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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

III

The Serbian Retreat of 1915

Introduction

The Retreat of the Serbian Army and civilians across Albania and Montenegro took place in November and December 1915, following the invasion of Serbia from three different opponents: the German Army, the Austro-Hungarian Army and the Bulgarian Army. The premise of the study, as already outlined, is that the Retreat, the central event of the First World War for Serbia, elicits an emotional reaction among the Serbs to this day, exemplifying the Serbian attitude to the past. The *Serbian national identity narrative*, as we have interpreted it, rests on different strands of the internalised Serbian historical experience. The Retreat holds these strands together — threat from more powerful enemies, desperate flight towards safety, misguided reliance on allies experienced as betrayal, the Golgotha — suffering of the nation, survival through *superhuman* perseverance and courage, resurrection of the Serbian Army on friendly soil, followed by the apotheosis of the liberation of the country. The Retreat involved grandfathers and great-grandfathers in living memory, which makes the remembering personal. Distance from *the event* is impossible, and the pronoun used is *we* rather than *they*. *We fought* is used regularly to describe the events. Asked about the Retreat, most Serbs will describe the moments

and sentiments from paintings, photographs, poems, or songs. Many will undoubtedly recount the story of the Retreat as they have seen it in photographs, read about it in literature,⁴⁸⁴ heard in veterans' testimonies,⁴⁸⁵ and most importantly through family lore. The Retreat *lives* in Serbs as a selection of *scenes*, or *moments* — a veritable “collage” of “reconstructed pictures” as Halbwachs would define them: the crossing of the frozen Vizier's Bridge, the hostility of the locals in Albania, the *white death* in the Albanian mountains, hungry soldiers eating raw horse's flesh, the bleak arrival in Corfu, the dead being buried in the *blue tomb* — all of these represent *the truths* of the Retreat. Many of those emotionally charged scenes from the Retreat did happen but do not tell the whole story. The Retreat can also be interpreted as a military disaster.⁴⁸⁶ How else do we explain the absence of a memorial? But for the majority of Serbs, these moments, these scenes, *are* the historical account of the Retreat.

To support this argument, and to understand the remembrance of the Retreat in subsequent chapters, we shall now examine the events that led to the Retreat and its consequences. We shall also refer to and contextualise those historically and emotionally important *moments* that have made the Retreat not only into a myth but into a *mythomoteur*, to be equalled only by the Kosovo cult. However, before we get to 1915, we must go back a little further, to the creation of the Kingdom of Serbia, and then to the beginning of the First World War, which ushered the series of events that unfolded resulting in the Retreat.

484 Dobrica Ćosić, *Vreme smrti [A Time of Death]* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1972.); Danko Popović, *Knjiga o Milutinu [The Book about Milutin]* (Belgrade: Književne novine, 1986).

485 Antonije Djurić, ed. *Solunci govore [Salonika veterans speak]* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 2008).

486 A 2016 novel by Dragan Velikić, *The Investigator* views the Retreat as a catastrophe.

1. The Making of the Kingdom of Serbia

“In Serbia proper the struggle for independence preceded the intellectual development of the nation.”⁴⁸⁷

From the mid-15th century when the Ottomans embarked on the occupation of Serbian lands, the Serbian *sanjak* — province — endured in a diminished state, subordinate to the Sultan for over four centuries. Serbs, like the other subjugated nations under the Ottomans, depended on the mercy of great powers.

Serbia’s wars of liberation against Ottoman rule began with the First Serbian Rising of 1804,⁴⁸⁸ which first started as an uprising against the violence of the four *dahijas* — janissaries ruling the province who were, in fact, apostates from the Porte rule. Originally, the uprising was not against Ottoman rule *per se*. The uprising was led by Djordje Petrović or *Karadjordje*, Black George, (1762 – 1817) a former *Freikorps* soldier and pig merchant who gathered capable troops and insurgents to fight *dahija* abuse and restore the Porte’s rule. After the rebel’s initial successes, the rebellion developed into a liberation war against Turkish rule, dubbed the *Serbian Revolution* by Leopold Ranke.⁴⁸⁹ After the Belgrade *pašaluk* (district) was liberated, the rebels proclaimed an independent Serbia on 31 March 1807. The event was only marginally interesting for the Great Powers, at that time in the grip of the Napoleonic wars. Russia’s support seemed promising but tentative. After Napoleon attacked Russia in 1812, Russia needed a quick peace deal with the Ottoman Empire and the previous promise of Russian help to the Serbian insurgents evaporated. After more Ottoman troops arrived from neighbouring Bosnia to quash

487 Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1914), 22.

488 In Serbia today, 15 February is celebrated as Serbian Statehood Day, in remembrance of the First Serbian Rising and the Candelmas Constitution.

489 Leopold Ranke. *The History of Serbia and the Servian Revolution* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853); originally published in German *Die Serbische Revolution*, Hamburg, 1829, subsequent editions 1844, 1879.

the rebellion, Karadjordje and his closest associates were forced to flee across the Sava River to the Habsburg Empire and eventually to Russia. The briefly independent state disintegrated. As violence returned with the Ottoman rule, the Second Rising was started in 1815 by Miloš Obrenović (1780 – 1860), another pig merchant who was eventually more successful in negotiating Serbia's autonomy from Ottoman rule. As historian Stevan K. Pavlowitch pointed out, Miloš Obrenović used different methods to Karadjordje: he manipulated, bribed and cajoled the Turks into giving Serbia more freedom and more privileges over time.⁴⁹⁰ The return of Karadjordje from Russia in 1817 threatened the game Miloš was playing as well as his leadership position.⁴⁹¹ He had the legendary First Rising leader killed in his sleep.⁴⁹²

Slowly and patiently, Miloš Obrenović worked on appearing to be a faithful subject of the Porte, while managing to achieve small gains. He knew how to deal with them because his mentality and temperament were close to that of the Turks. According to Pavlowitch, he was “an unreformed Turkish pasha” who “respected the Sultan’s authority, and cheated it as much as he could get away with.”⁴⁹³ Meanwhile, the situation in Europe developed in Serbia’s favour after the Ottoman Empire’s defeat in the war with Russia. The peace agreement of 1829 confirmed Serbia’s autonomy and the return of some Karadjordje-gained areas in 1830. Through two decrees, in 1830 and 1833, the Sultan used a new statute to grant Serbia internal autonomy and a hereditary title to Prince Miloš Obrenović while limiting his powers by introducing a council to rule with him. The Sultan also granted Prince Miloš the right to keep order in Serbia, which translated into the right to have an army.⁴⁹⁴ In 1835, Serbia adopted its first constitution, the so-called *Sretenjski ustav*, named after

490 Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Serbia: The History Behind the Name*, 2002, 37.

491 Karadjordje and Miloš Obrenović were the founders of the two Serbian royal houses, the Karadjordjević and the Obrenović.

492 Čorović, *Istorija Srba* [History of the Serbs] (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1989), 459.

493 Pavlowitch, 2002, 35-36.

494 Djordje Stanić, Zoran Kilibarda and Jan Marček, *Obuka Srpske Vojske* [Serbian Army Training] (Beograd: Vojnoizdavački zavod, 2007), 52.

the Christian holiday of Candelmas, separating the executive, judiciary, and legislative powers.⁴⁹⁵ Serbia was now a self-governed entity under the Ottoman Empire with a population of about 700,000 covering 38,000 square km.⁴⁹⁶ It would take another half a century of deals, another constitution, wars with the Ottomans, and a series of negotiations with the Great Powers before the Principality of Serbia became an independent state at the Berlin Congress in 1878, gaining an additional 11,000 square km and 400,000 more people.⁴⁹⁷

Even though Prince Milan Obrenović (1872 – 1889), Miloš Obrenović's grand-nephew, achieved Serbian sovereignty during his rule, he was disliked. Known for excessive drinking, gambling, and public quarrels with his wife Queen Natalija, he was also suspected of taking bribes from Austria.⁴⁹⁸ After one scandal too many, specifically in relation to the railway concessions collapse and Milan's incompetent handling of the wars with Bulgaria, he faced open opposition.

One of Milan's last achievements as a sovereign was to acquire the status of Kingdom for Serbia in 1882. This came at a price: he had signed a secret treaty with Austria in 1881 which supported this upgrade in status in exchange for guarantees that Serbia would not engage in anti-Habsburg activities or sign any treaty without Austrian approval.⁴⁹⁹ Vienna's approach was motivated by the large numbers of Serbs in the Empire⁵⁰⁰ who campaigned for their rights, status, and language as well as for a South Slav country, in cooperation with Croats and Slovenes.

495 *Ustav Knjaževstva Srbije* [Constitution of the Principality of Serbia] 15 February 1835, *Pro juris* [http://projuris.org/RETROLEX/Ustav%20Knezevine%20Srbije_Sretenjski%20ustav%20\(1835\).pdf](http://projuris.org/RETROLEX/Ustav%20Knezevine%20Srbije_Sretenjski%20ustav%20(1835).pdf) (accessed March 15, 2017).

496 Pavlowitch, 2002, 33.

497 Pavlowitch, 2002, 65.

498 Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 541.

499 Ćorović, 1989, 560.

500 By 1910 Orthodox Serbs were the largest national group in the Empire, 43.49%, Dušan T. Bataković, *Srbija i Balkan. Albanija, Bugarska, Grčka 1914-1918. [Serbia and The Balkans. Albania, Bulgaria, Greece 1914-1918]* (Beograd, Novi Sad: RTS, Prometej, 2016). 18.



The situation in Eastern Europe following the Berlin Congress, 1878. Serbia's capital was Kragujevac between 1818 and 1841. Belgrade, its furthest northern border city, became the capital in 1841. Serbian gains are marked in yellow. (Map courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, University of Texas in Austin.)⁵⁰¹

The Austro-Hungarian Empire was aware of having to keep Serbia close to protect its interests by making the most of the pro-Vienna orientation of the Obrenović king. King Milan was known to be an *Austrian man* while his wife Queen Natalija, who was half-Russian, opposed his rapprochement with Vienna and veered towards Russia.⁵⁰² The royal marriage mirrored the main rivalries — the Austro-Hungarian Empire had designs on the Balkans, and Russia was still its main competitor in the region. Following the abdication of King Milan in favour of his underage son Aleksandar, the country briefly turned to the Russian Empire for strategic support. At first popular, having taken power before he was meant to, Aleksandar proved a fickle king who abolished the more liberal 1888 Constitution and revived the more authoritarian one of 1869. It appeared that after his disappointment with the Russian Tsar, who stopped supporting

501 Map from "An Historical Atlas" by Robert H. Lobberton, E. Elaxton and Co., 1884.

502 Ćorović, 1989, 529.

his marriage,⁵⁰³ the strategic orientation of Serbia again turned towards Vienna. King Aleksandar offered a number of favours to Austria placing him on a collision course with a group of Serbian army officers.

The years between 1878 and 1903 were considered disastrous for Serbia with wars, defeats (in the war against Bulgaria), rebellions, internal crises and no shortage of court scandals.⁵⁰⁴ When a group of officers felt they could no longer tolerate what they perceived to be Serbia's humiliation at the hands of an unstable king who was compromising Serbian hard-won independence through his closeness with Vienna, they formed a secret association led by Captain Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis (1876 – 1917). The plot was carried out in the night of 28 to 29 May (old style) – 10 to 11 June 1903, when King Aleksandar was killed together with his wife Queen Draga. The officers' coup changed the course of the country – and possibly European history.

This event horrified Europe, especially because of its needless brutality.⁵⁰⁵ Most European powers were shocked to such an extent that they cut off diplomatic relations with Serbia. The blockade would last until most of the conspirators – but not all⁵⁰⁶ – were retired in 1906.⁵⁰⁷ Despite this event leading to a change of dynasty in Serbia, a general sense of relief and of a new beginning in Serbia,⁵⁰⁸ royal Europe came to hold a predominantly negative view of Serbian social and political life.⁵⁰⁹ The view that Serbs were a “regicide nation” would still be held by Franz Ferdinand⁵¹⁰ a decade later.⁵¹¹ The officers' coup appeared unusual at first

503 Ćorović, 1989, 545. Queen Draga was unpopular and the subject of countless rumours.

504 Ćorović, 1989, 547.

505 The king and the queen were shot, before the conspirators mutilated their naked bodies and threw them out of the palace window.

506 Apis was seriously wounded in the coup and possibly avoided retirement as he was out of public view.

507 Dušan Bataković, “Storm over Serbia. The Rivalry between Civilian and Military Authorities (1911–1914)”, *Balkanica* XLIV (2013), 308.

508 Ćorović, 1989, 547; Radmila Pejić, “Herbert Vivian in Serbia. A British Traveller in Late Nineteenth Century Serbia,” *Balkanica* XLIV (2013), 278.

509 Clark, 2013, 16.

510 Archduke Franz Ferdinand (1863 – 1914) was heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne.

511 Mitrović, 2011, 145.

as they handed over power to the politicians demanding a provisional government.⁵¹² However, many of them believed that their work was not finished and wanted to be politically involved in the running of the country. The simmering conflict between the Serbian civilian and military authorities would not be resolved by the arrival on the Serbian throne of Petar Karadjordjević (1844 – 1921).⁵¹³ In fact, the clashes and intrigues between the civilian and military authorities would continue to impact Serbian politics for over a decade as the conspirators attempted to exert more influence in the running of the country. Many of the junior officers among the conspirators continued to hold posts, including Apis.⁵¹⁴ Some would go on to establish the *Unification or Death* association in 1911, better known as the *Black Hand*,⁵¹⁵ triggered by the Austro-Hungarian Annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908. Under pressure from the Great Powers, the Serbian government had to accept the annexation. This caused much resentment among the officers who perceived the acceptance as an abandonment of Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁵¹⁶ Above all, these officers believed they were the keepers of the Serbian nationalist flame, to be kept alive wherever Serbs lived.

The new king, Petar Karadjordjević (1844 – 1921), was the grandson of the legendary Karadjordje, a student at St-Cyr, a graduate of the Metz Military School, a veteran of the Franco-Prussian War 1870 – 1871 and of the Bosnian rebellions against the Turks 1876 – 1878. He was also a translator of John Stuart Mill's *Essay On Liberty* into Serbian and a believer in parliamentary democracy, having spent four decades in exile in France and Switzerland. While he had not participated in the conspiracy to bring him to the Serbian throne, he would remain indebted to the conspirators,⁵¹⁷

512 David MacKenzie, *Apis The Congenial Conspirator* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 48.

513 He was elected by the Assembly on 2 June 1903.

514 Mackenzie, 1989, 54.

515 Bataković, 2016, 20.

516 Bataković, 2016, 124.

517 The conspirators were pardoned by the Assembly.

which would greatly influence the dynamics of the Karadjordjević rule.⁵¹⁸ Nevertheless, despite the gruesome royal killings, the arrival of a king who proclaimed his intention to be a truly constitutional Serbian ruler gave Serbia a renewed sense of purpose and enhanced civic life.⁵¹⁹

The new dynasty's political champion was Prime Minister Nikola Pašić (1845 – 1926) of the Radical party. There was no shortage of views on Pašić: "he appeared to be a wandering prophet, but his political decisions showed him up as a vague ditherer,"⁵²⁰ and he was reportedly such a Russophile that it was said, "he washed his face in St Petersburg."⁵²¹ A remarkable political fighter, having survived prison and a death sentence under the previous regime,⁵²² he was a man "whose words and deeds never coincided,"⁵²³ according to the Austrian envoy in Belgrade at the time. His ability to remain calm was legendary⁵²⁴ as were his seemingly contradictory pronouncements: "We are doomed, we shall not perish,"⁵²⁵ he is thought to have said in 1914. It was widely assumed that Radoje Domanović's satirical short story from 1901, "The Leader", about a man who turned out to be blind but not before leading a lost tribe of people to their demise was portraying Pašić, "the false Moses".⁵²⁶ Yet he was a skilled politician who took on the Austro-Hungarian Empire and a host of internal enemies among whom were Apis and his men. Pašić was committed to enlarging Serbia's territory and to unifying as many Serbs as possible in one state, but not by using the methods of the *Black Hand*. This conflict between him and the plotting officers would play a key role in the Sarajevo assassination and subsequent events.

518 King Petar ended up paying the senior conspirators off to retire, Petar I Karadjordjević, *Ratni dnevnik 1915 – 1916. [War Diary 1915 – 1916]* (Topola – Oplenac: Zadužbina Kralja Petra I, 2003), 19.

519 Clark, 2013, 14.

520 Simo C. Ćirković, *Oganj i nada. Srbija u Prvom svetskom ratu. [Fire and Hope. Serbia in First World War.]* (Beograd: Dereta, 2014), 11.

521 Ćirković, 2014, 15.

522 Lyon, 2015, 31.

523 Mackenzie, 1989, 56.

524 Carlo Sforza, *Nikola Pašić* (Beograd: Kosmos, 1937), 207.

525 "Spasa nam nema propasti nećemo."

526 Gerhard Gesemann, *Bežanija – Iz jednog srpskog dnevnika 1915. i 1916. godine [original: Die Flucht. Aus einem serbischen Tagebuch 1915 und 1916.]* (Beograd: Equilibrium, 2014), 21.

The Ottoman Empire had been increasingly showing signs of weakness when, at the Berlin Congress in 1878, the Austro-Hungarian Empire's designs on the Ottoman Balkan territories were furthered as Bosnia and Herzegovina was placed under Austro-Hungarian tutelage. This was a great disappointment for Serbia. Serbs had hoped that Bosnia and Herzegovina, with an important Serbian population, would have a chance to unite with Serbia. The Austro-Hungarian Empire had other plans — their foreign expansion strategy was focused on the Balkans because they had nowhere else to go.⁵²⁷ Their greatest ally, Germany, turned into their greatest threat since the defeat at Königgrätz in 1866. Meanwhile, when it seemed that the territories of the Ottoman Empire would soon be going on a political auction of sorts; Austro-Hungarian officials saw great potential for acquiring territory, stabilising internal conflicts and providing a *mission civilisatrice* to *backward Ottoman subjects*. They envisaged profitable railway concessions through the Balkans and to this end encouraged internecine sources of conflict in the region. The geopolitical situation meant that by supporting Bulgaria against Serbia over the fate of the Macedonian territory, supporting Albanian claims against Serbia and encouraging the Kingdom of Montenegro with a view to driving a wedge between them and Serbia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire would profit through the old *divide and rule* strategy.⁵²⁸ The Empire's Foreign Minister, Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal (1854 – 1912) was interested in seeing the numbers of Slavs in the Empire increase and come under Hungarian rule which, he hoped, could reignite their interest in the Empire.⁵²⁹ The *Young Turks'* revolution in July 1908 provided an excellent pretext for the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which von Aehrenthal engineered.⁵³⁰ The annexation may have been a logical step for the Austro-Hungarian foreign policy because they wanted to “educate Bosnia and Herzegovina for political life”⁵³¹ but it provoked a European crisis. The Great Powers were not consulted and Vienna did not have a mandate for the annexation. Serbia experienced

527 Mitrović, 2011, 83.

528 Mitrović, 2011, 99-101.

529 Mitrović, 2011, 92.

530 Ćirković, 2014, 9.

