

Centenary (Serbia)

By [Danilo Šarenac](#)

The anniversary has reaffirmed the belief that the First World War still has a very strong resonance in Serbian society. Numerous actors, state and private ones alike, took part in Serbia's centenary efforts. The manifestations and activities reflected Serbian politics, different approaches, expectations and evaluation of the trends in Europe. The controversies surrounding the 1990s Yugoslav Wars were easily perceptible during Serbia's commemorative activities. In the broadest sense, the centenary testified to Serbia's search for stable and positive landmarks of national identity in the post-Yugoslav context.

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Commemorating the Balkan Wars

During the centenary of the [Balkan Wars](#) in 2012 and 2013, many phenomena which would become fully observable during the centenary of the Great War were already noticeable. Back then, the activities of the Serbian state officials were narrowed to visiting one key battle site and reconstructing a few military cemeteries in modern-day North Macedonia.^[1] More complex topics were carefully avoided. Such was the case with the topic of Kosovo and Metohija, the region which was incorporated into the [Kingdom of Serbia](#) in 1912. No one desired to further deepen the public anxiety over Kosovo's unilateral independence from Serbia, which had been declared in 2008. In addition, the Second Balkan War was hardly mentioned in public due to its contested nature, being a bitter war between the former allies of 1912. Due to such lethargic tackling of the 1912-1913 centenary, the Serbian government found itself under mounting public pressure to take seriously the preparations for the forthcoming 1914 centenary.^[2]

The Centenary Committee

However, the government was already long overdue when its “Organizational Committee for Commemorating the Centenary of the First World War” was finally created in April 2013.^[3] It is important to stress that the initiative for creating this body came from the office of the president of the Republic, Tomislav Nikolić. It was instantly clear that the Centenary Committee was overly robust – it had as many as twenty-eight members, including all nineteen government ministers. There was only one historian in the committee; he had limited expertise about the Great War.^[4] Such a strong political grip enabled full control over the commemorative agenda but, unexpectedly, it also paralyzed the work of this body when the committee’s composition was changed in 2014 due to the reshuffling of the government. The ministers who lost their cabinet positions could no longer remain on the centenary committee.^[5] More importantly, in 2014, the political clash between President Tomislav Nikolić and the government’s most influential figure, Vice President Aleksandar Vučić, culminated in the centenary’s opening year.^[6] In the meantime, the public was bewildered to hear that the committee had no official program. In fact, the committee never had a single meeting.^[7]

As the time was now very limited, the government decided to embrace improvisation. The centenary activities were delegated to the Ministry of Culture. Nevertheless, in the end, the coordination between various state institutions was poor and each ministry ended up with its own provisional program.^[8] Indeed, great energy and activism were seen in an effort to “catch up” and fulfill the great expectations of the Serbian public. It is important to stress that the financial resources necessary for the realization of the most diverse activities were made available in more than sufficient quantities. Five million euros was incorporated into the 2014 state budget as a separate item.^[9] This amount was more than generous in the Serbian financial context. Moreover, additional resources were allocated in the subsequent state budgets for 2015 and 2016. Finally, significant amounts were allocated in the state budget in 2018, correctly anticipating the increase in activities during the final commemorative year.^[10] However, due to a lack of transparency it was almost impossible to determine how much was allocated to whom.^[11]

President Nikolić, deprived of almost any domestic influence in creating the commemorative agenda, participated in international ceremonies. He represented Serbia at the central international commemorative event in Liege in August 2014. Afterward he was invited to Ypres. Some unexpected problems awaited him there. Organizers of the event in the Belgian town decided to invite the delegation of Kosovo. The Serbian president boycotted the event, stating that the Albanian minority did not have any prominent role fighting for the Allied cause and that its part in the history of the First World War cannot be equalized with the one played by the former Kingdom of Serbia.^[12] This was only one aspect of Serbia’s troubles with the way in which most of the Western European countries approached the centenary.

