

# Constructing Identities. The Travel Experience of Elizaveta De Vitte and Rebecca West: A Compared Study Between Two Committed Women-Travellers

CRISTINA CUGNATA

*Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy*

| 9 |

Elizaveta de Vitte and Rebecca West partially shared the same travel experience: Dalmatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The former travelled through the area between 1902 and 1911, so in the very last years before World War I, while the latter in the 1930s at the eve of World War II. Although the two women-travellers had two different historical and cultural backgrounds, both distinguished themselves for their ideological commitment specifically expressed by travel. Referring to Indira Ghose's studies, I will take into consideration that "the very fact of travel constituted a form of gender power for women [...]. By entering the public world of travel, women transgressed gender norms that relegated them to the home" (Ghose 1998, 12). Their descriptions of local people, history, folklore, politics, and their gaze will be used as a 'trope', i.e. a tool for "the epistemic appropriation of the other" (Ghose 1998, 9) in order to make a comparison between Elizaveta de Vitte's and Rebecca West's voices and the construction respectively of a Pan-Slavic and a Yugoslav identity. The aim of my paper will be to demonstrate how travel can work as an "ideal paradigm to study the intersection of different axes that construct identity" (Ghose 1998, 5) and how the genre of literary travel flourishes in close connection with the development of social and political ideas.

*Key words:* Elizaveta de Vitte, Rebecca West, Balkans, Travelogue, Pan-Slavism, Yugoslavism



## INTRODUCTION

The Russian pedagogue Elizaveta Ivanovna de Vitte (1833–not before 1916) and the British journalist and literary critic Rebecca West (1892–1983) partially shared the same travel experience: Dalmatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The former travelled through the area between 1902 and 1911, so in the very last years before World War I, while the latter in the 1930s on the eve of World War II.<sup>1</sup> Both of them took a public position on the eve of a conflict, expressing their points of view on the current precarious *status quo* in the peninsula. It is noteworthy to consider that although the two women-travellers belonged to completely different historical, social and cultural backgrounds, they firmly expressed their ideological commitment thanks to travel and, subsequently, travel writing<sup>2</sup>.

Travel experience enabled women to step outside domestic boundaries, i.e. to enter the public world. In this sense it expressed the need to explore the world, to understand the full spectrum of history, taking part in it personally. The bibliography of Eastern and Western travellers visiting South Europe and the Balkans is quite rich:<sup>3</sup> explorations, military ventures, war operations, Grand Tours or simply travels to escape reality

- 1 Elizaveta de Vitte travelled through the Balkans within the Austro-Hungarian Empire's borders. Rebecca West travelled through the regions of Yugoslavia in 1937 and again in 1938.
- 2 Considering the extent and complexity of Elizaveta de Vitte's and Rebecca West's travel notes, my comparison will be mostly based on the chapters devoted to Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina where 'identity' seemed to represent a particularly controversial topic. For de Vitte, Elizaveta Ivanovna. 1903. *Putevyja vpečatljénija. Dalmacija, Gercegovina i Serbija. Lěto 1902 goda*. Kiev: Tip. M.M. Fichá; for West, Rebecca. 1993. *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia*. Edinburgh: Canongate.
- 3 See, for example, Rosslyn, Wendy, and Tosi, Alessandra. 2007. *Women in Russian Culture and Society, 1700–1825*. Houndmills: Palgrave-Macmillan; Bracewell, Wendy, and Drace-Francis, Alex. 2008. *A Bibliography of East European Travel Writing on Europe*. Budapest/New York: Central European University Press; Bracewell, Wendy, and Drace-Francis, Alex. 2009. *Orientalisms: An Anthology of East European Travel Writing, ca. 1550–2000*. Budapest/New York: Central European University Press.



following a Romantic ideal, as, for example, when in summer 1859, Georgina Muir Mackenzie (1833–1874) and Adeline Paulina Irby (1831–1911), two brave travellers, educationalists and political agitators – just two of the many English Victorian ladies who travelled independently and wrote about it – were arrested as spies – travelling across the Carpathian mountains – and accused of Pan-Slavism. The “incident” led them for further trips (five exactly) through the regions of the Austrian and Ottoman Empires in order to learn about Slavic people.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of my study will be to demonstrate how travelogue “evolves in close connection with the development of social ideas, political context and literary process” (Skibina 2014, 90). The gaze of these two women-travellers, which focuses on local people, history, folklore and politics, can be considered a ‘trope’, i.e. a tool “to study the intersection of different axes that construct identity” (Ghose 1998, 5) which leads to “the epistemic appropriation of the other” (Ghose 1998, 9). In addition, it is interesting to take into account how travel writing can produce images and stereotypes of the *other* (the Balkan Slav in this case) – which is a textual construct, an interpretation of reality – and knowledge, according to one specific ideological *discourse*. From this perspective, the works of author – travellers are an expression not only of their thought but also of their experience, imagination and the historical determinations they are involved in. Thus, these works allow the reader to focus on the evolution of socio-political and cultural paradigms, marking out a parallel way to study the ‘history of ideas’, as Foucault theorized:

---

4 Miss Georgina Muir Mackenzie and Miss Adeline Paulina Irby learnt Serbo-Croatian and Bulgarian in order to investigate seriously facts and people focusing specifically on Christian Slavonic communities under Turkish rule. The two English travellers wrote many books, contributed papers on their travels and were very active in providing education for Christian Slavic girls and women in Bosnia and Herzegovina. See Muir Mackenzie, Georgina, and Irby, Adeline Paulina. 1867. *Travels in the Slavonic provinces of Turkey-in-Europe: The Turks, the Greeks, and the Slavons*. London: Bell & Daldy.

The history of ideas, then, is the discipline of beginnings and ends, the description of obscure continuities and returns, the reconstitution of developments in the linear form of history [...]. It becomes therefore the discipline of interferences, the description of the concentric circles that surround works, underline them, relate them to one another, and insert them into whatever they are not. (Foucault 2002, 154)

| 12 |

Overcoming the postulate that travel writing is a transparent reflection of the reality of other cultures, I will focus on de Vitte's and West's interpretation – and not reflection – of reality. Their travelogue helps to understand:

how scientific knowledge is diffused, gives rise to philosophical concepts, and takes form perhaps in literary works; it shows how problems, notions, themes may emigrate from the philosophical field where they were formulated to scientific or political discourses; it relates work with institutions, social customs or behaviour, techniques, and unrecorded needs and practices; it tries to revive the most elaborate forms of discourse in the concrete landscape, in the midst of the growth and development that witnessed their birth. (Foucault 2002, 154)

Anyway, de Vitte's and West's experiences deserve particular attention because of their purpose. For that, they travelled with a concrete purpose – being agents of their own history – chose a type of non-fiction writing that, like photographs or contemporary reports, can capture specific moments, frailties, fundamental details, giving us the chance to understand complex historical processes under the illusion that these descriptions faithfully depict that historical reality. Nowadays, those travel notes are fundamental materials to study the perception of the *other* in specific periods according to political ideology or personal ideas and prejudices. It has to be also taken into consideration that author-travellers often contributed to shaping public opinion through their points of view about current issues.

Trying to further deepen the relationships between literary genre, travel experience and the *world view* of the author-traveller, I find interesting the definition of “*polifunkcional'nyj*



*žanr*” (multifunctional genre) proposed by Marija Leskinen; the Russian scholar catalogues travel reports on the basis of the strategies employed by the author and their style into ‘literary’, ‘virtual’ and ‘scientific’ (i.e. geographic, ethnographic, etc.) travelogues:

In the XVIII–XXI centuries itineraries and travels have become the most favorite form for presenting attitudes, beliefs and experiences; they reflected artistic conceptions and looked for new forms of storytelling, embodied in political and scientific ideas [...]. Stories about the journey were actively used for didactic and moralizing purposes and became a tool of propaganda, manipulation, and advertising. Travelogue as a genre has blurred boundaries, it is easily integrated into any kind of non-literary text – from the novel to the guidebook, from the ethnographic literary essay to the diary, etc. [...]. It is a multifunctional genre with distinct signs of hybridity and dialogism.<sup>5</sup> (Leskinen 2014, 235)

| 13 |

In contrast, Ol’ga Skibina places the travel report expressly in the context of the belletristic and explains that it summarizes the traits of both a scientific (*naučnyj*) and artistic (*chudožestvennyj*) text because of the sources to which it refers: “documents, figures, statistics, tables and artistic-subject world of the author, including equally all these elements: portrait, landscape, interior, and most importantly – the same author (narrator)”<sup>6</sup> (Skibina 2014, 90).

5 “В XVIII–XXI вв. путевые заметки и травелоги становятся излюбленной формой изложения взглядов, убеждений и впечатлений; в них отражались художественные концепции и велись поиски новых форм повествования, воплощались политические и научные идеи [...]. Рассказы о путешествии активно использовались в дидактических и морализаторских целях, выступали инструментом пропаганды, манипуляции, рекламы. Травелог как жанр обладает размытыми границами, он легко встраивается в любые виды нелитературного текста – от романа до справочника-путеводителя, от этнографического литературного очерка до дневника и т.д. [...]. Это полифункциональный жанр с отчетливыми признаками гибридности и диалогизма”.