531 Ćorović, 1989, 555.

it as a profoundly anti-Serbian act⁵³² and hoped for the Great Powers' intervention. Serbia eventually accepted the annexation following an ultimatum, Austro-Hungarian mobilisation, and an offer of economic incentives.⁵³³

Despite Serbia's overwhelmingly agriculture-based economy — 87% — and its lack of industry, the Kingdom was seen as attractive to the Serbs in the neighbouring empires and generally South Slavs in the Balkans.⁵³⁴ Serbia was rooted in the traditional institution of *zadruga* (family-based farming commune): “The *opanak* [Serbian leather peasant shoe also worn by most soldiers] was the guardian of all values, pillar of devotion to home and country”⁵³⁵ but it was not for nothing that Serbia's only established industry was military.⁵³⁶ The Serbs' struggle for an independent state had lasted several centuries — Serbs embodied what other small nations in large empires could be too: masters of their own land. They could be seen as the *Piedmont of the Balkans* and play a role in the unification of the South Slavs.⁵³⁷ The neighbouring empires did not really want to encourage Serbia — it had been the first country to rebel successfully against the Ottoman Empire and was now enjoying a renaissance of sorts, particularly after the “emancipation from Austria” in 1903.⁵³⁸ This attraction would only rise after Serbia's success in the two Balkan wars, alongside Vienna's hostility.

Serbia was considered the greatest winner of the two bloody regional conflicts in 1912 and 1913. In the First Balkan War, following an initial alliance between Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia, “each with a national mission before it”,⁵³⁹ large areas of Ottoman Empire territories were

532 Ćorović, 1989, 558.

533 Mitrović, 2011, 129.

534 Bataković, 2016, 14.

535 Ćirković, 2014, 11.

536 Ćirković, 2014, 10.

537 The newspaper issued by the association *Unification or Death* was called *Pijemont* (Piedmont). The idea of Serbia as Piedmont dates back to around 1860, see David MacKenzie, “Serbia as Piedmont and the Yugoslav Idea, 1804-1914” (*East European Quarterly*, XXVIII, No. 2. June 1994), 161.

538 Report, 1914, 41.

539 Report, 1914, 49.

liberated relatively quickly and incorporated into the three anti-Ottoman coalition countries. The Second Balkan War saw Greece and Serbia unite against Bulgaria, following a Bulgarian attack at the end of June 1913, resulting in a territorial redistribution. A quick and successful Serbian campaign ended in a Bulgarian capitulation less than six weeks later.⁵⁴⁰ The contentious territory of “Old Serbia”⁵⁴¹ and surrounding areas were then divided between the victors, Serbia and Greece. Serbia’s territory before the Balkan Wars covered 54,000 square km with more than 3 million inhabitants, and in 1914 Serbian territory covered 87,300 square km with just over 4.5 million people.⁵⁴² The Balkan Wars demonstrated Serbian military capability and readiness to fight. In the two Balkan Wars Serbia mobilised impressive numbers of troops. Estimates vary greatly, from 356,500,⁵⁴³ or 402,200,⁵⁴⁴ to 550,000 troops.⁵⁴⁵ While the First Balkan War could primarily be seen as a war of liberation from Turkish rule,⁵⁴⁶ systematic atrocities were committed by the warring sides. At the same time, the Great Powers were conveniently using the proxy wars to test their weapons: “[The outcome of the war] had been hailed on the stock exchanges of the European capitals as a victory for *Schneider-Creusot* and *Vickers-Armstrong* over *Krupp* and *Škoda*.”⁵⁴⁷ The French General Herr used his free time to visit the Adrianople positions to check on the performance of the Serbian, i.e. French howitzers.⁵⁴⁸ Subsequently, the Second Balkan War laid bare the deep-seated enmities in the region resulting in land-grabbing, as liberation was used as a pretext for

540 Frédéric Le Moal, *La Serbie: du martyre à la victoire 1914 – 1918* (Paris : SOTECA 14-18, 2008), 26.

541 “Stara Srbija” or “Old Serbia” was the term used in the 19th century to denote the territories of the Serbian Medieval Empire which included Macedonia and Kosovo although the term is not considered stable.

542 Andrej Mitrović, *Serbia’s Great War, 1914 – 1918* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2007), 55.

543 Nedok, 2006, 15.

544 Ćorović, 1989, 567.

545 Bataković, 2016, 15.

546 Report, 1914, 71.

547 Vladimir Dedijer, *The Road to Sarajevo* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1967), 18; French and British weapons manufacturers seemed to have gained an edge on the German and Austro-Hungarian firms.

548 Danilo Šarenac, *Top, vojnik i sećanje: Prvi svetski rati i Srbija 1914 – 2009* [*Cannon, Soldier and Remembrance: First World War and Serbia 1914 – 2009*] (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2014), 67.

conquest.⁵⁴⁹ Young Serbian socialist Dimitrije Tucović (1881 – 1914) was horrified by the crimes committed and diagnosed what he had seen as the implementation of a deliberate policy: “These crimes were not acts of individuals or a result of personal inclination but a part of the “national” policy of Balkan states. The Serbian Army exterminated Albanians in Old Serbia and Albania, the Bulgarian Army exterminated Turks [...] while the Greek Army exterminated Turks and Albanians [...] with a criminal conviction that they were carrying out a “national act”, that by removing these innocent people from the face of the earth they were getting rid of the enemy who would otherwise become a problem in the future.”⁵⁵⁰ The 1914 Carnegie Commission report⁵⁵¹ on the causes and conduct of Balkan Wars attempted to record the most egregious exactions committed, and tried to explain why they had happened. The report was published as the horrors described were about to be surpassed. Mass executions, rapes, pillaging and burning of villages by the Serbian, Greek and Bulgarian troops in 1912 and 1913 were setting the scene for what lay ahead.

2. Serbia on the Eve of the Great War

“Austria has declared war on us. Our cause is a just one. God will help us.”⁵⁵²

The role of the *Black Hand*, or rather the *Unification or Death* association, and the role of the Serbian government in the Sarajevo assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914, to this day remain hotly debated. The association led by Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis, supported the pro-Yugoslav groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina while Gavrilo Princip

549 Report, 1914, 50.

550 Dimitrije Tucović, “Krvna osveta soldateske” [“Bloody revenge of the *soldateska*”], Letter from 22 October 1913. *Radničke novine* 223. *Soldateska* is an unruly mob of troops.

551 The Commission was set up by the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace which selected experts, academics, journalists, and Nobel Prize winners to investigate the causes and the conduct of the Balkan wars.

552 Nikola Pašić upon receiving the telegram of the declaration of war while at lunch in a restaurant in Niš, in Mitrović, 2007, 52.

was a member of a broad movement established after the annexation,⁵⁵³ which came to be known later as *Mlada Bosna* — Young Bosnia.⁵⁵⁴ This was predominantly a cultural movement working towards the unification of all South Slavs. A group of young men among them grew closer to the members of another association called *Narodna odbrana* (National Defence),⁵⁵⁵ who helped them acquire training, explosives and weapons from people close to Apis. Apis, by now a colonel, chief of Serbian military intelligence since 1913, was involved in intrigues in the army and the court in his efforts to support the opposition in the upcoming elections against Prime Minister Pašić. Considering the rumbling civilian-military conflict in Serbia since the coup in 1903, predominantly linked to the so-called *priority question*,⁵⁵⁶ it is difficult to untangle the overlapping operations and intentions of those who were aware of the Sarajevo plans or the reasons behind hiding them.⁵⁵⁷ There was certainly complicity between Apis's group and the Sarajevo conspirators, "although their motives were by no means identical."⁵⁵⁸ While there are indications that some in the Serbian government may have suspected that there was a plot to assassinate the Archduke, and may have even launched an investigation and tried to warn Vienna, it seems that if any warnings were given they were too vague.⁵⁵⁹ In the words of Edward Grey: "Probably there is not, and never was, any one person who knew all there was to know."⁵⁶⁰

Strategically speaking there was no reason for the Serbian government under Pašić to provoke the Austro-Hungarian Empire into a war that Serbia was not ready to fight. Serbia's priorities lay elsewhere — Serbia's gains in the Balkan wars made it necessary for a political and diplomatic stabilisation of the kingdom which proved difficult. The new territories

553 Bataković, 2016, 118-120.

554 Lyon, 2015, 27.

555 Lyon, 2015, 45.

556 Whether civilian or military officials would have precedence or *priority* in Macedonia, Mackenzie, 1989,105; Clark, 2013, 46.

557 Bataković, 2016, 21-24.

558 Dedijer, quoted in Lyon, 2015, 60.

559 Dedijer, 1967, 395.

560 Quoted in Dedijer, 1967, 18.

gained in the Second Balkan war, particularly the “Old Serbia” territories of great historical significance for the Serbian historical identity – and thus for the legitimacy of the ambitious kingdom – were populated not only by Serbs but also by Macedonians, Albanians and Turks, many of whom were Muslim. The *stabilisation* of the region included Serbian troops’ often brutal treatment of the Muslim population.⁵⁶¹



Kingdom of Serbia, 1914.⁵⁶²

561 Lyon, 2015, 76.

562 Map of the Kingdom of Serbia in 1914, NZ History, New Zealand History online <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/map-kingdom-serbia-1914> (accessed September 25, 2019).

One of the Serbian government's objectives was access to the sea which had been achieved in military operations. However, the Serbian Army was forced to retreat in the wake of the establishment of Albania, organised by Vienna — which did not want to see its southern neighbour gain maritime access⁵⁶³ — and reluctantly supported by Rome.⁵⁶⁴ The *Balkan question* was becoming increasingly complex.

Once the shots were fired on 28 June 1914, killing the Archduke and his wife, and after the conspirators were apprehended, Serbia put all its diplomatic efforts into proving its good will to Vienna. However, the reprisals against Serbs in Austro-Hungarian territories, anti-Serbian demonstrations and attacks on Serbian businesses in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina ensued as the, “policy of pre-emptive repression inside Hapsburg Bosnia” was implemented by Vienna.⁵⁶⁵ In a flurry of diplomatic activity in July 1914, as the Entente powers were urging restraint on all sides, the Austro-Hungarian government sought Berlin's support for war against Serbia and received it from Bethmann-Hollweg,⁵⁶⁶ even before the von Wiesner investigation report⁵⁶⁷ was received from Sarajevo stating there was no proof to link the assassination to the Serbian government.⁵⁶⁸ The opportunity for war against Serbia had to be taken.⁵⁶⁹ Agitation for a South Slav State free from Vienna was perceived to be an “existential threat” to the Austro-Hungarian Empire.⁵⁷⁰ Ten days after the report, on 23 July, the Serbian government was given 48 hours to respond to the strongly-worded ultimatum demanding satisfaction. While most of the demands could be met, the demand under point seven was encroaching on Serbian sovereignty — to open a judicial inquiry

563 C.E.J. Fryer, *The Destruction of Serbia in 1915* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 99.

564 Lyon, 2015, 47.

565 Max Hastings, *Catastrophe: Europe Goes to War 1914* (London: William Collins, 2013), 147.

566 Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg (1856 – 1921) German chancellor 1909 – 1917.

567 Friedrich von Wisener, Austro-Hungarian official charged with compiling the reports on the investigation into the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie Chotek.

568 Mitrović, 2007, 6.

569 Geoffrey Wawro, *A Mad Catastrophe* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 111.

570 Lyon, 2015, 47.

which would include Austro-Hungarian investigators.⁵⁷¹ The conciliatory response was carefully worded and delivered personally by Pašić to the Austro-Hungarian legation in Belgrade five minutes before the deadline. As the staff of the legation had already evacuated its building at 1830 hours by going across the Sava River to Zemun, into Austro-Hungarian territory, it was clear that the Serbian response would be *a priori* rejected. The Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war against Serbia on 28 July 1914 to punish it.⁵⁷² Montenegro, the only ally that Serbia had signed a treaty with, declared its support immediately. Serbia and Montenegro established a joint military command early on in the war.⁵⁷³ Although Serbia had longed to “tie [their] small boat more tightly to the large Entente ship,”⁵⁷⁴ Serbia had no other treaties except with Greece and that was only in the event of an attack by Bulgaria. Russia voiced its support for Serbia, followed by the French and the British. There was every expectation that Serbia would be overwhelmed by the Austro-Hungarian attack. This would not be surprising in view of the disparity of size: Serbia was a small state facing 52 million Habsburg subjects.⁵⁷⁵ The world expected to see an Austro-Hungarian triumph as Austria imposed the Great War onto Europe to “punish — indeed, destroy — Serbia.”⁵⁷⁶

In his official proclamation, Regent Aleksandar (1888 – 1934), a graduate of St Petersburg Military Academy, victorious veteran of the Balkan Wars, made regent on 24 June 1914, accused Austria of invading Serbian Bosnia and Herzegovina, 30 years before and called upon the nation: “defend Serbian homesteads, the Serbian tribe, with all [our] might”.⁵⁷⁷ Meanwhile, the anti-Serbian propaganda from Vienna, repressive measures against Serbs in the Empire as well the atmosphere encouraging violence against

571 West, 1982, 580.

572 Christopher Catherwood, *The Battles of World War I: Everything You Need to Know* (London: Allison and Busby, 2014), 75.

573 Bataković, 2016, 31.

574 Savo Skoko, *Vojvoda Radomir Putnik [Field Marshall Radomir Putnik]* (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1984), 18.

575 Pavlowitch, 2002, 94.

576 Tim Judah, *History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 98; *Hastings*, 2013, 140.

577 Quoted in Bataković, 2016, 30.

Serbs and their property, had the opposite effect of what was expected. As Serbian businesses and homes were targeted by angry mobs, in Zagreb even more than in Sarajevo,⁵⁷⁸ the authorities did little to stop the excesses. Vienna encouraged such actions, thereby motivating the Serbs of Bosnia to join the defence of Serbia as volunteers.⁵⁷⁹ In July 1914, 532,000 Serbian reservists were mobilised, including 10,000 officers.⁵⁸⁰ By August 1915, there were over 570,000 mobilised citizens. By the autumn of 1915, with volunteers from other Yugoslav regions including the Austro-Hungarian Empire, there were 707,000 mobilised men and it is estimated that approximately less than half of that number were “meeting the demands of warfare of the time”.⁵⁸¹

3. 1914 — War, Defence, Atrocities

“It was in the east that the killing began when Conrad ‘s Austro-Hungarian Army launched its campaign of vengeance against Serbia.”⁵⁸²

The Austro-Hungarian Empire started the war with considerable confidence. Its forces “were supposedly some of the finest and best equipped in Europe”⁵⁸³ but Conrad von Hötzendorf (1852 – 1925) chief of the general staff of the Austro-Hungarian Army was still not taking any chances. Despite a far greater need for troops on the eastern front, Conrad “committed 19 divisions to fight Serbia’s 11, sent 30 to meet 50 Russian formations in Galicia”.⁵⁸⁴ Until 1914, the last war the Austro-Hungarian Empire fought, and lost, was in 1866 against Prussia, while Serbs had much more recent and more successful experience. From around 1883,⁵⁸⁵

578 Lyon, 2015, 20.

579 Pavlowitch, 2002, 94.

580 Nedok, 2006, 15.

581 Mitrović, 2007, 60.

582 Hastings, 2013, 138.

583 Catherwood, 2014, 76.

584 Hastings, 2013, 140.

585 Lyon, 2015, 78.

the Serbian Army was an army with mandatory conscription consisting of three bans, or levies: the 1st ban from 21 to 30 years of age were active troops, the 2nd ban constituting reservists from 30 to 38 years of age and the 3rd ban from 39 to 45 years of age constituting the territorial troops. In the event of war, 20-year-olds and those between 45 and 55 were automatically recruited to reinforce the territorial army, also known as the troops of the last defence.⁵⁸⁶ While all the bans were supposed to be issued with weapons, only the troops of the first ban were also issued with equipment and uniforms.⁵⁸⁷ The other bans were mostly expected to provide their own clothing and footwear, which explains why there were so many soldiers wearing leather peasant shoes. Despite these differences, they were recognisably combatants.⁵⁸⁸

Serbian soldiers were on their home ground and once the war became inevitable, they were ready to defend their homesteads. This gave the Serbian Army the kind of *élan vital* the French Plan XVII⁵⁸⁹ was relying on. Not only was there “classless comradeship among Serb soldiers, who acknowledged few distinctions of rank: a private might salute an officer, then shake hands with him if they knew each other at home, in a fashion implausible in any other warring army” but the Serbs “were not merely fiercely nationalistic; they also knew the business of soldiering” (...) “they liked fighting and were good at it”.⁵⁹⁰ Although US Ambassador Charles Vopicka thought they “looked like bands of tramps”, they were ready to fight and continue their successes from the Balkan Wars.⁵⁹¹ In his memoirs, Major Svetomir Sveta Djukić recalls how important the officers’ attitude

586 François Cochet et Rémy Porte, *Dictionnaire de la Grande guerre 1914 – 1918* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2008), 957.

587 Lyon, 2015, 78.

588 Nigel Thomas and Dušan Babac, *Armies in the Balkans 1914 – 1918* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2001); Serbian translation used *Armije na Balkanu 1914 – 1918* (Beograd: Evoluta, 2006), 10.

589 Plan XVII was WWI French military strategy authored by Maréchal Foch and based on the doctrine of the offensive embodied by *élan vital*, a special type of *esprit de combat* which would overcome all obstacles by sheer will to fight.

590 Hastings, 2013, 141-142.

591 Lyon, 2015, 89.

and bearing were for men's morale in describing how he always walked upright under fire, without showing any fear.⁵⁹²

Despite his lack of popularity and his unfortunate demise,⁵⁹³ King Milan played an essential role in the reform of the Serbian Army. During his tenure as commander in chief of the Serbian Army between 1898 and 1900 — during his son's reign — Milan modernised the army and built-up the officer corps.⁵⁹⁴ "Milan developed well-trained cadre battalions. Junior lieutenants fresh from the academy led companies and relatively young officers commanded battalions and regiments. [...] Highly selective because of a large applicant pool, the [military] academy attracted much of Serbia's ablest youth."⁵⁹⁵

By 1914, the Serbian general staff was not only well-trained and capable, but most of its officers had experienced intense combat in 1912 – 1913, including Regent Aleksandar who was victorious in commanding the First Army at the battle of Kumanovo in October 1912. In 1914, the chief of Serbian general staff since 1903 was Field Marshall Radomir Putnik (1847 – 1917), veteran of the Balkan Wars, who had served several terms as Minister of War. He was close to the ruling Radical party of Prime Minister Pašić,⁵⁹⁶ although sympathetic to the *Black Hand* officers. Field Marshall Putnik was taking the waters in Bad Gleichenberg when war was declared. He was then allowed to go back to Serbia and take the leadership of the Serbian Army, after the Budapest police who had initially detained him, received instructions to release him from Conrad von Hötzendorf. It appears that it was thought preferable to let Putnik go home than have another, younger and French-trained chief of staff take his place.⁵⁹⁷ This would turn out to be an expensive cavalier error. Putnik's

592 Svetomir Sveta Djukić, *Memoari knjiga I, Balkanski ratovi [Memoirs volume I, Balkan Wars]* (Beograd: Narodna odbrana, 2013), 96.

