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

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I

Prologue

"We all were sea-swallow'd, though some cast again,
 And by that destiny to perform an act
 Whereof what's past is prologue, what to come
 In yours and my discharge."⁴³

In Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, Antonio the antagonist encourages his friend Sebastian to kill Sebastian's sleeping brother, the king, in order to take his place and become the king himself. In a persuasive few lines, Antonio explains that since fate has led them to the present moment, it offers an opportunity which cannot be ignored. His words, "What's past is prologue" were meant to spur Sebastian on. This phrase, out of the context in the play, is best known in its uncontracted form as the inscription on a monument.⁴⁴ In or out of context, the phrase has at least two differing interpretations: the past, as the origin of everything that is happening now, represents a preamble to the present and we need to know it. Another interpretation is that regardless of what happened in the past, even though it might explain the present, the past matters much less now that the present is here. The latter is possibly closer to what Antonio meant when he was encouraging his friend to commit regi-fratricide: let us seize the present and act. The past played a part it was supposed to play but — the past is past. The former interpretation

43 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act II, Scene I (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1984), 79.

44 The phrase *What is Past is Prologue* is engraved on the monument called *Future* in front of the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

has a different message — let us stop for a moment, because if we are to understand the present plot, we must know what precedes it, we must listen to what the prologue has to say. The past is never past, it matters now and always. One interpretation rushes ahead while the other pauses to look back. Although the present study is formally situated in the “past is never past” camp, it looks reflectively at the “past is past” school of thought, evaluating the philosophical gap between the two. Specifically, the study is motivated by a desire to understand why the Serbs have a difficult time dealing with the past of their country: the selected heroic parts from their history are worshipped alongside the mainstream refusal to accept any critical inquiries into these events. We examine both sides of this cavalier yet dogmatic attitude to the past arguing that it matters because *it informs Serbian political choices in the present*. Because the past, depending on whose version of the prologue we hear, creates our present and shapes our future, even if that past is over one hundred years old.

1. The Great War: The Past vs. the Present

“Public memory is a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past and its present, and, by implication, its future.”⁴⁵

The bond between the past and the present is complex for all of us. The past interests us because it tells us where we *historically* come from: by teaching us who we *were*, who we *are*, or who we *could be*. As the present demands our attention, we are drawn into exploring past events and looking for clues about our identity and our place in the world. The past can be seen as inspiring, instructive, and a source of pride. Harnessing the potential power of the *proud* past would require managing its narrative.

45 John Bodnar, “Public Memory in an American City: Commemoration in Cleveland” in *Commemorations*, ed. Gillis, *The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 76.

The past, told through stories, is subject to today's interpretation which gives it meaning in line with our purpose.

In the introduction to his book *Serbia and the Balkan Front 1914*, published in 2015,⁴⁶ James Lyon provides insight into the fraught preparations for the commemorations of the centenary of the Sarajevo assassination of 1914, and the subsequent start of WWI, because of the old but unsettled question of whether Gavrilo Princip should be seen as a terrorist or a freedom fighter. The commemoration of the start of the war was already troubled when the controversy on the causes of the war was revived with the publication of books by Clark, McMeekin and MacMillan, as mentioned previously. Since commemoration is always linked to interpretation of an event, and since moving on 100 years had not assuaged "polarized views",⁴⁷ there was to be more than one commemorative event. In late June 2014, a series of cultural, artistic, and academic events were to take place in Sarajevo to commemorate the start of the First World War and a conference was to assemble the most prominent world historians on the subject. The commemorative events, accompanied by local protests,⁴⁸ were to begin with a symbolic Vienna Philharmonic concert on 28 June in Sarajevo, attended by dignitaries from the EU and the former belligerent states.⁴⁹ In a farcical re-enactment of the taking of sides in the Great War, albeit 100 years later, Austria and France were at odds regarding the organisation of commemorations. Although the French official delegation attended the concert, many of the French academics shunned the conference. The Serbian and Bosnian Serb delegations boycotted the entire series of commemorative events in Sarajevo proper, and attended a rival event at the unveiling of a statute to Gavrilo Princip

46 James Lyon, *Serbia and The Balkan Front 1914* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 8.

47 Lyon, 2015, 8.

48 Some Sarajevo protesters wore Princip masks, as noted in Jonathan Casey, "Eyewitness to History", entry for 28 June 2014, website of the National WWI Museum and Memorial (US), <https://www.theworldwar.org/eyewitness-dispatches-sarajevo-and-vienna-2014> (accessed May 11, 2019).

49 "Sarajevo Concert: Eurovision and Vienna Philharmonic Unite Europe In WWI Commemoration", Press Release, *European Broadcasting Union (EBU)*, 19 June 2014, <https://www.ebu.ch/news/2014/06/sarajevo-concert-eurovision-and> (accessed May 11, 2019).

in Serb-dominated eastern Sarajevo.⁵⁰ “The conference included over 100 scholars from North America, Europe, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine and all the Balkan States. Official Serbian and French institutions, as well as French scholars, were notably absent, although four Serb scholars defied official Belgrade and participated.”⁵¹ A century may have passed, everyone who was alive in 1914 is now dead, but the past is truly alive — and kicking.

The centenary of the First World War and related commemorations elsewhere in Europe generated considerable interest too, not only among academics and amateur historians, but also among the general public. It is possible to interpret this attraction through the prism of current acute complexities of European and worldwide politics, and the rise of uncertainty. The past may appear simpler and clearer than the present as we are drawn to *remembering* the past event because we know how it ended: it was not exactly a happy end, but we understand what happened and why — at least we think we do. While the present lacks this finality, the past showcased through commemorative events also draws us in through its escapist aspects. The past in general, but the First World War in particular, is often romanticised. Perhaps it is the weight of the sheer magnitude of the loss of life, or the tragic beauty of pointless sacrifice that fascinates us. In our mind’s eye, we move into another time and other circumstances while accompanied by history books, fictionalised accounts, and heroic narratives. With no living contemporaries of the Great War at the centenary celebrations, we may also feel freer to look at the events in different ways. Historians, on the other hand may see the absence of living witnesses as an opportunity to acquire a monopoly on the narrative.⁵²

Remembering the Great War today also means revisiting and reinterpreting an already sizeable body of research that keeps growing,

50 “WWI centennial event without Serbs”, *Deutsche Welle*, 28 June 2014 <https://www.dw.com/en/wwi-centennial-event-without-serbs/a-17743319> (accessed May 11, 2019).

51 Lyon, 2014, 9. Also in Miletić, 2016, 18-19.

52 Antoine Prost and Jay Winter, *Penser la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2004), 15.

changing and challenging entrenched ideas. Researchers are repositioning their views in the polemics on the causes of the war, renewing the debates on its conduct, its turning points, strategies, and legacy. Many welcome it, while others deplore it, or feel threatened by it, as will be discussed further. The Great War is popular also because it “*n’appartient à personne, pas même aux historiens.*”⁵³ The Great War is a *sure bet* in terms of new publications and crowd-pulling exhibitions. In France alone, there are over 13,700 monuments dedicated to the memory of the Great War⁵⁴ that still hold a central place in the communities. During the centenary years, the US writer and actor Indy Nydell hosted a successful series of the retelling of the Great War, “covering WWI in real time” using *Pathé News* footage. The series was posted on *YouTube* and acquired a respectable audience ranging between 150,000 to nearly 2,800,000 for 671 different videos, with well over a million subscribers worldwide.⁵⁵

The Great War has a recognisable brand; the symbols and imagery are powerful enough to summon our emotions directly. For instance, the large-scale art installation of ceramic poppies at the Tower of London enjoyed mass appeal by combining art, memorialisation, education, legacy-building, and charitable activities. In such memorialisation events, victims and heroes are remembered generally and specifically. Poppies that represent the “Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red”⁵⁶ make the experience universal, while the roll of honour and dedications of descendants also make this project personal. During the centenary years, 2014 – 2018, a number of museums and dedicated exhibitions offered *the experience of trenches*, with mock-up sandbags and sound effects of machine guns and artillery in an attempt to reconstruct *what it must have felt like*, as in the *Centre d’interprétation Marne 14 – 18* in Suippes, Champagne,

53 Prost and Winter, *Penser la Grande Guerre*, 2004, 9.

54 36,000 cicatrices, *Les monuments aux morts de la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Editions du Patrimoine, 2016), 9.

55 *The Great War*, <https://www.youtube.com/user/TheGreatWar> (accessed May 11, 2019).

