

Historiography 1918-Today: Serbia and Montenegro (South East Europe)

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Summary

Serbian historiography was analysed in light of Serbia's historical position and role in the Western Balkans. The topics evolved out of the war's origin and course, as well as out of Serbia's relation to European historiography during 20th century. This article outlines ten main themes with corresponding subgroups and identifies the most important authors according to their scholastic achievements and their research focus.

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Introduction

Keeping in mind the complexity of events, ideas, personalities and processes that characterized the First World War, including as it [played out in the Balkans](#) and especially on Serb and Yugoslav territory, it is possible to divide the whole corpus of corresponding literature into ten main themes:

- 1) The [origins of World War I](#) (WWI) and [Serbia](#) (this can be seen either as the Habsburg Monarchy's long-term, so-called historical confrontation with the [Ottoman Empire](#) and later with small Balkan communities and states, or a short-term set of events which led to war)¹
- 2) [Assassination in Sarajevo](#) and outbreak of WWI, including the "war guilt" question (the latter occurred during the war and was sanctioned at the end of it, becoming one of the main themes of European, and also Serbian historiography)²
- 3) [Serbian war aims](#) / Serbian Yugoslav Programme (Serbia wrote these at the very beginning of the war, independently but in accordance with the Allies)³

- 4) [Military operations \(1914-1915\)](#); Serbian army retreat (1915); formation of the Thessaloniki Front; liberation of Serbia and other Yugoslav territories; recruits, volunteers, [prisoners of war](#)⁴
- 5) [Occupation of Serbia](#) (Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian occupation, territorial devastation, extermination, deportation, concentration camps for Serbs, [refugees](#), collaboration)⁵
- 6) Serbia and the political campaign for [Yugoslavia](#) (organisations, policy, [propaganda](#), the role of the elites, especially the intellectuals and artists)⁶
- 7) Creation of Yugoslavia: enemies and allies (especially [France](#), [Great Britain](#), [USA](#), [Russia](#), [Italy](#), but also the revisionist states [Germany](#), [Austria](#), [Hungary](#), the Catholic and Orthodox [churches](#)).⁷
- 8) View from outside: French/British perception of Serbs before and during WWI⁸
- 9) Yugoslavism/Anti-Yugoslavism: ideas, movements, processes, personalities⁹
- 10) [Montenegro](#) in WWI¹⁰

Three periods: Between World Wars, Socialism and Post-Yugoslavia

It is possible to further divide the themes according to when the historiographical works were published. Initially, a post-WWI body of literature about the war emerged. It was historiographical in a broader sense, composed primarily of testimonies in the form of diaries and memoirs, such as V. Prodanović's *Serbian letters from The World War 1914-1918* or Borivoje Jeftić's *The Assassination in Sarajevo, Memories and Impressions*, both published in 1923, but also of a small portion of scientific works including Jovan M. Jovanović's *The Creation of the State of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes*, published in 1928, or Jovan Cvetković's *Unification of Montenegro and Serbia*, published in 1940.¹¹

Scientific works from the Serbian socialist period (inside Yugoslavia) followed.¹² These included Jorjo Tadić's *Dix années d'historiographie yougoslave 1945-1955* (1955), *The Historiography of Yugoslavia 1955-1965* (1965) and *The Historiography of Yugoslavia, 1965-1976* (1975). However, it is difficult to distinguish these from other ex-Yugoslavs' historiographies. Serb communities have lived for centuries – and still live – dispersed across the western part of the Balkans, mixed in with other South Slav communities. Thus, the

history of Serbs has always had a Yugoslav dimension, and so it is with their historiography as well.

