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**Svetomir Nikolajević (1844-1922): The First Serbian Historian
to write about Rigas Velesinlis**

There is not the slightest doubt that, in terms of his origin and his language, Rigas Velesinlis belongs exclusively to the Greeks. His revolutionary work, however, concerned all the Balkan peoples. This is the only explanation for the fact that the memory of Rigas still remains very much alive among the Christians of the Balkan Peninsula, particularly the Serbs, whose soil was soaked with his blood. Serbian literature and poetry turned their attention very early on to the Greek revolutionary's life and work, and particularly his tragic death. Serbian historiography did likewise, in the hands of some noted scholars at the end of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth.

The first Serbian historiographer to write about Rigas Velesinlis was Svetomir Nikolajević. On 19 March 1889, he gave a lecture at the Great School in Belgrade titled *Riga iz Fere, Grk patriota i pesnik* (Rigas Feraios, Greek Patriot and Poet). The lecture was published later that year in the historical and literary periodical *Otadžbina* (Motherland) under the title "Riga iz Fere (1753–1798)"¹. Essentially, this was the first monograph ever written in the Serbian world about the Greek national martyr. The fact that Nikolajević decided to write about Rigas as early as the end of the nineteenth century is not surprising, because we have other evidence that he was one of the most fervent Serbian philhellenes and an advocate of the idea of Balkan co-operation which Rigas himself propounded. So, before proceeding with an analysis of the monograph, it will be useful to give a general outline of its author's life and work.

Svetomir Nikolajević was born in the village of Raduši in Valjevo province on 27 September 1844, and died in Belgrade on 18 April 1922. He studied historical sciences at the Universities of Belgrade,

1. Vol. 22, pp. 104-122.

Berne, Berlin, Brussels, Paris, and London. When, at the proposal of the noted Serbian scholars Djura Daničić and Stojan Novaković, a special chair of General History of Literature was established at the Great School in Belgrade in 1873, Nikolajević was appointed professor there and retained the post for more than twenty years². In the course of his research into the history of literature, he focused exclusively on literary portraits (Tacitus, certain Renaissance poets, Montesquieu, Rigas Velestinlis, Byron, Ibsen, and others) and cultivated a grandiloquent rhetorical style. In his efforts to introduce foreign literatures to Serbia, he turned his attention to English, Scandinavian, and above all Greek literature. He also wrote studies on early church architecture, the history of the Great School in Belgrade, and many other aspects of cultural and political history.

He made his début in politics in 1881 as a representative of the Radical Party, which he had helped to found and of which he was one of the most accomplished speakers. He resigned from the party's central council in 1883, however, and shortly afterwards severed all relations with the Radicals, being henceforth a representative and ardent champion of King Milan. Very early on, in 1875, he rose to prominence as one of the protagonists of the Masonic Lodge in Serbia, and he also held some important posts, including: Chief Magistrate of the Municipal Court of Belgrade (1887), member of the Council of State (1893), State Counsellor (1895), member of the Senate (1901), and Ambassador to Athens (1903)³. It should also be noted that, apart from his monograph, Nikolajević dedicated two more works to Greek subjects: i) *The Greek Short Story* (1904) and ii) *A Greek Poem on the Serbian Revolution* (1902)⁴.

As we have said, *Rigas Feraios* was actually a lecture which Nikolajević delivered on 19 March 1889 at the Great School in Belgrade. The

2. See "Katedra za opštu književnosti i teoriju književnosti" (The Chair of General Literature and Theory of Literature), in the collective work, *Sto godina Filozofskog Fakulteta* (The Centenary of the Faculty of Philosophy), Belgrade 1964, p. 464.

3. Ivo Tartalia, "Svetomir Nikolajević", *Enciklopedija Jugoslavije*, vol. 4, Zagreb 1965, p. 289.

4. This is a presentation of Triandafyllos Loukas's historical poem *History of the Sloveno-Serbs*: see Ioannis A. Papadrianos, *Οι Έλληνες πάροικοι του Σερμλίνου (18ος - 19ος αι.)*, Thessaloniki 1988, p. 20, n. 64.

lecture was attended by the Greek Ambassador, Ioannis Moussikos, who made haste on 23 March to tell the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Athens about it:

Under the rectorship of Professor Svetomir Nikolajević, President of the St Sabbas Association, and on his initiative, every professor undertook, during the winter just past, to deliver a public lecture in the Great School in Belgrade.

