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PUBLIC HISTORY AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY: THE 500th ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF KOSOVO (1889) AND THE PUBLIC SHAPING OF SERBIAN NATIONHOOD***

Abstract

The Battle of Kosovo stands as one of the most powerful national symbols within Serbian historical consciousness and is frequently invoked in various public history practices. Considering Serbia's current position regarding the Kosovo issue and the ongoing negotiations between Belgrade and Priština, research into the origins of the institutionalization of commemorative practices related to Kosovo and the Battle of Kosovo within modern Serbian statehood constitutes an essential component for understanding the complexity of these issues. In this context, the 1889 marking of the 500th Anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo holds particular historical and symbolic significance, as it provides valuable insight into how national narratives were constructed, instrumentalized, and embedded into political

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culture. The paper explores the 1889 commemoration, focusing on the forms of public historical engagement that emerged during the final phase of the Obrenović dynasty. The aim is to identify patterns in the development of national historical narratives and their role in state-building processes in the late 19th century. It examines how key historical narratives centered on Kosovo and Serbian medieval history were constructed and mobilized for public and political purposes. The paper employs methodologies from memory studies and the politics of memory, with particular emphasis on the early development of public history in Serbia. Special attention is given to the roles of political and intellectual actors – including Kings Milan and Aleksandar Obrenović, regents, ecclesiastical circles, historians, and intellectuals – in the organization of commemorative practices and the shaping of Serbian nationhood.

Keywords: Public History, Memory Politics, 500th Anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, Historical Narratives, Serbian Nationhood, Identity, Nation-Building, Obrenović Dynasty, 1889

INTRODUCTION

The Battle of Kosovo (1389) occupies a central place in Serbian national identity, symbolizing sacrifice, resistance, and the belief in survival, often interpreted as a metaphysical struggle between good and evil (Mihaljčić 1989). During the period of Ottoman rule, knowledge and representations of the battle and the medieval Serbian state served as a foundation of collective memory. These narratives enabled the preservation of national consciousness and fostered aspirations for freedom and the restoration of statehood. Oral tradition and epic poetry embedded the heroes of the Kosovo Battle deeply into the national imagination, with the Serbian Orthodox Church playing a pivotal role in maintaining and transmitting this historical and spiritual legacy. In the 19th century, amid the process of national revival and state-building, the Kosovo narrative and the memory of the medieval Nemanjić dynasty gained renewed political function as instruments in shaping national identity. Commemorative practices such as the marking of the 500th Anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo in 1889 were instrumental in the institutionalization of collective memory. These practices strengthened

national identity and contributed to the formulation of a state ideology rooted in historical continuity.

Throughout the 20th century, especially in its final decades, the issue of Kosovo re-emerged at the center of Serbian political, social, and international discourse. During the 1989 commemoration of the battle's 600th Anniversary, Slobodan Milošević leveraged commemorative ceremonies and his speech at Gazimestan to consolidate political leadership and reaffirm the Kosovo myth within frameworks of memory politics and nationalism, which became central to his regime's ideological narrative. Amid the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the 1999 NATO bombing, and the unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo in 2008, historical narratives surrounding Kosovo and the Battle of Kosovo assumed heightened symbolic and identity-related significance (Dragnich and Todorovich 1984; Đilas 1998). These events intensified scholarly and public interest in Serbian history and how historical narratives on Kosovo shaped perceptions of Serbia and the Serbian people both domestically and internationally (Bataković 1998; Bieber 2002; Gatalović 2016; Čolović 2016; Gatalović 2018; Slavković Mirić 2018; Đokić 2019; Ejdus 2020; Vukadinović 2021; Radojković 2024). Given the importance of Kosovo* for both Serbia's internal and foreign policy, as well as the difficult living conditions for Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija due to displacement, life in enclaves, and the destruction of Serbian cultural and historical heritage (notably during the March 2004 pogrom and afterward), it is critical to re-evaluate and reconsider the role of historical narratives in the institutionalization of memory, identity formation, and memory politics. For most Serbs today, even amid ongoing negotiations between Belgrade and Priština, and Kosovo's* repeated attempts to join UNESCO and other international organizations, Kosovo remains a symbol of historical continuity, spiritual heritage, and national suffering.

