“Europe may well be gravely apprehensive – fearful that an unprecedented plague will sweep to the Old World”.¹ When the *American Red Cross Magazine* in April 1915 emphasized the health threat coming from Serbia, the grave dimension of the typhus epidemic was already evident. The devastating consequences of this infectious disease were established not only in the collective memory but also in the “Serbian narrative”² – similar to the withdrawal of the army and civilian population in the winter of 1915, known as the “Serbian Golgotha”. This epidemic had long-lasting effects that were felt well into the post-war era. Sir David Henderson,³ general director of the *League of Red Cross Societies*, which was founded in 1919, defined it as “the most serious scourge since the Middle Ages”.⁴ As a result of the rapid spread of the “Balkan-Plague”,⁵ the whole country was declared a direct health threat:

Serbia, with other Balkan countries, is a menace to the health of the western world. ... The intensity of sickness and misery which has existed in

that region has made the Balkans almost a synonym of death, starvation, and disease.⁶

This paper gives an overview of the deficiencies in Serbia during the typhus epidemic and of how it was finally brought under control. Therefore, this article discusses not only the development and the results of this dangerous mass disease, but also the implementation of different control strategies from national and international organizations. Furthermore, it describes anti-epidemic controls as well as coercive measures that the population had to endure. Taking into consideration the medical experiments of physicians, this paper analyzes the intentions, characteristics and consequences of medical missions and questions the predominant influence of foreign physicians. Finally, the issue of how the infectious disease was carried into Serbia and the consequential assignment of collective guilt will be observed critically.

The Initial Situation

Although the Serbian health system had been continuously modernized since the end of the 19th century, it still had numerous deficiencies that could hardly have been remedied until the outbreak of the First World War. Consequently, Serbia found itself in a precarious position, which was further aggravated by the insufficient sanitary conditions resulting from the exertion of the Balkan Wars. The planned reform of the military and civil medical service was prevented due to the outbreak of the Great War,⁷ thus neither could the losses be compensated nor could the health system be repaired. Therefore, the state of the medical services was inadequate even before the war began: medical equipment had been used up or destroyed, bandages were partially mouldy and there were neither enough stretchers nor portable pharmacies. Additionally the long period of war from 1912 to 1918 had brought a general deterioration of hygienic conditions not only in the army, but also in the civilian population, which was lacking even basics such as soap and clean clothes. The short period
