

The Rediscovery of the Serbian Great War Veterans in Socialist Yugoslavia (1970-1989). The Case of Momčilo Gavrić, the Boy Soldier

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Abstract:

The article puts in its focus the reappearance of the Serbian Great War veterans during the two last decades of the existence of socialist Yugoslavia. It has been argued that the public's demand for more and more stories from the first hand was propelled by a number of reasons including lack of previous systematic dealing with the war and its consequences. In addition, the need to strengthen the Serbian national identity also played an important role in this process. As an illustrative case study of these phenomena, the fate of the famous boy soldier of the Serbian army, Momčilo Gavrić, has been reconstructed and analyzed. Ultimately, the popularity of the old former warriors had a number of consequences for the Serbian and Yugoslav society. One of the most important was that oral history began to be perceived in the eyes of the public as a much more trustworthy discipline than was the case with the works of professional historians.

Keywords: Serbia, Yugoslavia, Momčilo Gavrić, First World War, Veterans

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Introduction

On the morning of 30 April 1993, a military funeral took place at the Belgrade's New Cemetery. The name of the departed was Momčilo Gavrić.¹ He died at the age of 87. He was no 1941 partisan hero nor a senior retired general of the Yugoslav People's Army. In fact, he was a Serbian boy soldier from the days of the Great War. Since the interwar years, this was the first veteran of the 1914-1918 war who had received military funeral honors. However, Gavrić was for most of his life an anonymous figure. He became a prominent veteran only at the very end of his life. Gavrić's rise to fame was part of a wider phenomenon – the public's rediscovery of Serbia's First World War. Within this process the remaining veterans of the Serbian army, the so called 'Salonika men' such as Momčilo Gavrić, (serb. Solunci) played essential and multiple roles.

With their wobbly and shaky voices, wearing their numerous decorations and many of them appearing in the elements of the traditional Serbian folk costumes, these men deeply affected the Serbian public of the 1970s and 1980s. It is worth here explaining the term 'Salonika'. Namely, in late 1915 when Serbia was overwhelmed by the invading enemy forces – the bulk of the troops, some 150 000 soldiers, managed to reach Greece and to subsequently continue their struggle, together with the Entente troops, at the newly established Salonika front. Consequently, the term 'Salonika men' implied much more powerful symbolism that was the case with the usual wording like 'veteran' or 'former warrior'. In the essence, the term 'Salonika men' implied that these men did not desert nor did they surrender as many others did during the ruinous retreat of 1915.

The fate of the remaining Serbian veterans reflected the wider societal attitudes within Yugoslavia concerning the traditions of the First World War. These men were utterly forgotten by the state after 1945 and their status barely changed until the 1970s. However, things begun to drastically change during the last two decades of Yugoslavia's existence. During the 1970s and especially in the 1980s the 'Salonika men' finally managed to reassert their position as respectable and praise worthy individuals. Their prestige was even, if not greater, to the one they had once experienced in the interwar years. During the 1970s and 1980s several processes became interlinked. Firstly, Serbia's rediscovery of the First World War was gaining momentum at the beginning of the 1970s. A genuine curiosity was propelling this phenomenon as the dramatic 1914-1918 period definitely presented one of the most dramatic episodes of the national past. The

¹ Branislav Goldner, *Momčilo Gavrić: Najmladi kaplar na svetu* (Beograd: Partenon, 2013), 186.

importance of this period for Serbia's self-image can hardly be overestimated. However, this war was under researched and underestimated in the official commemorative culture.

Moreover, the 1914-1918 period gained the status of a 'forbidden fruit' in Yugoslav Communism. Also, the public became weary and saturated with the complete dominance of the Second World War narrative in the public life. These characteristics also coincided with what Professor Jasna Dragovic Soso called the "outburst of history" which struck the entire Yugoslavia but especially Serbia.² Ultimately, the links between the revival of the Serbian nationalism and the Great War were very close ones.

The 'Salonika men' were vital for each of these processes. The authority and the immediacy of a witness was a commodity which could hardly be replaced or compensated any other way. Along the way these men were finally properly honored by the state representatives and other social subjects, but the veterans were also manipulated and were used in undermining socialist Yugoslavia as well as propelling Milošević's Serbia of the early 1990s. Furthermore, in the course of this process, the 'Salonika warriors' became the proper 'stars' who were able to position themselves as the highest authorities for the general public's interpretations of the 1914-1918 war.

The Great War in Socialist Times

After 1945, the communist guerillas replaced the iconic image which was cherished in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia: the Serbian Salonika 1918 soldier, usually depicted in a victorious posture holding his rifle and wearing his steel French 'Adrian' helmet. As the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) saw the resolving of the national question as one of its main tasks, the role of the Serbian nationalism was treated with great attention. As the Serbs were the most numerous nations within the state their nationalism was seen as potentially the most dangerous problem in this respect.³ Consequently, the new authorities developed a very complex relationship with the Serbian pre-1945 traditions, especially with the 1912-1918 'liberation' wars. For example, some associations which cherished the glory of the Serbian army were simply dissolved and banned. Others however were kept. For example, the most powerful Yugoslav veteran's pre-1941 network, the *Volunteer Federation*, (Serbian: Savez dobrovoljaca)

² Jasna Dragović Soso, *Saviours of the Nation: Serbia's Intellectual Opposition and the Revival of Nationalism* (London: Hurst and Company, 2002), 64.

³ Dejan Jović, *Yugoslavia: A State that Withered Away* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2009), 10.

was declared illegal in 1947. The court stated that their activities were “not in accordance with aspirations of the people of the Federal Democratic Republic of Yugoslavia”.⁴ Besides, in the Second World War, some of the key members of this organization openly expressed their anti-communist views. However, the true animosity of the socialist leadership was reserved for the Karadjordjević dynasty. For example, more than 200 monuments honoring this dynasty were destroyed all over Yugoslavia after 1945.⁵

Indeed, there were examples of a much more relaxed approach. For example, the veterans of the regular Serbian 1914-1918 army were seen ideologically less dangerous than the Serbian volunteers. Namely, if the volunteers were seen as overzealous Serbian nationalists, the regular 1914 Serbian servicemen were treated as men ‘who simply did their job’ - defending the country from a foreign invasion. Consequently, the pre-war *Society of the Albanian Commemorative Certificate* was allowed to function as before. This society was established as late as 1938 in order to cherish the memory of the Great Serbian Retreat of 1915/1916.⁶ As already mentioned, this historical event brought some 150,000 Serbian soldiers into the exile. The retreat took place in freezing temperature and across the inhospitable mountainous terrain in Montenegro and Albania. The service men who took part in this retreat were saw themselves as the most loyal citizens as they followed their commanders even beyond the state borders. As the pick of their hardships came in Albania the entire retreat of 1915/1916 became known as ‘the Albanian Golgotha’ in the Serbian tradition.

