

3 Forging a United Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes

The legacy of the First World War and the 'invalid question'

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In Miroslav Krleža's short story *Barracks Five B*, a conscripted soldier, Vidović, is mortally wounded whilst serving in the Habsburg army during the First World War. In the story, from the collection *The Croatian God Mars*, Krleža told of the suffering and slow death of his ill-fated protagonist in a ramshackle military hospital, situated near the front line. Barracks humour turns to gallows humour as Vidović's companions take bets on whether the injured soldier will make it through the night (the odds are long). The hospital/barracks is expected to be captured at any moment in a Russian assault, and an atmosphere of hedonistic reverie takes hold amongst the soldiers, depriving Vidović of a few last moments of tranquillity before he dies.¹

Krleža knew about the squalor of barrack life and about wounded soldiers: he had served with the Habsburg army in Galicia, and towards the end of the war he worked with injured soldiers and war orphans in Zagreb. His fictional soldier Vidović did not survive, but in reality tens of thousands of disabled veterans were an important part of the legacy left by the war on the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (hereafter Yugoslavia). This chapter will chart the various attempts to provide welfare and to reintegrate these disabled veterans into post-war society, a concern known in Yugoslavia as the 'invalid question'. The evolution of this question was closely connected with the transition of society from war to peace, as well as with the unification of the South Slav lands and the separate wartime histories of South Slav soldiers. In attempting to formulate social policy in the wake of the devastation left by war, initial optimism about what could be done for disabled veterans proved premature. At the end of the 1920s, financial hardship compelled the state to withdraw most material support for disabled veterans, many of whom became despondent about their post-war fate. In the Yugoslav kingdom, problems caused by budgetary restrictions were compounded by the heterogeneous nature of the South Slav 'war experience'. South Slav disabled veterans had fought on different fronts and – importantly – in different, opposing armies. Traces of official hostility towards soldiers who had fought in the Habsburg army lingered on in the new state. Those prejudices were a reflection of a post-war society whose culture emphasized the sacrifices and triumphs of the Serbian army during the war. In addition to this, South Slav disabled veterans

themselves were not in agreement over what had been won or lost during the war, what they had fought for, and how best to make their appeal to the government and the civilian public in the new state. Their history in the 1920s shows how many disabled veterans were ambivalent about their identity as ex-soldiers in the new state, simultaneously bound to one another as *ratni invalidi* ('war invalids') and yet divided by their divergent wartime experiences. At the beginning of the 1930s, as Yugoslavia faced greater domestic and international challenges, most disabled veterans and officials agreed that the 'invalid question' had still not received a satisfactory answer.

The cost of war

The failure was not considered inevitable in 1918, although at the end of the war few people in the newly-unified Yugoslav kingdom had illusions about the challenges they faced in the wake of the war. In terms of casualties, both civilian and military, no belligerent state had suffered as greatly as Serbia. When the Serbian army broke through the Salonica front and returned home in September 1918, it had been under arms for over six years.² Including the losses of Serbia's allies in the Montenegrin army, the First World War had claimed the lives of over 300,000 soldiers, about 40 per cent of mobilized men. Added to civilian casualties, total war losses for Serbia and Montenegro were between 750,000–800,000, from a population of around 4.5 million.³ The efforts of 'gallant little Serbia' against the Central Powers were recognized throughout the Allied nations, and for many Serbian soldiers this image of heroic struggle and eventual victory gave meaning to the mass death of the war years. The creation of Yugoslavia in December 1918 meant that the wartime sacrifice of the Serbian soldier became one of 'liberation and unification' made on behalf of all South Slavs, and it was this trope which became central to self-legitimizing narratives amongst veterans of the Serbian army after 1918.

Although not on the same scale, Habsburg South Slavs had also endured suffering and sacrifice during the war. Losses for Habsburg Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (civilians and soldiers) have been calculated at around 150,000.⁴ Habsburg South Slavs fought on the Balkan front against the Serbian and Montenegrin armies,⁵ on the Italian front, and against Russian soldiers in the East. The fact that so many Habsburg South Slavs had been in Russia during the October Revolution meant that these veterans were often suspected (occasionally with justification) of being Bolshevik sympathizers. Indeed the anarchic situation which engulfed the Croatian countryside in the autumn of 1918 was caused in large part by Habsburg military deserters and 'returnees', South Slav soldiers coming home from Russian captivity.⁶ The fear of radicalization within the army led to the decision to disenfranchise soldiers on the active list in the newly-formed Yugoslav army, hoping to avoid the appearance of politicized soldiers' councils similar to those that had played such an important role in Russia's communist revolution. This meant that South Slav veterans were of political, as well as social and cultural significance to the new

kingdom in 1918. In fact, only a minority of South Slav veterans who had fought in Russia became members of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. For those soldiers, the war had brought socialist revolution a step closer, but for many Habsburg veterans it was unclear what had been gained from their wartime sacrifice. In this respect, they stood apart from veterans of the victorious Serbian army. With the end of the war and the creation of Yugoslavia, South Slav veterans needed to come to terms with sharing a state with soldiers formerly of an opposing army. Reconciliation between former enemies was an important part of cultural demobilization and the transition from war to peace in the Yugoslav kingdom.