Therefore, it is essential to examine the early stages of commemoration and memory politics to better understand the long-term processes that have shaped the place of the Battle of Kosovo in Serbian national identity. This paper explores the 1889 commemoration of the Battle of Kosovo, focusing on forms of public historical engagement

* Contemporary references to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

that emerged during the state-building processes of the Obrenović dynasty's final phase. The goal is to identify patterns in the development of national historical narratives centered on the Kosovo myth and their role in shaping identity in the late 19th century. The research also analyzes key narratives rooted in medieval Serbian history, particularly the legacy of the Nemanjić dynasty, as foundational components of national identity. Accordingly, the methodological framework of this study is grounded in memory studies, politics of memory, and the field of public history.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Memory politics, understood as a constellation of institutional, cultural, and symbolic practices through which states, elites, and other social actors shape the collective memory of a given community, are not solely concerned with the preservation of historical knowledge. Rather, they frequently function as mechanisms for constructing narratives that legitimize contemporary political or social objectives, shape collective identities, and ensure social cohesion. In this sense, memory is not a neutral reflection of the past but a selective and strategic process, structured around decisions about what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten (Assmann 2011). This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of memory politics, drawing on insights from history, cultural studies, political science, and memory studies. This allows for a comprehensive examination of historical narratives, commemorative practices, official ceremonies, the erection of monuments, and the roles of institutions such as schools, archives, and museums (Assmann 2012). Particular attention will be given to the historical development of memory politics across different political systems and time periods, with an emphasis on their instrumentalization in the service of identity construction and political legitimization. The Kosovo case holds particular relevance within this framework. The Kosovo myth – centering on the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 – has been deeply inscribed in the Serbian collective imaginary as a foundational narrative of sacrifice, heroism, and national identity. From the nineteenth century onward, Kosovo has evolved into a *lieu de mémoire* in the sense formulated by Pierre Nora: a symbolic site where history, myth, trauma, and identity converge (Nora 1989). Accordingly, the study of the emergence and evolution of memory politics related to

Kosovo – especially in their early phases – offers critical insight into the formation of modern Serbian identity, the mechanisms of national cohesion, and the contemporary role of historical knowledge in shaping political agendas. By focusing on commemorative practices and narratives in specific historical contexts, this research aims to reveal how memory has been used not only to interpret the past but also to project political visions into the present and the future.

Public history refers to the practice of history by and for the public, often outside traditional academic settings. It encompasses a wide range of activities through which historical knowledge is interpreted and shared with broader audiences. Public historians work in museums, archives, historic sites, government agencies, media, and other community spaces, aiming to make history accessible and relevant to contemporary society (Cauvin 2016, 3–5). Unlike academic history, which typically addresses scholarly audiences, public history prioritizes engagement, collaboration, and communication with diverse publics (Kellley 1978, 16–28). It often involves community participation, oral histories, digital platforms, and exhibitions that present multiple perspectives (Meringolo 2012, 44–47). This field emphasizes ethical responsibility, inclusive narratives, and the democratization of historical knowledge (Conard 2002, 88–90). Public history thus serves both educational and civic functions, contributing to cultural memory, identity, and public discourse about the past in ways that inform present and future generations (Glassberg 2001, 7–9).

The practices of public history have a long tradition, although the term itself became widely used only in the second half of the twentieth century. As early as the nineteenth century, through the work of local historical societies, monuments, museums, and commemorative events, communities actively participated in shaping collective memory (Jordanova 2006, 141–145). In the twentieth century – especially after the 1970s – public history emerged as a distinct field aimed at connecting academic knowledge with the needs of broader publics (Gardner and LaPaglia 2004, 9–12). Studying these practices is important because it helps us understand how societies remember, interpret, and instrumentalize the past. The goal is not only to analyze historical narratives but also to develop a critical awareness of how history is used in contemporary social and political contexts. In this way, public history becomes a tool for fostering democratic dialogue, cultural inclusivity, and a responsible relationship with the past (Samuel 1994, 3–5).

