



Citation:

Gil, D. (2022). Reflections of the anti-occidentalism idea in Serbian cultural texts of the 20th century. *Slavia Meridionalis*, 22, Article 2720. <https://doi.org/10.11649/sm.2720>

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Reflections of the Anti-Occidentalism Idea in Serbian Cultural Texts of the 20th Century

From the perspective of studying anti-Occidentalism in Serbia, the first half of the 20th century, and especially the inter-war period, seems one of the most significant periods of axiological revaluations historically undertaken in Serbian culture. This period saw broad political, cultural and social transformations in the newly created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Attempts at defining Serbian national identity (Serbs vs. Yugoslavs) and religious identity within the framework of a common state, but also in relation to Europe/the West, would assume an extreme form, judging by the opinions of contemporary intellectuals. Postulates such as the abandonment of Serbian cultural traditions seen as *differentia specifica* in order to equally radically redefine native traditions viewed as either “non-European” or as a “synthesis of the East and the West”, and most importantly, to place the same tradition in the already modernized messianic idea of Pan-Slavism, contain clear anti-

This work was supported by the Polish Ministry of Education and Science.

Competing interests: the author is one of the journal’s reviewers.

Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences.

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European or – more broadly – anti-western elements. Let us stress here that the latter idea, which has 19th century antecedents (both Slavophile and Neo-Slavophile), contains elements that glorify the culture that came into being on the spiritual foundation of Eastern Orthodoxy (along with the Hegelian idea of the mission of nations which was adopted by the Russians). At the same time, it criticizes a culture that has its roots in Western rationalism and the civilization of the West (which are amoral, Godless and “rotten”). In the mid-war period, this view was additionally strengthened by popular research on ethnopsychology, by theories on civilizations and races and, most importantly, by Oswald Spengler’s ideas contained in his book *The Decline of the West* (Spengler, 1918–1922). At the time, the idea was definitely connected to a belief in the civilizational collapse of post-war Europe, which was mainly viewed in relation to morality and the sphere of ideas (Prpa, 2018, p. 337). However, this “anti-Europeanism” – which emerged as a result of dramatic war experiences – undermined European values and, being primarily the heritage of the Slavophile idea of traditions that were complementary to the social (peasant), cultural and religious (Orthodox) structure of Serbian (and partly Yugoslavian) society, became a stable and still-visible element of the discourse on the antithesis of Serbia – Europe, especially when it was included in the 1930s in the framework of the organicist Serbian national ideal. In this article, chosen cultural texts attributed to famous Serbian intellectuals who were engaged in the politics of the time (historiosophers and prosaists) will be interpreted as a confirmation of the strong presence of the trend of anti-Occidentalism, especially during the mid-war period.

Naturally, it should be remembered that, since the 18th century, the attitude of Serb intellectuals toward the cultural topos of Europe and the culture of the European West as a whole fluctuated and was radical in evaluation terms. This was due to opposing views, which (at certain stages) alternated between being apologetic about this civilizational model or, conversely, were anti-Western (these were substantially stronger and more definite). This anti-Western attitude resulted from Serbia’s long (and almost complete since the 18th century) affiliation to the sub-civilization *Slavia Orthodoxa* and from the 19th-century “cultural revolution” of Vuk Karadžić (1787–1854). He proposed a folk paradigm that severed the Serbian tradition from the Greco-Roman roots of high culture of classical antiquity and its Western European continuation. Ultimately, this attitude was strengthened by Slavophile themes of Russian origin. At the same time, as early as in the 18th century, a reverse tendency was quite perceptible

