

FINIR LA GRANDE GUERRE DANS LES BALKANS 1918–1923

SOUS LA DIRECTION DE
VOJISLAV G. PAVLOVIĆ



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www.balkaninstitut.com

Revu par

Ljubodrag Dimić, Membre de l'Académie serbe des sciences et des arts
Professeur *Milan Ristović*, Faculté de philosophie, Belgrade
Professeur *Slobodan Marković*, Faculté des sciences politiques, Belgrade

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Table des matières

PRÉFACE	7
Jean-Paul Bled LES DERNIERS PLANS AUSTRO-HONGROIS DE RÈGLEMENT DE LA QUESTION SUD-SLAVE	13
Luca Riccardi ITALY'S FOREIGN POLICY AND THE BALKANS IN 1918	21
Florin Turçanu UNE CAPITALE DANS L'ATTENTE DE LA FIN DE LA GUERRE. BUCAREST À L'AUTOMNE 1918	41
François Cochet LE RÔLE DES FRANÇAIS DANS L'AVIATION LORS DES OFFENSIVES DE SEPTEMBRE-OCTOBRE 1918	59
Frédéric Guelton LA CAVALERIE FRANÇAISE CONQUIERT USKUB. SEPTEMBRE 1918.	73
Dragan Bakić TRANSITION FROM AUSTRIA-HUNGARY TO YUGOSLAVIA. THE SERBIAN ARMY IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA IN LATE 1918 . .	91
Jean-Noël Grandhomme « UN HOMME-CLÉ DU DISPOSITIF DE FRANCHET D'ESPÈREY : FERNAND VIX (1876–1941). DE L'OFFENSIVE DE MACÉDOINE À LA MISSION MILITAIRE DE L'ENTENTE EN HONGRIE »	141
John Keiger THE BALKANS AND EAST CENTRAL EUROPE. A SOURCE OF POST-WAR GREAT POWER RIVALRY AND ESTRANGEMENT BETWEEN PARIS AND LONDON	171
Stanislav Sretenović DIFFICULT <i>SORTIE DE GUERRE</i> AMONG THE ALLIES IN THE ADRIATIC SEA. ITALY, FRANCE AND THE NEW KINGDOM OF SERBS, CROATS AND SLOVENIANS, 1918–1924	189

Luciano Monzali	
LIBERAL ITALY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW POLITICAL ORDER IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE 1918–1920	207
Yannis Mourélos	
Y A-T-IL EU UN IMPÉRIALISME GREC ?	229
Alberto Basciani	
MODERNIZATION WITH STEEL. THE BALKAN COUNTRIES AND THE ATTEMPT OF INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT AFTER THE GREAT WAR.	239
Vojislav Pavlović	
LA NAISSANCE D’UN HOMME NOUVEAU. LE CHEMIN QUE JOSIP BROZ A PARCOURU POUR DEVENIR COMMUNISTE	267
Mile Bjelajac	
THE PRESENCE OF THE FRENCH ARMY IN THE BALKANS AT THE END OF THE GREAT WAR AND THE CREATION OF YUGOSLAVIA. NEW EVIDENCE AND CONTROVERSIES	297
INDEX	323

Mile Bjelajac

*Institute for Recent History of Serbia
Belgrade*

THE PRESENCE OF THE FRENCH ARMY IN THE BALKANS AT THE END OF THE GREAT WAR AND THE CREATION OF YUGOSLAVIA NEW EVIDENCE AND CONTROVERSIES

Abstract: The historical assessment of the presence and the particular role of the French, Italian and Serbian armies in the aftermath of the armistice in the Balkans have had a long tradition. This paper offers a survey of the differences in the approach to the issue, especially in the light of the denials that the Yugoslav project represented a historically authentic South Slav movement and portrayals of it as an artificial project promulgated by French and Serbian power. The author of this paper tries to highlight the importance of the Allies' victory at the Macedonian (Salonika) Front and the far-reaching consequences of the end of the First World War and strengthening of the Yugoslav movement in Montenegro and the Habsburg Monarchy in its final days. The author emphasizes the fact that the scarce and scattered Serbian detachments would not have been able to impose unification if the majority of the South Slav population had been opposed to it in November and December 1918. The French army acted principally in the directions of Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, and Hungary. Only small detachments were sent to Rijeka (Fiume), Split, Bay of Kotor (Cattaro), and Skadar (Scutari). The predominant force was the Italian one. However, the commander-in-chief of the Allied Army of the Orient, General Franchet d'Espèrey, did his best to support the Serbian or Yugoslav cause, sometimes even against the instructions he received from Prime Minister Clemenceau.

Keywords: Macedonian (Salonika) front, French army, Serbian army, creation of the South Slav state, Franchet D'Espèrey, new historical revisionism

If anyone thought in the 1980s that everything was well-established and coherent in the historical narrative on this issue, they obviously failed in their judgment. New circumstances, especially the dissolution

of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, have brought new reassessments of the distant past. Some of them almost turned things upside down. But, on what academic grounds – one is compelled to ask. In this perspective, for instance, what was once “liberation and unification” has today become “an occupation” (of Croatia, Macedonia, and even Montenegro and Vojvodina) or “forcible annexation” (of the Yugoslav lands, Croatia, Montenegro or Kosovo).¹

There are views that the creation of Yugoslavia was a French mistake or a mistake in general. Instead, France should have turned turn to the Slovenes and Croats or even Hungary after WWI.² Almost every peace treaty, namely the treaties of Versailles or Trianon, is seen as unjust and in need of revision, even today. Or, in that type of interpretation, the Serbian friend Franchet D’Espèrey allegedly gave free rein to the Serbian Prime Minister Pašić to pursue his annexation ambitions. Another claim is that the whole offensive plan at the Salonika front had the hidden political goal of enabling Serbia to carry out its plan promulgated on 7 December 1914 (but with no mention of the Declaration of Liberation and Unification of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes made in Corfu in 1917). There is also the view that Clemenceau supported the Serbs in their

¹ M. Bjelajac, “1918. – oslobođenje ili okupacija nesrpskih krajeva?” (1918 – Liberation or occupation of non-Serbian lands?), in *Prvi svetski rat i Balkan – 90 godina kasnije*. (World War One – 90 years after), Tematski zbornik radova. Beograd: Institut za strategijska istraživanja Odeljenje za vojnu istoriju, 2011, 199–122.

² S. Ramet, *Whose Democracy? Nationalism, Religion, the Doctrine of Collective Rights in Post-1989 Eastern Europe*. New York, Oxford: Boulder, 1997; N. Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History*. New York University Press, 1998; J. Adler, *L’Union forcée: La Croatie et la création de l’Etat yougoslave* (1918). Genève: Georg, 1997; F. Grumel Jacquignon, *La Yougoslavie dans la strategie Francaise de l’entre-deux-guerres (1918–1935) Aux origines du myth serbe en France*. Berlin: Peter Lang, 1999; M. Kovach, *La France, la creation du royaume "yougoslave" et la question croate, 1914–1929*, Peter Lang, 2001 (*Francuska i hrvatsko pitanje 1914–1929*); H. Sundhausen, *Geschichte Serbiens 19.-21. Jahrhundert*, Wien-Köln-Weimar 2007 (Serbian edition: *Istorija Srbije od 19. do 21. veka*. Beograd: CLIO, 2009); S. Pavlović, *Balkan Anschluss. The Annexation of Montenegro and Creation of the Common South Slavic State*. Purdue University Press, 2007; Š. Rastoder, *Janusovo lice istorije. Odabrani članci i rasprave*. Podgorica, 2000; *Uloga Francuske u nasilnoj aneksiji Crne Gore*, (priredio i pogovor napisao R. Šerbo). Podgorica, 2000; Đ. Borozan, “Crna Gora u Prvom svetskom ratu. Sudbina jednog savezništva”, in *Prvi svetski rat i Balkan – 90 godina kasnije*. Tematski zbornik u Institut za strategijska istraživanja, 224–231. Beograd: Odeljenje za vojnu istoriju, 2011.

