WWI WAR GUILT EVIDENCE
(Serbia)

Primary Document
- Excerpt from “Program of The Narodna Odbrana” (1911)

Secondary Source
- “Serbian Nationalism and the Great War” by John Etty
A secret, patriotic society, the Narodna Odbrana or 'Defense of the People' was founded in Serbia around 1908. Its intent was to strengthen a spirit of nationalism. The following is an excerpt from a description of the society's program published by the Central Committee of the Narodna Odbrana Society.

The annexation [of Bosnia and Herzegovina] was only one of the blows which the enemies of Serbia have aimed at this land. Many blows preceded it, and many will follow it. Work and preparation are necessary so that a new attack may not find Serbia equally unprepared.

The object assigned to the work to be done by the people of every class is the preparation for war in all forms of national work, corresponding to the requirements of the present day. This is to be effected through strengthening of the national consciousness, bodily exercises, increase of material and bodily well-being, cultural improvements, etc. A new blow, like that of the annexation, must be met by a new Serbia, in which every Serbian, from child to greybeard, is a rifleman.

The old Turks of the South gradually disappear and only a part of our people suffer under their rule. But new Turks come from the North, more fearful and dangerous than the old; stronger in civilization and more advanced economically, our northern enemies come against us. They want to take our freedom and our language from us and to crush us. We can already feel the presages of the struggle which approaches in that quarter. The Serbian people are faced by the question 'to be or not to be?'

The Narodna Odbrana does not doubt that in the fight against the enemies with whom we stand face to face, our people will provide a succession of heroes. However, the Narodna Odbrana is not content with this, for it regards the so-called peaceful present-day conditions as war, and demands heroes, too, for this struggle of today which we are carrying on in Serbia and beyond the frontier.

In using the word 'people' the Narodna Odbrana means our whole people, not only those in Serbia. It is hoped that the work done by it in Serbia will spur the brothers outside Serbia to take a more energetic share in the work of private initiative, so that the new present-day movement for the creation of a powerful Serbian Narodna Odbrana will go forward in unison in all Serbian territories.

The Narodna Odbrana proclaims to the people that Austria is our first and greatest enemy. Just as once the Turks attacked us from the south, so Austria attacks us today from the north. If the Narodna Odbrana preaches the necessity of fighting Austria, she preaches a sacred truth of our national position.

For the sake of bread and room, for the sake of the fundamental essentials of culture and trade, the freeing of the conquered Serbian territories and their union with Serbia is necessary to gentlemen, tradesmen, and peasants alike.
John Etty questions whether Serb nationalism was an irresistible force that helped unleash the First World War.

Historians tend to blame nationalism for the European ills which led to the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. They are able to cite many examples of German aggression, and coyly quote British sources to show that nationalism had even managed to affect our own view of the world. But, they assert, the brand of nationalism which did most to undermine international stability by 1914 was Serbian. Doubtless Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria-Hungary would have agreed. Yet was Serb nationalism really so significant?

The Growth of National Identity

Serbian nationalism is, even today, powered by the mythologised sacrifice of a medieval army. On 15th June 1389 at Kosovo, 30,000 Serbs defended Serbia’s ancient empire and were defeated by the Ottoman ruler Murad I. Crucially, however, the Serb identity created by this memory is a negative one, defined by hatred of their enemies. This kind of nationalism was easily sustained through 400 years of Turkish rule. Serbs’ identity was defined by religious, economic, social and cultural difference – not just different from their Muslim overlords but also distinct from other Christians. Serbian pig farmers grew rich as neighbouring Austria-Hungary expanded, but proximity highlighted divergences between Catholic Christianity and Serbian Orthodoxy. The Serbian Orthodox Church incubated an old Slavonic faith, a language, an administrative system and an Archbishopric.