593 He was exiled following his son Aleksandar's marriage and died in Vienna in 1901.

594 Stanić, Kilibarda, Marček, 2007, 56.

595 MacKenzie, 1989, 28.

596 Le Moal, 2008, 25.

597 Skoko, 1984, 33.

generals were also exceptionally competent and all had extensive combat experience. General Živojin Mišić (1855 – 1921), veteran of Serbo-Turkish wars and Serbo-Bulgarian war was considered close to the Obrenović dynasty, possibly erroneously, and fell out of favour in 1903. However, as Putnik was aware of his ability he brought Mišić out of retirement for the Balkan Wars. It was thanks to General Mišić's advice to advance, against the orders of Putnik's general staff that the Bregalnica battle was won in 1913.⁵⁹⁸ General Petar Bojović (1858 – 1945) led the First Army, General Stepa Stepanović (1856 – 1929) commanded the Second Army, General Pavle Jurišić-Šturm (1848 – 1922), originally a Lusatian Serb from Prussia who came to Serbia to fight the Ottomans, commanded the Third Army. The armies were positioned respectively in the east of Serbia, in the centre and in the west as the general staff expected the attack to come from the north, from the Danube and the Sava River as well as along the Morava River.⁵⁹⁹

As soon as war was declared, the government was evacuated from Belgrade, the exposed capital, to Niš, 240 km south of Belgrade. The war started with the shelling of Belgrade from across the Sava River, with the Second Austro-Hungarian Army attacking from the north-west. The Austro-Hungarian Army was led by *Feldzeugmeister* (General) Oskar von Potiorek⁶⁰⁰ (1853 – 1933) with well-rested and well-equipped units. The Austro-Hungarian attacks started on 12 August 1914 with Potiorek's intention to celebrate the Emperor Franz Joseph's birthday on 18 August in Belgrade. His eagerness to defeat the Serbs and "erase the shame of Sarajevo once and for all,"⁶⁰¹ would prove detrimental to his plans, and yet there was much at stake. The defeat of Serbia was considered essential for "moral, political and propaganda purposes,"⁶⁰² as well as to create a corridor to Salonika and Turkey. It was also hoped that a quick

598 David Jordan, *The Balkans, Italy and Africa 1914 – 1918* (London: Amber Books, 2012), 42.

599 Le Moal, 2008, 47.

600 Potiorek, Military Governor of Bosnia and Herzegovina, was in charge of Franz Ferdinand's security in Sarajevo.

601 Lyon, 2015, 116.

602 Mitrović, 2007, 68.

victory over Serbia would encourage undecided countries such as Italy, Bulgaria or Romania to join the Central Powers.⁶⁰³ The town of Šabac was one of the first to fall. Prior to taking it, the Austro-Hungarian Army destroyed telegraph lines, but not telephone lines,⁶⁰⁴ for reasons unknown. This would later prove to be a decisive oversight. The direction of the Austro-Hungarian attack was towards Mačva and Pocerina (Mount Cer Valley) and it followed the start of the concentration of Austro-Hungarian Fifth and Sixth Armies in Srem and Banat facing 400,000 Serbian, 45,000 Montenegrin troops and an indeterminate number of *komitadjis* – guerrilla fighters. The attack was launched before the concentration of forces was complete and Potiorek ordered it amid confusion about whether the Second Army would also engage or not.⁶⁰⁵ The main Austro-Hungarian offensive came across the Drina River, which proved a difficult route.⁶⁰⁶ The Fifth Austro-Hungarian Army attacked the Serbian Third Army which began to retreat, with the Second Serbian Army coming to their support through a forced march in the night of 15 and 16 August which allowed them to reach the village of Tekeriš. Serbian reconnaissance units discovered the lines of attack used by the Austro-Hungarian army; Putnik – whose knowledge of Serbian topography was outstanding,⁶⁰⁷ – subsequently turned the Serbian Army “ninety degrees and launched a night attack on the enemy”⁶⁰⁸ setting the scene for the Battle of Mount Cer, the first Allied victory in the war on 17 August. Austro-Hungarian troops began to withdraw with Serbian forces forcing another battle at Jadar on 21 August. Serbian forces managed to remain in contact with the general staff and kept sending regular reports as telephones continued to function. Putnik’s ability to change the plan in accordance with the evolving situation, his well-organised defence and perfectly executed manoeuvres proved too much for Potiorek’s tactics.⁶⁰⁹ Potiorek’s troops

603 Jordan, 2008, 20.

604 Lyon, 2015, 120.

605 Lyon, 2015, 117.

606 Lyon, 2015, 124.

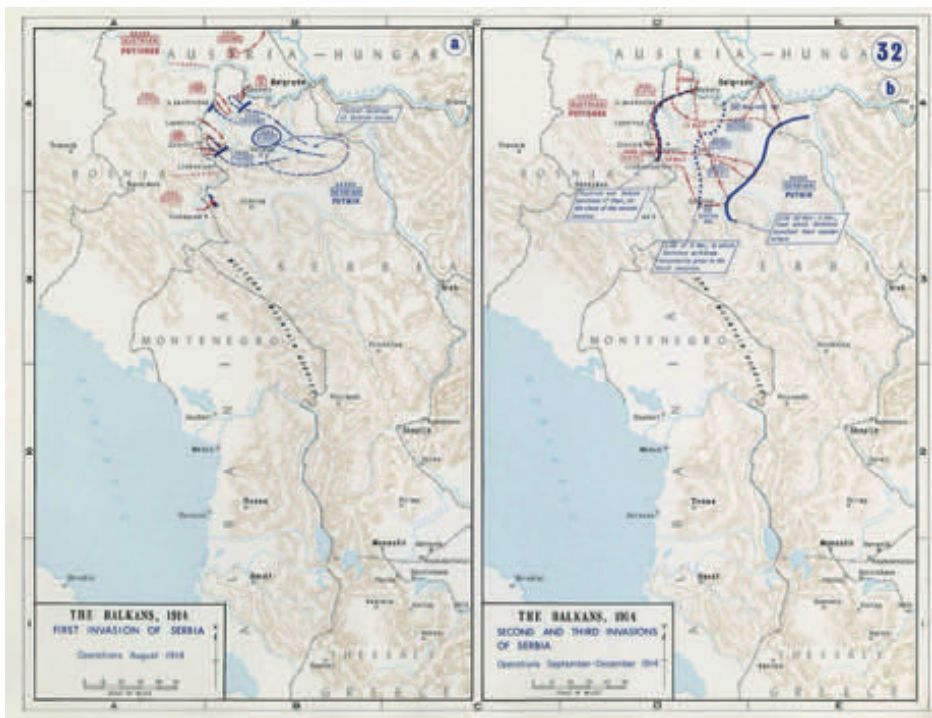
607 Svetomir Djukić, *Memoari 2 – Prvi svetski rat [Memoirs volume 2 – First World War]* (Beograd: Narodna odbrana, 2013), 45.

608 Catherwood, 2014, 76.

609 Jordan, 2008, 24.

were defeated and had to retreat across the Drina River less than two weeks after the initial attack.⁶¹⁰

The First Serbian Campaign resulted in 37,000 Austro-Hungarian casualties, with 7,000 killed, while Serbian losses were around 3,000 dead and 15,000 wounded.⁶¹¹ However, a far greater toll was on the civilian population when 3,500 civilians were killed in Serbia in the first two weeks of the Austrian campaign.⁶¹²



The First, Second and Third invasions of Serbia, August – December 1914. (Maps courtesy of the United States Military Academy Department of History).⁶¹³

610 Hastings, 2013, 151.

611 Jordan, 2008, 28.

612 Hastings, 2013, 149.

613 Campaign Atlas to The Great War, Department of History, West Point <https://westpoint.edu/academics/academic-departments/history/world-war-one> (accessed May 1, 2018).

Other losses in the Serbian Army came from not only combat but also from desertion. Because of food and equipment shortage, ten percent of the losses among Serbian troops were from soldiers refusing to go to the front.⁶¹⁴ Despite strict measures taken by the commanders, this problem remained. Under pressure from Russia and France, and following a transfer of several Austro-Hungarian units to Belgium, in particular the transfer of mortars previously used to bomb Belgrade from across the Sava River,⁶¹⁵ Serbia was pushed by its allies to launch an offensive into the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Several battles took place in the Drina River valley, including the Serbian offensive into Austria-Hungary and the Austro-Hungarian offensive into the Mačva region in north-western Serbia and encompassed several battles. The Serbian offensive started on 4 September, as did the Battle of the Marne.⁶¹⁶ Serbian troops crossed the Sava River and took Zemun, while more Serbian and Montenegrin troops advanced into Bosnia engaging Austro-Hungarian troops for several more weeks.⁶¹⁷ The occupation of Zemun was an additional humiliation for Potiorek following his defeat in the battle of Cer.

The overall result was embarrassing for Potiorek whose explanation was that the absence of the Second Army and the lack of munitions caused the defeats.⁶¹⁸ Potiorek additionally blamed the high command for “limiting his independence.”⁶¹⁹ Despite Conrad’s opposition, Potiorek, who enjoyed the Emperor’s personal support, was subsequently allowed to conduct operations without the approval of the high command in the subsequent offensives.⁶²⁰ The next Austro-Hungarian offensive began on 8 September with the invasion of Mačva. Several battles took place in September,

614 Lyon, 2015, 152.

615 Russia and France were keen for Serbia to keep Austro-Hungarian troops busy in the Balkans.

616 Lyon, 2015, 153-154.

617 Hastings, 2013, 155.

618 The Second Army and munitions bound for the Russian front had not been actually transported there.

619 Lyon, 2015, 160.

620 Jordan, 2008, 32; Lyon, 2015, 160.

culminating in the battle at Mačkov Kamen, starting on 19 September, and considered the bloodiest battle in the Balkans during 1914. Casualties and exhaustion on both sides resulted in troops digging trenches to continue engagements while allowing for sufficient rest; although the Austro-Hungarian side enjoyed the advantage of receiving replenishment of ammunition, which Serbian troops did not.⁶²¹ The fighting in Mačva continued with varying results leading Potiorek to believe that his final offensive would at last be successful.

The general Austro-Hungarian offensive started on 6 November 1914, with the Fifth and Sixth Armies crossing the Drina River, and consisting of 285,000 troops and 600 cannon. The Serbian Army consisted of around 200,000 troops and 298 cannon.⁶²² Despite offering considerable resistance, the Serbian Third Army withdrew towards Valjevo with the Serbian First Army retreating next. First, Second and Third Armies had to move into defensive positions around Valjevo, which eventually had to be abandoned with Serbian forces taking positions around the Kolubara River, after they were demoralised by the retreat, cold weather, lack of clothing and lack of ammunition.⁶²³ Austro-Hungarian troops crossed the Kolubara River on 17 and 18 November. Pašić's messages to the Allies grew in desperation. France was the only country that answered the plea and sent ammunition.⁶²⁴ Meanwhile, the Serbian front had been pushed back 120 km, moving from Belgrade to the western Morava River valley, which became almost impossible to hold by the Serbs, and equally hard to hold by the Austro-Hungarians. Putnik may have anticipated that eventually the Austro-Hungarian supply lines would become overextended,⁶²⁵ which proved to be correct when Potiorek, eager to carry out an encirclement of the Serbian Army, divided his forces on 19 November, sending his Fifth Army to Belgrade while leaving the Sixth Army to finish off the

621 Lyon, 2015, 174-182.

622 Lyon, 2015, 2015, 191.

623 Jordan, 2008, 34.

624 Mitrović, 2007, 71.

625 Jordan, 2008, 34.

bulk of the Serbian forces.⁶²⁶ Desertions of Serbian troops continued with disastrous consequences.⁶²⁷ Potiorek was delighted to be taking Belgrade at last, which the Fifth Army managed to do on 2 December. The news was welcomed in Vienna although Belgrade had, in fact, been abandoned by the Serbian Army. General Mišić, who had in the meantime taken over command of the First Serbian Army, when General Petar Bojović fell ill, decided to withdraw in depth from the advancing Sixth Army, against Putnik's wishes. They had a long and heated telephone conversation where Mišić even offered his resignation if his temporary withdrawal was not accepted.⁶²⁸ It was the most critical moment of 1914, when even Putnik reportedly considered concluding a separate peace,⁶²⁹ which was decisively rejected by Pašić.⁶³⁰ On 2 December, the long-awaited munitions from France arrived.⁶³¹ Following his tactical retreat, which displeased Putnik, General Mišić allowed his troops rest and recuperation after taking improved defensive positions around Mount Rudnik, 100 km south of Belgrade.⁶³² This operational rest allowed the troops to regain strength needed for the counterattack. Mišić's strategy was to surprise the enemy without allowing him to recover and to keep attacking.⁶³³ The First Army attacked the concentrated forces of the Austro-Hungarian Sixth Army. Immediately after, the Second, Third and Užice Armies also attacked. The battle of Kolubara, as it came to be known, was a defeat for Potiorek's troops. During the evening of 3 December, on the day the Austro-Hungarians troops held a triumphant military parade in Belgrade, the Austro-Hungarian Army was in disarray everywhere else in Serbian territory.⁶³⁴ By 8 December, the Austro-Hungarians were retreating as fast

626 Le Moal, 2008, 50.

627 Lyon, 2015, 195.

628 Skoko, 1984, 184. This scene would become iconic in the subsequent retelling of the battle, most memorably in Dobrica Ćosić's *A Time of Death* (1972 – 1979), part of which was adapted in 1983 as a play *The Kolubara Battle*, mentioned in chapter II.

629 Lyon, 2015, 193.

630 Mitrović, 2007, 70.

631 Henry Barby, *Avec L'Armée Serbe De l'Ultimatum Autrichien à l'Invasion de la Serbie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1918), 320.

632 Le Moal, 2008, 51.

633 Skoko, 1984, 190.

634 Le Moal, 2008, 52.

as they could. They held on to Belgrade for just two weeks, evacuating it without much of a struggle on 15 December. Upon completion of successful operations Mišić sent a telegram to the king: “There remain no Austrian soldiers on Serbian soil except prisoners”.⁶³⁵ According to Max Hastings, Austria-Hungary had 273,804 casualties from the 450,000 men deployed.⁶³⁶ Soon after the Kolubara battle, Potiorek retired from active service.

The advance of the Austro-Hungarian Army in their offensives during 1914, brought atrocities in its wake.⁶³⁷ The territories invaded were not densely populated and were mostly inhabited by elderly people and children because much of the population had retreated with the army. The Austro-Hungarian troops perpetrated large scale and systematic killing and torture of the civilian population.⁶³⁸ Among other contemporaries,⁶³⁹ Henry Barby (1874 – 1935), a French journalist attached to the Serbian general staff throughout the conflict, and John Reed (1887 – 1920), an American journalist who travelled to Serbia in 1915, in their writings described atrocities committed by the Austro-Hungarian troops.

Rodolphe Archibald Reiss (1875 – 1929) was a German-Swiss forensic expert, and a professor at Lausanne University who came to Serbia following an invitation from the Serbian government to investigate allegations of war crimes committed by invading troops in Serbia. Although sceptical at first, he accepted the invitation and arrived in Serbia in the autumn of 1914. His first investigations were carried out in September, October and November. He submitted his report to the Serbian government in the spring of 1915 and published it in 1916, while he also

635 Hastings, 2013, 512; Catherwood, 2014, 77.

636 The Serbian Army made 323 officers, 42,215 non-commissioned officers and soldiers prisoner; 43 banners, 142 artillery pieces, 71 machine guns, 60,000 rifles, 2 aircraft, 3,500 vehicles with munitions and materiel, 4,000 horses, 52 field bakeries, 45 kitchens were taken, and much else. Potiorek’s losses were 28,000 dead, 120,000 wounded and 76,000 prisoners, while the Serbs had 22,000 dead, 92,000 wounded and 19,000 taken prisoner, in Hastings, 2013, 513.

637 Wawro, 2015, 163-165.

638 Mitrović, 2007, 73-74.

639 Le Moal, 2008, 58.

published pamphlets with his findings and sent reports to the *Gazette de Lausanne*. Dr Reiss's investigations were as professional and complete as the circumstances allowed despite his growing sympathies for the Serbs.⁶⁴⁰ He examined ammunition outlawed by the rules and conventions of war, and interviewed prisoners of war and eyewitnesses.

The publication of Dr Reiss's first report in relation to Serbian war victims, *Report upon the atrocities committed by the Austro-Hungarian Army during the first invasion of Serbia* contains comprehensive and detailed reports of Dr Reiss's investigations of explosive and dum-dum bullet casualties, bombardments and destructions, massacres of prisoners and the wounded, rape of women and girls, massacres of civilians, pillage and destruction of dwellings and property.⁶⁴¹ Austro-Hungarian documents subsequently confirmed the atrocities recorded by Reiss.⁶⁴² One of the Austrian prisoners of war explained to Dr Reiss: "We were ordered, and the order was read out to us to kill and burn all we should meet in the course of the campaign and to destroy everything Serbian."⁶⁴³ Dr Reiss found consistent evidence of churches having been burnt with civilians inside, including the elderly, women and children, of public hanging of civilians, and of mass graves. When speaking with eyewitnesses and survivors, Dr Reiss verified the names, the locations, the wounds, and noted all relevant details. He also found photographs of atrocities produced as postcards for publicising the terror. The cards were meant as propaganda to showcase the Austro-Hungarian policy against *francs-tireurs*.⁶⁴⁴ This was also used to instil fear in the Serbian population in the Austro-Hungarian Empire because they were deemed "unreliable",

640 This is particularly evident in his subsequent report, *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). Dr Reiss went on to join the Serbian Army and made Belgrade his home until his death in 1929.

641 Rodolphe Archibald Reiss, *Report upon the atrocities committed by the Austro-Hungarian Army during the first invasion of Serbia* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & co Ltd, 1916).

642 Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary at War, 1914 – 1918* (London: Penguin, 2014), 142.

643 Reiss, 1916, 38.

644 Hastings, 2013, 148.

possibly subversive and thus a threat to be eliminated.⁶⁴⁵ Colonel Hunter of the British Medical Mission noted, “the campaign was stated to be not a war but an execution”.⁶⁴⁶

The presence of irregulars, *komitadjis*, was considered a justification for atrocities committed by Austro-Hungarian troops. There were cases of Croatian troops tricked by Serbian troops pretending to surrender and then being fired at, or other Austro-Hungarian troops hearing Croatian language possibly spoken by Serbian soldiers and becoming confused as to where the enemy was.⁶⁴⁷ General Adolf von Rhemen’s⁶⁴⁸ justification was that the Serbs were “a culturally backward people.”⁶⁴⁹ Apart from the racial argument, the Austro-Hungarian Army leadership justified the atrocities in the spirit of *Kriegsnotwehrrecht* — martial law of self-defence.⁶⁵⁰

Serbia’s victories in 1914 were not decisive but made the Allies look more favourably on the Balkan front, because it embarrassed one of the Central Powers that was expected to overwhelm the small Balkan State. These successes brought Serbia to the attention of Europe if not the world. “Gallant little Serbia” was lauded by Allied countries very much like “plucky little Belgium” was earlier in the war.⁶⁵¹ Following the failed Austro-Hungarian offensives, the Central Powers seemed to falter with their operational plans regarding Serbia. In preparation for the next offensive against Serbia in 1915, the German general staff would be able to draw on the defeat of Austro-Hungarian troops and on intelligence

645 Mitrović, 2007, 74; Watson, 2014, 145.

646 William Hunter, “The Serbian Epidemics of Typhus and Relapsing Fever in 1915: Their Origin, Course, and Preventive Measures employed for their Arrest” (London: Section of Epidemiology and State Medicine, 1919), 37.

