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## **1914 Revisited**

**Commemoration of the WWI centenary in Serbia**

This paper deals with a wide range of social, political and cultural phenomena connected with the commemoration of the centenary of the beginning of the Great War in Serbia. It addresses a variety of representations of the role Serbia played in the war in both historiography and popular culture. The paper includes analysis of official state commemorations and media interviews by professional historians, politicians, and people from media and art. It attempts to provide a contextual background of the main arguments and the most influential interpretations of the war in contemporary Serbian society. The phenomena under study include quite a recent material and still ongoing public and scholarly debates which provide for the rather ambiguous character of this study. Namely, while aiming to explain the main narratives and arguments in a neutral manner, it cannot escape being polemical towards some of them.

Although the academic genre dealing with politics of memory and culture of memory is nascent in Serbia, two important monographs by Olga Manojlović-Pintar<sup>1</sup> and Danilo Šarenac<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Olga Manojlović-Pintar, *Arheologija sećanja: spomenici i identiteti u Srbiji 1918-1989* [The Archeology of the Remembrance: Monuments and Identities in Serbia, 1918-1989]. Belgrade: Udruženje za društvenu istoriju and Čigoja, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Danilo Šarenac, *Top, vojnik i sećanje: Prvi svetski rat i Srbija, 1914-2009* [The Canon, Soldier and Remembrance: The First World War and Serbia, 1914-2009]. Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2014.

have recently been published in Belgrade. Manojlović-Pintar's book is primarily focused on monuments and the commemorative usage of public space in Serbia throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In approaching the topic, the author was preoccupied with the official commemorations and their narratives, and state-promoted remembrance practices surrounding memorial sites and places in Serbia. Šarenac's book covers three WWI-related topics, one of them being politics of memory with regard to important sites, places, and events of the war. In this part of the monograph, the author is elaborating on the development and discontinuity in the public commemorations in Serbia from the interwar period until the very beginnings of the Milošević era in the late 1980s. Several papers and at least one monograph published recently in Serbia are dedicated to the issue of WWI controversies and public commemoration. These publications are the main objects of analysis in this paper.

This paper consists of six subtopics which are arranged as separate sections. The first and second sections deal with media interviews and scholarly works by Serbian historians related to the commemoration of 1914. These parts of the study analyze what might be considered a typically Serbian historiographic response to presumed or, at some points, evident revisionist tendencies in WWI studies. The third section furthers this discussion by introducing a more relaxed and less dogmatic approach to the alleged revisionist literature in Serbian historiography. The fourth section covers public and media responses to "WWI revisionism", yet this time the main protagonists are the high ranking state officials. This section includes also the elaboration of the official state program of commemoration, its iconography and prevalent narrative. The fifth section sheds light on and provides analysis of the 1914 commemoration in popular and high art. Conclusions and results of analyses are summarized in the sixth section.

## Serbian historians vs. WWI “revisionist” literature

It was in 2013, a year before the official commemoration was to take place, that the most prominent Serbian historians had already reflected on the WWI centenary and underlined their ideological and professional stance on Serbia’s role in the July Crisis, the month following Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s murder, and its alleged responsibility for the outbreak of the war in 1914. Numerous media interviews and one monograph by leading Serbian historians were provoked by “revisionist” books on the diplomatic and political origins of WWI written by Margaret MacMillan, Sean McMeekin and Christopher Clark. Among these, McMeekin’s books on “the Russian origins” of WWI<sup>3</sup> and on the July Crisis of 1914<sup>4</sup> certainly represent the most daring revisionist accounts on the issue of the responsibility for the war. According to the author, Russia’s readiness to mobilize at the first indication of the July Crisis, and its decision to support Serbia under whatever might be the consequences were the key factors which transformed a local war into a global warfare. When it comes to the Serbian culpability in the Sarajevo assassination, McMeekin considers it “semiofficial” involvement. While the informal power networks in Serbia were responsible for the outbreak of the July Crisis, Russia’s premature mobilization was to be blamed for the outbreak of the war itself.

MacMillan’s line of reasoning on the Serbian extra-institutional involvement in the assassination is quite close to that of McMeekin’s. Yet, Serbia is not mentioned among the countries most responsible for the outbreak of the war. In that regard, MacMillan points out three main culprits Austria-Hungary, Germany and Russia; namely, in her own words the war was provoked by, “Austria-Hungary’s mad determination to destroy Serbia, Germany’s decision to back it to the hilt, Russia’s

<sup>3</sup> Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Sean McMeekin, *July 1914: Countdown to War*. New York: Basic Books, 2013.

impatience to mobilize”<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, Clark’s book offers a completely different approach to the issue of war guilt. The book which turned out to be a non-fiction bestseller in 2013 and 2014 aims at relaxing the exclusive German responsibility as underlined by Article 231 of the Versailles Treaty. Actually, the author stated he would not deal with the issues of either responsibility or guilt at all. Clark provides questions on “how” rather than “why” the chain of events of the July Crisis of 1914 was put in motion<sup>6</sup>.

In a complex manner, the book suggests what might be considered a shared unawareness of the main protagonists of the consequences of their acts during the crisis. The decision-makers in Vienna, Berlin, Saint Petersburg, Belgrade and Paris are portrayed as “sleepwalkers” whose acts stemmed from the common features of European political culture of the time. Although the author promised he would not open the issue of responsibility and that of blame for the outbreak of the war, the underlying suggestive tone is that of shared responsibility, with Serbian and Russian roles particularly emphasized in order to match Austrian and German “imperialist paranoia”.

After the first news came about the content of these books, some of the most influential Serbian historians – namely, Ljubodrag Dimić, Mile Bjelajac, Čedomir Antić, and Dragoljub Živojinović – almost unanimously labeled these books revisionist. Belgrade University Professor Ljubodrag Dimić provided a rather elaborate stance on the contemporary trends in WWI revisionism in several interviews. In methodological terms, Dimić claims that revisionist authors reduced the scope of their research to a small number of rather obscure and misleading sources which are applied with the aim of constructing a new paradigm that diminishes the objective (i.e. positive) German responsibility for the outbreak of the war. According to Dimić, the next step in producing revisionist pieces of scholarship is

<sup>5</sup> Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace. The Road to 1914*. New York: Random House, 2013, p. XXXV.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914*. London: Penguin Group-Allen Lane, 2013, p. XXVII.

