

## Perceptions of the Front by Serbian Civilians during the First World War, 1914-1918

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*This paper provides an insight into one segment of the civilian population in Serbia from 1914-1918. It aims to discover more clearly the real effects of war and how it impacts the people's lives through the analysis of the perception of the front among civilians and their impressions from the battlefield news. It shows the hopes and fears of people who constantly lived in conditions without reliable and due information which created the atmosphere of tense expectation and the certain sensationalistic and fantastic stories conditions. All this is shown through the analysis of the preserved documents and memories from that period as well as from the news that arrived to Serbia from the fronts from Serbia to Serbs in Austria-Hungary.*

Our anxieties and our hopes

While Russians advanced in Galicia, every place mentioned in the newspapers were closely looked for on the map. We were counting on substantial Russian force, on millions of Russian soldiers. We believed that war will result in the Eastern front. But when the fortunes of war turn over: when Russians started to withdraw, loosing for a day what had been taken in months, we started rubbing our eyes and in various ways commented large and regular Russian losses.

[...]

German submarines were great concern for us.  
When the news came to us that the second million of  
Americans reached the European front, we take a breath,  
because all believed that soon change at the battlefield  
will occur in favor of our Allies.<sup>1</sup>

The consequences of the First World War have marked the whole 20th century and still influence contemporary politics. The unrecorded number of victims by that time, destruction, and the use of all means available aiming to wage the war have left unforgettable traces and have had a deep mental impact on generations of people. The First World War is, in its civil and technological sense, the first “total war,” waged by the utmost use of all civil classes, science, technology and industry up to the unimaginable extents at that time. “The Great War” marks a turning-point in military history, as state conflict has introduced into the historical pattern of the 20th century the significance of the civilian population in all the future war conflicts. From then on, it will be unimaginable to wage any greater conflict without planning for the loss of civilians, the use of women’s and children’s labor in war manufacturing, or without insight into the public opinion. The consequences of “The Great War” have, even during the animosity, introduced new terms into the vocabulary regarding the feeling of the power of the conflict, war characteristics and their sinister legation.<sup>2</sup>

The Kingdom of Serbia entered The First World War after two Balkans Wars between 1912-1913, which influenced both its military capacity and the perception of the war among the civilians of Serbia. “The Austrian War,” the widespread name of this new war, followed the “Turkish” (The First Balkans War 1912) and “The Bulgarian War” (The Second Balkans War 1913), and as such represented the logical consequence of Serbian political and territorial aspirations on the Balkans whose greatest enemy was the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. After the successful defense of the state territory in 1914, and the repel of the two Austrian offensives, (The Battle on the mountain Cer and on the river Kolubara), in the autumn of the year 1915, the joined forces of Germany, Austro-Hungary and Bulgaria defeated the Serbian army and ushered Serbia into the three-year occupation period, while a new front was opened on the North of Thessaloniki.

Numerous works are dedicated to this military and political aspect of The Great War on the Balkans, though the insight into the war and life during the war seen by individuals was relatively neglected. Simply speaking, the generals, politicians, and canons, in this case, have completely hidden from view the every day life of the Serbian population in war conditions, their struggle for survival, and the material and spiritual culture which “occupied” the civilians of the Balkans’ states for more than four years. This work provides insight into only one segment of the civilian population in Serbia from 1914-1918. It also intends to discover more clearly the real effects of war and its impact on people’s lives through the analysis of the perception of the front among the civilians and their impressions from the battlefield news. It also shows the hopes and fears of people who constantly lived in conditions where a lack of reliable and due

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<sup>1</sup> Лазаревић, Лука. *Белешке из окупираниог Београда 1915-1918*. Београд, 1919. (Lazarevic, Luka. *Notes from occupied Belgrade 1915-1918*. Belgrade, 1919).

<sup>2</sup> Winter, Jay. “Shell-shock and the Cultural History of the Great War.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 35.1 (2000): 7.

information created an atmosphere of tense expectation and certain sensationalistic and fantastic stories conditions. All this is shown through the analysis of the preserved documents and memories from that period as well as from the news that arrived to Serbia from the fronts and from Serbia to Serbs in Austria-Hungary.

*The Balkans front seen by civilian population, 1914-1918*

While the bordering towns of Serbia towards Austria suffered a lot during military operations 1914-15 (Belgrade, Smederevo, Valjevo), and some were completely destroyed, like Sabac, the places in the interior of the country mainly remained saved. Towns like Cacak, Uzice, Kraljevo were back bases for the accommodation of headquarters, ammunition, and hospitals. The civilian population felt the war mainly through the hurry of military convoys which were heading one-way towards the front, and in the opposite direction, through the number of the wounded who came to military hospitals.

