

Serbian and Habsburg Military institutional legacies in Yugoslavia after 1918

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A major problem of state and institution building in Yugoslavia after 1918 was that the end of the war was not a complete caesura between separate South Slav pasts and a unified ‘Yugoslav’ future: much historical and institutional baggage was carried over into the new state. This was obviously the case with the Yugoslav army, where creating a new institution entirely from scratch was impossible, given the immediate internal and external threats that faced the new state and given the prestige and the military efficacy of the Serbian army. The Yugoslav army was consciously modelled on the pre-war Serbian army, not only in terms of its institutional framework, but also in terms of its ethos and ideology. There was little space in this ideology for commemorating Austria–Hungary’s war, just as there was little space in the Czechoslovak, Polish or Romanian armies. It was difficult to fuse Austro-Hungarian and Serbian veterans into one army, and problems were especially acute in the officer corps. This article addresses some of the successes and failures encountered in the attempt to fuse disparate and often antithetical military institutional cultures in Yugoslavia in the decade after the end of the First World War.

Keywords: Yugoslavia; Austria–Hungary; Serbia

Introduction

The disintegration of Austria–Hungary at the end of the First World War and the formation of the ‘successor states’ of Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, Hungary and Austria was a watershed in Central and Eastern European history. It was the first time that the region had a common form of government with Western Europe,¹ and Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland and Yugoslavia looked to countries such as France and Great Britain, fellow ‘victors’ of the First World War, as models for their own constitutional and parliamentary systems. In most cases, state-builders in the successor states wanted to draw a clear line of separation between their imperial past and their future as democratic nation-states. However, the institutional break was not always as radical as portrayed. The formation of viable state institutions was essential in order to make a successful transition out of empire and to gain the loyalty of citizens and subjects in newly ‘independent Eastern Europe’.² Sometimes this meant creating new institutions from scratch, sometimes this meant keeping institutions inherited from the past and sometimes this meant a combination of the two.

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The formation of national armies in the successor states falls into this last category. Here, there was often something to be salvaged from the Habsburg wreck, and whilst military and political leaders were keen to present their armies as brand new and pristinely national, there was nevertheless a trace of the *ancien régime* about them. In Poland, both Józef Piłsudski and Józef Haller were products of the Austro-Hungarian army; Piłsudski's Polish Legions comprised soldiers who had fought in the Habsburg and German armies, and many Polish formations that fought in the Polish–Soviet war were Austro-Hungarian units that had changed in name only.³ Official history in Czechoslovakia celebrated the wartime Czech Legion and its volunteers as the nucleus of the Czechoslovakian army and the source of its anti-imperial and anti-Bolshevik *élan*. The legionaries were certainly prominent in the Czechoslovakian army, but former Austro-Hungarian officers, many of them ethnic Germans, also had an important role.⁴ Creating Polish and Czechoslovakian armies where none had existed before was a delicate task: existing institutional structures, carried over from Austria–Hungary, needed to be invested with a new national ethos. In the Polish case, the war with the Bolsheviks created a potent foundational narrative for the new state and its army, fusing the various components of the armed forces into a national whole. In the case of Czechoslovakia, the Czech Legion, the ‘national army before the national state’ became the emblem of the entire military. Needless to say, its prominence obscured the importance of former Habsburg officers and Habsburg formations in the new army, just as it marginalized or excluded non-Czechs. In both cases, one need only lift the Czech and Polish trappings to reveal an institutional framework that owed much to the Habsburg and German imperial armies. Going back to the nineteenth century, Irina Marin has found that the Romanian army made overtures to high-ranking Habsburg officers of Romanian descent from the Banat region as early as 1868.⁵ Where military expertise were at a premium, as they were in the Romanian army in the latter part of the nineteenth century, concerns about officers’ imperial training and experience were of secondary importance.

State-builders in Yugoslavia faced similar challenges. There had, of course, been no Yugoslavia before 1918, hence no national army. This article has two concerns: first, it charts the attempts of state- and institution-builders to create an army which was inclusive of both veterans of the Serbian and Austro-Hungarian armies: wartime adversaries whose reconciliation and whose support for the army were essential to creating an integrated and effective armed force. Unsurprisingly the Yugoslav army, in its structure and ethos if not in its personnel, became a continuation of the pre-war Serbian army. However, whilst this continuity hampered attempts at integrating former Habsburg South Slavs, it did not doom them to outright failure. The Yugoslav army survived peasant subversion in the Croatian lands during 1918–1925, and armed resistance to Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav army on the part of former Austro-Hungarian officers remained marginal and ineffective throughout the interwar period, in contrast to the strength and durability of ex-officer networks in Hungary and Austria. The small-scale resistance of this former Habsburg elite is the second concern of this article. It is shown that the institutional imprint left by the Austro-Hungarian army was largely restricted to a small group of high-ranking ex-Habsburg officers of Croat descent. Whilst their role was insignificant during the 1920s, their unflinching opposition to Yugoslavia provided a blueprint for the Croatian radical right, the ‘Ustaše’, at the beginning of the 1930s. Thus, it is shown that an institutional legacy left by Austria–Hungary, having been incubated by a small ex-Habsburg elite, became a significant factor in the creation of the anti-Yugoslav radical right of the 1930s.

Serbian and Habsburg Military Institutions until 1918

There were, as we shall see, meaningful differences between Habsburg and Serbian military cultures in the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War, and meaningful differences in the mindsets of formerly Habsburg and formerly Serbian officers. The officer corps of the Habsburg army had prided itself on being 'beyond nationalism' (Istvan Deák); indeed, Habsburg officers rightly saw nationalism, in most of its manifestations, as the Monarchy's *bête noire*. Compare this to the Serbian army, which, in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, had been a nationalizing institution par excellence. The Serbian army's ethos was born in the anti-Ottoman wars of the early nineteenth century; typical of Balkan armies, its officer corps considered national emancipation through armed struggle to be its *raison d'être*.⁶