Last Sunday, 19 March, it was the turn of Professor Nikolajević himself to deliver his lecture, and he took as his subject Rigas Feraios, who was put to death in the fortress at Belgrade. Professor Nikolajević's purpose was to collect money to erect a monument to this hero to mark the site of his martyrdom. Professor Nikolajević conceived the notion of erecting a statue of Rigas three years ago, but was prevented from carrying it out by supervening external events, as also by the domestic circumstances.

A very select audience filled the great hall of the University⁵ for Professor Nikolajević's lecture, and included the Prime Minister, the Lord Chamberlain Mr Janković, General Lesjanin, Mr Pirocanac, and many other distinguished statesmen, academics, and professors with their lady wives. Naturally enough, most of the Greeks living in Belgrade were also present.

Professor Nikolajević spoke most feelingly about Rigas and with great enthusiasm about the idea of the co-operation and association between the peoples of the East, an idea that was first expressed by the intellectual genius of Rigas. The audience followed the lecture most attentively and responded with astonishing alacrity to the speaker's proposal; thus, as he told me later on, the philosophical conclusion to be drawn on that day was that the idea of the political association of the nations of the Balkan Peninsula —or at least between the Serbs and the Greeks— has now reached maturity in educated Serbian circles. For this reason, he added, he is about to at-

5. The Great School, that is, which served as a kind of university (see *Sto godina Filozofskog Fakulteta, passim*).

tempt to form a committee of ladies and gentlemen, members of the upper social classes in Serbia, whose task will be to raise money and decide what kind of monument will be erected—that is to say, whether it will be a simple plaque or a stone or an obelisk. The committee will also have the duty of finding the site and overseeing the process of erecting the monument. When the time comes, Professor Nikolajević told me, representatives will have to come both from Greece and from the other nations of the Balkan Peninsula to attend the joint celebration of the erection of the monument. For my own part, I assured him that, if a contribution is sought from us Greeks, in the form of either money or marble, we shall respond with great pleasure⁶.

As one would expect, Svetomir Nikolajević precedes his monograph with a bibliography of the works he consulted. The basic ones are the following Greek studies: Hristoforos Peraivos, *Σύντομος βιογραφία του αοιδίμου Πήγα Φεραίου*, Athens 1860; Anastassios N. Goudas, *Παράλληλοι Βίοι*, Athens 1870; Georgios Theofilos, *Βιογραφία του Πήγα Φεραίου*, Larissa 1887; and Konstandinos Paparrigopoulos, *Ιστορία του Ελληνικού Έθνους*, vol. 5, Athens 1888⁷.

The Serbian historiographer then goes on to explain why he selected Rigas as the subject of his study, namely because that revolutionary had envisioned the liberation not only of the Greeks, but of all the other peoples of the Balkan Peninsula. According to Nikolajević, the final prophecy of the national hero (“I have sown, others follow to reap”), uttered with his dying breath, had been fulfilled in the sense that the Greeks, the Serbs, the Romanians, the Bulgarians, and the Albanians were now regarding the ideal of the motherland in the same way as Rigas, and, like him, desired that the nations of the Balkan Peninsula, with mutual understanding and respect and with a like mind, should work together for their liberation and unity.

Nikolajević continues with an examination of Rigas’s life, learning,

6. M. M. S(pyromilios), “Ο Πήγας”, *Ο νέος Κουβαράς*, year 3 (1965), Athens 1966, 7-9.

7. Svetomir Nikolajević, “Riga iz Fere, 1753-1798”, p. 104.

and political career, as also the flourishing intellectual life in some parts of Greece in the eighteenth century. However, the paucity of the sources when he was writing his monograph caused the Serbian historiographer to express some inaccurate views and to draw some false conclusions. Thus he writes, "Rigas was born in the second half of last century (some say between 1751 and 1753, others between 1760 and 1762)"⁸. This is far from being the case, however, for when the Austrian authorities arrested and interrogated him in 1797, the Greek revolutionary declared himself to be forty years old⁹; so he must have been born in or around 1757.

