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# THE MILITARY CEMETERIES OF THE GREAT WAR IN CROATIA 1914–1941

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This contribution strives to give an initial overview of various legal frameworks and the connected everyday practices concerning military cemeteries containing the remains of Croatian soldiers – for the most part members of the Austrian-Hungarian armed forces – and to situate them within the changing political and cultural context, including memorial manifestations such as public monuments, individual war memoirs, and soldiers' frontline newspapers. As a consequence, the 1914–1941 period is further subdivided into the 1914–1918 Habsburg period, the short 1918–1921 intermezzo, and the 1921–1941 Karađorđević period, albeit none of this was exactly uniform. Apart from literature and published sources, the research was also based on archival documents (Croatian State Archives in Zagreb, Archives of Yugoslavia in Belgrade).

Keywords: First World War, military cemeteries, memory, Austria-Hungary, Croatia



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## INTRODUCTION

Although the situation is constantly improving (Herman Kaučić, 2016; Hameršak, 2016), even as of today the grand total of the knowledge and attitudes towards the First World War in Croatia – of the historiographers, the political elite, and the general public – is deeply conditioned by the decades-long promoted view that the Habsburg Monarchy was, to put it short and simple, nothing more than "a dungeon for nations",

the term, among others, equally encompassing ethnic Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes (Hameršak, 2013, pp. 177–192; Hameršak, 2015a, pp. 21–56).

Ostensibly proclaimed to bring about their liberation, the post-1918 Yugoslav states (both the monarchist and the communist one) were natural growth media for such claims, but often not in the same way, as their political, social, and cultural systems differed a lot. For instance, although official educational and memorial practices were centralised in a uniform way for most of the interwar period (pertaining to the pre-unification traditions of the Serbian Karađorđević dynasty, the state, and the army), and although the Habsburg armed-forces veterans mostly enjoyed an unfavoured status (Newman, 2018, pp. 187–200; Manojlović Pintar, 2014, pp. 203–215, 323–330; Šarenac, 2014, pp. 213–230), the autonomous public continued to exist to a significant degree, thus contributing to the heterogeneity of memory, allowing – for instance – communal monuments to be erected (Jezernik, 2018, pp. 140–157; Dobrovšak, 2020, pp. 405–414), which were dedicated to those who died in the Habsburg army (that fact was not explicitly mentioned, but it was obvious, and "the fallen" were generally treated as victims, not as heroes). Similarly, by the 1930s, non-demonising, or even to a degree positive, accounts of personal experiences within the First World War Habsburg army units written by some Croatian authors were published (Hameršak, 2013, pp. 245–250, 265–345).

Conversely, although for most of the post-1945 period the federal constitutional framework (and the power-relations within the republican branches of the ruling Communist Party) allowed for somewhat varied educational practices (that sometimes even extended the notion of "the dungeon for nations" to include the first Yugoslav state), the practical non-existence of an autonomous public made the memory concerning the First World War much more uniform. Within that scope, because of their nationalist, non-communist, and royalist connotations, even the traditions of the pre-unification Serbian army had some difficulties in re-emerging (Manojlović Pintar, 2014, pp. 330–349), while the dominant stance towards ethnic Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes serving in the Habsburg Army was again that they were "Kanonenfutter", *i. e.* cannon fodder, albeit not important enough to deserve public monuments of significance (Dobrovšak, 2020, p. 414; Hameršak, 2015a, pp. 21–29, 42–49; Hrštić, 2016, pp. 65–68).

Since the 1990s democratic transition and the establishment of the former Yugoslav republic of Croatia as an independent state, many of the neglected or one-sidedly treated themes were re-opened, including the First World War and the last years of the Habsburg Monarchy, resulting in various

new insights and making the whole picture more layered as well as paving the way towards a more balanced view of the 1914–1918 period regarding the Croatian soldiers serving in the Habsburg army, their cemeteries, and the whole culture of memory.<sup>1</sup> All of these complex themes should, of course, be studied in a broader, European or global context, but in such overviews, disregarding their high informational value, not even the larger countries Croatia had been part of (*i. e.* Habsburg Monarchy and Yugoslavia) could have been given adequate systematic attention (cf. Prost, 2011, pp. 135–151, and Bokovoy, 2001, pp. 160–181).

## **THE HABSBURG PERIOD (1914–1918)**

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Although the majority of the pre-First World War Croatian political and cultural elite<sup>2</sup> was dissatisfied with the constitutional framework and especially with dubious para-constitutional practices, the main accent was on the internal reform, rather than the destruction, of Austria-Hungary. Under the terms of the 1867 Austrian-Hungarian and the 1868 Croatian-Hungarian Compromises, the historical Kingdoms of Croatia and Slavonia were an entity with traits of statehood, while Dalmatia, Istria, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (occupied in 1878, annexed in 1908) enjoyed a lesser degree of autonomy (Čepulo, 2021, pp. 173–208, 218–227, 233–235, 254–258). Between them, Croatia, Slavonia, and Dalmatia nominally constituted a Triune Kingdom that was regarded as a basis for potential further unification and state-building, notwithstanding the fact that Dalmatia (as well as Istria) belonged to the Austrian half of the Monarchy, while Croatia and Slavonia belonged to the other, Hungarian half (according to the Croatian text of the 1868 Compromise: Kingdoms or Lands of the Crown of St Stephen or of the Hungarian Crown).