A good example of the position of a town during war operations during 1914-15 is Cacak, a town on the West Morava River. Apart from the pulling down of two bridges over the river in 1915, the town did not suffer any other war destructions. The greatest change in the life of the citizens was caused by the approach of the front during the second Austro-Hungarian offensive in 1914, (The Battle on the Kolubara River), when, beside the civil hospital which was turned into the military hospital at the very beginning of the war, many buildings in the town served as hospital premises such as the newly built caserne, the building of the Grammar school, as well as all bigger inns.<sup>3</sup> After the siege of the town by Austro-Hungary in November 1915, and the foundation of the occupational rule, the citizens of Cacak continued to experience indirectly the presence of front conflicts in their surroundings. Some of the obvious “monuments” of the drastically changed conditions were the two new graveyards in the town. The occupants in Cacak buried their dead in the graveyard opposite the town hospital on the spot of today's caserne. All the soldiers killed on the Cacak front or that died in the hospital were buried there. This hospital served as the gathering center for wounded and sick soldiers who arrived from the South. That graveyard was very big and well kept with a big central monument of general significance on which was the inscription, “Es starb ein jeder für sein Vaterland” (Each one died for his fatherland). The monument was on a dominant position, made of white marble, and it could be seen from the town. Single soldiers' graves were marked by a wooden cross and the names of the buried. A significant part in the Austrian graveyard was the Serbian graveyard, formed by the burial of the Serbian soldiers who died in the hospital. The Serbian soldiers' graveyard was in the separate part of the town graveyard, formed at the outburst of the Balkans' Wars in 1912.<sup>4</sup>

The Balkans front kept during the whole war period a certain kind of attraction and romantic illusion about the heroic deeds that can be achieved in the battle against the enemy. That picture was constantly renewed in the daily papers issued in Serbia, very similar to the titles and articles in other countries in war. As an illustration there is the daily paper “Politika” issued in Belgrade from 1904 and the print from the beginning of

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<sup>3</sup> Чачанске новине. (Чачак) 10. октобар 2006, стр. 23. (*Cacak's News* (Cacak, Serbia) 10 Oct. 2006: 23).

<sup>4</sup> Вукосављевић, Теодосије. “Споменик ратницима Првог светског рата на гробљу у Чачку”. *Зборник радова Народног музеја VI* (1975): 233. (Vukosavljevic, Teodosije. “Monument to the Soldiers of WWI in Cacak's cemetery”. *Collection of works of the National Museum VI* (1975): 233).

the war - August 1914, or the one from September 1915 when the paper stopped issuing. In its print no 3.784 from August 14th 1914 (1st in Julian calendar) "Politika", on its cover page is an article with the title "From our battlefield", while in no 4.146 from 11/24th September 1915, before the very offensive of the Central forces and the occupation of the country, the identical title is on the front page, only this time in plural: "From our battlefields". What attracts attention is the fact that beside the news about Bulgarian mobilization, which practically announced that Bulgaria entered the war, the newspapers do not miss to underline that "in Nish good mood prevails" (Nish being the biggest town of the Kingdom of Serbia after Belgrade and the seat of the Serbian government in that moment, otherwise near the Bulgarian border).<sup>5</sup> The pretty picture of the front was maintained among Serbian population even under the occupation.

Soon after the division of the territory of Serbia by Austro-Hungary and Bulgaria and the formation of the Military-general-government (Militar-general-gouvernement) in the Austrian part of Serbia at the beginning of 1916, followed the establishment of each segment of everyday life. The newly established Austro-Hungarian rule, among other things, paid attention to the formation of school system under its own control that would replace the Serbian educational system of that time. The textbooks and teachers were to come exclusively from the territory of Austria-Hungary. Modern Serbian historiography concluded that because of the needs on major European fronts, mostly men with limited military capabilities were drafted for service in occupied Serbia (second and third call soldiers, Landsturm units, older recruits, etc.).<sup>6</sup> The population of that time noticed bitterly that the teachers who were to teach Serbian children in an incomprehensible language and in a Latin alphabet all belonged to the non-commissioned officers of the Austrian army, incapable of joining front.<sup>7</sup> In this case a message or attitude is clearly seen: only those capable of joining the front and the battle deserve attention and have socially acceptable human values. If we try to evaluate this example from a wider historical perspective, we find a similar statement even today in everyday conversation of the population of Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the man who is not for the army (a rifle) is not for a marriage (wife) either.