These differences were more than academic. Although the Serbian Kingdom and Austria–Hungary had been on good terms during the reign of King Aleksandar Obrenović (1876–1903, reigned 1889–1903), his successor King Petar Karađorđević (1844–1921, reigned 1903–1921), along with the People's Radical Party (the dominant force in Serbian politics from 1903–1914) had dramatically altered the direction of Serbia's foreign policy. After 1903, Serbia became a protégé of Austria–Hungary's rival, Russia, and its political and (especially) military leaders pursued national expansion with greater vigour, to the south, in the Ottoman Balkans, and to the west, in Habsburg Bosnia. Antagonisms between Austria–Hungary and Serbia were common during the years of King Petar's reign: the two fought a tariff war between 1906 and 1911 – known as the 'Pig War', the annexation of Bosnia in 1908 inflamed nationalist circles in Serbia and Bosnia, and in 1909 members of the Croat-Serb Coalition in the Croatian *Sabor* (Assembly) were accused of spying for Serbia in two sensational trials: the 'Zagreb High Treason Trial' and the 'Friedjung Trial'. The stakes were raised significantly following Serbia's military successes in the first and second Balkan wars (1912–1913). As Samuel Williamson has noted, Serbia was by this stage the 'most persistent threat' that Austria–Hungary faced.⁷ This was because Serbia's victories stoked anti-imperial feeling in Austria–Hungary's South Slav lands, especially amongst the Serbian population of Bosnia;⁸ they also emboldened military circles in Serbia who, having 'liberated' all Serbs (and quite a few non-Serbs) from Ottoman rule after the Balkan wars, wanted to do the same for Serbs under Habsburg rule. The intersections between these two groups, the revolutionary South Slav youth in Austria–Hungary and military circles in Serbia, had fatal consequences for the whole of Europe. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie Chotek, in Sarajevo, 28 June 1914, was the result of a collaboration between the Serbian militarist clique *Unification or Death*, known as the 'Black Hand', and members of the revolutionary South Slav youth in Bosnia. The Black Hand provided the weapons and helped to smuggle the would-be assassins across the border between Serbia and Bosnia.

The war that Austria–Hungary waged against Serbia was an attempt to reverse the nationalizing trends that had been dominant in the Balkan state since 1903. Jonathan Gumz has argued that the Austro-Hungarian army's goal during its occupation of Serbia (1915–1918) was to 'denationalize' the country prior to its incorporation into the Monarchy. He claims that Austro-Hungarian military leaders perceived the conflict as one fought between 'a nationalizing state and an anational, bureaucratic-absolutist state'.⁹ In Habsburg-occupied Serbia, measures such as the internment of Serbian political, ecclesiastical and cultural leaders and the closure of Serbian schools, churches and cultural institutions were part of this programme of 'denationalization'.

The presence of South Slav soldiers in the Austro-Hungarian army meant that there was also a 'Yugoslav' dimension to the war in the region. To be sure, the experience of Habsburg South Slavs in the wartime army was far from monolithic, and we should not presume that all South Slav soldiers who served in the Habsburg army were as committed to the 'denationalization' of Serb-populated lands as the Austro-Hungarian army's High Command. When considering the level of mobilization of South Slav soldiers in the Habsburg army nationality, geography and rank are all important variables. To cite just a few examples: the Habsburgs considered Croats and Bosnian Muslims more reliable soldiers than Serbs;¹⁰ generally, South Slav soldiers seem to have fought with greater determination on the Italian front than on the Eastern front, at least until a very late stage in the war;¹¹ university students conscripted as reserve officers into the army, especially those from Istria and Dalmatia, were often opposed to Austria–Hungary and in favour of the formation of a common South Slav state; and mobilizing conscripts from rural areas such as Slavonia became almost impossible in the last year of the war. All this is to say that the Austro-Hungarian army did not pass on to Yugoslavia a single institutional legacy, but rather several legacies, or fragments, some of which were easily assimilated into the new institution, some of which were not.

Habsburg officers of South Slav descent tended to fall into the latter category. According to Richard Spence, South Slavs made up 3.1% of the Austro-Hungarian army's officer corps in 1914, making them the third largest non-German group (after Hungarians and Czechs); this figure rose to 9% during the course of the war.¹² South Slav officers were over-represented in the occupation regime in Serbia and the military governorship in Bosnia, where their knowledge of language and local conditions made them useful for intelligence gathering and other work.¹³ This over-representation was reflected in the highest echelons of the Habsburg occupation system. A Croat officer, Johann Graf von Salis-Seewis, served, for a period, as military governor of occupied Serbia; and for most of the war Stjepan Sarkotić, also a Croat, governed Bosnia. Both Salis-Seewis and Sarkotić endorsed Austria–Hungary's denationalizing plans in Serb-populated lands. Salis-Seewis supported the idea of incorporating a tamed Serbia into Austria–Hungary; he commented that 'For me, as a soldier, it is better to have an enemy who is in my room where I hold the pistol, than outside my door with a pistol in his hand.'¹⁴ Sarkotić, for his part, arranged the 'Banja Luka Trials' of 1916–1917, at which 156 Serbian intellectuals and political and ecclesiastical leaders were accused of spying for Serbia. Sarkotić also recruited armed militia groups, the so-called *Schutzkorps*, comprising mainly Slavic Muslims from Bosnia, to keep the Serb and pro-Yugoslav population of Bosnia under control.¹⁵ Here, the seeds of resentment and mistrust between former Habsburg and Serbian soldiers were sown; the contact between Habsburg South Slav soldiers and Serbians in the occupation regimes was bound to be one of the war's most contentious legacies. Indeed, memoir literature and other accounts written by Bosnian Serbs about this period tend to emphasize on the one hand the persecution of Serbs and on the other the agency of (non-Serbian) Habsburg South Slavs in such persecution. Thus Vladimir Ćorović, a Serb from Bosnia who was himself interned during the war, catalogued the misfortunes of his co-nationals in the *Black Book of the Suffering of Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the World War* (1925). Ćorović's work included passages about Sarkotić's wartime role in Bosnia,¹⁶ long descriptions of anti-Serb demonstrations in Bosnia and the Croat lands after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand,¹⁷ and information about Austro-Hungarian wartime internment and surveillance, which, according to Ćorović, was aimed mainly (although not exclusively) at the monarchy's Orthodox population.¹⁸ Similar experiences of persecution were described

by Pero Slijepčević (citing heavily from Ćorović) in his article 'Bosnia and Herzegovina in the World War' (1929).¹⁹