Nikolajević then looks at Rigas's political programme, which sought to achieve the co-operation and association of all the peoples of the East, including the Turks, the Syrians, and the Egyptians. Curiously, Nikolajević remarks, although Rigas mentions the Montenegrins in his revolutionary *Θούριος*¹⁰, he says nothing at all about the Serbs of the Sumadija region (modern Serbia), who had frequently waged struggles in the past and were already a name familiar to international public opinion. To explain the omission, Nikolajević suggests that it was deliberate, because at that time the Serbs in those parts were fighting against Pasvanoglou, renegade pasha of Vidin, who was a close confidant of Rigas's and had been apprised of his plans for revolution¹¹. Yet in his *Θούριος* Rigas specifically mentions the Serbs of all regions, not once but twice¹²; and the nature of his relations with Pasvanoglou, to whom he also dedicates a few lines¹³, have still not been fully clarified¹⁴.

8. Nikolajević, *op.cit.*, 105.

9. See *Ανέκδοτα έγγραφα περί Πήγα Βελεστινλή και των συν αυτώ μαρτυρησάντων εκ των εν Βιέννη αρχείων εξαχθέντα και δημοσιευθέντα υπό Αιμιλίου Λεγρράνδ μετά μεταφράσεως ελληνικής υπό Σπυρίδωνος Π. Λάμπρου*, Athens 1891, pp. 58-59.

10. "Tigers of Montenegro, eagles of Olympus" (line 65).

11. Nikolajević, "Riga iz Fere", p. 116.

12. See L. I. Vranoussis, *Πήγας Βελεστινλής*, Athens 1963², p. 169, for the relevant lines: "Bulgarians and Albanians, Serbs and Greeks" (line 45), "Christian brethren of the Sava and the Danube" (line 69).

13. "Why stand you, Pasvanoglou, so dumbfounded? Fling yourself into the Balkans, like an eagle make your nest; pay no heed to the owls and ravens; unite with the *rayah* if you would prevail. Silistra and Braila, Smaïli and Kili, Binderi and Hotini summon you; send your troops to pay homage there, for under Tyranny they cannot live" (lines 87-94).

14. For further details, see Vranoussis, *Πήγας Βελεστινλής*, pp. 65ff.

The last part of Nikolajević's monograph concerns the grievous events surrounding Rigas's arrest and his cruel interrogations by the Austrians, and the tragic death in Belgrade of the national martyr and his comrades¹⁵, whose number Nikolajević erroneously puts at only five¹⁶.

Apart from this, the Serb historian, like other biographers of Rigas before him, lightly accepts the oral traditions relating to the national martyr's final moments. He thus quite uncritically reproduces a verbatim account¹⁷ of the story left us by the sculptor Ioannis Kossos, creator of Rigas's statue in front of the Capodistrias University, who was invited to visit Prince Miloš Obrenović in Belgrade in 1861. There, in the Serbian capital, the Greek sculptor encountered an aged Turk, who made out that he had been Rigas's jailer and one of the two executioners who had killed Rigas and his comrades. When it came to Rigas's turn, the old man told Kossos,

“my comrade was stupid enough to release the prisoner's right hand from its fetters, and he even left on that hand the iron ring and a link of the chain that was suspended from it. My comrade knelt down to release the foot, and Rigas gave him such a blow with his right hand that he knocked him down dead. I was terrified and ran to the garrison commander, and he sent armed men to shoot Rigas from a distance. But before he died, he said, in Turkish: “Thus do giants die; I have sown, others follow to reap”. Rigas fell onto my comrade's body, and the two corpses together formed the shape of a cross, which was considered a bad sign. And so the order was given that the *giaour* [infidel] be quartered and sunk in the river, where the rest of the bodies were also thrown¹⁸.

