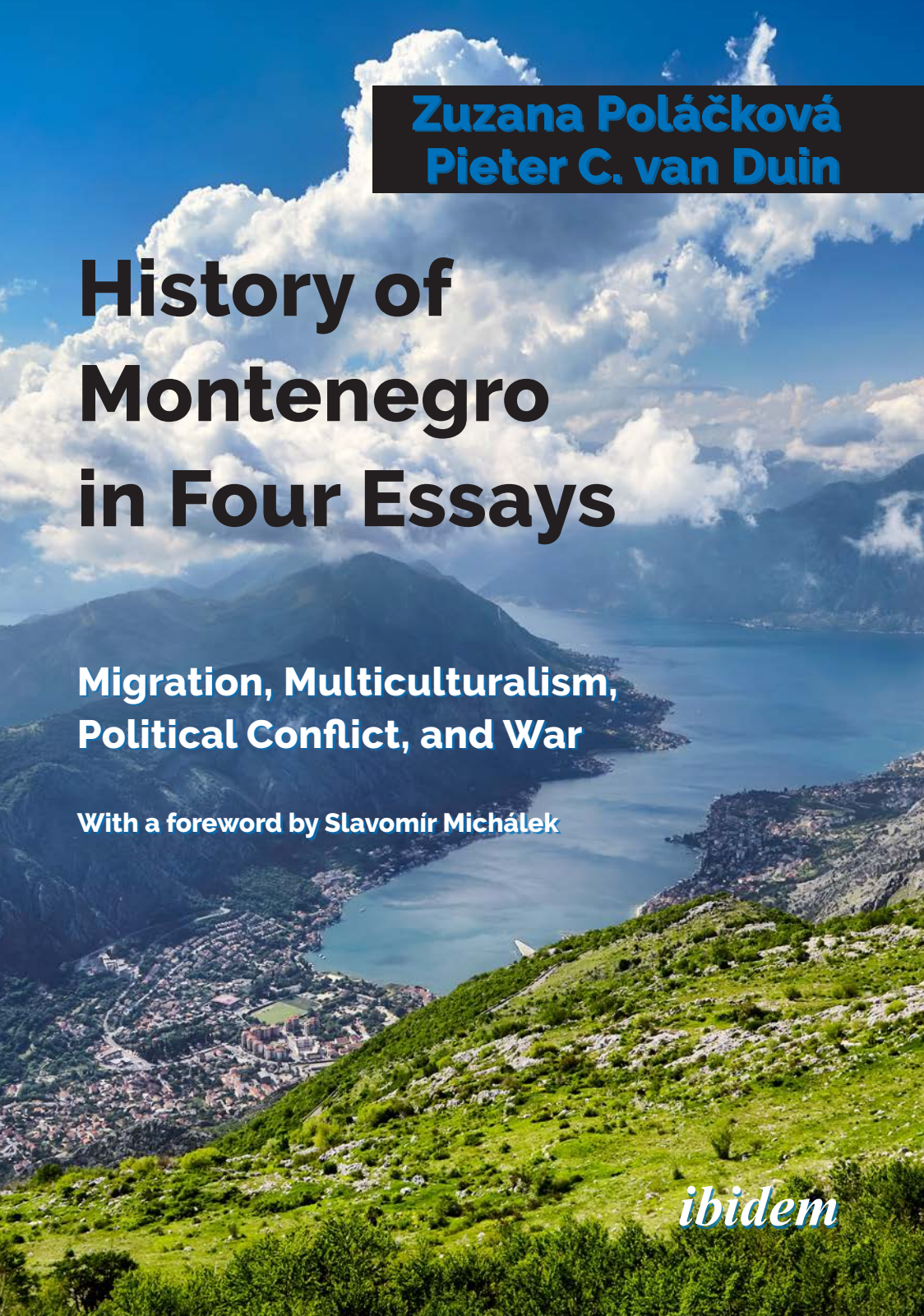
Zuzana Poláčková
Pieter C. van Duin

# History of Montenegro in Four Essays

## Migration, Multiculturalism, Political Conflict, and War

With a foreword by Slavomír Michálek



ibidem

Zuzana Poláčková & Pieter C. van Duin

# History of Montenegro in Four Essays

Migration, Multiculturalism, Political Conflict, and War

With a foreword by Slavomír Michálek

Zuzana Poláčková & Pieter C. van Duin

# HISTORY OF MONTENEGRO IN FOUR ESSAYS

## Migration, Multiculturalism, Political Conflict, and War

With a foreword by Slavomír Michálek

ibidem Verlag

**Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek**
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Cover picture: ID 187072243 © Vitalii Shastun | Dreamstime.com

This work is the partial result of Project VEGA 2/0106/24 Migračné vlny v 20. storočí a ich vplyv na slovenskú spoločnosť. Kontexty, aspekty a súvislosti. (*Migration waves in the 20th century and their impact on Slovak society. Contexts, aspects and connections.*)
Reviewers: Leo Lucassen, Juraj Marušiak

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-2034-5
ISBN (E-Book [PDF]): 978-3-8382-8034-9
© ***ibidem***-Verlag, Hannover • Stuttgart 2025
Leuschnerstraße 40
30457 Hannover
Germany / Deutschland
info@ibidem.eu

Alle Rechte vorbehalten

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Dies gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und elektronische Speicherformen sowie die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who commits any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

Printed in the EU

# Foreword

This publication on the history of Montenegro written by two historians, a Slovak and a Dutch one, is certainly useful to begin to understand the complexities of Montenegro from the Middle Ages to the twenty-first century. Until recently little was known about Montenegro apart from a vague imagery of Montenegrins having been courageous fighters against the Turks. In the twentieth century this began to change, and Montenegro's notoriety was now associated with other martial activities, including its participation in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. In the past few decades the literature on Montenegro has increased substantially, and we have the opportunity to learn about the history and recent developments in Montenegro as never before. This work by Poláčková and Van Duin is another addition to the Montenegro literature, but it has its own focus and perspectives.

