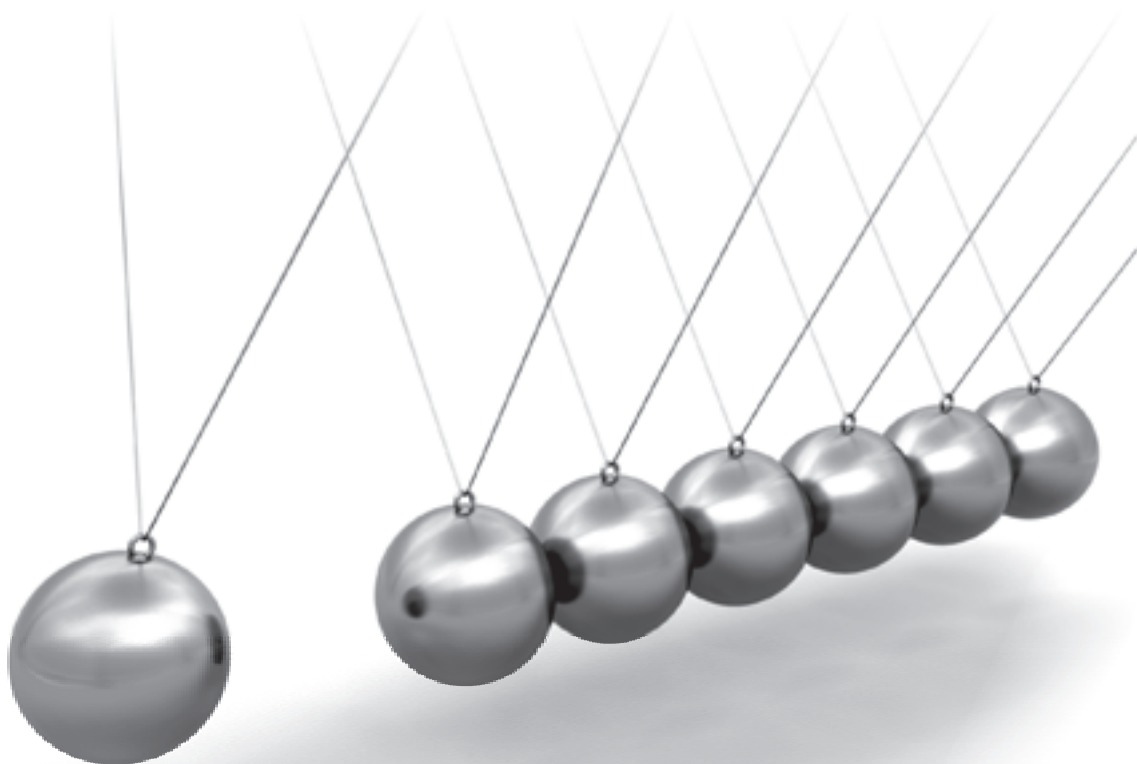


Women in Times of Crisis

Edited by Irina Deretić



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Times of Crisis

Edited by Irina Deretić

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Edited by Irina Deretić
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CONTENTS

- 7 | *Irina Deretić*
Preface
- 9 | *Aleksandar Kandić*
Emancipation or Instrumentalization: Some Remarks
on Plato's Feminism
- 21 | *Tamara Plećaš*
Female Friendship in Ancient Greece and Rome
in Times of Crisis
- 35 | *Irina Deretić*
Aspasia: Woman in Crises
- 49 | *Dragana Dimitrijević*
St. Monica as Participant in St. Augustine's Philosophical
Companionship: A Woman's Voice in the Time of Crisis
- 63 | *Višnja Knežević*
Hegel's Antigone: Crisis and Collapse of the Ancient
Greek *Sittlichkeit*
- 75 | *Melina Rokai*
The Balkan Sanitary Crisis in the British Women's Narratives
during WWI
- 87 | *Jovan Bukovala*
Isidora Sekulić: The First Martyr of Serbian Literary Scene
- 101 | *Marija Petrović*
Dealing with a Crisis: A Note from Ksenija Atanasijević

Jovan Bukovala*

ISIDORA SEKULIĆ: THE FIRST MARTYR OF SERBIAN LITERARY SCENE

Abstract: With this review, we will try to shed light on the suffering of Isidora Sekulić who has always been belittled, disavowed, misunderstood, rejected, improperly recognized, so she can rightly be called the first martyr of the Serbian literary scene.