The saved war letters show that this positive picture of the front was not an isolated example in the people's thoughts or in daily news' articles, which had to express the official governmental opinion. In a publication in Serbian, "Serbian letters from The World War 1914-1918," Vladislav Pandurovic collected, after the war, interesting people's confessions that he could obtain being employed in Austrian censorship for letters in Serbian written by prisoners-of-war (POW) and internees.<sup>8</sup> While the majority of letters searched for information about relatives, conditions at home and in the country (bearing in mind that this correspondence followed the soldiers at the Thessaloniki front

<sup>5</sup> *Politika*, Бр. 3784, 1. 8. 1914, Београд, стр. 1; Бр. 4146, 11. 9. 1915, стр. 1. (*Politika* (Belgrade) 1. Aug. 1914: 1; 11. Sep. 1915: 1. <<http://www.digital.nbs.bg.ac.yu/scc/novine.php>>

<sup>6</sup> Митровић, Андреј. *Устаничке борбе у Србију 1916-1918*. Београд: СКЗ, 1987, 44. (Mitrovic, Andrej. *Rebellion fights in Serbia 1916-1918*. Belgrade: SKZ, 1987, p. 44).

<sup>7</sup> Поповић, Љубодраг. "Школство у окрузима чачанском и горњомилановачком од 1916. до 1918. године". *Зборник радова Народног музеја XVIII* (1988): 296. (Popovic, Ljubodrag. "Schooling system in Casak and Gornji Milanovac districts from 1916 untill 1918". *Collection of works of the National Museum XVIII* (1988): 296).

<sup>8</sup> Пандуровић, Владислав., ур. *Српска писма из светског рата 1914-1918*. Осиејек, 1923. (Pandurovic, Vladislav., ed. *Serbian letters from The World War 1914-1918*. Osijek, 1923).

and Serbian war prisoners in POW camps in Austria-Hungary, as well as the refugees all over the world), we can find occasionally shorter reflections and thoughts of individuals about their own destiny, inevitably connected to the war engagement. Rarely these letters show the war horrors brought by the war fronts (the censure forbade the direct correspondence on such topics), and there were also those who evoked the front nostalgically. Such is a Serbian prisoner of war in Boldogas, Hungary, writing to his brother on June 24th, 1915, apologizing for not having written by then because “I considered it humiliating and shameful to be here, but what can I do when soldier's luck and destiny brought me here... Say hallo to our brave cavalry, those knights of our dear country,” (Pandurovic 51). From the same POW camp writes home an M.S. on July 15th, 1915:

Dear Godfather Marko, you write to me that my friends take leave and have fun in the village. But dear Godfather, everybody knows who are those who can befall prisonership: those who do not fear death and who will be first in every assault, and those who run away like chickens and retreat without orders they are the Brankovics who would sell Serbia. We have suffered enough enduring hunger and thirst and all sorts of hardship, but still it is not for ours but for hero fighters who attack bravely our enemy. (Pandurovic 52)

Mentioning Vuk Brankovic in this letter refers to the Vuk Brankovic from Serbian epic poetry. He was the Serbian feudal landowner from 14th century who is the symbol of a traitor because of his betrayal in the battle against the Ottomans Turks on the Kosovo polje in 1389. Historiography proved that his betrayal was the fruit of the political interest and oral folk tradition<sup>9</sup>, but is still used as a metaphor to any case of betrayal. In the case of this letter, the writer compares Vuk Brankovic's betrayal from 1389 with the easy life of those Serbian soldiers who did not get captured and killed because they did not act on the front like heroes who despise death. The Kosovo battle myth indicates another key figure, Duke Lazar, the antipode of Vuk Brankovic, who gathered the Serbian army to fight Sultan Murat. Duke Lazar was killed in a battle and the folk tradition turned his common death into the martyr choice between “earthly and heavenly kingdom.” The letter also shows, though not clearly expressed, the writer's wish to identify his temporary prisoner's suffering with Lazar's martyrdom as a conscious denial from his personal satisfaction in favor of the higher, general aims.

Similar motives are seen in the letter of a Serbian captain from prison where the death and front are glorified contrary to prisonership.

I could imagine to experience anything but to be imprisoned in such long war never occurred to me. I can say only that I very much envy those who got killed so that they ended all the suffering of this world. (Pandurovic 57)

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<sup>9</sup> *Serbian heritage*. Spremiћ, Momcilo. „Треба ли рехабилитовати највећег издајника? Вук није био Бранковић“. *Српско наслеђе-Историјске свеске* 11 (1998). (Spremić, Momcilo. “Should we rehabilitate the greatest traitor? Vuk wasn't Brankovic”. *Serbian heritage-Historical notebooks* 11 (1998) <<http://www.srpsko-nasledje.co.yu/sr-c/1998/11/article-5.html>>.