During the war, the relative prominence of South Slavs in the Austro-Hungarian army was a problem for the Yugoslav Committee (*Jugoslovenski odbor*, JO), a small group of pro-Allied émigrés, mainly from Dalmatia, trying to promote the cause of a South Slav state outside the borders of Austria–Hungary. From an early stage in the fighting, the members of the JO had worked for the formation of Allied volunteer units of South Slavs, recruited from the world-wide diaspora. The JO hoped that these legions would serve as an important counter-weight to the tens of thousands of South Slavs fighting loyally for Austria–Hungary, showing the Allies that a significant contingent of South Slavs were opposed to the Central Powers, and in favour of Yugoslavia. The volunteer question assumed its greatest dimensions following Austria–Hungary's defeats on the Eastern front, as more and more South Slavs fell into Russian captivity, and the Serbian consulate in Petrograd received almost 20,000 letters from South Slav prisoners of war (POWs) requesting to fight for the Allies.²⁰ The wartime volunteer movement was overwhelmingly a Serbian affair, its ranks comprised mainly Serbs from Bosnia or Vojvodina who had been conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian army. Moreover, the South Slav volunteer units were staffed by officers of the Serbian army. Nevertheless, whilst Serbs dominated the division in absolute numbers, Croats and Slovenes were over-represented in its officer corps.²¹ Many of the non-Serbs who served as volunteer officers were university students who were called up to the Austro-Hungarian army as reserve officers. At its peak, at the beginning of 1917, the South Slav volunteer movement comprised 42,000 soldiers, with a further 900 officers, organized into two divisions.²²

One of these divisions, the 'First Serbian Volunteer Division' suffered significant losses in battle in Dobruja, in September 1916, with about 2600 killed and over 7000 wounded.²³ These losses had an adverse effect on discipline and morale amongst the volunteers, and the officers of the Serbian army, responsible for maintaining the fighting efficiency of the division, resorted to force to restore order amongst the volunteers. On 23 October 1916, three units revolted against 'Serbian terror'; in quelling the mutiny, Serbian officers shot dead 13 Croat volunteers. More soldiers and officers would break away from the divisions, forming a 'dissident movement' opposed to 'Serbian hegemony' amongst the volunteers.²⁴ The volunteer episode proved far less edifying than the JO had hoped, and can be seen as a bad omen for the future of the South Slav army. A precedent had been set for the intransigence of officers of the Serbian army towards Habsburg South Slavs, and the reluctance of Habsburg South Slav to serve under Serbian officers.

Finally, there was a small Habsburg military and political elite in the Croat lands that hoped to improve its own standing within the Monarchy by supporting Austria–Hungary's war with Serbia. In the wartime Croatian assembly, the *Sabor*, the Pure Party of Right (*Čista stranka prava*), known as the 'Frankists', represented the interests of these elites. As soon as the news of the Sarajevo assassination reached Zagreb, the Frankists called for a reckoning with Serbia, organizing demonstrations in Croatian cities and decrying Serbia in the *Sabor*.²⁵ The war and the anger caused by the Sarajevo assassination was a chance for the Frankists to revive their political fortunes: at the outbreak of the conflict, they were in opposition in the *Sabor*, divided internally and defeated by the Croat-Serb Coalition in the 1913 elections. For the Frankists, the assassination of Franz Ferdinand was a vindication of their long-held anti-Serbianism, and the war was an opportunity to show the loyalty of Croats to Vienna. They hoped that, in a putative post-war re-organization, Austria–Hungary would transform from a dual to a triple Monarchy, with South Slavs (that is to say, Croats) gaining an equal standing alongside Germans and Hungarians.

This was the so-called ‘trialist’ solution – as envisaged by the Frankists – and in order for its successful implementation, it was necessary to confront and defeat nationalizing tendencies in Serbia and amongst Habsburg Serbs. The Frankists perceived the nationalizing Serb state and army as serious threats to their own Croatian national interests: they feared that if Serbian expansion into the Habsburg South Slav lands was not checked, then the Croat lands would eventually be incorporated into an enlarged Serbian state. As Ivo Pilar, an Austro-Hungarian officer and supporter of the Frankists who wrote during the war under the pseudonym ‘L. v. Südland’, put it, the proposed South Slav pillar ‘cannot be anything other than a Croatian state.’ He called for ‘Autonomy, achieved through eight-hundred years of historical development within the framework of the Monarchy’.²⁶ In this struggle, the Frankists hoped to swallow the Serbs before they themselves were swallowed.

The Frankists were a minority voice, but their loyalty to the Habsburgs meant they were close to ruling circles. Indeed, in the middle of 1918, at a critical stage of the war for Austria–Hungary, police in Zagreb found documents in which leading Frankists called for a suspension of the *Sabor* and the introduction of military rule in Croatia. The Frankists hoped that an Austro-Hungarian general would restore order and prevent further ‘Serbian sabotage’.²⁷

A number of Habsburg officers of Croat descent were also Frankists, or were close to the party. They included high-ranking officers such as Stjepan Sarkotić, Mirko Puk, Slavko Stancer and Gustav Perčec. Despite their shared concern about Serbia, there was a paradox inherent in being both a supporter of the Frankists *and* an Austro-Hungarian officer: the Austro-Hungarian army was an a-national – indeed anti-national – institution, whilst the Frankists were concerned with furthering Croatian national interest (as they perceived of it). The Austro-Hungarian army wanted to denationalize Serbia because its officers, as Jonathan Gumz has shown, hoped to restore the neo-absolutist values of the latter part of the nineteenth century; the Frankists wanted to denationalize Serbia in order to ensure the supremacy of Croats against Serbs in a proposed Habsburg political unit.

