Andrej Mitrović,
SERBIA'S GREAT WAR, 1914-1918,
Introduction by Professor Mark Cornwall,
London: Hurst & Company, 2007, xvi + 386 pages.

Serbia's "Great War" was indeed *la Grande Guerre*, that of 1914-1918. Too often, history books now remember only that Serbia was the (unwilling) cause of that war, and public perception then fast-forwards to the 1990s, when Serbia was generally cast as the villain of the "wars of the Yugoslav succession". Even to students of World War I, it seems to disappear from the screen between December 1915 – when it collapsed under the onslaught of German, Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian armies – and September 1918 – when an Allied offensive, with a resurrected Serbian army, broke through the Thessaloniki Front. Yet at the time, Serbia's resistance, the winter retreat of its aged monarch, with officialdom, parliament, army and countless refugees, was the stuff of legend. A wave of Serbophilia swept through public opinion in Allied countries – notably in France and Great Britain. V. Eskičević's painting, reproduced as a well-known picture postcard and used as the cover illustration of the volume here reviewed, symbolises it. Greek historians also remember that Corfu was occupied by Entente troops to provide safe haven for the exiled Serbs, whose government maintained a symbolic continuity there for the rest of the war. However, King Constantine's government would not allow Serbian troops to go overland to the Macedonian Front; only when Venizelos formed his counter-government was the Serbian army placed at the centre of Allied forces there.

Professor Andrej Mitrović is a leading Serbian historian whose work is highly regarded across the former Yugoslavia and continental Europe. He received the Herder Prize in 2001 and the Konstantin Jireček Medal in 2004. The first edition of his authoritative study of Serbia in World War I was published as far back as 1984. The present volume accomplishes the feat of being both a newly edited and a shortened rendering into English of the second, expanded, Serbian edition of 2004. It is thus the first fully comprehensive (yet condensed) study of Serbia's part in World War I in any language. It covers all its aspects, from the origins and the initial phase of the war in Serbia to 1915, to its final phase with the offensive from the Thessaloniki Front and the events that led to the setting up of Yugoslavia in 1918. What actually happened to Serbia's territory and its inhabitants is actually a topic that has hitherto largely escaped the attention of historians in the wider world.

Mitrović is a careful scholar who never asserts, assumes or refutes more than his sources allow. He investigates again the question of Serbia's responsibility. It was already well known that its government could not have been behind the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand; nor could any Serbian organisation, not even Colonel Dimitrijević "Apis", of Black Hand fame. The young men involved were all Austro-Hungarian nationals – not all of them ethnically Serbs. Austro-Hungarian investigators found no evidence of any Serbian government involvement; they even saw reasons for believing it had nothing to do with it. The public mood in Serbia rejoiced at the assassination, but not much grief was shown in Vienna, and there was some joy too in Budapest. The German kaiser was satisfied with the Serbian response to the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum, yet Austria-Hungary attacked. Serbia had not yet recovered from the Balkan Wars, and its latest territorial accretion was practically a separate territory. When attacked, it found in the idea of unification of the South Slavs both an incentive to resist and a lifeline for future survival. Even though it did not have the time to think about how the other South Slavs would regard its aspiration to be at the centre of the process, the more it proved itself capable of facing dangers, the more it was seen as a (if not *the*) central factor of the Yugoslav political front. By December 1914, its new coalition government was able to have the National Assembly, evacuated to Niš, vote a resolution that the war had, at the moment of its inception, turned into "a struggle for the liberation and unification of all our brother Serbs, Croats and Slovenes". The Yugoslav programme strengthened Serbia's resistance with an ideology that also provided a propaganda weapon to weaken Austria-Hungary. Henceforth both official Serbia, most of the Montenegrin politicians abroad and the representative Yugoslav émigrés from Austria-Hungary saw Yugoslav unity as an answer to threats from foreign powers, however much the immaturity of the concept meant confusion.

Even though the defeat of the Austro-Hungarian 5th Army in Serbia in August 1914 was actually the first Allied victory in World War I, it gave Serbia and Montenegro, both totally exhausted by the effort, no more than a ten-month break. With the all-out joint Austro-Hungarian-German-Bulgarian offensive of October 1915, Serbia and Montenegro could but help one another, before retreating through Albania to the coast – a decision taken with faith in the ultimate success of the Allies. Clinging to the idea that their country had evacuated and not capitulated, Crown Prince Alexander, who was Serbia's regent, and Prime Minister Pašić created the conditions whereby Serbia would continue to have an impact on the world war.

