

Dr. DMITAR TASIĆ
Research Associate
Institute for Strategic Research
Belgrade

SERBIAN PARTICIPATION IN GREAT WAR AND ITS PLACE IN IDENTITY AND
TRADITIONS OF YUGOSLAV ARMED FORCES

ABSTRACT: This paper tries to identify level of influence of traditions, doctrine, and formation of Serbian armed forces and its participation in Great War on its successors – armed forces of Yugoslav Kingdom and socialist Yugoslavia. Lack of sources and relevant literature complicated this research which had to be based on indirect conclusions, existing patterns in development of armed forces in general as well on presentations of contents with deliberate omissions or neglect.

Key words: Serbia, Yugoslavia, Austria-Hungary, army, officers, traditions, YA, YPA.

In August 1953, Washington DC was a place of one unusual meeting. On one side sat representatives of armed forces of USA, UK and France while on the other sat representatives of Yugoslav Peoples Army. This unusual meeting represented one of the final stages of Yugoslav rapprochement with Western powers during Yugoslav confrontation with Soviet Union and its satellites. Main purpose was for Western representatives to have an insight of Yugoslav needs in armament and war materiel as well to agree and arrange the amount and dynamics of future shipments within the framework of Western military assistance to those countries endangered by intensified military build up of Soviet Union and its satellites. Peculiarity of this situation was even emphasized by the content of conversation and level and amount of exchanged

information.¹ In order to get necessary modern weapons like tanks, heavy artillery, jet planes, radars etc Yugoslavs have to reveal lot of their secrets as well everything they had on satellite countries and Soviet units on their territories.

In one point of conversation chief of Yugoslav delegation, General Ljubo Vučković allowed General Poglajen explain to Western representatives Yugoslav plan and rules of mobilization, as well how Yugoslav peacetime army supposed to reach its war time strength. In one moment General Poglajen said: “Our plan is named Serbian plan for mobilization. It fully succeeded during Great War and proved to be equally efficient during Second World War.”²

Trained and educated by thousand times repeated different slogans of Yugoslav communist propaganda, initially it was difficult to believe that Yugoslav Peoples Army – “a respectable force forged within the fire of liberation war and socialist revolution” had to do anything with the formation, tradition and regulation of Serbian army from the Great War.

However, after taking into consideration several factors which are worldwide common for the military organization no matter of its social, historical or religious background it became obvious that yet another myth came on line to be deconstructed. Although it reached a status of mantra, often repeated claim that military represents one of the most conservative segments of society proved to be correct in the case of Yugoslav armed forces.

¹ ZAPISNIK SA RAZGOVORA TRIPARTITNO-JUGOSLOVENSKE VOJNE KONFERENCIJE, VAŠINGTON, avgust 1953. in: *Balkanski pakt 1953/54*, Zbornik dokumenata, Vojnoistorijski institut, Beograd 2005. pp. 354-493. (Hereinafter: ZAPISNIK SA RAZGOVORA, VAŠINGTON, avgust 1953. in: *Balkanski pakt*)

² ZAPISNIK SA RAZGOVORA, VAŠINGTON, avgust 1953. in: *Balkanski pakt*, pp. 378-379. As in Serbian army in Balkan Wars and Great war, mobilization of Yugoslav army was organized on territorial bases which enabled rapid mobilization and reaching necessary combat readiness. Units which were deployed in vicinity of state borders already in peace time had 80% of their strength and needed only 36 hours to reach 100%, while units located in country interior were used to develop new units according to the previously elaborated and exercised detailed plans. In total, war-time army would reach its full strength within five to seven days from the proclamation of mobilization. With certain variations this system existed throughout existence of Yugoslav armed forces and Wars for Yugoslav Succession in the 90's all away to the reforms and profesionalization of Serbian armed forces in 2010.

Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes

One of states which replaced old dynastic empires after the Great War was the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The first Yugoslav state was created in the maelstrom of the Great War as the fulfillment of Serbian war aims and aspirations for the unification of South Slavs. At the time of its proclamation, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes resembled the state quite little. War-torn Serbia and Montenegro were united with parts of just disappeared Austria-Hungary: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dalmatia and southern Hungary.

These regions were very different, with imperative of regulation of everyday life and public order. But above all the borders of the new state had to be determined. The only border that already existed and had been clearly defined was the border with Greece. With all other countries: Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Austria and Italy borders had yet to be defined. That was the moment that helped buildup the armed forces of the new state.

