

Through Snow and Red Fog: South Slav Soldiers in Revolutionary Russia and Beyond

John Paul Newman

The article is concerned with the way in which memories and experiences of the First World War were narrated and presented in interwar eastern and central Europe with special reference to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia). The intention is to investigate the significance of the fact that, in Yugoslavia and throughout interwar Eastern Europe, so many citizens, subjects had served on opposing sides during the war. For example, in the enlarged state of Romania after 1918, Transylvanian Hungarians and Germans had fought for the Central Powers, whilst Romanians had fought for the Allies. In Czechoslovakia, Czechs had supposedly been reluctant soldiers in the Austro-Hungarian Army but enthusiastic volunteers for the Czech Legion in Russia, whereas Sudeten Germans had been more loyal to the Habsburg war effort. Poles also, living together in the new state of Poland, had fought against each other in the armies of the Allies and the Central Powers.

Despite the complexity of wartime experiences in these states, often a simplified and nationally exclusive foundational myth drew a veil over conflicting legacies. In the Romanian case study, research has shown how an officially-sanctioned culture of victory privileged the masculine, Romanian sacrifice and excluded minority groups, women, Germans, Hungarians, Jews, etc.¹ Andrea Orzoff in her new book about the First Republic of Czechoslovakia *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia 1914-1948* (Oxford, 2009) has shown how the story of the Czech Legion in Russia became that state's foundational myth, serving as a national epic, again excluding pro-Habsburg elements, national minorities. Similar myths were associated with Polish heroes such as Josef Pilsudski and Josef Haller. In each case there is a narrative of heroic national sacrifice and resurrection. In each case the narrative is underpinned by anti-imperialism, sometimes also anti-Bolshevism. In each case, the victorious part represents the whole, the history of the 'winners' marginalizes that of the 'losers'.

In Yugoslavia, the same process of mythologization and marginalization was at work. The 'winners' of the Great War were clearly the Serbians. The Kingdom of Serbia had fought a successful war of national emancipation against the Ottoman Turks, the First Balkan War; then against their former allies Bulgaria in the Second Balkan War. In 1914 and 1915 they had successfully defended their homeland against Austro-Hungarian invasion, before making a harrowing retreat across Albania in the winter of 1915-1916, an episode that came to be called the 'Serbian Golgotha'. Finally, in 1918, the Serbian army had returned home in triumph to 'liberate' South Slavs from the Habsburgs and to 'unify' with them in Yugoslavia. This national epic of Serbian sacrifice and resurrection served as the

¹ Maria Bucur, *Heroes and Victims: Remembering War in Twentieth Century Romania* (Indiana, 2009).

foundational myth of Yugoslavia, and was known in the interwar kingdom as the wars of 'liberation and unification'.

Within Yugoslavia, the myth of 'liberation and unification' had a powerful emotional appeal for many Serbians, especially veterans of the Serbian army. But as has already been noted, the myth excluded those South Slavs, Croats, Slovenes, and Serbs, who had fought in the Habsburg army on the side of the Central Powers during the Great War. What is more, there was little that was truly 'Yugoslav' about the myth of 'liberation and unification'. Soldiers of the Serbian army were valorized for their wartime exploits, other South Slavs featured merely as passive imperial subjects who were 'liberated' by their brothers east of the River Sava. It was the failure of the narrative of liberation and unification to appeal to all South Slavs that led pro-Yugoslav intellectuals to search for a usable and more inclusive wartime past, one which would reflect the multi-national composition of the new state.

Their search brought them to the South Slav volunteer movement. The movement comprised men who had chosen to fight alongside the Serbian army during the First World War. Some of these men had been recruited during the war from South Slav diaspora communities, especially in the USA. The largest contingent of volunteers, however, had been South Slav Habsburg soldiers who were captured and held as POWs in Russia, before opting to fight in specially organized volunteer units subordinate to the Serbian army. The fact that Habsburg South Slavs were willing to volunteer and fight with the Serbian Army against the Central Powers was used as evidence that a pro-Yugoslav, anti-imperial sentiment existed amongst Habsburg South Slavs before and during the First World War. After 1918, supporters of Yugoslavia upheld the wartime volunteer movement as a truly supranational phenomenon. In these divisions, Habsburg Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes had demonstrated the same martial ardour and commitment to 'liberation and unification' as soldiers from the Serbian Army. In this way, the foundational myth of the kingdom acquired a Yugoslav aspect.

