

BISHOP NIKOLAJ VELIMIROVIĆ:
OLD CONTROVERSIES IN HISTORICAL
AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

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Table of Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	7
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	11
<i>Introduction</i> – All things to all people: The Contemporary Readings of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović	13
Slobodan G. Markovich <i>Cosmopolitanism, Ecumenism and Syncretism</i> <i>of Nikolaj Velimirović in 1915–1919</i>	33
Fr Aleksandar Djakovac <i>Fr Nikolaj Velimirović in England (1915–1919):</i> <i>A Theological Response to War, Violence and Evil</i>	61
Deacon Phillip Calington <i>St Nikolaj Velimirović and pre-Christian philosophers</i>	79
Rastko Lompar <i>Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, Dimitrije Ljotić</i> <i>and Zbor in Interwar Yugoslavia</i>	105
Miloš Timotijević <i>Interwar Attitudes of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović</i> <i>toward the Communists</i>	131
Dragan Bakić <i>Tempestuous Relations: Bishop of Žiča, Nikolaj Velimirović,</i> <i>and the Regency Government of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia,</i> <i>1936–1941</i>	169

Vladimir Cvetković	
<i>“Nationalism”, “Fascism” and “Anti-Semitism”</i>	
<i>of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović</i>	211
Radmila Radić	
<i>Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović as an “Enemy of the People”</i>	255
Nemanja Andrijašević	
<i>Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović’s Instructions to Very Reverend</i>	
<i>Protoiereus-Staurophore Aleksa Todorović for Editorial</i>	
<i>Work on the Religious-national Series Svečanik</i>	293
Dragan Šljivić	
<i>The Orthodox Nevercoming Land:</i>	
<i>St. Nikolaj of Ohrid and Žiča on Democracy</i>	323
Srećko Petrović	
<i>Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović and the Foundation</i>	
<i>of the World Council of Churches</i>	353
Bishop Maxim Vasiljević	
<i>Both in the East and in the West: Some Aspects</i>	
<i>of Holy Bishop Nikolaj’s Presence in North America</i>	
<i>(January 9, 1946 – March 18, 1956)</i>	387
<i>Appendices</i>	417
<i>List of Contributors</i>	443
<i>Index of names</i>	447



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All things to all people: The Contemporary Readings of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović

A contemporary who had an opportunity to get to know Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović (1881-1956)¹ and was impressed by his personality and his works believed that “with what he wrote and said, he entered the ranks of the fathers of the whole Church, the universal Christian church, and not just our Serbian church, because his sermons are general Christian assets. He left behind him an opus that ensures for him that great rank. There is no doubt about it—acknowledgement is only a matter of time.”² If the reach of Bishop Nikolaj’s theological thought within Christianity is a question that still needs an answer, there is no doubt that his significance at the national level and within the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) is quite exceptional. The above mentioned contemporary and admirer noted that in the 1920s Nikolaj as then Bishop of Ohrid “was a great name, ... who reaches his acmes and affirms himself as one of the greatest minds in our cultural life; at that time Bishop Nikolaj finally gets his physiognomy of a writer and a preacher, deep thinker and moralist; he becomes the heart of the Serbian church, the soul of our Orthodoxy; his authority in religious and moral matters over-

¹ Bishop Nikolaj’s name appears in the English language in different forms, including his own usage, most often as Nicholas, Nicholai, Nikolai (his surname is usually given as Velimirovich), etc. Although it would perhaps make sense to use some of these forms originating with his lifelong and strong connections with the Anglo-Saxon world in a publication in English, that does not seem appropriate for chapters dealing with most of his biography, the time he spent in Serbia/Yugoslavia and elsewhere. For the sake of uniformity, the editors thus opted to use his Serbian name and surname.

² Milan Jovanović Stoimirović, *Portreti prema živim modelima*, ed. Stojan Trećakov and Vladimir Šovljanski (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1998), 23.

whelms all other authorities in that field; for the most part, he, the Bishop of Ohrid, is the Serbian church; he develops a tremendous publishing activity and makes an impact in all dioceses, and not just his own, through many brochures, but it is a pity that he did not then systematically collect his sermons and other papers, studies, essays, articles, etc. and that he did not compile, at least partially, a bibliography (or calendarium) of his sermons in English.”³ This would be enough in and of itself to secure him a prominent place in theological as well as historical studies that concern the SOC in the first half of the twentieth century. However, Nikolaj lived during tumultuous times and the controversies surrounding the restless interwar period and then the tragedy of the Second World War in Yugoslavia dragged him into their vortex and exposed his legacy to differing interpretations and bitter debates.

The ancient world invented the *psogos* (ψόγος), a speech about or a written account of somebody made for the purpose of insulting, degrading, or otherwise criticizing the person in question. Sometimes, *psogoi* are the only preserved accounts of somebody’s life. An antipode to *psogoi* were panegyrics, another form of ancient speech that praises someone beyond good measure and conspicuously omits anything that might cast a critical light on their hero. There are many modern equivalents of both *psogoi* and panegyrics which deal with the life of Bishop Nikolaj. If an uninformed reader came across samples of both, providing such strikingly opposite and polarizing images of him, they would be much confused. As it happens, Nikolaj appears as both a Christian saint and a heretic, nationalist and anti-nationalist, ecumenist and anti-ecumenist, fascist and anti-fascist, communist and anti-communist, democrat and anti-democrat. Clearly, then, a reader of these accounts, no matter whether they are *psogoi* or panegyrics to Bishop Nikolaj, can learn much more about the authors in question and their attitudes towards Nikolaj than about the churchman himself. In this sense, many decades after his death, Nikolaj continues to fulfil the words

³ Ibid., 60. For an informative scholarly overview, see Bogdan Lubardić, “Nikolaj Velimirović,” in *Srbi 1903-1914: Istorija ideja*, ed. Miloš Ković (Beograd: Clio, 2015), 328-357.

of apostle Paul to be all things to all people (1 Cor 9: 19). He seems to serve both the need of some people to attribute to him the things they cherish and praise him for, and the requirement of other people to attribute to him the things they condemn and attack him for.