647 Wawro, 2015, 163-164.

648 Commander of the XIII Corps part of the Fifth Army.

649 Quoted in Wawro, 2015, 164.

650 “The Right of Defence in a War Emergency” as translated and explained in Watson, 2014, 145; Hastings, 2013, 147.

651 In his examination of the theoretical explanations of the use of the past, Todor Kuljić points out that the description of Serbia as “gallant” must have been a surprise for the British who had been used to the characterisation of Serbs as the “regicide nation”, but since the British interests changed in the region in 1914, the pragmatic invention of the “positive stereotypes” was required, see Todor Kuljić, *Kultura sećanja [Memorial culture]* (Beograd: Čigoja, 2006), 126.

reports. Serbia's victories became a double-edged sword: this made the Allies more willing to support Serbia and Serbian war aims. This also made it imperative for the Germans to take the lead in the subsequent offensive.

4. 1915 — Typhus Epidemic and Foreign Aid

“Their war, far from being won had scarcely started.”⁶⁵²

Serbia's battlefield successes were greeted in Entente Europe with a mixture of surprise and curiosity which attracted a number of foreign medical missions, as well as foreign adventurers, journalists, agents, researchers, many of whom wrote about the Serbs and the Serbian war effort with much sympathy. Apart from Reed, Reiss and Barby, numerous others came to Serbia to see a country at war and in need. Among the Americans who visited Serbia, was J.D. Rockefeller Jr., (1874 – 1960), a financier and benefactor whose foundation collected funds for assisting non-combatants in Europe, and authored a comprehensive report on the situation in Serbia.⁶⁵³ Paul Fortier Jones (1883 – 1940), a journalist and adventurer authored *With Serbia into Exile: An American's Adventures with the Army that Cannot Die* (1916), a skilfully drawn sketch of Serbs at war. Among the British, there was Henry Wickham-Steed (1871 – 1956), a British journalist and foreign correspondent for *The Times*, R.W. Seton-Watson (1879 – 1951), a British historian and political activist, Sir Arthur Evans (1851 – 1941), a British archaeologist; Sir Thomas Lipton (1848 – 1931), a famous tea merchant and yachtsman who put his yacht in the service of the Red Cross, earning the honour of becoming an honorary citizen of Niš.⁶⁵⁴ Among the French, apart from Henry Barby, a correspondent for *Le Journal*, there was also Victor Bérard (1864 – 1931), a French historian

652 Hastings, 2013, 155.

653 “Destitution and Disease in Serbia” (New York: The Rockefeller Foundation, 1915).

654 “Honorary Citizens of the City of Niš”, *City of Niš* <http://www.ni.rs/international-cooperation/honorary-citizens-of-the-city-of-nis/?pismo=lat> (accessed March 15, 2018).

and foreign policy expert, author of *La Serbie: la Serbie et son histoire, les victoires serbes, le peuple serbe*, August Boppe (1862 – 1921), a French diplomat who accompanied the Serbian government into exile, while Gabriele D’Annunzio (1863 – 1938), an Italian poet and journalist wrote his *Ode alla nazione serba (Ode to the Serbian Nation)* in November 1915 as the Serbian Army, government and civilians began to retreat after further attacks by the Central Powers.⁶⁵⁵ These influential foreigners interested in and impassioned by Serbia’s plight all contributed to the visibility of Serbia at the time of its greatest need. *Serbia Day* was organised in Paris at the end of March 1915 with collections amounting to half-a-million francs in one month.⁶⁵⁶

In the first six months of the war Serbia was ravaged by violence, and then disease followed. Several foreign medical missions had already worked in the region during the Balkan wars. For some, it was a cause they espoused again with determination and courage once the typhus epidemic struck, and a cholera epidemic threatened the country. Serbia’s casualties were “163,557 of its 250,000 combatants, 2,110 being officers. A total of 69,022 men had died on the battlefield of wounds or disease”.⁶⁵⁷ These large numbers of sick and wounded in late 1914 stretched an already weak and insufficient military medical service. Poor roads and lack of transport exacerbated the problem. The toll on the civilian population, the army and the officers was already considerable when the typhus epidemic broke out.

The Serbian Army took up to 40,000 prisoners of war in December 1914 and illness began to spread soon after. They were mostly relapsing fever and *typhus exanthematicus*, better known as spotted typhus. The epidemic started in Valjevo where 3,000 wounded and sick prisoners were found by the returning Serbian Army, in the worst sanitary conditions possible. Many of the 40,000 prisoners had to be moved and were therefore sent to

655 Ratomir Damjanović, ed., *Raspeće Srbije. Strani autori o Srbima i Srbiji u Velikom ratu – Savremenici, učesnici, svedoci* [The Crucifixion of Serbia. Foreign authors about the Serbs and Serbia in the Great War – Contemporaries, Participants, Witnesses] (Beograd: Itaka, 2014)

656 Mitrović, 2007, 105.

657 Mitrović, 2007, 102.

different parts of Serbia as farmhands which helped spread the infection.⁶⁵⁸ The *British Military Sanitary Mission* to Serbia arrived in March 1915, after the Serbian government had requested British help. The epidemics spread in the most dramatic fashion, mostly because of poor sanitary conditions in hospitals, lack of disinfecting and delousing facilities and limited knowledge that infected lice were spreading the disease. Between January and March 1915, there were almost 500,000 cases of typhus and by the time foreign medical missions arrived, the typhus mortality rate had risen to 40% in several hospitals.⁶⁵⁹ Lack of nursing staff prompted the Serbian government to request Red Cross help and the call was answered by the Scottish Women's Hospitals, the Red Cross, Stobart Field Hospital, Lady Paget's mission and many others. It is estimated that around 3,000 doctors and other medical staff worked in Serbia from 1914, many of whom were women. They included the first women doctors in Britain: Dr Elsie Inglis (1864 – 1917), Dr Alice Hutchinson (1874 – 1953), Dr Isabel Emslie (1887 – 1960), Dr Mary Philips (1875 – 1956), Dr Katherine Stuart MacPhail (1887 – 1974) and numerous nurses, orderlies and volunteers, some even with minimal medical background.⁶⁶⁰ The extraordinary presence of so many women volunteers on or very close to the front was unprecedented.⁶⁶¹

The containment and eventual cessation of the epidemics was largely owing to the actions of foreign medical missions, more specifically the British medical mission which made the Serbian military adopt preventative measures: temporary stoppage of all railway passenger traffic, refusal of army leave, disinfection, quarantine measures, improved sanitation and sewage management, immunisations against typhus and the anticipated wave of cholera. Propaganda and education about lice in leaflets and newspapers was also an important weapon in fighting

658 Hunter, 1919, 41.

659 Hunter, 1919, 43.

660 Anne Powell, *Women in the War Zone. Hospital Service in the First World War* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: History Press) 2013, 388-401.

661 These British women are still remembered in Serbia today as will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

the epidemic.⁶⁶² In medical history, the Serbian typhus epidemic had the most sudden occurrence and the most rapid decline, having lasted for six months with a peak of two months.⁶⁶³

It was an amazing victory over a “mysterious” enemy called typhus. And Serbia enjoyed a brief respite from it during the summer of 1915, although cholera was threatening in some areas. Even so, Austro-Hungarian aircraft continued to intermittently bomb towns while their artillery occasionally shelled Belgrade. According to Hans Zinsser, who came to Serbia as a member of the American Red Cross, typhus “was holding the border”.⁶⁶⁴ Germans, who were unimpressed with the Austro-Hungarian performance were attempting to discourage another offensive against Serbia arguing that the war against Serbia “plays quite a subordinate role, which demands only the most absolutely necessary defensive measures” insisting that the Serbs should be attacked only after the Russians were beaten.⁶⁶⁵

In the spring of 1915, the second battle of Ypres took place, a German U-boat struck the *Lusitania* and the Gallipoli campaign began. As Russia was driven out of Poland and Galicia, the Allies were keen to lure Bulgaria into the Entente camp but were at first not able to convince the Serbs to abandon territorial gains from the Second Balkan War. One of the offers from the Allies to Bulgaria was to remain neutral, which was sufficiently attractive to keep Bulgaria out of the war for a while. Possibilities of military alliances were intricately linked to land negotiation. Jovan M. Jovanović, Serbian politician and diplomat at the time, observed that Sofia, Bucharest, Tirana and Athens were simply *bazaars* where territorial conditions and concessions were up for grabs.⁶⁶⁶ The government in

662 Hunter, 1919, 54.

663 Hunter, 1919, 75.

664 Hans Zinsser, *Rats, Lice and History. Chronicle of Pestilence and Plagues* (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, Inc. 1963, first published 1934), 298.

665 Hastings, 2013, 140.

666 Quoted in Mira Radojević and Ljubodrag Dimić, *Srbija u Velikom ratu 1914 – 1918. Kratka istorija. [Serbia in the Great War 1914 – 1918. A Short History]* (Belgrade: SKZ, 2014), 172.

Sofia considered all the options. The Bulgarian King Ferdinand was pro-German and anti-Serbian: “The purpose of my life is the destruction of Serbia”, he is reported to have stated.⁶⁶⁷ The Bulgarian decision followed a diplomatic quandary involving Allied openings to Greece, which was also neutral, with Bulgarians reasoning that any offers to Greece were likely to come at Bulgarian expense. Furthermore, the increasing probability of Romania joining the Entente and Russia’s defeats were pushing Bulgaria in the direction of the Central Powers. Pašić found himself forced to accept the deal whereby Serbia would give Macedonia to Bulgaria as an incentive for that country to join the Entente and attack Turkey. Macedonia was thus conditionally given up with the proviso that post-war Serbia would extend into Croatia including the port of Fiume as well as being an active and independent participant at a post-war conference.⁶⁶⁸ Despite this agreement to cede Macedonia to Bulgaria on 1 September 1915, Bulgaria continued to seek better conditions to enter the war on the side of the Central Powers.

5. Triple Offensive Against Serbia

“The mission of Generalfeldmarschall von Mackensen is to defeat the Serbian Army wherever he finds it and to open and secure land communications between Hungary and Bulgaria as quickly as possible.”⁶⁶⁹

The Serbian government was aware of the Bulgarian intentions and struggled to prepare against a renewed attack from the Central Powers. Additional concerns existed in relation to Albania. Pašić’s government had reached an agreement with Essad Pasha Toptani, an ally made at the time of the Second Balkan War, and thanks to whom, Serbia occupied

667 Quoted in Misha Glenny, *The Balkans 1804 – 1999. Nationalism, War and the Great Powers* (London: Granta Books, 1999), 333.

668 Le Moal, 2002, 84.

669 Order for the offensive, quoted in Richard L. DiNardo, *Invasion – The Conquest of Serbia, 1915* (Santa Barbara – Denver: Praeger, 2015), 36.

strategic points in Albania in order to prevent continuous incursions into the *Old Serbia* region by Albanian irregulars as well as to save Essad Pasha from his opponents.⁶⁷⁰ The partial invasion of Albania by 20,000 Serbian troops in May 1915, represented a violation of the 1913 London Treaty and earned Serbia a reprimand from the Allies because of Italian territorial interests in Albania. The Entente was not interested in alienating Italy at that time when it had just joined the war on their side. The London Treaty, promising Italy parts of Dalmatia and much else, was signed in secret.⁶⁷¹ Nevertheless, the Essad Pasha connection would turn out to be strategically crucial for what would happen to the retreating Serbian Army in the second part of 1915. Essad Pasha had been saved by Serbs while he was encircled in Drač/Durazzo, and Serbian troops who remained in Albania helped him stay in control of the central part of Albania, while the northern part was held by rival clans. While these Serbian troops would be missed once the Central Powers attacked, they were able to prepare at least enough provisions that would prove vital in the retreat through this part of Albania.⁶⁷²

Meanwhile, German agents in Serbia sent thorough reports on diseases, morale and equipment of the Serbian troops. The Serbian economy was devastated, weaponry was lacking and debts to the Entente rising, which complicated the already difficult issue of potential territorial concessions to Bulgaria and Italy.⁶⁷³ Erich von Falkenhayn (1861 – 1922), Moltke the Younger's bolder and more ambitious successor as the German chief of staff, was hoping for a separate peace with Russia in the wake of the success of the Austro-Hungarian and German Gorlice-Tarnow offensive. Falkenhayn and Conrad decided that the autumn of 1915 was a good time to pursue victory in the Balkans while waiting for a *dénouement* on the Eastern Front with a reasoning that the control of the overland supply

670 Bataković, 2016, 162; 175.

671 The Treaty of London 26 April 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 March 28, 2017)

672 Bataković, 2016, 233.

673 Radojević and Dimić, 2001, 157.

route to Turkey would put further pressure on Russia.⁶⁷⁴ Because of the three failed Austro-Hungarian offensives and based on the reports by German agents, Falkenhayn wanted to wait “until he was sure Bulgaria would help”.⁶⁷⁵

The success of the Central Powers at Gorlice-Tarnow and the Entente failure at Gallipoli helped Sofia make up its mind.⁶⁷⁶ Bulgaria also made it clear that their accession was conditional on the Germans having the command in the autumn 1915 attack on Serbia.⁶⁷⁷ The Bulgarian decision also changed Germany’s mind about dealing with Russia before Serbia. The secret agreement between the Central Powers and Bulgaria was signed on 6 September 1915 with Turkey joining it a few days later. In anticipation of the expected offensive, Putnik and his general staff planned a pre-emptive attack on Bulgaria with Allied troops who would land in Salonika and with additional Greek troops as agreed by the pro-Serbian Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos (1864 – 1936). However, the Entente vetoed the plan, with first London and then Paris feeling unenthusiastic about attacking Bulgaria and committing a significant number of troops in the south-east of Europe.⁶⁷⁸ Pašić, unwilling to give the go ahead to Putnik without the agreement of the Allies,⁶⁷⁹ incurred the wrath of the *Black Hand*, still a strong faction in the officer corps.⁶⁸⁰ Apis had wanted to invade Bulgaria in the summer of 1915, but Pašić refused.⁶⁸¹ Shortly afterwards, Apis was dismissed as chief of military intelligence. Although the Entente envoys in Bulgaria had clear indications that Sofia was shifting towards Germany⁶⁸² and that they were unlikely to change this,⁶⁸³ the Entente still misread the Bulgarian strategy and failed to recognise the

674 DiNardo, 2015, 26.

675 David Stevenson, 1914 – 1918. *The History of the First World War* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 155.

676 DiNardo, 2015, 31.

677 Jordan, 2008, 45-46; DiNardo, 2015, 34.

678 Le Moal, 2002, 84-85.

679 Radojević and Dimić, 2014, 170.

680 Le Moal, 2002, 86.

681 Dedijer, 1967, 396.

682 DiNardo, 2015, 35.

683 Mackenzie, 1989, 155.

consequence of the Bulgarian mobilisation on 10 September 1915.⁶⁸⁴ On 24 September 1915, Sir Edward Grey promised support to Serbia, but it turned out that he meant this “in a political and not in a military sense”.⁶⁸⁵

Despite objections from the Allies, the Serbian general staff was forced to deploy part of their troops facing the Bulgarian border in anticipation of the attack. As the threat against Serbia became more explicit, French and British troops were brought from the unsuccessful Dardanelles operation to Salonika. Venizelos had asked for 150,000 troops from the Entente⁶⁸⁶ and obtained the backing of the Greek parliament to support Serbia on 4 October but faced strong opposition from the pro-German King Constantine. Venizelos was forced to resign the next day with Greece remaining neutral despite the treaty with Serbia.⁶⁸⁷ On the same day, the first troops from the Entente landed in Salonika — the French 156th Division and the British 10th Division.⁶⁸⁸ In the meantime, on 27 September, Putnik issued a general order for all young men who would have been conscripted the following year, as well as all draft-eligible men, to report to their command posts to counter the risk of reprisals by the advancing enemy troops.⁶⁸⁹ The army was to take with them young men born in 1897 and 1898. Putnik believed that 150,000 Allied troops would be coming to Serbia’s rescue which possibly explains his tactic in the coming weeks of using up reserves to replenish his front-line troops as they continued to fight while retreating.⁶⁹⁰

The German Field Marshall August von Mackensen (1849 – 1945), fresh from his victory in Galicia and Russian Poland, commanded six German, six Austro-Hungarian and four Bulgarian divisions with the intention of

684 Fortier Jones, 1916, 106.

685 Krippner, Monica. *The quality of mercy: women at war, Serbia 1915 – 1918* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1980), 111.