Thomas Cauvin's reflections further deepen this understanding. Cauvin likens public history to a dynamic "Public His'Tree," where the roots represent source creation and preservation, the trunk denotes interpretation, and the branches and leaves symbolize dissemination and public engagement. As he observes, "the multiple links between monuments and the Public His'Tree demonstrate that trained historians should not limit their work to studying monuments; they can also contribute to broadening public understanding of the past" (Cauvin 2022, 13). Therefore, it is important to examine how, during the process of constructing modern Serbian statehood in the 19th century, the institutionalization of collective memory surrounding the Battle of Kosovo became a key instrument of nation-building.

HISTORY, SERBIAN NATION-BUILDING, AND THE OBRENOVIĆ

Throughout the 19th century, Western European understandings of Serbia were shaped by Romanticism and Orientalist tropes. Serbia was frequently depicted as a peripheral, semi-Oriental society on the margins of European civilization (Kolaković 2016a). The political landscape was primarily characterized by the rivalry between two royal houses – the Karađorđević dynasty, descendants of Karađorđe Petrović, leader of the First Serbian Uprising against Ottoman rule, and the Obrenović dynasty, descendants of Prince Miloš, leader of the Second Uprising. This dynastic competition unfolded against the broader backdrop of national consolidation and state-building. At the same time, a significant segment of the Serbian political and intellectual elite in the mid-19th century received their education abroad, particularly in France (Bataković 1997; Trgovčević 2003). Influenced by the ideals of the French Revolution, they championed liberal reforms, constitutional governance, and the limitation of monarchical authority. Upon returning to Serbia, they established institutions modeled on European examples, contributed to state-building, became university professors, and entered the political arena by founding political parties in the 1880s, each with its own political platform and national objectives. Among these emerging political forces, some advocated not only for an alliance with Russia – traditionally viewed as a natural ally and protector of Serbian national interests – but also pursued and successfully cultivated ties with various European states. France, in

particular, served as a model for state and societal organization. By the late 19th century, the Serbian elite was already well-acquainted with the processes of patrimonialization and memorialization of historical events in France, such as the erection of the Monument to the Republic (1881) and the centennial commemoration of the French Revolution during the Exposition Universelle (1889). In their efforts to distance Serbia from the Ottoman legacy and promote national emancipation, many believed that by constructing a modern state and nation along European lines, Serbia could fulfill its broader geopolitical and national ambitions (Kolaković 2016b). This context fostered a favorable climate for the increasing significance of historical narratives, which became key instruments in shaping national identity and promoting social cohesion.

By the end of the 19th century, the Obrenović dynasty was actively consolidating its authority, modernizing state institutions, and promoting economic and infrastructural development in Serbia. Following the Congress of Berlin in 1878, which recognized Serbia's independence, and the proclamation of the Kingdom of Serbia in 1882, European perceptions of the country remained limited and often distorted (Živanović 1924a). Despite the establishment of embassies and formal diplomatic relations, Serbia was still regarded, particularly in Western Europe, as a *terra incognita*. Nevertheless, King Milan Obrenović endeavored to strengthen both his own authority and the dynastic position of the Obrenović line, presenting himself as the first modern Serbian king since the fall of the medieval Serbian state (Rajić 2009, 43–58). A central national concern during this period was the preservation of independence amid persistent Austro-Hungarian pressure, along with the aspiration to liberate and unify the Serbs living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Srem, Banat, and Bačka (then under Habsburg rule), as well as in the Ottoman-controlled regions referred to as “Old Serbia” (Kosovo and Metohija, Macedonia) – territories considered the historical heartland of the medieval Serbian state. Within this context, the historical narrative of the Battle of Kosovo and medieval Serbian statehood became a foundational element: initially, in the struggle for national independence; subsequently, as a tool for legitimizing and consolidating the Obrenović dynasty's authority; and ultimately, as an ideological framework for promoting the liberation and unification of all Serbs, as well as a projection of Serbian foreign policy ambitions.