In the case of Yugoslavia on the one side there were the members of the Serbian and Montenegrin armies, and on the other Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, former members of the Austro-Hungarian armed forces. The example of Yugoslavia is not alone when it comes to encounter of yesterday's adversary on the battlefield under the new circumstances in the same armed forces. This happened in Poland, because in war that just has ended, Poles served in the German, Austrian and Russian army, as well in Polish legion or Hallers army.³ In both examples because representatives of the same nation were to be found on either side at almost any front, battles sometimes turned out to be fratricidal.

In terms of organization, education, visual identity and doctrine, the new army continued to inherit traditions of the Serbian army. For obvious reasons the participation and achievements of Serbian army in Balkan Wars and in Great War were specially

³ Eichenberg, Julia. "Soldiers to Civilians, Civilians to Soldiers. Poland and Ireland after the First World War" in: Robert Gerwarth, John Horne (Eds), *War in Peace. Paramilitary Violence after the Great War*, Oxford University Press 2012, p. 187.

emphasized. Needless to say that Serbian army was formed, developed, and prepared for that cause in the first place. Balkan Wars and especially Great War represented final stage in a process that began during last decade of 19th century. Following contemporary models in organization of army and its General staff, especially Prussian one, Serbian army entered wars with educated and trained officer's corps and modern armament. The organization of the army was territorial so it kept certain militia characteristic which was common feature for other Balkan armies as well.⁴

However, upon the creation of new, Yugoslav armed forces, the common Yugoslav identity was also emphasized in way of celebrating the national holidays, commemorations, holidays of individual units, respecting religious differences, etc.

Approach of the new state became apparent on the example of officers. Former Austria-Hungarian and Montenegrin officers were invited to apply for commissions in new armed forces. Specifically, from around 5.000 former Austro-Hungarian officers who applied, by the end of 1920 around 2.500 have been accepted in the new army. One of the criteria was that they have not been involved in war crimes against Serbian and Montenegrin population during combat operations and occupation.⁵ Around 3.500 officers from Serbian and 469 from Montenegrin army joined the ranks of new army.⁶ In following years the officer corps continued to be filled by officers coming from the Yugoslav military academies. In general, the ethnic composition of the state was reflected in the composition of the army, with few exceptions. For example, for obvious reasons within the Navy there was predominance of non-Serbian elements. Under special instruction former Austro-Hungarian officers were forbidden usage of German language.

⁴ Further readings: Ратковић-Костић, Славица. *Европеизација српске војске 1878-1903*, Војноисторијски институт, Београд, 2007; Милићевић, Милић. *Реформа војске Србије 1897-1900*, ВИЗ, Београд, 2002.

⁵ Bjelajac, Mile. *Jugoslovensko iskustvo sa multietničkom armijom 1918-1991*, Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, Beograd, 1999, pp. 21-25. (Hereinafter: Bjelajac, *Jugoslovensko iskustvo sa multietničkom armijom*)

⁶ Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine SHS*, p. 91-92.

However, many of them, especially generals, could be heard speaking or even commanding in German.⁷

The differences in approach to the doctrine of former Serbian and Austro-Hungarian officers, but also in understanding of the role of officers in working with soldiers their training, and everyday relations represented initial obstacles for successful unification. According to contemporary estimates, Serbian officers have been educated in national spirit unlike its Austro-Hungarian counterparts, which primarily, due to the nature of the state, have been loyal to the Austro-Hungarian imperial dynasty. Also, the facts that work with soldiers in the Austro-Hungarian army primarily has been done by non-commissioned officers led to creation of a distance between officers and soldiers which was untypical for their Serbian colleagues.⁸

At first it has been noticed that newly commissioned officers “from former Austria-Hungary and Montenegro”, beside their good intentions to get acquainted with Serbian regulations and rules, could not perform training activities autonomously. However, their overall results have been satisfactory if we take in consideration that officers used to compensate their paucity with additional effort and expertise. Understanding and support of their CO was most helpful.⁹ According to the French military attaché in Belgrade at that time, for former Austro-Hungarian officer:” The Spartan simplicity of surrounding in which he entered, sharpness of duty performance which ruled resembled a little on former ‘Viennese style’ where superficiality and snobbism occupied equal place as service itself.”¹⁰

War experience of Serbian army from the Balkan Wars and Great War represented main resource for different analyses and comparisons published in official military

⁷ Bjelajac, Mile. *Generali i admirali Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1918-1941*, INIS, Beograd, 2004, p. 19.

⁸ Bjelajac, *Jugoslovensko iskustvo sa multietničkom armijom*, p. 29.