686 Bataković, 2016, 58.

687 Le Moal, 2002, 85.

688 Skoko, 1984, 234.

689 General staff order no. 21969, 27 September 1915

690 Skoko, 1984, 260-161.

having a ratio of two to one in relation to Serbian forces.⁶⁹¹ Mackensen was, in fact, explicitly named as the commander of the offensive in the agreement of 6 September, and considered as the best choice, partly no doubt because of his recent victories and partly owing to his knowledge of the region, having been posted to the Balkans in the 1880s and having written about the war between Serbia and Bulgaria.⁶⁹² Preparations for the offensive were thorough, based on Austro-Hungarian failed offensives and intelligence reports. The troops assembled in southern Hungary in September 1915, received intensive training, both theoretical – on the specificities of Serbian tactics – and practical, including firing practice and endurance drills.⁶⁹³

Serbia was attacked on 6 October 1915, by around 500,000 troops from the Central Powers,⁶⁹⁴ with an estimate of 800,000 – almost certainly an exaggeration,⁶⁹⁵ although a figure of 300,000⁶⁹⁶ is also given. The main advantage of the Central Powers was the artillery, with at their disposal 1,200 cannon, and around 10 German and Austro-Hungarian air squadrons as well as a fleet of river boats from the Austro-Hungarian Danube Flotilla.⁶⁹⁷ The Serbian Army was significantly weaker in manpower, with “soldiers who were either newly mobilised recruits, or drawn from a 1,000-kilometre front,”⁶⁹⁸ and in equipment, armed with 232,000 rifles and 685 cannon. The forces pitched against the Serbian Army were led by experienced commanders from the three armies, their forces positioned to restrict movement of the opponent as much as possible. The main thrust of the invading forces was towards the centre of Serbia while one part of the Bulgarian forces was used to cut off Serbian communications in the Vardar River valley.⁶⁹⁹

691 DiNardo, 2015, 34.

692 DiNardo, 2015, 39-40.

693 DiNardo, 2015, 53-55.

694 Skoko, 1984, 228.

695 Mitrović, 2007, 144.

696 Di Nardo, 2015, 39. This figure is mostly based on German sources.

697 Di Nardo, 2015, 39.

698 Mitrović, 2007, 144.

699 Le Moal, 2002, 88.

The Serbian 1st Army was commanded by Field Marshall Mišić (he had earned his new rank with the Kolubara Battle victory) and positioned in the north towards Bosnia, the 3rd Army was led by General Pavle Jurišić Šturm and positioned on the northern border. The 2nd Army was led by Field Marshall Stepa Stepanović (who had earned his new rank with the Cer Battle victory) and positioned on the eastern border of Serbia. There were additional troops known as the Defence of Belgrade Troops commanded by General Mihailo Živković. The western front was held by the Timok Army led by General Ilija Gojković, while the Troops of the New Regions were led by General Damjan Popović with his headquarters in Skoplje. The Serbian Army's commander-in-chief was Prince Regent Aleksandar, with Field Marshall Radomir Putnik as chief of staff. The Montenegrin Army, with a total strength of around 53,000 troops and 159 cannon, was the only ally of the Serbian Army that could provide direct support.⁷⁰⁰ The total strength of the Serbian Army at this point is disputed with figures varying between 190,000 to 220,000,⁷⁰¹ 200,000,⁷⁰² 300,000⁷⁰³ and 420,000.⁷⁰⁴ The most probable estimate of the total strength of the Serbian Army on all the fronts was around 250,000 troops and 685 cannon.⁷⁰⁵

The attack began with a heavy bombardment of Belgrade on 6 and 7 October, with 50,000 shells fired at the city in the first two days, with 30,000 falling on Belgrade on the first day. The Central Powers' troops entered Belgrade on 9 October, following desperate fighting by the Defence of Belgrade troops. There was strong resistance on all the fronts and the invading troops advanced more slowly than planned and incurred heavy losses.⁷⁰⁶ Meanwhile, the French General Maurice Sarrail, (1856 – 1929) arrived in Salonika on 12 October to take command of the Entente troops, a fraction of what the Serbs had asked for — around

700 Skoko, 1984, 238.

701 Di Nardo, 2015, 39.

702 Le Moal, 2008, 88.

703 Mitrović, 2007, 144.

704 Nedok, 2006, 39.

705 Skoko, 1984, 236.

706 Mitrović, 2007, 145.

20,000.⁷⁰⁷ Amid general strategic indecisiveness and disagreements between Paris and London on what to do next in the Balkans, and with the added complication of Greek neutrality, General Sarrail advanced with several regiments 140 km north of Salonika two days later in an attempt to link up with Serbian troops. The Entente was hoping that the operation would encourage Greece to join the war on their side. This could have happened had Germany attacked Salonika to prevent the operation. However, Falkenhayn realised this and desisted.⁷⁰⁸ Moreover, this was unnecessary when the town of Velež on the Vardar River fell to the Bulgarians and the Serbs and the Allies found themselves cut off from each other. Sarrail attempted to break through between the Vardar and Cerna rivers while Serbian troops attempted to regain the Kačanik Gorge that fell on 26 October, in order to retake Skoplje. Although they had limited success, they lacked additional Allied troops. General Gallieni (1849 – 1916), the French Defence Minister, ordered Sarrail to abandon the operation.⁷⁰⁹

With the Serbian temporary capital of Niš threatened, the government was forced to evacuate, together with foreign diplomats, to the new temporary capital of Kraljevo on 20 October. Prime Minister Pašić made his departure from Niš as late as 29 October. Fortier Jones was retreating with the army, and noted: “One day six limousines came by, filled with men in silk hats and frock coats. It was the cabinet fleeing from the Bulgarians before Nish”.⁷¹⁰

707 Krippner, 1980, 110.

708 Strachan, 2006, 154.

709 Le Moal, 2002, 90.

710 Fortier Jones, 1916, 97.



The cartoon by Bernard Partridge for *Punch*, issued on 27 October 1915, represents Serbia being attacked by Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire as Bulgaria attacks from the rear. The cartoon was subsequently made into this postcard as part of a WWI propaganda effort and into a poster for *Kosovo Day* on 28 June 1916.⁷¹¹ (From the *Punch* archive, courtesy of Topfoto Agency.)

Niš fell to the Bulgarians on 5 November. Kraljevo was a short stop where more refugees created chaos. Foreign envoys retreating with the Serbian government had to destroy their legations' archives and throw seals and stamps into the Morava River⁷¹² before leaving for Mitrovica towards the plain of Kosovo. As the Serbian Army retreated, civilians joined in the

711 Šarenac, 2017, 254.

712 Le Moal, 2002, 91.

retreat with the mass of refugees moving south.⁷¹³ Although war minister Colonel Radivoje Bojović had issued instructions to the general staff on 29 September and they in turn ordered the commands not to order the evacuation of civilians unless it was necessary for military reasons, the army was not able to stop large-scale evacuations.⁷¹⁴ The atrocities of the 1914 invasions by Austro-Hungarian troops were the main reason why so many civilians were fleeing in the direction of Kosovo. Columns of civilians were making the already narrow and cramped roads even more crowded adding to the atmosphere of panic.

Field Marshall Mackensen, accompanied by his capable Chief of Staff Hans von Seeckt (1866 – 1936), possibly in the spirit of a von Schlieffen-inspired obsession with the model of the ancient battle of Cannae,⁷¹⁵ was focused on the encirclement of the Serbian troops. With this in mind, the movements of the German, Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian troops copied this concept. Mackensen thought that at some point the Serbs would defend a town of special logistical relevance which would allow his troops to carry out the encirclement. However, this did not happen as Serbian troops kept retreating.⁷¹⁶ Mackensen's intention was to force a surrender and cause a near annihilation of the Serbian Army which would represent a significant blow to the Entente. Despite clear indications that the Entente would not be coming to help Serbia in any significant numbers, Regent Aleksandar issued an order which contained complete fiction saying that the Allies were sending "whole armies".⁷¹⁷

Serbian troops began to arrive in Kosovo in mid-November 1915. There was a sombre symbolism in thousands of soldiers and civilians finding themselves in Kosovo at that point; it was a place of supreme significance

713 Mitrović, 2007, 146.

714 General staff Order no. 22108, Živanović, 29 September 1915.

715 General Fieldmarshal Count Alfred von Schlieffen, *Cannae* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: The command and general staff school press, 1931).

716 Skoko, 1984, 265.

717 Quoted in Skoko, 1984, 270.

for the Serbs.⁷¹⁸ On 28 June 1389, the medieval Serbian Kingdom was defeated in the myth-laden battle of Kosovo by the greatly superior Ottoman enemy. Kosovo was regained in the Second Balkan War in 1913 as part of the gains of the *Old Serbia* region. Less than two years after Kosovo returned to Serbia, Serbia began losing its people, its army, its territory — everything. Fortier Jones observes in his account: “When the refugees looked at the mountains ahead and heard the guns behind, they realized finally that Serbia was lost, abandoned to the three strong invaders, betrayed by the three strong allies. This was the general sentiment”.⁷¹⁹ For all of them, as for all the other refugees in Kosovo in the second half of November 1915, the way out did not look promising: the Prokletije Mountains, the *cursed* mountains stretching into Montenegro and Albania.

6. Decision, Order, Retreat, and Consequences

“If Serbia had simply been occupied and had laboured under extreme conditions, there would be little more to say on the subject. But this was not the case. In an extraordinary development, the Serbian government, the army, its high command, deputies, government officials, King Peter, the Prince Regent Alexander and thousands of civilians began a historic retreat through Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania. The ageing King Peter, who had yielded his royal duties to his second son Alexander in 1914, was hauled on carts into exile. Generals were carried in sedan chairs. As if to exult in the idea that Serbia would soon be resurrected, the soldiers also carried with them the casket and remains of Stefan Prvovenčani, the so-called ‘First-Crowned’ Nemanjić monarch who had died 700 years before.”⁷²⁰

718 Sforza, 1937, 208-209.

719 Fortier Jones, 1916, 256.

720 Judah, 1997, 99.

The last chance for a link-up between the newly established *l'Armée d'Orient* led by General Sarrail and the Serbian troops, who were attempting a counter-offensive to regain Skoplje, failed on 18 November. The Serbs were isolated on the Kosovo plain, where they arrived through a series of tactical retreats as they were increasingly pressured by enemy forces in preparation for the inevitable. The only question was what that inevitable would be. There were three possibilities: capitulation and separate peace, a final, honourable and desperate battle to annihilation, or further retreat. While there were indications that Germany was interested in a separate peace with some evidence of Pašić negotiating with the Germans with unclear motives — either to save Serbia or demonstrate leverage to the Entente;⁷²¹ the Austro-Hungarian stance was in favour of the complete destruction of Serbia as a state. Pašić had sent enough desperate messages to the Entente from Niš in October, such as, reportedly, “She whom you have sustained for 14 months gravely ill; prompt aid can ameliorate situation. Telegraph immediately friends Paris”,⁷²² to know that the time for another decisive battle had passed. All hope of Allied help in Kosovo had to be abandoned. Only Field Marshall Mišić, an adherent of *the doctrine of the offensive*, was still in favour of a counter-attack and would be trying to convince his fellow commanders that there was still hope for success, even after the order for the retreat was given.⁷²³ Several meetings were held, chaired by Field Marshall Stepanović, where the commanders seriously considered only two alternatives, retreat and counter-attack, while the third one, capitulation, was not an option, neither for the army nor for the government. Mišić’s proposal of mounting a counter-attack failed to prevail.⁷²⁴

721 Dedijer, 1967, 426-427; Ćirković, 2014, 127.

722 Quoted in John Clinton Adams, *Flight in Winter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1942), 80. This is a rare account of the Retreat in English, written as a popular and vivid narrative, but is not a scholarly work.

723 Kosta Todorović, (ed.), *Kroz Albaniju 1915 – 1916 spomen-knjiga* [*Through Albania 1915 – 1916 memorial book*] (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1968), 56.

724 Skoko, 1984, 280. Mišić’s attempts to convince the general staff of the offensive option have also become stuff of legend.

Prince Regent Aleksandar had sent a telegram to King Constantine of Greece⁷²⁵ asking for help, in accordance with the 1913 Treaty between Serbia and Greece, which would come into force in the case of a Bulgarian attack.⁷²⁶ However, it was clear that Greece would not be tricked out of neutrality regardless of the efforts of Prime Minister Venizelos and despite a previous British offer of Cyprus to Greece if it abandoned its neutrality and joined the Entente.⁷²⁷ Following the forced resignation of the pro-Serbian Prime Minister Venizelos, the government of the new Prime Minister Alexandros Zaimis (1855 – 1936) refused the offer and maintained Greek neutrality.⁷²⁸

The fighting lasted for 50 days before the Serbian general staff issued the retreat order, when the Central Powers began closing in on the troops and the civilians in Kosovo,⁷²⁹ and the cold weather was starting. Chaos and confusion reigned, conflicting reports and rumours were rife, in addition to the shortage of food that turned from acute to chronic. There were many desertions as disheartened Serbian soldiers turned back to go home. When many sold their weapons to the local population, units shrunk drastically.⁷³⁰ The general situation of the Serbian Army was dire: it is estimated that the manpower per unit was reduced to about one quarter of the normal strength, and even less in some cases. The constant retreating, the loss of territory and lack of food — there were supplies left for only a few more days — all this combined had a major demoralising effect on the troops. More than anything else, the sobering realisation that the Allies would not come to help represented the ultimate disillusionment. There was little ammunition, in particular artillery ammunition while the uniforms and footwear of most soldiers were in tatters.⁷³¹ It was clear that the army was no longer able to fight effectively. The High Command made

725 King Constantine's wife was Emperor Wilhelm II's sister.

726 Aleksandra M. Pećinar, *Srpsko-grčki diplomatski i saveznički odnosi (1912-1918)* [*Serbian-Greek Diplomatic and Allied Relations 1912 – 1918*] (Belgrade: Odbrana, 2016), 130.

727 Pećinar, 2016, 130.

728 Pećinar, 2016, 130-131.

729 Skoko, 1984, 278.

730 Skoko, 1984, 280.

731 Todorović, 1968, 50.

the decision to retreat through Montenegro and Albania on 23 November, while the actual order reflecting the decision, was issued two days later.

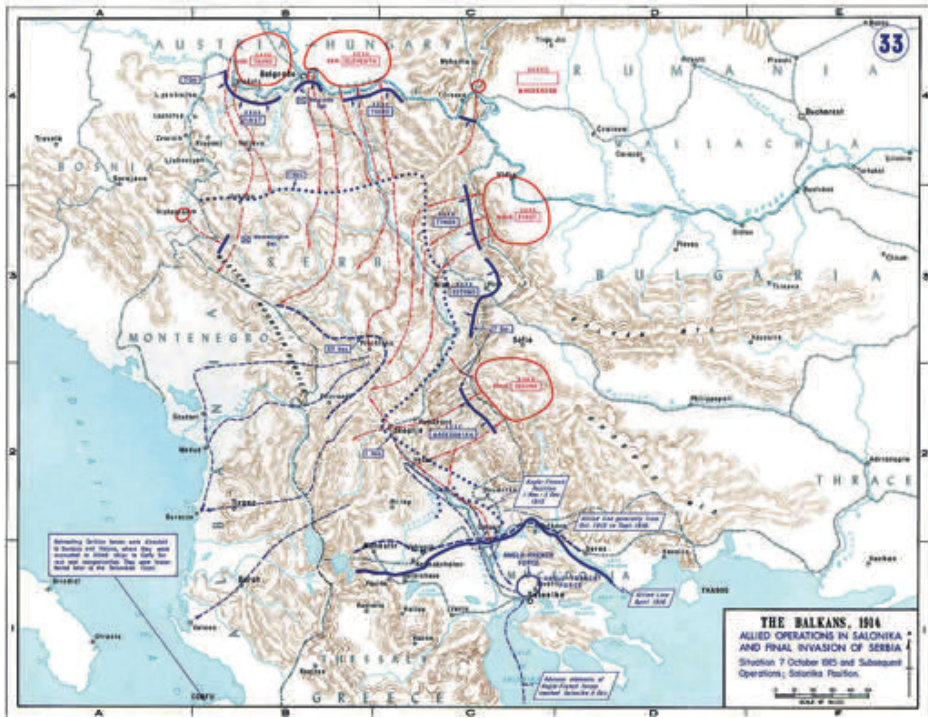
The order of the High Command to the commanders of all armies on 25 November 1915, no. 42942 said: "In view of the current situation, further retreat of our army has to be carried out through Montenegro and northern Albania to the Adriatic Sea (...). Along this line, our army is to reorganise, get food supplies, clothing, footwear, weapons and ammunition as well as any other materiel. Our further operations will depend on the state of our army, as well as on the general political and military situation in relation to our Allies ...".⁷³² The order clearly indicated that the army and the state were in mortal danger. Furthermore, the order instructed the commanders to retreat along the following lines: from Mitrovica to Prizren, then crossing Montenegro via Peć, Andrijevića and Podgorica and to Scutari (Skadar) and then St Giovanni-di-Medua (Medova). This route would be used by the Second and Third Armies and by the troops of the Defence of Belgrade. The First Army would protect the rear and then follow through a different route. Diplomats and medical missions were to also follow this route. The second route would go from Prizren to Ljum Kula and Scutari following the Drim River, this would be taken by the Troops of the New Regions.

The Regent, Pašić, Putnik, the government, and the general staff would be taking this route in separate groups. The third route would be the most southern going from Prizren and Tirana to Elbassan and on to Drač. This route would be used by the Timok Army, which was also given the order to link up with the Allied troops from Salonika, if possible. King Petar and his soldiers also took this route.⁷³³ The order gave detailed instructions as to which parts of the forces would be protecting the rear along which line, where the mustering stations would be located, and which communication lines were to be held. Further instructions were given in relation to weapons, what to take and what to bury in different

732 Quoted in Todorović, 1968, 51.

733 Todorović, 1968, 51; Le Moal, 2002, 92.

concealed locations after removing sights and firing pins. The cattle were to be taken and whatever else could not be taken or buried, was to be destroyed.⁷³⁴



“Allied operations in Salonika and final invasion of Serbia, 7 October 1915”; the map above shows the directions of the invasion from the Central Powers and the direction of the retreat through Montenegro and Albania (Map courtesy of the United States Military Academy Department of History).⁷³⁵

In view of the unusual nature of the order, to retreat beyond the country’s borders, the High Command issued a special explanatory directive no. 24971 on the same day: “The moment has come when, due to circumstances, we have to retreat through Montenegro and Albania. The morale and the discipline of our army have weakened and the faith in the salvation of the country has been lost. The state of the army is unfavourable. As we

734 Todorović, 1968, 52.

735 *Campaign Atlas to The Great War*, Department of History, United States Military Academy, West Point.

retreat through Albania and Montenegro to the Adriatic coast, it is to be feared that even greater demoralisation and disarray would ensue, as well as surrendering to the enemy in large numbers. In order to prevent this from happening, it is necessary to explain to the soldiers the purpose of our retreat and to convince them of the need to retreat. Capitulation would be by far the worst solution because we would lose the state, and our allies would abandon us completely and we would have no one to take care of us, to supply us with funds, weapons and everything we need, or to represent our interests. We would be completely lost. The only way out of this difficult situation is the retreat to the Adriatic coast. There, our army will reorganise, get food supplies, weapons and ammunition, clothing and everything else the Allies are sending to us. We will again become a factor to be reckoned with. **The state has not lost its being, the state still exists, although on foreign soil, as long as we have our ruler, our government and our army, regardless of its strength.** [emphasis mine] The readiness of our Allies to help us to the end and their limitless strength will break our common enemy in the end. Our Fatherland will again be free and greater. Convince all that this retreat is a state necessity, salvation for the state and that in these dark days our salvation lies in resolution, patience and ultimate sacrifice of all of us, with the faith in the final triumph of our Allies which is why we have to persevere to the end."⁷³⁶

Putnik's order and subsequent explanatory directive testify to the pragmatic nature of the decision-making — the retreat was considered essential for the survival of the army and the state. The Allies were requested to deposit food supplies and military equipment along the route⁷³⁷ and order no. 42942 stated that the mustering stations would be filled. Regardless of the unusual nature of the order and the explanatory directive, the details of the routes to be taken by the armies, and the instructions to ensure defensive actions where necessary still gave the impression of the degree of control in the High Command. The firm

736 Quoted in Todorović, 1968, 52.

737 Mitrović, 2007, 149.

intention of the Serbian government was to rebuild the Serbian Army immediately upon arrival.⁷³⁸

By this time, Field Marshall Putnik was severely ill with asthma and had to be carried by his soldiers in a sedan chair made from a sentry-box. Putnik, whose health has been in decline since before the war but whose mental strength kept him going, seemed to take a turn for the worse after the directive.⁷³⁹ The army was not alone in leaving, in fact, evacuation was to be complete: the government, the deputies, government officials, the archives, the treasury, and the casket of the first Nemanjić monarch, saluted by soldiers along the route, would accompany it. The convoy with Serbia's gold reserves was sent to Greece, and just managed to escape before the Second Bulgarian Army arrived. As the situation became more critical, in the second half of November 1915, there were refugees everywhere, with seemingly everyone trying to leave. Men, women, children, diplomats, all social classes, members of political parties, foreign journalists, actors, singers, university professors, Austro-Hungarian prisoners, and even criminals, when jails and asylums were opened. "Many thousands of Austro-Hungarian prisoners also retreated with their enemies after their repatriations were refused by Vienna.⁷⁴⁰ One of the officers of the Serbian Army, Major Svetomir Djukić, described these prisoners in his memoirs: "Austrian and Hungarian prisoners arrived. Barefooted, dressed in tatters, exhausted, no one is guarding them and no one needs them. No one understands why they have not escaped to join their side."⁷⁴¹

The High Command's order, despite the explanatory directive that followed, caused much confusion among the rank and file. Some 90% of the Serbian Army were old-fashioned peasants whose main motivation and fighting spirit came from defending their homesteads and the land; whose

738 Radojević and Dimić, 2014, 184.

739 Skoko, 1984, 280.

740 Krippner, 1980, 114.

741 Djukić, 2015, 167.

patriotism, rather than an abstract concept, was a pragmatic attribute, linked to their very livelihood. They found it difficult to understand how a state could exist *outside* the state borders. An army without a country was an absurd notion that they could not comprehend. There were many who decided to turn back but a sufficient number remained with their units.⁷⁴² The decision of the High Command went against everything that ordinary soldiers knew about the world. Dragutin Janković, a 25-year-old soldier who survived the Retreat remembered overhearing two officers while retreating across Albania with one saying: “Hey, we’ll end up like Napoleon in Russia”, and the other one retorting: “Worse, he was taking his army home, god knows where we’re going”.⁷⁴³

After the order of 25 November 1915, considerable discussion took place among the top military leadership about the possibility of a counter-offensive, but in view of the reports about the state of the army, the idea was abandoned with the decision on 2 December.⁷⁴⁴ Heavy weapons, artillery pieces and cannon that could not be taken or buried had to be destroyed and thrown into the river. These emotional scenes were described in a number of memoirs of the Retreat: artillery crews were kissing and hugging their cannon before destroying them and pushing them into the river, some having hauled them along the length of Serbia, after using them in the celebrated victories of 1912, 1913, 1914. “Gunnery, celebrated fighters, with tears in their eyes embraced the barrels of their favourite weapons, that they had carried and pushed to the positions with their own hands countless times with utmost effort and which they now had to destroy with their own hands.”⁷⁴⁵ The cannon represented the state and the state was being demolished.