Unifying the armed forces

When a number of ‘national councils’ took control from Austria–Hungary in the South Slav lands over the course of October and November 1918, along with political autonomy, they inherited the Monarchy’s security problems. Many of these problems were related to the Austro-Hungarian army. In the Croatian hinterland, peasants who had resisted the call-up into the Austro-Hungarian army and ‘returnees’ – former Habsburg soldiers who had been POWs in revolutionary Russia – formed armed bands, the so-called ‘Green Cadres’ that attacked tax offices and large estates throughout the region (Banac, ‘Emperor Karl has become a Comitadji’ 1992). This was one institutional fragment bequeathed to Yugoslavia by the Habsburgs: the Austro-Hungarian army had, over the course of 1918, lost the ability to mobilize rank and file South Slavs. In the Croatian countryside, many deserters and returnees were openly and violently defying imperial authority by attacking tax offices, landowners and local recruiting posts. The Green Cadres did not disappear as suddenly as Austro-Hungarian rule at the end of 1918, and they became a problem for the National Council of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the legislative body formed by Habsburg South Slav politicians who favoured the creation of an independent South Slav state, and which was established in Zagreb at the beginning of October 1918.

The National Council also had to deal with Austro-Hungarian officers whose *loyalty* to the Monarchy threatened to undermine their revolution. The Green Cadres caused unrest because of their opposition to Austro-Hungarian institutions, but there was also a fear that

Austro-Hungarian officers of South Slav descent would cause unrest because they were still loyal to the Habsburgs and wanted to salvage the Monarchy. In great contrast to the unwillingness of South Slav peasants to fight for the Monarchy, many South Slavs in the officer corps had remained true to their oath to the emperor until the very end of the war. So, for example, the Habsburg generals (of Croat descent) Luka Šnjarić and Mihovil Mihaljević did not put themselves at the disposal of the National Council in Zagreb until Emperor Karl himself had given them permission to break their oath.²⁸ Stjepan Sarkotić did not relinquish his military governorship of Bosnia to the National Council in Sarajevo until it was clear that the end of the Monarchy and the revolution of the National Councils was a *fait accompli*.²⁹ Sarkotić's return to Zagreb in November 1918 prompted panic amongst the National Council in Zagreb, who, worried that the Habsburg general would oppose the council's authority, sent an armed guard to surround his train and arrest him when he arrived in the Croatian capital. Similarly, fears of a possible Habsburg restoration or military coup led the National Council to intern the Croat general (and former governor of occupied Poland) Anton Lipošćak in November 1918, despite his professions of loyalty to the National Council and his offer to put his soldiers at the council's disposal.

These institutional fragments were all the National Council had with which to make an *ad hoc* military force capable of restoring order to the lands they now controlled and fending off the territorial claims of regional rivals, especially Italy. Conjuring up a national army out of these shards was impossible, despite the best efforts of the National Council. The council's appeal to the Green Cadres not to destroy property, 'because you are destroying what is yours',³⁰ was ineffectual and impossible to communicate to its intended audience. Their promise to 'liquidate feudal ties' and parcel out land,³¹ made to placate peasants in revolt, was a huge undertaking that could not be realized in such a short space of time. Then there was the fact that the National Council was unwilling to consider many trained and experienced ex-Habsburg officers as reliable soldiers in their national guard, despite professions of loyalty to the council. The antinomies piled up: soldiers who were causing unrest in the countryside needed to be recruited into a new force whose purpose was to restore order in the countryside; the perceived threat of *Kaisertreue* Habsburg officers carrying out a counter-revolution could only be dealt with by Habsburg officers themselves. How to establish political and military authority in circumstances such as these? How to transform a defunct imperial institution into a viable national institution in the course of a few days, weeks?

The National Council had no solution to these problems. Overwhelmed by internal and external security concerns, its leaders had to turn to the Serbian army to provide the military might it needed to restore order and secure its new borders. This meant political union with Serbia and Montenegro, favoured by most in the National Council, although with significant dissent from the leaders of the Croatian People's Peasant Party (Hrvatska pučka seljačka stranka), and from the Frankists. For the National Council, the final straw was a revolt of soldiers of the 25th and 53rd infantry regiments, stationed in Zagreb, who marched to Jelačić Square in the centre of Zagreb on the 5 December 1918 chanting republican and anti-Serb slogans. The soldiers' revolt seemed to prove both that rural unrest could spread to urban areas if unchecked and that existing Austro-Hungarian regiments were simply too unreliable to help put down the revolt.

In contrast to the institutional fragments of the Austro-Hungarian army in the South Slav lands, the Serbian army was in good shape. To be sure, it had sustained heavy casualties during 1914–1916, especially during its defeat at the end of 1915 and the retreat across Albania to the Adriatic coast during that winter. Indeed, the Serbian army had, proportionately, lost more of its enlisted men than any other army during the First

World War. But the institution had been reorganized and reconstructed whilst at the front at Salonika, and its ranks had been partially replenished by South Slav volunteers.³² In November 1918, the Serbian army had 145,225 officers and soldiers, compared to the National Council's force of about 15,000 officers, soldiers and volunteers.³³

With such disparity, and given the National Council's nervousness about former Austro-Hungarian soldiers, it is unsurprising that the Serbian army formed the basis of the combined forces, and that existing Austro-Hungarian formations were dissolved. Just five days after the barracks revolt in Zagreb, and barely over a week after the formal unification with Serbia and Montenegro, the National Council announced its decision to subsume its armed forces into the Serbian army.³⁴ The 'Yugoslav army' came into existence.

Constructing the Yugoslav army

It is difficult to understate how much was at stake in the formation of the Yugoslav army. A truly Yugoslav army which had the support of South Slavs from all parts of the country would serve as a powerful centripetal force in the new state, binding subjects to the new state and turning South Slavs into loyal subjects of Yugoslavia. However, an un-integrated army, or one that was perceived to favour one nationality over others, would have the opposite effect: it would alienate people from the new state and its institutions. In addition to these long-term benefits, there was a more immediate need for an effective and reliable armed force in 1918: the newly unified South Slav state needed security, its borders were contested by its neighbours and, internally, there were many groups who resisted the unification and the new order.

