

SERBIA'S WAR GOALS SEEN THROUGH OFFICIAL AND PRIVATE MILITARY CORRESPONDENCE, 1914-1918

Abstract: *The article presents a research of the war goals of the Kingdom of Serbia in the First World War, from the point of view of ordinary soldiers. It analyzes ceremonial addresses to the army, greetings, telegrams, but also private military correspondence such as diaries, letters, postcards and advertisements. Special emphasis is placed on the concepts of Greater Serbia and Yugoslavia and the ways in which soldiers understood these terms in various phases of the war. As a result, it is acknowledged that soldiers, like Serbian politicians, often had vague ideas about the ultimate goals of the war. However, the war goals clearly consisted of two components: the preservation of state independence and the expansion of state territory. The latter element depended on the situation on the local, but also on the European front. Such a perplexing situation provides possibilities for different interpretations of this issue, which was the case during and after the breakup of the Yugoslav state in 1991.*

Keywords: Greater Serbia, Yugoslavia, war goals, military correspondence

By the mid-1920s, most of the graves at the Serbian military cemetery on the Greek island of Vido were unrecognizable. Crosses from 1916 were mostly rotten. There were only a few monuments made of more durable materials, stone and cement, but they too lay broken. Letters from angry visitors were regularly sent to the relevant ministries. One of them was also sent by the judge of the Administrative Court in Skopje, Dušan M. Nikolić. Judge Nikolić's objections were recorded in 1932 and represent a commonplace. However, what is particularly interesting in his letter is the mention of a memorial inscription. On the remains of the broken grave of second lieutenant Ajdačić, judge Nikolić read the following sentence: "Greater Serbia begins from here."¹ As this officer was one of 1300 cor-

¹ Државни архив Србије, РГ 1, Писмо судије Управног суда Душана М. Николића, 16. август 1932.

porals, we know a little more about him. A short note about Tihomir Ajdačić was also left by his friend, student sergeant, and later by a well-known university professor, Miladin Pećinar. Thus we learn that the inscription in its original form read: “Goodbye, Homeland, goodbye, parents, goodbye, comrades and friends, I'm staying here – this is where Greater Serbia begins.”²

If the first part of the sentence is filled with classic elements of patriotic poetics, the second part of the inscription represents a paradox and is thought-provoking. Even in the most daring variants, the Greek islands did not fall within the possible borders of “Greater Serbia” nor were they part of any variant of the South Slavic project. Is this wording primarily metaphorical, signifying the absolute commitment of this reserve officer to the war goals of his country, at the cost of his own death? The question can be asked from another angle: what did the idea of “Greater Serbia” represent for Serbian soldiers, and did the idea of “Yugoslavia” represent? Was the idea for the memorial inscription proposed by lieutenant Ajdačić on his deathbed? Or was it the wish of his friends and relatives?

It is common to see the creation of Yugoslavia as the ultimate political goal of the Kingdom of Serbia. The text of the Niš Declaration of 7 December 1914 has been continuously interpreted as the cornerstone of Serbian war aims. However, by 1918, this proclaimed goal had undergone many oscillations. Depending on the situation on the front and on the favor of the allies, but also members of the Yugoslav Committee, the Serbian government wandered between a *small* and a *big* solution, i.e. expansion of the borders of the Kingdom of Serbia and the building of a completely new union. Previous research has examined this question from various angles, but above all with an emphasis on the history of the Yugoslav idea. Nevertheless, it should be underlined that even today very little is known about what the Serbian military factor saw as an acceptable condition for ending the war.

In the spirit of efforts of modern historiography, during the last thirty years, the question of examining the *war experience* arises.³ Primarily among or-

² Pećinar added several details in the memorial book dedicated to the student sergeants. We learn that Tihomir Ajdačić was from Ivanjica, that he studied engineering before the war. According to Pećinar, Ajdačić had a gentle nature, was a fatalist and a great friend. He suffered from typhus and was wounded near Knjaževac in 1915. His nickname was *Ajdača*. After arriving in Corfu, he fell ill. He was soon transferred to the island of Vido, where he died a few days later. Миладин Пећинар, „Аџа и Ајдача“, у: *Скопски ђачки батаљон 1914. Батаљон 1300 каплара* (Београд: Удружење 1300 каплара, 1968), 491–493.

³ Jean-Jaque Becker, *Histoire culturelle de la guerre* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2005); Włodzimierz Borodziej, Maciej Górny, *Forgotten Wars. Central and Eastern Europe, 1912–1916*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

dinary soldiers, conscripts and reservists. Following this research line, it is possible to ask a very interesting question – how did Serbian citizens under arms see the issue of war goals? We know quite a lot about how the student-sergeants viewed the war. Nevertheless, in the wake of modern historiography, a more difficult question should be asked - how did the soldiers subordinated to Lieutenant Ajdačić view the war efforts and war goals.

