

## CROATS AND CROATIA IN THE WAKE OF THE GREAT WAR

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**ABSTRACT.** This article addresses the experiences of Croats and Croatia in the aftermath of the First World War, showing how the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia privileged the wartime sacrifice of Serbia and the Serbian army and how Croats were often depicted as the remnants of a defeated state, Austria-Hungary, and therefore less entitled to citizenship in the South Slav kingdom. It focuses on three large veteran associations: the Association of Reserve Officers and Warriors, the Union of Volunteers, and the Association of War Invalids.

### **Introduction**

Croatia's 2013 entry into the European Union precedes a moment of reflection and remembrance for all Europeans, for 2014 is the centennial of the outbreak of the First World War, an anniversary – or rather the first year of a cycle of anniversaries – being marked throughout the continent and in a variety of ways. In many countries, the centennial is a tidal surge in what was already a fairly high water line: in Europe, popular and scholarly interest in the First World War has been continuously present, to a greater or lesser extent, since the war officially ended on 11 November 1918. The 'Great Seminal Catastrophe' of the twentieth century (George Kennan) has shaped the politics, society and culture of Europeans, and it has shaped the way Europeans think about their continent and its identity. And yet the vicissitudes of Europe's last hundred years have obscured the pan-European nature of the First World War. Thus, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent civil war drew a veil over Russia's First World War that has only recently begun to be lifted.<sup>1</sup> Europe's Cold War divisions of the second half of the twentieth century also generated alternate historical memories, realities, even; so whilst the First World War continued to feature prominently in French and British memory, it apparently left less of an impression in communist 'Eastern Europe', whose leaders preferred not to emphasise the importance of the

<sup>1</sup> The international project 'Russia's Great War and Revolution' looks set to address this research gap. See the project's website <http://russiagreatwar.org/index.php> (accessed 3 Jan. 2014).

‘imperialist war’ over their own revolutionary struggles, whose successes came later, usually in the wake of the Second World War. The end of communism and the gradual political integration of Europe – of which the eastward expansion of the European Union is an important part – has perhaps created the conditions, after a century, for a truly European understanding of the Great War and its impact, from Ypres to the Urals. Croatia’s increasing institutional integration into Europe might, then, go hand-in-hand with greater integration into the mainstreams of European historical memory and identity.

The signs are, in fact, good. The centenary of the First World War in Croatia has generated official, academic and popular interest, just as it has throughout much of the rest of Europe: the Croatian government has appointed an official ‘Centenary Committee’ of historians and experts, presided over by the Minister of Culture; the Croatian Institute of History in Zagreb will hold a conference on Croats and the First World War in late 2014; a four-hour television documentary is forthcoming, too.<sup>2</sup> It is hoped that these initiatives will act as a corrective to decades of relative neglect, for until very recently the First World War and its impact on Croats and Croatia has been dealt with in a somewhat cursory fashion. Tito’s socialist state had its own seminal conflict, the Partisan war, or the ‘Anti-Fascist Struggle of 1941–5’, in which, it was said, all Yugoslavs rose up in unison to rid their homeland of the fascist invader. The First World War was a footnote to the history of the discredited interwar kingdom, a state that was itself merely a preface to socialist Yugoslavia. According to the socialists’ version of events, the First World War was a conflict waged by the imperialists; it led to the creation of the first South Slav state, in which political and economic power was monopolized by the Serbian bourgeoisie and wielded as an instrument of oppression against the state’s other nationalities (and, of course, against the working class). Croats themselves were helplessly swept along in these historical currents, as a subaltern group in imperial institutions such as the Austro-Hungarian army, forced to fight not for their own interests (as they did during 1941–5) but as pawns for foreign capital.<sup>3</sup>

This, of course, is a very teleological perspective, and a response to the socialist regime’s most pressing concern, that is, fitting the First World War into the inexorable historical process that led the South Slavs towards the formation of the socialist state in 1945. In keeping with the theme of Croatia’s European integration, however, we could instead offer a new perspective on the First World War, one that emphasises the

<sup>2</sup> I am very grateful to Filip Hameršak for this information.

<sup>3</sup> A notable exception to this rule is Andrej Mitrović’s excellent single-volume account of Serbia during the First World War, *Srbija u prvom svetskom ratu* (Belgrade, 2004), published (slightly abridged) in English as *Serbia’s Great War 1914–1918* (2007).

*European* rather than exclusively the *Yugoslav* dimensions of the conflict and its consequences; one which places Croatia and the Croats in the context of the dramatic transformations in the political, social and cultural landscape wrought by the war throughout the continent. Some of the most consequential and enduring changes took place in the region to which Croatia belongs: the Great War completely altered the political borders of central and eastern Europe, laying to waste Austria-Hungary, the great continental empire (one of several great empires which became casualties of the conflict) of which the Croats had been subjects and for whom many had fought during the war, and replacing it with new 'successor-states', in theory if not in practice organised and governed on the principle of national self-determination. The most marked changes in borders and state structures, then, and with the possible exception of Russia, took place in central and eastern Europe, or 'New Europe'. After 1918, this region would become an unsuccessful experiment in liberal and democratic state-building; and experiment of which the Croats were a part.