Keywords: Isidora Sekulić, Milovan Đilas, communism

Instead of an Introduction

Throughout the existence of the human species, each time brought with it a certain crisis. Thus, throughout history, man and society have always gone through a political, economic, spiritual, moral, but, unfortunately, mostly through a health crisis. We are witnesses that last year and this year were marked by the pandemic of the COVID-19 virus, and we are afraid that the years ahead are also coming. However, a rhetorical question arises: at what time was there no crisis?!

From antiquity to the present day, there have been men, but also women who have left an indelible mark in the era of civilization with their works. Most of them were writers, painters, philosophers. Works, books and monographs about many scientists and artists have been published in our periodicals. Here are just a few that received the most attention: Ksenija Atanasijević (1894–1981), the first woman to receive a doctorate in philosophy, and Anica Savić-Rebac (1892–1953), a famous philosopher, writer and also a professor at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade, whose tragic fate was even recorded on the television drama “Coast of longing” produced by Television Belgrade in 2002, and Desanka Maksimović (1898–1993), our greatest poet.

* Jovan Bukovala, Junior Research Assistant, Institute for Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, e-mail: jovan.bukovala@f.bg.ac.rs.

We must not lose the fact that a lot of research results also referred to Isidora Sekulić (1877–1958). Unfortunately, few people dealt with her fate in difficult times, such as the tuberculosis disease due to which she lost members of her immediate family, the First and Second World Wars, and, above all, the period after the Second World War when she was persecuted under communism, but also of the whole life to a greater or lesser extent.

With this review, we will try to shed light on the suffering of Isidora Sekulić who has always been belittled, disavowed, misunderstood, rejected, improperly recognized, so she can rightly be called the first martyr of the Serbian literary scene.

The Apostle of Loneliness

The smartest Serbian woman has been accompanied by family tragedies since birth. She lost one brother at the age of four, and a mother at the age of seven. They both died of tuberculosis. She was left alone in this world with her father, who then married another woman, and that hit young Isidora Sekulić very hard. Psychologists think that in most cases girls are tied to their fathers and boys to their mothers. Of course, it should not be generalized, but these indescribably difficult moments in the life of a fragile being influenced her to be called “the apostle of loneliness” in intellectual circles. When she needed her mother most to guide her into a cruel life in the dominant male world, she didn’t have one. Unfortunately, she did not even have a father to protect her, and that factor is crucial, so our heroine found solace in writing. She loved her father, she respected him very much, and she actually saw in him the ideal of a man. Unfortunately, she also lost him when she was twenty.

Shortly afterwards, life took her other brother, who also died of tuberculosis. Although childhood and youth last the shortest, we all need strong figures, either in the father or in the mother, or someone who will understand and love us. However, Isidora Sekulić had no one. Instead of rejoicing in life, because she was successful in her job as a professor, she despaired and suffered.

Given the circumstances in which she lived, and we must keep in mind that it was the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, sexism reigned and there was terrible pressure on women who had not married before and had children, especially in this region. Left alone in this world, Isidora Sekulić had both lungs sick. In that trouble, escapism was the only solution and our heroine is going on a trip around Europe.

Her life was full of nervousness, pain and blood, and the only salvation was in writing.

Although she escaped from reality and petty bourgeoisie, she was always awaited by condemnations, reprimands and attacks by Jovan Skerlić (1877–1914), the most prominent literary critic, on her works and the style in which she created them (Pavlović, 2010, p. 11).