6 “Документы, цифры, статистика, таблицы и художественно-предметный мир автора, включающий в себя на равных все его



In this case, the background and the socio-cultural context belonging to the author-traveller play a fundamental role: “In literary travel, in contrast to scientific and other types, information material is based on the artistic and ideological concepts of the author. In addition to that, the genre of literary travel evolves in close connection with the development of social thought, the political situation and the literary process”<sup>7</sup> (Skibina 2014, 90).

| 14 |

The stylistic analysis of travel note forms, which are identified as *zapiski* and *zametki* (notes), *pis'ma s puti* (letters from travel), *portrety i pejzaži* (descriptions and landscapes) – claims Skibina – needs to keep in mind the total compositional freedom, the autonomy of gender and, consequently, the uniqueness of the final text: “This genre is ‘hybrid’, intermediating; so, it is necessary to speak about the ‘polycentrism’ of its genesis”<sup>8</sup> (Skibina 2014, 90), claims the Russian scholar.

To conclude this introduction, it is interesting to note that, despite socio-historical differences, the two travel experiences I am going to compare summarize the strong desire for self-determination and, in a certain sense, the negotiation of power, i.e. to be on the same level of other scholars, men, who had travelled the same routes, and to express one’s own critical opinion on the basis of a specific ideological *discourse*. Precisely through travel literature, the author-traveller’s self, projected in a wider space, becomes public and occupies an explicit position in political and cultural debate. As stated by Bernard Schweizer in this regard: “What gives a woman’s travel account a disruptive radical edge is not so much the gendered nature of her writing as the

---

элементы: портрет, пейзаж, интерьер, а главное, — самого рассказчика (повествователя)”.

- 7 “В литературных путешествиях, в отличие от научных и иных видов, информационный материал освещается на основе художественной и идеологической концепций автора. Кроме того, жанр литературного путешествия развивается в тесной связи с развитием общественной мысли, политической ситуацией и литературным процессом”.
- 8 “Жанр этот — «гибридный», промежуточный, следует говорить о «полицентризме» его генезиса”.



actual politics that motivate it, a politics based on specific views about social class, nationalism and comparative anthropology” (Schweizer 2001, 81).

## THE TRAVELS OF ELIZAVETA DE VITTE AND THE ATTEMPT TO BUILD A PAN-SLAVIC CULTURAL NETWORK

The intensifying activities of the Balkan populations for political sovereignty particularly during the 19th century drew the attention of foreign observers and travellers. As Maria Todorova noticed: “The effort to study the ancient world through the lives of the contemporary inhabitants [...] was soon extended to the different Slavs and other ethnic groups inhabiting the peninsula who became the live figures of what came increasingly to be seen as the *Volksmuseum* of Europe” (Todorova 2009, 63).

In the first decade of the 20th century Elizaveta de Vitte travelled through the Austro-Hungarian Empire to look for unity among the Slavs; in her series titled *Putevyja vpečatlěnjija* (*Travel Impressions*)<sup>9</sup> the author describes the Slavic world including the Czechs, the Slovaks, the Slovenes, the Galicians, and the Southern Slavs living in the Balkans and controlled by the government of Vienna.

De Vitte’s purpose was to support the idea of a Pan-Slavic unity, which would have been inspired and guaranteed by Russia because of their common cultural roots, which were based on the Cyrillo-Methodian heritage.

9 The complete series consists of six books: 1903. *Putevyja vpečatlěnjija. Dalmacija, Gercegovina i Serbija. Lěto 1902 goda.* Kiev: Tip. M.M. Fichs; 1904. *Putevyja vpečatlěnjija s’ istoričeskimi očerkami. Lěto 1903: Bukovina i Galičina.* Kiev: Tip. T.G. Mejnander; 1905a. *Putevyja vpečatlěnjija i istoričeskije očerki. Čechia. Lěto 1903. I.* Kremenec: Tip. L.D. Šumskij; 1905 b. *Putevyja vpečatlěnjija i istoričeskije očerki. Lužicy, Čechia i Moravija. Lěto 1903. II.* Kremenec: Tip. L.D. Šumskij; 1909. *Putevyja vpečatlěnjija s’ istoričeskimi očerkami. Slovačina i ugrorussy. Lěto 1903, 1906 i 1907 godov.* Počaev: Tip. Počaevo-Uspenskoj lavry; 1911. *Putevyja Vpečatlěnjija s’ istoričeskimi očerkami. Lěto 1907 i 1910 godov. Al’pijskija zemli i Primor’e s’ Triestom*”. Počaev: Tip. Počaevo-Uspenskoj lavry.

Before focusing on the content of her travelogue, it is necessary to understand why Elizaveta de Vitte decided to investigate the problem of Slavic unity beyond the Russian Empire's borders. Answering this question needs a step backwards and takes us to her previous personal and professional experience.<sup>10</sup> De Vitte had worked as *glavnaja nadziratel'nica* (main supervisor) and teacher for more than twenty years in three different female gymnasiums: in Tbilisi (1875–1878), in Kovno (1885–1897), and in Kiev (1897–1904). The enormous geographical space lets us rebuild an interesting journey along the inner suburbs of the Tsarist Empire: from the extreme south of the Empire (Tbilisi) to the centre (Kiev) passing through the *Zapadnyj kraj* or Western region (Kovno). She was induced to reflect on what Russian identity meant on the borders of the Empire, where differences among national identities appeared increasingly blurred<sup>11</sup>.

