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Post-war Societies (South East Europe)

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South East European societies faced several challenges in the post-war period. Their population changed significantly as a consequence of war losses, war-conditioned migrations and territorial reshaping. As predominantly agrarian countries, they were divided in rural and urban life worlds with contrasting needs and aims. As a legacy of the Great War, veterans played an important role in the Balkan societies. The war left these societies with a large number of invalids, who then faced difficult social and economic circumstances in their financially depleted countries.

Table of Contents

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Changes in Population
 - 2.1 War Losses and Migrations
 - 2.2 Minorities
- 3 Discrepancy between Rural and Urban Societies
- 4 The Society and the former Combatants
 - 4.1 The Political Role of Veterans
 - 4.2 The Difficult Status of War Invalids
- **5** Conclusion

Notes

Selected Bibliography

Citation

1. Introduction

In social terms, the change that came with the First World War was decisive. It was then that political and social systems, centuries in the making, came apart or were permanently transformed – sometimes in a matter of weeks. For Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith (1908-2006), it was in the First World War that age-old certainties were lost and the age of uncertainty began.^[1] The Great War had a deep impact on the post-war societies of South East Europe and influenced their politics throughout the interwar period and beyond.

From the very beginning of its existence, Yugoslavia^[2] was subjected to overwhelming internal economic, social and ethnic tensions, which would dominate its politics and society long after the war.^[3] Although Romania fulfilled its dream of national unity, the vast majority of its population remained very poor. Organizational and economic problems associated with unification combined existing corruption and election frauds. Initial hopes and expectations for a social and economic betterment did not last for very long.^[4] The Neuilly terms made Bulgaria into an angry revisionist state, isolated from and hostile toward her neighbors. Bulgaria was also a rancorous society, which was characterized by much internal violence. Albania almost lost its newly won independence (1913) in the turmoil of the Great War. It regained its sovereignty only in late 1920, but social and political tensions related to ethnic differences and external pressures, especially from Italy and Yugoslavia continued.^[5] The Greek state had big difficulties managing the settlement and integration of over 1 million Greek immigrants from Anatolia after its disastrous military campaign in Asia Minor in 1922-23.^[6]

The following article investigates changes in population demographics, national minorities and the striking discrepancy between rural and urban societies in South East Europe in the period following the Great War. The role of veterans and the status of war invalids are also described in detail with reference to the Yugoslav case.

2. Changes in Population

2.1. War Losses and Migrations

The First World War and the following peace settlements brought significant territorial and demographic changes to the South East European states, which had a transformative effect on their economies and societies. They all experienced an abrupt decline in birth rates. Serbia, Montenegro and Romania suffered the war's highest casualty rates. In Bulgaria, war losses, peasant reactions to the uncertainties of the European market coupled with their fear of over-dividing holdings, also reduced the rate of population increase. The highest pre-war birth rate in the Balkans was thus cut by rural reluctance, rather than rapid urbanisation. Following Greece's disastrous military campaign in Asia Minor in 1922-23, over 1 million Greek refugees from Anatolia streamed in, replacing the more than 350,000 departed Turks and Albanians. Without this refugee influx, Greece's population would have shrunk during the war. Outside of Greece, there were other factors contributing to population growth in these states after the war, namely significant pre-war emigration was reversed. In 1921, Post-war Societies (South East Europe) - 1914-1918-Online

the US authorities introduced stringent immigration quotas. Generally, lower post-war death rates and sharply reduced overseas emigration, especially from the former Habsburg territories in western Romania and Yugoslavia, brought overall population growth back to pre-war levels in the 1920s. At the same time though, population density in South East Europe remained the lowest in Europe during this period.^[7]

Bulgaria's military defeat in 1918 left a legacy of recrimination which was to last for the entire interwar period. Adding to the unsettled political situation were at least 220,000 refugees from the lost Macedonian lands and from previously Ottoman Thrace now north-eastern Greece. They poured into the Pirin region on the Yugoslav border and eventually came to live in a shanty town that quickly grew up in the western guarter of Sofia.^[8]

