It took the destruction of two great empires to make room for the formation of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918, a new state created out of the marcher lands straddling the Ottoman and Habsburg dominions. The histories of the Slav tribes settled south of the Danube have diverged since earliest times, when the power of Byzantium won the Serbs for the Orthodox rite, while the Croats and Slovenes adhered to Rome. The Ottoman victory at Kosovo Field in 1389 completed the separation, dealing a mortal blow to the crumbling Serbian empire carved out by Stefan Nemanja and his successors over two centuries. Serbia and Bosnia-Hercegovina came under Ottoman sway for half a millennium, leaving the Croatian and Slovene lands under Habsburg rule.

By the end of the Napoleonic wars both empires were in disarray, laggards in the race to modernization. Turkey was the pivotal state in the European balance of power throughout the nineteenth century, and it was in the Ottoman possessions that revolutionary national movements had their early successes. In Serbia, a peasant rising led by Kara Djordje (‘Black George’) Petrović, in 1804, was suppressed after a decade of guerrilla warfare, only to be followed by another rebellion under Miloš Obrenović, in 1815. Within two years, the Serbs of the Šumadija, the forest fastness south of Belgrade, had driven out all foreigners, and in November 1817 an assembly (skupština) of the people acclaimed Miloš as hereditary Prince of Serbia – he sent the stuffed head of Black George to Istanbul as a propitiating gift. Miloš succeeded in securing the formation of an autonomous principality in 1830, sponsored by Russia; then, after fomenting trouble in adjacent Turkish
districts to the south, he moved in to restore order, adding them to his domains in 1833.

For most of the nineteenth century, Serbia remained a backward satrapy of empire. As late as 1894, the Civil Code continued to recognize the zadruga as a legal entity, a form of communal ownership of property vested in the extended family or clan, reflecting the embedded social power of localism and tradition. Serbia was untroubled by the forces of capital and labour which elsewhere favoured the development of liberal democracy. In mid-century, there were 43 varieties of foreign coinages in circulation, and by 1884 Serbia was the only country in the Balkans still without a single kilometre of railway track. Miloš and his successors fought doggedly against constitutionalism. The Prince was the district headman writ large, and it was not until 1858 that the first national Skupština was elected on a franchise restricted to direct taxpayers, thus excluding most of the peasantry. Two dynasties locked in blood feud (Karadjordjević and Obrenović) alternated in power in a cycle of assassination and exile, constantly embroiled in domestic and international intrigues in which the consular representatives of the great powers regularly took a hand.

The fledgling state was puny, and Turkish garrisons continued to occupy key strongholds until 1867, including Belgrade, which, despite its commanding position on the confluence of the River Danube and the River Sava, was slow to develop its later pre-eminence as a capital city – in 1840 it numbered just 6000 people, and by 1863 still had fewer than 15,000 inhabitants. For years Kragujevac, in the heart of the Šumadija, was the preferred seat of Serbia’s rulers. Ottoman conquest had eliminated the native aristocracy, and Prince Miloš withheld grants of land in order to prevent the creation of large estates. The result was a remarkably homogeneous society of peasant smallholders, unscathed by industrialization, and immune to social and intellectual novelty. Even the revival of Serbian linguistic and historical studies inspired by Vuk Karadžić (1787–1864) was not a native plant – Vuk himself lived in Vienna. Indigenous Serbian culture was oral, contained in the folk epics recited by traditional bards, and rooted in the authority of the Orthodox Church, the only institution that connected Serbs with their remote past as a free people.

The achievement of Vuk Karadžić was to consecrate the language and poetry of the ‘common people’ (his term) as an expression of nationhood. Vuk was a towering figure in the South Slav renaissance, whose work attracted the admiring attention of Jakob Grimm, Ranke and Goethe, but his sympathies were all with the Serbs, with no trace of