

A King is Killed in Marseille: France and Yugoslavia in 1934

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King Alexander of Yugoslavia was assassinated along with the French Foreign Minister, Louis Barthou, in Marseille in October 1934 at the beginning of a state visit to France. Emigré Croatian and Macedonian separatist groups—the Ustaša and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (IMRO)—planned and carried out the assassination. The King's trip came after Barthou's very positive reception in the Belgrade parliament four months previously. While in Belgrade, Barthou sought to restore Yugoslav confidence in the Franco-Yugoslav alliance, which had suffered in the wake of French diplomatic overtures to the Soviet Union, including French support for admission of the Soviet Union into the League of Nations. Virulently anti-communist, Alexander had been critical of these initiatives. Further, Barthou wanted to show that France recognized the legitimacy of Alexander's personal regime, the royal dictatorship (established in 1929 and modified slightly by the constitution of 1931). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Barthou's presence would confirm France's anti-revisionist position vis-à-vis the new European states thus allaying any Yugoslav apprehensions regarding Franco-Italian co-operation, which had seemed all the more pressing to the French in the wake of the Nazi seizure of power.¹ Alexander's reciprocal visit would restore confidence in an alliance, shaped by war, but now under some pressure given the competing interests of Germany and Italy, and given the threat of the former to France's increasingly fragile sense of security. Thus, the unstated reason for the King's visit was to help open the way for the final consolidation of the Franco-Italian rapprochement that was difficult to achieve without Yugoslav co-operation, and to offer Yugoslavia diplomatic alternatives at a time when it was turning favorably towards Nazi Germany.

The memory of war shaped France's generally sympathetic attitude towards the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (re-named Yugoslavia in 1929). I argue, further, that this positive attitude affected Franco-Yugoslav relations and, subsequently, Yugoslavia's strong standing in international affairs irrespective of the Kingdom's abandonment of democratic processes and its penchant for repressing opposition. I also suggest that the impact of this interwar solidarity with the Yugoslav

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¹ See François Grumel-Jacquignon, *La Yougoslavie dans la stratégie de l'entre-deux-guerres (1918-1935). Aux origines du mythe serbe en France* (Bern, 1999), 463-464.

ideal reverberated through to the demise of the second Yugoslavia in the 1990s. My point of focus is French evocations of the alliance between France and Serbia in the Great War at the time of the assassination of Alexander in Marseille. The common experience of war and suffering provided the framework in which the Yugoslav state and the royal dictatorship were justified and supported. It could be argued, perhaps, that the outpourings of grief and the symbolic references to the war were superficial and characteristic of the kinds of manifestations and the sorts of platitudes that flow readily at such times. Indeed, François Grumel-Jaquignon, in his detailed 1999 study of Franco-Yugoslav relations between 1918 and 1935, argues that well before the assassination France enjoyed considerably less prestige in Yugoslavia than it had done in the wake of the war and that this loss of influence could be discerned in the Kingdom's cultural, economic and military policies.² Yugoslavia's disenchantment with its French ally was also, in part, a product of France's obsessive search, seemingly at any cost, for security through alliances, its "pactomania," as evidenced by its desire for closer ties with Italy to Yugoslavia's detriment. Initial French enthusiasm for the Kingdom also gradually subsided as it became clear that its government's methods for dealing with political and national problems were authoritarian and, on occasion, inflammatory.

Following the assassination in the Belgrade parliament, in 1928, of three leaders and representatives of the most popular Croatian party (the Croat Peasant Party,) French diplomats in Belgrade expressed their most serious reservations about the Yugoslav government. French critics of the regime (liberal and left) were unimpressed with the extent of political violence tolerated in the Kingdom, the Serbian ruling elite's disregard for the rights of the other constituent nationalities, its abandonment of democratic rule, and its receptivity to German trade and investment with the coming to power of the Nazis. Grumel-Jaquignon notes that this estrangement led to the debasement of "the Serbian myth" (the positive image of the supremacy of Serbia in the region) in some French quarters. However, he also shows that there was an overwhelming and persistent French attachment to that myth. This attachment was the basis of France's failure to respond appropriately to the diplomatic challenges posed by the difficulties the Kingdom faced almost immediately it came into existence. If we take into account a longer view and place French responses to the assassination in the broader context of the history of the South Slav state through to its final collapse and, by association, through to the demise of "the Serbian myth" itself, then it can be argued that the persistent references to the war and its associated comradeship were a critical element of the Franco-Yugoslav relationship.