National self-determination, of course, had been the vision of American President Woodrow Wilson, who had arrived in Europe belatedly and virtually unscathed, surveying the destruction and ushering in what he hoped would be a new, more enlightened and egalitarian epoch in the continent. It is now a truism of interwar history to note that Wilson's template for national determination was impossible to apply fully and uniformly throughout central and eastern Europe; in reality there was a significant shortfall between its universalist claims and the impossibility of these claims being applied universally. The eventual post-war settlement in Europe represented in part an attempt to draw borders which left the most number of Europeans inside territory governed by their own national group; but where this proved impossible, or undesirable, the peacemakers (and especially the French and the British) tended to favour those national groups identified as allies during the conflict at the expense of former enemies.<sup>4</sup> The states of 'New Europe' were compelled to sign up to minority treaties, the purpose of which was to guarantee the status of all peoples in 'New Europe', regardless of their nationality or country of residence. The problem of the minorities became one of the most acute of the interwar period. The Munich diktat of 1938, in which Great Britain and France colluded with Nazi Germany in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, demonstrates how the minorities question could be exploited with fatal consequences, in this case bringing about both the symbolic and actual end of the Allied-sponsored settlement of 1919.

<sup>4</sup> Zara Steiner, *The Lights that Failed: European International History 1919–1933* (Oxford, 2007), 80.

Quite rightly, then, the minorities question in interwar central and eastern Europe has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. But I want to offer another category, one that might be a better fit for the Croat case. In addition to being ethnically heterogeneous, the new successor states cut across the fault-lines of the First World War, and countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and the South Slav state all housed subjects and citizens who had, until 1918, fought on different sides during the First World War. This division very often cut across ethnic and national lines, too. Take, for example, the veterans of the First World War: Frenchmen had fought in the French army, Britons in the British Expeditionary Force (the BEF); but Poles might have fought in the Russian army, with the Entente, or in the Austro-Hungarian or Prussian armies for the Central Powers;<sup>5</sup> subjects of Greater Romania had fought either in the Romanian army with the Allies, or as soldiers in the Austro-Hungarian army (recruited from Transylvania) with the Central Powers;<sup>6</sup> Serbs, Croats and Slovenes had fought either in the Serbian army, or in the Austro-Hungarian army. In the interwar period, reconciliation of former wartime enemies would become one of the great challenges facing Europe;<sup>7</sup> but in the successor states of eastern and central Europe, reconciliation was primarily a domestic matter.

The Croats found themselves on the wrong side of this division in the wake of the war. They were ostensibly one of the three constituent 'tribes' in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, but in reality they were politically subordinate to Serbia and its institutions, institutions that were transplanted from the pre-war Serbian state into the post-war South Slav state, often without significant alteration. So much is well known,<sup>8</sup> but the war and its outcome adds another dimension to our understanding of the development of Croatian national identity after the First World War and of the failures of the South Slav state in the interwar period. For the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was strongly identified, both domestically and abroad, with Serbia's victory during the First World War and with the great sacrifices of the Serbian people and their army towards the creation of the state.<sup>9</sup> Serbia had been at the epicentre of the war's outbreak in 1914; its armies had fought successfully against overwhelming odds in the first year of the war; its people had made a harrowing winter

<sup>5</sup> Julia Eichenberg, *Kämpfen für Frieden und Fürsorge. Polnische Veteranen des Ersten Weltkriegs und ihre internationalen Kontakte, 1918–1939* (Munich, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Irina Marin, 'World War One and Internal Repression: The Case of Major General Nikolaus Cena', *Austrian History Yearbook*, 44 (Apr. 2013).

<sup>7</sup> See *The Great War and Veterans' Internationalism*, ed. Julia Eichenberg and John Paul Newman (2013).

<sup>8</sup> See Ivo Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics* (Ithaca, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> John Paul Newman, 'Allied Yugoslavia: Serbian Great War Veterans and their Internationalist Ties', in *The Great War*, ed. Eichenberg and Newman.

retreat through Albania in the winter of 1915; and in the face of defeat and even destruction, Serbia had ‘resurrected’ itself with the victory of 1918. The great cost of the war to ‘gallant little Serbia’ was recognised and lauded throughout the countries of the Entente. A kind of Serbian ‘culture of victory’<sup>10</sup> reigned supreme in the interwar kingdom, one that tended to emphasise Croatia’s past as part of a ‘defeated state’ – Austria-Hungary. It was a culture that justified consigning Croats to the status of second-class citizens in a country that supposedly recognised them as one of three constituent ‘tribes’. It therefore undermined the Croats’ sense of citizenship in the new state, contributing to their alienation and inhibiting the formation of a properly integrated Yugoslav culture.

### **Veterans’ associations: micro and national**

I want to examine this problem further by focusing on South Slav veterans of the First World War and the associations of which they were members in the interwar period, an area that remains relatively under-researched.<sup>11</sup> Many such associations sprang up throughout the country (although mainly in the Serbian lands) in the years immediately after the First World War. The majority of them were what we might term ‘micro-societies’, that is, ephemeral groups comprising rarely more than twenty members, established solely for the purpose of raising funds for a war monument or memorial at local level. Such associations could apply for subventions to the Royal Court in Belgrade in order to raise enough money to build their monuments, and it is in these records that we start to see the imbalance caused by the war throughout the South Slav state: the boxes of requests received by the Royal Court were overwhelmingly sent from Serbian associations, that is, associations formed by war veterans of the Serbian army, and they were most frequently raising monuments which celebrated Serbia’s victory or commemorated its war dead. Far fewer came from associations formed by Croat or Slovene veterans of the Austro-Hungarian army, and those that did were treated with suspicion (although their requests were not always turned down).

