Mile Nedeljković published about a hundred titles in ethnology, literature, folklore studies and journalism, focusing especially on Šumadija, the traditional culture of the Serbian and other South-Slavic peoples, as well as peoples and their cultures worldwide. This contribution makes an attempt to look at his major ethnological works, which address social, cultural and ethnic issues. As it turns out, they deal with some of the most intricate, most sensitive and most important issues of national history and culture, such as Kosovo and Metohija as the cradle of Serbian spirituality, Islamization in the South-Slavic areas, Šumadija as the pivot of Serbia’s restored statehood, or the gloomy destiny of the Serbs the Frontiersmen and their expulsion from Croatia in the 1990s. As it also turns out, their author has a fundamental and diverse work, the ability to make sweeping syntheses and significant scholarly discoveries, the culture of chronicle keeping, and the simplicity and beauty of narrative expression, and, as such, he belongs to the very top of contemporary Serbian ethnology.

Key words: traditional Serbian culture, Islamization, peoples of the world, chronicle, sweeping syntheses, important scholarly discovery

For more than fifty productive years, from 1958 when he, a high-school student, published his first newspaper article in Glas Šumadije (Voice of Šumadija), until his premature departure in 2009, Mile Nedeljković published a body of work which, counted as accurately as currently possible, numbers 102 titles, of which 19 books and separate studies, as well as nine contributions to edited volumes. Two books appeared under his editorship. He brought out more than 64 scholarly studies, contributions, articles and reviews, and authored five plays and three scripts for do-
cumentary films and documentary feature television series. The main areas of his interest were journalism, historiography, ethnology, literature, and folklore studies, with a focus on his native Šumadija, the traditional culture of the Serbian and other South-Slavic peoples, but also peoples and their cultures worldwide.

Even a brief overview such as this reveals an inquisitive and passionate researcher. Considering the diversity and complexity of his work, it is to be expected that it will be a subject of interest to experts in various areas of scholarship, literature and culture, and that our understanding of it will grow over time. This contribution will, therefore, make an attempt to present his major ethnological works, which address social, cultural and ethnic issues from a historical perspective.

1. According to the author’s introductory words, his book Serbs the Frontiersmen (Nedeljkoović 1994) is a ‘testimony to the Serbian frontier guards, which is a widespread term for the Serbs whose oldest stratum has been living for more than a millennium in the west of Yugoslavia, in the areas incorporated into the present-day Republic of Croatia since 1945’. The book covers a span of time between 822, from which dates the earliest reference to the Serbian name (thirty years before the earliest reference to the Croat name, made in 852) and 1991, and presents the most important documents, events and topics of relevance to the life of the Serbs in those areas. The book is structured into the following chapters: ‘The earliest reference to Serbs’; ‘Toponomastic evidence’; ‘Defenders of Christianity and Europe’; ‘Preservation of language, religion and culture’; ‘Uniatization’; ‘Genocide’; ‘Resettlement (1945–48)’; ‘Resettlement of Serbs from Croatia to Vojvodina’; and ‘The 1948 census’. The book contains an appendix, ‘Overview of the settlements in the Republic of Croatia with a Serbian majority according to the census of 15 March 1948’, and a list of ‘Settlements of the national minorities’, Czech, Slovak, Rusyn, Magyar, Italian and German. The selected bibliography contains 18 items, mostly from the area of historiography and demography.