“to introduce parallel discourses” which provides for parallel interpretations of one and the same fact. All this brought about “a relativization of truth” which according to Dimić had a strong political background. In short, it was connected with the sudden rise of Germany’s prestige and power within the EU. It developed as a (German) state-funded project, and was disseminated via scholarships granted to trustworthy academics:

There is a forceful machinery which is shaping historians by means of scholarships. If you examine key authors who are handling the process of the revision of the image of WWI, you will notice that these are mainly people of Irish origin, and almost all scholars on German University stipends. After a while, they are appointed to some chairs of the great universities. Namely, when you announce your quasi-scientific thesis from Cambridge or Oxford, it has considerably more significance [than it would have otherwise].<sup>7</sup>

One of the general methodological guidelines frequently advised by Dimić and other protagonists of the anti-revisionist course is that historians should go back to Fritz Fischer’s thesis on the exclusive German responsibility for the outbreak of the war. Namely, in the last three decades, since the Serbian translation of Fischer’s book *Bündnis der Eliten* was published in 1985, his controversial thesis on the German war guilt has almost acquired a status of dogma among Serbian historians. Therefore, in the Serbian scholars’ interpretations, the facts which support the thesis of sole German responsibility are proclaimed to be positive and “scientific” pieces of information and vice versa. Among the revisionist authors, Dimić in his interviews frequently points out Christopher Clark and Margaret MacMillan.

<sup>7</sup>The interview was published in monthly *Svedok* no. 926-927 and 928-929 (April-May 2014). Available at: <http://www.nspm.rs/kuda-ide-srbija/gavrila-principa-je-srpska-javnost-podrzala-a-politicka-elita-osudila-nemacka-stipendijama-menja-sliku-o-prvom-svetskom-ratu.html> (retrieved on May 5th, 2015)

Some of the aforementioned anti-revisionist arguments are reiterated in the opening remarks to a commemorative anniversary publication dedicated to the WWI centenary which Dimić co-authored with University Professor Mira Radojević. Yet, in this book, not a single critical remark on Clark's book can be found, while MacMillan's monograph is mentioned in a footnote as an example of revisionist historiography. Interestingly, Sean McMeekin's book which provides the most revisionist perspective on the origins of the war is pointed out as a citation reference for the development of the chain of events of the July Crisis<sup>8</sup>.

Margaret MacMillan's book could hardly be considered revisionist, yet it provoked the greatest outrage of Serbian anti-revisionist historians. The main reason for this lies in the unfortunate choice of exemplary parallels between 1914 Serbian, Bosnian and Macedonian societies and those of modern Iran and Lebanon. For the sake of truth, it should be underlined that MacMillan did not construct a total comparison between Serbian/Bosnian/Macedonian and Iranian/Lebanese states and societies. She only claimed that the Serbian unofficial frameworks which facilitated support for pro-Serbian irregulars in Macedonia and irredentist organizations in Bosnia had been functioning in a similar way ("much as") as contemporary Iranian confidential networks for the support of Hezbollah in Lebanon; nothing more than that was claimed<sup>9</sup>. MacMillan thus compared the *modus operandi* of Serbian and Iranian confidential undertakings, not these societies or states *per se*.

Yet, the Serbian anti-revisionist scholars intentionally disregarded that very fact and they placed emphasis on "unacceptable comparison" between 1914 Serbia and contemporary Iran. In doing so, they have created a false controversy which additionally strengthened a notion of anti-Serbian conspiracy constructed by Western historiographies.

<sup>8</sup>Ljubodrag Dimić, Mira Radojević, *Serbia in the Great War: A Short History*. Belgrade: Srpska Književna Zadruga and Belgrade Forum for the World of Equals, 2014, p. 84.

<sup>9</sup>MacMillan, *op. cit.*, p. 547.

According to University Professors Čedomir Antić, Ljubodrag Dimić, and academician Dragoljub Živojinović, it was derogatory and rather offensive to make such comparisons. The democratic and liberal character of the Serbian state in the period between 1903 and 1914 is among the arguments they used to prove the improperness of such parallels. Mass-violation of human rights and the unconstitutional character of Serbian rule in the newly acquired territories of Macedonia, Kosovo-Metohija and Sandžak were simply absent from this idealized image of 1914 Serbia<sup>10</sup>:

The very idea that one would compare the Kingdom of Serbia as of 1914 with the undemocratic Iran tells of his or her malicious intentions and unfamiliarity [with the topic]. The Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocracy which negates the human rights of its citizens, while the 1914 Kingdom of Serbia was a European democracy. The idea that Serbia might be considered Iran falls prey to one single argument. Namely, [ . . . ]<sup>11</sup>

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“Problems” with MacMillan’s text also emerge from the fact that she finds that “it is hard not to compare” Young Bosnians and Gavrilo Princip “to the extreme groups among Islamic fundamentalists such as Al-Qaeda a century later”. In the

<sup>10</sup> In November 1913, after the successful conclusion of the Balkan Wars 1912-1913, the newly acquired territories of Serbia were granted by a ruler’s decree an incomplete version of the 1903 Serbian constitution in November 1913. This reduced constitution did not include provisions for freedom of press and political association, electoral rights at both national and local level, and some elements of judicial protection. On the omitted articles of the Serbian constitution see more in “Ustav za Staru Srbiju (izostavljeni članovi ustava iz 1903.)” Available at: <http://internetbilten.com/izvori/item/24-ustav-za-staru-srbiju.html> (retrieved on December 20th 2015)