742 Todorović, 1968, 54.

743 Quoted in Nedeljko Bogdanović, ed., *Dok su Solunci još govorili* [When Salonika veterans still spoke] *Zapisi* [collected by] Vladeta R. Košutić (Beograd: Čigoja Štampa,) 2011, 5.

744 Mitrović, 2007, 150.

745 Todorović, 1968, 54. This is another scene that is *remembered* from the Retreat. In his 2014 work, Danilo Šarenac explains how the process of purchasing cannon by the Serbian State had been followed by the general public between 1904 and 1906, and the subsequent victories were linked to the cannon: Šarenac, 2014, 115.

Upon the realization that the Serbian Army would be retreating through Montenegro and Albania, the Austro-Hungarian High Command attacked Montenegro to make the retreat harder and possibly destroy the stragglers. It was at this moment that *Serdar* Janko Vukotić, the overall commander of the Montenegrin Army and the commander of its Sandžak wing, undertook large-scale operations in order to protect the passage for the Serbian Army.⁷⁴⁶ The invasion of Montenegro by Austro-Hungarian troops was slowed down. While one part of the Montenegrin Army under Vukotić continued to fight, part of the army in the west of Montenegro collapsed. Montenegro capitulated in confusion on 25 January 1916, with King Nikola leaving through Scutari for Italy and then France.

The retreat of the Serbian Army began with approximately 220,000 troops⁷⁴⁷ crossing the border into Albania and Montenegro. It is estimated that there were approximately 200,000 civilian refugees.⁷⁴⁸ Roads became impassable with so many people as bad weather turned them to mud causing carts and other vehicles to get stuck. Military units had difficulty remaining together. Eyewitnesses describe scenes of Biblical proportions with masses of people moving towards the mountains, as the weather grew colder and skies darker. Food became scarce and prices inflated as desperate refugees exchanged anything they had for food. Many soldiers bartered their weapons. As the Serbian troops moved deeper into Albania, a country torn by different armed factions, Essad Pasha Toptani's troops provided protection where he was in control and his gendarmes gave support to retreating Serbian troops. However, in isolated places and as the columns moved to Catholic territories in the north, where Essad Pasha's authority did not hold sway, attacks by Albanian irregulars became commonplace. Essad Pasha's gendarmes even engaged in clashes with their countrymen to protect the retreating Serbs.⁷⁴⁹

746 Radojević and Dimić, 2014, 184.

747 Nedok, 2006, 39.

748 Dušan Bataković, "Essad Pasha Toptani and Serbian government", *Serbs and the Albanians in the 20th Century*, Andrej Mitrović, ed. (Academic Conferences LXI, The Department of Historical Sciences No. 20, 1991), 70.

749 Bataković, 2016, 189.



“Serbian Army Retreating across the River Morava, 1915” (photograph by Sampson Tchernoff, courtesy of the Serbian National Library).⁷⁵⁰

The route through Albania that was the shortest and the easiest was the one already known to Serbian troops from 1912, and was the main reason the High Command took it.⁷⁵¹ However, it was also the most dangerous — previous Serbian Army invasions into Albania left many locals ready to take their revenge.⁷⁵² Conventional Serbian retellings of the Retreat never mention *why* local Albanians were attacking Serbian refugees, civilians and soldiers alike. While Albanian attacks on the retreating Serbs form an important part of the narrative, previous Serbian occupations of Albania are rarely mentioned.⁷⁵³ This makes the attacks seem random and unprovoked.⁷⁵⁴

750 Sampson Tchernoff, *The Five Years War, the Serbs in 1912 – 1916*.

751 Fryer, 1997, 99.

752 Judah, 1997, 100.

753 The article by Čedomir Antić, “A port and a railway: The history of a maritime county as a study of Balkan colonialism 1912 – 1913”, *The History of the 20th Century* (August 2017: 29-38), justifies the aspirations of Serbia to acquire maritime access and a railway route to the Adriatic by comparing Serbian “colonial” ambitions with Britain’s, France’s and Italy’s. Antić avoids the issue of crimes having been committed against the local population, although he quotes the most famous critic of the conduct of the Serbian Army in Albania in 1912, Dimitrije Tucović, without mentioning the crimes that Tucović described.

754 The subject is rarely addressed in Serbia while the Serbian occupation(s) of Albania is/are not taught in schools. There is a blog entry “All Serbian occupations of Albania!” where the blogger gives an overview of the Serbian invasions of Albania, and remarks: “I can’t exactly remember this from school” <http://misha.blog.rs/blog/misha/kosovo/2014/08/07/sve-srpske-okupacije-albanije> (accessed August 8, 2016); also, see “Pridrži Srbiju” [“Hold on to Serbia”], *Peščanik*, 21 March 2008 <https://pescanik.net/pridrzi-srbiju/> (accessed May 2, 2020).

Because Montenegro was Serbia's war ally, and still only partly occupied by Austro-Hungary in December 1915, it provided a friendlier territory for retreating troops and civilians. Nevertheless, the isolated settlements where families felt threatened by the approaching mass of refugees did not necessarily offer succour to desperate people passing through their lands.⁷⁵⁵ Milovan Djilas, who later became a prominent communist leader and subsequently an even more prominent dissident, remembered how his family did not do much to help the refugees asking for food.⁷⁵⁶

Although the High Command order had given a list of mustering stations, most were empty.⁷⁵⁷ Time was too short after the decision was made and even if the eventuality of the retreat through Montenegro and Albania had been more seriously considered two months prior to the Retreat, practical preparations were not made. Additional factors, apart from the hesitation of the Allies on whether and how to help, exacerbated the already terrible situation: cold weather, poor communications, inhospitable terrain, a predominantly hostile local population.⁷⁵⁸ The High Command's plan was improvised and had many flaws that could not be fixed. In addition to the difficulties of the retreat, many units not only fought Bulgarians while retreating, but also Albanian irregulars. The suspected Albanian attackers who were caught, were killed mercilessly.⁷⁵⁹

As the weather turned icy, shelters were difficult to find and hamlets across the mountains did not offer refuge. Walking was hard, with intermittent snow, ice, or mud if there was a thaw. Falling asleep in the snow meant certain death. Serbian troops ordered to retreat by following the routes through Montenegro had their departure times and positions staggered to prevent more chaos on the muddy, clogged paths. However,

755 Gesemann, 2014, 121.

756 Quoted in Šarenac, 2017, 244.

757 Djukić, 2015, 164.

758 Todorović, 1968, 57.

759 Djukić, 2015, 146-147. Djukić describes the gruesome murders of unarmed Albanians although it is unclear if he witnessed it or heard about it. His comment is "Civilisation has advanced but some people's instinct has remained savage." Op. cit. 147.

the retreating civilians who joined the retreat made crossing of dangerous passes even more difficult.⁷⁶⁰ Since no one was charged with protecting them, they had to fend for themselves. The staff of Scottish Women's Hospitals, who had taken basic supplies with them, were looked after by the Serbian Military Medical Service. The army was dependent on the mustering stations that either did not deliver or delivered only a fraction of the food required, yet this was still something, even if instead of 9,000 loaves of bread, only 1,107 were to be had.⁷⁶¹ Commanding officers asked for food throughout the journey but to little avail. The units designated to follow the Albanian routes, which were geographically shorter, but far more difficult, also had to face Albanian irregulars. Having left Prizren on 29 November, almost immediately they had to fight their way through, especially around *Vezirov most* (Vizier's bridge), where scores of Serbian soldiers were killed in clashes with the local population. Again, the designated mustering stations were empty.⁷⁶² When a unit in such a weakened state was ambushed, the commander would often decide to negotiate with the local irregulars and they were allowed to march on in exchange for a considerable amount of equipment and a number of horses and oxen.⁷⁶³

As an illustration of the poor food supplies, it is worth noting that a commander quoted having received 1 to 1.5 kg of flour per soldier and 1-2 kg of corn per head of cattle over a period of two weeks.⁷⁶⁴ Different units took between 19 and 67 days to arrive on the Albanian coast.

Although Regent Aleksandar was suffering from appendicitis while in Kosovo, he was unwilling to delay his departure for the Adriatic coast and rode on in great pain. He and his officers were among the first to arrive in Scutari after a two-day journey on 1 December. The Pašić government took four days, arriving in Scutari one day before the prince regent. The High

760 Todorović, 1968, 60.

761 Todorović, 1968, 61.

762 Todorović, 1968, 64.

763 Todorović, 1968, 65.

764 Todorović, 1968, 66.

Command took eleven days from Prizren to Scutari, because they were slowed down by the gravely ill Field Marshall Putnik who was carried by his soldiers. Shortly after his arrival, Putnik resigned as chief of staff and was evacuated first to Italy, and then to Nice.⁷⁶⁵ He was replaced by General Petar Bojović, commander of the Troops of New Regions. King Petar was also evacuated soon after. Adams sums it up in his romanticised account of the Retreat: “Peter and Putnik, personifications of Serbia’s rise, symbols now of her ruin, two broken old men, were the first to leave Albania”.⁷⁶⁶



“From Ipek to Andrievitsa, 1915” (photograph by Sampson Tchernoff, courtesy of the Serbian National Library).⁷⁶⁷

Throughout the journey across Montenegro and Albania tens of thousands died, soldiers and civilians. According to official statistics from 1919, 77,455 soldiers died and 77,278 soldiers went missing.⁷⁶⁸ Out of 70,000 prisoners of war who departed from Niš in October 1915, it is estimated that only 23,000 made it through the Retreat and were evacuated from

765 Putnik died in Nice in 1917. His remains were transported back to Serbia in 1926 where he was given a state funeral.

766 Adams, 1942, 202.

767 Tchernoff, 1916.

768 Nedok, 2006, 42.

the Albanian coast.⁷⁶⁹ The worst fate befell approximately 43,000 young boys who became conscripts in March 1916, when they were taken by the army to join the Retreat so that the enemy would not capture, kill or imprison them. The plan was to make a new Serbian army with these young men.⁷⁷⁰ Approximately 36,000 young men died during the Retreat. Official statistics state that only 7,192 young men landed in Bizerte on 26 May 1916, after passing through Tirana and then having to march to the Albanian coast to Durazzo and Valona. Branislav Nušić, a Serbian playwright whose only son died in the war, retreated with the army and other refugees and wrote a memoir of the experience entitled *Nineteen Fifteen: Tragedy of a Nation*, where he also speaks about meeting these young boys on the Retreat: “These were all children, young as morning dew, bare-cheeked, just taken from their mothers and from their homes straight to the road of suffering and hardship. There were around 40,000 children who were taken following the order, so that enemy would not get them, because these were the children who would become recruits in March of the following year ... I had no idea that these children had been sentenced to death.”⁷⁷¹ It is estimated that 220,000 civilian refugees set off for the Adriatic coast and only about 60,000 survived.⁷⁷²

7. “Serbian Golgotha” — Testimonies

“At a distance from the events we have survived, from the suffering we have endured, Serbia and its fate seem to me ever more like that of the Titanic. Serbia also took a long time to be built — from the Orašac Rising to date — and one day Serbia took off towards the horizon of world events, healthy, strong and proud [...] And in the middle of the most confident voyage, Serbia comes upon an underwater iceberg, gets a tough and unexpected flank hit and —

769 Paolo Giordani, *Za srpsku vojsku* [original: *Per l'esercito serbo*] (Belgrade: Medija centar Odbrana, 2015 – reprint from 1917), 100.

770 Nedok, 2006, 42.

771 Branislav Nušić, *Devetstoptnaesta* [*Nineteen fifteen*], (Belgrade: Prosveta, 2006), 246-248.

772 Bataković, 1991, 70.

sinks. In a few days, it sank to the bottom of the ocean — a whole country and a whole nation.”⁷⁷³

In his memoir of the Retreat, Camille Ferri-Pisani (1885 – 1954), war correspondent, writes: “*Rien au monde ne ressemble moins à une retraite qu’une autre retraite*”.⁷⁷⁴ There are numerous sources that tell the story of the Retreat from different angles. Many participants wrote memoirs, veterans recorded their stories of survival, foreign journalists, medical staff, and military envoys published their experiences. For Jan and Cora Gordon, who came to Serbia with the Royal Free Hospital unit, it was an adventure.⁷⁷⁵ Lt.Col. de Ripert d’Alauzier (1894 – 1985), French military envoy, describes the Retreat and its aftermath in precise military terms with fine literary flair;⁷⁷⁶ while August Boppe (1862 – 1921), French diplomat, authored a brief account with sensitivity to Serbian history, making his thin volume popular in Serbia.⁷⁷⁷ Rear-Admiral Troubridge (1862 – 1926), British military envoy kept a diary which offers another perspective on the evacuation from the Albanian coast.⁷⁷⁸ The photographs of Sampson Tchernoff (1887 – 1929)⁷⁷⁹ and Rista Marjanović (1885 – 1969)⁷⁸⁰ gave lasting images of the event, fixing the narrative almost exclusively in the snow-covered mountains where convoys of soldiers advanced. But there were other aspects of the Retreat, less epic and more personal. From autobiographical novels⁷⁸¹ and recorded testimonies⁷⁸² one acquires

773 Nušić, 2006, 53.

774 Camille Ferri-Pisani, *Un drame serbe* (Paris: Perri et Cie, 1916), 159.

775 Jan and Cora Gordon, *Two vagabonds in Serbia and Montenegro* (London: Penguin Books, 1939).

776 De Ripert d’Alauzier, *Un drame historique* (Paris: Payot, 1923)

777 Auguste Boppe, *A la suite du gouvernement serbe de Nich à Corfou* (Paris: Bossard, 1917).

778 Rear-Admiral Troubridge’s Serbian Journal was published as part of C.E.J. Fryer, *The Destruction of Serbia in 1915* (New York: East European Monographs, Columbia University Press, 1997). The diary is kept in the archive of the Imperial War Museum, London.

779 Sampson Tchernoff, *La guerre de cinq ans: Les Serbes en 1912-1916 (s.l. : 1916 (?))* <http://velikirat.nb.rs/items/show/6219> (accessed March 25, 2017).

780 *Ratni album Riste Marjanovića 1912 – 1915* [Rista Marjanović’s *War Album*] (Gornji Milanovac: Dečje Novine, 1987).

781 E.g. Rastko Petrović, *Dan šesti* [*Sixth Day*] (Beograd: Nolit, 1961).

782 Antonije Djurić, *Solunci govore* [*Salonika veterans speak*] (Beograd: Prosveta, 1978); Antonije Djurić, *Žene Solunci govore* [*Women Salonika veterans speak*] (Beograd: Euro-Giunti, 2014); Nedeljko Bogdanović, ed. *Dok su Solunci još govorili, zapisi Vladete R. Košutića* [*While Salonika veterans still spoke*] (Beograd: Čigoja, 2011).

additional awareness of the state of mind of those who were not involved in the decision-making but endured the consequences. They all provide their own *truths* about the Retreat.

In his poignant memoir, Branislav Nušić describes vividly the confusion among the refugees in Skopje, with endless rumours circulating, uncertainty and anxiety rising. These were desperate refugees who despite everything they saw around them still believed in the arrival of the Entente troops. So utterly convinced were they that the Allies were on their way that they decorated the Skopje railway station to greet the Allied troops with welcoming signs and bunting.⁷⁸³ Soon, the mood darkened as more news arrived about the advancing German armies and the fall of one Serbian town after another. Thousands were boarding trains to Salonika: “[...] I don’t want to hear anyone’s advice”, says one refugee, “The National Bank went to Salonika yesterday and I am following the National Bank. So there!”.⁷⁸⁴ Contrary to later narratives, it was clear that no one cared about the ordinary people, those escaping their homes in fear of the enemy, the destitute, the sick, and the old. Among the scenes of despair, government officials and their families were given priority for seats on the last two departing trains — one bound for Salonika, the other for Kosovo. Those who managed to catch the Salonika one — officials and those privileged by the government, would be saved. Those who boarded the Kosovo train, were unaware that their Golgotha was just beginning.⁷⁸⁵

In Kosovo, where thousands had gathered, Nušić witnessed a soldier arrested for desertion and sentenced for execution. Soldiers who fought with bravery and determination in 1914, could not bear the exodus they saw all around them.⁷⁸⁶ Rumours of suicide, made veteran soldiers feel despair and shame: “Retreat, retreat without order, without a plan, without an intention, without an objective; the retreat that the whole

783 Nušić, 2006, 25-37.

784 Nušić, 2006, 64.

785 Nušić, 2006, 74-75.

786 Nušić, 2006, 96.

world is watching, the retreat of the army and the people [...].”⁷⁸⁷ Nušić also revealed how powerful the cult of Kosovo was, when amid the widespread hopelessness, he whispered to himself the narrative poem of the Kosovo battle with images of Serbian knights advancing against their enemies, to regain hope.⁷⁸⁸ Nevertheless, as the situation worsened, the refugees had to leave the towns and retreat into the mountains. “The deeper one goes into the mountains, the road is getting steeper, and harder, the stones are bare and a narrow path has been cut through and beneath it gapes the abyss.”⁷⁸⁹



“Walking from Gramada to Albania, 1915” (photograph by Sampson Tchernoff, courtesy of the Serbian National Library).⁷⁹⁰

Old King Petar was also retreating with his people. King Petar’s war diary 1915 – 1916 gives yet another view of the retreat. In his critical and often emotional and embittered observations, King Petar notes food shortages,⁷⁹¹

787 Nušić, 2006, 109.

788 Nušić, 2006, 141-142.

789 Nušić, 2006, 380.

790 Tchernoff, 1916.

791 Karadjordjević, 2003, 160.

the desperation of Field Marshal Stepa Stepanović,⁷⁹² the misery of the refugees,⁷⁹³ looting by Serbian soldiers,⁷⁹⁴ corpses along the way.⁷⁹⁵ He despairs of the desertions: “Everyone is complaining of escapes. Yesterday and last night 1,000 deserted!” he noted on 21 November 1915.⁷⁹⁶ Angry and disillusioned, a man with grudges, and particularly resentful against the Allies, who to his mind sacrificed Serbia while making false promises: “If only they had not promised,” he lamented.⁷⁹⁷ He witnessed soldiers selling rifles for bread⁷⁹⁸ and walking shoeless. King Petar arrived outside Tirana on 5 December, where he was met by the Serbian ally Essad Pasha. From there he was taken to Valona, Brindisi and then to Salonika.