Controversies surrounding Nikolaj and all his works started during his lifetime. The editor of Bishop Nikolaj's *Sabrana dela* (Collected Works), late Bishop Lavrentije Trifunović, claims that the records of his last fifteen years were meticulously kept by his enemies, Nazi Germans and Yugoslav Communists.⁴ The Nazis kept records on Nikolaj while he was their prisoner from 1941 to 1944, while the Yugoslav Communist continued to track and record Nikolaj's activities from the time of his deportation to Germany in 1944 to his death in the USA in 1956. The Nazi Germans considered Nikolaj to be an anti-Nazi and anti-fascist, while the Yugoslav Communist regarded him as an anti-communist, although for both camps communism and fascism were two excluding ideologies. Moreover, as Serbia and Yugoslavia under German occupation became a theatre of multiple and bitter civil wars along ethnic and ideological lines, every faction produced their own image of Nikolaj in accordance with their own ideological platforms. For the two warring resistance movements, the victorious communist partisans and the royalist chetniks, and the collaborationist members of ZBOR, Bishop Nikolaj came to represent an important figure, and their conflicting presentation of his views and activities carried on after 1945. It was largely in publicist portrayals in communist Yugoslavia and the outlets of the Serbian emigres in Europe and the USA that this clash of images took place.⁵

Besides the flagrant ideological bias of the majority of authors, a major difficulty for coming to a more critical assessment of Bishop Nikolaj concerns the problem of authentication of many writings at-

⁴ Reč Episkopa Lavrentija u Episkop Nikolaj, *Sabrana dela*, vol. 1, 5. A reprint of this edition is also available: *Sabrana dela Episkopa Nikolaja u XIII knjiga* (Šabac: Glas crkve, 2013).

⁵ For an analysis of the genesis and course of attacks on Nikolaj, see an insightful text by Bishop Atanasije Jevtić, "Napadi na Episkopa Nikolaja," in *Sveti vladika ohridski i žički Nikolaj: 1. tekstovi i svedočenja 2. simposion*, ed. Episkop Atanasije Jevtić (Žiča – Kraljevo: Episkopska Eparhija žička i Sveti Manastir Žiča, 2003), 555-570.

tributed to him. In many Orthodox homes today, for example, one may find picture frames with the inscriptions of popular sayings attributed to Bishop Nikolaj. In many cases it is hard to prove that he was the author of these sayings, but being considered an unquestionable authority his name has been used to confirm the conventional wisdom of these sayings. More importantly, this benign practice is unfortunately extended from the sayings to the works published under his name. The *Collected Works* of Bishop Nikolaj in 12 volumes were published between 1976 and 1986 in Düsseldorf and Himmelsthür in Germany by the diocese of Western Europe of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Due to very poor conditions the undertaking of publishing more than 10,000 pages was an extremely difficult one. To his credit, Archpriest Milisav Protić collected an impressive number of manuscripts, which were later delivered to Bishop Lavrentije and served as the material for the *Collected Works*. Unfortunately, many of these manuscripts are of dubious authorship, to say the least.⁶

The first problem is that many publications included in the *Collected Works* as Nikolaj's authentic works were previously published in various Yugoslav periodicals as anonymous. The second and a more serious problem is that the previously unpublished manuscripts attributed to Nikolaj after his death were completely unknown and never mentioned by Nikolaj himself. To appreciate how this came to pass, it is necessary to look at the circumstances and motives of the publishers. Most of the post-1945 Serbian emigration in Western Europe was comprised of members of Dimitrije Ljotić's ZBOR, a marginal fascist organization in the Yugoslav Kingdom that served the occupying German army during the war, and General Draža Mihailović's chetniks who fought against the ZBOR armed detachments as much as against the Germans and partisans. With the increasing popularity of Bishop Nikolaj after his death, many of his previous writings were republished, but also some allegedly unearthed and unpublished material appeared in print for the first time from the publishing houses of Serbian politi-

⁶ Srećko Petrović, "Par uzgrednih napomena o proučavanju nasleđa Vladike Nikolaja Velimirovića: neki istraživački problemi," *Teološki pogledi* 53, no. 3 (2020): 827-832.

cal emigres. Since the followers of Ljotić took the lead in publishing Bishop Nikolaj's works, they included, whether intentionally or not it is difficult to judge, some manuscripts of dubious authorship simply because they reflected their own political and ideological views.⁷ For that reason, certain essays voicing clearly pro-fascist, anti-democrat, anti-communist, and anti-ecumenical tendencies emerged under the name of Bishop Nikolaj. The most flagrant example is the work *Reči srpskom narodu kroz tamnički prozor* (Words to the Serbian People through the Dungeon Window), allegedly written by Nikolaj during his imprisonment in the Dachau concentration camp and supposedly found as late as 1981 in the attic of the Serbian church in Linz, Austria. A number of scholars expressed their doubts concerning the authenticity of this work,⁸ advancing very convincing arguments, but other scholars decided to pass in silence over the issues of authenticity and largely based their assessment of Nikolaj as a visceral anti-Semite and fascist on this manuscript.⁹ The fact that this and other contested texts were published under Bishop Nikolaj's name in his Collected Works was sufficient for them to turn a blind eye to the critical examination of their sources.