This long and heterogeneous experience led de Vitte to the definition of a specific *Weltanschauung*: according to this world view, education had to be strictly based on Orthodoxy, on loyalty towards Tsarist authority, and on Russian nationalism.

In 1904, when she was working in Kiev, Elizaveta de Vitte decided to give up that job to follow her main interest:

And so, tending towards freedom, with this feeling I left K\*[iev] on the 1st of June 1904 in order to wade through the West Russian borders. And the farther I went, stopping in many historical places, the more freedom I needed, freedom to work in another field,

---

10 De Vitte, Elizaveta Ivanovna. 1908. *Iz' vospominanij načal'nicy ženskoj gimnazii v' trech' častjach' 1875–1904 g.*, I–II. Počaevo: Tip. Počaevo-Uspenskoj lavry. Moreover, this website <<http://viaf.org/viaf/113047852/>> (last seen 14/01/2019) shows the main libraries where de Vitte's books are available. It is also possible to find them at the Russian State Library and at the State Historic Public Library of Russia in Moscow. See also Cobiss (2019a; 2019b).

11 For a proper historical introduction, see Etkind, Andrej et al. 2012. *Tam, vnutri. Praktiki vnutrennej kolonizacii v kul'turnoj istorii Rossii*. Moskva: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie; Kappeler, Andreas. 2009. *La Russia. Storia di un impero multietnico*. Translated by Alessandro Torelli. Roma: Edizioni Lavoro, 225–333.





which had begun to attract me in recent years and could satisfy my spiritual needs.<sup>12</sup> (de Vitte 1908, II, 171)

In the same period, she started to think about another crucial question: considering the ‘peripheral’ position that Russia occupies with respect to Western Europe, what was the role that it had to assume with regard to the universal progress of all humanity? How could Russia have contributed concretely to that?

Based on this thought, she decided to face directly the ‘Slavic question’ beyond the borders of the Tsarist Empire, contributing to the Pan-Slavic project. While Russia could accomplish its task – i.e. to place itself in Europe as a reference point for people with whom it shared a common cultural, linguistic and religious background and to contribute to the universal process of enlightenment (*prosveščenie*) – Elizaveta de Vitte, as an intellectual, would give her personal contribution to Pan-Slavic progress and conscience. This project simultaneously responded both to the need to redefine the position of the ‘great’ Russian Empire and to revise the role of the intellectual class, as Susanna Rabow-Edling has explained:

| 17 |

The nationalism of the Slavophiles was not a state-oriented nationalism aimed at political power. Rather, it was oriented towards national culture, and focused on the nation and the intellectuals in a symbiotic relationship. The nation, in the sense of the Russian way of life, needed the intellectuals as its interpreters and articulators. The intellectuals, on their part, needed the nation as their source for moral development. Despite its orientation towards culture, Slavophilism can be seen as a conscious project for social change [...]. Social change should be achieved through moral regeneration of the nation. (Rabow-Edling 2006, 137)

12 “И такъ, я рвалась на свободу, и съ этимъ чувствомъ я выѣхала изъ К\*\* 1-го Іюня 1904 года, чтобы проѣхать по западно-русскимъ окраинамъ. И чѣмъ далѣе я ѣхала, останавливаясь въ разныхъ историческихъ мѣстахъ, тѣмъ болѣе мнѣ хотѣлось свободы, свободы работать на другомъ поприщѣ, которое стало меня привлекать послѣдніе годы и, хотя нѣсколько удовлетворять моимъ духовнымъ потребностямъ”.



In order to do that, de Vitte collaborated with cultural and philanthropic organizations, such as St. Nicholas, Peter and Paul Orthodox Brotherhood (Kovno), Historical Society of the Annalist Nestor (Kiev), Historical-Genealogical Society (Moscow), the Society of Supporters of Russian History in the Memory of Emperor Aleksandr III (Saint Petersburg). In addition, she was a member of the Slavic Society of Kiev.<sup>13</sup> Thanks to that, she had the chance to travel to Austria-Hungary, focusing on the Slavs living in the Czech, the Slovak and the Slovenian lands, and in Galicia, Dalmatia, Herzegovina, Bosnia and Serbia. Her aim was to show Russian readers how important the Slavs were inside the Dual Monarchy: Russia, as the guide of the Pan-Slavic world, had to intervene to support them. She was personally entrusted with keeping in touch with cultural circles, schools and Orthodox communities beyond the Russian borders to consolidate exchanges (through courses of Russian language and literature, grants for young students that let them study in Russian universities, funding for newspapers, etc.). Nevertheless, it was first necessary to make the Russian audience aware of the existence of Slavic communities that needed Russia's support. For that reason, she decided to travel and to take notes directly on the other Slavs.

