



УНИВЕРСИТЕТ ПО БИБЛИОТЕКОЗНАНИЕ
И ИНФОРМАЦИОННИ ТЕХНОЛОГИИ
КАТЕДРА „КУЛТУРА, ИСТОРИЧЕСКО НАСЛЕДСТВО
И ТУРИЗЪМ“



МНОГОЛИКАТА НАУКА

СБОРНИК ДОКТОРАНТСКИ
И ПОСТДОКТОРАНТСКИ ЧЕТЕНИЯ 2025

DISCIPLINA VARIABILIS

DOCTORAL AND POSTDOCTORAL
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS 2025

ЗА БУКВИТЕ
О ПИСМЕНОХЪ

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ОТ ШЕСТИТЕ ГОДИШНИ ДОКТОРАНТСКИ И ПОСТДОКТОРАНТСКИ ЧЕТЕНИЯ
НА КАТЕДРА „КУЛТУРА, ИСТОРИЧЕСКО НАСЛЕДСТВО И ТУРИЗЪМ“
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PRESERVING SERBIAN HISTORICAL AND LITERARY HERITAGE: UNCOVERING HISTORICAL AND POETIC DIMENSIONS IN DESANKA MAKSIMOVIĆ'S LETTERS TO RUSSIAN TRANSLATORS

Maša Lj. Petrović

Abstract: This paper emerged from the author's collaboration with the Desanka Maksimović Endowment in Belgrade, during which a collection of unpublished letters exchanged between the poet and her Russian translators Ida Radvoljina and Olga Kutasova was prepared for publication. The central objective is to examine the interpretive and historiographical potential of this correspondence through a close content analysis of selected letters, contextualised alongside Maksimović's late poetic works. Also, the paper examines how her personal correspondence reveals lesser-known aspects of her political views and life experiences. Special attention is given to her reflections on communism, Yugoslav-Soviet relations, and the socio-political tensions of late 20th-century Yugoslavia. The research integrates methods from literary theory, biographical criticism, and new literacy studies, treating the letters as culturally situated discursive practices. The findings may be of interest to scholars in literary studies, Slavic studies, cultural history, cultural memory, literary heritage, and epistolary research, offering a nuanced perspective on one of Serbia's most influential poets of the 20th century.

Keywords: Desanka Maksimović's correspondence, private letters, poetic reflections, political reflections, preservation of literary and historical heritage

Introduction

Desanka Maksimović (1898–1993) was not only one of the most important poets and cultural figures of the 20th century but also the only woman who achieved the status of a national poet among the Serbian people. Her poetry is known, read, and recited by people of all ages. Within the Serbian reading public, she is widely recognised as a poet of gentle tones, with tender and subtle love lyrics and vivid poetic imagery of forests, rivers, mountains, plants, and animals. At the same time, she is remembered as an outstanding patriot and a revolutionary poet who gave voice to the suffering and struggles of the Serbian people, from the Battle of Kosovo against the Ottomans in 1389 to the wartime devastation of the First and Second World Wars. She was frequently described as a socially engaged poet who felt the soul of her people, understood the historical hardships endured by the Serbian nation, empathised with the hunger and poverty of the most vulnerable, and advocated for universal education in a spirit of enlightenment.

Her work also praised heroism, loyalty, and courage, while criticising negligence toward one's ancestors, alienation, and the forgetting of cultural roots.

It is therefore not surprising that Serbian literary criticism regards her as an absolute poet, whose poetic structures embody both national and personal experience, the elements that provide meaning to poetry and ethically as well as aesthetically legitimise poetic expression (Andrejević, 1999, p. 46). As Branko Ristić notes in his essay “Desanka Maksimović among the Bulgarians” (1999), she is one of the most translated Slavic poets and among the most translated Yugoslav authors in Bulgaria. Her work is included in all anthologies of Serbian poetry published in Bulgarian, and from the 1930s until her death, her poems were regularly translated into Bulgarian immediately after publication (Ristić, 1999, pp. 151–153).

