

# Introduction

## *The Past Is Coming*

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In May 1996, the first trial for the crimes committed in the wars of Yugoslav succession was getting under way at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). It was the first war crimes trial in Europe after Nuremberg. There was considerable publicity for the proceedings, although the accused, Duško Tadić, was not a big fish by any means. Nevertheless, after horrendous pictures of starved prisoners had surfaced from the Omarska camp,<sup>1</sup> where he had been a guard, the world wanted to see justice done. The Tribunal, located in President Kennedylaan, a long six-lane avenue in The Hague, was equipped to be besieged by reporters. An enormous satellite dish appeared overnight, as did several prefab kiosks with global news brands. Most magnificently, a vast round red marquee for the press centre was installed in front of the ICTY building as if to confirm that, indeed, the circus had come to town. Outside the Tribunal, well-known TV faces were doing their spiel before the cameras. They had all come to see what they expected would be a fast-paced courtroom drama, with eloquent pleadings and dramatic testimonies.<sup>2</sup>

The first to appear was an expert witness, Professor James Gow, a political scientist who was to testify on the subject-matter jurisdiction, in order to provide an overview of the political situation in the former Yugoslavia, its history and its contextual specificities. Before long, the expectations of courtroom drama were dashed: Gow's detailed testimony lasted five days, on the basis of the questions that were meant to establish Bosnian Serb aggression in 1991, and the Bosnian Serb leaders' activities in Bosnia in 1992. However, his answers in relation to the history of the region inevitably went back to many centuries ago, going through the fourteenth century, through the finer points of 1878, the Balkan Wars, the First World

War and finally the Second World War, before getting to the 1990s. At one point, even the accused seemed to have had enough history and took his headphones off.<sup>3</sup> 'Professor Gow began in the third century and took us all the way up', Presiding Judge McDonald said twenty years later, and remembered asking him to 'fast-forward a couple of centuries'. She thought the extended historical background was 'a sleeping aid'.<sup>4</sup> Reporters from international news services thought so too. The red marquee and the kiosks were gone within days.

In 1991, another 'damned foolish thing in the Balkans', to use Bismarck's famous phrase, had threatened the peace in Europe. To many, the Yugoslav war came as a complete surprise, with much bewilderment in the Western media as to what was really happening. Contradictory reports were coming out of the country, with the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević – who would also appear before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in due course – looking more belligerent than others. In order to convey its proximity and urgency, the raging war was described as happening 'two hours from Brussels'. Many experts in Balkan history went beyond their fifteen minutes of fame across news outlets. Still, 'the world community couldn't get together to do anything'.<sup>5</sup> Within the European Community (EC, now the European Union (EU)) there was no consensus on how to deal with the increasingly violent civil conflict.

Following numerous allegations of war crimes, and having exhausted various uneven and often contradictory diplomatic efforts by different envoys and groups, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) decided 'to outsource' the Yugoslav problem to an ad hoc tribunal, hoping that the threat or promise of justice would eventually lead to peace. The ICTY was established in 1993, at the same time as the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). Meanwhile, still at a loss to explain such violent acts among people who had lived peacefully together for many decades, the general public opinion adopted the cliché of 'ancient hatreds'. This particular description presented the situation as something that was bound to happen and was therefore inevitable.

The spectre of the past was repeatedly brought up as a *deus ex machina*. An apocryphal quote originally about Crete, that it 'produced more history than it could consume', became a useful shorthand for the country that soon acquired the prefix *ex*. According to some counts, the region had suffered ten wars in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, not counting rebellions, insurrections, revolts, uprisings and general upheavals.<sup>6</sup> In trying to understand this history or, worse, explain it, it would be necessary to keep going further and further back, lifting more and more layers. Professor Gow had a point. Historical events can never be contemplated in a vacuum.



When the wars of the 1990s are being explained,<sup>7</sup> and the Serbian historical background outlined, one event from Serbian history is mentioned as the most significant: the defeat of the Serbs by the advancing Ottomans in the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, or rather the remembrance of it. Most historians today consider that the battle was mythologized so fast ‘that its basic facts were quickly obscured’.<sup>8</sup> Over the centuries, the remembrance of the event evolved into the mythomoteur of Serbian nationalism. From his rise to power in 1987, Milošević famously weaponized the date of 28 June 1389 (15 June Old Style), using the cult of Kosovo to strengthen his support among the Serbian intellectual elite and the wider Serbian population. This divisive strategy subsequently led to the disintegration of multi-ethnic Yugoslavia in civil wars. Milošević always knew that it did not matter what really happened in 1389, and even said so himself.<sup>9</sup> The ethnic allegiance that he invoked was based on popular remembrance.

