

# THE CONTESTED MEMORY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN MONTENEGRO

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*This article focuses on the memory of the period 1914–1916, from the Sarajevo assassination and outbreak of war up to the occupation of Montenegro by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in January 1916 and on two, Serbian and Montenegrin national narratives about the First World War.*

Keywords: *First World War, Montenegro, narrative, Serbia, memory, discourse*

*Ta članek tematizira spomin na obdobje 1914–1916, od atentata na Sarajevu in od izbruha vojne do okupacije Črne gore s strani avstro-ogrškega imperija januarja 1916, in dve nacionalni, srbski in črnogorski pripovedi o prvi svetovni vojni.*

Ključne besede: *Prva svetovna vojna, Črna gora, pripoved, Srbija, spomin, diskurz*

Veliko sodobnih preprirov, povezanih s spomini na prvo svetovno vojno v Črni gori se opira na eno od dveh prevladujočih in medsebojno se izključujočih nacionalnih pripovedi. Gre za dejstvo, že desetletja znano zgodovinarjem. Tako se zagovorniki srbske pripovedi izrecno zavračajo pogled, ki se identificira izključno s črnogorsko pripovedjo.

Ob tem se ime sovražnika spreminja, lahko je Turčija, habsburško cesarstvo, Tretji rajh ali pa nazadnje NATO, vendar „boj še vedno poteka.“ Bitka pri Mojkovcu je tako ponovitev bitke na Kosovu in v trenutni politični krizi jo razumejo in predstavljajo kot ponovitev prejšnjih borb. Tako je v srbski pripovedi nenehno ponavljanje borbe med „nami“ in „njimi“ zapleteno že zaradi „domačih izdajalcev“, katerih trenutno inkarnacijo predstavlja vlada Črne gore in zagovorniki črnogorske etnične identitete.

Izkaže se, da glavni dejavnik zgodovine ni narod, temveč država: črnogorska pripoved se v prvi vrsti vrti okoli sreče politične suverenosti in neodvisnosti. Prihodnost je tako zamišljena kot postopno, civilno in neherno izboljšanje sedanjega stanja (pridružitvev Nato in EU, dvig gospodarskega in družbenega standarda itd.). Zato se zdi le malo verjetno, da se bosta obe medsebojno izključujoči narodni pripovedi, ki sta se med stoletnimi komemoracijami dramskih dogodkov 1914–1916 še razvijali in krepili, zdaj uskaldili. A vendar je mogoča misel, da bi obe, le da v drugačni, spremenjeni politični atmosferi lahko izgubili svoj pomen in nujnost.

This article focuses on the memory of the period 1914–1916, from the Sarajevo assassination and outbreak of war up to the occupation of Montenegro by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in January 1916. This period was characterized by military conflict in the most traditional sense, and familiar to other battlefields of the Great War, with front lines, trenches, battles, and two opposing sides. From January 1916 until November 1918, Montenegro was under Austro-Hungarian military occupation. I do not focus on those

topics that have received the most attention and generated the greatest controversy over the last three decades: the end of Montenegro's independence, its unification with Serbia (proclaimed in November 1918 at the Podgorica Assembly, or *Podgorička skupština*), the Christmas Uprising (*Božićna buna*) against unconditional union, and the subsequent guerrilla movement against the new centralist regime. Unlike these events, the time between the Sarajevo assassination and the occupation of Montenegro in 1916 has, at the time of writing, been subject to much reinterpretation and been the subject of commemorations during the recent centenary.

### MONTENEGRO IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR, 1914–1916

Montenegro declared war on the Austro-Hungarian Empire on August 6th, 1914—the same day as Russia, despite the last-minute efforts of Habsburg diplomacy, which hoped for the country's neutrality. Montenegro was not bound by any treaty to enter the war on the side of Serbia. Relations between the two countries were relatively cold because both received international recognition at the Congress of Berlin in 1878. Relations improved during and after the Balkan wars of 1912–1913, when both armies combined their military efforts against the Ottoman Empire. After the establishment of a common border between Serbia and Montenegro, the issue of mutual cooperation and possible union was widely discussed in the final months preceding the war. After the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, feelings of solidarity with Serbia combined with considerable antipathy towards the Habsburg monarchy. Negative sentiments towards Vienna and Budapest could be attributed to the long-standing foreign policy of the Dual Monarchy, which had attempted to limit Montenegro's territorial expansion at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, after the annexation of Bosnia and Hercegovina in 1908, and most recently during the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 (see Treadway 1983; Raspopović 1996). The final and most decisive factor affecting Montenegro's decision to go to war was the position of Russia, Montenegro's most important ally. Montenegrin army and state finances were exhausted after the Balkan wars. A military conflict with its mightiest neighbor and most important trading partner was not in the country's best interest. However, a combination of popular opinion and foreign policy allegiances dragged Montenegro into support of Serbia in the war.

Close cooperation and the coordination of the Serbian and Montenegrin armies was in the best interest of both countries. However, Serbia's High Command did not regard Montenegro as an equal partner. It intended to subjugate the Montenegrin army to Serbia's war aims, which were unilaterally described as "common goals." King Nicholas of Montenegro accepted Serbia's ultimatum. Apart from advancing age and a weakening position on the domestic political scene, King Nicholas feared that, without close cooperation with Serbia, Montenegro would not be able to receive the allied aid it so desperately needed (Mrvaljević 1989: 37). Starting in August 1914, Serbian officers served as chiefs

of staff of the Montenegrin army (first General Božidar Janković, and then Colonel Petar Pešić). According to the orders of the Serbian Army High Command, two-thirds of the Montenegrin army was sent to the Sandžak front in order to contribute to the Serbian war effort in the area bordering Habsburg Bosnia. The remaining third was left to defend the rest of the front line, including key positions at Mount Lovćen, which separated the heavily militarized Bay of Kotor—an important naval base of the Habsburg army—from the Montenegrin capital of Cetinje. King Nicholas nominally retained the position of supreme commander of the Montenegrin armed forces, but in practice he lost his decisive influence over most units. The subjection of the Montenegrin army to Serbia's war effort represented an integral part of a long-term policy that sought to diminish the influence of the Montenegrin political elite and eventually unite Montenegro with Serbia without political autonomy and self-rule.

Montenegro was the smallest of the Entente allies. Its army was the least numerous and the worst equipped, and it fought on challenging terrain in harsh climatic conditions. Despite these hindrances, the 45,000 Montenegrin soldiers managed to defend a front five hundred kilometers long against an incomparably stronger enemy for eighteen months (Rakočević 1997: 459). After the defeat of Serbia following the Mackensen offensive in the fall of 1915, Montenegro alone could not possibly withstand the pressure by the enemy. Its fate was sealed although its political leadership was divided over the question of what to do. At the beginning of January 1916, the massive Austro-Hungarian offensive against Montenegrin positions on Mount Lovćen began. This section of the front, which was crucial for the defense of the country, was overrun in just a few days. Cetinje was occupied on January 11th. Meanwhile, on the Sandžak front, the Montenegrin army achieved its greatest victory at the Battle of Mojkovac on January 6th–7th, where a counterattack by the units commanded by General Janko Vukotić halted the effort of the Habsburg army to penetrate deeper into Montenegrin territory. Despite the victorious battle, the fall of Montenegro was inevitable. Unlike the Serbian army, whose retreat towards Albania was covered and secured by the Montenegrins, the Montenegrin army did not receive evacuation orders. Peace negotiations with the Austro-Hungarian Empire initiated after the fall of Lovćen failed—the Austro-Hungarian conditions were too harsh and unacceptable for the Montenegrin side. On January 17th, General Pešić resigned as chief of staff and joined the Serbian army in retreat. The same day, Montenegrin Prime Minister Lazar Mijušković left the country, followed two days later by King Nicholas. On January 21st, the new chief of staff, General Janko Vukotić, officially dissolved the Montenegrin army. This controversial decision was made with the aim of preventing the Austro-Hungarian Empire from conducting a planned internment of Montenegrin soldiers, but it effectively meant the end of the resistance movement. The rest of the country was quickly occupied. Montenegro did not sign a peace treaty or official capitulation. The king and a group of politicians left the country and established a government in exile on French soil. However, unlike in Serbia, the Montenegrin army ceased to exist and did not continue its war effort on the side of the Allies.