The subtitle of this work refers to the four essays of which it is made up, as well as to four topics—migration, multiculturalism, political conflict, and war—that are present in all the essays. The first essay gives an overview of the history of Montenegro, in which all the four topics unfold. One remarkable historical event discussed in this essay is the mass murder of Muslims and Montenegrins who had converted to Islam around 1700. This massacre, which borders on genocide, has been hotly debated by historians from Yugoslavia, the United States and other countries.

The second essay in the book analyses the special character of the Boka Kotorska (Gulf of Kotor) region, the waterway through which the Venetians discovered Montenegro and through which trade activity was instituted. This multicultural cooperation, including migration, was generally peaceful, but there were also war and political conflict as Montenegro tried to defend the culture and religion of the Orthodox population against the Catholic Venetians with their much larger state power. There was arguably only one thing that the mini-state of Montenegro could do in order to survive: seek an alliance with another, stronger Orthodox state. Of

course, Serbia had traditionally been a friend and ally of Montenegro, but far more impressive and effective was the aid and support that Russia could provide.

By the early eighteenth century, Montenegro succeeded in making contact with Russia. The third essay in this book is a unique analysis of Russian-Montenegrin relations. An almost endless series of Montenegrin visits to St. Petersburg, and Russian visits to Montenegro, were witness to the growing influence of the Russian Empire in the Balkans. The Montenegrins developed an ideology that can be described as Russophile and Panslavic. Thanks to the deliveries of Russian arms, Montenegro managed to hold its own and even to extend its territory in almost all directions. A major aim of the Montenegrin expansion was to annex the territories of the Muslim Albania, one of the traditional enemies of the Montenegrins (and the Serbs). In the nineteenth century the power of Montenegro reached its height, and Albanians were slaughtered in large numbers along with other Muslims including Turks.