The idea of Yugoslav or South Slav unification outside of the Habsburg domain started to gain serious momentum only during the 1912–1913 Balkan Wars, and was silenced after the outbreak of the First World War, not only by the arrests of its proponents, the discontinuation of public political life, and the inauguration of preventive censorship, but also with an inner shift towards those agents of Croatian politics who advocated the view that Croatian and Serbian national interests cannot be reconciled, and that loyal fighting in the Habsburg army is the best possible way towards the protection and, hopefully, solidification of Croatian statehood (cf. Hameršak, 2013, pp. 259–339, including references).

Therefore, at least in Croatia and Slavonia, the Monarchy-wide notions of dynastic loyalty and revenge against the "sneaky and aggressive" Kingdom of Serbia (and later Italy) were supplemented with a thesis that the war is also being

waged in the more narrow, Croatian interest, combining the defence of the Triune Kingdom (as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina and, later, Istria and Dalmatia) with possible future constitutional reforms (Hameršak, 2015b, pp. III–IX; Hameršak, 2017, pp. 278–283, 292).

Of course, the exact influence of such views is hard to tell, not only because of a degree of Hungarian control over Croatia and Slavonia, but also because of the imposed self-censorship of various political agents. Also, after the 1915–1916 occupation of Serbia, a South Slavic unification of a sort, within the Habsburg framework, and not necessarily around a Croatian centre, was again put forward even by some Vienna circles (Krizman, 1977, pp. 22–25; Matijević, 2001, pp. 45–95).

Therefore, the new rise of the Yugoslav idea, prominent with the 1917 liberalisation of political and cultural life within the Habsburg Monarchy (such as the May Declaration, put forward to the Imperial Council in Vienna), was not necessarily as anti-Habsburg subversive as it has been re-interpreted after 1918 (for instance, Hameršak & Pintar, 2019, pp. 171–180). After all, by the spring of that year, all of the Monarchy's belligerent neighbours were either defeated or seemingly neutralised: Russia, Italy, Serbia, and Romania.

Be it as it may, the aforementioned notion of Croatian interest was also regarded to have some roots in the special position of the Croatian-Slavonian Home Guard (*Domobranstvo*) founded after 1868 as a somewhat autonomous part of the Royal Hungarian Home Guard (*Magyar Király Honvédség*), which itself was analogous to the Austrian *Landwehr* and parallel to the Habsburg Common Army (*Das Heer*).

Although the exact degree of that autonomy was disputed, and although the early combined "Hungarian-Croatian" title of *Domobranstvo* was soon officially abandoned, its Croatian-Slavonian department retained a separate war flag and oath of enlistment (adjusted to include elements of Croatian national identity), Croatian as the command and official language, and the regional commander had to be of "native" origin, which was enough to enable sporadic unofficial talk of a "Croatian Home Guard" (Hameršak, 2015b, pp. III–IX), or even a "Croatian Army" (Hameršak, 2017, p. 279).

As a result, in contrast to the arguably more supranational or even anational identity of other Habsburg units recruited on the territory of the Triune Kingdom during the First World War, the Zagreb- and Karlovac-seated 25th and 26th Home Guard Infantry Regiments (forming one half of the 42nd Home Guard Infantry Division) showed more traits that were characteristic primarily of the Croatian national identity and, apart from the occasional unit commanders' incentive speeches (Hameršak, 2015b, p. VII–XIII), these traits were also reflected

in some of the burial and memorial practices (Hameršak, 2017, pp. 278–283; Hameršak, 2020, p. 378), such as "the Fallen Croatian Heroes" (*Pali hrvatski junaci*) pictorial necrologue series in the *Ilustrovani list* magazine (Dobrovšak, 2018, p. 117), uncensored contributions in the *Sudrug* (*Comrade*) low-circulation regimental frontline newspaper (Hameršak, 2017, pp. 278–283, 291–291), battlefield military monuments at cemeteries centred around the "Bog i Hrvati" ([only] God and Croats) inscriptions, built in 1916–1917,<sup>3</sup> and other similar landscape insignia (Paščenko, 2016, pp. 53–81, 108, 114, 118–119, 159, 173, 179–184).

Among other things in 1914, the initial "home before Christmas" attitude, the mobile nature of the fighting,<sup>4</sup> and the high death toll did not favour quick and uniform standardisation of the burial procedures and memory practices (Reichl, 2019, pp. 63–64). Austrian-Hungarian soldiers killed on the Serbian and Russian battlefields were often buried near the moving frontline, in individual or collective graves, as it seemed fit, in a somewhat improvised manner, without detailed plans (later to be known as cadastres), and with dubious identification procedures (Lanović, 1919, pp. 91, 164–165; Reichl, 2019, pp. 91–105; Paščenko, 2016, pp. 161–185). However, means were sometimes found for the remains of fallen officers to be transported home, where their family members would take care of the burial. On the other hand, wounded or sick soldiers that died in hinterland military or civilian hospitals were largely buried either in the pre-existing cemeteries (military as well as civilian) in respective towns and cities, or in new cemeteries organised near the hospitals (Hameršak, 2020, p. 379). Discrimination also existed among the ranks, as fallen officers and several of the NCOs were given individual portraits in daily newspapers (Dobrovšak, 2018, p. 117), praising their deeds, while the names of the majority could only be ascertained from the *Verlustliste* (the official, periodically publicised lists of casualties).

