

Cleaning Up the Battlefield. The Serbian Army and its War Dead (1914–1918)

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During the trials at the ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia), expressions such as “cleaning up” or “mopping up” were frequently heard. These terms eventually became some of the keywords of the Yugoslav wars. The dictionary meaning of these expressions refers to the treatment of the battlefield once the fighting is over, a process motivated by hygienic and moral considerations. However, at the ICTY trials, “cleaning up” meant something different. In the 1990s wars, clearance and salvage operations also meant transferring the corpses of killed soldiers or civilians to conceal traces of committed crimes (Baljak; Đokić 2019: 407–19). Accordingly, the term acquired an additional, quite sinister meaning (NIN, August 8, 2008: 3).¹

1 This new meaning was also debated by Serbian dramaturge and intellectual, Jovan Ćirilov, in the Serbian weekly *NIN*.

Whether we are speaking about war crimes or other types of war-related violence, this approach offers a lot of potential for digging out some of the most intimate but also unpopular and disturbing aspects of war. The history of war is full of telling examples. Achilles' famous dragging of Hector's body behind his chariot is one of the first such examples that come to mind. There are numerous other equally effective cases, more rooted in reality and historical sources. Historian Dominic Lieven described the gripping scene of the Borodino battle site and how it was seen by the retreating French in mid-October 1812. It was almost two months after the battle:

The battlefield itself was a terrible sight. None of the bodies had been buried. Scores of thousands of corpses lay out in the fields or in great mounds around the Raevsky battery and other points where the fighting had been most fierce. For fifty-two days they had lain as victims of the elements and the changing weather. Few still had a human look. (Lieven 2010: 268)

The issue of sanitation at battlefield sites fits neatly into the vibrant field of the cultural history of warfare—a very dynamic and interdisciplinary part of First World War historiography. Moreover, studying the work of battlefield burial teams meant going a step backward from the currently very successful and still booming studies centred on post-war memorials. As one interwar Belgrade resident pointedly observed: the battlefield site conveys a completely different set of impressions than is the case of a postwar neatly arranged cemetery (Popadić 1931: 526.).

Consequently, questions must also be raised: How were the soldiers' bodies treated in the immediate aftermath of their death? Moreover, what were the consequences of these actions for post-war remembrance? The pathbreaking studies about battlefield clearance came from US historians who researched the Civil War. French historiographical traditions centred on the Middle Ages have also been of particular use in this respect (Faust 2008; Aries 1975). The issue has been tackled in popular culture as well (Tavernie 1989; Kadare 1963).²

Studying the Serbian case of 1914–1918 from this perspective is much desired. The dead on the battlefield show that artillery was only partially “the main killer” as many losses were caused by “culprits” that

2 The movie by French director Bertran Tavernie made in 1989, *La vie et riend d'autre*, tackles this phenomenon. Similarly, Albanian author, Ismail Kadare wrote in 1963 his famous novel *The General of the Dead Army*, which also dealt with the issue of dead soldiers and their remains.

had little to do with industrialisation or modernity, such as typhus and general exhaustion. On the other hand, human reactions when confronted with the “intimacy of death” left a deep imprint on soldiers and bereaved families. It can be argued that the way Serbian military and civil authorities treated the dead during the war marked, in so many ways, Serbia’s approach to its First World War legacy. More precisely, the fact that most of the bodies of dead soldiers were never found or properly buried produced important social but also political consequences. These affected the Serbs but also the entire Yugoslav state.

THE EXPERIENCES OF THE BALKAN WARS 1912–1913

The Serbian army had its battlefield sanitation procedure ready since at least 1875. It was written by the distinguished Serbian doctor Vladan Đorđević based on textbooks used by major European armies (Đorđević 1876; Marković 1890; Anon. 1893). However, in 1909, a newer, more up-to-date book was published. It was another pocket guide for military medical units, also based on the latest European standards. The manual consequently copied the solutions applied in German, French, Russian, and Swedish armies (Žerajić 1909). It was edited by a well-known Serbian military doctor, Milan Žerajić. Dr Žerajić ended his medical manual with a comprehensive description of the necessary post-battle activities. When the fighting started in October 1912, Serbian units used his manual, and they did so until 1921.