In the general hopelessness, a man appeared in her life – Emil Stremnicki, for whom she got married, but she was left without him very soon, because he died on the train. At first, she thought she would be at least a little happy and fulfilled, and fate again denied her that opportunity.

Isidora Sekulić was and remained alone, but never lonely.

To Lovćen's Prometheus

In solitude, she welcomed the year 1941 and the April collapse of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Although she refused to serve the German occupier and his domestic helpers, it was worth nothing to her after her release that she refused to sign the Appeal to the Serbian people in the fight against the red danger. Despite that, she immediately fell at the mercy of the new communist authorities, and, above all, Milovan Đilas (1911–1995).

However, she found solace in her spiritual father – Peter II Petrović Njegoš (1813–1851). It is probable that Isidora Sekulić also thought about Njegoš during the war wrote her monograph on him. That work was extensive as early as 1945, how she says in a letter to Isak Samokovlija (1889–1955). In one letter from 1946 she writes: “Who will publish the work is quite extensive, and I am not extensive in power and ability.” (Поповић, 1979, pp. 277). Until the book appeared, she published three more excerpts about Njegoš, which they talk about his biography and Montenegro, as well as a text about the *Rays of the microcosm*.

The first book about Njegoš was published in 1951, with the author noting that she wanted to “separate the monobiography into one volume, and the works on the three main works of Njegoš to form the second volume of the whole” (Секулић, 1951, pp. 388–389). Her friends, to whom she told this, did not agree with that, and neither did she finally.

Now that the work on the *Mountain Wreath* has stretched at three times stronger volume than *Rays*, now one whole edition has become pure impossibility ... We should not just break the rhythm texts even stronger than breaking a book to get the *Mountain Wreath* into it. *Mountain Wreath* will

therefore remain in operation for some time, and, if all circumstances so desire, appear as another volume of the whole. (Секулић, 1951, pp. 388–389)

However, it is only once she dedicated a monograph, a book of deep devotion, and she wrote it in her later years. In those years, critical spirits often choose to write about personalities of supreme intellectualism, wisdom. She then chose to write about a person who assimilates and synthesizes in himself the feelings and wisdom of different cultures. It is important to point out that Isidora Sekulić wrote a book about Njegoš not so much as a cultural historian as much as a literary critic and literary thinker; more as an artist-critic than as a scientist-historian and philologist. She did not write essays of objectivist views empowered by the ironic opinions and dramatic talent of the essayist, with aspirations to psychologically and sociologically (in a positivist way) the causes, causes, connections and characters phenomena and people (Адамовић, 2016, p. 84).

“Bishop Rade was deeply religious, and pessimism sublimated into spiritual superiority over transience and death.” (Sekulić, 2002, p. 277–311). We learn how much Isidora Sekulić was impressed by Njegoš, who “was a creator who was also a collaborator of God” (Sekulić, 2002, p. 277–311), but the culmination of his admiration and respect for Njegoš’s character will be expressed in a book she published a few years before her death, *To Njegoš – a book of deep devotion*.

Towards the end of her life, Isidora Sekulić increasingly returned to traditional values. Dragan Jeremić (1925–1986) called her “the last national romantic” (Jeremić, 1965, p. 105). Her works on romantic poets, on Vuk Karadžić, but primarily on Njegoš, are significant. For the writer, Njegoš is the greatest national poet, he is the ideal of her vision of a genius artist, and the work of *To Njegoš – a book of deep devotion* is an expression of great love and respect, and at the same time a combination of her nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Despite that, near the end of her literary career, Isidora Sekulić is again criticized for taking her into isolation for the rest of her life (Pavlović, 2010, p. 68).

