

## THE SERBIAN ARMY IN 1914: TRADITION, RELIGION AND MORAL

### *State, Nation and Religion*

There is an assessment dominating in Serbian historiography which says that the period from 1903 to 1914 represents “the golden age” of Serbian democracy.<sup>1</sup> We can conclude that the army in such conditions could materially and morally become stronger and turn into one of the most respected institutions in the Kingdom of Serbia. Such an army was able to gain great victories during the Balkan Wars and in 1914. The Serbian Army was an important part of a complex internal political life, too.<sup>2</sup> In order to understand national identity, tradition and moral in the Serbian Army during the First World War and especially in 1914, we need to introduce the following facts. In the summer of 1914 the Serbian state’s territory consisted of two clearly separate entities: the territory before the Balkan Wars (around 54 000 square kilometres with more than 3 million inhabitants) and the territory which was acquired in the Balkan Wars (around 33,000 square kilometres and 1.5 million inhabitants).<sup>3</sup> For our analysis it is important to know that those two entities had not merged either economically or culturally and they differed totally in national composition. The Serbian state territory before the Balkan Wars was homogeneous with Serbian as the dominant nation and with the majority of Christian Orthodoxy. The newly-acquired territories were also populated by Macedonians, Albanians and Turks, many of whom were Muslims. When Serbia was attacked by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a state inhabited by a large number of persons whose ethnic origin was identical with or similar to that of the Serbs, and this atmosphere provided the psychological basis for resistance. National unity and high morale enabled the Serbian Army to be ready to defend national freedom and independence. The Serbs in Serbia numbered between 3 and 3.5 million. At the same time, there were some 2 million Serbs and about other 5 million South Slavs living in Austro-Hungarian Empire. This situation urged the Serbian government in December 1914 to announce the creation of a common Yugoslav state as one of the war aims.

### *The Serbian Army in 1914*

The last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were spent in an effort to implement the reform of the Serbian Army. The bases of a modern army were set in 1883 and new formation was passed.<sup>4</sup> The Serbian Army was made up

<sup>1</sup> Ekmečić 1988.; Zelenika 1962.; Mitrović 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Vishnyakov 1989. pp. 219–234.

<sup>3</sup> Jagodić 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Ratković-Kostić 2007. pp. 93–229.

of three line units, composed of men between the age of 20 and 45, and the so-called Last Defence troops (composed of veterans). After the Balkan Wars, the Serbian General Staff did not change the War Plan that had been set in 1908 as a result of the Bosnian Annexation Crisis of 1908–1909.<sup>5</sup> In July of 1914, Serbia was not ready for the war with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The war started at the worst possible time when Serbia faced internal political and economic crisis. The political struggle between civilian and military authorities lasted until 10 June 1914 when the government resigned.<sup>6</sup> The Serbian Army was exhausted during the Balkan Wars and most of the equipment and arms were useless. The financial situation in Serbia was difficult and the army felt the lack of clothing, camp equipment and artillery ammunition. The infantry lacked about 120,000 (30%) of modern rifles with ammunition, and even some first line units were not fully equipped. Army equipment and arms had not been purchased since 1912. The situation did not improve, despite the fact that the National Assembly approved a loan of 100 million dinars for weapons and other equipment in the second half of June 1914. During the Balkan Wars, over 21,000 people have been killed and more than 22,000 were seriously disabled. Due to the lack of time for reorganization, the Serbian Army entered the First World War mainly with an army formation from the Balkan Wars. The Serbian air force expanded from two planes in October 1912 to twelve over the end of the First Balkan War.<sup>7</sup>

The mobilization of the Serbian Army was released in the evening of 25 July, after the Austro-Hungarian envoy left Belgrade and when it was clear that war was inevitable.<sup>8</sup> The first day of mobilization was 26 July and mobilization lasted until 30 July. The concentration of the army was made from 31 July and the army was fully ready to fight by 10 August. By September 1914 Serbia has mobilized a total of 423,441 soldiers.<sup>9</sup> During the Battle of Kolubara in November 1914, the Serbian Army had a total number of 253,884 soldiers and 426 artillery guns on frontline.<sup>10</sup>

