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Yugoslav Eulogies: Remembering the Sarajevo Assassination

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 was, like any political murder, a violent and disruptive act. But it paled in comparison to the mass violence and disruptive influence of the First World War that broke out a month later, including the death of some nine million men; the fall of four empires (German, Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman); the advent of the Soviet Union; and the economic dislocations that abetted the rise of fascism. For many, it is thus easy to take the cognitive leap in constructing the assassination as “the immediate cause of the Great War, of its attendant horrors, and of the general suffering which has been its sequel” (London Times, 3 February 1930); and to blame the Bosnian Serb assassin, Gavrilo Princip, for everything from the decline of Europe’s “golden age” to the rise of Adolf Hitler. Likewise, the Archduke and his wife (who was also killed) are often memorialized as “the first victims of the First World War” and Sarajevo construed as the place where the war began: “It should not be a city,” wrote the Austrian novelist Joseph Roth. “It should be a monument, to make everyone remember with horror.”¹ By contrast, in interwar Yugoslavia a mausoleum was built to honor the assassins; and in post World War II socialist Yugoslavia a memorial-museum in Sarajevo acclaimed them as national heroes for liberating South Slavs from Austria-Hungary. Princip’s footprints were even embedded into the sidewalk on the corner where he committed the murders.

The diverse and often conflicting ways in which the Sarajevo assassination has been remembered, represented, memorialized, and imagined are the subject of my book project, tentatively entitled *28 June 1914: A Day in History and Memory*. One of the crucial questions of this study concerns the tension and interplay between remembrance in the various national manifestations of Yugoslavia in the twentieth century (from the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes after World War I to the bloody break-up of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the postwar situation today) and that in much of the rest of Europe and the world generally. In particular, how did Yugoslav leaders and intellectuals reconcile the awful legacy of World War I with their mythologization of the murder that provoked it?

In *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation* (Stanford, 1998), the Slavicist Andrew Wachtel considers how the intellectual arbiters of “Yugoslavism” strove to instill the diverse South Slavic peoples with what he calls a “horizontal sense of belonging to a single nation” (21), by

¹ Klaus Westermann, ed., *Joseph Roth Werke 2: Das journalistische Werk, 1924–1928* (Köln: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1990), pp. 731–733. First published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* (3 July 1927). Paul Miller, p. 2

seeking to create a unifying “Yugoslav” (literally: South Slav) culture out of the varied South Slavic peoples and their separate yet sometimes intertwining histories. Thus he considers such cultural processes as the codification of a shared national language (e.g., Serbo-Croatian, as opposed to Serbian and/or Croatian); the cultivation of a literary and artistic canon embodying a certifiably “Yugoslav” worldview; and the educational policies aimed at legitimating a Yugoslav historical narrative. From a cultural perspective, many Yugoslavists who had worked toward unification in the nineteenth century saw in the Sarajevo assassination a narrative of opposition and liberation that could appeal to all South Slavs (Serbs, Croats, Slovenians, Bosnians, etc.), thus forging and reinforcing a collective “Yugoslav” identity. For my conference paper, I would like to examine their and subsequent efforts to construct the assassination as a foundational myth in the creation of the Yugoslav state, and the various reasons, both external and internal, that these initiatives at shaping a unified, national memory around the Sarajevo assassination ultimately did not succeed.

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