CHAPTER 4

Answering Back to Presumed Accusations: Serbian First World War Memories and the Question of Historical Responsibility

Ismar Dedović and Tea Sindbæk Andersen

In the autumn of 2013, as the centenary of the First World War was looming in the near future, Tomislav Nikolić, president of Serbia, officially rejected that his country could in any way be held responsible for the beginning of that war. In an open letter published in the distinguished newspaper Politika, Nikolić wrote that voices were heard which tried to redefine the ‘Vidovdan assassination’, the Serbian phrase for the murder of Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914, as a terrorist attack. The aim of this, according to Nikolić, was to declare Serbia a priori guilty. ‘Will the victorious powers allow attempts at revising history by the invention of a terrorist attack as the cause for the beginning of the First World War? Are the victims of a righteous battle for freedom in vain?’ asked Nikolić, stating that ‘We have no right to remain silent even if this lie were represented by one single voice.’

The voices mentioned by Nikolić remain undefined and anonymous. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Nikolić’s passionate letter is composed as a response to what is perceived as accusations and attempts to blame Serbia for the beginning of the Great War. After posing his questions, Nikolić moves on to explain what he sees as the causes of the war, positioning them firmly outside Serbia, and to remind his readers of the catastrophic losses and suffering that Serbia endured during the wartime years.

While Nikolić’s letter has the appearance of a reaction, the exact origin of the accusation is not mentioned in it. However, in a speech given in June 2014, at the eve of the centenary of the First World War, Nikolić clearly identifies Christopher Clark’s book from 2012 The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914 as the primary source of revisionist attempts to blame Serbia for the

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outbreak of the war. Yet, these statements from Serbia's president are certainly not the first examples of attempts to contradict or reject presumed accusations that Serbia could be held responsible for the outbreak of the First World War. A long tradition of such rejections can be detected nearly all the way through the century since the War began. Thus, while Nikolić's statements constitute a highly politicized reception of, among others, Clarke's book, they are certainly also highly premediated repetitions of an old argument. Yet, Nikolić is also claiming to protect Serbia's memory of the First World War, a war that cost Serbia very dearly, but also ensured the country's position among the victorious Entente powers and led to the creation of the first Yugoslav state in 1918. Indeed, Nikolić's letter is titled 'Let us be proud of our heroic past'.

This chapter investigates Tomislav Nikolić's statements in connection to the First World War centenary, both as remediation of Serbian memories of the outbreak of the Great War and as reception of Clark's book. We trace what we see as a powerful premediation of Nikolić's statements in the tradition of rejecting Serbia's potential responsibility for the war in history books and school textbooks on history. We argue that this is an essential element of Serbia's war memory. Moreover, we propose that this tradition of rejecting war responsibility could be understood as reception of real and perceived accusations, and we suggest that the urge to stand up to these perceived accusations will render Serbia's First World War memory a certain urgency and a sense that it needs protection, which will increase its actuality and relevance in the present.

**Serbia and First World War Memory**

The First World War, Europe's 'great seminal catastrophe' in the words of George Kennan, is widely and massively commemorated throughout Europe.

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2 “Govor Predsednika Republike, sanu – Veliki Rat. 13 June 2014.” (A print of the speech was kindly supplied at request from the press centre at the office of the President of the Republic of Serbia).


4 Nikolić, “budimo dostojni junačke prošlosti”.


As a hugely complex ‘site of memory’, the First World War is an essential focus point of both European and national collective remembrance and of historical meaning, attracting intense attention from those involved in remembering and constantly being invested with new meaning. Like other well-established sites of memory, it possesses a massive tradition or ‘genealogy’ of remediation across various modes of cultural memory, one of these being historiography. Indeed, the origins and causes of the First World War are among the most discussed historical problems of Europe’s 20th century.