Pandurovic also analyzed in this book the initial delight of the imprisoned Serbian soldiers because they escaped the certain death that threatened them on the front (Pandurovic 48; 49). It is obvious with the soldiers who most voluntarily described food, the prisoner-of-war's camp conditions, and the acquaintances from home town they were imprisoned with. However, with the officers prevails disappointment and discontent because of imprisonment. As the time passed by, through the letters we can chronologically follow the increasing crisis while confronting the conditions they found themselves in, and the idealization of peace time, as well as the time when they looked into enemy's eyes from the trench. Numerous are narrative sources that tell about suffering and hardship that the Serbian prisoners endured during the war, about camps' conditions, illnesses, hunger, and constant presence of death which altogether caused the change of mood.

Yet, one of published letters, sent from Serbia in July 1915, by the family of an imprisoned soldier speaks cruelly and openly about the way of thinking of, at least one part of the population of Serbia, about prisoners and the expected soldiers honor and shown bravery that was necessary in the battle against the enemy.

Veljko! You wrote to your father but he would not you  
because you are a coward, He does not want to hear  
anything about you either, he curses you and wishes all the  
misfortunes to you. He even curses our children and wants  
them dead saying: I do not need offspring of one coward  
who brought me greatest shame and pain.

I, too, Veljko, do not think better. Every woman is proud of  
her husband, praising his bravery, and you, ashamed me  
and our home so that everybody despises us. I sent you  
money to buy yourself poison with it so that the village  
never sees you again. That is the hello from Stojanka.

(Pandurovic 33)

Bearing in mind such expectations that the soldiers were confronted with, we can draw a conclusion that in Serbia during The First World War there still existed a determined social pattern inherited from the times of battles for freedom against the Ottoman's rule, when nearly each capable man was regarded as a fighter whose presence in battle was obligatory. Applied to conditions from 20th century, that is to say to The First World War, the presence of soldiers on the front meant a certain recognition and valorization of his role in society according to the status of a man in Serbia at the beginning of 20th century.

The confirmation of the previously stated can be found in literary works dealing with The First World War on Serbia. Well-known writers Dragisa Vasic (1885-1945) and Isidora Sekulic (1887-1958) passed the war in two completely different ways: Dragisa Vasic was a non-commissioned officer and participant of all wars from 1912 to 1918. Isidora Sekulic spent the war under Austro-Hungarian occupation. They both express through their works their own picture of that time. Vasic undoubtedly paints the war period, 1912-1918, mostly inspired by his own experience of war. In his work there is a certain "inevitability" of history when he tells about the war outburst and the departure for war. Although in his afterwar novel *Red mists* he criticizes the fact that "always the same ones" go to war while "the same ones never pay their debt to country" (Vasic 10),

the departure for the front is regarded as an inevitable man's destiny in Serbia, where the difficult parting from family and quiet life in favor of the uncertain tomorrow goes together with the greatness of sacrifice that has to be done for fatherland.<sup>10</sup> While in his novel he paints the everyday rest after a battle, Vasic introduces us into a bitter discussion between two non-commissioned artillery officers, of which one asks to be transferred from front to the rear.

- Tell me the truth, clearly and without hesitation: have you really asked for the rear, have you begged for it humbly?
- It is true. I have.
- Are you not ashamed?
- No.
- Are you aware that the battery openly mocks your cowardice? (Vasic 19)

On the other hand, Isidora Sekulic speaks the language of civilians, common people who survived the war watching the armies march and fearing the news from the front.<sup>11</sup> Under the influence of a three year's Austro-Hungarian occupation of Serbia, she shows occupation as a condition "under the black star," while the news about the breakthrough of the Thessaloniki front in September 1918 was the birth of "a new Sun in the East" (Sekulic 49). This clearly expresses the hope that the population saw in that faraway front on somebody else's land.

Daily routine during The First World War was a distortion of all human values and established social standards that prevailed before August 1914. The change was radical and was felt on all social levels. Even children were not spared from it. Their plays with wooden rifles were considered during the occupation as "forbidden" on which the enemy soldiers watched with suspicion and which could cause them and their parents considerable trouble and punishment.<sup>12</sup> Those were not the same times either, which is confirmed by Eric Hobsbawm who remembers that his parents divided all events chronologically after 1918 into the period before and after the war; that is to say – "peace" (before 1914) and after it (all the rest).<sup>13</sup> The man from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was already used to reading daily papers and news from the other end of the world in order to fulfill his daily routine. With the outburst of The First War daily papers in Serbia continued its issuing although in difficult conditions and with the news mostly coming from military sources. It is thus completely clear that human curiosity asked to be satisfied on other places, so the retelling of different news and stories from places where people gathered mostly was common place. In Serbia these places were inns and restaurants.