Because of the security problems and unrest faced by the new state, demobilization of the army did not take place immediately after the war. In the first half of 1919, the army of the new state actually expanded to almost 450,000 officers and soldiers by calling up new waves of soldiers from across the country.³⁵ This figure came down over the following months and years, as the political and military situation in the region became less volatile. A law on the 'Structure of the Army', passed in August 1923, confirmed the establishment of the 'Army of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes' whose organizational structure was derived from the army of the Kingdom of Serbia. The new army comprised 110,000 soldiers in active service, as well as an officer corps of 6500.³⁶

Just as in Poland and Czechoslovakia, military and political leaders in Yugoslavia tried to build an ostensibly new army out of an existing institutional framework. But in Yugoslavia, unlike Czechoslovakia and Poland, there was no need to recycle parts of a defunct imperial army in order to create a viable armed force. This was because the army of the pre-war Kingdom of Serbia, not the Austro-Hungarian army, served as the institutional basis of the new force; in most respects, Yugoslavia's army resembled the pre-war Serbian force. But although there was no operational need to re-use the institutional framework and the personnel of the Austro-Hungarian army, as there was in successor states such as Czechoslovakia and Poland, military and political leaders in Yugoslavia still considered it important to integrate former Habsburg elements into the new army. The new army was to be an inclusive institution, not merely the Serbian army writ large, and in order to 'Yugoslavize' an otherwise Serbian institution, South Slavs who fought or served in the Austro-Hungarian army – and especially former Habsburg officers of South Slav descent – needed to be successfully incorporated into the new institution.

It should be noted that the army was not the only institution that needed to be 'Yugoslavized' after the First World War: many of the challenges faced in building a Yugoslav army were quite typical of the challenges faced in building other new

institutions after 1918. In all areas of public life in Yugoslavia, fully integrated and functioning state institutions were necessary to help reconcile South Slavs during the transition from war to peace. A functioning parliamentary system, for example, capable of compromise and effective governance, could help mediate tensions in the newly unified state. A national welfare programme that had the support of former soldiers and their families could help fully demobilize people from wartime mentalities, and would therefore help to legitimize the new state. Institution building in Yugoslavia was often complicated by the fact that the new state was the heir of a vast array of historical and political traditions: a bewildering number of currencies, languages, school curricula and civil lists needed to be meshed together into a cogent whole. As Joseph Rothschild put it, Yugoslavia was '[b]y virtually every relevant criterion[. . .]the most complicated of the new states of interwar East Central Europe, being composed of the largest and most varied number of pre-1918 units'.³⁷

In the army, this had damaging consequences. In 1920, for example, attempts by the army to brand cattle met with resistance in the Croatian countryside. The practice, not uncommon in Serbia before the war, was new to the Croatian lands, and peasants feared that branding was injurious to their stock. The situation was further inflamed when the army took some of these animals away for 2-month military exercises, a practice reminiscent of Austro-Hungarian wartime requisitioning. The cattle-branding affair resulted in the most serious unrest in the Croatian countryside since the end of the war, as peasants armed and seized control from the state in towns and villages near Zagreb. It became a protest against the army and even the state itself and showed how quickly things could spiral out of control where the military was in question.³⁸ There was a real danger that non-Serbs would come to see the Yugoslav army as an instrument of oppression and occupation.

Radićist anti-militarism

The Yugoslav army in its formative period faced particular difficulties in recruiting in the Croatian countryside. Here, traces of the anti-Habsburg, anti-war sentiment that had been prominent during the unrest of autumn 1918 lingered on. For many Croatian peasants, the Yugoslav army was much like the Habsburg army: an institution that uprooted them from their homes and compelled them to serve for somebody else's interests. It was not the case that Croatian peasants were slow to 'demobilize' from wartime mentalities, it was rather that Croatian peasants had, in the final months of the war, resisted mobilization into the Habsburg army, and were now, and for similar reasons, resisting mobilization in the Yugoslav army.

This resistance was harnessed and encouraged by the Croatian Republican Peasant Party (*Hrvatska republikanska seljačka stranka*), the populist agrarian party that had a near monopoly on electoral support in the Croatian lands during the interwar period. In the first half of the 1920s the party's leader Stjepan Radić rallied his supporters throughout the Croatian lands behind a pacifist, anti-militarist and republican programme that he hoped would be realized in a 'Neutral Peasant Republic'. Neutral, that is, because Radić claimed the Croatian peasant was pacifist, opposed to any war or violent revolution; and a republic, because the age of warring dynasties sending thousands of men into battle was over, as of 1918. According to peasant party ideologue Rudolf Herceg, the First World War was a 'great school' for the Croatian peasantry, one in which it had learnt firsthand about the futility of fighting for foreign interests and for a foreign monarchy.³⁹ These lessons were easily transposed to Yugoslavia: instead of the Austro-Hungarian army, the Yugoslav

army; instead of the Habsburg dynasty, the Karađorđević dynasty. The names were different, but the relations of domination and subordination were the same. Many Croatian peasants, who resented institutional impositions such as taxation and military service and, in these respects at least, made little distinction between Austria–Hungary and Yugoslavia, were more than ready to heed Radić’s calls for ‘no more army’.

Moreover, their success in avoiding conscription owed much to the reactivation of networks and patterns of disobedience used against Austria–Hungary during 1918. It must also be noted that the heavy-handed manner in which the army attempted to conscript resistant Croats, involving hostage taking, interrogation, and physical violence,⁴⁰ contributed to the sense that the Yugoslav army was more like an occupying force than it was an integrating institution.

Obviously, this kind of subversion was a serious challenge to Yugoslav state builders. Many Serbians, particularly veterans of the wars of 1912–1918, took offence at Radić’s pacifism and republicanism, since they rightly saw in them a refutation of two of Serbia’s most important state institutions: the army and the monarchy. For Serbians, these institutions defined their great sacrifice and triumph during 1912–1918. After all, Aleksandar Karađorđević had been the Serbian army’s chief of staff during the war (from 1916 onwards); and the army itself had made great and heroic sacrifices during the war. Here, the problem of Yugoslavia’s splintered wartime histories was at its most acute, and reconciliation between Radić’s pacifism and republicanism and Serbia’s valorization of the army and the king was difficult indeed. Even the most agile of institution builders would be hard-pressed to construct a state in which both monarchism and republicanism were prominent; one in which anti-militarism did not infringe upon the prestige of the army as a national institution. Moreover, the fact that so many Croats were successfully avoiding the call up undermined the ability of the new army to function as a truly Yugoslav institution in its formative period.

