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Literature: Serbia (South East Europe)

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The Serbian literature of the First World War, written by authors both from the Kingdom of Serbia and the Habsburg Monarchy, ranges from war chronicles by soldier-writers to avant-garde memoirs and poems that sought to make sense of the war. Newspapers printed in Greece included literary appendices which testify to the vitality of Serbian culture in exile, particularly as the press in Serbia itself were subject to strict censorship by the occupying forces. Much of the war literature was repressed and rejected after 1919, and since then, scholars have mainly looked to Habsburg Serbian authors, such as Miloš Crnjanski, to represent the Serbian war experience.

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Introduction

Serbian literature produced during World War I has to be divided into two text corpora, each of which exhibits different motifs and different linguistic expressions: literature written by authors from the Kingdom of [Serbia](#), and that by the Serbs of the Habsburg Monarchy.^[1]

The Kingdom of Serbia had witnessed two [Balkan wars](#) in the two years leading up to the First World

War, so death and dread were already present in the collective memory before the summer of 1914. Consequently, Serbian literature produced between 1912 and 1918 can be seen as belonging to a single period. Political and social questions monopolized the work of authors who had experienced the war firsthand, many of whom turned to avant-garde techniques of juxtaposition, opposing real, personal experiences with fantasies of an imaginary past. Serbian authors of different generations found themselves on the frontlines from the first day of war due to extensive mobilization and combat on Serbian soil, among them the contemporaries [Stanislav Vinaver \(1891-1955\)](#), [Milutin Bojić \(1892-1917\)](#), [Stevan Jakovljević \(1890-1962\)](#), [Stanislav Krakov \(1895-1968\)](#), and the slightly older [Vladislav Petković Dis \(1880-1917\)](#), [Sima Pandurović \(1883-1960\)](#), [Dragiša Vasić \(1885-1945\)](#), [Vojislav Ilić Mlađi \(1877-1944\)](#), and [Branislav Nušić \(1864-1939\)](#).

These writers were active participants in the war, believing in the possibility of change through personal and, especially, collective intervention. Some distanced themselves from their pre-war artistic expression, becoming passive observers or chroniclers of war. The most eminent comedy writer of the pre- and post-war era, Branislav Nušić, for example, did not produce any comedy between 1914 and the end of the 1920s. During the war, he instead wrote the novel *1915: Tragedija jednog naroda* (1915: Tragedy of a Nation, 1921), dedicated to his son killed in action that year, then the theatre play *Velika nedelja* (Holy Week) and numerous texts for the Serbian war [press](#) in exile, all revolving around the experience of war.

Soldiers as Writers

The Serbian literature of World War I is evidence of glory as well as woe. From this evidence, one can see the relation between artistic creation and wartime destruction, a constant interplay between suffering and pride, despair at the transience of life and hope. Stevan Jakovljević, professor at Belgrade University and reserve officer, created the most extensive prose text of that period, *Srpska trilogija* (Serbian Trilogy, 1937), in which he described the war from beginning to end from a soldier's, an officer's, and a Kingdom of Serbia civilian's perspective. Subjective fiction and objective reality were almost one and the same. In [Rastko Petrović's \(1898-1949\)](#) two-part novel *Dan šesti* (Day Six), too – written in the 1920s but published posthumously in the journal *Delo* between 1955 and 1956 – which describes the retreat of the Serbian army and [refugees](#) to Corfu after the [occupation](#) of Serbia (Petrović himself among them), it is barely possible to separate dream from reality. Though underage at the start of the conflict, Petrović enlisted voluntarily after several members of his family had fallen victim to war, including his sister, the well-known painter Nadežda Petrović (1873-1915). In this time he began writing, his notebooks serving as the basis for his later works, similar to his contemporary, [Momčilo Nastasijević \(1894-1938\)](#), who also wrote his first novels during the war. Stanislav Vinaver, the author of a manifesto on Serbian [Expressionism](#) who had interrupted his studies at the Sorbonne to serve in the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), also drew inspiration from his war diary for his book of poetry *Ratni drugovi* (War Comrades, 1939) and memorial book *Školski bataljon* (Student Battalion, 1941).

Romantic and moralizing moments are rarely found among those writers who had served as soldiers. They felt less compelled to tell others about the necessity of war, instead often composing their work as a series of snapshots of time. They give accounts of reality by capturing their memories and observations in many small episodes and by largely avoiding critical comments and analyses. In contrast, Vojislav Ilić Mlađi used a more patriotic style in his poetry, *Krvavi cvetovi* (Bloody flowers), 1914, and *Novi krvavi cvetovi* (New Bloody Flowers), 1915, which among other things dealt with the [atrocities](#) perpetuated on Serbian civilians during the first year of the war.

