

Memorial Heritage of the First World War and the Construction of Yugoslav Identity

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In the history of the South Slavs, the First World War was a milestone of enormous significance, not only because of the tragic destruction it wrought, but also because it brought about a geopolitical change that contemporaries called “the realisation of a millennium dream,” namely the establishment of a Yugoslav nation-state. Therefore, the memory of Yugoslav war victims provided an opportunity for reconciliation with the new nation-state, as the Italian threat remained in the postwar period. In the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, on the other hand, the memory of Yugoslavs who had lost their lives during the war in Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian uniforms, including those who had fought on the Isonzo Front, was not honoured within the idea of liberation and unification. Over the years, some people, especially in Slovenia and less in other parts of the nation-state, began to look for new ways to honour the fallen soldiers in a different setting, which

opened the door to alternative commemorations with different interpretations of the war and its meaning.

AUSTRIA-HUNGARY CONFRONTING THE YUGOSLAV IDEA

On Vidovdan 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie Chotek died as victims of the young Yugoslav nationalist Gavrilo Princip. Princip's shooting echoed across the Old Continent for four years, and in addition to the two victims in Sarajevo, millions of Europeans also fell victim to it. It started with loud counter-demonstrations in several cities of Austria-Hungary, which led to pogroms against the Serbian part of the population in Bosnia, Hungary, Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slavonia. During these pogroms, Serbian stores and houses were looted, the Evropa Hotel in Sarajevo was destroyed, and Orthodox churches were desecrated. The pogrom against Serbs took its most brutal form in Sarajevo and in the border towns with Serbia and Montenegro, where there were also several murders (Klemenčič 1914: 17; Banjanin 1915: 20–1; Bartulović 1925: 45–7; Obradović 1928: 7, 17; West 1942: I, 382).

Shortly after the assassination, there were also calls for revenge against the Kingdom of Serbia. The world was watching closely to see how the Dual Monarchy would respond. A month later, when the Dual Monarchy moved to “write its history with the sword and consolidate the foundations of its state with cannons, for the good of all its peoples,” the European powers were also ready to act. On July 31, Russia was the first country to respond to the Austro-Hungarian declaration of war on Serbia by announcing a general mobilisation. The Russian mobilisation served as a pretext for Germany to declare war on Russia on August 1 and on its ally France two days later. As a result of the German attack on Belgium on August 2 and France on August 3, Britain entered the war on August 4 and Montenegro on August 5; Turkey followed on November 1, joining the Central Powers. During 1915, Italy entered the war on the side of the Entente and Bulgaria on the side of the Central Powers. Finally, Romania sided with the Entente in 1916. Europe was turned into a slaughterhouse where millions of people died.

As the dark clouds of war loomed over the Yugoslav lands, they eclipsed the sun that had warmed the Yugoslav idea only a few years ago. The idea of trialism was dead, as was the heir to the Habsburg throne; the Russian plan was to establish Greater Serbia. Only a few refugees



Fig. 1: In commemoration of the World War. Austria-Hungary and Germany will inherit you. Down with the Russians! Down with the Serbs! Postcard from the private collection of B. Jezernik.

abroad still dreamed of Yugoslavia, while at home there was strong propaganda against Yugoslavism as those “ideas that are neither ethically nor politically correct” (Ušeničnik 1914: 289). The influential Catholic ideologue Aleš Ušeničnik explained in several places how the Slavs in the Balkans and in Austria-Hungary had the same dream that the great Dual

Monarchy would liberate the Balkans and “bring glory and freedom to Thessaloniki,” but forgot their great mission. The Balkan states have gone into battle without them, and on the field of Kosovo Serbian glory and Serbian freedom have risen from the ancient grave. It was not surprising, Ušeničnik said, that young Slovenian hearts also beat faster and dreamed “beautiful dreams of glory and freedom.” Nor was it surprising that this romanticism, which awakened in some young minds—“a longing for a utopian Yugoslav unity beyond the limits of reality”—was, according to Ušeničnik’s interpretation, “only superficially beautiful,” because it concealed the “political amorality” that was otherwise a feature of modern nationalism, from which emerged united Germany, united Italy, Greater Greece, and free Albania (Ušeničnik 1914: 290).

