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

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Summary

The dissertation investigates how the Serbs as a nation deal with the past through the prism of an event from the First World War, the 1915 Serbian Army retreat across Montenegro and Albania in the wake of the invasion of Serbia by the German, Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian armies in October 1915. Despite massive loss of life, the retreat was carried out with considerable military and political consequences, and allowed the preservation of the Serbian State and Army in exile in Greece. Subsequently, the reformed Serbian Army was included in *l'Armée d'Orient* and succeeded in the breakthrough at the Salonika Front in 1918, which was followed by the liberation of Serbia and the creation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

In order to examine how the 1915 Retreat is remembered and represented in Serbia a hundred years later, and what this tells us about Serbia's relationship with her past, the thesis looks into who is doing the remembering of this event and why, what sites of memory memorialise it, how it is linked to the *Serbian national identity narrative*, and how the remembrance and representations of this event and its meaning were instrumentalised for political purposes during the First World War centenary commemorations in Serbia. The Retreat today is a canonised memory symbolising Serbian heroism and sacrifice — the two pillars of the Serbian national identity narrative. Alongside the 1389 battle of Kosovo, the Retreat has the status of the Serbian *mythomoteur*. The objective of the research is to contribute to the knowledge of the role the 1915 Retreat plays in the Serbian national identity and memory discourse, to deepen the understanding of this discourse and to discover the way it connects to the contemporary Serbian national identity markers.

Because the grandfathers and great-grandfathers of many Serbs today had participated in the Retreat, there is a perceived strong bond across the generations, linking the *Salonika veterans* — those that had crossed Albania and participated in the breakthrough of the Salonika front —and

their descendants. In present-day Serbia, the First World War and the Retreat, rather than being thought of as abstract history, are experienced as specific and personal. Therefore, any attempts to introduce different points of view or consider heterogeneous narratives are interpreted as revisionism which is hostile to the Serbian cause. One such example was the 2013 publication of Christopher Clark's book *The Sleepwalkers* which generated largely negative reactions in Serbia not only from historians but also from politicians, many of whom used it as an opportunity to reinforce the dominant Serbian narrative whereby the Serbian role in the First World War and Serbian heroism are underestimated and forgotten by the West.

This attitude can be found in the instances of remembrance and representations of the Retreat one hundred years later, particularly in light of the First World War centenary commemorations. These events have provided an occasion for the Serbian government to use the events to distract the Serbian public from the more recent past that has not been dealt with — the Serbian role in the wars of the Yugoslav succession of the 1990s termed in the thesis as *historical frame switching*. This deliberate tactic of the Serbian regime consists of *framing* current political events within arguably irrelevant historical contexts in order to present an image of biased and unjust treatment of Serbs by the West.

In order to understand the link between the *mythemes* — interconnected narratives with mythical aspects — of the Retreat and the Serbian story, the thesis presents an outline of the Serbian national identity narrative, based predominantly on the strands of heroism and suffering. The Serbian *story* is essential for identifying patterns of acceptance or rejection of different versions of the past based on a kind of *emotional formula* that can be found in Serbian history. The literature review examines the interplay between memory, identity, history and types of memorialisation since these concepts are required to recognise the relevant patterns in the research. Halbwachs's concept of "social frameworks of memory" explains what is meant by "collective memory", which Aleida Assmann

reinterprets by demonstrating how nations *create* their memories. For Jay Winter, “collective remembrance” is a more apt term. Winter insists on the *plurality* of remembrances from which the *actions* of remembrance flow — these are memorial practices that groups of people carry out. The shared and public nature of the practices embody the collective remembrance of an event. Winter termed such groups of people gathering to remember the fallen in the Great War *fictive kinships* of remembrance. The nature of the remembrance of the global tragedy that was the First World War established a specific culture of remembrance that includes remembrance practices such as the tomb of the unknown soldier and the minute’s silence.

Serbia has a special relationship with the First World War and cherishes its role in it, despite the continued controversies about whether or not the Serbs were responsible for causing it. Serbia’s twentieth century has been rife with upheavals, conflicts and wars — the last ten years of the past century remain marked with the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and the aftermath. This recent past and Serbia’s role in these events have not been dealt with by the majority of Serbs, which brings up many uncomfortable questions with few willing to answer them. In Serbia, the wars of the 1990s are most commonly framed in the classic narrative of Serbian suffering and victimhood, with the 1999 NATO bombing being used as evidence of injustice in the imagined *the Serbs vs. the World* duel.

Meanwhile, the First World War and the Retreat remain popular, remembered and memorialised, particularly during the commemorative ceremonies of the centenary of the war. Both the war and the Retreat live on in a robust narrative filled with heroism and suffering without room for any negative aspects such as desertions, cowardice, merciless killings of Albanian irregulars, preferential treatment of government officials, and needless loss of life of many thousands of civilians, among others. The many different testimonies of the Retreat give a richly layered account of the event presenting a complex picture of a real drama with long-term consequences. In order to understand the power of the Retreat narrative,

it is essential to acknowledge the depth of the emotional bond that most Serbs feel in relation to their Salonika veteran ancestors. This bond, further stimulated and highlighted by the tabloid media, is routinely exploited to reframe political discourse.

Examination of systematic changes of street names in Serbia, specifically in Belgrade, gives more insight into the way the past is experienced in Serbia. Serbian First World War monuments often have backgrounds filled with controversies, with the present always being more of a priority than the past during their construction and inauguration. The fact that the Retreat has no monument or museum in Serbia remains a curiosity without a satisfactory explanation. However, this did not stop the Serbian politicians availing themselves of the centenary commemorations to use the events for their own purposes. The corresponding media coverage has been focused on the reinforcement of the narrative built around heroism and suffering.

Alongside the opportunism of the commemorations and newspaper articles breaking *news on history*, there are genuine *collective remembrance practices*. The sites of memory of the Retreat and the Salonika Front, in Vido and in Thessaloniki, are also pilgrimage destinations for many Serbs who visit them in large numbers every year. The music and songs that are part of those experiences are also constitutive of the Serbian national identity as can be seen in different cultural media such as theatre, films and museums. The centenary of the First World War prompted many representations of the war and the Retreat in museums and exhibitions with considerable public interest. Despite many different presentations, and a large number of exhibitions and events during the centenary in Serbia, the dominant narrative was not challenged and no other viewpoints were explored — the narrative was in fact cemented.

There are also other sincere remembrances of the Retreat, embodying “fictive kinships” of remembrances as defined by Jay Winter. These are carried out by *insiders* (Serbs) and *outsiders* (foreigners) who took it upon

themselves to remember the Retreat and the Great War, in different, practical and creative initiatives in order to pay tribute to the fallen or to their ancestors. These active and sincere kinships also contribute to the robustness of the narrative.

The Retreat is a truly unique event and has an undeniable place of honour in the family history of most Serbs. However, it need not be treated as fragile — the narrative should be questioned and challenged. Its darker aspects must be further explored. It is through acknowledging what really happened one hundred years ago that a nation may also begin to wonder what happened in the 1990s.