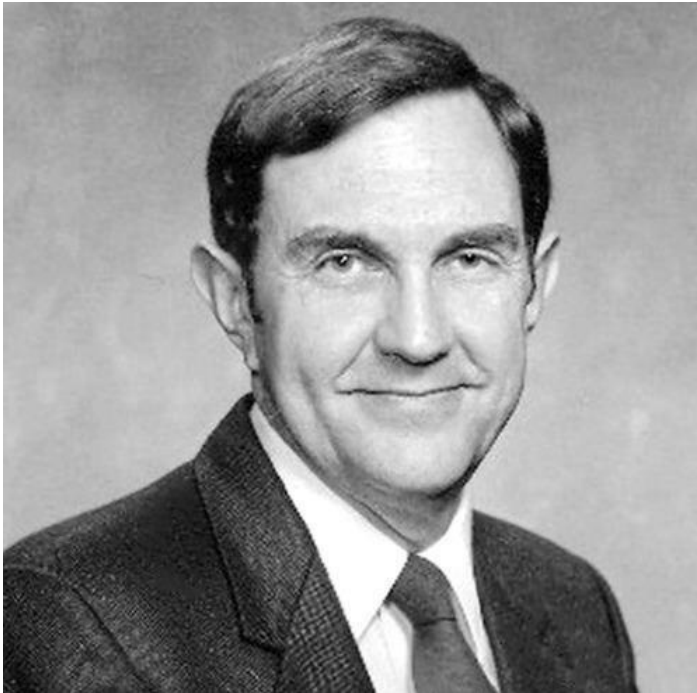


JOHN R. LAMPE (1935–2024)



Source: <https://history.umd.edu/news/memorial-john-r-lampe>

Professor John R. Lampe, who was one of the leading and most respected historians of the Balkans, passed away in September 2024. I had known Professor Lampe since 2008. We collaborated on several projects that he led, while in recent years he contributed regularly to *Tokovi istorije*, which I had edited until last year. This obituary is therefore also something of a personal acknowledgement to a scholar who shaped my career and who chose to publish his final works in a journal I was editing. I last saw him in person on 15 June 2019

in Belgrade, and then again on 10 December 2020 during the Zoom presentation of *The Routledge Handbook of Balkan and Southeast European History*, which he co-edited and to which I contributed a chapter.

John Robert Lampe, or simply John R. Lampe, was an American historian and a university professor known for his considerable research into the history and economy of the Balkans. He was born on 7 December 1935, in Duluth, Minnesota, and attended the Blake School in Minneapolis. He received his

undergraduate degree in history from Harvard University in 1957 and then went on to study at the London School of Economics. After serving in the U.S. Army, he worked as a junior diplomat at the United States Embassy in Belgrade from 1964 to 1967, when he became acquainted with the region that would captivate his scholarly attention for the rest of his life. He later returned to academia, earning his PhD from the University of Wisconsin in 1971. Lampe taught at the University of Maryland, where he also served as Chair of the Department of History, Executive Secretary of the East European Studies Program, and Senior Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC. He retired as Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Maryland in 2012 but continued to research and publish until the end of his life. Lampe also frequently provided commentary on contemporary Balkan politics for American radio and television networks.

According to *The Washington Post* of 15 September 2024, during the last nine years of his life, he maintained his intellectual vitality with the devoted support of his friend and caregiver, Victoria Ohene. While writing this text, I learned that his son, Jon Delange, is the owner of a Minneapolis-based music promotion company that supports independent artists, record labels, and digital distributors. In a mystical haze, based on indirect conversations, I had long suspected John had a child: I first heard the

expression “terrible twos” from him when I once complained about my only son’s noisy early childhood, and he offered rather seasoned advice, even going so far as to reserve an apartment for me in Budapest, having (mistakenly) assumed I would be arriving with my wife and son. The delicate presence of the personal within the professional, or the discrete attentiveness, was the signature of John Lampe.