FIGHTING FOR THE EMPIRE

The mobilised Austro-Hungarian soldiers went to the battlefield to realise the “old ideals” while defending the emperor and the fatherland (Turšič 1914: 105), which in plain language meant throwing the Yugoslav idea into the Sava and the Drina. Many among them admired the German organisation and discipline as a source of German strength and envied the Germans for their intrepidity: “Yes, many of our souls knelt before the German God Mars” (Herceg 1919: 3–4). In this admiration they found courage and determination for the march of the avengers. The press reported daily dozens of heroic deeds from the battlefields of Serbia, Galicia, and the Italian border. According to these reports, the Austro-Hungarian soldiers, especially the Yugoslavs, were true heroes who overcame even the worst battles with “indescribable courage.” They attacked the enemy with joy and laughter and only reluctantly withdrew from the battle (Anon. 1914e: 42–3). At the end of August 1914, *Slovenec* published an article comparing the heroism of Yugoslav soldiers in the Austro-Hungarian army with that of their Serbian enemies. “Certainly, no one is hiding, and our war leadership explicitly admits that the Serbs are fighting with great courage,” *Slovenec* reported, adding, “but the courage of our army is even greater.” The Croats, in particular, had distinguished themselves by their heroism: “One Croat for three Serbs,” the author of the article concludes, “that is the lesson of the Austro-Serbian war so far” (Anon. 1914c: 1).

Officially, since the declaration of war on Serbia, all the citizens of the Dual Monarchy sided “as one man” with their emperor and king and his glorious army. Neither their Slavic peoples nor the Yugoslavs,



Fig. 2: Obituary for Serbia. Postcard from the private collection of B. Jezernik.

although linguistically and ethnically related to the Serbian people, made an exception. Whoever insults Austria-Hungary, insults them too, they often heard. Therefore, they allegedly never had any doubts about their duty. From their religious leaders the soldiers heard told: “Be a hero!”, be ready at any time to give blood and life for your ruler and your fatherland as a true “man, worthy of your heroic ancestors” (Hafner 1914: 155–56). Although they would joyfully and proudly

take their heart from their shattered breast and lay it on the altar of the fatherland, they will perform only one of their duties in the presence of the Lord of the Troops. A soldier should not worry about his life and fear death, it was said time and again, because he was going to war for a “great holy cause,” he should only obey his commander. And if someone laid down his life for his country, then he sacrificed his life for the highest ideal and died as a martyr for his earthly country in order to win the heavenly country through his death (Hafner 1914: 156–58).



Fig. 3: “If the emperor likes his beautiful heroes, / Our maidens like them even better” (Simon Gregorčič. Postcard published in the series The War in Pictures, from the private collection of B. Jezernik.

The Austro-Hungarian propaganda machinery portrayed Emperor Franz Josef as the personification of the state. “We cannot draw the state, we cannot carve it in stone, we cannot see it, we cannot hear it ...,” declared military reporter Rudolf Peerz. “The only thing that makes it visible to us is the emperor. The state is embodied by the emperor” (Peerz 1917: 14). Loyalty to him had a deeper meaning and content, for it was both an expression and proof of patriotism (Peerz 1917: 3). And so, during the war, Catholic priests urged Slovenian soldiers to joyfully sacrifice their *vitam et sanguinem* (life and blood) to the beloved monarch, the “Prince of Peace” and “Father of the Austro-Hungarian Peoples” (see e.g. Hafner 1914: 7–8; 1915: 4; Palir 1914: 150; Limbarski 1914: 181; Pečovski 1915: 93; Holeček 1915: 2, 4; Šegula 1917: 27).

The ruling circles in Vienna were aware of the strong psychological impact of the Serbian victories in the Balkan Wars on the Yugoslav subjects of Austria-Hungary. In their eyes, the war was a means, first, to destroy the Kingdom of Serbia as the representative of the South Slavs outside the Dual Monarchy and, second, to suppress the growing national sentiments of the South Slavs within the monarchy. “We were united, and our eyes were on Serbia,” wrote Ilija Bošnjak. “Austria saw this and attacked Serbia in 1914, not because of Serbia itself, not out of mourning for Franz Ferdinand, but because of us, in order to suppress any hope of liberation in us” (Bošnjak 1918: 16). Already in the first days of the Austro-Hungarian mobilisation against Serbia, a rumour made the rounds in Zagreb that some high-ranking generals had been discussing whether Yugoslav troops should be sent to Serbia. At this consultation, one general is said to have ended his speech with the strong words, “Let the dogs slaughter each other!” It is not known whether there was any consultation at all or whether these words were uttered. But it was clear to everyone that this was in keeping with the spirit and traditions of the Austro-Hungarian policy of *divide et impera* (Banjanin 1915: 14).