2.2. Minorities

The drastic territorial changes gave rise to the minority question which preoccupied politicians as well as scientists in and outside the region the duration of the interwar period. In terms of nation building, political and scientific interests focused on the national and ethnic composition of the states. One of the most ethnic homogenous countries in the region, (in part as a result of the territorial losses it incurred during the war) was Bulgaria. Its first interwar census on the last day of 1920 showed 83.4 percent ethnic Bulgarians (including the Muslim Pomaks), the far most numerous minority was the Turkish population which made up 11.2 percent of the overall population. ^[9] The most homogenous state was Albania, where Albanians accounted for 92 percent of the population of 803,959 in 1923. However, about two-thirds as many ethnic Albanians were left in neighboring Yugoslavia and Greece, constituting a source of conflict and a desire for irredentism. ^[10]

As result of Romania's new territorial acquisitions, which had received international sanction by the autumn of 1920, Romania's territory and population doubled. 156,000 square kilometres and 8.5 million inhabitants were incorporated into the state. In 1920 Romania thus encompassed 296,000 square kilometres and 16,250,000 inhabitants. The number of Romanians living outside the boundaries of this enlarged state had been reduced to about 600,000: 250,000 in the Soviet Union, 230,000 in Yugoslavia, 60,000 in Bulgaria, and 24,000 in Hungary. However, in the process of national unification, Romania had acquired substantial minorities. In 1920, roughly 30 percent of the population was non-Romanian, as opposed to 8 percent before the war. The most significant minorities in Greater Romania were Magyars (9.3 percent), Jews (5.3 percent), Ukrainians (4.7 percent), and Germans (4.3 percent). [11] Between 1918 and 1924, some 197,000 Hungarians emigrated to Hungary. Since they mostly belonged to the secondary and tertiary sectors, the employment positions that they left vacant could not easily be filled by Romanians, who remained predominantly agricultural. In this way, this exodus very likely hampered economic development in the former Hungarian territories contained within the enlarged Romanian state in the early interwar period. [12]

Unlike Romania, Yugoslavia did not exist as a pre-war state, but was instead an altogether new state of contrasting regions, divided by internal mountain barriers that fragmented communication within and among several regions. Yugoslavia was populated by a very heterogeneous mix of ethnic and cultural communities which adhered to different religions, had inherited eight legal systems from their former sovereignties, and wrote the basic Serbo-Croatian language in two orthographies (not to mention the several other Slavic and non-Slavic languages in use). Assessing the ethnic complexity of Yugoslavia's population is complicated by the official policy of lumping Croats, Serbs, Montenegrins, Macedonians, and Serbo-Croatian-speaking Muslims together into one "Serbo-Croat" category in the first official census of 31 January 1921. [13] The following percentages are based on language, religious and regional statistics:

Serbs (with Montenegrins and Slav Macedonians) 44.5 %
Croats	23.5 %
Slovenes	8.5 %
Bosniaks	6.3 %
German	4.2 %
Hungarian	4.0 %
Albanian	3.7 %
Romanian	2.0 %
Turkish	1.3 %
Czech and Slovak	1.0 %
Other	1.0 %

The Yugoslav titular nation (collectively Serbs, Croats, Slovenes and Muslims by nationality) constituted approximately 83 percent of the country's population. The antagonism between Serbs and Croats dominated the politics of interwar Yugoslavia. Areas of mixed population, such as Vojvodina, Bosnia and Herzegovina or Macedonia, functioned less as bridges than as barriers, enforcing the separatist pressures the country was bound to be subjected to, for example, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO). In the course of the land reforms that followed the Great War, the government in Belgrade moved to settle politically reliable Serb and Montenegrin war veterans in Vojvodina or Southern Serbia (Macedonia, Kosovo and the Sanjak of Novi Pazar, where Turkish landowners had been expropriated), in order to strengthen the national ethnic element and thereby the power of the state in those regions.