For the Serbian nation, the First World War represents a memory of great battles and the alliance between Serbia and the Entente Powers. In spite of material difficulties, army war experience, and confidence obtained in the Balkan Wars, the Serbian Army managed to achieve great victories at the start of the First World War. There were two great battles in 1914 which are particularly important for Serbian military tradition: the Battle of Cer 16–19 August 1914, bringing the first victory of the Allies, and the Battle of Kolubara, 16 November–15 December 1914, when the Serbian Army defeated the stronger enemy forces. After the Battle of Kolubara the Serbian government formally proclaimed its war aim of wanting to create a Yugoslav state “on the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire”.<sup>11</sup> 16 November 1914, the day when Kolubara Battle started, is celebrated today in the Serbian Armed Forces as an Army Day (one of two Serbian Armed Forces Arms) and Infantry Branch Day.

<sup>5</sup> *Opačić* 1985.

<sup>6</sup> *Vishnyakov* 2013. pp. 219–234.

<sup>7</sup> *Milićević* 2014. pp. 13–26.

<sup>8</sup> *Mitrović* 2007. p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Mitrović* 2007.

<sup>10</sup> *Skoko* 1992. pp. 243–256.

<sup>11</sup> *Opačić* 1985.

*What kind of an army? (Tradition and Moral)*

The army system has its own characteristics and its line of development and transformation, but it does not work out of space and time and does not live for itself. Having that fact in mind, it is reasonable and only possible to observe the changes in the traditions of the Serbian Army through the lens of the changes in Serbian society. In order to understand the characteristics of the Serbian Army in the year 1914, we are going to analyse the direction and the influence that tradition, religion and moral gave to Serbian soldiers. “Tradition” and “traditional” are expressions that explain a certain way of behaviour and thinking acceptable within one or several generations for people of one country or one branch.<sup>12</sup> Military tradition is like any other tradition, but especially connected with national identity and moral. Military tradition affects the behaviour of soldiers and it has a specific influence on their moral and ethical views. Therefore, religious tradition is important and it has a specific role in the Serbian military tradition. Serbian military tradition is important as a part of national identity. The Serbian Army tradition can be tracked with certain parameters through which we can monitor the changes in tradition through time (festivals and celebrations, features and appearance of the army uniforms, social position of the army and officers, the role of the clergy). The tradition of the Serbian Army till 1914 can be viewed as a tradition through changes that had occurred within the military over time, regardless of the developments in state and society. Serbia has a military tradition with roots back to the Serbian medieval state when the Orthodox form of Christianity became the main source of all values. Different historical circumstances and factors influenced the creation of the military tradition in Serbia: Byzantine Orthodox Traditions; Kosovo Myth – St. Vitus’ Day and Kosovo battle of 1389.

The Liberation Wars are an important part of the Serbian tradition: the First Serbian Uprising against the Ottoman Empire in 1804, the Second Serbian Uprising in 1815, the Serbian–Turkish War in 1876–1878; the influence of different military traditions of other states (Ottoman Empire, Prussia, France, Austro-Hungarian Empire and Russian Empire). Back to the Battle of Kosovo, the task of the Serbian Army was to defend the state, national independence and Christian faith, believing that it was defending the system that God has created. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Kosovo Myth spread with the national liberation movement and the war against the Ottoman Empire. The Liberation Wars are important part of the Serbian tradition.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout Serbian history, the army has never been seen as an institution which should exist on its own and should only respond to possible security threats, and then disappear until needed again. Traditionally, the army has been a significant part of society. There was no aristocracy in Serbia and the army was not a privilege of the aristocracy, and military professionalism did not develop from the aristocracy but from the people. A good example of the permeation of military and national traditions is represented by the military headgear *sajkach*, originally a headgear of the Serbs from the flotilla of the Habsburg Monarchy and which became a Serbian Army headgear during the wars against

<sup>12</sup> *Shils* 1971. p. 123.; *Glassie* 1995. pp. 395–412.