<sup>11</sup> “Antić: Evropa je i pre atentata Principa klizila u rat“ [Even before the Princip’s Assassination Europe Had Been Moving Towards The War] In: RTV-Online, 8. November 2013. Available at: [http://www.rtv.rs/sr\\_ci/zivot/drustvo/antic-evropa-je-i-pre-atentata-principa-klizila-ka-ratu\\_436197.html](http://www.rtv.rs/sr_ci/zivot/drustvo/antic-evropa-je-i-pre-atentata-principa-klizila-ka-ratu_436197.html) (retrieved on May 5th 2015)

following sentence, the author pointed out similarities in their puritanical way of life.<sup>12</sup> The aforementioned Al-Qaeda quotation, therefore, only referred to the prevailing ascetic character of the private life of the members of these groups. The analogy did not refer to the aims and methods of these two secret organizations in their complexity and entirety. Yet, the above mentioned anti-revisionist Serbian historians were more than irritated by this historical parallel. A distinguished member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Art (Serbian: SANU), Dragoljub Živojinović, published an article in the Belgrade daily *Politika* which was entitled “Young Bosnia is not Al-Qaeda”. In this article, Živojinović raised his voice against politically inspired revisionist conspiracy; he provided also a detailed elaboration of organizational and programmatic differences between Al-Qaeda and Young Bosnia. Other anti-revisionist historians in Serbia followed the same line of argumentation. In this way, the public in Serbia was introduced to a hot debate based on a somewhat tendentious reading of MacMillan’s book.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the critique of the above mentioned historical analogies, and on a more general level, Margaret MacMillan was accused of being incorrect and tendentious in labeling “Young Bosnia” as a terrorist organization. While Christopher Clark has decided to replace the terrorist label which he applied in the first edition of his book<sup>14</sup>, Margaret MacMillan remained firm on this issue. According to Živojinović, she was persistent in labeling “Young Bosnians” terrorists since they “did not seek alternative ways of solving problems with the Austro-Hungarian regime.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> MacMillan, op. cit., p. 546-7.

<sup>13</sup> Dragoljub Živojinović, “Mlada Bosna nije Al Kaida“, *Politika-Online*, 12 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Kultura/Mlada-Bosna-nije-Al-Kaida.lt.html> (retrieved on May 5th 2015)

<sup>14</sup> The term „terrorist(s)“ was replaced with murder(s) or assassin(s) when referring to members of assassination plot.

<sup>15</sup> “Živojinović: Ljudi lažu iz političkih razloga” [The People Lie for the Sake of Politics] In: *Nezavisne Novine-Online*, 3. August 2014. Available at: [http://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/drustvo/Zivojinovic-Ljudi-lazu-iz-politickih-razloga-256534.html?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=feed&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3ANovosti-NezavisneNovine+%28Novosti+-Nezavisne+novine%29](http://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/drustvo/Zivojinovic-Ljudi-lazu-iz-politickih-razloga-256534.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3ANovosti-NezavisneNovine+%28Novosti+-Nezavisne+novine%29) (retrieved on May 5th 2015)



It is not clear whether he quoted MacMillan's statement from media or from their private correspondence. From the interview, it seems as if Živojinović personally tried to persuade her to change her mind on this very issue.

The patriotic rhetoric of the anti-revisionist historians in Serbia almost regularly includes dramatic appeals to defend Serbia's reputation and Serbian state interests from the Western (that is, German) conspiracy. Dimić, Antić and Živojinović often speak on behalf of a personified Serbia as if they were state officials rather than scholars. They all claim that revisionism was a political project. Therefore, they propose similar state-facilitated countermeasures, at first the publication of archival material which proves Serbian innocence. In addition, Antić suggests an active collaboration with foreign scholars. He insists that "we [i.e. Serbians] are to find serious scholars who are to confront revisionism". In other words, the Serbian state is to recruit another Clark who is to write pro-Serbian bestselling scholarly books:

Serbia is to support the publication of a good scholarly monograph by a distinguished foreign historian on the causes of the outbreak of WWI. This book should be published by a respected British or American publisher [ . . . ] A movie, dealing with the beginning of the war, or even better, with the role played by the Kingdom of Serbia in the war, its sufferings [ . . . ] should be directed by an Oscar Academy Award laureate, if anyhow possible from the USA. This requires a huge amount of money, yet our authorities have in any way expended much money in the previous decades.<sup>16</sup>

The patriotic anti-revisionist WWI discourse is prevalent among contemporary Serbian historians. It is founded on a rigid "scientific" approach based on the dogmatic acceptance of the

<sup>16</sup> D. Radeka Đorđević, "Od Gavrila Principa prave Bin Ladena" [Bin Laden has been Produced Out Of Gavrilo Princip] In: Večernje Novosti-Online, 01. June 2013. Available at: <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovnadrustvo/aktuelno.290.html:436815-Od-Gavrila-Principa-prave-Bin-Ladena> (retrieved on May 5th, 2015).

Fischer thesis. It often places emphasis on rather misleading emotional and hyperbolic interpretations of the “revisionist” authors. Yet, the mode of its rhetoric is distinctively defensive and apologetic. One does not find the slightest hint of either national pride or aggression, which is a bit strange given that 1914 was marked by Serbian military successes against the Austro-Hungarian military.

### **Anti-revisionist reflection and beyond**

Within the contemporary Serbian historiography production, the 2014 monograph by Mile Bjelajac, senior fellow and currently a director of the Institute for Recent History of Serbia, is of great importance for our topic. Namely, it represents the only relevant piece of scholarship dedicated to the “revisionist” interpretations of the origins of WWI. This book makes extensive use of the Yugoslav/Serbian, Anglo-Saxon, French, and German literature and studies from the field. It analyzes the most controversial issues related to Serbia’s alleged responsibility for the 1914 developments and the outbreak of the war. In addition to this crucial problem, it also deals with new trends in contemporary, mainly Anglo-Saxon, historiography and its approach to the Balkan studies. In this domain, Bjelajac is particularly critical about the latest affirmative interpretations of the history of “multi-ethnic and tolerant” empires, referring to the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman realms.

According to Bjelajac, a rather romantic and idealistic picture of these empires is regularly contrasted with the supposedly destructive power of nationalism associated with the new nation states founded on their ruins. This is particularly emphasized in case of the negative assessment of the Serbian national and revolutionary movement. In this particular context, the negative image of Serbia produced in the public opinion in the 1990s was mechanically attributed to events and characters in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, the Tsarist

Russia is the only one out of the pre-1914 European empires which is excluded from this positive reassessment.

