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Book review

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Srbija u Velikom ratu 1914–1918 [Serbia in the Great War 1914–1918], Belgrade, Srpska književna zadruga, Beogradski forum za svet ravnopravnih, special editions, Belgrade 2014, 300 p.



In the year of marking the 100th anniversary of the Great War (1914–1918), Serbian historiography has been enriched with a short history of the event that marked the 20th century, whose contours and indirect influences in the long historical processes can

be recognised today as well. Mira Radojević, Ph.D., an associate professor at the History Department of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade and Ljubodrag Dimić, Ph. D., a corresponding member of SANU (Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts) and professor at the History Department of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, motivated by the need to affirm the academic findings of Serbian historiography and their integration into the existing results of the European and global historiography, have prepared both for the academic and a wider readership a book about the event that ended one historical epoch. Being aware that only nations knowing the truth about themselves have a future, as they highlighted in the Preface, they delivered to the readers a short history of Serbia's

position in the Great War. At the same time, the authors also decided to share the acquired historical knowledge of the First World War with the foreign readers, since it is expected that the book *Srbija u Velikom ratu 1914–1918* will be published in different languages.

The First World War is characterised by a powerful image in the collective memory which is also reflected through an increased interest in this topic, not only of the academic but also a wider public, even one hundred years later. A rebirth of the need to interpret the past is encouraged by the consequences of the First World War that outlined the history of the 20th century and impact the world of today. Events that occurred during the turbulent 20th century created oscillations in the collective memory, so that selections and simplifications of the historical events and processes appeared. At the time of marking 100 years since the beginning of the First World War, we are witnessing an attempt to revise the history embodied in manipulation of historical events, occurrences and processes for political interests and aims. The use of unsubstantiated and unverified facts, or willfully connecting historical facts in an order that would lead to an already pre-set hypothesis is a great danger

of modern society. Through six chapters and a conclusion devoted to the Yugoslav unification, the book *Srbija u Velikom ratu 1914–1918* enables going back to the historical sources, historiographical heritage and academically argued dialogue in highlighting the complex causes of the First World War outbreak, the course of the war operations, relations between the countries involved in the conflict and the consequences of the first worldwide conflict in the history of mankind.

A long prehistory of the beginning of the First World War encompasses the period from the Congress of Berlin (1878), decisions of which influenced the development of Serbia and its relations with other countries, primarily with Austria-Hungary. Although a several decades long process of the renewal of Serbian statehood was ended in 1878, the Serbian elite had a task to keep and strengthen the acquired independence, ensure fast economic development, modernisation, integrate the nation, and find the foreign political support and a guarantee of Serbian interests in the Europe of increased conflicts and imperial ambitions. How the Serbian politicians responded to these challenges and what was the development of the Kingdom of Serbia like until shots were fired

by Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo in 1914, is part of Chapter One titled „From the Congress of Berlin to Sarajevo Assassination“. Special attention in this part of the book has been dedicated to the influence that the Serbian elite, sprung from an almost illiterate background and educated mostly at the European University centres, had on Serbia's political and social life. Creators of Serbian foreign and internal policy reached the level of the European science and, regardless of political and social differences, nourished a common ideal in defending the state's independence and gathering parts of the Serbian nation that lived outside the Serbian state. Observation of Serbia's position in international relations at the beginning of the 20th century through the issues of block division, Moroccan Crisis (1905, 1911), Annexation Crisis (1908) and Balkan Wars (1912–1913), is linked to „reaching for the world power“ and relations among the Great Powers, as well as the condition of their society and state apparatus. Processes leading up to the war are highlighted, particularly the increase of funds intended for military purposes and the outlines of the new military alliance of France, Russia and Great Britain, that changed the foreign policy position of Germany. The Habsburg

Monarchy (Austria-Hungary), the crisis of its ruling structure, problems of the Balkan politics, positions towards the Yugoslav idea and Serbia are also viewed within a combination of complicated international relations.