The inns, as I mentioned, did not exist, so we had no place where to gather. There was no walking in the streets either,

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<sup>10</sup> Васић, Драгиша. *Црвене магле*. Београд: Српска књижевна задруга, 1922. (Vasic, Dragisa. *Red mists*. Belgrade: SKZ, 1922).

<sup>11</sup> Секулић, Исидора. *Зачуци*. Београд, 1941. (Sekulic, Isidora. *Records*. Belgrade, 1941).

<sup>12</sup> Ђоковић, Милан. "Деца под окупацијом 1915-1918". *Београд у сећањима 1900-1918*. Београд, 1977, 216. (Djokovic, Milan. "Children under the occupation 1915-1918". *Belgrade in memories 1900-1918*, Belgrade, 1977, p. 216).

<sup>13</sup> Hobsbawm, Erik. *Doba ekstrema: istorija Kratkog dvadesetog veka 1914-1991*. Београд: Dereta, 2002, 24. (Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*. Belgrade: Dereta, 2002, p. 24).

since it was forbidden to meet more than three people in the street. Everybody was usually at home.

The news from different battlefields, of course reliable ones, absolutely did not exist, because of which numerous lies were spread, the most fantastic ones.<sup>14</sup>

Scarce army information about the situation on the front in their final version in conversation among people gained the element of science fiction. This was especially caused by the news regarding the conditions at fronts in Europe, because of the ignorance about geography of most participants of conversations. Such is the news brought by papers that Russian cavalry with General Renenkampf in command seized the town, Marmarosh-Sziget, while marching on the Hungarian border.

- Well when the Russians seized Marmarosh Siget the other day, it means that they surely seized Budapest as well, because there is only 70 km between those two places.
- Nonsense, noticed a retired captain, Mr. Jevta who obviously wanted to prove Mr. Misha's opinion untrue. But this one did not let him continue his speech but went on angrily.
- Why nonsense? When I say something my dear sir, it must be true. I was listening with my own ears the cannon thundering all night long. And do you know where it came from? There from. Yes, my dear sir, it is well known that water conducts sound to long distances, so that sound comes from the Danube, and after the Danube via the Morava it comes here. And then, my dear sir, you, obviously do not know the Russian army but I do, and very well so. Russian Kozaks – those are dragons, and that general of theirs, Renenkampf, he is... he is, how to put it... a spitfire. Surely, he is. (Marsicanin 52)

*Perceptions of the front: front as hope and fear*

The Western front, in its essence, was formed at least one decade before the outburst of the First World War (by signing of bilateral agreement between Great Britain and France), while on the Eastern front Russia planned the war to wage alone against Germany with France's coordinated attack to Germany from the West. International agreements concerning The Entente forces were not consoling for the Kingdom of Serbia, which entered the conflict with the only certain fact that Russia would declare war to Austria-Hungary after the formal cancellation of relations and the beginning of hostility between Vienna and Belgrade. Serbia practically spent the whole war looking at the Allies, for it was a small and undeveloped country that could not stand the demands imposed by a total war. The feeling of isolation was widely spread, from government and the general headquarters on the top, to people's conversations in the street. When it was evident that Russians can not break the front in Galicia, and "lower" into the Pannonian plain, the idea of the Alliance's help (the English and the French) from the direction of

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<sup>14</sup> Маршићанин, Божо К. *Успомене из збега*. Београд, 1919. (Marsicanin, Bozo K. *Memoir from flight*. Belgrade, 1919).

Thessaloniki, become very important among Serbs. Most of 1915 passed in expectation of such an event, so it is completely clear that the news about the landing and battles at Gallipoli wasn't welcome in Serbia and was considered as the loss of all hopes for help from the South. Yet, even before that period, a certain image of the front was formed in people's minds as a kind of psychological vent of war traumas. Good news from the front had a good effect on people's mood concerning the war and its final outcome. It was common that each speaker adds something to the original news, which was caused by the general delight because of the victory of their own and Allied army. Occupation of the country in the autumn of 1915, although catastrophic for the state system and society in Serbia, strangely enough did not, for a long period, affect the hope of home population for the Alliance's help and the front that would be formed in the South. Even after the arrival of enemy troops, the local population still spoke in a way that totally opposed the real situation.