In this regard, in the introduction to the first travel book titled *Putevyja vpečatľenija. Dalmacija, Gercegovina, Bosnija i Serbija. Lěto 1902 goda*, Elizaveta de Vitte wrote:

---

13 The Slavic Charity Societies (Moscow 1858, Saint Petersburg 1867, Kiev 1869, Odessa 1870) had philanthropic purposes. Their members supported pro-Russian organizations in different regions of the Turkish and Austro-Hungarian Empires and financed young Slavic students who wanted to attend university in Russia. After the Balkan crisis of 1877–78, these societies reduced their activities, working only on cultural projects: scholarships, sending of books to Orthodox schools and churches abroad, clubs that spread Russian language and literature, especially in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Galicia, Subcarpathian Ruthenia and Bukovina. The main activity was therefore to create cultural exchanges and networks, maintaining contacts with these communities abroad. See Boro Petrovich, Michail. 1956. *The Emergence of Russian Panslavism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 129–152.



Publishing our «*Putevyja vpečatljnja*», first, we have in mind those readers, who do not know anything about the Slavic lands. We want to make them interested and to wake up their desire to know them closer; but considering that present time is closely connected with the past, the history of the Slavs represents a *terra incognita* for a large number of our readers. Besides, the past of Dalmatia, Herzegovina and Bosnia is completely unknown, for that reason we will give also a short historical essay for each of them, because it is necessary for our aim. (de Vitte 1903, 3)

She had reached Zagreb and Rijeka by train through Lviv and Budapest. Then she went by boat to Zadar and Split. She was immediately impressed by the complex mix among the Italian, the Austrian, the Slavic nationalities, and by landscapes: “The weather was beautiful, the hot sun shone in its entire splendor, but the sea, into the Northern part, was grey and monotonous. Its monotony is interrupted on the right side by the appearance on the surface of the Kvarner islands, which abound in the Dalmatian coast [...]. The Julian Alps serve as a link connecting the Austrian Alps with the Balkan peninsula’s mountain system” (de Vitte 1903, 5).

After entering Herzegovina, Elizaveta de Vitte introduces this region, affirming that it was a land of heroes, who had obtained freedom from the Turks but immediately afterwards Austria took its faith, language, land and heart. She claims that “the occupation by the Austrian government should have brought civilization to the wild country. But thanks to historical essays we can know that in this country there was an ancient and highly developed civilization. The country was rich to guarantee its free development” (de Vitte 1903, 72).

The great number of military barracks surprised Elizaveta de Vitte, who arrived in Sarajevo on 3rd July 1903. In addition, she found an archaeological and an ethnographic museum, many mosques, such as the Gazi Husrev-beg Mosque, an old Serbian-Orthodox church founded in the 16th century, a lot of government buildings, hotels and stores. In spite of the apparent growth, she claimed: “Bosnia and Herzegovina are the only countries in Europe where there are no independent newspapers; in the local newspapers, there are no headings for events in the

region, but only news about Austria is reported. It is the only country where no state institution has been established [...]; it may also be the only country where the natives do not participate in governance” (de Vitte 1903, 68).

In Mostar, as Rebecca West will also do, the Russian woman observes with great interest the presence of the Turks who seem to be scared, not able to talk freely, because of the huge number of Austrian soldiers. She also notices that local newspapers were always divided in two columns: on one side articles were written in Serbian (in the Cyrillic alphabet), on the other side in Latin: “A cultural wall has been built between two blood brothers, the Serbs of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Serbs of the Kingdom” (de Vitte 1903, 73).

The Russian traveller repeatedly denounces the activity of the Roman Catholic Church at the expense of the Orthodox community, and the interference of the Jesuits. The Catholic Church had become a ‘weapon’, says de Vitte, in the hands of the Austrian government that constantly tried to fuel tensions between the Serbs and the Croats: “I was convinced that in the Austrian lands Constitution [...] is a force for the oppression of the weak Slavs thanks to its incompleteness. In Dalmatia the Austrian government constantly pits Serbs and Croats inciting Serbs against Croats, Croats against Serbs, while it [Austria] remains at the side” (de Vitte 1903, 18). Furthermore, she claims with conviction that Austrian politics was based on one specific idea: “divide et impera”. So, she invites the Tsarist government to protect its interests in the area despite the fact that the Treaty of Berlin had demoralized Russia and all the Slavs: “The Balkan peninsula to the Balkans” (de Vitte 1903, 70), she wrote.