Commemorations “Under Siege”

One of the peculiar features of Serbia’s commemoration of the First World War, especially in 2014, was the notion of *ohistorical revision*. This revision implied the alleged determination of numerous Western-based authors to use the centenary for branding Serbia, and to some extent [Russia](#), as the main culprits for the war of 1914. Such rhetoric could be heard in Serbia already in mid-2013 and was widely publicized by several well-established scholars and journalists. In the eyes of Serbian mainstream [historiography](#), the key figure seen as the protagonist of the revision was the Cambridge professor Christopher Clark, who in September 2012 published *The Sleepwalkers*. The book soon received praise from many European experts despite serious reservations expressed by experts on the Balkans. Protest statements arrived not only from leading Serbian historians but also from politicians. Serbia’s foreign minister, Ivica Dačić, complained in June 2013 that “Serbia will not allow any revisions of history where Serbian people are to be blamed for the outbreak of the Great War”.^[13]

Fears grew that Serbs might be branded as disruptors of European peace by linking the events of 1914 in Bosnia with the ones which took place in the wars of the 1990s. In a similar tone, the distinguished Serbian historian and former diplomat [Dušan T. Bataković \(1957-2017\)](#) argued about the purpose of the revision: “The aim is to transfer the war guilt to Russia and, to some extent, towards Serbia, to show Serbia as some sort of conspirator’s nest which has jeopardized the European peace in continuity.”^[14] Moreover, as the centenary was approaching, rumors spread about the alleged patronizing role of the EU in Serbia’s centenary program. Allegedly, the goal of such “well-intended pieces of advice” was to curtail Serbia’s potential centenary triumphalism and to stimulate the “correct attitude”.^[15]

Serbia and the Commemorative Events in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The centenary of the Great War provoked tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Namely, in the country's entity with the Serbian majority, Republika Srpska (Serbian Republic), the anniversary was commemorated in a very similar manner as was the case in the Republic of Serbia. It was stressed that the Serbs belonged to the victorious side in the war and that Bosnia and Herzegovina were liberated in 1918 from foreign Austro-Hungarian rule. As was the case in Serbia, the most worrying segment of the centenary proved to be the anniversary of the [Sarajevo assassination](#) and the interpretation of the subsequent [July 1914 crisis](#). The postulation of revision also found a very fertile ground in Republika Srpska. Serbian officials from Serbia, together with the leadership of Bosnian Serbs, issued joint statements protecting liberation traditions underlying "that no one will be allowed to change history".^[16] Ultimately, even without strict formal agreements, Serbia and Republika Srpska commemorated the centenary in a synchronized manner, agreeing on all major questions.

One of the key European scientific conferences about the Great War in 2014 was held in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Sarajevo. However, the problems for the organizers from the Sarajevo Historical Institute started as soon as publicly announced their intention in early 2013. The organizers were immediately placed under pressure to step back and allow the French embassy in Sarajevo to take over the entire project.^[17] However, the Sarajevo Historical Institute declined such a possibility and remained firm.^[18] Problems also appeared on the lines with Belgrade. More precisely, the Sarajevo Historical Institute's idea was to organize a pair of conferences. The first one would be in Sarajevo in 2014, while the second would take place in Belgrade in 2018. However, as several Belgrade institutions proved reluctant to cooperate the idea was quickly abandoned.^[19]

Furthermore, the image was soon created in the Serbian media that the Sarajevo conference was a part of the ongoing revision and attack against Serbia. Serbian historians who desired to participate in the Sarajevo conference reported that they were put under subtle but palpable pressure to cancel their participation. Ultimately, only four Serbian historians participated.^[20]

Apart from the Sarajevo conference, another event also marked the anniversary of the First World War in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In eastern Bosnia, in the town of Višegrad, the famous Yugoslav and Serbian director, Emir Kusturica, built a special theme town dedicated to [Ivo Andrić \(1892-1975\)](#) (Serbian: *Andrićgrad*). Apart from being a writer and winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962, Andrić was also imprisoned during the First World War as he cherished the idea of Young Bosnia. *Andrićgrad* was ceremoniously opened in 2014 by the Serbian prime minister, Aleksandar Vučić, on the anniversary of the Sarajevo assassination. In the following program, which included the participation of the Russian Alexandrov Ensemble, a special choreography was presented named *The Angels Rebelling*. The entire program was in its essence celebrating the act of [Gavrilo Princip \(1894-1918\)](#) and acted as a substitute program to the events organized in Sarajevo at the same time. Moreover, the delegation from the Republic of Serbia declined to participate in the official program in Sarajevo. The key formal reason for this boycott was that the main place envisaged for the centenary ceremony, the Sarajevo municipality building, still bore the anti-Serb inscription related to the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Scientific Conferences and Exhibitions

