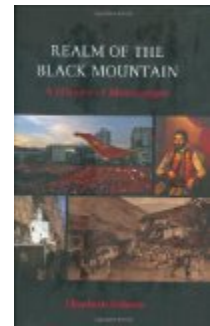




Elizabeth Roberts. *Realm of the Black Mountain: A History of Montenegro*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. xvi + 521 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4601-6.

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The Politics of Writing History

The book by Elizabeth Roberts, entitled *Realm of the Black Mountain: A History of Montenegro*, is an example of a politically induced academic and popular interest in the Montenegrin history that grew substantially over the past ten years. Thanks to a self-confessed infatuation of this former diplomat with Montenegro, this newest independent state in the world is introduced to readers with all the flair, mystique, and colors commonly associated with orientalized space. According to its author, *Realm of the Black Mountain* is an informative general history of Montenegro (p. xiv; p. xvii). *This book is, indeed, an attempt to fill a rather large gap, and it has been received with certain enthusiasm among fans of popular history. Some professional historians have praised it as well. The reviewer for The Economist*, for example, was so impressed by this book to suggest that “future historians may not bother again” to write anything on Montenegro since “if one history was enough for the last century, perhaps one is enough for this century too”.[1]

As someone who specializes in history and cultures of the South Slavs, I am always trilled to read new material published on the region. The singularity of historical interpretation offered by Roberts, however, unjustly undermines the plurality of historical narratives. Recognizing such plurality through a dialogue of scholars is the best way to approach history. I offer the following review in the spirit of such dialogue and scholarly cooperation.

Roberts offers an interesting and, at times, intriguing rendition of a selected number of secondary sources in English on this corner of southeastern Europe. The pref-

ace, as well as the leitmotif of identity that runs through this broad survey, are vivid reminders that writing history of the Balkans is seldom a non-political act. Her selectiveness when it comes to sources speaks loudly to the importance of continued researching of primary sources and further studying of South Slavic history in general and the history and cultures of Montenegro in particular. The bibliography of this general history of Montenegro includes only eight titles in the languages of the region. Most importantly, there are no bibliographical listings of any archival documents and primary sources on the Montenegrin history originating in either Montenegro or Serbia, or the Balkans for that matter. This further problematizes the research aspect of Roberts’s endeavor and begs the question if this author conducted any archival research in the region. Roberts’s almost exclusive reliance on secondary sources does not reflect well on the course of her analysis and the independence of conclusions reached.

This monograph consists of twelve chapters covering many centuries: from prehistory and the arrival of the Slavs to the Balkan Peninsula, to the contemporary discomforts of transition in Montenegro. It offers the readers a series of broad brushstrokes, i.e. brief overviews that pay insufficient attention to such important themes as the loss of Montenegrin independence and sovereignty in 1918, and the role Montenegro played in the former SFR Yugoslavia, as well as in the dissolution of that state.

The chapters on the medieval history of Montenegro live to the promise of an informative text and could serve

as a point of departure in further studying history of the region. Roberts provides a solid overview of John Fine's and Dimitri Obolensky's valuable accounts of that history (pp. 39-102). It is a presentation of an in-between geographic, cultural, and political space where events occur and are conditioned by outside forces. In this context, however, it is regrettable that Roberts has failed to consult Larry Wolff's *Venice and the Slavs* (2001) and when analyzing the Kosovo Battle of 1389, W. S. Vucinich and Thomas A. Emmert's *Kosovo: Legacy of a Medieval Battle* (1991).

The author promises a comprehensive "full-length history" of Montenegro (p. xvii). This is an ambitious task, and Roberts should be commended for attempting to achieve the impossible on less than 500 pages. Consequently, however, the excessive objectives of this volume result in its glossing over important issues and themes in the history of Montenegro. For instance, Roberts renders the marriages of King Nikola Petrović's daughters more important than the relations between the royal houses of the Petrovićs and the Obrenovići (pp. 261-271). There are twice as many pages devoted to Nikola's idea of conducting foreign policy through marriage than to the complex and multilayered political, economic, and military relations between the Serbian and the Montenegrin dynasties. Similarly, the last chapter entitled "The Djukanović Years," is considerably longer than the chapter on the WW I and the loss of statehood in 1918, and the one elaborating on the role Montenegro played in the post-WW II SFR Yugoslavia.

When it comes to analyzing Montenegro during the WW II there is no mention of the scholarly works of the most prominent Montenegrin historian of this period, Radoje Pajović. As a consequence, Roberts glances over the very sensitive issue of the collaboration between Krsto Popović, the former leader of the independent-minded *Greens*, and the Italian occupying force, limiting the analysis to a single explanatory footnote. There is no mention of a considerable contemporary relevance of this issue or of the fact that the life story of Krsto Popović is currently being used by the independentists and the unionists in Montenegro to validate their political views.

The contemporary political usability of this text becomes most apparent towards the end of the book. Devoted entirely to the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, the last chapter "The Djukanović Years" is not guided by the principles of objectivity professed earlier. Rather, it serves the purpose of validating the policies and actions

of the current power structure in Montenegro.