On the eve of his arrival in Marseille, the King was the subject of much press coverage. Descriptions of Alexander focused on his qualities as a military leader. In those "somber days of 1915," recalled the correspondent of *Le temps*, it was the then Prince Alexander, Commander in Chief of the Serbian forces, who had been "everywhere, had shared in the privations of the most humble of soldiers, given the example of endurance, and of sangfroid, rekindled courage [and] galvanized people's spirits." The message Alexander sent Poincaré from Corfu, where the Serbian army was resting after its long trek in the bleakest of winters in retreat from the Austrian forces in 1915, according to *Le temps*, "would have delighted Plutarch:" "Serbia exists no more but her army remains intact. We are ready to continue the fight on the French Front."³ Such was the loyalty of a man who would make it his task to promote

² Ibid., 487-536.

³ *Le temps*, 9 Oct. 1934.

peace in the Balkans and central Europe, cultivate the arts and learning in his capital, Belgrade, and become the hope of the Yugoslav people.⁴ Thus Alexander, the “hero-king,” was also the “unifying king:” a military man as well as a man of state who, the writer in *Le temps* continued, had undertaken the difficult task of “forging a homogeneous state out of elements united by race and language, but separated by recent history.”⁵ The meaning of the word “recent,” here was relative. The final success in the Great War and the subsequent establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was consciously projected by the Entente powers and foreign lobbyists for Yugoslavia both as a fitting reward for the Serbs’ efforts in the war, and as bringing to an end a 500-year cycle of triumph, defeat, decline and gradual resurgence: the defeat on the Kosovo plain in 1389 had been avenged, once and for all. For Serbs, and many others it now appears, the time between 1389 and 1919 seemed to have been especially “condensed.”⁶

On arrival in Marseille, before doing anything else, the King was to have laid a wreath at the *monument aux morts* of the French Orient Army. But within minutes of setting foot on French soil, both he and Barthou were the victims of the bullets of the assassin. Inconsolable sadness mixed with horror was the immediate response. The idea that foreigners had so cruelly abused France’s generous hospitality and its long, chivalrous tradition of providing asylum, added to the humiliation of the terrible crime having been committed there.⁷ Alexander had traveled safely to all sorts of insalubrious destinations, reported the fascist paper, *Je suis partout*. For example, the King was well protected by the police during a recent visit to the capital of his country’s former foe, Bulgaria, which was teeming with the Macedonian plotters it harbored. Similarly, there were no incidents in Istanbul or in Athens. But, Alexander “did not survive one hour on the soil of friend and ally, France.” Predictably, *Je suis partout* posited a number of theories about “suspect milieux” in the “fiefdoms of Marseille” and was deeply critical of the potentially destabilizing presence of what it saw as predominantly (and in this case quite wrongly) left-leaning foreigners seeking asylum in France.⁸ There were murmurings, too, about the lack of adequate security and the weaknesses within the French government that this state of affairs was seen to reveal.

Overall, however, after the murders, the emphasis was not on placing blame but on reaffirming the solidity of the friendship between France and Yugoslavia. King Alexander’s achievement on the international front (the Little Entente, the Balkan Pact) was to be maintained above all else, as his was the role of a peacemaker. Thus a third accolade was bestowed upon him. The hero-king, decorated by the French government for his role in the Great War was, in addition to being a military giant and politically gifted (as *l’unifacteur*), *le pacificateur*.⁹ Fundamental to this fulsome appraisal of Alexander was the premise of the durability of the ties that bound France to Yugoslavia. There was an emphasis on the commonality between the two nations that was evidenced in their parallel experiences of the war. The large format magazine, *L’illustration*, drew on its archive of photographs offering its readers images of the King’s life, the underlying theme being that companions in battle would

⁴ Ibid., 10 Oct. 1934.

⁵ Ibid., 9 Oct. 1934.

⁶ See Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation* (Stanford, 1998), 47-48.