Given the extent of her reception in Serbia, Bulgaria, and other countries around the world, as well as the cultural recognition she enjoys, I believe that the topic of this paper is both relevant and innovative. It offers a key to a new understanding of her later works and reveals certain historically unknown or lesser-known facts and insights about her life, as well as her reflections and political views on communism, post-World War II Yugoslavia, the relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, Serb-Albanian relations in Kosovo and Metohija, Serb-Croat relations within Yugoslavia, and the dissolution of the common South Slavic state.

Recognising that letter writing and its analysis “like all other types of literacy objects and events gain their meaning and significance from being situated in cultural beliefs, values and practices” (Barton & Hall, 2000, p. 1), this paper seeks to explore the interpretive and historical potential of Desanka Maksimović’s epistolary discourse. The primary objective is to conduct a close content analysis of selected letters addressed to the Russian translators Ida Radvoljina and Olga Kutasova, with the aim of offering new readings of several of Maksimović’s late poetic works. Particular attention will be paid to her reflective and patriotic poems from the collections “No Man’s Land” (1979), “Speech of Love” (1983), “Landmarks of Memory” (1988), “Heavenly Loom” (1991), and “The Elder Flute” (1992), which will be reinterpreted in light of insights drawn from her personal correspondence. In addition to this interpretive focus, the paper also aims to examine Maksimović’s political and ideological positions as they emerge from her letters, especially her views on the broader political climate of the late 20th century. Finally, by situating the letters within their historical context, the study will seek to uncover lesser-known or previously undocumented aspects of her biography, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of her intellectual and poetic legacy.

Research Methodology

This study applies a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology that combines literary theory, cultural history, and biographical criticism. The central methodological focus is the content analysis of selected letters written by Desanka Maksimović to Russian translators Ida Radvoljina and Olga Kutasova. These letters are examined in parallel with close readings of her late poems from the collections “No Man’s Land” (1979), “Speech of Love” (1983), “Landmarks of Memory” (1988), “Heavenly Loom” (1991), and “The Elder Flute” (1992). The study relies on established methods in literary scholarship, including analysis, synthesis, comparison, and contextualisation.

Particular emphasis is placed on understanding letters as culturally situated textual forms, as Barton and Hall note,

letters are a common form of text and letter writing is one of the most pervasive literacy activities in human societies, that crosses informal and formal contexts, and that [...] can be found in most of the domains in life’ (2000, p. 1). So, the letters are thus approached not only as biographical documents but as forms of social discourse shaped by cultural, historical, and ideological frameworks. Furthermore, the analysis follows the principle that ‘the most revealing way of investigating letter writing is to view it as a social practice, examining the texts, the participants, the activities and the artefacts in their social contexts (Barton & Hall, 2000, p. 1).

The Maksimović’s letters are approached as culturally embedded literacy practices, in line with the theoretical insights of new literacy studies about letter writing as social practice, which emphasise the socio-cultural context of written communication.

The analysis follows established methods of literary interpretation, including structural, thematic, and symbolic reading, while also integrating tools from cultural studies, such as discourse analysis and contextualisation within broader ideological and historical frameworks. Biographical criticism is employed to trace connections between Maksimović’s private reflections and her public poetic voice, especially regarding political and national themes. By synthesising interpretive, contextual, and comparative approaches, this paper aims to offer new insights into the poet’s late work and worldview. The interdisciplinary methodology enables the uncovering of lesser-known historical and ideological aspects of Maksimović’s writing, bridging personal correspondence and literary expression.

Results Findings

Within both the general public and scholarly literary circles, it is well known that Desanka Maksimović's lyrical poetry during and after the Second World War was socially engaged. Fundamentally rooted in local and patriotic themes, it often incorporated strong social elements and motifs. This was poetry that, as Slobodan Ž. Marković notes, preserves the poet's lyricism, in which tones of melancholy and sorrow, excitement and pride, suffering and elation alternate and intertwine. One can sense in it a liberating strength but it also expresses the human weaknesses of the poet's compatriots; it offers support, yet does not withhold reproach (Marković, 1990, p. 37). This poetry radiated the spirit of national renewal and post-war reconstruction, while also pointing to the pressing issues of the time. Through it, Desanka Maksimović came to be accepted as a national poet, one who understood the soul and life of the common person, who shared in the joys and sorrows of her people and her country.