The officer corps

Even more important than the soldiers were the Yugoslav army’s officers. For military and political leaders, the institutional heart of the Yugoslav army was its officer corps; if the officer corps were integrated and cohesive, its ethos would trickle down to the rank and file soldiers. The army’s commanding officers, most of whom were veterans of the Serbian army, believed that good relations between former Habsburg and former Serbian officers were essential in creating a unified spirit and an effective morale in the Yugoslav officer corps.⁴¹ As an article of 1921 in the military journal *Ratnik* (Warrior) put it, the army would have a ‘special role’ in the as yet unrealized unification of the new state. Officers needed to set an example to their soldiers, they needed to be ‘teachers’ as well as officers, since ‘Our officer is at the vanguard of national unity’.⁴² In accordance with this, the new army, whose officer corps was approximately 6500 strong, accepted 2590 officers formerly of the Austro-Hungarian army (according to the *Vojna enciklopedija* published in 1961. These figures have been checked and confirmed, with a small margin of error, by Hrvoje Čapo).⁴³

Cognizant of the need to create an integrated military culture in the officer corps, and cognizant of the fact that Serbian and Habsburg officers had been mobilized against one another during the war, military and political elites often downplayed the agency of South Slav Habsburg officers during the war. Ivan Ribar, president of the Yugoslav parliament and a reserve officer, wrote in *Vojnički glasnik* about the unfortunate position of South Slavs forced to serve in the Austro-Hungarian army. Germans and Hungarian had

dominated the imperial army's officer corps, he wrote, those South Slavs that served were 'enslaved, intimidated, and coerced', and were sorry to fight for 'foreign rule and lordship'. The Yugoslav army was different, however, and it was the 'duty' of former Habsburg soldiers to serve in the new force (Ribar).⁴⁴

Again, the process of integration was prone to a number of misunderstandings and mistakes: different ranks from the pre-war period needed to be reconciled, officers' salaries and pensions needed to be regulated, a balance between Habsburg and Serbian officers in the corps needed to be established. Many Habsburg officers resented their perceived loss of status in the new army; many Serbian officers tended to look upon veterans of the Austro-Hungarian army as soldiers of a defeated enemy.

The problems were manifold, but the task of integration was at least partly facilitated by the 'opting out' of a number of Habsburg officers whose wartime record would touch on the sensitivities of Serbian officers. So, for example, Stjepan Sarkotić was not admitted to the Yugoslav army, not did he have any intention of applying, since he was intransigently opposed to the creation of the common South Slav state. Sarkotić chose emigration instead, eventually settling in Vienna in order to 'await developments'.⁴⁵ Johann Graf Salis-Seewis was not admitted into the Yugoslav army either, and Antun Lipoščak was removed from the active list of the Yugoslav army and kept under close surveillance by the authorities. Slavko Kvaternik, a lieutenant-colonel in the Austro-Hungarian army who had served as Field Marshal Svetozar Borojević's adjunct on the Italian front, served only briefly in the Yugoslav army. He resigned his commission in 1920, following an interview with the Minister of Defence, Mate Drinković. Borojević himself was not admitted to the Yugoslav army, nor even granted a pension by the South Slav state, and died in emigration in Klagenfurt (1920). Borojević's Orthodox faith hardly mitigated in his favour, although it does serve as a reminder that the Austro-Hungarian army's South Slav contingent included many Orthodox 'Serbs'. Was Borojević's impoverished exile typical of their treatment? His high rank (Borojević reached the rank of Field marshal on the Italian front) and wartime profile would have been of over-riding concern to the National Council, more important than his confessional or ethnic background. Borojević, like Sarkotić and Lipoščak, was first and foremost a high-ranking Habsburg officer, and was therefore a partisan of the *ancien regime*.

Hrvoje Čapo has suggested that the Yugoslav army intentionally sidelined higher ranking officers of the Habsburg army in favour of more junior officers of that army, since the latter were more easily 'controlled' in the new corps.⁴⁶ This is a very plausible interpretation of army policy, although, as we have seen, a number of higher ranking officers did not want to serve in the Yugoslav army in the first place. It could also be argued, given what we know about the background of Austro-Hungarian officers, that many were simply unsuitable to serve in an institution that so closely resembled the Serbian army in terms of its structure and culture.

Indeed, official documents reveal that relations between Serbian and Habsburg officers were sometimes problematic. In March 1920, General Branko Jovanović of the Fourth Armoured Division (located in Zagreb) sent a classified memorandum to the high command in which he raised concerns about the integration of ex-Habsburg officers into the new corps. These officers, he noted, had made a number of complaints regarding their status in the new army, such as being passed over for promotion, or being treated 'tactlessly' by officers who had served in the Serbian army. For his part, Jovanović was suspicious of these ex-Habsburg officers, suggesting to his superiors that they install a quota system that would ensure a preponderance of Serbian officers in each regiment. This was desirable, he argued, because such officers were more reliable than those that had

served in the Habsburg army. He ended with a pessimistic estimate of the chances of integrating ex-Habsburg officers into the new army, claiming:

It can be perceived in every single one of them that they are ‘dynastic creatures’ [čovek-dinističar] and that the Austrian military education has killed any sense of nationalism. As far as training is concerned, most of them are modestly equipped. A large number of them are constantly off sick, which leads to resentment from those who do work, and from Serbian officers.⁴⁷

The comments could be taken as evidence of a Habsburg institutional imprint left on South Slav officers in the Yugoslav army; they could also be taken as evidence of the institutional imprint left by the Serbian army. Without doubt, Jovanović’s understanding of the word ‘nationalism’ differed from that of many non-Serbian officers. Did he mean Yugoslav nationalism, the supposed ethos of the new corps, or was he referring to Serbian nationalism? Then there are the complaints of Marko Skuljević, made at about the same time. Skuljević was a captain in the Yugoslav army who had served in the Austro-Hungarian army, he complained that his ilk were being stigmatized:

We, officers, are upbraided by the ‘patriots’, who claim that we are Frankists, Austrians – that we are unreliable. I ask myself, can I, can any man with a morsel of honour, remain in this kind of army? My service as an officer in the former A-H army should not imply that I am traitor – though this was said of us at the end of 1918 and at the beginning of 1919 – or a thief.⁴⁸