Unification and the end of the war meant that expertise and skills of former enemies could now be pooled for the benefit of all. The Croatian orthopaedist Dr Božidar Spišić, for example, had worked with disabled veterans at a military barracks used as a school for disabled veterans in Zagreb during the war. He travelled to Belgrade in spring 1919 to deliver a lecture to his Serbian colleagues entitled 'How we can help our Invalids'. Spišić appealed for basic medical care and schooling to be provided free of charge, to ensure that disabled veterans would once again be capable of working and providing for themselves. 'Our invalids must not earn their daily bread by begging,' he warned.⁷ Instead, he envisaged a reciprocal relationship between the state and its disabled veterans that would be beneficial to both parties. By re-training these men to become useful and productive workers in civilian life, the state would retain a large source of man-power. This was a vital consideration in Yugoslavia, where so much had been lost in material and human resources during the war.

A council of Serbian military doctors who had had experience of caring for disabled soldiers during the war responded with similar sentiments in May:

Nobody today can think of the invalid question as merely a calculated percentage of disability, [and] then giving to those disabled the label invalid, along with financial support from the state. That would do almost nothing to help invalids and the state in which they lived.⁸

Like Spišić, the Serbian doctors saw no need for wounded soldiers to wear the 'invalid' label indefinitely in civilian life, 'Invalid means incapable, not of living, not of working, but of further fighting, for military purposes. Freed from the army, he must not be freed from all kinds of work'.⁹ The council went on to suggest a programme of support, medical and financial, that would enable disabled veterans once again to earn money for themselves.

Outside the circle of military and civilian experts, many in Yugoslavia felt that the state was honour-bound to care for its veterans, especially those who were disabled.¹⁰ This duty fell to the newly-formed Ministry of Social Policy. The officials and bureaucrats of this government department were responsible for weaving together the wartime strands of social and medical expertise and creating a welfare programme in Yugoslavia. It was a Herculean task, but the

first Minister of Social Policy, Vitomir Korać, entered the debate with confidence. In November, he organized a conference on disabled veterans in Belgrade, attended by about 100 delegates from across the country. These included, *inter alia*, representatives of competent authorities, delegates of military and civilian groups, charitable organizations and families of missing, killed or interned soldiers. Participants were invited to offer opinions and suggestions pertaining to the resolution of the 'invalid question'. Some of these would be taken into account when drafting a unified law for disabled veterans. Items for discussion included medical treatment, organizational, administrative, financial, and socio-economic concerns for disabled veterans, housing, and programmes of professional training.¹¹

The conference was intended as a comprehensive survey of the 'invalid question' and of the problems associated with it, and demonstrates both the energy and the ambition with which the Ministry of Social Policy initially confronted the challenges ahead of them. The delegates reviewed the situation from its war-time origins until the present day and discussed the direction they hoped it would take in the future. Suggestions were put forward that every single disabled veteran should be re-examined using the most advanced medical methods in order to ascertain their individual needs. Provisions were made for passing the concern of disabled veterans from military to civilian authorities, and there were calls for a review of all those institutions involved with disabled veterans to be unified into one single authority which would cover the entire country. The delegates also discussed how to ensure that within one year (eighteen months at most) every single disabled veteran who required a prosthetic limb would be supplied with one. Finally, provisions were made for the establishment of a department for social statistics since, at this time, the ministry did not have figures of its own.¹² Like Dr Spišić and the Serbian medical experts, the ministry was confident about how much could be achieved for disabled veterans; it was held that the 'invalid question' could be resolved by informed policy making and hard work. However, well-intended and positive statements handed over a number of hostages to fortune. The pledges which were made in official circles so soon after the war would resonate with disabled veterans throughout the country for many years to come. In the newly-unified state, a set of assumptions about post-war social policy and about what disabled veterans could expect from the government was established.

Initially, at least, the state was committed to providing for disabled veterans. As the discussion topics at the conference suggest, the Ministry of Social Policy stressed the concept that *re-training* disabled veterans for the workplace would lead to their *re-integration* into society, the latter a logical consequence of the former. To this end, wartime 'invalid schools' were maintained and expanded in the new state. At these institutions, disabled veterans could be trained by qualified experts in a range of trades appropriate to their reduced physical capabilities. In Zagreb, for example, the Holy Spirit Poorhouse was converted into an 'invalid school' and orthopaedic hospital (the only one of its

kind in the region) in 1921, funded by the ministry. Disabled veterans could stay at a nearby dormitory (actually a converted army barracks) whilst they completed their apprenticeship. The state provided for accommodation, food, training, and even the necessary tools they would need for their new vocations (basket-making was considered suitable work, or disabled veterans could find employment at the orthopaedic hospital itself, making prosthetic limbs for amputee veterans). Schools for sightless disabled veterans were founded across the country, such as the one in Zemun, across the river Danube from Belgrade. Pupils at Zemun could learn Braille and make use of the school's well-stocked library.¹³ 'Invalid' did not mean 'incapable of living' as the Serbian doctors had insisted in 1919, and re-integration started to look like the answer to the 'invalid question'.

