groups long maintained their individuality and are recognized in the Serbian royal title in the first half of the thirteenth century.

The previous Balkan inhabitants consisted of several different groups. The Roman Empire continued to exist in towns and islands where the government, military, and institutions had been preserved along with the earlier population. During the period of Slav migration, the Hellenic substratum was becoming dominant in the Empire and already being christianized; it became Greek and the Serbs perceived it as the “Greek Empire” for many centuries.

Aside from the remnants of the Roman Empire in the Balkans there were also many enclaves where the original provincial population had lost contact with the capital. The population of various tribal origins had lived under Roman rule for the previous five centuries and was more or less romanized, appearing in a variety of forms.

Roman inhabitants of the towns on the Adriatic coast and islands preserved their own language, which differed from Italian dialects and survived until the nineteenth century. In the interior of the peninsula the Slavs encountered Vlachs, who had also been largely romanized. Over the centuries most of the Vlachs were absorbed by their Slav or Greek surroundings, while others merged with the population on the opposite bank of the Danube where the Romanian nation would later take shape; a Vlach ethnic group still exists today in eastern Serbia, while in Macedonia they are called Tzintzars (Aromani). Albanians who had been little romanized survived in the mountainous regions of what is now northern Albania, which Serbian sources call Arbanasi, maintaining the older form of the name, while the Albanians themselves called it Shqiptarë in later centuries.

Unlike in Italy and the western Roman provinces, the natives and settlers here did not live alongside each other in towns or smaller regions. Accounts from later times (tenth to thirteenth centuries) mention hostilities between the Slavs and Vlachs, and it appears that only later, with Christianization, the creation of durable states, regular trade, and economic cooperation, did contact and intermingling occur.

When the history of the Balkan Peninsula was brought to light between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through the search for national roots, those peoples who had not yet developed into a nation with their

own distinct culture and literature were ignored. The role of the Vlachs, as the largest indigenous group, was only brought to the fore through twentieth-century research. Historiographic disputes developed around this issue. Since the name Vlach denoted herders who had taken part in the migrations during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, using unquestionably Slavic names and language and belonging to the Orthodox faith, in intranational polemical debates it was disputed that they were Serbs. The Serbian reply was that the term Vlach indicated status and not ethnos, and that the Vlachs did not exist in later centuries as an ethnic group.

However, the maintenance of a special name was the result of different crafts and way of life, with distinct forms of social organization. The name Vlach vanished when these differences lost their meaning. The slavification process lasted for centuries: as early as the twelfth century there were Vlach groups under leaders with Slav titles; and in the next century Vlach communities, *katuns*, bore Slav names, indicating a certain degree of slavification. In each century Vlach groups emerged from isolation and mingled and blended with their Slav surroundings.

At the time of its greatest territorial expansion the Serbian state was the “Empire of Serbs and Greeks.” Emphasis on the Greek component of the ruler’s title was based on governance of Greek territories and justified its imperial claims. However, the Greeks were not the only foreign element – there are charters and legal texts that testify to the ethnic diversity of the medieval Serbian state. A charter from 1300 AD states that potential visitors to the marketplace at Skopje, “whether they are Greek, Bulgarian or Serb, Latin, Albanian, or Vlach, are to pay legal tax.” The designation Latin indicated Catholics, merchants from Italy or the coastal towns, as well as settlers from the Serbian hinterland who had converted to Catholicism in the cities. Saxons – German miners – represented a new element from the mid-thirteenth century, and after the end of the fourteenth century Turkish travelers and merchants appeared. Turks later increased in numbers when they conquered the territory.

The Serbian state of that time did not seek to unify or homogenize the diverse parts of its society; on the contrary, it respected the rights of individual ethnic groups just as it did the rights of certain social strata. The state used its authority to maintain the power balance, while harmonizing relations and resolving conflicts between members of groups with special rights.

The general development of the Serbian people was shaken to its foundations by the Turkish conquest in 1459. The Serbian motherland vanished, its ruling class was wiped out, and its institutions were destroyed. The people were dispersed over a vast area as a consequence of many

migrations, as far as the Slovene lands, central Hungary, and Transylvania, but thinly and in mutually unconnected enclaves. By 1557, when the Peć patriarchate was restored, the Serbs had no internal links or external boundaries. Under the patriarchs they came together as a religious community linked by the church hierarchy.

The Turkish conquerors added a new ingredient from Asia Minor, as well as Islamized subjects from previously conquered European lands. The towns accommodated Armenian, Jewish, Greek, and Tzintzar (Aromani) merchants, while Roma (Gypsies) spread across the land and remained marginalized, rejected, and unrecognized for centuries.

