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Past imperfect continuous: remembering Serbia's 1915 retreat one hundred years later

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Citation

Tomić, A. (2021, May 18). *Past imperfect continuous: remembering Serbia's 1915 retreat one hundred years later*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3161385>

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Title: Past imperfect continuous: remembering Serbia's 1915 retreat one hundred years later

Issue date: 2021-05-18

Past Imperfect Continuous:

Remembering Serbia's 1915 Retreat One Hundred Years Later

Introduction

In 1915, the Serbian Army retreated across Albania, following the Invasion of Serbia by the Central Powers. The retreating Serbian Army and government, including the king and his son, the regent, the state administration and almost all of the Serbian parliamentary deputies, church dignitaries and many other groups, were joined by thousands of civilians fleeing the invading enemy. The retreat took place in November and December across snow and ice-covered mountainous terrain in hostile territory. Many froze to death, or died from disease and hunger, some were killed by the local irregulars, while a large number of those who survived were so weakened by the ordeal that they died shortly afterwards. The retreat cost the lives of around 240,000 troops and civilians — the final numbers were never established. After the survivors arrived on the Albanian coast, they were evacuated by the Entente forces. Some were taken to Italy, others to French North Africa, but most were taken to Corfu. Today in Serbia, the retreat is not only memorialised in many different ways, it is *canonised*. The Retreat is seen to symbolise the sacrifice of the Serbian Army, of the entire Serbian nation, for the liberation of Serbia and for the subsequent establishment of Yugoslavia.

The thesis examines how the 1915 Retreat is remembered and represented in Serbia a hundred years later, and what this tells us about the Serbian relationship with its past. We will show who is doing the remembering of this event and why, what sites of memory memorialise it, how it is linked to the *Serbian national identity narrative*, and how the remembrance and representations of this event and its meaning were instrumentalised for political purposes during the First World War centenary commemorations in Serbia. With this research, our intention is to contribute to the knowledge of the role the 1915 Retreat plays in Serbian national identity and memory discourse and deepen our understanding of this discourse.

There are different reasons to consider why, in our view, the remembrance and representations of the Retreat, deserve such attention. These reasons can be broadly categorised as personal, historical, and political. The Retreat has a personal resonance for most Serbs today because many of their ancestors participated in it – some survived and others did not. Both groups are important for the *collective remembrance* of the event. Historically, it was a remarkable event in the First World War, which to our knowledge has no precedent. However, the dominant narrative of the Retreat insists *only* on the extraordinary side of it in a simplified account – although incurring vast losses, a retreating army avoids being defeated, reorganises after leaving the country and returns to liberate it. Other aspects of the Retreat, the disarray of the army and the government, the mass desertions, the catastrophic sacrifice of young men recruited prematurely, to name but a few, are marginalised. The support of the Entente is at times criticised as having been insufficient, incompetently executed or deliberately delayed. This brings us to the political angle. Politically, the Retreat evolved into a sacred symbol of Serbian suffering in the First World War and familiarised the trope of Serbs cast as *tragic heroes*.¹ This script is useful for various populist tendencies in Serbia whereby the context of the Retreat can be connected to current political

1 In the thesis, the general term “Serbs” is used to denote those Serbs who would use this as the first thing to describe themselves, i.e. those for whom every other characteristic comes second.

issues, framed as *Serbia vs. the World*. While the thesis does not focus on Serbian current affairs, we do examine certain instances where we identify *the glorious past* linked to the First World War being used for effect in political discourse.

In the aftermath of the Retreat, over the following few months in Corfu, with the assistance and support of the Allies, Serbian troops convalesced. Other Serbian refugees in Corfu revived the political and cultural life of the country from where they were exiled. It was a temporary exile soon to be continued in Salonika. Although the retreat was undoubtedly a disaster — it became known as *the Golgotha* — its subsequent outcome was that around 140,000 Serbian soldiers had recovered well enough by the early summer of 1916 to join other Entente troops in Salonika, where *l'Armée d'Orient* was being reorganised in preparation for the liberation of south-eastern Europe. The Allied Army of the Orient broke through the Salonika front at the end of September 1918. The Serbian Army, as part of the larger Entente forces, participated in the liberation of Serbia over the following six weeks. Soon afterwards, the war ended with the Armistice. The Entente was victorious. In November 1915, the retreat seemed to be the end of Serbia. Many perished but enough survived, including the state and political institutions of the country. The retreat was a defeat that was eventually turned into a victory. Both *because of* and *despite* the retreat, Serbia won. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes² was established on 1 December 1918. The Treaty of Versailles gave it its blessing on 28 June 1919.