“decisive battle against the Yugoslavs.”³ To support this claim, some frequently quote Clemenceau’s instructions issued to Franchet D’Espèrey on 5 November, days after the Armistice of Villa Giusti. Namely, he (D’Espèrey) was to enable the occupation of areas of interest in Bosnia and Herzegovina and north of the Danube and Sava rivers.⁴

For some historians, it is acceptable to define the battle in the Balkans as a battle between Serbs and Croats in which the Serbs won.⁵ An old political piece of propaganda, claiming that the Serbs were implementing the provisions of the secret Treaty of London in collusion with Italy and France (with no mention of Britain), comes to life again on the pages of those scholarly works. One can even find the claim that “Italians and Serbs shared a prey.”⁶ Italians entered Rijeka (Fiume) although the city had been allocated to Croatia even in the Treaty of London (sic!).⁷

We can trace the influence of some older literature, like Ivo Banac’s *The National Question in Yugoslavia* (1985), or even older works, like Rudolf Horvat’s account *Hrvatska na mučilištu* (Croatia in the Torture House, 1942). According to the historian Gordana Jović, Banac did not try to understand the real motives and actions of the Serbs and instead chose to portray them as maliciously working against the Croats in the new state.

³ F. Le Moal, *La Serbie, du martyre a la victoire 1914–1918*, 14–18 Edition. Paris: SOTECA, 2008, 205, 219. Unlike Jasna Adler (*L’Union force. la Croatie et la création de l’Etat yougoslave* (1918); Geneva: Georg, 1997. Le Moal accepts the view of Professor Bariety that Franchet d’Espèrey, as well as Prime Minister Clemenceau, prioritized military rather than political goals in the final stage of the operations; Vojislav Pavlović emphasizes that Clemenceau opposed D’Espèrey’s ambitious plans in the Danube basin by giving priority to Romania and the Black Sea (see: V. Pavlovic, *La France et la Serbie dans la Grande Guerre*, RHA No 280, 2015, 35–65, 64–65).

⁴ J. Adler, *L’Union force*; 291; F. G. Jacquignon, *La Yougoslavie dans la strategie Francaise*; 29; Le Moal, *La Serbie*, 218; B. Krizman, *Raspad Austro-Ugarske i stvaranje jugoslavenske države* (*Dissolution of Austria-Hungary and the Creation of Yugoslavia*). Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1975, 129.

⁵ M. Kovach, *La France, la creation du royaume “yougoslave” et la question croate, 1914–1929*, Peter Lang 2001; M. Kovač, *Francuska i hrvatsko pitanje 1914–1929*, Zagreb, 2005, 136.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

For this period alone, some prominent revisionists have chosen to put some fundamental and well-grounded accounts aside: for instance, the academically very sound and in-depth account by Bogdan Krizman, *Dissolution of Austria-Hungary and the Creation of Yugoslavia* (Zagreb, 1975), which does not commonly appear on the reference lists of such works. And even if it does, it does not seem to have affected their views at all.⁸

Some new revisionists in Croatia or scholars who have adopted the new "Croat narrative" are likely to forget the address of the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ante Trumbić, in Split after he had signed the Treaty of Rapallo with Italy in November 1920:

"Italy is a strong national and cultural presence in international life, while our people are a new phenomenon. It stands out only for his youthful energy, and Serbia stands out especially for its heroism, perfect loyalty to the Allies, and unbridled longing for freedom."⁹

In Slovenia, as early as the 1980s, historians and some intellectuals were quick to forget the assessment of the liberation made by the Slovenian and Yugoslav politician Anton Korošec¹⁰ on 1 December 1918. He emphasized that the Slovenes were grateful to Serbia and the Serbian army "for their many acts for the defense of our territory." The scholar accounts like those by Lojze Ude and Janko Pleterski, who correctly wrote about the contribution of the Kingdom of Serbia and its army, were set aside – namely, their descriptions of how the Serbian army acted in the struggle for the future borders and the share of Slovene participation in that endeavor.¹¹ Following the new "political correctness" introduced in Slovenia in the late 1980s, some intellectuals insisted that the Slovenes had been deprived of their national institutions after 1918 in favor of

⁸ See also: B. Krizman, *Hrvatska u Prvom svjetskom ratu. Hrvatsko-srpski politički odnosi (Croatia in World War One. Croat-Serbian Political Relations)*. Zagreb: Globus, 1989.

⁹ M. Bjelajac, *Diplomatija i vojska. Srbija i Jugoslavija 1901–1999 (Diplomacy and Military. Serbia and Yugoslavia 1901–1999)*. Beograd: MC Odbrana, 2010, 119.

¹⁰ Dr. Anton Korošec (1872–1940), Catholic priest, Slovene politician, at the time President of National Council of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs (Zagreb, from 5 October 1918), and minister in numerous Yugoslav governments until his death.

¹¹ L. Ude, *Vojne akcije u Koruškoj 1918/19 godine, (Military Offensives in Carinthia 1918/1919)*. Beograd, 1950; J. Pleterski, *Prva odločitev Slovencev za Jugoslavijo, Ljubljana (Serbian edition: Prvo opredeljenje Slovenaca za Jugoslaviju)*. Beograd, 1976.

Serbian-dominated ones. So, the new explanation for the disbandment of the national Slovene military units and creation of a joint Yugoslav army was seen as yet another form of Great-Serbian hegemony (Janez Švajncer).¹²

Revisionist tendencies are also apparent in the writings of some Montenegrin historians. In the new argumentation, the words "occupation", "reoccupation", "forcible annexation", "betrayal by Allies", or even "Anschluss" became common. To support their claims, those scholars use the old literature of communist provenance, reprints of wartime propaganda by Montenegrins in exile, or propaganda against the unification of Montenegro and Serbia. Despite extensive literature that established the role of Italy in helping the opponents of unification, its policy of weakening the position of the new Kingdom of SCS (Yugoslavia) at the Paris Peace Conference and aspiration to occupy the Slav lands even beyond the borders delineated in the secret Treaty of London (1915), the revisionists' approach still selectively uses those data. Sometimes, even the basic chronology is dropped. They insist that the Serbian army occupied Montenegro and enabled the intrigues that helped the unionists to prevail, while France supposedly turned a "blind eye". They try to conceal the fact that the Serbian (Yugoslav, in fact) forces were five times outnumbered by the local rebel forces, which had actually wiped out the Austrian occupiers and had full control of the territory. In addition, in order to avoid applying an ethnic adjective to the Montenegrin population, they usually rename or drop the full name of the Assembly in Podgorica, which proclaimed unification with Serbia on 26th November 1918 (according to the Gregorian calendar) by an overwhelming majority. Instead of the name "Great National Assembly of the Serbian People in Montenegro", they simply use the name "Podgorica Assembly", just like it was commonly done in socialist Yugoslavia when the Montenegrin nation was promulgated. The focal point in the new reinterpretation (or, more accurately, revived old version from 1918) is the so-called Christmas rebellion in the vicinity of the Montenegrin capital of Cetinje in January 1919. The role of King Nikola (dethroned on 26th November) and his loyal associates in exile or at home and the role of Italy, which supported