After the war, the veterans who participated in the retreat were issued a special document: the *Albanian Certificate*. This piece of paper symbolized the state’s gratitude for the soldier’s extraordinary services in the winter of 1915/1916.

Ultimately, finding the ‘appropriate’ level of 1912–1918 traditions in the Yugoslav public discourse proved to be very difficult for the new authorities. The 50th anniversary of the war’s outbreak presented a formidable test in this respect. The rediscovery of the First World War became a wider European trend starting in the 1960s, just around the 50th

⁴ Momčilo Pavlović, “Zabrana rada Saveza dobrovoljaca oslobodilačkih ratova (1912-1918) 1947. godine,” in *Dobrovoljci u oslobodilačkim ratovima Srba i Crnogoraca: Zbornik radova sa naučnog skupa održanog u Kikindi 11. i 12. aprila 1996*, ed. Petar Kačavenda (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1996/Kikinda: Udruženje ratnih dobrovoljaca 1912-1918 njihovih potomaka i poštovalaca), 395-405, here pp. 03.

⁵ Uglješa Rajčević, *Zatirano i zatrto: Oskrovljeni i uništeni srpski spomenici na tlu prethodne Jugoslavije* (Novi Sad: Prometej, 2001), 15.

⁶ Danilo Šarenac, *Top, vojnik i sećanje: Provi svetski rat i Srbija 1914-2009* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2014), 153-73.

anniversary of the war's outbreak.⁷ In 1964, Žika Mitrović, already a distinguished Yugoslav film director, decided to make a movie about the first Serbian and, at the same time, the first Allied victory in the war (the Cer battle). The film was entitled *The Drina March* (Serbian: Marš na Drinu). From the start, the project was linked with controversies. The director was worrying will his project be censored or completely canceled. On the other hand, the officials feared that this movie might boost Serbian national feelings beyond any acceptable limit. This tension was reflected in the fact that the state provided very limited logistical support. This was in stark contrast to 'partisan films' which could rely not only on lavish support of the Yugoslav National Army in terms of equipment and extras but could also count on full scale assistance by the state. For example, just five years after Mitrović made his movie another partisan movie spectacle was made. This was *the Battle of Neretva* where foreign star such as Yul Brynner and Orson Welles were hired with the full state support.

In contrast, Žika Mitrović was provided the extras for the battle scenes from the local army garrison only for two days a week, so he had to hurry up and make the entire movie in just one month. Ultimately, *The Drina March* won the audience's award at the most prestigious Yugoslav Pula film festival in 1964.⁸ Furthermore, it became the hallmark patriotic movie shown as part of the education of the recruits of the Yugoslav People's Army. Even today, it remains the most respected Serbian war movie and has evolved into a specific cultural phenomenon.

However, the television and the press were mostly closed for the content dedicated to the Great War. The most dominant way 'the 1914-1918' was still kept alive in the public sphere were books. The market was overwhelmed with partisan literature, diaries and recollections. However, the public was still waiting its *big novel* about the Great War. While waiting for the novel and historical synthesis, a very peculiar new type of literature emerged -the commemorative volumes. These were the collections of testimonies made by the remaining veterans. The first such book appeared in 1968. It was published by the *Society of the Albanian Certificate*. Entitled *Through Albania* this was the collection of oral testimonies focusing on the famous Serbian retreat.⁹ It is worth mentioning that this organization was led by some of Belgrade's finest academics and well-respected citizens who made the driving force of this organization. This fact certainly had a

⁷ Jay Winter, "Historiography 1918-Today," in *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War* ed. Ute Daniel et al. (Berlin 2014-11-11: issued by Freie Universität Berlin, 2014), 1-17. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10498.

⁸ Šarenac, *Top, vojnik i sećanje: Provi svetski rat i Srbija 1914-2009*, 245-47.

⁹ *Kroz Albaniju: 1915-1916. Spomen knjiga*, ed. Kosta Todorović (Beograd: Prosveta, 1968).

positive impact on communist authorities when discussing the future fate of this society. However, these men were doctors, architects, pharmacists and artists, not historians.

In 1971, another volume was published by the same organization: *The Golgotha and Resurrection of Serbia 1916-1918*.¹⁰ The phrasing *Golgotha and Resurrection* was the trope used in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia when referring to the 1915/1916 retreat. Imbued with religious connotations the title must have sounded strange in a deeply socialist context of the early 1970s. This edition was followed by another book with a similar Christian inspired title: *The Thorny Road of Serbia*, published in 1974.¹¹ All of these books were luxurious A5 volumes with illustrations and editorial notes made by the famous Yugoslav doctor and a Serbian veteran, Kosta Todorović. Todorović underlined what he saw as the key qualities of these collections: “plainness and authenticity” when describing war.¹² It is important to stress that these books were no samizdat editions but were published by major state publishers.

Besides stressing bluntness and genuineness, the aforementioned volumes brought other novelties as well. This was the focus on an ordinary soldier. Such an approach was in sharp contrast with the interwar literature where the former officers dominated the marked publishing their own books and testimonies. This shift of the 1970s seemed to be acceptable for the communist officials. This shift in focus fitted well into the general interpretation of the 1914-1918 war -a just and defensive struggle of the ordinary Serbian citizens.

In the meantime, the country suffered from political turbulence. In many respects, this was part of the global developments of 1968. Tensions increased in Kosovo and the status of the Serbian minority became the debated and divisive issue. Two members of the Party’s leadership, Dobrica Ćosić and Jovan Marjanović, were excluded from the Party due to their opposition to the official policy regarding the Kosovo crisis.¹³ It is worth noting that both men were very much interested in history. Jovan Marjanović was a distinguished Yugoslav historian while Ćosić was

¹⁰ *Golgota i vaskrs Srbije 1916-1918*, ed. Kosta Todorović (Beograd: BIGZ, 1971).

¹¹ *Trnovit put Srbije 1914-1918*, ed. Aleksandar Deroko, Kosta Todorović and Milorad Petrović (Beograd: BIGZ, 1974).

¹² Kosta P. Todorović, “Uvodna reč o spomen knjizi *Trnovit put Srbije, 1914-1918*,” in *Trnovit put Srbije, 1914-1918*, ed. Kosta Todorović (Beograd: BIGZ, 1974), 10.

¹³ Jović, *Yugoslavia: A State that Withered Away*, 115-18.

already a well-known writer. It was the latter who will dramatically challenge the official stance about Serbia's Great War.