## DISCOURSE ON THE FIRST WORLD WAR BEFORE THE BREAKUP OF YUGOSLAVIA

In the interwar period, discussions about the First World War in Montenegro focused on the question of responsibility for the fall of Lovćen and the occupation in January 1916. Most participants in these discussions—conducted on the pages of the Yugoslav press (not only in Montenegro, but also in Belgrade and Zagreb)—were politicians and officers directly involved in the events. There was a widespread belief that the occupation of Montenegro resulted from an act of treason. The person most often accused of “selling Montenegro out to the enemy” was King Nicholas. Later scholarship proved that allegations concerning the king’s contacts, negotiations, and even secret treaties with the Austro-Hungarian Empire were based not on evidence but rumor, propaganda, and forgeries, spread by the king’s political opponents from Montenegro and nationalist circles from Serbia (Dragičević 1968). Undermining the king’s position and reputation was an important step on the road to an unconditional union of Montenegro with Serbia. The collective trauma caused by the fall of Lovćen and its subsequent occupation was aggravated by the deeply-rooted myth that Montenegro had never been occupied throughout its long history. This myth played a central role in the self-perception and collective self-esteem of the Montenegrins (Šístek: 83–86). Contemporaries also overrated the role of the Lovćen massif as a “natural and impenetrable” fortress. From a purely military view, the success of the Habsburg offensive was both understandable and inevitable.

In the 1920s—after Montenegro had been integrated into Yugoslavia, King Nicholas had died in French exile, and the defenders of independence had given up their armed and diplomatic struggle—the discourse about events leading to Montenegro’s defeat lost much of its previous anti-dynastic character. Other topics and controversies emerged. The question of capitulation became particularly vitriolic after the former chief of staff of the Montenegrin army, Petar Pešić, published a series of documents and memories from his mission in Montenegro in 1914–1916 in the magazine *Ratnik* in 1925. Pešić confirmed the earlier suspicion that his mission possessed not only a military but also a political character. In the mid-1920s, Pešić openly admitted that, as chief of staff, he convinced King Nicholas to send a peace proposal to Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Joseph. This was later used by Serbian propaganda in its attempt to discredit the king for alleged contacts with the enemy. Pešić boasted that, thanks to his actions, King Nicholas was discredited and the Montenegrin army prevented from appearing on the Macedonian front alongside the Serbian army. He was convinced that this simplified the creation of Yugoslavia and assured the undisputed leadership of Serbia and its dynasty in the new state (Drašćević 1995: 360–362). Further polemics and testimonies by contemporaries followed, especially in the Zagreb journal *Nova Evropa* in 1926 and the journal *Slobodna misao*, published in Nikšić, between 1936 and 1940 (Kovačević & Miljić 2005). In centralist and royalist Yugoslavia, the efforts of the Montenegrin army in the First World War were generally underestimated. They and other topics, figures, and symbols reminiscent of Montenegrin independence

were not stressed in the official memorial culture. This attitude started to change only in the late 1930s, with the imminent threat of another world war on the horizon.

In the interwar period, no significant scholarly work devoted to the First World War in Montenegro emerged. The first serious overviews, published in the 1950s, focused on military history (Zelenika 1954; *Operacije* 1954). In the 1960s, important volumes by Dimitrije D. Vujović (1962) and Nikola Škerović (1962) were published. The first and still the most complex work that covers the entire wartime period in its military, political, and also to some extent economic and social aspects is Novica Rakočević's book *Crna Gora u prvom svjetskom ratu* (Montenegro in the First World War, 1997). In 1966, a large commemoration on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the battle was held in Mojkovac, attended by a number of veterans, high-ranking representatives of the state and party leadership of Montenegro, and a personal representative of President Tito. A new monument was inaugurated on the battlefield. In most communist narratives about the First World War, critical voices were directed toward both Montenegrin and Serbian actors of the war (King Nicholas and his ministers, the Serbian military mission that controlled the Montenegrin High Command, etc.). This distribution of responsibility reflected the official tendency of equidistance from both the "Green" (exclusively Montenegrin) and "White" (Serbian, pro-Serbian, or Great-Serbian) political currents from the first half of the twentieth century as two extreme poles of bourgeois politics, rejected and defeated "by the people" in the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> However, the close cooperation between Montenegro and Serbia and the creation of Yugoslavia itself was considered in a positive light.

## NEW REINTERPRETATIONS AFTER 1990

In the late 1980s, interest in the First World War and in events leading to the creation of Yugoslavia and the end of Montenegrin independence started to grow. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, relations between Serbia and Montenegro and the question of statehood received the greatest attention. This perspective was linked to the long-term process of "creeping independence" that preceded the referendum on Montenegro's independence in May 2006. The unconditional union with Serbia in 1918 and resistance to this decision through armed and diplomatic struggle undoubtedly became the most important topics in connection to the First World War. On the other hand, the fall of Lovćen and the question

<sup>1</sup> Before elections to the Podgorica Assembly (*Podgorička skupština*) in November 1918, which proclaimed the dethronement of King Nicholas and the unification with Serbia, supporters of unconditional union published their lists of candidates on white paper, and supporters of Montenegro's political autonomy on green paper. Throughout the twentieth century, proponents of pro-Serbian political currents, centralism, and Great Serbian ideology were subsequently referred to as *bjelaši* 'the Whites', and supporters of Montenegro's political autonomy, federal status within Yugoslavia, or complete independence as *zelenaiši* 'the Greens'.

of responsibility for the defeat of the Montenegrin army on the Lovćen front in January 1916 lost the central role it used to play in interwar narratives.

After the centenary commemorations of the events of 1914–1916, it is possible to identify several topics and events that presently stimulate the greatest interest and with almost no exception also the greatest controversies. The memory of the First World War has been greatly affected by the existence of two competing discourses of national identity and history within Montenegro: the ethnically Montenegrin perspective, which stressed a unique national character and the tradition of independent statehood, and the opposing, ethnically Serbian perspective, which stressed the wider Serbian identity of the Montenegrins and the importance of their links with Serbia (see Bieber 2003; Cattaruzza 2010; Zachova 2013; Džankić 2014a; Šistek 2015). These discourses have closely reflected the long-term political scene. The ruling coalition, represented by the Democratic Party of Socialists (*Demokratska partija socijalista*, DPS), led by Prime Minister Milo Đukanović, was also the main force behind the independence referendum of 2006. The predominantly ethnically Serbian opposition parties, on the other hand, have been opposing Montenegro's independence (Džankić 2014a). Their leaders cultivated close links with the hierarchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church, represented by Metropolitan of Cetinje Amfilohije Radović. The church leadership has also actively participated in discussions on history, memory, and identity. Last but not least, the question of Montenegro's membership of NATO and the strained relations between Podgorica and Moscow also influenced competing narratives on the First World War. During the centenary, three events assumed central position in the politics of memory in Montenegro: the context of Montenegro's entry into the war in 1914 alongside two further events from January 1916; namely, the Battle of Mojkovac and the sinking of the *Brindisi*, carrying Montenegrin volunteers from North America. It is notable that all of the key events connected with the First World War that have received most attention, generated the greatest controversies, and also assumed a central role in commemorative culture in the last hundred years took place at the beginning of January 1916: the fall of Lovćen (the greatest and most decisive defeat), the Battle of Mojkovac (the greatest victory and a symbol of solidarity with Serbia), and the "Medova tragedy" or sinking of the *Brindisi* (which had the greatest single loss of life and was a symbol of sacrifice for the homeland) took place almost simultaneously.