In 1915 and later through the war, as the frontlines became more static, especially on the Russian and the Italian fronts,<sup>5</sup> many of the battlefield cemeteries were appropriated in a way by singular battalions or regiments that had fought in the area for some time, and whose members tended to form the majority of the buried.

As battalions and regiments regularly rotated covering the same battlefield area, some cemeteries even became "divisional" in their character, with up to several thousand graves. On the other hand, as some former battlefields became for all intents and purposes devoid of fighting army units (Western Galicia since 1915, Western and Northern Serbia since 1916, the Isonzo river area since 1917), their respective cemeteries

ceased to be active in previous ways. That is, bodily remains continued to be found all over the landscape, but death in combat and the related more or less improvised burial practices were not so frequent any more. Moreover, many of the scattered burial sites proved difficult to maintain, and gradually it was taken as a general principle that, where possible, smaller cemeteries should be abandoned, and the remains transported to a lesser number of larger ones (Hameršak, 2020, pp. 376–378).

As far as Austria-Hungary is concerned, the first ever dedicated "War Graves Department" (*Kriegsgräberabteilung*) was founded in November 1915 within the Cracow Military District, covering approx. 10,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Until the end of the war, around 400 military cemeteries containing the remains of 100,000 soldiers were maintained in that area, their improvements requiring the efforts of architects and painters as well (Reichl, 2019, pp. 64–71).

Already in December 1915, a similar but central department was founded in the Vienna-seated common War Ministry (Reichl, 2019, pp. 73–85), which initialised the organisation of adequate departments in other military districts, including the Zagreb Military District (*Militärkommando*) that covered Croatia and Slavonia (equal to the 13th Corps area). According to the available, probably incomplete, archival sources for the 1914–1918 period, stored in the Croatian State Archives (State Government for Croatia and Slavonia, Department of Religion and Education), during the First World War at least 9,000 military and attached persons were buried on the territory of Croatia and Slavonia (HR-HDA-80, boxes 1550–1564; Hameršak, 2020, pp. 378–379).

Probably echoing trends in northern parts of the Habsburg Monarchy, during late spring and early summer 1916, Zagreb-seated popular periodicals such as *Narodne novine* and *Ilustrovani list* wrote about the need to give more attention to the cemeteries of "our fallen heroes", including individual and collective monuments (Dobrovšak, 2018, p. 404).

However, a sequence of preserved Zagreb Military District orders starts with Order No. 203 issued on 1 August 1916 (HR-HDA-1697, box 1; Hameršak, 2020, pp. 379–380).<sup>6</sup> According to it, single individual graves located outside of existing military or civilian cemeteries were to be transferred to the closest existing ones. On the other hand, grouped individual graves could be preserved and fences built around them, and this was postulated as a general rule for collective graves (in cases of establishing new military cemeteries, the military authorities were instructed to buy land from private owners).

Among other things, officers and soldiers of "proven heroic deeds" were to be given individual graves, and members

of enemy armed forces were to be given separate graves, which were to be maintained with "equal care". Where possible, original layouts had to be retained, showing the "modesty" and "innocent simplicity" of earthen graves provided with wooden crosses (Catholic, Orthodox) or other adequate religious insignia (Muslim, Israelitic, Augsburg Evangelical, Calvinist Evangelical).

For identification purposes, sheet iron plaques were to be painted a black base colour for "our soldiers", white for allied, and light blue for enemy soldiers, and brush-written with standard data containing dual inscriptions in German and Croatian (Common Army, allied armies, enemy armies) or Hungarian and Croatian (Hungarian Home Guard), as well as only Croatian inscriptions (*Domobranstvo*).<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, for every single cemetery or a discernible cluster of graves, local military authorities, hospitals, and gendarmerie stations were obliged to run a so-called cadastre sheet, including a 1:2,800 scale situation map (allowing for every single grave to be visible). A duplicate copy of each sheet had to be sent to the Zagreb Military District, where a central cadastre had to be founded, run by the War Graves Inspectorate department for Croatia and Slavonia (*Nadzornišтво ratnih grobova, Kriegsgräberinspektorat*).

The same Order No. 203 prescribed the standard paper forms and tables, and also an annual maintenance subsidy of two Crowns per every ten single graves or per every twelve square metres of a collective grave. Obviously, because of high costs, procurement of "extraordinary monuments" was explicitly left for "more peaceful times", and civilian as well as spiritual authorities were called to do their part.

The Zagreb Military District Order No. 286 issued on 29 October 1916 (HR-HDA-1697, box 1; Hameršak, 2020, p. 380) contained further details. Apart from mentioning an unspecified instructory book that had been sent to the lower levels of command,<sup>8</sup> it was stipulated that single graves had to have the form of a mound, and that the aforementioned wooden crosses could be replaced with a low tombstone or a memorial plaque, while one common pyramid-shaped (or other simple-design) monument should also be erected in each cemetery ("Art Nouveau and fancy letters are forbidden"). Also, it was ordered that officers' and other ranks' graves should look alike and be evenly cared for, in order to "stress their common warrior's deaths". If relatives of the deceased desired some additional ornamentation, they were free to ask for the exhumation and transfer of the bodily remains "to a place where such, often lavish, monuments would not impede the modesty of the military cemetery and the honour of battle comrades". Apart from that, the final design of tombstones, memorial plaques,

and the optional larger common monuments was left to the special, mostly civilian, State Committee for Warriors' Graves Care (*Zemaljski odbor za skrb ratničkih grobova*) to decide.