The fourth essay looks at the twentieth century, when Montenegro's independence was liquidated and it became part of the new Yugoslav state. Many Montenegrins never accepted this. The aftermath of the Second World War created a new opportunity for restoring Montenegrin autonomy, but complete Montenegrin independence became an established fact only in 2006. Although the Montenegrin population was divided into a pro-Serbian and a pro-democratic and pro-European sections, it would seem that the new Montenegro finally chose a pro-European orientation.

Together, the four essays give a detailed overview of key periods in the history of Montenegro. They show the complex structure of the country's population, its long process of seeking allies, and its efforts to defend its political independence and its national character. They shed light on a tough and difficult process of state development, which will certainly offer many interesting insights to historians of Europe and the Balkans.

Dr. Slavomír Michálek

# Contents

Foreword ..... 1

Preface ..... 9

Essay 1
Montenegro Old and New: History, Politics, Culture, and the People ..... 13

Essay 2
Montenegro's Gulf of Kotor as a Border Region: Political Rivalry, Cultural Competition, and Local Coexistence in a Long-Term Perspective ..... 53

Essay 3
The Dwarf and the Giant: Montenegrin-Russian Relations and Montenegro's "Cult of Russia", c. 1700–2015 ..... 93

Essay 4
Independence Lost and Regained: Montenegro's Contested Identity and the Failure of Yugoslavia (1918–2006) ..... 135

Epilogue ..... 171

# Preface

This book, which discusses the history and the social, political, and cultural traditions of Montenegro, does not use a classical chronological method, with each chapter or essay discussing a specific historical period within a larger whole. We have rather employed a thematic approach to Montenegrin history, exploring four crucial themes over a longer period of time. The first essay gives an overview of Montenegrin history, focusing on the most important issues from late classical and medieval times to the twenty-first century. Montenegro's evolution from a marginal polity to a militant enemy of the Ottoman Empire and Islam was a remarkable chapter in Balkan history. In fact, historians know for certain that for the Montenegrins genocide became one accepted practice among others to eliminate Slav traitors who had converted to Islam. The arrival on Montenegro's doorstep of yet another great power, the Catholic Venetians, was another important factor that helped to shape Montenegrin history. In this case the relationship was ambiguous rather than unambiguously antagonistic, but the strengthening of Catholic culture along the Adriatic coast also led to repeated tension and violence with the Orthodox Montenegrins. The Gulf of Kotor, especially, became a notable area of Orthodox-Catholic interaction; this is shown in the second essay. Further complicating political and multicultural patterns, Montenegro began to develop a special relationship with Russia, as explored in the third essay. Beginning around 1700 this relationship became ever more significant, for the Montenegrins believed that without Russian support and protection they could not withstand the enduring Ottoman threat. Montenegro developed into a robust little state in the western Balkans, and in the nineteenth century its sovereign statehood was recognized by the major European powers. The foundation of the Yugoslav state in 1918, however, meant the end of Montenegro's independence, with the country being effectively subordinated to Serbia. But then, in 2006, after the disintegration of Yugoslavia and after several wars and political transformations in the 1990s, a miracle happened. A referendum was held on Montenegrin independence

and a majority of the people voted in favor of establishing the new state. The fourth essay offers an analysis of this remarkable road from independence to dependence to renewed independence.

The political and cultural evolution of Montenegro was closely related to migration movements and to broader multicultural patterns in the western Balkans. Orthodox, Catholic, and Islamic communities lived together in this region, sometimes in peaceful coexistence, sometimes in conflict. The emergence of Catholic communities along the Adriatic and in the Gulf of Kotor was encouraged by the Catholic Church in Italy, and promoted further migration across the Adriatic. At one point Venice became the major engine of trans-Adriatic trade and migration movements, which brought the Venetians in growing numbers to the eastern Adriatic coast and also created new employment opportunities for the indigenous Slav population within the Venetian trade system. Further inland, Montenegro and other Slav communities were confronted with the coming of the Turks, a watershed in their history. The Ottoman military, demographic, and religious advance changed the history of the Balkan Slavs, with some of them fighting the Turks as long as they could and others letting themselves be converted to Islam. The political or military conflicts between the Montenegrins and the Turks, between the Montenegrins and the Venetians, and between the Venetians and the Turks constituted the basic framework within which not only political and economic but also cultural (multicultural) and religious developments took their course.