⁷ For the followers of Ljotić's approach to relationship between Nikolaj and Ljotić, see Nebojša Mandić, "Nad grobom vladike Nikolaja," *Iskra*, 15.5.1956; Borivoje Karapandžić, *S verom u Boga za kralja i otadžbinu – Dobrovoljci 1941-1991* (Klivilend: privatno izdanje, 1991), 147-148; Đuro J. Vrga, *Ostala su svedočenja* (Beograd: Raška škola, 2007).

⁸ Radmila Radić, Radio emisija, Pešćanik 24 May 2003: <https://pescanik.net/136-emisija/>; Bishop Jovan Čulibrk, "Izraelci nas odlično razumeju," *Jevrejski pregled* 2 (February 2009), 6-8; 7; Srećko Petrović, "Is Nicholai Velimirovich the author of the book *Words to the Serbian People Through the Dungeon Window?*," *Philotheos* 20, no. 2 (2020): 260-303; Vladimir Cvetković, "The Freedom from Passions and the Freedom for All: St Nicholai Velimirović on Democracy," *Nicholai Studies* 1 (2021): 53-80: 69-72; Stanko Lompar, *Učitelj ili farisej: Dimitrije Ljotić, hrišćanstvo i verske zajednice 1935-1945* (Beograd: Catena Mundi, 2021), 249.

⁹ Nebojša Popov, "Srpski populizam: Od marginalne do dominantne pojave," dodatak nedeljniku *Vreme*, 24 maj 1993, 135; Mirko Đorđević, "Povratak Propovednika," *Republika* 8 (jul 1996), 1-10; Klaus Buchenau, *Orthodoxie und Katholizismus in Jugoslawien 1945-1991: ein serbisch-kroatischer Vergleich* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag 2004); Jovan Byford, *Denial and Repression of Antisemitism: Post-communist Remembrance of the Serbian Bishop Nikolaj Velimirovic* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2008).

Interpretations of Bishop Nikolaj's life and work became even more politically charged in the context of the crisis, disintegration and then tragic demise of Yugoslavia in the civil war during the 1980s and 1990s. After the disappearance of strict state censorship and the return of churches and religious communities to the public space of the country in the mid-1980s, Nikolaj was revealed to the wider public in Yugoslavia through the publication and circulation of his writings. Until the beginning of the 1990s more than 30 works of Nikolaj were published in Yugoslavia. Apart from reprinting Nikolaj's early works such as *Reči o svečoveku* (Words on the Allman) and *Molitve na jezeru* (Prayers by the Lake), it was the works that emphasized the national and religious distinctiveness of the Serbian people such as *Words to the Serbian People through the Dungeon Window* (1985), *Život Svetog Save* (The Life of St Sava) (1986), *Iznad istoka i zapada* (Above East and West) (1987), *Kosovo i Vidovdan* (Kosovo and St Vitus Day) (1988) that caught the attention of publishers, the academic community and the wider audience. This interest can be explained, to a certain extent, by the weakening and fall of communism and the emancipation of national and religious feelings and aspirations suppressed under communism. The number of Nikolaj's published works multiplied in the following years—more than 200 such publications turned up between 1990 and 2000. It was no coincidence that this renewed interest fell at the time of a nationalist resurgence that became the main driving force and program of the political elites in what were the constituent units (republics and autonomous provinces) of the former Yugoslavia, which led to armed conflicts, first in Slovenia in 1991, and then in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the 1990s Nikolaj's work *Rat i Biblija* (War and the Bible) was published in five different editions in Serbia (1993, 1995, 1996, 1998 and 2000). The recognition of Slovenian and Croatian independence by leading Western countries, especially Germany and France, and their general anti-Serbian stance in the wars of Yugoslav succession greatly influenced the interest in what was perceived as Nikolaj's anti-Western writings, like *Tri aveti evropske civilizacije* (Three Ghosts of European Civilization) (1991) and *Najstrašnija inkvizicija* (The Most Horrible Inquisition) (1992). During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which centered to a considerable extent on the clash between different reli-

gious identities among the peoples who shared the same ethnic origins (Orthodox Serbians, Roman Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks), it is possible to observe a new moment in the reception of the works of Bishop Nikolaj. The emphasis shifted from criticism of the USA and the West for imposition of their global domination to the topic of the sacrifice of an Orthodox Serbian peasant and the Serbian people at large. Consequently, Nikolaj's works dealing with the mentality of the Serbian people and their role in history, such as *Nacionalizam Svetog Save* (Nationalism of St Sava) (1994, 1996, 1998), *Words to the Serbian People through the Dungeon Window* (1995, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2000), *Srpski narod kao Teodul* (The Serbian People as Theodulos) (1993, 1996, 1999, 2000) became increasingly popular.

On the other side, non-Serbian participants in the Yugoslav civil war advanced their own interpretations of the entire modern Serbian history, conveniently describing it as a permanent pursuance of nationalist ambitions and territorial expansion at the expense of others. Special place in such narratives was reserved for the SOC, which was routinely depicted as the spiritual instigator of Serbian nationalism, and within that context the role of Bishop Nikolaj and his articulation of the concept of *Svetosavlje* (Saint Sava'sness), a Serbian variant of Orthodox Christianity, was given paramount importance. From wartime propaganda such narratives spilled into both official historiographies and more popular accounts in successor states, and remain in strong evidence to this day.¹⁰

It was also in the context of the break-up of Yugoslavia and the role of what is loosely termed as international community in it that Bishop Nikolaj's legacy attracted the attention of scholars from abroad. The