As an illustration of the conditions of that time, there are the memoirs of a witness from that period.<sup>15</sup> Vrnjacka Banja (Central Serbia) was occupied by Austro-Hungarian army on November 10<sup>th</sup> 1915, while the whole Serbian army was retreating to Kosovo and Metohia, the late expedition corps from Thessaloniki was already effectively stopped, but stories of the Alliance's success on all fronts did not stop during the following month (it is obvious that any stories of Serbian army success do not exist. Because of a great number of imprisoned Serbian soldiers who were passing through the town, the reality of the Serbian army could not be ignored). People in Vrnjacka Banja, especially women, talked on November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1915, that the Russians entered Sofia, the English entered Constantinople, while the French recaptured Belgium and occupied Paracin, a town in Central Serbia, more than 500 kilometers far from Thessaloniki (Miodragovic 48). Stories of the fall of Constantinople continued even on November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1915, while rumor was spread that the Russians "were in Soko Banja" even on November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1915, (at that moment the Russian army was 1.000 kilometers far from Soko Banja) (50). Another news story from November 19, 1915, was that the French occupied Skopje and that they were soon expected in Nish. Two days later a rumor was spread that the Allied troops arrived to help and that the Austrians had to retreat (52). Hopes for the Alliance's help were biggest in Vrnjacka Banja on November 22, 1915, when people were talking about the Russians in the front of Sofia while its other wing arrived to Negotin in Serbia via Romania and that the Bulgarians left Nish; Skopje was kept by the Allies and "Italians reached the half of Bosnia and threatened to cut Austrians retreat from Serbia so that they had to leave in at least ten days"( 53). Of course all these news were not true at all.

An Austrian officer and writer under the name Roda Roda left clear observations about what he saw in Serbia in 1915 (his real name was Alexander/Sándor Friedrich Ladislaus Rosenfeld 1872-1945).<sup>16</sup> One of the greatest surprises and astonishments for him was the ignorance of the local population concerning the situation on the front. At the moment when Serbian forces were leaving the territory of their fatherland, the

<sup>15</sup> Миодраговић, Јован. *Трагични дани Србије. Белешке из злогласне трогодишње владавине Аустројугске у Србију 1915-1918*. Београд, 1921, 46. (Miodragovic, Jovan. *Tragic days of Serbia: Notes from notorious Austrian three year rule over Serbia 1915-1918*. Belgrade, 1921, p. 46).

<sup>16</sup> Рода Рода, "Из дневника о Чачку". *Чачак у прошлости: студије и путописи*. Чачак, 1995, 187-195. (Roda Roda, "From Diary of Cacak". *Cacak in the past: sketches and itineraries*, Cacak, 1995, p. 187-195).

civilians in Serbia were saying that “The Russians are marching across the Marne towards Sofia. Kraljevo (the neighbouring town from where I am just coming) is in Serbian hands. Belgrade, however, is in Russian hands. [...] That Bulgarians occupied Nish, Leskovac, Vranje, Gnjilane, Kacanik, and we occupied Krusevac... in a word, that [King] Milan’s Serbia mostly belongs to the Central Powers and a half of Macedonia to Bulgaria – the population here has no idea about it” (Roda Roda 191). In the end he soberly concluded that “this euphoria with the Allies” was not to last long (Roda Roda 191).

Other narrative sources for that period give mainly identical insight about the situation in Serbia in the eve of debacle of the Serbian army with a direct message about the expected hopes for help from outside:<sup>17</sup>

The Allies’ help is weak and late. We feared and yet hoped for it and believed in it. At all stations people waited for saviors from morning till night. Some groups of the French are in Nish. The news was clear: the first transport for the North front was sent. All houses were decorated then: it was not a festivity, it was hope. It was only an expression of hope that never disappeared. (Bartulica 46)

Bad news spread equally fast through the country, tending to be received with disbelief and refusal at the beginning. Perception of the front as hope for salvation of the country as well as personal salvation from horrors of defeat, slavery or imprisonment (which was the prevailing fear of most adult men in Serbia who were at home when the country was occupied) was constantly overpowered by other kind of the recognition of front: a phenomenon that threatened and warned at the same time.

That fear always precedes hope that comes after the victory as it happened during both Austro-Hungarian offensives in 1914. When in mid November 1914 the Serbian army retreated after the unsuccessful adventure in Bosnia, people in Serbia were being convinced that it had been done because of better strategic position for the encounter with the enemy (Marsicanin 104). When the very same army from Bosnia soon left its positions on the territory of Serbia (forced by the second Austro-Hungarian offensive of the general Potiorek), which were previously claimed “strategic,” people encouraged themselves that the move of the front line was indispensable because of the even better defense lines in the interior. However, the Austrian army soon overtook those positions and entered an important town of Valjevo. “Everybody was worried then. Hope in sufficient strength of our army to oppose the enemy started diminishing. The concentration of the army in the rear appeared to be a phrase meant to deceive people” (Marsicanin 105).

