

War in the Balkans, 1914–1918

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John Paul Newman

University College Dublin

Serbia's Great War, 1914–1918. By Andrej Mitrović. London: Hurst. 2007. xvi + 386 pp. £19.99 pbk. ISBN 978 1 85065 883 2

Balkan Breakthrough: The Battle of Dobro Pole, 1918. By Richard C. Hall. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 2010. xvii + 216 pp. US\$27.95. ISBN 978 0 253 35452 5

The Resurrection and Collapse of Empire in Habsburg Serbia, 1914–1918. By Jonathan E. Gumz. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2009. xii + 275 pp. £45 hbk. ISBN 978 0 521 89627 6

Balkan Anschluss: The Annexation of Montenegro and the Creation of the Common South Slavic State. By Srdja Pavlović. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press. 2008. 215 pp. US\$34.95 pbk. ISBN 978 1 55753 465 1

Natalija: Life in the Balkan Powder Keg, 1880–1956. Edited by Jill A. Irvine and Carol S. Lilly. Budapest and New York: Central European University Press. 2008. xix + 494 pp. £33.00 hbk. ISBN 978 963 9776 23 4

On more than one occasion Otto von Bismarck said that the whole of the Balkans was not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier. On this he was not vindicated by history: a conflict that began in the Balkans in summer 1914 would eventually cost Europe far more than that. Historians of the First World War can hardly afford to be as casually dismissive about this region as the Iron Chancellor. The Balkans were undoubtedly of lesser importance to the outcome of the war than the Western or even Eastern fronts, but they are nevertheless essential for understanding the 'bigger picture' of the First World War. The war in the Balkans has not been neglected by historians working on the region, but linguistic barriers have hampered its inclusion in historical discussions and debates about the First World War. For this reason the five titles reviewed in this

Corresponding author:

John Paul Newman, University College Dublin

Email: johnpaul.newman@ucd.ie

article are all very welcome additions to the English-language historiography of the First World War.

Serbia's Great War, 1914–1918, by the eminent Serbian historian Andrej Mitrović, is an excellent introduction for those uninitiated to developments in the region during 1914–18. The book is a translation of a work first published in socialist Yugoslavia in 1984, abridged and edited, and with a new introduction (provided by Mark Cornwall, professor of modern European history at Southampton University) that sets out the significance of the topic and the importance of the work. This new edition discards some of the detail of the original, as well as a long ‘epilogue’ that dealt with social and political changes in Serbia and the Balkans, and relations between Yugoslavia and the Great Powers. The essence of Mitrović’s arguments remains intact, however, and is clearly conveyed in a very high quality translation. Mitrović’s account is comprehensive, and although the emphasis is on political and military developments, social and cultural history is covered too.

Serbia's Great War begins with the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo and the ‘July Days’ that followed it. It covers the Austro-Hungarian attack and the Serbian army’s surprising early victories in 1914–15, followed by its defeat and harrowing retreat across Albania during winter 1915, accompanied by the Serbian government and many thousands of civilian refugees. The narrative then forks in two directions, covering on one hand the reconstruction of the Serbian army and the politics of the Serbian wartime government, and on the other the experience of occupation (Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian) in Serbia. Mitrović ends his account with the re-convergence of these two forks: the breakthrough at Salonika in September 1918, the return of the Serbian government and army, the army’s entrance into the formerly Habsburg South Slav lands, and the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (Yugoslavia).

The problem of Yugoslav unification is ever present in the text. Mitrović favours the creation of Yugoslavia, and in his interpretation unification was desired by South Slavs at a popular level (a conventional interpretation in socialist Yugoslavia, it has been less prominent since the break-up of the country). Nevertheless, he describes in great detail the numerous and competing visions of the South Slav state, and especially the inability of the Serbian government to come to a substantial agreement about the structure of the future state with the members of the émigré Yugoslav Committee.

