Edin Omerčić, *Brzina mraka. Politička djelatnost Srpske pravoslavne crkve u Bosni i Hercegovini od 1989. do 1996,* Sarajevo: Institut za historiju, 2024, 497 str.

In the extensive academic literature on the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and on the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in general, the role of religious organizations remains relatively under-researched compared with other social actors.[1] The call for "historicizing the actual activities of clergy and religious institutions" addressed by Catherine Baker in her 2015 book about the Yugoslav wars maintains its validity.[2] This is apparently the consequence of two dominant trends. The so-called "essentialist" approach considers the religious substratum of war to be so crucial that it is taken for granted and deemed unnecessary to explain further. On the other hand, the "deconstructionist" approach regards the religious factor as instrumental and subordinate to the dynamics of distribution of power and economic and material resources, following the decline and fall of socialism. However, this approach risks minimising the importance of symbolic constructions and identity mobilisations.

In *Brzina mraka*, Edin Omerčić achieves an analytical and empirical balance between these two tendencies. It illustrates how the political and religious mobilisation of Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina were parallel and evolving processes. Without explicitly quoting it, Omerčić confronts the "fundamental dilemma" posed by Mitja Velikonja: "Were religions and religious communities and symbols used by nationalist politics/policies in their grand nationalist schemes? Or, conversely, did they exploit

[1] Among the few exceptions, I would recall: Vjekoslav Perica, *Balkan idols : religion and nationalism in Yugoslav states*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; Mitja Velikonja, *Religious Separation and Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, College Station: Texas University Press, 2003; *Religion and the War in Bosnia*, ed. Paul Mojzes, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998.

[2] Catherine Baker, *The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s,* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 59.

nationalist euphoria and policies to achieve their own religious goals? In short, did they play an active or passive role in the most recent Balkan history?".[3] Clearly, there is no simple answer to these questions. Through an extremely detailed account and the analytical tools of political and intellectual history, the book further problematizes that dilemma while providing a detailed picture of one of the most influential actors in the late 20th-century Bosnia and Herzegovina: the Serbian Orthodox Church (hereafter SPC or "Church").

The book analyses the impact of the Serbian Orthodox Church on the process of social homogenisation and political mobilisation of Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina from the late 1980s to 1992, and then on the war goals, operations, and justifications during the Bosnian conflict until 1996. The book contends that, besides supporting the nationalist elites, the SPC's political agency legitimised collective violence and dehumanisation towards non-Serbs in Bosnia Herzegovina, leading to war crimes and a genocidal process. A variety of sources is employed, but two types of documentation stand out in particular: the extensive range of SPC's press organs and the substantial documentation from the databases of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT). These sources illuminate the internal documents of the Bosnian Serbs' political elite and demonstrate the direct influence (and, sometimes, participation) of the SPC's senior leadership on them.

Chapter I introduces the concepts that are further developed throughout the book. The author focuses on the reaffirmation of the *Svetosavlje* ideology, as a form of anti-modernising and anti-materialist worldview that was originally conceived in the 1930s, and re-emerged in the mid/late 1980s. It was channelled through the Church's publications and press. The author explains how the SPC elevated Saint Sava as the ideal and symbolic embodiment of national reunification while increasing its attacks against the 'emancipating trends' in Yugoslav society. Omerčić then discusses the

[3] M. Velikonja, *Religious Separation and Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, 287.

relevance of the myth of Kosovo as representation of the dichotomy between civilised Byzantium and Islam, as projected onto 20th century events. This resulted in a dehumanising discourse initially directed at Albanians and then gradually extended to Bosnian Muslims. Chapter II provides much-needed context on the trends of religious revival, de-secularisation, and re-traditionalisation in South-eastern Europe (and beyond) in the 1980s and 1990s.

In Chapter III, the author reconstructs the SPC's evolving positioning since the 1950s / 1960s and its gradual but consistent realignment with Serb national interests in the 1980s, following various turning points, particularly the Kosovo unrest in 1981. The recurring conflicts between the SPC and communist institutions after 1982 depict the fluid nature of the Church's political activity and its approach to public opinion. The apparently contradictory stance of the SPC towards Slobodan Milošević's early rule adds further complexity and nuance to this picture. A turning point in the book is reached when the medieval Kosovo myth and dramatisation are 'transferred' to Bosnia-Herzegovina, particularly Romanija. BiH is deliberately placed at the core of the geographical imagination of the Serb-centred narrative, which is associated with cycles of migration and suffering. This laid the groundwork for a narrative of the Bosnian Herzegovinian (as well as the Croatian) social and political space as inherently hostile and therefore exposed to the 'human/inhuman', 'us/them' polarisation.