A new paternalistic paradigm is constructed which tends to disqualify positive connotation attributed to the small nations' liberation movements. Among these, the Serbian nationalism is perceived as particularly "malignant". Moreover, Bjelajac reminds his readers that the revisionist authors such as Clark, McMeekin and others particularly posit responsibility for the outbreak of the war in 1914 on Serbia and Russia. According to him, this argument is somewhat discordant when compared to the general trends of reconciliation of former enemies in contemporary official narratives:

On the one hand, there is insistence that after a century went by, no nation is to be burdened with feeling of guilt – namely, everybody suffered and felt pain equally – on the other hand, all of a sudden, a finger is pointed towards two states, two nations at this moment outside the EU, or more precisely, outside the so-called international community. Is this a sort of prediction of "a new political correctness" for a new cold war period?<sup>17</sup>

One of the main theses elaborated by the book is that the key arguments of contemporary revisionism can be traced back to the 1920s and 1930s state-facilitated German diplomatic and propaganda efforts focused on contesting the war guilt clause of the Versailles Treaty. Bjelajac provided a rather detailed elaboration of the development of revisionist scholarship and its close interconnectedness with particular German or broader EU or US foreign policy agenda. The author is a particularly harsh critic of the paternalistic attitude towards "uncivilized" Balkan societies and Serbia. Following the example of Maria Todorova, Bjelajac's book deconstructs some of the negative stereotypes and misconceptions about the Balkan countries

<sup>17</sup> Mile Bjelajac, *1914-2014: Zašto revizija? Stare i nove kontroverze o uzrocima Prvog svetskog rata* [1914-2014: Why There is Revision. The Old and New Controversies About Causes of the WWI] Belgrade: Medija centar "Odbrana", 2014, p. 232

which had been adopted in the US and European public opinion during the 1990s.

In the realm of the technicalities regarding the particular Serbian share of responsibility, Bjelajac provides data and arguments which contradict any allegation concerning the involvement of civil authorities in the assassination. When it comes to the Serbian military and military intelligence involvement, Bjelajac made an effort to confirm that the head of the Serbian military intelligence service – notorious colonel Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis – had only approved what had originally been an independent assassination plot designed and later executed by Young Bosnians, all of them Austro-Hungarian subjects. Only shortly after the approval was given, the Serbian intelligence staff, and Apis himself, invested all their powers to revoke the assassination plan. Yet, it was all in vain, for the Young Bosnians were eager to finish, once and for all, with the archduke.

The issue of the dysfunctionality of the Serbian state and its inability to control branches of military was not among topics discussed in this book. A few lines dedicated to this problem could have counterbalanced Bjelajac's firm anti-revisionist discourse. Apart from this objection, the book proves to be an extremely valuable contribution in the domain of anti-revisionist WWI studies. Translated to English, it would certainly contribute to a more balanced and a more constructive debate on the origins of WWI in global scholarship.

### **Scholarly vs. “scientific” approach**

Apart from this prevalent apologetic attitude and defensive stance against revisionism, one also finds authors in Serbian academia who have taken a more relaxed approach to the issues of WWI controversies. In this context, I will mention two historians, namely Dubravka Stojanović of the Belgrade University and Danilo Šarenac of the Institute for Contemporary History in

Belgrade. Not only that these two historians do not share the dominant “patriotic” discourse on 1914 but they have argued against it in media interviews and scholarly works. In the first place, they object to the degree of emotional mobilization caused by (mis)interpretations of the revisionist scholarship. Stojanović labeled it “hysteria”, while in Šarenac’s opinion this overall anxiety had already reached a level of collective paranoia. More specifically, Stojanović was surprised to witness such a high degree of public outrage in a society which has generally been either ignorant or completely indifferent about the gruesome details of war crimes committed by Serbian (para-)military during the the 1990s. Namely, while there was almost no public response to the thousands of monographs dealing with these crimes, the publication of the Clark’s book has provoked a broad public response in media, political circles and historiography.<sup>18</sup>

Šarenac, on the other hand, considers Clark’s book a revisionist piece of WWI scholarship. In line with this principal stance, he wrote a review of the book which included a detailed elaboration of his general objections to and particular disagreements with its contents<sup>19</sup>. Yet, instead of emotional exclamations and xenophobic remarks, we have here a calm scholarly mode of reasoning and critical reflection. Šarenac summarized what he considered acceptable and what was tendentious and problematic in Clark’s book. His argument is that only time will prove the credibility of such a controversial publication. Stojanović’s discourse is much more critical towards the Serbian-orchestrated historiography response against alleged revisionism. She defines it as a rather spontaneous expression of the *modus operandi* of the mainstream institutional historiography in Serbia:

<sup>18</sup> The transcripts of Stojanović’s interview broadcasted in Radio program Pešćanik on 2nd December 2013 is available at: <http://pescanik.net/ljudi-iz-sume/> (retrieved on May 5th, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Danilo Šarenac, “O knjizi *Mesečari. Kako je Evropa ušla u rat profesora Krištofera Klarka*” [On The Book *Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*] *Vojnoistorijski glasnik* no. 1 (2013), pp. 267-80.

How come that one book could cause such an avalanche of hysteria? [. . .] What happened with this book is no incident – it is something deeply rooted in the tradition of contemporary historiographies which are at first critical towards themselves [their own societies] and this is a good evidence that our historians understand their profession exclusively as subordinated to the state; for they consider it is nothing more than the one who orders you and thereafter you will write. This is why they believe that someone ordered Christopher Clark to write the book. This is evident from frequent requests that the Serbian state is to react, that our diplomacy should write a protest note [. . .].

According to their statements and writings, both Šarenac and Stojanović generally accept much of Fritz Fischer's thesis, yet they do not consider it dogma. They also have many objections referring to the aforementioned books by revisionist authors but they argue that historiography could only benefit from scholarly debate provoked by such controversial monographs. Moreover, these two historians do not believe in a politically inspired historiographical conspiracy against Serbia, nor do they consider themselves obliged to act on behalf of the state as state-designated officials. On the contrary, the public activism of Dubravka Stojanović aims at confronting the stereotypical ethnocentric mode of WWI commemoration as perceived by official state policy in Serbia. In broader scholarly terms, Stojanović and Šarenac proved to be open to deal with new interpretations and new approaches to WWI studies within a more relaxed notion of scholarly approach which is clearly confronted with an uncompromising "scientific" approach as proposed by their mainstream colleagues.