Finally, the Zagreb Military District Order No. 14 issued on 14 January 1917 (HR-HDA-1697, box 1; Hameršak, 2020, p. 380) focused on the general layout of the cemeteries, footpaths, and gardening. Interestingly, instead of a common pyramid-shaped monument, a cross was now preferred (no official reason was given for this change), made of wood, metal, stone or concrete, eventually, as an alternative, to be replaced with an obelisk or a chapel.

Responding to the plea of the Zagreb Military District No. 4083 issued on 13 May 1916, the aforementioned State Committee for Croatia and Slavonia was founded by *Ban* Ivan Skerlec's Decree No. 2699 issued on 25 May 1916 (HR-HDA-78, box 922). As said, the Committee was given the task of devising the military cemeteries' design from an artistic aspect. Therefore, apart from incumbent or former high Government officials such as Teodor Pejačević, Ferdinand Mixich, and Vladimir Nikolić-Podriński, its appointed members were the renowned architects or sculptors Janko Holjac, Martin Pilar, Ivan Kerdić, Robert Frangeš Mihanović, and Viktor Kovačić, while the military was represented only by the lieutenant-colonel Demeter Kučeković, in an advisory role (HR-HDA-78, box 922; Dobrovšak, 2020, p. 404; Hameršak, 2020, p. 380).

However, according to the fragmentary documentation, the Committee "abruptly" ceased to function already in early 1917 (HR-HDA-1363, inventory number 195).<sup>9</sup> It is only known for sure that architect Kovačić travelled to Vienna in order to study possible designs (HR-HDA-78, box 922),<sup>10</sup> and several of his coloured drawings have lately been reproduced in print (see Dobrovšak, 2020, p. 405 and Hameršak, 2020, p. 381). We can only assume that some of the Committee's recommendations influenced the aforementioned Zagreb Military District Order No. 14, particularly concerning the abandonment of the pyramid-shaped central monument. Also, it follows that the Committee prepared the founding of a public foundation intended to finance additional permanent crosses and common monuments, but there is no record whether this was accomplished.<sup>11</sup>

## **THE INTERMEZZO (1918–1921)**

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Although formally proclaimed on 1 December 1918, the Yugoslav political and administrative unification was a gradual, non-linear, and severely disputed process. Since first serious talks about it were started during the war, resulting in the 1917 Declaration of Corfu, Croatian and Slovene émigré politicians strived to secure their respective nations and terri-

tories an adequate degree of influence against possible Serbian hegemony. For instance, the Karađorđević dynasty and the unitary structure of the future joint state were accepted, but qualified majority voting was stipulated for the future constitution (Čepulo, 2021, pp. 209–210). Similar steps were also taken by the Croatian State Parliament and its members during October and November 1918, which proclaimed separation from Austria and Hungary on 29 October, and at the same time willingness to join the new, greater South Slav state as well as acknowledging the authority of the temporary People's Council. For a month preceding the formal unification with Serbia into the Kingdom (*Kraljevstvo*) of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the former Habsburg territories of the Triune Kingdom, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and of the Slovenian lands were known as the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, having separate government bodies (initially responsible to the People's Council), army, administration etc., which later only gradually ceased to exist (Čepulo, 2021, pp. 261–272).

According to fragmentary documentation, it may be concluded that, due to the withdrawal or even dissolution of the majority of the Habsburg military units during late October and early November 1918, war graves' maintenance temporarily ceased for all intents and purposes, even in the central Zagreb cemetery of Mirogoj, where not enough personnel were available for pallbearing, while the frequency of funerals skyrocketed because of the Spanish flu (HR-HDA-1363, inventory number 195).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, during the ensuing civil unrest and turmoil, a number of local military cemetery cadastre sheets were destroyed (HR-HDA-1363, inventory number 195).<sup>13</sup> Therefore, instead of military and gendarmerie units, in some places the maintenance was taken over by the civilian communal services (HR-HDA-1363, inventory number 195; Hameršak, 2020, pp. 381–382).<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, already in early November 1918, the duties as well as the cadastres and some of the personnel of the former Zagreb-seated War Graves Inspectorate were taken over by the newly founded Military Department of the Government of the People's Council of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs (*Odjel za vojne poslove Vlade Narodnoga vijeća Slovenaca, Hrvata i Srba*), that is, more precisely, by its Zagreb-seated 1st Military District, within which a body of the same name as before, the War Graves Inspectorate, was established in early 1919 at the latest (cf. Manojlović Pintar, 2014, pp. 199–200).<sup>15</sup>

As follows from the documents, the new/old Inspectorate, responsible for the territory of Croatia and Slavonia, continued to care about the cemeteries in the same way, without discrimination concerning the citizenship and nationality ("narodnost") of the fallen soldiers (HR-HDA-1363, inventory number 195; Hameršak, 2020, p. 381).<sup>16</sup>

Already on 14 November 1918, the 1st Military District wrote about an earlier proposal concerning erecting collective memorial plaques in the parish churches, initiated by colonel Slavko Štancer and the Society of Brethren of the Croatian Dragon (cf. Gabelica, 2022, pp. 401–402), and also about the possibility to appoint a new State Committee for Croatia and Slavonia.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in January 1919 another earlier proposal was reconsidered, the one about hiring disabled veteran soldiers as cemetery custodians (HR-HDA-1363, inventory number 195),<sup>18</sup> and in April that year individual sheet iron memorial plaques were mentioned in a way leading to the conclusion that a significant number of graves still lacked them.<sup>19</sup>