¹² J. J. Švajncer, *Slovenska vojska 1918–1919, (Slovenian Army 1918–1919)*. Ljubljana: Prešernova družba, 1990.

the rebellion, are heavily distorted or presented with carefully selected data in order to avoid the fact that the Christmas rebellion was mounted in favor of Italy and actually put down by the Montenegrin forces of the unification supporters. In short, they insist that Montenegro was not liberated on that occasion and that it was instead occupied by the far more numerous Italian, French, British, American, and Serbian forces. The Serbian troops allegedly had full French support and free rein to implement the policy of unification. To this end, even chronology can be turned upside down. In those interpretations, it was the evacuation of the Allied forces in the spring of 1919 and throughout the 1920s that left the Serbian army in Montenegro to block the free self-determination of the Montenegrin people.¹³

There are some historians who claim that the experiences and fates of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia “prove” that their respective unifications were an unsuccessful experiment.¹⁴

Some historians are willing to accept that Yugoslavia was formed by the will of the victorious powers at Versailles alone. That is to say that it was an artificial state and that no one asked its peoples what they wanted. Alternately, for selfish reasons, France established that state and subdued it to Serbian hegemony.

In order to minimize the complexity and historical reality of those events, some historians ignored the deeper historical roots of political

¹³ D. Vujović, *Ujedinjenje Crne Gore i Srbije*. Titograd: Istorijski Institut narodne republike Crne Gore, 1962; *Idem*, *Podgorička Skupština*, Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1989; Š. Rastoder, *Janusovo lice istorije. Odabrani članci i rasprave*, Podgorica, 2000; *Uloga Francuske u nasilnoj aneksiji Crne Gore* (edited with an afterword by R. Šerbo), Podgorica, 2000; Sr. Pavlović, *Balkan Anschluss. The Annexation of Montenegro and Creation of the Common South Slavic State*. Purdue University Press, 2007; Đ. Borozan, *Crna Gora u Prvom svetskom ratu*, 229–230.

¹⁴ K. Donald, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*. New York: Ancor Books, 1996, 293; J.-N. Grandhomme, “Le Marechal Franchet D’Espèrey, trait d’union entre la France et la Serbie”, in *La Serbie et la France une alliance atypique, Relations politiques, économiques et culturelles, 1870–1940*, dir. Doussan Batakovitch). Belgrade: Institut des études balkaniques, 2010, 297–313, 312; J.-N. Grandhomme, “Le General Paul Vanel (1864–1920) et le rôle de la France dans la rattachement du Monténégro au Royaume des Serbes, Croates et Slovènes”, in *De Part et d’autre du Danube. L’Allemagne, l’Autriche et les Balkans de 1918 de 1815 à nos jours*, dir. Mathieu Dubois & Renaud Meltz. Paris: PUPS, 2015, 97–116.

movements and figures, their ideological convictions or the pro-Austrian persons who acted chauvinistically against the Serbs in 1914 and later. Certain historians sometimes turn to secondary sources and then take someone's assumptions or a personal opinion as proof of their claims. So, for example, one can find among the listed "the credible witness" some known opponents of the unification and creation of a common South Slav state. Such "proof" then becomes a far-reaching argument for the historical evaluation of the peace treaties signed after World War One and the creation of the South Slav state.

Some historians show little interest to delve deeper into the military mindset and operational motivation of the time. Instead, they speculate and insinuate political second thoughts, assigning them to some desperate nations or groups. In order to offer the so-called "new approach", they use the available sources very selectively. At times, they even tailor the surviving documents to suit their purpose.¹⁵ Sensitive questions faced by the Allied leaders, like how to preserve peace, and for how long, and by what means, seem to be of little interest to some historians.

How did a second-rate front become the decisive one?

It is worth revisiting this topic since we frequently hear that the South Slavs in Austria-Hungary liberated themselves by declaring independence. Consequently, there was no need for Serbia and the Allies to liberate them.¹⁶ But, one can ask why they did not do so in 1914 or before that. What had happened in the meanwhile? Germany was still firmly entrenched on French and Belgian soil when she asked for an armistice, and the Austro-Hungarian army was still in Italian territory. Something had really happened and forced the Central Powers to give up their fight and surrender.

¹⁵ Jasna Adler tends to use this method in her book (*L'Union force*; 328–329). For an analysis see: M. Bjelajac, G. Krivokapić-Jović, *Prilozi iz naučne kritike, Srpska istoriografija i svet*. Beograd: INIS, 2011, 141–142.

¹⁶ H. Matković, *Povijest Jugoslavije (1918–1991)*. Hrvatski pogled. Zagreb: Naklada Pavličić, 1998; M. Bjelajac, G. Krivokapić-Jović, *Prilozi iz naučne kritike, Srpska istoriografija i svet*. Beograd: INIS, 2011, 40.

The Salonika Front was, up to 1917, a secondary front for the Allies. But, in early spring 1918, during the German offensive in the West, it became of outmost importance. General Ferdinand Foch insisted on its immediate activation and offensive. General Guillaumat, the commander-in-chief of the Allied Army of the Orient, started consultations with his highest British associate, General Milne, but, interestingly, at this point, they still stuck to the idea of breaking the enemy front through the Vardar valley and Doiran Lake, towards the Stroumitza valley. They saw the Serbian mountain front as impenetrable.¹⁷

Fortunately, the new commander-in-chief who replaced Guillaumat, General Franchet D'Espèrey, accepted an old idea of the Serbian colonel Živko Pavlović and the Serbian Supreme Command: to make a strategic surprise on the Serbian front by reaching the Vardar river in the zone of Gradsko and the city of Prilep, thereby cutting off the enemy front in two and threatening the rear of its detachments before other Allied positions. For this purpose, the Serbian army was reinforced with two French divisions (17th and 122nd) and by almost the entire reserve of the heavy artillery of the *l'Armée d'Orient*.¹⁸ It is worth mentioning that D'Espèrey was an old partisan of the idea of resolving the war through an indirect approach on the Balkan front. In 1915, no one listened to his suggestions. Three years later, he was in a position to prove his views, and he did.¹⁹ The plan worked out well. It surprised not only the enemy but also the highest Allied leaders, political and military alike. Its impact exceeded expectations.

¹⁷ P. Opačić, *Solunska ofanziva 1918, Srpska vojska u završnom periodu Prvog svetskog rata*. Beograd: Vojnoistorijski institut 1980, 56–59; J. B. Duroselle, *La Grande Guerre des Français 1914–1918*, Perin, 2002, 401; F. Le Moal, *La Serbie du martyre à la victoire 1914–1918*, 204; L. Franše D'Epere, *Memoari, Solunski front, Srbija, Balkan, Centralna Evropa 1918–1919*, prir. Vojislav Pavlović. Novi Sad: Prometej 2018, 44–54; J.-N. Grandhomme, *Le Marechal Franchet D'Espèrey, trait d'union entre la France et la Serbie*, 304; *The Salonica Theatre of Operations and the Outcome of the Great War*. Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 2005.