But there is another more recent history that has a firm grip on the sense of Serbian national belonging: the First World War. The remembrance of the First World War in Serbia is strong and vivid, still appearing to unite all its citizens in veneration. In this they are not alone: the British do it<sup>10</sup> and the French are known for it too. A satirical song by Georges Brassens, ‘La guerre de 14–18’ (The War of 14–18), came out in 1961.<sup>11</sup> The song seemed to praise the First World War as the ‘best’ of all the wars.<sup>12</sup> Serbs could no doubt sing along heartily with Brassens: 1914–18 is their favourite war too. Even though the nation had suffered, it emerged victorious and heroic, with considerable international attention. For a small nation, brief celebrity status becomes a defining marker of identity – long after others have forgotten. In Serbia’s history and collective memory, the Great War (*Veliki rat* in Serbian)<sup>13</sup> has pride of place. This war matters more than any other. In particular, it is far more preferable to keep talking about this war rather than mentioning the wars of the 1990s, where Serbs participated but Serbia was never officially *at war*.

Of all the events of the First World War, one stands out as having the most powerful and personal connotation for Serbs today. The *Golgotha*,<sup>14</sup> the Retreat, represents a deeply meaningful past for all the Serbs – and a footnote in the history of the First World War for almost everyone else. The Serbian Army retreated across Albania in November and December 1915, following the invasion of Serbia by the Central Powers. The Serbian Army and government, including the king and his son, the regent, the state administration and almost all of the Serbian parliamentary deputies, church dignitaries and many other groups, were joined by thousands of civilians fleeing the invading enemy. The army and central state apparatus escaped

encirclement in a desperate attempt to live and fight another day, and the civilians followed for fear of enemy reprisals. The retreat took place across snow and ice-covered mountainous terrain and in hostile territory. Many froze to death or died from disease and hunger, some were killed by the local irregulars, while a large number of those who survived were so weakened by the ordeal that they died shortly afterwards. The Retreat cost the lives of around 240,000 troops and civilians – the final numbers were never established.

After the survivors arrived on the Albanian coast, they were evacuated in stages by the Entente forces. Some were taken to Italy, others to French North Africa, but most were taken to Corfu. In the aftermath of the Retreat, with the assistance and support of the Allies, Serbian troops convalesced. Serbian refugees in Corfu revived the political and cultural life of the country from where they were exiled. It was a temporary exile soon to be continued in Salonika. Although the retreat was undoubtedly a disaster – the Golgotha as the ultimate sacrifice – its subsequent outcome was that around 140,000 Serbian soldiers had recovered well enough by the early summer of 1916 to join other Entente troops in Salonika, where l'Armée d'Orient was being reorganized in preparation for the liberation of Southeastern Europe. The Serbian Army started its comeback by capturing the strategic peak of Kajmakčalan in September 1916. The Allied Army of the Orient broke through the Salonika Front two years later. The Serbian Army, as part of the larger Entente forces, participated in the liberation of Serbia over the following six weeks. Soon afterwards, the war ended with the Armistice. In November 1915, the retreat seemed to be the end of Serbia. Many perished, but enough survived, including the state and political institutions of the country. The retreat was a defeat that was eventually turned into a victory. Both *because of* and *despite* the retreat, Serbia won. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, often referred to as Yugoslavia (its official name from 1929), was established on 1 December 1918 and recognized in the Treaty of Versailles on 28 June 1919.

Today in Serbia, the Retreat is not only memorialized – it is canonized. The Retreat is seen to symbolize the sacrifice of the Serbian Army and the entire Serbian nation, for the liberation of Serbia and subsequent establishment of Yugoslavia. The remembrance, representations and commemorations of the 1915 Retreat illustrate the complicated Serbian relationship with the past and its controversial link to the *Serbian national identity narrative*. The Retreat has a personal resonance for most Serbs today because many of their ancestors took part in it – they are not abstract figures from the past, but family members, grandfathers or great-grandfathers, known by name and surname. There were those who survived and others who did not. Both groups are important for the collective remembrance of the

event: the dead are martyrs and the survivors are liberators. The dominant narrative of the Retreat – taught in schools and glorified in commemorations – is thus straightforwardly tragic and heroic.

