

The Battle for Commemorating the First World War Centenary in Croatia¹

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Important anniversaries, such as the first World World War Centenary, should be moments of reflection for countries and their peoples because they offer an opportunity for the reflection of existing narratives about a past event, through which their meanings to individual or collective identities, as well as their importance to political and social relations in these societies, are confirmed or changed (McCartney & Morgan-Owen 2017: 235). Of course, this presumes that these narratives exist, which is rather questionable in Croatia's case. The commemoration of the first World War Centenary (2014–2018) was the most important social event in the last decade in the developed countries

1 This paper was created within the frame of the research project 'World War I in the Culture of Memory. A Forgotten Heritage' (IP-2019-04), led by Ljiljana Dobrovšak and funded by the Croatian Science Foundation.

of Western Europe, especially Britain and France, and in Canada and Australia. In contrast to these victorious countries, the countries defeated in the war (primarily Germany and Austria) had a significantly more modest and different approach to the commemoration. The emphasis was on all war victims, soldiers and civilians, regardless of which side of the war they had fought on. Since Croatia, as a former part of Austria-Hungary Monarchy, found itself in a new state union with the Kingdom of Serbia after the war, veterans were ill-advised to mention their participation in the war on the wrong side. After the end of the Second World War one victor's narrative replaced another and made the mentioning of formerly existing monarchies completely unacceptable. All these facts influenced attitudes towards the First World War, which was over time almost completely forgotten in Croatia over time. A researchers of this period of history in Croatia sometimes get the impression that the country has not yet heard of Jay Winter's saying, 'Memory is always about the future.' (Winter 2017: 239).

Anniversaries of important historical events are ideal opportunities for historians to open new topics or research new areas within existing ones, including offering completely new perspectives on the recent or distant past, and calling attention to their influence on today's public stage. Different views of the same event present a lesser problem to them because the pluralism of thought and perspectives is an integral part of history as a discipline (in contrast to certain other humanities and social sciences). Unlike historians, Croatian politicians are significantly more careful in commemorating events linked to wars (except the Homeland War), despite the fact that wars had a decisive influence on the history of humanity in general, and the 20th century in particular (Winter & Sivan 1999: 19–29; Winter 2006: 17–20). Or, perhaps, precisely because of this.

Preparations for the Centenary commemorations, first of the outbreak, then of the end of the war and the signing of the peace treaties, and finally the commemoration itself occupied the public stages of developed countries through the first decade of the 21st century.

In developed countries, preparations started years before the official beginning, with the United Kingdom and its former dominions taking a leading role, using the distinctive Poppy of Remembrance as its symbol, which all public persons, including the royal family, bore on their lapels at public appearances during the commemoration years. Although the practice of selling the poppy symbol and wearing it during the week preceding 11 November was introduced only in the 1920s, in order to raise funding for assisting disabled war veterans who were being cared for by the Royal British Legion, a charity that still

offers various forms of support to former soldiers and their families, in time the support was broadened to include veterans of other wars, including contemporary ones, which caused some controversy in the British public during the Centenary commemoration. The poppy also served as the symbol of the art installation near The Tower of London, entitled *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*, in which an army of volunteers 'planted' almost 900,000 ceramic poppy flowers around the Tower during summer 2014, i.e. approximately one poppy for each British imperial soldier who fell during the First World War. Numerous art activities, funded by public money, were held throughout the UK, and the BBC broadcast around 2,500 hours of related programmes on its TV and radio channels and internet platforms; some considered this excessive (Noakes 2019; Mullen 2015; Winter 2014: 168–170; McCarty & Morgan-Owen 2017: 289–303).

In Germany and the countries of former Austria-Hungary Monarchy, preparations began only after they had already gained momentum among the former western Entente countries, and the necessity of the commemoration of such an important event became evident despite all controversies. Each of the formerly defeated countries approached the commemoration differently, because the burden of guilt still lay with Germany (Mombauer 2017: 276–288; Brennan 2015: 139–170). Historiographical debates about who was culpable for the war again came to the forefront in 2013, after Christopher Clark's book *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914* was published, but this time they leaked into the sphere of politics and caused heated disputes. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the German federal government was hesitant to voice its plans for the central national commemoration, leaving the provincial governments to organise commemorations on the local level, which resulted in numerous exhibitions and conferences. Each province commemorated the First World War on its own, specific, local level, completely unquestionable and fairly unproblematic. Still, the Centenary in Germany prompted two online projects important for the European and world history of that era: *Europeana* and the First World War encyclopedia as well as the project of digitising archival materials kept in the German federal archives (*Bundesarchiv*) in Koblenz (Mombauer 2017: 279–284).

I believe that the importance of the Centenary to each individual country is proportional to the budget it approved for that purpose. Thus, the UK set aside 50 million pounds, Australia around 552 million Australian dollars, Germany around 3.5 million euros, and France around 20 million euros for its 800 or so projects (Winter 2014: 167; Mombauer 2017: 279).