The lack of data as to the number of disabled veterans was also a consequence of the transition from war to peace, and of the lack of integration in the state's legislation. The Ministry of Social Policy understood that in order to effectively tackle the 'invalid question' it would need to know its dimensions; in other words how many disabled veterans were in Yugoslavia, and what was the level of their disability. The ministry wanted to carry out a comprehensive survey which would process and categorize every single disabled veteran in the kingdom. This would create a corpus of knowledge that would allow the ministry to decide how many people were entitled to how much support. Disabled veterans were inspected at special tribunals throughout the country starting in spring 1921. The raw data could be used to make informed policy decisions, but it should be kept in mind that it also created the parameters of 'invalidity' in interwar Yugoslavia, parameters through which the state would define its responsibility (or lack of responsibility) to disabled veterans, and through which many disabled veterans would understand their own status. The language through which the 'invalid question' would come to be expressed in the Yugoslav kingdom was established by this process.

Despite these efforts, absolute numbers of disabled veterans are difficult to trace, the hunt for reliable figures is made harder by the condition of the archival collections of the Ministry of Social Policy in interwar Yugoslavia, of whose records only fragments remain. The historian is forced to look at less-reliable and sometimes conflicting reports. The Yugoslav delegates at the peace conferences in Paris supplied a figure of 264,000 disabled veterans *of the Serbian army*.¹⁴ Given what is known about the chaotic situation at the end of the war and the difficulties encountered in quantifying disabled veterans at this time, the figure should be treated with due care. No doubt the number was inflated to ensure the best possible chance of receiving reparations from the defeated Central Powers. The most reliable figures in the first decade after unification were provided in an anthology published to celebrate the decennial of the formation of Yugoslavia. The author gave a figure, supplied by the Ministry of Social Policy, of 74,531, which broke down as follows: Serbs, 33,837; Croats, 21,850; Slovenes, 11,817; Germans, 2,657; Hungarians,

2,527; Romanians, 800; Czechs, 643; and others, 400. Thus the total amounted to 74,531.¹⁵

This is really the only figure that should pass the litmus test of historical scepticism, which means it is very difficult to trace the evolution of this aspect of Yugoslavia's social history in the first post-war decade. By the end of the 1920s, the number of disabled veterans had undergone several official reductions and re-calculations. It seems certain that, in the years preceding 1928, a number of disabled veterans were successfully re-integrated into society (which is to say re-trained and absorbed into gainful employment), perhaps many decided they were better off under the care of their families rather than the state, and some certainly died during this time (tuberculosis, for example, was a great killer in hospitals and invalid schools during and after the war). Nevertheless, it gives a sense of the scale of the problem facing the country in the years after the war. With its limited funds, some at the Ministry of Social Policy might have taken cold comfort in the knowledge that the war dead vastly outnumbered the war living. In fact, the figure did not include the large number of bereaved widows and war orphans created by the mass killing of the war, especially in Serbia. Their financial well-being was also the ministry's responsibility.

Disabled veterans' societies

Whilst the Ministry of Social Policy attempted to get to grips with the 'invalid question', a number of disabled veterans were themselves beginning to organize, the better to present their own demands to the state. After 1918, veteran societies and organizations were a significant and – in many cases – new development in associational life throughout Europe,¹⁶ and Yugoslavia was not an exception. Unsurprisingly, veterans of the Serbian army were most active in this area, and their organizations were by far the largest in interwar Yugoslavia,¹⁷ although smaller societies formed by veterans of the Habsburg army also emerged in the 'newly-associated' regions of the Yugoslav kingdom.

The disabled veterans' society differed significantly from most other veteran groups in so far as its membership could be drawn from throughout the kingdom, and included former soldiers of the Serbian and the Habsburg armies (not to mention the Montenegrin army).¹⁸ However, cutting across tribal lines, or rather reconciling soldiers who had fought in opposing armies during the war, was no mean feat. The disabled veterans' movement in interwar Yugoslavia was an ambivalent creature, its members felt united by their shared fate as disabled veterans, and yet seriously divided by their wartime experiences. Their attempts at presenting a unified front to the government were hampered by the lingering iniquities in post-war legislation. Disabled veterans from all backgrounds agreed that those iniquities needed to be effaced by a single law, although the consensus broke down over the details of such a law. Most feared that they would be forgotten by the 'non-invalid' population, although there was much disagreement as to what they

should be remembered for. The first disabled veteran organization was established by former soldiers of the Serbian army at the beginning of 1919, and based in Belgrade. A few months later, in June, the statute of a similar group was accepted by Zagreb authorities, and by 1925, there were disabled veteran organizations in Novi Sad, Kragujevac, Skopje, Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Podgorica, and Split, with a combined membership of about 38,000 members, over half of whom were from Serbia.¹⁹