The poet herself was aware of her public reputation, a matter she did not address openly but which becomes evident in her private correspondence. In offering suggestions to her Russian translator Ida Radvoljina regarding the translation of her socially engaged and patriotic poems, she reflects on her conduct during the Second World War and expresses a sense that it may have been more difficult for her not to be present on the battlefield. Consequently, she sought to evoke, through her poetry, the suffering of those who experienced the war from a distance. Particularly telling in this regard are the following lines:¹

*Perhaps even during the war you imagined me as a hero, since you came to know in peacetime that I was no coward. If there are two kinds of courage, I possess the other kind, the secondary one. Had I been younger, perhaps I too would have found myself in the forest, as our people say, during the war. That might have been easier for my soul, if not physically as well, for some of the suffering endured by those in the rear was worse than that of the fighters. In the collection *The Poet and the Homeland*, there is a poem of mine, I believe it is titled *Welcome*, in which I tried to paint and lament precisely that kind of suffering and humiliation faced by those behind the front lines (Maksimović, 2025, pp. 27–28).*

These lines from Maksimović's correspondence offer a poignant insight into the poet's self-perception during and after the Second World War, revealing a deeply introspective and ethically nuanced stance on the nature of courage and artistic responsibility. In a broader sense, these reflections exemplify the intersection of

biography and poetics, where private sentiment becomes entangled with public memory. Maksimović's self-aware commentary, shaped by gendered and ideological expectations of heroism, ultimately affirms the legitimacy of poetic testimony as both personal confession and collective address.

The poet also held a clear and well-articulated stance toward communism, and she expressed her views publicly, without fear of the potential consequences that criticism of the political regime might entail. She wrote about this in her correspondence with her Russian translators, particularly highlighting how the new authorities in Belgrade, following the end of the war, were extremely ruthless toward writers of bourgeois background. In later years, during the escalation of the Tito–Stalin split, Maksimović emphasised her support for the country's post-war recovery and development but she admitted that communist ideology never truly appealed to her. She could not genuinely believe in it, as it failed to respect the human being as such, valuing only ideological conformity. As she herself writes, the individual meant more to her than any idea or belief. Rather than adopting a combative stance, Maksimović offers a deeply personal rationale for her scepticism toward communist ideology: its dehumanising tendencies and its conditional regard for individuals, based not on intrinsic human worth but on ideological alignment. It speaks to a broader tradition within Central and Eastern European literature in which writers articulated forms of interior dissent that were not overtly oppositional but nonetheless subversive in their insistence on the irreducible value of human subjectivity (Konrád & Széleányi, 1979).

In this same spirit of humanistic values lies Maksimović's perspective on the relationship between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. The rift between Tito and Stalin, which led to Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Cominform in 1948 and a subsequent intensification of anti-Soviet policy (Perović, 2007), is consistently refracted in her writing through the lens of its impact on the ordinary individual. The very fact that she continued corresponding with her Russian translators during this period speaks volumes in itself. However, it is equally important to note that she closely followed and commented on the evolving nature of this relationship throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Since her correspondence has not previously been thoroughly examined, scholars of her work have not had access to this dimension of her thought. With the recent availability of these letters, her views on such matters are now coming to light in a clear and public way. In one letter from 1962, she writes:

I would love to see all of you in Belgrade, in my home, to embrace you and kiss you. And I believe that one day, soon, that will happen. You see, we are reconciling again, loving, trading, you are helping us, the officials are visiting one another, so perhaps they will allow such pleasures for the people too (Maksimović, 2025, p. 27).

Through the warm and personal tone of the letter, she comments on the normalisation of Yugoslav–Soviet relations in the early 1960s, alluding to official diplomacy while implicitly emphasising the emotional and human dimension of political reconciliation. Her hope that *such pleasures* might eventually be granted to ordinary people reflects a deeply humanistic concern for the lived consequences of international politics. While refraining from overt ideological declarations, she manages to embed a quiet critique and a longing for a more humane political climate. This letter, like much of her work, testifies to the fact that Maksimović consistently responded to contemporary political events and inscribed them into both her private correspondence and her poetry.