In 1972 Dobrica Ćosić finished his novel entitled *A Time of Death*. This became only the first out of four sequels. These books marked the entire decade. The second part was published in 1973 and a new one in 1976. The final chapter was published in 1979.¹⁴ The plot followed the fate of the Serbian peasant family during the Great War and it ended at the shores of the Albanian coastline in early 1916. These novels became immensely popular and were continuously republished with massive circulation. Ćosić later explained the evolution of his interest in the First World War and in many respects, his story was emblematic for the entire communist nomenclature. He said that he got interested in the Great War while still a senior communist official. "As a young writer and a man belonging to the ideology, I nourished a very unjust perception of the Great War. I have also used to pronounce the term *Salonika profits* (Serbian: solunastvo) in a very negative connotation".¹⁵

However, he began the work on his novel already in 1954-1955. Interestingly, he argued that his motivation was to deal with "the deeply tragic theme of human suffering".¹⁶ However, due to his clash with the fellow communists over the fate of the Kosovo Serbs, Ćosić's interest evidently evolved. He became the man 'who opened the Serbian question within Yugoslavia'. This 'question' implied the renegotiations of the Serbs position within Yugoslavia. Consequently, Ćosić's novel was by the late 1970s read less as a universal quest for knowledge and more as part of the Serbian peculiar quest for the lost roots and neglected national identity. The fact that the Yugoslav crisis was gaining momentum only strengthened such interpretation. Namely, the period from 1968 until 1971 was marked by an intense internal crisis and ended up with the new state arrangement with emphasis on federal organization.¹⁷ If numerous European countries were heading towards post-national commemorations of the Great War, in Yugoslavia the dynamics was quite the opposite.

By mid-1970 the publishing activity of the *Society of the Albanian Commemorative Certificate* had ceased as the key protagonists of the society departed. However, the model they installed had been taken over by other

¹⁴ Dobrica Ćosić, *Vreme smrti*, vol. I-IV (Beograd: Prosveta, 1972-1979).

¹⁵ Slavoljub Đukić, *Čovek u svom vremenu: Razgovori sa Dobricom Ćosićem* (Beograd: Filip Višnjić, 1989), 330.

¹⁶ Đukić, *Čovek u svom vremenu: Razgovori sa Dobricom Ćosićem*, 330.

¹⁷ Branko Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije, 1918-1989*, vol. 3: Socijalistička Jugoslavija, 1945-1988 (Beograd: Nolit, 1988), 402.

publishers. The edited collections of oral accounts continued to appear in the bookshops. There were two volumes entitled *The Golgotha and the Resurrection of Serbia* published in 1986.¹⁸ Though they had the same title as the books from the 1970s these were not reprints but volumes with new, previously unpublished testimonies. The editors, Silvija Djurić and Vidosav Stevanović, were journalists and writers. All over Serbia 'Salonika men' were interviewed by local journalists.¹⁹ As seen before, the collections brought raw, immediate, and compelling materials from the war.

The presence of the oral testimonies in the public sphere was lifted to a new degree in 1979. The short, colorful, and highly emotional stories from the Salonika front began to appear regularly in the weekly and daily press. Nothing like this ever happened in socialist Yugoslavia, Antonije Djurić, journalist of the popular *Politika Express* paper wrote a feuilleton about the surviving 'Salonika men'. This was a great success and he decided to edit his articles and collected in a special volume. In 1979 his book was published, entitled *the Salonika Men Speak. This is How it Was*. The second part of the title revealed the author's intention to tell 'the truth about the Great War' presuming that the official account of the war was false and dishonest.

After the book was published nothing was the same. It became immensely popular and widely read. Almost each year an additional edition had to be printed. In his preface, Djurić wrote on the 15th of September 1978 (the anniversary of the Salonika front's breakthrough): "This book presents just a small authentic history of the past events, not written by historians, but those who made history – the participants in the events themselves".²⁰ Again, as before, the old warriors were seen as the men who were 'as close as possible to the source of history'.

Also, Antonije Djurić did not only used the model used by the previous publishers established back in the late 1960s. Namely, he introduced another powerful element: he expressed his anticommunism quite openly. Firstly, Djurić already had an aureole of an anti-communist dissident as he spent 7 years in prison due to his opposition to the Yugoslav

¹⁸ Silvija Đurić and Vidosav Stevanović, *Golgota i vaskrs Srbije, 1914-1915*, vol. I (Beograd: BIGZ / Partizanska knjiga, 1986); and Silvija Đurić and Vidosav Stevanović, *Golgota i vaskrs Srbije, 1915-1918*, vol. II (Beograd: BIGZ / Partizanska knjiga, 1986).

¹⁹ In 1974 a well-known Serbian avantgarde film director, Purisa Đorđević, decided to make a 10-minute long documentary dedicated to one of the well-known Salonika men, Budimir Davidović. The film was entitled *Dve zvezde 1914-1918* [Two Stars 1914-1918]. Puriša Đorđević, "Karađorđeva kralja Aleksandra" [The Karadjordje Star of King Alexander] in *NIN*, 18.09.2008, 28.

²⁰ Antonije Đurić, *Solunci govore: Ovako je bilo* (Gornji Milanovac: Kulturni centar, 1978), 9.

authorities. Consequently, his admirers liked to see him as the “Serbian Solzhenitsyn”.²¹ Secondly, he contextualized the oral history materials of the veterans in such a way so to stress the neglect and the injustice these men suffered during the communist rule. Perhaps his conception was most clearly stated in his 2000s forward notes to yet another edition of his book. There the author wrote that his book was composed of “disturbing recollections which are destroying the shameful oblivion and sinister destruction of history”.²² It is essential to stress, however, that these testimonies were transmitted to paper without any critical apparatus nor reflection.

By the early 1980s, the Great War was becoming the topic symbolizing the head-on clash with the Yugoslav system.²³ At the same time, the Great war was becoming part of the popular historical consciousness.²⁴ As was the case in other communist countries oral history became a political tool for delegitimizing socialism and communism. Old men 'who knew how it was' became the symbols of alternative memory.²⁵ The Serbian veterans were eager to be heard while many nationalists were eager to exploit their testimonies in undermining the existing political system.

Rifts were now seen everywhere in Yugoslavia including the federal army. For example, historian Petar Opačić who worked at the Military Historical Institute in Belgrade found himself in trouble because he decided to write his Ph.D. thesis about the Salonika front. He faced continuous internal disciplinary measures in the early 1980s.²⁶ However, as the decade was ending and the early 1990s were starting this historian published

²¹ Anonim, “O autoru,” in *Po zapovesti Srbije*, ed. Antonije Đurić (Beograd: Princip Press, 2018), 427-28.