The micro-societies rarely needed to broach the question of post-war reconciliation between the men who had fought in the Serbian army and those who had not, because they operated only at a local level and almost never crossed the boundaries between the two contingents of the wartime generation. They asked only that the local dead, the men

<sup>10</sup>This term, an inversion of Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s notion of a ‘culture of defeat’, is explored by John Horne in his essay ‘Beyond Cultures of Victory and Defeat? Interwar Veterans’ Internationalism’, in *The Great War*, ed. Eichenberg and Newman.

<sup>11</sup>There is an important study of the interwar ‘Chetnik’ associations in Bosnia – many of whose members were veterans of the Great War – by Nusret Šehić, *Četništvo u Bosni i Hercegovini (1918–1941): politička uloga i oblici djelatnosti četničkih udruženja* (Sarajevo, 1971).

who hailed from their village and who had lost their lives fighting in the Great War, were honoured with a plaque or monument. Once this demand had been fulfilled, the associations tended to disappear from the record. But matters were quite different for the handful of national associations that formed in the years after the war and that were active throughout the country. The ambitions of such associations were grander: they aspired to memberships that crossed tribal boundaries, and their corporate identities were more fixed. Thus, it was with three of the largest and most important national associations in the interwar kingdom: the 'Association of Reserve Officers and Warriors' (*Udruženje rezervnih oficira i ratnika*), a patriotic association whose members were largely although not exclusively veterans of the First World War (of all nationalities); the 'Union of Volunteers' (*Savez dobrovoljaca*), an association formed by men who had volunteered to fight for the Serbian army during the Balkan wars and the First World War; and the 'Association of War Invalids' (*Udruženje ratnih invalida*), a national association which promoted and protected the welfare of disabled veterans of the wars (again, of all nationalities). Croats were represented at every level in the membership of each of these associations. Their experiences in them, however, show the way in which the legacy of the war continued to divide the country and to marginalise Croats.

### **The Association of Reserve Officers and Warriors**

The Association of Reserve Officers and Warriors, in most respects, defined the commemoration of the First World War in the interwar kingdom to a greater extent than any other.<sup>12</sup> This association represented on a macro level what the tiny, local associations mentioned above represented on a micro level: its members were concerned with the commemoration of the war in the interwar kingdom, as well as the welfare and well-being of its members and their families. The society had started small: its first meeting, in Belgrade, was attended by just a few hundred people, but it claimed to have as many as 20,000 members in 1930,<sup>13</sup> making it one of the largest patriotic or veteran associations in the country at the time. The reserve officers had close ties with the army and with the Royal Court of King Alexander Karadjordjević; delegates of both often attended commemorative and festive ceremonies organised by the association, as did the king himself. They were responsible for raising some of the most striking monuments of the First World War, including the first monument to the unknown Serbian soldier at Avala, in 1922 (which would later become a monument to the 'Unknown Yugoslav Hero'); a

<sup>12</sup> For a good overview of the association's activities, see Danilo Šarenac, 'Udruženje rezervnih oficira i ratnika 1919–1941', *Istorija XX. veka*, 1 (2011), 27–38.

<sup>13</sup> *Ratnički glasnik*, May–June 1930.

monument to Chetnik Vojvoda Jovan Stojković 'Babunski' in Veles; and a monument to Rudolf Archibald Reiss, the Swiss criminologist who had published reports of Austro-Hungarian wartime atrocities against Serbs, and who had made Yugoslavia his home after 1918. In 1931, the reserve officers unveiled a huge monument and ossuary to the 'Defenders of Belgrade' – the men who fought against the Austro-Hungarian invasion of 1914 – in the Serbian capital's New Cemetery. Needless to say, it was the achievements of the Serbian army that the Association of Reserve Officers wanted to pass on to future generations. The monuments and commemorative activities of the reserve officers, initially, at least, were largely silent about the tens of thousands of men who had fought in the Austro-Hungarian army during the First World War.

It should be noted, however, that beyond these initiatives for monuments to Serbia's war, the reserve officers did make efforts to build relations between Serbian and Austro-Hungarian veterans, and especially with Croat veterans. As well as their domestic activities, the association was part of the inter-Allied veterans' movement, through their membership (from 1921) in the international war veterans' association, the *Fédération Interalliée des Anciens Combattants* (FIDAC). Throughout the 1920s, FIDAC agonised about the correct relations between war veterans of the Entente and veterans of the Central Powers.<sup>14</sup> The Association of Reserve Officers and Warriors were aware of a corresponding gap in Yugoslavia between veterans of the Serbian army on the one hand, the 'victors', and those who had fought for Austria-Hungary on the other, the 'vanquished'. The Italian section of FIDAC repeatedly underlined (at FIDAC conferences during the 1920s) that South Slavs – and especially Croats – had fought against Allied interests during the war.<sup>15</sup>

These relations were subject to the winds of international diplomacy and reconciliation, for just as the Locarno Treaty of 1925 advanced cultural demobilisation throughout Europe,<sup>16</sup> in the latter half of the 1920s the reserve officers internalised a kind of 'Locarno Spirit'. Thus, in summer 1926, a few months after the treaty was signed, the Association of Reserve Officers and Warriors held a Gala in Zagreb in an attempt to reach out to the Austro-Hungarian contingent of South Slav veterans into its ranks. The association claimed that about 2,500 of its 12,000 members were Croats and Slovenes, many of whom, presumably, were

<sup>14</sup> See their report on the FIDAC congress in London, Sept. 1924, at which the discussion of relations with 'former enemies' was discussed, mentioned in *ibid.*, Oct. 1924.

<sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*, Nov. 1925. See also Martina Salvante 'The Italian Associazione Nazionale Mutilati e Invalidi di Guerra and its International Liaisons in the Post-war Era', in *The Great War*, ed. Eichenberg and Newman.

<sup>16</sup> See John Horne, 'Démobilisation culturelle de l'après-guerre', in *Sortir de la Grande Guerre, le monde et l'après-1918*, ed. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Christophe Prochasson (Paris, 2008), and Steiner, *The Lights that Failed*, 387–452.

also veterans of the Austro-Hungarian army.<sup>17</sup> The glittering ceremonies in the Croatian capital were attended by, *inter alia*, the Yugoslav Minister of the Interior and the Minister of the Army and Navy, and by Colonel Fred Abbot, chairman of FIDAC's 'Propaganda Committee'. The secretary of the Zagreb branch of the Association of Reserve Officers and Warriors welcomed his comrades and spoke of how 'All eyes, and especially those of our neighbours [i.e., Italy], are fixed on us at this solemn moment.' To this, a delegate from Belgrade replied 'We are today united and will always remain so.'<sup>18</sup> An ostentatious display of unity with a double purpose, the organisers intended to show FIDAC and the world that Yugoslavia belonged wholly to the inter-Allied camp, and to show that South Slav veterans were all comrades together, without regard for their wartime past. The ceremonies in Zagreb exemplified the contradictory interests of the reserve officers and, more broadly, the contradictions inherent in celebrating Serbia's war victory above all else in the South Slav state. On the one hand, the reserve officers wanted to place the culture of Serbian and inter-Allied victory at the core of Yugoslavia's national culture; on the other hand, they wanted to find a way to reconcile Allied veterans with those of the Austro-Hungarian army, including, of course, Croats.

How successful was the Association of Reserve Officers and Warriors in integrating Croats who had fought in the Austro-Hungarian army into their ranks and into their narrative of war victory and sacrifice? In terms of the commemorative projects that the association initiated and sponsored, as indicated above, non-Serbs were entirely absent: their monuments featured exclusively motifs and themes from Serbia's war. The only partial exception was the monument to the Unknown Soldier at Avala, which went from honouring an 'Unknown Serbian Soldier' to honouring an 'Unknown Yugoslav Hero'. This change, which was a long time coming (the monument to the Unknown Yugoslav Hero was not unveiled until 1938), was an attempt to create a more inclusive, Yugoslav commemoration of the war to replace the solely Serbian memory which had predominated throughout much of the interwar period. But the commemorative culture of the Association of Reserve Officers and Warriors, like that of the network of micro-societies beneath it, and like the state itself, remained first and foremost a Serbian affair.

### **The Union of Volunteers**

Perhaps more promising for Croats, then, was the Union of Volunteers an association formed by South Slavs of all nationality that had served

<sup>17</sup> *Ratnički glasnik*, May 1926.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, June–July 1926.



or fought in the Serbian army's volunteer divisions during the wars.<sup>19</sup> The volunteer legions were the wartime initiative of a small group of pro-Entente South Slav émigrés, mainly from Dalmatia. They had fled the monarchy at the beginning of the war and had formed the 'Yugoslav Committee' (*Jugoslavenski odbor*, or JO) through which they worked assiduously to promote the cause of South Slav union outside of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. To this end, the JO had recruited a South Slav volunteer force, from the diaspora throughout the world and from prisoners of war in Entente countries (mainly pre-revolutionary Russia). Arguably, the propaganda value of these divisions outweighed their military value: the JO needed a counterweight to the many thousands of South Slavs whose presence in the ranks of the Austro-Hungarian army undermined their case for the pro-Entente sympathies of the Habsburg South Slavs.

The volunteers were first and foremost a symbol of Yugoslav unity, then, and they continued to serve as such a symbol once the war was over. In the South Slav state, the volunteers would assume a prominence that belied their wartime contribution,<sup>20</sup> for to celebrate the volunteer sacrifice was to celebrate a more inclusive culture of victory, one that encompassed not just Serbians but all South Slavs. It was a means of breaching the Serbian/Austro-Hungarian gulf that divided veterans in Yugoslavia. The most prominent figures in the volunteer movement in the interwar period were great examples of 'Yugoslav warriors', Serbs, Croats and Slovenes whose sacrifice showed how the legacy of the war could transcend tribal distinctions and contentious wartime histories. The volunteers also had their own association, similar in size and scope to the Association of Reserve Officers and Warriors, and based in Sarajevo.