For this reason, many scholars of her work, as well as general readers, were puzzled by the absence of patriotic poetry in her collections published between 1972 and 1993. They noted the lack of poems that would creatively reflect the political and historical moment, as she had done in the 1940s with works such as “A Bloody Fairytale”, “In Captivity”, “Serbia is a Great Secret”, and “Serbia Awakens”. However, a closer look at her correspondence with her Russian translators and close friends, Ida Radvoljina and Olga Kutasova, reveals an important poetic stance. In one letter, she writes:

The poems I am about to send are somewhat different from those that were first translated by you, from those I wrote during the war. Somehow, I am returning again to my earlier themes, to what is called pure lyricism (Maksimović, 2025, p. 112).

Based on these words, it is clear that the poet felt a need to turn toward a more intimate form of lyricism, while also expressing a readiness to return to patriotic themes should the nation once again face hardship. Although she expressed a clear poetic intention, when the first politically turbulent years in Yugoslavia emerged, particularly during the 1970s with the rise of the Croatian Spring and the reawakening of long-standing tensions between Croats and Serbs, and later in the 1980s with the escalation of conflicts between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo and Metohija, Desanka Maksimović remained publicly and artistically silent. Whether

this silence was the result of illness and physical weakness, which, according to her letters, had already taken hold, or whether it stemmed from fear for her own life and the safety of her descendants, remains uncertain.

What is clear from her correspondence, however, is that she held strong opinions on these events, that they deeply affected her emotionally, and that it was painful for her to witness brotherly nations resolving their disputes through conflict and violence. The following excerpt from one of her letters makes this especially evident:

Things in our country are now even worse than before. A terrible feud. The Croats increasingly cannot stand the Serbs. Now they are creating a new language, just for literature. The Muslims have completely forgotten that they are not Turks and are declaring themselves a new Muslim nation. The Albanians are relentless: they rape, destroy cemeteries, and want to completely get rid of the Serbs. The Slovenians want to secede and unite with the neighbouring Germans. And Vojvodina – well, I can't even bring myself to talk about that anymore (Maksimović, 2025, p. 105).

From a discourse analytical perspective, this passage reveals a highly polarised and emotionally charged representation of ethnic relations in late socialist Yugoslavia (Wodak, 2011). Ideologically, the letter echoes key elements of the Serbian national narrative that gained strength in the 1970s and 1980s (see Cigar, 1995; Greenberg, 2004; Ramet, 2006) and reveals how private writing can serve as a conduit for broader ideological concerns, blending personal emotion with nationalist discourse rooted in a specific historical and political context.

Having insight into this letter offers a different perspective on the interpretation of certain late poems by Desanka Maksimović, such as *The Battlefield*, published in the collection “*The Elder Flute*” (1992). Specifically, it becomes evident to both the reader and the interpreter that her verses carry not only a universal and abstract semantic charge applicable to all wartime contexts but also suggest that the poet had specific historical events in mind that inspired the creation of the poem and the articulation of such sentiments. This refers to the first clashes between Serbs and Croats in 1972, a time when Yugoslavia, symbolically speaking, was full of moles, informants, and traitors, and when the general populace was gripped by distrust and anxiety (Bjelac, 1999). Therefore, it can be observed that the overwhelming fear of death experienced by the poem’s lyrical subject, stylised in a hyperbolic manner so as to engulf everyone around him, mirrors the fear Desanka

describes in her letter to Olga Kutasova and Ida Radvoljina regarding the conflict with the Croats.