Šarenac was the only specialist in WWI studies from Serbia who took part in the international conference dedicated to the centenary of the war which took place in Sarajevo in June 2014. The conference had been condemned by the leading Serbian historians and state officials even before it actually took place, and one would assume that this was not an easy decision for a young scholar from Serbia to participate in it. Šarenac presented

there a paper on the issue of the national minorities recruited as combatants in the Serbian army; he also participated in the conference debates. Šarenac's participation in the conference was of a huge symbolic importance; his readiness to be engaged in debate rather than to criticize from a distance is an encouraging gesture in terms of contemporary development of the Serbian historiography. This is true, even more so as Šarenac is one of the most promising young historians in the country.

Stojanović, in the interview for the radio program *Peščanik*, claimed that much of the problem with accepting WWI controversies comes from the fact that the Serbian public and mainstream historians were unaware of developments in modern Anglo-Saxon, German or French historiography. The Serbian scholars' inability to accept a more relaxed and often self-questioning stance of these national historiographies comes from their own state of mind which does not include self-critical reflections in the realm of the national history. While assessing the work of foreign authors, they were reading it using their own distorted lenses. Only from this perspective could alternative historiography interpretations be perceived as nothing more than a politically inspired conspiracy against Serbia:

Modern British, French, Canadian or American historiographies cannot be content with the [thesis of] exclusive German responsibility. That is something people here cannot understand at all. Everything here is to be perceived black-and-white; our side is to be perfectly innocent, which is not the case in modern societies where the social sciences are to question [everything] and to question themselves. Already for decades, these serious historiographies have been dealing with their own responsibility. Another problem is that no one here was aware of this, that no one read these books [. . .]

In her interview, Stojanović also tackled a controversial issue of Serbian war guilt. In that very field of inquiry, she recognizes

Serbian state responsibility for being unable to impose effective control over military affairs, and more specifically, over military intelligence headed by colonel Apis. Stojanović considers it would be much better if Serbian historians were preoccupied with this very issue, namely the long-term problem of fragile institutions and that of the state jurisdictions being always inferior to the uncontrollable para-institutions. She does not blame Serbia for the outbreak of WWI; according to her, this was the exclusive responsibility of the great powers. Yet, according to Stojanović, “for one who lives here, this perspective [i.e. of dysfunctional state involved in the 1914 assassination] of the event is to be crucial”. Namely, quite a similar pattern of anti-government plot by insubordinate branches of military, police and state security took place in the organization and execution of the assassination of Serbian PM Zoran Đinđić in 2003.

### **The official state commemoration**

Most probably influenced by the aforementioned Serbian mainstream historians, the official state commemoration was very much focused on the issue of “ungrounded accusations” against Serbia. In thematic terms, the commemorative manifestations placed emphasis on the victimization of Serbia and its population in WWI. While Serbia is portrayed merely as a victim of Austro-Hungarian aggressive policy, Tsarist Russia assumed the role of almighty savior. Like the anti-revisionist historians, the official commemoration has displayed a rather defensive stance against alleged trends of revisionism in WWI studies. This is evident also in the official state-funded “musical and theatrical fresco” *Amanet* [Legacy] – a low-budget (probably in a spirit of proclaimed austerity measures) performance dedicated to the centenary commemoration. Although it was announced as a performance which would deal with “both Serbian sufferings and victories in WWI”, the play was focused again on victimization rather than on “glorious” victories which



actually marked 1914 on the Serbian frontlines. Namely, in the two decisive battles that took place in August and November-December 1914, the Serbian army was able not only to repulse the Austro-Hungarian military, but the invading armies were almost completely annihilated.

The *Amanet* play introduces a personified Serbia as an innocent fragile ballerina confronted with the Austrian military and other perils of war. The authentic photographs of the Austrian atrocities committed against the Serbian civilian population during the unsuccessful campaigns of 1914 are displayed in the stage background. Salvation for the ballet dancer comes from the strong figure of Nicholas II representing Russia. It is rather surprising that Tsarist Russia was the only Serbian ally to be particularly mentioned and emphasized in this play and throughout the official commemoration of the centenary. On the occasion of the 2014 anniversary, Russia finally replaced France in the official narrative as the most esteemed wartime ally of Serbia. Namely, in Serbian popular and official narrative, France had always been recognized as the most valuable ally; this was obvious in the interwar period and onwards until this very commemoration. The Serbian/Yugoslav commemorative homage to France has much to do with the role played by the French military in rescuing remnants of the Serbian military after its retreat across Albania in Winter 1915/1916<sup>20</sup>. In the following months, the French military rearmed Serbians and provided them with all necessary provisions after which they became capable of taking part in military operations on the Macedonian Front. As far as I could confirm, throughout the 2014 commemorative manifestations, the French alliance was not even mentioned. The aforementioned shift from the French

<sup>20</sup> The Serbian army, together with the members of government and Parliament was compelled to retreat after a joint German, Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian military offensive that took place between October and December 1915. What remained of the Serbian military found a refuge on the Greek island of Corfu, and afterwards they joined the Allies on the Macedonian Front. The Serbian Army played a decisive role in the Dobro Pole Battle after which the Bulgarian and Turkish government decided to sign the armistice agreements with the Entente.

to the Russian alliance narrative is evident in the erection of a monument to Nicholas II in downtown Belgrade in October 2014.