56 “Tower of London Remembers” http://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/tower-of-london-remembers/#gs.syJl_Pg (accessed May 11, 2019).

France.⁵⁷ The *Yser Tower* in Diksmuide in Flanders, an important Flemish monument, which has been turned into a museum,⁵⁸ went a step further by making one of its floors into a pretend gas-attack area, with dark corridors, from which noise of explosions, and soldiers screaming and coughing could be heard. Visitors to such museums and exhibitions are encouraged, in fact, they are almost forced, to take part in a kind of role play. The purpose of this trend — to offer a better understanding of the war, to further mystify it, or perhaps to provide a form of *educational entertainment* — is not always clear.⁵⁹

In many countries, collective cultural and artistic marking of anniversaries is seen as encouraging creativity and inspiring the study of history. At the same time, such commemorations are also opportunities for the political interests of the day to use public memorialisation to their advantage, usually to confirm the continuity between the past and the present with the underlying message that the holders of political office today represent an unbroken line of common values.⁶⁰ Continuity matters because it asserts authenticity and bolsters legitimacy of the *commemorators*. They expect that the heroic deeds of fallen heroes would improve their reputation through commemorative association. As Prost and Winter write: “*La commémoration devient, pour les acteurs sociaux, collectivités publiques, institutions, entreprises, etc., le moyen d’affirmer leur importance et de confirmer leur être. Elle remplit une fonction de légitimation en attestant l’ancienneté et en marquant les différences. Par quoi elle contribue à la valorisation des identités, si caractéristique du monde contemporain.*”⁶¹ [emphasis mine] Celebrations of past events are thus imbued with multiple acoustics resonating with different audiences and representing a variety of emotions. Local events celebrating heroes

57 Visited in August 2016 <http://www.marne14-18.fr> (accessed May 11, 2019).

58 Visited in August 2018. “The Yser Tower” <http://www.museumaandeijzer.be/ijzertoren/en/ijzertoren-diksmuide/yser-tower> (accessed May, 11, 2019).

59 Susan Sontag notes the *Imperial War Museum* in London offering *The Trench Experience* and *The Blitz Experience* in Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2004), 109.

60 In a parallel to 1914, Serbia sought the support of Russia and France, but this time to oppose the commemorative conference on the 1914 Sarajevo assassination, organised by the Sarajevo Historical Institute. See Lyon, 2015, 9.

61 Prost and Winter, 2004, 45.

fallen for a greater cause, also involve a current political agenda as well as a permanent and genuine need of the community to reflect, to take a moment to be silent and pay one's respects at the same time (*se recueillir*). They look at the *remembered* event whose impact has stretched to the present day and whose meaning has evolved. While just invoking the name of someone can be a powerful message,⁶² the remembrance goes beyond the event remembered. It is never *just* about the event, it could be about a range of issues that the people assembled care about. It could also be about the events that are seemingly unconnected to what is being remembered, as in some Serbian First World War commemorations where references to the 1999 NATO air strikes were made.⁶³ These apparently disparate needs of remembrance — political, emotional, social, individual, national — are embodied through places known as *lieux de mémoire*, defined by Pierre Nora.⁶⁴ As communities disappear, they become the *milieux de mémoire*. Human activities change as occupations, habits, and rituals disappear. It is up to history to “organize the past”.⁶⁵ But while the world changes, the actual places are still here. They have to be *remembered*, associated with the events that happened there, which is why we need to keep retelling the story, so that the sites will preserve their meaning. The meaning of the *site of memory* is found in the interpretation — it tells the story of the way the past was *organised*. We lose the past if we lose the story.

This research recognises that history can never be contemplated in a vacuum. The context of when history is written matters: record of what occurred during a war will depend on the consequences of the outcome.

62 In his lecture on the remembrance of WWI in Europe, Jay Winter speaks of 11 November commemorative events in France, where the teacher reads the names of the fallen in the war, engraved on the local WWI monument as the children reply “*présent*”. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpH5l6EA1t0&list=PL3A8E6CE294860A24&index=18> 26’ (accessed May 11, 2019).

63 Serbian WWI commemorations described in chapter V “Retreat Remembered and Rediscovered”.

64 Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire.” *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24.

65 Nora, 1989, 8.

The government in power, depending on the type of regime in question, may also control the official *remembering* which will shape the perception of the event for newer generations. They may rebel against the official version, or go along with it. The dominant narrative is perpetuated in history books, official commemorations, street names, monuments, museum exhibitions and other mediated acts of memorialisation. Dominant historical narrative elements in everyday life represent the internalisation of history: we live in streets with specific street names, near certain monuments, and we do not work on public holidays that are assigned such status because of something that happened in the past. All these aspects of our lives, and much more, are ruled by the dominant narrative. Since the reality is thus directed by “mnemonic hegemony”, to use Berthold Molden’s coinage,⁶⁶ the imbibed perception of history becomes the truth we live by, barring active resistance of significant counter narratives. Moreover, the perception of a historical event matters more to a national group than a factual historical record of what actually happened. National groups will, in fact, forget parts of their past. Indeed, forgetting parts of history and adopting historical errors is necessary for the nation to come unto itself, Ernest Renan boldly asserted in 1882. “*Une nation est un principe spirituel, résultant des complications profondes de l’histoire, une famille spirituelle, non un group déterminé par la configuration du sol.*”⁶⁷ In other words, national belonging is about ideas and ideals. They are transformed into collective memory which will include manipulation, false remembering as well as forgetting.⁶⁸ Part of the identity of each national group comes from the perception of its history which depends on how a national group and its antagonists (choose to) remember the actions of their ancestors in a specific set of historical circumstances. This perception is part of the cohesive force that defines national identity.

66 Berthold Molden, “Resistant pasts versus mnemonic hegemony: On the power relations of collective memory”, *Memory Studies* (2016, Vol. 9 no. 12), 125-142.

67 Ernest Renan, “Qu’est ce qu’une nation”, (Paris: Conférence donnée à la Sorbonne, 1882), 49. http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/renan_ernest/qu_est_ce_une_nation/renan_quest_ce_une_nation.pdf (accessed September 28, 2016).

68 Renan, 1882, 37. Also, David Rieff, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 135.

Indeed, we accept that what distinguishes a national group from others is, in Anthony Smith's definition, "a named human population sharing a historic territory, or homeland, **common myths and historical memories** [emphasis mine], a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members".⁶⁹ There seems to be a symbiotic yet troubled relationship between common myths and historical memories because myths may be, and often are, partially based on historical events with fictional and factual elements combined in a potentially intoxicating cocktail.

2. Serbia's Main Event

"No one knows what's hard suffering until they've crossed Albania walking."⁷⁰

For *small* and relatively *new* nations, there are no small or unimportant historical events. If a small nation becomes *famous* on the international stage through an event, this becomes a defining marker in the small nation's identity. The *fifteen minutes of fame* may pass quickly for everyone else, but the event remains central to the nation in question. Past wars and battles depicted in textbooks, or fictionalised in novels and films, defeats and triumphs that are remembered, commemorated, and celebrated, represent more than routine public life and popular culture — the sanctity of past events is actively maintained. Consequently, there is little distance between the event and the national group. The present is judged, usually harshly, when compared with the glorious past. Every nation needs an imagined *Golden Age*, which is longed for and used as a reference, as will be discussed later on. The imagined values we believe inspired the deeds of the past are maintained as a roadmap for the present and the future. In 2013, the Serbian Minister of Culture and Information, Ivan Tasovac, used exactly this image in his speech on the occasion of the commemoration

69 Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1991), 14.

70 Serbian saying.

of the 1918 breakthrough of the Salonika Front: “We have an obligation to ask ourselves what messages and signposts we can draw from this feat carried out by the most glorious generation in our history”.⁷¹ Minister Tasovac was talking about Serbia’s Great War. In both Serbia’s history and collective memory, the Great War (*Veliki rat* in Serbian) has pride of place. In the run-up to the centenary of its beginning and in the centenary of every year of the war, Serbia has been publicly remembering a great many events of the Great War. Not only its first shots fired by a Bosnian Serb in Sarajevo in June 1914, but more importantly, one century later, Serbia remembers and celebrates the war which made it “famous”, as expressed by the Serbian Prime Minister, Ivica Dačić, in 2013, in his speech on the occasion of the commemoration of the 98th anniversary of the arrival of the Serbian Army on the islands of Vido and Corfu: “For us Serbs, every time we come to Corfu and Vido, we experience it as a memorial service. More than 10,000 people rest in the ossuaries and in the deep blue sea tomb. As someone once said, here lies the best part of Serbia⁷² — the eternal Serbia. An entire generation went through the Golgotha here, followed by the start of the resurrection. Serbia paid for her freedom dearly, in the words of a British military adviser, she paid for it in blood and tears. This was the war that made Serbia famous.”⁷³ The passage above exemplifies a number of the issues in examining the memory of the event that is the subject of the present research: there are different ways in which this event is remembered and represented 100 years later, but it always tends to generate a strong emotional response. This is in itself contradictory to serious historical investigation but it represents part of the *Serbian problem* as mentioned previously. The 1915 Retreat is considered

71 “Podvig Solunaca putokaz za nas” [“The feats of Salonika veterans are the signposts on our road”] *B92*, 28 September, 2013 http://www.b92.net/kultura/vesti.php?nav_category=1087&yYYY=2013&mm=09&dd=28&nav_id=759029 (accessed September 30, 2015).