Similar correlations between the epistolary voice of Desanka Maksimović and her late poetry emerge when the poet addresses the conflict between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo and Metohija. If we are not aware of her position expressed in her correspondence with Ida Radviljina and Olga Kutasova, in which she writes:

The situation in the country is at its darkest. The Albanians are blackmailing us, insulting us, hating us; war may break out, and I have four such good, intelligent nephews. Our fellow Yugoslavs are only now beginning to consider our suffering, now that it seems the Albanians may reach their doorsteps too. And if blood is shed, we will again be the first in line and blamed for starting the war. (Maksimović, 2025, pp. 107–108),

we would interpret the poem *Before the Mine Shaft* in a completely different way. Namely, Desanka Maksimović's private letter, though personal in tone, functions as a powerful instance of political discourse. It reflects entrenched ideological positions and collective narratives that align with broader ethno-political tensions in late Yugoslav society. Maksimović constructs Albanians as an inherently antagonistic group, positioning Serbs as victims of their hostility. This rhetorical strategy mirrors what Teun A. van Dijk identifies as "in-group favouritism and outgroup derogation" in ideological discourse, wherein the dominant group presents itself as morally superior and under threat (van Dijk, 1998). Such discourse plays a key role in shaping public perception by creating a polarised us-versus-them binary. In the Yugoslav context, these binaries were instrumental in the political radicalisation of ethnic identities during the 1980s and 1990s.

The personalisation of suffering not only humanises the in-group but also fosters empathy and solidarity, positioning the group as innocent and undeserving of aggression. This aligns with broader patterns of "suffering nationalism", where collective identity is constructed through an ongoing experience of pain and persecution, thereby legitimising resistance and potential violence as necessary acts of self-defence (Dragović Soso, 2002). Moreover, the text reveals a profound sense of disillusionment with the federal Yugoslav structure and interethnic solidarity. The perception that other national groups only acknowledge suffering when it directly impacts them highlights the fragmentation and weakening of the Yugoslav project (Ramet, 1992). This erosion of trust among constituent nations contributed

significantly to the rise of nationalist sentiments and political instability in the 1970s and 1980s.

Finally, the anticipation of violence and the rhetoric of inevitability reflect a cyclical understanding of history marked by repeated victimisation and unjust accusations. This cyclical narrative taps into deeply rooted national myths that portray the group as both the primary victims and wrongfully blamed aggressors. Such framing is characteristic of broader Balkanist narratives, which intertwine internal self-perceptions with external representations (Todorova, 1997), further complicating the political and social landscape. In sum, Maksimović's epistolary voice exemplifies how personal affect and political ideology can converge, providing insight into the ideological undercurrents that shaped the breakdown of Yugoslav identity and the eruption of ethno-political conflict.

Given the aforementioned attitudes, her late poem "Before the Mine Shaft" can be read as an artistic attempt to confront and negotiate the entrenched national prejudices previously highlighted. Notably, the poem gives voice to an Albanian child who seeks to teach the narrator about the beauty of national diversity and to forestall conflict. The verses convey a powerful message of peace and mutual understanding. These lines emphasise the futility of ethnic divisions when contrasted with shared humanity and innocence. The child's perspective, free from the burden of inherited enmity, invites a hopeful vision where religious and ethnic differences are acknowledged but do not impede coexistence. In doing so, the poem challenges the dominant narratives of fear and hostility by positing empathy and dialogue as alternatives to violence. It is this poetic gesture, rooted in both personal sensitivity and political consciousness, which enriches Maksimović's late work, offering a subtle yet poignant critique of the nationalist ideologies that marred the Yugoslav social fabric.

The poet also addresses Serbian–Albanian relations in the poem "There Are More of You Underground", published in the collection "No Man's Land" (1979). Her positions, articulated in her private correspondence, cast this poem in a different light and contribute to the depth of its interpretation. Thanks to this additional context, beyond the poem's pessimistic tone and its focus on existential questions of life in Kosovo and Metohija, as well as its eschatological lament for the fallen Kosovars, another layer of meaning becomes evident, one tied to ideological and religious questions. The poet openly names the Albanians as enemies and emphasises that they forbid the Serbs from lighting candles and paying respects at the graves of their ancestors. This powerful and emotionally charged accusation

situates the poem within a broader discourse of cultural and spiritual dispossession. By invoking the ritual act of lighting candles at graves, central to Serbian Orthodox mourning traditions, Maksimović draws attention to the violation not only of physical space but of memory, identity, and sacred obligation. The denial of such acts is presented not merely as political oppression but as an assault on the metaphysical continuity between the living and the dead. In this way, the poet's depiction of Albanians as obstructing access to ancestral graves transcends ethnic conflict and enters the realm of symbolic and religious violence, reinforcing the gravity of the historical and moral stakes embedded in the poem.