⁷ *Le temps*, 11 Oct. 1934.

⁸ *Je suis partout*, 13 Oct. 1934.

⁹ *Le temps* summarizing reports in *Le petit parisien*, 11 Oct. 1934.

remain friends in perpetuity.¹⁰ No one had suffered in the war as had the French and the Yugoslavs. No other countries knew the real price of peace or worked so painstakingly to make it last.¹¹ An address in the French Assembly on 6 November had established this irrefutably as the Yugoslavs themselves had recognized with gratitude: their friendship was solid and based on a “boundless trust.” An enemy of Alexander’s was an enemy of France’s. It was as simple as that.¹² The increasing trade and co-operation between Nazi Germany and Yugoslavia had elicited concerns in France but these were now in the background, placed within the context of the new country rightfully making its own way and maintaining independence without compromising its closest allies.

Marshal Franchet d’Espérey, commander of the Allied Armies of the Orient, recalling Alexander as his “companion in arms,” in a thirty-page address delivered in Paris in early November, said:

The alliance sealed on the Albanian coast and in the mountains of Macedonia has persisted, founded as it was on a common understanding of duties and rights. A pact of friendship links the people [of France and Yugoslavia], both committed to maintaining peace by respecting treaties, both conscious of their strength, and each assured of the support of the other in the defense of its just cause. ... But beyond all the diplomatic pacts ... [there is a bond] of mutual affection. Towards France, which had brought together its dispersed families and rebuilt its army, Yugoslavia has retained the most touching gratitude. And we, moved by the bravery and tenacity of the people of heroes, gave them as their king [father of Alexander] a lieutenant ... who himself had fought for France [in 1870]. ... Such profound and heartfelt sentiments are indestructible; the alliance between France and Yugoslavia will endure as long as the two peoples themselves [endure]—and we know them to be immortal.¹³

The veterans of the French Orient Army had led other *anciens combattants* in the memorial services and rituals in various cities after Alexander’s death. The fact that 11 November was so close stamped the tone of the reporting of these events, moving and as inclusive as they were. Moreover, the death of Poincaré, not a week after the assassinations, symbolic of the passing of the generation that had led France through the ordeal, lent the process of remembering and commemorating in the context of the Great War that much more urgency. In December, three new medals were struck and released simultaneously; they bore the busts of Poincaré, Barthou and Alexander.¹⁴ The service at the Arc de Triomphe on Armistice Day itself was to focus on honoring the dead King. His death mask and a huge standard bearing his coat of arms provided the centerpiece behind the altar for the preparatory all-night vigil on 10 November at the Arc de Triomphe. Cardinal Verdier, representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church in Paris and other dignitaries made their way to pay tribute while through the night a constant stream of *anciens combattants* ensured there was not a moment when there was not someone silently keeping watch.¹⁵ *L’illustration* covered also, early in the New Year, a pilgrimage of the soldiers of the French Orient Army to Alexander’s tomb in Belgrade. Two hundred and fifty men participated and were met by

¹⁰ See for example *L’illustration*, 13 Oct. 1934.

¹¹ *Le temps*, 10 Oct. 1934.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10 Oct. and 10 Nov. 1934.

¹³ Marshal Franchet d’Espérey, “Alexandre 1^{er}, mon compagnon d’armes,” *Revue des deux mondes*, 15. Dec. 1934, 765-792 (790-791).

¹⁴ *L’illustration*, 15 Dec. 1934, 557.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17 Nov. 1934, 403.

enthusiastic throngs of people on all the platforms of all the stations through which they passed on their way to Belgrade: how reassuring it all was in the wake of the tragedy the previous October. Now, more than ever, the memory of their wartime comradeship had to be maintained.¹⁶

