Dušan T. Bataković

Serbian War Aims and Military Strategy, 1914–1918

The Austro-Hungarian declaration of war of 28 June 1914 found both the Serbian government and the General Staff completely unprepared for a major military conflict. In that summer, after spectacular military successes in the Balkan wars (1912–1913), Serbia was still recovering from the enormous financial effort and considerable losses in manpower and military equipment. Although Serbia was on the way to becoming a regional political hub with considerable prestige among South Slavs of Austria-Hungary, her political and military leaders had no plans for armed confrontations in the foreseeable future: tens of thousands of soldiers wounded in the Balkan Wars were still recovering in hospitals and there were shortages of war materiel. After all exports had ceased and the procurement of war materiel doubled expenditure on imports, state revenues had dropped sharply. The total cost of the Balkan Wars, was about one billion francs.¹

Moreover, Serbia needed a substantial period of peace and stability, not only for restoring the agricultural production drained by military campaigns, but also for fully integrating the newly-acquired territories in the south: Old Serbia and Macedonia. Serbia had almost doubled her territory – by an additional 39,000 km², containing some 1,290,000 inhabitants, including often hostile Albanian and Bulgarian minorities. The New Territories were labouring under an Ottoman legacy of a backward feudal-type economy and lacked the rule of law and political liberties.²

After peace had been restored by the Conference of Ambassadors in London and the Treaty of Bucharest of 10 August 1913, Serbia's immediate concern was to repel frequent Albanian armed incursions from Albania into Kosovo and Bulgarian *comitadjis* into eastern Macedonia. Apart from the impending border delimitation with Albania, the only (secret) plans on the table in early 1914 were for the merging of two Serb kingdoms, Serbia and Montenegro, into a real union with common military, customs and diplomatic structures.³ As for any eventual war planning, the delicate international situation, together with the sharpening internal conflict between military pressure groups and the democratically elected gov-

¹ Cf. more in: Andrej Mitrović: *Serbia's Great War 1914–1918*. London 2007, pp. 53–63; Frederic Le Moal: *La Serbie du martyre à la victoire. 1914–1918*. Saint Cloud 2008, pp. 20–32. On Balkan Wars: Henry Barby: *Les victoires serbes*. Paris 1913, pp. 55–84, pp. 119–149.

² Michael Boro Petrovich: *History of Modern Serbia 1804–1908*, vol. 2. New York/London 1976, pp. 603f.

³ Dušan T. Bataković: *The Kosovo Chronicles*. Belgrade 1992, pp. 173–176.

ernment were decidedly limiting factors on any Serbian activity. The internal strife, mounting since the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908 and the humiliating recognition of this act by Belgrade in March 1909, had led to the founding of "National Defence", an anti-Habsburg organisation to defend the endangered rights of the Bosnian Serbs; but once the initial revolutionary enthusiasm had abated, National Defence had limited its activities mostly to cultural action through a network of confidants. Meanwhile, the pressure of the Young Turks' pan-Ottoman policy on Serbs in Turkey-in-Europe after 1908 had exacerbated national frustrations among Serbian Army officers previously involved in secret *comitadji* action (*četnička akcija*) in Macedonia;⁴ and it was against this background that a clandestine pan-Serbian organisation, "Unification or Death" – soon to become notorious as the "Black Hand" – was founded in 1911 in order to further the process of Serbian unification. Consisting mostly of army officers and led by younger conspirators of 1903, this influential military clique was a mixture of uncompromising patriots and fervent nationalists with limited political experience. In terms of foreign policy, national unification was the society's absolute priority.⁵ Its unofficial leader, Dragutin T. Dimitrijević Apis, head of the Intelligence Department of the Serbian General Staff, started by setting up an intelligence service of officers stationed along the borders with the Ottoman Empire and Austria-Hungary; and after 1912, drawing on confidants of the National Defence, and boosted by the enthusiasm of the Serbian population living in both neighbouring empires, they developed a rapidly expanding network of agents. Also admitted into the "Black Hand" were Serbian students from Bosnia, such as Vladimir Gaćinović, leader of Young Bosnia, and Yugoslav patriots from Dalmatia.⁶ During the Balkan Wars, the "Black Handers" proved to be first-class officers, leading the Serbian Army in its key battles at Kumanovo, Monastir and Bregalnitz; and they enjoyed the protection of the leading Serbian strategist, Field-Marshal Radomir Putnik, architect of Serbia's victories in the Balkan Wars, who held their military skills and ardent patriotism in high regard.⁷

Only a few of the "Black Hand's" leading figures had any political agenda beyond national unification. Its daily *Pijemont* (Piedmont), started in 1911 by a group of Belgrade freemasons (Ljuba Jovanović Čupa, Branko Božović, Bogdan Radenković), had among its contributors Serbian, Croat and Jewish journalists (including Tin Ujević and Moša Pijade) of both pan-Serbian and Yugoslav orientation (as the two were often considered compatible).⁸ Apart from tirelessly cam-

⁴ Vojislav J. Vučković: Unutrašnje krize u Srbiji i Prvi svetski rat. In: Istorijski časopis 14/15 (1963–65), pp. 173–229.

⁵ Čedomir A. Popović: Organizacija "Ujedinjenje ili smrt" ("Crna ruka"). Uzroci i način postanka. In: Nova Evropa 15 (1927) 12, pp. 401f.

⁶ Oskar Tartalja: Veleizdajnik. Moje Uspomene. Zagreb/Split 1928, pp. 31–33.

⁷ Cf. more in: Milan Ž. Živanović: Pukovnik Apis. Solunski proces hiljadu devetsto sedamnaeste. Prilog za proučavanje političke istorije Srbije od 1903 po 1918 god. Belgrade 1955.