According to Dr Žerajić, the motivation for cleaning the battlefield was inspired by the “Serbian faith, moral, and hygiene considerations.” He noted that it was essential to clean up the battlefield site as quickly as possible (Žerajić 1909: 350). This was to be handled by a special burial team. A designated doctor, at the divisional level, was to be the main authority. He was to be assisted by officers of all regiments present at that moment in that specific area. A military priest was also to be part of the team. The workforce was to be composed of a number of soldiers and orderlies, equipped with the appropriate tools. The search for the dead and wounded was to be performed “even at the most remote corners of the battlefield.” Special search patrols were to be sent out on all sides of the site. In addition, not a single burial should be performed without the special permission of a military doctor (Žerajić 1909: 350).

Finding the men was the first task; the second was to separate the wounded from the dead. Then came determining the identity of

the soldiers. Dr Žerajić's pocketbook mentioned a small metal box as the key object in this process. There, each soldier kept a piece of paper with his name written on it. The soldier was given the box to wear around his neck upon mobilisation. All personal belongings were to be taken from the dead and orderly transferred to the command of the soldier's unit (Žerajić 1909: 350). Despite being technical, and in essence dominated by hygienic concerns, this manual is revelatory in terms of the importance placed on those who fell defending the country.

Each one who was killed on the battlefield sacrificed his life for the happiness of his fatherland and, consequently, should be buried with the utmost respect, as a hero and a patriot, and if possible, following the rites of the holy Serbian Church. (Žerajić 1909: 351)

Furthermore, the pocketbook provided detailed instructions for the proportions of individual graves. Dr Žerajić also added grim but realistic instructions for the burial process. Individuals' graves were only to be dug when losses were not "significant in numbers." If the losses were massive, it was allowed to bury up to five dead soldiers in one common pit. As was the case with individual graves, the dimensions of the large pits were also prescribed. The depth was also essential. For individual graves, it should be 1.70 metres, while the depth of common graves should be 2 metres (Žerajić 1909: 351).

The cross with the inscription was to be placed above the head of the buried soldier. The medical mission was also advised about the type of soil that was to be used for burial. Certain types could speed up the decomposition of the body, thus narrowing down the risks of contaminating the local farms. The same manual gave advice for the burial of dead animals. Fear of contamination was clearly the most important message of this section of Dr Žerajić's book. He also underlined that cholera, typhus, and amoebiasis posed the greatest threats on the site where armies once fought or camped. He insisted that all traces of human excreta, all organic waste in general, and anything that had the potential to rot was to be burned or disinfected (Žerajić 1909: 352). The doctor concluded his book with the message that the history of wars has demonstrated that more soldiers perished due to diseases than enemy fire or action (Žerajić 1909: 353). In the case of the Serbian army, his words proved prophetic.

Despite entering the 1912 war with such precise guidelines, as soon as the shooting started it became clear that the reality of war was much more complicated than the pre-war manual anticipated. Despite being victorious in both relatively short conflicts, the Serbian army lost more than 30,000 men. Their bodies were dispersed across the

Balkans, across Kosovo and Macedonia, but also in Albania and the vicinity of the town of Edirne (Šarenac 2013–2014: 85–102). The men were buried in various ways or, as had often happened, were simply left on the site where they had died (*Politika*, April 1, 1914: 1).

In February 1913, the Serbian troops in Albania participated in a nighttime attack on a strategic hill, overlooking the town of Shkoder, which was besieged for some time already by the Montenegrin army. The attack on Brdica Hill ended up being a complete failure for the Serbian army. There were as many as 814 dead, 18 officers included. The dead were entangled in barbed wire in front of the Ottoman positions. During the next few days, the Serbian commander attempted in vain to convince the Ottoman counterpart to bury the dead. He also invoked the articles of the Geneva Convention which Serbia signed in 1874, but the victorious Ottoman garrison nevertheless ignored the Serbian dead (Žerajić 1909: 358–59). The Serbian press wrote about this in May 1913, providing more details concerning the fate of the soldiers' remains. The situation remained appalling, and the dead remained in the "killing zone." Not only were they deprived of a decent burial, but they were also looted. The article revealed that the local Roma were often used for burial work.