The Ottoman system of privileges and obligations emphasized religious differences, which had also been significant during earlier periods. Islamization was not imposed, but accepting the ruler's religion brought social advantages. Conversion to Islam was not uncommon, especially during certain periods (seventeenth to eighteenth centuries) and in certain regions (Bosnia, Albania). By accepting Islam, the Balkan Christians became detached from their compatriots, who considered them to be Turks, since they had accepted their customs and way of life. On the other hand, within large ecclesiastic communities, such as the Peć patriarchate, differences were eliminated and there was intermingling with the basic mass of the population. The Serbs absorbed not only groups of Vlachs who were later slavized, but also smaller Greek communities, while the assimilation of the Tzintzars (Aromani) has lasted until modern times.

The war at the end of the seventeenth century (1683–99) represented an important turning point since part of the Serbian people came under Christian rule, developing in significantly different surroundings than under Turkish rule. Their separate existence lasted more than 200 years and represented a serious obstacle to national integration. Religious criteria once more gained importance, since the general position of the Serbs within the Habsburg Empire was determined by imperial promises to observe the faith and church life of its new subjects. An ever more dynamically developing Serbian society was interwoven with the church, a factor that would later prevent the adoption of modern ideas about the nation being a language community and hinder processes of integration. The Serb people were rearranged under Austrian rule. They vanished from the periphery of the regions they had inhabited, and converged on the Military Border and regions along the border with the Ottoman Empire (i.e., the border with Serbia from 1804 to 1815). The intense colonization carried out by the Habsburg authorities during the second half of the eighteenth century directly contributed to this relocation. The Serbs now lived alongside Germans, Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks, and Ruthenians.

The great turning point in the development of the Serbian people was the creation of the state, first the autonomous principality in 1815, later independent state (1878), and then kingdom (1882). It gradually took over the cultural heritage that had been created in the eighteenth century by the Serbs in Hungary, developing it further and becoming the center of Serbian convergence. The Serbs witnessed crucial European political events (German and Italian unification) or took part in them (the 1848 struggle in the Habsburg monarchy), drawing important conclusions concerning the necessity of struggle for the liberation and unity of the partially enslaved and divided nation.

Serbian struggles, starting with the First Uprising (1804–13), were considered revolutionary and disruptive of relations between states, regardless of whether they were formally associated, for example in the Holy Alliance, or interested only in European balance. At first the main Serbian effort was directed toward the Ottoman Empire, but Austria-Hungary became a persistent competitor following the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878. Clashes with other nations (Greeks, Bulgarians, and later Albanians) were inevitable, since they too sought to free themselves of Ottoman rule and had defined their borders based on “historical rights.”

After the long and bloody conflict and huge casualties of the Balkan Wars (1912–13) and World War I (1914–18), the Serbs, having overcome their disunity and division by state borders, found themselves practically all in one state: the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (1918–29; Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 1929–41). From this point on it became apparent that the heritage of their previous development imposed other serious problems. It was obviously not only the borders that hindered integration, but also differences that had developed on account of the distinct environments that existed on different sides of the border. Within the context of political and party struggles, in addition to antagonisms that emerged between the nations (Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs), frictions based on regional interests appeared inside those nations themselves. This occurred between Serbs from Serbia and the Serb population from the northern parts who had once been under Austrian-Hungarian rule; while the Montenegrins were dissatisfied with the manner of unification. The population of the territories acquired in 1913 were officially regarded as Serb inhabitants of southern Serbia, but this did not correspond to actuality since a significant portion of them declared themselves to be Bulgarians, and there were also Macedonians.

The difficulty in modifying their historical inheritance was visible also in the spatial distribution and intermingling of Serbs with other Yugoslav nations. In the state created in 1918, a relatively high degree of homogeneity had been achieved only in parts of Serbia and Montenegro that

had been liberated early on (including territories acquired in 1878), employing the means commonly used in European states at the time. Serbs accounted for half the ethnically diverse population of Vojvodina; in Croatia their numbers were dense only in the region of the former Military Border, and there were minorities in all the towns. They shared the historical territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina with Muslims and Croats, while the Albanian element had in the meantime grown strong in Kosovo and so-called Old Serbia.

The historical heritage also created indecision as far as distinguishing Serbs from others was concerned. While the Serbian Orthodox Church imposed the notion that only Orthodox Christians were Serbs, secular nationalists, political movements, and parties struggled for the nation to include “Catholic Serbs,” and Muslims as Serbs of “Muhammad’s faith.” No larger group from either of these two confessions integrated into the Serbian nation, but as it later turned out, especially after 1944, large numbers of Serbs could be atheist.