15. See Nikolajević, “Riga iz Fere”, pp. 111-113.

16. The Greek patriots who were martyred with Rigas in Belgrade on 24 June 1798 (N.S.) were eight in number, all in their prime. They were: Rigas, aged 40; Efstratios Aryendis, a merchant from Hios, aged 31; Dimitrios Nikolidis, a physician from Ioannina, aged 32; Andonios Koronios, a merchant and scholar from Hios, aged 27; Ioannis Karadzas, a scholar from Nicosia, Cyprus, aged 31; Theoharis Georgiou Touroundzas, a merchant from Siatista, aged 22; Ioannis Emmanouil, a medical student from Kastoria, aged 24; and his brother Panayotis Emmanouil, a salesman employed by Aryendis, aged 22 (see Vranoussis, *Πήγας Βελεστινλής*, p. 130).

17. Nikolajević, “Riga iz Fere”, p. 113.

18. Anastassios N. Goudas, *Παράλληλοι Βίοι*, vol. 2, Athens 1870, pp. 146-147.

However, that aged Turk, Rigas's supposed executioner, was still alive in 1875, when he explicitly told the French scholar Émile Legrand, who visited him, that he was in his seventy-ninth year. So in 1798, which was definitely the year of Rigas's death, he would have been just two years old. This admission, together with the whole discussion between the old Turk and Legrand, led the latter quite reasonably to conclude that the old man's account of Rigas's final moments was a mere figment of his imagination¹⁹. The period between Rigas's imprisonment in Belgrade and his death is in fact shrouded in mystery. All we know for certain is the date of his execution, which was 13 June 1798 (Old Style)²⁰.

Nikolajević concludes his monograph with a moving exhortation to his compatriots:

At times when we are pondering the future of our country,
I should like us frequently to visit the site where Rigas fell, for
I am persuaded that we shall always find comfort and counsel
in that sacred place²¹.

I should like to conclude this discussion of *Rigas Feraios* with a mention of Nikolajević's knowledge of Greek. Fortunately, we have a fair amount of information on the subject. Specifically, reliable sources tell us that Nikolajević attended the Serbian High School in Belgrade from 1866 to 1870, where, apart from other subjects, he also studied Greek. He made astonishing progress with the Greek language, for, in addition to his own diligence and application, he was fortunate to be taught by an erudite Greek teacher, Panayotis Papakostopoulos²². He was thus able, later on, to make direct use of Greek literature for his own writings; and this is precisely why there are no misinterpretations in his evaluation of the testimony they bear. It seems too that it was Papakostopoulos who

19. See Legrand/Lambros, *Ανέκδοτα έγγραφα*, pp. β' - δ'.

20. Dušan Pantelić, "Pogibija Rige iz Fere" (The execution of Rigas Feraios), *Brastvo* 25 (1931) 130-174.

21. Nikolajević, "Riga iz Fere", p. 120.

22. Ioannis A. Papadrianos, "Der griechische Gelehrte Panagiotis Papakostopoulos und die Serben (1820-1879)", *Collection of Reports from the Second Greek-Serbian Symposium: Greek-Serbian Cooperation, 1830-1908*, Belgrade 1982, p. 120; *idem*, "Οι μεταφράσεις αρχαίων ελληνικών κειμένων στα σερβικά από τον Παναγιώτη Παπακωστόπουλο", *Βαλκανικά Σύμμεικτα* 2 (1983) 98-99.

fired his subsequent enthusiasm for co-operation between the Balkan peoples, for the Greek teacher was a keen advocate of it, and particularly of friendship between the Greeks and the Serbs. Of Papakostopoulos, Nikolajević wrote:

When the sun of freedom began to rise over the Balkans in the early years of this century, the Balkan peoples had a shared belief, which could have been a strength: they believed that co-operation between them was a historical necessity. Sadly, their foes abroad, as also their unpatriotic writers and politicians at home, contrived to weaken this belief and caused it almost to disappear. Yet Panayotis Papakostopoulos continued until the end of his life, both in school and out, to speak on behalf of the sacred idea of solidarity between the Greeks and the Serbs. This idea was his very life, and he died believing in it²³.

23. *Odisija: Omirov spev u XXIV pesme. Preveo s jelinskog †Dr Panajot Papakostopulos* (The Odyssey: Epic by Homer in 24 rhapsodies. Translated from the Greek by Dr Panayotis Papakostopoulos), with a foreword by Svetomir Nikolajević, Belgrade 1881, pp. IV-V.