The issue of the 1991 siege of the Croatian coastal city of Dubrovnik is the first case in point. The author places the blame for the attack on Dubrovnik squarely on the shoulders of Slobodan Milošević and the Yugoslav Army (JNA) (p. 34; p.430; pp. 438-439). It should be noted that such view is indeed one-sided. Roberts failed to consult sources on this issue that present a more complex picture and shed more light on the involvement of the Montenegrin power structure in the assault on Dubrovnik.[2] Also, to refer repeatedly to "Montenegrin paramilitaries" and "irregulars" joining the JNA soldiers in the *Dubrovnik Operation*, as Roberts does in her book (p. 34; p. 438), is a characterization that cannot be supported by evidence. After all, the Special Unit of the Montenegrin police dispatched to the Dubrovnik front in 1991 by the Montenegrin Ministry of Interior could hardly be called "irregulars." [3] Roberts's line of argument mirrors the rhetoric of the Montenegrin ruling elite.

The large scale smuggling operations coordinated by the Montenegrin State Security and organized crime elements, and with the full knowledge of the political leadership, is the second case in point. The ruling party in Montenegro and its leader, Milo Djukanović, strongly profess their innocence in the case of organized smuggling operations. Roberts, once again, embraces the explanation offered by the ruling elite and argues that the establishing of such a criminal enterprise was a consequence of the international economic sanctions (p. 446.). While it is plausible to argue that economic sanctions inevitably speed up the emergence of the black market economy, responsibility of the regime (or the lack of it) for not opposing such trend should be subjected to careful examination. Placing blame on the outside factors effectively absolves the local power structure of any responsibility. This issue is so vital for understanding the recent past of the region and the contemporary transitional problems in Montenegro that it deserves a complex investigation and comprehensive analysis. Unfortunately, readers of the *Realm of the Black Mountain* are left with a politically benevolent glossing over this acute problem.

The issue of the 2006 referendum on independence and the role of the non-governmental organization *Group for Changes* (GZP) is the third case in point. In a journalistic fashion, Roberts claims that in the months leading to the 2006 referendum on independence the politically powerful non-governmental organization *Group for Changes* threw "its weight behind the 'no' campaign" (p. 472). Such statement by Roberts is not germane to the

enterprise of describing reality. The *Group for Changes* never took sides in the pre-referendum campaign.[4] It is the ruling elite and the Montenegrin nationalists who accused the GZP of betraying the idea of independent Montenegro because the leadership of this non-governmental organization refused to rally under the nationalistic banner carried by the ruling elite. Attacking the reform-oriented NGO that advocated tolerance, consensus, and civil society was an integral part of the pre-referendum campaign of the ruling elite. First, Roberts does not acknowledge that as a non-governmental organization the GZP acted in accordance to its proclaimed principles of civic engagement—it advised its members not to boycott the referendum but rather to exercise their democratic right and vote their conscience. Second, she did not research numerous written statements issued by the GZP on the matter of the referendum and failed to take into account the other side of the story. It is regrettable that Roberts adopted the view of the ruling party rather uncritically.

Despite the attempt to cover multiple topics spanning over many centuries, the early promise of a comprehensive general history of Montenegro remains unfulfilled. The leitmotif—the thorny issue of identity—was meant to be glue keeping this text together. What is missing, however, is a substantial analysis of the multi-layered and complex structures of the identity construction processes. The failures of this book underline the paramount importance of thoroughly researching primary sources and keeping one’s analysis outside of the realm of daily politics.

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Notes

[1]. “Fighting and Looting,” *Economist*, February 3 2007.

[2]. In addition to this reviewer’s published articles on the siege of Dubrovnik in English and Serbo-Croat, and the publications of the ICTY in the Hague, the analyses of the war in Croatia are also available through the *Scholar’s Dialogue* project (Purdue University). Moreover, there are numerous local sources offering alternative views of the Dubrovnik Campaign such as the IPG OBALA’s documentary *War for Peace*, and the Podgorica-based weekly *Monitor*, to mention the most important ones.

[3]. For an alternative account and analysis of the *Dubrovnik Campaign* see Srdja Pavlović, “Reckoning: The 1991 Siege of Dubrovnik and the Consequences of the ‘War for Peace,’” *Spaces of Identity*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2005), York University (<http://www.spacesofidentity.net>).

[4]. See Srdja Pavlović, “Još Jednom o Državi i Demokratiji” (October 1, 2005); “Nacionalizam i Patriotizam” (October 5, 2005); and “O? i Širom Zatvorene” (October 6, 2005), <http://www.pcnen.com>. Also see Svetozar Jović, “Medijska Hajka na Grupu za Promjenu” (December 27, 2005); and GZP Press Conference, “Prihvatanje Referendumskih Uslova” (March 2, 2006), <http://www.promjene.org/gzp/sort.php?~sort==aktkonf&sender>