¹⁰ For the case of Croatia, see Ljubica Štefan, *Pregled srpskog antisemitizma*, (Zagreb: Alatir, 1992); Ljubica Štefan, *Srpska pravoslavna crkva i fašizam*, (Zagreb: Globus, 1996); Juraj Batelja, *Rivellijeva zavjera laži* (Zagreb: Postulatura blaženog Alojzija Stepinca, 2015), 53–141. The most recent example from Montenegro is Dragan Veselinov, *Moj Bog: pitajte popa* (Podgorica: Nova Pobjeda, 2022), 117–118. In this example, the author, a former politician, endeavors in a particularly nebulous manner to present Nikolaj as a virulent opponent of Darwin, humanism and Europeaness. It is a thinly veiled contribution to the campaign against the Serbian Orthodox Church spearheaded by the sections of Montenegrin society close to President Milo Đukanović.

first important book was Thomas Bremer's published doctoral dissertation *Ecclesial Structure and Ecclesiology of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the 19th and 20th Century*, defended in 1990 at the University of Münster (Germany).¹¹ For Bremer, Bishop Nikolaj was not a systematic theologian but rather a very practical and engaged churchman, dedicated to and loved by his flock.¹² Although Bremer points out Nikolaj's critique of Europe and his idealization of the Serbian peasantry as the cornerstone of Serbian Orthodoxy, he believes that Nikolaj's major failure was his inability to think about the full union between Orthodox and non-Orthodox churches, instead reducing their relationship only to practical cooperation and understanding.¹³

The emergence of Bremer's book also had an impact in Serbian society. A group of intellectuals headed by Nebojša Popov and Mirko Đorđević, a faction of opposition to the regime of Slobodan Milošević, pushed for the translation of Bremer's book, which indeed materialized six years after the original German edition.¹⁴ The said group of intellectuals branded themselves as European-minded liberals deeply attached to civic values and they tended to take a moral high ground even in relation to other opposition parties and groups which they did not find committed enough to the modernization of Serbia. In their resistance to nationalism and Milošević's military involvement in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, they turned to the "deconstruction" of much of the Serbian historical heritage. Central to this was their critique of Bishop Nikolaj which, in their view, the book of the German theologian Bremer exemplified through critical examination of Nikolaj's ecclesiology. Indeed, the reason for publishing a Serbian translation of the book, as Bremer himself asserted in the preface of the Serbian edition, was an increased interest in the SOC, and especially its role in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s.¹⁵ It should be noted, though, that Bremer admitted that the reading of Nikolaj Velimirović and his dis-

¹¹ Thomas Bremer, *Ekklesiale Struktur und Ekklesiologie in der Serbischen Orthodoxen Kirche im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1992).

¹² *Ibid.*, 158.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 159-160.

¹⁴ Tomas Bremer, *Vera, kultura i politika* (Niš: Gradina; Junir 1997).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

ciple Justin Popović as proponents of Serbian nationalism was not necessarily the only one that could be drawn from their work. For him, such interpretations in the West were the products of a fairly modest knowledge about the SOC rather than hostility toward it, whereas in Serbia a certain political agenda was often hidden behind such assessments.¹⁶ Bremer was no doubt correct in his judgement because for Serbian intellectuals who promoted his book there was no other interpretation of Nikolaj than that which saw him as a retrograde, anti-European, nationalist and clerical thinker.

The second important book was Radovan Bigović's revised doctoral dissertation published in 1998 under the title *From Allman to the Godman: The Christian Philosophy of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović*.¹⁷ Similar to Bremer, Bigović finds that Nikolaj was not a systematic theologian but rather the preacher of the word of God.¹⁸ Although Bigović holds Nikolaj in high esteem, he does not consider his theology beyond reproach. Bigović deems Nikolaj's idea of the "all-man" as neo-Arianism, and his account of God's creation of the world as an aesthetical materialization of the preexisting idea of the cosmos and not the biblical creation *ex nihilo*. However, Bigović's major critique of Nikolaj is in the sphere of Christology. According to him, Nikolaj did not think of Christ in Chalcedonian terms as being both the perfect God and a perfect man, and he did not differentiate between the divine nature and divine energies.¹⁹ While Bremer's focus was mostly on ecumenical theology, Bigović largely paid attention to dogmatic issues.

In spite of Bremer's remark that the interpretation of Nikolaj in the context of Serbian nationalism should not be the only one, it not only prevailed in the West, but also came to serve as a platform for a number of charges against him. As a natural extension of his Serbian nationalism,

¹⁶ Ibid., 12-13.

¹⁷ Radovan Bigović's doctoral dissertation that bears the title *Hrišćanska filosofija Vladike Nikolaja Velimirovića* was defended in 1993 at the Theological Faculty in Belgrade and published as *Od svečoveka do bogočoveka: hrišćanska filosofija Vladike Nikolaja Velimirovića* (Beograd: Raška škola 1998).

¹⁸ Bigović, *Od svečoveka do bogočoveka*, 6.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Nikolaj was further portrayed as an anti-Westerner,²⁰ anti-European,²¹ fascist,²² anti-Semite,²³ anti-ecumenist²⁴ and anti-democrat.²⁵ As can be seen, the list includes the whole spectrum of anti-liberal stigmatization that might be applied in order to discredit an individual and ostracize him from the sphere of an acceptable historical legacy. The most influential castigation of Nikolaj, which caused a considerable stir in Serbian public opinion, certainly came from the works of Jovan Byford and centered on the Bishop's antisemitism.²⁶ The problem with Byford's and other similar works was that they appeared to have been designed to prove a premeditated thesis, as reflected in a selective and tendentious use of sources and an evasion to confront any alternative, much less opposing views.

It is not surprising then that such works, and Byford's in particular, provoked a response from some Serbian authors close to the SOC. These

²⁰ Buchenau, *Orthodoxie und Katholizismus in Jugoslawien*, 82.

²¹ Klaus Buchenau, "Anti-Europeanism in the Balkans, Anti-Americanism in Latin America: a Comparison, Religion," *State & Society* 40, no. 3-4, (2012): 379-394, 384.