²² Anonim, “O autoru,” 427-28.

²³ A unique phenomenon during the transformation of the Great War traditions into the mainstream of the Serbian media attention was the novel written in 1985. It was *Knjiga o Milutinu* [the Book about Milutin] written by Danko Popović. The key character of this novel was the old warrior who was telling his life story from a prison cell. Danko Popović, *Knjiga o Milutinu* (Beograd: Književne novine, 1985).

²⁴ Another case where a press feuilleton evolved into a very successful book was the following example: *Junaci srpske trilogije govore: Dragoslav P. Đordjević, Sinisa Đaja, Svetislav Krejaković*, ed. Kosta Dimitrijević, (Beograd: Industrodidakta, 1971). Here, a journalist, Kosta Dimitrijević decided to find and interview the main characters from the cult Serbian interwar novel about the Great War: *Srpska trilogija* [The Serbian Trilogy].

²⁵ Natalia Khanenko and Gelinada Grinchenko, “Introduction,” in *Reclaiming the Personal: Oral History in Post-Socialist Europe*, ed. Natalia Khanenko and Gelinada Grinchenko (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 8.

²⁶ Petar Opačić, *Solunski front: Zejtinlik* (Beograd/Jagodina: Republički zavod za zaštitu spomenika / Gambit, 2004), 8-9.

several biographies of the senior Serbian commanders and these editions saw great success.

This was all related with the palpable political changes which were taking place in Serbia. Since the summer of 1986 the Serbian communist were led by Slobodan Milošević. During 1987, Milošević fully consolidated his power over the political leadership in Serbia.²⁷ It should be added that already by the early 1980s, Belgrade became the focal place in Yugoslavia where criticism towards the state ideology and various social taboos was formulated.²⁸ However, in historiography, the bulk of the controversy was linked with the Second World War and the potential themes of discord concerning the 1912-1918 wars were still kept at a low profile.²⁹

In the late 1980s, the Great War finally became the regular topic for the Belgrade television. Documentaries and reportages were becoming growing expressions of appreciation towards Serbia's Great War. In 1987 Belgrade television made a 45 minutes documentary dedicated to Momčilo Gavrić, seen more and more 'as the youngest Serbian soldier of the Great War'. This documentary unearthed the story for the wider audience and Momčilo Gavrić became instantly a 'star' among the veterans.

In 1990 television movie was made, *the Battle of Kolubara*.³⁰ It was based on Dobrica Ćosić famous novel *A Time of Death*. The script was written by Ćosić's friend and the famous Serbian writer Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz.³¹ The movie instantly became a success. It is worth mentioning that in the 1990s Ćosić's novel entered curriculum in Serbian elementary schools. Similarly, the famous collection edited by Anotnije Djurić was adapted for the theater. This is how one of the most popular Serbian plays

²⁷ Kosta Nikolić, "Osma sednica: Kraj borbe za Titovo nasleđe u Srbiji," in *Slobodan Milošević, put ka vlasti: Osma sednica CK SKS. Uzroci, tok i posledice*, ed. Momčilo Pavlović, Dejan Jović, and Vladimir Petrović (Beograd/Stirling: Institut za savremenu istoriju / Centre for European Neighbourhood Studies, 2008), 121-47.

²⁸ Dejan Jović, "Osma sjednica: Uzroci, značaj, interpretacije," in *Slobodan Milošević, put ka vlasti: Osma sednica CK SKS. Uzroci, tok i posledice*, ed. Momčilo Pavlović, Dejan Jović, and Vladimir Petrović (Beograd/Stirling: Institut za savremenu istoriju / Centre for European Neighbourhood Studies, 2008), 33-68, here pp. 35.

²⁹ Serbian historian Veselin Đuretić provoked great turmoil when publishing his books about the Second World War where he branded the Serbian royalist movement as the second antifascist army within occupied Yugoslavia. Veselin Đuretić, *Vlada na bespuću: Internacionalizacija jugoslovenskih protivrječnosti na političkoj pozornici Drugog svjetskog rata* (Beograd: Narodna knjiga / Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1982). and Veselin Đuretić, *Saveznici i jugoslovenska ratna drama* (Beograd: SANU, 1985).

³⁰ TV movie "Kolubarska bitka" [The Kolubara Battle], directors: Arsenije Jovanović, Jovan Ristić <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0200782/>.

³¹ Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz, *Kolubarska bitka: Strategijska drama u dva čina. Prema romanu "Vreme smrti"* (Beograd: Jugoslovensko dramsko pozorište, 1985).

was created – *The Salonika Men speak*.³² The play was performed in the Serbian National Theater as much as 400 times between 1981 and 1993.³³ Some of the performances were characterized by very intense emotions as surviving veterans were seen in the front row together with the Serbian patriarch and other dignitaries.

September 1970 the remaining veterans, together with their families, founded the organization named *Society for Cherishing the Traditions of Serbia's Liberation Wars 1912-1918*. This organization organized in the late 1980s regular commemorative trips to sites of Salonika front as well to countries once belonging to the Entente. The Great War was becoming the mainstream. The only component that was lacking in the process of full public acceptance of the Great War was public recognition by the main political actors who were still, at least formally, communists. This happened in 1989. In May 1989 the rising star of the Serbian communists, Slobodan Milošević organized a reception for the old warriors.³⁴ Momčilo Gavrić as well as Živojin Lazić, the two most well-known 'Salonika men' were there as well. Besides, on the 16th of November 1990 the governing body of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia issued to Gavrić one of the highest state decorations: *The People's Medal for Merits with the Golden Star*.³⁵

The Great War traditions were essential in reshaping the image of the Serbian communists in the wake of the first multi-party elections in Yugoslavia which were planned for December 1990. The decorations given in November the same year were the highest decorations Serbian leadership could offer at the moment. Paradoxically, the medals were given by the state which was already on the brink of its collapse. Since January the same year, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia practically did not exist and the country was sliding into a complete serious paralysis. Milošević met the veterans once more, in July of 1991.³⁶ To understand these processes better it is necessary to narrow the perspective to one peculiar case, one of the already mentioned Momčilo Gavrić.

³² Šarenac, *Top, vojnik i sećanje: Prvi svetski rat i Srbija 1914-2009*, 253-54.

³³ Šarenac, *Top, vojnik i sećanje: Prvi svetski rat i Srbija 1914-2009*, 253-54.

³⁴ Stari ratnici kod Slobodana Miloševića [Slobodan Milošević Receiving the Old Warriors], *Politika*, 11.05.1989, 7.

³⁵ The Presidium of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, the Medal Office: Certificate confirming that Momčilo Gavrić is the recipient of the Medal for People's Merits with the Golden Star. Document no. 82, issued on November 16, 1990. Gavrić family archive.