Once the centenary started, numerous activities were hastily organized across the Serbian scientific and cultural community. Most of the activities which took place during the four-year period had a very traditional outlook. For example, the Serbian Academy of Science organized a large international conference which was perceived by the public as the central Serbian centenary event and the key response to the revision accusations. This conference was an international event and a number of historians were present who expressed their understanding for revisionism. Much more media attention was dedicated to the political conference "The European Tragedy of 1914 and the Multipolar World of 1914 – A Lesson Learned" that hosted Professor Clark. The main organizer was the former Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic. The Archives of Serbia organized a series of exhibitions focusing on presenting documents in its possession. The original telegram sent to Serbia's government with the declaration of war was certainly among the most interesting high-profile exhibits.

However, some institutions and individuals took a different approach, tackling more directly some less-known aspects of the 1914-1918 war, such as a joint Serb-Austrian exhibition about bilateral relations between the two countries from 1836 until 1914. The initiative was understood in Belgrade as a "hot potato" and several institutions declined to participate in this project. The Institute for Contemporary History and Belgrade's City Museum decide to accept the invitation and collaborate with the Austrian side. The exhibition entitled *The Notes of Turbulent Relation* took place in Belgrade and it ultimately achieved great success

and was later hosted in Vienna.

Digitalization presented perhaps the most unexpected success story of Serbia's centenary. It is important to stress that some institutions were part of the international collaborative digitalization projects even before the centenary. This was the case with the National Library which had been part of the Europeana project since 2011. This active policy was continued with even more vigor and large quantities of documents from 1914-1918 were uploaded on its specially designed website section. Similarly, the University Library in Belgrade placed large quantities of wartime [press](#) and other periodicals [online](#) with searchable options. Some [museums](#) also embraced new concepts and creatively used modern technologies, such as the Historical Museum of Serbia. With interactive content, 3D animations and mobile apps, their exhibition was refreshing in comparison to the usual approach seen in Serbian museums.

Serbian NGOs were also very active. The new generation took over the key private organization for the preservation of the 1912-1918 traditions ("The Society for Preservation and Protection of Serbia's Traditions of Wars of Liberation and Unification"). This organization launched a comprehensive action of collecting soldiers' [photographs](#) preserved in family [archives](#). Started as a small project, it evolved into one of the most widely talked-about centenary topics. This was one of the rare projects which managed to reach younger audiences more prone to use digital platforms.

[Yugoslavia](#) was one of the episodes almost erased from Serbia's centenary agenda. Few events were organized and only one institution dealt with this topic in continuity. This was Belgrade's Museum of History of Yugoslavia where, under the concept of post-Yugoslav studies, several exhibitions and lecture series were held focusing on the Yugoslav idea and its realization in 1918.

It is worth mentioning a very important exhibition organized by the Serbian National Library in 2018. The authors chose to collect and present [soldiers' letters](#) sent to and from the front. Entitled *One Can Only Write the Private News. Private Correspondence During the First World War*, this exhibition presented an important methodological step forward as it stressed the social and private aspects of soldiering.^[21]

Very important, in terms of its novelty, was the exhibition organized by the privately-owned Serbian Bread Museum – Jeremija. Focused on bread used during war times in Serbia, this museum opened up the important topic of nutrition and the preservation of [food](#) during the war. One of the best-publicized events during the entire centenary was the series of exhibitions organized by the private Institute for History of Advertisement. The authors focused on the topics of [propaganda](#), war posters, and other means of mobilizing the wartime public.

