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JAMES LYON, *SERBIA AND THE BALKAN FRONT, 1914:*  
*THE OUTBREAK OF THE GREAT WAR.* BLOOMSBURY: LONDON 2015, 306 p.

Reviewed by Miloš Vojinović\*

James Lyon's book has been eagerly awaited by the historians of the First World War. As Lyon himself points out, the historiography of the Great War, after dealing with the events from the summer of 1914, usually loses sight of the Balkan front in the remaining months of 1914. If we look at the *Cambridge History of the First World War: Vol. 1 Global War* edited by Jay Winter, we can see that the Balkan front was not dealt with. Lyon offers several reasons why the Balkan front in 1914 should not be omitted from general overviews of the First World War. Firstly, relative to its size, it was as bloody as the Western or Eastern fronts. Five months of fighting in the relatively small northwestern quarter of the Kingdom of Serbia brought death, serious wounds, and captivity to 273,000 Habsburg soldiers and to 165,000 Serbian soldiers (pp. 234–236). Moreover, the Balkan front did not have to wait for 1919 and Spanish flu – at the end of 1914 typhus, diphtheria, and cholera were already taking lives. Secondly, Lyon demonstrates that events on the Balkan front were in focus of diplomacy of all belligerents, and of some countries that were weighing whether to enter the war or not. Finally, what is of special importance, the outcome of the war operations in the Balkans in 1914 had serious consequences for the Habsburg defeats by the Russian Empire on the Eastern front (pp. 4, 138, 149–150, 178–179).

The book is based on the author's PhD thesis defended at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1995, before a dissertation committee which included Bariša Krekić and Dimitrije Djordjević. The published version also drew upon works published after 1995. Lyon's fluency in Serbian enabled him to research Serbian primary sources from the period, which he had done in a rather meticulous and diligent way. The

detail in which the battles and troop movements are presented can even be described as burdensome by those who are not enthusiastic about military history. The narrative starts with chapters that are supposed to explain the origins of the conflict between the Kingdom of Serbia and Austria-Hungary, and ends with the last days of 1914, when hostilities ceased after the Battle of the Kolubara and the liberation of Belgrade.

Lyon states in the introduction that one of his goals is to demonstrate that most Western historians, due to the lack of knowledge of Serbian sources, have accepted the premise set forth by former Habsburg officers and politicians anxious to justify themselves, that the Habsburg army had been in a poor state whereas their foe had been better equipped and supplied (p. 2). Lyon is not the first to claim this. Historian Graydon A. Tunstall has spoken about "Habsburg command conspiracy", which was intended to hide the true reasons for the defeats of Habsburg armies in 1914.<sup>1</sup> Lyon provides a well-substantiated refutation of such claims, showing that the Habsburg troops outnumbered the Serbs by a ratio that went up to 3 to 1. Moreover, he clearly shows that the Habsburg forces were better equipped, that they had up to three times as many guns as the Serbs, and that they never faced problems with the lack of equipment, clothing and ammunition comparable to those that the Serbian forces did.

The first three chapters ("A Sunday in Sarajevo"; "A third Balkan war?"; "Parallel structures and hostile neighbors") cover the

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<sup>1</sup> G. A. Tunstall, "The Habsburg Command Conspiracy: The Austrian falsification of historiography on the outbreak of World War I", *Austrian History Yearbook* 27 (1996), 181–198.

time before hostilities began. Lyon claims that "In 1914, influential elements in both Austria-Hungary and Serbia pressed diametrically opposed geopolitical and national aims that contemplated future programs of territorial expansion at each other's expense" (p. 2). What remains unclear is why Lyon has chosen to base his conclusions about some of the crucial events only on the work of Luigi Albertini. Being well acquainted with Yugoslav and Serbian historiography, he should have had no trouble noticing that some of Albertini's conclusions, at times based only on interviews made by his assistants after the Great War, have been disproved by the subsequent research based on the documentary material made available by the opening of archives.

Using Albertini's work as a source, Lyon claims that it appears that Gavrilo Princip was a fully inducted Black Hand member (p. 58), a notion which is not supported by any primary source or any research into Young Bosnia. He also argues that "Vienna's visible progress transforming and modernizing Bosnia-Herzegovina represented a threat to Serbia's national program," especially because, Lyon adds, Franz Ferdinand's triune ideas were an obstacle to the Greater Serbian national project (p. 56). What is questionable here is not just the fact that for Franz Ferdinand the triune solution was nothing more than an idea he briefly contemplated and discarded,<sup>2</sup> and that it is uncertain whether Serbian politicians knew about his plans at all. The main problem is that no evidence is given to support the claim that Austrian policy in Bosnia was a "threat to Serbia's national program". In fact, quite the opposite is true. As time went by, and especially after the Balkan wars, Serbia appeared more and more attractive to the South Slavs, and not just to those in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also to those

inhabiting other parts of the Habsburg Monarchy.

