

**Alexandre Popovic**  
**1931–2014**

**A**lexandre Popovic, “Sacha,” as he was known to friends and colleagues, was an unconventional scholar by any means. Born in Belgrade in 1931, he took an interest in Islamic studies early on and enrolled in a program of Oriental philology in 1950. But sports took up a major part of his time. Eventually—and fortunately for academia—the scholarly interest overweighed the physically more active one. In late 1954, Sacha found himself in Paris, where he decided to take a degree in Arabic at the *École des langues orientales* (which became the Inalco in 1971). Nevertheless, Sacha would keep a life-long passion for sports, which opened possibilities for some *belles rencontres*, including with his future wife Nathalie.

Struggling in Paris with odd jobs, he decided to prepare a PhD on the classical age of Islam at the Sorbonne. The subject he chose remains to this day a too-often-forgotten event: the uprising of African slaves in Iraq in the second half of the ninth century, known as the Zanj Revolt. Sacha managed to navigate between conflicting accounts and facts and came up with a narrative of the uprising that accounted for the essentially incoherent nature of the event and did not cede to simplistic interpretations. He defended his thesis in 1965, and an English version was published in 1998. Despite the fact that the work dates half a century, his book offers an authoritative and elegantly written study of the subject. This was the first book that I read by Sacha (around the year 2000). And I could not hide my surprise when, a couple of years later, I discovered that its author was indeed our beloved teacher and friend Sacha. In fact, he had let go of the classical age and completely changed his research interest after his PhD.

In 1967 Sacha entered the CNRS, initially as an associate of the famed (and at times complicated) scholar Maxime Rodinson. Here he chose as his new focus Islam and the Muslim populations in the Balkans in modern times. Sacha ventured into a field virtually untouched. During the years, he meticulously brought together a wide array of sources in order to approach the subject—a process he characterized in his usual modesty as learning. In the 1980s, he also developed a keen interest in Muslim mystical orders and Sufism, and more recently in the question of magic, which would guide his work until the end. Over the years, Sacha prepared a *Thèse d'État* and published several monographs, edited volumes, and innumerable articles. By the 1990s, Sacha had established himself as a legendary pioneer on Islam in

the Balkans and as the leading scholar of Muslim orders. More generally, he had become a central figure of Islamic studies in France.

This process included the seminars he gave starting 1973 at the *École pratique des hautes études* IVe and VIe section (to become the EHESS in 1979). They lasted four decades. More than a course, these seminars became real events, in which generations of scholars working on Islam, the Ottoman Empire, or the Balkans would gather to benefit from Sacha's knowledge and generosity. And everyone was sure to have a good time, for Sacha was not only a great pedagogue who easily transmitted the rigor and enthusiasm of scientific work to young students. He also was one of those rare people who spontaneously made you feel good.

Sacha formed entire generations of scholars on Islam, the Balkans, and the mystical orders without ever abusing his authority, a quality that distinguished him from so many others. However, he also was an important person to innumerable scholars who, like myself, did not share many common research interests with him. His openness and genuine interest in the work of others made him a good teacher and colleague to everyone. Hierarchies between professors and students, or academics and nonacademics, did not exist to him. He was always ready to listen, to share, to comment, to criticize, and to encourage you when you needed it the most. Most scholars in France and beyond working on the Balkans, Islam, the Middle East, or the Muslim world feel in some way indebted to Sacha.

You could count on Sacha's sharp mind, his cordial way, and his sense of humor to brighten up the cloudiest days in Paris. Even without seeing him for months, you had the feeling he was just around the corner, ready to jump in whenever you needed him. It is hard to imagine that anyone could have disliked him. And it will be hard to realize he no longer is with us.

Alexandre Popovic died on 1 October 2014 in Paris. He is survived by his wife Nathalie Clayer, an expert on the Balkans, and his son Thomas from his first marriage. ✂

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