72 John Kelly, White House chief of staff (July 2017 – January 2019), considers that the best Americans are in Arlington. *Time*, 19 October 2017 <http://time.com/4990521/john-kelly-donald-trump-soldier-death-transcript/> (accessed November 30, 2017).

73 “Nama je svaki odlazak na Krf opelo” [“We hold a memorial service every time we come to Corfu”]. *B92*, September 26, 2013. http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yYYY=2013&mm=09&dd=26&nav_category=11&nav_id=758324 (accessed September 30, 2013).

sacred — nationally, historically and emotionally. The research explores the Retreat transposed into the wider *mythomoteur* of the Serbian national consciousness, within the Serbian national identity narrative.⁷⁴ The Serbian Retreat and the associated First World War events are emotional triggers for commemorations with an agenda, and one might argue that there are no commemorations without one. Referring back to Mr Dačić's quoted speech, we note that the passage is heavy with an emotional charge that cannot be countered. The facts ("10,000 in ossuaries") are correct and they are juxtaposed by a value judgement that seems completely arbitrary ("here lies the best of Serbia"). Mr Dačić then refers to an unnamed British military adviser,⁷⁵ presumably to add credibility to his claims. One could say that Mr Dačić is speaking as a politician and does not burden himself with the desired neutrality of a historian. Nevertheless, the speech is symptomatic of the way the subject of the First World War is treated in Serbia. Many historiographic texts, articles and books by Serbian authors on this subject seem to contain objective facts interspersed with value judgements, frequently supported by statements reputedly belonging to foreign observers as a way of claiming objectivity. It appears that a certain amount of bias is inevitable among a number of Serbian historians — to say nothing of politicians — when it comes to the First World War. The general discourse surrounding the centenary commemorations is predominantly about the righteousness of the Serbian cause. The works of outstanding historians such as Andrej Mitrović⁷⁶ were not used as reference for the centenary events, ostensibly because they were based on facts, not emotions. As Latinka Perović⁷⁷ explained in 2014, at the start of the centenary commemorations, the First World War is used by Serbian politicians to glorify the participation of Serbia in the war — always eager

74 The Kosovo legend is the main Serbian story. The First World War is used in the same way as the Kosovo myth, see Nevena Daković, "The Serbian mythomoteur as sacrificial narrative", *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, (4(1) (2018)), 140-145.

75 This is probably Rear Admiral Troubridge, see chapter III.

76 Andrej Mitrović's *Serbia's Great War, 1914-1918* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2007) is considered standard work on WWI in Serbia in English.

77 Latinka Perović (b. 1933) is a Serbian historian.

to debate what caused it while crying foul over an *anti-Serbian conspiracy*.⁷⁸ As we shall see in the research, the Serbian government's discourse in contemporary political communication mirrors their stance on the Great War — there is a tendency to emphasise *Serbia's dual status as a victim of the Great Powers and a small heroic country*. In the context of the Entente, Serbia views itself as a *loyal but abandoned ally*. This serves the government well with an internalised message: *despite our qualities and loyalty, the world is against us*, providing room for populist rhetoric and policies.

Commemorative events in relation to the Great War in Serbia can generally be divided into two types. There are official commemorations, where a solemn crowd is gathered around a freshly cleaned monument, and after a minute's silence, a politician makes a speech, or several politicians make a speech each. But there are also grass-roots commemorations in Serbia which are more creative, sincere and usually self-financed. Ordinary citizens express their gratitude or pay their respects through a variety of community-based projects, seemingly unprompted by the establishment — citizens' associations, mountaineers' clubs, pensioners' groups, history enthusiasts, completely independent of official commemorations which they may even hold in contempt.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, the official commemorative events of the Great War in Serbia accurately illustrate Jacques Le Goff's assertion that memory is in the service of today and tomorrow.⁸⁰ This does not necessarily make the emotions behind the commemorative events less genuine, but they require interpretation in relation to political agendas and the uses of memorialisation.

While endeavouring to mark what is largely seen as a *debt* to its forefathers through many commemorative events and a peak in the interest in

78 Miloš Teodorović, "Stotinu godina Velikog rata u Srbiji: Mitovi ispred činjenica" ["Hundred years of the Great War in Serbia: Myths above facts"], *Radio Slobodna Evropa* [Radio Free Europe] 28 July 2014 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/latinka-perovic-za-rse-bez-price-o-stvarnim-posledicama-velikog-rata/25472877.html> (accessed May 20, 2019).

79 From interviews and correspondence with individuals involved in such initiatives.

80 Rieff, 2016, 22.

memorial culture,⁸¹ Serbia is a country dealing with many issues from the past while contemplating a tentative European Union future, having become an EU candidate country in March 2012.⁸² Serbia is struggling to come to terms with the ways in which it has to adapt and change in order to be accepted as a reliable EU partner following the tragic Yugoslav wars of the 1990s in which Serbia is largely seen to have played a prominently negative role. In this undoubtedly painful process for Serbian society, collective memory, historical and national identity narratives — in all their ambiguities — play an important role.

In the 1980s, a series of revived historical traumas from the First and Second World Wars, through arguably manipulative encouragement by a number of historians, writers, and scores of politicians and other public personalities, surfaced in the Serbian political and public arena. Serbia was undergoing an invasion of memory. It was the *collective memory* of the mythologised defeat of the Medieval Serbian Kingdom against the Ottomans in the Kosovo battle in 1389, which played a crucial role in strengthening the position of Slobodan Milošević (1941 – 2006) in 1989, and bolstering the revival of Serbian nationalism. Triggered by Serbia, the subsequent resurgence of nationalism throughout the rest of the multi-ethnic state, under the influence of their own memories and narratives, led to the Yugoslav wars between 1991 and 1999. The date with which the Kosovo battle is associated, 28 June/15 June (Gregorian/Julian calendars), is poignantly the date when the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo on the occasion of his visit to the city in 1914. The date is thought to have been chosen as a provocation against the Serbs in Bosnia. While Serbia may or may not have been instrumental in starting

81 At an event promoting the publication of a brochure on Serbian POWs who died in the Netherlands, M. Dačić, the Serbian Foreign Minister, stated that preservation of memorial culture was a way of resisting “revisionist tendencies of part of the international community”: “Dačić: 91 srpski vojnik poginuo u Holandiji, pamтите to” [“Dačić: 91 Serbian soldiers had fallen (sic) in Holland, remember that.”] B92, 2 November 2017. http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2017&mm=11&dd=02&nav_category=11&nav_id=1321075 (accessed November 30, 2017).

82 Coincidentally, Serbia made 11 November Armistice Day a national holiday starting in 2012.

the Great War, depending on the approaches of different historians,⁸³ the subsequent mobilisation, battles, occupation, retreat through Montenegro and Albania to Greece, and eventual triumphant return and the liberation of Serbia, together with the Entente forces, has the Great War standing on a pedestal of the Serbian past perceived as heroic.⁸⁴ This event is known as “the Crossing of Albania”, “The Retreat”, or “Golgotha”, and it took place in November and December 1915. Attacked from three sides in October 1915, the Serbian Army continuously retreated south in order to survive. The retreat eventually meant the evacuation of the territory of Serbia, not only by the army, but also by thousands of civilians, thousands of young men and boys, thought to be likely targets of the enemy.⁸⁵ Originally, instructions were issued to military commanders to ensure that other civilians refrained from evacuation, but instead be kept away from hostilities as much as possible and hand over any weapons they had, since the enemy would confiscate them anyway.⁸⁶ Army commanders were attempting to provide structure and order in an increasingly chaotic situation. It was clear that almost an entire country was on the move. The elderly King Petar I, his son, Regent Aleksandar, the Prime Minister Nikola Pašić and his cabinet, all retreated with the Serbian troops. Most of the Serbian parliament deputies, public and less public figures, academics, writers, and ordinary people retreated. The state seals, the archives, and the state treasury, in a specially guarded convoy, were sent into temporary exile, extraordinarily improvised in dire conditions. The routes into safety

83 These controversies were mentioned in the introduction and are explored to a limited extent in chapter III.

84 Curiously, Belgrade weekly *Nedeljnik*'s special issue *100 Events that Changed Serbia* (2017), excluded the Retreat, but included the first *Rolling Stones* concert in Serbia in 2007, among a variety of political, cultural, and sports events. When asked about it, the acting editor-in-chief answered that omitting the Retreat was an “oversight, “was forgotten”, adding that space was limited.