²² Stefan Rohdewald, *Götter der Nationen: Religiöse Erinnerungsfiguren in Serbien, Bulgarien und Makedonien bis 1944* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2014), 516.

²³ Buchenau, *Orthodoxie und Katholizismus in Jugoslawien*, 161; Jovan Byford, "From 'Traitor' to 'Saint': Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović in Serbian Public Memory," *Analysis of Current Trends In Antisemitism* 22 (2004), 1-41; Julia Anna Lis, *Anti-westliche Diskurse in der serbischen und griechischen Orthodoxie – Zur Konstruktion des «Westens» bei Nikolaj Velimirović, Justin Popović, Christos Yannaras und John S. Romanides* (Berlin: Peter Lang 2019), 62.

²⁴ Vjekoslav Perica, "Interfaith Dialogue versus Recent Hatred: Serbian Orthodoxy and Croatian Catholicism from the Second Vatican Council to the Yugoslav War, 1965-1992," *Religion, State and Society* 29, no. 1 (2001): 39-66: 48.

²⁵ Klaus Buchenau, "Orthodox Values and Modern Necessities," in *Civic and Uncivic Values. Serbia in the Post-Milošević Era*, eds. Ola Listhaug, Sabrina P. Ramet and Dragana Dulić (Budapest — New York: Central European Press, 2011), 111-142: 115.

²⁶ Jovan Byford, "Willing Bystanders: Dimitrije Ljotić 'Shield' Collaboration and the Destruction of Serbia's Jews," in *In the Shadow of Hitler: Personalities of the Right in Central and Eastern Europe*, eds. Rebecca Haynes and Martyn Rady (London: IB Tauris 2011), 295-312; Jovan Byford, "Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović: 'Lackey of the Germans' or a 'Victim of Fascism'?" in *Serbia and Serbs in World War Two*, eds. Sabrina Ramet and Ola Listhaug (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2011), 127-152; Jovan Byford, *From "Traitor" to "Saint": Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović in Serbian Public Memory* (Jerusalem: SICA, 2004).

works were not without merit in expanding our knowledge about Nikolaj in terms of the empirical material they brought forward, but they were not conducive to critical examination of his life and work, just like the studies of the authors whose claims they set out to disprove. The authors in question were openly apologetic in tone and avoided confronting squarely the evidence that contradicted their praise of the “holy Bishop Nikolaj” (he was indeed canonized in 2003).²⁷ Debate on Nikolaj has thus largely remained a reflection of clashes between different and opposing political paradigms and our understanding of him has not grown in keeping with the ever increasing number of publications.

Nevertheless, there are some works that have advanced a critical perusal of the most controversial aspects of Nikolaj and addressed the more extravagant claims made in literature. In one perspicacious analysis, it has been demonstrated that Nikolaj’s distaste for contemporary Europe revolved around the notion that it abandoned Christianity, which constituted its spiritual and moral backbone, and that apostasy accounted for its decline and the disasters that it suffered.²⁸ More recently, a different and more nuanced view has been advanced concerning some contentious issues from Nikolaj’s biography that challenges what has become conventional wisdom offered by German historiography.²⁹ Combining thorough research with the relevant theoretical approaches to the relationship between religion and fascism, a book-length study has explored Ljotić’s attitude toward Christian churches

²⁷ Vladimir Dimitrijević, *Oklevetani svetac: Vladika Nikolaj i srbofobija* (Gornji Milanovac: Lio, 2007); Predrag Samardžić, *Episkop Nikolaj i Novi Zavet o Jevrejima* (Beograd: Hrišćanska misao, 2004).

²⁸ Zoran Milutinović, *Getting over Europe. The Construction of Europe in Serbian Culture* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011), 147–168.

²⁹ Vladimir Cvetković, “Još jedan osvrt na predavanje ‘Nacionalizam Svetog Save’ Svetog Nikolaja Žičkog,” *Crkvene studije* 16, no. 1 (2019): 131–148; Id., “The Freedom from Passions and the Freedom for All: St Nikolai Velimirović on Democracy,” *Nicholai Studies* 1 (2021): 53–80; Id., “The Reception of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the 21st century German Academia,” in *Philosophos – Philotheos – Philoponos: Studies and Essays as Charisteria in Honor of Professor Bogoljub Šijaković on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Mikonja Knežević (Belgrade: Gnomon, Podgorica: Matica srpska, 2021), 993–1004.

in Yugoslavia, and within that context the links and mutual influences between the leader of ZBOR and Nikolaj.³⁰ Cvetković's and Lompar's works not just do away with much of what has been repeated *ad nauseam*, but point to alternative and convincing readings of a number of controversies. This is important because while some claims relating to Nikolaj, such as his admiration to Hitler, are ludicrous in light of the evidence, others, such as his anti-Semitism, cannot be dismissed but yet require careful contextualization and assessment.

Building on those valuable contributions the present volume seeks to depart from the polarizing and highly politically-charged views of both Nikolaj's detractors and apologists. In an attempt to move away from the proverbial black legend and the golden legend, it aims to reassert the necessity to revisit the totality of primary sources, including the writings of Nikolaj himself, and to apply critical analysis to often repeated, but not adequately substantiated, claims. This is all the more necessary as there are many lacunae in our knowledge concerning some important episodes and aspects of Nikolaj's life—no scholarly biography of this prominent personality has been written so far³¹—and the editors hope that this volume will go some way toward clearing the air. Importantly, the facts of Nikolaj's life and work must be placed in the only methodologically sound and appropriate historical and theological context of his time. This seemingly obvious truth has too often been disregarded, and not just in Nikolaj's case,³² and is a mandatory re-

³⁰ Rastko Lompar, *Dimitrije Ljotić – učitelj ili farisej*.