This paper shows that Serbian soldiers simultaneously nurtured several, often very different, and even conflicting, notions about war goals. On the one hand, the basis was the idea of defending the country, suppressing foreign invasion. The conflict was definitely perceived as imposed. However, from the very first days of mobilization, the very clear existence of another idea can be noticed, namely the expansion of state borders at the expense of Austria-Hungary. In this regard, there is also the third idea – the creation of a completely new, very vaguely defined state entity. In this respect, the soldiers themselves followed the vagueness of the politicians and their wanderings when it comes to defining what was achievable as a war goal. There were phases, and they depended on the situation on the battlefield and international circumstances. Bearing in mind the wider goal of this compilation of the *Serbia 2020* team, this paper pays particular attention to the changes in the national structure of the Serbian army. As the conflict progressed, the Kingdom of Serbia increasingly relied on recruits from New Serbia (1915) and South Slavic volunteers (1918). These changes were also indirectly reflected in the experience of the war goal, both among *old* and *new* fighters. Official state and military proclamations, orders, announcements and greetings were used as the central source for this research. Another important group of sources on which this work is based are military diaries and letters.

Method and problems

Ceremonial telegrams, as well as daily orders, can be studied from the point of view of national identity, as well as the proclaimed war goals of the Kingdom of Serbia. Despite their very brief form, the messages officially addressed to the army represent very eloquent source material. Researching this type of discourse provides opportunities for new insights into how contemporaries perceived their identity, but also what the nature of the current conflict was. This specific rhetoric, full of symbolism, reflected a rich historical consciousness, and thus offers a wealth of material for analysis. The messages of the Regent or King Petar I have mostly been used thus far, similarly to quotes from diaries, only as an illustration of a problem, but a deeper analysis. However, these texts primarily requi-

re an analysis of the context in which they were created. Attention should also be drawn to the linguistic patterns used.⁴

The first centenary of the World War showed that the volumes of preserved diaries exceeded even the most optimistic expectations. Even in Yugoslav historiography, diaries from 1914-1918 were present in an incomparably greater number than is the case with historiographical works. The war diary of an officer or soldier almost made up for the absence of syntheses about the First World War. Thus, Serbian military diaries played a key role in the transfer of memories of the First World War to the Serbian public. It can be said that the memories and diaries of contemporaries were also key to the memory boom about the First World War that began with the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the war, in 1964. On the Serbian front, the problem seen in the West was repeated, the soldier who regularly kept a diary became a kind of competitor, but also an object of ridicule for the real author. The diary was seen as the best source for the illustration of the war and the transmission of the wartime experience. In connection with this, there is also the criticism of certain veterans regarding the excessive realism that many diary authors brought in their diaries.⁵

Although the diaries were often written in a concise and linear manner, the authors often touched on a number of sensitive topics that were not mentioned in official military correspondence.⁶ This is precisely why the thematic classification is imposed as a basic principle in working with diaries. The search for topics omitted by the author is also very important. One of the very important and sensitive topics is the issue of military motivation, i.e. the question of the psychological mechanisms applied by the soldier in order to survive extraordinary efforts and perils.⁷

Soldiers' letters are treated in a similar way. Postal cards and personal ads in the press are also an important source of insight into the private world of soldiers and civilians. It is estimated that the British Army sent as many as three

⁴ There is a very important book in the Serbian language: Милисав Савић, *Сећање и рат* (Београд: Службени гласник 2009).

⁵ Дуња Душанић, *Фикција као сведочанство. Искуство Првог светског рата у прози српских модерниста*, (Београд: Досије студио, 2017), 39–40.

⁶ Andre Carroll, *War Letters: Extraordinary Correspondence from American Wars* (New York: Scribner, 2001); *Dear America: letters home from Vietnam*, ed. Edelman, Bernard (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985); Paul Fussel, *Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Jan Vansina, *Oral tradition: a study in historical methodology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965); Пол Томсон, *Усмена историја. Глас прошлости* (Београд: Clio, 2012).

⁷ Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War. Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

million postcards from France every day.⁸ As has been noted, the most important thing to a soldier after his rifle was his mail.⁹ This type of material is much less used in our science. A collection of military letters created immediately after the war, published by Dr. Vladislav Pandurović, stands out.¹⁰ In domestic science, it is still very difficult to find soldiers' letters. The recent effort of Nemanja Kalezić and Jasmina Tomašević, who organized an exhibition on the correspondence of Serbian soldiers in the First World War, is also praiseworthy.¹¹

There are also series of problems with using this type of material that belongs to the domain of ego-documents. Did the author resort to self-censorship?¹² Were all parts of the diary preserved and arranged orderly and reliably? Communication problems are of a completely different type. Namely, to what extent are the linguistic patterns from the wartime in general comprehensible to the modern researcher? However, it is important to point out that the question of censorship is raised here in a particularly strict form. Nevertheless, despite all the limitations, diaries, postal cards and letters are often the only source available to researchers for the domain of the private in war.

Greater Serbia or Yugoslavia. *Primordial Aspiration or Mistake (1918-1991)*

In order to understand the messages, both those sent to the army and those left by the soldiers in their diaries, it is necessary to make some basic observations about the war goals of the Kingdom of Serbia. One of the features of the discussion of this issue is the retroactive interpretation of Unification. Namely, after 1918, all the efforts of the Serbian army were interpreted exclusively from the perspective of the building of the Yugoslav state. With the discussions about

⁸ Martha Hanna: War Letters: Communication between Front and Home Front, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10362.