The public statements by President Tomislav Nikolić and then-Prime Minister Ivica Dačić followed, almost in every detail, the logic and rhetoric of the anti-revisionist historians. President Nikolić particularly amply argued about German war guilt, about credibility of the historiographic facts and methodology, about distorted contextualization applied by revisionist authors, etc. His opinion is that the German and Austro-Hungarian responsibility for the outbreak of the war had already been established by a “special allied commission”. In the domain of revisionist historiography, Nikolić expressed his disagreement with Christopher Clark’s book in particular. He considered it unacceptable to pardon Germany and to introduce a notion of shared unawareness of sleepwalkers “who staggered into the war”. The PM Ivica Dačić was less elaborate, yet he also warned about “distortion and revision of history” and underlined that the war was the “expression of German and Austro-Hungarian expansionism”<sup>21</sup>. What we have here is an odd situation with historians who assumed the rhetoric of state officials and politicians who adopted the phraseology of historians. In that quasi-professional capacity, president Nikolić delivered an emotional speech on the opening of the international history conference organized by SANU in Belgrade in June 2014:

Cicero’s words remind us, Serbs, confronted with an attempt of the falsification of history [. . .], that evil and dishonesty are widespread phenomena and a constant feature of the history of mankind. [. . .] There are attempts to throw into the mud the Serbian war of liberation which has been for a century a symbol of struggle for justice and truth. Ample evidences of the

<sup>21</sup> “Optužba da je Srbija kriva za rat iskrivljavanje prošlosti“ [The Accusation that Serbia Is To Be Blamed for The War is A Distortion of the Past] Politika Online, November 11th, 2013. Available at: <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Ekonomija/Dacic-Izgradnja-Juznog-toka-da-pocne-24-noveembra.sr.html> (retrieved on May 5th 2015)

events, facts and historical material – all this is futile when individuals recruited by echelons of power will take the facts out of context, reverse them, change their meaning, give them new clothing and outfit and lie will become a generally accepted truth. In this new truth, these great deeds will become a great shame; bravery will become terrorism, and the nobleness – weakness. What remains to us is to fight by words and deeds in the pursuit of preventing revision of historical facts [ . . . ] To remain silent and indifferent is to be an equal accomplice in guilt, the same as if it were accepted.<sup>22</sup>

A strong pro-Russian undertone is evident also in what might be considered a semi-official centennial commemoration organized by Emir Kusturica in Višegrad in Republika Srpska, the Serbian entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The commemoration took place in a newly constructed quarter of the town called Andrićgrad (i.e. town of Ivo Andrić, the celebrated Nobel Prize winner). The construction of Andrićgrad was a joint venture of Kusturica's company Lotika, the communal authorities of Višegrad, and the governments of the Republic of Serbia and Republika Srpska. Situated on a picturesque place on the banks of the rivers Drina and Rzav, Andrićgrad hosts cultural institutions, a scholarly institute and a film academy<sup>23</sup>.

The official opening of Andrićgrad took place on the very anniversary of the Sarajevo assassination on 28 June, 2014, in the presence of the Prime Ministers of the Republic of Serbia and Republika Srpska, Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik. The highpoint of the event was a theatrical performance named "Rebel Angels" which was directed and performed according to Kusturica's own artistic design. The apologetic approach was most evident when Gavrilo Princip and his accomplices in the assassination were represented as angels. In a somewhat

<sup>22</sup> "Nikolić: Srbija ušla u Prvi svetski rat da bi opstala" [Nikolić: Serbia Had Entered the First World War in Order to Survive] In: *Blic-Online*, June 13th, 2014. Available at: <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Drustvo/473201/Nikolic-Srbija-usla-u-Prvi-svetski-rat-da-bi-opstala> (retrieved on May 5th, 2015)

<sup>23</sup> See more on the Andrićgrad's official web-site: <http://www.andricgrad.com/en> (retrieved on May 5th, 2015)

bizarre and confusing manner, Kusturica also introduced a ridiculed figure of Uncle Sam who is placed in Sarajevo during the assassination.<sup>24</sup>

According to the official commentator who was broadcasting the event for the Radio and Television of Republika Srpska, “the figure of Uncle Sam [. . .] is symbolizing the entire Western world that allowed Austria-Hungary to invade Serbia in a peculiar and conscious manner and for the sake of its own interests”. One is to have an extremely exaggerated anti-Western and anti-American attitude to have such a distorted perception of WWI to disregard Serbian war alliance with Western European Entente Powers and the USA. Such a hostile attitude is even more puzzling from the state-run television of the Bosnian entity which advocates, at least nominally, an active pro-EU policy.

On the very scene of the assassination, Gavrilo Princip and other “rebel angels” are coming out from the sky waving their clumsy wings. After the archduke was murdered, the play proceeds with trial proceedings against “Young Bosnians” emphasizing their martyrdom. The performance ended up with sounds of artillery which announced the war, and powerful Soviet military songs (such as *Nesokrušimaya i legendarnaya, Polyushka, polye* etc.) which probably emphasized Russia’s decisive support to Serbia in 1914. In a rather surreal context of 1914, the Soviet music was performed by the official Russian Army Ensemble *Alexandrov* which provided for the official Russian presence in Andrićgrad commemoration. At the same time, in Sarajevo Town Hall, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra performed a concert of classical music. One could not imagine a more discrepant pairing of the musical motives and political agendas.

In Serbia, there was no corresponding commemoration of the centenary of the Sarajevo assassination. However, as it has been

<sup>24</sup> “Rebel Angels” recording by Radio Television of Republika Srpska is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjQu444c6bo> (retrieved on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015)

mentioned, Serbian state officials took part in the Andrićgrad commemoration held on the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This was consistent with the official state agenda which defined the assassination as an exclusively Bosnian undertaking, committed by Bosnian patriots with no involvement of official Serbian authorities.

### **WWI controversies in media, film and art**

One photograph, shot in a compartment of Adolf Hitler's special train *America* near Graz, on 20<sup>th</sup> April, 1941, became in the Autumn of 2013 a strong visual symbol of the forthcoming WWI commemoration in Serbia. The photo had captured a moment when a memorial plaque from Sarajevo was handed over to Hitler as a birthday present. Sarajevo and the rest of Yugoslavia had just been occupied by the armies of the Nazi Germany and its allies, and this was to be considered as a war trophy. The memorial plaque which bore the name of Gavrilo Princip in Cyrillic letters was removed from the 1914 assassination site, and the photo depicts Hitler accompanied by two officers staring at it. The photo was shot by Hitler's official photographer Heinrich Hoffmann, and it was published for the first time on the front cover of the Serbian weekly *Vreme* [Time] in October 2013<sup>25</sup>.