³¹ A lot of material is provided in Milan D. Janković, *Episkop Nikolaj: život, misao i delo* (Beograd: Eparhija šabačko-valjevska, 2002), 3 vols; Ljubomir Ranković's *Sveti Vladika Nikolaj: život i delo* (Šabac: Glas crkve, 2013) is a biography, but it lacks scholarly apparatus and reads as something of a hagiography.

³² A famous example of writing history backwards from the perspective of "our changed vantage point," especially given the tremendous success of the book, is provided in Christopher Clark's introduction to his own *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012). On p. xxvi he warns against "a vulgar presentism that remakes the past to meet the needs of the present," but only 23 lines later goes on to declare, with the touch of reproaching Balkanist discourse: "The Yugoslav wars of the 1990s have reminded us of the lethality of Balkan nationalism. Since Srebrenica and the siege of Sarajevo, it has become harder to think of Serbia as the mere object or victim of great power politics and easier to conceive of Serbian nationalism as an historical force in its own right."

quirement if one is to not only avoid the pitfalls of the kind discussed above but also open new alleys in scholarly investigation of Nikolaj's voluminous work. It is also to be hoped that a critical edition of Nikolaj's works will be published in the not so distant future and that more of it will be translated into English and other languages, since that would greatly facilitate further studies.

Since the charges against Nikolaj are presented mostly by historians and political scientists, the majority of chapters in this volume are contributed by historians and political scientists, with only a few theologians and philosophers. The volume is divided into three sections dealing with: i) Nikolaj's formative period before and during the Great War, which he spent in Germany, Switzerland, the UK and the USA, and his ecumenical endeavors; ii) the interwar period, while he served first as bishop of Žiča and later as bishop of Ohrid and Žiča again, and his relationship with the Yugoslav government, political parties, the Roman Catholic Church, Jewish communities, as well as his attitudes toward the ideologies of fascism and communism; iii) his immigration to the USA, and his life in immigration, including his political and literary activities and ecumenical engagements.

Slobodan G. Markovich focuses on Nikolaj's articles published in the literary avant-garde London journal *The New Age* in 1915 and in 1918-1919. It discusses Nikolaj's nationalism and anti-ecumenism, but also his religious syncretism and the origins of his idea of the all-man or pan-humanism. Markovich argues against the dominant scholarly attitude that Fr. Nikolaj was for rapprochement between Orthodox and Anglican churches, but had a profound suspicion towards Catholicism,³³ at least at that stage. Fr. Nikolaj's enthusiasm for reunion between all Christian churches refutes Bremer's remark that his ecumenism was limited to practical cooperation and understanding among the churches. Markovich also describes Fr. Nikolaj as an ardent critic of nationalism; he was a proponent of the Yugoslav idea, but not a Yugoslav nationalist, because he perceived Yugoslavia as a transitory entity on the path to the larger unity of European and world nations, rejecting ethnic

³³ Byford, *Denial and Repression of Antisemitism*, 32; Buchenau, *Auf russischen Spuren*, 161.

and racial divisions and the concept of nation-states. Finally, Markovich offers a new interpretation of Fr. Nikolaj's idea of the all-man or panhuman (*svečovek*) as a human being, and not the incarnate God as Bigović has claimed, who can accommodate the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the main religions of the Far East, but at the same time oppose materialism, narrow nationalism and imperialism. Therefore, the all-man cannot be reduced to 'the Slavic and Orthodox antidote to the selfish Nietzschean, Germanic, and pagan superman.'³⁴

Aleksandar Djakovac investigates how evil, the brutality of the Great War, and Nikolaj's anthropological universalism shaped his theological understanding of war and violence. He challenges the view that Fr. Nikolaj's universalism was rooted in the 'Slavophile idealization of rural lifestyle,'³⁵ arguing that it rather originated in the evangelical sense of the community of all people on earth. In Nikolaj's view, wars were but a consequence of the lost inner wars against sins in the soul of each individual; his understanding was thus not informed by the Kosovo covenant that emerged from the battle between the Serbians and Ottomans in the field of Kosovo on St. Vitus' Day 1389. Djakovac further argues that Nikolaj was critical of Europe not because of its rationalism,³⁶ but because of the war and violence that erupted in its midst. It was because Europeans abandoned Christianity that they lost their inner battles with vices and the war against sins was replaced by the war among the people—this is in line with Milutinović. For Djakovac, the idea of personal sacrifice is central to Fr. Nikolaj's views on war, violence and evil, because only by accepting it may one acquire life. Since all particular sacrifices are subsumed into the sacrifice of Christ, the final redeemer of history, only the return of Christianity to Europe might bring peace and love.

Phillip Calington explores the role that pre-Christian seekers and the religious figures of the Middle and Far East, such as Lao Tzu, Krish-

³⁴ Jovan Byford, *Denial and Repression of Antisemitism*, 31.

³⁵ Klaus Buchenau, "From Hot War to Cold Integration? Serbian Orthodox Church Voices on Globalization and the European Union," in *Eastern Orthodoxy in a Global Age: Tradition Faces the 21st Century*, eds. Victor Roudometof, Alexander Agadjanian, and Jerry Pankhurst (Walnut Creek: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 58.