which resulted from the appearance in Serbia of inspiring cultural patterns that were mostly related to rationalism. Initially, they indirectly emanated from Kiev, which had ties with Poland (temporarily even from Moscow), and after 1770 from the universities of Leipzig and Halle, which were attended by young Serbian intelligentsia, Protestant high schools in Slovakia, as well as the universities, printing houses and merchant colonies in Venice, Padua and Trieste (Gil, 2019, pp. 19–25). In a specific way, protestant axiology and related visions of new standards of collective life formed the worldview of Dositej Obradović (1742–1811), who was well-versed in Western realities. He was a major propagator of Occidentalism, which collectively defined rational and cosmopolitan attitudes in the sphere of social philosophy and religion (related, for example, to the ideas of civic liberties, educational and linguistic reforms, critical thinking, and the non-antagonistic treatment of faith and reason). Commonsensical knowledge, which developed in Western thought and sprang from the ability to doubt oneself, was radically contrasted by Obradović with the reality of the Balkan province, where so far the key place in the cultural hierarchy had been held by the historical myth (Gil, 2018, pp. 67–69). In the middle of the 19th century, awareness of the attractiveness of European values (in the sense of Western thought) was even keener, as was proved by the ideas of Ljubomir Nenadović (1826–1895), who was full of admiration for German organizational, technical and legal achievements, attempts at reforms in the ecclesiastical sphere, as well as similar improvements in British civilization (Nenadović, *Pisma iz Nemačke* [1852, 1855]; Nenadović, 1852, 1855/1922).

The dispute between Occidentalists and nativists arose from the appearance of a romantic ethnic model/folk particularism, proposed by Vuk as canonical for the national culture. This dispute helped gradually remove a universal (though “bourgeois”) pattern of enlightenment rationalism and replace it with a tribal and patriarchal project of “original genius”, which, through the culture of *gunja* and *opanci* (homespun coat and leather moccasins) and the spread of Serbian folk prose in Europe, would influence the rise of an image of the collective who were totally impervious to Western influences. In turn, as a compromise, Lukijan Mušicki (1777–1837) read the same significance in folk heritage (of a vernacular character) as in the Orthodox Church, and the latter’s other hierarchs saw the “Slavia – Europe” opposition (Bobrownicka, 1995, pp. 33–34) as being between the moralism of Orthodox Slavs and Western immorality (an idea known in Russian Slavophilia). Vuk’s anti-elitism stance and his attempt to glorify folk culture, along with his identifying Serbia with plebeian Slavonic

culture, partly resulted from a complex of civilizational inadequacy. Svetozar Marković (1846–1875) questioned holding such a dichotomist social and cultural understanding of what it was to be Serbian, but he did so assuming a socialist, utilitarian and agrarian position.

Jovan Skerlić (1877–1914), an adamant Occidentalist of the beginning of the 20th century, still considered Dositej Obradović an “enlightened Occidentalist” (*prosvećeni zapadnjak*) and contrasted him with the romantics, who held the West in contempt and wavered in defining their own culture. By the 1920s and especially the 1930s, however, the criticism of “European values” that was levelled by the organicists had gained popularity.

Among the latter was Vladimir Velmar-Janković (1895–1976), who placed the original Serbian culture entirely outside Europe:

Of all nooks and corners of Europe, the Balkans are least European. And in the Balkans among the Christians it is the Serbs who are least European [...]. *Homo europeus*, formed by the Rome of the Caesars and the Rome of Catholicism [...] created something, which it called the “European civilization” and which was a spiritual image of the West, with its faith in European progress and the omnipotence of science and technology [...]. Conversely, the Serbs had been following a very different path since the 19th century, remaining outside the “European circle”, independent of it, and creating an original political system based on the tradition of Orthodox Christianity. (Velmar-Janković, 1938/2002, pp. 81–82)¹

Believing in the cultural mission of the Slavs, Velmar-Janković postulated forming one integral Slavonic culture and Slavonic religion (*sic*) which would guarantee the rise of a more perfect society imbued with the ethics and spirituality of a renewed Christianity or a synthesis of the spiritual powers of the East and the West, and thus the emanation of a new type of man (Prpa, 2018, p. 334).