The book about Njegoš was published in 1951 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of his death. Some new ideologies rule in the country, religion is disputed, and the book about Njegoš is nothing but the thought and testimony of one religion. The book was vehemently opposed by the then prominent communist ideologue Milovan Đilas. Without any literary reason, he judges this literary work on the basis of his political ideology. The verdict is disparaging and incorrect:

...bearing in mind that it was written in fact against our so-called pre-war social literature (true and weak and primitive, but still social at the time

socio-politically important), and ostensibly in the praise of Krleža's (1893–1981) *Kerempuh* as “the victory of the eternal problem,” that is, in the time of bitter class struggles, then both the social place and the social role of this philosophy become clear. (Đilas, 1952, p. 1911)

Đilas described her essay *The Problem of Poverty in Man and Literature* as “the most banal pop sermon” and “blurry and dark individualistic skepticism” (1998, p. 166). If it was worth arguing with Skerlić, she had to keep silent and withdraw before Đilas. How much Isidora Sekulić, a woman who entered the eighth decade of her life, was affected by these inappropriate convictions, is best shown by the words to Jara Ribnikar (1912–2007):

“Mr. Đilas took an ax and killed an old woman!” (Рибникар, 1984, pp. 56–62). Criticized and unscathed again, at the end of her literary career, she isolates herself for fear of the “communist inquisition,” the malefactors will call her “a mad grandmother who has a strange and awkward nature” (Pavlović, 2010, p. 69).

Isidora Sekulić herself honestly says how much Đilas's verdict will put a stain on her fruitful writing career:

You see, this Đilas' book had a terrible effect on me. I don't agree with his views, I know seven philosophies, and he only knows one. What's worse, I can't write anymore now. I just can, but no one will be allowed to print my manuscripts. Therefore, these days I have burned my diary, which I have kept for years... (Marinković, 1963, p. 226)

In her later years, reflecting on her half-century-long literary career, she concludes:

I was unlucky in my work; I still don't have it. It's hard to see from the side, but I know it best. (...) They didn't let me to be my own or smart, they were constantly looking for something else in what I was doing. I felt on my shoulders all the burden of a woman cultural worker in an environment that, let's be honest, finds it very difficult to get rid of unhealthy traditions. (Marinković, 1963, p. 226)

Đilas points out that Isidora Sekulić is an important person in the culture of that time, but in his opinion, Marxists must not close their eyes to the fact that her book on Njegoš is:

Based on idealistic views on the interpretation of phenomena, not on the basis of the analysis of material, social conditions (without considering their specific archival study, which is very much with Isidora extensively and conscientiously), from which, in the end, spiritual phenomena originate and they are explained, rather than on the basis of general idealistic categories.

Such a method shows the deep impotence of idealism to really explain Njegoš and his epoch, and Njegoš's historical roots and the real meaning of Njegoš's poetry, and especially those religious, which Marxists today shyly keep silent and bypass in the holiday exasperation, dwelling only on the obviously progressive and the obvious the revolutionary Mountain Wreath. (...) When something has already been written in public, then it should also be publicly, very publicly criticized by those – in this case Marxists – who do not agree with that. (Đilas, 1952, p. 21)

Đilas also tried to explain his procedure to Isidora Sekulić, but he did not give up his intention to take her book about Njegoš more seriously. Actually, his goal was to settle accounts with the Serbs from Marxist positions idealism and its protagonists. That is how the book *Legend of Njegoš*, in which Njegoš had to come to the background (Томић, 2018, pp. 99).

Đilas bases Isidora Sekulić's objections on her vision of the mystical vitality of a nation that overcomes difficulties with the cosmic power of a higher order. This, he believes, is the focal point of her idealism, in which "there is nothing mentally original" (Đilas, 1952, p. 67). While the analysis of Isidora Sekulić goes towards the essences of Njegoš's ideas, Đilas lacks causality between Njegoš's and the modern age in her interpretation. It is about the lack of causality from which the idea arises and lasts (Томић, 2018, pp. 100). Criticism refers to absolute, non-historical interpretation, to existentialist and general modes of interpretation. He says ironically:

By the way, according to that – 'we' are not exactly a cat's cough and Njegoš is not only ours, but, you see, there is 'something deeper', 'more human', 'more worldly', 'more cosmic'... And really, we are not real cat's cough, just as the real Njegoš is not only ours! But he is not an existentialist either. (Đilas, 1952, p. 68)