Following his studies at Harvard and the LSE, Lampe focused on researching the economic history of Southeastern Europe. His groundbreaking works, including *The Bulgarian Economy in the Twentieth Century* and *Yugoslavia as History*, reshaped our knowledge of the region’s complex past. The leadership positions as Chair of the Department of History at the University of Maryland and Director of the East European Studies Program at what was then known as the Wilson Center demonstrated his capacity to promote scholarly engagement and dialogue. He would be appointed a permanent senior fellow at the Wilson Center, which enabled him to continue to bring together academic scholarship and policymaking and diplomacy.

Professor Lampe’s career was likewise defined by a deep commitment to mentoring future generations of scholars. Rather than using his leadership positions to promote himself, he used them to expand the space for critical thinking and to encourage the professional growth of younger colleagues in our re-

gion. Even after retirement, he continued to publish, peer review, and participate in academic conferences and debates. His comments on manuscripts and proposals demonstrated a close attention to clarity, rigor, and intellectual integrity. Averse to stylistic flamboyance, he valued above all the exactness of phrasing, the full articulation of concepts, and the clear distinction between evaluative judgments, impressions, and analytical insights.

The bibliography of Professor Lampe's most significant works includes the following titles: *Balkan Economic History, 1550–1950: From Imperial Borderlands to Developing Nations* (1982, co-authored with Marvin Jackson), a monograph that remains a staple in the field of comparative European economic history; *The Bulgarian Economy in the Twentieth Century* (1986), one of the most serious scholarly contributions to the study of Bulgarian modernization; *Yugoslav-American Economic Relations since World War II* (1990, co-authored with Russell O. Prickett and Ljubiša S. Adamović), in which they examined the complex relations between the two countries during the Cold War; *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country* (1996, 2000), his best-known and most widely read book, also translated into Serbian; *Balkans into Southeastern Europe: A Century of War and Transition* (2006), an analytical overview of the twentieth century that remains a feature of English-language university curricula; *Embracing Democracy in the Western*

Balkans: From Postconflict Struggles Toward European Integration (2011, co-authored with Lenard J. Cohen), which seeks to systematize political challenges facing the region after the 1990s; *Battling over the Balkans: Questions and Controversies* (2020, co-edited with Constantin Iordachi), which aims to bring the voices of early career historians from the region into a broader international context; and *The Routledge Handbook of Balkan and Southeast European History* (2020, co-edited with Ulf Brunnbauer), which is now regarded as a major synthesis of the current state of Southeast European studies. This most recent volume brings together 47 scholars who examine essential historical processes in the region, ranging from imperial partitions and national movements to world wars, interethnic conflicts, communist regimes, and post-communist transitions. The emphasis is on transcending beyond ideological narratives and expressing the region's different perspectives. The handbook, which is clearly written and based on recent scholarship, is designed for a wide range of readers, including students and specialists. Lampe persistently favored scholarly dialogue and collaboration, complexity and nuance over simplification, just as the book aims to transcend ideological paradigms.

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I first met John Lampe at Central European University in Budapest, while he was working on the book *Battling over the Balkans* with a group of

early career historians. Due to administrative delays, the book was not published until a decade later. His intention was to convey recent scholarship produced by Balkan historians to broader, Western audiences. I was invited to that intellectually stimulating workshop at the suggestion of Dejan Djokić, whose Cambridge history of Serbia was, by curious coincidence, reviewed by John Lampe in his final published contribution to *Tokovi istorije* 3/2023. Even at our first meeting, I was impressed by John's ability to be comprehensive in his analysis while staying attentive and kind in our personal contact. Despite being an undisputed academic authority, John came out as someone who sought to encourage rather than judge and who examined thoroughly and relentlessly before reaching conclusions.