As a single-volume history of Serbia during the First World War, Mitrović’s work is unsurpassed, and therefore its translation into English is most welcome. Historiographical tastes in Yugoslavia have greatly changed since its original publication. The work was written according to the conventions of Yugoslav socialist historiography, and occasionally the author’s interpretation may strike the reader as too schematic. In his analysis, for example, Austria-Hungary went to war against Serbia solely to ‘resolve internal contradictions’ within the monarchy (p. 28), and in a long subsection he argues rather deterministically that Germany fought in order to complete its economic infiltration in the region (pp. 204–21). More on the agency of historical personalities would have been interesting as well. One suspects that individuals such as Nikola Pašić, Serbian Crown Prince Aleksandar Karađorđević, and *Vojvoda* Radomir Putnik had a significant influence on Serbia’s war and Yugoslav unification. These are small qualms, however: Mitrović’s work is a classic, and it is hoped it will become a standard reference for historians of the war in the Balkans.

While Mitrović provides his reader with a comprehensive account of Serbia at war during 1914–18, Richard Hall reports from the other side of the Balkan trenches. The title of his very useful and well-researched *Balkan Breakthrough: The Battle of Dobro Pole, 1918* is slightly misleading on two counts. First, the book covers much more than the breakthrough battle of the title. Hall also provides background information on regional Balkan politics leading up to the Balkan Wars, the Balkan Wars themselves, and the establishment of the Balkan Front at Salonika (which Hall calls ‘The Macedonian Front’), and he also discusses the long- and short-term aftermaths of the battle of Dobro Pole. Secondly, Hall’s focus is on Bulgaria and the Bulgarian army, for which the battle was less of a breakthrough than a breakdown. The Bulgarian army’s defeat at Dobro Pole in September 1918 led to the collapse of the Balkan Front, the capitulation of Bulgaria, and the deep penetration of the Entente into the Balkans. It is therefore an important episode in the final act of the First World War, and one that helps us understand the ultimate defeat of the Central Powers.

Hall has an excellent grasp of the interplay between local and general interests in the Balkans during the First World War. The tensions between those interests are ever present in the relations between the two Central Power allies on the Balkan Front: Bulgaria and Germany. Hall rightly characterizes Bulgaria’s ambitions in the First World War as strictly national: Bulgaria entered the war for the sake of Macedonia, the lands it was deprived of after defeat in the Second Balkan War (1913). For the Bulgarians the First World War was essentially a continuation of conflicts which pre-dated 1914 and which were rooted in competing Balkan nationalisms: Bulgarian, Serbian, and Greek. In the Balkan Wars and in the First World War, Bulgaria fought to achieve territorial aggrandizement in the region. The author explains how for Bulgaria the years 1912–18 were one single period of warfare. This was also the case for Serbia, and is the reason why both Bulgarian and Serbian war memorials are typically inscribed with those dates rather than 1914–18. But whereas 1912–18 is remembered as a period of victory for Serbians, in Bulgaria it is remembered as a period of defeat. As Hall points out in his conclusion, the defeat at Dobro Pole would eventually lead Bulgaria to side with the Axis during the Second World War, in order to gain those territories for which it fought during 1912–18.

In contrast to Bulgaria, Germany’s aims were far-reaching. Germany was fighting on various fronts and concerned more generally with the victory of the Central Powers. The Balkan Front was often considered of secondary importance, much to the chagrin of Bulgaria’s political and military leaders. Tensions between the two allies came to a head in 1918, as the German army focused on its spring offensive on the Western Front, to the detriment of Bulgarian interests in the Balkans. By this stage, shortages in material and manpower were having an increasingly deleterious effect on morale in the Bulgarian army. Ultimately, argues Hall, it was this crisis of morale that led to defeat at Dobro Pole and the capitulation of Bulgaria.

Hall’s book draws attention to the importance of regional/European dynamics in the Balkans during the First World War. Although the author in his analysis has focused on Bulgaro-German relations, he also notes that similar tensions and problems existed in the Entente camp. On the other side of the front at Salonika, a multinational force comprising French, Serbian, British, and eventually Greek armies held the line. As with Bulgaria, Serbia’s interests were exclusively national and local,

whereas those of its Great Power allies were European, even global. Hall points out that the First World War was an international military intervention in the Balkans which occurred 'After thirty-seven years of reticence' (p. 57). International interventions, sometimes made reticently, sometimes less so, would become a recurring theme of Balkan history in the twentieth century, as would the tensions between local and European interests in the region.