Publishing and Historiography

Lavish state support, as well as the huge interest of readers, stimulated publishing activity which had hardly been seen before in Serbia. The online bibliographic system operating in Serbia recorded an astonishing number of book titles published for the centenary: 677.^[22] Most of the books were published during the initial anniversary euphoria in 2014-2015. However, the momentum built again in 2018. Titles included reprints of old books published during the conflict itself or in the early interwar years. However, only a handful of authors brought new insights and managed to push forward the existing paradigms.^[23] Publishing house Novi Sad, "Prometej", with the support of several state institutions, published more than eighty titles during the four-year period. Professor Clark's book was translated into Serbian in 2014.^[24]

The highlight of the centenary in Serbia was the appearance of a whole range of diaries, recollections and memoirs, many of these had never been published before. Various archives used the centenary as an opportunity to publish sources that had previously been on hold for a long time, due to lack of resources. The French Institute in Belgrade, together with the Belgrade-based publishing house, launched a project creating a series of comic books by Serbian authors focusing solely on Serbia's Great War. Similarly, there were books written solely for [children](#) where the war narrative was adapted to their age.^[25]

Documentaries and Motion Pictures

The Serbian Broadcasting Corporation (RTS) invested a great deal of energy into creating a large number of documentaries and other TV programs exclusively dedicated to the First World War. Independent production houses also showed great ingenuity in

their treatment of the Great War. In this field, it also became apparent that Gavrilo Princip and the nature of his actions intrigued most of the authors. Director Miloš Škundrić created a documentary about the outbreak of the war, interviewing a myriad of international experts all across Europe. The master's study project of the film student Miloš Ljubomirović attracted considerable attention. His short movie *Sjene* (The Shadows, 2014) focused on Gavrilo Princip. The author presented the last days of Princip while in the Terezin military prison. His biography was narrated using the notes of the prison doctor, psychiatrist Dr. Martin Pappenheim (1881-1943). The fate of Gavrilo Princip and other Young Bosnians was also interesting for the Serbian director Srdjan Koljević who in 2014 produced his movie *Branio sam Mladu Bosnu* (I Have Defended the Young Bosnia). Director Koljević focused on the fate of the attorney who defended Princip at his trial, Dr. Rudolf Zistler (1886-1960).

It is also important to mention the documentary made by Filip Švarn and Nikola Lukić, *Hero 1914*. This was a very innovative documentary showing the human face of war approach, or war seen as individuals, as it traced the lifeline of a single, ordinary Serbian infantryman.

However, two directors decided to make another type of effort and to deliver a proper war spectacle. In 2018, the young Serbian director Petar Ristovski finished a movie named *King Peter*. The story focused on the Great Serbian Retreat of 1915 and the role of the Serbian king Petar I Karadjordjević (1844-1921). The director's father and the main actor in the movie, Lazar Ristovski, pointed out the ambition of the authors: "to immortalize, on film, the most heroic period of Serbia's past".^[26] Despite being seen by great numbers in cinema and on Serbian television it is still questionable as to whether this movie managed to position itself as Serbia's landmark movie about 1914-1918. It appeared as if the creator of the project departed from his original intention to stamp an exclusively triumphant and patriotic mark on the project. Ultimately, the conservative part of the Serbian public accused the movie producer of corrupting national morale.^[27] Critics also noted that the movie was supported logistically in controversial ways as various state resources were made available to the movie crew. The film was also the Serbian candidate for the Oscar in 2019. Here too, much controversy appeared linked to the selection procedure.^[28]

The second classical historical movie filmed during the centenary in Serbia was called *Zaspanka za vojnike* (Flowers for the Dead Soldiers) and was made by Dragan Antonijević in 2018. Director Antonijević, similar to Lazar Ristovski, stressed the capacity of his film to imbue Serbia with a new dose of healthy patriotism after the turmoil of the 1990s: "We've managed to turn patriotism during these last wars into a dirty word. It's time for some kind of a new and clean patriotism."^[29]

Theater

The theater houses across Serbia took the centenary very seriously and prepared a program presenting a mix of classical and contemporary work. Two famous Serbian screenwriters were commissioned to write pieces exclusively dedicated to the centenary. These were modern and more risky projects addressing the past but also the big issues of the current time. Interestingly, both plays dealt with the consequences and meaning of the Sarajevo assassination.