Since early 1919, the aforementioned 1st Military District had an extended title, "in liquidation", which was part of the process of gradual dissolution of the army of the short-lived State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs and the transfer of its agendas to the army of the Kingdom (*Kraljevstvo*) of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which was practically an enlarged army of the Kingdom of Serbia. As a result, during that time the 1st Military District functioned with reduced means, inadequate even for the previous maintenance subsidy of two Crowns, let alone for further improvements.<sup>20</sup>

A telling case of poor coordination, or even malevolence, emerged in June 1919, when a query was sent from the Presidency of the State Government for Croatia and Slavonia to the newly constituted 4th Army District of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (supposed to substitute the 1st Military District), asking for instructions on how to deal with war graves, especially whether there exist some uniform rules that should be implemented on the entire new state territory (HR-HDA-1363, inventory number 195; Hameršak, 2020, p. 382).<sup>21</sup> Reacting to that query, in August that year, the 4th Army District appointed a special Commission for War Graves, consisting of a lieutenant-colonel, a Catholic archvicar, and a Serbian Orthodox protoiereus (HR-HDA-1363, inventory number 195),<sup>22</sup> which by the end of September 1919 reported that the State Government should directly contact the War Graves Inspectorate, the only one that still existed, as part of the Building Department of the 1st Military District, in liquidation (HR-HDA-1363, inventory number 195).<sup>23</sup> Obviously not satisfied with such an answer, in October 1919 the State Government for Croatia and Slavonia requested further clarification both from the 4th Army District and the 1st Military District, in liquidation (HR-HDA-1363, inventory number 195).<sup>24</sup> The sole answer came in November 1919, from the former, stating that it was precisely the 4th Army District on whose orders the only two officers of the War Graves Inspectorate had been sacked, and that the Building Department was in

such a way forced to take over its activities. Moreover, in the 1st Military District's opinion, the aforementioned 4th Army District's Commission for War Graves was totally redundant, and it was best for the civilian authorities to take responsibility for the graves themselves (HR-HDA-1363, inventory number 195).<sup>25</sup> Apparently, in a kind of almost circular paradox, not willing to take additional, expense-laden responsibilities, the Commissariat for Education and Religions (*Povjereništvo za prosojetu i vjere*), a sort of a ministry of the State Government for Croatia and Slavonia, declined such an idea, at least until the cemeteries are properly arranged (HR-HDA-1363, inventory number 195; Hameršak, 2020, p. 382–383).<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, several months earlier, in March 1919, while it had still been operational, the Zagreb War Graves Inspectorate directly addressed the Belgrade central authorities with a suggestion that maintenance of approx. 500 cemeteries should be rationalised by erecting one central, common monument per every cemetery, instead of the costly dealing with individual graves.<sup>27</sup>

Another curious case is a short notice on the alleged, draft-stage statute (decree) on the arrangement of the "warriors' graves", prepared in late 1918 by an unknown department of the State Government for Croatia and Slavonia, but supposedly permanently misplaced within the files of the newly established Commissariat for Public Health of the State Government for Croatia and Slavonia (HR-HDA-1363, inventory number 195; Hameršak, 2020, p. 382).<sup>28</sup>

Finally, in March 1920 the same problem was also addressed by the Commissariat for Internal Affairs (*Povjereništvo za unutarne poslove*) of the State Government for Croatia and Slavonia (Hameršak, 2020, p. 383), suggesting three possible solutions to the Belgrade Ministry of Religions (*Ministarstvo vera*). According to the first, a completely new department within the Commissariat for Internal Affairs should be organised; according to the second, the General Register Office (*Matičarska referada*) of the Commissariat for Education and Religions should also take care of the war graves; according to the third, the responsibilities should go to the Public Health Department (now a part of the Commissariat for Internal Affairs).<sup>29</sup>

## **THE KARAOĐORĐEVIĆ PERIOD (1921–1941)<sup>30</sup>**

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Even after the June 1921 Vidovdan Constitution had been ratified (only with a simple majority, which resulted in a long-lasting unrest among the Croatian political elite and public), the processes of administrative and legal unification were rather gradual, concentrated on the standard areas of state power, and the seemingly unifying identity notion of the "three-tribe people" of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes soon lost its momentum (Čepulo, 2021, pp. 268–276).

Interestingly, a letter of the Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the State Government of Croatia and Slavonia dating from March 1920 did not mention the fact that, already in January that year, the Belgrade central Government had published a Decree on the Organisation and Maintenance of Our Military Cemeteries in the Homeland and Abroad (Uredba, 3 January 1920; Hameršak, 2020, pp. 383–384; Lajbenšperger & Mamula, 2014, pp. 209, 214–215).