In 1919, the Belgrade and Zagreb organizations, the two largest in the country, were in agreement over the urgent need for unity in order to raise the profile of the 'invalid question' and, most importantly, to put pressure on the government to pass a law for disabled veterans. At the end of the war Habsburg veterans were still being paid according to the laws established by the defunct monarchy, whereas veterans of the Serbian army were catered for by legislation dating back to the pre-war Serbian kingdom. This was yet another legal anomaly which needed to be ironed out by the new state's lawmakers. The unified Yugoslav kingdom was heir to a vast array of historical, cultural and political traditions, legal and political headaches were a symptom of unifying those traditions into a coherent polity. Nevertheless, like many other such irregularities and misunderstandings concerning the military, voting quotas, and currency exchange rates, the lack of a single disabled veterans' law retarded the process of unification and, in this case, post-war reconciliation amongst former soldiers.²⁰

Just as with the high politics of interwar Yugoslavia, disagreements and antagonisms amongst disabled veterans often revolved around the Belgrade/Zagreb axis. The Belgrade and Zagreb societies differed over seemingly small details in the draft proposal. The polemics between the two organizations, however, revealed a deeper antipathy based on the memory of the war years. The disharmony in the Yugoslav parliament echoed in the meetings of the disabled veterans, as the Belgrade society complained that 'The representatives of Croatian invalids have the same attitude as their politicians [...] Many times we have made this futile attempt [at unification], always with sacrifices on our part'.²¹ Such post-war sacrifices were a continuation of those made during the war, as the Serbian soldiers were keen to point out: 'we succeeded in freeing our brother Croats and Slovenes from the thousand-year slavery of Austria-Hungary [...] If the Croat and Slovene nations had trusted Radić and others [like him] they would not now be free.'²²

The war years and the Serbian victory were sensitive matters for many Habsburg disabled veterans who resented the implication that they were soldiers of a defeated enemy. The Zagreb disabled veterans preferred the pacifistic solidarity of an 'invalid international' based on their shared suffering in the war and after. This meant unity 'not just with the comradely organisation in Belgrade, but with all war victims of all countries, since we are all victims one and the same'.²³ This was impossible at a national level, however, since 'our comrades in Serbia and Montenegro do not admit us as their comrades, they maintain that we are Austrian invalids'.²⁴ The corrosive

impact of this kind of bickering on veteran relations should not be underestimated. The memory of the Great War was interwoven into the fabric of the new state, and Serbia's struggle for the 'liberation and unification' of all South Slavs was the constituent myth of Yugoslavia. However, most Habsburg veterans did not recognize in it their own war experiences. The polemics between the Zagreb and Belgrade societies were a reflection of post-war culture in the Yugoslav kingdom and of the divisive nature of war memory.

Direct action

Interestingly, reconciliation between South Slav veterans was easier to achieve at an international level, as ex-soldiers looked beyond their own borders and saw that their fate was linked to the impact of the war throughout Europe. It was this international dimension, coupled with the notion of disabled veterans as victims of the Great War who were entitled to support and recognition, which facilitated the unification of all disabled veteran societies into a single organization, at the beginning of 1923. It also led to the most public display of veteran solidarity in the 1920s: a large rally held to express dissatisfaction at the perceived failures of the government to address the 'invalid question'.

The rapprochement between the feuding societies began in September 1922, and was prompted by the forthcoming 'Inter-Allied Invalid Congress', which was to be held in Ljubljana, bringing delegates from all formerly Allied states to Yugoslavia. The congress raised the profile of the 'invalid question' in the Yugoslav kingdom which, despite the earlier promises of the Ministry of Social Policy, was at risk of becoming submerged in the many other political and financial demands being made on the government. In what appears to be an exercise in public relations, the ministry set aside ten million dinars to adapt a tuberculosis clinic in Croatia, and a further three million dinars to build a disabled veterans' home in Belgrade.²⁵ The ministry also took the initiative in providing a draft for a disabled veterans' law, the lack of which was still the biggest complaint of many disabled veterans. After meeting with ex-soldiers from Belgrade, Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Split, and Novi Sad, the minister of social policy offered a generous proposal that was acceptable to all present.

On the eve of the 'Inter-Allied Invalid Congress' disabled veterans in Zagreb recognized that squabbling with the Belgrade society would jeopardize their tenuous link to Allied veterans, and offered 'fraternal' and 'patriotic' support to the central council.²⁶ The unity within the movement and the renewed interest in the 'invalid question' also convinced the Croatian contingent that it was time to take more decisive action to ensure that both the government and the general public knew about the suffering of disabled veterans in the new state. They suggested that a march or demonstration in Belgrade could achieve both of these goals. The strategy was approved by the central council (as it now was) in Belgrade, and a 'Section for Intervention' of about 100 disabled veterans was chosen for the purpose of lobbying the government.²⁷

They arrived in Belgrade in November 1922 and a number of the veterans were received by the Prime Minister Nikola Pašić. Pašić had been with the Serbian army during its harrowing wartime retreat across Albania in 1915, and he expressed sympathy for the disabled veterans and their cause. He stated that the matter needed to be addressed immediately, but that due to the current parliamentary crisis it was very difficult for his government to act.²⁸ This was encouraging, and the disabled veterans decided to remain in Belgrade to see if the conditions in parliament would become more favourable.