85 “Naredjenje 21969” [Order regarding next class of recruits and all bans] 27 September 1915, *Serbian Military Archive*, 16/19, 2-1, box no. 59.

86 “Vrhovnoj komandi – uputstvo 7199” [“To the Supreme Command – instruction 7199”] These instructions issued by the Minister of War cover different topics related to the expanding war operations: how to protect the civilian population, getting civilians to hand over any weapons and food they had (against receipts), how to deal with state property, what to do with prisoners etc. The instructions were issued on 1 October 1915 in Niš: *Serbian Military Archive*, 16/34, 2-4, box no. 59.

were few and the refugees, civilians and military, were forced to cross Albania in order to get to the Adriatic. The original plan was for the Allies to help the Serbian Army recover in Albania. Meanwhile, as the refugees fled, in groups, in pairs, on foot, on mules, or simply walking alone, many succumbed. Casualty estimates differ widely — one such estimate is that 94,000 soldiers died of hunger, cold, and disease while another 174,000 were captured or went missing.⁸⁷ Another set of data states that 144,098 soldiers and officers died of disease or fell in combat between September 1915 and March 1916,⁸⁸ and yet another, sent by the War Minister Terzić to Prime Minister Pašić, was 243,877.⁸⁹ Thousands of civilians died, their definite numbers unknown. Since the plan for reorganisation of the Serbian Army *in situ* had to be abandoned — the Austro-Hungarian Army was getting closer — it was decided that the weakened Serbian troops and a number of civilians would be taken to French North Africa,⁹⁰ Greece and metropolitan France. Many who made it to the Adriatic on the Albanian coast had to wait too long for the Allied ships in inclement weather and died. Others made it to the ships and then died. When Serbian refugees landed on the Greek island of Corfu, the camps were not ready and as the cold weather continued, many perished. The refugees who were sick with typhus and other infectious diseases were placed on the small island of Vido, where they died in great numbers, making Vido known as *the Island of Death*. They were given burial at sea and this body of water became known in Serbian history and tradition as the “Blue Tomb”. This site of memory is personified in a poem by a young poet Milutin Bojić who died at Salonika in 1917. It is said that Greek fishermen did not fish in

87 Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (London: Pocket Books, 2006), 154.

88 Aleksandar S. Nedok, *Povlačenje srpske vojske ka albanskom primorju I njena evakuacija na Krk 1915/1916. Rad vojno-sanitetske službe*, [Retreat of the Serbian Army towards the Albanian coast and its evacuation to Corfu: Work of the Medical Service]. (Beograd: AMD system, 2006), 83.

89 Sladjana Zarić, “Od Srbije do Krfa – Put albanske Golgote” [“From Serbia to Corfu – The road of Albanian Golgotha”], *RTS* (Radio Television Serbia), centenary article, 17 January 2016. <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/Velikirat/story/2528/srbi-na-krfu/2175355/od-srbije-do-krfa-put-albanske-golgote.html> (accessed May 11, 2019).

90 The story of Serbian evacuee soldiers in North Africa is mentioned but not covered in the thesis and it deserves a separate study. E.g. see Nedeljko Gizdavić, *Srpska Afrikijada – Naši u Africi* [Serbian African Adventure – Our people in Africa] (Beograd: Medija Centar Odbrana, 2017, reprint from 1922).

these waters for 50 years out of respect for the dead.⁹¹ This is an example where one nation's collective memory is shared by another, acquiring additional meaning for the Greeks who became the people of solidarity and faithful friends of the Serbs. The study looks at these *lieux de mémoire*, the memorials erected in memory of those who died, and their role in the Serbian national identity narrative.

3. The Serbian National Identity Narrative

"Whoever is a Serb, of Serbian blood,
Whoever shares with me this heritage,
And he comes not to fight at Kosovo,
May he never have the progeny
His heart desires, neither son nor daughter;
Beneath his hand let nothing decent grow —
Neither purple grapes nor wholesome wheat;
Let him rust away like dripping iron
Until his name shall be extinguished!"⁹²

The *Serbian national identity narrative* is part of the pre-existing assumptions of the research. Any part of this narrative, even if it is mentioned in only a few words, will require no added explanation for the Serbs. Certain events, situations, or people, might be referred to in passing and *everyone* in Serbia will know what is meant. A fitting illustration of this would be the 2017 Haradinaj Case. In 2017, Mr Ramush Haradinaj, a Kosovo politician who had been charged with war crimes and then acquitted before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (2005

91 "Položeni venci u "Plavu Grobnicu"" ["Wreaths laid at the "Blue Tomb""], *Politika*, 16 April 2016 <http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/353345/Polozeni-venci-u-Plavu-grobnicu> (accessed October 30, 2016)

92 "Propast carstva srpskoga" ["The Downfall of the Kingdom of Serbia"], translated by John Mattias and Vladeta Vučković https://www.rastko.rs/knjizevnost/usmena/battle_of_kosovo.html#s02 (accessed May 11, 2019).

– 2012),⁹³ was still under investigation by the Serbian judiciary, when he travelled to France. Serbia asked French authorities to arrest him based on an international arrest warrant, which they did. A Serbian request for extradition followed. This was eventually rejected by a French court in Colmar.⁹⁴ There was consternation and anger in the Serbian media about the decision and Mr Dačić, the Serbian Foreign Minister, issued a statement of rebuke saying that, “the French generals from the First World War would have been ashamed”.⁹⁵ This is a direct reference to the traditional Franco-Serbian friendship going back to the Great War and the French role in the recovery of the Serbian Army following the Retreat. Mr Dačić was thus using historical events from 100 years ago to present the Serbian point of view in a Franco-Serbian judicial *contretemps* in 2017. The audience for his statement were, of course, not the French authorities, but the domestic public, who could understand the reference. It was a calculated emotional retort intended to remind the home crowd of the Serbian national identity narrative trope: *everyone* is against Serbia so she must fight alone for what is right since her allies of old have forgotten their friendship. This is a useful device for the government to emphasise their hardship in leading Serbia, or seeking justice for Serbia — against all odds. Evoking the past in this way sheds a different light on the matter, removes the regime’s responsibility, and distracts the public from what really happened (e.g. perhaps there was insufficient evidence, or there was a legal problem with the warrant), as the context becomes transformed through the introduction of a historical reference that has meaning for the Serbs as *the French* are accused of betraying their ancestors. We refer to this device as *historical frame switching*. Because the dominant narrative of the past is not only well known but regularly reinforced in Serbia —

93 Haradinaj et al. (IT-04-84), ICTY <http://www.icty.org/case/haradinaj/4> (accessed May 11, 2019).

94 “La justice française rejette l’extradition du Kosovar Ramush Haradinaj vers la Serbie”, *Le Monde*, 27 april 2017 https://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2017/04/27/la-justice-francaise-rejette-l-extradition-du-kosovar-ramush-haradinaj-vers-la-serbie_5118447_1653578.html (accessed May 11, 2019).

95 “Dačić o Haradinaju: Francuski generali bi se stideli ...” [“Dačić on the Haradinaj Case: The French Generals would have been ashamed ...”]. *B92*, 27 April 2017. http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2017&mm=04&dd=27&nav_category=11&nav_id=1254778 (accessed April 27, 2017).

particularly in the centenary years — reframing a current political issue by giving it a different historical context, historical frame switching can be turned on quickly, almost as a backdrop to any political, economic, or other issue. Such tactics are frequently used by the Serbian government: one of the ways to remember the Retreat 100 years on is to use its *well-remembered* tropes for whatever political purpose they fit.