The measures taken to this end had an effect, at least as far as the public was concerned. When the 53rd Regiment went to war in Zagreb in 1914, decorated with flowers and Croatian flags, it was enthusiastically received by the population (Stopar 1938: 19). Carried away by this mood, many mobilised Croats went to war eager to fight, believing that the destruction of Serbia and the victory of Austria-Hungary would also be their victory. Thus, as an Orthodox priest from Bosnia-Herzegovina, himself a recruit, explained, they

went to war in the hope that Austria-Hungary would create a Greater Croatia for them and thus “devour the Serbs inside and outside the borders of Austria” (Obradović 1928: 13). Voices to the contrary were not heard in public. Those who supported the idea of Yugoslavia were forced to remain silent or were driven to the fronts: “Official Austro-Hungarian patriotism celebrated its feast” (Stopar 1938: 19–20).

In order to put as much pressure as possible on the Serbs in the Dual Monarchy, actions aimed at provoking the Croats against the Serbs served the Austro-Hungarian state policy. A whole legend was formed around the name of Archduke Franz Ferdinand to show the Austro-Hungarian Yugoslavs what they had lost in him. Supposedly, he wanted to liberate Croatia in order to create an equal state within Austria-Hungary. It did not bother the Hungarians that at the same time they talked about the archduke being not only their future king but also their great friend, and that the Hungarians would veto any move in that direction. Some Croatian politicians, under the guise of Croatian patriotism, preached with fiery words that the Serbs had “destroyed all the hopes of the Croats.” They were supported in this by both state authorities and Catholic circles, who saw in the assassinated archduke their greatest hope. Franz Ferdinand was given the halo of a martyr for the Croatian national cause. The Croats were told that Serbia was the enemy of Croatia, not the monarchy, and that this was a war of the Croats against the Serbs. In this way, the mental mood was created with which the Croatian soldiers went to the battlefield (Banjanin 1915: 22–3).

On August 1, 1914, the Belgrade *Politika* published an article on the “use” of South Slavs in the war against Serbia. According to the author of the article, Austria-Hungary was threatening to defeat Serbia with its Slav regiments (nominally 60,000 soldiers each), which were grouped into eight corps. The Austro-Hungarian calculation, as stated in the article, was as follows: “If our Slav regiments defeat Serbia, we have nothing to worry about. But if Serbia defeats them, then these defeated Slavs will have a terrible hatred for Serbia” (Anon. 1914b: 1).

MARKO KRALJEVIĆ VS MILOŠ OBLIĆ

Slavic soldiers, “these Croatian and Serbian pigs,” were often used at the front to “slaughter with the Serbs” (Banjanin 1915: 14; Potočnjak 1915:

6; Anić 1919: 6; Paulová 1925: 84; Supilo 1970: 474). In the battles of Šabac and Valjevo, Croatian soldiers, convinced that they were fighting for themselves, raised the Croatian flag, whereupon the Hungarians threw it down and “disgracefully dishonoured” it (Potočnjak 1915: 6). On the Serbian front, in the front ranks, Serbs from Preko were also sent “to fight in Austro-Hungarian uniforms and fight against their brothers and their freedom and for their slavery” (Obradović 1928: 8). According to some data, a large percentage of those mobilised in Bosnia-Herzegovina were Serbs. When asked if they wanted to be in the line of fire, out of a thousand Serbs “only 18 answered that they wanted to go to another battlefield” (Blašković 1939: 81). However, when they reflected on their fight against their Serbian “brothers” after the war, many felt bad. At that time, many thought that perhaps it would have been better if Patriarch Čarņojević had not settled his flock north of the Sava and Danube rivers, because that way they would have all stayed together. Thus, if they had to fight the enemy, they would fight as united brothers, as worthy descendants of Miloš Obilić and Marko Kraljević, as well as of many other knights and heroes.