#### NATIONAL DUTY OR HARD-EARNED LESSON: WHY DID MONTENEGRO GO TO WAR?

Despite the fact that Montenegrin and Serbian historians during the communist period displayed critical attitudes towards "bourgeois" currents in the political landscape and their representatives, they did not question the crucial decision of the Montenegrin political leadership to enter the war on Serbia's side. It was taken for granted that Montenegro could not remain neutral after the Habsburg monarchy decided to attack Serbia. Until

the breakup of Yugoslavia, historians more or less unanimously assumed that Montenegro had a “moral” and “national” duty to help its neighbor. In the words of Novica Rakočević, “by showing solidarity with Serbia in the hard times when the existence of the Serb nation was in question and the destiny of not only these two Yugoslav states but all Yugoslav nations was at stake, Montenegro fulfilled its historical duty (Rakočević 1997: 458).” The overwhelming support for the war on Serbia’s side by the country’s population was usually stressed as decisive, along with obligations towards its allies, especially Russia.

Since the breakup of communist Yugoslavia, a different narrative representing Montenegro as a betrayed victim of its Serbian ally has been gaining prominence. According to this interpretation, Montenegro selflessly (or naively) entered the war on the side of Serbia against its own strategic interests. However, its “brotherly loyalty” was exploited by Belgrade, which used every opportunity to undermine its army, institutions, and statehood. In the 1990s, this narrative was present especially in texts by authors that supported Montenegro’s independence. This was a minority discourse at first—until the late 1990s, the political establishment promoted the idea that Montenegro should remain in a common state with Serbia. After 2000, the theses presented by these authors entered mainstream political discourse and were more or less adopted as the official perspective of the state administration after Montenegro became independent in 2006. One can trace the origin of this discourse to the period following the unconditional union of Montenegro with Serbia in 1918 (the main arguments can be found in texts published by the Montenegrin government in exile after 1918 and by political opponents of centralism in interwar Yugoslavia). After 1991, and even more pronouncedly after the Kosovo war of 1999, Montenegro’s participation in the First World War and its troublesome wartime relations with Serbia were conceptualized as a “historical lesson”—in the sense of a negative example or warning—by intellectuals and politicians who supported Montenegro’s independence after the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991. Such a contemporary perspective on Montenegro’s involvement in the “Great War” was summed up by the writer Dragan Radulović, chairman of the cultural organization *Matica Crnogorska*, in October 2014: “Many in Europe had been ready for that war for a long time and hoped for it; however, Montenegro was not among them. Despite being exhausted both in manpower and materially after the Balkan wars, out of respect for duties towards its allies, it entered the First World War, but did not come out of it again. Montenegro was defeated twice: it first capitulated before a mighty enemy and, for the second time, it was politically and morally betrayed by allies on whose side it had fought. Montenegro lost everything in this war: its statehood, army, dynasty, and church” (Radulović 2015: 5–6).

The official position on the memory of the First World War was elaborated in a speech by Prime Minister Milo Đukanović at a commemoration of the centenary of the First World War in November 2014.<sup>2</sup> The prime minister conceptualized the war primarily

<sup>2</sup> Milo Đukanović, predsjednik vlade Crne Gore: govor na Svečanoj akademiji povodom stogodišnjice Mojškovačke bitke, Mojkovac, 07. 01. 2016. godine, (4 pgs.).

as a tragedy and a “hard-earned lesson.” Despite the fact that Montenegro emerged from the war on the victorious side, it lost its independence and was “erased from the map of Europe.” Đukanović felt obliged to stress that the Montenegrin monarchy of King Nicholas was not involved in the plot to kill the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne in Sarajevo and officially condemned the assassination: “It is a historical fact that Montenegro did not support the terrorist act that was used as a pretext for the war, nor did it believe that political assassinations represent solutions to the problems of any nation.” This statement could be interpreted as an attempt to distance itself from the new wave of glorification of the assassination and its perpetrators, which had been prominently displayed in the memorial culture of Serbia and Republika Srpska (the Serbian entity within Bosnia and Hercegovina) during the centenary earlier that year. These words by Đukanović, and in particular the term “terrorist act,” were harshly condemned in the Serbian media and by pro-Serbian media outlets in Montenegro. Despite its predominantly somber mood and apparent lack of glorification, which contrasted with official commemorations that took place in Serbia, the overall message of Đukanović’s speech transcended the narrative of victimization and national tragedy. The “lesson” of the First World War and the loss of independence in its aftermath was transformed into “an impulse for the renewal of Montenegrin national and state identity.” The rest of the twentieth century represented an evolution leading towards the renewal of independence. Đukanović highlighted the positive contribution of the Communist Party to the resurrection of Montenegro’s statehood in the interwar period and during the Second World War. Significantly, he also recalled that in 1999, in the time of “new trials” that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Montenegro did not repeat the same mistake it made in 1914 and did not join Serbia in war against the international community. Therefore, the decision not to participate in Serbian war efforts in Kosovo and the refusal to proclaim the state of war after the launch of NATO air strikes against the Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999 (which can chiefly be attributed to Đukanović himself, who served as Montenegro’s president at the time) was presented as a successful application of the “hard-earned lesson” of the First World War. As a result, Montenegro managed to maintain peace and multiethnic and religious tolerance, and eventually restore its independence. Obviously, from this *longue durée* perspective, the decision to avoid the Kosovo War, the confrontation with NATO in 1999, and the subsequent referendum on independence of May 2006 are conceptualized as acts of final redemption for the tragic decision to participate in the First World War.<sup>3</sup>

The ethnic Serbian perspective, prevalent within Montenegro, has on the other hand retained familiar, traditionalist contours. During the centenary, it also echoed the contemporary discourse prevalent in Serbia and Republika Srpska. From this perspective, the question as to why Montenegro went to war is regarded as artificial, even as a sign of

<sup>3</sup> Veliki rat je bio tragedija za Crnu Goru, *e-novine*, November 20th, 2014, available at: <http://www.e-novine.com/region/region-crna-gora/112588-Veliki-rat-bio-tragedija-Crnu-Goru.html>.

unacceptable revisionism. Because both Montenegrins and Serbians as well as the Serbs of Bosnia were nothing but different limbs of one national body, Montenegrins had a duty to join the conflict on Serbia's side. Their sacrifices are justified by the claim that they served a common Serbian cause. From this perspective, the narrative promoted by ethnically Montenegrin, pro-independence intellectuals, and the government represented by Prime Minister Đukanović was refused as an artificial and anti-Serbian instrumentalization, serving the selfish interests of the ruling regime.