From the present perspective it is clear that the Serbs as a nation were not sufficiently integrated in 1918 when they found themselves in a single state. The political and cultural elites of the time were unaware of the importance of continuing the processes of Serbian integration. This was replaced by the integration of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in the creation of the Yugoslav nation. This project was the highest objective of state policies for the Serbs, resisted only by an intellectual minority, while only a small number of intellectuals in other nations supported it. The “Yugoslav synthesis” was not achieved: contentions between the Yugoslav nations were amplified, and a new division occurred among the Serbs, between those who advocated Yugoslavism and those who wanted to protect Serbian traditions. This division still exists, as the final chapter of this book describes.

# 1 Ancient Heritage

## The Roman Provinces

Parts of the Serbian tribe were among the Slavs who headed south across the borders of the Roman Empire during the sixth and seventh centuries, thus starting a new cycle in their development on its territory. At the time of the Slav migration, an extensively built *limes*, a defensive belt consisting of a series of fortified garrisons, followed the Empire's frontier with the task of preventing barbarian incursions and overseeing the neighboring territory. The defensive strength of the *limes* received additional reinforcement from the Danube River, an immense natural barrier along which the fortresses were located. Construction of the *limes* ended the lengthy process of expanding Roman authority, which gradually spread from the west and the Adriatic coastal region toward the interior of the Balkan Peninsula. A turning point was reached in the early first century AD with the suppression of the Illyrian uprising, resulting in the establishment of a uniform provincial system.

Every Slav who crossed the *limes* was exposed to the lasting influence of the land, shaped by previous centuries of Roman rule. The territories occupied by the Romans were scattered with the remains of Roman cities, crisscrossed by Roman roads, and covered with the traces of earlier inhabitants' efforts to adapt the natural environment to their needs. Serbs and members of other Slav tribes had fundamentally altered their surroundings: from a scarcely populated area, with ephemeral and unstable political entities and without recognizable names and permanent borders, they entered a structured and stable zone. Along with material remnants they found the names of urban settlements, provinces, and regions, all preserved among the sparse and impoverished provincial population.

Some of these names recalled the populations encountered and subdued by the Romans. The name Illyricum, the spacious province that initially



included everything the Romans conquered from the Adriatic coast to the Pannonian plain, preserved the common name of the numerous Illyrian groups that inhabited the central and western parts of the Balkan Peninsula. In the first century AD Illyricum was divided into two provinces, Dalmatia and Pannonia. The border that divided them ran parallel to the Sava River (50 to 60 km south of the river). The province of Moesia, which was named after the Pannonian tribe of the Moesi, was divided in 86 AD into Moesia Superior, in the present-day Morava river valley, and Moesia Inferior, in what is now Bulgaria. Later reforms separated Dardania, between the Western and Southern Morava rivers, the Ibar River, and Macedonia. Its name preserved that of the Dardans, a tribe that belonged to either the Illyrian or Thracian tribal groups, an issue that is still being debated. This is also the case for the Triballi, former inhabitants of Moesia, against whom Alexander the Great sent his army.

The newly arrived Slavs had no contacts with these tribes, or rather their distant descendants who had greatly changed under the half-millennium of Roman rule and the influence of Roman civilization. Nonetheless, the names known from toponyms and from the works of classical authors were passed on and later associated with the Serbs; Byzantine writers most often thought they were Triballi, and sometimes Dalmatians. The name Illyrian was used to identify the western wing of the Southern Slavs up to the nineteenth century, although since the Middle Ages it has been used primarily in connection with the Albanians. The artificial continuity of the pre-Roman and Roman period, which was established by means of territorial names and preserved by learned circles, did not affect the Serbs' historical traditions and their understanding of their origin.

The territories of the Balkan Peninsula were not evenly populated prior to the Roman conquest but were for the most part covered by a network of fortified headquarters (*oppidum*, *teichisma*), from which local tribal rulers governed the surroundings. These centers preserved their function during Roman rule and the tribal communities were governed from here. Often local native settlements formed the core of Roman cities; their role in commerce and in spreading cultural achievements turned them into focal points of romanization.

Dalmatia and other Balkan provinces, especially the interior, were not extensively colonized by emigrants from Italy. Veteran soldiers settled here and were given land and privileges, as was the case in other parts of the Empire. The process of Roman urbanization was spontaneous and depended largely on natural conditions, economic potential, and lines of communication. It was indisputably slower in the Balkans than in the central parts of the Empire, developing gradually, but it also continued at times when other parts of the Empire were engulfed in crisis.