In the Albanian mountains, when their footwear disintegrated, many soldiers and refugees could no longer walk because their feet froze. Henry Barby, who accompanied the High Command, described the horrors he saw along the road: *“Les cadavres! ... En voici un: ses pieds gelés dans ses ‘opantsi’ qui ne sont plus qu’un bloc de glace. Ses mains gonflées sont énormes. Résigné, il attend la fin ... Voici, plus loin, un pauvre vieux, une toile de tente sur les épaules. Il me montre ses pieds de glace. Il me parle. Je ne le comprends pas. Bien que je sache mon geste inutile, je lui tends un biscuit. Ce n’est pas ce qu’il veut. Sa main, avec une peine infinie, se lève lentement, son doigt tendu m’indique ce qu’il desire. Je regarde et comprends! Il me demande de l’achever d’une balle de revolver!”* Je passe en hate. Voici d’autres morts, d’autres agonisants ... en voici d’autres encore ...⁷⁹⁹ Barby, retreating with a group of French doctors and officers, also witnessed half-naked soldiers exchanging their last pieces of clothing against barely edible cornbread from local Albanians.⁸⁰⁰

792 “Stepa despairs”, Karadjordjević, 2003, 161.

793 Karadjordjević, 2003, 165.

794 Karadjordjević, 2003, 173.

795 Karadjordjević, 2003, 177.

796 Karadjordjević, 2003, 167.

797 Karadjordjević, 2003, 169.

798 Karadjordjević, 2003, 182-183.

799 Henry Barby, *L’Épopée Serbe : L’agonie d’un peuple* (Paris : Librairie Militaire Berger-Levrault, 1916), 103.

800 Barby, 1916, 121.

The foreign missions in Serbia were numerous in 1915 — Russian, English, French, Danish, Dutch, Scottish, Greek, and American. During the organisation of the retreat of the medical missions there were considerable diplomatic and logistical difficulties. Many retreated with the Serbian Army while foreign missions were mostly evacuated through St Giovanni-di-Medua on the Albanian coast and taken to Bari from where they were repatriated.⁸⁰¹

However, many resisted being evacuated in the face of the coming disaster: “We are doctors and nurses — under no circumstance could you induce us to abandon the wounded in our hospitals. We were not sent out here to retreat upon the first approach of danger.”⁸⁰² Two-hundred foreign medical staff who chose to remain to look after their patients and save the medical equipment were made prisoners of war by the invading troops and eventually repatriated.⁸⁰³



“Lost in the snow! 1915” (photograph by Sampson Tchernoff, courtesy of the Serbian National Library).⁸⁰⁴

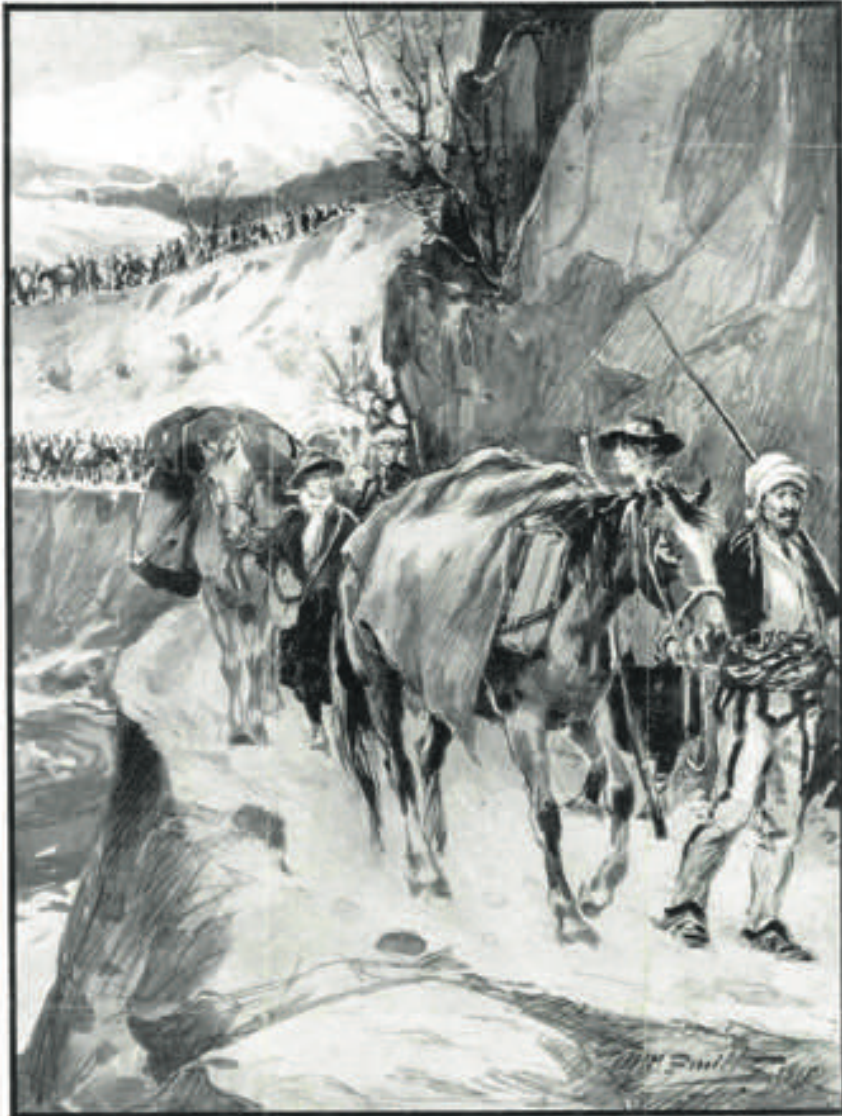
801 Nedok, 2006, 36.

802 Krippner, 1980, 106.

803 Nedok, 2006, 30.

804 Tchernoff, 1916.

ON THE MARCH THROUGH MONTENEGRO
DRAWN BY A MAN WHO WAS IN THE GREAT RETREAT



Copyright in the United States and Canada. Shows the Women's Hospital Unit, which arrived in London last week after a year's work in Serbia, last a team of pack animals and mules on their way to the entrance, as ordered by the War Office, to the Balkan front. The scene is the scene of the retreat of the British Expeditionary Force from the Balkans, which they did last year. For much of the year the road, between a heavy, wooded path, led a mile or more and for the other's progress down which a number of horses fell into the snow-drifts over here.

William Smith, drawing of a four-day long passage between Ipek and Andrijevica. A Scottish Women's Hospital unit convoy is led by an Albanian guide. (Courtesy of Alan Cumming.)

Dr Elsie Inglis, the founder of the Scottish Women's Hospitals, made sure her patients would be taken care of and set up nursing stations in different locations before she was taken prisoner, and after a period of hardship managed to be sent back home.⁸⁰⁵

Another staff member from the Scottish Women's Hospitals, William Smith, a painter from Aberdeen, who was a secretary to the 1st Serbian Unit of the Scottish Women's Hospital, managed to leave⁸⁰⁶ and described the departure: "The road was a moving mass of transport of all kinds — motor-wagons, bullock wagons, horse-wagons, men, women and children, all intent on escape ... This procession had been passing continuously for days, stretching from one end of Serbia to the other, and one realised that this was something more than an army in retreat; it was passing of a whole nation into exile, a people leaving a lost country".⁸⁰⁷ Smith published articles on the "Great Retreat" in *The Graphic*⁸⁰⁸ and *The Sphere*⁸⁰⁹ along with his sketches and photographs, describing "a most exciting and strenuous time on their way to the sea coast."⁸¹⁰

Flora Sandes (1876 – 1956) served as a nurse in Serbia in 1914 and went back to England to recover after surviving typhus in the great Serbian epidemic in February 1915. She returned in November of that year to rejoin the Valjevo hospital as a Red Cross nurse just as the Serbian Army started retreating. Upon arriving in Salonika and being told that it was impossible to get to the Serbian Army to help, she decided against all odds to join a military hospital at Prilep where she was warmly received, and subsequently joined an ambulance unit. After the order for withdrawal arrived, she was offered the opportunity to leave through Greece. Sandes refused and, after some creative administrative procedures, she was made a private in the Serbian Army. The divisional commander, Colonel

805 Krippner, 1980, 160-162.

806 Men of military age were encouraged to leave, Krippner, 1980, 109.

807 Quoted in Krippner, 1990, 112.

808 William Smith, "The Serbian Retreat", *Supplement to the Graphic*, 1 January 1916.

809 William Smith, "A Journey Through the Albanian Wilds", *The Sphere*, 1 January 1916.

810 Smith, *The Graphic*, 1916, 5.

Vasić confirmed the appointment by reasoning that her “presence will ... encourage the soldiers since you will represent our ally, England”.⁸¹¹ Her regiment gave Sandes a mare, Diana, to ride. The crossing was as hard as had been promised upon her joining. Apart from fighting Bulgarians and hostile locals, crossing Mt Čukus and overnighing there — the journey was an adventure for the intrepid Sandes.⁸¹² She made it through with her fellow soldiers, and so did her violin.

Fortier Jones, an American who also joined the Retreat was full of admiration for the women belonging to different medical missions: “[they] stood it better than the Serbian refugees and fully as well as the Serbian Army. [...] They saw things that generations of their sisters at home live and die without the slightest knowledge of — the madness of starvation, the passion to live at all cost, the swift decay of all civilized characteristics in freezing, starving men. They understand now better than any biologist, any economist, could have taught them the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest.”⁸¹³

Mable St Clair Stobart⁸¹⁴ (1862 – 1954) went to Serbia in February 1915, to lead the Third Serbian Relief Fund Hospital Unit. As the Central Powers forces were massing on Serbia’s borders, St Clair Stobart was put in command of a unit that would join the flying-field hospital accompanying the Serbian Army to the front. Her column ended up joining the Retreat after she took with her medical equipment and staff without consulting Sir Ralph Paget, commissioner in charge of relief for Serbia, which subsequently resulted in animosity towards her in London.⁸¹⁵ Nevertheless, St Clair Stobart led her unit through all the hardships of the retreat, with her account echoing all the others: unbearable cold, barely

811 Powell, 2013, 176.

812 Flora Sandes, *An English Woman-Sergeant in the Serbian Army* (Kansas University reprint of Hodder and Stoughton original published in 1916), 142.

813 Fortier Jones, 1916, 207.

814 Mabel St Clair Stobart, *The Flaming Sword in Serbia and Elsewhere* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1916); “The Crushing of Serbia”, *Forum* (March 1918).

815 Powell, 2013, 182.

passable tracks instead of roads, day after day of misery for refugees. “Men by the hundreds lay dead; dead from the cold and hunger; and no one could stop to bury them. But worse still, men lay dying from cold and hunger and no one could stay to tend them”.⁸¹⁶

Major Thomson, a doctor with the French medical mission described scenes from hell having witnessed men desperate with hunger tearing flesh from dead horses lying by the roadside. The hunger was “stronger than disgust”. Many died from having eaten raw horse meat.⁸¹⁷ Dragiša Vasić, a veteran from the Balkan Wars and the Kolubara Battle, in his memoir of the Retreat says: “Whatever was known about death was different from how we died there. On a narrow mountain path, which meandered above the abyss ... was a skeleton ... he kept asking his own corpse to continue walking ... Albania was both nightmare and reality ... People died believing in some awful end of the universe because death was the law there. Albania was the Serbian Good Friday, the Mont Blanc of our suffering”.⁸¹⁸



“Serbian soldier eating the flesh off a dead horse, 1915” (photograph by Sampson Tchernoff, courtesy of the Serbian National Library).⁸¹⁹

816 St Clair Stobart, 1916, 245.

817 Louis-L. Thomson, *La Retraite de Serbie (octobre-décembre 1915)* (Paris: Librairie Hachette et Cie, 1916), 128.

818 Quoted in Radojević and Dimić, 2013, 187.

819 Tchernoff, 1916.

Gerhard Gesemann (1888 – 1948) was a German slavist living and working in Belgrade when the war broke out and who found himself retreating with other civilians in 1915. In his diary, he described desperation, hunger, and exhaustion of thousands of civilians on their way from Podgorica to Scutari waiting to cross to the other side of the lake. Gesemann was so desperate to leave that he jumped on the wooden pontoon already transporting hundreds of people.⁸²⁰

After arriving in Durazzo having endured extreme hardship, he spent a number of weeks among several-thousand civilians who were also hoping to sail away as the Austro-Hungarian Army began closing in. Gesemann recorded tragic stories of people he met on the way: “Another man who was sitting by the church and crying, had carried his three-year-old daughter across the mountains. Her mother died just before the collapse of the country. He said that in the last few days he was spending his remaining money on the food for the child but that he set aside the last twenty dinars for a gun.”⁸²¹ Gesemann was eventually transported to Brindisi from where he reached Switzerland and then Germany.

It is clear that many thousands of people, soldiers and civilians had the experience of the Retreat that justify it being called *Golgotha*. But government officials, a number with their families, foreign medical and military missions, officers on horseback, did not experience it the same way as civilians and soldiers-stragglers on foot.⁸²² Yet, what is *remembered* a century later is a simplified version devoid of desertions, betrayals, officials’ privileges, and cowardice. The necessarily *human* aspects of an extraordinary event fall by the wayside, allowing for the script to be dominated by the *superhuman* qualities of Serbian soldiers, as we shall see in chapter IV.

820 Gesemann, 2014, 120.

821 Gesemann, 2014, 164.

822 “Even Albania was not Albania for everyone” according to Milan Ćurčin, quoted in Manojlović Pintar, 2014, 87.

8. Evacuation to Corfu

“Heroism and fortitude are cheap words in the Balkans and the Serbs are prone to excessive usage of both. But the soldiers who attempted to reach the island refuge of Corfu from Kosovo deserve great respect, even in this century of suffering.”⁸²³

Despite German and Austro-Hungarian messages and propaganda claiming that the Serbian Army no longer existed, 139,750 troops from the Serbian Army still remained on 31 December 1915, positioned along the Albanian coast between the Scutari Lake and Durazzo.⁸²⁴ Several thousand more arrived over the following days and weeks, joined by Montenegrin troops who had avoided capture by the invading Austro-Hungarian Army and wanted to join the Serbian Army. The plan of the Serbian government, even before their arrival on the Albanian coast, was to reorganise and reform the army with the help and support from the Allies.⁸²⁵ The original plan was to use the Albanian coast as an area for the recuperation. However, as the Austro-Hungarian troops advanced and the Kingdom of Montenegro capitulated in mid-January 1916, Albania itself was threatened, not least by the proximity of the Austro-Hungarian Navy at Cattaro (Kotor). The existing threat of the Austro-Hungarian attacks, the concentration of thousands of hungry and exhausted soldiers and civilians, as well as the continued hesitation of the Allies over the distribution of aid, meant that the hardships were far from over. The weather contributed to the misery of the troops and the civilians. Nothing was ready for them on the Albanian coast, neither food stores, nor shelters from the rain. As well as the shortage of food there was also a shortage of weapons.⁸²⁶ Although food supplies had been sent by the French and the British to St Giovanni-di-Medua, the sinking of an Italian cargo ship

823 Glenny, 1999, 334.

824 Todorović, 1068, 69.

825 Mitrović, 2007, 152.

826 Mitrović, 2007, 152.

by an Austrian submarine halted further food transports to that port.⁸²⁷ Serbian sources interpreted this as hesitation on the side of the Allies.⁸²⁸

The Serbian Army was positioned in two groups, one larger group in the north around Scutari, and a second in the area around Tirana-Elbassan in the centre of Albania where they had the last skirmishes with the Bulgarians who they repelled. The Allies were ready to help with supplies and evacuation, with the understanding that not helping would benefit the Central Powers.

On 12 December 1915, the French established a military mission mandated to reorganise the Serbian Army and assist it both politically and logistically, by placing General Piarron de Mondésir (1857 – 1943) in charge of the mission.⁸²⁹ Rear-Admiral Troubridge, the British envoy charged with assisting the Serbian Army, “could not co-exist in that position”, as Fryer put it, and the subsequent animosity between the two made matters worse.⁸³⁰

The transport of food, already slow and uncertain, started arriving in the ports of Durazzo and Valona, some 100 and 200 km from the positions where Serbian refugees had arrived. Initially, Mondésir hesitated to take Troubridge’s advice that the Serbs should march further south, so they could be evacuated from the ports of Durazzo and Valona.⁸³¹ After the submarine attack, the French recognised that the port of Medua was too dangerous because of the Austro-Hungarian proximity.⁸³² The recommendation of the Allies, that the Serbian Army should march to those ports, was not well received by the Serbian military leadership. Moreover, travelling south was complicated further by the Italians who

827 Mitrović, 2007, 152.

828 Todorović, 1968, 72.

829 Le Moal, 2008, 97.

830 Fryer, 1997, 118.

831 Troubridge’s journal, entries January 5 – January 8, 1916, in Fryer, 1997, 221-224.

832 Troubridge’s journal, entry January 7, 1916, in Fryer, 1997, 223-224.

feared Serbian territorial claims to Albania,⁸³³ going as far as to prohibit Serbian troops from crossing the Skumbi river, which was necessary to access Valona, under the pretext that Serbian troops were carrying infectious diseases. The Italians demanded from Regent Aleksandar a written statement declaring that Serbia would never claim the territory where the Serbian Army would be positioned.⁸³⁴ There were disagreements between Serbs who wanted to leave Albania as soon as possible from Medua, and the French and the British who wanted them to march further south, another 100 to 200 km, while the Italians were opposed to the Serbian government moving from Scutari to Valona. The disagreements had to be negotiated at the highest level.⁸³⁵ Regent Aleksandar, who was about to be operated on for appendicitis in sub-standard conditions, sent a beseeching telegram to the Russian Tsar, appealing for the survival of the Serbian Army. When the Russian Tsar responded, and intervened with the Allies, the food supply improved.⁸³⁶

The initial refusal of the Serbs to march further south to safer ports, and the subsequent standoff between the Italians and the Allies in relation to the crossing of the Skumbi River may have resulted in the death of another 10,000 Serbian soldiers.⁸³⁷ Apart from the soldiers, there were thousands of civilians, without food or shelter, waiting to be evacuated. Every morning, after waiting throughout the night, several bodies of desperate refugees were found in the Meduan port.⁸³⁸ King Petar, speaking to General de Mondésir, felt that the Allies did not do enough: “Even if Serbia survives, I fear there will be no more Serbs”.⁸³⁹ Mondésir resolved Italian opposition to the Serbs reaching Valona and then convinced Regent Aleksandar, with difficulty, to order his troops to continue by land to Durazzo and Valona. The Serbs left Scutari between 17 and 20 January,

833 Todorović, 1968, 71.

834 Radojević and Dimić, 2013, 188.

835 Le Moal, 2008, 98.

836 Todorović, 1968, 73. This intervention of the Russian Tsar is still remembered 100 years later, see Chapter IV.

837 Le Moal, 2008, 98.

838 Todorović, 1968, 78.

839 Quoted in Mitrović, 2007, 154.

with the Austro-Hungarian Army entering Scutari on the 21st. As the Kingdom of Montenegro capitulated at this time, more refugees streamed into Scutari from the Montenegrin mountains. Montenegrin soldiers were offered places in the Serbian Army.⁸⁴⁰ Remaining civilian refugees were struggling to survive. Immediately before the Austro-Hungarians arrived, two ships left with hundreds of soldiers and refugees. Rear-Admiral Troubridge, also left on one of the ships, leaving the French to take full charge of the Serbian evacuation.⁸⁴¹

The Serbian government was transported to Brindisi on 14 January and then to Corfu four days later.⁸⁴² Regent Aleksandar refused the offer of naval transport and went with his troops to Durazzo by land. As the Austro-Hungarian troops advanced, it became urgent to transport larger numbers of soldiers, once 10,000 sick and wounded had been evacuated to Bizerte. Although Durazzo was used to evacuate 90,000 soldiers and 5,000 civilians, it was decided that the harbour was too small and shallow to evacuate all the troops. This meant that thousands of troops had to continue their journey to the port of Valona to be evacuated.⁸⁴³ The evacuation established between Durazzo and Corfu and between Valona and Corfu lasted for several weeks. 12,000 people were evacuated from Medua, 95,000 from Durazzo, 51,564 from Valona. Among them were 3,500 government officials and 5,000 civilian refugees.⁸⁴⁴ The last troops to board ship were the cavalry units and the remainder of the Serbian Army who left Valona and Albanian soil on 5 April 1916.⁸⁴⁵ 140,000 soldiers were evacuated to Corfu, 10,000 to Bizerte in Tunisia, 1,200 to France and 4,500 to Salonika.⁸⁴⁶ Sources from the Italian Navy gave the following numbers:

840 Todorović, 1968, 82.

841 Adams, 1942, 233. Adams does not view Troubridge's contribution favourably. For his part, Troubridge is highly critical of Mondésir and of Corfu as a destination, having proposed Egypt instead, see Troubridge's journal, entry January 13, 1916, in Fryer, 1997, 226.