Inspired by poetry idealising the Orthodox Serbian peasant lifestyle and glorifying the Battle of Kosovo, and bolstered by Russian assistance, Serbia secured independence from Turkey by 1815. Under Milos Obrenovic, an army was created, and the Serbian Orthodox Church regained independence. Serbia’s school system taught Serbian literature, language and history. However, the formulation of the ‘Nacertanije’ (Programme) by Ilija Garasanin (later Minister of Internal Affairs) was the main development in Serbian nationalism. Though concerned about upsetting them, this secret document identified Turkey and Austria-Hungary as obstacles to Serbian greatness and detailed, in order of ease of acquisition, the annexation of all Serbian-speaking regions. Although implementation was delayed by domestic disruption, such expansionist aspirations were significant. Before 1890, Nikolai Pasic (future Prime Minister) referred to the Nacertanije when he explained ‘the Serbs strive for the unification of all Serb tribes on the basis of tradition, memory and the historical past of the Serb race.’

Balkan Warfare

Pan-Slavism strengthened Serbian nationalism. After humiliating defeat in the Crimean War, Russian benevolent societies sent money and good wishes to Balkan Slavs, and dreamed of restoring Constantinople as capital of an Orthodox empire. Membership of this Slavic brotherhood inspired (occasionally ill-founded) confidence. Despite an army of 90,000 men by 1871, Serbian military prowess was insufficient to achieve her rather less modest foreign policy aims. After uprisings in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia declared war on Turkey in July 1876, imagining that a wider revolt would ensue, but (even assisted by 700 Russian volunteer officers) she failed to defeat Turkey. The Great Powers’ attention was thus drawn to the Eastern Question, and Serbia found herself (geographically, at least, since she was excluded from the subsequent Congress of Berlin) central to European diplomacy. More importantly, Austria-Hungary and Russia both recognised Serbia’s aggression and modified their policies.
By the time Russia declared war on Turkey in April 1877 it had transferred its hopes for Balkan influence to Bulgaria, which was enlarged by the Treaty of San Stefano.

Austria's new policy towards Serbia was ambiguous at first. Serbian independence, territorial gains from the Ottoman Empire after the Congress of Berlin, and its elevation from a principality to a kingdom under Milan Obrenovic in 1882, were negated by increased Austrian influence in the Balkans. An Austrian contractor began building railway links between Belgrade and Austria, and bilateral trade agreements were signed. Despite Serbia's protests, by 1905 84 per cent of Serbian exports were going to Austria-Hungary. Control of Bosnia-Herzegovina would have given Serbia significantly increased territory and an Adriatic coastline, but the Congress of Berlin handed administration and military occupation rights to Austria-Hungary. To compensate, in 1881 Austria-Hungary sanctioned Serbian expansion to the south-west on condition that it did not agitate among the Habsburg Serbs. Thus, in November 1885, concerned about Bulgaria's unification with Eastern Rumelia (and aware that Russia, angry with Bulgaria's Prince Alexander, would not fight in defence), Serbia declared war on Bulgaria. This attempt to exploit the situation backfired on Serbia. Serbia remained neutral, but the war only ended when Austria-Hungary threatened to intervene to stop Bulgarian expansion.

In this imperialist age, Serbian nationalists were distracted by the dynastic drama at home. Alexander Obrenovic (crowned 1889) and his marriage to Queen Draga, his mother's servant, became an embarrassment for Serbia. What fatally worsened the situation, as Obrenovic shifted towards Austria-Hungary, was his proposed military funding cut. In June 1903 the royal couple were cornered in their bedroom and murdered by nationalist army officers led by Dragutin Dimitrijevic. The reign of Serbia's new king, Peter Karadjordjevic, brought further deterioration of Ottoman control, massive army investment and a pro-Russian stance. However, Russian protection did immediately allow a braver Serbian foreign policy since Russia, whose foreign policy priorities lay eastwards, avoided Balkan conflict.