⁸ Dnevnik ppuk. Velimira Vemića, Arhiv SANU (Archives of Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts), no. 14.434/6; cf. also: Ivan Mužić: Masonstvo u Hrvata. Split 1983, pp. 77–89.

paignig for pan-Serb unification, *Pijemont* offered a variety of mostly rightist political ideas, targeting corruption and discord in Serbia. The post-1903 Serbian democracy was portrayed as an unrestricted democratic chaos with endless political rivalries absorbing most of the nation's energy.⁹ The symbol of the prioritisation of party politics over sacred national goals – and hence a main target of *Pijemont's* attacks – was Nikola P. Pašić, charismatic leader of the Old Radicals. An experienced and shrewd politician, Pašić was in fact a patriot as well as a democrat, but he was never prepared to allow the democracy he had struggled for in the decades before 1903 to fall victim to the influence of the military clique, or to enter into long-term arrangements with them.¹⁰

Pijemont, by contrast, determined to assert itself as a political movement in the making, denounced both Pašić's government and the opposition (Independent Radicals, Liberals, Progressives, Social Democrats) and sought to make the military the key factor in the country's domestic and foreign policy. During the negotiations for the Balkan alliance with Bulgaria, the "Black Hand" had backed Pašić's cabinet, but a definitive rift opened up between them over territorial concessions to Bulgaria. The "Black Handers" were also at odds with Crown Prince Alexander, who was gathering around himself a rival group of military officers popularly known as the "White Hand". In 1913, the conflict between the government and the "Black Hand" officers, put on hold at the start of the Balkan Wars, re-erupted in full force over the Serbo-Bulgarian dispute over the "contested zone" in Macedonia.

The escalating military-civilian conflict between the "Black Hand" and the Pašić government, became public early in 1914, when the "Priority Decree" by Interior Minister Stojan M. Protić accorded priority to civilian over military authorities in the newly-liberated areas. Initially, the Pašić government had not extended the provisions of the Serbian Constitution to Old Serbia and Slavic Macedonia; but its provisions were now gradually introduced through special decrees and regulations which opened the way for power abuse by civilian officials, usually Old Radicals, and sharpened the rivalry between civilian and military authorities.¹¹ The "Black Handers", as the most influential pressure group within the army, emboldened by their late military victories, demanded that Serbian Army representatives should continue to take precedence over civilians on public occasions in the New Territories; and Apis even advised the military commanders, mostly members of the "Black Hand", to threaten the government with a military coup if their priority in the newly-acquired territories was not recognised. Clearly, the "Black Hand"

⁹ Cf. David MacKenzie: Ljuba Jovanović-Čupa and the Search for Yugoslav Unity. In: David McKenzie (ed.): Serbs and Russians (= East European Monographs, vol. 459). Boulder/New York 1996, pp. 111–131.

¹⁰ Dušan T. Bataković: Nikola Pašić, les radicaux et la "Main noire". Les défis à la démocratie parlementaire serbe 1903–1917. In: *Balkanica* 37 (2006), pp. 155–162.

¹¹ The Priority Decree was eventually modified in order to defuse discontent within army ranks. In detail: Dušan T. Bataković: Sukob vojnih i civilnih vlasti u Srbiji u proleće 1914. In: *Istorijski časopis* 29/30 (1982–1983), pp. 477–492.

posed a major political threat to Pašić, who, determined to resist the undermining of democracy by politically “irresponsible factors” such as the “Black Hand”, moved to thwart them with the support of the ambitious Heir Apparent, Prince Alexander, and the influential Russian Minister in Belgrade, Nikolai Hartwig. The upshot was that old King Petar, who although popular enough as a constitutional and democratic ruler, was in the last resort unwilling to make a stand against the army that had put him on the throne in 1903, was persuaded to abdicate “on the grounds of ill health”, and hand over his regal powers to his second son, Alexander, who became Prince-Regent on 24 June 1914, a few days before the Sarajevo assassination. Meanwhile Pašić, determined to get rid of the threat posed to Serbian democracy by Apis and his dangerous meddling once and for all,¹² proceeded to call new elections in the hope of rallying popular support against his opponents, the Independent Radicals and Liberals, tactically backed by Apis.

The Defensive War Strategy and Plans for Yugoslav Unification, 1914–1915

It was in the middle of this crisis, when Pašić was on his electoral tour in southern Serbia, and the ailing Chief of Staff, Radomir Putnik, was actually in Austria, taking the cure at a spa, that the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum was delivered to the foreign ministry in Belgrade. Totally unprepared for war as the Serbs were, they did everything they felt they could justifiably do to avoid it.¹³ The Serbian response to the ultimatum was conciliatory and very skilfully drawn: the only conditions that were rejected were those incompatible with the status of a sovereign state – that delegated investigators from the Habsburg police be permitted to search for potential accomplices on Serbian soil. Otherwise, Belgrade expressed its readiness to fulfil, with minor modifications, all terms of the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum.¹⁴

The Austro-Hungarian declaration of war was met with defiance. The Prince Regent reminded his people that “thirty years ago, Austria-Hungary conquered Serbian Bosnia and Herzegovina”, provinces which “it finally and unlawfully appropriated six years ago”, and summoned the nation to defend “their households and the Serbian race with all their strength”. In Montenegro King Nicholas announced that his subjects were “ready to die in defence of our independence” – in fact, when war broke out the only tangible political and military support Serbia could count on was from the co-nationals of Montenegro. Serbia had no formal alliance with the Triple Entente apart from her 1913 treaty of alliance with Greece, Athens explained to Pašić, would not be activated unless Bulgaria attacked Serbia.¹⁵

¹² Dušan T. Bataković: *La Main noire (1911–1917). L’armée serbe entre démocratie et autoritarisme*. In: *Revue d’histoire diplomatique* 2 (1998), pp. 94–144, esp.: pp. 127–136.

¹³ Mark Cornwall: *Serbia*. In: Keith Wilson (ed.): *Decisions for War, 1914*. London 1995, pp. 55–95.

¹⁴ Mitrović: *Serbia’s Great War* (see note 1), pp. 43–52.