Serbia-in-exile continued to exist within its prewar constitutional framework, however reduced. One hundred and eight parliamentary deputies (out of 160) were able to attend a session of the National Assembly convened on Corfu. Political battles continued to be fought. The biggest was the dénouement of a conflict that had been simmering since the assassination of the last Obrenović king in 1903, and that reached its peak in exile as a result of defeat. The trial before a Serbian military court, in Thessaloniki in 1917, of Colonel Dimitrijević "Apis" and others, on charges that included an attempt on the life of the regent, leading to the execution of Apis and two others, was the result of a three-cornered power struggle among the rising star that was Prince Alexander, Pašić with the "Old" Radical leadership, and the Black Handers, who had generally controlled the army and the new territories in the war. After carefully looking at the evidence, Mitrović says that Apis and friends *may* have been devising something in their confused way, without actually doing anything, and that once the war had started, they had become less and less capable of any such action. It seems to Mitrović that the regent *may* have decided to find an excuse for eliminating a rival factor, and that he was allowed, if not actually helped, to do so, by Pašić and his party colleagues. If the execution (which the author calls a political assassination) effectively ended all Black Hand influence, it led to the collapse of the coalition government. However, a stable, homogeneous Old Radical cabinet remained in office for the rest of the war.

An interesting chapter in the life of Serbia-in-exile relates to the continued education of its young refugees. This has been researched by Professor Ljubinka Trgovčević – Mitrović's wife – and her doctoral students. The Serbian government, with substantial help from France, but also Britain, Italy and neutral Switzerland, invested a great effort, in attention and money, on the schooling of the young, from primary to university level. They were gathered mainly in France, where there were 1600 schoolchildren by the middle of 1916, and some 2000 students two years later – which explains the strong affection felt towards France in the educated class of Serbia between the wars.

The real novelty is the important section on the Serbia that remained behind. Germany, which had provided most troops for the onslaught of 1915, left the occupation to Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria, but only after it had secured for itself the exploitation of railways, mines and agricultural resources. The various plans envisaged for the ultimate fate of Serbia and Montenegro involved much rivalry between Austrian and Hungarian circles, and included total and partial

annexation, the attachment of reduced kingdoms to the monarchy, the setting up of a new military "march", and large-scale colonisation by German and Magyar settlers. For the duration of the war, military governorates were set up over Serbia and Montenegro. Here the author makes skilful use of the reports of Austro-Hungarian liaison officers at German commands and of German consuls in Austro-Hungarian-occupied territories. The fundamental policy of the Habsburg monarchy was that Montenegro should be won over, but Serbia destroyed. Measures were taken to disarm the population, exploit resources, remove national treasures and the Cyrillic script, ban all forms of public life and impound male hostages. No real local support was sought, and there was no organised resistance. As for the Bulgarian occupation, it sought to "Bulgarianise" through deportations, executions, language, names, and even the release of prisoners, internees and convicts who declared themselves (personally or by way of their next-of-kin) to be Bulgarians.

What armed resistance there was in Austro-Hungarian Serbia was initially the work of army stragglers who had been left behind. In Montenegro, divisions over how and when to resist were overtaken by systematic arrests carried out in July 1916. The author dwells on the March 1917 rising in the Bulgarian-occupied area, organised, or rather not organised by Lieutenant Kosta Milovanović "Pećanac". He had been sent by the Serbian military in October 1916, without the knowledge of the government, to prepare for a rising to take place once Serbian troops had entered Skopje. His arrival caused an immediate and disorganised movement, which he was unable to control, and which Bulgarian army recruitment turned into a general uprising in March 1917. Unsupported in other parts of occupied Serbia, it was suppressed by a concentration of Bulgarian troops, with Austro-Hungarian and German assistance, and the use of local Albanians. It soon started again, however, and duly spread, mainly over Bulgarian-occupied territory.

The longer the war lasted, the more Serbia's fate became linked to that of other Yugoslav populations, and the greater was the complexity of the Yugoslav movement. Official Serbia, the Yugoslav Committee of émigré personalities from Austria-Hungary, the Montenegrin Committee for National Unification, the population of occupied Serbia and Montenegro, and a Yugoslav movement within the Habsburg monarchy still seeking non-subversive solutions within that framework, were all involved, overtly or covertly linked. Yet Russia was growing weaker, until it dropped out of the war, and what remained of the Entente did not yet include the elimination of Austria-Hungary from its war aims.