Despite their dynastic legitimacy, King Milan Obrenović and his son, King Aleksandar, struggled to secure broad public support, largely due to a series of personal scandals and contentious political decisions. In this context, historical narratives became a crucial tool for consolidating dynastic authority. King Milan ruled in an absolutist manner and aligned Serbian foreign policy closely with Austria-Hungary – an orientation that provoked strong opposition from the Radical Party, which advocated for deeper ties with Russia and, by the end of the 19th century, increasingly with France (Kolaković 2014a). Although French cultural and political influence had been present in Serbia since the mid-19th century a more decisive reorientation of Serbian foreign policy towards France began during the government of Stojan Novaković in 1895 (Vojvodić 1988). In the lead-up to the 500th Anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, 1889, King Milan's rule was seriously undermined by both military and personal failures. Serbia's defeat in the Serbo-Bulgarian War (1885), combined with his extravagant lifestyle, gambling debts, and high-profile romantic scandals, including a public and acrimonious divorce from Queen Natalia, significantly damaged the public image of the monarchy.

The political climax of this crisis was the adoption of the 1888/89 Constitution. Although it marked a personal setback for King Milan, it represented a significant advancement for the state. Modeled on contemporary European – particularly French – constitutional frameworks, the new constitution laid the foundation for Serbia's democratic development. Following his abdication, King Milan transferred the crown to his underage son, Aleksandar, and appointed a regency to govern until the young king came of age (Živanović 1924b; Jakšić 1953, 226; Rajić 2014, 27). In this altered political environment, historical narratives – particularly those centered on medieval statehood and the Battle of Kosovo – played an essential role in legitimizing the authority of the Obrenović dynasty and bolstering the position of the new monarch. In 1889, under the influence of the regency, King Aleksandar Obrenović formally established Vidovdan (June 28th) as a national holiday to honor the fallen Serbian warriors of Kosovo (Durković-Jakšić 1989, 365–388). This move was politically strategic, reinforcing national identity through historical remembrance and ritualized state ceremony. These historical narratives also served broader functions in reinforcing national unity and the project of nation-building. Later, as King Aleksandar Obrenović assumed full

power, his suspension of the constitution, orchestrated coups, and his controversial marriage to Queen Draga, a widowed court lady significantly older than himself, further alienated conservative and patriarchal segments of Serbian society (Stolić 2019). Consequently, the strategic use of historical memory persisted beyond 1889, serving as a means of sustaining dynastic authority amidst growing political and social unrest.

In light of the foregoing, it is crucial to highlight the practices that can be categorized as public history in late 19th-century Serbia. Commemorative practices and historical examples were deliberately employed to promote the dynasty, the Serbian state, and Serbian national interests – particularly the unification with Serbs living under Ottoman and Habsburg rule, i.e., beyond the borders of the Kingdom of Serbia. Preparations for the 500th Anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo were carried out peacefully, with the memory of the event, but without a bellicose narrative and with a high level of care not to provoke Austria-Hungary in the first place (Vojvodić 1999, 47–50). When examining the motivations and methods underlying the deployment and manifestation of historical narratives – in this case, Serbian medieval history and the remembrance of the first Serbian state and the Nemanjić dynasty during the reign of the last Obrenović – it is essential first to consider the national and dynastic contexts. Subsequently, through illustrative examples, one can observe the broader range of factors that unconsciously shape public historical consciousness.

In order to understand the place of history in Serbia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it is important to add that the triumph of critical historiography over myth and legend-based historical narratives was achieved in Serbia. Within this intellectual context, scholarly books and articles shed light on the conflict between two prominent Serbian historians. The first, Panta Srećković (1834–1903), a professor at the Great School, author of history textbooks, and representative of romantic historiography, relied heavily on the erroneous belief that folk creativity – such as songs and legends – constituted reliable historical sources (Srećković 1889; Srećković 1900). The second, Ilarion Ruvarac (1832–1905), who initially studied law in Vienna before becoming a monk and eventually archimandrite of the Grgeteg Monastery (from 1874), employed the principles of critical historiography to systematically challenge and refute Srećković's interpretations, particularly those found in *History of the Serbian People* (Radojičić

1956). At the time of these debates, both Srećković and Ruvarac were members of the Serbian Learned Society (later the Serbian Royal Academy of Sciences), exerting significant but contrasting influence on the shaping of historical consciousness (Suvajdžić 1997, 212–215). Moreover, in the period between these developments, the State Archives was established by order of King Aleksandar Obrenović, with Mihailo Gavrilović, educated at the Sorbonne, appointed as its first director (Kolaković, Stojkovski 2014b). These developments marked a decisive shift: academic historiography emerged as a leading force, underscoring the critical role it played in shaping historical discourse and national identity.