The Annexation crisis, the staged High Treason Process and Frid-jung process, as well as the Balkan Wars, in the book *Srbija u Velikom ratu 1914–1918* are seen as crucial events that built the “obsession about Serbian danger” in Austria-Hungary. Under the influence of a war party behind which was the generalate, one of the main Austro-Hungarian foreign policy aims was to destroy Serbia by military force. Although Germany did not fully support the position of Vienna for a shorter period of time, the outcome of the Balkan Wars, the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire and the announcement of Great Britain that it wouldn't be a passive observer of the conflict between Germany and France, made it opt for the war. Military reinforcement of the Entente Powers in the autumn of 1913, influenced the consolidation of Germany's alliance with Austria-Hungary and the forming of position that the first next crisis was to be used for war. The issue of destroying Serbia or attracting it to the Central Powers, was „open“ for Germany

when the Council of Ministers in October 1913 in Vienna gave approval to start the preparations for a war with Serbia. A motive to start the war was found in the assassination of the Austrian heir to the throne Franz Ferdinand on *Vidovdan* (St. Vitus Day), 1914, in Sarajevo. In Chapter Two titled „The Beginning of the Great War“, based on sources and literature, the authors laid out the events, occurrences and processes in relation to the Sarajevo Assassination and July Crisis. A secret, youth and revolutionary organisation *Mlada Bosna* (Young Bosnia), whose members carried out the assassination, the situation in Austria-Hungary and its relation with Germany, preparations for the war and relations between the Great Powers at the time of the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum being sent to Serbia on 23 July 1914, are in the focus of attention of the authors. The discontent with Austro-Hungarian regime in Bosnia and Herzegovina, implementing strict police control, performing a „civilizing mission“, closing down Serbian national societies and not addressing the issue of serfdom, along with an idea of cultural unification of Yugoslavs, was reflected through the shots fired by Gavrilo Princip, that became a spark thrown in a „storage full of gunpowder“. Serbian

government was not aware of the Sarajevo Assassination preparations and was in conflict with some officers gathered around the secret organisation called *Ujedinjenje ili smrt* (*Crna ruka*) (Unification or Death (Black hand), led by lieutenant colonel Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis, Chief of Intelligence Department of the Serbian Army's General Staff. Nevertheless, already in the first days following the assassination, propaganda accusations about the involvement of the official Serbia in this act, as well as calling for responsibility, were started, with simultaneous preparations for the war in military and diplomatic circles in Vienna and mass expulsions of Serbs from the Habsburg Monarchy.

Srbija u Velikom ratu 1914–1918 sheds light on significant issues that are still the subject of polemics among historians today. First of all, it concerns the organisation and execution of the Sarajevo Assassination, France, Russia and Great Britain's response to the crisis, Germany's entry into the war, or its support to the Austrian „war current“, led by General Conrad von Hötzendorf, Chief of the General Staff, which turned the war of potentially local character into the war between two blocks of powers. Chapter Two of the book, along with the situ-

ation on the frontlines (Western, Eastern and Balkan), discusses the issues such as the reach of coalitions, alliances and agreements signed in the decades before Austria-Hungary declared the war on Serbia on 28 July 1914 and before the Great Powers got engaged in the conflict. The attention is focused on the situation in Serbia in a year of war 1914 and problems that the Serbian army and state had when invaded by Austria-Hungary, with which it did not want to be at war. At the same time, the authors also point out the importance of the Serbian state programme. In war circumstances, with *Niška Deklaracija* (*Niš Declaration*), the Serbian elite equated the idea of the „three tribes of one nation“ to „fighting for the liberation of home“ and incorporated it into the state war programme and foundations of the future statehood.

Chapter Three titled „A Year of War 1915“ describes war operations on land and sea with most attention oriented towards Serbia's military victories. Although the victories induced pride and the competence of the Serbian soldiers caused admiration, in 1915 Serbia was exhausted. Resistance offered by Serbia against a superior enemy attracted the sympathy of the general public following the visits paid by foreign military

missions and intellectuals, reports written by Archibald Reiss, newspaper articles by John Reed and Henry Barby, missions by Henry Wickham Steed and Richard Seton-Watson as well as the French intellectuals Victor Bérard and Emile Owen who advocated for Serbs. The text of the book *Srbija u Velikom ratu 1914–1918* has been enriched with their testimonies of the traces of war and death from the entire territory of Serbia. Troubled by economic crisis, high costs of financing the war and epidemics of contagious diseases, destroyed roads and communications, in the year of war 1915 Serbia had no agreement outlining obligations and rights with the allied countries. The authors think that Serbia back then was „stretched between aggressive enemies and selfish allies“, who realised that it would be a long war and that, due to the unfavorable situation in major battlefields, it was necessary to attract the neutral countries – Italy and Bulgaria. The analyses of the allied diplomacy indicates that Balkan capital cities were „stock markets“ in which the Entente Powers competed with the Central Powers. In such circumstances and without a more detailed knowledge of the signing of the Treaty of London between the allied countries and Italy, at the end of 1915 Serbia

confronted the combined invasion of the Central Powers and, after the government's refusal to capitulate, started to retreat and evacuate through Albania to Corfu, which one part of the third chapter is dedicated to.