In Serbia, the First World War is a strongly established and hugely politicized site of memory. Indeed, Serbia’s First World War history supplies abundant material for a heroic national narrative. Attacked in 1914 by a much stronger neighbouring Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Serbian army successfully defended the country’s borders until the winter of 1915–1916 when, overpowered by the joint offensive from Germany, Bulgaria and Austria-Hungary, the army retreated together with the Serbian government and the royal house through the mountains of Albania, abandoning Serbia to be occupied by the Central Powers. When they reached the Adriatic coast, Serbia’s military forces were sailed to Corfu, where they were reorganized in order to be deployed as part of the Entente forces at the Salonica front. Here they contributed to the break-through of the Bulgarian lines of defence and the reconquering of Serbia, returning to Belgrade in October 1918. Serbia thus emerged as a victorious
Entente ally and played a dominant role in the creation of a new large South Slav state in 1918, when the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia from 1929) was established through a unification of the kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro with the formerly Austro-Hungarian regions of Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia. Yet, the costs of this uncompromising war effort were terrible; presumably a quarter of Serbia’s pre-war population was killed fighting or died from war-related hunger or epidemics in the trenches or back home in the occupied country.11

The heroism and suffering of Serbia’s army became key elements of the national mythology in the new Kingdom. Serbia’s fallen soldiers on the allied side were widely commemorated with enthusiastic support, both personally and materially, from the Serbian royal house.12 From its very outset, Serbia regarded the Great War as a defensive struggle against the imperial ambitions of Austria-Hungary in the Balkans. ‘Brave little Serbia’, as the story went, was heroically defending its freedom against a manifold larger and stronger foe, and despite innumerable hardships it managed to survive and even triumph over the invading forces. This narrative was elaborated and institutionalized after the end of the war, becoming the official narrative of the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later called the Kingdom of Yugoslavia).13

It was during the first post-war years that several elements of the narrative template of Serbian First World War memory were first put in place: the brave, little state defending itself against the aggressions of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and managing to win spectacular victories, the suffering and patient nation, living through occupation and the terrible Albanian winter as the army

11 For an overview of Serbia’s war history, see Andrej Mitrović, Serbia’s Great War (London: Hurst, 2007); John R. Lampe, Yugoslavia as History. Twice there was a country (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 101–117; Stevan K. Pavlowitch, Serbia. The History behind the Name (London: Hurst, 2002), 93–110.


retreated to safety in Greece, and finally, the resurrection of the nation and the state as the Serbian army broke out from the front at Thessaloniki and liberated its country from Austria-Hungary and other occupiers.\textsuperscript{14}

This narrative has, with modifications, dominated the perceptions of the Great War in Serbia and Yugoslavia since its establishment. Always focused primarily on the heroic Serbian side of wartime history, the narrative tended to exclude the memories of the millions of Yugoslav citizens who had experienced the war from within the Austro-Hungarian Empire or had fought in the Empire’s armies.\textsuperscript{15} Yet, in spite of the strongly pro-Serbian leaning, efforts were made in the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia to create a more inclusive all-Yugoslav line of commemoration, for example by letting school book narratives emphasize the Yugoslav aspirations of Serbia’s war effort or by constructing pro-Yugoslav monuments, such as the Monument to the Unknown Hero on mount Avala outside Belgrade.\textsuperscript{16}

At the same time, the new state elevated Gavrilo Princip and his fellow conspirators to the status of national heroes and heralds of freedom for the South Slavs. This was a paradoxical move as it opened the state to international criticism for glorifying an assassin that – in the eyes of the world – put in motion a process leading to the Great War.\textsuperscript{17} But the Princip cult was at the same time a very potent symbol of the struggle of the South Slavs for their freedom. The graves of Princip and his fellows became sites of pilgrimage for young nationalists and in 1930 a memorial plaque was erected on the site of the assassination.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{15} Newman, \textit{Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War}; Dedović and Sindbæk Andersen, “To Battle, go forth all heroes”.


With the establishment of communist rule in Yugoslavia in 1945, commemoration of the Second World War, which had brought the Communist party to power, completely dominated public memory. Yet, in the background, the established memory narratives of the First World War remained, with history books and textbooks still focusing on Serbian heroism and suffering, only with a Marxist interpretation added, presenting the war as a result of the imperialist politics of Europe's great powers. In the socialist period, the cult of Gavrilo Princip was strengthened and received substantial official support. The Princip of the Communists became a revolutionary hero, struggling for national freedom and social justice.