But there is much more to the Retreat: the disarray of the army and the government, preferential treatment of government officials, the mass desertions, the catastrophic sacrifice of young men recruited prematurely, to name but a few. While these less heroic aspects are marginalized, they are not invisible. The Retreat is well documented by participants' written testimonies, memoirs of surviving soldiers, medical staff from foreign missions, public figures, writers, refugees, journalists, Serbs and foreigners who followed the army. There are photographs of the Retreat, of the Albanian and Montenegrin mountain crossings, drawings by participants, and film footage of the soldiers' boarding ships for Salonika.

Another strand in the popular storyline often describes the Entente support as having been insufficient, incompetently executed or deliberately delayed. This also brings us to the domestic political angle. The Retreat evolved into a sacred symbol of Serbian suffering in the First World War and popularized the trope of Serbs cast as tragic heroes. This script is useful for various populist tendencies in Serbia whereby the context of the Retreat can be connected to current political issues, framed as Serbia versus the world. I have termed this tactic 'historical frame switching' similar to what Ivan Čolović has called 'parasitic remembrance'.<sup>15</sup> This method is persistently employed in Serbia's current political discourse. Whether it is applied to explain why a French court did not extradite a Kosovo politician suspected of war crimes in 2017, or why the EU appears hesitant regarding the Serbian accession, or even why Novak Djoković, a Serbian tennis player, was deported from Australia in 2022 following his breach of that country's border rules,<sup>16</sup> the theme is that the Serbs are fighting against the world. Serbs are routinely misunderstood, prevented from succeeding and, above all, unjustly treated. Consistent in state-controlled media, present in some independent outlets and dominant on social media, this way of thinking is as all-pervasive as it is robust. Challenging the narrative is not easy and the 1999 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) air strikes will be thrown into the face of anyone who tries it.



The populist Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka (SNS)) came to power in Serbia in 2012. The new Serbian government and president planned centenary commemorations of many different events from the *Veliki rat* and were looking forward to it. In 2013, in his speech on the occasion of the ninety-eighth anniversary of the Serbian Army's arrival on Corfu and Vido, the then Prime Minister Ivica Dačić said:

For us Serbs, every time we come to Corfu and Vido, we experience it as a memorial service. More than 10,000 people rest in the ossuaries and in the deep blue sea tomb. As someone once said, here lies the best part of Serbia<sup>17</sup> – the eternal Serbia. An entire generation went through the Golgotha here, followed by the start of the resurrection. Serbia paid for her freedom dearly, in the words of a British military adviser, she paid for it in blood and tears. This was the war that made Serbia famous.<sup>18</sup>

The centenary was a valuable opportunity to remind the population, as well as the world, that those brave soldiers from 100 years ago were the true face of Serbia, not the terrible images on their screens in the 1990s. The commemorations were going to be popular and unifying events, since every town had suffered and every family had at least one ancestor who had crossed Albania or perished in the snow in 1915.

Around the same time, three books came out to upset the applecart: Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*; Sean McMeekin's *July 1914: Countdown to War*; and Margaret MacMillan's *The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914*. These works heated the atmosphere in historical and political circles, with accusations of 'historical revisionism' flying across the Serbian academic world and beyond.<sup>19</sup> Perceived as challenging Fritz Fischer's seminal work on German responsibility for the war, it was principally Christopher Clark's book that offended Serbian historical sensitivities (while the fact that there were three books appearing almost simultaneously was perceived as amounting to a campaign of revisionism).<sup>20</sup> As observed by Holm Sundhaussen,<sup>21</sup> Fischer did not even mention Gavrilo Princip in his 700-page-long volume from 1961.<sup>22</sup> Hundreds of different interpretations have been published since and this was Clark's.<sup>23</sup> He examined the instability of the Serbian political situation and the dysfunctionality of the Serbian government in the early twentieth century, particularly the rogue elements of the Serbian military, suggesting that the Serbian government in 1914 may have had more responsibility for the outbreak of war than had been previously accepted. But what was perceived as particularly inflammatory was the connection Clark drew between what happened in Sarajevo in 1914 and the wars of the 1990s.<sup>24</sup> Although Clark's book was not only about Serbia, his reading of the events that led to the First World War was interpreted in Serbia as the West's reappraisal of the German guilt for the War.<sup>25</sup>