The greatest battles of the First World War were waged in 1916, so the authors dedicated Chapter Four titled „A Year of War 1916“ to the analyses of military operations and conditions on the frontlines, as well as to the forming of the Macedonian (Salonika) Front. The image of occupied Serbia, division of interest spheres and the plan of separation between Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria are argumentatively presented. The work of the Occupation Administration was based on ensuring economic exploitation, realisation of plans on permanent acquisition of occupied territories, and intimidation of Serbia's population. Intelligentsia and elite were to be destroyed, the use of Serbian personal names, inscriptions and language was forbidden, Serbian church buildings were desecrated, even the cultural treasures (treasuries of the Dečani, Ravanica and Manasija monasteries, Dušan's Code, archive materials) became the spoils of war. Relationship with the Allies, organisation of the Macedonian Front, as well as keeping the statehood con-

tinuity were issues of vital importance for a military broken and occupied Serbia. *Srbija u Velikom ratu 1914–1918* also actualises the issue of attitudes of French, Russian and British military and political leadership towards Serbia, i.e. how their plans in the Balkans and events in the major battlefields in Europe influenced the forming of positions towards the efforts of the Serbian government to protect Serbian interests.

Following the unsuccessful „peace offers“ at the end of 1916, countries exhausted by the war and burdened with problems in internal politics, faced the new challenges. In Chapter Five titled „War and Revolution“, the authors dedicate their attention to the major turning points of the war – the revolution in Russia and the USA's entry into the war, and the influence of these events on the course of the war and the position of Serbia. Already in the early 1917, members of the Triple Alliance and Tripartite Treaty started to observe the war aims of the Allies together with giving promises to the existing or new allies in terms of territorial concessions and support in the post-war period. The Inter-Allied Conference in Rome in January 1917, assembled to discuss the conditions of peace, implementation of war aims and battlefields in the

Balkans, and the London Conference in August 1917, were of multiple importance for Serbia with regards to the engagement of the Allies in the Macedonian Front. Knowingly combining historical sources and literature, the authors decided to parallelly present the efforts made by the Serbian government in exile to maintain the Macedonian front, recognition of the Kingdom of Serbia's statehood continuity and support to the Yugoslav programme, as well as the life in occupied Serbia. The issue of Solunski proces (Thesaloniki Process), that ended the conflict between military and civilian authorities, members of the Black Hand organisation and the government and regent Aleksandar Karađorđević, has also been lightened. The outbreak of the revolution in Russia, abdication of Tsar Nicholas II Romanov, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's coming to power and his proposals for the conclusion of peace, as well as economic, financial, military and diplomatic aspects of the USA entering into the war, made the government of Nikola Pašić engage more actively diplomatically in order to gain favor of the new war ally, internalise the Yugoslav issue and implement Serbian war aims. The authors of the book *Srbija u Velikom ratu 1914–1918* associate the military and political position of Serbia,

epitomised through a diplomatic offensive of the Pašić's government, with the adoption of the Corfu Declaration in 1917, as the foundation of the internal organisation of the future Yugoslav community. Thus, they opened the issue relating to the attitude of the allied governments towards the Declaration adopted in Corfu, as well as the issue of relationship between two Serbian states, Serbia and Montenegro.