There is evidence to suggest that these responses to Alexander's death drew on an established tradition of relating developments in the new state to its wartime record. The *poilus* of the French Orient Army, for example, had already made a pilgrimage to Yugoslavia and to the graves of the French war dead there. That was in 1929 (the year the dictatorship was established) and, similarly, the occasion of much reflection on the ties that bound the French and Yugoslavs to each other. The splendid *monuments aux morts* in Bitola, Skopje and Belgrade itself, were the sites of civic and military services, occasions on which the local population (folksy in the smaller villages and well-heeled in the towns) greeted the *poilus* with heartfelt enthusiasm. How moving it was to see that the French war graves, though maintained by the French government, were the focus of the tender attentions of those living nearby. Not bought, but hand-made candles flickered on these graves on the appropriate feast days and days of commemoration. Serbian mothers watched over the dead sons of France and this re-assured the pilgrims that their comrades could rest in peace here.¹⁷ In a curious twist on the interwar cult of the fallen soldier which allowed for the partial integration of the Slovenes, who had fought not with France but against it in the Great War, a monument was erected in Ljubljana in 1929 to the unknown soldier of the Grand Armée. Its unveiling recalled the contribution of Napoleon to the Slovenian-Yugoslav struggle against encroachments on its identity by (the ever problematic, in France's view) Austria.¹⁸ In fact, Alexander was likened to another great liberator, Napoleon himself, the man who, we are told, had been "the first" to suggest a south Slavic state with his Illyrian provinces. The fact that the highly centralized Kingdom, which sought not a South Slav synthesis but identified Yugoslavism with the dominant nation, had borrowed much from the French model of government and administration with its first constitution in 1921, seemed simply to confirm that view of ongoing French influence in the region.

The memory and commemoration of the Great War provided the framework in which the political and diplomatic problem that the assassination had opened up to the world, was scrutinized. Take the example of the treatment of the Yugoslav dictatorship. It is true that Socialists and Communists were disparaging. Léon Blum, leader of the Socialists, said his party had always been critical of the fascist dictatorship but rejected the methods adopted by its opponents. In January 1934 when there was talk of a possible royal visit, the Communists arranged a demonstration in Paris against it and against the "fascist dictatorship" (now celebrating its fifth anniversary): according to the communist paper, *L'humanité*, "democratic France's ally" oppressed minorities and workers and was responsible for "unspeakable crimes."¹⁹ Communists subsequently greeted the King in Marseille by singing the International. After the assassinations, *L'humanité* expressed concerns about the way in which the government might deal with other foreigners, workers in particular, who

¹⁶ Ibid., 12 Jan. 1935, 34.

¹⁷ The coverage of this "pilgrimage" was extensive. See *ibid.*, 19 Oct. 1929, 432-435; 2 Nov. 1929, 490-496; 16 Nov. 1929, 563-568.

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, 23 Feb. 1935, 214-215 and 26 Oct. 1929, 460-461.

¹⁹ "Il y a cinq ans Alexandre de Serbie violait la constitution," in *L'humanité*, 8 Jan. 1934. Reprinted in Grumel-Jacquignon, *La Yougoslavie*, 482.

had sought asylum and a better life in France.²⁰ *Je suis partout*, as we have seen, had a lot of disparaging things to say about such workers, but nothing to say about the dictatorship. Others, seemingly unselfconsciously, praised its moderation.

Radical, republican France came out in full force, it appeared, in defense of a royal dictatorship. Indeed, Yugoslavia's dictatorship was seen to be defensible because it preserved the unity of the country and hence preserved the peace. Described as a dictatorship that snatched the country from the threat of civil war, it was therefore an interim measure, a necessity before democracy could be restored. Everyone knew this because everyone knew that Alexander was not disposed towards dictatorship, that he had "no taste for absolute power." The great tragedy was that his noble intention—preserving the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia and international peace—led to his untimely demise.²¹ During the war much had been made in propaganda about the autocratic powers of Austria and the intertwining of self-determination and democracy in the struggle to establish the successor states, Yugoslavia especially. French opinion had long demonized the Austro-Hungarian Empire and sought its dismemberment on the grounds that it would be replaced by a more fitting "suite" of states. Memories of war and its goals were, as we know, of necessity, selective. But any unease that might have been felt at the unqualified official support expressed in 1934 for a royal dictatorship (which was not moderate or benign), was assuaged, in part at least, by the knowledge that there were supposedly no committed republicans in Yugoslavia! In addition, all parties in Yugoslavia, it was argued, paid tribute to the dynasty and sought its preservation.²² This attitude was reinforced by a fairly basic miscalculation on the part of the French. Yugoslavs (Croats, Serbs and Slovenes) were obviously mourning the death of the King. The almost universal abhorrence in Yugoslavia for the crime, and the sympathy it elicited for his widow and their son Peter, the boy King, were thus interpreted as support for the system Alexander had instituted. The French analyzed Yugoslav opposition within this context of the apparent widespread grass roots support for the dynasty in its bereavement. Thus, French writers could argue, a great deal of fuss about the dictatorship and some "poisonous criticism" of it came not from legitimate opposition, but from the permanently recalcitrant.²³ Plainly, according to elements in the French press, this negative criticism was overstated. Noted, with a complete absence of irony, was the fact that even the leader of the republican Croat Peasant Party, who was, at the time of the 1934 assassination in jail on political charges, had sent condolences from his prison cell to the Yugoslav Queen.²⁴ This was presented as evidence of the unanimity of support for and affiliation with the state.