⁹ Military archive Belgrade (MAB), register 4/3, box 56, file 8, document 2/205, Report of the command of Kosovo division district to the command of Third army district, confidential no. 4719 from 4 November 1919.

¹⁰ Bjelajac, *Jugoslovensko iskustvo sa multietničkom armijom*, p. 30.

journals between two world wars. Majority of the authors were Serbian officers, war-veterans from period 1912-1918.

Although, differences between Serbian and Austro-Hungarian officers have begun to emerge publicly during the existence of Yugoslav Kingdom, Serbian discourse, rules and traditions prevailed. However, despite numerous attempts to present Yugoslav military as cradle of Great Serbianism where other nationalities have been oppressed by ruling Serbian majority in the armed forces of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (especially since the introduction of king Alexander dictatorship in 1929) it has been insisted that the officers and NCO's Serbs, Croats and Slovenes are the bearers of the Yugoslav idea so they were obliged to identify themselves exclusively as a Yugoslavs. However, claims of Serbian dominance and oppression somehow entered many studies of Yugoslav Kingdom.¹¹ These claims mostly came from Croat activists and historians who were against Yugoslav integrations. When confronted with relevant sources they actually proved to be most incorrect. Immediately after the WWI three generals and three admirals from former Austro-Hungarian army have been accepted in the new Yugoslav army. These six together with other 57 officer of the Austro-Hungarian army which during the existence of Yugoslav kingdom have been promoted to the rank of general or admiral, counted in total 63 generals and admirals from Austro-Hungarian army – 51 general and 12 admirals. From them only 14 were Serbs. As for other members of the officers corps, at the beginning of 30's there were approximately 1775 former members of Serbian army and 1000 former members of the Austro-Hungarian army. Just before the WWII both groups consisted approximately 15% among 10.000 officers.¹² Clear illustration of Yugoslav army leadership policy related to national share is formation of Yugoslav army just before the WWII (1940-1941):

- in 16 divisional districts two CO were from former officers of Austro-Hungarian army,

¹¹ Further readings: Bićanić, Rudolf. *Ekonomska podloga hrvatskog pitanja*, Zagreb, 1938; Banac, Ivo. *Nacionalno pitanje u Jugoslaviji. Porijeklo, povijst, politika*, Globus, Zagreb, 1988; Bilandžić, Dušan. *Historija SFRJ. Glavni procesi 1918-1985*, Zagreb 1985; Rotschild, Joseph. *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars*, University of Washington Press 1974.

¹² Bjelajac, *Generali i admirali Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, p. 20-22.

- in 58 infantry, Guard and mountain regiments (within these 16 divisions) 18 CO were Croats,
- in 5 regiments of army group artillery 3 CO were Croats and one Russian.
- in 6 engineering regiments all 6 CO were Croats,
- in 6 cavalry brigades 2 CO were Croats,
- in 4 Air force brigades 2 CO were Croats,
- in 34 artillery regiments (within these 16 divisions) 11 CO were Croats, 6 Slovenes, 1 Muslim, 3 Russians, and 13 Serbs,
- among 11 Yugoslav military attaché's 4 were Serbs, 3 Croats and 4 Slovenes, etc.¹³

Socialist Yugoslavia

In April 1941 Yugoslav Kingdom collapsed as a result of joint military campaign of the Axes. State was occupied, territories divided and Yugoslavia practically vanished from maps. However, due to the tradition and outside influences resistance was unavoidable. So, socialist Yugoslavia was created from the desire to restore and rearrange the Yugoslav community which has experienced a collapse in the maelstrom of World War II, but on new ideological and political foundations.

During World War II in occupied Yugoslav territories several different military-political movements have been opposed to each other while fighting occupiers. Among them, being most successful and skillful as well having political and material support of the Western allies and Soviet Union proved members of the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (Partisans), which was organized and led by the Communist Party. In the last phase of the war the name was changed to Yugoslav Army. In May 1945 the Yugoslav Army had around 766 000 members.

In the years that followed Yugoslav army was faced with serious problems related to the general condition and quality of officer and NCO corps and their education and

¹³ Bjelajac, *Generali i admirali Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, p. 21-22.

training. In 1946, together officers who were sent to study in the Soviet Union, Yugoslav army had about 35.000 officers. However, in 1946, only 12.4% of the officers had formal military education.¹⁴

Within the officer corps of the Yugoslav armed forces clearly distinguish several groups. First, there were partisan officers who came from the ranks, with or without any formal military education (or any education at all). Their core comprised veterans of the Spanish Civil War. Some 1.500 Yugoslav citizens fought on the side of Republican forces and half of them survived. During their stay in Spain, many have completed some of the special courses for guerrilla warfare and subversive activities, what gave them significant advantage during combat activities in Yugoslavia from 1941 to 1945. Needless to say, that this group enjoyed the greatest confidence of the Communist Party leadership. In the final phase of the fighting in Yugoslavia, all commanders of the four army groups were veterans of the Spanish Civil War: Koča Popović, Petar Drapšin, Peko Dapčević and Kosta Nad.