The Serbs had around one thousand dead after they attacked the Brdica positions. They all remained on the field below the hill, unable to bury them. Gypsies are usually employed for this work, so they gladly accepted hoping for booty. Turkish soldiers had already deprived the dead of their weapons, but there were still some things left, and the Gypsies returned with shoes, belts, caps, handkerchiefs, and underwear. They later shared the loot in their camp, near the bazaar. That night, four Gypsy women left their camp to wait for their husbands, and when they spotted them, they went to meet them. At that moment, shrapnel, coming over from Shkoder, exploded over their heads, killing them all. (*Ilustrovana ratna hronika*, May 9, 1913: 236)

Soon after the end of the fighting in 1913, it became clear what a great logistical and financial burden the issue of the mortal remains of the war victims represented for Serbian society. From the obituaries in the press, it is clear how difficult it was to transfer the body to the home town or village of the fallen soldier. The families of the bereaved thanked the unit commanders or local authorities for their help in the transfer. The long lists of people involved in this process can be found in the "Gratitude" section of the obituaries (*Politika*, January 9, 1914 4).

After the Second Balkan War, a number of families hurried to the battle sites to exhume their relatives. Sources suggest that these were wealthier people who could organise and finance this intricate

task. Serbian officer Vojislav Šikoparija documented a case involving the exhumation of a lieutenant from his outfit by the name of Dimitrije Nikolić. A family from the prosperous Serbian border town of Šabac brought with them a zinc coffin. The regiment commander was present at the site as he wished to supervise the whole exhumation process. He was very nervous, afraid that the soldiers digging might catch some illness. Indeed, this was a time when cholera had just ceased ravaging the Serbian army. Šikoparija recalled the dead officer's perfectly preserved face that appeared once the coffin was opened: "The parents saw their son and they wept bitterly." The mood was very grim and depressive. Officers pulled the parents aside, attempting to console them until the work was over (Šikoparija 2014: 110–11). A similar scene was documented in Kosovo. A wealthy Jewish family from Belgrade traveled there to exhume the body of their son, also an officer killed while fighting against local Albanians in the town of Uroševac in 1912 (Marković 1977: 58).

Most Serbian peasants, however, had to accept the fact that their beloved would, at best, be left in improvised military cemeteries arranged along major battle sites. The process of properly burring or transporting the dead was never finished as the new conflict erupted in 1914. The news of the mass graves of Serbian soldiers, killed in 1913 and buried in haste, with all their weapons and other belongings, emerged from time to time in interwar Yugoslavia, testifying how abruptly caring for the dead of 1912–1913 was halted.

THE INITIAL EXPERIENCES OF 1914

Serbian artilleryman, Mileta M. Prodanović, left a rare and detailed account of how the Serbian dead were treated in the early days of the First World War. He wrote about his late brother who was killed in the Battle of Cer in mid-August 1914. Moreover, he testified on the impact of the first deaths on Serbian society. His brother, Zdravko Prodanović, was a cavalryman who was engaged in ferocious street fighting in the strategic village of Prnjavor. Mileta Prodanović went to search for his brother's grave practically still during the battle. The men from his brother's unit showed him the exact location of the fight and where he was killed. The fellow combatants also provided other details. Namely, another soldier was also killed on the same spot, and he was trying to assist the first casualty. Prodanović noted in his diary that fresh blood traces were still easily discernable on the ground.

It was very hard for me. I wished to kill myself, but then I thought about my parents and children. My death would kill them as well. (Prodanović 1994: 29–30)

Local villagers provided more information on the fallen men. Not long after the two Serbian soldiers were killed, their bodies were carried inside a local tavern, where a priest was summoned to perform the service for the dead. A candle was lit, while wooden caskets were being made. The villagers wanted to bury the dead as soon as possible, but just as they went out onto the street, fresh fighting broke out as a group of retreating Habsburg soldiers was attempting to fight their way through the village. In the end, the dead were buried in haste, just outside the tavern.