¹⁸ P. Opačić, *Solunska ofanziva 1918*, 58. The Serbian plan was hatched in June 1917, but it was rejected. It was not before 5th June 1918 that General Guillaumat came close to accepting it, but he was removed from his post of commander-in-chief on June 9 and replaced by General D'Espèrey: See also the memoirs of Marechal D'Espèrey (L. Franše D'Epere, *Memoari, Solunski front, Srbija, Balkan, Centralna Evropa 1918–1919*, prir. Vojislav Pavlović. Novi Sad: Prometej 2018).

¹⁹ L. Franše D'Epere, *Memoari*. 59, Annex 149 (Letter from General Petar Pešić to General Franchet D'Espèrey, Paris, Septembre 23, 1919).

For one reason or another, this impact has usually been underestimated in favor of the Western front. Even the Italians attribute much greater importance to their offensive in late October 1918. However, in 1933, one paragraph in the great French edition of wartime documents, *Les Armées Françaises* correctly attributes far-reaching results to the victory in Macedonia. The victory and steady advance towards the Danube, Sarajevo and Skadar/Scutari “not only caused the capitulation of Bulgaria and Turkey, but also prompted Austria-Hungary to lay down its arms and Germany to abandon the idea of continuing the fight.”

In his diary, British Admiral Ernest Troubridge noted on 28th November 1918: “The Serbs who are so particular not to admit foreign interference only admit me as a 4-year old friend and Franchet D’Espèrey.”²⁰ He also noted his fears about the future interpretations of the Allies’ success on the Balkan front in favor of the Western front:

“The H.Q.S. sent me the account of the Battle of the Moglenitza. ... This battle, begun on September 15th broke completely the Bulgar-German army in Macedonia, compelling them to beg an armistice and surrender on September 30. The very name of the battle is unknown today and the military establishment in France will not for a moment allow that it had any bearing on the collapse of Germany, which they attribute entirely to their pressure in France. Contemporary judgements of great world events are usually at fault. In my opinion future historians will see in this battle of the Moglenitza the first link in a chain of events which only became immediately possible on account of that victory. The collapse of Bulgaria opened the direct and undefended way to Constantinople. Having been grievously defeated by General Allenby in Palestine, the Turks had no troops to defend Constantinople and accordingly demanded an armistice and surrendered. The surrender and elimination of both Bulgaria and Turkey opened the direct route to Budapest and Vienna. The Austrians ... at once demanded an armistice and surrendered, military pressure on the Piave assisting but not so decisive. This at once opened a direct and independent route to Saxony and Bavaria and the rear being thus in danger Germany demanded an armistice and surrendered. I think history will give events somewhat as above. The hypothetical question, would Germany have been able to retire the shortened lines, first to Meuse, then to Rhine and continue to struggle? Would Entente in that event stick it out? But

²⁰ E. Troubridge, *The Forgotten Admiral. Extracts from the Diary of Sir Ernest Troubridge (1915–1919)*, Zaboravljeni admiral ser Ernest Trubiridž. Izvodi iz dnevnika Belgrade : RTS, 2017, 292.

for the victory of Moglenitza these hypotheticals would have become real questions. How will history answer them?"²¹

Two weeks later (entry for 7th January 1919), Troubridge would add:

"General Franchet D'Espèrey has gone to Paris ... Every effort has been made in France to diminish his action here, or rather the magnitude of the results achieved. The French army have quite openly put it down to the jealousy of Foch and hint that it is class jealousy, Franchet D'Espèrey representing the aristocratic type of French officer, Foch the plebeian."²²

Well, fortunately, some contemporaries as well as historians give a more balanced and accurate interpretation. Namely, Louis Cordier in many of his articles and accounts did not want to abandon his brothers-in-arms and downplay what they did. His book *Victoire éclair en Orient 15/19 septembre 1918. Bataille pour les cimes* (1968) is particularly notable and was awarded by the French Academy of Sciences.

Jean-Baptiste Duroselle and some other authors would note that the decisive strike in the East by Franchet D'Espèrey not only brought the Bulgarians to their knees but also forced General Ludendorff to admit defeat on 28th September and demand from the German government to negotiate an armistice, which they did on 6th October. Duroselle, however, did not even mention the Serbs, only D'Espèrey and General Jouinot-Gambetta and his cavalry.²³

The Austrian General Glaise-Horstenau wrote of Hindenburg and Ludendorff's decision back in 1928 in his work *Die Katastrophe*.

Liddell Hart, in his well-known study *Strategy of Indirect Approach*, attributed the greatest importance to the achievements on the Salonika front for the final defeat of the Central Powers and fixed 29th September as the decisive moment when the German leadership understood the course of the war in spite of the stable situation during October on the Western front.²⁴

²¹ *Ibid.*, 302.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ J. B. Duroselle, *La Grande Guerre des Français 1914–1918*, Perrin, 2002, 401, 400; A. Sheldon-Doublaix, "Marine et le théâtres balkaniques durant la Grande Guerre", *RHA*, 289 (2015), 87–98.

²⁴ L. Hart, *Strategija posrednog prilazjenja*. Beograd: Vojno delo, 1952, 280. "The issue of the war had been finally decided on the 29th September – decided in the mind of the German Command. Ludendorff and his associates had then 'cracked' and the sound

Everything was accomplished, writes Hart, "by an indirect approach in a far-distant theatre. This was the Allied offensive on the Salonika front. Aimed at the sector where the terrain was so difficult that the defenders were few, it soon broke through ... This achievement not only knocked away the first prop of the Central Alliance but opened the way for an advance upon Austria's rear. The menace became closer when an Italian offensive fell on and broke through Austria's morally shaken and physically exhausted front; for with Austria's prompt capitulation her territory and railways were available to the Allies as a base of operations against Germany's back door. In September General von Gallwitz had told German Chancellor that such a contingency would be decisive."

The German Emperor Wilhelm II in his telegram of 29th September to the Bulgarian High Command bitterly remarked: "62.000 Serbian Soldiers decided the fate of the war. Shame!!!" Historian Andrej Mitrović quotes the following passage from the book that Hugo Kerchnawe, one of the highest-ranking Austrians in Belgrade's General Military Government, wrote in 1921 based on official records: "The underrated Salonika Front became a decisive battleground in the fall of 1918. Namely, the collapse of Bulgaria and extended enemy advances increased the likelihood that Italians could undertake a decisive offensive in the Alps, while the Central Powers could not transfer necessary reinforcements from Western Front at which the German army ... and the already shaken self-confidence was rapidly eroding, particularly in Austria-Hungary."²⁵

Intentions of the Serbian and Allied Supreme Command

The Serbian Supreme Command was, as one of the Allies, under the command of General Franchet D'Espèrey, commander of the Allied Army of the Orient. At the end of October 1918, the French general, through a

went echoing back-wards until it had resounded throughout the whole of Germany. Nothing could catch it or stop it. The Command might recover its nerve, the actual military position might improve, but the moral impression- as ever in war- was decisive."

²⁵ P. Opačić, *Solunska ofanziva 1918*, 287; A. Mitrović, "Political Consequences of the Break Up of the Salonika Front", in *The Salonika Theatre of Operations and the Outcome of the Great War*. Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 2005, 321–341.