The subject of Jonathan Gumz's book *The Resurrection and Collapse of Empire in Habsburg Serbia, 1914–1918* is more specific still: the intentions and execution of the Habsburg army's occupation of Serbia. Gumz has an original take both on violence in Habsburg-occupied Serbia and more generally on violence and warfare in the twentieth century. Through a close reading of Habsburg documents, mainly those produced by the *Militärgeneralgouvernement Serbien* (Military General Government of Serbia, the occupation authority in Habsburg Serbia), Gumz argues that Habsburg occupation policies have been misinterpreted. It has been argued (mainly by Serbian historians) that the Habsburg army's occupation of Serbia was an exercise in revenge and brutality against an implacable enemy, a violent campaign that frequently transgressed international law and made a target of the entire Serbian nation. Not so, says Gumz. In fact, the Habsburg occupiers intended to operate within the boundaries of international law. In their eyes, the Serbs were the transgressors because they were waging an illegal guerrilla war against the empire, blurring the distinctions between army and society, distinctions that the Habsburg army depended upon in order to maintain the customs of war. The aim of the occupation was not to take revenge on Serbia, but rather to 'denationalize' and 'depoliticize' the state as a precursor to its eventual incorporation into the empire. Gumz claims that 'the memory of 1848 stamped the military culture of the Habsburg Army' (p. 12). That is to say, the Habsburg army used as an example the successful counter-revolutions of 1848 and the subsequent period of neo-absolutism in the empire. The battle here was between a 'nationalizing state', Serbia, and an 'anational, bureaucratic-absolutist state', Austria-Hungary (p. 7). The Habsburg army was attempting merely to put the brakes on the process of nationalization in Serbia. It was not attempting to destroy the Serbian nation outright.

Gumz's interpretation has important implications. Not only is the author confronting Serbian historians who (he claims) have overstated the violence of the occupation and misread its aims, he is also challenging those historians who see the violence of the First World War as an important step towards even greater violence later on in the twentieth century. According to Gumz,

we should reverse this notion of total war in the twentieth century as something rising to an ever-greater crescendo of destruction [...] Instead, we should turn our gaze to how war as a practice fell over the course of the early-twentieth century. (p. 20)

Whereas most historians look forward from the First World War to the Second World War, Gumz asks that we look back. The Habsburg occupation of Serbia was based on nineteenth-century principles of warfare and the 'bureaucratic-absolutist state' (p. 4), principles that ultimately failed the Habsburgs, hence the 'resurrection and collapse' of the title.

Gumz's work has many qualities. His original approach to the genealogies of violence will challenge readers to question teleological thinking about the nature of warfare in the twentieth century. He shows that we need not always approach 1914–18 via 1939–45. The work raises important questions about the intention and execution of occupations during the First World War. We are gradually getting a better understanding of this field, and Gumz's work can be read alongside that of John Horne and Alan Kramer and Vejas Gabriel Liulevecius. In terms of theories of violence and warfare in the twentieth century, the ideas of this book demand to be acknowledged and engaged with.

But if Gumz's work excels as a history of twentieth century warfare, its secondary conclusions about social and political conditions in Serbia itself are less convincing. Once again the author has used the records of the Militärgeneralgouvernement Serbien, which are an excellent source if one's subject is Habsburg occupation policy, but they are less useful for telling us about the occupied Serbs themselves. His reliance on these records leads to some eccentric conclusions about the state of affairs in Serbia under Habsburg occupation. For example, Gumz finds evidence of a 'low-level civil war' in Serbia in 1918 between various factions of Serbian guerrillas (p. 221). He uses the term *komitadjis* (though they would have referred to themselves as *četnici*), who were demoralized after failing to lead a popular uprising in 1917 and were increasingly adrift from the population. These guerrillas were also at war with Serbs who were loyal to the occupation. Gumz's estimate of the level of co-operation between Serbs and their Habsburg occupiers is very high indeed, and his discovery of a civil war among Serbs during 1918 (even a low-level one) would, if verified, be a scholarly sensation.