The reality of the wartime volunteer movement, of course, does not correspond entirely with the post-war myth. During the war, the question of volunteer units had been raised by émigré South Slavs on the Yugoslav Committee, a propaganda organization based in London and comprised of a handful of Habsburg South Slavs who had left Austria-Hungary at the beginning of the war. They sent emissaries throughout the world, but mainly to North America, to agitate for the formation of a South Slav volunteer regiment, which would fight alongside, but separate from, the Serbian Army. The wartime Prime Minister of Serbia, Nikola Pašić, was in principle supportive of the idea of volunteer soldiers, although he was less favourably disposed to their separation from the Serbian Army. Pašić wanted to maintain complete control of the military and political situation during the war, and was frequently at odds with the Yugoslav Committee over volunteer units and their relationship to the Serbian Army.²

The question of using volunteers to fight against the Central Powers became more pressing as, due to Austria-Hungary's military set backs on the Eastern Front, an ever larger

² See Đorđe Janković, *Nikola Pašić i jugoslovensko pitanje*, vol. 2 (Belgrade, 1985), pp. 76-107.

number of Habsburg South Slavs were falling into Russian captivity. The Serbian consulate in Petrograd received a number of letters from these POWs requesting to fight alongside the Serbian Army (based at Salonika from the beginning of 1916 onwards). Pašić and the Yugoslav Committee reached a compromise agreement that allowed for these POWs to form an independent volunteer unit, separate from the Serbian Army but staffed by its officers. The unit was called the 'First Serbian Volunteer Division', despite the protests of the Yugoslav Committee and a number of volunteers who had wanted to include the title 'Yugoslav'. Contrary to the post-war depiction of the volunteer unit as a South Slav melting pot, most of the requests to volunteer came from Habsburg Serbs, with a far smaller number received from Croats or Slovenes. Along with the Serbian officer corps, this meant that the First Serbian Volunteer Division was almost precisely that, a division of Serbian soldiers. Nevertheless, non-Serb volunteers were in the majority in the Division's small officer corps, comprised mainly of former Habsburg reserve officers (university students) of Croat and Slovene descent.³

So the volunteer movement was far less 'Yugoslav' than the post-war myth suggested, and like the Czech Legion, its military élan was also overstated. The biggest military engagement in which the volunteers took part was the so-called 'Battle of Dobruja' in September and October 1916. Here, about 17,000 South Slav volunteers fought alongside the Romanian army in an attack on Bulgarian and German forces. The battle was not a success and about 2,600 volunteers were killed or captured, and over 7000 wounded.⁴ In the aftermath of the battle, morale dropped amongst volunteers, especially non-Serb volunteers, and Serbian officers, responsible for maintaining discipline within the division, frequently resorted to force to keep the volunteers in line. Towards the end of 1916, three units openly revolted against 'Serbian terror' and in quelling the mutiny, Serbian soldiers shot dead thirteen Croat volunteers. The impact of these deaths led to further divisions amongst the volunteer movement, including a sizable number of 'dissidents', Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, who rejected Serbian command of the volunteers and called for the First Serbian Volunteer Division to be renamed the Yugoslav Legion, or the Yugoslav Division. The volunteers did not see action again until the very end of the war, when they were used, mainly for cosmetic purposes, to spearhead the Franco-Serbian breakthrough at Salonika and the Serbian army's liberation and unification of the South Slav lands, in September 1918.

The reality of the volunteer movement with all its fissures, its military failures, and its inter-ethnic divisions, was soon masked by the myth of a division which was united in its desire to liberate the South Slav lands from Habsburg occupation and unify them into one Yugoslav nation-state. Very soon after the end of the war, supporters of unitary Yugoslavism, which included many of the country's leading intellectuals, literary figures, and most importantly the royal palace, promoted a history of the division which glossed over the

³ See Ivo Banac, 'South Slav POWs in Revolutionary Russia', in Samuel Williamson and Petor Pastor (eds.), *War and Society in East Central Europe, Volume 5: Essays on World War One: Origins and POWs* (New York, 1983), p. 125.

⁴ Pero Slijepčević, *Naši dobrovoljaci u svetskoj ratu*, (Zagreb: 1925), p. 13.

problems it faced during the war, and instead promoted an image of Yugoslav warriors willing to sacrifice everything for the liberation and unification of the South Slav lands.

Volunteers inspired pro-Yugoslav forces throughout the country, such as the literary Gazette *The Contemporary*, organ of the Croatian Literary Society, and the respected journal *The New Europe*, published in Zagreb. The editors of these publications saw in the volunteer movement (or chose to see) proof that Habsburg South Slavs had opposed Austria-Hungary during the war, and that many of them had desired union with Serbia before 1918. For the promoters of this volunteer myth, there was no ambiguity about the Habsburg past. The path that took South Slavs out of Austria-Hungary and into Yugoslavia might not have been smooth, but its final point had been desired and sought after. Here was a chance of reconciliation with the Serbian trope of 'liberation and unification'.