Russia and Ukraine (formerly part of the Russian Empire) had a specific relationship towards the Centenary commemoration because of the revolutionary events that removed Russia from the winning side near the end of the war and were followed by civil war and the victory of communism, which drastically influenced the relationship towards the tsarist heritage and thus the First World War. Since the communist authorities considered that war ‘imperialist’, it needed to be suppressed from collective memory, and it soon became a ‘forgotten war’, regardless of the fact that almost 15.5 million people had participated in it, and almost 2 million died from wounds or disease. Military and POW cemeteries formed throughout the country during the war were soon completely abandoned, and local enthusiasts began rediscovering them only in the late 1980s. They were assisted in these revitalisation efforts by local and church authorities, so that new memorials were erected and some old ones were restored. The central authorities joined only in summer 2012, when Vladimir Putin publicly stated that Russia would join the First World War Centenary commemoration, and he strengthened this statement by sending an official address to the Russian Federal Assembly. In the following years, a cult of heroes and martyrs who had fallen for their homeland during the First World War was systematically built and generously financed, with the goal of strengthening the nation-state and central government. The Ukrainians, on the other hand, lacked the funds to commemorate the Centenary in the desired manner, but they nonetheless held numerous smaller events centred on the individual, also highlighting examples of national resistance towards Russian conquerors during the war and after it (Bazhenova 2021: 368–383).

Similarly, the First World War was forgotten in Croatia, which, soon after the ceasefire was signed, entered a new state union with the Kingdom of Serbia, a country on the winning side. This was followed by several schizophrenic decades for veterans of the war that hailed from the former countries of the Monarchy, during which they were ill-advised to mention their participation in the war, especially in the campaign against Serbia, while the victories of the Serbian army were glorified and the crimes of the Austro-Hungarian occupational authorities were highlighted (Manojlović Pintar 2014: 134–142).

It was no better after the Second World War, when the state policy of the ‘brotherhood and unity of the peoples and ethnicities of Yugoslavia’ determined a selection of acceptable topics that were supposed to contribute to the creation of a new social order. Although the First World War was potentially a very problematic topic, it could not be circumvented due to its great importance for the following

periods, so an acceptable narrative was created using strictly filtered data. The teaching of the most basic facts regarding the root and proximate causes and flow of the First World War on all the fronts, and not only the Western one (as is the case in some European countries), was a component part of the history curriculums in primary and secondary schools during the whole socialist period and afterwards. Most of today's politicians in Croatia learned about this period from secondary school textbooks dating from the late 1980s, printed in several editions, and whose text about the period was written by Croatian historians Dragutin Pavličević and Nikša Stančić. In a series of very short texts, one can find brief but correct information on the flow of the war, including the occupation of Serbia and the retreat of the Serbian army through Albania, but without any mention of Croats within the Austro-Hungarian military forces (Bilandžić et al. 1987: 101–126). The Croatian component of the army was added after Croatia achieved independence, but, despite a partial change in the narrative towards Austria-Hungary, the emphasis remained on the political history, mostly the activities of the Yugoslav Committee and the creation of a new state union after the collapse of Monarchy.

Other components of the war shyly broke through to the public during the 2000s, when two issues of *Hrvatska revija*, the journal of the Matica Hrvatska, dedicated to the First World War were published on the 90th anniversary of the beginning of the war, which was explicitly stated in the editorials (*Hrvatska revija* 2004: 15). This was followed by the exhibition *Dadoh zlato za željezo – Hrvatska u Prvom svjetskom ratu (I Gave Gold for Iron: Croatia in World War I)* in the Croatian History Museum in Zagreb, which lasted for an exceptionally long time by Croatian standards (from 14 December 2006 to 28 October 2007), and a comprehensive catalogue was published under the same name in 2011, containing a list of everything related to the First World War that is kept in the collections of the mentioned museum. At the same time, an exhibition about Svetozar Borojević was staged in the Croatian State Archives on his 150th birth anniversary, and an international colloquium was held in his birthplace, Mečenčani; the research presented there was published as conference proceedings under the same name in 2011. Since two conferences were held on the 90th anniversary of the end of the First World War in late 2008, the first in the Matica Hrvatska on 29 and 30 October and the second in the Croatian Institute of History on 4 and 5 December (both resulted in conference proceedings, published in 2012 and 2010), it appeared that the preconditions for a successful the First World War Centenary

commemoration in Croatia were slowly being fulfilled (Herman Kaurić 2020: 347–392).

As time went by, news about the plans of other countries for the First World War Centenary commemoration began to arrive in Croatia, but there was no institutional response. One of the first calls for participation in an international project arrived to the Croatian Institute of History via the Ministry of Science, Education and Sport in early September 2012. It was sent by a Canadian non-profit organisation calling for participation in the video projection entitled *The World Remembers*, which was forwarded to Croatia via the Croatian Embassy in Canada. Attached to the invitation was a description of a complex project that was to be conducted during the Centenary (2014–2018), and its most publicly visible component was supposed to be a display of the names of fallen soldiers on public buildings chosen by the hosting country. Participation needed to be confirmed by 31 November 2012, with the Canadians pledging to provide logistic and technical support, though each country was to bear the costs of the project's implementation on its own territory (Udruga 1914–1918, Document No. 1). It later turned out that this project had been realised on a significantly lower scale than expected precisely due to a lack of funding in the participating countries, though some of them, such as Slovenia, incorporated their fallen into the online version of the project (Svoljšak 2018).

However, even if there had been a will for cooperation, Croatia would have had a significantly greater problem than that because it did not have a registry of fallen soldiers and nobody showed any willingness to create one. The situation has not changed to this day, except that Croatia now has access to the digitised version of the list of dead and wounded soldiers made during the war (the so-called *Verlustliste*), which contains the names and dates of all the losses of the Austro-Hungarian armed forces until the penultimate year of the war. It can be found on a separate page dedicated to the First World War at the portal of the Croatian State Archives in Zagreb (HDA, Popis). I must stress that this list is unofficial and incomplete despite having been made by the Ministry of War (*Kriegsministerium*), with many incorrect entries and various kinds of errors, so many users are surprised when they cannot find their ancestor (Herman Kaurić 2022: 180–189). However, for all its drawbacks, it is currently the only one we have.

