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

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VI

*Forward to the Past —***Conclusion**

“In the 2011 US Open semi-final, Novak Djoković turned around a match against Roger Federer that was almost lost, and won the tournament in the end. This reminded me of a historical feat of our forefathers who, (...), after the Golgotha across Albania and Corfu, found the strength to liberate their homeland in an unstoppable victorious charge.”¹⁴¹³

After reading this quote, we may be justified in thinking that if all we have as reference is epic history, then every event in any context will look like *heroic suffering* to us. We met Vuk Jeremić, the author of the quote, in chapter V.1. when he succeeded in getting the UN Secretary General to clap to the rhythm of the Serbian WWI military march, for which the UN then had to apologise to the *Congress of North American Bosniaks* (CNAB). When the former Serbian foreign minister and president of the 67th session of the United Nations General Assembly, was asked by a Belgrade weekly who he thought was the most influential person in Serbia, he gave the answer at the start of this chapter above. Mr Jeremić is a tennis fan and his choice of person and his historical association

1413 *100 Most Influential People in Serbia, Nedeljnik*, Special Issue, July 2013. Vuk Jeremić, (chapter V.1), answering the survey.

hardly raised any eyebrows in Serbia.¹⁴¹⁴ His answer, while it may seem ridiculous to many, has its own internal logic, borne out of the Serbian national identity narrative, and a firm belief in *Serbian exceptionalism*.

Fast forwarding to the spring of 2020, as *Covid-19* put the world on hold, the media everywhere carried countless scientific and less scientific analyses, predictions, and comments about immunity. Dr Branimir Nestorović (b. 1954), pulmonologist, member of the *Covid-19* Crisis Team in Serbia established in March 2020, first stunned the public by saying that he could not “believe how people who had survived sanctions, bombing raids, and all sorts of mistreatments could be afraid of the funniest virus in history.”¹⁴¹⁵ As people started getting sick and dying from the disease, he revised his opinions, but came up with another reassuring statement a few weeks later. In early May, as the strict curfew measures in Serbia were being gradually relaxed, he spoke of the *exceptional genetic makeup* of the Serbs, saying that he knew from studying *epigenetics* that Serbs had good immunity because their ancestors had gone through famines, and then added: “My grandfather had gone hungry and crossed Albania so I am now immune to some diseases.”¹⁴¹⁶ Again here, we recognise the trope of exceptionalism based on identity established through suffering.

When Tim Marshall, a journalist who reported from the region during the war of the 1990s, described the Serbian attachment to their own history, he humorously illustrated it with an imagined exaggerated answer to the question “What time is it?” (chapter II.5), whereby Serbs would always relate the answer to important moments in their history, always giving priority to the heroic and suffering past over the present. Marshall also

1414 Vladimir Kecmanović wrote mockingly on the subject “Ljubav je samo srpski reket i ništa više” [“Love is just a Serbian racket”], *e-novine*, 26 July 2013 <http://www.e-novine.com/entertainment/entertainment-tema/88365-Ljubav-samo-srpski-reket-nita-vie.html> (accessed August 13, 2013)

1415 Quote from 26 February 2020, Branimir Nestorović, *Istinomer* <https://www.istinomer.rs/akter/branimir-nestorovic/> (accessed May 2, 2020).

1416 “Očekujem katastrofu već u subotu ...” [“I am expecting a catastrophe already on Saturday ...”], *B92*, 2 May 2020 https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2020&mm=05&dd=01&nav_category=12&nav_id=1680038 (accessed May 2, 2020).

found that if he was ever asked — which happened often — whether he knew much about Serbian history, the only placatory answer he could give that would not land him in trouble was: “I know you have suffered many times in the past.”¹⁴¹⁷ The Serbian attachment to suffering, particularly to the suffering of its army and people in the First World War represents an important part of the narrative which we have taken as a case-study for analysing Serbian handling of their own past.

These three examples are perhaps extreme, but they are not *exceptional*. A strong faith in the Serbian version of the *manifest destiny* of heroism and suffering is omnipresent in contemporary Serbia. This view of the world, as we have seen in this thesis, is expounded in the media, presented in history textbooks, glorified in speeches. The pattern is discernible, as we have said earlier, that *everything that has happened will continue to happen*. The 1389 Kosovo battle was used to set the pattern of the narrative, ostensibly *remembered* throughout the Ottoman occupation. The mythical defeat became intertwined with the idea of Serbian national identity, predominantly in the 19th century. We have addressed some elements of the construction of the Kosovo *mythomoteur* which remain in the Serbian psyche as an all-encompassing *über-myth*, including myths of *territory, redemption and suffering, unjust treatment, military valour* and others.¹⁴¹⁸ These myths can be said to have persisted, specifically through the *sacrificial narrative* which permeates the Serbian public discourse today in its connection to Serbia’s Great War.