The outstanding figure of the Union of Volunteers was a Croat, Captain Lujko Lovrić, who was also, arguably, the outstanding figure of the interwar veteran movement in Yugoslavia. And he was truly remarkable, a kind of composite figure who embodied all the fissures and fault-lines of the South Slav wartime generation. Hailing from Bakar, as a student Lovrić had been influenced by Frano Supilo (who became a leading figure in the JO) and the pro-Yugoslav newspaper *Novi list*; he started the war as a reluctant reserve officer of the Austro-Hungarian army but ended up in the uniform of a Serbian infantry captain.<sup>21</sup> Lovrić had deserted the empire in Galicia and thereafter volunteered for the Serbian army,

<sup>19</sup> For a history of the Union of Volunteers, see Novica Pešić, *Udruženje ratnih dobrovoljaca 1912–1918, njihovih potomaka i poštovalaca: nekad i danas* (Belgrade, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation: Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia* (Stanford, 1998), 99–100.

<sup>21</sup> For Lovrić's biography, see Boris Grbin, *Portret Lujka Lovrića* (Zagreb, 1985); and Arhiv Jugoslavije (Archives of Yugoslavia, hereafter AJ) 74–234–200.

distinguishing himself fighting with the First Serbian Volunteer Division. Indeed, there were few Serbians who had sacrificed as much and fought with such distinction as this Croat, who held some of the highest honours the Serbian army bestowed upon its soldiers. A bullet to the temple from enemy fire permanently blinded Lovrić, but did not stop him becoming a prolific writer (he learnt Braille during the war, at Saint Dunstan's School for the Blind in England) and a prominent veteran activist after 1918. He attended official ceremonies both at home and abroad in full uniform, adorned in medals and wearing his signature dark glasses.

From 1928 onwards, Lovrić served as president of the Union of Volunteers, beginning a spell of great activity and prominence for the association, both at home and abroad. It was Lovrić who linked the Union of Volunteers to the international veterans' movement, joining FIDAC soon after his presidency began. The affiliation of the Union of Volunteers with FIDAC further 'proved' the pro-Allied sympathies of all South Slavs (including the Croats), since the Union of Volunteers was apparently a fully fledged 'Yugoslav' association whose membership bridged the Serbian/Austro-Hungarian divide, was composed of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and was presided over by a Croat. He produced two volumes about his wartime experiences, *Tears of Autumn* (1922) and *Through Snow and Fog* (1923), but abandoned a third volume, putatively titled *Return in Spring*, which would have dealt with the hardships faced by veterans in Yugoslavia after 1918. Lovrić claimed (plausibly) that this highly critical account of the state's politics would not have made it past the censors.<sup>22</sup> Because of all this activity, Lovrić became a kind of veteran 'celebrity' in interwar Yugoslavia; he met several times with King Alexander, and even, in Berlin in 1937, with Adolf Hitler. A sincere believer in South Slav unity, Lovrić was used by the likes of Alexander and Hitler for their own ends.

Like the Association of Reserve Officers and Warriors, the volunteers had their monuments and their days of celebration and mourning. Of their monuments, most notable was the pyramid ossuary marking the 'Battle of Dobruja', the volunteer 'epic' of 1916. The Battle of Dobruja had taken place in the second half of 1916, when the First Serbian Volunteer Division fought on the flanks of the Romanian army against Bulgaria. The battle itself was not a success: Romanian and South Slav troops failed to capture their objective despite numerous and, in terms of casualties, costly assaults. The defeat had had an adverse effect on discipline and morale within the volunteer movement, as did the revolutionary changes taking place in Russia at the time. The corps' Serbian officers, responsible for maintaining the fighting efficiency of the units, resorted to force to restore order amongst the volunteers. On 23 October 1916, three units revolted

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

against 'Serbian terror'; in quelling the mutiny, Serbian soldiers shot dead thirteen Croat volunteers. Josip Horvat, a Croat publicist who served in the Austro-Hungarian army and spent much of the war in Russian captivity, would later write of how the volunteer movement revealed in embryonic form many of the problems that would plague the first Yugoslavia, claiming that 'the mistakes and the fallacies began in Russia'.<sup>23</sup> Such omens were ignored in the interwar period: the disappointments on the battlefield and the unedifying aftermath of Dobruja were virtually erased from the record after 1918.

The Battle of Dobruja, like the volunteer movement, lent itself to mythologisation: it became the most important symbol of the volunteer sacrifice in the interwar period. From 1926 onwards, the Union of Volunteers organised an annual pilgrimage to Dobruja to commemorate the anniversary of the battle.<sup>24</sup> Dobruja was said to be the place 'where all three brothers, Serb, Croat, and Slovene, fought for the first time shoulder-to-shoulder for liberation and unification'.<sup>25</sup> In the 1930s, Alexander would frequently court the Union of Volunteers and attend their celebrations: Lujo Lovrić and the Battle of Dobruja were precisely the kind of symbols useful to the king in shoring up his Yugoslavising dictatorship.