But neither Serb–Habsburg co-operation nor Serb–Serb conflict can be discovered through Habsburg documents alone. One would need to consult sources produced by occupied Serbs themselves. And such sources do exist: diaries, memoirs, and postwar testimony of Serbian guerrilla leaders, for example, none of which mention a civil war in Habsburg Serbia. One would also need to look at conditions in Bulgarian-occupied Serbia and in occupied Bosnia-Herzegovina and Dalmatia. Did a Serbian civil war break out in these regions too? Is there evidence of co-operation between Serbs and their occupiers in these parts? Gumz's arguments here are further undermined by a number of typographical and factual errors. For example, Fruška Gora is rendered as 'Fruska Gora' (p. 38), Mount Cer becomes 'Mount Čer' (p. 44), Toplica is 'Topliča' (p. 194, and throughout), and the Habsburg general (of Croat descent) Luka Šnjarić is introduced as 'Lukas Snjarić' (p. 38). It was not King Milan Obrenović but his son Aleksandar who was killed in the 1903 palace coup in Belgrade. And the guerrilla leader Kosta Milovanović Pečanac *did* have links with the Serbian high command at Salonika, although Gumz claims that these links were just false rumours put about by Pečanac himself for the purpose of self-aggrandizement (p. 208).

Gumz's work is a first-class piece of military history and a refreshing new perspective on violence in the twentieth century, but as an analysis of local conditions in the Balkans during the war it would have benefited from a more thorough consultation of local sources and literature. In contrast, local sources and literature abound in Srdja Pavlović's monograph about Montenegro at the end of the First World War, *Balkan Anschluss: The Annexation of Montenegro and the Creation of the Common South Slavic State*. If the history of Serbia during the First World War is 'little known' (as Mark Cornwall puts it

in his introduction to *Serbia's Great War*), then the history of Montenegro is entirely *terra incognita* to most Anglophone historians. Pavlović's gem of a book is a most welcome corrective.

The subject of *Balkan Anschluss* is the Kingdom of Montenegro's loss of sovereignty at the end of the war as a result of its unification with the Kingdom of Serbia. Pavlović's central hypothesis is that this unification was in fact an 'annexation', that is to say, an unconditional incorporation of Montenegro by Serbia which cost the tiny state its historical and political traditions, and which was made without a genuine consultation of the popular will of its inhabitants. Pavlović, like Mitrović, implies that the seeds of later Yugoslav crises were planted during the war and in its immediate aftermath.

Balkan Anschluss begins with a discussion of the various notions of Montenegrin national identity and its differentiation (or lack thereof) from that of Serbia, notions which would clash at the time of the unification/annexation of 1918. Pavlović then surveys the scholarly (and not so scholarly) literature on his topic and discusses its various historiographical controversies. Chapter 1 gives a full overview of Montenegrin history through the ages. This is informative and for the most part relevant, though it is in part a repetition of the introduction. The argument begins in earnest in chapter 2, which takes the reader through Montenegro's wartime history until its capitulation to Austria-Hungary at the beginning of 1916. Pavlović gives a very full account of Montenegro at war, and his use of primary sources in this chapter sheds new light on the often fraught relations between the Serbian and Montenegrin militaries during 1914–15.

Chapter 3 follows the Montenegrin king, Nikola Petrović, into exile in France, where he hoped to rally international support for his vision of Montenegro's future. That vision was unification into a South Slav state in which Montenegro enjoyed an equal footing with Serbia. Nikola's is a story of increasing isolation. Based in the Parisian suburb of Neuilly, he could do little more than look on as the Entente was persuaded that Serbia should act as 'Piedmont' in a putative South Slav state. Having declared Montenegro a kingdom in 1910 with himself as its monarch, Nikola was deposed by 1918, and almost all diplomatic support was withdrawn from his émigré court in Neuilly in the first half of the 1920s. Chapters 4 and 5, the book's best sections, explain how this happened. A rival émigré group, the Montenegrin Committee for Unification, successfully agitated abroad for an unconditional unification under Serbian terms. Unsurprisingly, the committee enjoyed the moral, political, and financial support of the Serbian government. Once again, the figure of Serbian Prime Minister Nikola Pašić looms large over proceedings, backed throughout by the Entente powers. The stage was thus set for outright annexation at the end of the war, when the Serbian army entered Montenegro unopposed, and Serbian forces ensured that a vote on unification – held under the auspices of the hastily convened 'Podgorica Assembly' (set up in November 1918, it is the subject of the book's final chapter) – went the way they wanted.