Furthermore, there is a large body of historiographical literature from the past two decades, published in Serbia, various European research hubs and abroad. This period, which is both historiographical and scientific, is characterized by its revisionism.¹³ This revisionism emerged in the last fifteen years of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ). During this period, there were two main camps: the national camp, which was more or less revisionist in either the Yugoslav or anti-Yugoslav direction, and the new critical perception within scientific historiography.¹⁴ This can be seen in various works, including Miroslav Jovanović's and Rade Radić's *Crisis of History. Serbian historiography and social challenges at the end of 20th and beginning of the 21st Century* (2009) and Kosta Nikolić's *The Past without History* (2003). With the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Serbs and other ex-Yugoslav communities lost their natural monopoly on writing their own history, have necessarily made their own national historiographies with dramatic abbreviations of their Yugoslav past. These historiographies strongly resemble local histories, with lot of misinterpretations due to the attempts to avoid the omnipresent Yugoslav dimension.

Every important topic that emerged from the Balkan and Serb perspective of WWI went through the various above-mentioned phases. These phases were in many ways restrictive for different reasons. Generally, the historical science of the post-WWI period adopted the syntagmas from political/military vocabulary, such as the immediate causes of war, blame for the war's outbreak, war aims, and the "war guilt" question, adding others, like the origins of WWI. So did the historiography of the new Kingdom of SHS/Yugoslavia and these stigmas survive?

The historiography that developed between the two world wars, which was more Yugoslav than Serbian in its general characteristics, shared the destiny of the state whose history it attempted to record and explain. There was not enough time for Kingdom of Yugoslavia to explain itself. As a result, its historiography was very poor, exacerbated by the condemnation of communist rule in post-WWII Yugoslavia.¹⁵ However, many excellent and useful works were nonetheless written during this period. French and British historiographers made an important contribution to understanding the Serbian role in the war and in the creation of Yugoslavia.¹⁶ Some useful diplomatic documents were been published during the war, and also between 1924 and 1939. The important military documents were published in a series of thirty-one volumes under the name *The Great War of Serbia for Liberation and Unification of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes*.¹⁷

The leading questions in the general research and analysis of WWI were revived in Europe in the 1960s, especially with the works of A.J.P. Taylor and Fritz Fischer, both of which had an important echo in the Balkans, especially in Serb historiography (inside Yugoslav). Clearly opposing, these two interpretations of the origins of both world wars, [German war aims](#), and the continuity and discontinuity of German policy toward world power influenced the historical concepts and interpretations of the most renowned names in 20th century Serbian historiography, for example Milorad Ekmečić and Andrej Mitrović. Both are among the most important Serbian historians who dealt with the origins of WWI, its inner course, and its immediate and remote consequences. Not only because of the close attachment to the European and world tendencies in historiography, and not only because of the cool attitude towards reigning ideology in the communist/socialist Yugoslavia/Serbia, both historians represent the highest level of Serbian historiography on WWI. Their importance lies in the fact that they developed a highly conceptual and methodological approach to Serbian scientific historiography. Both represent the top of socialist and post-socialist Serbian historiography; their works have remained relevant after the historical breakdown of the Yugoslav idea, state and society (created in WWI, survived WWII).

In all his works,¹⁸ but especially in his famous two-volume *The Creation of Yugoslavia 1790-1918*, Milorad Ekmečić¹⁹ analysed the other centres of power that ruled and directed the history of the South Slav people and territory, examining their deep impact on the historical destiny of small Yugoslav communities. The two-volume work reflected a living mixture of the various Yugoslav [nationalisms](#) and represents their histories; it recorded the story of how small agrarian communities with corrupted elites made enormous sacrifices in order to establish their own framework for living. For them, Yugoslavia represented not only the idea of freedom but the transformation from being a social, political and economic object to being a member of the European community. As Ekmečić showed, with his intellectual persuasiveness, this was done not only against historical enemies, but also against historical allies and supporters in WWI. In *Serbia's War Aims 1914* (1973), as in his other works, he argued that Serbia made the decision to create Yugoslavia completely by herself, involving only other Yugoslav communities, although she did do so in some kind of mute accordance with the Allies. In his works, Andrej Mitrović followed the same path as Ekmečić, trying to ascertain the origins of the inter-war regimes in Europe. In *The Age of Intolerance. The Political History of Great Powers of Europe 1919-1939* (1974), he described his detailed research and analysis of Austro-Hungarian and German plans to reorganise South Slav and Serbian communities and territories between 1908 and 1918. His *The Annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina until the End of WWI* is a detailed history of using war to transform imperialistic plans into reality. This work corresponds to Fisher's historiography, which