Serbia could not postpone her aims, however, and sought independence from Austria-Hungary. The 1904 Treaty of Sofia, with Bulgaria, formed an anti-Austrian Balkan customs union. Austria-Hungary reacted angrily to Serbia's attempts to break their trading relationship, imposing an embargo which lasted for six years and became known as the 'Pig War', since pork was Serbia's main export. Austria, expecting quick victory, undoubtedly wanted to crush Serbian economic independence and hoped for a wider reduction of Serbian influence, but the Pig War benefited Serbia. Her farmers found new markets and the army purchased more reliable French heavy artillery rather than Austro-Hungarian Skoda guns. By 1911, only 30 per cent of Serbian exports went to Austria-Hungary. Austrian attitudes hardened and, with Russia introverted after 1905, the Dual Monarchy sought to reduce Serbian strength.

Self-styled as a unifying force for Balkan nationalism, Serbia had assisted Macedonian freedom-fighters, but in 1908 Austria-Hungary detailed Serbian expansion plans by annexing Bosnia-Herzegovina. Although the timing was determined by the Young Turk revolution and Russian weakness, removing a potential Serbian ally was also an important motivation. Austria actually considered waging a pre-emptive war against Serbia after the annexation. Ironically, Archduke Franz Ferdinand disapproved and Serbia escaped having learned a crucial lesson.

The Balkan states, realising that the Great Powers were unwilling to involve themselves in the Eastern Question, perceived their individual weakness after the annexation crisis. This understanding, coupled with nationalistic fury at the outrage committed against fellow Slavs, had significant effects. First nationalist groups - like Narodna Odbrana (National Defence) and Ujedinjenje ili Smrt (Unification or Death - created by Dimitrijevic) were formed in Bosnia and Serbia. Motivated by hatred of Austria-Hungary, these groups trained spies, agitated for reform and circulated anti-Austrian propaganda. Secondly, Serbia and Bulgaria agreed to attack Turkey. For Serbia, this was an opportunity for belated revenge for the Battle of Kosovo. When Italy occupied Tripoli in late summer 1911 and Turkey declared war in September (Europe was again distracted by Morocco), Serbia and Bulgaria acted against Turkey. They signed a treaty in March 1912, with Russia's Tsar Nicholas II arbitrating. Montenegro and Greece joined two days before war was declared in October 1912. The Balkan League rapidly liberated Macedonia and much of Thrace in a savage war, pushing Turkey back as far as Adrianople, before dividing Macedonia unequally between them.

Towards Armageddon

The Treaty of London, May 1913, left problems unresolved. Serbia was again denied an Adriatic coastline by Austria-Hungary's diplomacy, and an independent Albania was created. Naccetanjie aims thwarted, Serbia looked south-east and came into conflict with Bulgaria over the remaining spoils. The Balkan League had been formed hastily and the division of captured Turkish territory had not been agreed. While Bulgarian troops bore the brunt of the fighting, Serbia and Greece occupied much of the conquered land. Turkey encouraged dis-agreement, and the Second Balkan War broke out in June 1913 when Bulgaria attacked Serbia before herself being defeated by the unlikely coalition of Greece, Serbia, Turkey and Romania.

The Balkan Wars saw Serbia increase in size by 82 per cent and 1.5 million new Slavs. Her army fought impressively, and now almost justified the glorious memory of 1389. The critical consequence of these wars was the effect on Serb-Habsburg relations. Angered by Austrian intervention at the London
negotiations and emboldened by victory over the old enemy, Serbia became increasingly aggressive. The achievement of a Greater Serbia involved liberating the nine million Serbs, Croats and Slovenes of the Austria-Hungarian Empire. Serb nationalists launched a campaign for the acquisition of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Serbs within Austria-Hungary began agitating. Unsurprisingly, Austria-Hungary's attitude changed after 1913. Serbia had long been an irritation, but the boost of Serbia's recent victories led Austria again to consider preventive war. Serbia's army now numbered 400,000 regulars and reservists, an expansion that upset the assumptions of the Schlieffen Plan, so Kaiser Wilhelm II reassured Austria-Hungary of German support.