Whether all this was true or not – was unknown, but under the influence of other bad news from the battlefield, it was believed that fear was constantly growing in the town as well as among us - the refugees. And from then on gloomy days arrived, the days of various doubts and guessing, the real critical, difficult days. And in order to make even more difficult and unbearable, the convoys of refugees from

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<sup>17</sup> Bartulica, Milostislav. *Raspeće Srbije*. Zagreb, 1920. (Bartulica, Milostislav. *The Crucifixion of Serbia*. Zagreb, 1920).

departments of Podrinje, Valjevo, Uzice, started passing through, spreading rumors that froze people's blood.  
(Marsicanin 107)

Serbian government stuck to the rule during the war, that bad news from the front or foreign policy badly influenced the country's battle readiness. That is why all media was controlled and news censored. Similar procedure was in practice in nearly all other countries in war.<sup>18</sup> Controlled access to reliable information about the events on the front in 1914 did not have deep effects on civil population in Serbia due to victories achieved in August and December in 1914.

However, completely different were the consequences of concealing the real situation on the battlefield during the joined offensive of Central Powers in Serbia in October, 1915. The relaxed attitude that reigned in Serbia in the first nine months of 1915, due to absence of battles, made people to wait impatiently for the news from other fronts, believing that Austria-Hungary had no more forces for attack.<sup>19</sup> Not only that people did not know till the last moment what to hope for, but it was crucial for many of them. The memoirs (because such information are not to be found in official correspondence) show that people in Nish, in October 1915 did not know for days that Skopje was captured on October 19, 1915, by Bulgarians, although everybody expected the approach of the offensive from the North so as to escape to the South, namely to Skopje (Marsicanin 139). However, there was a certain proof for the population about the situation on battlefields and the seriousness of the things – the behavior and movement of government clerks, but only those who were in government's favor since the government decided to keep as top secret the movement of enemy army, as well as its own movement, in order not to threaten "State interest" (Maksimovic 29). It was not unnoticed that the ministers and the Prime Minister Pasic moved their belongings and family members to a safe place, towards Thessaloniki, before thinking of the state interest (Marsicanin 139). The arrival of the enemy in Serbia and establishment of occupation over the conquered territory confronted the civil population with the presence of the war front in their imminent surroundings, in living places, in front of their homes and families. Many towns in the interior faced the first manifestations of war and confrontation with the nearness of the front to the non-fighting population, through robbery and destruction of houses by the army, like other armies, was led by the ancient right of the victor (Maksimovic 46-47).

When completely (un)expectedly the Serbian front towards Bulgaria failed within ten days, the only retreat and runaway direction was towards the South, by the valley of the West Morava and the Ibar. The liberal Berliner paper "Vossische Zeitung" brought on November 20<sup>th</sup> the news that the population from the North of Serbia fled as far as the West Morava, only "to be captured by the enemy there."<sup>20</sup> At one moment the town of Kraljevo was the gathering place of Government and the Army headquarters, as well as innumerable refugees, soldiers and captives. After that followed painful retreat in the

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<sup>18</sup> 123HelpMe.com. "Social, Political and Economic Effects of WWI." 05 Dec 2007

<<http://www.123HelpMe.com/view.asp?id=23655>>; live-wirez.gu.edu.au. McCullum, Kerry, and Peter Putnis. "Press censorship and propaganda in World War I Australia: co-operation and conflict in press-government relations." 29 Nov 2007 <<http://live-wirez.gu.edu.au/jea.papers/McCallum%20and%20Putnis.doc>>

<sup>19</sup> Максимовић, Стеван. *Успомене из окупације*. Београд, 1919, 19. (Maksimovic, Stevan. *Memories from the occupation*. Belgrade, 1919, p. 19).

<sup>20</sup> *Наше патње и наше борбе*. Женева, 1917, IV. (*Our sufferings and struggles*. Geneve, 1917, p. IV).

winter of 1915-16 over Raska, Kosovo and Metohia, Albania and Montenegro that took many thousand hundreds of lives. It is interesting that the population of Serbia under occupation knew nearly nothing about this tragic withdrawal that was ended by transfer of the rest of Serbian army over the sea.<sup>21</sup> The new front on the North of Thessaloniki was vaguely seen like many other things that prevailed during the first months of occupation.