The century that has passed since the end of the First World War produced much history: The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was attacked by Nazi Germany in 1941 and then taken apart by the Axis powers; the Nazi occupation and the civil war opposing royalists, communists, and nationalist collaborators of different types against one another continued until the end of the war; in 1945, a new state of Yugoslavia was established, now a republic with

2 The Kingdom of Yugoslavia as of 1929.

communist partisans in charge; Socialist Yugoslavia endured for just over 45 years, when it fractured into several countries. As we write this, in 2020, Yugoslavia is a *loaded* word. In the most simplified terms, what started as an idea and an ideal of a multi-ethnic state of South Slavs, and initially, mainly built on the basis of the Serbian victory in the First World War, was dismembered in the Second World War, was re-established by the communists, was then destroyed in the bloody civil wars of the 1990s, largely caused by the surge in Serbian nationalism which awakened all the other nationalisms in the country. The story of the disintegration of Yugoslavia is outside the scope of this thesis, but a number of the causes of its break-up can be found in the *idées fixes* of the Serbian national identity narrative.

In order to understand the remembrance and representations of the Retreat, as well as interpret certain of its political uses, we have to delve deeper into the history of Serbia and the Serbian national identity narrative. Each nation has its own national — more or less official — identity narrative, its own *story*. We look at the main carriers of the *Serbian story* — its constitutive elements. We research the themes we have identified as relevant for the study of the subject matter, such as memory and how it constructs the idea of the past; national identity and the pertinence of myths — for Serbia it is the Kosovo myth, which we will outline; we examine memorialisation as a form of sacralisation of the past; and we identify these themes in the Serbian context. We give an account of the Retreat and assess its wider historical impact. The remembrance of the Retreat is investigated through the exploration of the Serbian attitude towards the past, through street names, monuments, commemorations, and media coverage of past events in the shadow of the political instrumentalisation of history during the centenary events and beyond. We further examine the ways in which the Retreat is remembered and represented in music and in museums. The Retreat has its sites of memory and we visit these places of pilgrimage and meet the pilgrims. We recognise that these “agents of remembrance” form “fictive kinships”

of remembrance as termed by Jay Winter.³ We are interested in them, their motivations and their acts of remembrance, inside and outside the official narrative. Whether they fit in the narrative or not, they all have a need for replaying the past by *servicing* it or *performing* it.⁴

In examining the discourse related to the First World War in Serbia during the centenary events, against the backdrop of Serbian history and politics of the 20th and early 21st century, we demonstrate that the Serbian *attachment* to the past — in particular to the First World War⁵ — has an impact on the image that the Serbs have about themselves today. The First World War is *Serbia's favourite war* as we show further on. The war was ignited by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Bosnian Serb. The official narrative of the war is that Serbia was the victim of Austro-Hungarian aggression and in no way responsible for the assassination, despite the links between the chief of Serbian military intelligence and the conspirators. Serbia's subsequent participation in the war resulted in proportionally more casualties than any other belligerent state suffered.

The controversies about the role of Serbia began immediately after the Sarajevo assassination and continue to this day. A salient recent example is the *Sleepwalkers* controversy on the eve of the First World War centenary commemorations. The polemic was revived by Christopher Clark's book *The Sleepwalkers*,⁶ and works by Sean McMeekin and Margaret MacMillan.⁷

3 Jay Winter "Forms of kinship and remembrance in the aftermath of the Great War", in Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, eds. *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 40-41.

4 Jay Winter "The performance of the past: memory, history, identity", in Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree and Jay Winter (eds.). *Performing the Past. Memory, History and Identity in Modern Europe*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 11.

5 "Ismar Dedović and Tea Sindbaek Andersen. "Answering Back to Presumed Accusations: Serbian First World War Memories and the Question of Historical Responsibility" in *The Twentieth Century in European Memory. Transcultural Mediation and Reception. European Studies* (volume 34, 2017), 85.

6 Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Penguin Books, 2013).