⁹ William Broyles Jr. "Forward", *Dear America*, 10.

¹⁰ Владислав Пандруовић, *Српска писма из Светског рата* (Нови Сад: Прометеј, Београд: РТС, 2014).

¹¹ Немања М. Калезић, Јасмина И. Томашевић, „Писати се могу само приватне вести“, *приватна кореспонденција током Првог светског рата* (Београд: Народна билбиотека Србије, 2018).

¹² *Theoretical Discussions of Biography. Approaches from History, Microhistory and Life Writing*, eds. Hans Renders, Binee de Hann (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Willemijn Ruberg, *Conventional Correspondence, Epistolary Culture of Dutch Elite, 1770–1850*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

the “breaking up” of the state and the subsequent declaration of Yugoslavia as a “fatal Serbian mistake”, the tendency has become completely reversed.¹³

Since 1918, the historiography effort has been primarily directed towards an attempt to explain the origin and genesis of the common state. Great attention has therefore been devoted to the Niš and Corfu Declarations. The main role in solving the Yugoslav question was interpreted as more or less revolutionary due to the struggle to overthrow the Habsburg monarchy.¹⁴ However, one of the key problems in explaining the emergence of a common state was how to make a distinction between Serbian commitment to the possibility of creating a “Greater Serbia” and the idea of “Yugoslavia.” The liberation of the South Slavs has been seen partly as a continuation of the “votive mission of Prince Mihajlo”, whose roots can also be found in *Načertanije* from 1844.

The programs of the main Serbian parties have also been studied. It is clear that even the People's Radical Party, and even less the Independent Radical Party, did not deny the possibility of South Slavic cooperation and unification. In this respect, Laza Paču's statement from June 1913 can serve as a good illustration. Paču stated that only after the liberation of Old Serbia and Macedonia, the first major tasks of “national unification of the Serbs with their brothers, the Serbs and Croats, as well as the Slovenes, who are just as good South Slavs as we are”, were set.¹⁵ Professor Milorad Ekmečić also agreed with this, stating that the war goals of Serbia from 1914 were essentially a continuation of the ideas of national liberation movements from earlier times to create a unified Yugoslav state.¹⁶

Certain secrecy of the Serbian side during 1914 is also a problem in the study of this issue. Until the appearance of the Corfu Declaration in 1917, Nikola Pašić avoided talking about the Yugoslav issue as the cause of the war, fearing that this issue would strengthen accusations that Serbia had been actively working to cause war and undermine Austria-Hungary.¹⁷ On the other hand, there were also hesitations regarding the feasibility of South Slavic unification.¹⁸ This hesitation became very pronounced with Nikola Pašić from the end of October 1914 and the

¹³ Ђорђе Станковић, *Србија 1914-1918. Ратни циљеви*, (Нови Сад: Прометеј, Београд: РТС, 2014), 5.

¹⁴ Dragoslav Janković, Mirko Mirković, *Državnopravna istorija Jugoslavije* (Naučna knjiga: Београд, 1982), 315.

¹⁵ Ђ. Станковић, *op. cit.*, 47.

¹⁶ Милорад Екмечић, *Ратни циљеви Србије 1914*, (Београд: Просвета, 1990).

¹⁷ Ђ. Станковић, *op. cit.*, 103.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 122, 123.

deterioration of the situation on the front.¹⁹ In those weeks, not only could there be no talk of any expansion of the borders, but the very survival of Serbia was most directly called into question.

Science has also discussed a whole series of issues related to the Niš Declaration. Why were the war aims announced at all, and so early? After the war, Pašić defended the action as coerced: "As soon as we were attacked, we saw that it was about staying alive, and then if we stayed alive, we had to use that opportunity to free our brothers, the Croats and the Slovenes, or we would all perish."²⁰ Stanoja Stanovijević expressed a similar view. He believed that the Balkans had to avoid being "a battleground of the unfulfilled desires of the South Slavs and predatory attacks from the outside."²¹ A big and powerful state seemed like a solution. It should be noted that almost all key Serbian political actors estimated that the Yugoslav issue had entered an acute phase.²² Already in August 1914, the government mentioned that the war was being waged for the solution of the entire South Slavic question. It is also a fact that Nikola Pašić spoke about the borders of the new Yugoslav state already on the second day of the war, 29 July 1914.²³ Similarly, it is known that Pašić already informed the Allies on 4 September 1914 of his intentions to create "one strong southwestern Slavic state, which would include all Serbs, all Croats and all Slovenians."²⁴ Pašić's guidelines from 27 October 1914 for the establishment of the Yugoslav Committee are also interesting, stating that the new state would not be just an expanded Kingdom of Serbia, but a new state. The inclusion of Slovenes in this country was at times uncertain. Pašić's strong views against federalism are also known, even from that time.²⁵ The formation of the new government on 5 December 1914 is entirely in the spirit of the idea of "defending the home and freedom", but it is also emphasized that this is "at the same time a struggle for the liberation and unification of all our enslaved brothers, Serbs, Croats and Slovenes."²⁶

It is important to break down several basic questions about the term "Greater Serbia." As a rule, the use of this term has been vague almost as a rule,

¹⁹ Ibid, 126.