<sup>13</sup> *Vujačić* 1996. p. 774.

the Ottoman Empire in 1876–1878. Sajakcha soon became a Serbian national symbol and an element of the national costume.

There is a long tradition of military service in Serbia. Standing army was established in 1808, during the First Serbian Uprising against the Ottoman Empire. The first army formation was based on the Austrian army model. The first army recruitment was organized in the end of February 1825. In 1845, the first “Recruitment Rule” was published. From the moment of the introduction of mandatory military service, the most important event in the life of a young Serb was serving the army. Serbia introduced compulsory military service and modern military formation based on the territorial principle in 1883. Due to economic reasons, Serbia couldn’t support large numbers of soldiers. Mandatory military service lasted for 18 months and at the same time, more than half of the soldiers served shortened military service of 8 months. That is why the Kingdom of Serbia had a small peacetime army of about 30,000 people, but around the outbreak of the war it was able to achieve even ten times larger numbers of soldiers. Corresponding the numbers, the Serbian Army’s officer corps was small but well-educated. Serbian officers were educated at the Military Academy in Belgrade since 1850, but also in Germany, Austria–Hungary, Russia, Italy and France. Military officers belonged to upper class of Serbian society and the social and political role of the increasing number of officers became more and more important.

Morale is sensitive category and it is always interesting to examine the moral of an army at war. In the Serbian Army strengthening and maintaining the combat morale were under the jurisdiction of the Supreme Command and unit commanders. According to the military law, Serbian officers were allowed to kill soldiers who did not obey or tried to run away during the battle – and this was the case in almost every modern army. The Yugoslav military journals published after the First World War represent valuable sources for understanding the moral of Serbian soldiers. The soldiers were described as honest, tenacious, and persistent men, with serious terms of their duty as defenders of the country. In their memoirs, Serbian veterans emphasized that strong moral and deep national consciousness were the basis for victory and facing the suffering during the First World War.<sup>14</sup> According to their experience, the main quality of the Serbian Army was discipline, physical training and moral nurture.<sup>15</sup> The moral of the army came from the nation, while the national moral power stems from its collective historical memory. The officers’ role in strengthening combat morale is also stressed. The officers were ordinary people and were not a particular caste or of noble origin. They fought on the frontline together with other soldiers and they had a positive effect on the soldiers with their knowledge and personal example. It is particularly important to note that during the Balkan Wars five regiment commanders were killed (Col. Aleksandar Glišić, Col. Voja Velimirović, Col. Ilija Radivojević, Col. Radomir Arandelović and Col. Milivoj Stojanović).<sup>16</sup> According to the Rules of Service, an officer was defined as a person responsible for developing the moral strength of soldiers.

<sup>14</sup> Jovanović 1923. p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> Pavlović 1926. pp. 73–79.

<sup>16</sup> Jovanović 1923. p. 30.

One of the important elements of the military tradition in Serbia is the religious tradition. Being a Serb meant implicitly being an Orthodox for many years. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, religion was the basis of moral in Serbian society and in the Serbian Army as well. The Orthodox form of Christianity eventually became the main source of all values.<sup>17</sup> Despite the officer's authority, the military chaplain was also responsible for the morale in the unit. The tradition of army chaplains and the organization of religious life in the Serbian Army is linked to 1839 when the Organization of the Army was published in May, allowing the presence of a military priest in supreme military headquarters, and then in October, the Military Law was passed, in which the conduct of religious services in the Serbian Army was institutionalized for the first time.<sup>18</sup> In the following years different laws and regulations were adopted which regulated different segments of the religious service in the army. Military priests were government officials proposed by the military minister and appointed by the King's decree. In the Kingdom of Serbia, the king was the protector of all recognized religions in the country and the constitution guaranteed the right of a free exercise of religious rites and organization based on religious canons. Army chaplains served during the celebrations of national and religious festivals and during the celebrations of the infantry and cavalry regiment's patron saint. There were 192 chaplains out of 404,020 conscripted members of the Serbian Army at the beginning of World War I, in July 1914.<sup>19</sup> During the World War I, army chaplains of Orthodox, Islamic and Jewish confessions were involved in the Serbian Army in different tasks. The duty in which the chaplains were most engaged was working in the Serbian and allied military hospitals.<sup>20</sup> Funeral and memorial service was also one of the duties of an army chaplain. Divisional chaplains drew up the curriculum for the moral education of soldiers.