The "untold story" about this photograph was announced by the weekly editorial with a suggestive title, "Hitler's Revenge on Young Bosnia" on the front cover. The photo was accompanied by an article written by Sarajevo author Muharem Bazdulj; it was entitled with another expressive title, "Happy Birthday, Mister Hitler". There was no additional German text attached to the original photo, yet Bazdulj gave his best in trying to recreate the entire context and Hitler's hidden reflections on Gavrilo Princip, Young Bosnians, and Yugoslavia. In popular perception, the discovery of the photo finally resolved many of

<sup>25</sup> *Vreme*, no. 1191, 31. October 2013.

the traumatic issues of modern Serbian history. Unexpectedly, all the Serbian enemies were exposed and lined up behind the arch-evil himself. From this utterly problematic perspective, Gavrilo Princip was perceived as a symbol of struggle not only against Austrians, but Nazi Germans as well. Motivated by the discovery of this picture, Predrag J. Marković, one of the most mediated historians in Serbia was advocating a similar popular conception of Gavrilo Princip's role in Serbian history<sup>26</sup>.

Another Sarajevan, the aforementioned world famous movie director Emir Kusturica was, apart from his semi-official role in the Andrićgrad commemoration, very much engaged in the discussion over 1914-related topics in the Serbian cyber-media and press. A picture of him kissing Gavrilo Princip's bust on the official opening of the monument in the small community of Tovariševo in Vojvodina became widely known and shared in the Serbian cyberspace<sup>27</sup>. In February 2014, Kusturica even initiated a petition to organize a revision of the trial proceedings against Gavrilo Princip and members of Young Bosnia. In an interview for the state-run Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), he said he would start the legal procedure after his initiative obtained one million signatures<sup>28</sup>. To this very moment (January 2016), we still have no indication on whether we would eventually witness the initiation of such an epic retrial or not.

While arguing for the retrial, Kusturica was actually reiterating arguments which had already been used by Gavrilo Princip's defense attorney Rudolf Cistler in the Sarajevo trial in 1914. The forgotten hero of this historic trial was the only court

<sup>26</sup> Marković's interview in a popular TV program 24 minuta, authored by Zoran Kesić was broadcasted on 29th June 2014. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUR4FbZmVcQ> (retrieved on May 5th 2015)

<sup>27</sup> "Sami digli Principu spomenik, Kusturica ga otkrio" [They erected the Princip's Monument Themselves, Kusturica Has Unveiled It] In: *Kurir On-line*, April 22nd, 2015. Available at: <http://www.kurir.rs/tovarisevo-sami-digli-principu-spomenik-kusturica-ga-otkrio-clanak-1333329> (retrieved on May 5th, 2015)

<sup>28</sup> "Princip ponovo pred sudom?" [Princip Once Again Before the Court?] In: *RTS-ONLINE*, February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Available at: <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/Dru%C5%A1tvo/1522721/Princip+ponovo+pred+sudom%3F.html> (retrieved on May 5<sup>th</sup> 2015)

designated attorney in the process who actually defended the accused. He did it in spite of threats, and allegedly while facing a danger of being lynched by the Austrian officers. Consistent with his own ethics and an uncompromising attitude of a professional attorney, he pointed out that the charge of high treason against Young Bosnians could not have been legally valid, since Bosnia-Herzegovina had not been legally part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the moment of the assassination. Cistler claimed that following the ruler's act of annexation in 1908, there was no subsequent parliamentary procedure of ratification in either Hungarian or Austrian legislative bodies. Under the circumstances, subjects of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1914 were still living in a state of disputed citizenship. From that perspective, Young Bosnians could not have been considered culpable for the crime of high treason.

Rudolf Cistler's life and his valiant trial defense of the Young Bosnians was the topic of a 160-minute commemorative movie which was entitled *The Man Who Defended Gavrilo Princip*<sup>29</sup>. The movie production received a generous funding from the Serbian state which provided for its fast completion in 2014. In his interviews, the movie director Srđan Koljević often emphasized that the film script was entirely based on historical documents. Cistler's anti-Austrian and anti-annexation attitude is even more highlighted as this attorney was of a mixed German-Croatian ethnic background. According to Koljević, Cistler's argument of the illegality of the Austrian unilateral act of 1908 is of paramount importance: "Therefore, if we are to talk about the origins of WWI, it was the annexation of Bosnia in 1908 which produced the chain of events which brought about its beginning in 1914".

Koljević proved to be well-informed about the new European trends in commemorative practices which sought to find a common integrating narrative rather than divisions between former enemies. Yet, he is not particularly fascinated by these

<sup>29</sup> More info about the movie available at: <http://kosutnjakfilm.rs/press/projekti/branio-sam-mladu-bosnu.html> (retrieved on May 5th, 2015)

new developments. Koljević is also very much concerned of the role of Germany in this process and distortion of historical facts which is associated with such commemoration policies:

From Germany's point of view, it is understandable that it has requested from Great Britain that throughout the commemoration of the jubilee, there won't be either defeated or victors, that there won't be those who are guilty and those a bit less guilty. It is understandable why Germany would like all of us to be equally responsible for that war, yet from the point of history and that of the victims, this is unacceptable. Even if such a request was issued for the sake of reconciliation, which is of course affirmative, the reconciliation does not mean alteration of historical fact.<sup>30</sup>

A diametrically opposed artistic perception of the Sarajevo assassination is provided by Serbian playwright Biljana Srbljanović in her latest drama entitled *Mali mi je ovaj grob* [This Grave Is Too Small for Me]. Srbljanović was commissioned to write this play by the Schauspielhaus Theater in Vienna where it was performed for the first time on October 16, 2013. As far as I know, the play was later on performed in theaters in Belgrade and New York, while in Serbia it was also published as a book<sup>31</sup>. This paper will not be engaged in the assessment of the artistic value of the play; it will rather focus on the author's interpretation of the 1914 assassination and public debates inspired by it.

