

Religion and Politics in Interwar Yugoslavia: Serbian Nationalism and East Orthodox Christianity. By Maria Falina. London-New York-Dublin: Bloomsbury, 2023; 220 pp.; \$115 (hardcover); ISBN 978-1-350-28203-2.

Nolens volens, historians' work is closely tied to the goal of understanding the present. We stare at the past not so much for the past's sake but mostly for the present's. Such an aim, noble as it might be, exposes the serious historian to the threat of falling into the trap of presentism. Indeed, the serious historian constantly walks that fine line separating the solid scholarly work from that of an ideologically driven mission. The temporal dimension of continuity and change remains one of the main concerns of historical work. Shedding light on what survives from the past, and what are the threads that extend from now long gone decades and have been lost over the course of years tells us much of how the time we live in has come to be. In her book *Religion and Politics in Interwar Yugoslavia: Serbian Nationalism and East Orthodox Christianity*, Maria Falina takes on this challenge and demonstrates the centrality of interwar era years in shaping the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church toward the modern state and nation.

While there is a flourishing literature on this topic regarding the nineteenth century and the communist era, there has been a void in the literature regarding the 1920s and 1930s. Falina's book is an important contribution to filling this void. In fact, compared to the pre-World War I era, the Serbian Orthodox Church found itself in a new framework, which, as the author of this book shows, has been critical in shaping many of the questions modernity posed for both the clergy and lay followers of this church. With the establishment of the multireligious and multinational Yugoslavia, the Serbian Orthodox Church found itself in a new political, ideological, and institutional context, different from that of the nineteenth century. However, Falina does not isolate the osmosis between Serbian Christian Orthodoxy and Serbian nationalism in the conjuncture of the interwar era to some inherent characteristic of Orthodoxy or its Serbian variant; she rather contextualizes her analysis within the broader European debates and responses that secularization and technological advances posed on historical actors across Europe. Instead of repeating the mantra of the genetic symbiosis between the autocephalous churches of the Balkans and nationalism, Falina argues that the turn of the Serbian Orthodox Church toward a militant and messianic nationalism was contingent on historical circumstances and the interplay of Serbian Orthodox thinkers and clergy with other actors, especially the promoters of integral Yugoslavism, and in constant dialogue with transnational ideological currents of those years. For this reason, this book is important not only for the scholars of Yugoslavia but also for the Balkans writ large because it explains the interaction between the general and the local.

There is another important aspect of the book, which the author of this book successfully explains and shows how she was able to dissect the texts she has analyzed without taking them at face value. Regardless of the antimodernist discourses of the most prominent Serbian Orthodox theologians and top clergy that defined and refined the answers and position of this church toward the challenges of modernity, she argues that these responses were fully immersed within the horizon of modernity. The narratives that arched back to an imagined past and tradition were constructed based on modern concepts. While trying to reject materialism, atomization, and new supra-

religious secular identities the Serbian Orthodox clergy and laymen reformulated the notion of Serbiandom and nation by exactly deploying modern concepts of their secular interlocutors. Hence, religiosity and secularism are not necessarily antagonistic even when the competing narratives point in this direction. They constantly inform each other in a dynamic relationship where both actors mutually shape their respective visions.

In one of his famous books, Bruno Latour claimed that we, the allegedly modern people have never been modern. Reading Falina's book the reader can go the other way and understand that even those who have claimed to be the most anti-modern are instead very modern and have participated in building modernity regardless of their original intentions. In the four chapters and the epilogue of the book, the author analyses the metamorphosis of how from supporters of the Yugoslav idea, the Serbian Orthodox Church gradually shifted its position and turned its back to Yugoslavism. Rather than putting the blame on one of the historical actors, Falina brings to the reader the world seen from the eyes of the Orthodox clergy and state actors. In her analysis that is very close to Geertz's "thick description," she argues how the promoters of integral Yugoslavism and the leading personalities of the Orthodox Church were caught in different symbolic webs that incapacitated them from building a meaningful dialogue, thus undermining the Yugoslav project. The position of the Yugoslav secularizers and modernizers is typical of the political elites of the twentieth-century Balkans, who consciously considered their countries as *tabula rasa* and conceptualized top-down social engineering under the banner of de-Ottomanization. This hostility toward the past, which became especially sharp in borderlands between different religions and empires, as was the case with Yugoslavia, and for that matter Albania too, triggered significant counter-reactions. Falina's book explains how in the end, the nationalism promoted by the Orthodox Church gradually became fervently anti-Yugoslav and qualitatively different from that of the nineteenth century, including its conservative and anti-Western orientation. Notwithstanding the communist interregnum, the ideological sources of the interwar era survived and re-emerged in the 1980s, when the Yugoslav state started cracking under the pressure of the competing nationalisms that eroded the whole architecture of power and the supranational identities that it promoted. *Religion and Politics in Interwar Yugoslavia: Serbian Nationalism and East Orthodox Christianity* sets an example of a solid academic work that overcomes partisanship while preserving the necessary empathy for its subjects.

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***Strength for the Fight: The Life and Faith of Jackie Robinson.* By Gary Scott Smith. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022. xiv + 298 pp. \$24.99 cloth.**

In *Strength for the Fight*, Gary Scott Smith delivers a unique and comprehensive spiritual autobiography of the baseball pioneer Jackie Robinson. The book builds upon a