In tune with the founding traditions of the new Yugoslav state, the Decree put special emphasis on the graves of "the fighters for freedom and unification of our people", which signified members of Serbian and probably also the former Montenegrin army. However, the provisions that followed mentioned "our soldiers that fell in the past wars", which – if understood according to the ethno-national key – did also include Austrian-Hungarian soldiers of Croatian, Serbian, and Slovenian origin (opposite opinion in Jezernik, 2018, p. 130). Furthermore, implying international relations of the Kingdom of Serbia during the First World War, the Decree regulated the care for the graves "of the soldiers of the allied armies" on the territory of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

Contrary to the Austrian-Hungarian legal framework, where the armed forces had the rights as well as duties of supervision, and in many instances also of direct organisation and maintenance, the 1920 Decree set the Belgrade Ministry of Religions as a supervisory body, while everyday care was delegated to the "church municipalities and parish priests" of the respective locality.

Either because of the central government Decree, or because of some other yet unknown legal ground, valid only for Croatia and Slavonia, in early 1921 the Zagreb-seated Commissariat for Education and Religions distributed "warriors' graves" cadastre sheets for the territory of Croatia and Slavonia precisely among the local Catholic and Serb Orthodox parishes, trusting them with "evidence and maintenance". From the preserved lists and handover protocols, it follows that several Catholic parish priests officially declined such a move, stating "the unregulated burden of expenses" as the only reason for their stance (HR-HDA-80, box 1550).<sup>31</sup>

According to the 1920 Decree, for larger military cemeteries situated abroad, such as those of Serbian army members after its 1915 withdrawal from Serbia, of prisoners of war, and of the interned civilian persons on the territory of former Central Powers (these instances were given in the original text), Yugoslav diplomatic representations were declared responsible, and special priests were to be assigned the status of state employees for this task.

Furthermore, all military cemeteries were declared to be temporary, as all of the remains were to be gradually transferred to the representative ossuaries ("mausoleums") planned on the level of one per "province" (*pokrajina*), which was generally in accordance with the contemporary tendencies in France and Italy, and one or two steps further than had ever been envisioned in Austria-Hungary (Hameršak, 2020, pp. 376–378).

As far as expenses were concerned, a somewhat unclear provision stated that the Ministry of Religions should provide for them, that is, if the expenses "cannot be covered through voluntary contributions of the relatives and of the whole people, who are obliged and willing to pay respect to the graves of heroes and martyrs".

The 1920 Decree said nothing about the members of the non-allied armies in which none of "our soldiers" had fought. However, the 1919–1920 peace treaties with Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria, also signed by the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, provisioned that signatory states should maintain all military cemeteries on their respective territories, notwithstanding their affiliation (Hameršak, 2020, p. 377).

Consequently, in April 1922, the previous Decree was replaced by the Law on the Organisation of Our Military Cemeteries and Graves in the Fatherland and Abroad as well as Fallen Soldiers and Seamen, Prisoners of War and Interned Persons, Citizens of Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria that were Interred on Our State Territory (Zakon, 22 April 1922; Hameršak, 2020, pp. 384–385; Lajbenšperger & Mamula, 2014, pp. 210, 212–216).

Apart from provisions concerning the members of the former enemy armies, the 1922 Law introduced more precise provisions than the 1920 Decree, and also restyled some of the already existing ones. For instance, besides "our fighters for freedom and unification", a phrase followed that mentioned "our fallen and deceased soldiers in the wars for freedom and unification", which logically could more directly have encompassed Austrian-Hungarian soldiers of Croatian, Slovenian, and Serbian provenance, thus opening the legal possibility not to treat them (solely) as (former) citizens of Austria and Hungary.

At the moment we do not know much about the everyday praxis, but available sources testify that the "priest-custodian" (*sveštenočuvár*) seated in Prague, obliged to cover Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria and Hungary, at least during the 1927–1928 period, also surveyed the military cemeteries of Austrian-Hungarian soldiers of Croatian, Slovenian, and

Serbian provenance in those countries (AJ-69, folder 117).<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the activities of the Belgrade Ministry of Religions (that is, of its Central Information Department for Warriors' Cemeteries and War Casualties, *Centralno izveštajno odeljenje za ratnička groblja i ratničke gubitke*) concerning data retrieval and evidence of "our soldiers' graves" undoubtedly included cemeteries of Austrian-Hungarian soldiers, such as prisoners of war that died in Italy or fell on the Russian front, for which purposes the provincial governments received a subsidy already in 1920 (Kosić, s. a., pp. 101–113). One of the more curious examples is a file on the eight Austrian-Hungarian soldiers buried in the Swedish town of Trelleborg during the 1915–1918 period, who died after being released from Russian captivity (AJ-69, folder 126).<sup>33</sup>

However, when judging about the level of attention given by the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes to the cemeteries of the non-allied armies, one must also have in mind that otherwise friendly Czechoslovakia formally protested because of the inadequate maintenance of the graves of Austrian-Hungarian soldiers of Czech and Slovak provenance, and that even the effort of the Serbian Orthodox priest-custodian Miron Janković, who was in charge of the Serbian army cemeteries on the island of Corfu, was criticised as "unworthy" (Kosić, s. a., pp. 105–106).

Greatly worried because of the budgetary constraints, even the renowned Serbian writer Miloš Crnjanski (1926) publicly wrote about the necessity of the better treatment of outland graves of Serbian army soldiers and interned civilians (for other instances see Jezernik, 2018, pp. 129–130; Manojlović Pintar, 2014, pp. 210–211; Šarenac, 2014, pp. 196–197 and Lajbenšperger & Mamula, 2014, pp. 215–216).