³⁶ Buchenau, "Orthodox Values and Modern Necessities," 131.

na, Buddha, and Zoroaster played in the religious philosophy of Father and latter Bishop Nikolaj. Calington rejects the view that in his pre-Ohrid phase Bishop Nikolaj's thought was a form of religious syncretism rather than the form of Christianity.³⁷ Calington argues that in his approach to non-Christian religious figures Fr. Nikolaj took the Orthodox Christian perspective, similar to the perspective of early Christians who had praised Greek philosophers as the forerunners of Truth. He not only compared pre-Christian philosophers with Eastern religious thinkers, but also the key concepts in different religions. Thus, the notion of "nirvana" employed in his *Prayers by the Lake* for Nikolaj corresponds, Calington believes, with the Christian notion of deification (*theosis*) as the goal of personal striving. Moreover, Calington argues that Fr. Nikolaj's position was not exceptional, as many other great Orthodox figures, such as St Seraphim of Sarov, St Nicholas of Japan and Fr. Seraphim Rose opined that pre-Christian philosophers and seekers were "prophets" of Christ.

Rastko Lompar investigates the contacts between Bishop Nikolaj and Dimitrije Ljotić from their early days to 1941. First, Lompar exposes the falsehood of the claim that the leadership of Ljotić's Zbor constituted the backbone of the God-devotionalists movement (*Bogomoljci*) led by Nikolaj;³⁸ he shows that most of the priests who joined Zbor by the late 1930s had been God-devotionalists since the early 1930s. Second, Lompar looks at the nature of Bishop Nikolaj's anti-Semitism by comparing it with Ljotić's position towards the Jews. There was a major difference indeed: while Nikolaj's views were a mixture of Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Jewish prejudices from the nineteenth century, Ljotić's propagated modern and secular anti-Semitism, although without the racial element central to the anti-Semitism of the Nazis. Nikolaj's antisemitism was of the kind typical for clerical conservatives. In this and other respects, as Lompar concludes, Bishop Nikolaj can hardly be considered as the ideologue of Zbor, although he did influence Ljotić to certain extent.

³⁷ C. Cimermam, "Nekoliko reči o Nikolaju Velimiroviću," *Hrišćanski život* 11-12 (1922), 606-612: 611-612.

³⁸ Byford, *Potiskivanje i poricanje antisemitizma*, 33.

Miloš Timotijević explores Bishop Nikolaj's stance toward the Yugoslav Communist Party and communist ideology in the interwar years. In line with Lompar's findings, he shows that Nikolaj's anticommunism was different in form, strength and content than that of Zbor and other right-wing parties in Yugoslavia. Timotijević stresses that Nikolaj was a harsh critic of capitalism for creating injustice among the people and thus turning workers toward communism and atheism. The Bishop's critique of communism centered on its aggressive atheism and primitive materialism, while he never criticized it for fighting against capitalism. His criticism of communism was not directed against the Yugoslav communists as much as against the Bolshevik regime in Russia. Nikolaj was rather concerned with foreign affairs and found that the atheist regime in the Soviet Union failed the role that Russia was supposed to play, in his view, on the international stage. Timotijević claims that Nikolaj had a strong belief in Orthodoxy and the Slavs, and he considered the role of "Holy Russia" as immensely important for the salvation of humankind.

Dragan Bakić offers a missing account of Nikolaj's attitude toward the regime of Prince Regent Paul, with a special emphasis on the crises caused by the opposition to the Concordat with the Holy See in 1937 and the 27 March 1941 coup d'état, both of which involved the Bishop as a ringleader. These two pivotal events provide insights in Nikolaj's stance toward the Roman Catholic Church at that time, his view of relations between the SOC and the authorities, his relations with Patriarchs Varnava and Gavriilo (especially the latter), and finally, his resistance to Nazi Germany. Nikolaj emerges as a particularly assertive and unbending church dignitary who influenced political developments in Yugoslavia, despite his professions to the contrary. Bakić argues that there was a clear link between the blow that the government authority suffered during the Concordat crisis, to which Nikolaj contributed immensely, and the apparent ease with which the coup d'état was executed in 1941, and draws attention to the politically irrational stance of the SOC leadership, and Nikolaj in particular, on both occasions.

Vladimir Cvetković also explores accusations regarding nationalism, fascism and anti-Semitism brought against Bishop Nikolaj in contemporary scholarship. He not only challenges these charges, but also

deconstructs the scholarly strategy applied to disputing the moral authority of Bishop Nikolaj. Cvetković argues that in much of this scholarship these strategies have been borrowed from the media, which has applied them to political or ideological adversaries such as Slobodan Milošević, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, and which aim at *reductio ad Hitlerum*, an effective disqualification of the personality in question by likening them with Hitler, regardless of the lack of foundation for such a comparison. In the rest of his paper Cvetković offers alternative interpretations of Nikolaj's alleged nationalism, fascism and anti-Semitism. In this connection, he explains that Nikolaj's Saint-Savian nationalism was an expression neither of Serbian ethnical nationalism, nor of Yugoslav integral nationalism, but rather the evangelical platform for building Yugoslav unity on the principles of holiness. He points out some of the main reasons for attributing fascist proclivities to Nikolaj, namely his lecture on Saint-Savian nationalism in 1935, his acceptance of the Red Cross medal from Nazi Germany in 1936 for restoring the German military cemetery in Bitolj, and his friendship with Ljotić, on the one hand, and glaring disregard for the overwhelming evidence of his hostility to Nazism, on the other. Cvetković's view of Nikolaj's anti-Semitism chimes with that of Lompar and he rejects Nikolaj's authorship of *Words to Serbian People through the Dungeon Window* which usually underpins the charges for his anti-Semitism.