## REBECCA WEST AND HER JOURNEY THROUGH YUGOSLAVIA

When Rebecca West (Cecily Isabel Fairfield) visited the Balkans in the 1930s on the eve of World War II, she was already a famous writer and journalist. From the 1910s she wrote polemical articles for the *Freewoman* and for the socialist *Clarion*, demanding for women’s suffrage and better conditions for the working



class.<sup>14</sup> She has been defined as a supporter of English left-liberalism, anti-communist, pro-Labourist, a democratic socialist, and so on.<sup>15</sup> Bernard Schweizer described West as a ‘liberationist’, specifically with reference to her travel book *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1942): “her journeys in the Balkans furnished her with a host of arguments against every kind of oppression, in the public as well as in the private spheres. Consequently, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* is a monument to the ideologies of national self-rule, anti-imperialism, and feminism” (Schweizer 2001, 80).

| 21 |

Between 1935 and 1938, she went on three tours to Greece, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia with a specific purpose: to find an answer to and understand what was threatening Europe, which was supposed to come from the Balkans. She was wondering whether a new conflict, a war, was going to break out; in order to answer that question, she needed to visit the Balkans to have a more complete idea about the situation. The “Kingdom of the South Slavs” (Yugo-Slavia) had been founded in 1919, and when Rebecca West travelled there, Prince Paul Karadorđević was ruling the country. He was the cousin of King Alexander I, who had been killed in 1934 in Marseilles; his murder represented the input of West’s reflection and travel:

I heard the announcer relate how the King of Yugoslavia had been assassinated in the streets of Marseille that morning. We had passed into another phase of the mystery we are enacting on earth, and I knew that it might be agonizing [...]. It appeared to me inevitable that war must follow, and indeed it must have done, had not the Yugoslavian Government exercised an iron control on its population. (West 1993, 2)

*Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* is much more than an ordinary travel book: it is an extraordinary “combination of passion and certainty” as Trevor Royle stated in his introduction to the book (West 1993, xvii), making it a timeless and essential

14 See Marcus, Jane. 1982. *The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West, 1911–17*. London: Routledge in association with Virago Press.

15 See Schweizer, Bernard. 2001. *Radicals on the Road: The Politics of English Travel Writing in the 1930s*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.



book in order to understand the complexities of the Balkans. Structurally, the book does not have a clear narrative line; it is a collection of travel notes and different thoughts about history, folklore, politics, lifestyle and society. West's long and deep reflection on various topics would need a proper analysis, but according to the aim of my article and in order to compare it with Elizaveta de Vitte's travelogue, I have decided to focus on one more specific question concerning the identity of those people, the Slavs, who lived there:

| 22 |

I knew nothing about the South Slavs, nor had I come across anybody who was acquainted with them. I was only aware that they formed part of the Balkan people [...]. Violence was, indeed, all I knew of the South Slavs. I derived the knowledge from memories of my earliest interest in Liberalism, [...], and later from the prejudices of the French, who use the word '*Balkan*' as a term of abuse, meaning a *rastaquouère* type of barbarian [...]. But I must have been wholly mistaken in my acceptance of the popular legend regarding the Balkans, for if the South Slavs had been truly violent they would not have been hated first by the Austrians, who worshipped violence in an imperialist form, and later by the Fascists, who worship violence in a totalitarian form. (West 1993, 19–20)

Rebecca West discovers contradictions and conflicts, and thus a deep heterogeneity from social and ethnic points of view. Visiting Trebinje, Mostar, Sarajevo, Ilidža, Travnik, Jajce and Jezero, the British traveller specially focuses on the Muslims living there. According to her, they were Slavs, converted by the Turks, who tried to maintain possession of their lands. She described how she felt as if she were in front of the corpse of a great empire: "I hate the corpses of empires, they stink as nothing else. They stink so badly that I cannot believe that even in life they were healthy" (West 1993, 280). All the young Bosnian Slavs who had been obliged to serve the special Sultan's army, called "Janissaries", had tried to defend their identity at all costs, but, in fact, Turkish education was unable to make them forget they were Slavs. However, it was not only the Ottomans who tried to bend the Balkan Slavs. In addition, she explains that Russia tried to influence Bosnia: "through several channels, some of them most unexpected" (West 1993, 353). Rebecca West gives as an



example the boarding school for girls of Tsetinye (Cetinje), the capital of Montenegro at that time, which the Russian imperial family founded and financed in order to educate the daughters of the aristocratic families of Dalmatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

There is a constant reflection on the idea of Slavic unity in Yugoslavia. The three different guides, who led Rebecca West and her husband through Croatia, actually represented three different entities: Constantine, a Serbian poet, was a member of the Orthodox Church; Valetta, who worked at the University of Zagreb, came from Dalmatia and was a member of the Catholic Church; Marko Gregorijević was a journalist from Croatia. They always discuss the idea of Yugoslavian unity, their right to reach it and its difficulties.

According to Valetta, for example: “In Yugoslavia [...] it is as if the Serbs were the elder brother and we Croats the younger brother, under some law as the English, which gives the elder everything and the younger nothing” (West 1993, 84). Whereas Gregorijević stated: “we are its [of Austria] history. We Slavs in general, we Croats in particular. The Habsburgs won their victories with Czechs, with Poles, and, above all, with Croats. Without us the Austrians would have no history, and if we had not stood between them and the Turks, Vienna would now be a Moslem city” (West 1993, 63).