Following King Alexander's autocratic takeover (Čepulo, 2021, pp. 278–283), in the 1929 re-organisation, the Ministry of Religions was disbanded, and its affairs were transferred to the Religious Department of the Ministry of Justice of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, as the state was renamed. Nowadays, its archive holds the most copious collection of documents (AJ-63, folders 186–240) pertaining to military cemeteries in Croatian territories that were once a part of the Habsburg Monarchy, and, as it seems, also to Austrian-Hungarian military cemeteries in other former parts of Yugoslavia (many of these documents were originally delivered from the former provincial administrations of Croatia, Slavonia, and Dalmatia, in the early or mid-1920s).

Contrary to the 1920 Decree, the 1922 Law prescribed that the secular (administrative) communes were also responsible for the organisation and maintenance of the military ceme-

teries, and the higher-level counties (*oblasts*) were burdened with some of the costs. Along the same line, the priest-custodians were to be assigned lay assistant officials. Furthermore, private owners of the lands on which cemeteries were erected were entitled to a fee. There was also a provision that all of the cemeteries should be given permanent fences, and that wooden crosses should be replaced with more durable ones made of stone or concrete. These articles surely testify to the complexity of the military cemetery organisation and maintenance, and of the inadequate means dedicated to that purpose. Reasonably, the 1922 Law also set a two-hundred-grave limit, meaning that all bodily remains in smaller cemeteries were to be exhumed and transferred to the larger ones. However, as in the 1920 Decree, not even these larger cemeteries (at least in the case of "our soldiers") were considered to be permanent, as they were to be abandoned in favour of more representative ossuaries. However, according to the same law, the building of these ossuaries was delayed until the post-1928 period.

The 1922 Law stayed in power for the rest of the interwar period, and mostly served as a basis for the organisation and maintenance of the Serbian army cemeteries near former frontlines (Lajbenšperger & Mamula, 2014, pp. 216–217). However, some of the greater memorial projects did include former enemies: the Zagreb Mirogoj ossuary in the mid- and late 1930s, containing the remains of approx. 3,300 soldiers of Austrian-Hungarian, Serbian, and other armies (Kukić, 2015),<sup>34</sup> the Crni Vrh (Gučevo) ossuary in the late 1920s and mid-1930s, containing the remains of approx. 3,700 soldiers of the Serbian army and of the predominantly Croatian Habsburg 53th Infantry Regiment (Lajbenšperger, 2015), and the 1926 Olomouc mausoleum, containing the remains of approx. 1,200 Austrian-Hungarian soldiers of Croatian, Serbian, and Slovenian provenance (Skoupy, 2016).

Apart from finally reaching a sort of Croatian-Serbian compromise, reflected in the establishment of the Banate of Croatia (Čepulo, 2021, pp. 282–294), the late 1930s also witnessed a significant public debate on the marginalised experience of the Habsburg soldiers (though they were, in fact, more numerous among the citizens), stemming from the critical reception of Pero Blašković's recently published war memoirs,<sup>35</sup> and also the beginning of other changes concerning their status (Hameršak, 2014, pp. XIX–XXX).

Be it as it may, in spring 1941 events took a completely different turn, leading to a whole series of further upheavals in the field of military cemeteries and the First World War memory.

To conclude, it can be said that ambitious and detailed Habsburg period plans concerning military cemeteries were only partially realised. Some of the causes are surely the 1918 demise of Austria-Hungary and of its constituent parts such as Kingdoms of Croatia and Slavonia, entailing the focus switch towards the fallen of the Serbian Army as a key founding factor of the new Yugoslav state. However, contrary to the post-1945 period, one must bear in mind that 1919–1941 regulations on the matter did not exclude cemeteries of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes fighting in the ranks of Habsburg armed forces, and that at the present state of research several notable instances of significant state care are known to have occurred, notwithstanding more numerous actions by local authorities and civil and veteran associations that contributed to the heterogeneity of the First World War memory, especially in the late 1930s. Apart from nation-building, ideological reasons, the whole process had also been affected by relegating cemetery maintenance from military to civilian authorities, growing financial constraints and, presumably, by over-centralising the cadasters which had been duly transferred to the undermanned Belgrade-seated Ministry of Religions already in the early or mid-1920s, making them for all intents and purposes unknown to the Croatian public (and even the cemetery officials) until most recent times.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The most prominent current effort in this field is represented by the aforementioned project, *The First World War in the Culture of Memory*.

<sup>2</sup> In this text, generalised terms such as "Croatian elite" and "Croatian soldiers" may well, to a certain degree, encompass agents of non-Croatian ethnicities on the territory of the Triune Kingdom, bearing in mind that constraints of space do not allow for a more subtle treatment.

<sup>3</sup> Probably first used by Ante Starčević in his 1861 speech against Austrian rule, that motto called for the sovereignty of Croatian people and state. Two such monuments have been preserved in the regional military cemeteries in nowadays Ukraine, in Dobrinivci and Glibivka. Without Habsburg insignia, just in Croatian, the simple laurel wreath at the Glibivka monument also reads "for King and Homeland", while the Dobrinivci one, modelled on the Lion of Aspern, bears no state symbol other than the Croatian chessboard coat-of-arms.

<sup>4</sup> During 1914, most of the Habsburg units from the territory of the Triune Kingdom were deployed against Serbia, and only a small proportion against Russia.