Clark's book provoked largely negative Serbian reactions, often indignant or outraged, some decidedly paranoid, with one historian claiming that Germany was issuing grants to scholars with the specific goal of revising Germany's role in the Great War.<sup>26</sup> Aleksandar Miletić analysed the reactions of Serbian historians pointing out that Fischer's theory was accepted almost as a 'dogma' by many of them.<sup>27</sup> There were historians

who approached the subject in a professional and analytical manner by critically examining the arguments of Clark's book and particularly some of his sources.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the majority seemed to take the issue personally and view the revisionist historians as personifying 'the West'. Various public figures came out to describe how they were offended by the book and, in particular, how all 'true' Serbs should be offended by it. Such reactions made it clear that most had not read Clark at all, but simply picked up on the outrage expressed by so-called mainstream Serbian historians and found it a useful tonic for reiterating how misunderstood Serbia was.<sup>29</sup> By then it was obvious that the controversy was not actually about the book, but about the perceived attack on the myth of Serbian victimhood.<sup>30</sup>

The upheaval in Serbia was not limited to academic and political circles. As the centenary approached, T-shirts bearing Princip's face appeared in shops, some with the slogan 'It is all a matter of principle' (a play on words, since Princip means 'principle' in Serbian). In May 2014, at a café in the centre of Belgrade, I overheard a conversation about Clark's book between two elderly gentlemen: 'How dare they?! After everything Serbia has gone through!' I refrained from joining the conversation to clarify who 'they' were – clearly the unappreciative, ever-thwarting 'West'. Except between 1914 and 1918, when Serbia was an ally, 'gallant little Serbia' – in the same vein as 'plucky little Belgium' – but many things have changed since. The nostalgia for those good old days was palpable. For the politicians, above all, the arrival of Clark's book caused genuine panic that it was going to spoil the party. The book had called Princip a terrorist and was said to depict Serbs as the culprits for the outbreak of the catastrophe of the First World War.<sup>31</sup>

In June 2014, a series of centenary events – cultural, artistic and academic – was to take place in Sarajevo and an international conference was to assemble prominent world historians on the subject. A symbolic Vienna Philharmonic concert would mark the centenary since Princip's fateful bullet on 28 June in Sarajevo.<sup>32</sup> However, on the last two days of May (thus effectively preceding the Sarajevo event), the Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD), headed by the former Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić, held a conference in Belgrade entitled 'The European Tragedy of 1914 and the Multipolar World of 2014: Lessons Learned', which drew a diverse group of academics. Clark was invited and from his presentation and subsequent interviews in the Serbian media, it was clear that he was neither a Serb-hater nor a conspirator, but a serious historian.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, in Sarajevo, in a farcical re-enactment of the taking of sides in the Great War, Austria and France were at odds regarding the commemorations. Although the French delegation attended the concert,

many French academics did not attend the conference.<sup>34</sup> Only four Serb scholars participated.<sup>35</sup> The Serbian and Bosnian Serb delegations boycotted the entire series of commemorative events in Sarajevo proper, and instead attended the unveiling of a statue to Gavrilo Princip in Serb-dominated eastern Sarajevo.<sup>36</sup> A century might have passed and the war generation might be all gone, but the past was truly alive and kicking. And the centenary years had only just started.

Years later, Clark's book continues to excite tempers in discussion forums.<sup>37</sup> Why? The answer to this question lies partly in the roles that the First World War and, most importantly, the Retreat play in the Serbian national identity narrative. In 2018, Jay Winter commented on the reaction to Clark's book in Serbia: 'Of course the Serbs are furious – but that's their problem.'<sup>38</sup> The *Serbian problem*, a fervent attachment to an exceptionalism centred on heroism and suffering, is possibly the most important factor in the whole Serbian story.

Although the Retreat may be considered one of the elements and not the whole picture, its role in Serbian self-perception as a heroic and suffering national group deserves a closer look. The First World War with the Retreat at its core encapsulates how the Serbs experience the remembrance of the past as their identity in the present. If the ancient Greeks believed that character was fate, today's Serbs believe their past is their identity.



Memory and identity can be seen as the shapeshifters of any historical narrative. They are generally considered as fluid and unstable,<sup>39</sup> and yet memory and identity feature prominently as a part of any nation's historical foundation. How the history of a country is remembered is part of the self-image of the country and its people:<sup>40</sup> the way the community of people imagine themselves to be, because 'identities and memories are not things we think *about* but things we think *with*'.<sup>41</sup> In other words, identity and memory are part of a belief system determining a nation's set of values, what they believe to be true or false, and right or wrong. For some nations, this can become more than simply 'their' problem. The context of when history is written matters – how a war is recorded will depend on the consequences of the outcome. The government in power, depending on the type of regime in question, may also control the official remembrance that will shape perceptions of the event for newer generations. They may rebel against the official version or go along with it.