The stigmatization of former Austro-Hungarian officers as soldiers of a defeated enemy is unsurprising given the primacy of Serbia’s war victories in the culture of interwar Yugoslavia. What Jovanović failed to note was that both Habsburg *and* Serbian military cultures and institutional legacies had the potential to impede on the creation of a genuinely Yugoslav officer corps and, by extension, a genuinely Yugoslav army. It was not so much that the Yugoslav army was ‘Serb-dominated’ (although it certainly was), it was more that the army’s institutional framework and ethos was simply carried over from that of the pre-1914 Serbian army. A ‘spirit of revolution’ animated the army, but it was Serbia’s national revolution of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not the Yugoslav revolution of 1918. There were some innovations, such as scattering soldiers across the country, or attempts to ‘re-mobilize’ Croat and Slovene recruits by referencing the military threat posed by powerful neighbours and the myth of ‘enslaved brothers’ in Italy and Austria.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the Yugoslav army, in essence, was a continuation of the Serbian army, and a continuation of the revolutionary nationalizing Balkan armies of the nineteenth century. It could hardly be otherwise, in a country whose foundational myth was that of the ‘liberation and unification’ of all South Slavs by the Serbian army, that is, liberation from imperial rule, and unification into a single South Slav state; the institutional culture of the army was merely a distillation of a culture that was widespread in interwar Yugoslavia.

The shades of empire: Frankists and ex-Habsburg officers

There was, finally, a small contingent of ex-Habsburg officers who remained entirely aloof from the Yugoslav project: those that had been associated with the Frankists during the war and had supported Austria–Hungary’s war against Serbia. At the end of the war, their loyalty to Austria–Hungary was quickly shed, whereas their hostility to Serbian nationalism remained deeply entrenched. Demobilization of these ex-soldiers through participation in Yugoslav state institutions was impossible, a number of them chose instead to continue the fight against Serbia – now Yugoslavia – after 1918. Ex-Habsburg

officers and Frankists in emigration were the founders of the 'Croatian Committee' and the 'Croatian Legion'. The former was established in the summer of 1919 for the purpose of carrying out the kind of counter-revolution that the National Council in Zagreb had been so worried about. The latter was a paramilitary group comprising ex-Habsburg officers of Croat descent and POWs, it was based, eventually, in Miklós Horthy's Hungary.

Data on the Croatian Committee and the Croatian Legion are sparse, and historians such as Ivo Banac and Bosiljka Janjatović have noted the difficulty of trying to reconstruct their story.⁵⁰ The problem is exacerbated by the unreliability of one of the key sources on the group's activities, the account of its leader turned Yugoslav informant, Emanuel 'Manko' Gagliardi, made available in 1922. According to Gagliardi, the Committee started out as a propaganda council that called for the withdrawal of the 'Serbian army' from the Croat lands. In November 1919, the Committee announced the formation of the Croatian Legion, a volunteer force based in Hungary. Its chief recruiter was Stjepan Duić, a former lieutenant colonel in the Austro-Hungarian army. The Italian army had allowed Duić to tour their POW camps in order to garner support for amongst Croatian internees for the Committee's cause. The Committee wildly exaggerated the extent of their support, claiming it had 300,000 members.⁵¹ Yugoslav authorities were aware of the activities of the Committee and the Legion from an early stage. They supplied a figure derived from 'various sources' of 250 officers, with perhaps a further 50 'higher officers'.⁵² It seems likely that these émigrés counted on other factors offsetting their lack of manpower. The Frankists, trenchantly opposed to the creation of Yugoslavia, took it for granted that there was widespread discontent with the unification in the Croatian lands. They probably also thought that disgruntled Croatian officers and soldiers in the Yugoslav army would support any putative uprising against Yugoslavia. The members of the Croatian Legion could also look to the example set by other paramilitary groups in Europe, such as the *Freikorps* in Germany, Gabriele d'Annunzio's volunteer army in Rijeka (Fiume), the Szeged counter-revolutionaries in Hungary, and the Austrian *Heimwehr*. These groups formed what Robert Gerwarth has called a 'paramilitary subculture' throughout Central Europe after the war, a transnational network of former soldiers and other violent activists whose aims were to reverse the revolutions of 1918.⁵³ But the Croatian counter-revolution was a minor strain of this subculture: the Legion was no *Freikorps* nor *Heimwehr*. Its small size after 1918 showed how weakened Habsburg military and political elites such as the Frankists were in the Croatian lands without the backing of Austria-Hungary. They were merely the shades of a deceased empire.

The denouement for the Croatian Committee came at the end of 1920, when the press in Yugoslavia discovered the émigrés and their foreign connections in Hungary and Austria. The government in Belgrade sent a letter of protest to Vienna and Budapest, and this was enough to end the group's capacity for armed insurrection (if it had ever had such a capacity). In Zagreb, a number of Frankists believed to have co-operated with the émigrés, including former Habsburg officer Ivo Pilar, were arrested and tried on charges of treason. The trial, which took place over the summer of 1921, became a *cause célèbre* in the national press, Ante Pavelić, one of the rising stars of the post-war Frankists, represented the defendants.

The significance of the Committee and the Legion lies not in its counter-revolutionary might immediately after 1918, but rather in the way it served as a prototype for the wave of Frankist émigrés, led by Gustav Perčec and Ante Pavelić, who left Yugoslavia at the beginning of 1929 and established the 'Ustaša – Croatian Revolutionary Organization' (*Ustaša – Hrvatska revolucionarna organizacija*; the 'Ustaše') a paramilitary terrorist group opposed to King Aleksandar's dictatorship. Veterans of the Croatian Legion and

former Habsburg officers such as Josip Metzger and Stjepan Duić were once again involved, and Stjepan Sarkotić provided support and advice for both groups. On both occasions, émigré groups maintained links with supporters in Croatia and allowed themselves to be used by countries that had an interest in destabilizing the regime in Belgrade: Italy, and Hungary. Both the Croatian Legion/Committee and the Ustaše comprised to a large extent Frankists and ex-Habsburg officers, the latter providing the military knowledge and experience with which to realize the political goals they shared with the former. This was one institutional legacy of Austria–Hungary that, tragically, would come back to haunt the South Slav lands.