The conflict between the Serbs supporting a unified Yugoslavia and their non-Serbian opponents is expressed throughout the travelogue. Rebecca West openly declares her admiration for Serbia’s Byzantine heritage and for Orthodox Christianity – an authentic institution of Slav culture – in contrast with Roman Catholicism, which is described as a limiting and oppressive religious system. On the other hand, the Orthodox Church is seen as a vehicle of true Serbian culture.

In the epilogue, Rebecca West makes a long reflection on many different urgent topics. Writing about the South Slavs, the heritage left them from past great empires, and the disadvantages of being a part of this type of institution she claims:

In contemplating Yugoslavia these disadvantages of Empire are manifest [...]. The South Slavs have also suffered extremely from

the inability of empires to produce men who are able both to conquer territory and to administer it [...]. How strange a dream it was, it is, that the Southern Slavs should be reared to civilization by Russia! The Old Russia was not even a true empire, she was not even a modern state, she was rather a symbol of immense spiritual value but of little material efficacy. (West 1993, 1092–1906)

| 24 |

To conclude, considering West's opinions about the newborn Yugoslav reign, the reader cannot ignore repeated references to inner divisions, political contrasts, which were, according to the British woman, the heritage of Austro-Hungarian politics and, previously, of five centuries of slavery because of Turkish rule. At the end of the section devoted to "Croatia" Rebecca West wrote: "I had come to Yugoslavia to see what history meant in flesh and blood. I learned now that it might follow, because an empire passed, that a world full of strong men and women and rich food and heavy wine might nevertheless seem like a shadow-show" (West 1993, 103) and then: "Such a terrible complexity has been left by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which some desire to restore; such a complexity, in which nobody can be right and nobody can be wrong, and the future cannot be fortunate" (West 1993, 121).

It is noteworthy to observe how the places where she stopped mark out the complex process of history and its forces, which in Yugoslavia appeared particularly effective: "I knew that the past has made the present, and I wanted to see how the process works" (West 1993, 54). So, the reader can understand how the author-traveller adapts the journey motif to the purpose of political rhetoric. At that time, from Rebecca West's point of view, Yugoslavia was the symbol of imperialist resistance and nationalistic wrongs: "There is not the smallest reason for co-founding nationalism, which is the desire of a people to be itself, with imperialism, which is the desire of a people to prevent other peoples from being themselves" (West 1993, 843).

## CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that Elizaveta de Vitte and Rebecca West came from two different countries with different socio-political





institutions and traditions, their travelogues have interesting common points, such as (1) ideological commitment: both de Vitte and West are never afraid of expressing their political opinion. To the former, inner divisions could have been overcome by the intervention of Russia in the Balkan *affaire* to save the Slavs from the Austrian threat; for that purpose, it would have been necessary to improve the sharing of common Slavic culture opening centres of study and schools. Instead, to the latter, it appears really difficult to make unity concrete considering historical, socio-cultural and religious background. In the first case, heterogeneity in Slavic identity in the Balkans represents a starting point for a common project, while in the second it risks becoming the reason for a new conflict (or more). (2) The very act of travelling and travel writing become a way to place themselves within a historical continuum. The two women became “agents of their own history”. Those lands are not just places to visit but need to be revealed and explained to be understood by their readers. (3) Both women-travellers think about women and their role in history.

On this last point, for example, according to Elizaveta de Vitte education was the most important conquest for women and the sole way to protect and maintain their true Slavic identity: “The aim of a common education for Slavic women is peace among the hostile Slavic nationalities thanks to the woman” (de Vitte 1903, 83). Rebecca West also makes some general comments about the history of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and tries to consider what would have happened if women had played a different role; she suggests as an example the case of Empress Elizabeth:

Elizabeth [...] should have solved the problem of the Slav populations under the Habsburg rule. The Slavs [...] came from Asia into the Balkan Peninsula early in the Christian era and were Christianized by Byzantine influence. [...]. Now all of these were under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Czechs and the Croats, and the Slovenes and the Slovaks and the Dalmatians [...]. Therefore they [the Austrians] harried the Slavs as much as they could, by all possible economic and social penalties, tried with especial venom to destroy their languages, and created for themselves an



increasing amount of internal disorder which all sane men saw to carry a threat of disruption. It might have saved the Empire altogether, it might have averted the war of 1914, if Elizabeth had dealt with the Slavs as she dealt with the Hungarians. (West 1993, 4–5)

To conclude, as scholars of women's travel writing have claimed, it is not so simple to define "gendered" elements that go beyond specific cultures and countries. It is possible that approaching these texts in terms of 'multiple discourses' becomes more productive in better understanding how scientific knowledge takes form in literature, emigrating from the theoretical field to political, nationalist and imperialist discourses.