²⁰ Ibid, 126.

²¹ Ibid, 126.

²² М. Екмечић, *Ратни циљеви Србије 1914*, 66; Драгослав Јанковић, *Југословенско питање и Крфска декларација 1917. године* (Београд: Савремена администрација, 1967).

²³ Ђ. Станковић, *op. cit.*, 119.

²⁴ Д. Јанковић, М. Мирковић, *op. cit.*, 316–318.

²⁵ Ibid, 318.

²⁶ Ibid, 322.

so it is even more difficult for today's researchers to define it. For Professor Milorad Ekmečić, "Greater Serbia" has always had the character of a struggle for the unification of the Yugoslav state.²⁷ However, in modern times the term has become synonymous with "stealing other people's lands."²⁸ The newspaper "Greater Serbia" was launched in 1888, but even the editors never made a statement about which territories should be considered parts of the future Greater Serbia.²⁹ It is important to address a certain secretive and almost coded language that was in use in Serbia for a long time. Ever since the state's independence, the issue of Bosnia and Herzegovina has become a very important and highly combustible topic in Serbian public discourse. Bosnia was included in the same ideological corpus in which Old Serbia had already been – the regions that were supposed to become part of Serbia. In this regard, we should look back at the way in which these territories were discussed in the Serbian public.

Although Serbia officially gave up its claims to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the reality was quite different. During the reign of King Milan in 1899, the Belgrade newspaper "Male Novine" wrote as follows:

"...the thought of all-Serbian liberation and unification is born with us and we still suck it with our mother's milk..._These ideas will disappear once they come true or when the last Serb has perished..._Bosnia and Herzegovina will be Serbian, with Austrian consent, if possible, or against Austria-Hungary if it has to be."³⁰

Bosnian revolutionary Dobrosav Jevđić mentions in his memories the chorus line of a song that the Serbian army sang while marching through Belgrade at the beginning of the 20th century. Its verses were written sometime between 1903 and 1909, while the older son of King Petar Karađorđević, Đorđe, was still seen as the heir to the throne: "King Petar, long live Đorđe, let the army go to Bosnia..."³¹

The preface to Živojin Mišić's *Strategija /Strategy/*, published in 1907, can be used as an example: "Our officers and our army face great, difficult and lofty tasks in the unification of Serbs. If I, with this humble work, would help, at least a little bit, to prepare our officers and our army as well as possible for their holy

²⁷ Милорад Екмечић, „Појам Велике Србије према светским узорима“, у: *Велика Србија. Истине, заблуде и злоупотребе*, ур. Василије Крестић, Марко Недић, (Београд: Српска књижевна задруга, 2003), 39.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 40.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 40.

³⁰ Аноним, „Gutten Morgen!“ *Мале новине*, 7. јун 1889, 1–2.

³¹ Добросав Јевђевић, *Сарајевски завереници. Видовдан 1914.* (Рим: С. л. 1953), 5.

task, for the bloody war...then I would consider that with this work I have achieved my goal and that I have fully fulfilled my duty both as a soldier and as a man and as a Serb.”³²

Communication with the army

How were these ideas conveyed to the soldiers? The declaration of war was announced to the army precisely through the proclamation of the Regent on 29/16 June, a day after the Austro-Hungarian declaration of war in 1914. In his speech, the Supreme Commander emphasized the primarily defensive character of the conflict. The essence is stated in the last sentence: “Serbs, defend your home and the Serbian tribe with all your strength.”³³ However, already in this proclamation, the Regent also mentioned the Croats, in the context of the ingratitude of the Hapsburg Monarchy for the loyalty of the “Serbian and Croatian border guards.” Six days later, the Regent issued “Order No. 1.” This time, in addition to the emphasis on the defense of the country, other topics were mentioned much more. The Regent spoke about “the cries from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Banat, Bačka, Croatia, Slavonia and Srem”, but “also from our sea, burly Dalmatia.” In this way, the area that would be united with the Kingdom of Serbia or would be annexed to it was clearly demarcated. It is interesting to note the omission of Slovenia, which at the same time and in the political calculations of the radicals entered and exited the program of South Slavic unification.

The motif of defending the Kingdom of Serbia and its right to exist still remains at the center of rhetoric and should be the source of the main motivation for the fight. The speech emphasizes that Serbia is fighting for the right to live. “Now, (Austro-Hungary, D. Š.) has asked the ultimate price, it is asking for our head, our independence, life and honor of Serbia!”³⁴ Immediately after, emphasis is placed on the liberation of compatriots, i.e. Serbs: “That is why I am convinced this time too, on the homeland defense line and in a large part of the liberation of Serbian slaves, you will only be able to increase the glory and the beautiful image of Serbian weapons and your heroism.”³⁵ The proclamation ends in a similar tone:

³² Владимир Белић, „Војвода Живојин Мишић живот и рад“, у: *Летопис Матице Српске*, XXXIV, (1935), 38.

³³ „Прокламација“, *Службени војни лист*, 16 јул 1914, бр. 19; Ferdo Šišić, „Manifest Regenta Aleksandra“, у: *Dokumenti o postanku Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca 1914-1919*. (Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1920), 2–3.