In order to properly understand and evaluate this tragedy, Jovan Banjanin, a pre-war Serbian politician from Croatia and a member of the Yugoslav Committee, warned in a text published in Niš (Kingdom of Serbia) in 1915 against making a general judgment that all those who were in the ranks of the Austro-Hungarian army had the same motives for fighting in it. In his opinion, neither education nor national consciousness is equally developed among all people of a nation, including Serbs. But, Banjanin continued, one should not forget that a good part of the generation still lived in the Dual Monarchy among the Serbs, whose most popular song was “The Serb likes to go to the soldiers” with the well-known refrain: “If the emperor wants, the frontiersman jumps to his death” (Banjanin 1915: 18). The troops gathered under the black and yellow flag, composed of South Slavs, who went into battle and fought bravely, were a great success of Austro-Hungarian propaganda and the heaviest blow against the Yugoslav idea. Their war heroism was publicly praised in Austria-Hungary and highlighted with pain in Serbia (Banjanin 1915: 15).

PROPAGANDA IMAGE OF THE YUGOSLAVS AND THE SERBS

Austro-Hungarian propaganda successfully fomented discord among the Yugoslavs by pitting “our Yugoslavs,” against the Serbs,

portraying them as “true heroes” (Kosi 1914: 22), distinguished by their brave battles against the Serbs. The fourth issue of the weekly *Tedenske slike*, which was intended to help Slovenian readers to follow the course of the war, contained a detailed description of the battles fought by Austro-Hungarian troops in western Serbia. In it, Slovenian soldiers were presented who supposedly distinguished themselves by their “special heroism,” in particular the 16th, 53rd, and 79th Infantry Regiments, in which mainly the Kajkavians from Zagorje served—whom the author described as Slovenes “by blood and nature and Croats only by citizenship,” or “true Slovenes”—and who were acclaimed for their bravery (Anon. 1914a: 3). “Well, it has always been like this,” added the official propagandist from the imperial capital, “where the Slovenian soldier has fought for his fatherland so far, he has always fought from head to toe as a hero, and that is how it will remain” (Peerz 1916/: 3).

With these battles, they showed the world that the “old Austrian heroism” had not yet died out, and with their heroism in the fight against the Serbian soldiers they proved that their high opinion of their martial virtues was only a wild imagination. Allegedly, during the war the Serbs made use of the most heinous means: they threw poison into wells, laid ambushes, used all kinds of tricks, and maltreated the wounded in a way that “the pen could not write.” Thus, the Austro-Hungarian soldiers waged war not only to punish brazen murderers and avenge a crime, but also to defend themselves against savages (Anon. 1914d: 6–7).

Black-and-white depictions of “our heroes” fighting “Serbian savages” served, of course, to raise the morale of Yugoslav soldiers in Austro-Hungarian uniforms, but also to erect an ever-stronger *divide et impera* wall between them and their enemies on the other side of the front line. The reality of the war was not so clearly differentiated on the white and black sides, but it was also full of other colours, particularly blood red. Most Czech soldiers considered the Serbs as their “brothers,” and when sent to the front, they were determined not to shoot at them (Hajšman 1932: 35). When the soldiers of the 28th Prague Regiment were ordered to storm the Serbian positions during the Battle of Cer in mid-August 1914, they dropped their weapons and marched against the Serbian positions, while loudly singing a nationalist song: “Hey, Slavs!” Their fate was tragic: none of them survived. It remains unclear whether this was solely due to Serbian gunfire or, at least partly, due to the shots fired at them by Austro-Hungarian officers for their desertion (Bálek 2018: 23).

But on the other side of the frontline, too, the war took on an increasingly mythical image. Even the Serbian army did not simply go to war, but went in defence of the Serbian homeland “From the accursed dragon from Vienna, / Who opened his evil mouth, / To devour our heritage” (Pavićević 1920: 16).

However, the reality on the battlefields did not always and fully correspond to the wishes of the warlords. Lieutenant Marko Jakovljević of the 28th Regiment in Osijek, a Serb from Vojvodina, even achieved a two-hour truce with the enemy at the end of the fifth week of the war. His soldiers, Serbs and Šokci from Srem, and Serbs from Serbia, embraced and kissed each other. When the Austrian artillery began to fire near them, they parted with the cry, “Long live the Serbs and Croats!” (Jakovljević 1923: 5; see also Wendel 1925: 741–42).

On the other hand, even the battle lines of the opposing armies did not exclusively include citizens of one country or another. Thus, one of the first Slovenian casualties of the war in Serbia on the night of August 16–17, 1914, was Avgust Jenko, a Slovenian volunteer in the Serbian army in western Serbia, who could easily have been killed by Slovenian rifle fire (Kolar 1930: 5; Paulin 1936: 135; Ristanović 1989: 60).