Our relationship later deepened through collaboration within the journal *Tokovi istorije*, where he contributed three lengthy review essays, including his last ever published text, mentioned previously. He was precise and conscientious regarding language, often requesting last-minute revisions not from uncertainty but out of concern to avoid imprecise terminology or misinterpretation by readers. His comments were unobtrusive yet incisive, and he had a talent for suggesting solutions while recognizing the effort involved and seeking to facilitate its successful realization. In his tireless pursuit of clarity, he frequently sent supplements and clarifications to articles that had already been accepted and techni-

cally edited to prevent any possibility of misunderstanding. The style he employed reflected his character, with no word being superfluous and no assertion left unsubstantiated.

Belgrade was not only his place of employment in the late 1960s but also a city of transformative experiences. He socialized with Andrej Mitrović, Ljubinka Trgovčević, "Moma" Zečević (as he called him), and many other young Belgrade intellectuals of that time. These friendships were sincere, lasting, and academically beneficial. He frequently mentioned that people in Belgrade never saw him as an "American" or a "diplomat", but rather as an ordinary, curious interlocutor and a colleague. He frequently returned to these friendships later in life, both through personal memories and collaboration on other publications and projects. John Lampe often spoke about his days in Belgrade within the context of professional and even emotional connections. At his insistence, we sent the penultimate issue of *Tokovi istorije* containing his essay to a certain lady in downtown Belgrade, evidently someone whose judgment he deeply cared about.

He did not reveal much about his private life, and I never knew how old he was, even though I knew he had long retired; he seemed more vigorous than the rest of us from former Yugoslavia, exhausted by the tumultuous 1990s. When we were drinking coffee, I compared the skin on his hand to mine and concluded that he looked younger than I did. He told me about his morning

stretching ritual that helped maintain his head in the highest operating order. In the end, I was the one who was hard of hearing, not him. His thinking was characterized by fast cognitive shifts, as well as a mild yet incisive wit full of harmless and hilarious ironies. He was ready to make fun of himself, but he was also willing to express true enthusiasm for things that inspired him, often with a childlike delight and lively gestures. I recall him using his index finger to mimic retching as a humorous critique of the excessive use of the definite article “the” in book titles. No matter how anxious one might feel, a few minutes of conversation with him had a calming effect, as years of teaching at prestigious universities seemed to have endowed him with a distinctly therapeutic aura. Elegant and personable, he created the image of someone with whom one always knew where one stood, since he did not hide his disapproval or excitement for an idea. He always carried a canvas book bag and wore corduroy trousers, which reminded me of the urban American style popularized in Woody Allen films.

In several of his final emails, he ended with somewhat pessimistic and partly unfinished reflections on the future of the Balkans, which I found unsettling. In his message of 9 August 2024, kindly apologizing for not feeling sufficiently competent to review a manuscript I had sent him, he surprised me with a nearly valedictory line, marked by several unintentional spaces: “I want to congratulate you on editing the journal as an

independent voice for good scholarship in trying times. And I have fond memories of our long connection...” He passed away on 6 September, following a brief illness, and was buried beside his late wife, Anita, at Lakewood Cemetery in Minneapolis, as noted in the *Washington Post* (15 September 2024) and the *Minnesota Star Tribune* (7 October 2024) obituaries.

John Lampe will be remembered for his scholarship, for his care for nuance, intellectual depth, and dedication to academic dialogue. He was a knowledgeable mediator in often politically charged debates concerning Balkan history and someone whose presence inspired trust and confidence. His colleagues and students respected him because of his deep knowledge, kindness, and scholarly integrity. He was an advocate and supporter of scholarship in a region that frequently turned away from scientific inquiry, an outsider who became something of an insider and who came to understand us almost better than we understood ourselves. In an era of quick judgment and even quicker forgetting, his intellectual legacy serves as a constant reminder that academic work may be noble, trustworthy, and valuable, allowing readers to continue discovering new layers of meaning in his substantial scholarly oeuvre.

Vladan JOVANOVIĆ