The mythologisation of the wartime volunteer movement was, then, an alternative strategy for breaching the gulf caused by the legacy of the war in Yugoslavia; one that differed from that of the Association of Reserve Officers and Warriors. The volunteers offered a set of symbols, including Lovrić himself, that offered a more inclusive memory of the First World War, one that could integrate the Croats rather than alienate them. And yet on closer inspection the volunteer 'myth' barely papered over the fault-lines within the association itself; the facts were that non-Serbs were seriously under-represented among the volunteers, that the movement itself, both now and during the war, was wracked by controversies and conflicts. Even within the volunteer movement itself, veterans such as Lovrić were unusual, part of an articulate and literate minority (mainly reserve officers educated in Austria-Hungary's gymnasia and universities) that defined the volunteer legacy in the interwar period by promoting their own experiences at the expense of others, just as the British war poets had projected their own experiences of combat onto popular perceptions of the Great War in Britain. The South Slav volunteer movement, like the South Slav veteran movement itself, was in reality deeply divided.

<sup>23</sup>Josip Horvat, *Živjeti u Zagrebu 1900–1941. Zapisnici iz nepovrata* (Zagreb, 1984), 85.

<sup>24</sup>See AJ 69–159–248.

<sup>25</sup>AJ 74–349–72.

### Disabled veterans

If the Association of Reserve Officers and Warriors, and the Union of Volunteers, show the difficulties of creating a set of binding symbols and narratives about the war that would include the Croats, the problems faced by Croat disabled veterans show in the starkest terms the institutional prejudices that operated against Croat war veterans in the interwar state. In the associations formed by disabled veterans in the 1920s, it was welfare provision rather than commemoration of the war that was of paramount importance.

Croat veterans of the Austro-Hungarian army formed an association in Zagreb, in June 1919. Its records show that from the outset its members were painfully reminded of their wartime pasts. At one meeting, in June 1920, an attendee told of how he had been to see an official at the Ministry of Social Policy and had been asked ‘were you at the front at Salonika? [t]hen go to [deposed Habsburg emperor] Karl, maybe he will give you something’.<sup>26</sup> Another speaker, a former officer of the Austro-Hungarian army, agreed that such accusations were common at the ministry, and were unfair since ‘We fought because we had to . . . you did not want to fight, but you had to, if you did not, you would be shot.’<sup>27</sup> Apparently, the Habsburg stigma was enough to discount the Croat veterans’ claims on the social conscience of the new state: attendees of these early meetings had the impression that only those who fought in the Serbian army were entitled to welfare. This was ironic, since many far worse offenders were able to shed their wartime pasts with ease: ‘Those same gentleman, those same devils, who were the greatest black-and-yellow clamourers, that Frankist rabble who didn’t even know how best to express their dog-like loyalty towards the Austrian eagle, are now the greatest Yugoslavs and Serbophiles.’<sup>28</sup> The Zagreb veterans, then, were victims of an institutionalised hostility against Croats who had fought or served in the Austro-Hungarian army.

The disabled veterans were deeply divided between Austro-Hungarian and Serbian wartime contingents: it was necessary for them to find a shared sense of wartime sacrifice, but the war could not bind veterans of the Serbian army to those of the Austro-Hungarian army. Disabled veterans had fought on different fronts, and even against one another. The disabled veterans, without a shared sense of victory, needed to find a common language of entitlement with which to confront the state’s welfare institutions. This was not always easy, when disabled veterans themselves were divided over the legacy and meaning of the war, and

<sup>26</sup> Hrvatska državni arhiv (Croatian State Archives, Zagreb, hereafter HDA), Pravila društva 4684.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ratni invalid* (Zagreb), 1 July 1920.

many bureaucrats and officials harboured prejudices against disabled veterans who had fought in the Austro-Hungarian army.

In such circumstances, the disabled veteran movement made halting progress towards unification, forming a national association at the end of 1922, following an international congress on disabled veterans held in Yugoslavia that summer. The central council of this 'Association of War Invalids of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes' (*Udruženje ratnih invalida Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata, i Slovenaca*) was based in Belgrade, and it drew the majority of its membership from veterans of the Serbian army. By 1925, the unified association claimed to have a membership of about 38,000 with branches throughout the country, making the society of comparable size and scope as the Association of Reserve Officers and Warriors.<sup>29</sup> Tensions did not disappear entirely, however, and the unified association would continue to experience internal divisions and disagreements along the Austro-Hungarian/Serbian fault-line throughout the 1920s.<sup>30</sup>

For its part, the state pondered the extent of its responsibility to disabled veterans, attempting to weigh this against economic scarcity (especially in the 1930s) and the possibility that the duty of care for these men could be shifted to the private sphere of the family. There was a shortfall between the amount of welfare that could be realistically delivered and the amount that disabled veterans had been promised in the years immediately after the war. Moreover, disabled veterans were seriously disappointed by the legislative and political paralysis that marked the national affairs of Yugoslavia during the 1920s. This failure was felt keenly by disabled veterans since the inability of the state's political parties to pass new laws left them in a kind of legislative limbo, their status as recipients of welfare and social care undefined, or defined through pre-war or temporary arrangements. But whilst the state assumed responsibility for the retraining and reintegration of disabled veterans, it also assumed responsibility for providing disabled veterans with adequate facilities. On this matter, a complex of facilities at the Holy Spirit in Zagreb, and the sanatoria at Brestovac (on Mount Medvedica, outside of Zagreb) and Moslavina (also in Croatia) offer insights into the experiences of disabled veterans. The records of these institutions reveal a litany of complaints on the part of disabled veterans about living and working conditions due to inadequate funding and bad relations between staff and pupils/patients.