After the end of the war and at the height of Serbian nationalistic triumphalism, a serious flaw in the myth of Serbian unity became apparent. Namely, the question arose as to how Serbs across the Sava and Drina rivers, who were sent to the front in Austro-Hungarian uniforms to fight against “their brothers” (Obradović 1928: 8), could be accommodated within this myth. Dušan Obradović, a former Orthodox military priest in the Austro-Hungarian army, offers an interpretation in his book published ten years after the end of the war, in which he refers to two great heroes of Serbian folklore. According to him, many of them on the battlefield thought that perhaps it would be better if Patriarch Černojević did not lead his flock north of the Sava River so that they would all stay together. And if they had to fight a war, they would do so as brothers in arms, as worthy descendants of Miloš Obilić and Marko Kraljević. “But for Miloš to fight against Marko?! Marko against Miloš, Serb against Serb, brother against brother. Is there a greater sadness and tragedy in a nation?” (Obradović 1928: 19).

Jaša Tomić, a Serbian journalist and leader of the Serbian Radical Party in Vojvodina, completely sidestepped this tragic issue. Instead of addressing the issue, he explained that at the end of the conflict, Yugoslavs from the Dual Monarchy fought in the Yugoslav Legion alongside the Serbian Army, emphasising that among the Legionnaires

were “an overwhelming number of Serbs” from Vojvodina. According to Tomić, this was “the only balm for our great wound,” because the Bosniaks, Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes had to fight in this war “against those who were closest to them and who finally liberated them” (Tomić 1918: 1–2).

Finally, Serbian propaganda erased from collective memory the Austro-Hungarian Serbs who had fought in the war against the Kingdom of Serbia—they were forgotten as if they had never existed. This interpretation was fossilised in public monuments to the soldiers of the Kingdom of Serbia in Subotica (Vojvodina) and Trebinje (Bosnia-Herzegovina), from where Serb soldiers in Austro-Hungarian uniforms were sent to fight against the Kingdom of Serbia. On the other hand, the collective memory of the “Croats” who had fought against the “Serbs” was not only kept alive, but also bitterly resented.

US AND THEM IN BLACK-AND-WHITE

The reality of the First World War was characterised by a black-and-white division of the world into “Us” and “Them,” with a clear ring of fire between them. The propaganda machinery on both sides of the front eagerly emphasised the facts that confirmed this worldview and sought to silence those who questioned it. However, the black-and-white division of the world, used as a means of mobilising for war, never quite lost its persuasive power. After the creation of the new nation-state of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the division into “Serb” winners and “Croat” losers quickly led to deep mutual distrust, especially in times of crisis. In the new nation-state, however, these suspicions and mistrust also led to regular and frequent political and economic crises that caused some politicians to point fingers at others. Some presented these divisions as the main cause of all the problems faced by the citizens of the common Yugoslav state. For example, the famous English writer Rebecca West, author of an extensive travelogue on Yugoslavia, interpreted the country’s current problems in the years leading up to the Second World War as the inability of Serbs and Croats to live together because of the bloody war past. In her travelogue *Constantine*, as the author calls the Serbian poet Stanislav Vinaver, indignantly recalls the Serbian-Croatian conflicts during the past war:

They do appalling things and they make us do appalling things, these Croats. When God works through the Croats He works terribly. I

will tell you what once happened in the war. There was a hill in Serbia that we were fighting for all night with the Austrian troops. Sometimes we had it, and sometimes they had it, and at the end we wholly had it, and when they charged us we cried to them to surrender, and through the night they answered, "The soldiers of the Empire do not surrender," and it was in our own tongue they spoke. So we knew they were our brothers the Croats, and because they were our brothers we knew that they meant it, and so they came against us, and we had to kill them, and in the morning they all lay dead, and they were all our brothers. (West 1942: I, 89)



Fig. 4: E.H. R. Craniology. Postcard from the private collection of B. Jezernik.

The government and the population of the Kingdom of Serbia entered the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes with the consciousness of having won the bloody war and considered the Croatian and Slovenian lands as the liberated and seceded parts of the loser, parts incapable of defending themselves against other covetous neighbours (Rothschild 1974: 206). Victory in war never leads the victors down the path of self-denial, and Serbia's political leadership was no exception to this rule. Stojan Protić, one of the leaders of the National Radical Party, for example, said that never in the history of warfare had the victor fed the vanquished. This, according to Protić, would be "a cardinal and catastrophic political mistake," because in no case "can and must the victor feed the loser," but rather the other way around, regardless of who is stronger or socially weaker: "The motto that the defeated must feed, support and obey the victor, that is an axiom" (Protić 2006: 129–30).