Furthermore, there is a noticeable presence of the linguistic and stylistic expression of oral folk tradition and Romanticism in a twist towards medieval folk epic poetry and legend heroes, a poetic romantic expression. In Serbian theatre, too – from soldiers' [front theatre](#) and convalescent camp theatre (in Tunisia, Algeria, Bizerte and Lazouaz, and Thessaloniki, which became one of the most important Serbian cultural centers of that time) to the exile theatre of [refugees](#) (such as on Corsica) and even Serbian theatre groups in Austro-Hungarian [prisoner of war](#) camps (such as Mauthausen, Aschach an der Donau, Frauenkirchen, and Neusiedl am See), the prevailing repertoire was musical theatre about village life, love affairs, and heroism. Two of the most significant of these were *Đido* (The Fearless Man) by Janko Veselinović and *Artiljerija rustikana* (Artilleria Rusticana) by Brana Cvetković. Wartime plays performed in refugee theatres sometimes discarded war topics entirely and presented a fresh political orientation: *Hej Sloveni!* (Hey Slavs! An episode from the Serb-Austrian war) by Risto Odavić is one example.

A vast number of Serbian authors did not survive the war at all. The Parnassian-symbolist poet Vladislav Petković Dis published his last poem, "Proleće" (The Spring), in 1915, just before the start of the occupation. He died in 1917. Milutin Bojić, one of the most acclaimed young pre-war poets and dramatists, died in exile in Thessaloniki, where he had published his last book of poems, *Pesme bola i ponosa* (Lyrics of Pain and Pride, 1917). The novelist [Milutin Uskoković \(1884-1915\)](#), founder of the so-called "Belgrade style," committed suicide in 1915 during the Serbs' retreat. Measured against its total population, the Kingdom of Serbia suffered the greatest loss of its citizens among combatant nations.^[2]

Censorship and Literature in Exile

One curious characteristic of Serbian literature from World War I is that it was rejected and repressed after 1919. The cause for this is to be found, as it was in many other countries, in the historical-political circumstances after the war. The Kingdom of Serbia emerged the winner of the war, but then ceased to exist, becoming part of a new state: the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (from 1929, the Kingdom of [Yugoslavia](#)). The development of a new South Slavic national identity became a goal. As a result, Serbian literature about the First World War was often published only very late and in small editions. After 1919, war nearly disappeared as a literary subject. Some writers temporarily reverted to the war topics, while some discontinued their literary activities altogether. The poet Sima Pandurović, whose book of poetry *Okovani slogovi* (Chained Syllables,

1918) included both poems written before the war and during his time in an Austro-Hungarian internment camp, devoted himself after the war to literary criticism and the translation of English and French literature.

Because the Kingdom of Serbia immediately found itself on the frontline in 1914, and was occupied from the end of 1915 to 1918, newspapers and magazines (some even handwritten) represented almost the only venues for literary publishing during the war. From the beginning of 1916, exile literature emerged in [France](#), [Great Britain](#), [Russia](#), [Switzerland](#), and the [USA](#), where Serbian newspapers and books were printed. The most significant exile literature is the so-called “literature of Corfu,” which included poetic and prosaic pieces printed on the Greek island between 1916 and 1918 in the official newspaper of the Serbian government, *Srpske novine* (Serbian Newspaper), which was, apart from a period from October 1915 until April 1916, albeit at different locations, printed throughout the whole war. A cultural appendix was also attached to the official government reports, the *Krfski zabavnik* (Almanac of Corfu). These literary appendices were of great significance to the morale of the troops and refugees, and document the literary life of Serbs in World War I. Many of the authors mentioned above published in these cultural papers, as did [Todor Manojlović \(1883-1968\)](#), writer and literary theorist from the Vojvodina region, who had come to the island as a volunteer, as well as poet [Jovan Dučić \(1871-1943\)](#) from Herzegovina, at the time a Kingdom of Serbia diplomat in Athens, and playwright [Ivo Ćipiko \(1869-1922\)](#) from Dubrovnik, who, after the liberation and imprisonment of Serbs in Dubrovnik, joined the Serbian army in [Greece](#). There were approximately 100 Serbian newspapers and magazines published during the war, though from the autumn 1915 until the end of the war, not one was published in Serbia itself. Varying in both scope and duration, the newspapers were nonetheless always accompanied by the literary appendices, which bear witness to the enormous importance of communication as well as the cultivation of Serbian language and culture during the war.