³⁴ „Наредба Врховног комаданта“, *Службени војни лист*, 22. јул 1914, бр. 20, 655.

³⁵ Ibid.

“Fight for the freedom and independence of the Serbian people! Long live Serbia! Long live My Glorious Army!”³⁶

Thus, from the very beginning, there is a whole series of topics, which exist side by side and which are very clearly and expressively inserted into the public space. The announcement of the Montenegrin King Nikola, relayed on 31 July (13 August) by the Official Military Gazette of the Kingdom of Serbia, is also very interesting. King Nikola fully equated the two concepts. At the same time, he spoke about the “holy war for the freedom of Serbia and Yugoslavia.” Like Regent Aleksandar, he made references to the bad historical experience of the Serbian people with Austro-Hungary – about “the black and yellow banner that has been pressing the Yugoslav soul like a nightmare since ancient times.”³⁷

A letter of the Russian emperor to the Serbian army also shows how different the concepts of the war goal were and how many different factors influenced their formation. It was published on 27 July (10 August) 1914. In addition to the Serbian and Yugoslav question, there is now a general Slavic perspective. The emperor pointed out that the fate of Europe was now being decided, and that Russia would not put the sword back in its sheath until Germany and Austria-Hungary were completely defeated “and can no longer interfere with the peaceful development of the Slavism.”³⁸

After the victory in the Battle of Kolubara, on 28 December 1914, the Supreme Commander issued an order, which, this time more specifically, hinted at the expansion of the state territory. This announcement is also called the Macedonian and Kosovar Declaration of 28 December 1914.³⁹ This name was given to the document by professor Đorđe Stanković because of the emphasis on the recruits from New Serbia who were of particular importance in this phase of the war. The inclusion of national minorities in the Serbian army took place in stages. First, in May 1914, recruits from Macedonia joined the army, and then, from the end of the year, other categories of population from New Serbia.⁴⁰ The Regent thus pointed out that “in this third war, you are witnesses of their heroism, their love for the Homeland, the people of Kosovo and Vardar, the people of Žegligovo and Bregal-

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ „Прокламација његовог величанства краља Црне Горе“, *Службени војни лист*, 31. јул 1914, бр 21, 676.

³⁸ „Поздрав српској војсци“, *Службени војни лист*, 19. август 1914, бр. 25, 762.

³⁹ Ђ. Станковић, *op. cit.*, 131; *Govori Nj. V. Kralja Aleskandra Karadjordjevića I Ujedinitelja*, priredio Živan M. Miloradović, (Lingua: Beograd, 1991), 29.

⁴⁰ Danilo Šarenac, Aleksandar R. Miletić, *Između diskriminacije i neplanirane integracije. Albanci i Bošnjaci u srpskoj uniformi 1914–1918*. (Novi Sad: Centar za istorijske studije i dijalog, 2020).

nica, the people of Bitola and the people of Poreč have shown themselves to be worthy of their brothers from Šumadija.” The citizens of New Serbia were promised all the political and constitutional benefits of the “liberating Serbia.”⁴¹

The recruitment of Muslims into the Serbian army began in December 1914 and January 1915. By March 1915, there were as many as 7,000 Muslim recruits from the New Areas at the training in Niš. The Serbian officer Vasa Eškićević traveled by train in 1915 for part of the journey with recruits from New Serbia: “In Niš, we all went our separate ways. My companions, the Macedonian recruits, were taken to Niško polje, where there were already several thousand of them, and they immediately began accelerated training of the recruits. There were people from all over! Turks, Arnauts and other folk, each in his own ethnic dress over which he wore a government issued overcoat, and a fine šajkača on his head. I watched them practice like this for several days, and I admired their quick understanding during training, especially when the corporal explained to them stiffly, in a stern and official tone, how they should stand in the most important place, on the dead watch, how they should hold the rifle, and at how many steps the enemy soldier, or anyone else, is allowed to approach them.”⁴²

Again, in addition to revenge on the enemy, the Regent also hinted at territorial expansion. “The glow of your weapons will shine through the ages. Europe admires you, and our allies are delighted with the great deeds of the small Serbian army. With a strong charge, you brought down the enemy and struck a solid foundation for the Great Glorious Serbia... Everything for the happiness of our Homeland and the freedom of the Serbian tribe! God is with us.”⁴³ The “Greater Serbia”, as a territory where primarily the Serbs from the Habsburg Monarchy would be gathered together with the Kingdom of Serbia, seemed like a guaranteed win, a secure goal. “We must continue to perform our difficult duty for some time and stand by our great and powerful allies, who are also fighting for us, until they crush the common enemy on their vast fields, and then there will be peace, long peace, which will duly reward the sacrifices for our Great Serbia. Our Homeland will then be much bigger, stronger and happier than it has ever been.” However, the end of the statement was followed by words about the necessity of punishing the enemy and the movement towards the state borders, “to the Drina and the Sava!”⁴⁴

⁴¹ *Govori*, 30.

⁴² Vasa Eškićević, *Из мог ратног дневника (1914–1919)*, приредио Слободан Бјелица (Нови Сад: Прометеј; Нови Сад: Музеј Војводине, 2018), 31–32.