It is therefore not surprising that the Serbian political and military leadership viewed the resolution of current political, economic, social, and cultural issues in the newly formed common state through the prism of their own interests. Many Serbs viewed the Croatian and Slovenian parts of the new nation-state as a liberated and detached territory of a war-torn monarchy that could not defend itself against Italy. Because of their war losses and their heroic past, the Serbian population expected a leading position in the new nation-state of the triple named nation. In the plain language of the political reality of the time, this meant that the Serbian political and economic elite was not ready to share power. Emphasising their role as members of the victorious coalition during the war and as the sole force of liberation and unification, they saw no need to share power with anyone, especially those who had served in the enemy coalition during the war and as such had not contributed to liberation and unification (Janković 1983: 389–90). Leading Serbian politicians, who held the lion's share of power in the common state even during the crisis, did not fail to mention the great Serbian sacrifices of liberation and unification. To make their portrayal credible, they had to paint the enemy as black as possible. Many of the claims they made to support this narrative were necessarily exaggerated, if not illusory, which made them easy targets for their critics.

For example, it did not go unnoticed that the Viennese government mobilised "1,356,000 inhabitants of Croatia, Dalmatia, Slovenia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina" and sent them in Austro-Hungarian

uniforms to the battlefields of Galicia, northern Italy, Serbia, and Macedonia (Protić 2009: 219); however, those who drew attention to this forgot to mention that soldiers were also mobilised for Austro-Hungarian units in Vojvodina. Or that the “Yugoslavs” or “Croats” fought on the side of the Central Powers and committed “countless war crimes, especially against the civilian population” in occupied Serbia and therefore should have been condemned by the decision of the great Entente powers. These “Yugoslavs” or “Croats” had allegedly repeatedly failed to gain the status of allies of the Entente powers, so the only way out for them, according to the Serbian nationalists, was to unite with Serbia. “The idea of an integral Yugoslavia did them good. It was a cure for Croats and Slovenes and a poison for Serbs” (Protić 2009: 219).

In the part of the new common state that belonged to the pre-war Kingdom of Serbia, the interpretation of the war was set in the Serbian national framework with strong biblical connotations. According to this interpretation, the First World War was the struggle of David against Goliath with a dramatic climax of suffering between the retreat of the Serbian army over the Albanian mountains and the glorious resurrection of the nation at the end of the war. The war was anchored in the Yugoslav narrative as the most important historical event that served as the base for the formation of a Yugoslav nation-state (Troch 2015: 91).

The Serbian elites were adamant that their story of heroic resistance to a stronger aggressor, of Serbian suffering, of the martyrdom of the Serbian army, and of final victory was so beautiful that it needed no additions, let alone changes. They did their best to petrify it by erecting numerous monuments in Serbian towns and villages depicting soldiers in the uniforms of the victorious Serbian army, usually wearing *opanci* (traditional peasant shoes in Southeastern Europe) and a *šajkača* (Serbian national cap) on their heads. The Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Royal Court supported initiatives to erect monuments to fallen soldiers both financially and morally. Especially after the end of the war, Serbian veterans’ organisations frequently erected monuments to King Petar the Liberator. Local monuments to fallen soldiers and monuments erected to commemorate major battles were also popular. The Serbian veterans’ associations that erected these monuments portrayed the Balkan Wars and the First World War as a single conflict. Therefore, the dates 1912–1918 and the inscriptions “Liberation and Unification” were engraved on the monuments, as the liberation and unification of all Yugoslavs was seen as the goal and result of Serbian victories in these wars (Newman 2015: 57).

Soon after the end of the war, the families of the fallen soldiers began to erect monuments in all the villages and towns of Serbia, where mourning family members, relatives and acquaintances gathered. Over time, they came to terms with the loss of their loved ones, and it became a part of their personal and family identity. During this time, local committees for the establishment of memorials began to work to preserve the memory of fallen soldiers. They combined individual initiatives with state-oriented proposals and attempts to create a collective memory of the fallen through “their nationalisation, *i.e.* by placing them within the identity framework of the (Serbian, B. J.) nation” (Manojlović Pintar 2014: 134).