Commentators concentrated on the nature of the Marseille killings almost to the complete exclusion of an analysis of the possible reasons for the assassins' recourse to extreme behavior. The focus on the event rather than its causes was probably predictable given the recent (July 1934) killing of Austria's chancellor, Engelbert Dollfuss by Austrian Nazis and with the specter of fascist and Nazi rhetoric on the glorification of violence on the near horizon. Equally, in France itself, the riots in the wake of the Stavisky scandal and the wave of anti-fascism that ensued, provide important background. The focus on the alleged fascism of the groups responsible for the assassination which were themselves harbored, in exile, by fascist states (or

²⁰ Summarized in *Le temps*, 11 October 1934.

²¹ Charles Loiseau, "Après la mort du Roi," *La revue universelle*, 15 Nov. 1934, 401-414 (406).

²² *Ibid.*, 411-412.

²³ *Ibid.*, 407.

²⁴ *Le temps*, 18 Oct., 1934.

revisionist states deemed all but fascist), deflected attention from the nature of the royal dictatorship. A pamphlet which fulminated against the Macedonian separatists and their role in the assassination, quoted from Henri Barbusse's vigorous 1928 denunciation of IMRO. He, like others after him, noted the "absolutely indisputable" fact of "the collusion of autonomists with fascism," but wrote nothing of the treatment of Macedonians in the successor state.²⁵

In many regards the dictatorship itself was arguably as, if not more, coherently fascist in both its rhetoric (on the notion that Yugoslavia constituted one race or nation) and its methods (discrimination against non-Serbs, a reliance on police brutality, arbitrary arrests of political opponents and extreme anti-communism) than were its opponents at that stage. Defending one's support for such a regime on the basis of an anti-fascist stance was to attempt to defend morally, the morally indefensible. This changed, up to a point, when the popular frontism of communists everywhere led to a different view of the successor states and an end to the policy that separatism was to be supported for its national revolutionary potential. "Yugoslavia Versailles," as the Kingdom was dubbed, once viewed by the Comintern as the quintessential product of the imperialist war, the "prison house of nations," became acceptable on the understanding that it could be reformed along more equitable lines from the national perspective.²⁶ So while France's indulgence towards a fascist-leaning dictatorship can be explained and contextualized, it could also be argued this was an inadequate response and as a result of it, the dictatorship was retrospectively justified, that is, justified in the light of the subsequent assassination of the King.

Some commentators in France, as elsewhere, equated the troubles in Yugoslavia with its repressive centralism, with the Serbian King's hegemonic policies on the question of nationalities, and the vagaries of the police state that had itself set the precedent of political assassinations and terror. But this was not a view that was widely accepted. On the contrary, the lesson of Marseille was not that dictatorship and the rescinding of rights were inappropriate strategies for solving the problems Yugoslavia faced, but that these were necessary and acceptable. As such there was no need to grapple with the issues, just their consequences (in this case terrorism). Thus the "inexpiable crime," was of such an order that European civilization "risked being plunged back into the darkest centuries of its history." There had to be a united front of civilized nations against terrorists. Words like "shocking," "vile" and "barbarous" were common in reports on the assassination, an act which, we can read in *Le Temps*, indicated that the "instincts of primitive beasts were being unleashed in the heart of Europe."²⁷ Presumably political assassinations in the parliament of Belgrade, because they had occurred not in the heart of Europe but on the corn of its little toe, were less threatening to civilization. The assassins' flight from the rational took the national question in Yugoslavia out of the realm of a generalized political discussion and into that of myth and demonization. This response had something to do with the understandable unwillingness to dignify the assassins' methods with reasoned debate. But it also had rather a lot to do with two other factors: the widely accepted stereotypes of Balkan political culture; and a reliance, as we have seen, almost at any cost, on a system of pacts and alliances in the hope that another war would be averted.