2. The Cross and the Crescent is a ‘cool-headed’ attempt at presenting the ‘facts that may help understand the Orthodox-Muslim conflict which has escalated into a war unto extermination’ (Nedeljković 1993, 43). In other words, Mile Nedeljković’s intention is to inform us of ‘what it is that should be known about the Muslims of Yugoslav origin and of what they should know about themselves’ (Ibid 1–2), and, in order to do that, he undertakes an in-depth historical and comparative analysis. Thus, the first chapter deals with the clash of world religions, the second with population migration and change, especially from the late 17th to the early 20th century, the fifth with the ethnic distinctiveness of the Muslim population, and the sixth with the ‘Possibility of settling the Muslim question’. The appendix titled ‘Selected evidence’, brings excerpts on Muslims from classical works of Serbian ethnologists, anthropo-geographers and historians, Petar Mrkonjić, Jovan Cvijić, Vladimir Ćorović, Petar Radjenović, Jovan Erdeljanović, Milenko S. Filipović, Mitar S. Vlahović and Milisav V. Lutovac. At the end, the book provides a remainder
of the origin of Muslim clans compiled from several monographic editions of the Srpski etnografski zbornik (Serbian Ethnographic Collection), a glossary of less-known words, a bibliography and a note on the author. Critically looking at the influence of politics and religion on the life of people in general, and of those in the South-Slavic ethnic and cultural area in particular, Nedeljković concludes: ‘Of seven ethnic indicators, five give no grounds to infer the ethnic distinctiveness of the Muslims of Yugoslav origin (indivisible territory, dependent economy, shared language, cultural intertwining, shared racial features), one is dimorphic (a sense of affiliation torn between Slavic origin and the supposed dissolution of all ethnic entities in Islam), and a single one shows a difference, the one straw the proponents of this differentiation grasp at – religious difference […] In the light of these indicators, those ethnologists get it right more than others who designate the Muslims of Yugoslav origin as an ethnic group, but the issue raised here and now is not this, but rather the differentiation of Muslims [by religion] as Muslims [by nationality], which has a seemingly ethnic character only in this part of world, while elsewhere it turns into its opposite […] Into estrangement, assimilation, and disappearance […] That is what happens when the religious is given precedence over the ethnic’ (Ibid 106, 107). Concluding his analysis, the author takes the stance that the Muslim question would best be resolved by the Muslims themselves. That would be a ‘decisive’ moment for them and their fellow countrymen of other religions, a tantalizing moment of facing a division ‘that means uprootedness’. Given that these lines were written some twenty years ago, one should bear in mind that a more recent notion of identity, shaped largely in the 1970s and 1980s – as opposed to the earlier ones postulating ethnic groups as objective cultural categories – sees ethnic communities as being shaped by their members through a subjective sense of belonging and the ability to use symbols to define themselves in relation to others, which is to say that ethnic communities or nations can come into being independently of their ethnic roots, as evidenced by the experience of some European and other states and nations.

3.

Notes on Šumadija (Nedeljković 1996), with a preface (‘Šumadija Today’) by Dragan Antonijević, an ethnologist and member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, are structured into ten chapters. The first, in which the author relies on J. Cvijić for the title, ‘Concentrated strength of all Serbian lands’, deals with the inhabitants of Šumadija, the Serbs who came from ‘all parts’ to settle in Šumadija, and an ‘awareness of Šumadijaness’. The second chapter, ‘Vestiges of a distant past’, begins from the earliest, prehistoric, evidence of human presence in Šumadija, interprets local names for medieval Serbian cemeteries (old, white, forlorn, Bosniak, giant, Jewish, Latin, Roman, Greek, monastic, Turkish, Tsintsar, Magyar, of Dušan’s times etc.), portrays medieval country life and especially the villages recorded in the Ottoman defter of 1476. A subchapter, ‘Rudnik, a holy mount’, is devoted to the monasteries on Mt Rudnik, important hubs of spirituality as early as Nemanjić times and flourishing under the Despotate of Serbia. On this ‘constellation of monasteries’, the author writes: ‘In brief, on the cliffs and slopes of Mt Rudnik over fifty Serbian monasteries were erected, more than anywhere in
Serbdom, in our ethnic and spiritual space [...] Several clusters of monasteries lay claim to the epithet of a Serbian Holy Mountain (Fruška Gora, Ovčar-Kablar). In that respect, Mt Rudnik has no equal.’ What best illustrates their importance for the spiritual identity of the Serbian people is the fact that they were demolished and set on fire as many as twelve times, in ‘1409, 1413, 1425, 1427, 1438, 1439, 1459, 1594, 1683, 1788, 1791’ and 1813 (p. 34). As stressed by D. Antonijević in the preface, today there are five active monasteries on Rudnik. Following the trail left by historical sources and popular tradition, Nedeljković discovered and located more than 40 monasteries, while three remained unidentified. Aware of the importance of this exploratory undertaking, we must subscribe to D. Antonijević’s view that Nedeljković’s enquiries ‘resulted in a major discovery, without which the history and role of Šumadija would have been neither explained nor understood’ (Ibid 10). In the third chapter, ‘Evidence of geographical names’, the author uses toponymic and other sources, and the technical literature, to identify pre-Indo-European, palaeo-Mediterranean, Greek, Magyar, oriental (Tatar and Turkish) and ancient Slav layers. The fourth chapter, ‘Founders and restorers of settlements’, deals with the repopulation in the 1730s of the largely depopulated Šumadija region by settlers from the historic regions of Stara Raška, Stari Vlah, Herzegovina, Montenegro, Metohija, Skadar and Stara Srbija. Imbued with a strong sense of freedom and statehood, they made it possible for Šumadija to be ready for the war of liberation of 1804. The fifth chapter, ‘On Captain Koča’s squad’, provides information about the participants of the 1788 insurrection, while the sixth, ‘Karageorge’s decisive times’, offers an account of the peak of in-migration on the eve of the First Serbian Insurrection and under Karageorge. The seventh chapter, ‘Dispersed clans and tribes’, explains how many of the incoming settlers (Štavljani, Košani, Biorci, Lutovci, Koraći, Barjaktarovići, Osačani, Gračani, Boroštice, Kozoderi, Čampari, Boljarci, Budjevci, Pačarizi, Lekići, Gudževići etc) left parts of their families, clans and tribes behind. In that connection, the author notes that individual settlement and the changed physico-geographical conditions led to a change in social organization: ‘Šumadija’s administrative fragmentedness and individual settlement were unpropitious for preservation and formation of a tribal society, and thus life in Šumadija unfolded within villages and knežinas [subdivisions comprising 20 to 30 villages] as self-governing communities’ (Ibid 104). The eighth chapter, ‘Genealogical memory’, traces the genealogy of the Vukičevićs – founders of the village of Svetlići, the descendants of the ober-knez Mirko of the village of Šuma, the descendants of Bajo Pivljanin, ten generations of the Isakovićs, the Boškovićs of Boškov Zbeg, the Alempijevićs of Mala Pčelica, and the Žujović clan of Ješevac in Gruža. The ninth chapter, ‘The meaning of some surnames’, traces back the origin of some surnames to different occupations, trades, especially those associated with military service and warfare, various types of animal husbandry, handicrafts, female ancestors etc. The last, tenth, chapter, ‘On customary law’, presents some customary law practices, such as running the gauntlet or village displacement, as corroboration for the author’s main point, that the state-building process in Karageorge’s Serbia relied upon customary law (p.p. 158).
4.