It seems that Lyon devoted more time to researching hostilities than events that had preceded the war. The chapters describing the period before the war contain several factual errors. Belgrade did not become the capital of the Principality of Serbia after the rebellions of 1804 and 1815 (p. 91). The Serb-Croat Coalition in Croatia had not been in power from 1903 (p. 23), it did not even exist in 1903. Serbian chetnik units in Macedonia were not formed in 1902, and they were not formed by the Serbian state (p. 43). Lyon writes that in 1913 Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis maintained contact with Prime Minister Pašić via Milovan Milovanović. (pp. 58–59). It was hardly possible since Milovanović had died in 1912.

The major part of this book is devoted to war operations conducted from August to December 1914. The portrayal of the military preparedness of both the Kingdom of Serbia and Austria-Hungary is extensive and convincing. The descriptions of the battles and of the generals who led them are detailed and precise. The understanding of the battles and troop movements is made easier with six maps.

Lyon writes that at the beginning of the war Serbian army was "half uniformed and poorly equipped", while the Austro-Hungarian army "entered battle well-equipped, rested and possessing ample supplies" (pp. 88–89). He concludes that on paper the outcome seemed predetermined (p. 89). In the following chapters, Lyon depicts the Battle of Mt Cer, the Battle of the Drina with a special focus on the Battle of Mačkov Kamen, the Serbian invasion of Srem, and the Battle of the Kolubara.

Readers can follow parallel dynamics of decision-making processes in both General Staffs. While Oskar Potiorek set the imperative of fast victory in Serbia in order to be able to fight the Russian army with full capacity (pp. 116, 123), at the same time "Serbia's General Staff understood the

<sup>2</sup> J.-P. Bled, *François-Ferdinand d'Autriche* (Paris: Tallandier, 2012), 230–233.

strategic importance of the Morava-Vardar corridor, as well as the defensive advantages afforded by the country's mountains and rivers, and incorporated these natural obstacles into their defensive plans" (p. 109). Lyon argues that one of the reasons of Austro-Hungarian defeat and Serbian victory was the fact that, unlike the plans of the Habsburg army which were made almost exclusively in consequence of political imperatives, the Serbian generals made plans with military considerations foremost in mind (pp. 239–241). In this respect, Lyon praises General Putnik's decision to leave Belgrade undefended, since its defence did not have any military logic behind it. At the same time, Lyon shows that the only military decision that the Serbian generals made as a result of political pressure proved to be very costly: i.e. the decision to invade Srem taken after Russian and French repeated request to Serbia to attack Austria-Hungary on the latter's own soil.

What sets Lyon apart from some Serbian historians is his insistence on the importance of the role played by General Pavle Jurišić-Štur姆: "Highly capable, he [Štur姆] held what would turn out to be the most crucial assignment of any Serbian general in 1914" (p. 111). Lyon shows that Štur姆's III Army was "by far the weakest" of the Serbian armies (p. 111); however, Štur姆 led it ingenuously against much stronger enemy forces, furthermore, he acted even when his superior, General Putnik, was hesitant about what should be done (p. 127). Štur姆 held his ground on Mt Cer in a way which Lyon describes as heroic (p. 143), and, during the most difficult days for the Serbian forces at the Battle of the Kolubara, "In contrast to other Serbian commanders, Jurišić-Štur姆 reported that even though he lacked artillery ammunition, telephone and telegraph cables for communications, and all units were seriously under strength, he could attack the following day" (p. 211).

The closing chapters deal with the Battle of the Drina, the short Serbian invasions of

Bosnia-Herzegovina and Srem, and, finally, with the Battle of the Kolubara. The battles are presented on various levels, mainly from the viewpoint of military history, with a focus on tactics, strategies, usage of weapons, and logistics. The author also provides an account of the diplomatic activities taking place in the background of the field of battle, the best example of which is the chapter about the Battle of the Kolubara and the efforts of the Serbian government to procure ammunition and supplies. As in many other books about the Great War, the readers can learn about the horrors that soldiers had gone through, and about the appalling ferocity of Habsburg troops towards local civilian population.

Like several Serbian historians, Lyon argues that General Putnik helped the Habsburg troops to escape encirclements, since he acted slowly or stopped the progress of Serbian advancement on more than one occasion (pp. 144, 223). However, in conclusion Lyon argues that "The primary reason for Serbia's success was brilliant strategy by the Chief of Serbia's High Command, Vojvoda Radomir Putnik, and numerous officers willing to take the initiative on the field of battle" (p. 241). Lyon also adds: "Other reasons for success include good generalship, the army's tactical doctrines, battlefield experience from the Balkan wars, and the psychological makeup of the Serbian soldier." Analyzing the reasons for the Habsburg defeat, the author claims that it was the consequence of poor strategic planning and leadership on the one side, and lack of tactical integration of artillery and infantry doctrine on the other.

The chapters of this book devoted to the war in the Balkans in 1914 make a fine contribution to the historiography of the Great War, and they will, without a doubt, fill the gap that has hitherto existed in it.