In conversation with the heads of other public institutions, it became apparent that they too had been asked to participate in similar Centenary commemoration projects by other ministries. In time, it also became increasingly apparent that no institution in

Croatia was planning to participate in a foreign project (with the exception of *Europeana*) or conduct something similar on the territory of Croatia.

This was a signal for the few First Croatian World War researchers scattered among various institutions to gather in a joint initiative dubbed The Initiative Committee for Commemorating the First World War Centenary, established in November 2012 at the Croatian Institute of History in Zagreb. They attempted to point out the importance of the First World War and the need to commemorate the Centenary by sending letters to all relevant institutions: the president of Croatia; the prime minister; the Parliament speaker; the ministries of culture, defence, foreign affairs, and science; the Croatian History Museum; the Croatian State Archives; the Zagreb city government; etc. They contacted anyone they believed would be willing to help and those whom they believed needed to participate in this, but most offers were turned down, with the explanation that the institution in question does not consider itself responsible and that they should contact a different one. The greatest controversy was due to the fact that the beginning of a world war was to be commemorated, which was a completely new concept in Croatia, where very different anniversaries were the norm.

Aversion to political/war topics is not a specificity of Croatia, but is significantly more pronounced there than in developed democracies that experienced two world wars in the 20th century. Namely, Croatia experienced three bloody wars, of which only the latest was not a global conflict, but was nonetheless relatively recent and is deeply embedded in the consciousness of most Croatian citizens. This defensive war for the independence and territorial integrity of the country was fought from 1991 to 1995, and is usually called the Homeland War in Croatia itself, though no consensus on the name or its many consequences, some of which are still being felt, has been reached. Since all the First World War researchers agree that remembrance of ‘their’ war has been completely overshadowed by the experience of the Second World War (Winter 2010: 321; Beaumont 2015: 530), it is easy, through simple analogy and the addition of another war, to understand the reasons behind the mentioned reactions of Croatian state institutions when the need to commemorate the Centenary of the outbreak of the First World War—if possible on the highest state level—was pointed out to them in early 2013.

A step forward was taken in mid-April 2013, when the Croatian Government adopted the Decision on the Founding of the Commission for Coordinating the First World War Centenary Commemoration,

with the goal of drawing up and monitoring a Centenary commemoration programme, 'which particularly includes: the creation of a digital list of the fallen, the marking of places where Croatian soldiers fell and their cemeteries outside the borders of the Republic of Croatia, the organising of modern historiographical and political-science discussions about the significance of the First World War, and the making of an analysis of cultural, museological, and literary segments on the topic of the First World War.' Funding for the Commission's work was supposed to be secured 'from the national budget of the Republic of Croatia at the position of the Ministry of Culture', and Committee members were not given the right to any allowance or compensation. The Committee consisted of 13 representatives of 12 different institutions, led by the president of the Committee, the then minister of culture, Andrea Zlatar Viočić. All the members' names were given in full in the Decision,² together with their full academic titles and names of their parent institutions (Ministarstvo kulture (2013c). Three members of this Commission were members of the Initiative Committee, but state structures did not allow them to officially represent this informal group of citizens; instead, they represented only their parent institutions, which were only indirectly linked to their initiative. This example demonstrates how far Croatia is from a developed democracy, in which it is normal for such associations to form the link between family memories and the state administration, with the goal of working together on preserving the culture of memory (Winter & Sivan 1999: 29).

The very next day, the portal Obris³ generally welcomed the Government's decision, but also pointed out the brevity of time for such a voluminous amount of work, highlighting the creation of a list of the fallen as a priority. The author of the text considered the lack of a representative of the History Department of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb problematic (without suggesting anyone in particular), while Filip Hameršak was described as the 'weakest link of the newly-formed body' without any explanation (Knežević 2013). The reasons for this are unclear, especially since the Commission included people with lower professional and academic

2 The other members were: Ivan Grujić (Ministry of Veterans), Mario Werhas (Ministry of Defence), Davor Vidiš (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs), Anamarija Kirinić (Ministry of Science, Education and Sport), Petar Barišić (Central State Office for Croats Abroad), Petar Strčić (Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts), Jozo Ivanović and Ivan Filipović (Croatian State Archives), Jelena Borošak Marijanović (Croatian History Museum), Mladen Klemenčić (The Miroslav Krleža Institute of Lexicography), Vijoleta Herman Kaurić (Croatian Institute of History), and Filip Hameršak (Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, Chair of Croatian History of Law and State).

3 The portal name is an abbreviation of 'defence and security' in Croatian.

qualifications than him, not to mention his knowledge about the topic. If the institution he was employed at was seen as problematic, one should bear in mind that no institution in Croatia is focused on researching the First World War.

The Commission met a total of five times: the first time with the goal of drawing up a programme draft for the Centenary commemoration (27 June 2013), the second for the creation of a preliminary list of programmes/projects and a projection of costs (24 July), the third in order to review and evaluate the proposed projects (7 April 2014), the fourth to get acquainted with the formal commemoration ceremony proposal (24 April), and the fifth to establish the commemoration programme (14 May) (Udruga 1914–1918, Document No. 2 – 5). At one point, a logo for the Centenary commemoration appeared (see Figure 1), but its creation was not discussed at the Commission meetings and its members had no access to any concept designs.