In Volume II of the _Notes on Šumadija_ (Nedeljković 2000) the author resumes his research on the region, briefly interrupted by his work on a book on Kosovo, of which more will be said later. Volume II contains the following chapters: ‘Šumadija – nature and people’; ‘From centuries past’; ‘Evidence of geographical names’; ‘On the origin of some settlements’; ‘The origin of the population’; ‘From the folk economy’; ‘Vernacular architecture’; ‘Food and beverages’; ‘Folk costume’; ‘Family life’; ‘Religion and mythology’; and ‘Folk creations’. However, the author gives his most detailed attention to toponymy, to the origin of the population, and to various areas of folk creativity, devoting, for instance, 23 studies to geographical names. In the process of population migration from Sjenica to Lepenica, the author identifies six prominent migratory movements – between two great migrations (1690–1736); between the second great migration and Koča’s Revolt (1737–87); between Koča’s Revolt and the First Serbian Insurrection (1788–1803); under Karageorge (1804–13); between the Second Insurrection and the so-called Javor War (1815–74); and from the Javor War until the end of the 19th century (1875–1900) – as well as the fact that, apart from the settlers from Sjenica, Šumadija was also populated by members of the Vasojevići, Bjelopavljići and Pipers tribes, as well as by incomers from Osat (Osačani), Crna Trava (Crntravci), Leskovac (Leskovčani) etc. As for folk creations, the author looks at folk songs, dances, curses, swearwords, jokes, etc. Based on historiography, popular legend, toponomastics and fieldwork insights, the research results presented in Volume II are a continuation of those presented in the first book on Šumadija and, taken together, constitute a precious and inseparable whole.

5.

The book _Kosovo and a World War_ (Nedeljković 1999) contains seven chapters. The first, ‘Timetable of death’, provides a detailed chronicle of the NATO bombing campaign against Yugoslavia between 24 March and 12 May 1999, accompanied by statistics for air strikes (‘timetable of death’) and a list of the targets hit by air strikes with their exact dates (‘geography of suffering’). There follow an account of the rallies in support of the Serbian people worldwide, an overview of the designations for the aggressor used in public discourse, the slogans launched on various occasions, and the emerging phenomenon of war profiteering. The chapters ‘On the fringes of war’, ‘Laughing and singing in the face of terror’, ‘Journalists – a lucrative cause’, ‘Double-faced humanity’, and ‘A strange and sad Year of the Lord’, comment on many events that took place at the time. Written in a simple and lively style, the commentaries, notably the essays ‘Two worlds’ (Ibid 149–50) and ‘Morning and evening’ (Ibid 159–60), at times achieve a measure of literary quality. The concluding chapter, ‘Kosovo and Metohija as a cause of war’, gives an overview of many important issues of relevance to the history and culture of the region from the times of the Nemanjićs until the present. In that context, the author discusses, among other things, the foundations of Serbian spiritual culture, population censuses, displacements of the Serbian population, Islamization, interwar resettlement, expulsion of the Serbian population, and the historical and geopolitical
context of the latest war. In this chapter, replete with meaningful observations, two moments are perhaps more important than others. One of them is the author’s interpretation of the Kosovo myth: ‘Kosovo is a Serbian myth. This fact is simplistically related to the Battle of Kosovo by many, who argue that the bloodshed of 1389 has been turned into a mythomania of death, or claim, failing to grasp the gist of the issue, that the Serbs are the only nation that celebrates its defeats […] Namely, those who question the Kosovo myth and its significance tend to overlook that Kosovo had existed in Serbian national consciousness as the foundation of Serbian culture and spirituality even before the Battle of Kosovo’ (Ibid 165). The other is the identification of the real cause of the war, which is entirely ‘geopolitical’, Kosovo and Metohija being the main crossroads in the Balkan Peninsula. ‘Major directions of territorial aspirations, imperial agendas and strategic plans intersect in Kosovo and Metohija. The centuries-long German disposition to eastward expansion (Drang nach Osten), which can only take a west-east direction, coincides with the so-called green, Islamic, transversal aimed at linking Bosnia and Turkey, whereby the north-south direction, a natural thread of national and state union of the Serbs in Serbia and Montenegro, would be severed […] All the rest is a red herring of war propaganda and blatant excuses for the unparalleled violence, relentless killing of innocent people and outright plunder’ (Ibid 233). The book is based on field observation, media coverage, demographic data and the technical literature, and brings plentiful photographic material documenting the human suffering and material damage inflicted by the war. It should be noted that this is one of the few chronicles ever kept within our ethnology. It seems, therefore, that the period covered by it and the analysis of its diverse potentials, methodological included, are yet to become a subject of ethnological interest. Mile Nedeljković was one of the harbingers of the process.