The rituals of memorialization of the past are all around us in the cultural topography of our world. We live in streets with specific street names, our urban landscapes contain landmarks and monuments, and we do not work on public holidays that are assigned such status because of something



that happened in the past. All these aspects of our lives, and many more, are ruled by the dominant narratives. Since the reality is thus directed by ‘mnemonic hegemony’,<sup>42</sup> the imbibed perception of history becomes the truth we live by, barring active resistance of significant counternarratives. As in the example of the Kosovo cult, the perception of a historical event matters more to a national group than a historical record of what actually happened. National belonging is about selectively remembered and selectively forgotten events, ideas and ideals. They are transformed into ‘national memory’ that will involve manipulation and confabulation as well as forgetting.<sup>43</sup>

Not all historical narratives make the cut. Some are overlooked while others are highlighted, duly perfected in the continuous retelling, commemorated and celebrated. The Battle of Kosovo remains a national myth, but at a distance of over 600 years from today, it is abstract because it lacks the familiarity of authentic details. In contrast, the Retreat and the First World War encapsulate the Serbian story in a way that no other period in Serbian history does. This is not only because so many Serbs have a family connection to the participants and because it is an irresistible narrative of national demise followed by regeneration, but also because in comparison to the Second World War, when different Serbian factions fought with or against the Nazi occupiers, or as members of the Yugoslav partisans, the First World War represents the time when Serbs seemed truly united. Dwarfed by the far greater forces of the enemy, Serbia fought back against the odds and triumphed when it mattered. This narrative is cherished not necessarily because it is representative – most Serbs certainly think so – but because it represents a guarantee of Serbian character. The Serbs today are the descendants of Serbs from 1915 and therefore any other story – the war crimes of the 1990s, for example – is either untrue or an aberration. While the Kosovo Battle remains a mythological ‘origins story’ for the Serbs, the Retreat as the tragic focal point of the First World War leads to the redemptive victory in 1918. This historical narrative represents the blueprint for thinking *with*. Its potency seeps across the boundaries of the past and impacts the present. Therefore, the Retreat and the Great War narratives have to be kept immaculate in Serbia. This is also why commemorations, remembrance practices, mediations and representations matter today.

This book explores a range of aspects of this remembrance, 100 years after the event, of the First World War and the Retreat: what is remembered and how, and what is overlooked and why. It records encounters with the actors and performers of remembrance, and travels to the sites of memory in order to examine their deployment in the current Serbian national identity narrative. There are contradictions and limitations to bear in mind. While it is well documented, photographed and mapped, the full human cost of the Retreat remains unknown. Despite several attempts,

the inquiry to determine what went so terribly wrong and caused so many lives to be lost was never finalized. The latest list of the First World War casualties was published in 2019 by the Serbian Ministry of Defence and it remains an approximation. Since the publication was not widely advertised and has been seemingly limited to expert circles, there are still many Serbs today wanting to know what happened to their forefathers between 1914 and 1918.<sup>44</sup>

There is an inherent ambiguity in an experience shared by so many, passed on to their descendants, with many questions still unanswered. Another ambiguity – equally stark – is that some remembrance activity is sincere and authentic, while some is opportunistic and manipulative, motivated by changeable political agendas. There are true ‘fictive kinships’ of remembrance,<sup>45</sup> whose unofficial acts of remembrance have led to genuine grassroots projects with lasting achievements. On the other hand, the official First World War centenary commemorations in Serbia have instrumentalized remembrance of the War and the Retreat, using them as a diversion from the wars of the 1990s and Serbia’s role in them – one story, different strands, many uses. A century later, the Retreat continues to inspire, fascinate and resonate in Serbian political culture.



My interest in the Serbian remembrance of the Retreat and its Great War context grew in the run-up to the centenary of the start of the war. As of 2012, there were clear signs that numerous commemorative events were planned surrounding the centenary to demonstrate just how much the new Serbian leadership cared for Serbia’s Great War past. The best imagined version of this part of Serbian history was going to be retold, exhibited and celebrated. Judging by the Clark controversy, no blemish on the shining version of history would be tolerated. The outrage caused by Clark, McMeekin and MacMillan seemed so disproportionate that it had to be significant. The parade of war remembrance was rolled out early: apart from the polemics in the media, there were conferences, public discussions, a glut of new books and articles about the war, previously unpublished archival documents, documentaries, feature films, concerts, museum exhibitions and much else.