Volunteers themselves were not passive in the process of their own mythologization. A number of volunteer veterans published memoirs and fictional accounts of their time in the corps, creating a small cycle of 'volunteer literature'.⁵ Certain constellations can be traced in the moral universe presented by ex-volunteers in these accounts. For example, the Bolshevik revolution was typically presented in tragic terms, as an event that unleashed violence and heartbreak onto the Russian people. This was perhaps a reflection of the hostility many felt towards the Bolshevik revolution and the danger of it spreading to Yugoslavia. In these soldiers' accounts the élan of the volunteer division in Russia was immune to the Bolshevik infection (in reality many volunteers fought for the Bolsheviks). Neither had Habsburg spies and other anti-Serbian forces infiltrated the volunteer movement (again part of the myth, maintaining discipline and morale, especially amongst non-Serbian volunteers, had in fact been problematic). The predominance of Croatian and Slovenian volunteers in the officer corps was perceived as evidence that the ideology of South Slav unification was deeply entrenched amongst the non-Serbian soldiers. And they had an almost religious faith in the demise of Austria-Hungary and the creation of a South Slav state.

This highly teleological vision, culminating in the 'liberation and unification' of all South Slavs, was shared by the volunteer movement's outstanding figure in the interwar period, a Croat from Bakar named Lujó Lovrić. Lovrić was attracted to the movement for South Slav unification whilst a student in Rijeka, he had been imprisoned by Habsburg authorities at the outbreak of the war, before being released and conscripted (as a reserve officer) into the army. He deserted (in Russia) and volunteered to fight with the Serbian army, seeing action in Dobruja and receiving an injury that permanently blinded him. After the war, his responsibilities as leader of the Union of Volunteers, a veteran organization that he presided over from 1928 onwards, took him across Europe to meet with Czech

⁵ See, e.g., Slavko Diklić, *Pred olujom: roman jugoslovenskih ratnih dobrovoljaca u Rusiji* (Osijek: 1932), and *Putničke bliješke jugoslovenskog ratnog dobrovoljca: od Dobruže do Soluna preko dalekog Istoka* (Osijek: 1932); Dane Hranilović, *Iz zapiska jugoslavenskog dobrovoljaca* (Zagreb, 1922); Ante Kovač, *Impresije iz jedne epohe* (Zagreb: 1923); Lujó Lovrić, *Suzna jesen* (Zagreb, 1922), and *Kroz snijegove i magle* (Zagreb: 1923).

legionaries and French *ancien combattants*. In the 1930s, his visit to a congress of German veterans led to a meeting with Adolf Hitler. He had a number of audiences with the Serbian/Yugoslav King Alexander, and after the assassination of 1934, remained a supporter of the monarch's vision of an integral Yugoslavia (as did most former volunteers). Lovrić was determined after 1918 to devote all his energies to the (Yugoslav) national cause; his personal sacrifice was meaningful since it was related to a national sacrifice made for Yugoslavia. There were very few Croatian veterans who could reconcile their sacrifice to the Yugoslav national cause in this way. For the handful of Croatian men who had, like Lovrić, pursued the Yugoslav cause in Austria-Hungary before the war and on the battlefield thereafter, a position of privilege and perceived responsibility awaited them in Yugoslavia..

Men like Lovrić helped pro-Yugoslav circles to disassociate non-Serbs from Austria-Hungary and associate them with the Allied war effort. To this end, they glossed over the realities of wartime volunteering, such as the overwhelming predominance of Serbs in the ranks, and the apparently brutal way in which Serbian officers imposed discipline on non-Serbian volunteers. Instead, they re-imagined a volunteer corps that was broadly representative of all the South Slav nationalities, a fiction which both suited their own ideology and reconciled Serbs and non-Serbs in the interwar state. There are many parallels between the Yugoslav volunteer movement and the Czechoslovak Legionary Movement. In both cases, the image of the volunteer and the myth of volitional sacrifice for the national cause are sacred in the post-war period. In Czechoslovakia, the legion filled the gap created by the absence of a national army during the Great War. The Yugoslav case was complicated by the divided nature of the legacy of the Great War, the belief (in Serbia) in the Serbian army's 'liberation and unification' of all South Slavs and the role of Croats and Slovenes in the Habsburg war effort. In this sense, a Yugoslav volunteer army was an important symbol of South Slav national integration in the post-war period.