¹⁵ Dušan T. Bataković: *Yugoslavie. Nations, religions, idéologies*. Lausanne 1994, p. 118.

Ever since 1903, when Belgrade had chosen to look for support to Russia and France instead of the Dual Monarchy, Austria-Hungary had been the most likely adversary of Serbia. Since then, relations had gone from bad to worse, as the Monarchy launched the “Tariff War” in 1906 (in Serbian eyes a crude attempt at coercion by crippling their economy), annexed Bosnia and the Herzegovina in 1908, and by 1912 even used the threat of military action to force Serbia to withdraw her troops from the Adriatic littoral of autonomous Albania, Vienna’s new protégé. Not surprisingly, therefore, Serbia’s strategic planning in these years was very much directed towards coping with a potential Austro-Hungarian invasion.¹⁶

Once war broke out Serbian strategists, like most of their counterparts abroad, believed that the military conflict would be over within two or three months. In the Serbian General Staff, this view was strengthened by the conclusions they drew from the Balkan Wars.¹⁷ Hence, the Serbs planned to stick to a purely defensive strategy for the first few months of the war, expecting – in fact correctly – that the major attack would not come through the open valley of the Save to the north, but from the west, across the Drina.¹⁸ In this case, the Serbs reckoned that their best chance of inflicting a mortal blow on the Austro-Hungarian troops would be to allow them to penetrate deeper into Serbian territory. In the event, this defensive strategy worked: the first invasion of Serbia, from eastern Bosnia, was marked by a brilliant Serbian victory on the slopes of Cer, from 16 to 19 August 1914 – the first Allied victory in what had now become the Great War – and a second invasion was successfully repulsed in December.¹⁹ Offensive operations, by contrast, were less successful. Two Serbian breakthroughs into the Austro-Hungarian territory during 1914 – in eastern Bosnia, up to Pale near Sarajevo, and in the Srem area, now Vojvodina – although welcomed by both the local Serbs and the South Slav population in general – proved insufficiently prepared and overambitious for the limited effectiveness of the Serbian Army.

As regards Serbian war aims, these were at first strongly influenced by the belief that the war would not last longer than a few months – and were naturally formulated at an early stage of the war.²⁰ In September 1914, Pašić summoned a

¹⁶ Cf. in detail: Vladimir Ćorović: *Odnosi između Srbije i Austro-Ugarske u XX veku*. Belgrade 1991, pp. 371–488.

¹⁷ Like so many others they drew the wrong lessons: they should have looked not at the lightning (rather flukish) victories at the start, but at the endless slog of the trench warfare that developed at Chataldja.

¹⁸ Hew Strachan: *The First World War*. Vol. 1: *To Arms*. Oxford 2001, here: pp. 335–347.

¹⁹ For the victory in the battle of Cer, General Stepa Stepanović was promoted to Field Marshal (vojvoda). A still valuable account in: Crawford Price: *Serbia’s Part in the War*. Vol. 1: *The Rampart against Pan-Germanism*. London 1918, pp. 85–114; Marie Alphones Th. R. A. Desmazes/Naoumovitch: *Les victoires serbes en 1914*. Paris 1928.

²⁰ Dimitrije Djordjević: *Vojvoda Putnik*. The Serbian High Command and Strategy in 1914. In: Béla K. Király/Nandor Dreisziger (eds.): *East Central European Society in the First World War*. Boulder 1985, pp. 569–585; Dimitrije Djordjević: *The Idea of Yugoslav Unity in the Nineteenth*

number of eminent Serb scholars to Niš to put together a statement of Serbia's war aims, including the vision of a union of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. When asked about the post-war borders, Pašić indicated an area on the map that included Marburg, Klagenfurt and Szeged. "If we fail", he said, "we shall fail in good company – with the Entente powers".²¹ In Serbia, the idea of Yugoslav unification was primarily a programme embraced by the Independent Radicals, the second largest political party. Prior to 1914, an influential group of Serbian intellectuals (St. Novaković, J. Cvijić, J. Skerlić, J. M. Žujović, A. Belić) had strongly advocated a Yugoslav union, citing linguistic similarities, a common culture and ethnic origins. Meanwhile, the Croato-Serbian Coalition, both in Croatia-Slavonia (under Hungary) and Dalmatia (under Austria), and a growing pro-Yugoslav feeling among the younger generation in Bosnia-Herzegovina, boosted tangible support for the Yugoslav movement.²² The cultural unity of Yugoslavs (Serbs, Croats and Slovenes) was also preached, prior to 1914, by an influential elite of Croatian scholars (V. Jagić, T. Maretić). Yugoslavs were described as "a nation in the making" (M. Marjanović, Š. Kurtović) which would constitute a synthesis of East and West in the Slavic South. Already in 1911 the Serbian historian and diplomat St. Novaković, was predicting that a future Yugoslav state would stretch from Split in the west, to Subotica in the north, and from Lake Ohrid in the south to Marburg (Maribor) in the north. Croatian advocates of the Yugoslav idea included Dalmatians who were imbued with more central-European attitudes, including Mazzinian ideas.²³ Another important theoretical basis for the Yugoslav idea was provided by the geographer Jovan Cvijić, who argued that the Dinaric Alps (covering most of Montenegro, Herzegovina, Bosnia, Dalmatia) were a specific geopolitical whole with an almost uniform ethnic composition (since numerous migrations had mixed up Serbs and Croats and created related patterns of culture and civilisation). At any rate, with the outbreak of war this Yugoslav idea, essentially a construct of theorists before 1914, became an important and concrete element of Serbia's programme of war aims. Moreover, thanks to the military and political support of the Triple Entente in their struggle against the Dual Monarchy, the Serbs were presented for the first time with the opportunity to achieve Yugoslav unity and by creating a large "Yugoslav" state under the Serbian dynasty to rid themselves once and for all of Austria-Hungary's relentless threats to their sovereignty and independence. As Pašić declared in a circular of 4 September to all Serbian legations "Serbia should become a strong south-western Slavic state that would include all the Croats and all the Slovenes as well". Only such a state could achieve "the abolition of Germanic supremacy

Century. In: id. (ed.): *The Creation of Yugoslavia 1914–1918*. Santa Barbara/Oxford 1980, pp. 1–18, esp. pp. 7–14.