3. Discrepancy between Rural and Urban Societies

With the exception of Greece, which had a significant trade sector, the South East European states were agricultural countries at the end of the war. In 1920, 78.9 percent of the total population was dependent on agriculture in Yugoslavia, 74 percent in Romania, 76.1 percent in Bulgaria and 70.9

percent in Greece. In 1930, 80 percent of Albania's population was dependent on agriculture.^[17] This percentage declined only slightly throughout the interwar period as the urbanization process moved on very slowly. Only 19.9 percent of Bulgaria's population of 4.864.971 inhabitants lived in legally defined urban localities in 1920.^[18] In 1921, out of Yugoslavia's 12 million inhabitants, only the cities of Belgrade and Zagreb had over 100,000 inhabitants, and only five other Yugoslav cities had more than 50,000 inhabitants.^[19]

The vast majority of the population in South East Europe was extremely poor. The agricultural population predominantly followed the principles of subsistence farming. After the Great War, they had to deal with a multitude of obstacles making it difficult for them to improve their socio-economic situation: shortage of capital, high tax loads, indebtedness, failing infrastructure, small plots, land fragmentation, antiquated equipment and agricultural techniques, lack of education, unbalanced and poor nutrition, bad housing and hygiene and insufficient health care. The post-war agrarian reforms did not succeed in bringing significant improvement to this situation. Furthermore, children of the peasant population could not find earnings in the cities, due to the slow process of industrialization. Many tried to find secure employment in the state bureaucracy or in the military. The hardly existing service sector had practically no relevance for these young workers.

There was a fundamental conflict between the peasantry and the bureaucratic and economic elites in South East Europe in the interwar period. [21] The peasantry was, in effect, excluded from the nation's political life and treated as an inert object to be manipulated; hence, it mistrusted all authority. A lot of peasants regarded cities as evil and amoral, and city people as nothing but parasites. The ruling urban elites perceived the peasants, with their reluctance to modernization and their tendency towards uprisings with a mixture of fear, compassion and disdain. On their list of priorities, improving the peasant situation ranked long after the satisfaction of their own cravings for political recognition, the buildup of the army, the expansion of the bureaucratic apparatus and the glorification of nationalism. The oligarchic elites behaved simultaneously as nationalistic modernizers and as prospective emigrants, salting away in foreign banks the wealth squeezed out of the peasantry under the device of patriotic banners. [22]

4. The Society and the former Combatants

4.1. The Political Role of Veterans

Due to the financial and economic turbulence within the South East European countries after the First World War, veterans found themselves in a difficult situation. Politically, they became pawns used by the political elites to serve their interests, or else they actively participated in political games and, in turn, reinforced already existing tensions. Yugoslavia is a good case to look at when trying to understand the problems that these societies, and the veterans that lived in them, faced as a legacy of the war. As historian John Paul Newman emphasizes, Yugoslav society was overshadowed by the heterogeneous nature of its wartime experience. Yugoslav veterans had fought on different fronts

and more 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 triumphs and sacrifices of the Serbian army during the war.^[23]

The Serbian effort against the Central Powers, which had brought the country the highest military and civilian casualty rate of the war (between 750,000 and 800,000 casualties out of a population of approximately 4.5 million), were recognized throughout the Allied nations. For many Serbian soldiers this image of heroic struggle and eventual victory gave meaning to the high casualty rates experienced during the war. 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 Yugoslav people. This view remained the central self-legitimizing narrative 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. Habsburg Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes fought on the Balkan front against the Serbian and Montenegrin armies, on the Italian front, and against Russian soldiers in the East. Because many of them had been in Russia during the October Revolution (1917), these veterans were often suspected 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 soldiers coming home from Russian captivity. The fear of radicalization within the army led to a decision to disenfranchise soldiers in the newly-formed Yugoslav army, in the hopes to avoid the appearance of politicized soldiers' councils similar to those that had played such an important role in the October Revolution. In fact, only a minority of Habsburg 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, the country's 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 process and the overall transition from war to peace.[24]