Conclusion

The analysis of Desanka Maksimović's correspondence with Russian translators Ida Radvoljina and Olga Kutasova, alongside close readings of her late poetry, confirms the initial working hypothesis that her epistolary discourse reveals an underexplored layer of political consciousness and ethical reflection. These private letters, previously unexamined in scholarly literature, significantly contribute to a deeper understanding of her poetic oeuvre, particularly those works composed during the last two decades of her life. Contrary to the prevailing image of Maksimović as a primarily lyrical or patriotic poet anchored in historical memory, the correspondence discloses a politically alert, ideologically sceptical, and morally grounded author whose humanistic values inform both her personal reflections and her poetic expression.

The findings reveal that Maksimović remained consistently engaged with the political currents of her time. Her letters demonstrate an ongoing concern with the moral cost of ideological conformity, the dangers of historical amnesia, and the erosion of interethnic solidarity in Yugoslavia. Importantly, they shed light on her ambivalence toward communism, her critique of cultural persecution, her disillusionment with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and her profound empathy with the suffering of the Serbian people in Kosovo and Metohija. These views are not only articulated in private but are also subtly encoded in her poetry through metaphors of silence, mourning, estrangement, and spiritual continuity.

Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that Maksimović's poetry and correspondence must be read as mutually illuminating. Her poetic vision does not retreat from politics but rather reframes it through ethical and existential concerns. Far from being apolitical, her late poems, especially when read in tandem with her letters, constitute a sustained, if often understated, commentary on the ideological and cultural crises of her time. Through this lens, Maksimović emerges not only as

a national poet but also as a politically and historically conscious intellectual whose voice resonates with urgency, integrity, and compassion. Further research might continue to explore how her unpublished correspondence with other interlocutors contributes to the evolving portrait of a poet who, even in her final years, remained committed to bearing witness to the world around her.

NOTES

1. All translations of Desanka Maksimović's texts from Serbian into English in this paper are the author's own.

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СЪХРАНЯВАНЕ НА СРЪБСКОТО ИСТОРИЧЕСКО И ЛИТЕРАТУРНО НАСЛЕДСТВО: РАЗКРИВАНЕ НА ИСТОРИЧЕСКИТЕ И ПОЕТИЧНИТЕ ИЗМЕРЕНИЯ В ПИСМАТА НА ДЕСАНКА МАКСИМОВИЧ ДО РУСКИТЕ ПРЕВОДАЧКИ

Резюме: Докладът е резултат на сътрудничество с Фондация „Десанка Максимович“ в Белград, в рамките на което бе подготвена за публикуване сбирка от непубликувани писма между поетесата и нейните руски преводачки Ига Рагволина и Олга Кутасова. Основната цел е да се изследва интерпретативният и историографският потенциал на кореспонденцията чрез детайлен съдържателен анализ на подбрани писма, поставени в контекста на късната поезия на Максимович. Изследването разглежда как личната ѝ кореспонденция разкрива по-слабо известни аспекти от нейните политически възгледи и житейски преживявания. Особено внимание е отделено на размисленията ѝ за комунизма, югославско-съветските отношения и социалнополитическото напрежение в кр. на XX в. Изследването съчетава методи от литературната теория, биографичната критика и новите изследвания върху писмеността и разглежда писмата като културно обусловени дискурсивни практики. Резултатите биха могли да представляват интерес за изследователи на литературознанието, славистиката, културната история, културната памет, литературното наследство и епистоларните изследвания, предлагайки нюансирана перспектива към една от най-влиятелните сръбски поетеси на XX в.

Ключови думи: Десанка Максимович, лични писма, поетични размисления, политически размисления, опазване на литературното наследство

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