Serbian delegate, told Field Marshal (Vojvoda) Živojin Mišić²⁶ that, for political reasons, it was necessary to transfer several dozen Serbian soldiers across the Danube, Sava and Drina as soon as possible, so that the communiqué could state that Serbian troops had crossed into Austro-Hungarian territory. Having received that message on October 30th, Marshal Mišić ordered his army to send small detachments over the rivers on observation missions, as well as to rest the main force for a while, keeping them closer to the supply sources and bases.²⁷

However, in a dispatch addressed to General Bojović²⁸, Marshal Mišić added that the commander knew that Romania had pretensions on “our” Banat. This fact suggested that it was necessary that Serbian troops reach, as soon as possible, the line Bela Crkva-Vršac-Timisoara and not to allow the Romanian troops to enter Banat. In his order, Marshal Mišić insisted that sufficiently strong units must be transferred across the Danube as soon as possible. However, the Supreme Command warned Bojović that these motives were strictly intended for him personally.²⁹

The capitulation of the Austro-Hungarian army in Villa Giusti on 3 November was not accepted by Hungary, so the operations had to be continued against both Germany and Hungary. The armistice with Germany was signed on 11th November and with Hungary on 13th November. The Italian government and army did not intend to respect the provisions of the armistice and set out in advance to occupy all the territories promised to it by the secret Treaty of London (1915) by the Allies and beyond. These independent actions caused misunderstandings with other Allies at many points.³⁰ The Serbian delegate at the Supreme Allied Command in the East, Major Marinković, sent a telegram with

²⁶ Chief of the Serbian Supreme Command.

²⁷ B. Krizman, *Raspad Austro-Ugarske i stvaranje jugoslovenske države*. Zagreb 1977, 65–66; M. Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca 1918–1921*. Beograd: Narodna knjiga, 1988.

²⁸ Commander of the Serbian First Army.

²⁹ B. Krizman, *Raspad Austro-Ugarske*, 124.

³⁰ D. Živojinović, *Amerika, Italija i postanak Jugoslavije 1917–1919*, Beograd, 1970, 236–241; D. Živojinović, *Vatikan, Srbija i stvaranje jugoslovenske države 1914–1920*, Beograd: NOLIT, 1980, 318; M. Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*, 20–21, 171–182; R. Maksimović, “Srpska vojska u Dalmaciji 1918. godine”, *Vojno-istorijski glasnik* 1–2 (1996), 47–73; M. Gulić, “Stupanje srpske vojske na područje Dalmacije

new instructions by D'Espèrey to Marshal Mišić from Thessaloniki sometime before midnight on 4/5 November 1918. However, this telegram would not reach the Chief of the Serbian Supreme Command until afternoon of the next day. According to D'Espèrey's new instruction (No. 5.740/3 of 3 November), which heavily modified the previous ones of October 18, he insisted, among other things, that the Serbian army should be deployed in the territories favorably disposed to the Yugoslav movement, like Banat, Bosnia, Herzegovina, etc.³¹

The following excerpts from these new orders issued by General D'Espèrey illustrate the rapid change in the evaluation of the situation both in Thessaloniki and Paris:

"I. – The changes that have taken place in the general situation in recent days, and especially the murky situation that prevails in Austro-Hungary, require that some changes be made to the work plan of 10 October and special orders no. 5.524 / 3 of 18th October, according to which a solid defense front in Northern Serbia is to be formed temporarily.

II. – Serbian army. As it turns out, the South Slavic movement is taking on great proportions. The Serbian Army should try to organize and use it in all possible ways in our favor, for the joint action against the Central Powers to their end. So, *it is necessary to intervene directly* (underlined by B. K.), and it will be so much easier that we no longer have to shy away from any repeated attacks by Austro-Hungarian troops on the Northern Front of Serbia.

The Serbian army should therefore push forward the necessary units as soon as possible to all territories that are in favor of the South Slavic movement, to Banat, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Croatia, etc. to give a hand to the elements to be organized.

The issue of supplying the Adriatic coast will be resolved later when the situation on that side becomes clearer ..."³²

As early as on November 5th, Field Marshal Mišić compiled new instructions for army commanders:

"Since the events are developing very quickly and successfully and it may not be possible to regularly deliver orders from our Supreme Command,

1918. godine", in *Kraj Velikog rata – put ka novoj Evropi*, eds. Miljan Milkić, Aleksandar Rastović, 37–58. Beograd, 2020.

³¹ B. Krizman, *Raspad Austro-Ugarske.*, 124.

³² *Ibid.*

I authorize the army commanders to make their own decisions according to the current situation, following these general guidelines: in Banat, to take the line Bela Crkva — Vršac — Timisoara and ten kilometers east of it; in the north, to reach the Mureş river; in Bačka, to take the line Subotica — Baja, and in the west and northwest, to develop action throughout Srem.”³³

Based on the directive from Thessaloniki and instructions issued by the Serbian Supreme Command, the First and the Second Serbian armies, began to be deployed in Vojvodina and Srem. The troops arrived in Sremska Mitrovica and Stara Pazova on November 7th, in Pančevo, Bela Crkva and Vršac on 6th November, in Novi Sad on 9th November, in Subotica on 10th November, then Sombor on 13th November, Baja on 14th November, Senta on 16th November, and Bečkerek on 17th November.³⁴

Although in some directions of the offensive, the Serbian army fought against the retreating parts of the German army, at some points they negotiated peaceful terms for the German retreat to avoid any unnecessary casualties and destruction of property. These negotiations were often initiated by the local authorities. Upon arrival, the military authorities tried to ensure order and security everywhere and gather former Serb prisoners scattered all over as workers on farms and facilities, or those who were returning from POW camps and to organize them for new duties.³⁵

In Slovenia and Croatia, even before the arrival of the Serbian units from the Salonika front, two strong detachments were formed in Ljubljana and Zagreb, as well as a smaller one in Rijeka and a company in Maribor. In addition, the National Council in Novi Sad had established the “Petrovaradin Regiment”, which played an important role in supporting the political shift and maintained order and peace.

Almost anticipating the spirit of the new instructions issued by General Franchet D’Espèrey, which the Serbian Supreme Command would receive on 5th November, Marshal Mišić had ordered the 2nd Serbian Army on 3rd November to begin transferring units to Bosnia

³³ B. Krizman *Raspad Austro-Ugarske*, 125–126.

³⁴ L. Krkljuš, “Pitanja organizacije vlasti u Vojvodini 1918 – 1919. godine”, u *Srbija na kraju Prvog svetskog rata*, 143–154. Beograd, 1990.

³⁵ Manuscript of the diary-memoir of Divisional General Žarko Majstorović, copy in author’s possession

in order to clarify a situation and connect with “Yugoslav troops.” The Serbian cavalry clashed after the crossing with the Austro-Hungarian troops, defeated them, and captured Dobrun and Vardište. During its advancement, in the vicinity of Višegrad, the Serbian army met a delegation sent by the National Council from Sarajevo with the instructions to meet the commander of the 2nd Serbian Army, Field Marshal (Vojvoda) Stepa Stepanović and ask him to urgently send his troops deeper into Bosnia since there was a threat of anarchy. In response, the Supreme Command ordered that a detachment should be formed under the command of Colonel Milan Nedić and transferred by rail to Sarajevo, where it was cheerfully welcomed by huge masses on 6 November. Later on, smaller detachments were deployed in other places as well.³⁶

The advance of the Serbian army through Slavonia, Croatia, towards Rijeka and Dalmatia was synchronized with the wishes and needs of the National Council in Zagreb. The desire to strengthen the pro-Yugoslav movement in the capital and free transport by rail from Rijeka through Zagreb to Belgrade coincided in particular. With its organization, the army was supposed to ensure the authority of the local organs of government and establish order and peace. On 14th November, one battalion from the Drina Division was sent to Rijeka, and later one battalion to Zagreb.