First World War memory attracted more attention in Yugoslavia after the 50 years anniversary of the War's outbreak in 1964, when new monuments were erected. Especially during the so-called 'outburst of history' in the 1980s, the Great War once again became an important and also controversial topic, particularly in Serbia. One of the strongest Serbian reassessments of First World War memory figured in Danko Popović's hugely popular short novel *The book about Milutin*, which was published in 1985. Milutin, a Serbian peasant who is being mobilized for the Serbian army, hears of the murder of Franz Ferdinand and is less than impressed: 'It is easy to kill a prince and a woman, but a war is not won by killing a prince and a wife' he thinks, wondering why Serbian peasants have to pay for this, and who will help Serbia, while the country's soldiers are fighting for the South Slavs. Popović thus lets Milutin undermine the heroic interpretation of Gavrilo Pincip and his fellow conspirators, and then moves on to underline the meaninglessness of the war and Serbia's huge sacrifices. In essence, Popović and other authors questioned the legitimacy and prudence in creating the common Yugoslav state, while emphasizing the suffering of Serbia for the Yugoslav cause. They also emphasized the futility of

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that sacrifice, since a majority of the other Yugoslav peoples seemed ungrateful to Serbia for liberating them in the Great War. In doing so, they rejected the Yugoslav aspect of Serbian First World War memory and paved the way for a narrowly national Serbian war memory.24

After the collapse of the Yugoslav state in 1991 the perception of the First World War in Serbia became increasingly nationalized. The country was still represented as an innocent victim, heroically defending its freedom against insurmountable odds, while the creation of the Yugoslav state was regarded as more of a problem than a positive outcome of the war.

Rejecting Presumed Accusations

It was this well-established and very national Serbian First World War memory that Tomislav Nikolić was defending in his letters and speeches in 2013 and 2014. Yet, Nikolić specifically felt the need to emphasize that Serbia could not be held responsible for the outbreak of the war. While this was at least partly a reaction to Christopher Clark’s book, it still seems puzzling that the president himself must repeatedly use this somehow vague argument. However, President Nikolić was in fact repeating a pattern of discourse that can be traced back throughout Serbian (and Yugoslav) First World War history writing. As Astrid Erll has pointed out, ‘existing representations which circulate in a given society provide schemata for new experience and its representation’.25 This kind of premediated schemata was one of the reasons behind Nikolić’ reaction.

Since the end of the Great War, it has been an integral part of the Yugoslav (and later Serbian) memory tradition to present the war in a way that could absolve the country of the responsibility for the outbreak of war. From the establishment of the Yugoslav state, the defence against possible accusations of war guilt has taken the form of attempts to separate what were presented as the ‘causes of war’ from the actual ‘pretext for war’, the latter being the Sarajevo assassination. This rhetorical move has served to underline Serbia’s innocence and justify Serbia’s actions. There is a clearly distinctive ‘genealogy of remediation’26 of that argument within Serbia’s First World War memory.


According to history books from the interwar period, the causes for the war were to be sought in Austria. One book, a history teaching manual for junior officers, simply declared that ‘the causes to the war lay in the great hatred that Austria felt towards Serbia.’27 History textbooks for primary and secondary school suggested that Austria-Hungary was worried by Serbia’s expansion in the Balkan wars, and that the Empire wanted to prevent any further strengthening of the Serbian state.28 According to one of Serbia’s leading historians in the interwar period, Vladimir Ćorović, Austria-Hungary feared a united Balkans dominated by Russia. Therefore ‘leading circles in Vienna found that the only medicine for everything would be just to break Serbia.’29 Yet, Austria needed an excuse – or a pretext – for attacking, and that was the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, even though Serbia could not at all, according to the books, be held responsible for that. A primary school textbook stated that: ‘one day in the year 1914, without any just cause, Austria-Hungary declared war on little Serbia. As at that time on Vidovdan in Sarajevo the Austro-Hungarian heir to the throne was murdered by a young Serb from Bosnia, Gavrilo Princip, it [the Empire] declared that Serbs from Serbia were involved in this. And that was the pretext to declare war on Serbia.’30 A secondary school textbook simply writes: ‘To find an excuse for war, Austria-Hungary accused Serbia for the murder of their heir to the throne.’31 And Ćorović emphasized how Austria ‘without any proper documentation’ accused Serbia itself for the murder of Franz Ferdinand, though Serbia was not involved.32

In history books from Yugoslavia’s socialist era, this division into causes and pretexts remained clearly visible. It is present in history textbooks printed shortly after the end of the Second World War and it has been continuously remediated in various forms since then. Yet, during the socialist period this defensive rhetoric was given a different and more Marxist approach. The textbooks first present the international situation prior to the outbreak of war, emphasizing the colonial crises, the ambitions of the imperialist powers, the arms race and the inevitability of war owing to the logic of capitalism. Finally, Princip’s assassination of Franz Ferdinand is presented as a mere pretext for