In this thesis, we set out to show how the 1915 Retreat is remembered and represented a century after the event, and during the First World War centenary commemorations in Serbia. Our interest not only lay in exploring how acts of remembrance of this event and its meaning are instrumentalised for political purposes, but also in examining how some acts of remembrance spontaneously exist independently of the official

1417 Marshall, 2019, 25.

1418 George Schöpflin, “The functions of myth and a taxonomy of myths”, in Hosking and Schöpflin, 28-34.

narrative although they do not always contradict it. We have found them to be performed by *fictive kinships of remembrance* established many decades after the event. Our starting point for the research was the assumption that the answer to the questions would contribute to more accurately diagnosing the Serbian relationship with the past.¹⁴¹⁹ In examining the actors of remembrance, the sites of memory and memorialisation, we linked them to the *Serbian national identity narrative*. The thesis, intended to contribute to the understanding of the role the 1915 Retreat plays in the Serbian national identity and memory discourse, has yielded the outcomes that are outlined below.

1. We have deconstructed one of the key iconic episodes of Serbian history which still represents a constitutive and indisputable part of Serbian individual and collective identities. We have looked at different accounts of the Retreat and examined the strength of the dominant narrative of the event. Although there are accounts that include some (sub)consciously repressed negative aspects of this national epos, which we have acknowledged, our finding is that the official narrative is too robust to be challenged in any significant way. The reasons for this are multiple and are included in other findings.

We recognise that the Serbian refusal to look critically at its 20th century past starts with 1912 and 1913. The Balkan Wars are usually presented as *liberation wars*. But they were not perceived as liberating for everyone. Since the Orthodox Church had over centuries pushed for equating the faith and ethnicity, thus refining the concept of *Serbian exceptionalism*, Muslim citizens in the newly acquired regions were not considered as Serbs. While this would presage many conflicts to come, these aspects of Serbian past are usually not taught or discussed. The dissenting voices against the 1912 – 1913 Serbian nationalist agenda and multiple invasions

¹⁴¹⁹ Dubravka Stojanović explains how a historian can contribute to a diagnosis about the relationship of past and present in Stojanović, 2010, 9.

of Albania are marginalised.¹⁴²⁰ As we have seen, it is the 1914 war that represents the core of Serbian 20th century myth-making. The *gallant little Serbia*, in a war that made her famous, humiliated the superior Austro-Hungarian forces despite myriads of setbacks. Serbia was fêted in Europe and has never forgotten it. In 1915, the German-led offensive succeeded in pushing the Serbian Army further and further away from its heartlands. The Entente promised forces to help Serbia but did not deliver. The events that followed evolved into the core of the *Serbian national identity narrative*, stripped of any *distractions*. Desertions, preferential treatment of government officials and their families, cowardice, summary executions of Serbian deserters, brutal killings of Albanian irregulars, indifference of Montenegrin civilians through whose homesteads the stragglers passed are simply not discussed. They are researched by some historians, acknowledged by others but do not exist as heterogonous narratives, or counter-narratives in their own right. The past of every nation, its very establishment, as Renan told us in 1882,¹⁴²¹ consists of remembering as much as it consists of forgetting. Lost battles, heavy defeats, internecine violence — may undergo a thorough makeover to help the descendants deal with the historical trauma.

2. We have demonstrated the way that the rigid canonisation of the Retreat has helped legitimise political instrumentalisation during the First World War centenary events.

The commemorations have allowed politicians to *employ the past to serve the present* echoing Jacques Le Goff's words. At the centenary commemorative events, politicians are retelling the story that everyone knows. By keeping the same version of history going, and linking it to the present-day issues, they are providing *alibis* for their own inability to change things in Serbia for the better: *the world is anti-Serbian and there is little we can do about that*. The discourse shores up the legitimacy of the regime and its national(ist)

1420 Dimitrije Tucović, *Srbija i Albanija* [Serbia and Albania], 1914 <https://pescanik.net/srbija-i-albanija-iv/> (accessed May 20, 2018).

1421 Renan, 1882, 49.

credentials. We have seen how the centenary commemorations of the Great War have been ostensibly used to make references to the wars of the 1990s, denying any Serbian responsibility. The real objective of their commemorative performances has been a reiteration of the refusal to deal with the legacy of the wars of the 1990s, and Serbia's responsibility for initiating them by providing the glorious Serbian past as a kind of *character witness*: the descendants of Serbian heroes who sacrificed themselves in 1915 could not have possibly done anything bad 76 years later.