### VICTORY IN DEFEAT: THE ETHNIC MONTENEGRIN NARRATIVE OF THE BATTLE OF MOJKOVAC

The Battle of Mojkovac (January 6th–7th, 1916) currently represents a symbolic culmination of the narrative of the First World War in Montenegro. At Mojkovac, the Sandžak units—commanded by General Janko Vukotić—managed to halt the Austro-Hungarian offensive through a surprising counterattack. This ensured the retreat of the Serbian army towards Podgorica and Shkodër (Serbo-Croatian: *Skadar*). However, just a few days after the battle, the Montenegrin army—and with it the state administration—finally collapsed. Historians agree that the popular concept of an event that took place on Orthodox Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, known as the Battle of Mojkovac, is a reductionist construction. They stress the fact that this battle formed an integral part of a wider and longer operation, which started more than two months earlier. The most crucial victories of the Sandžak units, which really ensured the Serbian retreat through Montenegro and northern Albania towards the sea, were in fact achieved earlier and far from Mojkovac—in late October and early November 1915 at Višegrad and Javor in eastern Bosnia (Drašković 1995: 9). These events, which did not take place on Montenegrin soil, never received their proper place in popular narratives and commemorative culture. In scholarly works, historians prefer to speak of the Mojkovac operation rather than the Battle of Mojkovac as a single, unique event. This opinion—widely shared by experts—has had little effect on public memory.

Since the 1950s, some historians have argued that the Battle of Mojkovac was most likely unnecessary and counterproductive from a military point of view (Drašković 1995: 10). In the last quarter of a century, such views have become more widespread, especially among intellectuals and politicians that favored Montenegro's independence after 1991. The links between the battle and the loss of statehood have been stressed. On the occasion of its eighty-fifth anniversary, the writer Marijan Miljić summed up this view in an article entitled “Mojkovačka bitka, Crnogorska Troja” (The Battle of Mojkovac: The Montenegrin Troy): “This was the last battle of the independent Montenegrin state, the swan song of Montenegrin glory and pride, an honest and fanatical attempt to save the powerless allied army of Serbia and a desperate attempt at saving itself. . . . This was the highest achievement of Montenegrin heroism and quixotic behavior” (Rakočević 2013: 303).

From the Montenegrin perspective, the Battle of Mojkovac assumes an ambiguous place: it represents “a victory in defeat.” It is understood as a glorious but tragic event (Rakočević 2013: 304). In the Miljić’s metaphorical description, the “Montenegrin Thermopylae” turned into the “Montenegrin Troy.” By allowing Serbian officers—headed by General Božidar Janković and Colonel Petar Pešić—to take charge of the Montenegrin army, King Nicholas and other leading politicians in fact opened the gates to a Trojan horse. In the end, Montenegro was manipulated into a useless battle and eventually lost its statehood as a result of this “brotherly conspiracy and betrayal” (*bratska zavjera i izdaja*; Rakočević 2013: 305–307). The literary historian Radoslav Rotković stresses the wickedness and treason of the Serbians even more explicitly in his *Kratka ilustrirana istorija crnogorskog naroda* (Short Illustrated History of the Montenegrin Nation), which was aimed at a wider readership: “The army was misled that this was a fateful battle, that it had a duty to defend the exhausted Serbian army. In fact, Serbian soldiers were already washing their boots in the Adriatic. Instead of a tactical retreat, which would have resulted in the same or even greater losses of the enemy . . . the Montenegrin army was ordered to dig trenches in the snow and ice, which became soaked with blood” (Rotković 2005: 399). The authors of the five-volume encyclopedia of Montenegrin history have maintained an unemotional tone. Instead of providing their own assessment, they cite a scholarly work, published as long ago as 1954 by Serbian military historians in Belgrade that—long before the post-Yugoslav debates over history and identity—concluded that the Mojkovac operation was a deliberate strategic mistake: “The highest command had no reason, from the military point of view, to order the defense of positions on the Tara River to the last man. Such a solution made sense only if a wish existed that the Montenegrin army be maneuvered into such a position that would prevent its members from retreating in the footsteps of the Serbian army and instead face destruction within the confines of Montenegro” (*Operacije 1954*: 454, cited in Rastoder 2006: 888–890). Despite differences in the presentation of arguments and the level of nationalist exaltation, the main features of the narrative of the Battle of Mojkovac, as expressed by authors favoring Montenegro’s independence, are shared by scholars, politicians, and journalists.

“WE SHOULD NEVER FIND OURSELVES AT MOJKOVAC AGAIN”:  
THE AMBIVALENT POSITION OF THE BATTLE IN OFFICIAL MEMORY  
OF THE MONTENEGRIN STATE

By the time of the centenary of the Battle of Mojkovac, the main contours of the “Montenegrin” narrative were already established. The official view of Montenegrin state administration was described by Prime Minister Milo Đukanović in his speech at a commemoration in Mojkovac on January 7th, 2016. Đukanović quoted the writer and politician Milovan Djilas: “The Battle of Mojkovac was purely Montenegrin. The last and most glorious in the history

of this small state. With the Battle of Mojkovac, the Montenegrin state was extinguished, in a bloody and unforgettable flash of heroism, glory, and legend.” The prime minister went on to highlight the bravery and high morale of the Montenegrin soldiers that managed to defeat the four- times more numerous and much better-equipped enemy forces. The Montenegrin soldiers, he stressed, fought bravely despite the widespread knowledge that the occupation of Montenegro and the end of its independence was inevitable. The speech included relatively detailed and historically correct information on the wider Mojkovac operation and situation on the front without demonizing the Austro-Hungarian Empire, while mostly refraining from the usual recriminations against Serbia, which tend to frequently appear in the “Montenegrin” narratives of the First World War. In the closing part of the speech, Đukanović situated the Battle of Mojkovac in a wider narrative, covering the entire twentieth century and culminating in the present. The victory at Mojkovac was, in the words of Đukanović, the last event in the great era of independent Montenegro under the Petrović Njegoš dynasty.<sup>4</sup> It was followed by a series of tragic events: the Austro-Hungarian occupation, the loss of statehood after the unification with Serbia in 1918, and the establishment of the interwar centralist regime of Royal Yugoslavia. However, the idea of a free and sovereign Montenegro survived. Its fortunes began to rise after the uprising of July 13th, 1941 (*Trinaestojulski ustanak*) against the fascist occupation of Montenegro. The breakup of Yugoslavia resulted in a period of “new trials.” This time, however, Montenegro had learned its historical lesson well. At present, ten years after the restoration of independence, Montenegro is about to enter NATO and is also the most advanced candidate on the road towards EU membership (Đukanović 2016). In this way, the heroic but tragically hopeless battle was integrated into a wider narrative about the great fall and gradual resurrection of Montenegrin statehood, which has now ended more or less happily.

In May 2016, Đukanović referred to the Battle of Mojkovac again, this time in a speech dedicated to the tenth anniversary of the referendum on independence, remarking that “we should never find ourselves at Mojkovac or in front of Dubrovnik again.” The Dubrovnik reference was a clear allusion to the shelling of the city during the controversial campaign of Serbian and Montenegrin forces against Croatia in 1991. The connection of these two events raised some eyebrows. Ironically, Đukanović served his first term as prime minister during the Dubrovnik campaign and undeniably bore part of the responsibility for the military operations, which he presented a quarter of a century later as a negative lesson of history alongside the Battle of Mojkovac.<sup>5</sup> During a motion of no-confidence session in parliament, a member of the opposition Socialist People’s Party (*Socijalistička narodna partija*, SNP) asked Đukanović to clarify this remark. “After Mojkovac, we lost our statehood and were eliminated from the map of the world, while at Dubrovnik we threatened some of

<sup>4</sup> Members of the Petrović-Njegoš dynasty ruled the country from 1697 until 1918, first as prince-bishops of Cetinje, and after 1852 as secular monarchs.