Mitrović introduced into Serbian historiography in the best manner.²⁰ Together with *Serbia's Great War 1914-1918* (2007), it is the most detailed insight into the diplomatic, military, social, economic and political condition of one small nation involved in big events. From European to Serb national history, Mitrović then took a local history perspective in two works, providing two perspectives of the so-called Toplica Uprising in *Toplica Uprising. The Place in Serbian History* (1993) and *Uprising battles in Srbiji 1916-1918* (1987).

From the 1960s onwards two military historians, Savo Skoko and Petar Opačić, conducted initial research on the Serbian army's military operations. They continued to produce monographs on the most important topics of these aspects of WWI, such as Skoko's *Voyvoda Radomir Putnik* (1985) and *The Battle at Kolubara 1914* (1990) or Opačić's *Serbia and the Thessaloniki Front* (1984). They also published personal documents and memoirs from the most important military personalities, such as Voyvodas Živojin Mišić and Stepa Stepanović.²¹ In this period, Montenegrin historian Novica Rakočević published his very well-known books on Montenegro in WWI and Montenegrin-Serbian relations in the period 1903-1918, *Montenegro in FWW* (1968) and *Political Relations between Montenegro and Serbia 1903-1918* (1981). These works analysed the political, social, military and ideological aspects of Yugoslav unification between Montenegro and Serbia.²²

Dragoljub Živojinović has extensively researched the important question of Serbia's (and Montenegro's) foreign relationships with European powers – both traditional and new – involved in the Balkans. From the beginning of his career in the 1970s, his numerous works have analysed the Allies' (Great Britain, France, USA, Russia, Italy) changing policies towards Serbia, and her position and role in the Western Balkans, in great detail, particularly for the periods surrounding WWI. Živojinović also made a special contribution to the research on the role of the Vatican, the USA and Italy in the Western Balkans during the war.²³

In addition to Mitrović, who concentrated on the Austrian occupational zone, Vladimir Stojančević researched the Bulgarian occupational zone in his excellent book *Serbia and the Serbian People during the Occupation 1914-1918* (1990).²⁴ In the past decade, the historian Božica Mladenović added to the research on occupied Serbia, exploring socio-historical phenomena such as the overall and specific situations in occupied cities during the war in his *Cities in the Occupied Serbia 1916-1918* (2000).²⁵

The most important collection of scientific research on the international character of WWI, which resulted with six volumes of articles, was Slavenko Terzić's *Serbia: Collection of Works* published in Belgrade just before the dissolution of Yugoslavia, between 1984 and 1990.²⁶ Its

length, diversity and high level of objectivity underline its importance.

More than the Marxist philosophy and concept of history, it was communist ideology that imposed limits on the concepts, research and analyses of historical materials concerning WWI and other historical events. Even if there is research from historians who argue that Yugoslavia was created not only against the “traditional enemies” (Austro-Hungarian Empire, Ottoman Empire) but also against the “traditional friends” like Tsarist Russia and the new European allies such as Italy (The London Treaty), it has not entered into mainstream political culture, collective memory or the education system. Furthermore, important questions have not been answered. Was Yugoslavia, whose creation was considered a major achievement of WWI, an artificial product of [Versailles](#)? Did Serbian hegemony arise from WWI in that artificial state? These questions about the major consequences of WWI in the Western Balkans – foremost the creation of Yugoslavia – were starting points for the revisionist wave during the 1980s and the auto-revisionism at the beginning of the 1990s. With the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the formerly natural starting points for writing history became the most problematic and obscure questions in the narrow national/nationalistic histories.

Conclusion

In the past two decades, Serbian historiography has not been capable of reproducing the high level of historiography published during the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Keeping in mind the political, economic and social situation, as well as the cultural atmosphere, that must be overcome, the next generations should be prepared to offer new interpretations.

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