This caused huge problems for Mileta Prodanović as no one could tell him the exact location of the grave he was looking for. What else was there for him to do, but dig out bodies from a long row of graves? Soon, it became clear that this led nowhere. Then, suddenly, a woman appeared claiming that she was the one who buried the two soldiers behind the tavern's barn. Prodanović went there and found two bodies buried in a common grave. As their faces were already unrecognisable, Prodanović could not easily tell which body belonged to his brother. Finally, thanks to personal belongings he found in one of the uniforms, he was able to positively identify his brother's body. With the help of nearby soldiers, he made a wooden casket. He also made a second one for the soldier buried together with his brother. Spontaneously, a number of villagers gathered to witness their reburial, placing flowers on the graves. Prodanović was then granted leave from his unit for several days. As his family lived in relative proximity to the front-line, the news of the tragic event had already reached them. This section of the diary was filled with heart-wrenching details.

I came home at around 11 o'clock at night. It was hard for me, so I was shaking. My heart wanted to burst, but I controlled myself seeing them virtually devastated. I spent three days at home. (Prodanović 1994: 29–30)

The family immediately set out to transport the body to the home village. However, the military declined permission to dig out the remains for the next 20 days as the area was still part of the military-operational zone. The family had to accept this. Nevertheless, a prolonged period of waiting brought one good thing in the eyes of the family. They now had the time they needed to buy a proper metal casket instead of a wooden one (Prodanović 1994: 29–30)

In this testimony, practically everything happened differently than was anticipated by Dr Žerajić's manual. It also shows how quickly

the identity of the fallen was lost. The metal box that Dr Žerajić wrote about was never mentioned in this narrative. The help of the locals and other witnesses of the burial proved essential in discovering the location. It should be noted that this happened in the summer of 1914 when the Serbian army was winning and controlling the battlefield. Later, during the critical months of the autumn of 1914, caring for the dead was even lower on the list of wartime priorities as the entire army was close to a complete collapse.

The war also influenced local burial customs and the rites of the Serbian Orthodox faith. Here, a few words should be said regarding these customs that provide a picture of Christianity and old Slavic customs. As is the case in many other nations, the Serbian cult of the dead insisted on the separation of the soul from the body of the deceased. However, for the soul to be transferred to the other world and become part of the ancestors' cult, it was essential to perform several rituals in a specific order. The Serbian population in 1914 was mostly composed of peasants, so it is interesting to see how the cult of the dead adapted to a prolonged and modern war. The most striking feature was that the body of the deceased was often missing. This became a major phenomenon, as will be discussed later. It is worth mentioning that the Serbian army, like practically all armies entering service at the time, was organised according to territorial principles. Consequently, kinship played an important role in caring for the dead comrades.

There is one additional witness account describing the fate of the remnants of Serbia's dead soldiers from 1914. The appalling conditions on old battle sites were described by Serbian officer Stanislav Krakov. In 1915, he was stationed at the Austro-Serbian border, near the town of Šabac. This town was devastated during the battle in August 1914. Officer Krakov used his spare time to walk around the sites of past ferocious fighting. As he moved towards the town's outskirts, the traces of the violence became omnipresent. Houses had holes in the middle of the walls. These were made by infantrymen as loopholes for firing. Krakov soon found a small cemetery "of heroes," in his own words, just outside the town (Krakov 2019: 105). There were trenches of various types and sizes, all of which were half collapsed. Ammunition and shrapnel fragments, both Serb and Austrian models, were dispersed everywhere (Krakov 2019: 105–9).

It soon became clear that only a fraction of the fallen men were buried in the cemetery he mentioned. Individual graves could be found everywhere between the soldiers' dugouts. There, small wooden crosses, made of dismantled ammunition boxes, stood above the graves. Walking further, he reconstructed the events based on the

traces he was seeing. Large-caliber unexploded grenades were stuck in the ground. Small pieces of piled-up earth indicated that the infantry used these as protection while making small advances. After observing the Austro-Hungarian trenches, he advanced towards the Serbian side. This was a distressing experience:

The unearthed graves were all around me. I saw a disturbing scene there. Hungary dogs dug out the corpse of one of our soldiers from a shallow grave and devoured him. Only a skeleton was now left lying on the field: half of his skull, together with his spine and his thigh bone with parts of his white underwear still visible. These graves were just outside the trenches. It appears that the dead soldiers were just thrown out from the trenches and buried in haste, during the night. (Krakov 2019: 108)

Krakov returned tomorrow with his men and buried the dead properly. Again, this source signals that much depended on individual officers and that regulations were generally not respected.