Crushing Serbia was not now as simple as Wilhelm imagined, however. Russia's army reforms outlined a 40 per cent manpower increase by 1912, and her recovery from the humiliations of 1905 and 1908 made her a dangerous enemy since she was now eager to defend her Slav ally. The international repercussions from the next Balkan war had become immense. Such a conflict might have been avoided, however, for a much less obvious complication.

In 1911 Dragutin Dimitrijevic reformed Ujedinjenje ili Smrt as the 'Black Hand'. Its members, regicidal army colleagues from 1903, mistrusted Nikola Pasic and parliamentary government. More sinister than their predecessors or their Bosnian counterparts, the Black Hand embezzled Serbian army funds, taking advantage of Dimitrijevic's position as army Intelligence chief to supply information and weapons to Serb, Croat and Bosnian students inside Austria-Hungary. It was the Black Hand who guided Gavrillo Princip and his accomplices towards their target in Sarajevo in June 1914.

The Events of 1914

None of the Bosnian-Serb assassins cited Slav nationalism as a motive for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand – only unhappiness with the Habsburgs. Yet dedicated Serbian nationalists like Dimitrijevic had more sophisticated motives. Their popularity among Bosnian students depended upon the negative aspects of Austrian occupation, however, and it would have dealt a severe blow to hopes for a Greater Serbia if Austrian control had grown more sympathetic. The Archduke, Emperor Franz Joseph's nephew, advocated 'trialism'. He intended to dilute the influence of the Hungarian element by adding a Slavic component to create a Triple Monarchy. Clearly, such a reorganisation would render Serbia's claim to be liberating the Slavs from the oppressive rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire redundant.

When Franz Ferdinand was shot by Gavrilo Princip on 28th June 1914, Austria-Hungary seized the opportunity to punish Serbia. Austria's July 23rd ultimatum was deliberately unpalatable. Austria-Hungary knew nothing of the Black Hand and did not establish the assassins' guilt. The 48-hour time limit was intentionally too short to allow discussion, and Austria was more concerned with securing a German 'blank cheque' than mourning its heir. Serbia was no more concerned to avoid war, however. Serbia's army mobilised even before the reply to the ultimatum was completed.

The assassination crisis was just another incident involving Austria-Hungary and Serbia. The stakes were higher this time, however. Climbedown was unimaginable for Serbia. Though he only rejected one of the terms, Nikolai Pasic did not contemplate agreeing unreservedly once he received Russian backing. The humiliation would have undone all the progress towards the goals of the Nacertanje achieved since 1903. Austria sought the excuse to punish Serbia for countless impudences and could not ignore the assassination of the heir. More important, Austria needed to prove her Great Power credentials by dealing decisively with Serbia. Crucially, however, defeat by Serbia in 1914 would destabilise the empire. Slav nationalism troubled Austria-Hungary and the need for victory over Serbia superseded other concerns. The potential gains blinded both countries to the possible effects of their dispute. Yet neither side wanted a world war. The First World War began because in so obsessively pursuing the aim of crushing Serbia, Austria fatally misinterpreted Germany's intentions. Gavrillo Princip was wracked with guilt at the knowledge of the suffering which the assassination of Franz Ferdinand unleashed. He comforted himself with the belief that the war would have broken out anyway. He was right.

**Timeline**

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<th>Year</th>
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<td>1804</td>
<td>The Battle of Kosovo</td>
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<td>The Serbian revolution</td>
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<td>1844</td>
<td>The Archduke, Emperor Franz Joseph's nephew, advocated 'trialism'.</td>
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<td>1876</td>
<td>Serbia is defeated by the Ottoman Empire</td>
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<td>1903</td>
<td>King and Queen of Serbia murdered by army officers, Peter Karadjordjevic assumes power</td>
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<td>1911</td>
<td>Formation of the Black Hand</td>
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<td>1914</td>
<td>Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Bosnian-Serb in Sarajevo</td>
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**Further Reading**

- M. Glenny, *The Balkans* (Granta, 2000)
- N. Ferguson, 1914: Why the world went to war (Penguin, 2005)

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