Newspapers did not exist either, except that we, rarely, got some issue of "Pester Lloyd" and "Neue Freie Presse" from Austrian soldiers, which did not have anything else but self-praise. Incessantly they boasted of their successes in Serbia, and for other fronts they usually said: "nothing new". We lived like in a prison. (Marsicanin 166-167)

The main sources of information for the civilian population in Serbia about the Thessaloniki front were Austrian publications (especially Pester Lloyd) and the very occupational armies in Serbia (Marsicanin 206-207). As it was already noticed: "The newspapers create good mood with their readers. Victories are in papers everywhere. The paper bears anything."<sup>22</sup> Only by the end of spring of 1916, rumor was spread among people that Serbian army, somewhere far in the South, enters the battle again which arose hopes for soon liberation.<sup>23</sup> Lack of expected victory on the Southern front, especially after the Allies' offensive stopping in autumn 1916 in Macedonia, again had a derisive effect on public opinion in Serbia. Before that many hopes were arisen among Serbs by the entrance of Romania into the war on the side of the Entente by the end of August 1916. In Serbia the population celebrated the news in September of that year that Romania, with its 500,000 soldiers attacked Austro-Hungary, women in town walked with colorful parasols in the streets in order to show their good mood in spite of the situation. People in Serbia thought that the Russian army would, after the rest from Brusilov offensive in summer 1916, come down from "the Carpathians into the Hungarian plain and join the Romanians near Budapest" (Lazarevic 47). Celebrations were, however, secret because public manifestations led into imprisonment to war camps of Hungary, as in case of the peasant Pavle Milosevic from Cacak<sup>24</sup>, and many more Serbian internees after the Romanian war declaration. But the quick defeat of the Romanians by the end of 1916, took away all hopes together with the passivity of the front in Macedonia.

It is interesting that one front in Serbia itself, formed at the outburst of the civilian uprising at the Bulgarian occupational zone of Serbia in March 1917 (known as Toplicki uprising), did not manage to raise the spirit of people in Serbia like the indirect news of the defeats of the Central Powers on European battlefields. Occupational armies managed to forcefully break the initiative of the poorly organized uprising while the occupational apparatus successfully prevented the news about this event. The regime of the Military-general-government in Belgrade admitted this event only in April when everything was

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<sup>21</sup> Captured Serbian soldiers transfer the rumors "how Serbian army all have capitulated, that Serbia is complete smashed, that Serbian King with Government fled to Italy etc." (Marsicanin, op. cit., p. 167).

<sup>22</sup> Обрадовић, Душан Н. *Србија и аустријски Словени у светском рату 1914-1918*, Нови Сад, 1928, 81. (Obrovic, Dusan N. *Serbia and Austrian Slavs in the World War 1914-1918*. Novi Sad, 1928, p. 81.

<sup>23</sup> Mitrovic, Andrej. Op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>24</sup> Archives of Serbia (Belgrade), VGG, XVII/134, N. 34850, 27 Nov. 1917.

already finished (Marsicanin 237). Much more important was the effect of the catastrophic defeat by Italians on the river Soca (Battle of Caporetto) in October 1917, or the news about the revolution in Russia and the possible Moscow's leaving war. The contemporaries marked those events as a catastrophe for the Entente, believing that it killed the last hope for a favorable outcome of war (Marsicanin 265).

However, the war ended favorably from the point of hopes and fears in Serbia, only faster than anybody expected in 1918.

By the end of September [1918] rumor was spread about battles on the Thessaloniki and Albanian front. First it was talked about great success of the Allied forces on that front and then about Bulgarians who did not want to wage war anymore. On October 1<sup>st</sup>, however, the "Pester Lloyd" wrote that Bulgaria really asked the Allied forces for the separate peace, and "Pesti Hirlap" confirmed that peace between Bulgaria and the mentioned Forces was already achieved. (Marsicanin 295)

The civilian population under Bulgarian occupation in the second half of September noticed Bulgarians' anxiety. It was firstly believed that it was due to a successful offensive of Marshal Foch on the West front. Some offensive in the South was overheard, but the certainty of the news was not believed (Maksimovic 104). After Bulgaria asked for peace on September 29, 1918, everything was in favor of the Entente on the Balkans. The atmosphere among Austro-Hungarian officers and soldiers was best described by the event from October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1918 in the town of Trstenik where the officers got so drunk, delighted by the false news of the general peace on all fronts, so that "they rolled on the ground" (Marsicanin 296). The population of Serbia felt in another way the approach of the Southern front that they were expecting for three years. As the news of the Serbian approach spread, a merciless robbery increased by the Austrian army from all structures and for most various interests. The knowledge of the imminent freedom raised among peasants, artisans, citizens refusal to pay taxes for occupational system which forced the very system to general robbery of all goods (Lazarevic 50). That was essentially the last episode of war for the population of Serbia before the formal end of hostility in the early November 1918.

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