The authorities brought some decisions to address this problem. The first was to forbid all civilians from wandering near the front. Moreover, any transport of dead bodies from the battlefield was strictly forbidden, which affected the Prodanović family, among others (*Službeni vojni list*, August 14, 1914: 822). However, it became clear that more attention should be dedicated to the war dead. In early September 1914, the Minister of War issued a decree underlying the importance of keeping the graves and military cemeteries in good order.

The minister's instructions were in part technical. It was reiterated that all dead soldiers, regardless of whether the death occurred in a military hospital, on the battlefield, or within the perimeter of an army camp, had to be buried according to existing regulations. Consequently, a list of the dead man's belongings had to be compiled prior to the funeral and these items had to be sent to the local court. All state property, such as military equipment, had to be returned to the military. Similarly, the property of the dead enemy had to be respected.

However, the minister's instructions also brought some novelties. The important symbolic role attributed to dead soldiers and their resting places was explicitly underlined for the first time. Specifically, the funeral had to be as honourary and ceremonious as possible. Church bells were to announce the funeral and continue ringing during the inhumation. Furthermore, military graves should be grouped and placed on a visible and honorary plot of land. They should be protected from flooding and have a clear and lasting inscription indicating the identity of the buried person. Cemeteries were to be protected in cooperation with local civil authorities and special precautions



Fig. 1: Transport of the dead Serbian soldiers for the burial at the sea in the so-called Blue Sea Grave

taken to prevent animals from entering and destroying these sites. As it was said, “the graves of the fallen for the state’s liberty were seen as national sanctity” and were to be protected as such. The importance of proper Christian burial was also underlined. Finally, in his last sentence, the minister underlined the essential role attributed to the war dead during war and peace alike. It was said that “military cemeteries were to be eternal, bright, and elevated examples of sacrifice and self-sacrifice for the holy faith, King, and country, as well as nationality and personal and national freedom” (*Službeni vojni list*, September 14, 1914: 836–37).

Consequently, it was clear that the war efforts, right after the initial battles, had already reached certain critical points or limits of Serbian society and that the state had to do more to show it appreciated the sacrifices of its citizens and their bodily remains. Nevertheless, all these instructions targeted the maintenance of already existing cemeteries and did not encompass the immediate procedures for dealing with the remains of those dead on the battlefield.

In the winter of 1914, Serbia was struck by a typhus epidemic. Soldier and civilian losses were counted in tens of thousands. Consequently, despite the respite on the front, soldiers were lost in huge numbers. This situation, however, raised general awareness within the

military about the importance of maintaining proper hygiene within the army. This also meant more attention to the battle sites. A document from May 1915 revealed that battlefield clearing teams were engaged in cleaning and salvage operations as part of wider anti-typhus efforts. It was reported that these units discovered a number of unburied corpses of both men and animals.

Shallow military graves have been covered with additional layers of earth. Many garbage sites have been burnt. Surrounding peasant houses were painted, especially the ones that were inhabited for some time by the soldiers. (*Veliki rat Srbije* 1926: 130)

Serbia was also dotted with shallow graves of Austro-Hungarian soldiers. They were sometimes buried with the Serbs in common graves, while other times they were separated. Serbian officer Vasa Eškićević described a scene he witnessed while on a boat on the Danube River. It was in the summer of 1914:

My thoughts were wandering as I sat on the boat's roof, observing the Romanian and Bulgarian coasts when all of a sudden I hear the captain saying: *Corpses of Austrian soldiers!* We all stood up and looked ahead, and on the calm and blue Danube, we saw Austrian horses and heroes slowly sailing towards us. (Eškićević 2019: 22)

At the end of 1914, there were numerous cases of Serbian and Austro-Hungarian soldiers being buried together. Clearly, this was seen as a quick solution for preventing any hygienic problems on the battlefield. This was happening, for example, in Belgrade in 1915, when a mass grave was created for the two sides. The dead were, however, separated in 1927 and each side was placed in its own cemetery. This "separation of the dead" provoked some criticism on the part of the Belgrade public (Popadić 1931: 525). In any case, the treatment of the enemy dead took on various forms, from respect to utter neglect. It is worth mentioning a positive example that took place in Belgrade in 1914.