Political and military conflicts, multicultural complexities, and migration patterns shaped the history of the western Balkans and Montenegro. This territory was characterized by complex relations between the Balkan states, including Montenegro, and outside countries, as well as between different political and cultural forces inside the region, for example, between Montenegrins and Albanians. In addition, even within a small polity like Montenegro there were internal tensions between different clans or tribes, with different social and political issues determining the level of domestic violence in different periods. At the same time, in the long-term perspective it is noticeable that the pressure towards internal ethnic

and religious homogeneity and towards intolerance and an aggressive attitude to the outside world was constantly growing. The possibility of interreligious or interethnic coexistence was clearly declining during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, with Muslim Slavs and Albanians being regularly attacked by the dominant group in the region, which included the Montenegrins, i.e., the Orthodox and nationalistic Slavs who sometimes went so far as to idealize their aggressive behavior.

In these complicated regional circumstances, Montenegro experienced the rise of modernity in its own way and at its own pace. But when the country regained independence in the early twenty-first century, there finally came a chance to develop a more liberal outlook and to seek integration in Europe.

# Essay 1

# Montenegro Old and New: History, Politics, Culture, and the People

Montenegro (Crna Gora, Tsrna Gora, Tsernagora) is a small country in the Western Balkans region with some 625,000 inhabitants,[1] which became an independent nation in 2006 and a candidate member of the EU in 2010. Its newly rediscovered European and Western orientation is not only expressed in the use of up-to-date politically correct terminology, including the focus on the rule of law, democracy, and multiculturalism, and in increasing use of the Latin alongside the Cyrillic script, but even in declaring itself an "ecological state", which is difficult to take seriously when walking around in this otherwise attractive country where garbage is lying all about but garbage barrels are often non-existent.[2]

Montenegro's being part of the Western Balkans region means that the country belongs historically to the zone that is sometimes described as the Catholic-Orthodox "fault line", marking the great religious divide and intra-Christian antithesis between the Western and Eastern Churches.[3] Until the thirteenth century and even later Montenegro was influenced not only by Byzantium and Eastern

---

1 Census of Population, Households, and Dwellings in Montenegro, 2011, published by the Government of Montenegro and available in the internet.

2 The new Constitution of Montenegro (2007) describes the independent republic as a "civic, democratic, ecological state of social justice, based on the reign of Law"; see, e.g., Wikipedia, s.v. "Montenegro".

3 See, for example, Gale Stokes, *Three Eras of Political Change in Eastern Europe* (New York/Oxford, 1997), chapter 1. The significance of this confessional divide can also be relativized by arguing that in popular culture the distinction was not so great; see, e.g., Edgar Hösch, *Geschichte der Balkanländer. Von der Frühzeit bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 1988), p. 27. But the rise of national Orthodox Churches meant that religious differences were politically consolidated and confirmed, and if Hösch's work had been written some years later his assessment of the meaning of the religious divide—which he says was mainly a question of *Hochkultur*—might have been somewhat different.