But how did the *Serbian national identity narrative* evolve? We have to go back — into the past. The Serbian Medieval Kingdom is generally imagined by Serbs today as having been a long, uninterrupted and magnificent reign when Serbian culture surpassed that of Byzantium. This much-mythologized Serbia had its beginnings as a decentralised medieval polity under the relatively powerful Nemanjić dynasty, which held on to power, and gradually took possession of the lands around its fiefdom.⁹⁶ Different mixed and evolving entities were vying for prestige gained through territory acquisition — the glory was in the size of the territory not its ethnic composition,⁹⁷ as Bulgarians, Greeks, Vlachs, Hungarians, Venetians, among others, squeezed in different polities, challenged and allied with each other, sometimes in opposition to, and frequently in jealous imitation of, the great maverick empire of Byzantium. On today's map of Europe, the former Serbian Empire would have occupied roughly the southern part of Serbia south of Smederevo, Kosovo, Macedonia, Albania and Northern Greece.⁹⁸ The Serbian realm under the Grand Prince Stefan Nemanja (1113 – 1199) became the Kingdom of Serbia under his son Stefan *Prvovenčani* — The First Crowned (1196 – 1228). The kingdom gained its own autocephalous Eastern Orthodox Church in 1219 through the skilled diplomatic efforts of the king's younger brother Rastko (1176 – 1228) who, having become a monk under the name Sava, subsequently became the Serbian Church's first archbishop. Serbia

96 RTS [Serbian Radio and Television] released the TV series *The Nemanjić Dynasty* in 2018 and a monument to the founder of the dynasty Stefan Nemanja is being prepared in Belgrade in 2020.

97 Vladimir Ćorović, *Istorija srpskog naroda [History of the Serbian People]* (Beograd: BIGZ, 1989), 167.

98 Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Serbia: The History Behind the Name* (London: Hurst and Company, 2002), 6.

grew to its apogee under Tsar Stefan Dušan (1308 – 1355) after which its decline loomed against the backdrop of the Ottoman expansions in south-eastern Europe. Two battles against the advancing Ottomans, the battle of Marica in 1371, and the battle of Kosovo in 1389, are considered to have marked the beginning of the Ottoman arrival in the Balkans. The Battle of Kosovo on 28 June 1389, “gave rise to legends so soon after the event that its basic facts were quickly obscured”.⁹⁹ Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović (1329 – 1389), connected through marriage with the Nemanjić dynasty, and other Serbian lords, were to defend a much-reduced Serbian realm (from the time of Tsar Dušan), against the Ottoman armies led by the Sultan Murad and his sons Bayezid and Jacup. The probable truth is that Lazar’s Army wasn’t only Serbian and their opponents weren’t only Ottoman.¹⁰⁰ Serbian lords from the south of Lazar’s town of Kruševac did not send troops to fight on the Serbian side, presumably in anticipation of Ottoman success. Lazar’s Bosnian ally King Tvrtko I Kotromanić (1353 – 1391) did send troops, joined by Croatian crusader knights,¹⁰¹ as well as by Albanians, Vlachs and Bulgars¹⁰².

According to the myth, one of the Serbian knights, Miloš Obilić, killed Murad before the battle by approaching him under the pretence that he was crossing over to the Ottomans. It is known that both Murad and Prince Lazar died in the battle, but “there is no detailed battle report which is close to the time of the battle”.¹⁰³ The cult of Kosovo and Prince Lazar grew and constitutes the main narrative of Serbian identity in the coming centuries under the Ottoman occupation. The cult of “the Kosovo tyrannicide” flourished, making Miloš Obilić a mythical hero who sacrificed himself for his country. Obilić was greatly admired by Gavriilo Princip, among others. Edward Gibbon presciently commented

99 Pavlowitch, 2002, 10.

100 “The battle of Kosovo in 1389 was fought not between a Serbian and a Turkish Army, but between two feudal leagues of no clear ethnic loyalty.”; Pavlowitch, 2002, 227.

101 Ćorović, 1989, 202.

102 Pavlowitch, 2002, 10.

103 Marko Šuica, “Kosovska bitka – moral manipulacije” [“The Kosovo Battle – the moral of manipulation”, in *Bolja prošlost [Better Past]*, preface by Radivoj Radić (Beograd: Evoluta, 2018), 72.

on the Obilić cult: “It is a commentary on the Serbian character that this questionable act has been held up to posterity as the most saintly and heroic deed of national history”.¹⁰⁴



On the map above, we can see the borders of Serbia under Tsar Stefan Dušan.¹⁰⁵ (Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.)

It could be said that the core of Serbia's identity gradually developed in opposition to the Ottoman occupation. Certainly, the 19th century Serbian philologist and language reformer, Vuk Karadžić (1787 – 1864), who collected traditional folk poems and songs, including the series of narrative poems on the Kosovo battle, further popularised the legend

104 Quoted in Vladimir Dedijer, *The Road to Sarajevo* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1967), 251.

105 William R. Shepherd, *Historical Atlas* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1923).

which ultimately shaped the Serbian national identity.¹⁰⁶ We highlight two key elements in the Kosovo myth, as told through these epic poems. The first element is supernatural and is meant to explain the Serbian defeat: Prince Lazar lost the battle because on the eve of the battle, he was offered a choice between the “earthly kingdom” — triumph in the battle, and the “heavenly kingdom” — defeat on Earth but reward in Heaven. The second element concerns the alleged betrayal by Vuk Branković, one of the Serbian lords under Lazar, which also seems to explain the Serbian defeat, although there is no historical evidence for this.¹⁰⁷

This identity centred around the cult of Kosovo was possibly spread through panegyrics written by monks. Belgrade fell to the Ottomans in 1521, but in 1557, the Patriarchate was restored at its See in Peć, “this sole surviving institution of the Nemanjić monarchy continued the development and the extension of Serbian consciousness”.¹⁰⁸ The Nemanjić rulers’ lasting legacy are monasteries of remarkable art and architecture. With strong ties with the monastic ideal, several of the rulers became monks before they died and were subsequently declared saints. The monasteries became the visible custodians of the Kosovo flame and ensured the centrality of spirituality in what emerged as Serbian ethnicity: “the constructed Serbian ethnic memory ensured a successful future for a long-gone historical event”.¹⁰⁹

As the Ottoman expansion continued, many Slavic peoples, including Serbs, moved towards the Christian realms of Austria and Hungary when

106 Leopold Ranke became interested in the history of Serbia through Vuk Karadžić who was a central figure in the Romantic Nationalism in 19th century Europe. See Biljana Marković, Vuk Stefanović Karadžić <http://ernie.uva.nl/viewer.p/21/56/object/131-158707> (accessed May, 11, 2019).

107 Niko, Županič, “Lazar Dimitrijević. “Narodna epopeja “Kosovo””. *Etnolog* (Ljubljana) knj. 5/6 (1933) str. 134-176. https://www.etnomuzej.si/files/etnolog/pdf/Etnolog_5_6_1933_zupanic_narodna.pdf (accessed March 31, 2020). It is worth noting that both elements still persist in the Serbian public discourse, e.g. some Serbs may refer to themselves as “heavenly people”, while anyone who is seen as a traitor — or even just critical of the Serbian cause — will be called “Vuk Branković”.

108 Pavlowitch, 2002, 16.

109 Šuica, 2018, 67.

the Turks were stopped at Vienna in 1683. The Habsburgs established the so-called *Vojna Krajina*, military frontier, as a buffer zone against the Turks. This attracted large numbers of mostly Serbian settlers. Among the different migrations of Serbs escaping Turkish reprisals, the Great Migration of 1690 under the patriarch Arsenije Čarnojević (1633 – 1706) remains entrenched in Serbian historical memory.¹¹⁰ Following several uprisings against the Turks in the first half of the 1800s, Serbs began to regain control of their lands. The last Turkish troops left in 1867 and Serbia became an independent state at the Berlin Congress in 1878. The *Serbian national identity narrative* could thus be described, albeit reductively, as dominated by a great defeat in Kosovo which ended the *Golden Age*. This was followed by centuries of Ottoman occupation after which much blood was spilled before the country became independent again. Serbian people on the move and seeking sanctuary also feature prominently in the narrative.

In the aftermath of the First World War, through its sacrifices and its position of strength as a victorious nation belonging to the Entente, Serbia was instrumental in the establishment of Yugoslavia, which began as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Yugoslavia was also the country that would subsequently gain the extraordinary distinction of breaking apart twice, first in 1941¹¹¹ and then in 1991,¹¹² with arguably both causative events ignited by Serbia. In the spring of 1941, after Serbian army officers staged a coup, and Serbs revolted against the Yugoslav government's signing of the Tripartite Pact, Hitler launched an attack on the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. A swift defeat by Nazi Germany led to the dismemberment of the country. In the late 1980s, aggressive political machinations of the Serbian leadership, accompanied by strident nationalist rhetoric — which

110 Pavlowitch, 2002, 20.

111 The military coup led by Serbian army officers on 27 March 1941 prevented the Kingdom of Yugoslavia from implementing the pact with Hitler signed on 25 March 1941 by the Yugoslav government, subsequently deposed by the army. The coup was supported by mass demonstrations. The attack on Yugoslavia by Nazi Germany started on 6 April 1941.