For Pavlović, the Podgorica Assembly is overdetermined in Montenegrin history. Its convocation and its decision in favour of unconditional unification were due to the machinations of the Serbian government and army and their supporters in Montenegro. In this sense the Assembly was merely a democratic façade. Nevertheless, it raised real and pressing questions about the Montenegrin nation. It was the forum in which the various competing iterations of Montenegrin national identity, incubated over centuries,

faced off against one another. It was also the forum in which those who favoured a union of equals with Serbia were defeated by those who believed that the Montenegrin nation should now be subsumed into a larger Serbian identity. Although Pavlović clearly states his sympathies for the defeated faction at Podgorica, he is far too committed to telling this story accurately and exhaustively to ignore the many in Montenegro who favoured exactly the kind of unconditional union realized by the Assembly. Their victory at Podgorica was not conclusive (mainly because they were backed not by popular support, but by Serbian bayonets), and the debates and questions posed at the Assembly remained unanswered throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, those questions remain central to debates about Montenegrin national identity in the twenty-first century. The immediate aftermath of the Podgorica Assembly was a long and violent campaign of ‘pacification’ waged by the Yugoslav government and its pro-unionist supporters – Pavlović misleadingly attributes this violence to the ‘Serbian government’ (p. 167), a rare slip in what is usually a balanced account: there was, of course, no Serbian government as such after 1918 – and those ever dwindling forces that hoped that Montenegro would retain some vestiges of its former sovereignty and independence in the South Slav state.

This is a gripping and sophisticated reading of the events leading up to the end of the Kingdom of Montenegro’s short life. Apart from its important findings about Montenegro during and after the war, it can also be read as a case study in the shortfall between the universalism of Wilsonian rhetoric and the very limited and occasional way it was applied after 1918. Interestingly, Pavlović points out that, during the conflict in Montenegro at the end of the war, the question of independence from Yugoslavia was hardly raised (as it was, say, by the Macedonian autonomists of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization). As the author puts it, the conflict in Montenegro was between those who favoured ‘unconditional unification’ and those who ‘argued for a more cautious and less romanticized approach to the issue of unification’ (p. 153). Both sides agreed on South Slav unification; conflict arose when each group tried to implement unification on its own terms. The annexation effected by the Podgorica Assembly was, for Pavlović, a betrayal of the Yugoslav idea, because ‘The Yugoslav idea was based on the principle of mutual respect of differences and cultural/political/national specificities ... the guiding principles of the Yugoslav idea were suspended [by the Podgorica Assembly]’ (p. 162). But who says it was? The Yugoslav idea was fluid in space and time, it meant different things to different people, and therefore its practical application was bound to be problematic. In this reviewer’s opinion, Pavlović’s ideal type of Yugoslavism would, in practice, have been just as contentious as any other.

The last item in this article stands slightly apart from the others. *Natalija: Life in the Balkan Powder Keg, 1880–1956* is not a monograph but rather a primary source itself: a fascinating document of a Serbian life lived during times of great transformations and, of course, times of war. The book comprises the memoirs, letters, and mostly personal diaries of a Serbian woman, Natalija Matić Zrnić. Born in 1880, Natalija started keeping a personal diary at the age of 24, and continued to add entries, with varying degrees of frequency, until shortly before her death in 1956. These were originally published in Serbia in 2003, and in this English-language edition have been edited, abridged, annotated, and introduced by historians Jill Irvine and Carol Lilly. The editors note that their subject is a ‘remarkable woman’ (p. xix), and indeed she is, for many reasons, and so is her story.

Natalija was an educated Serbian woman (she finished high school in Belgrade) at a time when most of the Serbian population, male or female, had no schooling whatsoever. She was a member of various philanthropic and charitable organizations, and she became passionately attached to the Serbian national cause. She was politically minded and closely followed the developments of parliamentary life in Serbia before 1914 and, to a lesser extent, in Yugoslavia after 1918. She was also a very devoted mother of six – she intended these diaries as a record for her children – who broke with the norms of Serbian patriarchal society by choosing her own husband (not allowing her parents to choose for her).