Furthermore, while recalling Slavophile ideas popular since the 19th century (also in a Pan-Slavic version), Miloš Milošević points to a “religious and moral” (K. Leontiev, W. Solovyov, J. J. Strossmayer, F. Dostoevsky and neo-Slavophiles) and a revolutionary – “sociocultural” (A. Herzen, N. Danilevsky, S. Marković) dimension of the messianic and missionary idea of Slavdom and believes that “Slavs chosen by God, Fate or Idea to reach an objective are a ‘God-bearing’ nation” [*narod-bogonosac*] (quoted after: Prpa, 2018, p. 30).

The same trend in philosophy, described at the time as a “rebellion against the West” (Radulović, 1989, pp. 18–22), gave rise to the ideas of Miloš Djurić

¹ All Serbian quotes were translated into Polish by D. Gil. The paper was translated into English by Piotr Pieńkowski.

(1892–1967), a philosopher of culture. Significantly, he emphasized the importance of the Serbian and Slavonic cultural tradition rather than just the Slavonic. His so called “white philosophy”, understood as a positive cultural tradition of the Yugoslavs-Serbs and called a *Vidovdan Philosophy of Nationalism* (in the sense of patriotism), which resulted from the legacy of the Kosovo Cult, was to become the basis of general ethics which the Serbs were seen as predestined to maintain and to become “the leaders of the Pan-Humanity” (Djurić, 1914). In Djurić’s most famous and valued work, *Vidovdanska etika* (1914), Kosovo is not only seen as the source of the modern history of Serbia, but also as the beginning of the next era of a deified Serbia, which would be commensurate with a transformed Europe and the whole world. An attempt to inscribe this heroic philosophy into the idea of Slavdom, which was tinted with messianism and a partly laicized missionary urge, is the best example confirming the assimilation of the ideas of Russian thinkers who were popular in Serbia at the time, and reinforced its selective character (sometimes betraying the ignorance of some of those thinkers). This allowed some of its components to become compatible with Serbian/Yugoslavian realities. Contrary to the opinions of Russian Slavophiles and Fyodor Dostoevsky, Djurić believed that purely national (Serbian, but on the eve of World War I, Yugoslavian) ideology and a vernacular (nominally Yugoslavian, but in fact just Serbian) element crowned with Eastern Orthodoxy would manage to defeat the declining civilization of the West. Only Serbs were able to “create the philosophy of high culture with their martyrdom and heroism”, which elevated not only Yugoslavs but also all Slavs to a “higher, all-human level of Pan-humanism” (Djurić, 1914). It is worth stressing that the strategy of selective assimilation of chosen fragments of Slavophile thought resulted in a surprising attempt to harmonize the concept of integrity which was present in Russian thought (especially in Vladimir Solovyov’s *The Philosophical Principles of Integral Knowledge*) with the ideology of the Unitarian Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. This concept of “integral Yugoslavism” (Gil, 2020, pp. 257–271), along with the idea of a Pan- or God-Man, which was first formulated by Dostoevsky, who was seen as a “prophet, apostle and genius”², assumed the shape of national messianism and Southern Slavonic/Serbian missionary drive (Radulović, 1989, pp. 209–211). Djurić, however, did not imply a total rejection of the European cultural paradigm but stressed that the idea of Slavdom was a synthesis of

² According to, among other authors, V. Djurić and N. Velimirović.

the East and the West, whose emanation was the “Slavonic soul”. In his 1928 work *Pred slovenskim vidicima. Prilozi filosofije slovenske kulture* he writes:

Between Europe and Asia, the Slavonic soul wails in birth pain. It does not suffer from European technicisms, it is far from the paroxysms of theocracy, which we inherited from the *Imperium Romanum*, it is not shaken by European convulsions of might, power and capital. The Slavonic soul, whose emanation was Dostoevsky, Chaadayev, Soloviev, Tolstoy, Merezhkovsky, Velimirović and the Serbian Folk Song, is being washed by the spring dew of the first days of Christianity. (Djurić, 1928, p. 57)

According to Djurić, the Slavs “who are neither the East nor the West, but live between the East and the West, have a mission to fuse these two modes of existence into a cultural synthesis: the space mode of the East and the time mode of the West, Western practicality and Oriental calm and peace” (Djurić, 1928, p. 64). In this view, the Yugoslavs/Serbs would become “the children of the father of the West, who embodies the male element, energy and technology, and the mother of Asia, who embodies the female element, harmony and ethics” (Djurić, 1928, p. 65).