²¹ Panta M. Draškić: *Moji memoari*. Ed. by Dušan T. Bataković. Belgrade 1990, p. 87.

²² Milorad Ekmečić: *Ratni ciljevi Srbije 1914*. Belgrade 1971, pp. 80–112; Ljubinka Trgovčević: *Naučnici Srbije i stvaranje Jugoslavije 1914–1920*. Belgrade 1986, pp. 28–32.

²³ Bataković: *Yougoslavie* (see note 15), pp. 124–129.

and its penetration towards the East” and stand up to “all the combinations whose aim would be to endanger European peace or to annul the successes of the Allies’ weapons”.²⁴

Further military successes against the second Austro-Hungarian invasion at the end of the year boosted the self-confidence of the Serbian government and the army considerably; but the overall situation in the kingdom remained difficult. In the two campaigns in 1914, out of 250,000 Serbian soldiers 163,557 perished, while 69,000 civilians died in the campaign of terror conducted by Austro-Hungarian troops.²⁵ (According to renown Swiss forensic expert Austro-Hungarian troops committed horrible massacres in western and central Serbia, executing thousands of civilians, including elderly people, women and children.) Meanwhile, some 600,000 internally displaced Serbs constituted an additional heavy burden on a country which two Austro-Hungarian invasions had left with a ravaged economy and agriculture.²⁶

Moreover, although the Serbian Front along the border with Austria-Hungary was to remain quiet for nearly a year after the Battle of the Kolubara the military and economic exhaustion of Serbia caused by the ravaging of western and central Serbia and large-scale war crimes by Austro-Hungarian troops, led in early 1915 to the outbreak of a typhoid epidemic, which epidemic took the death toll of more than 100,000 of 400,000 infected soldiers and civilians, and undermined Serbia’s defensive capacity considerably.²⁷

The official proclamation of Serbia’s war aims came in December 1914 during the Battle of the Kolubara, regarded as a decisive victory over the Dual Monarchy, a vanishing empire doomed to crushing defeat at the hands of the Allies. Proud but exhausted, Serbia now hoped for a speedy end to the war which had already drained most of her military and economic strength. When Belgrade, was liberated and the last Habsburg soldier was expelled from Serbia between early and mid-December, the moment seemed appropriate for an official statement of Serbia’s war aims, whereupon the new coalition cabinet headed by Pašić and including ardent pro-Yugoslav Independent Radicals summoned a National Assembly in Niš, the wartime capital of the kingdom, on 7 December and issued the Niš Declaration proclaiming the unification of the

²⁴ Milorad Ekmečić: Serbian War Aims. In: Djordjević (ed.): Creation (see note 20), pp. 19–36, here: pp. 21–23; see also Djordje Dj. Stanković: Nikola Pašić. Saveznici i stvaranje Jugoslavije. Belgrade 1981, pp. 47–55.

²⁵ The architect of the Serbian counteroffensive in the Battle of Kolubara (3–14 December 1914), General Živojin Mišić, was promoted to the rank of Field Marshal. Cf. Dušan T. Bataković/Nikola B. Popović (eds.): Kolubarska bitka. Belgrade 1989.

²⁶ Rodolphe A. Reiss: Report upon the Atrocities Committed by the Austro-Hungarian Army during the First Invasion of Serbia. London 1916, pp. 30–146 (chapter “Massacres and Atrocities Perpetrated on Civilians”); cf. also: Henry Barby: Avec l’armée serbe. De l’ultimatum autrichien à l’invasion de la Serbie. Paris 1918, pp. 112–147.

²⁷ Cf. chapters on Serbia in 1915 in: John Reed: The War in Eastern Europe. New York 1916, pp. 22–96.

South Slavs (Serbs, Croats and Slovenes) of Austria-Hungary as Serbia's ultimate war aim.²⁸

Six months later, in May 1915, these Serbian war aims were endorsed by the Yugoslav Committee of exiled Croats, Slovenes and Serbs in Paris. Sponsored by the Serbian government, the leading members of the Yugoslav Committee – A. Trumbić (its President), F. Supilo, N. Stojanović, F. Potočnjak, H. Ninković – vigorously promoted the idea of Yugoslav unity in Allied capitals. Thus, the Niš Declaration became not merely a Serbian vision of Yugoslav unity, but also a response to the demands of prominent Yugoslav political exiles from the Austria-Hungary for the formation of a common state with Serbia and Montenegro. As the very first Manifesto of the Yugoslav Committee called explicitly for South Slav unification, the dismemberment of the Dual Monarchy was clearly on the agenda.²⁹ Meanwhile, a Yugoslav Congress, held in Niš in May 1915 under the presidency of the Dalmatian writer Ivo Ćipiko, also adopted a resolution calling for the “complete and indestructible national unity of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes”. The Serbian government, for its part, sent a group of leading Serbian scholars (J. Cvijić, A. Belić, P. Popović, J. M. Žujović, Lj. Stojanović) to Allied capitals to promote the Yugoslav union, the necessity for which, incidentally, suggested that proposals for the dismemberment of Austria-Hungary were not universally welcomed.³⁰ Petrograd, for instance, objected strongly to the Serbs’ uniting with Croats and Slovenes, since the latter had fought fiercely against the Russian Army on the Eastern Front.³¹ In Rome, too, there was fierce opposition to Serbia’s Yugoslav programme, and Italian war aims as embodied in the 1915 Treaty of London with the Entente gave rise to major conflicts with both the Serbian government and the Yugoslav Committee. For example, the Treaty gave Italy most of Dalmatia, Adriatic islands and Istria, which the Croats and the Dalmatian Serbs were claiming as a part of the future Yugoslav state with Serbia as its “Piedmont”; and although the Yugoslav Committee was focused primarily on the dismemberment of Austria-Hungary, its first broader action was a fervent campaign against the provisions of the Treaty of London.³²

²⁸ Dragoslav Janković: Niška Deklaracija. In: *Istorija* 20 (1969) 10, pp. 7–111. On overall situation in Niš in late 1914 see the memoirs of the Russian chargé d'affaires: Vasilij Štrandman: *Balkanske uspomene*. Belgrade 2009.