This type of “parasitic memory”¹⁴²² is often used at commemorative events, but we have observed that this is not just a by-product of the centenary events. It is, in fact, a deliberate tactic of the Serbian government which we have termed *historical frame switching*. This is a stratagem deployed on occasions when Serbian policies encounter obstacles and a diversionary tactic in the form of a historical reference is required to summon suitable emotions among the Serbian public. We have demonstrated that this stratagem has been used systematically since 2012, in the centenary years and beyond — continued commemorative events show no sign of abating.¹⁴²³ Research has further shown how the state-controlled media underpin the government's *frame switching* with extensive coverage of commemorative events and related narratives by indulging in sensationalist and tendentious retelling of First World War stories, directly contributing to the robustness of the narrative.

3. We have examined how the ideological layers of the sacred representations of the Retreat have strengthened the *martyrological* discourse on which the Serbian national ideology was established. Having surveyed the centenary exhibitions in museums in Serbia, we noted that they have mostly retold the same stories of Serbia's Great War. In the centenary years the museums and cultural institutions gave it their all

1422 See Čolović, 2019 in chapter IV.2.

1423 “Obeležena 101. godišnjica proboja Solunskog fronta” [“101st anniversary of the breakthrough of the Salonika Front marked”], *RTS*, 28 September 2019 <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/3677356/obelezena-101-godisnjica-proboja-solunskog-fronta.html> (accessed November 3, 2019).

with exhibitions, performances, readings, concerts, book promotions, forums, conferences. They have paid tribute, remembered, memorialised, commemorated. However, they have not asked *new questions* or given other perspectives. A visit to a museum thus becomes a validation ritual. The vast majority of Serbian museums have added to the inventory of Serbian heroism and *suffering* in the First World War and the Retreat, but they have *not* questioned the narrative or offered alternative views. These endless recurrences of commemorative cultural events are akin to memorial services. They all contain moving text or music, lyrics, and *remembering* the courage and fortitude of the Serbian heroes. The assembled public have heard that same music, words, lyrics, many times. Yet, many will cry, as Susan Sontag explains: “They weep, in part, because they have seen it many times. People want to weep. Pathos, in the form of a narrative, does not wear out.”¹⁴²⁴

4. However, we have discovered authentic *fictive kinships of remembrance* whose activities coexist alongside official events although with different philosophies and motivations. The examination of these spontaneous acts of remembrance during the centenaries has revealed that they have taken on these acts of remembrance willingly, without any pressure or obligation.

What is their motivation? We have looked at two types of *fictive kinships of remembrance* — the insiders and the outsiders. While there are differences between those who come from Serbia and those who come from elsewhere, we noted that both groups share commitment, interests, and agency. They are community builders, organisers, communicators. Their interest in the First World War is sincere and their acts of remembrance have specific goals which they have managed to achieve: the expedition that crossed Albania, the rowers who travelled by three seas, the mountaineers who are cleaning the military cemeteries. Mark Keating, Fabian Vendrig, Tanja Vendrig, John Stienen, and Alan Cumming have all gone out of their way

1424 Sontag, 2004, 74.

to create something lasting and worthwhile while carrying out their acts of remembrance. The kinships examined are particular because they were formed so long after the end of the war. Their mourning is not for the dead, but for the ideals that the dead fought for, or died for. They may not even know it, but they also mourn *the loss of the idea of such ideals*.

How do we reconcile the sincerity of the people who go on pilgrimages and participate in commemorations with the opportunism of politicians who manipulate the public through perpetuating the *sacrificial narrative*? We don't. They exist alongside one another. The use of past for political purposes "is as old as the hills" as Norman Davies put it.¹⁴²⁵ The *fictive kinships* represent a counterweight to the cynicism of the commemorating politicians who see every anniversary as an opportunity to equate themselves with illustrious ancestors and their glorious deeds while implying perfect continuity with their values. The actors of remembrance have fundamentally different motivations that are coming from the *inside* taking them to the *outside*. The actors of remembrance are seeking out the sites of memory of the Great War and the Retreat. There is a mystical quality to their journey to go to the exact place where their ancestors walked, or fought, or died. These sites of memory have meaning for the group, therefore they have meaning for the individual. These too are "social frameworks of memory" and examples of "collective remembrance". But these *mnemonic labourers* also contribute to the robustness of the heroic and tragic narrative — the Retreat narrative is potent, attractive and easily transcends into the mythical because of its universal appeal of the story of suffering that ends in redemption.