In addition to the participants of the Spanish Civil War, other important group was the officers and noncommissioned officers of the armed forces of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia who managed to evade capture after the defeat in the April war and there were about 700 of them. Their expertise as experienced professionals had a great importance for the organization and training of partisan units during the war. An illustration of their importance is evident in the composition of partisan Supreme command. Thus, the Chief of Supreme Command Arso Jovanović (later General Staff), his Deputy Velimir Terzić and two Assistants, Rade Hamović and Rudolf Primorac, were pre-war officers. This fact, however, has been deliberately minimized in official interpretations of history from the period socialist Yugoslavia. For example, in official *Military encyclopedia* under the entry Supreme Headquarters in National-liberation War one can first notice names of all non-military members coming from the structures of the Communist party while military experts were only mentioned as "several military executives such as Chief of Staff and his assistances and heads of certain branches and

¹⁴ Bjelajac, *Jugoslovensko iskustvo sa multietničkom armijom*, p. 48.

services (Arso Jovanović, Velimir Terzić, Pavle Ilić, Vladimir Smirnov, Gojko Nikoliš and others)”.¹⁵

After the war, some 2,000 officers of the army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia – who returned from German captivity, joined the ranks of Yugoslav army. They consisted most of the teaching staff at military schools and in branches and services where high skill has been required, such as the Air Force and Navy.¹⁶ Among those were: Vjekoslav Kolb, Branko Popović, Ilija Đuknić which eventually have been promoted to generals. Also, there were generals: Đorđe Jovanović, Dragoljub Dinić, Milan Kragujević, Milan Zelenika, Vaclav Jelinek, Vuko Lepetić, Dobrosav Milenković, Miloš Obradović, Ljubiša Hadži-Popović, Josif Đorđević i Živan Ranković.¹⁷

As an illustration, since October 1944 in partisan Navy served 250 officers from former Royal Navy, most of them on high and important command positions. It was similar in the Air force where 220 officers and 460 NCO's from the ranks of the former Yugoslav Royal Air Force have served. Their common characteristics were their expertise, and indifference to communist ideology “*These professional military specialists mostly had different ideological and life views from partisan officers*”. Their role in the organization of Yugoslav army, education and training of its members was immeasurable. However, due to ideological reasons, this role has been deliberately ignored.¹⁸

Typical example is official publication under title *Development of Armed Forces of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia 1945-1985* in 25 volumes where participation of the former Royal officers, for example in military education, was mentioned but not explained entirely. Their way of work, knowledge and teaching practices could not find

¹⁵ Vrhovni štab u narodnooslobodilačkom ratu, *Vojna enciklopedija*, tom 10, VIZ, Beograd 1975, pp. 623-624.

¹⁶ Bojan Dimitrijević, *Jugoslovenska armija 1945 – 1954. Nova ideologija, vojnik i oružje*, ISI, Beograd 2006. p. 232.

¹⁷ Further readings: Mile Bjelajac, *Generali i admirali Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1918-1941*, INIS, Beograd 2004.

¹⁸ *Razvoj oružanih snaga SFRJ 1945-1985, Kadrovi i kadrovska politika*, VINC, Beograd 1989, p. 67 (Hereinafter: *Kadrovi i kadrovska politika*).

understanding of often simpleminded and non educated but ideologically indoctrinated partisan officers which only possessed experiences from guerrilla warfare. Royal officers were considered as theoreticians without practical knowledge. Right after the war their total number in system of military education was estimated between 30% and 50%.¹⁹ However, their knowledge of theory, especially of army organization and arts of war proved to be crucial for the development of armed forces in period of peace. First Head of the Yugoslav military academy (1944-1947) was General Savo Orović, former Royal officer who evaded to get captured by the Germans and as experienced officer, already in rank of Colonel, joined partisan forces becoming a member of Supreme Headquarter.²⁰

There is no need to point out that because the Communist Party was the main instigator and organizer of the uprising in World War II, its impact on officers and non-commissioned officers was overwhelming. For example, at the end of the war, the Communist Party had 140 000 members, of whom 80 000 have been located in the armed forces (officers, NCOs and soldiers).²¹ Following Soviet and original experiences from the war, party control was further strengthened by keeping the system of political commissars. This institution was finally abolished in 1953.