In the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, Serbian military conquests were celebrated with magnificent public monuments financed by the state, and Serbian soldiers and volunteers were honoured on national memorial days. In the Slovenian part of the country, there were fewer such celebrations, and in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Vojvodina, Montenegro, or Macedonia there were quite rare. After several years of silence on the subject of fallen soldiers, in Slovenia complaints were heard from family members who were denied a place of remembrance and mourning. They found it “shameful” that most of the soldiers had not received even a modest nameplate on a church wall or in a cemetery, that not even a simple monument had been erected in a public place, that not a single memorial service had been held in their honour (J. H. 1923: 2).

As we have seen, although numerous Yugoslav soldiers in Austro-Hungarian uniforms fought on the Serbian battlefield, they were not exclusively Croats; in addition to Croats, Bosniaks, and Slovenes were also present, and even Serbs were not absent. However, since they had been taught to see the world through the prism of black and white division into their own and the enemy side, they used formulas for interpreting the world that had been developed by exclusivist war propaganda.

THE UNHAPPY END OF THE STORY OF GOLD FOR BLOOD

After the establishment of the new nation-state, Serbian nationalists made sure that few, if any, Serbs would forget that Yugoslav soldiers in Austro-Hungarian uniforms had fought enthusiastically against the Kingdom of Serbia (see Jelavich 1988: 121). It was all too easy for them

to add to the dozens of mutual prejudices, resentments, and suspicions they already harboured against the “Švabs” from across the Sava and Drina rivers. Nevertheless, this fact alone was a major obstacle to an official common memory of the war. In addition, the issue was never really approached in a thoughtful way, but was left to an unbridled mixture of triumphant complacency on the one hand and a stumbling search for an embellished image of the past on the other. When, after a few quiet years, the massive construction of monuments to the fallen soldiers began in the Serbian and Slovenian parts of the kingdom—a few were erected in other parts of the kingdom—the commemoration of the dead became deeply intertwined with exclusionary nationalist ideologies.

In the new nation-state with the Serbian dynasty, the predominantly Serbian government, and the army stationed in the Serbian capital, Serbian and volunteer military traditions and Serbian war sacrifices tacitly took a special place as a primary factor in nation-building. Croatian, Bosnian, Slovenian, and Serbian losses alongside the defeated Habsburg army were not acknowledged, nor were Yugoslav losses in the Bulgarian and Albanian armies (Bokovoy 2001: 251; Lampe 2006: 100). John Paul Newman, for example, tells of a Croatian war veteran who asked for the financial support he was entitled to. The official asked him if he had fought on the Salonika Front, and then rudely sent him away to beg for money from Emperor Charles I instead (Newman 2011: 56–7). For the former combatants of the Austro-Hungarian army, the new nation-state was “more of a stepmother than a mother,” because until 1925 Austro-Hungarian war veterans, war widows, and invalids received war and disability pensions that were 75% lower than those of Serbian war veterans, widows, invalids, and war volunteers (Svoljšak 2006: 285).

In the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, there could be no simple commemoration and re-legitimation of a common history. Instead, citizens constructed the collective memory of the postwar period through complex processes of negotiation and repression. Old animosities, reinforced by wartime propaganda, became a serious obstacle in these processes. When Mars fell silent after four tragic years, the tongues of the Muses loosened again. All of them, especially Clio, were entrusted with the urgent task of transforming the antagonistic and divisive narrative that war propaganda had created and spreading a new, common narrative that would unite the citizens of the new nation-state. According to Karel Ozvald, the division created by the Great War could be overcome only by solving the problem, which he called “demobilisation of souls” (Ozvald 1920: 6). However, this never really happened, and even after the establishment of the Yugoslav

nation-state, the war divisions continued to work in the hearts and minds of the people, undermining the unity of the country.¹

When the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was established, it was crucial to reassess all values, which meant that Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes had to be made Yugoslavs. Since it was a historical fact that only the end of the First World War opened the possibility for the establishment of the Yugoslav nation-state, the trials and tribulations of the war inevitably had to be included in the basis of the founding myth. However, for this myth to be accepted by the vast majority in the new nation-state, it was crucial to find a common interpretation of the war. The country's leadership failed to do so, however, because it was too busy pursuing a policy that, on the one hand, swept the issue publicly under the rug and, on the other, capitalised on the "lakes of blood spilled during the war." By doing so, they opened the door for the wicked and bad to gather and make a bad deal, as the saying goes. Without a common memory of the war years and their aftermath, people were left on their own to deal with their grief and pain. They all had a father, a brother, a friend, or a neighbour who was no longer there, and some families had been completely wiped out. This tragic situation provided fertile ground for political parties to capitalise on and mobilise their supporters. The lack of a common memory led to a multitude of particularistic memories that tended, more or less, to confirm the "truth" of the war propaganda about their former enemies.

As Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper (2000: 16) argue, the politics of war memory and commemoration consist precisely of various groups struggling to publicly articulate particular memories and the narratives in which they are structured and thereby gain recognition. In the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, commemoration of the war consisted almost exclusively of ceremonies and cemeteries for Serbian soldiers. King Aleksandar and most of the Serbian army leadership made extensive use of their dedication ceremonies. Serbian military conquests were celebrated with magnificent state-funded public monuments, and Serbian soldiers and volunteers were honoured on national memorial days. However, this was not just for the sake of commemoration. The Serbian political leadership used this for its own purposes. By preserving the memory of the "lakes of Serbian blood

1 Years after the breakup of Yugoslavia, some claimed that the war divisions of the First World War provided too shaky a foundation for the unity of the new nation-state. Serbian philosopher Svetozar Stojanović, for example, claimed that "there were far-sighted people who doubted its solidity because it had been created by nations of different sides in the 1914–1918 war" (Stojanović 1997: 80).



Fig. 5: Kranjski Janez, sculpture made by Svitoslav Peruzzi and Lojze Dolinar in Judenburg, 1917. Erected at the Ljubljana Cemetery in 1923 as a “gravestone for the victims of Judenburg and Ivan Endlicher.” Published for the benefit of the widows and orphans of the victims of Judenburg. Postcard from the private collection of B. Jezernik

spilled in the War of Liberation and Unification,” the Serbian civilian elite arrogated to itself the right to lead the new nation-state founded in 1918 (Lampe 2006: 100).

The oft-repeated statements of Serbian politicians about the “lakes of Serbian blood” spilled in the “War of Liberation and Unification” finally triggered an angry reaction from some Croatian politicians. When Puniša Račić, a deputy from the Serbian National Radical Party, mentioned in the National Assembly on June 20, 1928, that he too had shed his blood “for the king and the fatherland,” a Croatian politician loudly demanded that he say how much his Serbian blood had cost so that he could pay for it in gold and the country could finally live in peace. Deputy Račić demanded an apology. When he did not receive it, he took his gun and started shooting at the Croatian Peasant Party’s deputies. His shots not only killed a deputy and seriously injured Stjepan Radić, but inflicted a mortal wound on the Yugoslav idea.

Thus, the Yugoslav idea was already dead before King Aleksandar christened his kingdom with a single name (Yugoslavia) in order to preserve the “national and state unity and integrity.” By giving the nation-state a single name, the king wanted to emphasise not only the unified form of the state, but also the unity of the nation that formed it, in order to balance the existing ethnic misunderstandings and conflicts. Due to the great authority and prestige that the king enjoyed among his subjects, he could have succeeded in creating the Yugoslavs. However, this did not happen, as the fear of such success guided the hands of the Croatian and Macedonian separatists, who assassinated him in Marseille on October 9, 1934 (Jezernik 2023: xii). After the death of King Aleksandar, nationalists in various parts of the kingdom loudly praised the king; in Slovenia, they even decorated the monument to fallen Slovenian soldiers who had fought in Austro-Hungarian uniforms with his name in gold letters, but they stubbornly insisted on preserving their own (contradictory and exclusive) memories of the First World War.

The First World War, as the first industrial war in history, also proved to be an extremely important milestone in the social development of the Old Continent. The assertion of the nation-state principle as the most “natural” form of organisation of political and social life became the norm. The old empires (the Russian, the Ottoman, the Habsburg, and the German) disintegrated, and on their ruins new nation-states emerged, including the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. On the one hand, the establishment of a nation-state was celebrated as the realisation of the ultimate goal of all nationalist movements, and so in 1918 many rejoiced that with its creation a “centuries-old dream” had come true. However, the First World War, which made possible the establishment of the first nation-state in which the majority of South Slavs were united in one state for the first time in history, proved to be

too great an obstacle. The division and mistrust in the interwar period, coupled with a one-sided focus on one's own right, proved to be such an obstacle that the leaders of the time who spearheaded the unification process were unable to overcome it. Instead of striving for common goals, they prioritised the assertion of particular attitudes and interests.

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