As the issue of the “reoccupation” of Kosovo and “occupation” of Montenegro was brought up during the recent Yugoslav crisis, let us recall only some intentions or reactions of the Serbian Supreme Command and lower levels of command and the endeavors of Italy to undermine the new Yugoslav state and cause instability. From the perspective of Italy, any Yugoslav state and its creation on the eastern shore of the Adriatic Sea, as well as the unification of Serbia and Montenegro, would jeopardize Italian war objectives.³⁷

In order to understand why the French government and army supported the advocates of the unification rather than those who stood

³⁶ B. Mladenović, “Štampa Bosne i Hercegovine o dočeku srpske vojske novembra 1918. godine”, u *Srbija 1918. godine i stvaranje jugoslovenske države*, 380–381. Zbornik radova knjiga 7, Beograd: Istorijski institut, 1988.

³⁷ D. Živojinović, “The War Aims of Serbia and Italy (1917)”, in *Italy’s Balkan Strategy 19th and 20th Century*, ed. Vojislav G. Pavlovic, 137–158. Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies, 2014.

behind the Montenegrin dynasty and king, one should not only look for geopolitical motives but also note that the majority of the Montenegrin people and politicians in exile had long pled for unification.³⁸

The Montenegrin dynasty in exile found itself under strong pressure of its former subjects to cease to be an obstacle to the widespread desire of the people for unification. Instead, the Montenegrin court turned to Italy and Russia, demanding the preservation of Montenegro after the war, with respect to its territorial demands (northern Albania with the mouth of the river Drin; Sarajevo and the surrounding areas; from the Neretva Valley to the Adriatic Sea; and the coast from the Neretva to Medua, including Dubrovnik and the Bay of Kotor/Cattaro). The Montenegrin king Nikola declared that “Serbdom shall not be unified, that is nothing but a hot-headed idea. It cannot happen without the eradication of one dynasty [i.e. either the Karadjordjević or the Petrović dynasty].” His prime minister resigned. On the other side, the Serbian prime minister was resolute: “The unification of Montenegro with Serbia must be carried out, whether there will be Yugoslavia or not.”³⁹ On 18th August 1916, the new Montenegrin Prime Minister Andrija Radović (1872–1947) suggested that Nikola should immediately pursue unification with Serbia by abdicating in favor of the Serbian Prince Alexander, his grandson. Since the King declined the proposal, Radović resigned in January 1917.⁴⁰ His successor, Milo Matanović (1879–1955), reiterated the urgency of negotiating unification with Serbia. He appealed in vain that “the idea of unification became a religion of the masses” and that the king’s hesitation could lead to “anti-national separatism” in Montenegro.⁴¹ Matanović and his government also resigned shortly thereafter. The Serbian government helped to organize and promote the Montenegrin Committee for National Union in March 1917. This committee publicly

³⁸ M. Bjelajac, “War Aims and War Aims Discussions (South East Europe), in 1914–1918”. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*.

³⁹ A. Mitrović, *Serbia’s Great War 1914–1918*, West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2007, 190.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 192.

⁴¹ N. Rakočević, *Politički odnosi Crne Gore* [Political Relations between Montenegro and Serbia 1903–1918]. 1981, 269.

endorsed the Corfu Declaration in favor of Yugoslav unification.⁴² On the other side, King Nikola I and his supporters waged a propaganda war against the committee. In the final stage of the war, the intention of the Serbian government was to send Montenegrins in the Serbian army into the field ahead of the other troops. The aim was to instigate an uprising and sweep out the Austro-Hungarian occupation regime from Montenegro. They were supposed to be there before the Italians, who, as it was perceived, intended to occupy the region and rule in the name of Nikola I.⁴³

The commander of the Allied Army of the Orient, Franchet D'Espèrey, accepted the Serbian proposal for action in Montenegro on 24th October, but with a slight modification. Firstly, he demanded that the designated troops (called *Skadarske* after the city of Skadar-Scutari) be renamed into *Jadranske* (Adriatic troops) and gave them the principal task of liberating Montenegro and reaching the Bay of Kotor/Cattaro.

The Serbian Government also developed their own plans, but all of them primarily relied on the Montenegrins themselves and the Montenegrin committee for unification, less on the Serbian armed forces. Besides, some 2.000 troops could not achieve much if they faced the resistance of entire population and the strong Italian forces.

According to the government instructions, the Serbian forces were to be reinforced with the Montenegrins incorporated in the Serbian army since 1916. However, the Serbian Supreme Command and Government also counted on irregulars and insurgents in the fight against the occupiers. Actually, at Andrijevića, the Serbian-Yugoslav detachment met with Montenegrin irregular battalions. The only tiny domestic political echelon that wanted the occupiers to remain in Montenegro and its capital until the Italians came consisted of those who had collaborated during the occupation and supported of the exiled king.⁴⁴

⁴² B. Petranović, M. Zečević, *Declaration of Montenegrin Committee*. Paris, 11th August 1917, 54; Mitrović, *Serbia's Great War*. 2007, 282 (after: D. Vujović, *Ujedinjenje Crne Gore i Srbije* [Unification of Montenegro with Serbia]. Titograd, 1962, 173–176); R. M. Raspopović, *Diplomatija Crne Gore /Diplomatie du Monténégro*. 1996, 612–623.

⁴³ Petranović, Zečević, *Jugoslavija 1918/1984*. Belgrade: Zbirka dokumenata, 1985, 77. (Serbian Minister of War to High Command, 3 October 1918)

⁴⁴ N. Rakočević, *Crna Gora u Prvom svjetskom ratu 1914–1918*. Cetinje, 1969, 686–687; P. Opačić, *Solunska ofanziva 1918* 356–359; A. Životić, "Srpska vojska i Božićna

It is important to note that the maneuvers of Italy indeed influenced not only the situation in Dalmatia but also the demarcation line with Albania in Kosovo and Montenegro. The demarcation line towards Albania, which did not coincide with the border established in 1913, was determined by Franchet D'Espèrey in order to limit the zone of influence of Italy. The French units, General Tranié's detachment, including some Greek forces, were the first to arrive in Kosovo and would only be replaced by the Yugoslav division. The first round of the disarmament of the local population was already being carried out by the French forces in the Debar zone.

The Yugoslav division arrived in Kosovo and Metohija not before 21st October with two brigades and an artillery regiment. A few days later, on 24th October, two battalions supported by three mountain guns and led by Lt. Colonel Ristić rushed towards Scutari (Skadar). They entered Scutari after two days of combat on 31st October. They did not know that the commander of the Serbian operation, Colonel Milutinović had already received orders to abandon the operation in Scutari in favor of the Allies and direct all of his forces towards Podgorica, Cetinje and the Bay Kotor/Cattaro. The third battalion of the Yugoslav division, supported by one artillery gun, led by Lt. Colonel Svetislav Simović marched towards Podgorica and the Bay of Kotor/Cattaro, its principal goal. A few days later, the Supreme Command was informed that there was not enough military power in Kosovo to impose state authority. On the contrary, the Albanians believed that they could even disarm the police authorities and refuse to obey the public call to return the plundered state property, especially weapons. The Yugoslav division command asked for permission to disarm the population in the vicinity of Priština.⁴⁵

Before leaving for Montenegro, the commander of the 2nd Yugoslav Regiment reported that Montenegrins from all parts of the deputation were coming to him with the request "for the army to bring order to the country." The Albanians from Plav were voicing the same request. Its report stated that "Montenegrins warmly receive[d] the Serbian army" and that the commander would try to lead a battalion of Montenegrins being

pobuna' 1919", in *Kraj Velikog rata – put ka novoj Evropi*, Eds. Miljan Milkić, Aleksandar Rastović, 59–74. Beograd, 2020.