<sup>29</sup>John Paul Newman, 'Forging a United Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes', in *New Perspectives on Yugoslavia: Key Issues and Controversies*, ed. Dejan Djokić and James Ker-Lindsay (2010), 52.

<sup>30</sup>Although the association was better organised and more united in the following decade. This, according to the Royal Court, was due to the administrative skill of its new president, Božidar Nedić brother of Milan Nedić, the head of the Axis-affiliated Serbian quisling state during the Second World War. See AJ 74–233–366.

Problems arose within just a year of the Holy Spirit opening. In summer 1922, disabled veterans complained that despite grand talk of reintegrating them into society, the school was still woefully underfunded, and disabled veterans were finding it too hard to gain employment on leaving.<sup>31</sup> At the end of 1922, 140 pupils at the school downed tools in protest at the poor conditions. The pupils presented a note of protest to officials in Zagreb and called (unsuccessfully) for the dismissal of the school's director.<sup>32</sup> Disabled veterans made similar complaints about Brestovac, a former barracks located at Sljeme at the top of Mount Medvedica that now served as a sanatorium for soldiers suffering from tuberculosis, which had space for 120 patients and forty-two members of staff. Disabled veterans made complaints about the standard of treatment in these facilities from a very early stage. In September 1921, the Society for War Invalids in Croatia (*Udruženje ratnih invalida u Hrvatskoj*, see below) printed a list of complaints about conditions at Brestovac. Disabled veterans, they claimed, were given sub-standard food and drink whilst staff kept the better food for themselves. They complained further that horse-drawn coaches, the most comfortable way of getting to and from Sljeme, were used exclusively by the staff, whilst disabled veterans were made to travel in freight cars. One disabled veteran, they noted, died two days after being sent down the mountain to another hospital in such a car. Finally, they drew attention to the dilapidated state of the barracks due to lack of funds, and how this was of critical importance during the winter months.<sup>33</sup>

Disabled veterans at Brestovac made national headlines when they started a hunger strike in protest at poor conditions in the sanatorium,<sup>34</sup> prompting a commission from the Ministry of Social Policy that arrived from Belgrade to address their demands.<sup>35</sup> Complaints persisted, however, and in November 1926 patients went on strike once again, demanding warm clothes for the approaching winter.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, complaints from disabled veterans persisted throughout the 1920s. Similar problems arose at Moslavina, whose history in the 1920s is marked by bad relations between staff and disabled veterans. So serious were the problems here that Moslavina became the subject of two investigations by the Ministry of Social Policy (1925 and 1930) after disabled veterans lodged official complaints against staff there. The first occasion for complaint came in September 1920, when disabled veterans at Moslavina expressed

<sup>31</sup> *Ratni invalid* (Zagreb), 8 July 1922.

<sup>32</sup> *Ratni invalid* (Belgrade), 21 Dec. 1922.

<sup>33</sup> *Ratni invalid* (Zagreb), 10 Jan. 1921.

<sup>34</sup> *Obzor*, 17 Oct. 1924.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, and 20 Oct. 1924.

<sup>36</sup> HIDA 137–468.

dissatisfaction about the treatment they received from the institute's director.<sup>37</sup> At the end of 1924, disabled veterans, as well as a number of blind students who were receiving training at Moslavina, submitted a further list of complaints against staff at the school to the Ministry of Social Policy. One in particular stood out: three disabled veterans who tried to raise complaints with the institute's director, they were dismissed with the response, 'I am in charge here, and if you don't like it, you can go to Franz Joseph.'<sup>38</sup> It was neither the first nor the last time that Austro-Hungarian veterans claimed to have been insulted in this way, that is, on the basis of their having served or fought in the Austro-Hungarian army.

Just as at Brestovac, however, complaints persisted, and Moslavina was investigated again in 1930, following further complaints about conditions and staff at the institute. Again, the commission heard of how disabled veterans complained that staff had made insulting and derogatory remarks about their war records. In this investigation, a disabled veteran complained of how the school's Serbian director had called him a 'kraut whore' (*švapska kurva*) after getting drunk, and threatened to 'turn his brains into schnitzel'.<sup>39</sup> The complaint was upheld and the director, who conceded both to being drunk on duty and to the possibility that he had made such a remark, lost his job. The report found that this comment was not only characteristic of his attitude to work, but that it reflected more generally the bad state of relations between staff and patients at Moslavina over the years.<sup>40</sup> The director was a Serbian, and almost all of the residents at Moslavina had served in the Austro-Hungarian army during the war, hence the insult 'kraut whore' (and the references to Franz Joseph before that). Such prejudices match the kind of attitudes found in the records of the Ministry for Religious Affairs and the Royal Court when dealing with requests for money from Austro-Hungarian veterans' associations. Indeed it is difficult to refute evidence of prejudice against Austro-Hungarian veterans when it is supported by an independent investigator.