Education in the barracks was essential for the Serbian Army's moral strength.<sup>21</sup> During the 19<sup>th</sup> century religious education was obligatory for Serbian officers and soldiers. During the Balkan Wars and World War I religious education was maintained through moral lessons by army chaplains and was obligatory for all army members. In these conditions, religious education came to full significance. Priests talking about national tradition, heroic examples from the past and the feeling of national pride, succeeded in revitalising the soldiers' strength in many cases.

The important elements of military tradition, such military oath and military flag, were defined in the Serbian Army's Rules of Service as the most sacred things, inseparable from religious feelings. The oath is defined as the highest and most solemn commitment in the name of the Lord, and the flag as the most sacred, "bestowed by the king, and consecrated by God", to which the soldier swears that he will never abandon and betray it.

The important element of moral and also for preservation of military tradition in the Serbian Army was the decision made on 14 January 1888 when the celebration of the significant dates in the history of the unit was introduced.<sup>22</sup> All the commands in the

<sup>17</sup> Jevtić 2001, p. 96.

<sup>18</sup> Milkić 2003, pp. 168–184.

<sup>19</sup> Milkić 2011, p. 119.

<sup>20</sup> Milkić 2012, pp. 85–97.

<sup>21</sup> Bulovan 1924, pp. 94–100.

<sup>22</sup> Миљан 2009a, pp. 57–65.; Milkić 2011, pp. 118–125.

infantry and cavalry, who had their flag, got their celebration day as well as the artillery regiments, brigades and battalions, and the engineering battalions and independent half-battalions, the Military Academy and other military schools, military arsenals and military armoury. The unit was supposed to take some significant date from its past for its festival (the establishment day, special emphasis on a battle day, etc.), or the day of some Serbian Christian saint. Through the celebration of significant dates, the Orthodox spirit and a sense of belonging to the national community was maintained in war situations during the First World War. Celebrating ceremonies and religious festivals gave a sense of belonging to the state and religion and its importance was primarily moral. The Supreme Commander of the Serbian Army, Crown Prince Alexander Karađorđević, celebrated Christmas on 25<sup>th</sup> December 1914, expressing his gratitude that God gave his blessing to the Serbian arms.

During World War I, celebrating military festivals were important in raising morale. Besides the celebration of military festivals, national and religious festivals were also significant for the morale.<sup>23</sup> The festivals of Islamic and Jewish confessions in the Serbian Army were celebrated every war year according to the rules of the respective religion and in a way prescribed by military regulations. During the days of national and religious holidays, special meals were prepared in the army. During the holidays, even in wartime, quality meals had to be provided. The soldiers were the protectors of national culture and traditions.<sup>24</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The Serbian Army had a very high morale during the Balkan Wars, primarily due to the moral force of the nation and the younger officers. This moral still existed at the beginning of the First World War. The connection between the national and military traditions, then the ideas of liberation and also the creation of a common Yugoslav state affected the morale of the Serbian Army in 1914. Thus the lack of military equipment was compensated in the first year of the war. But for the next year the moral force could not be a decisive factor and the joint attack of Austria-Hungary, Germany and Bulgaria forced Serbian troops to withdraw from Serbia.

<sup>23</sup> *Milkić* 2008. pp. 7–20.

<sup>24</sup> *Milkić* 2009b. pp. 51–66.

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*Miljan Milkić*

#### A SZERB HADSEREG 1914-BEN: HAGYOMÁNY, VALLÁS, ERKÖLC

##### *Rezümé*

A tanulmány bemutatja, milyen szerepet játszottak a hagyományok, a vallás és a morál a szerb hadseregben 1914-ben, az első világháború kitörésekor. A szerző megállapítja, hogy a szerb hadsereg magas morálja, amelyet a nemzeti és katonai hagyományok, valamint a közös jugoszláv állam létrehozásának célja alakítottak, 1914-ben még kompenzálni tudták a hadsereg hiányosságait.