<sup>5</sup> In 2000, Đukanović publicly apologized for the participation of Montenegro in the attack by the Yugoslav People’s Army on Dubrovnik and southern Dalmatia in 1991.

our basic values.<sup>6</sup> Neither the first nor the second event was in the interest of Montenegro and that is why we should learn this lesson: to strictly follow our own political interests,” replied Đukanović. These new remarks were emotionally reported and commented on by the Serbian press and pro-Serbian media in Montenegro itself—in the words of an article headline published by the daily *Kurir*, “Milo Prolupao: Đukanović pljunuo na Mojkovачku bitku” (Milo Has Gone Crazy: Đukanović Spat at the Battle of Mojkovac).<sup>7</sup>

#### “THE BATTLE OF MOJKOVAC IS NOT OVER”: THE ETHNIC SERBIAN NARRATIVE IN MONTENEGRO

The “Serbian” narratives of the First World War are an integral part of a wider discourse on the Serbian identity of Montenegro, and stress the historical and ethnic proximity or homogeneity of Serbs and Montenegrins. According to the latest census (2011), ethnic Serbs make up almost 29% of the population. This makes them the second-largest ethnic group in the country after the more numerous Montenegrins (45%). The ethnically Serbian wing of the Montenegrin political scene has been rather fragmented. Parties competing for this segment of the electorate have been plagued by periodic conflict, personal rivalry, and realignment. The ethnically Serbian intelligentsia and political leaders suffered a great blow from the successful referendum on independence that they had so vehemently opposed. In post-independence Montenegro, the Serbian Orthodox Church, represented by Bishop Amfilohije of Cetinje, who has been known as a Serb nationalist hardliner since his investiture in 1990, assumed the role of main guardian of Serbian national interests in Montenegro. As a result, the Serbian nationalist discourse in Montenegro has largely become clericalized and “church-centric” (Šišteć 2011: 129–130). During the centenary commemorations of the Battle of Mojkovac, it was Amfilohije—along with other clerics and secular publicists close to the Serbian Orthodox Church—that assumed a leading role in interpreting the historical events and their meaning.

The centenary of the Battle of Mojkovac was celebrated in a heated political atmosphere. Hopes were mounting among Serbian political parties, clerics, and the nationalist intelligentsia that the long rule of Milo Đukanović and his DPS, which has governed Montenegro without interruption since the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991, could finally be challenged. Violent protests in October 2015, led by the ethnically Serbian Democratic Front (*Demokratski front*, DF) aimed to overthrow the government but were unsuccessful. However, the split of the ruling coalition, due to growing disagreements between the DPS and its junior coalition partner, the Social Democratic Party (*Socijaldemokratska partija*,

<sup>6</sup> Referring to “our values,” the prime minister most likely meant “humanity and heroism” (*čovjstvo i junaštvo*), which have traditionally been attributed to the Montenegrins.

<sup>7</sup> Milo prolupao: Đukanović pljunuo na Mojkovачku bitku, *Kurir*, June 1st, 2016, available at: <http://www.kurir.rs/region/crna-gora/milo-prolupao-dukunovic-pljunuo-na-mojkovacku-bitku-clanak-2289171>.

SDP), increased the prospect of new elections in early 2016. The political atmosphere was also greatly influenced by the prospect of NATO membership (Montenegro was officially invited to join NATO in 2015), a project largely opposed by the ethnically Serb population of Montenegro, by the Serbian Orthodox Church, and last but not least by Moscow. After 2013, Podgorica severed its previously intense economic links with Russia as a reaction to failed Russian investments in key Montenegrin industrial facilities. After the eruption of conflict in Ukraine, Montenegro firmly sided with the EU and NATO, joining in economic sanctions against Russia. Russia, in its turn, introduced sanctions against Montenegro and openly supported Serbian nationalist parties in their efforts to topple the Đukanović regime and reorient Montenegrin foreign policy towards Moscow instead of Brussels and Washington (Džankić 2014b). These developments had a considerable impact on new interpretations of the “Serbian” narrative of the Battle of Mojkovac on the occasion of the centenary.

The central commemorative event of the Battle of Mojkovac, which rallied the ethnic Serbs, was a memorial mass at Mojkovac that coincided with Orthodox Christmas and was celebrated by Bishop Amfilohije. In his speech, Amfilohije claimed that Montenegro’s drive to join NATO could be considered akin to King Nicholas and General Janko Vukotić welcoming the Austro-Hungarian army in 1916, expressing their willingness to cease resistance and serve as slaves to the occupiers. He also compared the pro-NATO policy of the current Montenegrin government with the beginning of the Second World War, claiming that joining NATO would be akin to Belgrade and Podgorica willingly accepting Hitler’s tyranny. “NATO bombed us, NATO stole our Kosovo and Metohija, NATO today supports the fratricidal war in Ukraine, it is continuing the work of Hitler. The NATO that our government wishes to join represents the continuity of the same ideas and actions that led to the Battle of Mojkovac.” Amfilohije also attacked the idea of joining the EU, which he described as an “atheist and polytheist” organization.<sup>8</sup> The speech documents a typical construction of the eternal enemy, which periodically surfaces in texts and in talks by members of the Serbian Orthodox Church and secular authors close to the church. The face and name of the eternal enemy of the Serbian nation keeps changing—be it the Ottoman Turks, the Habsburg Empire, Nazi Germany, Communists, or NATO/US/EU—but its essential characteristics remain. The Serbian Orthodox Church—along with the closely aligned Serbian nationalist current in Montenegrin politics—maintains that Christian Montenegrins are nothing but a regional branch of the wider Serbian nation. The concept of a modern Montenegrin nation, equal to the Serbs, Croats, and other South Slavic nations, has been consistently rejected by the Serbian Orthodox Church as a “Communist fabrication,” despite the fact that most citizens of a Christian Orthodox background continue to identify with this concept even in the post-communist and post-Yugoslav period.

<sup>8</sup> Amfilohije: tako smo mogli uz Hitlera 1941., *Vijesti*, January 8th, 2016. Available at: <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/amfilohije-tako-smo-mogli-uz-hitlera-1941-868990>.