| 26 |

## REFERENCES

- Bracewell, W., and Drace-Francis, A. 2008. *A Bibliography of East European Travel Writing on Europe*. Budapest/New York: Central European University Press.
- Bracewell, W., and Drace-Francis, A. 2009. *Orientations: An Anthology of East European Travel Writing, ca. 1550–2000*. Budapest/New York: Central European University Press.
- Boro Petrovich, M. 1956. *The Emergence of Russian Pan Slavism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cobiss. 2019a. De Vitte. Accessed 14 January, 2019, <https://plus.si.cobiss.net/opac7/bib/search?q=de+vitte&db=cobib&mat=allma+allmate&auf=vitte%2C+elizaveta+de>.
- Cobiss. 2019b. De Vitte. Accessed 14 January, 2019, [http://www.vbs.rs/scripts/cobiss?ukaz=SEAL&mode=5&id=0901450734265040&PF=AU&term=%22%D0%B4%D0%B5%20%D0%92%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%82%D0%B5,%20%D0%95.%22\\_](http://www.vbs.rs/scripts/cobiss?ukaz=SEAL&mode=5&id=0901450734265040&PF=AU&term=%22%D0%B4%D0%B5%20%D0%92%D0%B8%D1%82%D1%82%D0%B5,%20%D0%95.%22_)
- De Vitte, E.I. 1903. *Putevyja vpečatlěnjija. Dalmacija, Gercegovina, Bosnija i Serbija. Lěto 1902 goda*. Kiev: Tip. M.M. Fichs.
- De Vitte, E.I. 1904. *Putevyja vpečatlěnjija s" istoričeskimi očerkami. Lěto 1903: Bukovina i Galičina*. Kiev: Tip. T.G. Mejnander.
- De Vitte, E.I. 1905a. *Putevyja vpečatlěnjija i istoričeskije očerki. Čechia. Lěto 1903. I*. Kremenec: Tip. L. D. Šumskij.
- De Vitte, E.I. 1905b. *Putevyja vpečatlěnjija i istoričeskije očerki. Lužicy, Čechia i Moravija. Lěto 1903. II*. Kremenec: Tip. L. D. Šumskij.
- De Vitte, E.I. 1908. *Iz" vospominanij načal'nicy ženskoj gimnazii v" trech" častjach" 1875–1904 g., I–II*. Počaev: Tip. Počaevo-Uspenskoj lavry.



- De Vitte, E.I. 1909. *Putevyja vpečatljnija s'' istoričeskimi očerkami. Slovačina i ugrorussy. Lěto 1903, 1906 i 1907 godov.* Počaev: Tip. Počaevo-Uspenskoj lavry.
- De Vitte, E.I. 1911. *Putevyja vpečatljnija s'' istoričeskimi očerkami. Leto 1907 i 1910 godov. Al'pijskija zemli i Primor'e s'' Triestom''.* Počaev: Tip. Počaevo-Uspenskoj lavry.
- Etkind, A., et al. 2012. *Tam, vnutri. Praktiki vnutrennej kolonizacii v kul'turnoj istorii Rossii.* Moskva: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie.
- Foucault, M. 2002. *The Archeology of Knowledge.* London: Routledge.
- Ghose, I. 1998. *The Power of the Female Gaze. Women Travellers in Colonial India.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kappeler, A. 2009. *La Russia. Storia di un impero multi-etnico.* Translated by S. Torelli. Roma: Edizioni Lavoro.
- Leskinen, M. 2014. 'Zapiski poljakov sarmatskoj epochi v kontekste sovremennykh issledovanij putešestvija/traveloga v narrativnom aspekte.' In *Slavjanskij al'manach, 1–2*, edited by T. Vendina et al., 235–247. Moskva: INDRIK.
- Marcus, J. 1982. *The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West, 1911–17.* London: Routledge in association with Virago Press.
- Muir Mackenzie, G., and Irby, A.P. 1867. *Travels in the Slavonic provinces of Turkey-in-Europe: The Turks, the Greeks, and the Slavons.* London: Bell & Daldy.
- Rabow-Edling, S. 2006. *Slavophile Thought and the Politics of Cultural Nationalism.* Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Rosslyn, W., and Tosi, A. 2007. *Women in Russian Culture and Society, 1700–1825.* Houndmills: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Schweizer, B. 2001. *Radicals on the Road: The Politics of English Travel Writing in the 1930s.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Skibina, O. 2014. 'Putevoj očerk: sinkretizm žanra (na primere ruskij publicistiki XIX veka).' In *Voprosy teorii i praktiki žurnalistiki*, 4: 90.
- Todorova, M. 2009. *Imagining the Balkans.* Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.
- Virtual International Authority File. 'Elizaveta Ivanovna'. Accessed 14 January, 2019, <http://viaf.org/viaf/113047852/>.
- West, R. 1993. *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey through Yugoslavia.* Edinburgh: Canongate Classics.