From the perspective of the "eternal idea" and the "eternal law," Đilas does not see the "reality" of the historical moment, either of Njegoš or Tito (Томић, 2018, p. 100). In this regard, he necessarily connects Njegoš's and the socialist idea ("And since similarities can really be found there [fight against the occupiers: Turks with Njegoš, Germans with Tito], they portrayed what looks like the same, although in terms of content it cannot be the same," Đilas, 1952, p. 71), also criticizing Isidora Sekulić's "nationalist setting that Njegoš is a Serbian poet, from the Serbian-local Montenegro country" (Đilas, 1952, p. 71).

Following the idealistic cognition of Njegoš, Đilas emphasizes the unjustified and harmful ideologisation of Njegoš as a legend, in a manipulative sense. In the second chapter of the book *Legend of Njegoš*, Milovan Đilas discusses the way of creating a legend, its mythologizing and mystifying (Томић, 2018, p. 100).

Đilas uses the term “Serbian idealism” for the format of the legend in whose form it originates the thought of Njegoš, which, again, is not original, although in its original form, and with Nikolaj Velimirović (1880–1956), and with Isidora Sekulić. Đilas determines who has been since when “took” the idea, the thought, linking the contents of the books about Njegoš with the idea that Isidora Sekulić also continues the thought of her predecessor, both literary and philosophical (Томић, 2018, p. 101).

Đilas had no intention of researching either reveals some new, unknown facts from Njegoš’s life and work. He did not have the conditions for such a thing in prison, and that was not his goal. He focused on expressing his relationship, that is, his understandings and views of Njegoš as a person and his overall work, especially poetry.

So, they didn’t it was more about some ideological-political reasons but an irresistible need for searching in Njegoš and through Njegoš about the meaning of human existence and man fighting in general. In order to achieve that, Đilas had to experience the whole drama in himself first Njegoš, and from that experience, referring to some sources, to create their own seeing Njegoš and his work (Адамовић, 2016, p. 159).

Both Isidora and Milovan announced the continuation of their books. Although only Roman number one appears in it and in the title (which will appear in posthumous editions of the same reading to be erased), only Đilas fulfilled the given promise. According to her testimony, which the official legend will spice up with the patina of suffering, Sekulić burned her second work about Njegoš. Due to that, it spread with Serbian literary criticism a story about a magnificent achievement which is – as one of the performers said poetically the author’s last will – “cut across the waist.” The missing next part was to be dedicated to the *Mountain Wreath*.

The truth, however, does not reside in the fictions that culture has imprinted in mass psychology, but elsewhere. Not only did Isidora survive the *Legend*, rather, it continued to contribute to the literary and political life of Yugoslavia, by has – for example – written hymns to its armed forces (renamed since 1951 in the JNA) and youth work actions. In the meantime, it is taking place at Đilas a truly tragicomic somersault, after which the former omnipotent ruler in prison reads the writer’s court texts and at the same time regrets the injustice he inflicted on her – as he (did he ever manage to believe?). And is it he did not sin far more about Radovan Zogović, when he proclaimed it in his Manichaeism her Montenegrin counterpart?

There is an entry in Đilas’ prison diary from which it can be seen that he was not only sincerely saddened by the news of Sekulić’s death, but also that he was bitten by his conscience because he condemned her wonderful

literary work about Njegoš. “It is my sin the greater that I was in power,” the writer of the *Legend* sprinkled ashes (Brebanović, 2014, p. 144).

Thus, on the day of her own death, Isidora completely defeated Milovan. As a skeptic, she will continue to prove culturally tougher than the innocent an ideological heretic. Bazaar mythology sang of their clash as an immoral attack of the announced communist bloodthirsty to a fragile, indeed, female Schönggeist. Due to the perception of the chauvinist elite, it remained one of Đilas’ greatest crimes: fortunately for him, he was miserable (Brebanović, 2014, p. 145).