27 Adamović, Istorija Jugoslovena za podoficire, 136.
28 Špoljar, Povijest Hrvata, Srba i Slovenca, 61; Kostić & Ljujić, Istorija Jugoslovena, 42; Lazarević, Istorija jugoslovena, 175.
29 Ćorović, Istorija Jugoslavije, 609.
30 Kostić & Ljujić, Istorija Jugoslovena, 42. See also Adamović, Istorija Jugoslovea za podoficire, 137; Špoljar, Povijest Hrvata, Srba i Slovenca, 61; Ćorović, Istorija Jugoslavije, 610.
31 Lazarević, Istorija jugoslovena, 175.
Germany or Austria-Hungary to start a war. An example of this is evident in an eighth grade history book from 1984. After presenting the numerous crises pre 1914, the text continues:

... the war was inevitable and both sides were putting enormous sums into armaments. Germany was the leading party in this and was just waiting for an opportune pretext to launch the war. The assassination on the Austro-Hungarian heir to the throne on 28 June 1914 was exactly this kind of opportunity.

History books by socialist Yugoslavia’s great historians also follow this pattern. Vladimir Dedijer, communist veteran from the Second World War and author of the official biography of President Tito, as well as several studies of the murder of Franz Ferdinand, wrote in 1973: ‘Claiming that the Sarajevo assassination was the basic or immediate cause for the war would be an exaggeration ... the opposition between the European Great Powers were so tense, the reorganization and arming of the German armies had already reached such a level that only the smallest excuse was needed for the beginning of the conflict.’ And according to Branko Petranović’s three-volume standard work on Yugoslav history, a war party in Vienna wanted to ‘settle accounts with Serbia’ and ‘the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand gave the war party a pretext for war ...’

All these books about the First World War clearly made an effort to emphasize that the outbreak of the war should certainly not be seen as something for which Serbia could be held responsible, as if to pre-empt any potential accusation against Serbia. One book, published for the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Kolubara, where the hard-pressed Serbian armies successfully repelled an Austrian attack in November and December 1914, explicitly pointed to such accusations:

immediately after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo ... an indictment was prepared against Serbia and the Serbian nation as

35 Božić et al., Istoriija Jugoslavije, 374.
instigators of the war, and afterwards also the historical responsibility for the European (later called the World) War was loaded on their backs. Historical research has long ago established the actual responsibility for the war, but the old accusations, invented from the side of Serbia's enemies, are still talked about and appear to be fundamental.37

The authors remind their readers that a large amount of literature repeating these accusations is still present in the libraries and issue a warning: ‘we must not forget that this was used as preparation for the attack on Yugoslavia in 1941.’38 The authors thus underline how potentially dangerous such a war guilt could be, thereby actualizing the need to protect the Serbian version of First World War memory and to reject any possible blame.

These arguments were continuously remediated after the fall of Yugoslavia, still serving the purpose of removing the war guilt from Serbia. Almost all post-Yugoslav Serbian textbooks examined for this chapter repeat the pattern of those of the socialist period: On the first page(s) of the chapter on the Great War, a more or less detailed description of the world situation prior to 1914 is given, with an emphasis on the crises and conflicts of the Great Powers. A high school textbook from 2012 writes:

The causes of the outbreak of the First World War are to be found in the imperialist interests of the great European powers and their struggle for political and economic domination over the Old Continent at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th Centuries.39

In this way, it is made explicitly clear that the Great Powers would have gone to war even if the assassination in Sarajevo had never happened. Thus, they largely copy the socialist argument, even though they do not use quite the same Marxist rhetoric anymore.40

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38 Ibid.
39 Đorđe Đurić and Momčilo Pavlović, Istorija – za treći razred gimnazije prirodno-matematičkog smera i četvrti razred opštog i društveno-jezičkog smera (Belgrade, Zavod za udžbenike, 2012), 72. See also Mira Radojević, Istorija – za treći razred gimnazije prirodno-matematičkog smera i četvrti razred opštog i društveno-jezičkog smera i opsteg tipa i četvrti razred srednje stručne škole za obrazovne profile pravni tehničar i birotehničar (Belgrade: Klett, 2014), 86.
40 Only two of the textbooks do not fit this frame neatly: they place the cause of the war in the rivalry between Austria-Hungary and Serbia from 1903 to 1914 and the unresolved national questions of the Dual Monarchy, as well as Serbia’s perceived desire to expand
Just like in the Yugoslav period, the assassination itself is presented as a ‘pretext for war’. Sometimes this is clear from the text itself while in other textbooks it is done in a headline that frames the understanding of the text in advance.\textsuperscript{41} Several textbooks also emphasize that Serbia had nothing to do with the assassination and therefore the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum was unreasonable. Clearly casting Serbia in the role of the victim, a high school textbook from 2012 states: ‘Although the Serbian government was not responsible for the Sarajevo assassination, war circles in Vienna immediately launched a campaign, which accused the official Serbia of carrying it out. They reasoned that a war should be waged against a manifold weaker Serbia to defeat and humiliate it militarily.’\textsuperscript{42}