Christianity but also by Catholic Italy and Dalmatia, while the rising power of Venice (and of Ragusa/Dubrovnik) made its influence felt in the coastal area and even farther inland, which the Byzantine Empire was increasingly powerless to resist. Nevertheless, the majority of Slav Montenegrins became closely associated with the Serbs and adopted the Orthodox faith, an orientation that seems to have become definitive shortly after 1200 when the Catholic influence among a major part of the Serbian and Montenegrin ruling strata was largely removed.[4]

Another factor influencing the historical destiny of the Montenegrins was the presence of a large Albanian population immediately to the south, probably descendants of the ancient Illyrians that had been pushed into the Albanian mountains by the invading Slavs, who gradually became the dominant population group in much of the Balkans after 700 even though the older non-Slavic ethnic groups held their own relatively well.[5] Slav-Albanian antagonism became a remarkable factor in the history of the Western Balkans, especially when the majority of Albanians (some 70 percent) adopted Islam after the arrival of the Ottoman Turks in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. On the other hand, both the Montenegrins and the Albanians would also fight among themselves along clan and tribal lines, and would sometimes even form temporary interethnic alliances, or pragmatically change their confessional orientation, when the circumstances of tribal warfare and

---

4 See, for example, Tim Judah, *The Serbs. History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (New Haven/London, 1997), pp. 8–9, 18–20; Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History* (London, 1998), pp. 42–4, 52. Even the founder of the Serbian Nemanjić dynasty, Stefan Nemanja, who was born in Montenegro (Dioclea), had received a Catholic baptism, and in 1217 his son Stefan the younger was crowned king of Serbia by a papal legate. But the new king's brother Sava, who was intensely angered by this, managed to create an autocephalic Serbian Orthodox Church, which subsequently became the dominant factor in Serbian and Montenegrin religious life. Even so, Catholicism did not entirely remain without influence in Old Serbia (Kosovo) and Montenegro and in northern Albania, and among the Kosovo and Montenegro Albanians the Catholic faith even became a major influence.

5 Dennis P. Hupchick, *The Balkans: from Constantinople to Communism* (New York, 2002), pp. 6–8.

collective survival seemed to require this.[6] But, interestingly, many of the northern Albanians (including many in present-day Montenegro) remained Catholics, so that the Slav-Albanian confrontation in Montenegro was not only an ethno-linguistic and proto-national conflict, or simply a question of Christians vs. Muslims, but also to some extent a continuation of the older Orthodox-Catholic fault line.

The third fundamental issue that played a crucial role in the history of the Montenegrin people was the relationship with the Serbs living to the east and north. Although the Montenegrins and the Serbs were often closely allied in the struggle against the Turks and seen as religiously and ethnically similar, or even constituting one "Greater Serbian" people, there were also differences between them in terms of national-historical, political-territorial, and cultural-linguistic identity. The mutual-identification aspect sometimes found expression in a Montenegrin tendency to be "more Serbian than the Serbs" and to take the lead, almost in competition with Serbia, in the common struggle against their enemies (Turks, Austrians, Albanians).[7] "In customs and habits", however, "in morals and behavior, they differ from the Serbs in Serbia",[8] and after 1918 there emerged a remarkably intense conflict between a section of the Montenegrins and the newly dominant Serbs as a result of the resentment about the Serbian-imposed suppression of Montenegrin autonomy in the new Yugoslav state. This reawakened Mon-

---

6 In this connection Malcolm speaks of patterns of "ethnic osmosis" between Montenegrin and Albanian clans; see Malcolm, *Kosovo*, p. 10.

7 Hupchick (*The Balkans*, p. 258) describes this phenomenon rather well for the nineteenth century: "Small, poor, inaccessible Montenegro played a role in Serbian national affairs disproportionate to its size and resources. To the lowland Serbs, it represented a beacon of Serbian independence and anti-Ottoman resistance … Closeness also fed an undercurrent of rivalry over leadership in Serbian and South Slav affairs … Montenegro's leaders were cognizant of the Romantic argument and often subtly exerted the validity of their claim to pre-eminence".

8 P. D. Ostović, *The Truth about Yugoslavia*, intro. Ivan Meštrović (New York, 1952), p. 33. The author also writes: "The Montenegrins are a very proud people, who still cultivate the knightly and the heroic, more than any other Southern Slavs".