⁴³ Н. Цоловић, *op. cit.*, 181.

⁴⁴ „Наредба Врховног комаданта за целу војску“, *Службени војни лист*, 16. децембар 1914, бр 35, 978–979.

King Petar also sent congratulations to the army for the victory, but also on religious holidays. He ended his Christmas greeting with the words: “Long live the Serbs in all four sides of the world!”⁴⁵ Similarly, on Easter in 1915, the religious holiday was an opportunity to interpret the war efforts in a *Serbian* key: “...may we soon all celebrate Easter together and the unification of all Serbs.” King Petar continued in a similar tone: “In the dawn of the resurrection of Greater Serbia, I greet you on this day with ‘Christ Is Risen’! And with the desire to successfully finish the great work started on the realization of the Serb's ideals!”⁴⁶

The calm that prevailed during most of 1915 is important because of the mention of the upcoming offensive. The idea of penetrating the territory of Austria-Hungary was an opportunity to show in more detail the thoughts on this issue. Namely, in January 1915, the 19th Infantry Regiment was stationed on the slopes of Torlak. On 21 May 1915, the following order of the Supreme Commander arrived:

“After the glorious and happy ending of the first war period, after the heroic and admirable defense of our Homeland, my brave army has two more very important tasks ahead of it in this war against Austria, namely: cooperation with the army of our powerful ally Great Slavic Russia and the occupation of the territory which we claim. An inevitable and absolute necessity of our offensive is set here, without which the war could never end. When and at what moment the offensive will be launched, is a matter of state policy, but I demand from my commanders to prepare my troops for that moment, and that my brave army, as the most powerful tool in the hands of state policy for the achievement of great Serbian tasks, would be, in the upcoming offensive, as prepared in terms of morale and enthusiasm as it was on Jadar, as it flew on Cer, as it destroyed the enemy on the Kolubara...”⁴⁷

However, a retreat ensued instead of an offensive, and the loss of the entire state territory. This was the greatest crisis of morale and the entire army was on the verge of disintegration. In connection with this, very interesting is the order issued on 12/25 November 1915 by the commander of the Combined Detachment, Colonel Dušan Tufegdžić. The colonel here uses extreme rhetorical means, fiercely threatens, but also promises. At this moment, his units were on the very border of Serbia and Albania, and a huge number of troops had already deserted.

⁴⁵ „Његово величанство краљ Петар I упутио је Начелнику штаба Врховне команде овај поздрав“, *Службени војни лист*, бр 36, 25. децембар 1914, 1004.

⁴⁶ „Његово величанство краљ упутио је начелнику штаба Врховне команде овај поздрав“, *Службени војни лист*, бр. 7, 22. март 1915, 123.

⁴⁷ Добросав Ј. Миленковић, *Шумадијска дивизија I позива 1915*. (Београд: Б.М. 1930), 13.

It was important to retain the remaining soldiers in the unit. The ideas of Greater Serbia and Yugoslavia now lost all significance. The fight was for bare survival.

“Attacked by a superior enemy, we were compelled to retreat gradually, in order to preserve our forces until the situation improved by the arrival and action of a strong force of our allies... However, these disheartened men lose sight of the fact that we do not wage the war alone, but in an alliance with the four largest countries in Europe, and that the war cannot be solved by Serbia, but by our allies, who are incomparably bigger and more powerful than us. If our allies win, and the victory is undoubtedly on their and on our side, Serbia will not only return to what it was, but it will also be twice as big, even if ran over by the enemy three times.”⁴⁸

Again, the claimed territories were not specified, but it is certain that the idea was completely implied. From 1916, on the Thessaloniki front, the emphasis was primarily on returning to Serbia. An example is the Regent's Easter greeting to the army on 16 April 1916.⁴⁹ It was emphasized that “the fight is being waged until the Resurrection of Serbia and the liberation of the entire Serbian and Yugoslav people.” A little later, on 16 August 1916, during the Battle of Malka Nidzhe, the Regent again emphasized the idea of liberation. The “liberation of Serbia and all Serbs” is mentioned. “And I assure you that the day is not far when the sun of freedom will shine again on the entire Serbian nation and a peaceful and happy life will be secured.”⁵⁰

A war goal in the domain of the private

How did all these ideas affect the ordinary soldiers, almost 700,000 of them who passed through the Serbian army? Colonel Nikola Colović left in his memories an interesting description of the conversation with the soldiers. Namely, during the fourth day of mobilization, the commander of the Moravian Division, General Ilija Gojković, came to visit the Cavalry Division in Niš. He gave a short speech to the 3rd Cavalry Regiment.

“*May the good Lord grant that you drive the Austrian army out of Bosnia and into Austria on these horses.*” These words sparked great enthusiasm and joy among the soldiers. The general ordered the *kolo* (TN: circle dance) to be played, and the musicians played *Sarajevka*. The soldiers called the general to lead. The

⁴⁸ Војни архив (ВА), II. 7. К. 39. Ф. 3. Л. 9.

⁴⁹ *Govori*, 41.