7 Sean McMeekin, *July 1914: Countdown to War* (New York: Basic Books, 2013) and Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914* (New York: Random House, 2013).

The publication of these books in 2012 and 2013, heated the atmosphere in historical and political circles in Serbia, with accusations of *historical revisionism* flying across the Serbian academic world and beyond.⁸ In his book, as part of the examination of the causes of the First World War, Clark examines the instability of the Serbian political situation and the dysfunctionality of the Serbian government in the early 20th century, particularly the rogue elements of the Serbian military, suggesting that the Serbian government in 1914 may have had more responsibility for the start of the war than what had been previously accepted. Although Clark's book was not *only* about Serbia, his reading of the events that led to the First World War,⁹ was interpreted in Serbia as *the West's reappraisal of the German guilt for the Great War*.¹⁰ Serbian reactions were often emotional, some decidedly paranoid, with one historian in particular alleging Germany was issuing grants to scholars with the specific goal of revising Germany's role in the Great War.¹¹ In his paper, "1914 Revisited: Commemoration of the WWI centenary in Serbia",¹² Aleksandar Miletić analyses the reactions of the Serbian historians,¹³ from those who were outraged and offended, to others who approached the subject in a professional and analytical manner — e.g. by examining the arguments

8 Dubravka Stojanović, "Onward! To World War II!", *Peščanik*, 16 December 2013 <https://pescanik.net/onward-to-world-war-ii/> (accessed May 15, 2018)

9 Clark occasionally makes some unexpected parallels, e.g. Serbia in 1914 and Syria in 2011. In his 2008 Stanford course lectures, *History of the International System*, James Sheehan compares Serbia in 1914 to Pakistan in 2008.

10 In the Introduction to *The Sleepwalkers*, Clark links the Serbian nationalism of the First World War to the wars of the 1990s, Clark, 2013, xxvi.

11 Milan Dinić, "Ljubodrag Dimić: Gavrila Principa je srpska javnost podržala, a politička elita osudila, Nemačka stipendijama menja sliku o Prvom svetskom ratu" ["Ljubodrag Dimić: Gavrilo Princip was supported by the Serbian public but opposed by the political elite, Germany uses grants to change the picture of the First World War"], *Nova srpska politička misao*, 31 May 2014 <http://www.nspm.rs/kuda-ide-srbija/gavrila-principa-je-srpska-javnost-podrzala-a-politicka-elita-osudila-nemaacka-stipendijama-menja-sliku-o-prvom-svetskom-ratu.html?alphabet=l> (accessed, March 31 2020). In this interview Dimić also claims that most such scholars were Irish. It is not quite clear where this claim comes from, given that Clark is Australian, McMeekin American, and MacMillan Canadian.

12 Aleksandar Miletić, "1914 Revisited. Commemoration of the WWI centenary in Serbia", in *Memory and Memorialization of WWI in Eastern and Southeastern Europe*, edited by Gabor Egry, Múltunk Foundation, Special Issue 2016, 5-32.

13 Miletić points out that Fritz Fischer's theory on the German guilt for WWI "almost acquired a status of dogma among Serbian historians", in Miletić, 2016, 9.

of Clark's book through "a calm scholarly mode of reasoning and critical reflection".¹⁴ Nevertheless, the majority of the historians seemed to take this issue personally and view the *revisionist historians* as personifying *the West*. Serbian politicians¹⁵ and public figures were offended by the book, many of whom had probably not read it but quickly picked up on the outrage expressed by the majority of Serbian historians.¹⁶

Why was this such a scandal in Serbia and why does it continue to fill newspaper columns and discussion forums?¹⁷ The answer to this question lies partly in the role the 1915 Retreat and the First World War in general play in the Serbian national identity narrative, and the thesis aims to shed light on the matter. Jay Winter's comment about the reaction to Clark's book in Serbia was: "Of course the Serbs are furious — but that's their problem."¹⁸ We consider this *Serbian problem* to be an important factor in the *Serbian story*. In our view, the elements for the answer as to, *Why the Serbs were so upset by Clark's book?* and more widely to the questions about the Serbian relationship with the past can be found in the Serbian national identity narrative.