Several days after the anniversary, another commemoration of the Battle of Mojkovac took place, this time organized by the Serb National Council of Montenegro. Prominent guests included the Serbian nationalist poet of Montenegrin origin Matija Bečković, Bishop Joanikije of Budimlje and Nikšić, Serbian politicians, and gusle players. A notable effort was made to confirm the status of Janko Vukotić, commander at the Battle of Mojkovac, as a pure hero, a symbol of Serbian ethnic identity in Montenegro and of solidarity with Serbia. Vukotić was constructed as someone that played no role in the subsequent controversial decision that led to the collapse of the Montenegrin army and resistance. The only institution charged with responsibility for the collapse of Montenegrin resistance was the “government of Montenegro.” Bishop Joanikije made it clear that “unlike at Kosovo, there was no betrayal at Mojkovac.” The betrayal came several days later, the bishop continued: “The inglorious decision of the government of Montenegro that the Montenegrin army should lay down its weapons . . . was immediately understood as treason and immediately generated chaos and internal conflicts in this nation; conflicts that have, unfortunately, lasted until the present day. The Battle of Mojkovac, just like the drama of Kosovo, is not over. The battle for the honor of Montenegro is still going on; Montenegro is not willing to accept the betrayal of Janko Vukotić and Mojkovac, of Kosovo and Russia.”<sup>9</sup> It can be assumed that the charge of betrayal, directed at the (wartime) government of Montenegro, pronounced at a time of political crisis in a milieu predominantly hostile to the (current) government of Montenegro, reinforces the cyclical notion of history. Attempts to raise Vukotić to the status of a great hero and to transfer responsibility for the disintegration of the Montenegrin army solely to the government, are a distortion of the considerably more complex historical evidence. In fact, it was Janko Vukotić who, in his position as chief of staff, which he assumed after the resignation of Petar Pešić on January 17th, officially disbanded the army by proclamation on January 21st, 1916 (Rakočević 1997: 187). Although no one questions his heroism on the battlefield, historians have long agreed that Vukotić, along with other key figures from political and military life, also bears his share of responsibility for the controversial decision that led to the collapse of Montenegrin resistance (Drašković 1995: 380–389). It is perhaps fitting to say that Janko Vukotić has been reduced, rather than elevated, to the status of an indisputable hero in the Serbian narrative of the First World War.

<sup>9</sup> Bečković: Na Kosovu je osnovana prva NATO država, koju je priznao Montenegro, a nikad neće Crna Gora, *Vijesti*, January 10th, 2016, available at: <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/beckovic-na-kosovu-je-osnovana-prva-nato-drzava-koju-je-priznao-montenegro-a-nikad-nece-crna-gora-869328>. The mention of the “betrayal of Kosovo” could be understood as a reference to the decision by the government of Montenegro to recognize the independence of Kosovo in 2008, a move still bitterly contested by ethnically Serb parties and the Serbian Orthodox Church.

“THE DAY WHEN THE SERB NATION DECIDED TO DEFEND THE SERB ARMY”: THE SERBIAN NARRATIVE OF THE BATTLE OF MOJKOVAC

Centenary celebrations of the Battle of Mojkovac also took place in the Serbian capital of Belgrade on January 17th, 2016. Prominent guests included Patriarch Irinej, head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Bishop Amfilohije of the Montenegrin eparchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church, chief of the Serbian army Ljubiša Diković, and a number of figures from academic life. During the program, Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić appeared on screen, speaking from Abu Dhabi. The overall tone of the commemoration was similar to events organized in Montenegro by the Serbian Orthodox Church, Serbian political parties, and other organizations, stressing the Serbian identity of the Montenegrins and their solidarity with Serbia. The role of Serbia as the *matična država* ‘mother country’ of the Serbs and main defender of Serbian national interests was highlighted. This tendency obviously represents a reincarnation of the old concept of Serbia as the “Piedmont” of the Serbs, asserting the primacy of Belgrade over other “centers of Serbdom,” including Montenegro.<sup>10</sup> The recurrent topic of the speeches was the role of the Montenegrin units at Mojkovac in defending the retreating Serbian army. The tone was set by President Nikolić, who said that Serbia will forever be grateful to those who stood up to defend it. Christmas Eve, 1916, the day when the Battle of Mojkovac began, was “the day when the Serbian nation decided to defend the Serbian army” (*Dan kad je srpski narod odlučio da brani srpsku vojsku*). The Battle of Mojkovac represented “an epic event in the history of the Serbian nation of Montenegro.” In another speech, Patriarch Irinej went even further in constructing a link between the Montenegrin units and the Serbian state, in so doing distorting historical reality, by describing a chain of command that is different from the one that existed in 1916. Irinej claimed that the Montenegrin soldiers “did everything to fulfill the great duty entrusted to them by Prince, and later King, Alexander.” In fact, Prince-Regent Alexander was not the person that ordered the Montenegrin soldiers to launch a counterattack against the Habsburg army at Mojkovac. He did not issue the previous order to hold the position at the Tara River to the last man either. These orders came from Serbian Colonel Petar Pešić, who served as head of the Montenegrin army and was himself subordinated to the position of chief of staff of the Serbian army by Radomir Putnik, not Prince-Regent Alexander. The main strategic decisions that led to the Battle of Mojkovac were made by General Janko Vukotić, King Nicholas’s most trusted commander, who had simultaneously served as Montenegro’s prime minister until late December 1915. Moreover, the words of President Nikolić lend a false impression of spontaneity to the battle, suggesting a collective decision and a unique goal of defending the Serbian army, neglecting other motivations and the decisive role of military structures. The integration of the Battle of

<sup>10</sup> Before the creation of Yugoslavia in 1918, the notion of Serbia as the “Piedmont” of the Serbs was contested by the Montenegrin court and government during the rule of Prince (later King) Nicholas.

Mojkovac into a wider Serbian historical narrative was confirmed by Patriarch Irinej, who claimed that the anniversary of the Battle of Mojkovac had the same or nearly the same importance as the anniversary of the battle of Kosovo.<sup>11</sup>

From a “longue durée” perspective, it is possible to conclude that the importance of the Battle of Mojkovac has finally been recognized in Serbia. After one hundred years, it has been integrated into a wider Serbian historical narrative that centers on Serbia and its primacy, yet does not exclude the heroic contribution of other Serbs, including the Serbs of Montenegro. In the interwar period, the prevailing attitude was radically different. The performance of the Montenegrin army in the First World War was generally neglected, underestimated, and sometimes even ridiculed. However, beyond the enthusiastic recognition of the heroism and sacrifice of the “Serbian nation of Montenegro,” which has recently become fashionable among Serbian elites, one can detect a firm mental construction of hierarchical relations, which affirms the primacy of Serbia over Montenegro and also a subservient position of the Montenegrins vis-à-vis the Serbians, obscured by an emphasis on shared national identity and the greatness of the Montenegrins’ service to the Serbian army and sacrifices for Serbdom.

#### VETERANS, WOMEN, AND RAFTERS: BEYOND THE GRAND NARRATIVES

Is there a middle way between the “Serbian” and the “Montenegrin” narrative? Or, to put it another way, is there anything missing from these grand narratives that revolve around the fortunes of the nation and statehood? During the centenary of the battle, certain hints could be found at the local level. In the summer of 2016, the cultural center at Kolašin (some twenty kilometers from Mojkovac) held an exhibition in honor of the Kolašin Brigade, composed of local soldiers that contributed to Montenegro’s decisive victory at Mojkovac in 1916. Speaking at the opening ceremony, Professor Savo Marković provided a somewhat different explanation of their motivations: “I think that it is neither scholarly nor fair to say that the Battle of Mojkovac was not necessary and that the sacrifices of its heroes were in vain. Apart from the fact that they did sacrifice themselves in order to save their ally, the heroes of the Battle of Mojkovac were defending their own territory and their own freedom.”<sup>12</sup> The Montenegrin army was organized territorially, even tribalistically. Most of the soldiers that participated in the Battle of Mojkovac came from neighboring areas, from villages directly endangered by the approaching front. The need to defend the safety of homes and families, the local, the family, and the tribal pride—all of these factors have

<sup>11</sup> Nikolić: Mojkovačka bitka je epopeja srpskog naroda iz Crne Gore, *Vijesti*, January 18th, 2016, available at: <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/nikolic-mojkovačka-bitka-je-epopeja-srpskog-naroda-iz-crne-gore-870703>.