⁴⁵ M. Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*, 226–232; Lj. Dimić, Đ. Borozan, *Jugoslovenska država i Albanci*, zbornik građe, tom I. Beograd, 1998.

formed in Mitrovica. In its instructions, the Supreme Command adds that the troops “would not enter the villages or touch the women, which can completely disrupt the whole operation” and that it would not count on the local funds for its supply needs, but would take everything it needed for seven days from Prizren.⁴⁶

When the 2nd Yugoslav Regiment marched from Metohija to the Adriatic coast, it was welcomed everywhere. Together with Montenegrin fighters, it fought on Vjetrenik and at the doorstep of Podgorica, then in Skadar/Scutari. The rest of the country was liberated by the Montenegrins themselves, and Montenegrins expanded their offensive to Eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina up to the area of Dubrovnik. On the night of 4th November, a delegation from Cetinje headed by Archbishop Gavriilo Dožić met the commander of the operations in Podgorica and asked him to send one company to Cetinje.⁴⁷ It became difficult to supply and feed all those numerous local detachments in the coming winter conditions so irregulars were disbanded on the order of General Milutinović on 12th November. However, that decision coincided with the preparations for the great national assembly for unification. On the other hand, the irregulars took their arms home.⁴⁸

The rumors about discontent about the unification, at least in some areas around the former capital of Cetinje, reached General Milutinović in early January 1919, at the time delegate of the new Yugoslav government in Montenegro, as well as other representatives of the Allies. He tried to mediate between the different local figures and groups, but in vain. The French General Vanel, commander of the Allied troops in the Bay of Cattaro and Montenegro, also tried to mediate after the course of events became serious. He came from Cattaro to Cetinje on 6–7th January and in order to persuade the rebels to cease their attacks on the city. He supported his action by bringing one French company, one Italian company, half an American company and one company from the 2nd Yugoslav Regiment near Njeguši. He also paid a visit to General Milutinović. Both of them invited Bishop Mitrofan Ban to mediate, but he declined. However, since the Montenegrin defenders kept control over the city,

⁴⁶ Lj. Dimić, Đ. Borozan, *Jugoslovenska država i Albanci*, knj. I, 115–117.

⁴⁷ N. Rakočević, *Crna Gora u Prvom svjetskom ratu*, 686, 690, 692.

⁴⁸ N. Rakočević, *Crna Gora u Prvom svjetskom ratu*, 687–698.

Vanel issued an ultimatum to both sides to free the captured fighters, allow communications and repair telegraph communications within 48 hours. He promised amnesty to the rebels, but it was in vain because the rebels felt supported by the appearance of Allied forces and proceeded to insist on their political demands. However, the “Christmas uprising” fell apart by the following day, 8th January, and prominent personalities sought refuge with the Italians. General Franchet D’Espèrey came after the uprising in Cetinje, accompanied by the British general and an Italian colonel, and had a discussion with both parties. General Milutinović also attended the meetings. After the visit, D’Espèrey informed his government that the Serbian army was not engaged in the clashes between two or in the preparations for the election of the delegates for the Great Assembly of Serbian People in Montenegro, which declared the unification and dethroned the Petrović dynasty.⁴⁹

After the unification of the two Serbian countries and the above-mentioned “Christmas uprising” of January 1919, the Italians became the patrons of the three Montenegrin battalions in exile (in Gaeta and Formi). The first one was composed of Montenegrins released from Austro-Hungarian captivity by the Italians, the second was formed by refugees from Montenegro, and the third one was composed of other Yugoslavs. They were armed with rifles and received a salary from the Italians. In February 1920, there were no more than 2,600 soldiers and 400 officers. In the March of the same year, the number had dropped to 1,000. In Forma, the 3rd Battalion rebelled and threw down their weapons because they thought they had been cheated. From Italy, the groups moved to Albania and then to Montenegro.⁵⁰

When the 1st Vardar Brigade was withdrawn from the Yugoslav Division and sent to Skopje, the 1st Yugoslav Regiment, with a few mountain guns, remained in charge of the entire territory of Kosovo and Metohija. In November 1918, it was noticed that the Albanians were carefully watching the location of the troops, waiting to see if they would leave or how much material was being taken out of the warehouses. But at the beginning, the situation was mostly calm, and the military and

⁴⁹ J.-N. Grandhomme, *Le General Paul Vanel*, 108; A. Životić “*Srpska vojska i 'Božićna pobuna' 1919*”, 70–71 (After personal papers of General Dragutin Milutinović, Archives of SANU, Belgrade).

⁵⁰ M. Bjelajac *Vojska Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*, 194–195.

civilian authorities tried to keep it that way. The confiscation of weapons and stolen state-owned horses was temporarily abandoned, and the necessary requisitions were reduced to a minimum.

Military and Diplomacy

The situation on the ground suggests that many questions and tasks had to be accomplished: who would restore transportation routes and control the Danube? Who would ensure the continuation of coal production? Who would restore the railways and ports and take back thousands of rail cars and locomotives taken from Serbia and Yugoslav lands? Who would feed the thousands of liberated POWs and enable them to go home? What country they would go to? How to prevent the plundering and violence after Austria-Hungary collapsed? What the port of Rijeka (Fiume) meant for the Allies in the Balkans since the Salonika port was out of reach until bridges and railroads could be rebuilt?⁵¹ And, finally, how to deal with individual allies in the victorious camp in the aftermath of the armistice, since each of them had their own national interests and expectations?

Basically, the French and Serbian troops were the only available tool for so many tasks. The other Allies were more of an obstacle than assistance. At the end of operations, the Serbian army numbered only 143,933 men, divided in two armies and seven divisions (around 79,000 rifles and 2,000 machine guns). There were not enough troops to withstand the Italian advance in Dalmatia, Slovenia and Istria. Only one regiment (2,000) was sent to occupy Scutari and the Bay of Cattaro with their arsenal; two companies were sent to Cetinje, the Montenegrin capital. The French troops rushed through Bulgaria to Romania and the French *Armée d'Orient*⁵² towards Hungary. Actually, the Italian army was the strongest among the Allies in the Adriatic and the Balkans. According to Italian data, it had 4,500,000 troops in November 1918.⁵³

⁵¹ M. Bjelajac *Vojska Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*, 183; A. Marzona, "Les incidents franco-italiens de Fiume ou l'expression des frustrations italiennes (novembre 1918–juillet 1919)", *RHA*, 254 (2009), 29–38.

⁵² Latter renamed to Army of Hungary (L'Armée Hongrie).

⁵³ M. Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*, 175.