Srbljanović provides a rather affirmative account of Gavrilo Princip and Young Bosnians in terms of their positive social activism, pro-Yugoslav liberation ideology, and their anti-occupation and anti-colonial stance. What is alluded by the

<sup>30</sup> The interview was published in: Sonja Ćirić, "Branio sam Mladu Bosnu" [I Defended Young Bosnia] *Vreme*, no. 1186, 26th September 2013. Available at: <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1139707> (retrieved on May 5th, 2015)

<sup>31</sup> Biljana Srbljanović, *Mali mi je ovaj grob. Drama u dva dela* [This Grave Is Too Small For Me. The Two Parts Play] Belgrade: Samizdat B92, 2014.



drama is that much of the problem in 1914 Bosnia came from the Austrian occupation, yet Srbljanović did not portray Austrians as the number one villains. This role was assumed by the Serbian military intelligence and its chief Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis. According to Srbljanović's artistic interpretations, Apis is to be blamed for exploiting the idealism of Young Bosnians for the sake of his nationalistic ambitions. While Young Bosnians dreamed of liberated Yugoslavia, Apis only thought of enlarged Serbia.

In order to point out the persistent problem of the omnipotent and insubordinate military and intelligence services in modern Serbia, Srbljanović included in her play several contemporary quotations. In the drama dialogues, one finds quoted statements by notable Serbian politicians and people from intelligence service sector. Almost all the quotations refer to the political environment and the technicalities surrounding the assassination of the Serbian pro-EU, democratic PM Zoran Đinđić in 2003<sup>32</sup>. Srbljanović's underlining rationale is quite an obvious one, namely, in both 1914 and the contemporary period, Serbian society was confronted with the very same problems of a dysfunctional state unable to impose effective control over the branches of military, paramilitary and intelligence service. From this very perspective of a socially engaged artist-intellectual, Srbljanović's critique of modern Serbian society is very similar to that of historian Dubravka Stojanović. Such a principal attitude becomes even more imperative in the view of the most recent developments which once again point out the insubordinate position of the military intelligence in Serbia. On this occasion, high ranked officials from the military intelligence denied access to their documentation when it was officially requested by ombudsman Mr. Saša Janković.<sup>33</sup> An orchestrated media campaign against Janković which followed and which was going on for several months (April-July 2015)

<sup>32</sup> Srbljanović, *op. cit.*, 30, 38-9, 100, 143.

<sup>33</sup> "Serbia's Angry Leaders Turn on Ombudsman" in *BalkanInsight*, 29 April 2015. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbia-s-angry-leaders-turn-on-ombudsman> (retrieved on May 5th, 2015)

is a clear sign of the strong influence of para-institutional networks in the Serbian society. The campaign against Janković calmed throughout the second half of 2015; however, he has not yet (January 2016) been allowed to inspect the requested transcripts.

### **Concluding remarks**

One after another as they were coming out of printing press, the revisionist books altogether had a profound impact on the scholarly circles and public sentiment of the people in Serbia. One cannot deny that there were some degrading remarks, offensive historical parallels and cases of unjustified moral bias against Serbia. For instance, it might not have been necessary to provide such historical analogies which link Young Bosnians with Al-Qaeda terrorism, or 1914 Serbia and Bosnia with the contemporary troublesome Middle Eastern societies, no matter how scrupulously these correlations were defined by the corresponding authors.

The Serbian public might also be confused by Christopher Clark's point given in the book's intro that after a harsh experience of Serbian military campaigns in the 1990s, it "became easier to conceive of Serbian nationalism as an historical force in its own right"; in this regard he added that "our [referring to the Western world] moral compass has shifted too".<sup>34</sup> Regardless of the fact that Clark wanted to communicate a more complex explanation, for an average Serbian the first reflection is that the author had already been convinced about the moral character of the role played by Serbia in 1914 even before he began writing his book: namely, what do the Siege of Sarajevo and the Srebrenica Massacre of the 1990s have to do with professional scrutiny of the work with 1914 archival material?

<sup>34</sup> Clark, *op. cit.*, p. XXVI.

One should acknowledge that there were many provocative points which might have offended or could have had a negative impact on the scholars and general public in Serbia. This, on the other hand, cannot be used as justification for an irresponsible and exaggerated response by the Serbian mainstream historians. Instead of pointing their fingers on the unconfirmed foreign conspiracies, and instead of raising emotional arousal of an already distressed nation, they should have engaged in a professional debate based on concepts, facts and interpretations. Instead of speaking in the name of the state and nation, they should have written their works and spoke publicly only on behalf of their profession. Bjelajac's 2014 anti-revisionist monograph provides a nice model of such intellectual response to what was perceived as revisionist studies.

However, an ideal concept of what I would like to read from a Serbian WWI specialist would combine Bjelajac's critique of revisionist authors with strong self-critical reflections provided by polemic writings by Dubravka Stojanović. Otherwise, in terms of ideological balance within the Serbian historiography, it would be good to have more scholars engaged in the self-critical and self-questioning tendencies, especially when it comes to the main topics of Serbia's Grand National narrative. In this context, I have to mention a powerful remark by German historian Holm Sundhaussen, specialist of the Balkan and Serbian history, concluding his lecture held on 4 July, 2014, in Berlin. After dealing with anti-revisionist rhetoric in Serbia and after providing a positive assessment of the social role played by Fritz Fisher in German society, he asked one simple question, namely: "Where is the Serbian Fritz Fischer?"<sup>35</sup>

A more moderate and self-critical and less emotional and apologetic mainstream historiography would provide for a more responsible and more balanced stance by the Serbian government and – consequently, for more constructive and

<sup>35</sup> Sundhaussen's lecture translated in Serbian is available at: <http://pescanik.net/sarajevski-atentat-srbija-i-duh-1914/> (retrieved on May 5th, 2015).

conciliatory WWI commemorations in the future. Serbian historiography should be a vanguard in this process. In doing so, it does not need to “recruit” another Christopher Clark from abroad who would write apologetic bestsellers on Serbia’s role in the July Crisis. One also has doubts whether anything would become different after a Hollywood block-buster about 1914 funded by Serbia as proposed by the aforementioned Belgrade University Professor. What the Serbian historiography and Serbian society desperately need is more self-critical reflection which would enable them to begin constructing a more complex identity structure and more responsible and tolerant scholarly and societal community.