³⁶ Milisav Sekulić, *Sa Gučeva u legendu: Životopis Momčila Gavrića, najmladeg ratnika Srbije* (Beograd: M. Sekulić, 2009), 95.

The Boy and the War

In the early hours of the 12th of August 1914, the Austro-Hungarian invasion of the Kingdom of Serbia begun. The direction of the incursion supposed to stun the Serbian army. However, the element of surprise was lost and by the 18th of August, the bulk of the two armies met and fiercely clashed in Western Serbia. This was the Cer battle (18–21 August), the one which inspired the Yugoslav director Žika Mitrović, to make his famous movie from 1964. After being victorious, the Serbian units had reoccupied the ground they lost during the first few days of the enemy invasion. They soon made shocking discoveries. It became apparent that the enemy troops treated local civilians with immense brutality. Indiscriminate shooting and killing were widely practiced in the whole front-line zone. The Swiss criminologist, Rudolph Archibald Reiss, was invited to Serbia to make an independent investigation about the atrocities. He estimated that somewhere between 3000 and 4000 civilians were killed while around 500 were taken across the border as internees.³⁷ Throughout the war, such behavior was never repeated, but the crimes from the first weeks of the war placed a deep imprint on the 'Serb-Austrian War' – as the contemporaries called the 1914 conflict.

One of the villages affected by this violence atrocities was Trbušnica, a small hamlet on the northern slopes of the Gučevo Mountain. Trbušnica was less than 5km far away from the state border. It is thus very likely that the Austro-Hungarian troops arrived in the village in the early hours of the invasion. It is hard to reconstruct the exact chain of events, but the result of the Habsburg presence was utter devastation.

This is what Momčilo Gavrić said to the Yugoslav media on several occasions in the late 1980s.³⁸ Namely, the Gavrić family was one of those living in Trbušnica. Momčilo Gavrić, an 8-year-old boy, was one of the youngest among the eleven of the family's children. The only family members absent from the house that day were the two of Momčilo's elder brothers. They were already summoned to the Serbian army. Besides, his elder sister was married and was living in a neighboring town. As it became apparent that the village will be sucked into the war zone, Alimpije Gavrić -Momčilo's father, decided that family should flee. He urged Momčilo to run to uncle's house and borrow a pair of oxen and a wagon.

³⁷ Rudolph Archibald Reiss, *Zločini nad Srbima u Velikom ratu*, ed. Miloje Pršić (Beograd: Svet knjige, 2014).

³⁸ Miloš Bato Milatović, *Najmladji podnarenik u istoriji ratova, Momčilo Gavrić* [The Youngest Sergeant in the History of Warfare, Momčilo Gavrić], TV Belgrade 1987; Sekulić, *Sa Gučeva u legendu: Životopis Momčila Gavrića, najmladeg ratnika Srbije*.

However, by the time Momčilo returned he saw that family building on fire. His mother and father were killed as well as seven of his brothers and sisters.³⁹ Momčilo Gavrić managed to escape. He went in the direction where he saw the Serbian soldiers moving the same morning. Soon he stumbled on one Serbian artillery unit. The boy was soon 'adopted' by this outfit and became its member.⁴⁰

Momčilo Gavrić also explained how the soldiers tailored him a boy sized uniform and subsequently promoted him to the rank of corporal. Momčilo stayed with the soldiers and even retreated with the same battery across the Albanian mountains in the winter of 1915/1916. The boy stayed with this outfit as it soon saw action again. At the Salonika front, the boy was wounded and soon sent to school in the rear of the front. Ultimately, he was dispatched to England in 1918, to continue his education. He came back to Serbia in 1921. As an ordinary citizen, he continued his life in Belgrade. He worked as a chauffeur, gardener, and depo worker. No one was aware of his extraordinary fate. People simply did not believe him when he tried to explain them that he was actually in uniform during the Great War. In addition, he was often ridiculed by his surroundings when trying to tell his story.⁴¹

However, his fate was not fully unknown to those who fought at the Salonika front. On the 9th of February 1917, one of the Serbian papers circulating in Greece printed a song dedicated to Momčilo Gavrić. It was written by a well known Serbian poet, Mladen St. Đuričić.⁴² However, as the war ended the memory of a boy soldier faded. In many aspects, this forgetfulness of Gavrić's extraordinary fate reflected the wider trend in the Serbian commemorative culture of the post-1918 world. The public was very much saturated with stories from the war while the level of Serbia's devastation was appalling. After yet another world war it was even less probable that anyone would unearth this strange episode about the little boy in uniform.

Things began to change with the 50th anniversary of the war's outbreak. On January 19th, 1964, Gavrić's younger son rushed into the house. He said to his father that "the papers were writing about him".⁴³

³⁹ Miloš Bato Milatović, TV Belgrade 1987.

⁴⁰ Miloš Bato Milatović, TV Belgrade 1987; Sekulić, *Sa Gučeva u legendu: Životopis Momčila Gavrića, najmlađeg ratnika Srbije*, 13, 16-17.

⁴¹ Sekulić, *Sa Gučeva u legendu: Životopis Momčila Gavrića, najmlađeg ratnika Srbije*, 14-16.

⁴² Mladen St. Đuričić, "Podnarednik. Momčilu Gavriću" [The Sergeant. To Momčilo Gavrić], *Velika Srbija*, February 9, 1917, 2.

⁴³ Sekulić, *Sa Gučeva u legendu: Životopis Momčila Gavrića, najmlađeg ratnika Srbije*, 27.

The most influential Yugoslav daily, the *Politika*, published the article under the title: *Where is Corporal Momčilo?*⁴⁴ What happened was that second lieutenant Svetislav Ćirić, the immediate superior to Momčilo in his platoon, had decided to contact the press and try to find out what happened to Momčilo after his trip to England in 1918. On the other hand, the press was eager to publish more material about the World War as the 50th anniversary was approaching.

Former second lieutenant Ćirić told how Gavrić was placed into his platoon after joining the battery, and how the two developed close bonds. Ćirić waited in vain for Gavrić to write after his return from England, as was agreed between the two. After reading the published article Gavrić went to the newspaper. Two days later, *Politika* published a new piece: *Reporting to his Superior Fifty Years Later*.⁴⁵ The two former soldiers met in a cordial atmosphere. It was clear how strong were the deep-rooted bonds made during the war. However, there was no follow-up in the press. Momčilo Gavrić will wait for his next interview for almost 25 years. As was the case with many other 'Salonika men', journalists were the ones interested in publishing their stories. Historians, on the contrary, still kept themselves at distance from these topics. Dragiša Penjin, a journalist from the small Serbian town of Šabac, visited Gavrić and made a series of tape recordings. He used these materials to write a romanticized account of Gavrić's war years.⁴⁶ However, television was the key media at the time and things changed once the state television decided to make a documentary about Gavrić's life.