Unless the archive and my memory deceive me, the Commission did not meet after that, though it was never formally abolished. Furthermore, at the 87th session of the Croatian Government, held on 29 March 2018, the Decision on the Amendment of the Decision on the Founding of the Commission for Coordinating the First World War Centenary Commemoration was adopted, which Prime Minister Andrej Plenković commented as appropriate for ‘a very important anniversary’. The decision came into force on the day it was adopted, and was prompted by ‘passage of time since the founding and appointment of the members [...] in order to secure the functioning and implementation of the decisions and duties of the Commission’ regarding the commemoration of the end of the First World War, as stated in the statement of reasons. Most of the names of the representatives of institutions were different,⁴ but the greatest change was that the still active minister of culture, Nina Obuljen Koržinek, was listed as president (Vlada RH 2018a, Vlada RH 2018b). It is interesting that the members were neither informed about their appointment, nor did they ever meet, and the decision was not published in *Narodne novine* (the *Official Gazette*). The original list of members is

⁴ The members are: Zvonimir Frka-Petešić (Croatian Prime Minister’s Office), Stjepan Sučić (Ministry of Croatian Veterans), Marijo Reljanović (Ministry of Defence), Ljiljana Pancirov (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs), Andreja Radović (Ministry of Science and Education), Ivan Zeba (Central State Office for Croats Abroad), Petar Strčić (Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts), Andreja Smetko (Croatian History Museum), Mladen Klemenčić (The Miroslav Krleža Institute of Lexicography), Vijoleta Herman Kaurić (Croatian Institute of History), Jozo Ivanović (Croatian State Archives), Mirela Krešić (Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, Chair of Croatian History of Law and State).

still found on the official website of the Ministry of Culture, but this amended one is not. Despite all attempts, we did not find the official version of the document, but only the proposal, which is still available on the Government's webpage.

By the time the Commission had had its first meeting in the Ministry of Culture, the Initiative Committee for the First World War Centenary Commemoration had drawn up an Action Plan for the commemoration, entitled 'Croatia and the First World War 1914–1918 / 2014–2018', which encompassed a programme of public, cultural, and scholarly activities through all four years of the Centenary commemoration (Herman Kaurić 2013). Sometime later, they also created a proposal for a commemoration at Mirogoj, Zagreb's main cemetery, and forwarded both proposals to the Commission and other institutions. However, their proposals proved too ambitious for the then-existing level of consciousness about the need for a commemoration and the readiness of the institutions to cooperate.

Commission members often sent substitutes, as a rule completely uninformed, and it appeared that nobody present had any authority to do anything, and that everything needed to be addressed to some higher authority. Soon, only one thing became clear: there would be no separate budget for the Centenary commemoration, so that anything that was planned had to be done within the existing budgets of the ministries involved in the Commission's work, with particular emphasis on the budget of the Ministry of Culture. The only thing that the Ministry of Culture could do in such a short timespan was to prompt museums and galleries to register projects about the First World War within existing competitions that are traditionally published every year, with the indication that said projects are linked to the Centenary commemoration, which was done on 2 August (Udruga 1914–1918, Document No. 6). Since the application deadline was 15 September 2013 (Ministarstvo kulture 2013b), I presume that the documentation was sent only by those who already had their projects prepared or who had improvised them with exceptional skill.

This is how the original list of 115, mostly one-year, programmes related to the Centenary commemoration was created. It grew to 132 projects by March 2015, and included multi-year computerisation and digitisation programmes. One of these was the mentioned website, 'World War I 1914–1918: A View from the Archives', made by the Croatian State Archives. Traditional book fairs in Leipzig and the *Sa(n)jam knjige* book fair in Pula were highlighted as the spearhead events, together with a substantial number of physical and virtual exhibitions, lectures, concerts, book translations, and other cultural events

(Ministarstvo kulture 2013a). The focus of the registered programmes in the museum-gallery field was on war events in the broader or narrower local community, with little on the national level. Essentially, an attempt was made to brand everything that had been planned for that

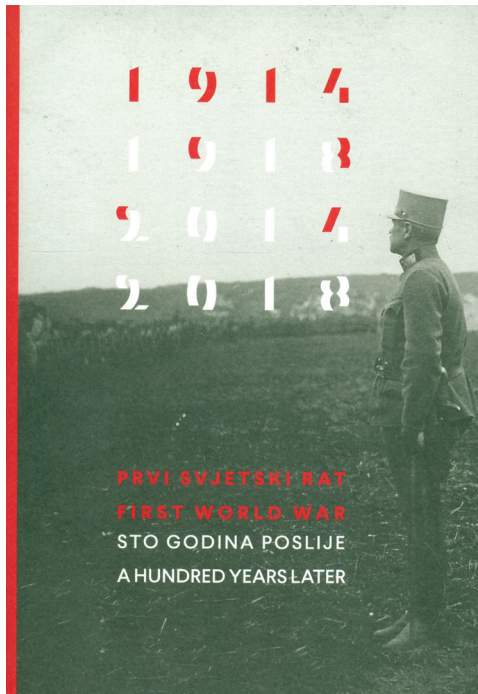


Fig. 1: Cover of the commemorative booklet for the Centenary (photo: V. Herman Kaurić).

year as relevant to the Centenary commemoration and place it on the official list, which was later printed in the form of a booklet given out at the official commemoration held in the Croatian State Archives (see Figure 1).