Notwithstanding opinions on Djurić’s proposals (which were, in fact, incoherent and fluctuating in the span of his 55 years of life), the concept of Slavdom as a “synthesis of the East and the West” and especially of the “Slavonic soul”, being the antithesis of a different, European culture (based on rationalism and materialism), gained immense popularity – especially and understandably among intellectuals shaped by Christian and Orthodox ideas (Radoje Marković, Vladimir Vujić, Vladimir Velmar-Janković, Prvoš Slankamenac, Nikolaj Velimirović, Justin Popović, among others). The concept was also adopted by some literary authors of the 20th century: Velibor Gligorić, Todor Manojlović, Svetislav Stefanović or Rastko Petrović.

Other solutions which were based partially on Russian Orthodox Christian thought or its antithesis were proposed by authors such as Dimitrije Mitrinović (1887–1953) and Ljubomir Micić (1895–1971) in their discussions on the mission of the Slavs and/or the Serbs. The first of these authors, one of the most mysterious and eccentric philosophers and a student of historiosophy, was the author of the controversial 1914 project *Osnove Budućnosti*, in which he discussed the problem of “blood bonds” (*savez krvi*). This active ideologist³ – a supporter of the idea of “integral Yugoslavism” and the cosmopolitan and

³ The intellectual leader of the “Young Bosnia” organization, who was involved in preparations for the Sarajevo assassination of 1914.

ecumenical idea of “Aryan Europe”, tied by brotherly blood relations (Palavestra, 1977, pp. 246–257) – suggested a unique but mostly risky synthesis of the idea of the God-Man, as understood by Dostoevsky, with its racist theories, which was popular in the West at the time. However, as an alternative to the religious concept espoused by Russian thinkers, it was the irrational but non-sacral idea of a “Slavonic savior” that gained popularity. This savior, created by Ljubomir Micić, a Zenitist, was seen as a Messiah-destroyer or revolutionist, the *Übermensch*, a Balkan Barbarogenius (Czapik-Lityńska, 2005, pp. 94–101). In this scenario, however, artistic visions of the *avant-garde* imagination depended far less on stiff worldviews and ideologies.

A vast majority of the cultural texts on the issues involved in Serbian/Slavonic relations with Europe/the West that came into being in the first half of the 20th century were undoubtedly syntheses of motifs selected from Russian thought that were treated as a whole, the most important of which was the criticism of the laicized culture of Western Europe. This was strengthened by the radically anti-European trend rooted in the ethnonationalistic idea of *svetosavlje* (Gil, 2005, pp. 37–41) and the related idea of “ideology with the cross”, offered by Dimitrije Ljotić (1891–1945; Popov, 1994, pp. 15–36), as well as other, mostly émigré, organicists active after World War II (Djordjević, 2003). Although, in reality, Tito’s Yugoslavian discourse on Europe was reduced to schematized comparisons of social and economic achievements within the doctrine of “social progress”, the topos of “rotten Europe” turned out to be an exceptionally vibrant element of an almost wholly irrational trend in religious and political thought, founded on anti-enlightenment and anti-liberal beliefs.