In 1987 state television broadcasted the documentary *The Youngest Sargent in the History of Wars*, written and directed by a well-known name of the Serbian television, Miloš Bato Milatović.⁴⁷ The movie was conceptualized in such a way that Gavrić was filmed while telling his story to a class of high school students. From a mocked figure Gavrić now became a guest lecturer. The second part of the movie showed how Gavrić and his fellow veterans were passing the time within their society in

⁴⁴ Ž. Todorović, "Odiseja najmladjeg vojnika u Prvom svetskom ratu. Gde je kaplar Momčilo?" [The Odyssey of the Youngest Soldier in the First World War. Where is Corporal Momčilo?], January 19, 1964, 10.

⁴⁵ Ž. Todorović, "Javio se podnarednik Momčilo. Raport posle pedeset godina" [Sergent Momčilo Came. Reporting to his Superior Fifty Years Later], *Politika*, January 21, 1964, 7.

⁴⁶ Dragiša Penjin, *Sin Drinske divizije: Roman o najmladem vojniku svih armija sveta* (Beograd: Nova knjiga / Jugoslovenska estrada, 1986).

⁴⁷ The movie made by Miloš Bato Milatović can be found on the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glc3y7QxZWU>

Belgrade. The movie also reflected the evolving modern-day status of the 'Salonika men'.⁴⁸

Gavrić's rise symbolized the transformation of the lives of all the remaining 'Salonika men'. Most of them did not end up becoming television stars but they did become guests at local schools and town halls. This documentary found a ready audience as the interest for the Great War was immense. Gavrić's was invited to visit Serbian cemeteries in Greece, he also traveled to London in September 1987 to participate at the Salonika Society Luncheon in London.⁴⁹

One of Gavrić's friends, Milisav Sekulić published Gavrić's biography in 2009. Though rich with data the book was full of romanticism and has no footnotes. Moreover, it was attuned so that it could more fit into the prevailing context of the early 1990s. Namely, Milisav Sekulić linked anti-Croat and anti-Albanian sentiments into Gavrić's biography. Namely, within the Gavrić family, the information was preserved that Momčilo Gavrić ended up in prison for one year, sometime between 1946 and 1948 as he protested against the party members who knocked at his door asking donations for Yugoslavia's neighbour, People's Republic of Albania. This arrival of party men allegedly provoked Gavrić who expressed his resentment towards the Albanians mentioning his experiences while retreating at the end of 1915.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, there are no documents which could confirm or fully discredit this version of events.

Milisav Sekulić also linked the massacre in Gavrić's village with the Croats members of the Austro-Hungarian troops which were part of the first invasion of Serbia in 1914. This way the clash of August of 1914 was not portrayed as the Austro-Serb war but as the first episode of an imagined century long Serb-Croat conflict.⁵¹ In any case, Gavrić's experiences with the Croats and Albanians, be them real or false, became a standardized segment of his biography which circulated in the Serbian public. These parts of the 'Gavrić narrative', though unverified and unsupported by any documents from the family archive, played an important role in attuning this personal biography into wider

⁴⁸ Antonije Djurić, "Priča o devetogodišnjem podnaredniku" [The Story about the Nine Years old Sargent], *Radio TV revija*, September 23, 1988, pp. 32-33.

⁴⁹ Octavius C. Haines, *My Dearest Mama and Papa: War Letters, 1914-1918*, ed. Barbara Beck (Cowbridge: D. Brown & Sons, 1994).

⁵⁰ Sekulić, *Sa Gučeva u legendu: Životopis Momčila Gavrića, najmlađeg ratnika Srbije*, 25-26.

⁵¹ Sekulić, *Sa Gučeva u legendu: Životopis Momčila Gavrića, najmlađeg ratnika Srbije*, 43, 60-61. Ivana Stojanović, "Najmladji srpski solunac od Srbije nije dobio ni hvala" [The Youngest Serbian Salonika Man did not get even a *Thank you* from Serbia], <https://noizz.rs/big-stories/najmladi-srpski-solunac-od-srbije-nije-dobio-ni-hvala/v3vkcky> 20. 08. 2017.

developments in the Serbian political and social context. The story acquired new features which were optimal for fueling nationalism of the late 1980s and the early 1990s.

Oral History and its Variations

From their first appearance in the late 1960s and well until early 1990s hundreds of veterans' accounts were published. Each testimony had a different narrative logic and structure. Their content was often imprecise and was riddled with questions about chronology and facts. All this becomes apparent in the case of Momčilo Gavrić. Luckily, his family preserved much of his papers.⁵² Also, he gave many interviews. Consequently, the sources for studying his life are much more numerous than it is usually the case with the typical 'Salonika man'. This provides the opportunity not only to show how was it to be a 'Salonika men' from 1918 until 1993 but to also reflect on several specific problems – emblematic for the 'Salonika men' testimonies.

Belgrade Television's documentary from 1987 became the most important source for disseminating Gavrić's life story. However, there are other sources as well. The Gavrić family owns two small autobiographies of Momčilo Gavrić, each only a few pages long. Nevertheless, these documents offer somehow a different perspective in comparison to the data presented in the mentioned documentary made by the Belgrade branch of the Yugoslav broadcasting corporation. Finally, there are two sources with the 'military' background. These were written by Gavrić's superiors. Firstly, the second lieutenant Svetislav Ćirić, when contacting the Belgrade press in 1964, left important information about 'the boy soldier'. The second source was written by no one else but the very commander of the battery which became Gavrić's 'second home' amid war. This is the diary of Colonel Stevan Tucović. This, high profile source was unexpectedly published in 2016, as part of the Centenary efforts of the Serbian Užice archive.⁵³ Such a favorable situation with sources offers the possibility to 'compare and contrast' different materials and perspectives. Three key components have been chosen here for the analysis: Gavrić arrival to the unit; his subsequent promotions and his fate at the Salonika front.

⁵² The grandson of Momčilo Gavrić, also named Momčilo Gavrić in honor of his grandfather, was kind to show me the documents and correspondence left by his grandfather for my research.

⁵³ Stevan Tucović, *Ratni dnevnik pukovnika Stevana Tucovića*, ed. Aleksandar V. Savić and Đorđe Pilčević (Užice / Čajetina: Istorijski arhiv / Čajetina, 2017).