Chapter IV covers the SPC's activities in Bosnia between 1989 and 1992. First, the author illustrates how the SPC struggled to make itself more present in the public space by exploring the 'Construction Case' (i.e. the establishment or planning of numerous religious buildings in the Bosnian eparchies). Another turning point came with the SPC's reorganisation in December 1990, which revealed a latent conflict between the moderate and dogmatic wings, the latter prevailing after the election of Patriarch Pavle. The SPC's growing public influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, channelled through exhumations of victims of Ustasha regime oppression between 1941 and 1945, fuelled a narrative of victimisation and sacrifice.

This narrative was in line with the Serb Democratic Party's campaign before the Bosnian Herzegovinian elections in November 1990, leading to their rise to power.

In Chapter V, the author explores how the relationship between the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) and the self-proclaimed Republic of Serbian People of Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter RS) in 1992 was inspired by the concept of *symphonia*. This concept defined the relationship between Church and State in the Byzantine era, when they each used their own laws to prevent disagreements, despite there being no clear demarcation between their respective authorities. The author contrasts the *symphonia* between the Church and Republika Srpska with the dissonance between the Church and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SRJ). Disagreements between the SPC's top echelon and Milošević's power base widened from 1992 onwards, despite the latter's relatively unaltered political and military support for Republika Srpska. This led to the idealisation of the 'Western', 'trans-Drina' Serbs in the Bosnian and Croatian para-states by the SPC as the authentic bearers of national symbols, traditions and territory, a view that was fully reciprocated by the RS in its recognition of the Church's privileged role.

In Chapter VI, which covers the SPC's activity in 1993-94, the international factor emerges more clearly. Omerčić illustrates the SPC's symbolic participation in inter-religious initiatives that advocate dialogue and peace. This is in contrast to the Church's commitment to promoting the right to self-determination at any cost, including systematic violence. The author also recalls the SPC's increasingly defiant tone towards the international community, enhancing its political profile as the only Serb-led institution to maintain official communication with foreign diplomats. Chapter VI reconstructs how, until the final stages of the Bosnian War (1994–96), the SPC played an active role in justifying and covering up crimes, as well as in the ideological and symbolic codification of space, despite not being involved in their execution. This commitment remained unaltered even after the Dayton Agreement, which the Church considered an unfair imposition.

In conclusion, two main points emerge from Omerčić's book. Firstly, the political and religious dimensions of Serb nationalist mobilisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina were parallel, evolving processes involving dynamic interactions between the Church and institutional elites. The SPC did not react to historical changes. Instead, it presented itself as the bearer of divine laws on earth, proclaiming these laws to be superior to human laws, and was determined to proactively build a new reality.

Secondly, it clearly illustrates Bosnia and Herzegovina's specific place in the SPC's narrative and practice, elucidating how the Kosovo myth was transferred to BiH following the Church's significant contribution. While Bosnia and Herzegovina was represented as an *analogy* in the late 1980s, during the war of the 1990s it served as its substitute, becoming the front line of nationalist mobilization. Furthermore, it illustrates how the space of Bosnia and Herzegovina was re-imagined, re-codified and fragmented, as the SPC sought to undermine the unity of BiH as a political and multi-ethnic community, paving the way for its socio-political transformation through wartime violence. Historical phenomena associated with Kosovo, such as mass migration and the ongoing suffering from the Middle Ages to World War II, were therefore applied to specific regions such as Podrinje, Eastern Herzegovina and, in particular, Romanija, which was portrayed as the 'third Kosovo'.

However, the book carefully clarifies how Bosnia and Herzegovina's centrality derived not only from imagery and ideology, but also from evolving political contingencies. Occasional conflicts between the SPC and Milošević's regime in Belgrade regarding the inclusion of religion in education and the public sphere contributed to the elevation of Republika Srpska as the purest and most authentic reference for the Church, the true custodian of national symbols, a place where the doctrine of state-church *symphony* could be implemented. Therefore, Omerčić's overall analysis takes into account discontinuities and splits within the actors, including the SPC itself.

In summary, this book sheds new light on the power hierarchies, temporalities, and geographies of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. It deserves to be translated into English, as it would be very useful not only to historians and social scientists specialized on the post-Yugoslav region, but also to those dealing with the interaction between religion and politics in late and post-Cold war Europe.

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