Namely, during a short but fierce close combat at Ada Ciganlija, an island just outside Belgrade, a number of dead Austro-Hungarian soldiers were discovered. Among them was Lieutenant Colonel August Schmitt, the commander of the Austro-Hungarian 32nd Regiment. After searching the pockets of his bloodied uniform, the Serbian officers found an unopened letter. These were not important military documents as the Serbs had hoped. The letter was written by his daughter living in Switzerland. The Serbian officers decided to write her back, sending attached all of her father's personal possessions. This

correspondence was saved by the family of Lieutenant Petar Kunovčić, one of the Serbian officers involved in the event.

We have buried your father honourably with all due respect, marking his grave with a cross, so that you, once the military operations are over, can come with your family to Serbia and find the body of your father respectfully buried and his grave intact, so that if you are unable to see your father, you will, at least, be able to see his grave and do whatever you deem suitable. Please receive our deepest and chivalry condolences, may God provide you and your family with a long and happy life. (Nikolić 2018: 21)

After six months the reply arrived from Switzerland. The daughter thanked the officers for such a decent treatment of the dead and their polite letter. She mentioned that she desired to arrange the transfer of the bodily remains to Vienna once the war is over (Nikolić 2018: 21).

It is not certain what happened at the end, but the ferocious artillery bombardment of Belgrade in 1915 probably also destroyed all improvised memorials on Ada Cingajja.

ALBANIA, THE ISLAND OF VIDO, AND THESSALONIKI

The period of the Serbian retreat in late 1915 and early 1916 was a time of almost complete neglect of the burial and honourary treatment of the dead. Tens of thousands of men were listed in the units' documents as "unaccounted for." For many contemporaries, these months signaled the collapse of civilisation and humanity.

Officer Milutin Velimirović, for example, mentioned the fate of the Serbian Combined Force, a unit that served as a rearguard along one of the retreating routes through Albanian mountains. The unit continuously fought in minor skirmishes with local armed Albanians. After being killed, the soldiers and civilians were usually stripped of their clothes by the local population:

The losses of our forces are very great. It is sufficient to say that only the X recruits' regiments suffered 46 dead and 170 wounded. There was no time for burial, the men were left naked in places where they were killed, as well as several wounded men, as they could not be transported away and saved. (Velimirović 1968: 116)

Other records and recollections are replete with accounts of men falling into the abyss of snowy Albanian and Montenegrin



Fig. 2: Dead Serbian soldiers on the island of Vido, before they were loaded on the ships.

mountains or ice-cold rivers. It is difficult to provide reliable figures for the losses during the Great Retreat, but even the lowest estimates claim at least 20,000 dead soldiers. The Serbian army took with it thousands of Austro-Hungarian prisoners. Only a small fraction survived to be transferred to the Italians. The dying continued even after the Serbian forces finally reached the Adriatic coast. Serbian doctor Vladimir Stanojević left a disturbing account of the situation in the town of Shkoder after it became crowded with exhausted Serbian troops. He noted that men were dying in masses, without any apparent reason. They all suffered from starvation, but this was not the main cause of death. He concluded that all soldiers reached the limits of their endurance due to immense suffering after two months of continuous deprivation during the retreat. The men died due to the utter collapse of their organism. The local chapel was packed with piled-up bodies, almost reaching the roof. Corpses of men and animals lay on the streets for days as the authorities were unable to collect them all. Finally, order was somewhat restored, and medical teams collected the dead while burial teams worked day and night to inhumate hundreds of bodies (Stanojević 1921: 20–1).