112 Although there were strong nationalist elements across Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, it is widely argued that the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević was instrumental in starting the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s.

came to a head at the 600th anniversary commemoration of the Kosovo battle — triggered nationalist responses in the other republics and the 1990s Balkan wars ensued.

Serbs see their history as turbulent and heroic, and themselves as having always been a nation focused on *state building*.¹¹³ The *Serbian national identity narrative* considers that the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, built on the sacrifice of the Retreat, was destroyed by *others*. There are Serbian historians who view the establishment of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia as a Serbian “error”.¹¹⁴ This *ex post facto* speculation is taken further through the explanation that because Serbia was a winner in the First World War, she **saved** the other South Slavs, who would otherwise have ended up as citizens of other countries. The often-repeated trope of the late 1980s, that Serbia was *a winner in wars and a loser in peace*, is the essence of the revival of Serbian nationalism exemplified in the infamous 1986 *Memorandum*.¹¹⁵ Although this document was only ever a draft and not officially published at the time, it had considerable impact. Catching the latent mood of the Serbs following the loosening of one-party rule in Yugoslavia, the *Memorandum* expanded on the ills of the position of Serbia in the then Socialist Yugoslavia. The *Memorandum* — at the time accepted as the voice of the Serbian *intelligentsia*¹¹⁶ — clearly stated that Serbia was in an inferior position in relation to other republics: “the Serbian people could not achieve equality in Yugoslavia for which establishment they

113 Serbs in fact use it as an adjective to describe themselves as *državotvorni narod*, state-building people, or nation.

114 This approach is comprehensively refuted in Miroslav Jovanović, “Dominacija tradicionalnog pozitivizma” [“Dominance of traditional positivism”], in *Bolja prošlost* [Better Past], Preface by Radivoj Radić, (Beograd: Evoluta, 2018), 50-56.

115 *Memorandum Srpske Akademije Nauka i Umetnosti* (nacrtn), Jesen 1986. [Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (draft) Autumn 1986] <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/memorandum%20sanu.pdf> (accessed May 12, 2019)

116 216 Serbian intellectuals linked to the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences signed it, see Christina Morus, “The SANU Memorandum: Intellectual Authority and the Constitution of an Exclusive Serbian “People””, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* Vol. 4. No.2 (June 2007), 143; 18 intellectuals protested and signed an antimemorandum, see Branka Mihajlović, “Mirko Simić: Memorandum SANU, crna tačka srpske istorije” [“Mirko Simić: SANU Memorandum, the black spot of Serbian history”], *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 1 October 2016 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/mirko-simic-sanu/28024025.html> (accessed April 11, 2018)

have borne the greatest sacrifices".¹¹⁷ This sense of injustice permeates the Serbian story. The narrative can be summarised in the following way: Serbs believe to be losing, be it territory or heritage, despite being braver, having won battles and wars against a stronger enemy, blaming either the other *ex-Yugoslav*, or other neighbouring nations for hypocrisy and betrayal. The Great Powers usually fail to lend the Serbs sufficient, or any, support against their opponents while the Serbs have to defend themselves from superior and ruthless enemies. This feeling of injustice, defined by Dubravka Stojanović as, "probably the strongest glue of a nation",¹¹⁸ is kept alive through repetitions of the narrative. It is intensified through claims of Serbian *antiquity*,¹¹⁹ and its *superiority* as demonstrated in exceptional artistic and cultural achievements, such as in medieval monasteries and frescoes.¹²⁰ The frequent repetition of 1389¹²¹ is meant to reinforce legitimacy which comes from history, from whence the great pride in Serbian monasteries in Kosovo and elsewhere, dating back to the Golden Age. The Golden Age could also be conceived as Paradise, embodied by the mythical Nemanjić Dynasty Empire, which is followed by the fall personified by the Kosovo Battle defeat. The suffering under the Ottomans can be seen as the search for God — or nationhood — state building — which is eventually achieved. The Balkan Wars 1912 – 1913 brought Kosovo back into the fold of the Serbian nation for a short while before the Great War threatened to take it all away. The Retreat is Golgotha and the Resurrection is the reorganisation of the Serbian Army leading to the final victory and the liberation of the country. In this context, the historical pattern works not because it is true, but because it is familiar, therefore recognisable. In this case well-known Biblical elements

117 *Memorandum*, idem.

118 Dubravka Stojanović "The Mythical War", *Peščanik*, 5 July 2014 <https://pescanik.net/the-mythical-war/> (accessed March 18, 2017).

119 Regional comedians like to make fun of Serbian nationalists' propensity to call the Serbs "the oldest nation" or "the heavenly people".

120 Another Serbian trope is that Serbs were using the fork very early on since it was pictured at a medieval fresco, this "fact" is usually accompanied by the comment "while the rest of Europe were eating with their hands".

121 There is a political group called '1389' in Serbia, politically veering to the extreme-right, although they deny being a party, calling themselves an "association" or even an "NGO".

can be set up *to explain* what happened to the Serbs. In the same way, if the pattern of the national identity narrative is well established (*Serbs vs. the World*) then each new event that happens today can be framed so it is understood/interpreted against the backdrop of that narrative: Mr Haradinaj did not get off because the judicial case against him was below par but because of the French betrayal. This argument only makes sense in the alternative reality of this narrative. This is how controlling the memory of the past serves a real-world purpose. The feeling of injustice, the “glue of the nation” has to be kept strong. Thus, the *Serbian national identity narrative*, strengthened by targeted memorialisation, serves to frame each new event so that it will fit the pattern. This approach paralyses a nation — if everything that happens is interpreted through *old* historical patterns, not only is there no hope of future renewal, but there is no hope, no future, and no renewal. The past rules supreme: everything that has already happened will continue to happen.

Elements confirming the contours of this assumed narrative can be found in the news, feature and documentary films and productions, public events and private initiatives: “Serbs were the first among the enslaved nations to regain their sovereignty, [...] with much blood and intellect, and then invested it several times into different states until they were recently forced to take their sovereignty back”,¹²² says a commentary from a documentary on the history of Serbia from 2008. Sovereignty is gained, given, taken, or constructed, but how can a nation be *forced* to take its sovereignty back? This would be baffling to those unfamiliar with the Serbian penchant for victimhood. While it may be interesting to examine this sentiment at greater length, i.e. why are Serbs so attracted to suffering and to the idea of suffering; however, this may be outside the scope of this study.

122 *Kneževina Srbija* [Principality of Serbia], documentary film, *Košutnjak Film*, 2008.

4. The Retreat in Time

“How easy it is to talk and invent the past and how hard it is to face the present. Serbian mythology about long-gone heroic days is becoming meaningless in the horror we are living through today. If we are descendants of such heroes, how come we turned out to be such cowards? If our history is so bright, how come our present reality is so dark?” (Tired from the past, 28 September 2013)¹²³

The quote at the beginning of this section illustrates the disconnect between the perception of the heroic Serbia and the real Serbia. Serbs generally perceive their past as valiant and glorious, containing all the elements of the narrative already mentioned, while the reality of the last quarter of the Serbian century has seen civil wars, economic decay, civil unrest, NATO air strikes, and the assassination of a progressive prime minister in 2003.¹²⁴ This disconnect is not necessarily a universal feeling and there is much division between Serbs as to how their past is viewed and its connection to the present. As noted by Dušan Kovačević, a contemporary Serbian playwright, Serbs worship their great and heroic ancestors, even though they did not recognise them as such while they were alive. On the contrary, Kovačević says, “they were unacknowledged at best, and persecuted at worst. Now that they are safely dead, all sorts of things can be said and done *in the name of the heroes*: The abuse of heavenly ancestors is common, inappropriate, rowdy, and appallingly distasteful.”¹²⁵ This phenomenon is significant in considering the way Serbs perceive and deal with their past. As previously mentioned, Serbian historians, perhaps mirroring Serbian society, are divided among themselves in respect of the cause of the Great War, its meaning, and its legacy.¹²⁶

123 Anonymous comment on news site B92 in relation to a commemorative event from WWI, http://www.b92.net/kultura/komentari.php?nav_id=759029 (accessed September 28, 2016).