The death of Emperor Franz Joseph at the end of 1916 increased uncertainties, as it raised hopes of a reorganisation of the monarchy and of a separate peace. Those Slovene and Croat politicians who were in favour of continued links with the dynasty called for the unification of all the Habsburg lands inhabited by Slovenes, Croats and Serbs into one "state body freed from the domination of other nations" – a declaration aimed against dualism but not against the ruling dynasty. Their call coexisted with growing dissatisfaction within Austria-Hungary and increased desertions from its armed forces. The reorganised and French-equipped Serbian army, placed in the central sector of the Allied Front, north of Thessaloniki, had already set foot again on Serbian soil. It was joined by volunteers from the New World and from the ranks of Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war. The Yugoslav Committee insisted on purely volunteer units that would be called "Yugoslav" rather than "Serbian", with Prince Alexander eventually deciding in favour of the former. However, the initial enthusiasm soon declined, due to such disagreements, high losses, bad wages and developments in Russia.

Serbia's leadership upheld its right to the central position within that increasingly complex Yugoslav programme, on the grounds that it provided a core around which others could assemble. There were fewer active factors participating in its decision-making process. The regent was with the army at the front. With his full support and that of the Allied Powers, Pašić controlled a homogeneous cabinet. The National Assembly was no longer convened. King Nicholas of Montenegro, left without real power in his French exile, still supported unification in words while thwarting it in deeds. Negotiations with Serbia on the eve of war had gone no further than to indicate that Montenegro and its dynasty could be Bavaria to Serbia's Prussia. Montenegro's most prominent politicians were of the opinion that the creation of a common state should not be postponed. Pašić placed the Serbian-supported Yugoslav Committee in the process of the policies he was conducting. The committee was a complex body, made up of personalities from different regions, with different visions. It was only as international developments began to highlight the right to self-determination that its president, Trumbić, showed greater autonomy. In the uncertain days of early 1917, it was felt necessary to clarify unresolved Yugoslav issues, so as to make it known that Yugoslavs were determined to obtain their Yugoslav state.

Serbia's government and opposition agreed to reconvene parliament on Corfu, where Pašić's position was reconfirmed. Along with the Yugoslav Committee,

Serbian government and opposition leaders then discussed and issued the Corfu Declaration in July 1917. This put forward the vision of a centralised state, set up as a parliamentary democracy, over all the lands in which the three-named Yugoslav nation of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes lived in a compact and continuous mass. Serbia's war aims remained as laid down in the second half of 1914, even though a more detailed territorial project was elaborated, based on a combination of ethnic and strategic considerations, the fundamental aim of which was the dismantling of Austria-Hungary. As the Habsburg monarchy began to flounder in the course of 1918, so did conditions in the Yugoslav lands, while guerrilla activity increased in occupied Serbia and Montenegro. Revolution stood at the gates of the Central European empires when the Allies started their decisive strike on the Thessaloniki Front, on 14 September 1918, with 628,000 troops, of whom the 150,000-strong Serbian contribution was second only to the 180,000 French (half of whom were colonials). The successful offensive brought the population of occupied areas to its feet. Authority evaporated; territories were actually "freed" before the arrival of Serbian and French troops.

Once again, Mitrović gives a reasoned interpretation of what Pašić was trying to achieve in the final stages of the war. He continued to uphold the entire Yugoslav programme, while considering what territory Serbia could gain for itself from the war – with which it could enter the Yugoslav state. Mitrović confirms the ample evidence of a predominant desire for unification throughout the Yugoslav populations. Unification was not without its opponents, but they were in a minority and without power. Advancing Allied Italian troops and remaining Austro-Hungarian troops resisted the new authorities set up by local provincial governments, by the Sabor of Croatia and by the National Council of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs in Zagreb. The overall nominal "State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs", set up in Zagreb over the whole South Slav territory of Austria-Hungary, was effectively rudderless, unrecognised and defenceless. The Montenegrin Committee for National Unification took over in Montenegro. The rest, leading to the formal act of unification proclaimed in Belgrade on 1 December 1918, is but a sequel to the story of "Serbia's Great War". Mitrović's latest volume in English does, however, add finishing touches. The rest – the final dissolution of Austria-Hungary, the setting up and the international recognition of the new Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes – has been researched and published from the 1960s to the 1980s by Ivo Lederer (*Yugoslavia at the Paris Peace Conference: A Study in Frontiermaking*, New Haven 1963), Leo Valiani (*La dissoluzione dell'Austria-Ungheria*, Milan 1966), Andrej

Mitrović himself (*Jugoslavija na Konferenciji mira, 1919-1920*, Belgrade 1969), Bogdan Krizman (*Austro-Ugarska i stvaranje jugoslavenske države*, Zagreb 1977), Dimitrije Djordjević (ed.) (*The Creation of Yugoslavia, 1914-1918,* Santa Barbara and Oxford 1980) and (the unavoidable, provocative, brilliant and one-sided) Ivo Banac (*The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Policies,* Ithaca and London 1984).

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