4.2. The Difficult Status of War Invalids

The Great War resulted in a large number of war invalids to be cared of by the South East European states. Unfortunately, prejudices dating from the Middle Ages against the disabled were widespread in these societies and resulted in a negative image of the disabled who were marginalized both socially and economically. In colloquial speech, many expressions which were originally coined to refer to a disabled person's condition, were used as obscene and insulting words. For the politicians, the disabled population had limited political use and was regarded merely as a burden on society. As Belgrade based historian Ljubomir Petrović concluded in his study of the Yugoslav example: The status of the invalids in post-war Yugoslav society was strongly influenced by contempt, political attitudes and prejudices. Applying social policy to war invalids was difficult since the laws and

regulations were changing so often that it was hard to determine whether their effects on war invalids and their families were harmful or beneficial. In addition, there was a considerable lack of both will and ability to enforce social policy acts.^[25]

Bureaucratization would progressively become the main feature of Yugoslav social policy towards its war invalids. The disabled were entitled to a state pension but invalids themselves as well as the families of those who were killed and missing in battle had to obtain many documents issued by various institutions in order to exercise their social rights. There were several ongoing revisions to invalid pensions, which only brought additional confusion to local authorities. The number of beneficiaries of invalid pensions was quite large, so the government's budget and social policy tended to be extremely restrictive towards issuing them. Expert bodies designed to evaluate the level of physical disability of war veterans were quite strict. Therefore, many war invalids received less compensation money than they should have been entitled to considering their actual medical conditions. Providing free medical care for the invalids was a constantly avoided issue complicated by the fact that it was difficult to determine whether particular medical conditions had resulted from wounds and injuries inflicted in battle. The number of beneficiaries of state invalid pensions was constantly reduced whenever new laws and regulations were introduced. The actual number of pensions issued was less than a half of the number of all those registered as war invalids. There was a considerable disproportion between the amounts that the beneficiaries of invalid pensions received in Serbia and Montenegro compared to other parts of the country. The state failed to pay the invalids regularly and owned them large sums of money. Another way of abusing the rights of war invalids was buying them out of their disability pensions. The buyout money would rarely be paid in time which resulted in many invalids becoming increasingly indebted. There were quite a few efforts to fight restrictive social policy, but unfortunately they were not particularly successful due to the divisions within the veteran movement.[26]

After 1918, veteran societies and organizations were a significant new development in associational life in Yugoslavia. Unsurprisingly, veterans of the Serbian army were most active in this area, and their organizations were by far the largest in interwar Yugoslavia, although smaller societies formed by veterans of the Habsburg army also emerged. In contrast from most other veteran groups, membership in the Disabled Veterans' Society could be drawn from throughout the kingdom. This group included former soldiers of the Serbian, Montenegrin and the Habsburg armies. In 1919, the Belgrade and Zagreb based wings of the organization, 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 to put pressure on the government. However, similar to the high politics of interwar Yugoslavia, disagreements and antagonisms amongst disabled veterans revolved around the Belgrade/Zagreb axis. 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 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 political and

financial demands with a celebration of "liberation and unification" and of their wartime sacrifice. However, these celebrations excluded Habsburg veterans. Throughout the 1920s conflicting centripetal and centrifugal forces were ever present within the Yugoslav disabled veteran movement. However, the unification of all disabled veterans groups into one "Society for War Invalids" was finally achieved at the beginning of 1923, mostly as a result of the need to link the World War I invalid movement internationally.^[27]

5. Conclusion

Although the elites in the South East European capitals spent much effort on national unification after 1918, the society remained divided on several lines. Veterans, who had fought on different sides during the war, found themselves in the same state. National minorities found themselves in new and challenging contexts. Population movements led to distrust between new-comers and long-time residents. Urban-rural antagonisms were growing. Large segments of the majority population were dependent on agriculture lived in extreme poverty. Governments were reluctant to spend available money on war invalids, compounding their already difficult situation in society. In this sense, the consequences of the First World War laid the basis for the crisis-shaken interwar period in South East Europe.