²⁵ Edouard E. Plantagenet, *Les crimes d'ORIM, organisation terroriste* (Paris, [n.d.]), 29.

²⁶ See Mark Wheeler, "Pariahs to Partisans to Power: the Communist Party of Yugoslavia," in *Resistance and Revolution in Mediterranean Europe 1939-1948*, ed. Tony Judt (London and New York, 1989), 110-156 (115).

²⁷ See *Le temps*, 11, 14 and 15 Oct. 1934.

Self-interest thus merged with an idealism borne of war and suffering, producing a mindset which was almost impossible to dislodge.

Framing the interpretation of the assassination in terms of the memory of war thus reveals a great deal about the fortunes of interwar Yugoslavia and the way it was perceived and projected internationally. A vast historiography surrounds the subject of the memory of war and twentieth-century history. We know from the example of France that if the Great War was not a totally transforming experience, socially, culturally or politically, it was nonetheless a cataclysmic event in the life of the nation. Different French men and women remembered the war in different ways. A Socialist municipality may have commemorated its lost sons with a poignant evocation in stone of the humble *poilu*, while a Catholic municipality may have sought comfort in raising a modified version of the Pietà, evoking the universality of the suffering of mothers whose sons had died in the fields of battle. But the overwhelming sense of a nation united in bereavement was not compromised by this plurality of memories. It was not diminished but strengthened in a process whereby the local, regional, and national or collective ritual of commemoration and mourning accommodated the individual, or personal and familial sense of loss. And so, what has been described as “the very exuberance of civil society” provided for the needs of the state and its diverse citizens at a time of national mourning.²⁸ Thus, regardless of the dissident voices which, in France, had been potentially destabilizing in 1917 for example, the victory and the collective bereavement assumed a dimension that was as “national” (if not triumphalist) and as inclusive as possible, given the range of opinion accommodated in the modern democratic state.

On the contrary, evocations of World War I were to complicate (perhaps even thwart) the project of state building in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the first Yugoslavia. This Kingdom was a product of the Great War. Proclaimed in December 1918, it was accepted as a *fait accompli* at the Paris Peace Conference. When it became known as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929, this change was accompanied by the suspension of both parliament and the constitution and the establishment of the royal dictatorship. The history of the Kingdom was fraught with dissent. This was to be especially evident at the time of the concerted program of national homogenization embarked upon by King Alexander after 1929. World War One helped forge Yugoslavia perhaps, but the experience of Yugoslavs during the war, and their subsequent memory of it, were not integrative forces in the new state. Some Yugoslavs had fought alongside the victors but the majority (including Habsburg Serbs) fought on the losing side. So, in the early narrative of Yugoslavia’s making, it was one nation, the Serbs, loyal allies of the Entente powers who had begun the battle valiantly, suffered terrible defeats as well as the pain of evacuation, then rose triumphant to liberate and re-unite their south Slav brothers. This experience, which became the Yugoslav (as opposed to the Serbian) story of the war, could not be transposed onto the population as a whole regardless of the fact that by war’s end large numbers of Croats and Slovenes had abandoned the Habsburg cause. However much one might have chosen to argue that the establishment of the successor state was a reflection of the general will (or, according to some, the product of a Yugoslav revolution), the war experience and the memory of it was not, and

²⁸ The literature on this topic is vast. Here I have drawn specifically on Peter Fritzsche, “The Case of Modern Memory,” *Journal of Modern History*, 73 (2001): 87-117 (105); Antoine Prost, “Monuments to the Dead,” in *Realms of Memory; The Construction of the French Past*, vol. 2, ed. Pierre Nora (New York, 1997), 306-330; and Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning; The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1996).