Over the course of November the demonstration gained momentum and proved to have a broader appeal than the disabled veterans had expected, as civil servants and ex-volunteers joined the protests against the government. Like the disabled veterans, these men were dissatisfied with the way they were treated in the Yugoslav kingdom. By the beginning of December, around 6,000 disabled veterans, ex-volunteers, civil servants, and sympathizers had gathered outside the Yugoslav parliament. It was a huge public manifestation which happened to coincide with the fourth anniversary of the unification of Yugoslavia, on 1 December. Much to the chagrin of the Zagreb society, there seems to have been a hint of festivity within the ranks of the veterans of the Serbian army. The Croatian organization complained that some participants appeared to be more concerned with 'cinemas and concerts' than with the 'empty stomachs of invalids'.²⁹ Apparently, a number of veterans of the Serbian army combined protest with a celebration of the 'liberation and unification' of all South Slavs. The smaller Zagreb society was encouraged to see their ranks swelled on the streets by a large number of veterans of the Serbian army, but they were also worried that the focus of their protest would be lost. Nevertheless, tensions which had previously kept the societies apart were now firmly in the background, sublimated to the important task of getting a law passed. The disabled veterans, emboldened by the support they had received on the streets and in the press, promised an even larger demonstration if a law was not passed immediately. The Section for Intervention threatened to call every single ex-volunteer and disabled veteran in the country to the capital, and to block all exits out of the city, bringing daily life in the capital to a virtual standstill. They predicted that the call would bring up to 160,000 protestors onto the streets of Belgrade.³⁰

During these weeks, it looked like the disabled veterans had caught the mood of a country dissatisfied with the lack of progress made in the four years since the end of the war. The threats to clog the streets of Belgrade with the country's malcontent proved empty, however, and the protest ended with a whimper rather than a bang. At the end of the year, Pašić's government was dissolved and new elections were called. Lobbying the government now became a moot point and the time spent on the streets and in council with the government had been wasted; disabled veterans would have to reformulate their strategy for a new political constellation. The announcement in parliament to dissolve the government was greeted by angry jeers from veterans in the public gallery, who heckled members with cries of, 'For shame!'

'National bloodsuckers!', and 'We will be waiting for you with sticks when you reconvene!'³¹ A small consolation for their failed attempt at direct action was the definitive unification of all disabled veteran societies into one pan-Yugoslav organization, which was agreed upon at the beginning of 1923.³²

Victors or victims?

The failed demonstration shows that the disabled veterans shared a sense of frustration at the lack of recognition their wartime sacrifice was given in the 1920s. The primary targets of this frustration were the state, the government, and its politicians. These were the men most directly responsible for the hardships the veterans now faced and also most directly responsible for compensating them in the post-war period. The government, for its part, was reaping what it had sowed immediately after the war. The politicians were measured against the promises they had made to disabled veterans in the first months after unification, and were found wanting. In addition to this, the disabled veterans wanted recognition from the general public. Non-veterans were not entitled to ignore the pleas of these men, and it was in search of this recognition that disabled veterans swelled on to the streets of Belgrade in their thousands. Veterans felt that the only alternative to this recognition was to be forgotten, to become invisible. For Serbian and Habsburg veterans alike this was their greatest anxiety. To become invisible was to admit that their wartime sacrifice, their invalidity, was meaningless, a burden on a society which did not care to be burdened by such matters. The demonstration of December 1922 was an attempt on the part of ex-soldiers to give meaning to their status as veterans by calling upon the state and society to acknowledge it.

It is also notable that the initiative for the demonstrations and the formation of a 'Section for Intervention' came from the Zagreb society. This is consistent with that society's aims to work exclusively for the purpose of gaining material and financial concessions for its members. This aim informed the decision to demonstrate outside the parliament in Belgrade, but it also created a tension with veterans of the Serbian army commemorating 'liberation and unification' with 'cinemas and concerts'. Many Habsburg disabled veterans preferred to reduce the 'invalid question' in Yugoslavia to its lowest common denominator, namely, that all disabled veterans in the new state were victims, and as such shared the same fate. Habsburg veterans embraced the notion of victimhood throughout post-war Europe (the notion which informed the Zagreb society's appeal that 'we are all victims one and the same') more enthusiastically than their Serbian counterparts, who saw themselves not just as victims, but also as victors. Veterans of the Serbian army wanted to combine such demands with a celebration of 'liberation and unification' and of their wartime sacrifice, celebrations which excluded Habsburg veterans. The social and cultural dimensions of the 'invalid question' were at odds: all disabled veterans protesting on the streets of Belgrade wanted support from the state and all agreed that solidarity amongst veterans was crucial.

Beyond this, mutual ground between Habsburg and Serbian veterans was harder to find, and there was no common language of mourning and commemoration between soldiers of such different backgrounds.

Throughout the 1920s conflicting centripetal and centrifugal forces were ever present within the South Slav disabled veteran movement. It seems, however, that after the protest in Belgrade, the forces of unity were in ascendancy. The unification of all disabled veterans groups into one 'Society for War Invalids' (*Udruženje ratnih invalida*) took place at the beginning of 1923. The decision was informed by the events in Belgrade at the end of 1922, where collective action was deemed more effective than working apart. The ability of South Slav disabled veterans to work together in spite of such divisive wartime experiences demonstrates that, at the very least, there was a potential for reconciliation in the post-war period (Similarly, it must also be noted that veteran movements throughout Europe were divided as to the meaning of the war and the best way to tackle their problems in the post-war period).³³ However, this unification did not create a *tabula rasa* which erased differences between disabled veterans of the Habsburg and Serbian armies. Neither did the law for disabled veterans, eventually passed in 1925, almost eight years after unification and having undergone 16 re-drafts.³⁴ The unambiguous sense of victory on behalf of the 'liberation and unification' of all South Slavs, felt by most veterans of the Serbian army, remained present throughout the 1920s.

