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The Great War from Below in Croatian Memoirs

Hundreds of studies covering the activities of political, economic, military and other elites of the 1914–1918 period had never left any doubt that views on the great conflict differed and still differ across the European continent. Dedicated to questions such as the war guilt, researchers were regularly divided along national lines, and often practised history as a continuation of warfare by other means. Certainly, there were exceptions, but in our day it is perhaps exactly this kind of approach to history that is becoming an exception in its own right.

Whether this is true or not, the concepts involved in a study of opposing national elites tend to put aside the experiences of the “ordinary” or “common” people. Of course, the principles of division between the so-called elites and the so-called masses can be methodologically disputed, but on this occasion I wish to stress another point. Namely, if coupled with reconciliatory tendencies, which are of course a desirable international achievement, the traditional focus on high politics can result in a simplified picture of a pacifistic, trans-European, homogenous popular mass that was brought to slaughter by their respective warmongering national elites.

In fact, neither the members of national elites, nor the members of various social classes, held entirely compact, fixed views on the subject of war. Of course, that does not mean that no generalization is possible, but apart from the controlled public space, which was itself not always consistent, there exists a whole variety of private opinions which should be taken into account.

In short, from a systematic point of view it is tempting to group attitudes of, let’s say, politically aware French, Russian and Croatian intellectuals on the one side, and those of French, Russian and Croatian peasants on the other, thus implying that e.g. the experiences of Croatian and Russian peasants were mutually “closer” than that of an intellectual and a peasant of any nation-state. However, the empiric evidence does not always support such a conclusion.

Although it is evident that numerous elements of Great War were similarly experienced and interpreted across Europe, it is also true that some were taken differently not only according to national or social divisions, but also on the purely individual level, within the same nation or class. As a result, when for instance talking about a Croatian, Croatian intellectual, or even Croatian peasant perspective of the Great War, one must bear in mind the necessity of further sub-divisions.

Yet another obstacle in reconstructing the Croatian perspectives of the Great War “from below” lies in the scarcity of sources. First of all, around two thirds of mobilised soldiers were completely illiterate, and thus unable to leave a lasting report on their experiences. Also, no oral history project on the subject was ever initiated. To be sure, a significant number of private letters have been preserved, but they are not yet available for a systematic study. Anyway, a large proportion of them had been written not to upset the censors, or in a standard, formulaic language of half-literate writers. Around a dozen war-diaries can be traced in various Croatian public institutions, but no definite effort has been vested to make them widely accessible. Similarly, there is still no study on the tens or even hundreds of fragmentary remembrances published in the popular press. Furthermore, even the potential official sources are seldom available. Archives of the Common Army, *Landwehr* and *Honved* regiments which had been based on Croatian territory, are for the most part either destroyed, or lie unresearched in Vienna and Budapest. Not surprisingly, two *Feldzeitungen* (field newspapers) of particular regiments were found to have existed, but most of their issues remain unavailable.

All in all, at the moment we are destined to base our findings on some forty published book-length memoirs of direct war participants, mostly low-ranking officers, but also several NCOs and one common soldier.

Obviously, this set is in many ways selective. Although for the most part they did not belong to the political or social elite (at least not at the time), these usually conscripted young officers regularly held a high school degree, and thus didn’t actually belong to the statistically defined, illiterate common majority. NCOs, recruited among craftsmen, able workers, and elementary-educated peasants, were closer to it, but also not completely equivalent. As a result, we have to study the statistical majority through the eyes of others, risking possible distortions.

Another kind of selectivity was caused by the changing political context. Generally speaking, the total percentage of pro-Habsburg, or at least univocally loyal, texts is significantly higher among the unpublished memoirs and diaries.

From the chronological perspective, it is interesting that memoirs published during the Great War period tend to take the Austria-Hungary for granted, without explicit propaganda, and that they present their authors as rather weak, un-heroic subjects, even showing sympathy for the enemy soldiers, be it Russian or Serbian ones.

On the other hand, practically the whole first decade of the new Yugoslav state was dominated by memoirs written in an exalted, anti-Habsburg tone, while the 1930s, which could be termed the Golden Age of Croatian Great War Literature, were characterized by the preponderance of apolitical texts or, gradually, even those that acknowledged not only Italian territorial claims, but also a more abstract sense of duty as valid motives for fighting.

The short-lived Croatian autonomy, granted in 1939, also saw the pre-print phase of one memoir that directly accused the Kingdom of Serbia’s elite for pre-1914 imperial ambitions, the *Slaves of War* by Mile Budak, but they were published only in 1941, after the Independent State of Croatia was founded within the Axis framework. These four years were certainly characterized by the renewal of interest for the Great War period of Croatian history, but also by political constraints that have, for instance, practically excluded any treatment of the Italian army as a former enemy. Similarly, no book-length memoirs were published during the time of the Independent State of Croatia.