On 11th November 1918, the French Armée d'Orient had its General Staff in Niš. Jouinot-Gambetta's cavalry was on the Danube, which it was supposed to cross. The second group of French divisions (led by General Henri Patey) was in Ćuprija and tried to repair the bridges over the Morava River and then continue northwards. General Tranié's detachment with its artillery and engineering was ready to cross the Danube in the vicinity of Smederevo. The forerunner of the 76th Division had reached Požarevac. The 17th Colonial Division arrived at the Bulgarian border near Negotin, and the 11th Colonial Division was moving towards Niš. The Italian 35th Division was concentrated near Kyustendil and preparing to advance behind the 11th Division towards Niš. The Third Greek Division worked on repairing the road from Niš to Belgrade. The 9th Greek Division, which arrived from Epirus, was stationed in Florina, south of Bitola. The third group of French divisions (General De Lobit), with the 57th and 156th Infantry Divisions, which came from Albania, was resting near Bitola. The French heavy artillery was divided into three groups. One advanced with the First Serbian Army north of the Danube, the second group followed the second Group of the French Divisions, and the third group headed from Veles to Constantinople. General De Lobit also had two divisions under his command near Bitola. The French Army of the Danube (Armée du Danube) crossed the Danube near Trnovo on 10th November and advanced on Romania. The 28th British Infantry Division was with them. In the meantime, the British divisions were ordered not to cross the Danube. General Piacentini's Italian forces (16th Army Corps) advanced slowly towards northern Albania, Scutari, Montenegro and the Bay of Cattaro.⁵⁴

The Italian and French governments reached an agreement on 10th November 1918, which stipulated that northern Albania would be occupied by the Italian army and that the garrison in Skadar/Scutari would be mixed (comprising French, British and Italian detachments). The commander of the forces was the French General Bardi De Fourtou.

⁵⁴ L. Franše d'Epere, *Memoari* 121–122; F. Cochet, "Le haut-commandement français et les opérations en Serbie durant la Grande Guerre", in *Une Alliance bâtie dans la Grande Guerre*, dir. Vojislav G. Pavlović, 97–116. Beograd : Institut des Etudes balkaniques, 2019; R. Dorlhiac, "La coopération franco-serbe sur la théâtre albanaise (1915–1920)", in *Une Alliance bâtie dans la Grande Guerre*, dir. Vojislav G. Pavlović, 281–305. Beograd: Institut des Etudes balkaniques, 2019.

There were also mixed French, British, Italian, Serbian and American forces in the Bay of Cattaro.⁵⁵ The Italian, French and British troops were in Rijeka.⁵⁶ The French troops entered Bar, Virpazar and Kotor/Cattaro in addition to the Italian ones. The French troops of the Armée d'Orient separated the Serbian and Romanian forces in Banat. Upon the request of the Allies, the Serbian army had to withdraw from Scutari and Timisoara, but it participated in the Allied forces in Split. The French banned the transport of Serbian units to the Dalmatian islands, and the Serbian troops had to withdraw from where they had already landed.⁵⁷

The Italian Expeditionary Corps was used to occupy Bulgaria, with a denser deployment in the western and northwestern regions, maintaining a strong garrison in Prilep (5,000 men). From 3rd to 16th November, the Italian army occupied: Trieste, Gorizia, Istria and the western part of Carniola (Slovenia), and only with the action of the Serbian officers they were stopped near Vrhnika, west of Ljubljana. On the eastern coast of the Adriatic, the Italian army occupied the islands of Cres, Mali Lošinj, Krk, Vis, Lastovo, Mljet, Hvar, Korčula, Pag, Rab, Ugljan, Silba, Pašman and Premuda. It also captured the cities of Opatija, Zadar, Šibenik and Karlobag. The entire coast to Trogir, close to Split, was also occupied. The Italians would enter Rijeka later when they fraudulently removed the Serbian battalion to Kraljevica. The Italian corps from Albania transferred its units on ships to the Bay of Kotor/Cattaro, Bar, Virpazar and Ulcinj. From 12th to 18th December 1918, 12,000 Italian soldiers, artillery and armored vehicles landed in Šibenik and Rogoznica and set out to attack Perković, Drniš and Knin.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ The Italians had some 18.000 troops in Montenegro and the Bay of Cattaro (13th Division plus other units) and two divisions in Albania in early March 1919. In the same period, the Italians concentrated almost 20.000 troops in Rijeka (Fiume) (see: M. Bjelajac *Vojska Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*, 184, 187).

⁵⁶ On 17th November 1918, the Italians had one infantry brigade and detachment of armored vehicles, as well as a strong fleet in the port of Rijeka (Fiume).

⁵⁷ M. Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*, 22.

⁵⁸ M. Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*, 183.

This advancement was met with the resistance of Serbian troops. However, the Italians did not clash only with the Serbian and Yugoslav detachments but with the French, too.⁵⁹

“For several months, the city of Fiume crystallized transalpine frustration and became the place of numerous clashes between the Italian population and French soldiers. Tension grew as the question of Fiume became more intractable, particularly at the peace conference from January to June 1919. The Italian resentment was focused primarily on the French, accused of favoring the Yugoslavs. In July 1919, the tension reached its climax when a minor incident escalated into slaughter, with several French soldiers being killed. For France, this event symbolized the deterioration of relations with Italy since the end of the war and its ambivalence toward Italian and Yugoslav interests.”⁶⁰

However, it was not only the civilians that attacked the French troops but also the Italian military personnel, soldiers and marines as well. The violent demonstrations followed by real military guided attacks against the weak French garrison caused severe casualties (79 killed and wounded).⁶¹

The best and most comprehensive analysis of the situation in the Balkans, at the turn of 1918 to 1919, is found in the report submitted by Franchet D’Espèrey on 3rd March 1919 to Ferdinand Foch, Supreme Allied commander:

“The British, by following their particular interests, concentrate all their forces in Turkey, ... and, according to your instructions, I have ceded the post of commander in Constantinople to the British General.

The Italians have continued with their intrigues everywhere. They want to occupy every port of importance on the Adriatic. They support the scarce Montenegrin Chetniks and support Albanian retributions against our allies, the Serbs and Greeks.

In Bulgaria and Hungary, the Italians have numerous military and civilian agents who work on reinstating economic ties and preparing a future political alliance against other Balkan nations, there is no doubt of that.

⁵⁹ M. Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*, 187–194; M. Gulić, “Stupanje srpske vojske na područje Dalmacije”, 54–56.

⁶⁰ A. Marzona, *Les incidents franco-italiens de Fiume*, 38.

⁶¹ M. Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*, 188 (After: EMAT, 20 N 955, C 9, D 5, The incidents in Fiume in July 1919).

The American troops consisted of two battalions only, stationed mainly in Cattaro and Fiume. They are very independent and could leave any moment now. On the contrary, they are very present in numerous civilian missions, well-supplied, and they enter everywhere we let them.

The Serbs, overwhelmed by victory that they did not expect on this scale, are clumsy like all beginners, and they face enormous foreign relations difficulties, as well as internal. Their pretensions are limitless, and they obey hardly any orders and advice. ...

Summarizing the situation in all Allied countries, it is obvious that each of them follows own path and goal, trying to take advantage of the situation with no hesitation. They keep or withdraw their troops or send them on numerous missions. All of them have the same wish – leave the heavy policing duty (of maintaining peace) to the French army.

But, the current state of the French army does not permit it to carry out this task. In spite many repeated demands for reinforcements, there have been none in the last eight months. Infantry regiments have barely two battalions with 200 men each. The Senegalian ones are not fit for use anymore. They consist of young recruits who have been forcefully gathered from the uncivilized population. However, we can still intervene but not without risk of dishonoring our flag.”⁶²

⁶² J. Bernachot, *Les Armées francisées en Orient, Après l'armistice de 1918*. Paris, 1970, Annex 7, 392–394 ; M. Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*, 294–296.