Disabled veterans of the Serbian army, both before and after unification in 1923 and unlike Habsburg veterans, felt that their wartime suffering and sacrifice was at least partially redeemed by their victory and by the 'liberation and unification' of all South Slavs. In this sense, it is understandable that dates such as 1 December would resonate more strongly in their ranks. The war, as we have seen, had taken a far greater toll in Serbia than elsewhere in the Yugoslav kingdom. The commemoration and 'cinemas and concerts' of which the Zagreb veterans complained was part of an attempt by Serbian veterans to mediate the great trauma caused by the war. Invasion, defeat, retreat, occupation, and eventual triumph became elements of a national narrative from which the Serbian disabled veterans could find meaning in their wartime experiences. This epic ran like a red thread through Serbian national life in interwar Yugoslavia,³⁵ but it was not transferable to Habsburg veterans, and therefore had an exclusive quality which marred complete identity between disabled veterans.

In fact, it seems that this attitude of Serbian victory permeated deeper into post-war society in the Yugoslav kingdom. Sometimes it came with an attendant definition of Habsburg veterans as defeated enemies. Veterans in Zagreb made repeated claims that officials at the Ministry of Social Policy had insulted them on account of their war records. For example, at a meeting in Zagreb in 1920, a Croatian disabled veteran told of how, when he had been to see an official to request financial assistance, he was asked, 'were you at the front in Salonica?' and was told to 'go to [deposed Habsburg emperor] Karl,

maybe he will give you something'.³⁶ No doubt former Habsburg soldiers were self-conscious about their wartime records, but official documents reveal similar prejudices. Croatian disabled veterans at an invalid school in Moslavina made frequent complaints about their treatment by staff during the 1920s. Disabled veterans, pupils at the school, told the Ministry of Social Policy in 1925 that so far complaints about their living conditions had been dismissed by the director, who on one occasion had told them 'if you don't like it, you can go to Franz Joseph'.³⁷ In 1930, an official report by the Ministry of Social Policy investigated numerous complaints made against the director, including the accusation that he had drunkenly called one pupil a 'kraut whore'. The comment referred to the ex-soldier's wartime record in the 'Austrian' army, and the director, who subsequently lost his job, did not deny making it. The ministry's investigation found that not only was the insult characteristic of the director's approach to his work, but that it reflected more generally the bad state of relations between staff and veterans at the school over the years.³⁸ In its willingness both to investigate the veterans' complaints and to dismiss the offending director, the Ministry of Social Policy showed sincerity in its attempts to treat disabled veterans in the Yugoslav kingdom fairly and equitably. Nevertheless, the history of this institute exposes lingering prejudices which went against the official line. These kinds of prejudices are very difficult to quantify, but can at least be highlighted.

Silent liquidation

Apart or together, the disabled veterans were swimming against the tide in the 1920s. In 1929, the Ministry of Social Policy re-defined – or rather restricted – its responsibility to disabled veterans. Initial optimism, so prevalent in the period immediately after the war, had evaporated in the face of scarcity and financial hard times. The law of 1925 was re-drafted in 1929 and a far less generous welfare policy was formulated, which included a reduction in the 'invalid fund' of 10 million dinars.³⁹ Invalid schools across the country were emptied of disabled veterans who no longer qualified for care. Support for the sightless, for example, was completely withdrawn, and disabled veterans at the Holy Spirit in Zagreb were moved to a smaller facility, as the building returned to its original function as a poorhouse.⁴⁰ The facts and figures about disabled veterans that the Ministry of Social Policy had gathered over the years now helped them to decide who was and who was not entitled to help from the state, essentially, who was and who was not an 'invalid'. In contradistinction to the line taken at the conference on disabled veterans so soon after the war, the ministry now decided that the responsibility for care of disabled veterans lay in the private sphere of the family, not in the public sphere of the state.

It is very difficult to gauge, in absolute terms, whether the Ministry of Social Policy made the right decision regarding disabled veterans towards the end of the decade. No doubt many wounded men had returned from battle

and re-integrated into pre-war kinship groups, or at least their welfare had been looked after by such kinship groups, rather than in veteran organizations or by the state. The new, less-generous line taken by the Ministry of Social Policy might not have been entirely egregious, and it certainly made financial sense. Crucially, however, it was inconsistent with the approach the Ministry of Social Policy had taken towards the 'invalid question' immediately after the war. As elsewhere in Europe initial promises proved impossible to keep: there simply was not enough money to provide the conditions which disabled veterans, nevertheless, now expected to receive.⁴¹ The Ministry of Social Policy had created an ideal image of welfare for disabled veterans which it was unable to realize, and within these relative terms, it can be judged as a failure.