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Notes

- 1. † Galbraith, John Kenneth: The Age of Uncertainty, London 1977, p. 133.
- 2. ↑ The "Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes" was the name of the country from December 1918 until October 1929, when it was renamed "Kingdom of Yugoslavia". For colloquial reasons, the term "Yugoslavia" will be used in the following discussion to refer to the period before and after 1929.
- 3. ↑ Sundhaussen, Holm: Geschichte Jugoslawiens, Stuttgart et al. 1982, p. 41.
- 4. † Heinen, Armin: Die Legion "Erzengel Michael" in Rumänien. Soziale Bewegung und politische Organisation, Munich 1986, p. 103; Saurer, Andreas: Modernisierung und Tradition: Das Rumänische Dorf 1918-1989, Sankt Augustin 2003, p. 9.
- 5. ↑ Rothschild, Joseph: East Central Europe between the Two World Wars, Seattle et al. 1974, pp. 325 and 357-366.
- 6. ↑ Freris, A. F.: The Greek Economy in the Twentieth Century, London 1986, pp. 43-53.

- 7. † Lampe, John R./Jackson, Marvin R.: Balkan Economic History, 1550-1950. From Imperial Borderlands to Developing Nations, Bloomington 1982, pp. 330-331; Lampe, John R.: The Bulgarian Economy in the Twentieth Century, London et al. 1986, p. 55; Mazower, Mark: Greece and the interwar economic crisis, Oxford 1991, pp. 45-46.
- 8. † Lampe, The Bulgarian Economy 1986, p. 49. For the Bulgarian-Greek population exchange after the war see Dragostinova, Theodora: Navigating Nationality in the Emigration of Minorities between Bulgaria and Greece 1919-1941, in: East European Politics and Societies 23/2 2009, pp. 185-212.
- 9. ↑ Rothschild, East Central Europe 1974, pp. 325-328.
- 10. ↑ Ibid., pp. 358-359; Fishta, Iliaz: Agrarproblem und Agrarreform im Albanien der Zwischenkriegszeit, in: Südost- Forschungen 59/60 (2000/2001), p. 387.
- 11. † Hitchins, Keith: Rumania, 1866-1947, Oxford 1994, p. 290. For nation building and ethnic struggle in post-war Romania see Livezeanu, Irina: Cultural politics in Greater Romania, Ithaca et al. 1995.
- 12. ↑ Ronnås, Per: Urbanization in Romania, Stockholm 1984, p. 125. See also Verdery, Katherine: Transylvanian Villagers. Three Centuries of Political, Economic, and Ethnic Change, Los Angeles et al. 1983, pp. 276-291.
- 13. ↑ Rothschild, East Central Europe 1974, pp. 201-202.
- 14. ↑ Blagojević, Miloš et al. (eds.): Istorijski atlas. Belgrade 1997, p. 91.
- 15. † Rothschild, East Central Europe 1974, p. 202; see also Janjetović, Zoran: Deca careva, pastorčad kraljeva. Nacionalne manjine u Jugoslaviji, 1918-1941 [Emperors' children, kings' stepchildren. National minorities in Yugoslavia 1918–1941], Belgrade 2005.
- 16. ↑ See Avramović, Teodor: Privreda Vojvodine od 1918. do 1929/30. godine s obzirom na stanje pre prvog svetskog rata [The economy of Vojvodina from 1918 to 1929/30 with regard to the situation before the first World War], Novi Sad 1965, pp. 81-89; Jovanović, Vladan: Tokovi i ishod međuratne kolonizacije Makedonije, Kosovo i Metohije [Settlement of Macedonia, Kosovo and Metohia between Two World Wars Course and Outcome], in: Tokovi istorije 14/3 2006, pp. 25-44; Boškovska, Nada: Das jugoslawische Makedonien 1918-1941. Eine Randregion zwischen Repression und Integration, Vienna et al. 2009, pp. 207-218.
- 17. † Lampe/Jackson, Balkan Economic History 1982, pp. 334-335.
- 18. † Rothschild, East Central Europe 1974, p. 327.
- 19. ↑ Petranović, Branko: Istorija Jugoslavije, 1918-1988. Prva Knjiga: Kraljevina Jugoslavija, 1914-1941 [The History of Yugoslavia, 1918-1988. Volume one: The Kingdom of Yugoslavia 1914-1941], Belgrade 1988, pp. 74-75. For the development of Belgrade in the post-war period see Marković, Predrag J.: Beograd i Evropa, 1918-1941. Evropski uticaj na proces modernizacije [Belgrade and Europe, 1918-1941. European influence on the process of modernization], Belgrade 1992.
- 20. ¹ Fishta, Agrarproblem und Agrarreform 2000/2001, pp. 387-388. Romania had the dubious distinction of having the highest general death rate, the highest infant mortality rate (one out of five dying in the first year of life), and the second highest tuberculosis mortality rate (after Yugoslavia's) in Europe; Rothschild: East Central Europe 1974, p. 285. For a discussion of the agricultural population in Serbia see Isić, Momčilo: Seljaštvo u Srbiji, 1918-1941. Knjiga prva: Socijalno-ekonomski položaj seljaštva, Tom drugi [The peasantry in Serbia 1918-1941. First Book: The socioeconomic situation of the peasantry, Volume 2], Belgrade 2001; for a lively contemporary description of rural life in Yugoslavia see: Bićanić, Rudolf: How the People Live. Life in the Passive Regions, Amherst 1981.