It was Natalija's fate to live in interesting times: she saw 'five wars (including two world wars), four ideologies, and numerous governments' (p. 1). Irvine and Lilly are to be congratulated for providing the reader with the full measure of Natalija's extraordinary life. This book is her story, rather than the story of a specific era. As such it offers a new and very rewarding approach to the periodization of Balkan history. The focus is through the lens of a generation rather than through traditional chronological divisions (1912–18, 1918–41, 1941–45, and so on). Having reached maturity before the outbreak of war in the Balkans, Natalija lived through both Balkan Wars, the First World War, occupation, the interwar period in Yugoslavia, yet another war and occupation, and into the Communist period post-1945. Area specialists should read this volume carefully and should feel encouraged to consider the impact and the world views of this 'pre-war' generation of Serbians.

Nevertheless, and despite the editors' commitment to letting Natalija tell her story in full, the First World War remains at the centre of this story. The second section of the book, 'Years of War', deals with Natalija's life during 1914–24, and amounts to over a third of the entire text. Natalija spent the war in Prokuplje and Vranje, that is to say, Bulgarian-occupied Serbia (an occupation which was by most accounts more severe than its Habsburg counterpart in the north of Serbia). Through her observant and insightful commentary, we hear much about the internment of Serbian men, suppression of Serbian culture and language, and attempts to forcibly 'Bulgarianize' the Serbian population.

All of this is fascinating and important information for historians of occupation in Europe during the First World War. This book will be of enormous interest to scholars of Serbian and Yugoslav history, as well as those working on occupations and the lived experience of war in the twentieth century. The text is long but Natalija's voice is so compelling and her story so remarkable that the work is, as the editors point out, an easy read.

As with any primary source, each reader will bring to it his or her own set of questions, and each will take away something different. Specifically, this reviewer wondered how representative Natalija's attitudes were. Her devotion to Serbia is ardent before, during, and after the First World War. She rejoices at Serbia's victories in the First Balkan War, and hopes, in 1912, that 'our sweet Bosnia, the land of our forefathers', will be the next lands to be 'liberated' by Serbia (p. 152), and during the First World War the sound of Bulgarian music reduces her to tears (p. 232). Is this a typical Serbian attitude, or an example of how exceptional Natalija is? During the occupation, Natalija repeatedly expresses disgust at Serbian women who collaborate and fraternize with the Bulgarian occupiers. How should we interpret these episodes? As evidence of widespread hatred for the Bulgarian occupier, or as evidence of widespread fraternization? Did most Serbians share Natalija's very negative view of the occupation, or did most Serbians

accommodate themselves to it? It could be that Natalija was in the minority here, but even if her story is untypical, her many insightful and observant comments on the period mean that nothing is detracted from the value of this publication. And even if she were in a minority, one suspects that the attitudes and ideas of the nationally minded Serbian elite, of which Natalija was undoubtedly a member, had a significant impact on Serbian and Yugoslav history during the twentieth century. In this area, one quotation is particularly striking. In an entry dated September 1916 Natalija claims to have told a Bulgarian interlocutor that

I used to be a socialist and an internationalist [...] Now I have become a nationalist, thanks to you who have enslaved us [...] if with God's help they are liberated, Serbia will have not an army but men of steel, because we will remember what it means to be under somebody else's rule. (pp. 251–2)

Such is the potency of the war experience for Natalija, and it held a potent emotional grip on many nationally minded Serbs throughout the twentieth century.

All the books discussed here can be consulted with profit by historians of war in the twentieth century, and especially by historians of the First World War. Mitrović's work stands out because of its scope and its value as an introduction to the war in the region. Pavlović's book gives a more specialized treatment of one aspect of Yugoslavia's unification. Both tell us much about the processes of state-building in eastern Europe after 1918, and the impact of the First World War on those processes. Hall's work is a purer kind of military history, but it tells the story of how the defeat of a small ally considered of secondary importance had a huge, possibly fatal, impact on a larger war effort. Despite its flaws, Gumz's treatment of the Habsburg occupation in Serbia has the most sophisticated approach to the comparative study of warfare and occupation in the twentieth century. And Natalija's memoirs help us understand how all this warfare had an impact at the level of the individual. So perhaps Bismarck was wrong about the Balkans after all. Pomeranian grenadiers should apply here.