<sup>5</sup> Between early 1915 and early 1918, the majority of Croatian-Slavonian units were deployed in Eastern Galicia and Bukovina, being transferred to the Asiago plateau and upper Piave area only in the

spring of 1918. On the other hand, a majority of Dalmatian units served on the Isonzo front from mid-1915 to late 1917, advancing towards the river Piave during the Caporetto offensive. All in all, most of the Triune Kingdom Habsburg units spent the last months of war on the Italian front.

<sup>6</sup> These orders apparently recapitulated earlier Vienna War Ministry instructions. Available also in the official Croatian translation, all of them were signed by Generalmajor Josef Seipka.

<sup>7</sup> Croatian inscriptions were excluded for the Rijeka (Fiume) area.

<sup>8</sup> Among several books and booklets, the most probable candidate is *Denkschrift über Kriegsgräberanlagen* (Wien 1916), prepared by the War Ministry commission attached to the Cracow Military District.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from the 1st Military District to the Military Department of the Government of the People's Council of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs (14 November 1918).

<sup>10</sup> Decision concept in file No. 4353 Pr/1916.

<sup>11</sup> See footnote 10 reference.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from the Mirogoj Military Cemetery to the Zagreb Military Command of the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs (23 November 1918).

<sup>13</sup> Letter from the 1st Military District to vicar Ferdo Rožić (26 September 1919).

<sup>14</sup> Letter concept in file No. 12761, Commissariat for Internal Affairs to the Presidency of the State Government for Croatia and Slavonia (20 March 1920).

<sup>15</sup> It is also possible that the Inspectorate never ceased to exist during the late 1918 upheavals, as some of the military units and offices directly switched from the Habsburg authority to that of the People's Council of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Military Department for Croatia and Slavonia to the Intendancy of the 1st Military District, in liquidation (7 April 1919).

<sup>17</sup> See footnote 10 reference.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Presidency of the State Government to the Commissariat for Internal Affairs (8 September 1919).

<sup>19</sup> See footnote 17 reference.

<sup>20</sup> See footnote 14 reference.

<sup>21</sup> Letter concept in file No. 26228/1919, subject title "Maintenance of the Warriors' Graves in Croatia and Slavonia".

<sup>22</sup> Letter from the Commissariat for Internal Affairs to the 4th Army District Command (16 September 1919).

<sup>23</sup> Letter from the Commission for War Graves to the 4th Army District Command (30 September 1919).

<sup>24</sup> Five letter concepts in file No. 50261/1919, subject title "Maintenance of the Warriors' Graves in Croatia and Slavonia".

<sup>25</sup> Letter from the Building Department of the 1st Military District, in liquidation, to the Commissariat for Internal Affairs (1 October 1919).

<sup>26</sup> Official transcript of the Commissariat for Education and Religions statement (28 February 1920).

<sup>27</sup> See footnote 24 reference.

<sup>28</sup> Letter concepts in files No. 44821 (16 September 1919) and No. 7245 (22 November 1919) from the Commissariat for Internal Affairs to the Military Department, in liquidation, and from the Presidency of the State Government to the Commissariat for Internal Affairs, respectively.

<sup>29</sup> See footnote 15 reference.

<sup>30</sup> A significant part of this chapter is grounded in the copies or excerpts of documents stored in the Archives of Yugoslavia (Belgrade), provided to me by Ljiljana Dobrovšak, Nenad Lajbenšperger, and Hrvoje Baričević, to whom goes my deepest gratitude.

<sup>31</sup> Letter concept in file No. 1287, from the Commissariat for Education and Religions to the Bishop's Ordinariate in Đakovo (1 January 1921).

<sup>32</sup> Letter No. 60 from the priest-custodian attached to the embassy of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in Prague to the Minister of Religions in Belgrade (20 March 1928).

<sup>33</sup> Official translation of letter No. 778 from the military envoy of Czechoslovakia in Belgrade to the General Military Department of the Ministry of Army and Navy of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (27 October 1921).

<sup>34</sup> The Italian and French soldiers, as well as Jewish soldiers of Austria-Hungary, were previously buried separately.

<sup>35</sup> Active Habsburg officer and Kronenorden bearer, until the early 1920s Blašković also served in the King's Guard of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. His 1939 memoirs were denigrated by reviewers close to the Serbian Cultural Club, and praised by Yugoslav intellectuals such as Milan Ćurčin and Ilija Despot.

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## Vojna groblja Prvoga svjetskog rata u Hrvatskoj od 1914. do 1941.

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U radu se nastoji dati početni pregled različitih zakonskih okvira i povezanih svakodnevnih praksi u svezi s vojnim grobljima s posmrtnim ostacima hrvatskih vojnika – većinom pripadnika austro-ugarskih oružanih snaga – te ih smjestiti unutar promjenjivoga političkoga i kulturnoga konteksta, uključujući memorijalne manifestacije, kao što su javni spomenici, individualna ratna sjećanja i frontovske vojničke novine. Vremenski raspon od 1914. do 1941. analitički je podijeljen na habsburško razdoblje od 1914. do 1918., na kratki intermezzo od 1918. do 1921. te na razdoblje Karađorđevića od 1921. do 1941., iako ni jedno nije bilo posve ujedinjeno. Osim literature i objavljenih izvora, istraživanje se temeljilo na arhivskim dokumentima (Hrvatski državni arhiv u Zagrebu, Arhiv Jugoslavije u Beogradu).

Ključne riječi: Prvi svjetski rat, vojna groblja, sjećanje, Austro-Ugarska, Hrvatska



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