The question of war guilt was thus being answered in a very uniform manner in Serbia. The fact that all textbooks use the same language, pointing to ‘cause’ versus ‘pretext’ when describing the run up to the war and that all have the same basic argumentative structure in their chapters on the Great War is indicative of a broader and strongly premediated memory tradition. Indeed, this had been the language and argumentative structure of Serbia’s First World War memory scheme for nearly a century by the time Christopher Clark’s book shook the Serbian public opinion and prompted President Nikolić to react.

\textbf{Clark and Nikolić}

Christopher Clark wrote in \textit{The Sleepwalkers} that ‘Since Srebrenica and the siege of Sarajevo, it has become harder to think of Serbia as the mere object or victim of great power politics and easier to conceive of Serbian nationalism as
an historical force in its own right ... Putting Sarajevo and the Balkans back at
the centre of the story does not mean demonizing the Serbs or their statesmen,
nor does it dispense us from the obligation to understand the forces working
on and in those Serbian politicians, officers and activists whose behaviour and
decisions helped to determine what kind of consequences the shooting at Sara-
jevo would have.'43 Thus, he certainly pointed towards Serbia in his attempt to
explain the outbreak of the First World War, suggesting that both the assassins
and Serbia's politicians were at least partly responsible. Moreover, Clark explic-
itly argued that for Austria-Hungary 'the Sarajevo murders were not a pretext for
a pre-existing policy of invasion and warfare. They were a transformative event,
charged with real and symbolic menace.'44 Knowingly or not, Clark thus direct-
ly rejected the essential elements of Serbia's narrative of innocence, which was
based on the claim that the assassination was exactly not a cause, but a mere
pretext. Furthermore, Clark suggested that Serbia's heroic fighting and status as
belonging within the victorious camp of the Entente had somehow prevented
Western historians from looking seriously at Serbia's role in the crisis that led
to the First World War, and only the infamous events during the Yugoslav wars
1991–1995 had enabled them to look critically at Serbian nationalism. While he
 refused to ascribe guilt to any one side, but rather located parts of the guilt with
every major player in the crisis,45 Clark could hardly have made a more direct
attack on Serbian First World War memory and Serbian nationalism.

In Serbia, Clark's book was met with a response which far surpassed that of
any other country. Not surprisingly, this was primarily a reaction to the parts
of The Sleepwalkers that concentrated on Serbia's role in both the Sarajevo assa-
sination and in the breakout of war in general. While these analyses and
conclusions were considered the methodologically and theoretically weakest
parts of the book, Serbian academic circles denounced the whole study as un-
scientific and lacking scholarly weight, while Serbian pundits and politicians
regarded the work as not only lacking in merit, but as an attack on Serbia and
its sacrifices during the Great War.46

Yet, the most clear and elaborate public reaction to the arguments in Clark's
The Sleepwalkers came from Serbia's president, Tomislav Nikolić. Indeed, as was

43 Christopher Clark, The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914 (London: Penguin
2013), xxvi–xxvii. The book was first published by Allen Lane in 2012. It was published in
Serbian in 2013.
44 Clark, The Sleepwalkers, 559.
46 See for instance: Danilo Šarenac, “O knjizi Mesečari. Kako je Evropa ušla u rat 1914, profe-
net/sukob-oko-velikog-rata/.
already obvious from his open letter to the newspaper *Politika* in November 2013, Nikolić had casted himself as defender of Serbia's First World War memory.\(^{47}\) On 10 November 2013, just before Armistice Day, Nikolić was also present at the reburial of Serbia's famous female First World War veteran, Milunka Savić, in Belgrade. Having briefly described Savić's life and praised her courage in the Second Balkan War and the First World War, the President compared the heroine to Serbia, as being both thoroughly good, but unappreciated and misunderstood: ‘Milunka Savić so resembles her country. Courageous when needed, invincible and upright, ready to help everyone, but again pushed aside when others think that she might get in the way, being so great and strong.’ Indeed, according to Nikolić, Savić was a ‘symbol of Serbia's struggle for freedom.’\(^{48}\) Thus, in Nikolić’s narrative, Serbia's war history was, like Savić’s, pure, brave and righteous.