The thesis consists of five chapters, each contributing to answering our research question. We first outline the Serbian national identity narrative in chapter I — the Prologue. The *Serbian story* is essential for identifying patterns of acceptance or rejection of different versions of the past based on the type of *emotional formula* that can be found in Serbian history. Chapter II proposes a literature review exploring the main theoretical concepts, which we rely on to use as tools for identifying the *phenomena*, to use Eric Hobsbawm's term, involved in the interplay between memory, identity and history. Understanding these concepts

14 Danilo Šarenac reviewed the book on its merits: Miletić, 2016, 17. See, Danilo Šarenac, "O knjizi Mesečari. Kako je Evropa ušla u rat 1914, profesora Kristofera Klarka." *Vojnoistorijski glasnik* (2013), 1: 267–280.

15 Even Tomislav Nikolić, the president of Serbia in 2013, authored several articles denouncing the books as revisionist.

16 Miletić, 2016, 22.

17 J.K. "Predratni odgovor Klarku" ["Prewar response to Clark"], *Danas*, 29 October 2019, 6.

18 Jay Winter at the *To End All Wars? Conference*, Ypres, August 2018, used with permission.

is required to recognise patterns in subsequent readings and research. The account of the Retreat in chapter III is given based on our reading of selected sources, both Serbian and international, some well-known and others less well-known. We focus on the facts and analyse certain perceptions in primary sources such as diaries and memoirs. In chapter IV, we address the manner in which Serbs *remember* and *forget* their past, by looking at a selection of street names and monuments in the context of the turbulent Serbian history, and we then delve into the different ways the First World War and the Retreat are memorialised in Serbia and analyse the corresponding media coverage in light of the centenary commemorations, against the backdrop of the current Serbian political situation. Chapter V investigates the actual remembrance practices of the Retreat and establishes who are the agents of remembrance. Most of the research for this chapter was done in the field, at museums, at the sites of memory and by interviewing informed sources. We surveyed the museums by email and visited specific exhibitions organised as part of the centenary events. Owing to the large number of events commemorating the First World War in Serbia, only a representative selection of the surveyed and visited museums and exhibitions is featured in this thesis. The field research, museum surveys, visits to sites of memory, attendance of commemoration ceremonies, and interviews all took place between 2014 and 2019. The interactions that were done in person — with museum staff, guides, historians, local sources of information, participants in the acts of remembrance — were mostly carried out using unstructured interviews. Some sources were interviewed by telephone and email using structured questionnaires. Relevant observations outside the interviews, during the acts of remembrance and commemorations were noted in real time.¹⁹ These building blocks of the thesis are presented below in more detail and are all drawn together in the conclusion.

Chapter I: We formulate the Serbian national identity narrative as commonly interpreted and understood, found across history books,

¹⁹ Considerable number of photographs were taken, some speeches were audio or video recorded and subsequently transcribed.

political statements, television programmes, media, theatre and musical performances, literature, news reporting, comments on social media, as well as on official websites,²⁰ but also what it *looks like* to outsiders.²¹ We look at the role the First World War generally and of the Retreat specifically in the Serbian national identity narrative. We limit our consideration to the dominant *scripts* while recognising the aspects of the *Serbian story* that are marginalised. In general terms, the Serbian national identity narrative revolves around Serbia's potential greatness — military, intellectual, or spiritual — which is harmed through internal or external obstacles, for instance, betrayal, resulting in great suffering. The two-fold trope of the Serbian national identity narrative is *heroism* and *suffering*.²² This image is echoed even in history textbooks.

Chapter II: The literature review of the research project focuses on the main strands in literature on memory, history, identity, and memorialisation. We examine how societies remember and forget, or rather how people in different communities remember and forget, as well as the factors that impact remembrance. How do people deal with conflicting versions of the past and how might different versions of past events influence the present and why? We consider *collective memory* as defined by Maurice Halbwachs,²³ and *collective remembrance* as interpreted by Jay Winter,

20 On the Serbian Tourist Association's website, under the *Serbian History* section there are twelve articles on the First World War: "The project "Serbia at the beginning of the Great War and the memory of the heroic deeds" was implemented with the assistance of "The Office for cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the region", in order to improve the image and rediscover the truth about Serbia's participation in the First World War." See *World War One* at Serbia.com <http://www.serbia.com/about-serbia/serbia-history/world-war-one/> (accessed May 15, 2020).