Chapter Six titled „The Last Year of the War“ encompasses the position of the warring parties, further course of war operations and the breakthrough of the Macedonian Front, as well as the issue of Serbo-Croato-Slovenian unification. In a concise and clear style, the authors described the difficult situation on the frontlines, social riots and demands that brought Austria-Hungary into existence, as well as the consequence that internal political conflicts in Germany had on the continuation of the war. At the beginning of 1918, the Peace Treaty in Brest-Litovsk disintegrating the Eastern front was signed, which made it possible for Germany and Austria-Hungary to concentrate their army units, outnumbering for the first time, in the west. The preparations for the Macedonian Front breakthrough, relationship between Serbia and the Allies, as

well as the course of the operation itself, are singled out as a separate part of Chapter Six in *Srbija u Velikom ratu 1914–1918*. It proved that Germany, even with three offensives, did not have enough power to win. By the signing of the act of surrender on 11 November 1918, the First World War, in which ten million people were killed, as many died, and twice as many were wounded, was brought to an end. By presenting the information on the number of victims, invalids, prisoners in the camps, material damage estimated at 360 billion dollars, as well as the change of borders, decreased economic development and the new world order, that the winners of the war tried to make according to their own interests, the authors motivate a reader to think about how the horrors of the First World war left a mark on the lives of contemporaries and future generations.

Parallely with the description of the course of the war, warfare operations, analysis of the relationship between Serbia and the Allies, the book *Srbija u Velikom ratu (1914–1918)* follows the development and implementation of the Yugoslav Unification idea, which, since the Niš Declaration, became part of the Serbian war plan. The final chapter „Yugoslav Unification“ considers the issue

of the Allied Powers's attitude towards the unification of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes into one independent and free country. Early at the beginning of the 20th century, a perception that the unification was, basically, the issue of existence in the future, prevailed among the Serbian politicians, as the authors of the book *Srbija u Velikom ratu (1914–1918)* pointed out. Aware of the fact that destiny of the regions in the international relations is decided by the interests of the Great Powers, the Serbian elite opted for a strong action. The programme and course of the Yugoslav unification in the book *Srbija u Velikom ratu (1914–1918)* are viewed in line with its Balkan, Mediterranean and Central European dimension and diplomatic attitudes of the winning powers. For a new state to be created, which marked the change in the structure of the postwar Europe as well, it was necessary to have a consent from the Great Powers that Austria-Hungary should disappear from the political map, which was definitive in the last months of the war. Therefore, it is important that the book *Srbija u Velikom ratu (1914–1918)* re-examines the issue of the Yugoslav unification through a conference of the representatives of the Serbian government, Yugoslav Board, National

Council of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs and Serbian opposition in Geneva, in November 1918, the analysis of relationship between the Kingdom of Serbia and the National Council of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, which was filled with distrust, a political dilemma whether to affiliate Vojvodina directly to Serbia and the resolution of the unification issue of Serbia and Montenegro. At the end of the book, the history of Serbia in the First World War, which Serbia entered into for the reason of self-defense, goes into the history of the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, in which Serbia invested its statehood, built in the foundations of its entire history and tradition, sacrificing more than a quarter of its population.

The book *Srbija u Velikom ratu (1914–1918)* is a continuation of the Serbian Literary Co-operative's tradition of publishing books that are based on science and have educational purposes. At the same time, it is also about the academic response of the Serbian historiography to the attempts of making the role and function of history and historians in society meaningless. The need for a book that would enable understanding of the place and role of Serbia in the First World War was recognised by the Dias-

pora, which helped the printing of the work made by two experts of the modern history of Serbia and Yugoslavia, through the Belgrade Forum for a World of Equals. Sublimation of experiences gathered by the Serbian historiography, which the authors prepared and enriched with their opinions, offers an image of the time and events, recognised as the most glorious in the Serbian history for its heroic feats, but also as the most tragic, as almost one quarter of the population of the Kingdom of Serbia died in the war. A multi-annual research carried out by the authors on the subjects of the Serbian and Yugoslav history, primarily the history of the Yugoslav idea, Serbo-Croatian relations, problems of democracy and parliamentarism, the role of political and intellectual elite, the history of the Balkans in the 20th century, social, diplomatic and cultural history, makes it possible for the reader to find the original and scientifically founded interpretation of the past of the First World War. At the same time, by the way they approached the subject, enlightened all aspects of the war and presented many details, the authors motivate the reader to re-examine the past over again. The book *Srbija u Velikom ratu (1914–1918)* isn't just a collection of historical knowledge, however,

by its existence, it is a permanent contribution to the development of culture of remembrance in the Serbian society. Knowledge and understanding of the events related to the First World War, created on the basis of a methodologically established approach to historical sources and literature, are a necessary part of the social memory of Serbs at the beginning of the new millenium, in which the Serbian people are facing the new challenges.