
Andrej Mitrović’s (1937-2013) survey of Serbia’s involvement in the First World War is the result of many years of dedicated and skilled work from a Serbian historian of exemplary talents. Beginning with his first book, *Yugoslavia at the Peace Conference 1919-1920*, written on the basis of his doctoral dissertation, Mitrović has evinced interest in the First World War and the results of this landmark event in contemporary history. The early period of Mitrović’s historical research is also marked by his contributions to the development of *The History of the Serbian Peoples*, a monograph collection in several volumes of particular importance. A flurry of publications followed, dealing with Serbia immediately prior to, during and after the Great War. His monographs on European history have also centred on the impact and implications of the first global conflict of the twentieth century.

The book in question here is the result of Mitrović’s extended studies on the topic. He has expanded on his earlier work on the First World War and synthesised the results of a range of other researchers. Hence, *Serbia’s Great War* is the outgrowth of a sustained and systematic engagement with the history of the Serbs. It is worth mentioning that, even in its abridged translation, this book exceeds all others in any language on the subject. In addition, Mitrović’s book provides an excellent entry point and overview of the historian’s development from his initial article, first published in 1963, “The Peace Conference of Paris, 1919.”

In the course of his research on Serbia and the First World War, Mitrović has explored the archives in Belgrade (Military, Serbian, Yugoslav and the archives of the Academy of Arts and Sciences); Vienna (Kriegsarchiv, Allgemeines Verwaltungssarchiv, Haus-Hof-und Staatsarchiv); Munich (Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Kriegsarchiv); Koblenz (Bundesarchiv); Freiburg (Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv); Potsdam (Zentrales Staatsarchiv) and London (Public Records Office). However, as betokens synoptic historical examinations, Mitrović’s work did not restrict itself to archival information. He availed himself of many other materials, including public building records, memoirs and works of literature. His research was by no means restricted to Serbian historians, some of whom had doctorates on specific topics relating to Serbia and the First World War, but instead positioned his conclusions and interpretations on the Great War and its aftermath in the broader European context. His orientation was always towards international literature, particularly German and, to a lesser extent, English and Russian. When, in 1984, the first edition of Mitrović’s book appeared, it was greeted in scholarly circles as a layered, lucid, scrupulously written magnum opus.

A particular quality of the book that may be singled out is that, despite the fact that the ostensive theme is war, at no stage does Mitrović subsume his study to the dictates of military history. Troop movements, combat deployments and officer training, although covered throughout, are not central to the study. Instead, Mitrović opts for at once a more difficult and fruitful approach,
following the human and social interactions and phenomena that led to war, describing the changes in societies caught in the conflict. He maps the gaps between plans and desires on the one hand and the harsh actualities of the participants. He dissects propaganda slogans and the motives and causes of varied events, seeking to understand and explain the bloodshed and why the Kingdom of Serbia found itself at the centre of it.

The author sets a clear chronological framework by choosing to open the book with a chapter devoted to the period between the assassination of Franz Ferdinand by Gavrilo Princip and the actual outbreak of the war. The chapter reconstructs events in connection with the assassination and the diplomatic activities that followed as well as the ruinous demonstrations against the Serbs that gripped the southern areas of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (predominantly centred on Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia). In the process, he has highlighted the role of the conspiratorial organization, “Black Hand.” Drawing attention to the outbreak of war and the decisions of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in relation to it in this section, Mitrović discerns several causes, broader and deeper than the Sarajevo assassination, causes that have formed over years and that have their origin in special needs, causes that have no substantial ties to Serbia itself. The findings and lines of argument are augmented with a large body of documentation, particularly from German speaking countries. Questions surrounding these events are far from resolved and historians continue to debate them.

There is little doubt that the questions raised in the opening chapter of this book, in particular those regarding the circumstances surrounding the assassination, will continue to elicit new research and interpretation. Miroslav Perišić released a new book in 2014 that brought new resources to the subject and sharpened understanding of the assassination, its context, and the ways in which it has been politically revised and coopted. Perišić’s work continues where Mitrović left off, demonstrating that comprehensive understanding of the circumstances surrounding the outbreak of the First World War is far from achieved. From the middle of the nineteen eighties to the civil wars of the nineties, many artefacts that were looted in the two world wars and the documents surrounding their disappearance have made their way back to Serbia from Austria and Germany. According to archivists, there are approximately half a million pages of documents, much of these yet to be systematically accessed. There are also materials in the Russian State Military History Archive that are yet to be examined. Therefore, in the period that separates us from the first edition of Mitrović’s book, there have arisen not only new interpretations and specialist studies, but a wealth of newly discovered resources. Nevertheless, Serbia’s Great War continues as both a touchstone in the field and a scholarly springboard for future research.

Among the qualities that have kept Mitrović’s book relevant is the way in which he analyses the various social and political processes and ideals in parallel with clashes on the front. In accessing the position of the Serbian government in relation to the war, Mitrović in fact dissects its political programme, placing it in the context of collective Serbian social attitudes towards her allies and foes. Conversely, Mitrović investigates the ideological presup-