⁵⁰ *Govori*, 43.

general apologized but ordered the regimental commander: “You lead this dance, you will be leading it these days with these people around our beautiful Bosnia and Vojvodina.”⁵¹

This was followed by an individual conversation between General Gojković and the soldiers. He wanted to know what the mood was, not only among the soldiers, but also among their families.

“The people, Mr. General, do not want war, but when Austria asks for it, it will find it, just like Bulgaria did last year. If it is true that Russia is with us and that the Russian emperor said that after the war the border between Russia and Serbia will be in Bukovina, then that’s it, let’s fight to the last man, so at least the children live in peace. The general laughed and said: That’s right. Russia is with us, and when we win, the border there will definitely move across our Banat, maybe even to Russia. And what is your name, brave man? Zdravko Prodanović, Mr. General, reserve cavalry sergeant, from Čačak. Good, good, Prodanović, may God give that we see each other in Bukovina, said General Gojković, smiling.”⁵²

This conversation shows the scale of war fervor and the extraordinary self-confidence of an army that had just emerged from two victorious wars. However, these daydreams in the days of mobilization were far from coming true. By force of circumstances, the war diary was also kept by the brother of the mentioned noncommissioned officer Zdravko Prodanović, artilleryman Mileta Prodanović.⁵³ Thus we learn that the horseman Zdravko Prodanović was killed in a shootout in the village of Prnjavor, already during the Battle of Cer. His brother Mileta left a rare and poignant description of the search for his brother’s body. Similarly, General Gojković did not see the end of the war and the new borders either. He died after a shipwreck in the Adriatic Sea in February 1917.⁵⁴

The case of Ljubomir Šašlić’s diary is also interesting. He was a Serb from Baranja who went from Austro-Hungarian recruit to Thessaloniki volunteer. He described the transition from Russian captivity to the ranks of volunteers, as part of the Serbian army. The laconic words hide the difficult process of making an important and fateful decision.

“We were there until our New Year, and then we went out for an exercise, and the commander gathered us together and said that an order had come that

⁵¹ Н. Цоловић, *op. cit.*, 165.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 166.

⁵³ Милета Продановић, *Ратни дневник 1914–1918*. (Горњи Милановац: Дечје новине, 1994), 29–30.

⁵⁴ Милић Милићевић, Љубодраг Поповић, *Генерали војске Кнежевине и Краљевине Србије* (Београд: Војна књига, 2003), „Гојковић Илија“, 74–77.

those who were willing to report for the Thessaloniki front were allowed to go to help the brothers in Thessaloniki, but also that everyone should think carefully, it is not like going to a wedding, but one should roll up his sleeves, take a bloody knife in his hands and go forward like that; And then he gave us two hours to decide, let everyone think carefully.”⁵⁵

When he arrived at the Thessaloniki front, Šašlić recorded the speech of Colonel Danilo Belimarković from April 1918. In addition to the liberation, the motive of revenge is now mentioned.

“We need to hold on courageously and, God willing, we will leave for mother Serbia, and if we reach Bulgaria to take revenge on them, to return their love.”⁵⁶ Similarly, before the breakthrough of the Thessaloniki front, the same colonel, Danilo Belimarković said to the soldiers: “Dear brother soldiers! Tonight we are going to the position and tomorrow, God willing, we will break through the steel gate and leave for mother Serbia, to free our loved ones.”⁵⁷

Memorial inscriptions and obituaries can serve as a source for observing the war and war goals. Such is the record about a young volunteer in Duke Vuk's detachment, Rizvan Sefi. He was seen as a Serb of the Muslim faith. “Eight months before the war, out of necessity, young Sefo came to Serbia to take part in the creation of a great Yugoslavia and the destruction of Austria.”⁵⁸ Other Muslims who had died as volunteers in Serbia were also mentioned. Husnija Kurtović allegedly said before his death: “I am not sorry, Serbia will be the Empire.”⁵⁹ Both were killed in Bosnia, during the penetration of the Serbian army that had arrived near Sarajevo, during the Battle of Glasinac.

Among the war diaries, the one kept by the artillery officer Stojan Ivković stands out. Part of the diary kept during 1914 and 1915 has not been preserved, so we only know about the author's views and thoughts from the period 1916-1918. Thus, the period on the Thessaloniki front was filled with hope for a return to Serbia, but also with the fulfillment of the war goal of expanding the state toward the regions where Serbs lived. It should be noted that the author of the diary was a native of Bjeljina and that his family still lived in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

⁵⁵ Петар Шмрчковић, Перо Матић, *Ратни дневник Љубомира Шашлића, од аустроугарског регрута до солунског добровољца* (Загреб: СКД Просвјета, подбор Кнежеви Виногради, 2021), 32.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 51.

⁵⁸ К. Марић, „Последње почасте. Рахметли Ризван Сефо“, *Вечерње новости*, 11. децембар 1914, 2.

⁵⁹ „Четничка акција“, *Београдске општинске новине*, 1. мај 1935, 235.