A szerb hadsereg és tagjai a katonai és vallási hagyományokon, valamint a nemzeti érzelmeken keresztül azonosították önmagukat, és a szerb katonai hagyomány fontos része volt a nemzeti identitásnak. A szerző bemutatja a hadseregben szolgáló, a katonának vallási tanításokat és morális értékeket közvetítő papok szerepének történelmi háttérét és főbb jellemzőit. A tanulmány hangsúlyozza a morál, a vallási ünnepek és a történelmi megemlékezések fontosságát, amelyek mind hozzájárultak a szerb tisztek és katonák kitartásához az első világháborúban.

*Miljan Milkić*

#### DIE SERBISCHE ARMEE IM JAHR 1914: TRADITION, RELIGION UND MORAL

##### *Resümee*

Die Studie stellt vor, welche Rolle die Traditionen, Religion und Moral im Jahr 1914, beim Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkriegs, in der serbischen Armee spielten. Der Verfasser stellt fest, dass die starke Moral der serbischen Armee, die von den nationalen und Militärtraditionen sowie den Zielen der Schaffung eines gemeinsamen jugoslawischen Staates geformt wurden, im Jahr 1914 noch die Mängel der Armee kompensieren konnte.

Die serbische Armee und ihre Mitglieder identifizierten sich selbst über die Militär- und religiösen Traditionen sowie die Nationalgefühle, und die serbische Militärtradition

war ein wichtiger Teil der nationalen Identität. Der Verfasser stellt den historischen Hintergrund und die wichtigsten Charakteristika der Rolle der Geistlichen vor, die in der Armee dienten und den Soldaten religiöse Lehren und moralische Werte vermittelten. Die Studie betont die Wichtigkeit der Moral, der religiösen Feste und des historischen Gedenkens, die allesamt zur Ausdauer der serbischen Offiziere und Soldaten im Ersten Weltkrieg beitrugen.

*Miljan Milkić*

#### L'ARMÉE SERBE EN 1914 : TRADITION, RELIGION ET MORALE

##### *Résumé*

L'étude présente le rôle des traditions, de la religion et de la morale dans l'armée serbe en 1914, au moment du déclenchement de la Première Guerre mondiale. L'auteur constate qu'en 1914, la morale solide de l'armée serbe, nourrie par les traditions nationales et militaires et l'ambition de créer l'État yougoslave, était encore capable de compenser les insuffisances de l'armée.

L'armée serbe et ses soldats s'identifiaient à travers les traditions militaires et religieuses et les sentiments nationaux. La tradition militaire serbe faisait partie intégrante de l'identité nationale. L'auteur présente le contexte historique et les caractéristiques principales du rôle des prêtres qui servaient dans l'armée et qui transmettaient aux soldats des enseignements religieux et des valeurs morales. L'étude insiste sur l'importance de la morale, des fêtes religieuses et des commémorations historiques qui ont toutes contribué à la résistance des officiers et des soldats serbes dans la Première Guerre mondiale.

*Мильян Милкич*

#### СЕРБСКАЯ АРМИЯ В 1914-ОМ ГОДУ: ТРАДИЦИЯ, РЕЛИГИЯ, МОРАЛЬ

##### *Резюме*

Исследование показывает какую роль играли традиции, религия и мораль в сербской армии в 1914-ом году, во время вспышки Первой Мировой войны. Автор приходит к выводу, что высокая мораль сербской армии, которую формировали национальные и военные традиции, так же как и цель создания единого югославского государства, в 1914 году способны были ещё компенсировать недостатки армии. Члены сербской армии отождествляли себя с военными и религиозными традициями а также с национальными чувствами и сербская военная традиция занимала важную часть национальной идентичности. Автор представляет исторический фон и основные черты роли священников, служивших в армии и проповедующих солдатам религиозные учения и моральные ценности. В исследовании подчеркивается важность морали, религиозных праздников и значение исторических воспоминаний, все из которых внесли свой вклад, в стойкости сербских офицеров и солдат Первой мировой войны.