In June 2014, just before the centenary, the Serbian Academy for Science and Arts (SANU) organized a conference on ‘Serbs and the First World War’. Speaking as a guest of honour, Nikolić summarized the significance of that war for Serbia: ‘A small, brave, country entered into a just fight for freedom, by the Grace of God it achieved victories, survived a Golgotha and, like Nathalie’s ramonde under a drop of rain, it rose from the ashes and was revived.’\(^{49}\) This is a distilled version of the official Serbian representation of the First World War and as such it is not in any way surprising to find it repeated in the Presidential address. But the real aim of Nikolić’s speech was not to repeat the official Serbian narrative, but rather to reaffirm and defend it against a perceived new threat. According to Nikolić, Serbs were confronted with an ‘attempt at falsification of history in relation to the causes of the breakout of the First World War’. This falsification was driven by ‘individuals from the echelon of the powerful’ who would ‘take facts out of context, twist them, alter their meaning, dress them in a new attire and give them a new look whereby a lie will become a globally accepted truth’.\(^{50}\) And, Nikolić continued, this attempt at a historical revision was mainly

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\(^{47}\) Nikolić, “budimo dostojni junačke prošlosti”.


\(^{49}\) “Govor Predsednika Republike, SANU – Veliki Rat”. Nathalie’s ramonde, or Ramonda Nathalie is a small purple flower named after Serbia’s queen Natalija. It grows in the South of Serbia. Since 2012 it has been a symbol of Serbia’s Armistice Day.

\(^{50}\) Ibid.
aimed at Serbia: ‘The Serb struggle for freedom, which has for an entire century
been a worldwide symbol of the fight for justice and truth, a great deed, is now
to be dragged through the mud.’ The aim of this revision, according to Nikolić,
was ‘to make the world believe that Serbs caused a war, which took 10,000,000
lives’. Later in his speech, President Nikolić pointed specifically to the work of
Christopher Clark as the primary source of this revisionism:

‘In his book, Professor Clark describes the Great Powers of the time as
sleepwalkers who staggered into war, though they in fact did not wish
that ... Clark even connects the assassination in Sarajevo with the crime in
Srebrenica in 1995, and because of that he says it is difficult for him to see
Serbia as a victim! Luckily, there is a minimal number of such extremes
within science or, rather, quasi science. Nobody, and really nobody serious,
accuses Serbia of being the cause of the Great War ... Serbia entered
the war to survive. It entered the war because there was no alternative.’

The fact that a scholarly work is interpreted as an attack on a sovereign
country is to an extent puzzling and requires further examination. The first point to
note here is that President Nikolić seemingly does not understand the nature
of historical research. In his speech he states that ‘After the publication of
the book by the famous German historian, Fritz Fischer, it was believed that
the question of war guilt was finally solved.’ It seems that Nikolić does not
quite understand that historical questions – especially more complex ones
such as the causes of the Great War – are rarely answered once and for all and
that, for this reason, it is to be expected that historians will use an opportunity
like the Centennial to once more bring up this theme.

The outrage levelled against Clark’s work does not seem to have the charac-
ter of a mere historical argument. The emotional appeals in Nikolić’s reaction
are very much about the present: he talks about lies and falsifications that take
place in the current moment, and he fears that Serbia’s great sacrifices are now
to be ‘dragged through the mud’. Clark’s own rather un-historical connection
between the Srebrenica massacre and Serbia’s role in the events leading up to
the First World War obviously touches a sore point and makes his argument
even more unacceptable to Nikolić, who represents a state that still finds it diffi-
cult to recognize that massacre and admit to Serbia’s co-responsibility for it, and
the role that Serbian forces played in it. This makes Clark’s parallel particularly
problematic, as it constitutes a double accusation against Serbian nationalism,
both of which Nikolić denies. What really provokes Nikolić is the suggestion that, because of Srebrenica, Serbian nationalism is no longer innocent, and thus Serbia’s status as a righteous victim in the First World War is threatened.