One of the most successful 'invalid authors' of the interwar period was Josip Pavičić, a Croat disabled veteran who wrote about his experiences as a disabled veteran in Yugoslavia in the interwar period. Pavičić had been called up by the Austro-Hungarian army in 1915 at the age of twenty and lost a leg fighting in Galicia, in 1917. Pavičić had visited many of the mainstays of disabled veteran life in the 1920s, staying at Ciglana, Brestovac and the Holy Spirit, where he worked briefly as a support teacher. In 1928, he graduated from the law faculty in Zagreb

<sup>37</sup> *Ratni invalid* (Zagreb), 15 Sept. 1920.

<sup>38</sup> HDA 1363–16.

<sup>39</sup> AJ 39–7.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

and went on to work as a civil servant until his retirement in 1939.<sup>41</sup> Yet, Pavičić never escaped from his status as a disabled veteran, and his experiences in what he called the ‘invalid catacombs’ of Yugoslavia made an indelible mark on him. Pavičić wrote about his debilitating sense of an ‘invalid identity’ in short stories, which he started to publish in 1931. In these stories, the end of the war was depicted ironically, as the beginning of a new phase of agony: ‘And so began the roaming down tortuous paths of the invalid catacombs, from hospitals to the invalid barracks at Ciglana . . . , from the barracks to the invalid home at the Holy Spirit, ending at last in the sanatorium for invalids with tuberculosis on Sljeme.’<sup>42</sup> Pavičić did not equate this common sense of suffering with any kind of post-war camaraderie, however: there was no ‘trenchocracy’ that could bind disabled veterans together. Instead, the ‘invalid’ experience was one of isolation and ultimately death, often by suicide. It was a process that Pavičić referred to as ‘silent liquidation’. The bitter irony of the invalid question stemmed from the fact that whilst in the immediate post-war period these men were encouraged to hope for so much, by the end of the 1920s they were ‘silently liquidated’, empty-handed and long-forgotten by the very people who had sworn to help them. Pavičić was very explicit about this when he wrote a new preface to his short stories in 1946. Speaking of his experiences in the interwar period, he remarked:

Those were difficult days . . . Whilst the system concealed the tragedy with endless solutions to the ‘invalid question’, the problem was resolving itself – with alcohol, with the tuberculosis bacillus, with a bullet, a knife, with poison . . . And ten years later, whilst the ‘invalid question’ was still filling up sheets of paper, it had in reality resolved itself long ago.<sup>43</sup>

Pavičić wrote these words immediately after a new war had produced a new generation of veterans, disabled and otherwise, in Yugoslavia. Pavičić had reworked his stories, adding four new tales about the Partisans and the anti-fascist struggle and renaming the collection *In Red Letters*. It was to be the final chapter in what had proven to be a long and difficult publication history. The ten stories of invalid life in interwar Yugoslavia had originally been published under the title *Memento* in 1937, only to be withdrawn and pulped after two weeks, banned by the royal regime of Prince Paul. In 1946, Pavičić, now with the socialists, wrote of how ‘Those [invalid] masses were for the capitalist order too much of an encumbrance, ballast which needed to be cast away so as not to hamper the rise of their balloon. And so the ballast was cast away.’<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Biographical details from Vladimir Popović, *Izabrana djela: Josip Pavičić, Antun Boglić, Mato Lovrak* (Zagreb, 1971), 7–16.

<sup>42</sup> Josip Pavičić, preface to *Crvenim slovima* (Zagreb, 1946).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



### Conclusion

The years 1914–18 are of critical importance for understanding the development of Croat national identity in the twentieth century and of the Croatian experience in Yugoslavia. Still in the process of national integration at the war's outset, Croats were, like many other Europeans, cast into the maelstrom of the world war; they fought on many of the conflict's fronts (in the east, in the Balkans, in Italy), and by war's end they had lurched from an imperial state and into a (South Slav) nation-state. National identity would hereafter have to be mediated in a country dominated by its Serbian contingent and a state (Serbia) whose experience of the world war was in most cases very different from the Croats. The prominence of Serbia's culture of war victory in the interwar state further alienated many Croats, especially those who had fought in the Austro-Hungarian army during the war, since their sacrifice and therefore also their sense of citizenship was rendered of secondary importance, even, in some cases, as being in opposition to the interests of the state itself. Attempts to bridge the divide were unsuccessful. The Association of Reserve Officers and Warriors did much to construct a monumental and commemorative culture of the war that emphasised Serbia's sacrifice and victory, but largely excluded non-Serbians; their attempts to draw Croats into their ranks were not wholly successful. The Union of Volunteers placed Croats very prominently in its leadership and offered an complementary narrative of the First World War that was more Yugoslav than Serbian, but like unitary Yugoslavism itself, it failed to take deep roots in the interwar state. And the experiences of disabled veterans show how deeply ingrained prejudices based on the war years were in the institutional culture of the interwar kingdom.

Perhaps all this goes to show how precarious a state's national culture is when it rests so heavily on a myth of the war years that excludes so many of the state's citizenship. If so, it was nevertheless a mistake repeated by the socialists after 1945, who built their country on the foundations of the Partisan struggle against the fascist invader, ostensibly a pan-Yugoslav myth, but one that concealed the messier and more complex experiences of the South Slavs during the war years, in the same way as the privileging of Serbia's war did in the interwar kingdom. Perhaps now that the Yugoslav story has reached its conclusion, Croats and Croatia will be able to explore the history of the years 1914–18 more fully.