5. We have demonstrated that the *Serbian problem* as mentioned by Jay Winter is, in fact, the contemporary Serbian attitude to the past, exemplified in the official script of the Retreat and the First World War. The canonised image of martyred Serbia in the Retreat that cannot possibly be guilty

¹⁴²⁵ Davies, 2007, 249.

of any crimes, including in the wars of the 1990s is *the* Serbian problem. Without solving it, Serbia will have a hard time finding its course.

The findings of the thesis may be relevant for those interested in finding solutions to overcome the Serbian reluctance to look at their country's actions in the wars of the 1990s by appreciating the complexity and the strength of the Serbian national identity narrative as embodied by the Retreat and Serbia's participation in the Great War. Recognising the sensitivity of the subject for the Serbs today may contribute to better insights of an ongoing political problem.

In a 1975 play *Miracle at Šargan's*, a disgraced politician suddenly sees what no one around him can see — two Serbian soldiers retreating during the 1915 offensive. Once he is back in favour, he again becomes blind to their existence.¹⁴²⁶ The scenes are brief yet poignant, seemingly not crucial to the plot of the play, but their implied message at the time of socialist Yugoslavia was bold: in order to succeed in politics, a Serbian politician must be blind to the past sacrifices of Serbia.

Forty-five years later, a different kind of blindness is required, but blindness nevertheless.

1426 Ljubomir Simović, "Čudo u Šarganu" ["Miracle at Šargan's"], *YouTube, Atelje 212* (1989) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtDGnSKxLN0> (accessed March 20, 2017).



Ruins of the Serbian general staff building in Belgrade, which was hit in the 1999 NATO air strikes, have not been torn down or renovated. For years, it has been covered by a promotional billboard with the words of Field Marshall Mišić: “He who dares can. He who knows no fear goes forward.”¹⁴²⁷

Above is a photograph of a billboard covering the ruins of the general staff building. The building was not levelled and has been left as a ruin. It is still (2020) covered by a massive billboard showing a First World War Field Marshall quote next to a picture of a beautiful young Serbian woman officer saluting. We are looking at the perfect illustration of what the Serbian government is doing in order to sidestep facing up to the wars in the 1990s — the derelict general staff building makes the evidence of *suffering* visible. At the same time, the government is quite literally covering up the consequences of its policies with a First World War motivational quote and a pretty woman in uniform. The message projected could not be clearer. *Nothing to see here*. Serbia did good in the Great War and, by the way, today Serbia is an equal opportunity country.

1427 Ralex fasade [Ralex facades] <http://www.ralex.rs/site/bilbordi-i-fasade/generalstab-beograd1/> (accessed October 31, 2019).

We are reminded of the metaphor Olga Manojlović Pintar uses to describe the phenomenon of distorting history: “The representation of the past is always a portrait of those who create it, and any attempts to embellish reality are based on the distortion of history, and just like in Wilde’s story of Dorian Grey, they will always end up in a traumatic confrontation with the truth. What is hidden never disappears, but becomes grotesquely deformed in secret.”¹⁴²⁸

The story of Serbia’s Great War and its central event, the Retreat, can withstand being remembered and represented differently, being taught comprehensively, without reverting to the stereotypes of the sacrificial narrative. As Mitch Landrieu put it, “there is a difference between our remembrance of history and reverence of it.”¹⁴²⁹ If the Serbs today tried looking at the events from a century ago in a different light, and moving away from the “demonic memory regime”¹⁴³⁰ by seeking different perspectives and points of view, they would begin the process of emancipation from the shackles of “historical determinism.”¹⁴³¹

The wars of the 1990s remain highly damaging for Serbia’s image. Since the Serbian nation did not, in fact, have a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* to help its citizens understand what happened and why, to help them move forward, there is continuing tension between how the Serbian nation sees itself and how the world sees Serbia. In addition to the gap between the self-perception and the external perception, Serbian society contains fissures in its understanding of what really happened in the past. Whether we are talking about the past from 100 years ago or from 25 years ago, independent historians who are in a minority persist in researching what really happened, what the media said happened and what that means for the present and the future. Not only are the wars of the 1990s *not*

1428 Manojlović Pintar, 2014, 32.

1429 Mitch Landrieu, *In the shadow of history. A white southerner confronts history*. (New York: Viking, 2018), 218-219.

1430 Winter, 2018, 123.

1431 Dubravka Stojanović, “Udžbenici istorije kao ogledalo vremena” [“History textbooks mirror their time”] (1994) in *Oil on Water* (Belgrade: Pešćanik, 2010), 115.

considered factually, even the facts about civic opposition to the wars at the time have been *erased*. This means that the narrative about the responsibility for the wars and Serbia's actions in them will continue to be fudged and falsified while the commemorative events of the Great War and the Retreat will go on to have countless *encores* as the band plays on *There, Far Away*.