²⁹ [Le Comité yougoslave]: *Le programme yougoslave: avec une carte*. Paris 1916; Dragovan Šepić: *Srpska vlada i počeci Jugoslavenskog odbora*. In: *Historijski zbornik* 13 (1960), pp. 1–45.

³⁰ Dinaricus [Jovan Cvijić]: *Jedinstvo Jugoslovena*. Niš 1915, pp. 5–60; Jovan Cvijić: *La pensée de la nation serbe*. In: *Revue hebdomadaire*, 10. 4. 1915, pp. 209–219; St. Novakovich: *Problèmes Yougo-Slaves*. In: *La Revue de Paris*, 1. 9. 1915; W. M. Petrovitch: *Serbia. Her People, History and Aspirations*. London 1915; Trgovčević: *Naučnici Srbije* (see note 22), pp. 35–54.

³¹ Michael B. Petrović: *Russia's Role in the Creation of the Yugoslav State 1914–1918*. In: Djordjević (ed.): *Creation* (see note 20), pp. 73–94, here: p. 76.

³² Cf. more in: Vaso Bogdanov: *Jugoslavenski odbor u Londonu u povodu 50-godišnjice osnivanja*. Zagreb 1966; Gale Stokes: *The Role of the Yugoslav Committee in the Formation of Yugoslavia*. In: Djordjević (ed.): *Creation* (see note 20), pp. 51–71.

One unforeseen consequence of putting forward demands for the dismemberment of Dual Monarchy at this early stage of the war was felt by the ordinary population of Serbia after the third invasion ended in the occupation of the entire country in late November 1915. The kingdom was divided into Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian zones, and a systematic campaign to denationalise the Serb population was accompanied by the systematic plundering and destruction of cultural property, libraries, archives and monastery treasuries. Indeed, a veritable campaign of terror by the Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian military authorities against civilians now ensued, which included internment in detention camps in Hungary, arbitrary arrests, hostage-taking, and mass executions. Between August and October 1916, 16,500 Serbs were deported to detention camps in Hungary; by May 1917 the number of Serbs held in detention camps of the Dual Monarchy had risen to 40,000; and even the Pope was moved to intervene in Vienna against the internment of children. After a Serbian insurrection in the region of Toplica in 1917, however, deportations and mass executions intensified further.³³

The Allies, Bulgaria's Claims and the Serbian Campaign in Albania 1915

In their efforts to attract Bulgaria into their camp in 1915 the Entente Powers exerted growing pressure on Serbia to cede most of Macedonia (the 1912 "contested zone") to Bulgaria, offering in return territorial compensations at the expense of Austria-Hungary: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slavonia, Bačka, northern Albania and most of Dalmatia, up to the port of Split (August 1915). None of these offers were accepted: Pašić considered the Morava-Vardar axis vital to maintaining the balance of power in the Balkans, which would be seriously upset by the further enlargement of Bulgaria. In any case, Serbian officials were sure (and were later proved right) that the Central Powers were offering Sofia even more significant territorial concessions at Serbia's expense than the Allies.³⁴

Meanwhile, an undeclared war had been going on since 1913 on Serbia's border with Albania: Albanian paramilitary units, often trained by Ottoman officers and financed by the Dual Monarchy, had launched a number of incursions in an attempt to instigate a large-scale rebellion of Kosovo Albanians. Pašić, for his part, sent 23,000 soldiers into Albania in May 1915 to support Essad Pasha Toptani, his only ally in this traditionally hostile environment. Essad, formally a supporter of the Entente, was balancing between Italy and Serbia, and had concluded two agreements with Pašić about closer political cooperation, in Niš in 1914 and in

³³ Dimitrije Djordjević: Austro-Ugarski okupacioni režim u Srbiji i njegov slom 1918. In: Naučni skup u povodu 50-godišnjice raspada Austro-Ugarske Monarhije i stvaranja jugoslovenske države. Zagreb 1969, pp. 220f.; on Toplica insurrection more in: Andrej Mitrović: Ustaničke borbe u Srbiji 1916–1918. Belgrade 1987.

³⁴ Dušan T. Bataković (ed.): Histoire du peuple serbe. Lausanne 2005, pp. 272f.

Tirana in 1915. Now, with Serbia's decisive military support Essad Pasha defeated the supporters of the Central Powers and re-established his authority in central Albania. Giving military assistance to Essad Pasha had been a bold political gamble; but it was to prove fully justified later in the year, during the Serbian retreat across Albania.³⁵

The Third Campaign Against Serbia: Military Defeat and Exile, 1915–1916

Halted on the Marne and compelled to resort to trench warfare, the German High Command chose to cut back on its operations on the Serbian front. After its Austro-Hungarian Allies had suffered two humiliating defeats in 1914, Germany had taken command of the campaign against Serbia, and by late August was preparing a new offensive. On 22 September Bulgaria finally joined the Central Powers and ordered a general mobilisation. The outlines of the impending offensive were taking shape: a German attack from the north towards the Morava valley under General Mackensen; an Austro-Hungarian attack across the Drina from the west; and a Bulgarian move into the Vardar valley from the east to cut off the southward route of retreat for Serbian troops. The Entente Powers had adamantly rejected the demands of Putnik and Pašić for a pre-emptive strike to neutralise Bulgaria and Serbia now found herself unable to fight on two fronts.³⁶ True, Venizelos, the Prime Minister of Greece, in a defensive alliance with Serbia against Bulgaria since 1913 and Serbia's only ally in the Balkans besides Montenegro, asked the Allies to send 150,000 Allied troops to Salonika from the Near East, and actually ordered mobilisation a day after Bulgaria. But on 5 October, as the Allied troops began to disembark in Salonika, King Constantine, brother-in-law of Wilhelm II, determined to keep neutrality of Greece, dismissed Venizelos from office. The new cabinet in Athens declined Serbia's desperate appeal to implement the 1913 alliance treaty and assist her against her Bulgarian attackers.³⁷