In 1987, Gavrić explained to the television audience how he lost his family. He also provided details about his meeting with the soldiers and officers whom he met after his family was murdered in 1914. This version of events is however faulty in terms of military logic of the time. In any case, Gavrić, explained how he met the battery commander, colonel Stevan Tucović. Gavrić immediately asked for a cannon, so that he could “avenge his family”.⁵⁴ However, the commander declined his request, explaining that the gun is “a big weapon” and that his wish cannot be granted. However, according to Gavrić, the commander nevertheless decided to launch a brief strike. He sent the boy back to his village with one able soldier. The idea was to go to the site of the massacre and throw some hand grenades at the enemy. Gavrić completed this vengeance mission as a great success. Later, Gavrić was given the army uniform and promoted to corporal. Gavrić underlined that his ‘initiation’ happened around the time of the Cer battle, thus already in August of 1914. In 1987 movie, Gavrić also mentioned that he was promoted to sergeant by no one else but by the field marshal Živojin Mišić whom he accidentally met at the Salonika front. It is worth underlying that Živojin Mišić was one of the ablest and most respected Serbian military commanders from the First World War. Moreover, his popularity skyrocketed in the late 1980s.

The first one of the two autobiographies Gavrić wrote was probably created soon after the end of the Second World War. Namely, Gavrić stressed in this manuscript that he was never a member of any party nor part of any of the military formation operating during the occupation of Yugoslavia. His allegiance to the new socialist state was also underlined by his statement that he had no family members living abroad. When the Great War was concerned Gavrić mentioned that, besides being a soldier, he also spent some time in an elementary school in Greece and that he was sent to high school in England, in August 1918. This means that he was not in Greece at the time when the Central Powers collapsed at the Salonika front, which happened in September 1918.⁵⁵

The second autobiography offers a bit more information about the 1914-1918 developments. This document has been written in 1987 or 1988. Namely, Gavrić made this brief account of his life at the request of the British author, Barbara Beck, who worked on her book about the Great War. The two met at the Salonika Society luncheon in London in 1987. In the manuscript, Gavrić explained what had happened to him after his family was killed and after he met the Serbian gunners in the local woods.

⁵⁴ Miloš Bato Milatović, TV Belgrade 1987.

⁵⁵ Gavrić family archive/autobiography no. 1.

However, his account was a bit different from the version he offered for the television in 1987. Namely, in his second autobiography, Gavrić wrote that colonel Stevan Tucović did not allow any retaliatory action against the Austro-Hungarian soldiers in Gavrić's village. The colonel allegedly said: "You must do nothing, we have to retreat as the enemy is now stronger and the situation will remain like this until we get some reinforcement".⁵⁶ The legendary scene with the vengeance was cut.

Gavrić also wrote that he was with his unit already at the time of the Cer battle. He added that it was after this famous battle that he was promoted to corporal and was issued the military uniform for the first time. As in the previous statements, Gavrić claimed that he was promoted to sergeant at the Salonika front, and that it was a direct initiative of the Field Marshal Živojin Mišić. Also, Gavrić underlined that he was at the front near Salonika in September, meaning at the time of the breakthrough. Namely, he now situated his departure to England not in August, as claimed before, but in December 1918. The few of the inconsistencies already visible so far significantly multiply when 'military sources' are introduced into the picture.

The first source of military provenience was the interview with second lieutenant Svetislav Ćirić from 1964. Ćirić was the immediate commander to Momčilo Gavrić. Ćirić's version of events is very different from the Gavrić shared with the TV audience. Svetislav Ćirić situated their first meeting, not in the midst of 1914 and the Cer battle, but at the very end of the same year or possibly at the beginning of 1915. Ćirić mentioned that his battery was "recovering after the great battles of 1914" when he met Gavrić for the first time.⁵⁷ As the last battle of 1914 ended in mid-December, Ćirić probably referred to the early months of 1915. Ćirić recalled that during the unit's lunch breaks one boy used to approach the soldiers asking for the remnants of the food. The boy explained that he lost his family and that he was living with his small sister in the town of Loznica, with some neighbors. Soon, the boy became a regular guest in the military kitchen, always bringing with him "one big old pot".⁵⁸ However, one day he did not show up. The soldiers asked around and found out that the boy was ill. The officers were afraid that he had caught typhus. The motif of typhus also helps to situate these events in early 1915 as this was the time when Serbia was struck by a devastating epidemics which lasted until the spring

⁵⁶ Gavrić family archive/autobiography no. 1.

⁵⁷ Ž. Todorović, "The Odyssey of the Youngest Soldier in the First World War..."; Ž. Todorović, "Sergent Momčilo Came...".

⁵⁸ Ž. Todorović, "Sergent Momčilo Came...".

of the same year. Anyway, the soldiers found the boy and brought him to their camp for therapy and recovery. Uniform was made and he was practically 'adopted' becoming the 'soldier' of the battery. Svetislav Ćirić underlined that Momčilo was always very bold, disciplined, and extremely brave.⁵⁹

According to Ćirić Gavrić was indeed promoted to corporal but not in 1914. Ćirić situated this episode in the context of the Great Serbian retreat, which started in late 1915. During the march, an infantry Lieutenant Colonel, Jovan Joca Petrović, who commanded with the 10th infantry regiment, stumbled on Momčilo. The Lieutenant Colonel was impressed seeing a child in uniform. After asking around who was the boy's superior the officer launched the initiative to promote Gavrić into sergeant. Ćirić also explained how Gavrić, after spending some time at the island of Corfu left England. Consequently, from Svetislav Ćirić's perspective, the meeting of the boy with the gunners was less dramatic than Gavrić claimed and it took place sometime after the massacre of his family.

There were other variations as well. For a start, Ćirić got Gavrić' birthplace wrong. He mixed the famous village of Tršić with little known Gavrić's village of Trbušnica. Both places were close to the town of Loznica and it was easy to make such a mistake. Ćirić also said that he could not remember what exactly happened to Momčilo after the unit's recuperation at the island of Corfu in early 1916.⁶⁰ He had forgotten Momčilo's days at the Salonika front and his school days in the rear of the front. Only after instigated by Gavrić, during their meeting, Ćirić managed to recall that the boy did spend some time with the unit at the Salonika positions.⁶¹ This moment clearly shows how frail is the memory of the contemporaries.

What did the battery commander write about his famous child soldier? Interestingly, Colonel Tucović also situated the first meeting with little Gavrić in 1915. Namely, the colonel wrote how he was moved by the immense suffering of the Serbian refugees in the autumn of 1915. Colonel noted in his diary especially the hardships of children: "At every corner, you could see small and abandoned children, who, terrified, could not speak anymore. Our hearts wanted to burst of sadness, looking at our youth which was being lost and was in the process of disappearing."⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ž. Todorović, "Sergent Momčilo Came...".