The decision of the Ministry immediately caused controversy regarding the fairness of the 2014 competition, and questions arose about how much Committee members were influencing the selection of the programmes/projects, and especially the distribution of funding. The Ministry's regular method of functioning proved an excellent basis for speculation because the publicly available list of projects/programmes about the First World War does not contain any data about the amount of allocated funds, and this is despite the fact that this information is available on the list of all approved programmes for that year according to field of activity, individually by institution, and by programme.

However, the official numbers are different from those in analyses of individual programmes, likely partly because it is not exactly defined which entry refers to what. Visible data shows that, as part of its archival and museum-gallery activities, the Ministry of Culture spent just over 720,000 kunas, i.e. just under 100,000 euros, on the First World War Centenary (Ministarstvo kulture 2014b: 2–24; *Ministarstvo kulture 2014a*: 2–6). Although most of these activities were exhibitions, this does not mean that the figure includes the publishing of exhibition catalogues, because publishing activities could have been funded via other, more specific, competitions. In addition, the figure does not include various other programmes, such as book translations or setting up digital platforms, whose funding is currently impossible to determine, and some of which were certainly significantly financially more demanding than those we have found. However, this was only a drop in the ocean when compared to the total number of projects approved for 2014, which stood at 3,864 from 17 programme fields, financed by 206.6 million kunas (Galić 2014: 2). Although the public did not perceive it as such, the funding for the Centenary commemoration was low, especially when compared to said programme fields or the total budget of the Ministry of Culture (*Ministarstvo kulture 2015*: 37).

As regards the commemoration, the prevalent opinion at first was that the international conference organised by the EUNIC (European Union National Institutes for Culture) and funded by the Ministry of Culture, *Commemorating 1914: Exploring the War's Legacy*, held in Zagreb on 5–6 May 2014, would be enough (*Ministarstvo kulture 2014e*; *Ministarstvo kulture 2014f*; HINA/MK 2014). Even though 23 lectures by top scholars from 10 countries, including Croatia,⁵ were held then, the absolute star of the conference was Christopher Clark with his introductory lecture, 'The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914'. On that occasion, the translation of the identically-named book into Croatian was arranged and was published several years later (Clark, 2018), by which time the pomp around the First World War had died down considerably. Public interest was substantial, which is not surprising since his book had brewed up a storm among historians throughout the world, and especially in Serbia (Ponoš 2014a; Šarenac 2013: 267–280; Vukotić 2013; Bjelajac 2014). Disagreements about the events that had led to the war spread

5 The participants were from Croatia (6), Bosnia and Herzegovina (1), Belgium (3), Austria (3), France (4), Italy (2), Germany (1), Greece (1), Portugal (1), and Switzerland (1).

to the sphere of politics, and comparisons were drawn between the events in Europe then and those that had taken place a century ago (Jakovina 2014: 60). Therefore, the central European commemoration of the Centenary, even though it had been planned to be in Sarajevo a few years ahead, saw some significant changes. One of the most obvious for historians was the split in the great ‘conciliation conference’, which was supposed to gather experts from 26 countries in Europe and further abroad. The Serbian side boycotted the organisation at the last moment, after it had been announced that Christopher Clark and like-minded individuals would attend (Winter 2017: 242–243; Brennan 2015: 147). But this event is beyond the scope of this paper.

However, for some reason, in late April, talks started about a commemoration ceremony and central observance of the Centenary in Croatia, including a laying of wreaths near the grand *Pietà* of Vanja Radauš and Jozo Turkalj at the central Zagreb cemetery, Mirogoj.

Although the base of the monument bears the inscription PALIM HRVATSKIM VOJNICIMA U PRVOM SVJETSKOM RATU (‘TO THE FALLEN CROATIAN SOLDIERS OF WORLD WAR I’), on the eve of the Centenary, thanks to the research of Boris Kukić, it was established that this is not true because the memorial ossuary contains the remains of 3,300 participants of the war, only approximately one-third of whom were Croats (Rašović 2014). It turned out that the inaccurate inscription was put up in 1994 by the association *Hrvatski domobran* (Croatian Home Guard), without consulting the relevant authorities and without permission—or, at least, there is no record of this—which surprised the institutions (Kukić 2015: 124). The information that some 450 Hungarians had been laid to rest in the ossuary caught the attention of the Hungarian military attaché, so the Ministry of Culture and the Republic of Croatia found themselves in a delicate position, faced with a problem that they could not ignore. Instead of launching an urgent procedure to remove the inscription, the Ministry ordered a brief study from Kukić, an abstract of which was then printed in Croatian and English on a panel set at the foot of the ossuary, a sort of info-plaque, until a way to resolve the problem is found (see Figure 2). This temporary solution has remained in place to this day, except that, after seven years, it is in an embarrassing state. The inscription is cracked and difficult to read, and the plaque broken after it fell over several times in strong winds, though at least someone has secured it so as to prevent this from happening again (see Figure 3).

The Ministry of Culture chose the international conference *Prvi svjetski rat i avangardna umjetnost: dekonstrukcija – konstrukcija* (The First World War and Avant-Garde Art: Deconstruction



Fig. 2: The info-plaque next to the memorial ossuary in Mirogoj, June 2014 (photo: B. Kukić).



Fig. 3: The info-plaque in Mirogoj, 3 August 2021 (photo: S. Kaurić).