Sources are abundant with similar accounts across Albania. Serbian writer Andjelko Krstić was working in a Serbian hospital in Tirana in late 1915. He writes in his memoirs:

Every morning, two or three wagons were packed with dead soldiers who had not managed to recuperate. They threw them into the wagon like jumbled-up bulrush: some legs were placed near other ones' heads, while others were thrown across all of them. Serbian soldiers did not deserve this. If they are dead and do not feel this, the living should at least feel something. Is it so difficult to lay them properly, to place their heads on one side and legs on the other, at least for the sake of passersby? (Krstić 2000: 122)

However, the worst scenes were witnessed on the Greek island of Vido. Serbian soldiers were evacuated to Corfu, but those with serious health problems had been sent to Vido first. Thousands of Serbian soldiers died there after being evacuated on Allied ships. Dr Stanojević described the grim impression one had upon being disembarked on the island. The first thing one saw was a large number of dead bodies piled up as logs (Stanojević 1921: 21). The men were buried in haste, in part due to fear of cholera spreading, as well as other diseases. Moreover, the soil was extremely hard to dig. The authorities ultimately decided to dispose of the bodies at sea as they were unable to bury so many dead at the desired rate. Ultimately, around 1,200 men were buried while somewhere between 4,500 and 5,000 men were buried at sea (Nedok 2014: 100–1).



Fig. 3: Dead Serbian soldiers outside the town of Lezhë, Albania, 1916.

Six months later, the Ministry of War, now operating in exile on the Greek island of Corfu, sent a special commission to investigate the state of Serbian graves on Vido island. There was evidently some pressure from soldiers and civilians who were not fighting and living in Greece. The opinion of the local Greek population probably also played a role.

The findings of this commission were appalling. After visiting Serbian military cemeteries on Vido Island they wrote that “the stench was so unbearable that it made walking through the cemetery impossible” (*Arhiv Srbije*, RG, IV/41, July 31, 1916). The reason for this was that the corpses were buried poorly and placed in shallow graves. Consequently, due to the weather, especially rain, the graves were partially opened, exposing parts of the corpses (*Arhiv Srbije*, RG, IV/41, July 31, 1916).

Due to very specific military developments, by early 1916, the Serbian army ended up fighting at the Salonika front. By late 1918, its dead were scattered across northern Greece, but also France, Italy, and northern Africa, as the wounded were sent there for treatment. This meant that those who died could not be transported to Serbia for burial. At least not for some time. The fact that the bodies of their beloved were missing forced the Serbian population still living in, now occupied, Serbia to modify their funeral rituals. Symbolic funerals took place in villages. For example, in the village of Slatina, near the town of Bor in Eastern Serbia, soldier Jovan Simonović’s cloth was buried in a grave at his estate. The soldier’s body was never transferred from the Salonika front where he was killed. However, the memorial, ordered by his sister, provided the family with a site where all necessary rituals could be performed (Zečević 1982: 60).

Those killed at the Salonika front, more than 9,000 of them, were mostly properly buried at the frontline. After the war, most of them were transferred to the newly built ossuary at Zejtinlik near Salonika. However, some recent research has proven that not all of the dead have been transferred as Serbian cemeteries can still be found along the lines of the former Salonika front (Vlasidis 2018: 189–90).

CONCLUSION

Despite being based on anecdotal evidence, this brief analysis suggests that the Serbian theatre of operations witnessed a specific type of warfare within the broader conflict. If the artillery was the primary destroyer in 1914, it was no longer so in 1915 when diseases and exhaustion took over. At the Salonika front, the artillery once again became the dominant weapon and prime cause of losses. The huge impact of war casualties was felt early into the war. The deceased added more pressure on the soldiers who were already forced to cope with other psychological strains of the fighting. On the other hand, civilians had to adapt to a world where the dead often had no remains to be buried anymore.

One of the key challenges in estimating the impact of the First World War on Serbian society is the lack of precise data on the fallen. The poor results in terms of the proper burial of the dead were caused by officials who disregarded precise and useful prewar guidelines. The conditions on the Serbian front were, indeed, extremely difficult, especially during the critical months of 1915. It may be argued that during such high-intensity and maneuverable fighting, caring for the dead was not the priority. However, Serbia had spent almost 10 months in relative peace in 1915 and the impression remains that more could have been done to preserve the remains and identity of the dead. The vague position concerning the numbers, identity, and exact circumstances of the death of Serbian Great War casualties, proved to be favourable for political manipulations throughout the twentieth century as well as for the construction of an uncritical self-victimhood narrative.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper is based on the historical research conducted in the framework of the national research project IP-2019-04-5897: "The First World War in the Culture of Memory. Forgotten Heritage" financed by the Croatian Science Foundation.

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