21 E.g. Tim Judah, "The Serbs: The Sweet and Rotten Smell of History", *Daedalus*, Vol. 126 (No. 3, *A New Europe for the Old?* Summer 1997): 23-45.

22 In 1915, moved by the suffering of the Serbian Army and civilians, Serbian poet Jovan Dučić, wrote a poem "Ave Serbia" where he poetically describes this fatidic duality. Dučić's vision is of *Mother Serbia* whose sons suffer and fight: "The milk you gave us poisoned us forever, to always be first in suffering and glory, for you have brought twins into this world, a martyr and a hero, to cry and to bleed" (Translated by A.T.). Jovan Dučić, "Ave Serbia" <https://www.poezija.info/srbija/ave-serbia-jovan-ducic/> (accessed March 31, 2020). More on this duality will be explored further in the thesis.

23 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, edited, translated, and with an introduction by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago and London : The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

through his extensive research into the remembrance of the Great War in the main former belligerent countries.²⁴ Every nation's past relies, more or less, on myths and legends that originate in real and imagined stories. Paul Cohen illustrates how historical events are mythologised and for what purposes.²⁵ On the basis of the works of Benedict Anderson and Anthony Smith, we seek to understand the origins of national identity.²⁶ Identity is a concept that has evolved over time; in particular national and religious identity, and the way we interpret it today is scrutinised by Leon Wieseltier²⁷ and Amartya Sen,²⁸ among others. The ethics of memory are explored through the work of Avishai Margalit.²⁹ Forgetting the past is done for different reasons and with different purposes — Paul Connerton explores different categories of forgetting.³⁰ In the last part of the literature review, the interconnectedness of memory, history, and memorialisation is examined in the context of the Serbian case. Against the backdrop of Serbia's problematic handling of the past in general, including the Second World War and the Balkan War of the 1990s, as well as Serbia's *infatuation* with the First World War in particular, we look at how the "sacrificial narrative",³¹ pervasive throughout the *Serbian national identity narrative*, is continuously applied in political and public discourse. Dubravka Stojanović uses the example of Serbia to make an insightful analysis of the role of history and memory in the rise of populism.³² Stojanović has carried out bold and important research in analysing how the current

24 Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 2014); Jay Winter, *Remembering War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), and others.

25 Paul A. Cohen, *History and Popular Memory. The Power of Story in Moments of Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

26 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991).

27 Leon Wieseltier, "Against Identity", (*New Republic*, November 27, 1994) <https://newrepublic.com/article/92857/against-identity> (accessed November 1, 2016).

28 Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence* (New York. London: W.W. Norton and company, 2006).

29 Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts. London, England: Harvard University Press, 2004).

30 Paul Connerton, "Seven types of forgetting" (*Memory Studies* 1, (2008): 59-71.

31 Nevena Daković, "The Serbian mythomoteur as sacrificial narrative", *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, 4(1) (2018),140.

32 Dubravka Stojanović, *Ulje na vodi [Oil on water]* (Belgrade: Peščanik, 2010); *Populism the Serbian Way* (Belgrade: Peščanik, 2017).

Serbian regime — as well as previous ones — have been using the past, specifically the First World War, to influence the present. Through the examination of the commemorative practices, in subsequent chapters, we develop Dubravka Stojanović's assertions further, by exposing a specific tactic used by the current government to reframe political and economic issues through the filter of the perceived glorious Serbian past, which we have termed *historical frame switching*. This term will be explained in more detail through the examples in the thesis.

Chapter III: A number of historians have noticed that in the Great War histories as told in the West, Serbia is mentioned early on in 1914, before it *disappears* from view. As pointed out by Danilo Šarenac in his account of the Retreat,³³ many important episodes from the First World War on the Balkan Front have not been sufficiently examined, the Retreat being one of them. The Retreat is no longer a well-known event outside Serbia, although it was widely written about at the time, which is in itself a curious transformation from an event into a footnote. This part of the study presents significant research on the Retreat with an overview of variations in the way different historians, Serbian and foreign, as well as participants and eyewitnesses have given an account of the event. Our intention here is to give a comprehensive account of the Retreat and highlight the significant scenes that are echoed in representations and remembrance of the event known as *Golgotha* in Serbia. We will also consider less commonly mentioned aspects which are usually eschewed. The Retreat is well documented by participants' written testimonies, memoirs of surviving soldiers, public figures, writers, refugees, journalists, Serbs and foreigners who followed the army. There are photographs of the Retreat, even of the Albanian and Montenegrin mountain crossings,³⁴

33 Danilo Šarenac, "Golgotha: the retreat of the Serbian Army and civilians in 1915 – 16", in *Europe on the Move: The Great War and Its Refugees*, edited by Peter Gatrell and Lyubov Zhvanko (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 236.

