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Vasilije Krestic. *History of the Serbs of Croatia and Slavonia, 1848-1914*. Belgrade: Beogradski izdavasko-grafiski zavod, 1997. 667 pp. [Price unavailable] (paper), ISBN 978-86-13-00888-0.

Reviewed by Nicholas Miller (Boise State University)

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Vasilije Krestic is the leading Serbian scholar of the Serbian communities of the Habsburg monarchy in the nineteenth century. Since the publication in 1969 of his book *Hrvatsko-ugarska nagodba 1868. godine* [1], he has published numerous articles on various aspects of Serbian life in Croatia and Hungary. Until the last decade, he worked virtually alone among Serbs and Croats on Serbian history in the monarchy. [2] Today others have joined him, most notably Drago Roksandic, a scholar working in Croatia. The book under review here, *History of the Serbs in Croatia and Slavonia, 1848-1914*, was first published in Serbian in 1991. It is the only work of synthesis that Krestic has attempted. Its publication in English renders it the only study of its kind in this language. His other books include two collections of essays and a useful two-volume collection of documents that serve as an accompaniment to the volume under review. None of his other publications have been translated into English.

This *History of the Serbs of Croatia and Slavonia* is a history from the "inside out": its single concern is the Serbian community of Croatia. Krestic betrays little interest in the broader context, as Austrian, Hungarian, and Croatian developments are presented only insofar as they affected the Serbs of the monarchy. Immediately, then, the book loses a bit of its value, for it is exceedingly difficult to evaluate developments, even in the most self-contained of communities, in a microcosm—unless one's thesis is narrowly conceived. And so it is: Krestic writes that he wishes "to stress, as the main point of the entire book, that one of the basic results of the policy based on the 'Croatian state and historical rights' was the widespread conviction among the Croats that their national and political program can be realized only through destruction of the Serbs (p. 25)." The book is unconvincing because its author is too devoted to the

demonstration of this tendentious thesis, which he first broached in a controversial article published in 1986 entitled "The Genesis of Genocide of the Serbs in the Independent State of Croatia." [3] Ivo Banac described that article as "ten quotes..., accounts of four incidents, and unpublished observations by a Croatian politician to claim that the 'genocide against the Serbs in Croatia is a specific phenomenon in our centuries-old common life with the Croats.'" This *History of the Serbs of Croatia and Slavonia* seems to be an expanded version of that earlier article, with all of its apparent weaknesses. [4]

Krestic's survey begins in 1848 and concludes with the outbreak of the First World War. It is organized as a political history: there are chapters on the revolutionary movements of 1848-49, the period of Bach's absolutism, the era of the Ausgleich and the Nagodba, the banate of Ivan Mazuranic, the period between the Congress of Berlin and the fall of Ban Karoly Khuen-Hedervary, and the era preceding the First World War. Of these periods, Krestic deems only the revolutionary period in 1848 (marked by the collaboration of Ban Josip Jelacic and Patriarch Josif Rajacic), the brief two-year period 1866-68 (when Prince Michael of Serbia sponsored cooperation between Serbs and Croats in Serbia and Croatia), and to a degree the New Course of 1905-1907 to be periods of harmony between Serbs and Croats. Krestic sees those interludes of peace as exceptions to the rule: Serbs were a besieged community threatened with assimilation and/or physical destruction. The sources that Krestic utilizes include contemporary newspapers and private correspondence. One of the contributions of this book is to make available many extensive quotations, especially from the correspondence. These excerpts not only reflect the flavor of nineteenth-century correspondence, but they provide illuminating glimpses of the nature of Serbian dissat-

isfaction with Croatian and Habsburg governance. However, these excerpts must be considered with care, since Krestic is prone to interpret them in a rather exclusive light, in keeping with his thesis.

There are alternatives to Krestic's approach towards the history of the Serbs of Croatia, but even when he edges toward new territory—such as an examination of social conditions—his conclusions are defensive rather than simply illuminating. For instance, he pays some attention to social conditions in the Serbian community, but his purpose is to highlight the lower standard of living and poorer education of the Orthodox Christians in comparison with their Catholic neighbors, which, Krestic concludes, was evidence of intent on the part of the Habsburgs and the Catholics to destroy the Serbian community. One needs to be careful with this sort of assertion: of course there was discrimination against Serbs in the Habsburg monarchy, but discrimination is not the same as destruction (or genocide, a word that Krestic uses on occasion). Authors should not be judged by what their book might have been, and Krestic never claims to be a social or cultural historian. But the utilitarian approach to evidence (all the evidence that proves a destructive urge on the part of Croats is fit to print) will probably annoy and occasionally confuse unwary readers and serve to obfuscate some of the other tensions in Serbian society, such as those between Serbs.