For me it was a *déjà vu*, *déjà vécu* sensation. It took me back to the late 1980s when Serbia, then part of Yugoslavia, became intoxicated with the First World War. At the time, it was striking how quickly and how deeply this fervent nationalist mood spread in the public sphere, notwithstanding its political instigators. Inciting intolerance through reworking tragic episodes from the nation’s history is not uncommon. ‘History wars’ could be regarded as an important category of ‘culture wars’ – a useful diversion from

any real issues facing a nation. In the case of Serbia, the intolerance transitioned into violence, fuelling other nations' hostilities within the former Yugoslavia. Although I had witnessed the remembrance of history in the 1980s Serbia, at the time I did not recognize it for what it was: 'one of populist symptoms'.<sup>46</sup> The Yugoslav wars of the 1990s followed and not long afterwards I was able to observe some of the *dénouements* firsthand in the courtrooms at The Hague Tribunal. While there had been interethnic animosities in Yugoslavia, the war was not inevitable – it had been provoked and the ethnic divisions had been used as fuses. In this context, the Serbian indignation against Clark in 2013 was a warning signal that 'history wars' were back. I decided to follow them on their chosen battlefield of remembrance. This study is the result of my examination of the manifestations of Serbia's Great War remembrance against the backdrop of the centenary commemorations.

The book is divided into four parts.

Part I, 'The Main Event', first looks briefly at how Serbia eventually managed to free itself from the Ottoman yoke in the nineteenth century following decades of rebellions and negotiations. The newly independent Principality and then Kingdom of Serbia attempted to find its way between the Great Powers in the hope that one day all the Serbs would live in one state. Despite its success in the Balkan Wars, Serbia had many internal and external challenges. The Sarajevo assassination forced Serbia into a war it did not want, but proceeded to fight despite the discrepancy in strength. I explore what led to the Retreat of the Serbian Army and civilians in the winter of 1915, how the Retreat proceeded and how it was recorded by the participants. The factual background will better enable the reader to follow my arguments concerning how the emotive power of this remembrance was used in the 1980s and how it affects the nature of remembrance practices to date. As mentioned earlier, the remembrance has additional significance because the Retreat was a defeat that turned into a victory: if the Retreat is mentioned at the beginning of a speech, it will almost certainly be followed by the mention of the Kajmakčalan victory at its end. Serbian historical narrative regularly underscores the role of the Serbian Army as a crucial, although often unrecognized, contributor to the end of the First World War.

Part II, 'The Script', illustrates and examines cultural and educational representations of the First World War and the Retreat: how from the 1980s interest in this part of Serbian history turned to fascination. The passionate exploration of Serbian heroism and suffering, although somewhat diminished from when it started, has not only endured but has also been perpetuated and reinforced in education and culture. The decade following Tito's death in 1980 was the last decade of the Cold War, the last decade

without the internet and social media, and the last decade of Yugoslavia. Instead of the future, Serbia, followed by others, started looking to the past for inspiration. Pre-digital technologies – newspapers, television, radio, telephones and group meetings – proved more than up to the task of circulating divisive, nationalist rhetoric: there was no trending of ‘#serbiadeservesbetter’ shared and ‘hearted’, but this and other similar slogans opened the floodgates to a deluge of ‘remembered history’. First in Serbia and then elsewhere, the nations constituting the country of Yugoslavia were instigated by their leaders to step back into their own past<sup>47</sup> and fight a new war to settle perceived or imagined old scores. The nightmare of armed conflict and atrocities ensued. There have been no lessons learned, despite where the ‘national reawakening’ has led Serbia. The effects of these misguided years persist: the ‘sacrificial narrative’ continues to dominate the way the First World War and the Retreat are remembered and mediated. The narrative is continuing in music and museums as the potent mythologized history that spills over into all other aspects of Serbian past and present.

Part III, ‘The Scenography’, examines a contradiction. Despite the apparent attachment to a proud past, something common to many other nations, Serbia is a country where the past matters so much that it can be readily altered to accommodate the present. Living with the uncertainty of one’s address in a year’s time sounds ludicrous. Yet, where street names habitually change to fit in with political regimes, basic social reality cannot be taken for granted.