THE 500th ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF KOSOVO

The central commemorative events took place in the city of Kruševac, the medieval capital of Prince Lazar (Vojvodić 1999, 45). The reception accorded to the young monarch was grand and carefully choreographed. Although only thirteen years old at the time, King Aleksandar Obrenović arrived accompanied by high-ranking officials, including General Kosta S. Protić, General Jovan Beli-Marković, Prime Minister Sava Grujić, and other members of the government. Upon entering the city, the king was greeted with enthusiastic cries of “Long live!”, and the crowd showered him with flowers. He proceeded through the city’s main square, where he inspected the site designated for a future monument to the heroes of Kosovo. Later, he visited the Lazarica Church, where he was received by Metropolitan Mihailo, an influential figure and known political opponent of his father King Milan Obrenović. Throughout the day, Kruševac was adorned with Serbian tricolors, creating an atmosphere of national pride. However, by early evening, black flags were hoisted to signal mourning for “the tragic yet glorious Kosovo” (Šešum 2023, 285–308). At six o’clock in the evening, a solemn vigil was held in the Church of Lazarus, marking the spiritual beginning of the commemoration.

On the following day, June 28, 1889, after the Divine Liturgy in the Lazarica Church, a memorial service was held in honor of the Kosovo martyrs. The king, members of the regency, high-ranking government officials, military commanders, and prominent ecclesiastical dignitaries attended the ceremony. That afternoon, at

five o'clock, King Aleksandar ceremoniously laid the foundation stone for the Monument to the Heroes of Kosovo. Into its foundations were placed symbolic objects: a parchment inscription, contemporary coins, a book of Kosovo epic poetry, and a specially prepared Vidovdan Memorial. This act of foundational ritualism served to sacralize the site and materialize national memory in public space. Approximately 5.000 people gathered outside the Church, where a commemorative service was conducted in a purpose-built, black-draped ceremonial pavilion. Following the memorial, a new and elaborately decorated flag for the Obilić Choral Society, donated by the king, was consecrated. The ceremonies concluded with a military parade in which all present army branches marched in battle formation before the monarch, symbolizing the continuity of Serbian martial tradition from the medieval battlefield of Kosovo to the modern Serbian state (Đorđević 1996, 167–179).

The king Aleksandar Obrenović and his retinue, in the presence of a large crowd, proceeded to the site designated for the Monument's construction. There, the prime minister delivered a brief speech and read aloud the memorial document that was to be embedded within the Monument's foundation. Following this, the king struck the foundation stone three times with a golden hammer, amidst thunderous and enthusiastic exclamations of "Long live!" (Pajević 1889). Subsequently, Colonel Jovan Dragašević, the king's instructor in Serbian language and geography, addressed the assembly, followed by Stojan Bošković, a state adviser. The king then recorded a donation of 2.500 dinars toward the Monument's construction. Two young girls sold flowers harvested from Kosovo fields, each bouquet tied with a black ribbon inscribed with "Spomen sa Kosova" (Souvenir from Kosovo). Various delegations laid wreaths at the Monument, with particular attention drawn to the wreath presented by Czech youth, which garnered special notice.

The following day featured the ceremonial laying of the foundation stone for a new state powder mill, located on the property of Đ. Simić, near the Rasina River, approximately one hour from Kruševac. This facility was acquired by the state and symbolized the foundation of the country's military strength and preparedness. During his stay in Kruševac, the king Aleksandar also visited the Ljubostinja Monastery, where a special commemoration was held at the grave of Princess Milica. After the events in Kruševac, the king and his entourage traveled to Kraljevo and then to the Žiča Monastery, where he was anointed in an exceptionally solemn ceremony by Metropolitan

Mihailo, like all Serbian kings of the Middle Ages, starting with Stefan the First-Crowned from the Nemanjić line (Pajević 1889).