This was certainly the attitude of many disabled veterans, as we have seen. They had from an early stage been critical of the state, whose responsibility it was to provide for disabled veterans, and who were therefore blamed by veterans when they failed to do so. The lethargy of the government in passing a law and its failure to provide financial care for veterans was regarded as nonfeasance by many disabled veterans. The budgetary restrictions of 1929 were hardly an abrupt turnaround; they merely confirmed what many veterans already believed to be true: Yugoslavia did not care about its disabled veterans. It was also a realization of the marginalization of disabled veterans from the public sphere, the 'invisibility' which lay at the roots of so much veteran angst in the interwar period, and which had galvanized them into taking action.

The despair which this caused was eloquently captured by a double amputee from Croatia, Josip Pavičić, one of the few disabled veterans to write about his experiences in the post-war kingdom. Unlike Krleža, Pavičić depicted the soldier's fate after 1918, recreating the atmosphere of invalid schools and hospitals in the post-war period, which he termed 'invalid catacombs'.⁴² Whilst Vidović had died before the Armistice, Pavičić's protagonists survived the war, but the end of the conflict was merely the beginning of a new phase of their suffering. Their experiences in Yugoslavia were of neglect and hostility, from the state and from 'non-invalid' society, dreaming of pre-war life gave a temporary respite to the disabled veteran, but many, realizing they could not endure their post-war fate, turned to suicide. This caused a gradual but pronounced decline in the ranks of disabled veterans, and was thus the ultimate solution to the 'invalid question'. The process was barely noticed by the rest of society, and Pavičić termed it 'silent liquidation'. 'Silent liquidation' was the realization of the disabled veterans' worst fears: to be ignored and forgotten, to become invisible in a society which wanted to move away from the war years, a luxury which was denied to Pavičić and his fellow *ratni invalidi*.

Conclusion

Obviously, the melancholy trope of 'silent liquidation' was the antithesis of official policy towards disabled veterans, which aimed, if not to restore all

disabled veterans to pre-war life, then at least to re-integrate them into the workforce, and to provide for them where this was not possible. This chapter has tried to show that the experience of disabled veterans in the 1920s was in part responsive to official policy. The Ministry of Social Policy, like the Yugoslav state, attempted to find its way in a new epoch, facing unprecedented challenges in the wake of the war. Disabled veterans took their cues from the state, negotiating with the government and with each other to find a meaning for their wartime experiences and a place in post-war society worthy of the sacrifices they had made during the war. For many veterans of the Serbian army, this was a straightforward matter of a debt of honour owed to them by Yugoslavia on account of their wartime sacrifice. The foundational narrative of the state acknowledged the important role soldiers of the Serbian army played during the war. This did not necessarily mean that the state would look after disabled veterans of the Serbian army in the interwar period, but it did mean that they had a convincing claim to the country's moral conscience. For Habsburg veterans, the matter was more complicated, and notions of victory and sacrifice were often eschewed in favour of a broader sense of suffering and victimhood in the post-war period. It should be remembered that Josip Pavičić, whose stories are marked by themes of the futility and hopelessness of war, was also a Croat who fought in the Habsburg army. This is perhaps an explanation for the absence of a positive message in the war stories of men like Miroslav Krleža and Josip Pavičić.

For Pavičić, the notion of a meaningful war did not come until after 1945. Like Krleža, he became a supporter of Tito (another veteran of the Habsburg army) and the Socialist revolution. Pavičić's stories about the 'invalid question' in the 1920s were re-printed in 1946, under the title *In Red Letters*, and with four new fictional tales of the Partisan struggle during the civil war in Yugoslavia. In a preface written especially for the new edition, the author spoke of his experiences as a disabled veteran in the interwar period:

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 [...] 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.⁴³

Pavičić and Tito, two Habsburg veterans of the Great War, had finally found a war worth commemorating, and socialist Yugoslavia, unlike its royalist predecessor, had found a more inclusive foundational narrative.