Monuments, through which common values are celebrated and remembered, tend to be controversial in Serbia and subject to much public debate. Some of the First World War monuments have intriguing histories. A closer look at commemoration events that take place around such monuments reveal an interesting fact – for a number of politicians, it seems that commemoration is virtually a full-time job. This is not to say that commemorations offer a break from political communication; on the contrary, they provide a platform and a forum where topics of political interest are raised without challenge because of the commemorative context. These will invariably concern present issues that are somehow related to the wars of the 1990s. Serbian heroism of the First World War is repeatedly used to relativize, minimize and whitewash the Serbian role in the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the ensuing bloodshed. This reframing serves a real-world purpose with real-world consequences because it leads to political choices. At the same time, the centenary years have also given a justification to the Serbian press to issue a steady supply of suitable topics and themes – all intended to direct the remembrance of history toward a politically fitting goal.

Part IV, ‘The Chorus’, researches the steadfast keepers of the Serbian flame at sacred sites of remembrance in Greece and North Macedonia. The

Serbian dead of the First World War are especially honoured in Thessaloniki, on the island of Vido, in Corfu, as well as on the slopes of Kajmakčalan. Although outside the country's borders, these sites have a special meaning for Serbs, having Serbian identities and even different names: Corfu is the island 'where the yellow lemon trees bloom', as popularized in a song from the period; Vido is the 'Island of Death' where so many exiled Serbs died; and the Ionian Sea is the 'Blue Tomb' where they were laid to rest. The drama of the Retreat has its own emotional geography coexisting with the actual sites. Serbs who fell in the War are regularly and piously visited by their descendants, both actual and notional.

In Chapter 8, I meet the members of other active fictive kinships of remembrance and look at their ways of performing the past.<sup>48</sup> Whether they are retracing the steps of the soldiers on the Retreat, bringing to prominence the Scottish Women's Hospitals (one of the largest medical missions in the War) or discovering the stories behind Serbian prisoners of war in the Netherlands, these individual initiatives are nothing short of impressive. The motivation of the actors of remembrance is personal and often related to their family history, but among them are also history enthusiasts and passionate social activists. All of them acquired a passing celebrity in Serbia during the centenary years, but their motives are not ultimately self-interested, nor are they significantly politicized.

The book's conclusion, 'Past Imperfect Continuous', briefly draws together different elements of the Serbian national identity narrative captured in the belief that the past is never over and that it is a determining factor of the present and the future. With a fixed and largely unquestioned narrative legacy in place, too many Serbs are reluctant and unwilling to consider any alternative versions of their country's past that would allow them to consider a different vision of the future. In short, the continuing allure of the heroic past does not encourage agency. The narratives are kept artificially frozen in order to keep the hostilities warm and all change impossible. Yet, the fictive kinships linked to the Retreat generate a different kind of agency. The examined remembrance practices have some elements of critical thinking that could perhaps – if allowed – lead to more diverse views in Serbia regarding its relationship with the past in general.

The scene is now set: we have a war dating back over a century and another from some thirty years ago. We have people who choose to remember the former and not even talk about the latter because the old war is a better legacy for the country and its people. If we can simply choose the past we want to be defined by, and deny or hide what we do not want to think about, then who are we really? And where do we go from here?

Here it comes, then: the story of remembering an imperfect past and its legacy.

## Notes

1. ICTY press release 13 February 1995, ICTY website, <https://www.icty.org/en/press/international-tribunal-former-yugoslavia-charges-21-serbs-atrocities-committed-inside-and> (last accessed 6 July 2023).

2. Author's own memories as a staff member at the ICTY, 1994–2003.

3. All hearings were simultaneously interpreted from and into English, French and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, so the accused would have been receiving interpretation from English into Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian; see *Prosecutor v. Duško Tadić*, IT-94-1-T, 7 May 1996, p. 100 of the English transcript.

4. Interview with Judge McDonald, Brandeis University Oral History Project.

5. Interview with Judge McDonald, Brandeis University Oral History Project.

6. David, 'Sećam se, dakle postojim', 148.

7. Thorough and insightful works have been written on the subject by Misha Glenny, Allan Little and Laura Silber, Sabrina Petra Ramet, V.P. Gagnon, Slavoljub Djukić and Tim Judah, among others.

8. Pavlowitch, *Serbia: The History behind the Name*, 10.

9. 'Govor Slobodana Miloševića na Gazimestanu', <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2011/06/govor-slobodana-milosevica-na-gazimestanu-1989-godine/> (last accessed 6 July 2023).

10. Jenkins, 'Germany, I Apologise'.

11. Winter, *Remembering War*, 43.

12. As Brassens briefly explained to a television audience seventeen years later, it was an anti-war song. The song alluded to the Algerian war – which the French government had never called a war – that was ongoing at the time and would end a year later. A verse in the song, 'Guerres saintes, guerres surnoises, qui n'osent pas dire leurs noms' – 'Holy wars, deceitful wars, those that dare not have a name', was a clear reference to Algeria. (All quotes from French and Serbian in the book are translated by the author.)