However, evident example of existing conservatism within Yugoslav military was immediate after war policy of relying on Soviet Union. In terms of organization of armed forces, as well in everything else, Yugoslav communists introduced the course of total relying on USSR. It was visible in structure, formations, rules of engagement and armament of armed forces. The old traditions were abandoned as well the doctrine of guerrilla warfare; even the Soviet marching drill has been introduced.

¹⁹ *Razvoj oružanih snaga SFRJ 1945-1985, Vojno školstvo JNA*,, VINC, Beograd 1989, p. 82 (Hereinafter: *Vojno školstvo JNA*).

²⁰ *Vojno školstvo JNA*, p. 49.

²¹ *Kadrovi i kadrovska politika*. p. 39.

Also, from 1945 till 1947, 3.696 officers and 1439 NCO's were sent to USSR for the purpose of elementary and additional education.²² They attended different schools and courses like: infantry, artillery, anti-aircraft, armored units, engineering, signals, cavalry, naval, medical, intelligence, counter-intelligence and political. In 1948, when Yugoslav split with Soviet Union there were 1424 members of YA, of whom 1082 returned home while 342 choose to stay.²³

However, despite the wish for unification and adjustment to Soviet standards, in short period of time it became obvious that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible to achieve. Many aspects of Soviet military organization were simply impossible to implement despite the huge number of Soviet instructors and intense willingness of Yugoslav Communist leadership. They simply did not have educated and trained cadres to achieve this. So, when in 1948 Yugoslav confrontation with the rest of international communism happened, officers raised and educated on Serbian military traditions did what they have been prepared for. Soviet models were abandoned and these officers gave their full contribution in reorganization of Yugoslav armed forces following Serbian and Yugoslav experiences and traditions.

So, when in August 1953 Yugoslav delegation, led by General Ljubo Vučković came to Washington DC reorganization was already on its way. Needless to say that General Ljubo Vučković was also former Royal officer who will in just two year from that event take a position of Chief of Staff of Yugoslav Peoples Army.

Practically, this paper represent yet another contribution to research of military factor and its importance and influences within Yugoslav context. In essence, the military was inseparable from the identities of both Yugoslav states. The army was the creator of both states, the guarantor of their survival and sovereignty, the environment in which the ruling ideology was spread out and demonstrated and practical polygon for building of a

²² See: *Југословенско-совјетски односи 1945-1956*, Зборник Докумената, МСП Републике Србије и МИП Руске федерације, Београд 2010, р. 151, Document бр. 67, Note of the Soviet embassy in Yugoslavia to the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign affairs, 19 December 1946. (Hereinafter: *Југословенско-совјетски односи 1945-1956*).

²³ *Kadrovi i kadrovska politika*. p. 78; and *Југословенско-совјетски односи 1945-1956*.

new, Yugoslav man who was supposed to overcome the existing differences among Yugoslav nations.

Also, the army was inseparable from the personalities of the two Yugoslav rulers who embodied the Yugoslav project - King Alexander I Karadjordjevic and Josip Broz Tito. The uniform was an integral part of their daily lives, and their links with the military and the war years were constantly emphasized. The army has represented surrounding which they often encountered with and where they enjoyed staying. Finally, the military eventually proved the most persistent and most loyal defender of the specific cult of the personality of both Yugoslav rulers.

SUMMARY

In Yugoslav examples, both those from mid-war kingdom and socialist republic after 1945, relying on Serbian participation and achievements in Great War became corner stone of new multinational armies. While in Yugoslav Kingdom this phenomenon was apparent and obvious and was connected with creation of new multinational army comprising of former adversaries, in socialist Yugoslavia it was quite the opposite. After initial ideologically driven course on total relying on Soviet Union came sobering and return to the already deeply imbedded models. Yugoslav conflict with Soviet Union which emerged meanwhile and initial differences between Yugoslav and Soviet model which prevented reasonable introduction of Soviet model in Yugoslav armed forces caused return to the indigenous traditions. However, the fact of return to the Serbian organization and traditions was deliberately concealed or minimized. Same happened with names and number of former Royal officers as well their role in this process. While partisan veterans, who often did not possess adequate military education and skills or any other education and skills at all, received all praise, former Royal officers executed all necessary changes and laid foundations for future development of Yugoslav armed forces.