All three provinces under consideration – Dalmatia, Moesia Superior, and Dardania – were renowned for their mineral deposits, and the extraction of precious and other metals played an important role in the economy and in the foundation of cities. Places where gold, silver, copper, or iron were extracted grew in population and maintained close links with their surroundings, from where the supply of miners came. These towns indirectly influenced the development of already existing urban settlements. In the Roman administrative system, mining brought with it certain peculiarities: the presence of local representatives of imperial authority, a greater degree of centralization, the establishment of districts with special local currencies and prices, and increased imperial supervision.

In addition to the littoral, which was the most urbanized and colonized region, highly populated cities arose along major axes, such as the roads running parallel to the Sava, Danube, and Morava rivers, or those connecting Byzantium (Constantinople) with remote border regions to the north (*via militaris*). Cities developed here from different roots and were supplied with everything created by the Roman Empire. Some became centers of provincial authority, such as Viminacium (near present-day Kostolac), while others were even capitals of the co-ruler collegium, such as Sirmium (present-day Sremska Mitrovica). Along the Danube sprouted Bassiana (away from the river, near Putinci, Ruma), Singidunum (Belgrade), Margum (Dubravica near Orašje), and Aquae (near Prahovo). Horreum Margi (Ćuprija), Naissus (Niš), and Remesiana (Bela Palanka) were on the road to Constantinople.

Certain towns were linked to mining, such as Municipium Dardanorum (Sočanica on the Ibar), Ulpiana (Lipljan in southern Kosovo), Municipium Malvesatium (Skelani on the Drina), and Domavia (near Srebrenica close to the Drina River), which was the seat of mining supervisors for the whole of Illyricum. Certain large Roman settlements are known exclusively by their archeological remains, such as Kolovrat near Prijepolje and Visibabe near Požega, whose original names are not known. Certain tombstones have provided text fragments with only the first letter of the name, such as *Aquae S . . .* on Ilidža Hill near Sarajevo or *Municipium S . . .* in Komini near Pljevlja.

Some cities owed their prosperity to their location, a site on an important road or junction, while others owed it to the fact that they were local government seats. In any case, they received forums, temples, waterworks, large public baths, and everything that went along with the status of a city. Numerous structures outlived Roman rule. Abandoned and destroyed remains of cities did not attract Slav settlers. Ancient remains were included in settlements and reused only in regions where Byzantine rule was later established. The Slavs stayed away from ancient

ruins swathed in stories that occasionally included the name of an emperor (Dukljanin – Diocletian; Trojan – Trajan).

Some towns influenced the expansion and completion of the Roman road network, which was rational, technically uniform, and subordinated to the needs of the state center. Roman roads also outlived Roman rule and had a powerful influence on the transit routes of people and merchandise in later centuries. Larger towns on the Adriatic coast, which were easily accessible by sea, served as starting points for roads leading inland into the interior of the peninsula. Certain major roads should be noted for their role in later periods: one parallel and close to the Adriatic coast, and the other further inland, parallel to the Sava River. The route along the Morava River valley became increasingly significant as the center of the Empire moved eastward. It was given the name “military road” (*via militaris*) when it connected Belgrade and Constantinople, and was much later the route of military expeditions into Central Europe in one direction, and toward the center of the Ottoman Empire in the other direction.

Initial antagonism between the Romans and the local population was overcome in time, and the province’s inhabitants were included not only in local administration, but also in the Roman army. Able-bodied and eager men spent a considerable part of their lives in the military, fighting wars in other parts of the Empire. They became both defenders of the borders and propagators of the Roman way of life. The principles of Roman administrative organization in regions that were conquered allowed room for the remnants of tribal organization in the form of *convents* and *decuries*, which often bore the name of the tribe.

The increasing integration of the local population within the Roman system was reflected by the towns that rose in rank in the administration, with the *municipium* of Roman citizens marking the highest level; on an individual level it was reflected by attaining the rights of Roman citizens. A visible expression of social promotion was the assumption of the name of the emperor who granted citizenship. Numerous tombstones marked *Aelii* speak of the time citizenship was granted. From the beginning of the third century with the Edict of 212, citizenship was extended to all free citizens in the Empire.

Nevertheless some questions remain, such as how romanization influenced people outside the cities and urban regions, how tribal traditions survived, how language and elements of cultural heritage were preserved during the long period of Roman rule, which itself remained on the surface, relying on the cities for its pillars. Different degrees of romanization were found in the descendants of the provincial population with whom the Slavs came into contact upon their arrival. These disparities were caused not only by the difference in tribal background and degree