<sup>12</sup> Izložba “U slavu junacima Kolašinske brigade,” *Vijesti*, August 4th, 2016, available at: <http://www.vijesti.me/caffe/izložba-u-slavu-junacima-kolasinske-brigade-898885>.

been largely neglected. In fact, limited attention was paid to the memory of the veterans throughout the entire twentieth century. No systematic research on the memory of the First World War was conducted in Montenegro. Sporadically, fragments of “eye-witness testimonies” were added like rare and exotic spices to season the works of historians. These testimonies were primarily of a written nature. During the first official commemoration of the battle that took place in 1940, many participants were present, often still sufficiently fit to participate in combat—because many of them, in fact, did less than a year later. At the fiftieth anniversary commemoration, a large number of veterans showed up with pride. At the eightieth anniversary in 1996, only four remained. However, the veterans were rarely given an opportunity to speak—talking was reserved for politicians and other dignitaries.

Further research on the Battle of Mojkovac is complicated by the fact that some of the most important sources have not survived. Petar Martinović, the last commander of the Sanždak units, destroyed all written records before his escape to northern Albania (Drašković 1995: 11). Despite fragmentary evidence, the memory of the battle can be approached from new angles. Earlier in 2016, the cultural center in Kolašin held an exhibition devoted to women and their role in the Battle of Mojkovac, including photographs and written documents. The Montenegrin army was notorious for its lack of logistical competence in the modern sense of the term. In times of conflict, soldiers were supplied by female members of their families—wives, mothers, and sisters, who often had to cross large distances in constant movement between the front and the “home-front” in the literal sense of the word. The message of the exhibition was clear—without women, the victory at Mojkovac would have been impossible.<sup>13</sup> Despite the considerable role of the questions of collective identity and history in Montenegrin society, contemporary Montenegro is also a modern, predominantly urban European country, oriented towards the tourist industry and exposed to foreign influences. A group of young people found a way of commemorating the Battle of Mojkovac in their own way, a way that was remarkably devoid of politicization and even most historical considerations. On the centenary of the battle, the sports club Extreme Montenegro celebrated the anniversary by organizing a rafting expedition on the Tara River. The event also served to promote the Mojkovac section of the river, which has so far received less attention from rafters and other visitors than the more dramatic parts of the Tara Canyon further downstream (beyond Mojkovac, the Tara Gorge turns into the largest canyon on the European continent and the second-largest in the world).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Sjećanje na žene i majke junaka, *Vijesti*, April 24th, 2016, available at: <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/sjecanje-na-zene-i-majke-junaka-885113>.

<sup>14</sup> “Extreme Montenegro”: Božićnim raftingom Tarom obilježili 100-godišnjicu Mojkovacke bitke, *Vijesti*, January 7th, 2016, available at: <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/bozicnim-raftingom-tarom-obiljezili-100-godisnjicu-mojkovacke-bitke-868980>.

## THE MONTENEGRIN *TITANIC*: COMMEMORATING THE MEDOVA TRAGEDY

On January 6th, 1916, the Italian boat *Brindisi* carrying several hundred Montenegrin volunteers from North America sank after hitting a mine near the northern Albanian coast, which was occupied by Serb and Montenegrin forces. This event has become known as the “Medova tragedy” in reference to the nearby port of Shëngjin (Serbo-Croatian: *Medova*, Italian: *San Giovanni di Medua*). After the declaration of war in the summer of 1914, thousands of Montenegrins that lived and worked in North America attempted to return to their homeland and join the Montenegrin army as volunteers. Groups of volunteers from neighboring territories under Habsburg rule also wished to join the Montenegrin army. In the summer of 1915, some two thousand volunteers reached Montenegro through Salonika and Serbia, after receiving military training in Canada. In December 1915, another group consisting of some six hundred volunteers left Canada and managed to reach southern Italy. On the night of January 5th, they sailed from the port of Brindisi on an overcrowded boat of the same name and managed to cross the Adriatic at night without attracting enemy attention. However, on the morning of January 6th, 1916, the *Brindisi* hit a mine near the port of Medova and sank within fifteen minutes. Over four hundred passengers died (389 volunteers and twelve members of an American-Czech mission of the Red Cross). One hundred fifty volunteers and two members of the Red Cross mission survived. The sinking of the *Brindisi* has been the focus of many questions and the object of many conflicting accounts. Most evidence suggests that the inexperienced Italian crew tried to approach the port from an unusual angle and hit an Italian rather than an Austro-Hungarian mine, one in a chain of mines that had been placed to protect the port from enemy intrusion. In terms of the loss of life, the sinking of the *Brindisi* is the greatest single catastrophe at sea not just in Montenegrin history, but in the entire history of the South Slavic nations (Špadijer 2016: 63).

In 1940, a monument by sculptor Risto Stijović, known as *Lovčenska vila*—the Lovćen fairy—commemorating the victims of the Medova tragedy was unveiled in Cetinje at the initiative of Montenegrins living in America. Over the years, the monument has been attributed a wider meaning and it is commonly seen as a memorial to the Montenegrin diaspora and its sacrifices for the homeland. In recent years, increased attention has been paid to the actual place where the *Brindisi* foundered. Since 2007, several expeditions of the Dolcinium diving club based in the town of Ulcinj and led by Ilir Čapuni have located, identified, and studied the remnants of the shipwreck, half-buried on the sandy seabed fourteen meters below the surface (Špadijer 2016: 83–84). Several commemorations—including a high-profile commemoration on board a Montenegrin army ship on the occasion of the centenary—have taken place off the northern Albanian shore. Two other commemorations took place on the centenary of the Medova tragedy: one in Cetinje in front of the Lovćen Fairy monument, and another at the rectorate of the University of

Montenegro in Podgorica, which was accompanied by an exhibition. The main speaker at the Podgorica commemoration was Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Lukšić, who admitted that Montenegro never showed much gratitude to its diaspora and highlighted the fact that the efforts of the diaspora played a crucial role in the reestablishment of independence in 2006. Similarly to Đukanović in his speech at the Mojkovac ceremony, Lukšić integrated the sinking of the *Brindisi*, sometimes popularly called the “Montenegrin Titanic,” into a wider narrative of heroism, the loss of independence at the end of the First World War, and a progressive return of statehood.<sup>15</sup> The victory of the Yugoslav Partisans in the Second World War and the 2006 referendum on independence were presented as two highly important events that have redeemed the previous sacrifices, tragedies, and injustices. If seen thus, the Medova tragedy—although less connected to political and military events—symbolically marks the beginning of the tragic disintegration of Montenegrin statehood in the First World War. It seems that there is a clear—if unspoken—analogy between the sinking of the *Brindisi* and the similarly tragic but metaphorical sinking of the Montenegrin state that quickly ensued.