Resurrection

During her life, none of the men ever spared Isidora Sekulić! However, 63 years have passed since her death, but, unfortunately, she still does not have her peace, and by all odds, I doubt that she will ever have it. To this day, our heroine has been subjected to relentless suspicions, assessments and malicious tendentious research.

An example that best reflects this is certainly the text of Mr. Blagoje Pantelić, which was published on September 5, 2019 in the 399th issue of the highly read magazine *Nedeljnik*. As is usually always the case with us, the title was, of course, very sensational: *Did Isidora Sekulić really get her doctorate: The story of the first controversial doctorate*. We note that the author was then a researcher at the Institute of European Studies, and otherwise a theologian by profession.

A colleague began his tractate with an extreme statement:

There is not a single witness who saw Isidora Sekulić’s husband, her doctorate and another book about Njegoš. We know that she had a husband, defended her doctorate and wrote another book about Njegoš only from her stories, which were suspected before. It seems justified... (Pantelić, 2019)

It seems justified to the author to present such flat-out views that are not even the greatest intellectuals like Jovan Skerlić, who was our most eminent literary critic, let alone the stubbornest communists, among whom the leader was “later dissident” Milovan Đilas. Each of them managed to inflict as much pain as possible on our greatest writer and inviolable philosopher, while enjoying a sadistic manner.

However, the author continues in his recognizable style:

Stories about a man she fell in love with and married on the trip, and who soon passed away, so none of Isidora’s friends and compatriots ever saw

him, as well as the fact that she wrote another book about Peter II Petrović, but she burned and managed to destroy every trace of the work on that manuscript because of Đilas' critique of the first book – they really sound unlikely, but they are also difficult to deny. The story of Isidora's doctorate also sounds incredible. However, it is possible to check it, because there must be at least some trace of it. Does it exist?' (Pantelić, 2019)

If, by any chance, this colleague wanted to conduct a thorough research, he could have gone to the competent historical archive and tried to look for an excerpt from the registry of marriages for bridegroom Emil Stremnicki and bride Isidora Sekulić. However, he did not do that and he "skillfully" supported his claims in the article, calling them "indications" (Pantelić, 2019).

"Answer" to his rhetorical question *How do we even know that Isidora has a doctorate?* explains in the chapter he characterized as a *Testimony*.

Mr. Pantelić states that Isidora Sekulić from address *Berlin W, Luther Str. 29. I.* sent on June 16th, 1922 a correspondence card to her close friend, the famous Belgrade bookstore and publisher Svetislav B. Cvijanović, who also published her first two books, in which she informed him that she had obtained her doctorate in June.

However, he again posed a rhetorical question, to which he nevertheless answered by imposing his unsubstantiated opinion:

Why did Isidora need to hide her doctoral dissertation? Because she was modest? Or maybe for some other reason? In any case, only that hiding raises suspicion... But also some other data from her biography. The most important are, of course, those related to her stay in Berlin. (Pantelić, 2019)

By no means do I want to enter into scientific controversy and discussion, because such arbitrary assessments would result in the questionability of the scientific and social contribution of the candidate in general.

Mr. Pantelić based his hypothesis on the following sharp words:

Isidora changes her original plan, she does not go to England but to Germany, and there, after only a few weeks, she manages to defend her doctorate no less and no more, at one of the most famous philosophical faculties in the world. And that's really weird. Even if she had a written text, the procedure that precedes the defense of the work is complicated and often takes several months.

Many today are not aware of what the process that ended with obtaining a doctoral degree used to look like. At that time, almost not everyone could be crowned with that title. It took years of serious work in a particular field, and years and years of dedicated work on a specific topic. This was

especially true for German universities, and especially for the philosophical faculties there. (Pantelić, 2019)

However, the author again discriminates, but no longer gender, but age, and emphasizes that Isidora, as she is directly addressed, who was 45 years old at the time of her doctorate, then did not have years of serious work in the field of philosophy, let alone a day of study of some faculty of philosophy.