– Construction) as the cornerstone of the Centenary commemoration. It was held in the Museum of Contemporary Art on 28 and 29 June and organised by the Institute for the Research of the Avant-Garde and the Marinko Sudac Collection, under the high sponsorship of the Ministry. The Centenary commemoration supposedly began with an opening ceremony of the accompanying exhibition on the evening of 26 June, and ended the next evening with a cocktail party marking the beginning of the conference (Ministarstvo kulture 2014d; MK/HINA 2014). The conference was attended by 24 theorists of contemporary art from six countries,⁶ but I did not manage to find any material regarding the events, except for the official communication published in the press, not even in the Museum of Contemporary Art

6 The participants were from Croatia, the Russian Federation, Switzerland, Germany, Montenegro, Serbia, and the USA.

(Franceschi, 2014; Moj Zagreb 2014; Glas Istre, 2014) (see Figures 4 & 5) The Ministry of Culture generously supported both events, setting aside 90,000 kunas for the needs of the conference and the exhibition (Ministarstvo kulture 2014c: 10).

The central national commemoration of the First World War Centenary took place between these two bizarre events, in the Great



Fig. 4: Poster for the exhibition *First World War and Avant-Garde Art: Deconstruction – Construction* (SOURCE: <https://www.avantgarde-museum.com/hr/museum/projects/prvi-svjetski-rat-i-avangardna-umjetnost-dekonstrukcija-konstrukcija/>).



Fig. 5: A view of the exhibition (SOURCE: <https://min-kulture.gov.hr/vijesti-8/izlozba-i-diskusijama-zapocelo-obilježavanje-stogodisnjice-prvoga-svjetskoga-rata/10768>).

Reading Room of the Croatian State Archives. Coincidentally, the same motif is found on the poster for the exhibition of the avant-garde and the cover of the booklet bearing the Centenary commemoration programme, whose copyright is held by none other than the Croatian State Archives.

At 9 o'clock in the morning on 27 June 2014, a common wreath was laid down beside the memorial ossuary by Zlatko Gareljčić, defence advisor and representative of the Croatian president Ivo Josipović; Goran Beus Richembergh, representative of the Croatian Parliament speaker; Predrag Matić, veterans' minister and representative of the Croatian prime minister Zoran Milanović; and Berislav Šipuš, deputy minister of culture. It is interesting that the event announcement did not mention a representative of the Parliament, even though one obviously attended, so one can assume that he or she joined the ceremony later (Ministarstvo kulture 2014d; *Ministarstvo branitelja* 2014). However, the inscription on the wreath's ribbon claimed that it was brought by three central Croatian institutions, without the Ministry of Culture, which was perhaps omitted simply due to lack of space, or due to a misunderstanding. The wreath was laid down 'in remembrance of



Fig. 6: The wreath laid down next to the fallen warriors' memorial in Mirogoj on 27 June 2014. (photo: V. Herman Kaurić).

the victims of the First World War' (see Figure 6). The dreary impression of the entire commemoration was highlighted by the two empty stands that had been set up by employees of the City Cemeteries, who had likely thought that there would be three delegations with three wreaths. (see Figure 6a)

This was followed by ceremonial speeches in the Croatian State Archives at 10 o'clock, accompanied by an artistic programme

conducted by the Croatian Radiotelevision Choir led by Maestro Tonči Bilić. Despite the late invitation, a considerable number of representatives of certain institutions gathered there, especially considering a large part of the higher diplomatic and political milieu, including Prime Minister Zoran Milanović, had already left to participate at the central Centenary commemoration in Sarajevo. I must, however, stress that the commemoration was attended by Croatian president Ivo Josipović, who had promised to do so at the preparation meeting with members of the Initiative Committee, and only left for Sarajevo afterwards (see Figure 7). In addition, speeches were held by the prime minister's representative, Predrag Matić; the Parliament speaker's representative, Goran Beus Richembergh; Andrea Zlatar Violić as the president of the Commission for Coordinating the First World War Centenary Commemoration; and Vlatka Lemić, director of the Croatian State Archives, the host (Puhovski & Filipović, 2014). ///

In his speech, President Josipović recalled his grandfather, a soldier in the Austro-Hungarian army who had fought on the Isonzo and, unlike many others, returned home safely from the war. He also highlighted the complexity of the perceptions of the war in Croatia because some Croats had volunteered to serve in the Serbian army as well. In this context, he said: 'It is difficult to forget wars. Wars, unfortunately, do not seem to die and their consequences are felt through generations. But it is our duty, the duty of all those involved in politics, in society, to not allow new wars to begin. And for us who sit in various institutions, not only in Croatia, but in all countries throughout the



Fig. 7: Croatian president Ivo Josipović at the central Centenary commemoration (SOURCE: <https://branitelj.gov.hr/vijesti/ministar-matic-na-obiljezavanju-stogodisnjice-pocetka-prvog-svjetskog-rata/100>).

world, there is no duty more important than preventing another war among us.' (Zebić, 2014).

At 12 o'clock, a solemn mass for all those who fell in the First World War began in St Mark's Church in Zagreb's Upper Town, led by Military Ordinary Juraj Jezerinac in concelebration with the head of the Office for Cultural Property of the Archdiocese of Zagreb, Juraj Kolarić, and the local parish priest, Franjo Prstec. The mass was attended by representatives of the Croatian president and Parliament speaker, the Ministry of Culture and the Commission for Coordinating the First World War Centenary Commemoration, the Zagreb City Veterans' Office, and the Austrian ambassador, Andrea Ikić-Böhm. Apart from those mentioned, the mass was attended by a very small number of curious individuals and interested public figures.