After 1945, in communist Yugoslavia, the perspectives of those that had more or less loyally fought within the ranks of Austro-Hungarian army, were – generally speaking – not publicly present, although from time to time it was stressed that their fighting on the Isonzo front was justified and even heroic. Also, before the 1990s, no dedicated book-length Great War memoirs were published in Croatia, save for the post-mortem publication of texts by a former military chaplain, edited by his fellow priest. During that time, personal Great War experiences were presented exclusively as part of broader autobiographic recollections, and mostly situated within an anti-Habsburg political context, similar to that expressed in the dramas and novellas of the highly influential Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža or in the novel *Good Soldier Schweik* by the Czech author Jaroslav Hašek. Somewhat ironically, at least one renowned Yugoslav communist, Marko Orešković, confessed in his memoirs that he was delighted to had been mobilised in the army of Austria-Hungary, while even the close reading of Marshall Tito’s recollections may suggest that he once was an ambitious NCO, leading a recon unit on the Russian front.

The positive, or at least rather neutral, attitude towards partaking in the Great War on the Habsburg side was more present within ranks of the Croatian post-1945 political émigrés, but it also had some unexpected twists. According to their memoirs, otherwise pacifistic Croatian Peasant Party leader Vladko Maček had in 1918 successfully insisted to be returned to front-line service, while Ante Pavelić, future Poglavnik of the Independent State of Croatia was, as it seems, rather happy to be found unfit.

All in all, the post-1990 period of democratic transition did bring an increase in the total amount of interest allocated to the Great War, but to this day only one dedicated book-length autobiographic text on the subject has been published.

Finally, there remains the question about what kind of picture of war “from below” do these memoirs present? Speaking of the Croatian soldiers’ fighting motivations in general, they did form a rather expected European melange, from consent to rough discipline, but the prevalence of certain stances was unusual. First of all, not even the most intellectual low-ranking officer had a clear concept of homeland to stick to. Belonging to the non-dualistic peoples, some of them wanted the Dual Monarchy to be transformed, while some of them preferred its dissolution. A significant number recognized its defensive potential against Serbian, Russian, and especially Italian expansion. Moreover, even some of those that detested the Habsburgs felt obliged to fight due to their personal sense of honour.

As far as the statistic, illiterate majority is concerned, it was, arguably, to a large degree apolitical, perceiving itself not as the citizens of a modern state, but as Emperors’ subjects, bound by sworn allegiance, and even more by the traditional notion of personal honour, possibly acquired through immersion into the oral, epic culture, a product of dozens of generations that lived their dangerous lives on some kind of military frontier.

However, this pre-modern notion of honour should not be understood in static terms, for as the war progressed, its great price was steadily shown. Gradually, the “fight or flight” dilemma was re-thought again and again, and in late 1918 the majority of combatants reached the conclusion that it is better to be a living coward then a dead hero, “coward” here meaning all short of fighting to the last breath. To conclude, honour as one of the key motivational factors was painfully replaced by a notion of rational, political interest, however simplified. For some this interest was associated with proclaiming a sort of independent Croatian republic, perhaps even including anarcho-socialist notions concerning private property, for others with the immediate abandoning of the battlefield without any other expectations of tomorrow.

In fact, this slow, modernizing process of a sort was already catalysed with the outbreak of war. First of all, as in other countries, the automatised technology of large-scale fighting was found to be shocking and practically unendurable, which greatly contributed to mounting war-weariness. Continuous artillery bombardments, and the expectation of deadly infantry assaults, were psychologically the most strenuous, together with the lack of food which characterized the ending phase of the war. As a consequence, self-inflicted, incapacitating wounds and traumatic disorders were not uncommon. When possible, religion, alcohol, tobacco, sexuality, literature and other resources were all used to alleviate the stress.

Generally speaking, enemy soldiers were not an object of lasting hate, and numerous instances of the “live and let live” principle were recorded, and the real or putative perpetrators subjected to vengeance, all of which bears resemblance to customary law. At the same time, surrender was not an easy affair, as it involved various risks for the both sides, or was simply not recognized in the heat of battle. It was also taken as a fact that the Russian Cossacks do not take prisoners, so it seems they were regularly executed, either based on summary procedure or on popular request.

Although international law was not unknown to them, common soldiers’ behaviour was more influenced by variations of a moral golden rule, “Do not do to others what you do not wish for yourself”. However, testimonies also do state that perhaps even as much as 10 percent of mobilised men, those ruffians and hoods of everyday life, simply enjoyed all the opportunities for unrestrained violence. When volunteers of such kind were not available, orders to shoot civilian hostages, hang alleged spies, or burn villages were also obeyed, albeit reluctantly. On the other hand, “free looting” orders, especially of abandoned towns, were gladly accepted, with soldiers prone to interpret the unguarded property as *res nullius*, regardless of the owner’s citizenship. Apart from cases of individual sexual violence, there is also a first-person account of a spontaneous, non-ordered destruction of the Galician village of Hrimno, including the women and children, because it was suspected of harbouring a Russian patrol.

All in all, not even the Great War was such a knightly conflict as it is sometimes perceived. On the other hand, because of the rather undeveloped education and media systems, it seems that, among Croatian soldiers, enemies were not as demonized as in some other instances. Certainly, additional spatial and temporal comparisons are needed if we are to make further conclusions.

As far as mass violence is concerned, international law may seem to be a rather weak replacement for the simple, traditional or pre-modern moral values, but – as we have seen – these moral values were also not ideal. Societies constantly change and develop, and with them the technology of warfare. Not even the united potentials of Europe suffice to predict the future of these complex processes. But the cooperation of historians may at least bring us few steps closer to understanding their nature.