The commemoration of the Battle of Kosovo was predominantly a local affair, observed in multiple Serbian cities beyond Belgrade. In this context, the local population attended the event and took part in it, and King Aleksandar's circular journey through central Serbia conveyed historical narratives about the Battle of Kosovo and represented an important basis for creating a policy of liberating compatriots in areas under foreign rule, whether Habsburg or Ottoman. The royal procession's journey deeper into the interior – visiting sites such as the Žiča and Ravanica Monasteries, historically significant as the coronation site of Serbia's first king – reflected an intention to engage rural and largely uneducated populations in the national memory project. The Church was an important cohesive factor, and the whole event of commemorating the Battle of Kosovo included high church dignitaries as well as lower clergy. They were transmitters of memory for centuries before this act, and through this commemoration, their narratives about the Battle of Kosovo merged with the state's need to strengthen the identity and reputation of the dynasty. Queen Natalija contributed to the celebrations by presenting a white silk curtain, hand-embroidered by herself, to the Kruševac church for the Epiphany celebration. King Aleksandar Obrenović gifted a golden cross to the Ljubostinja Monastery, an endowment originally associated with Princess Milica. Furthermore, King Aleksandar commissioned two additional gold crosses from a Belgrade. One of these crosses was presented to the Church in Žiča during the king's anointment, while the other was sent to the Church in Ravanica in Srem, where the relics of Saint Prince Lazar rest and where, despite governmental prohibitions, a celebration of the 500th Anniversary had been held. The Serbs in the Habsburg Monarchy observed "Vidovdan as a day of all-Serbian hope and faith in the resurrection of Serbian unity and freedom," as well as "the hope that we will once again be free and united as a people", in the words of Dr. Stevan Dobričić, President of the Organizing Committee (Spomenica 1919, 1).

Notably, Serbs residing in Vojvodina were prohibited from traveling to Serbia to participate in the central celebrations, nor were they allowed to organize commemorative events on the territory of the Habsburg Monarchy (Pejin 1991, 141–165; Rakić 1989, 7–24). The Hungarian Minister of Internal Affairs and local authorities deemed

such activities as “anti-state agitation” with prohibitions particularly targeting Serbian students and teachers. The Serbs living in the territory of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy – specifically in what is today Vojvodina – organized themselves in larger urban centers and established committees to prepare for the commemoration of the Battle of Kosovo. Preparations began six months prior to Vidovdan, and the committees were composed of members of the wealthier classes, as well as respected and educated Serbs. These groups worked on developing a program aligned with the central celebration taking place in Serbia. Accordingly, they maintained contact with Serbian authorities but coordinated their activities primarily in cooperation with the parishes of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Austro-Hungarian authorities viewed the organization of the commemoration – both in Serbia and among the Serbs within their own borders – with suspicion and a lack of sympathy (*Zastava* 1889). Regarding the Serbs living in Bosnia and Herzegovina under the so-called Kalaj’s regime, the cultural and educational community in Mostar played a significant role in commemorating the 500th Anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo (Aleksić 2024, 37–54).¹ News circulated throughout Serbia and among Serbs in Srem, Bačka, and Banat that banning this event would constitute a violation of Serbian religious rights, as the commemoration was intrinsically linked to ecclesiastical rites. This connection was likely emphasized to discourage authorities from prohibiting the celebrations. Importantly, it was asserted that “such a ban would be an insult to civilization, for our ancestors perished at Kosovo for their homeland, their freedom, and emancipation, which simultaneously represented the freedom and advancement of all Europe” (*Zastava* 1889, 1).