A specific example of the flaws of Krestic's presentation is his treatment of the government of Ban Ivan Mazuranic. Mazuranic's government was responsible for legislation in 1874 proposing to transfer the control of schooling from the churches to the state in Croatia. Krestic states that "[Serbs] knew very well that the communalization of Serbian schools was only a stratagem in the attempt to denationalize and Croatize Serbian children and all the Serbs in Croatia (p. 225)." He offers no alternative theories, he does not consider the possibility that Mazuranic might not have desired the destruction of the Serbs (for instance, that his school legislation reflected an attempt to modernize the education system). Characteristically, Krestic finds it appropriate to integrate in his discussion of educational policy a quote taken from the diary of a turn-of-the-century Croatian politician who wrote that the Croatian idea could only be realized by taking an ax to all of Croatia's Serbs (p. 229). A reprehensible thought, no doubt, but irrelevant to the discussion at hand. Krestic's treatment of the episode is typical of the book as a whole: a decent enough summary of the Serbian side, brimming with extensive quotes from contemporary sources (which, it must be said, are

usually interesting and would be enlightening if properly contextualized), tied together with provocative but usually incongruous quotes or anecdotes that serve to press home his preferred theme.

Krestic is equally convinced that Serbs in Croatia lived in harmony, comprising a unitary community fully conscious of their shared fate. He is explicit about this: the first chapter of the book begins with a section addressing "Serbian spiritual unity." As evidence for this assertion in 1848 he cites popular verses; the election of a Serb from the Croatian military frontier as "vojvoda" in 1848, in spite of the fact that the majority of electors were from Slavonia and Hungary; the great material support given to the revolutionaries by the principality of Serbia; and the efforts of Rajacic to spread the message of cooperation. This use of circumstantial evidence is typical of Krestic's defense of Serbs' spiritual unity. Whereas his support for the assertion that the Serbs of Croatia were threatened with annihilation is aggressive, Krestic offers only a passive defense of the thesis that the Serbian community of Croatia was spiritually unified.

As an example of this passive style of argumentation, Krestic's depiction of the period 1903-1914 serves well. The period saw the emergence and then dominance of the Croato-Serbian Coalition, which initially included both major Serbian parties, the Independent and Radical parties. A whole host of issues divided the Radicals and Independents, including regional bases, economic interests, and not least ideology. While Krestic's long examination of those relations reveals deep hostility between the two parties, he ignores most of the more convincing reasons for that discord—in particular, the nature of their ideological disputes and the possibility that for some Serbian political leaders ideology served baser economic interest. Thus, in spite of evidence to the contrary, Krestic attributes the Radicals' departure from the Coalition in 1907 to their recognition of the "ulterior motives of some Croats, not only extreme right-wing Frankofurtumists [sic] who wished "to assimilate and Catholicize the Serbs in Croatia (p. 526)." The Independents, loyal to the Coalition, were dupes of Croats who "wanted more than anything else to build, enlarge and strengthen Croatia (p. 530)." Krestic reduces the entire period to the question of who understood most clearly the fact that Croats intended to assimilate Serbs and create a large Croatian state. The reader is the loser, but one also wonders if by so simplifying Serbian affairs in Croatia Krestic has also dishonored the complex history of his own Serbian people.

This book is notable for two reasons. First: it is the only general history of the Serbs of Croatia available in the English language, which instantly gives it a large (and unwary) potential audience. And in fact, in spite of its excesses, the book does include much valuable information, not least extensive quotations from contemporary sources. Second: Krestic is not only one of Serbia's leading historians today, but he has been active in Serbian intellectual life for the past fifteen years. His body of work therefore stands not only as historiography in the standard sense, but also as primary source material for a study of Serbian intellectuals since the death of Tito. Krestic's contribution to the intellectual revolt against the regime in Serbia was to promote the idea that Croats are a genocidal people. He propagated that notion at every turn after the publication of the article described in the first paragraph of this review. As a primary source, this *History of the Serbs of Croatia and Slavonia* exemplifies the type of polemic that passed as history in Serbia (and other parts of Yugoslavia) after the death of Tito. For English speakers who have not had the doubtful pleasure of ingesting any of that scholarship, this book will provide a taste. With fair warning and a healthy, critical

eye, readers can also glean from it an enormous amount of raw information about the Serbs of Croatia.

Notes:

[1]. Vasilije Krestic, *Hrvatsko-ugarska nagodba 1868. godine* (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1969).

[2]. Others who worked in this field include Slavko Gavrilovic and Dusan Popovic. Gavrilovic concentrated on the period preceding 1849; Popovic wrote on the Serbs of Hungary.

[3]. Vasilije Krestic, "O genezi genocida nad Srbima u NDH," in *Knjizevne novine* (September 15, 1986).

[4]. Ivo Banac, "Historiography of the Countries of Eastern Europe: Yugoslavia," in *The American Historical Review*, 97:4 (October 1992), p. 1101.

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