

Press/Journalism: Serbia (South East Europe)

By [Srđan M. Jovanović](#)

Summary

Not unlike its regional counterparts, the standards of press and journalism in Serbia during the Great War was problematic. Most of the no more than twenty newspapers in Belgrade operating at the time were already accustomed to biased reporting from the recent Balkan Wars, and have to be understood in such a context.

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Introduction

The Serbian press in the first decades of the 20th century resembled that in Central Europe, with satires, [caricatures](#), short stories and pastiches, including a large amount of advertising, mostly appearing on the final pages of the dailies. Many (if not most) of the articles, even interviews of high-profile politicians, were signed credited to “the Editorial Office,” or simply “the Office,” so information on individual journalists has largely been lost; the only cases in which the writer was known were in printed government proclamations. Some newspapers suspended publication during the course of the war, such as the *Srpske novine* (Serbian Newspaper), which stopped publishing in 1914, and resuming again in 1919 after the conflict had ended. Others, such as *Politika* (Politics), have continued in circulation until today. Almost all of the printed press concentrated heavily on war reporting. Contemporary scholarship has, however, yet to produce detailed analyses of the early 20th century Serbian press.¹

From the Balkan Wars to the Great War

Barely two years separated the onset of the [Balkan Wars](#) from the beginning of the Great War,² and there are similarities in journalistic reporting. A few months before the beginning of the First Balkan War, the press adopted a strong [warmongering tone](#). The *Ilustrovana Ratna Kronika* (Illustrated War Chronicle) was founded for the sole purpose of avid warmongering and presenting the Serbian side of the war as both morally justified and victorious in advance, and was published only during the Balkan Wars, just as several publications later appeared only during the Great War.³ A comparable perspective was seen in the reporting of the oldest Serbian daily, *Politika*, in which the Balkan Wars were defended, and the readership was called on to support the Serbian army. Other sides fighting against Turkey during the First Balkan War were largely ignored, or had their contributions diminished in the articles, while Turkey and [Albania](#) were presented in a highly negative fashion.

Dailies during the Great War

An almost identical *modus operandi* was seen at the onset of the Great War and throughout the conflict. The *Ratni Dnevnik* (War Diary) reported on “Serbian heroes” who had tackled forces greater than their own. It gave detailed reports on how many combatants either died or were captured on both warring sides, with clear moral support for [Serbia’s](#) military efforts; it was published only during the Great War. Some papers, such as the *Beogradske Novine* (Belgrade Newspaper) were founded by the [occupation](#) forces, coming out between 1915 and 1918 only, and presented a positive view of [Austria-Hungary](#).

Srbobran (the Serb-defender) engaged in fervent praise of the Serb armies, especially after the retreat towards Corfu, belittling the enemy and offering a strong ethno-[nationalist](#) perspective. Enemy [atrocities](#) were reported on the front page, ending in “martyrdom” for the Serb and Allied combatants who perished. It is among the rare Serb newspapers published in New York, USA, until 1918. All of the above-mentioned periodicals supported government policies.

The most significant of dailies, *Politika*, regularly reported on the war. The opposing side was commonly represented as overly violent, oftentimes getting detailed listings of atrocities (*Austrijska nasilja*, Austrian violence). Local, Serb-nationalist points of view were presented⁴ alongside inceptions of the Yugoslav idea, sometimes coming from international sources, such as [Robert Seton-Watson \(1879-1951\)](#) “Yugoslav (South-Slav) question” from January 1915, which ran on the first page.⁵ It had been founded only a decade earlier by [Vladislav Ribnikar \(1871-1914\)](#), and continues to support government policies up to the present.

Magazines

Not many magazines circulated during the Great War. The *Ratni Zapisi* (War Writings) was one of them, founded exclusively for the purposes of war [propaganda](#), which included [war poetry](#) and colorful depictions of the “invasion of the barbarians in 1914,” “enlightened examples for honor and fatherland,” and the like. Non-genre-conforming publications could also be found, such as the *Ratnik* (The Warrior) – the “war calendar for the year 1915,” in which, in addition to a month-by-month calendar, patriotic poetry was presented, including family trees of the Serbian royal family, [pan-Slavic](#) ideology, as well as a day-by-day recapitulation of the war efforts.

Conclusion

The Serbian press, like both the Balkan and the wider European press, was characterized by a particularly strong bias towards its own side during the Great War. The vast majority of the printed press reported on the war, though with a clear ethical skew towards Serbia’s armies and victories, often engaging in ethno-nationalist discourse. Making sense of the war was primarily conducted by boasting the righteousness of the Serbian side, fighting against a stronger enemy, as well as by drawing on nationalist feelings. Contemporary scholarship has so far failed to tackle the Serbian press in the Great War period, with the exception of some minor works, most of them suffering from the same bias as their object of research a century ago.⁶

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Notes

1. On the press during the Great War on a more global level, see McEwen, John M: The national press during the First World War. Ownership and circulation, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 17/3 (1982), pp. 459-486. ↑
2. On Serbia during the Great War, see Mitrović, Andrej: *Serbia’s Great War, 1914-1918*, West Lafayette 2007. ↑
3. There is minimal research on the IRK. See Miljković, Milan: Prilog analizi medijskih predstava o Albancima u srpskoj štampi 1912–1913 [A contribution to the analysis of media representations of Albanians in the Serbian press 1912–1913], in: *Edicija Ton B* (2015), p. 55. ↑
4. For a more detailed depiction of Serbian nationalism, see Bieber, Florian: Nationalist mobilization and stories of Serb suffering. The Kosovo myth from 600th anniversary to the present, in: *Rethinking History* 6/1 (2002), pp. 95-110. ↑

5. Many works by Seton-Watson are relevant for the time period at hand. See Seton-Watson, Robert William: *The rise of nationality in the Balkans*, London 1917. ↑
6. Nikolić, Mirjana: *Sećanje srpske štampe na Prvi svetski rat – dnevni list Politika* [Remembering the Serbian Press of the First World War – The Daily Politika], Belgrade 2014. ↑

Selected Bibliography

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- [Watson, Robert William Seton: **The rise of nationality in the Balkans**, London, 1917: Constable and Co.](#)

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External Links

- [Ilustrovana Ratna Kronika Archive 1912-1913 \(Europeana\) \(Database\)](#)
- [Periodika \(Veliki Rat\) \(Database\)](#)

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