Significantly, Vidovdan was established as a national holiday for the first time. King Aleksandar Obrenović laid the foundation stone for the Monument to the heroes of Kosovo in Kruševac, the city that served as the central seat of Prince Lazar’s rule, thereby linking historical tradition with modern statehood. Foreign agents were also

¹ Milan Petronijević – generalu Savi Grujiću, predsedniku Ministarskog saveta i ministru inostranih dela Kraljevine Srbije, Beč 5 juna 1889; *Istorija srpske diplomatiјe*, 5/II, Diplomatsko predstavništvo Srbije u Beču 1878–1891, 524–525; Milan Petronijević – generalu Savi Grujiću, predsedniku Ministarskog saveta i ministru inostranih dela Kraljevine Srbije, Beč 15 juna 1889; *Istorija srpske diplomatiјe*, 5/II, Diplomatsko predstavništvo Srbije u Beču 1878–1891, 529–531 (Perišić, Reljić, i Rajak 2019).

present during the Kosovo anniversary commemorations, notably those affiliated with the Austro-Hungarian Empire and others loyal to the Karađorđević dynasty, reflecting the geopolitical tensions surrounding Serbian national identity at the time. This commemoration was intended to demonstrate to Western countries that Serbia possessed statehood prior to Ottoman domination. The Battle of Kosovo commemoration thus served as a performative assertion that the modern Serbian state was a direct continuation of the medieval polity and that Serbia shared a historical legacy comparable to that of other major European states. Furthermore, it framed the Serbs as defenders of Christian civilization against Turkish incursions, emphasizing that not only had they reclaimed their independence after centuries of subjugation, but they were also prepared to reintegrate into the European community.

The agenda for marking the 500th Anniversary testifies to deep consideration of how to fit the history of one of the most significant events in Serbian history into the representation and presentation of the ruling house of Obrenović, the national building, and the empowerment of Serbia. It is important to highlight that among the Serbian organizers of the event there were differing opinions regarding the terminology: some preferred the phrase “commemoration of the Battle of Kosovo,” while others advocated for “celebration of the Battle of Kosovo.” Additionally, certain bishops opposed celebrating the event at all, arguing that there was nothing to celebrate given the tragic nature of the historical defeat. An examination of Serbia’s historical practices in the late 19th century reveals the early use of what can be described as *public history*. One of the most prominent examples is the commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo in 1889. This historical event, deeply embedded in the Serbian national consciousness, was mobilized by the state as a tool for national cohesion and as a means to bolster the diminishing legitimacy of the Obrenović dynasty, which was at the time facing a crisis of public confidence due to a series of personal scandals and its alignment with Austrophilic policies.

CONCLUSION

The Battle of Kosovo occupies a foundational place in the construction of Serbian national identity, serving as a symbol of historical continuity. Over the centuries – especially during the period of Ottoman rule – the Kosovo myth preserved national consciousness

through oral tradition, religious practice, and literary forms. The Serbian Orthodox Church played a pivotal role in transmitting Kosovo memory and maintaining its central position in both cultural and political life. Accordingly, the role of the Church and its high-ranking clergy was both present and significant during the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo. The Obrenović dynasty made particular use of Kosovo symbolism to link its rule to the legacy of the medieval Serbian state. In parallel, within the broader project of rebuilding and constructing a modern Serbian state, commemorative practices, such as the 1889 marking of the 500th anniversary, served as instruments for shaping modern national identity. These commemorations linked collective memory with processes of state institutionalization, thereby lending legitimacy to historical narratives. They were also directed toward the Serbs living within the Habsburg Monarchy, who, despite official bans on attending the central event in Kruševac, managed to commemorate the occasion within ecclesiastical circles, fostering a sense of unity and a perceived need for the unification of all Serbs within a single state. The 500th Anniversary commemoration, including the erection of the Monument to the Kosovo Heroes in Kruševac, contributed to the beginnings of the institutionalization of memory regarding this historical event, shaping subsequent narratives and perceptions well into the 20th century – and, in part, even today. Public historical practices related to the Battle of Kosovo reveal a dynamic relationship between rulers, elites, and the Church, between political power and institutionalized memory, as well as between narratives constructed in earlier periods and transmitted orally among the populace.