34 Sampson Tchernoff, *La guerre des cinq ans: les Serbes en 1912-1916*. S.a. s.l. <http://velikirat.nb.rs/items/show/6219> (accessed October 31, 2016) ; *Ratni album Riste Marjanovića 1912-1915 [Rista Marjanović's War Album 1912-1915]* (Gornji Milanovac: Dečje novine, 1987)

drawings by participants,³⁵ film footage of the soldiers' boarding ships for Salonika.³⁶ Representative samples from Serbian and foreign sources are examined, because there are different renditions of the Retreat. It is often forgotten that not everyone had the same experience.³⁷ We consider what led to it and what followed. Certain episodes of the Retreat have received more attention than others and these have come to symbolise the courage, the suffering, the sacrifice and the eventual redemption of the Serbian *peasant-soldier*. The redemption — resurrection — was embodied in the recovery of the Serbian Army which subsequently played an important role in the breakthrough at the Salonika front. Serbian historical narrative regularly underscores the *crucial role* of the Serbian Army as one of the main, although often unrecognised, contributors to the end of the First World War.³⁸ While the Retreat is well documented, photographed, and mapped, its human cost remains unknown: as said there is no definitive list of casualties, nor was there a complete inquiry to determine what went wrong and caused so many lives to be lost. There is an inherent contradiction in an experience shared by so many, passed on to their descendants, with many questions still unanswered. The remembrance is experienced emotionally, also because it was a defeat that turned into a victory: if the Retreat is mentioned at the beginning of a speech, it will almost certainly be followed by the mention of the Kajmakčalan victory at its end.³⁹ The Retreat remains alive in individuals' family histories: most Serbs who are fifty years or older today have at least one great-grandfather who participated in the Retreat. The proposed account includes the background and the context of the Retreat, the military and political circumstances as well as the main actors — it outlines the main episodes as described in outstanding testimonies and documents. Our aim is to

35 E.g. by William Smith, of the Scottish Women's Hospital unit.

36 Serbia's Exiled Army (1914-1918), *YouTube*, British Pathé News <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUbQEFmUVXg> (accessed October 31, 2016)

37 Olga Manojlović Pintar, *Arheologija sećanja. Spomenici i identiteti u Srbiji 1918 – 1989 [The Archeology of Memory: Monuments and Identities in Serbia 1918-1989]* (Beograd: Čigoja, 2014), 87.

38 There are frequent mentions of Serbia's contribution to the end of WWI in popular literature and media. This claim is frequently repeated at WWI commemorative events in Serbia.

39 The 1916 Kajmakčalan Battle is the first victory of the reformed Serbian Army. The Kajmakčalan Peak on Mt Nidža in present-day North Macedonia is 2521m high.

contribute to the historiography of the Retreat in English by combining different narratives of the Retreat and highlighting those episodes that are salient for the continuing popularity of the widely accepted Retreat narrative, and which form the essence of the Retreat remembrance. We note the considerable impact of the popular narrative on the scholarly research which may be partly explained by the subjectivity of scholars whose forefathers crossed Albania. Perhaps those historians whose great-grandfathers have participated in the Retreat are invested in protecting the conventional narrative.⁴⁰ This part of the research project further notes the direct and indirect consequences of the Retreat, both military and diplomatic. The Retreat, although disastrous, led to the reorganisation of the Serbian Army and to the creation of the new state. It is not stretching the truth to say that the Retreat — in all its heroic and tragic folly — paved the way for Yugoslavia.