The Austro-German offensive against Serbia was launched on 5 October 1915, and Bulgaria's from the east on the 7th, on a front that was almost 1,000 kilometres long, and comprised three German and three Austro-Hungarian Army corps which crossed the Save at Belgrade, and two Bulgarian armies advancing towards Niš and Skoplje. Belgrade, under fierce attack, was abandoned after heroic resistance. The Serbian plan to secure a retreat route via Niš and Skoplje to Salonika, and join the Allied forces under General Sarraill, had already been thwarted by the fall of Venizelos's government and the slow disembarkation of Allied troops in

³⁵ Dušan T. Bataković: *Essad Pasha Toptani and Serbian Government*. In: Andrej Mitrović (ed.): *Serbs and Albanians in the 20th Century*. Belgrade 1991, pp. 57–78.

³⁶ Balcanicus [Stojan M. Protić]: *The Aspirations of Bulgaria*. London 1915.

³⁷ Dušan T. Bataković: *Serbia and Greece in the First World War. An Overview*. In: *Balkan Studies* 45 (2004) 1, pp. 59–80.

Salonika.³⁸ As early as 16 October, the vital communication line, the Niš-Skoplje railway, was severed by the rapidly advancing Bulgarian troops, while the Serbian attempt to break the Bulgarian front line at Kačanik and get to Skoplje had ended in failure by mid-November.

Not that these reverses sapped the determination of the Serbs to fight on. As early as 4 November, as rumours began to circulate that Austro-German agents were offering peace negotiations, Pašić, for whom the separate peace was no option, dispatched the following instruction to all Serbian diplomatic missions: "I have learnt that Serbia is rumoured to be about to conclude a separate peace treaty with Germany and her Allies. I would kindly ask you to deny such rumours categorically and assure the domicile government that Serbia, even though she is in a very difficult situation, and even if the situation gets more difficult, is nonetheless determined to fight the invader to the end, and, loyal to her Allies, endure the whole war which she is convinced will end with the enemy's defeat." Even when, on 18 November, after two more weeks of disasters, the Serbian government, now in exile in Scutari, discussed the separate peace offers it was almost unanimous in its support of Pašić's firm stance.³⁹

The plan for a gradual retreat to join the Allies at Salonika was finally abandoned after General Sarrail held his forces back from penetrating further into Macedonia to meet the Serbian troops. The proposal of Field-Marshal Živojin Mišić, the hero of the Battle of the Kolubara, to concentrate in Kosovo for a decisive counter-offensive against the combined German-Austrian and Bulgarian force was also abandoned. Instead, on 25 November, the Serbian General Staff ordered a general retreat across Albania.⁴⁰

This, of course involved a change of retreat routes. One headed towards Scutari and Saint Giovanni di Medua through Montenegro. Defending the western flank of the retreating Serbian Army, the Montenegrin Army inflicted a serious defeat on the Austro-Germans in the epic Battle of Mojkovac (7 January 1916) but could not withstand another attack. The Montenegrin parliament decided to follow the Serbs and withdraw into exile without surrendering. King Nicholas, however, crushed and demoralised, left for Italy in early 1916, while the Montenegrin government, after the fall of Lovćen, was forced to sign a capitulation.⁴¹

The other route was via Prizren. Putting up fierce resistance and launching occasional counterattacks, the Serbian rear-guard secured the retreat of the main body of the army and masses of civilian refugees, through Kosovo Polje to the Albanian border west of Prizren. In Albania, the only safe area for the retreating Serbian troops was the domain of Essad Pasha in Durazzo and its hinterland. Ac-

³⁸ See: Charles E. J. Fryer: *The Destruction of Serbia in 1915*. Boulder/New York 1997, pp. 74–93.

³⁹ Stanković: Nikola Pašić (see note 24), pp. 79–82.

⁴⁰ A concise documentation on Serbian military operations in: Mihailo Vojvodić/Dragoljub R. Živojinović (eds.): *Veliki rat Srbije 1914–1918*. Belgrade 1970, on retreat through Albania, pp. 221–260.

⁴¹ Novica Rakočević: *Crna Gora u Prvom svjetskom ratu 1914–1918*. Cetinje 1969, pp. 152–167.

cording to the Serbian General Staff's initial plan, the troops would reassemble under the protection of Essad Pasha, and re-equip themselves with material that the Allies were to supply by sea.⁴²

This plan soon proved unfeasible and, at the initiative of France and the insistence of the Tsar, plans were set on foot to evacuate the Serbian troops on Allied ships. In view of the difficult terrain and wintertime conditions the Serbian Army decided to abandon its military equipment, including the French cannons, and to cross into Albania with only small arms. In early December 1915, the terrible ordeal of the retreat, long to be remembered as the "Albanian Golgotha", began, over snow-laden Albanian mountains and swollen rivers.⁴³ The exhausted Serbs, were ill prepared and suffering from shortages of food, warm clothing and footwear in extreme winter conditions. Once outside the region controlled by Essad Pasha's gendarmerie, they faced surprise attacks from hostile Albanian tribes; and owing to Italian obstruction, they were obliged to fight their way through to Valona in the south, where French ships waited to evacuate them to safety.⁴⁴

In fact, the "Albanian Golgotha", went down to history as the worst human catastrophe in the history of modern Serbia. The overall losses in 1915–16 amounted to 247,887 dead, wounded, captured or missing. The Allied ships, mostly French, first took 10,000 exhausted evacuees to Bizerta, but the vast majority – the army, the ailing King, the government, the parliament and masses of civilian refugees – were evacuated to Corfu, occupied by the French for that purpose. In Corfu, host to 151,288 soldiers by the spring of 1916 and Vido, a further 7,751 soldiers died from exhaustion and diseases;⁴⁵ but by May, recovered and rearmed, three Serbian armies over 115,000-strong with a cavalry and six infantry divisions were deployed on the Salonika Front within the ranks of the French-led *Armée d'Orient*. At first, the Serbian Prince-Regent, as the Supreme commander of the Serbian Army, tried to insist on exercising a fully autonomous command; but it was eventually agreed that General Sarraill would assume effective command in his name.⁴⁶

"Greater Serbia" or Yugoslavia, 1916–1918?