13. It only started being called the Great War after the end of Tito's era.

14. This event is referred to as *Golgota* in Serbian, and I am therefore using *Golgotha* in English. Occasionally, the term 'Calvary' is also used in English texts. It is relevant to note that a series of events in Albanian history are remembered as Albanian *Golgotha* and this term refers to the atrocities committed by Serbian troops against Albanians during the Balkan Wars. See Freundlich, *Albanian Golgotha: Indictment of the Exterminators of the Albanian People*.

15. Čolović, 'Parazitska sećanja'.

16. Ali, 'Novak Djoković Being "Crucified Like Jesus"'

17. John Kelly, White House chief of staff (July 2017–January 2019), considered that the best Americans were in Arlington.

18. 'Nama je svaki odlazak na Krf opelo'.

19. Stojanović, 'Onward! To World War II'.

20. Kljakić, 'Revizija prošlosti u režiji velikih sila'.

21. Sundhaussen, 'Das Attentat von Sarajevo, Serbien und der "Geist von 1914"'

22. Nor did Barbara Tuchman mention Princip in her Pulitzer-winning work *The Guns of August* in 1962. On the contrary, Vladimir Dedijer's 1966 *The Road to Sarajevo* went into great detail about Princip, the cause of the conspirators and their motivations, as well as why the idea of a political assassination came 'naturally' to the group. A.J.P. Taylor praised Dedijer's book in his review and made a painfully incorrect prediction, that the book 'is likely also to be the last word on the subject': Taylor, 'The Great Assassination'.

23. Other studies in relation to the start of the First World War have been published since Clark too, the latest, from 2022, being *Misfire* by Paul Miller-Melamed.

24. Clark occasionally makes some unexpected parallels, e.g. Serbia in 1914 and Syria in 2011. In the Introduction to *The Sleepwalkers*, Clark links the Serbian nationalism of the First

World War to the wars of the 1990s: Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, xxvi. This is not the first time that a surprising comparison was made: in his 2008 Stanford course lectures, 'History of the International System', historian James Sheehan compares Serbia in 1914 to Pakistan in 2008.

25. Bjelajac, *New (Old) Controversies on the Origins of WWI on the Eve of 100th Anniversary, Tokovi istorije*, 15. Bjelajac questions the absence of a complete bibliography at the end of Clark's book.

26. 'Ljubodrag Dimić: Gavrila Principa je srpska javnost podržala'. In this interview, historian Dimić also claims that most such scholars are Irish. It is not quite clear where this claim comes from, given that Clark is Australian, McMeekin American and MacMillan Canadian.

27. Miletić, '1914 Revisited. Commemoration of the WWI Centenary in Serbia', 6.

28. Šarenac, 'O knjizi Mesečari ... Kristofera Klarka', 267.

29. Miletić, '1914 Revisited', 22.

30. Stojanović, 'Mitski rat'.

31. Stojanović, 'Narrative on WWI as the Energy Drink of Serbian Nationalism', 139.

32. 'A Time to Remember', European Broadcasting Union (EBU).

33. Rujević, 'Najbolja slika oba rata'.

34. Hockenos, 'World War I Conference in Sarajevo Divides Scholars'.

35. Lyon, *Serbia and the Balkan Front*, 9; Miletić, '1914 Revisited', 18–19.

36. 'WWI Centennial Event without Serbs'.

37. J.T., 'Predratni odgovor Klarku'.

38. Jay Winter at the 2018 *To End All Wars? Conference*, Ypres, used with permission. <https://www.inflandersfields.be/en/program/conf-to-end-all-wars-e> (last accessed 6 July 2023).

39. Gillis, *Commemorations*, 3.

40. Minarova-Banjac, 'Collective Memory and Forgetting', 9.

41. Gillis, *Commemorations*, 5.

42. Molden, 'Resistant Pasts versus Mnemonic Hegemony', 125.

43. Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, 37; Rieff, *In Praise of Forgetting*, 135.

44. There are several different associations of descendants of veterans from the First World War that assist the descendants in tracing their forefathers. Those clearly sponsored by official institutions are not included in this book.

45. Winter, 'Forms of Kinship and Remembrance', 40.

46. Stojanović, *Populism the Serbian Way*, 10.

47. Drakulić, *Café Europa Revisited*, 9.

48. Winter, 'The Performance of the Past: Memory, History, Identity', 11.