Notes

- 1 M. Krleža, *Hrvatski Bog Mars* (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1973), pp. 219–36. The stories were originally published together soon after the war, in 1922.
- 2 Including the Balkan Wars of 1912–13. For a comprehensive English-language history of Serbia in the First World War, see A. Mitrović, *Serbia's Great War, 1914–1918* (London: Hurst, 2007).
- 3 See J. Tomasevich, *Peasants, Politics, and Economic Change in Yugoslavia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1955), pp. 222–23.
- 4 *Ibid.* Tomasevich notes how statistics are less reliable due to the decomposition of the Dual Monarchy at the end of the war.
- 5 Including a non-commissioned officer from the Croatian Zagorje named Josip Broz who, under his Comintern alias ‘Tito’, would preside over Socialist Yugoslavia after the Second World War.
- 6 See I. Banac, ‘“Emperor Karl has become a Comitadji”: The Croatian Disturbances of Autumn 1918’, *Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 70, no. 2 (April 1992), pp. 284–305.
- 7 *Obzor*, 25 April 1919.
- 8 *Službene novine*, 17 July 1919.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 The leading Belgrade daily *Politika*, for example, in an article published in September that year, wrote of how the state had a ‘moral responsibility’ to its veterans. The newspaper was thinking in similar terms to the Ministry for Social Policy at this time; the article goes on to note how the huge losses sustained in fighting added an economic urgency to the matter, and that the state should put as many disabled veterans back to work as possible. See *Politika*, 11 September 1919.
- 11 Arhiv Jugoslavije (Archives of Yugoslavia, hereafter AJ), Belgrade, Fond 39 ‘Ministarstvo socijalne politike i narodnog zdravlja, 1919–41’, fasc. 7.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 See *Politika*, 7 September 1919. The article also notes how the library’s collection included the classics of Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian literature, although pride of place was given to Serbian epic poetry.
- 14 M. Isić, *Seljaštvo u Srbiji 1918–1925* (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 1995), pp. 25–26. Cited in Lj. Petrović ‘Diskriminacija invalida u Jugoslovenskom društvu 1918–41. godine. Oblici socijalne represije nad osobama sa invaliditetom’, *Tokovi istorije*, 3–4, 2003, pp. 21–38. Disabled veterans were designated as Serbian soldiers since the Yugoslav kingdom was not recognized by all powers until June 1919. See A. Mitrović, ‘The Yugoslav Question, the First World War, and the Peace Conference 1914–20’, in D. Djokić (ed.), *Yugoslavism: Histories of a Failed Idea 1918–1992* (London: Hurst, 2003), pp. 42–56.
- 15 M. Mrvaljević, ‘Naše invalidsko pitanje’ in *Jubilarni zbornik života i rada Srba, Hrvata, i Slovenaca 1918–1928* (Belgrade: Izdanje Matice živih i mrtvih SHS, 1928). Disabled veterans are categorized exclusively by ethnic criteria, so ‘Serbs’ in this table are veterans of the Serbian, Montenegrin, and Habsburg armies.
- 16 See, for example, A. Prost, *In the Wake of the War: Les Anciens Combattants and French Society 1914–1939* (Oxford: Berg, 1992).
- 17 See N. Šehić, *Četništvo u Bosni i Hercegovini 1918–1941: Politička uloga i oblici djelatnosti četničkih udruženja* (Sarajevo: Akademija nauka i umjetnosti Bosne i Hercegovine, 1971).
- 18 The only other large veteran society to do so was the Union of Volunteers, formed by veterans who had served in South Slav volunteer divisions during the war, and which had branches throughout the Yugoslav kingdom.
- 19 *Ratni invalid* (Belgrade), 18 January 1925.
- 20 The American historian John Lampe has studied the nature and the repercussions of some of these mistakes. See his ‘Unifying the Yugoslav Economy, 1918–21: Misery and Early

- Misunderstandings' in D. Djordjević (ed.), *The Creation of Yugoslavia, 1914–1918* (Santa Barbara: Clio Books, 1980).
- 21 *Ratni invalid* (Belgrade), 6 April 1922.
- 22 Ibid., 30 April 1922.
- 23 *Ratni invalid* (Zagreb), 1 August 1922.
- 24 Ibid., 15 November 1922.
- 25 Ibid., 30 September 1922.
- 26 *Obzor*, 29 October 1922.
- 27 The protest outside the *ban's* palace was reported in *Ratni invalid* (Zagreb), 1 April 1920. The wisdom behind this demonstration and that which was about to take place in Belgrade is explained in an article in the same newspaper, 30 November 1922.
- 28 See D. Djokić, *Elusive Compromise: a History of Interwar Yugoslavia* (London: Hurst, 2007), pp. 54–55.
- 29 *Ratni invalid* (Zagreb), 15 December 1922.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Hrvatski državni arhiv (Croatian State Archives, Zagreb, hereafter HDA), Pravila društava, Zagreb, 4684, 'Udruženje ratnih invalida na području Hrvatske, Slavonije, Istre, Međumurja'.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 See, for example, J. Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996); R. W. Whalen, *Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War 1914–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Prost, *In the Wake of the War*.
- 34 *Ratni invalid* (Belgrade) 24 October 1926.
- 35 And beyond, the author Dobrica Ćosić would revive the story of Serbia's Great War, *mutatis mutandis*, to great effect in his multivolume novel *A Time of Death*, first published in 1972. See N. Miller, *The Nonconformists: Culture, Politics, and Nationalism in a Serbian Intellectual Circle, 1944–1991* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2007).
- 36 HDA, Pravila društava, Zagreb, 4684, 'Udruženje ratnih invalida na području Hrvatske, Slavonije, Istre, Međumurja'.
- 37 HDA, fond 1363, 'Politička situacija', box 16.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 AJ, Fond 39 'Ministarstvo socijalne politike i narodnog zdravlja, 1919–41', fasc. 7.
- 40 A number of leading Croatian newspapers were in favour of the move, in a significant turnaround from the support they had given the disabled veterans earlier. *Obzor* suggested that the needs of the city's poverty-stricken children outweighed those of the veterans. See *Obzor*, 4 September 1928.
- 41 See, for example, Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*.
- 42 J. Pavičić, in his preface to *Crvenim slovima* (Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1946).
- 43 Pavičić, *Crvenim slovima*, pp. 5–6.