6.

A Lexicon of the Peoples of the World (Nedeljković 2001), written over a period of twenty years and published on 376 large-format pages, offers an overview of the world population. Looking at the people of the entire terrene globe at the turn of the second and third millennia as a whole, he sought to give an answer to a few basic questions, such as how many people there are on earth, which nations and ethnic communities they belong to, what their traits are, where they live, what languages they use, and what they believe in. The Lexicon contains about 4500 entries. Comparing it with similar books worldwide, the author wrote: ‘So far no lexicon in the world has presented this many peoples and ethnic communities. The ethnic maps in this lexicon plot about one thousand and five hundred peoples, considerably more than the number of peoples plotted on the maps in similar publications in the world. Moreover, statistical data in such lexicons as a rule are obsolete (ten, twenty, even more years in some cases), whereas the data presented inhere correspond to the year of publication. It may be said, therefore, that this lexicon, being the most complete ethno-demographic overview of the world’s peoples and ethnic communities, is justly subtitled ‘Humanity in 2000’. Once the challenge was accepted, the dangers seemed less discouraging’ (Ibid xxix). This ‘dictionary collection of the peoples of the world’ contains rich and detailed contributions: ‘Language
families’; ‘Language families, groups and subgroups’; ‘World population by language families, groups and subgroups’; ‘Major world languages’; ‘Peoples by size’; and ‘World population by countries’. As most of this author’s books, this one too is furnished with an index, a list of selected literature, photographs and a note on the author. A practical, easy-to-use, and important book, long-needed in our culture, the Lexicon was written with the aid of a bibliography in Serbian, Russian, Czech, French, German and English.

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As we have seen, Mile Nedeljković’s scholarly work addresses some of the most intricate, most sensitive and most important issues of national history and culture – Kosovo and Metohija as the cradle of Serbian spirituality, Islamization in this part of the world, Šumadija as the pivot of Serbia’s restored statehood, the gloomy destiny of the Serbs the Frontiersmen and their expulsion from Croatia in the 1990s. All these processes, however remote from one another in space and time, are interrelated and form part of the history and culture of the Serbian people as a whole. To be able to address these topics successfully, Nedeljković had to master the archival, linguistic, demographic and ethnological sources and the relevant literature, which made his basically ethnological research more comprehensive, and with the inclusion of historiography, linguistics and demography, helped it grow into a multidisciplinary research. Even though he often dealt with nationally and socially sensitive subjects, his motivation was always to establish the truth, as he was aware of its healing power even if it tasted bitter. Apart from nationally relevant topics, however, he dealt with those universal and global as well, as best evidenced by his Lexicon of the Peoples of the World. As if he had wished to embrace all of humanity with his human and scholarly effort. One of the characteristics of his work, whether tackling South-Slavic, Yugoslav or universal themes, is a critical attitude towards the possible effects of changing political agendas on human lives, the role of religion in warfare, and the impact of territorial conquests, subjugation of nations and plundering of their resources on their lives. His condemnation of such attitudes and behaviours lends an utterly human and humane dimension to his work. If one adds that this work is fundamental and diverse, that its author had the ability to make sweeping syntheses and significant scholarly discoveries, the culture of chronicle keeping, and the simplicity and beauty of narrative expression, it would not be far-fetched to say that he belongs to the very top of contemporary Serbian ethnology.

References