It is unlikely that a President would address this topic if it were relevant to historians only. Indeed, Nikolić’s speech was not an isolated act: in the run up to the centennial, numerous Serbian articles, op-eds etc. dealt with the issue of the outbreak of war in general and Clark’s book in particular. By and large this media campaign expressed the same views as the President in his speech to members of sanu. Nikolić’s speech thus seems to reflect and protect a dominant and widespread presentation of the Great War in Serbia. However, this does not necessarily explain why a president would chose to throw himself into the fray like Nikolić does. One explanation, suggested by the historian Dubravka Stojanović, is that the speech itself and the general debate on the war in Serbia was instrumentalized by the political elites in order to distract the populace from unpopular reforms and a faltering economy by whipping up nationalist frenzy. This would, furthermore, have the effect of signalling to nationalists in Serbia that the pro-EU course of the state was only a necessary evil while the real ambitions of Serbia were rooted in the nationalist framework and its history.

One argument in favour of this explanation is that the First World War as a contested topic seemingly disappeared as soon as the main festivities and ceremonies were over.

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However, this functional understanding does not quite explain why Nikolić and other parts of the Serbian public reacted so strongly to Clark's rethinking of the causes for the First World War, or indeed, why the First World War as such could become such a vital topic. Why this particular history? As has been shown in this chapter, the First World War is a well-established and very present memory in Serbia. The heroic and tragic narrative of Serbia's First World War is well known and certainly has the potential to be emotionally affective. Moreover, through the century that has passed since the war, Serbian (and Yugoslav) narratives have consequently rejected that Serbia could in any way be held responsible for the war's outbreak. And while Princip and his fellow assassins have been presented as heroes, their deed has never been accepted as a cause for the war; it was, in the Serbian phrase, only a pretext. Yet, Princip's heroic status is seemingly less important than Serbia's status as an innocent and heroic victim of the war. Indeed, given the catastrophic consequences of the First World War for Serbia, with the loss of about one quarter of the country's population, it would seriously question the legitimacy of Serbian nationalism and nationalist politics if exactly that nationalism were to be seen as the main cause of that war. Thus, Nikolić confirms the established narrative that Serbia was forced into the war, and thus he defends its status as an innocent victim of Great Power politics. As such, his reaction was highly premeditated; indeed he repeated an argumentative scheme that was established in the interwar period and has been remediated in Serbian and Yugoslav history books ever since.

The repeated rejection that Serbia in any way could be held responsible for the outbreak of the war inevitably had the effect of suggesting that such an accusation could indeed be made. The defensive discourse created the understanding that there was a need for Serbia to defend itself. Thus, it actualized the memory of the First World War as something that had to be protected, rendering it with certain urgency. Indeed, President Nikolić's reaction to Clark's book did have the appearance of an urgent need to protect Serbia's national memory. Moreover, the established memory narrative portrays the victory in the First World War as decisive for Serbia's existence; in Nikolić's rhetoric it was an unavoidable Golgotha of the Serbian nation, a war that Serbia entered to survive. Thus, it is the memory of a fatal and definitive event that Nikolić had taken upon himself to defend.

Conclusion

The existence of Serbia's strong tradition of First World War memory and the pervasiveness of the 'anti-war guilt rhetoric' help explain the need of Nikolić
and other parts of Serbia’s elites to react strongly to Clark’s shifting of the responsibility from Germany towards Serbia. Not only was he thereby challenging the established truth on the war in Serbia; he was also adding new weight to an idea that – however unspoken – has always been present in the textbooks: namely that Serbia will always be thought of as potentially responsible for the outbreak of the war. The defensive argument is necessary to disprove such accusations.

In his speeches and statements in the run-up to the centenary of the First World War, Serbia’s President Nikolić clearly confirmed and remediated a well-established narrative and argumentative scheme of Serbian First World War memory. Yet, his statements were also clearly a reaction to the publication of Christopher Clark’s rethinking of the causes to the First World War, and as such Nikolić’s speeches and letters are probably the most public and political reception of Clark’s book. Nikolić’s response was highly premeditated; in essence he was repeating the defensive arguments that had been present in Serbian and Yugoslav history books for nearly a century. Apparently, Nikolić perceived Clark’s argument as if he was stating the accusations that the Serbian tradition had been rejecting since the end of the First World War. Indeed, the fact that Clark’s book fitted so neatly into the fears and argumentative patterns of Serbia’s First World War memory was probably the main reason why it attracted so much attention in Serbia.

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