If we follow these formalities, according to that logic, Laza Kostić's dissertation would probably be disputable for Mr. Pantelić, because at the age of only 25 he obtained the title of Doctor of Laws at the Royal University in Pest, after defending his six-page dissertation!

A fellow researcher emphasized in his review article that if Sekulić really had a doctorate she had to publish the entire dissertation or at least a part of it. However, she did not do that and therefore he came to a "concrete" conclusion that she did not even defend the thesis, because if she had, the work would now be in the University Library "Svetozar Marković."

So, he sent a letter to Humboldt University in Berlin, which replied that it could not satisfy his request, because it did not have any doctorate in the name of Isidora Sekulić, but he sent it then to the University Archives, which he immediately addressed and received a reply with the same content – she never even studied.

Again, I do not want to enter the academic discussion, because the article was not published in a scientific journal, but in a weekly, and is not supported by facts, but I must single out the quote by which the author defined the chapter *Last question*:

In the end, we have only one question left to answer. Why did Isidora, who was a polyglot, an extraordinary erudite, a talented writer and a recognized and celebrated cultural worker, also invent that she was a doctor of science? (Pantelić, 2019)

Adhering exclusively to material evidence in the form of a paper document, Mr. Pantelić also referred to Ksenija Atanasijević, because she was the first woman who received a doctorate at the University of Belgrade, so she is rightly called Ksenija the First, while Isidora Sekulić was her rival who because of that decided to go to Berlin and magically gain the title of doctor of science there, also in the field of philosophy, because, unlike Ksenija Atanasijević, she could not cope with the criticism of Belgrade university professors and intellectuals.

The author ends his text with the words that there is half... (truth) in every joke, and I will answer all these his questions which obviously bother him so much, as an Orthodox Serb, very simply: we both believe (I hope especially he because he is a theologian) that only He (the Lord) is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Isidora Sekulić, through the character of Ana Nedić, the protagonist of the novel *Deacon of the Church of the Mother of God*, would answer him exactly as her heroine who knew and felt that God came down and was in the church: "Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty!" (Sekulić, 2019, str. 32).

So, both Isidora Sekulić and I, because we are calm and satisfied, have only this to say to him: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." (Јован 20:29, 1997).

Instead of a Conclusion

As we stated at the beginning, this year is also marked by the CORONA virus. However, apart from this plague, another very important event will be remembered. Namely, on June 1, the Law on Labor Equality came into force, which regulates very gender-sensitive language issues.

Our Isidora Sekulić has been surrounded by misogyny all her life and unable to express her deepest feelings. We hope that at least with this positive legal regulation, every person will be able to express themselves as they wish.

We believe that Isidora Sekulić is among us today, although her spirit lives and is chained in the stars, she would also fight fiercely for women's rights, but we are sure that she would also be constantly condemned by her Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, which she was a full member.

Certainly, justice has been satisfied, at least formally, and even today, after more than one hundred years, her impressive words remain written at all times:

Serbian woman! Smash with your fist and in men's way smash the pattern of that empty and sinful false life, and don't sleep when it's not time to rest, and don't cuddle when your children are born in a sign of death and decay... (Bjelica, 2012, p. 19)

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Јован Буковала*

ИСИДОРА СЕКУЛИЋ: ПРВА МУЧЕНИЦА СРПСКЕ КЊИЖЕВНЕ СЦЕНЕ

Апстракт: Овим прегледним радом ћемо покушати да осветлимо страдање Исидоре Секулић која је увек била омаловажавана, дезавуисана, несхваћена, одбачена, недовољно призната, па се тако се с правом може назвати првом мученицом српске књижевне сцене.

Кључне речи: Исидора Секулић, Милован Ђилас, комунизам

* Јован Буковала, истраживач-приправник, Институт за филозофију, Филозофски факултет, Универзитет у Београду, имејл: jovan.bukovala@f.bg.ac.rs.