The Medova tragedy has been markedly less contested in the Serbian and Montenegrin historical narratives. On the occasion of the centenary, the newspaper *Dan*, which mainly represents the views of the Serbian opposition to the current political establishment, reported on the state-organized commemorations in the same positive and matter-of-fact manner as the pro-government daily *Pobjeda* or the independent daily *Vijesti*. However, even the sinking of the *Brindisi* is not completely immune to nationalist reinterpretations and appropriations. As is evident from the preserved lists of passengers, most volunteers indeed came from the Kingdom of Montenegro. Some came from coastal territories that belonged to the Habsburg Empire prior to 1918 but have been part of Montenegro since the Second World War: the Bay of Kotor and the Paštrovići region above Budva. There were a few others that came from Hercegovina, Lika, and Serbia. The units were organized by Montenegrin emissaries. They were supposed to join the Montenegrin army and used the Montenegrin flag, which survived the catastrophe and was presented to the king. Even Serbian army documents from the time of the tragedy speak of “Montenegrin volunteers” (Špadijer 2016: 40). However, a calendar of notable anniversaries, published by the Serbian Tanjug agency and aired by Serbian state television in January 2010, provided a different version of history. On January 6th, 1916, this source claimed that, “the boat *Brindisi* sank, carrying 390 Serbian volunteers. . . . the Italian boat *Brindisi*, carrying Serb emigres from Canada and the US, who wanted to help Serbia in its war effort.” The calendar then mentioned another event from Montenegrin history: “On the same day the Austro-Hungarian general staff made the decision to take over Montenegro. In seven days, Montenegro no longer existed because King Nicholas signed the capitulation of his

<sup>15</sup> Lukšić: Medovska tragedija vrhunac rodoljublja, *Vijesti*, January 14th, 2016, available at: <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/luksic-medovska-tragedija-vrhunac-rodoljublja-870030>.

own country.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, while the volunteers who died at Medova were appropriated as Serbs bound for Serbia without any mention of Montenegro, the defeat was described as distinctly Montenegrin and distinctly shameful. In fact, seven days after January 6th, the Montenegrins were still fighting—the order to lay down weapons was issued on January 21st. King Nicholas never signed a capitulation or peace treaty with the Austro-Hungarian Empire—in fact he left the country and formed a government in exile in France, remaining on the side of the Entente just like the Serbian government. Here one is dealing with a selective appropriation and distortion of Montenegrin history: the “good” and “useful” events and personalities are labeled as Serbian and appropriated by Serbia while the “problematic” ones are further distorted and ascribed to Montenegrins, whose negative image provides a useful contrast to the Serbians’ positive (self-) representation. A similar tendency to view Serbians as inferior to Montenegrins in terms of fighting capabilities, idealism, and readiness for sacrifice can, however, also be detected in some Montenegrin narratives.

## CONCLUSION

Many contemporary arguments regarding the First World War in Montenegro belong to one of two dominant, mutually exclusive national narratives and are not new; they have been familiar to historians for decades. In the last quarter of a century, there has been a process of considerable politicization and the nationalization of certain interpretations that had not been understood as “Serbian” or “Montenegrin” at the time of their formulation. In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, not only Montenegrin but also Serbian historians expressed the opinion that the Battle of Mojkovac was unnecessary and most likely counterproductive from a military perspective. This idea was put forward as the non-political, neutral view of academic specialists irrespective of their ethnic identity. Such a view is firmly and exclusively identified with the Montenegrin narrative and is vehemently rejected by proponents of the Serbian narrative. A person expressing this view is now immediately recognized and classified as a proponent of Montenegrin ethnic identity and a supporter of the country’s independence. It is very unlikely that an ethnic Serb from Montenegro, a former supporter of the common state with Serbia, or an adherent of the Serbian Orthodox Church would agree with the idea that the battle was a tragic mistake.

The wider temporal frames of both narratives display interesting structural differences. The Serbian narrative includes unmistakable elements of a cyclical vision of history. The name of the enemy keeps changing—Turkey, the Habsburg empire, the Third Reich, and most recently NATO—but “the battle is still being fought.” The Battle of Mojkovac was a replay of the battle of Kosovo, and the current political crisis is similarly understood as a replay of

<sup>16</sup> Vremeplov: Potonuo “Brindizi” sa 390 srpskih dobrovoljaca, *Tanjug*, January 5th, 2010, available at: [http://www.rtv.rs/sr\\_lat/drustvo/vremeplov/vremeplov-potonuo-brindizi-sa-390-srpskih-dobrovoljaca\\_166817.html](http://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/drustvo/vremeplov/vremeplov-potonuo-brindizi-sa-390-srpskih-dobrovoljaca_166817.html).

previous struggles. The identity of the Montenegrins is also essentialist and unchangeable: they are—or at least should be—ethnically Serbian just like their forefathers. The eternal replay of struggles between “us” and “them” is complicated by the existence of “domestic traitors,” whose current incarnation is represented by the government of Montenegro and proponents of Montenegrin ethnic identity. The future of the Serbian nation of Montenegro is still at stake: much depends on the results of the battle that is currently raging. The world once more has to undergo a reset and the “natural order of things”—the predominant position of the Serbs in Montenegro and close links with Serbia and Russia—must be reestablished. The Montenegrin narrative, on the other hand, is more linear and can best be summed up as the story of a collective fall and a redemption. In fact, the main actor of history is not the nation but the state: the Montenegrin narrative primarily revolves around the fortunes of political sovereignty and independence. The occupation of Montenegro by the Austro-Hungarian Empire after the fall of Lovćen and victory at Mojkovac represents an overture to the tragic loss of statehood after 1918. The period from the Second World War until 2006 is conceptualized as a gradual revival of sovereignty. The Partisan victory in the Second World War, the establishment of Montenegro as a republic in communist Yugoslavia, the decision to refrain from joining Serbia in the confrontation against the West during the Kosovo crisis at the end of the 1990s, and the referendum on independence in May 2006 represent the main evolutionary steps on the road towards the reestablishment of statehood. According to this interpretation, Montenegrins have indeed “learned a historic lesson.” The restoration of independence is presented as a reestablishment of the natural order of things and redemption for the tragic events of the past, including the First World War. The time for battle is no more. The future might be imagined as a gradual, civil, and unheroic betterment of the present condition (joining NATO and the EU, rising economic standards, etc.). It seems unlikely that both mutually exclusive national narratives, which have been further developed and strengthened during the centenary commemorations of the dramatic events of 1914–1916, can be easily reconciled. However, it is possible to imagine that they might lose their perceived importance and urgency in an altered political climate.

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## SPORNI SPOMINI NA PRVO SVETOVNO VOJNO V ČRNI GORI

*Veliko sodobnih preprirov, povezanih s spomini na prvo svetovno vojno v Črni gori, se opira na eno od dveh prevladujočih in izključujočih se nacionalnih pripovedi. Gre za dejstvo, že desetletja znano zgodovinarjem. Tako zagovorniki srbske pripovedi izrecno zavračajo pogled, ki se identificira izključno s črnogorsko pripovedjo.*

*Ob tem se ime sovražnika spreminja, lahko je Turčija, habsburško cesarstvo, tretji rajh ali pa nazadnje NATO, vendar »boj še vedno poteka.« Bitka pri Mojkovcu je tako ponovitev bitke na Kosovu in v trenutni politični krizi jo razumejo in predstavljajo kot ponovitev prejšnjih borb. Tako je v srbski pripovedi nenehno ponavljanje borbe med »nami« in »njimi« zapleteno že zaradi »domaćih izdajalcev«, ki jih trenutno utelešajo vlada Črne gore in zagovorniki črnogorske etnične identitete.*

*Pokaže se, da glavni dejavnik zgodovine ni narod, temveč država: črnogorska pripoved se v prvi vrsti vrti okoli sreče politične suverenosti in neodvisnosti. Prihodnost je tako zamišljena kot postopno, civilno in nenehno izboljšanje sedanjega stanja (pridružitve NATO in EU, dvig gospodarskega in družbenega standarda itd.). Zato se zdi le malo verjetno, da se bosta obe izključujoči se narodni pripovedi, ki sta se med stoletnimi komemoracijami dramatičnih dogodkov*

*1914-1916 še razvijali in krepili, zdaj uskladili. A vendar je mogoča misel, da bi obe, le da v drugačni, spremenjeni politični atmosferi lahko izgubili svoj pomen in nujnost.*

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