Conclusion

Part of the problem of state and institution building in Yugoslavia was that 1918 was not a complete caesura between separate South Slav pasts and a unified ‘Yugoslav’ future: much historical and institutional baggage was carried over into the new state. This was obviously the case with the Yugoslav army, where creating a new institution entirely from scratch was impossible, given the immediate internal and external threats that faced the new state, and given the prestige and the military efficacy of the Serbian army. The Yugoslav army was consciously modelled on the pre-war Serbian army, not only in terms of its institutional framework, but also in terms of its ethos and ideology. Thus 1912–1918, that is, the first and second Balkan wars as well as the First World War, was interpreted as a single period of national revolutionary warfare waged by the Serbian army for the ‘liberation and unification’ (*oslobođenje i ujedinjenje*) of all South Slavs from imperial rule, and defending ‘liberation and unification’ was the guiding principle of the Yugoslav army. Obviously there was little space in this ideology for commemorating Austria–Hungary’s war, just as there was little space in the Czechoslovak, Polish or Romanian armies. It was difficult to fuse Austro-Hungarian and Serbian veterans into one army, and problems were especially acute in the officer corps. And yet the tiny Frankist ‘counter-revolution’ should serve as a reminder that only a very few ex-Habsburg officers were violently un-reconciled to the new state and its institutions, many more went quietly onto the reserve list or else ‘opted out’; many more, career officers, stayed on in the Yugoslav army. Did they undermine the efficacy of the Yugoslav army? Not fatally, it seems. The Ustaše would later boast of the extent to which their organization had infiltrated the Yugoslav army during the short ‘April War’ of 1941. Clearly, morale and motivation were significantly higher amongst Serbian soldiers than amongst Croatian soldiers during this conflict, and clearly the interwar Yugoslav army was dominated by Serbians throughout its existence. Nevertheless, the Ustaše were far quieter about their unsuccessful attempt to incite an armed rising in 1932, the so-called ‘Lika Uprising’. Like the men of the Croatian Committee, the Ustaše had over-estimated their own popularity and, it seems, the dissatisfaction of Croats with Yugoslavia. Moreover, as Stevan Pavlowitch has shown, non-Serbian generals were not significantly under-represented at the rank of general on the eve of the April war.⁵⁴

As for Radić’s subversion, this was a case of a military culture faced a culture of anti-militarism, the two were obviously incompatible, and peasant party subversion only subsided when Radić entered government in 1925. His opposition prior to this undermined the ability of the army to function as a truly Yugoslav institution. But it should be remembered that for many military and political leaders, the army’s ‘Yugoslavism’ was primarily cosmetic, underneath those trappings, it was a Serbian institution. This is the most important fact about the Yugoslav army in the interwar period: it was neither a new-born

institution nor a true mixture of separate institutional legacies, it was a continuation of the nationalizing Serbian army of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whatever remained of Austria–Hungary in the South Slav lands after 1918, it had no place in an institution such as the Yugoslav army.

Notes

1. Okey, *Eastern Europe 1740–1985*, 156.
2. The definition comes from Macartney and Palmer, *Independent Eastern Europe*.
3. Eichenberg, *Kämpfen für Frieden und Fürsorge*, 38–39.
4. Zückert, 'National Concepts of Freedom', 340.
5. Marin, 'Formation and Allegiance of the Romanian Military', 258–301.
6. See Djordjević, 'Role of the Military'.
7. Williamson, *Austria–Hungary and the Origins*, 103.
8. Okey, *Taming Balkan Nationalism*, 207.
9. Gumz, *Resurrection and Collapse of Empire*, 7.
10. Spence, 'Die Bosniaken Kommen!'.
11. Cornwall, *Undermining of Austria–Hungary*.
12. Spence, 'Yugoslavs, the Austro-Hungarian Army', 42.
13. Gumz, *Resurrection and Collapse of Empire*, 234.
14. Opačić, 'Politika genocida austrougarske protiv', 66.
15. Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History*, 163.
16. Ćorović, *Crna knjiga patnje Srba Bosne*, 21–23.
17. *Ibid.*, 27–42.
18. *Ibid.*, 45–64.
19. Slijepčević, 'Bosna i Hercegovina u svetskom ratu'.
20. Mandić, *Fragments za historiju ujedinjenja*, 43.
21. Slijepčević, 'Bosna i Hercegovina u svetskom ratu', 12.
22. *Ibid.*, 13.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Paulova, *Jugoslovenski odbor*, 130–131.
25. Krizman, *Hrvatska u prvom svjetskom ratu*, 70.
26. Südland [Pilar], *Jugoslavensko pitanje*, 401.
27. Matković, 'Members of the Party of Right'.
28. Ćulinović, *Jugoslavija između dva rata*, 136.
29. Krizman, *Hrvatska u prvom svjetskom ratu*, 317–320.
30. Šišić, *Dokumenti o postanku Kraljevine Srba*, 211–212.
31. *Ibid.*, 256–257.
32. Opačić, 'Solunski front 1917 godine', 143.
33. Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine Srba*, 57.
34. Šišić, *Dokumenti o postanku Kraljevine Srba*, 285.
35. See note 33 above.
36. Belić, 'Vojska', 1142.
37. Rothschild, *East Central Europe*, 201.
38. Banac, *National Question in Yugoslavia*, 260; and Biondich, *Stjepan Radić, the Croat Peasant Party*, 167.
39. Herceg, *Svjetski rat i problem nove države*, 3.
40. Janjatević, *Politički teror u Hrvatskoj*.
41. Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine Srba*, 94.
42. Živko M. Stanisavljević, 'O potrebi vojaska uopšte', *Ratnik*, October 1921.
43. Čapo, 'Broj primljenih časnika bivše', 1087.
44. Ivan Ribar, 'Vojnik i država', *Vojnički glasnik*, 15 March 1921.
45. Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine Srba*, 33.
46. Čapo, 'Broj primljenih časnika bivše', 1101.
47. Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine Srba*, 95.
48. Banac, *National Question in Yugoslavia*, 151.
49. Bjelajac, 'Military and Yugoslav Unity', 213.

50. Banac, *National Question in Yugoslavia*, 264; and Janjatević, *Politički teror u Hrvatskoj* 196.
51. Banac, *National Question in Yugoslavia*, 264.
52. Hrvatski državni arhiv, Zagreb, record group 1363, 'Politička situacija', box 5.
53. Gerwarth, 'Central European Counter-Revolution', *Past and Present*, 200.
54. Pavlowitch, 'How many Non-Serbian Generals'.

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