Bishop Jezerinac finished his inspired homily with the words: 'We have gathered here in mutual love, without ideological, religious, national, or political flavour, for we know that all are equal in death. Each victim, regardless of which side they fought on, regardless of faith or nationality, or any other affiliation, deserves our respect, for we all are children of our heavenly Father. To separate them after death is not good. All need to be shown equal respect. This is why the whole world is gathering these days in a joint prayer for the repose of their souls. When we remember the First World War centenary today, let these regrettable events prompt us to think about what we are to do if a similar event afflicts us in the future. May the world never again see war as a way of life. Let this anniversary prompt us to deeper thinking about our lives and bring us to our God Christ, who is our only and true source of peace.' (IKA 2014).

Not a word was written about the commemoration in the most widely distributed Croatian newspapers like those days, and only a few mentioned the Centenary in Croatia at all. The *Večernji list* published, within a mosaic devoted to the war, a small article with excerpts from the speeches held in the Croatian State Archives was published under the title 'Ivo Josipović: Wars are Shadows that Always Follow Us' (*Večernji list* 2014: 12-13).

In Contrast, *Novi List* columnist Tihomir Ponoš pointed out the illogicality of the selected anniversary date because a successful assassination attempt on the Austro-Hungarian heir apparent and his wife was carried out on 28 June in Sarajevo, which was a pretext for the war, but the war itself began in early August. Ponoš claimed that 'this is how things go when there is no tradition regarding something, and there is little in the way of a tradition of commemorating and researching the First World War in Croatia' (Ponoš 2014b: 10). We could agree

with this, though not with the part that claims that nobody knows what to do and when to do it. Because knowing what to do is one thing, but actually implementing it on the state level is something that requires much more than just good will and knowledge, which the Centenary commemoration has clearly proven.

Many citizens only realised the importance of the Centenary in the following years, when numerous projects conducted by local institutions and enthusiasts were presented to the public. Prompted by what they saw, a considerable number of people began to research their family histories and find participants of the war among their ancestors. The Initiative Committee continued to appeal to the Ministry of Culture, striving to prompt a commemoration of the opening of the Isonzo Front in 2015, which was seen as a very important event in the other countries that had participated on that front, but not in Croatia



Fig. 8: The laying of wreaths during the installation of the memorial plaque to fallen Hungarians (SOURCE: <https://www.braniteljski-portal.com/na-mirogoju-otkrivena-spomen-ploca-madarskim-vojniscima-poginulim-u-prvom-svjetskom-ratu>).



Fig. 9: Memorial plaque to fallen Hungarian soldiers (photo: S. Kaurić).

(2015, September 11th). The Ministry completely ignored the appeal, with the verbal explanation that they were working on removing bureaucratic obstacles that had arisen from the decisions of the previous Government, because there had been a change of government and in the leaderships of all institutions, including the Ministry of Culture. In the end, the Committee members gave up and devoted themselves to their projects, which they realised thanks to private connections and acquaintances, and their personal funds.

In the meantime, the Hungarian military attaché managed to secure all the permits necessary for putting up a memorial plaque to fallen Hungarians next to the *Pietà* (see Figure 8), which had at first seemed impossible. The plaque was ceremoniously unveiled on 3 April 2018, with full military honours, attended by members of Croatian and Hungarian honorary battalions, defence ministers Damir Krstičević and István Simicskó, and numerous dignitaries (M.M., 2018; MŠ 2018). (see Figure 9) On that occasion, the Hungarian defence minister said, 'He who does not respect his ancestors and heroes, he is also not fit to respect the culture of others' (MŠ 2018). This example clearly shows that when there is a will, there is a way, and what such events should look like, as the mentioned commemoration looked genuinely solemn and dignified.

The new Hungarian defence minister, Tibor Benkő, arrived to Croatia for a two-day visit in October 2018 and, already on the first day, laid a wreath next to the Hungarian memorial plaque for their fallen soldiers and the central monument to all warriors. This time it was less ceremonious, but the Croatian defence minister, Damir Krstičević, attended again and laid wreaths on both spots (MORH 2018).

The First World War commemoration in Croatia was mostly prompted by the activities of foreign institutions or countries, and the same applied to the commemoration of the end of the First World War, which, in western countries, is traditionally held at 11 o'clock on 11 November, the date when the armistice on the Western Front was signed.

On that day in 2018, Josip Kučić, the rector of the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saints Stephen and Ladislaus in Zagreb, held a solemn mass to mark the end of the war, and in his sermon, he emphasised reverence towards all the victims of the war. He stressed that building peace requires an unconditionally strong will to respect other people and nations and their dignity. The mass was attended by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković; Parliament Speaker Željko Reiner; Mate Granić, representative of the Croatian president; ambassadors and military attachés of numerous countries including the

USA and Canada; representatives of religious communities; and numerous other invitees. British ambassador Andrew Dalgleish bore on his lapel the apparently indispensable red poppy flower (GS 2018).

Foreign officials mostly emphasised the need for cooperation in preserving the peace, which should never be taken for granted and requires constant work. They especially highlighted the fact that former enemies are now allies, meaning above all France and Germany, and that it is possible to reconcile through earnest work. In contrast to this, in addition to expressing reverence towards all victims, Prime Minister Plenković stated that the war had changed the map of Europe and the future of the world (GS 2018; DD/H 2018; HRT 2018). I do not know, and perhaps I err, but I have the impression that Croatian politicians were only present because Europe and the rest of the world were commemorating the end of the war, so something of the sort had to be done in Croatia as well. At the same time, the central commemoration of the end of the First World War took place in France, and was attended by Croatian president Kolinda Grabar Kitarović (HINA/GS, 2018).