The most telling examples that also testify to the fact that these beliefs contain already permanently rooted elements of a “nationalistic quasi-Christianity” of Slavophiles and Neo-Slavophiles (Przebinda, 1998; Walicki, 2002) can be found in the texts of Bp. Nikolaj Velimirović (1881–1956) and Fr. Justin Popović (1894–1974), the clergymen and philosophers of history, who were canonized and since the 1990s have been regarded as the “pillars of Serbian spirituality” (Gil, 2005, pp. 167–186). Their texts condemning the “devilish” enlightenment, rationalism, science, and culture itself as the epitome of evil⁴ considerably contributed

⁴ Among the many works of both thinkers that are critical of Western European civilization and culture, there are three that deserve special attention: N. Velimirović, *Reči srpskom narodu kroz tamnički prozor* (1985); J. Popović, *Svetosavlje kao filozofija života* (1954) and J. Popović, *Pravoslavna Crkva i ekumenizam* (1974) (Velimirović, 1985/1996; Popović, 1974, 1954/1993).

to the consolidation of an anti-Western trend in Serbia in the second half of the 20th century. Their criticism of Europe fits into a long list of categories related to the Western European reality, which, they claimed, had no spiritual or moral value, and included papism, Jesuitism, intellectualism and even the acceptance of technological advances. Called the “White Demon”⁵ by Bp. Velimirović, this incurable Europe is riddled with heresies, polytheism and promiscuity, generated by hereditary characteristics of the European as a DevilMan (the reverse of the God Man), which, apart from some affinities that can be found in Russian sources such as Dostoevsky, have connotations with the remarks of Oswald Spengler). Bp. Velimirović’s criticism of the “corruption” of Europe by Darwin, Nietzsche and Marx resembles that of a large number of other Christian denominations, but he is especially critical of the French Encyclopedists, sociologists, lawyers, German metaphysicians, writer-realists, Western scholars, and what he views as typical “idols”, such as progress and equality (Velimirović, 1985/1996). On the other hand, Fr. Popović prophesizes the end of European culture that emanated from the mind of the man who considers himself God (the betrayal of Christ) and also from “Vatican scholasticism” in philosophy and “cannibal Jesuitism” in ethics (Popović, 1974, p. 189, 1954/1993, p. 126). In this case, the peculiar catalogue of “phantasms of evil” includes not only Europe (the rotten West, the wanton West, the mother of de-Christianization, Evil, the White Demon (a label borrowed from Velimirović), but also, for example, humanism (the greatest evil, a deviation from old European culture, one of Satan’s masks), progress (an idol, a mask of Evil), and culture (described in the texts as demonic, Satan-like, *civitas diaboli*, the new ungodliness and idolatry, a mask of Evil and Evil itself (Gil, 2010, pp. 89–100).

The opinions of the “pillars of Serbian spirituality”, updated at the end of the 20th century, along with the whole trend of organicistic thought, were fully taken advantage of for political purposes in the 1990s. This amalgam of theses, used to create an ethnonationalistic and great-state meta-idea with a tint of messianism, was at the same time the natural building block for a spiritual “defense shield” against Europe – the anti-Christian “White demon” – and as such would strengthen the anti-Western attitude.

⁵ The topos of Europe as the “White Demon” was discussed in a greater detail in *Reči srpskom narodu...*, but had been in use much earlier, since the mid-war period. To learn about the political implications of Bp. Nikolaj’s works, see an extensive analysis by Dj. J. Janić, *Politika kao teodulija (politička misao vladike Nikolaja)* (Janić, 2009).

Thus, at the turn of the 21st century, the decades-long topos of “rotten Europe” became the most important argument used by those who opposed the inclusion of Serbia in the EU political community, consistent with the warning of Velimirović: “Serbia is a neighbor of Europe, but it is not Europe” (Velimirović, 1985/1996, p. 97). This view is echoed by clergyman Bp. Atanasije Jevtić (1938–2021), who considers his spiritual motherland “Europe before Europe”: “The Serbs are quintessential Europeans. We were Europe before Europe and its civilization came into being. Moreover, we the Serbs are first of all spirituality” (Jevtić, 1996, p. 325). Beside this fundamental alternative that places Serbia before, or, as Velmar-Janković said, outside of Europe, and numerous (updated) opinions on Serbia as “a synthesis of the East and the West”, there is another argument: Europe, “born in Serbia”, as the poet Matija Bećković (b. 1939) claims, is trapped in a cage of materialism, because “it assumed a secular temporality, a history understood as progress, a soulless history,” whereas non-European Serbs “remain outside major trends of European secular history” but “at the same time they are still Europeans because they retain the deep history of its spirit”, anchored in Greece and Byzantium (quoted after: Čolović, 2001, p. 53). Ivan Čolović paraphrased the opinions of a significant majority of Serbian intellectuals, which was dominant at the time (but is also popular today), in the following way:

The Serbs want to join Europe not because they need it for any reason, but because they do not want to be egoists. They want to share their immense treasure that they have guarded as the genuine heirs of European civilization – after all, it originated in the Balkans. Their treasure is Serbian culture – our gusle, which relate us to Homer, and his gusle, or whatever his musical instrument was called. The Serbian accession of Europe would be a gesture of good will for Europeans (...). It is not the point that the latter become charmed with the culture of some small nation, but that they get to learn the only true culture – the Serbian one. (Ćirlić & Čolović, 2002, p. 15)

In today’s realities, two decades after the above diagnosis, the logic of anti-Western thinking remains very much alive. However, it does not dominate as a construct of an alternative geography of culture or spiritual elitism. It is offset by a strong conviction that the cultural “absolute otherness” of Serbs can be successfully incorporated within the requirements of tolerance and equality, and the functional “liberty pact” that is accepted by numerous European societies.

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Refleksy antyokcydentalizmu w serbskich tekstach kultury XX wieku

Artykuł wskazuje na najbardziej reprezentatywne teksty kultury oraz opinie intelektualistów serbskich XX wieku, które ukształtowały (częściowo na wcześniejszych podstawach) nurt antyokcydentalny. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono okresowi międzywojennemu i opiniom utrwalającym antytezę Serbia – (Slavia) – Europa, a wyrastającym głównie ze zaktualizowanej wówczas rosyjskiej myśli słowianofilskiej. Jej podstawowy (w wersji mesjanistyczno-misjonistycznej) topos Europy – „zgniłego Zachodu” został w tym stadium rozwojowym skompilowany z konceptami serbskich organicystów. Wyraziste antyeuropejskie i szerzej antyokcydentalne refleksy znaleźć można w wielu ówczesnych próbach redefinicji tradycji rodzimej, ale także w nowszych, aktualizujących je opiniach reprezentantów serbskiego świata intelektualnego z końca lat 90. XX wieku. W wielu z omawianych ujęć tradycja ta postrzegana jest jako „nieeuropejska” bądź stanowiąca syntezę wątków kulturowych Wschodu i Zachodu, czy też emanację idei wszechsłowiańskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: Europa/Zachód, serbski antyokcydentalizm, słowianofilstwo, idea wszechsłowiańska

Reflections of the anti-occidentalism idea in Serbian cultural texts of the 20th century

The article presents the most representative cultural texts and opinions of Serbian intellectuals of the 20th century that formed the anti-Occidentalism trend (and which were partly based on earlier foundations). The article focuses on the mid-war period and the opinions that strengthen the antithesis of Serbia – (Slavia) – Europe, which were mostly rooted in a version of Russian Slavophile thought. It juxtaposes the basic topos of Europe (the messianic and missionary version of Europe) as “the rotten West” with the concepts of Serbian organicists. Clear anti-European and anti-Western reflections can be found in many contemporary attempts to redefine the native tradition, as well as in the more modern, updated opinions of Serbian intellectuals active at the end of the 1990s. In many of these debates, this tradition is seen as “un-European”, as being a synthesis of cultural motifs of the East and the West, or as emanating from the Pan-Slavonic idea.

Keywords: Europe/the West, Serbian anti-Occidentalism, Slavophilia, the Pan-Slavonic idea

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