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Tucović, *Ratni dnevnik pukovnika Stevana Tucovića*, 130.

While moving with his column, Colonel Tucović explained that he met a small boy “pretty looking and bright”⁶³ This was Momčilo Gavrić. Colonel wrote how the boy explained that his family was killed and that he was afraid “the Svabas would kill him as well”. The colonel felt pity and continued the conversation. Finally, he offered the boy the possibility to join the artillery unit. The boy enthusiastically accepted this invitation and he was sent to be the part of the cannon no. 1 crew. His second promotion Momčilo Gavrić received not before arriving at the Corfu Island. Colonel Tucović, as his officer Svetislav Ćirić had already recalled, wrote that it was Lieutenant Colonel Jovan Joca Petrović who launched the initiative for promoting the boy to a rank of sergeant.⁶⁴ Consequently, officers Ćirić and Tucović agreed on numerous facts. They said that the boy’s arrival to the outfit was not a breath-taking story which included the immediate revenge action against the Austro-Hungarians. More likely, it was a story of compassion and a prosaic and accidental meeting in late 1915, at times when the latest offensive against Serbia sparked another refugee wave. Still, even the two officers did not agree on everything. Tucović situated the meeting in the second half of 1915, while Ćirić believed this happened at the beginning of 1915 or even at the end of 1914. Also, Ćirić explained the boy's arrival to the unit more as a process than as a single decisive event.

It is worth underlying that Tucović edited his diary during the interwar years hoping to find a publisher. Namely, the episode about Momčilo Gavrić was described in his diary in the form of an anecdote he recalled while spending his days at the Salonika front in 1917. Did he remember in 1917 things from 1914 and 1915? Did things begin to blur in his memory? For example, the colonel said that Gavrić was aged 6 in 1915. However, the boy was already 8 years old in 1914.

Apart from omitting mentioning ‘the bomb attack’ the officers also, mostly, agree about the history of the boy’s promotions. Namely, even though the two officers disagree regarding the exact dates and places where the promotions took place. Ćirić as well as Tucović claimed that the initiative for Gavrić’s promotion from Corporal to Sargent came not from the Field Marshal Mišić but a much more modest figure in history -the commander of the 10th infantry regiment Jovan Joca Pavlović.

What other conclusions can be made regarding the above-mentioned sources? Namely, there is no doubt that the Austro-Hungarian army did

⁶³ Tucović, *Ratni dnevnik pukovnika Stevana Tucovića*, 130.

⁶⁴ Tucović, *Ratni dnevnik pukovnika Stevana Tucovića*, 131.

enter Momčilo's village. The Serbian official gazette published in 1915 the list of civilians which were taken to Habsburg internment.⁶⁵ Interestingly, there were several people from Momčilo's small village of Trbušnica. One of them even had the same last name as Momčilo which almost certainly meant that they were relatives. This is clear evidence that Habsburg troops did enter his village and that they spent some time there applying harsh and violent measures.

It is also clear that the 'vengeance moment' – with hand grenades – most likely never happened. This is so not only because the two officers do not mention this event. Namely, the Serbian artillery units were never issued hand grenades.⁶⁶ Not even the Serbian infantry units did always carry bombs with them. More precisely, hand grenades were issued only to special detachments – to the bomb squads which were established in 1912. It is also highly unlikely that an artillery unit would risk launching a skirmish with enemy's infantry and risking losing its precious cannons.⁶⁷

Could it be that Gavrić, mocked by his surroundings time and again, now finally had the opportunity, not only for self-actualization, but also for manipulation with the Serbian public? Belated attention offered him the opportunity to 'create history' by remodeling his own story. It seems that he added heroic elements such as his presence at the Salonika front at the time of the breakthrough even though he was by that time already in England. Did he introduce 'the story with the hand grenades' following his dreams of vengeance? Did he invent the meeting with the famous field marshal Živojin Mišić? By adding this famous general to the plot the whole story would become contemporized and would perfectly fit into the climate of the late 1980s. Was this a people-pleasing moment?

Momčilo Gavrić's case study shows that oral history varies very much depending from the context and its audience and authors position in society at specific time. Some discrepancies in storytelling were unconsciously made and were the result of share passage of time affecting this way author's memory. This is true as for Gavrić as well as for his superiors, colonel Tucović and second lieutenant Ćirić.

⁶⁵ "Rat sa Austro-Ugarskom 1914. godine. Spiskovi zarobljenih oficira, vojnika i gradjana srpskih u Austro-Ugarskoj" [War with Austro-Hungary of 1914. The Lists of the Imprisoned Officers, Soldiers and Serbian Citizens], Archives of Serbia, MID, PO, 436/13-14.

⁶⁶ The bombs were issues to special squads where each soldier carried 10 hand grenades. Branko Bogdanović, *Braća po oružju* (Beograd: Vojni centar / Medija centar Odbrana, 2015), 254-58.

⁶⁷ Šarenac, *Top, vojnik i sećanje: Prvi svetski rat i Srbija 1914-2009*, 112-13.

Conclusion

The appearance of such a large number of testimonies between 1970s and 1990s signaled that Serbia's Great War legacy was far from being properly debated, explored and reflected upon. As Momčilo Gavrić's case shows, the neglect of veterans had long roots dating back to the interwar years and was not exclusively linked to communists' antipathy towards the former Serbian warriors. The 'Salonika's men' desire to speak up and the audience's need to read and hear more, testified about the immense impact the Great War had on Serbia's cultural memory. Nevertheless, there were other aspects of this process of rediscovery. The veterans became 'stars' at the time of Yugoslavia's severe social and political crisis. From the manner in which the veterans' words and appearances were framed they could either support or undermine the dominant socialist paradigm. They did both. It is hard to estimate how conscious the veterans were about their role in the process. As the analysis of Gavrić's archive shows the versions the veterans' accounts at times varied depending from context as well as intended audience. In the euphoric and later on downright flammable atmosphere in socialist Serbia of the 1970s and 1980s, narratives of the 'Salonika men' were not used as a starting point of a debate or of a further inquiry. Instead, emotionally loaded narratives were treated as an uncontested and unadorned history. It was 'past as it truly was'. This only limited the space for a sound and dispassionate thinking about such a sensitive period of Serbia's history. Moreover, it appears that in the Serbian case due to the lack of historiographical monographs about the 1912-1918 period oral history took almost an exclusive role in building Serbia's general public's understanding of the 1912-1918 events. However, as the case study of Momčilo Gavrić shows, oral history by definition implies variations and inconsistencies which makes it difficult to *stand alone* in process of interpreting the past.

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