On 21 November (according to the old calendar) in 1916, Lieutenant Stojan Ivković wrote about the news that kept coming about the battles around Kajmakčalan and the death of Duke Vuk: “With God's help, this is just the beginning of this volume and the beginning of Greater Serbia. And it is really expanding more and more...”⁶⁰

Similarly, on 16 July 1917 according to the old calendar, he wrote: “The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes will be formed under the Karađorđević dynasty.” It is a beautiful day.”⁶¹ Ivković also sent postal cards to his wife in Serbia. How difficult it is to penetrate into the meaning of these texts is also evidenced by the following entry. Namely, on 23/10 October 1917, Ivković wrote: “Today I also wrote her a card in which I told her: *The house we have started building will be almost finished* and further: *Cancel the apartment to that tenant if he is not paying regularly*. I think that she will understand me well, because it refers to Greater Serbia and the Austrians.”⁶²

There were entries of his feelings toward Serbia even later: on 16/3 May 1918, Ivković wrote: “It was a Serbian gymnasium. The boys and girls sang *Hey, Serbia*, which song deeply shook me and moved me to tears, because I hear the Serbian students only after three years. There were also several *kolo* dances. The poems by Jova Zmaj were recited by the director Mr. Hadži Tašković. And then: “Our Yugoslav officers also sang a few songs.”⁶³ By this time, there were several thousand Yugoslav volunteers on the Thessaloniki front.

We can also mention the letter that Duke Živojin Mišić received in February 1916 from D. Radojlović, describing his arrival in Corfu: “...I have told you how much of a coward I am when someone says *rough sea*, let alone to swim in it and look for the borders of Greater Serbia, that fear of mine is growing into insanity.”⁶⁴

The well-known Thessaloniki soldier Živojin Lazić wrote down the events around him in his diary in a monotonous and extremely concise manner. However, on 30/17 August 1918, his tone changed: “Seventeenth: here I am drinking wine and looking forward to the fact that soon we will go to the battle and enter our homeland.”⁶⁵ Finally, the moment of victory and the end of hostilities were an op-

⁶⁰ Стојан Ивковић, *Ратни дневник 1915–1918*, приредио Александар С. Ивковић (Београд: Александар С. Ивковић, 1998), 84–85.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 147.

⁶² *Ibid*, 158.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 181.

⁶⁴ Велибор Берко Савић, *Војвода Живојин Мишић. Споменица* (Ваљево: „Милић Ракић“), 228.

⁶⁵ Живојин Лазич, *Ратни дневник* (Београд-Фоча: Хришћанска мисао-Хиландарски фонд, 2006), 84.

portunity for the soldiers to look back at the war and its purpose. It seems that it was not so important for the soldiers to go into the details of the achieved state organization. It was clear to them that the war objectives had been achieved.

Dragoslav Ranković was also a student sergeant, but from the class that came after the famous 1300 corporals. He was wounded in the leg on the Thessaloniki front, and was soon declared unfit for military service. On 1 December 1918, he wrote in his diary: "The unification of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was announced, which made me very happy. Thank God that this is also be over."⁶⁶ The famous Serbian painter Vasa Eškićević traveled to Serbia from Russia as a volunteer. During the war, he was a translator with the Russian engineering detachment. The end of the war for him essentially represented the creation of Greater Serbia: "I parted ways with my war comrades, only to meet some of them again after our three-year exile in the great, free and united Greater Serbia, and with many of them never again..."⁶⁷ The impression of relief can also be found on Sima Šević's postcard addressed to Tihomir Đorđević on 11 November 1918: "Today, the news also arrives here about the armistice with Germany. Thank God that this war has ended as justice demands. The whole world is crazy with joy."⁶⁸

Conclusion

With the breakup of the Yugoslav state, there is a very present desire to eradicate every trace of Yugoslavism from Serbian history and to interpret the First World War in a distinctly Serbian key. However, the way in which the Serbian ranks saw the war is much more complex. It seems that the terms "Greater Serbia" and "Yugoslavia" were often similar, if not synonymous, to the soldiers. The case of second lieutenant Tihomir Ajdačić shows that the term "Greater Serbia" primarily meant sacrifice and strain. The war obviously consisted of three components: the defense of Serbia, the liberation of "slaves" and the construction of a new state structure. The last two categories changed their meaning according to the situation on the front and the mood of the soldiers. The "slaves" could be primarily Serbs across the Drina, but also other South Slavs.

It can also be stated that the soldiers experienced the war as an imposed evil, and as a conflict that was clearly different from the Balkan Wars of 1912-

⁶⁶ *Смиље и сумпор. Два војничка дневника 1916–1919*, приредили Дуња Душанић и Данило Шаренац (Београд: Слио, 2016), 202.

⁶⁷ В. Ешкићевић, *op. cit.*, 113.

⁶⁸ Н. Калезић, Ј. Томашевић, *op. cit.*, 14.

1913. It was clear that the situation was much more difficult and worse. Therefore, the result of the war had to be worth such a great sacrifice. The defense of Serbia was seen as a minimum goal, while the expansion of its borders, in the spirit of the tradition of the liberation struggle since the 19th century – as the First World War was experienced among Serbian soldiers, was experienced as a logical reward for the successful end of the war. The First World War was experienced as part of a “historical mission” and as such had to ensure a long period of peace and development, regardless of whether those results would take on the outlines of “Greater Serbia” or “Yugoslavia.”