- 21. ↑ Sundhaussen, Holm: Die Transformation des Dorfes und der Landwirtschaft im Balkanraum vom 19. Jahrhundert bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg, in: Südosteuropa Mitteilungen 36/4 1996, pp. 322-333.
- 22. † Tomašić, Dinko: The Structure of Balkan Society, in: The American Journal of Sociology 52/2 1946, p. 136; Rothschild, East Central Europe 1974, pp. 272-273 and 321; Sundhaussen, Holm: Historische Statistik Serbiens, 1834-1914, Munich 1989, p. 29; Daskalov, Roumen: Development in the Balkan Periphery Prior to World War II, Some Reflections, in: Südost-Forschungen 57, 1998, pp. 239-240.
- 23. ↑ Newman, John Paul: Forging a United Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The legacy of the First World War and the 'invalid question', in: Djokić, Dejan/Ker-Lindsay, James (eds.): New Perspectives on Yugoslavia, London et al. 2011, p. 46.
- 24. † Ibid., pp. 47-48. In multiethnic Transylvania, sometimes veterans from the same town had fought on opposing sides. Some ethnic Romanians had volunteered in the Romanian army. Although they were considered traitors in the eyes of the Hapsburg army and their Hungarian neighbors, they were regarded as true patriots by ethnic Romanian community; Bucur, Maria: Heroes and victims. Remembering War in Twentieth-Century Romania, Bloomington 2010, p. 64.
- 25. † Petrović, Ljubomir: Nevidljivi geto. Invalidi u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji, 1918-1941 [The invisible ghetto. Disabled People in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia 1918-1941], Belgrade 2007, pp. 320-321.
- 26. † Ibid., pp. 322-324.
- 27. Newman, Forging a United Kingdom 2011, pp. 51-53 and 55.

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