Upon the occupation of Serbia in late 1915, the occupation force took measures to regulate the use of the Serbian language. Cyrillic script was forbidden in public life (administration, education, and media), and the Serbian language was re-cast as “Serbo-Croatian.” All books in Cyrillic were removed from bookstores and the Serbian publishing houses were closed. The fact that the printed materials for the population of Serbia came out exclusively in Latin script, Ijekavian dialect, and with Croatian lexis indicated efforts to exclude the Serbian language and literature from public life. Pre-war works by Serbian writers were occasionally published in occupational newspapers in German translation, and in rare instances, also in “Serbo-Croatian” in Latin script. The bilingual Serbo-Croatian/German occupation newspaper *Beogradske novine/Belgrader Nachrichten* was printed in Belgrade and subject to the [censorship](#) of the Austro-Hungarian war press agency. Its only Serbian associate writer was the well-known novelist [Bora Stanković \(1876-1927\)](#), who had taken the position after his release from an [internment camp](#). His war texts, published posthumously as *Pod okupacijom* (Under Occupation, 1929), are a valuable testament to the literature of the occupation period. An essay by [Isidora Sekulić \(1877-1958\)](#), “Pitanje” (The Question), originally written during the Balkan Wars and reprinted in *Beogradske novine/Belgrader Nachrichten* during the war,

discusses the meaningfulness of war. Poised between [nationalism](#) and cosmopolitanism, it reflects the individuality of Sekulić, who became one of the most important modernist writers in the post-war era.

Serbian Literature from the Habsburg Monarchy

Despite the extent of the corpus, very few works by authors from the Kingdom of Serbia who experienced the war as a soldier, prisoner of war, exile, or civilian have been translated into English. Comparative studies about World War I literature have moreover generally relied on Serbian authors from the Habsburg Monarchy to define the Serbian view – most notably [Miloš Crnjanski \(1893-1977\)](#), one of the most important writers in all of Serbian literature,^[3] and [Dušan Vasiljev \(1900-1924\)](#), author of the most famous Serbian anti-war poem, “Čovek peva posle rata” (A man sings after the war). Serbian authors from the Habsburg Monarchy experienced World War I as citizens and soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian Royal and Imperial Army, which wedged them between two fronts. The double loyalty to, or rather solidarity with, two warring states frequently lead to inner conflicts. Their work is dominated by [pacifism](#), cosmopolitanism, an awareness of the transience of life, and an emphasis on despair and suffering. They describe ordinary people’s destinies and address the relationships amongst the South Slavic population, especially among the Serbian population of the Monarchy. Serbian artists and intellectuals who, for reasons of age or health, could not be mobilized were in large part interned in Austro-Hungarian camps even before the beginning of the war, in the time of [July crisis](#). Two important writers, Aleksa Šantić and [Svetozar Ćorović \(1875-1919\)](#), both from Mostar, Herzegovina, were among them; Ćorović died as a result of three years’ internment shortly after the end of the war. The prose writer [Veljko Petrović \(1884-1967\)](#), who had been a correspondent from Serbia for a newspaper in Novi Sad and Sarajevo during the Balkan War, remained in Serbia after the outbreak of the war as a volunteer in the Serbian army. He conveys the experience of a Monarchy Serb within Serbian army lines in *Izdanci iz opaljenog grma* (Shoots from a Burning Stump, 1932).

Conclusion

The First World War interrupted or re-directed the creative work of many Serbian artists. For some, war served to stimulate their best work, while others wrote texts that had barely anything in common with the rest of their oeuvre. A number of young new writers also emerged during the war, such as Momčilo Nastasijević and Rastko Petrović. The Serbian literature of WWI is a literature of personal as well as collective tragedy. Created on the front, in prisoner of war camps, in occupied territory, and in exile, it was written by authors from Serbia and the Habsburg Monarchy. Though most of this literature’s characters are people who suffer, who are in despair, who criticize themselves and their circumstances, nevertheless, they long for the bliss of life and the beauty of nature.

Notes

1. † According to the population census in 1910, 1.9 million Serbs were registered as citizens of the Habsburg Monarchy. See Đorđević, Dimitrije: Die Serben, in: Wandruszka, Adam / Urbanitsch, Peter (eds.): Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918, Band III. Die Völker des Reiches, Vienna 1980, pp. 734–774.
2. † The Kingdom of Serbia experienced a true demographic disaster in the Balkan Wars (1912 and 1913) and the following First World War. It lost 28 percent of its entire population – including two-thirds of civilians and 53 percent of its male population aged 18 to 55. In addition to that, there were 260,000 invalids and disabled ex-soldiers (Sundhaussen, Holm: Geschichte Serbiens, Vienna 2007, p. 228). These numbers refer to the population of the Kingdom of Serbia and do not include thousands of imprisoned and executed Serbs under the Monarchy, or killed and wounded Serbian Austro-Hungarian soldiers.
3. † Crnjanski's *Dnevnik o Čarnojeviću* (Čarnojević's Journal, 1920) was published in French as *Journal de Čarnojević* in 1977 and in German as *Tagebuch über Čarnojević* in 1993; his poetry cycle *Itaka i Komentari* (Ithaca and Commentary) also appeared in German in 2011.

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