In strategic terms, Serbia's Yugoslav programme was a success in so far as it drew a considerable number of volunteers into the Serbian Army, whose reputation was enhanced by important victories in 1916 (battle of Kajmakčalan, recapture of

⁴² Djoko Tripković: *Srpska ratna drama 1915–1916*. Belgrade 2001.

⁴³ John Clinton Adams: *Flight in Winter*. Princeton 1942, pp. 151–197.

⁴⁴ Fortier Jones: *With Serbia into Exile. An American's Adventures with the Army that Cannot Die*. New York 1916, pp. 351–391; cf. also: Henry Barby: *Epopée serbe. Agonie d'un peuple*. Paris 1916.

⁴⁵ Lieutenant-Colonel Ripert D'Alauzier: *Un drame historique. La résurrection de l'armée serbe. Albanie, Corfou, 1915–1916*. Paris 1923, pp. 174–208.

⁴⁶ Cf. more in: Petar Opačić: *Le front de Salonique*. Belgrade 1979, pp. 52–62.

Bitolj [Monastir]);⁴⁷ and two divisions of volunteers under Serbian command served on the Salonika Front. Apart from Serbs – the majority – the volunteers included a number of Croats and Slovenes attracted by the prospect of Yugoslav unification, a number of whom came from as far afield as North and South America (having originally emigrated from the South Slav provinces of Austria-Hungary). Indeed, a separate “Yugoslav division” was made up of Yugoslav volunteers enlisted primarily in the United States. Meanwhile, the show trial at Salonika of Apis and his clique of “Black Hand” officers in 1917, indicted for alleged conspiracy against life of the Prince-Regent, eliminated both a threat to democracy and potential opposition to Yugoslav unification within army ranks.⁴⁸ On the other hand the February Revolution in Russia deprived Serbia of one of her main supporters, namely, the Emperor Nicholas II, who had on a number of critical occasions, shown his utter devotion to Serbia, whereas the old ruling elite in Russia frowned on Serbian plans for a union with the South Slavs of Austria-Hungary, preferring simply an enlarged, i.e. “Greater” Serbia.⁴⁹

The Corfu Declaration signed between the Pašić government and the Yugoslav Committee in July 1917 – intended partly as a counter to demands for a separate South Slav polity within a reorganised Dual Monarchy – was an essential step towards a common state, although, despite long deliberations, no agreement was reached as to its future internal organisation. For Pašić, the Yugoslav Committee had no real legitimacy; thus he considered the Corfu Declaration not as a binding document but as an important political statement regarding the future unification. In contrast, for Ante Trumbić and most other members of his Yugoslav Committee, the Corfu agreement was a binding preliminary constitutional arrangement. The Montenegrin Committee for unification with Serbia, also accepted the Corfu Declaration; and most Serbian intellectuals and politicians were in favour of Yugoslav unification. Pašić himself remained cautious, insisting on the unification of predominantly Serbian-inhabited lands (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Vojvodina, Montenegro, Srem) with Serbia in advance of any eventual union with Croats and Slovenes – a plan which generally coincided with the territorial compensations that the Allies had offered Serbia in 1915 if she ceded the “contested zone” of Macedonia to Bulgaria.

Meanwhile, in the Dual Monarchy, the Corfu Declaration served as a wake-up call for Slovenes and Croats interested in preserving the Dual Monarchy. Prior to the Declaration, Anton Korošec, leader of the Slovenian People’s Party, warned the Austrian Premier that in the south of the Monarchy, the “Greater Serbian idea is the strongest” and proposed countering it by uniting Slovenia with Croatia. Indeed, at his initiative, in May 1917, the Yugoslav club of Croatian and Slovenian

⁴⁷ Eugène Gascoin: *Les victoires serbes de 1916*. Paris 1919, pp. 84–143.

⁴⁸ David MacKenzie: *The “Black Hand” on Trial*. Salonika, 1917. Boulder/New York 1995, pp. 373–399.

⁴⁹ Petrović: *Russia’s Role* (see note 31), pp. 76–80; Nikola B. Popović: *Odnosi Srbije i Rusije u Prvom svetskom ratu*. Belgrade 1977, pp. 310–344.

members of the Viennese parliament actually adopted a declaration which, "on the basis of the national principle and the Croatian state right, calls for the unification of all the lands in the Monarchy inhabited by the Slovenes, Croats and Serbs into one independent state [...] under the sceptre of the Habsburg-Lorraine dynasty". The overwhelming majority of the Serbs in the Dual Monarchy, by contrast, remained completely opposed to such a solution.⁵⁰

Concurrently with the assertion of the principle of self-determination as a solution for the Polish and Czecho-Slovak questions, the Yugoslav programme was gradually finding its way to the Allied cabinets, eventually featuring prominently in April 1918 at the Rome Congress of Oppressed Nationalities comprising representatives of all the subject peoples of Austria-Hungary. There, the Italian representatives recognised the unity and independence of South Slavs or Yugoslavs; while the U.S. government, after deeper deliberation, assured the Serbian government that "all branches of the Slav race should be completely freed from German and Austrian dominance". In late July 1918, Great Britain acknowledged the unification of Yugoslavs as Serbia's war aim, while France's decision in the summer of 1918, to accept the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, helped further to pave the way to Yugoslav unity.⁵¹