Radmila Radić investigates the treatment that the authorities in communist Yugoslavia meted out to exiled Nikolaj, including accusations for falsifying history, slandering the USSR, and preaching darkness, fascism, religious and racial hatred. Both the government of Josip Broz Tito and the Synod of the SOC thwarted Nikolaj's attempts to create an independent Orthodox Church in the USA and Canada. Nikolaj foresaw the merging of national Orthodox churches in North America into one, united independent Orthodox Church of America. Not surprisingly, neither the Yugoslav authorities nor the Synod wanted to lose control over that part of the SOC and the Serbian emigration in North America. Tito's communists punished Bishop Nikolaj by stripping him of Yugoslav citizenship in September 1951, while the Synod remained deaf to Nikolaj's recommendations and proposals for dealing with the split in the Serbian diaspora. Nikolaj eventually withdrew to

St Tikhon monastery, which was under the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church of America. The control that the Yugoslav authorities exercised over the Patriarch and the Synod of the SOC defeated all Nikolaj's plans and ensured that Tito's regime could contain the activities of the anti-communist diaspora in the USA and Canada.

Nemanja Andrijašević introduces the reader to the correspondence between Nikolaj and his life-long friend and associate, priest Aleksa Todorović, concerning the former's editorial work for the USA-based journal *Svečanik*. In doing so, Nikolaj intended to unite Serbian theological forces in Europe and the United States and to respond to the spiritual needs of the Orthodox people in Yugoslavia, as well as to familiarize the English-speaking readership with the spiritual heights of the larger Orthodox tradition. This was done through the English translations of Bishop Petar Petrović Njegoš's *Luča mikrokozma* (*The Ray of the Microcosm*). This was in keeping, as Andrijašević shows, with Nikolaj's equally dividing his missionary work between the Orthodox people in Yugoslavia deprived of spiritual counsel under communist rule, the Serbian Orthodox people in Western Europe and America, who as immigrants found themselves uprooted from their spiritual tradition, and the Western Christians of whom some were converts to Orthodoxy.

Dragan Šljivić explores Nikolaj's attitude toward democracy, focusing mainly on his post-1945 American period and analyzing his work *Zemlja nedodjija* (*The Nevercoming Land*). Šljivić argues that Nikolaj's discourse was an attempt to de-secularize and re-Christianize democracy and all previously secularized theological concepts employed in the modern theory of the state. Moreover, Nikolaj's understanding of democracy was shaped by the two pillars of the Serbian Orthodox tradition: Saint-Savanness, the legacy of the first Serbian archbishop Sava Nemanjić (1175–1236), and the Kosovo covenant. Šljivić thus contests the claim of some scholars that Saint-Savanness and the Kosovo covenant are exclusive concepts and, as such, oppose democracy based on inclusivity. Šljivić further argues that Nikolaj's Saint-Savian nationalism was a unifying force not only in regard to ethnic and national community, but also in regard to sex and gender, pointing to the equality of genders in the God-Worshippers movement in which women could vote and stand for candidates. Šljivić considers Nikolaj's work *The Nev-*

ercoming Land both his major criticism of and praise for democracy. Nikolaj was critical of political partisanship and skeptical of the scope of representative democracy, because of its focus on power and not on service, but at the same time praised democracy because of its connection to Christianity, which by its ideas of liberty, fraternity and equality laid the foundation for it.

Srećko Petrović turns to the post-1945 ecumenical activities of Bishop Nikolaj, bringing new evidence which rebuts the assessment that, apart from his early ecumenical activities during the Great War, he was anti-ecumenist. In fact, Nikolaj, then residing in Great Britain, shared the views that led to the World Council of Churches (WCC) as a permanent forum for the gathering of Church leaders. He was invited to the first preparatory meeting for establishing the WCC to be held in Geneva in early 1946. However, as Petrović shows, he did not participate on account of the expediencies of British foreign policy (which came to support Tito's regime) and the attitude of the Anglican Church. A visceral critic of Yugoslav communists, Nikolaj did not get a visa to remain in the UK and had to leave for the USA. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, disagreed with Bishop George Bell about Nikolaj's ability to represent the SOC at the planned meeting given the circumstances. However, despite his absence from the WCC's first assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 (all the Christian churches under Soviet dominion were absent because of the political climate of the early Cold War), Nikolaj was the only Orthodox bishop in the Committee on Displaced Persons of the Church World Service, an organization working under the auspices of the WCC. Moreover, against the decision of the Holy Synod of the SOC, he attended the Second general assembly of the WCC in Evanston in 1954 and wrote very positively about this ecumenical gathering.

Bishop Maxim Vasiljević draws attention to Nikolaj's extensive literary work during his exile in the USA, comprising more than ten books and a large number of articles, homilies, essays and letters. In particular, he focuses on his ecumenical and pan-Orthodox activities. Similar to Petrović, Bishop Maxim refutes the claim that Nikolaj was ecumenically engaged only in his early years and that he later abandoned ecumenical dialogue. On the contrary, many sermons Nikolaj

preached in the churches across New York during the late 1940s, as well as his attendance of the Second General Assembly of WCC, demonstrate his ecumenical openness and his opposition to those who reduced the Orthodox Church to either confessionalism or nationalism. As for Bishop Nikolaj's pan-Orthodox activities, Bishop Maxim also shows that he worked for a single Orthodox Church of America which would unite all Orthodox believers, regardless of their ethnic roots. Although he was aware of the importance of ethnic ecclesial traditions, Nikolaj decided to act in accordance with the reality that the new generations of church-goers were American-born and English-speaking Orthodox Christians, exhibiting a fine example of "enculturation".

With all this content in view, the editors hope that the present volume will not just advance the body of knowledge concerning Bishop Nikolaj, but also contribute to breaking the petrified paradigms, born out of ideological prejudices and political agendas, and facilitate further innovative studies of his theological thought and political agency in Serbia, Yugoslavia, and in exile, all of which undoubtedly deserve much scholarly investigation. Some additional information on the circumstances of his transition from Britain to the USA after the Second World War is provided by the annexed documents, freshly unearthed in the course of archival research.

Vladimir Cvetković and Dragan Bakić