842 Mitrović, 2007, 159.

843 Mitrović, 2007, 159.

844 Nedok, 2006, 55.

845 Todorović, 1968, 85; Mitrović, 2007, 160.

846 Nedok, 2006, 55.

11,651 sick or wounded were transported to Brindisi, Lipari, Marseille or Bizerte; 130,841 Serbian soldiers were taken to Corfu and 4,100 to Bizerte.⁸⁴⁷

On 24 January, when Austro-Hungarian troops entered Medua and Alessio, time was pressing to evacuate the Serbs from Albania.⁸⁴⁸ Although the evacuation preparations had started on 29 December 1915, the decision on the destination of the evacuation was not made until 8 January 1916. It was decided to ship the Serbs to Corfu without seeking permission from the Greek government or the Greek King Constantine and French troops landed in Corfu on 11 January.⁸⁴⁹ At this point, the political situation in Greece was complex. Greece was only *de facto* neutral —troops from both sides had occupied different parts of the Greek territory.⁸⁵⁰ Corfu was problematic as a location not only because of the pretence of Greek neutrality, but also because it was a poor island and all the supplies had to be brought from elsewhere.⁸⁵¹ Additionally, many more food supplies had to be brought in for 140,000 new arrivals.⁸⁵² The first landings and sheltering of people were improvised, and made difficult by rainy weather.⁸⁵³ General Mondésir received a new British counterpart in charge of the British Adriatic Mission, General Taylor. Their mandate was to reform the Serbian Army after ensuring their recovery. Serbian troops were weakened by what they had been through and even those who were well were unable to do much.⁸⁵⁴ Many soldiers sick with typhus were quarantined on the small island of Vido across from Corfu. It is estimated that some 5,400 people died on Vido.⁸⁵⁵ When the dead could not be buried

847 Giordani, 2015, 99. Giordani also disputes Italian unwillingness to assist Serbian troops, attributing delays in assistance to logistical issues, see Giordani, 2015, 41.

848 Le Moal, 2008, 101.

849 Mitrović, 2007, 154.

850 Pećinar, 2016, 144.

851 The British were against the evacuation to Corfu because of Greek neutrality. The French then proceeded to transport the first 9,000 Serbian evacuee soldiers to Tunisia. Because of the duration of the sea passage and the associated logistical difficulties, the French decided to occupy Corfu after all and did it without consulting the other allies, Pećinar, 2016, 144.

852 Mitrović, 2007, 160.

853 Troubridge's entry for January 29, 1916: "now I hear the French have nothing ready at Corfu, no tents, no clothes, nothing and the Serbs are dying 50 a day" in Fryer, 1997, 237.

854 Le Moal, 2008, 106.

855 Mitrović, 1997, 160.

because there was no space left on land, they were buried at sea. A total of 11,000 soldiers died with 7,000 buried at sea.⁸⁵⁶

Field hospitals were organised at short notice on Vido and in Corfu, with medical services supplied by French, English and Greek medical missions. Serbian medical teams included 252 Serbian doctors, 150 medical students, 116 pharmacists and 60 veterinarians who had retreated with the army and joined foreign medical teams treating Serbian soldiers.⁸⁵⁷ The sick were also shipped to hospitals in France, Greece, Switzerland, Italy, Britain, and Russia. Although Serbia had lost approximately 400,000 men, an army of around 140,000 - 150,000 remained ready to recover and live to fight another day.

There were also 20,000 civilian refugees in Corfu, and as they and the troops convalesced, Corfu became a temporary Serbian political centre because its political leadership was essentially intact.⁸⁵⁸ King Petar, Regent Aleksandar, most of the Serbian Assembly deputies, most of the political leaders, and army commanders had reached Corfu. Social and political life flourished. Newspapers and magazines were published in Serbian, parliamentary sessions organised, and plays and concerts were held. The French and the British worked together to make sure soldiers recovered fully. Serbian troops received new pale-blue uniforms and French army instructors were put in charge of their training. French rifles were delivered to Corfu while heavy weapons were sent directly to Salonika. The French envoy reassuringly messaged Paris to say Serbian soldiers were much better as “the women of Corfu [were] noticing”.⁸⁵⁹ After four months of recovery, they were ready to join *l'Armée d'Orient*. Regent Aleksandar and the High Command recognised the risk of Serbs being incorporated into the Allied Army to the point of no return, and not having a separate army. Regent Aleksandar requested an independent

856 Judah, 1997, 101.

857 Nedok, 2006, 66.

858 Mitrović, 2007, 161.

859 Le Moal, 2008, 107.

Serbian Army.⁸⁶⁰ After everything that he had seen the Serbs go through, Mondésir seconded the request for Serbs to be under Serbian command and Joffre⁸⁶¹ eventually accepted this.⁸⁶²

9. Renewal of the Serbian Army and the Salonika Front

“We will depart with our Allies from here. The journey is desperately difficult, but the objectives are vast. Albania gave us moral grounding for our future endeavours. At home, we beat our enemies. In Albania, we beat the whole world.”⁸⁶³

Once Serbian troops in Corfu were restored and reorganised, they began transferring to Salonika on 12 April 1916. The last transport was on 30 May. The arrival in Salonika of 125,000 troops embodied the resurrection of the Serbian Army.⁸⁶⁴ In speaking to his troops on the occasion of Easter 1916 in Corfu, Regent Aleksandar highlighted the Christian connection between the Golgotha of Albania and the Resurrection in Corfu: “*Le Christ est ressuscité: Ainsi mon armée elle aussi est maintenant debout après tant d’épreuves ... prête à de nouveaux efforts et à nouveaux triomphes.*”⁸⁶⁵ The images of suffering and resurrection paralleled the experience of the Serbian Army in 1915 and 1916 drawing on the role of the Serbian-Orthodox faith in Serbian patriotism.⁸⁶⁶

After troops left Corfu for Salonika, the government and Regent Aleksandar stayed on to continue their political work and negotiations that would decide the future of Serbia after the victory of the Entente.

860 Mackenzie, 1989, 195.

861 Joseph Joffre (1852-1931), *maréchal de France*.

862 Le Moal, 2008, 108.

863 Field Marshall Putnik in Corfu, March 1916. Quoted in Todorović, 1968, 71.

864 Le Moal, 2008, 108.

865 D’Alauzier, 1923, 198.

866 Le Moal 2008, 113.

Although the regent was invited to stay in Aix-en-Provence as the guest of France, he declined and stayed in Corfu with his government without giving an opportunity to the Great Powers to have influence over what would be a critical time for the future of Serbia and South Slavs in the Balkans. Contrary to Aleksandar, King Nikola of Montenegro⁸⁶⁷ accepted French hospitality in Neuilly and although he officially represented the Montenegrin government, the absence of any real army left him without much influence.⁸⁶⁸ Pašić's main interest lay in the creation of a Greater Serbia, which would encompass most of Croatia and Bosnia, but there were other political interests too. Yugoslav activists in Croatia and Slovenia wanted to use the opportunity of the anticipated break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Serbian political weight to create an independent state that would unite Southern Slavs into Yugoslavia.⁸⁶⁹ Serbian military objectives were already controversial when the statement known as the *Niš Declaration*,⁸⁷⁰ was published by the Serbian National Assembly on 7 December 1914. Pašić's geopolitical ambitions for the future of the Serbian State veered more towards the Greater Serbia than towards Yugoslavia. The main danger to either set of goals was the secret agreement between Italy, France, Britain and Russia, signed in London on 26 April 1915, detailing the conditions under which Italy would be joining the cause of the Entente. The Allies were promising to give Italy large territory from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, including Istria, Dalmatia, parts of what would later be Slovenia, as well as parts of Tyrol and Albania. The treaty also detailed what regions would be given to Serbia, Croatia and Montenegro.⁸⁷¹ Although the Serbian government and political leaders in Croatia and Slovenia knew that Italy had been brought into the Entente in 1915, through a deal involving the territories they had a claim on, the full details of the agreement were not known

867 King Nikola was Regent Aleksandar's grandfather because his daughter, Princess Zorka was King Petar's wife and Aleksandar's mother.

868 Mitrović, 2007, 162.

869 Judah, 1997, 102.

870 *Niška deklaracija* [*Niš declaration*] znaci.net http://www.znaci.net/00001/138_4.pdf (accessed May 20, 2017).

871 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 March 10, 2016).

until the Bolshevik government published it in 1918, to demonstrate the hypocrisy of capitalist diplomacy.⁸⁷² The work of the Yugoslav Committee, with its headquarters in London, was concerned with the Great Powers' backroom deals and forecasting the victory of the Entente with the ending of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and resulted in the drafting of the *Corfu Declaration*.⁸⁷³ This declaration would lay the foundation to the future state of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The *Corfu Declaration* boldly stated that Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes were one people with three names, that they were one people in "in blood, in spoken and written language, in the feelings of unity, the continuity and integrity of the territory in which we live together, sharing the existential interests of our national survival and wholesome development of our moral and material life".⁸⁷⁴ It was signed by the President of the Yugoslav Committee, Dr Ante Trumbić (1864 – 1938), a Croat, and Serbian Prime Minister Nikola Pašić, following the conference in Corfu. Trumbić and Pašić would go on to have many clashes, with additional strains being put on the relationship and the future of South Slavs after the secret French government initiative to convince the Austro-Hungarian leadership to agree to a separate peace in order to shorten the war.⁸⁷⁵ It was clear that any deal involving the survival of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was a threat to the sovereignty of the future country of South Slavs.

Before the *Corfu Declaration* could get any traction, the Serbian government and Regent Aleksandar needed to regain full control of their army after the Allies had agreed to the independent Serbian command. It is possible that because of the *Black Hand's* demands, and because the High Command had to take responsibility for the horrific suffering of the army across Albania, that the regent and the Pašić government felt they could no longer tolerate past and potential future conspirators. After the resignation of Field Marshall Putnik, which might have been forced

872 Judah, 1997, 102.

873 *Krfska deklaracija* [Corfu Declaration] znaci.net http://www.znaci.net/00001/138_7.pdf (accessed May 20, 2017)

874 Corfu Declaration, 1917.

875 Le Moal, 2008, 221.

on him, with the regent's cryptic acceptance of the resignation saying that the Field Marshall was "honourable and pure as the sun",⁸⁷⁶ there were speculations that the regent was purging the army officer's corps of *Black Hand* sympathisers. Rumours were rife after Putnik's deputy Živko Pavlović was also dismissed, and Field Marshall Mišić sent to France, ostensibly to recuperate. However, Mišić would later be brought back to Salonika to command the Serbian troops on the Salonika front. Apis and his followers, considered too dangerous to leave be, were subsequently charged with plotting against the regent and the government, then tried and executed following the infamous Salonika trial.⁸⁷⁷ The pretext used was an incident when shots were supposedly fired in the vicinity of the car in which the regent was travelling. This led to the rounding up of suspects — all members of the *Black Hand*. The charges were trumped up, but the French were not interested in the affair and gave their consent for the initial arrests. More than 130 Serbian officers were investigated. Eight officers, two civilians and two volunteers were tried between 2 April and 5 June 1917.⁸⁷⁸ Several were tortured while Apis was promised clemency if he confessed. Apis subsequently wrote a letter to the court outlining his role in the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. It is believed that he exaggerated his role in the plot with the intention of emphasising his patriotism — whatever he had done, he did it for Serbia. The court was not moved, while the military leadership was alarmed that this might have implicated Serbia in *the original sin* of the war — thus proving the Austro-Hungarian attack was justified — and Apis was found guilty of treason. Dozens of officers were also found guilty and imprisoned, while others were retired.

The Salonika trial affair was riddled with intrigue and scheming, fuelled by old grudges partly stemming from Regent Aleksandar's wish to finish with the *Black Hand* once and for all, and partly from resentment that Apis's men had accumulated since 1903. For Major Svetomir Djukić,

876 Quoted in Adams, 1942, 201.

877 Mackenzie, 1989, 241.

878 Bataković, 2016, 450.

who described his frequent clashes with *Black Hand* sympathisers in his memoirs, the group had a nefarious influence. After being passed over for promotion despite multiple superiors' recommendations, Major Djukić included his complaints in a report to the regent: "We [the army] are in a dilemma as to who we should obey. The secret authority or our superiors? This will result in the breakdown of morale and integrity in the army."⁸⁷⁹ There is little doubt that Pašić and the regent agreed that speculation and rumours about what could and should have been done to prevent the 1915 disaster were widespread in the army. After the collapse of Serbia in November 1915 and the Albanian Golgotha they did not want any *praetorian* officers criticising the decisions that had led to the deaths of so many soldiers and civilians. Following the verdict, Apis and two of his followers were executed on 26 June 1917 near Salonika. Apis's last words were said to have been: "Long live Greater Serbia, long live Yugoslavia!"⁸⁸⁰

The reorganised Serbian Army, wearing their new uniforms joined the British, French, and Russian troops in Salonika in preparation for the great breakthrough on the Salonika front. They would also be joined by Greek troops once Greece entered the war on the Entente side in June 1917. After the first victory of the Serbian Army on Serbian soil at the battle of Kajmakčalan on 20 September 1916, the front stabilised. Trench warfare set in after the German and Bulgarian troops checked the advance of the Allies north of Monastir (Bitola), and was to continue for nearly two years.⁸⁸¹

The Salonika front was eventually broken on 15 September 1918, and proved a contributing factor to the victory of the Entente over the Central Powers⁸⁸² after the withdrawal of Russia from the war. Belgrade was

879 Djukić, 2013, 221.

880 Bataković, 2016, 462.

881 Mitrović, 2007, 165.

882 Hindenburg on 3 October 1918: "As a result of the collapse of the Macedonian front and the weakening of our western reserves which this has brought about, and now that it is impossible to make good the very considerable losses which have been incurred in the battles of the last few days, there is, so far as can be foreseen, no longer a prospect of forcing peace on the enemy." Quoted in Alan Palmer, *The Gardeners of Salonika* (London: faber and faber, 2009), 226.

liberated on 1 November 1918. The Ottoman Empire capitulated on 30 October 1918. The Austro-Hungarian Empire capitulated one day later. Germany agreed to the formal cessation of hostilities on 11 November. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was established on 1 December 1918. The Versailles Treaty was signed on 28 June 1919, exactly five years after the Sarajevo assassination of Franz Ferdinand.

There never was a proper inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the Retreat. According to Danilo Šarenac,⁸⁸³ there were two military investigations during the war specifically to establish why food was not delivered to the recruits. Another investigation initiated after the war by the National Assembly had no outcome.

Conclusion Chapter III

Following the outbreak of the war, the Serbian Army successfully and unexpectedly repelled three Austro-Hungarian offensives in 1914. These victories were the result of the high-calibre general staff and its veteran officers, as well as Serbian peasant-soldiers whose determination outweighed the ruthlessness and power of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Serbia paid a heavy price for the victories when enemy troops raided the countryside and retaliated against the civilian population. The typhus epidemic that followed in the spring of 1915, additionally desolated the army and the country. Once the German-led offensive started in October 1915, with Bulgaria joining on the side of the Central Powers, the fall of Serbia was inevitable. The promised Entente aid never materialised and Serbia was left to its own devices. The Retreat came as a result of the Serbian Army repeatedly avoiding the final showdown with troops under the command of Field Marshall Mackensen. The Serbian Army retreated through Montenegro and Albania in late November 1915, with the intention of making it to the Albanian Adriatic coast and reorganising

883 Šarenac, 2017, 255.

with the help of the Allies. The army was followed by the entire government, the royal household, the parliament and the administration, along with thousands of civilian refugees. The Retreat was a disaster for thousands of troops and civilians who died of starvation, cold, and enemy operations. Thousands of soldiers turned back and deserted, with many imprisoned on the way back. It seemed that all was lost and that Serbia would cease to exist. Although the country was invaded and occupied by the Central Powers, the Serbian Army, the government, the parliament, king and regent were evacuated from the Albanian coast to Corfu with Allied help. Although thousands died upon arrival from disease and exhaustion, more survived and recovered. With the help of the Allies, France in particular, the Serbian Army was reorganised and ready to join armies in Salonika. The courage and fortitude shown in the Retreat by the Serbian soldiers contributed to the Serbian Army having their own command as part of *l'Armée d'Orient*. The Serbian Army thus participated in liberating Serbia with the Allies under its own flag in 1918. Although veering between its own national project and the Yugoslav one, Serbia was instrumental in the founding of the new state of South Slavs. The multi-ethnic kingdom, encompassing three nations that had fought in the war, albeit on opposing sides, was established on the eve of the conferences that would culminate in the Versailles Treaty.

More than 100 years have passed since the *Golgotha* and the end of the First World War, but the Retreat remains a strong presence in Serbian national consciousness. The Retreat represents a defeat turned into a victory, a tragedy with a happy ending. As we have seen, the Retreat is an enthralling story which combines struggle and suffering, the two main tropes of the Serbian collective past woven in a captivating narrative. With this storyline in mind, we now turn to the changeable nature of the perception of the Serbian past with particular attention to the remembrance of the Great War and the Retreat