Meanwhile, the French General Franchet d'Espérey, commander of the Salonika Front since June 1918, accepted Serbia's proposal for an offensive strategy with French-Serbian troops as a main component in the planned breakthrough. Spectacular military victories in the autumn of 1918, in particular a breakthrough by two Serbian armies, brought the realisation of Serbian war aims nearer than had been expected.⁵² For, to the fury of Kaiser Wilhelm Serbia's successes on the Salonika Front had a domino effect on military operations on other fronts and made a significant contribution to the outcome of the Great War. Indeed, as the Kaiser put it in a sarcastic telegram to King Ferdinand, commenting on Bulgaria's sudden capitulation: "Disgraceful, 62,000 Serbs decided the war."⁵³

With all of pre-war Serbia liberated on 1 November 1918, the strategy for Serbian unification prior to the formation of a common state with Croats and Slovenes began to move forward. Serbian troops under Field-Marshal Stepa Stepanović were invited by the National Council of Bosnia-Herzegovina to liberate these provinces and were solemnly greeted in Sarajevo on 6 November, while French and Serbian troops liberated Kosovo and entered Montenegro. The unconditional unification of Vojvodina (24 November in Novi Sad) and Montenegro

⁵⁰ Bataković: *Yugoslavie* (see note 15), pp. 134f. In contrast to Yugoslav programme, the typical Croat-inspired positions against unification with Serbia are summarised in: L. von Südland [Ivo Pilar]: *Die südslawische Frage und der Weltkrieg. Übersichtliche Darstellung des Gesamt-Problems*. Wien 1918.

⁵¹ Dragan R. Živojinović: *America, Italy and the Birth of Yugoslavia (1917-1919)*. New York 1972; Le Moal: *Serbie* (see note 1), pp. 216-228.

⁵² Opačić: *Front* (see note 46), pp. 93-103.

⁵³ Peter Kirch: *Krieg und Verwaltung in Serbien und Mazedonien 1916-1918*. Stuttgart 1928, pp. 101-111.

(26 November in Podgorica) with Serbia was followed by the successive unification of 42 of 54 districts of Bosnia-Herzegovina (Banja Luka, Prijedor, Bihać, Ključ, Jajce, Zvornik, Bijeljina, Višegrad, Gacko, Nevesinje, Rogatica, etc.) directly with the Kingdom of Serbia.⁵⁴

The future position of the non-Serbian South Slavs, by contrast, remained uncertain. True, in late October 1918, all state and legal ties with Austria-Hungary were declared annulled by a National Council based in Zagreb, an ad hoc body which went on to proclaim a separate “State of the Slovenians, Croats and Serbs” within the Yugoslav provinces of the former Monarchy. This state was not recognised by the Allies, however, and lacked popular approval; and the National Council’s calls for military mobilisation met with no response. The National Council authorised the Yugoslav Committee to represent it abroad: but in early November 1918, in discussions with Serbian officials at Geneva, the Croat and Slovene negotiators, led by Dr Anton Korošec, President of the National Council and Ante Trumbić, insisted that the new state be organised along dualist, i.e. federalist lines (on the model of the former Austria-Hungary). Suspecting that the Prince-Regent might try to resolve the issue of unification along centralist lines, and pressured by the opposition, Pašić reluctantly agreed to the dualist model and to a proviso that its monarchist character be not specified.⁵⁵

The Geneva Agreement caused a cabinet crisis: several Serbian ministers resigned, warning that the agreement tended “to separate the Serbs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Srem and Slavonia, Dalmatia and Lika, Bačka, Banat and Baranja, from Serbia, and to play them off against Serbia”. Minister St. M. Protić stressed that “our brothers from former Austria Hungary have been materially liberated thanks to the rivers of Serb and Allied blood, but they have not been liberated spiritually. Their ideology remains Austro-Hungarian.” At this point Pašić himself submitted his resignation, thereby invalidating the Geneva Agreement altogether; while it was also denounced by the National Council in Zagreb, which was always, like the Yugoslav Committee, more of a revolutionary than a representative body.⁵⁶

All this left simple unification with Serbia as the only viable option. After the Villa Giusti armistice Italy moved to occupy most of Dalmatia and Istria and parts of Slovenia, while Austrians and Hungarians started fighting for control of Carinthia and Styria. Fearing further territorial losses, a delegation from the Zagreb National Council rushed to Belgrade, whereupon Prince Regent Alexander hastily proclaimed the new “Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes” in the name of

⁵⁴ Dušan T. Bataković: *The Serbs of Bosnia & Herzegovina. History and Politics*. Paris 1996, p. 91. On Montenegro, where the popular representatives deposed the King Nicholas I and his dynasty to merge with Serbia, see: Jovan R. Bojović: *Podgorička skupština 1918. Dokumenti*. Gornji Milanovac 1989.

⁵⁵ Bogdan Krizman: *Raspad Austro-Ugarske i stvaranje jugoslovenske države*. Zagreb 1977, pp. 80–89, pp. 163–172.

⁵⁶ Bataković: *Yugoslavie* (see note 15), pp. 136f.; Mitrović: *Serbia’s Great War* (see fn. 1), pp. 321–323.

King Peter I, on 1 December 1918. In that way, Pašić's plan for creating a unified or – as the Austrians termed it –, “Greater” Serbia in advance of overall Yugoslav unification was abandoned. True, the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918 was to some extent a fulfilment of Serbian war aims; but the price had been very high: according to the official report submitted to the Peace Conference in Paris, Serbia had lost some 845,000 civilians and 402,000 soldiers, a total of 1,247,000 lives.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Cf. more in: Milorad Ekmečić: *Stvaranje Jugoslavije 1790–1918*, vol. 2. Belgrade 1989, pp. 810–832.