never could be, an integrative force in the new state. Regardless of the way in which Serbs, or Croats, or Slovenes or the forgotten nationalities like the Macedonians for that matter, sought to shape the successor state, to many outsiders the words Serbia and Yugoslavia were interchangeable. This was obvious during the war and for the good part of a decade after the war. To a large extent it was inevitable. The French fought on the Balkan Front not with “Yugoslavs,” but with Serbs. French diplomatic correspondence from Belgrade in the early interwar years routinely referred simply to Serbia, rather than the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. This was not surprising given that Yugoslavia was projected (consciously and repeatedly) in Allied propaganda as the Serbs’ reward for their loyalty and their unique suffering and loss in the war.

What complicated the situation further was the fact that other symbols which could not be universalized in the forging of a Yugoslav identity were superimposed onto the Serbian victory of 1918. An unfinished monument to Serbia’s triumphs in the Balkan Wars, for example, was recycled, in 1919, as the World War I victory monument in a Belgrade park.²⁹ A pragmatic move, perhaps, but not an especially diplomatic initiative given that a large percentage of “Yugoslavs” were not involved in the Balkan Wars. Moreover, the nations embroiled in the second of these conflicts were attempting to negate the identity of another group of “south Slavs,” the Macedonians. Macedonia was simply “Southern Serbia” in the interwar years, and as far as the Bulgars and Greeks were concerned, it did not exist.

Yugoslavia came about not, as some would have it, as the result of a national revolution. Nor was it simply a strategic necessity after the war. Yugoslavia was imagined and defined in a burgeoning discourse on issues of race and nation in the second half of the nineteenth century. But it was the war that occasioned the transformation of this vision into one of the most problematic of the successor states. Then, as a result of the war, Yugoslavia had become, in the eyes of many nations, a necessity, strategically and diplomatically, and its nature was at least in part shaped by that perception. The example of France and responses to the assassination of Alexander in Marseille provide us with a dramatic point of focus for an elaboration of this point.

An historian of Yugoslav culture and identity, Andrew Wachtel, argues that Serb nationalist writers of the 1970s and 1980s tended often to focus on the Great War.³⁰ Novelists began their family sagas with the martyrdom of Serbia between 1914 and 1918 and the elaboration of the pedigree of sacrifice and suffering, continuing through to the second great conflagration of the twentieth century, reached its nadir (or zenith, depending on one’s position) in the 1980s with the perceived attempts by the Kosovars to wipe out the Serbian presence in its “historic” home. The dominance of this narrative of decline and resurgence, it could be argued, precipitated the violent disintegration of the country. In the official history of the First World War, the projected Yugoslav synthesis, in a sense, denied Serbs aspects of their personal and collective history because it had attempted (unsuccessfully) to universalize them. Thus, over time, an inversion had taken place. The Croats, considered first restless, then un-redeemably nationalist and, finally, “fanatically” separatist because of their seeming “obsession” with Serbian centralist hegemony almost from the moment of Yugoslavia’s inception, had become the oppressors. This was effected through their identification, in literature and in evocations of World War II, most notably in the

²⁹ Wachtel, *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation*, 114-115.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 200.

person of the Croat, Tito, with a Yugoslav ideal or synthesis which apparently further negated elements of Serbia's "Yugoslav" history.

It was not the Great War, but the Second World War, that was the Yugoslavs' war. The partisan struggle was one of the foundational tenets of the new Yugoslavia and gave it its legitimacy. The success of the partisans was such that for a period of time, perhaps for between twenty and thirty years, it served as one of the primary integrative forces in Yugoslav political and national life. However, as was the case in the 1920s and 1930s, the potentially integrative discourse on war, nation and identity came to be associated with a system of rule that cynically undermined those foundational myths and which was dismissive of individual and collective rights and freedoms. Perhaps when we consider the Kingdom in this light we should also recall the words of one incisive observer of the destruction of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.³¹ He wrote that Yugoslavia fell not so much because it was multinational, but because it was undemocratic and unrepresentative and, we could add, supported and championed internationally as such. The same could well be said of the Kingdom.

³¹ Viktor Meier, *Yugoslavia. A history of its demise*, trans. Sabrina P. Ramet (London and New York, 1999).