In addition to Mirogoj, wreaths were laid at the former military cemetery in Varaždin, where 424 soldiers were buried. Apart from the representatives of the highest state institutions (President, Parliament, Government), representatives of the ministries of defence, culture, and the veterans, representatives of Varaždin County, Homeland War veterans from the Puma association, and other citizens all paid their respects to the fallen (e-Varaždin 2018). (see Figure 10) A wreath was also laid next to the memorial plaque put up in 2014 on the so-called Rudolf's Barracks in Zagreb, in honour of Croatian soldiers fallen on



Fig. 10: Commemoration of the end of World War I in Varaždin (SOURCE: <https://evarazdin.hr/preporucamo/stricak-svaki-rat-je-nesto-najstrasnije-sto-se-ljudskom-rodu-moze-dogoditi-373670/>).

battlefields throughout Europe from 1914 to 1918. The exhibition *1918: A Pivotal Year in Croatia* was held in the Croatian History Museum, and resulted in a catalogue of the same name (Smetko 2018), while a new reprint of Ivo Pilar's book *The South Slavic Question and World War I* was launched in the Croatian State Archives, in honour of the centenary of the annexation of Međimurje to Croatia (GS, 2018).

At the end, I must mention a lasting memorial to the end of the First World War, a coin of 92.5 percent pure silver with a nominal value of 150 kunas, issued by the Croatian National Bank and designed



Fig. 11: Silver commemorative coin issued on the Centenary of the end of World War I (SOURCE:<https://www.hnb.hr/-/100-obljetnice-zavrsetka-prvoga-svjetskog-rata-1918-2018->).

by the Croatian Monetary Institute Ltd. The coin, of which no more than 2,000 were minted, became available for purchase on 31 October 2018, and the total production cost was limited to 300,000 kunas. The silver coin is 37 mm in diameter, weighs 24 g, and was designed by sculptor Ana Divković. It can be purchased for 407.5 kunas (HNB 2018a; HNB 2021: 1).

The commemorative coin's obverse depicts the representatives of the belligerent sides in the First World War, witnesses and signatories of the armistice that ended the war, in front of the railway carriage in Compiègne in which it was signed. The inscription '1918–2018' is found on the left side of the depiction, and the inscriptions 'COMPIÈGNE' and '11. 11. 1918.' on the right side. Above the depiction of the signatories and witnesses of the armistice and the railway carriage, a semicircular inscription '100. OBLJETNICA' ('100th ANNIVERSARY') is written along the top edge of the coin, and is continued in a semicircle below the depiction, along the bottom edge with the words 'ZAVRŠETKA PRVOGA SVJETSKOG RATA' ('OF THE END OF WORLD WAR I'). The coin's reverse bears a depiction of

the battleship *Viribus Unitis* in its centre, shown anchored in the port of Pula on 31 October 1918, when Austria-Hungary handed the ship and its entire remaining fleet over to the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, so the ship is flying a Croatian flag. Above the depiction of the battleship stands the inscription 'REPUBLIKA HRVATSKA' ('REPUBLIC OF CROATIA'), while the Croatian coat of arms is depicted on the upper-right part of the coin. The coin's denomination, '150', is shown below the depiction of the battleship, along with the name of the monetary unit: 'KUNA' ('KUNAS') (HNB, 2018b).

CONCLUSION

In 2014, developed countries honoured their citizens who had participated in the war, soldiers and civilians, in various ways, expressing sorrow for the victims and gratitude to all. Reverence was also shown for the enemy side, constantly highlighting the fact that war is a great evil for all, regardless of on whose side our ancestors fought. From the Croatian perspective, the attempts of other countries seemed very meaningful and unanimous, which is not entirely true, but the scant news that reached Croatia left a different impression and fed the frustrations of the Initiative Committee. Croatia eventually organised its own commemoration ceremonies on the centenaries of the beginning and end of the First World War, however reluctantly and only after European institutions and civil society organisations had started their own projects, which 'leaked into' Croatia due to geostrategic conditions. Were it not for this, I am fairly certain that Croatia would have met the Centenary in silence, save for a few lonely voices here and there. And even then, state institutions relied too heavily on the symbolism of the western Entente (the coin is the best example of this), which is mostly the result of not having enough time for such a complex task, but also of the fact that there is no such symbolism that stems from the collective memory of the war in Croatia.

In hindsight, it was a difficult trench war with state institutions on all levels, in which the greatest obstacle was the lack of understanding of the importance of the First World War for Croatia today. For me personally, the most distressing part was the stance of the head of an important museum institution, who saw no reason to prepare for the First World War Centenary because they had already covered the topic extensively a few years ago and had nothing new to add. In contrast, other institutions did organise one or more events during the Centenary, but

these were not part of state commemorations and are thus not mentioned in this paper.

Some things have changed substantially since the anniversary years, but the basic problem regarding the senior institutions is, frustratingly, the same: who even cares about the First World War and why is it important? In hindsight, it appears that the First World War commemoration in Croatia should be considered ancient history, because an unfortunate set of circumstances has made the war seem even further off, even more ancient, in the consciousness of ordinary people than was the case in 2014, or even 2018, when there was considerable discussion of the Centenary in the Croatian public arena. Since then, central Croatia, including its capital city, Zagreb, suffered two major earthquakes, both in 2020, a global pandemic, and a series of lesser, local natural disasters, and this has made discussions of some old war seem pointless, at least for the time being.

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