124 Zoran Djindjić (1952 – 2003).

125 Dušan Kovačević, *Dvadeset srpskih podela. Kako se Srbi množe deljenjem*. [Twenty Serbian Divisions. How Serbs Multiply by Dividing.] (Belgrade: Laguna, 2017).

126 The divisions are examined in Miletić, 2016.

Nevertheless, the Retreat as an event had major historical consequences. The Retreat not only expanded beyond the borders of the Serbian nation, involving other nations in its drama, but the Retreat also had long-term results in several other aspects. The military impact was significant — the sheer feat of survival legitimised the Serbian demand for independent command at the Salonika front in 1916. Consequently, the liberation of Serbia in 1918 was carried out not only by Allied troops but also by the Serbian Army. Moreover, the Serbian Army continued its advance all over the South Slav-inhabited territory of the soon to be former Austro-Hungarian Empire, scuppering Italian hopes of keeping Dalmatia, as promised to them by the Entente in the 1915 London Treaty.¹²⁷ This in turn gave Serbia a stronger voice at the Versailles Conference.¹²⁸ In this sense, the Retreat as a historical event can be interpreted as an affirmation of the perennial Hegelian question on the direction of history. The Retreat, as terrible as it was, could be interpreted as not having happened in vain: Serbian sacrifice was the price placed on the altar of future resurrection. Without the triple offensive, there would have been no Retreat, without the Retreat there would have been no suffering, and no renewal of the Serbian Army — no Golgotha thus no Resurrection. It is not a coincidence that Regent Aleksandar's 1916 speech to his troops makes this direct Christian link as his soldiers take their Easter communion on Corfu.¹²⁹ The sacrificial element in the Serbian national identity narrative is deeply embedded since the cult of Kosovo. This was described by the American writer and participant in the Retreat, Fortier Jones, as the Serbian "capacity for sacrifice".¹³⁰ The dominant narrative links the suffering with the final victory — the Retreat is seen as the price paid for the Salonika Front breakthrough, the liberation of the country, and the establishment

127 The secret treaty promised Dalmatia to Italy as incentive for joining the Entente. See *The Treaty of London* (1915) [https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Treaty_of_London_\(1915\)](https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Treaty_of_London_(1915)) (accessed May 12, 2019).

128 The Versailles Conference is not covered in the thesis.

129 "H.M. Aleksandar inspects Serbian units in Corfu", *YouTube, Kraljevina Srbija*, published on March 15, 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9cdgZ-GCKA> (accessed November 1, 2016).

130 Fortier Jones, *With Serbia into Exile: An American's Adventures with the Army that Cannot Die* (New York: The Company Co., 1916), 389.

of Yugoslavia. The Serbian role in the Great War is considered sacred mostly *because of* the Retreat, which represents the pinnacle of suffering. Consequently, each *new look* at the War is perceived as an attempt at reassessment, therefore as *revisionism* which is by definition viewed as anti-Serbian and insulting to the martyrs of the Retreat and the Great War. Foreign commentators are always acclaimed when they reiterate the Serbian point of view, as Boris Johnson did in 2014, when writing in *The Telegraph* about Germany's responsibility for the First World War. The target of his article was not Germany but "the Left."¹³¹ However, the Serbian media acknowledged Johnson as a friendly voice, his article was widely reported,¹³² and his later appointment first as Foreign Secretary, and subsequently as Prime Minister was welcomed.¹³³ It seemed as if Johnson's view on the First World War was his most important quality. The debates in the Serbian public sphere during the centenary years are animated by a *personal* interest. This is undoubtedly related to the family history of many Serbs whose great-grandfathers fought in the Great War and the personalisation of such discussions can be seen through expressions such as, *our grandfathers fought*.¹³⁴

The *grandfathers* are the so-called *solunci*, Salonika veterans, or Salonika warriors. The term refers to the Serbian troops after 1916, part of *l'Armée d'Orient*, who participated in the liberation of Serbia, having previously survived the Retreat. They are invoked as the ultimate holders of Serbian

131 Boris Johnson, "Germany started the Great War, but the Left can't bear to say so", *The Telegraph*, 6 January 2014. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10552336/Germany-started-the-Great-War-but-the-Left-cant-bear-to-say-so.html> (accessed May 12, 2019).

132 "Londoni gradonačelnik: Nemci su krivi za rat" ["London Mayor: The Germans are to blame for the war"], *Blic*, 10 March 2014, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/londonski-gradonaclnik-nemci-su-krivi-za-rat-i-oni-ne-krive-srbe-za-to/t1q2dlb> (accessed May 12, 2019).

133 Milivoje Pantović, "Serbia Welcomes Boris Johnson as UK Foreign Secretary", *Balkan Insight*, 18 July 2016. <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/07/18/serbia-praising-johnson-appointment-as-uk-s-foreign-secretary-07-15-2016/> (accessed May 12, 2019); M.B. "DŽONSON O SRBIJI! Dva puta je bio u Beogradu, a evo šta misli o NATO bombardovanju naše zemlje" ["JOHNSON ABOUT SERBIA! He was in Belgrade twice and here is what he thinks about the NATO bombing of our country"], *Blic*, 24 July 2019. <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/svet/dzonson-o-srbiji-dva-puta-je-bio-u-beogradu-a-evo-sta-misli-o-nato-bombardovanju-nase-zemlje/h91j8fq> (accessed March 28, 2020).

134 "Naši su se dedovi borili ..." – This phrase is often found on social media and heard in everyday speech.

ideals and values. The values that are considered to have carried the retreating soldiers through the Retreat and given them strength for the final victory in 1918, have been appropriated as components of the Serbian national identity as an ideal — on an abstract level. In reality, young Serbs of today, who may well feel patriotic and brave, are leaving the country of their birth in growing numbers.¹³⁵ Remembering the glorious past and professing faithfulness to the Great War ideals cannot distract forever from a range of serious economic and political issues in Serbia, and yet it happens a great deal. The issue of the disputed territory of Kosovo is a case in point. Those who do not believe that Serbia should recognise Kosovo as an independent state will invariably mention past sacrifices and among them the Salonika veterans' contribution to Serbia. In 2007, a well-known Serbian playwright said in an interview that Kosovo would never be Serbian again, and the following comment was typical of many that were posted: "... If *solunci* had given up like you, you would have been reading and writing in German."¹³⁶ In other words, an emotive argument is put forward, that *we* cannot abandon what was fought over in the past when blood was shed by *our* ancestors, regardless of reality. Remembering *solunci* is an answer to everything: whatever the issue, we can say that we will follow in the footsteps of the *solunci* — *our* ancestors, who have shed their blood *for us*. This guilt-inducing cliché is shorthand for reminding people of who they are — whatever that may be — and who they should aim to be, whatever the elusive goal. This imagined and constructed image of a First World War veteran connects the Retreat, the narrative, and the national identity.

In popular culture in the former Yugoslavia, the First World War was not a frequent choice as a film subject. Significantly, only two feature films were made about the First World War between 1945 and 2018.¹³⁷ With the

135 654,000 people have left Serbia since 2000. "Anketa: Zbog čega mladi napuštaju Srbiju?" ["Survey: Why are young people leaving Serbia?"] *Blic*, 12 February 2019 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/anketa-zbog-cega-mladi-napustaju-srbiju/1ffsssd> (accessed May 20, 2019).

136 "Kosovo više nikad srpsko" ["Kosovo will never be Serbian again"] *B92*, 4 May 2007 http://www.b92.net/srbija2020/komentari.php?nav_id=244938 (accessed May 12, 2019).

137 *March on the Drina* in 1964, and *St George Slays the Dragon* in 1984.

exception of a documentary by Stanislav Krakov from 1940,¹³⁸ no feature film was produced with the Retreat as its subject until 2018, when a film entitled *King Peter I*,¹³⁹ was scheduled to premiere on the centenary of the Armistice. At the same time, another film which focused on 1914, was released in Serbian cinemas.¹⁴⁰ It is worth noting that almost every other important historical event in the former Yugoslavia, and later in Serbia, was made into a film or a television series. In socialist Yugoslavia, *the communist partisans vs. the Nazis* films dominated film production.¹⁴¹ The Kosovo Battle, and the uprisings against the Turks, became topical in the 1980s and 1990s. Subsequently, many different eras were depicted in television and feature films, the interwar years, the wars of Yugoslav succession of the 1990s and the 1999 NATO airstrikes. The absence of the Retreat as a subject has never been satisfactorily explained. A novel published in 2015¹⁴² mentions that the American film director John Ford became interested in filming the epic of the Retreat in the 1960s but was put off by the communist authorities offering other historical events instead as *more suitable*, namely partisan operations against the Nazis from 1941 to 1945. Even if this story is not true, the fact that this anecdote is in circulation fits perfectly with the conspiracy element in the *Serbian national identity narrative* whereby Serbian sacrifices are unacknowledged.