Biljana Srbljanović wrote the play *Mali mi je ovaj grob* (This Grave Is Too Small for Me). The author was asked to write a play by the Viennese Schauspielhaus.^[30] She has a reputation as a very vocal critic of Serbia's role in the Yugoslav Wars and was seen as someone who could critically address the past. The theater advertised her piece as "an extremely relevant contribution to the existing debate about the ethics of terrorism".^[31] Throughout her play, Srbljanović drew parallels with contemporary Serbia, adding a grim modern resonance to her piece. In Belgrade, her play was performed at the famous Serbian and regional theater festival of modern and vanguard art, the *Bitef*. The centenary marked the entire festival, which was advertised with the motto "The Past is Now". Srbljanović's work was one of the four plays dealing with the First World War to be presented at the festival that year. Srbljanović's drama was presented on 12 March 2014, the exact day of the eleventh anniversary of the assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Djindjić (1952-2003) – drawing clear parallels between the past and present.

The second play was written by Milena Marković and was entitled *The Dragonslayers*, a term borrowed from Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Marković described her work as a heroic cabaret. She, as did Biljana Srbljanović, also showed compassion and understanding towards Princip and other revolutionaries. However, she dedicated a great deal of effort to reconstructing the social issues which guided the Bosnian revolutionaries which were lacking in Srbljanović's play. Marković stressed their ideological consciousness as well as their ideas about South Slav unity.^[32]

1918

It can be argued that Serbia's anniversary of the Great War ended in a similar tone as it had started. Serbia's problems with Kosovo were made fully visible at the closing international ceremony in [France](#). On 11 November 2018 in Paris, at the central commemorative event, the protocol envisaged that Serbian President Vučić was to stand far from the main stage. On the other hand, Kosovo's president was just next to the most powerful world leaders. The situation shocked the Serbian public, who felt humiliated. The French ambassador in Belgrade at the time, Frédéric Mondoloni, quickly offered an apology, stressing the regrettable procedural oversight. However, in Serbia, the public debated over potential coded messages sent to Serbia's leadership regarding Serbia's place in the modern world. In any case, as former Serbian UN Ambassador Pavle Jevremović said, the event left "psychological and political consequences."^[33]

Official silence about the Yugoslav project became absurd in 2018.^[34] Instead of marking the centenary of Yugoslavia's creation, the officials turned their attention towards the single territorial gain of the Great War that was still relevant. Part of southern [Hungary](#) until 1918, the region of Vojvodina joined the Kingdom of Serbia immediately after the war. Consequently, Vojvodina replaced Yugoslavia in the national narrative. Vojvodina Museum quickly founded a new department, "The Annexation Museum of 1918", dedicated to the history of unification with Serbia.^[35]

There were other contemporary problems as well. In 1918, just weeks after the Vojvodina assembly decided to join Serbia, a similar decision was made in the [Kingdom of Montenegro](#). However, in 2018 the Montenegrin assembly, even though Montenegro had been an independent state since 2006, decided to use the centenary and vote on the new law denouncing the unification decision from 1918 as irrelevant.^[36] Such a symbolic gesture provoked bitterness in Serbia but also in parts of Montenegro. Billboards across some Montenegrin towns were installed celebrating the entrance of the Serbian troops in 1918. However, there were also posters with inscriptions "1918 never again" testifying to the bitter polarization and complex interlinkage of old and new problems in the region.^[37]

Conclusion

Serbia's centenary was marked by great enthusiasm but also controversies. Serbia's leadership as well as most of the public took up an extremely defensive posture against any possibility of a renewed debate about the Great War's outbreak. Such watchful posture can in part be explained by still ongoing wars over interpretation of the 1990s Yugoslav Wars. Namely, the understanding of the 1914-1918 period as Serbia's most glorious moment proved to be extremely conducive to boosting Serbia's inner morale, which had plummeted after years of conflicts with neighbors and parts of the international community.

The centenary confirmed that well-studied topics such as the fate of Gavrilo Princip and Young Bosnia, the major military campaigns or the role of the Serbian wartime government still attract great interest among experts as well as wider audiences. However, opportunities for discussion and further critical evaluation of the past were mostly missed and critical tackling of sensitive topics was mostly done by artists. Only a handful of historians dared to challenge and question the established narrative about [military-civilian relations](#), high casualty rates or life in exile or under [occupation](#).

Indeed, there were numerous positive developments, including the appearance of authors who tackled topics in new and interdisciplinary manners, in this way linking Serbia with the emerging trends in international [historiography](#). Finally, an enormous quantity of previously unknown or hardly accessible sources was made public. Much of it is now available online for free and is yet to be studied in great detail.

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Notes

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