In 1906, two years before the 1908 annexation crisis over Bosnia and Herzegovina, the so-called ‘Pig War’ erupted between Serbia and Austria Hungary. It lasted until 1911 and saw the Dual Monarchy shut its borders to Belgrade’s agricultural exports, 75 per cent of Serbia’s export market. The trigger was probably Serbia’s decision to purchase French artillery rather than the competing Austro-Hungarian Škoda guns.¹ This customs war fueled growing antagonism between Belgrade and Vienna before the First Balkan War of 1912, while providing quick-firing French 75mm and 120mm artillery for Serbia’s Army. It also made Serbia dependent on France and its allies for materiel and ammunition.

The ‘Pig War’ aside, the story of Serbia’s artillery in the Great War is colorful and diverse: in 1914–15, Serbia used a panoply of front-line cannon manufactured by Schneider, Škoda, de Bange, Krupp, and Broadwell, alongside British, French and Russian naval artillery. Artillery would play an overwhelming role on the Balkan Front during 1914–15, particularly the victories, defeats, and cataclysmic disasters such as the Kolubara Battle and the Central Powers invasion and occupation of Serbia in late 1915. From 1916 to 1918, a re-equipped and much smaller Serbian Army in exile on the Thessaloniki Front was armed almost exclusively with French artillery.

The war’s first five months gave the sharpest contrast between the theories and realities of the modern battlefield, based on the changes wrought by technology. Nowhere is this truer than the Balkan Front, where Serbia’s artillery corps had already learned from the Balkan Wars, and where it faced a much larger foe that still adhered to older practices. These first months also offered brutal and incontrovertible proof of a lesson crucial to the modern battlefield: that the side with mishandled (or no) artillery would always lose.

Balkan War Experience

For Serbia, war began in 1912, and the First and Second Balkan Wars (1912, 1913) provided two years of invaluable experience. Artillery officers were the most

intelligent, and “the artillery were considered the elite of the Serbian Army,” with many of the most prominent general officers having finished artillery school. During these relatively mobile wars, the Serbian army used its artillery more effectively than the other combatants, or as one Great Power observer condescendingly phrased it, they were “less timid” than the Bulgarians, Turks, and Greeks. Contemporary observers portrayed Serbia’s army as aggressive and innovative in handling field pieces, mountain guns, and heavy artillery, ignoring prevalent French doctrines in ways that would soon become accepted practice among all combatants of the First World War. The heavy artillery was thought to have been particularly effective.

While the Bulgarians kept their field guns at maximum range, the Serbians usually moved them in close, occasionally to exposed positions on the battlefield. Commanders were advised to position batteries less than 4,000 meters from the enemy lines: long range firing was considered “heretical” and “was condemned by the rules and the higher commanders.” This meant that “when the situation demanded it, they not only took unconcealed positions, but actually moved to a closer one during the course of the battle” to better support the infantry. Serbian field artillery was very mobile, having roughly double the number of horses of its adversaries.

The Serbs often improvised. During the Battle of Manastir, the Morava 1 Division dragged four field guns up to the crest of a mountain, then each night used ropes to haul the guns closer to the Turkish forces, lowering guns down steep slopes by hand: infantry carried fuse setters and 2,500 shells uphill to the battery. Because the crest had room for only four cannon, and because there was a need to fire at several targets simultaneously, each of the four guns in the battery acted independently, firing faster and engaging targets sooner than had they operated as a single battery.