With regard to memorialisation, there is no monument to the Retreat in Serbian territory. There are various First World War monuments and memorials such as the monument to 1300 corporals in Kragujevac, several monuments in Belgrade's New Cemetery that commemorate the First World War, a monument in the centre of Kraljevo, nicknamed *Milutin* as a symbol of the Serbian soldier of the First World War, the equivalent of the French *poilu*, and there is a street in Belgrade called *Ulica Albanske*

138 *Golgota Srbije* [Serbian Golgotha] Stanislav Krakov, Artistik Film, 1940.

139 The film *King Peter I* has since been made into a television series broadcast by the state-run Radio Television Serbia (RTS). *Kralj Petar Prvi*, Zillion Film, 2018.

140 *Zaspanka za vojnike* [Soldiers' Lullaby], Predrag Antonijević, Avala Film, Film Danas, Komuna, 2018.

141 This was depicted in the documentary *Cinema Komunisto* by Mila Turajlić in 2010.

142 Dragan Velikić, *Islednik* [Investigator] (Beograd: Laguna, 2015), 48.

Spomenice, Albanian Commemorative Medal Street, but there is no actual, physical *lieu de mémoire* in Serbia commemorating the Retreat. There seem to have been tentative plans immediately after the war, for a monument to be erected somewhere along the road to the Adriatic Sea through Albania, but these were abandoned.¹⁴³ The unofficial memorial appears to be the ossuary on the island of Vido, in Corfu, Greece.

The Retreat as an event has a number of iconic episodes, tragic and heroic. Most echo a refrain that can be heard throughout the Serbian narrative. The themes are recognisable: pursuit by a far stronger enemy, initial setbacks yet ultimate triumph, inability or unwillingness of the Allies to help, resulting in suffering, deaths, sacrifices, and worldwide attention (“the war that made Serbia famous”). The attention of the world is important for the perception of the Retreat by Serbs too. Foreign eyewitnesses who are seen to espouse the Serbian cause are celebrated. Some participated in the Retreat, and many wrote about their experiences. These include Archibald Reiss,¹⁴⁴ Flora Sandes,¹⁴⁵ doctors and nurses with Scottish Women’s Hospitals,¹⁴⁶ and other medical missions. The presence and support of foreigners have multiple functions: they validate the Serbian struggle — foreigners are objective and can therefore be trusted, acting as ambassadors of the Serbian cause. In today’s Serbia, foreign supporters are still valued, while those who are critical face open hostility.¹⁴⁷ How they are viewed by others, particularly other Europeans, remains relevant for Serbs. Although examining the prospects of the Serbian EU future

143 *Srbi na Krfu [Serbs in Corfu]*, RTS, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gMd758zbnY> (accessed May 12, 2019).

144 R. Archibald Reiss, *Infringements of the Rules and Laws of war committed by the Austro-Bulgaro-Germans; Letters of a Criminologist on the Serbian Macedonian Front*. (S.l.: Forgotten Books 2012; Originally published in 1919).

145 Flora Sandes, *An English Woman-Sergeant in the Serbian Army* (Kansas University reprint of Hodder and Stoughton original published in 1916).

146 Scottish Women’s Hospitals Website <https://www.scottishwomenshospitals.co.uk> (accessed May 12, 2019), *Elsie Inglis and the Scottish Women’s Hospitals*, 2018 <https://www100.theapsgroup.scot/elsie-inglis/24/> (accessed May 12, 2019).

147 Herta Müller, Nobel Prize Laureate for Literature, visited Serbia in 2017 and gave her view of the wars of the 1990s. Michael Martens, “Herta Müller made Serbia Look in the Mirror”, *Balkan Insight*, November 1, 2017 <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/11/01/herta-müller-made-serbia-look-in-the-mirror-10-31-2017/> (accessed October 10, 2018).

is outside the scope of this research, there is some merit in questioning a possible link between Serbia's need for acceptance and approval by Europe and of Europe, and the Retreat as part of the Serbian national identity marker. In an ambitious project finalised in 2017, in the House of European History in Brussels,¹⁴⁸ the history of Europe is told through exhibits from around the continent, illustrating events that have shaped it, from the myth of Europa and the bull, up to the Brexit vote and beyond, into the uncertainty of the future. Can we envisage how Serbs would wish to feature in that house, should they ever get there as a member-state?¹⁴⁹ Can Serbia understand its past — and any past — as something that can be viewed through different perspectives, something which is not absolute and immovable, something that should not serve political agendas, or will Serbs always cling to their known and fixed master narrative, indulging in “struggles of competitive victimhood” as Berthold Molden describes a feature of a grand historical narrative?¹⁵⁰ How can a nation be weaned off such a diet?

One of the best-known Serbian authors, Borislav Pekić (1930 – 1992) wrote in *How to Quiet a Vampire*: “We have to look straight-ahead. If we were supposed to look behind us, we would have had eyes on the back of our head. We have to kiss the ground of our children, not the ground of our forefathers. Our honour does not depend on where we come from but on where we’re going.”¹⁵¹

This quote, seemingly incompatible with the general Serbian relationship with the past, was featured on the shop window of a bookshop in Belgrade city centre for many years.¹⁵² Its popularity is evident on social media

148 House of European History <https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/mission-vision> (accessed May 12, 2018).

149 There are, in fact, at least two Serbian exhibits in the HEH, the first Serbian Constitution from 1835 and the 1852 edition of the Serbian German Latin Dictionary by Vuk Karadžić (visit to the museum 10 February 2019).

150 Molden, 2016, 125.

151 Borislav Pekić, *Kako upokojiti vampira* [*How to quiet a vampire*] (Belgrade: Laguna, 2012). From the translation by Stephen M. Dickey and Bogdan Rakić.

152 The quote was moved inside the bookshop in November 2018.

and possibly demonstrates some degree of self-awareness of at least a portion of the Serbian population. Could this be taken as an encouraging sign or is this just a voice in the wilderness? Through the example of the remembrance of the Retreat, the research will examine the way Serbs look back at seminal events in their history, as well as how and why they refuse to look at other important events from their past. The study confronts the counterproductive nature of the *Serbian national identity narrative* by presenting evidence on how the feeding of this narrative rejects all critical reflection, harms rather than heals, and ultimately prevents progress.

Conclusion Chapter I

To understand the present, we need to look at the past. Luc Huyse, Belgian sociologist, said that, “Everything passes except the past”. It is in this spirit that we examine the attraction of the Great War, and the appeal of it in Serbia more specifically. We have chosen to investigate the 1915 Serbian Army Retreat across Albania as a seminal event in the First World War, the war that the Serbs consider as “the war that made Serbia famous”. Controversially, the Great War is linked to the sense of the Serbian identity, much like the mythical Kosovo battle from the 14th century. Interconnectedness between history, memory, and identity is explored through the *Serbian national identity narrative*. In the First World War, Serbia proportionally lost more population than any other combatant country, a fact which defines how Serbs see themselves — heroic victims of Europe and the world. Because so many Serbs lost their grandfathers and great-grandfathers in the Great War, they take this part of their country’s history *personally*. Serbia’s victory alongside the Entente was instrumental in the establishment of Yugoslavia, an ambitious multi-ethnic project which failed, first as a monarchy and then as a socialist federation. Serbia’s role in the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s in a series of violent conflicts, has not been appropriately acknowledged or dealt with by the Serbs. The centenary commemorations of the Great War have been used to evoke Serbia as a victorious nation in the Great War, to

be celebrated as the *real* Serbia. This Great War nostalgia is rooted in the refusal to deal with the legacy of the conflicts of the 1990s and Serbia's responsibility for triggering them. The study identifies a tactic we have termed *historical frame switching*, used by the Serbian government — and supported by the media — whereby political obstacles are presented through various historical contexts depicting Serbia as wronged by the Great Powers. This instrumentalisation of the past — the sacralised Great War — ultimately serves the present government and keeps Serbia frozen in time through the cohesive power of *shared injustice*.

In the next chapter, we shall examine the concepts of memory, identity, and history and how they might help us explain the case of Serbia.