Chapter IV: This chapter of the thesis looks at the way Serbia's past gets in the way of Serbia's future. Our intention is to shed more light on the degree of attachment that Serbs have to their past and how this bond is manifested. At the same time, we examine how the Serbian *national memory* is impacted by the politics of the day. Despite the apparent attachment to the past, we note a systemic volatility in relation to the past. We posit that this contradictory mixture is detrimental for the advancement of Serbia towards becoming a true progressive democracy. Serbs tend to take pride in the past of their country, as do many other nations. But Serbs also live in a country where the past matters to such an extent that it can be readily altered to accommodate the present. What does it say about a country where street names habitually change when regimes do? It could mean that nothing is certain, especially not an address. Monuments, through which common values are celebrated and remembered, are a way for society to signal its appreciation of an event, or a person — we remember and celebrate. Monuments in Serbia tend to be controversial and subject to much public debate. A closer look at commemoration events that take

40 While this is also true of this author, the intent is not to let it impact the research.

place around such monuments make for intriguing discoveries — for a number of politicians it seems that commemoration is a full-time job. Commemorations offer a platform and a forum where topics of political interest are raised without anyone challenging the content because of the commemorative context. In examining such occasions and speeches during the centenary events, we read between the lines and interpret the messages behind the official pronouncements. At the same time, the centenary years have given the Serbian press a staple supply of topics and themes. The battles of the First World War, the anecdotes surrounding the Retreat, tragic stories and selected moments retold in the language of today's media, are another way of looking at how Serbian society managed the past and its remembrance in the second decade of the 21st century. We make a distinction between *tabloids* and *broadsheets*, as well as between government-sponsored media and independent media, noting the different approaches on the same subjects.

Chapter V: Partly in comparison with and in contrast to the previous chapter, the last chapter of the research examines how the Retreat is remembered now, how its presentation is mediated in museums and exhibitions, and how the story is told and memorialised — rediscovered — a hundred years after the event. The Retreat also has music and songs that keep it alive because they are always present at commemorations. These acts of memory, be they officially or privately organised, all have the Serbian dead as their focus. The main reason for this is certainly that Serbia proportionally lost more men than any other WWI country — 25% of its male adult population.⁴¹ The Serbian dead of the First World War are honoured in Thessaloniki, and on the island of Vido, in Corfu. These places have special meaning for Serbs, acquiring new identities and even different names: Corfu as the island “where the yellow lemon trees bloom”, Vido as the “Island of Death”, the Ionic Sea as the “Blue Tomb”. The Retreat has its own *emotional geography* coexisting with the

41 This is mentioned at most commemorations in relation to WWI, including on 11 November 2018, Belgrade New Cemetery where the main commemorative event was held.

actual sites.⁴² Serbs who fell in the Great War are regularly and piously visited by their descendants, the actual and the notional. We examine these pilgrimages that have become increasingly popular over the years and look at the keepers of the Serbian flame in these sacred Serbian places in Greece. The examination of the remembrance of the Retreat would not be complete without looking at the individual initiatives to remember the Retreat and the First World War casualties. The people carrying out these acts of remembrance deserve special attention. Whether they are cleaning military cemeteries, researching the graves of Serbian soldiers in other countries and finding their descendants, retracing the steps of the Serbian soldiers in the Retreat 100 years later, cycling to commemorate the Retreat, or rowing around Greece with the same purpose, they are all actors of remembrance. In our view, they represent, as mentioned, what Jay Winter described as “fictive kinships” of remembrance. Their motivation is personal and often related to their family history, but there are also history enthusiasts and social activists. We examine the roots of their engagement and their enthusiasm as described through interviews, reports, and the actual acts of remembrance.

Conclusion: There are past events in a nation’s history that are never truly over. For a variety of reasons, they are replayed, re-enacted, reproduced, retold as they become *sacred scripts*. They shine so bright that everything else fades to black. The Retreat is one such crucial identity marker in the Serbian national narrative. As the symbol of Serbia’s Great War, we will demonstrate that today *the Retreat is in the service of the present*. Our research will provide us with the elements to formulate an answer to the research question: How is the 1915 Retreat remembered and represented in Serbia 100 years later and what does this tell us about the Serbian relationship to the past?

But first, our journey starts with the prologue.

42 There are Serbian WWI war memorials and cemeteries in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Tunisia, Algeria, Austria, Albania and France but none have the status of Salonika and Vido. The largest ossuary, in Jindrichovice, holds the remains of over 7,500 Serbs, former POWs. See mausoleum at Jindrichovice <https://www.secanje.nl/en/cemeteries/jindrichovice/> (accessed May 25, 2020).