The interpretation of history gradually shifted from the domain of political and ruling elites to broader segments of the population. During the commemoration of the Battle of Kosovo, King Aleksandar was only thirteen years old; he did not actively shape the event but instead served as a symbolic figure within public discourse. While his father, King Milan, exerted a degree of influence, primary authority rested with the regency, ecclesiastical circles, and the political elite. An examination of contemporary memoirs and published documents pertaining to the Obrenović dynasty reveals that the roles of participants in the commemorative ceremonies were fluid and multifaceted. Given that these events often extended beyond several hours, individuals frequently alternated between passive spectators and

active contributors – as speakers, organizers, or facilitators. Notably, women were largely excluded from the conceptual leadership of these commemorations, appearing predominantly in performative roles. Exceptions to this trend include Queen Natalija. Analysis of the 500th Anniversary commemoration of the Battle of Kosovo demonstrates that employing the methodological frameworks of public history and the politics of memory offers a critical foundation for developing new research trajectories. These approaches enable a deeper understanding of the political and cultural dynamics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as they relate to the enduring legacy of this foundational historical event.

These historical narratives have also been subject to instrumentalization throughout Serbian history, particularly since the marking of the 600th Anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo. Slobodan Milošević’s 1989 speech at Gazimestan stands as a paradigmatic example of the instrumentalization of historical memory for the purposes of nationalist mobilization and political consolidation. Accordingly, further research into this topic, especially through comparison with the 500th Anniversary commemoration analyzed here, would not only contribute to the field of identity studies but also to two additional areas. First are memory politics, which are crucial for understanding national interests and identifying mechanisms through which the past is employed to shape the future. Second are the contemporary political uses and abuses of history and of Kosovo, both the battle and its associated legends, in parliamentary and non-parliamentary political life and public discourse. Kosovo remains deeply embedded in Serbia’s domestic and foreign policy. Serbia’s opposition to Kosovo*’s membership in UNESCO and other international institutions is rooted in the symbolic significance of Kosovo within Serbian historical consciousness. For this reason, understanding early commemorative practices, especially those of the 19th century, is essential for grasping today’s memory politics. By illuminating the commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, we open space for a more responsible and constructive engagement with memory politics in contemporary Serbia, as well as with the legacy of history in geopolitical and international contexts, particularly in relation to the ongoing Belgrade–Priština dialogue.

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ЈАВНА ИСТОРИЈА И ПОЛИТИКА СЕЋАЊА: ПЕТСТОТА ГОДИШЊИЦА КОСОВСКЕ БИТКЕ (1889) И ОБЛИКОВАЊЕ СРПСКЕ НАЦИОНАЛНОСТИ***

Резиме

Битка на Косову представља један од најмоћнијих националних симбола у оквиру српске историјске свести и често се помиње у различитим формама јавне историје. С обзиром на то каква је тренутна позиција Србије по питању Косова и смера у којем се одвијају преговори између Београда и Приштине, истраживање порекла институционализације комеморативних пракси у вези са Косовом и Косовском битком у оквиру модерне српске државности представља кључну компоненту за разумевање сложености ових питања. У том контексту, обележавање петстоте годишњице Косовске битке 1889. године има посебан историјски и симболички значај, јер пружа драгоцен увид у то како су се национални наративи конструисали, инструментализовали и уградјивали у политичку културу. У овом раду се истражује обележавање из 1889. године, са фокусом на облике јавног историјског ангажмана који су се појавили током завршне фазе владавине династије Обреновић. Циљ је идентификација образца у развоју националних историјских наратива и њихове улоге у процесима

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*** Рад је део истраживачких пројеката аутора на Институту за политичке студије (Београд) 2025. године, финансиран од стране Министарства науке, иновација и технолошког развоја Републике Србије, на основу Уговора о спровођењу и финансирању научноистраживачког рада научноистраживачке организације (НИО) у 2025. години, број у евиденцији: 451-03-136/2025-03/200044 и 1053/1.

изградње државе крајем XIX века. Анализира се како су кључни историјски наративи усмерени на Косово и српску средњовековну историју били конструисани и мобилисани у јавне и политичке сврхе. Рад се ослања на методологију студија сећања и политике сећања, са посебним нагласком на рани развој јавне историје у Србији. Кроз компаративни приступ, посебна пажња посвећена је улогама политичких и интелектуалних актера у обликовању српског националног идентитета – укључујући краљеве Милана и Александра Обреновића, намеснике, црквене кругове, историчаре и интелектуалце.

Кључне речи: јавна историја, политика сећања, петстота годишњица Косовске битке, историјски наративи, српска националност, идентитет, изградња нације, династија Обреновић, 1889

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