

The Myth of a Good King: Franjo Tuđman and King Aleksandar in Veterans' Eyes

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Croatian veterans of the 1990s War

The 1990s War – referred to as “the Homeland War” – serves as Croatia’s founding myth.¹ This myth offers a story of a small nation that has finally achieved its national freedom after 900 years of foreign rule. According to the dominant narrative, in the “Homeland War”, Croats defended their Homeland from aggression by Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) and their proxies in the country, local Serbs. Croatian role in the Bosnian War is limited to liberating parts of neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina and even preventing potential new genocides over Bosniaks. In the dominant narrative, the War is seen as a defensive, liberating and legitimate War in which Croatia defended its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Like every myth, the Homeland War one offers a simplified story about complex historical events. Thus, the dominant narrative brushes off all unpleasant episodes, such as war crimes committed against Serb civilians in Croatia and Croatia’s role in the Bosnian War, by helping Croat secessionists that committed crimes against Serb and Bosniak civilians. Despite its fallacies, the Croatian Parliament transformed this dominant narrative into an official one when it passed the Declaration of the Homeland War in 2000. Although the Declaration does not status a law, it is still somewhat used for policing the discourse about the War.²

Croatia’s culture of victory built around the Homeland War myth is nurtured in society by politicians, media, academics, but, most fiercely, by war veterans. As active participants of the conflict, veterans who invested their mental and physical health in the “defence of the Homeland” are naturally the most interested party in keeping the Homeland War narrative alive. After years of Homeland War’s myth presence in the public arena, veterans and the general population express “sheer universality” in their view of the War according to the dominant narrative. War veterans strictly keep to the script of the

¹ About the Homeland War myth, see: Dejan Jović, *Rat i mit: Politika identiteta u suvremenoj Hrvatskoj* [War and Myth: Identity Politics in Contemporary Croatia] (Zagreb: Fraktura, 2017).

² About the role of the Declaration of the Homeland War, the political context in which it was passed and its afterlife, see: Snježana Koren, “‘Korisna prošlost’? Ratovi devedesetih u deklaracijama Hrvatskog sabora,” [“Useful Past’? Nineties Wars in Declarations of the Croatian Parliament,”] in *Kultura sjećanja: 1991. Povijesni lomovi i svladavanje prošlosti* [The Culture of Memory: 1991. The Historical Breaks and Coming to Terms with the Past], ed. Tihomir Cipek (Zagreb: Disput, 2011).

dominant narrative according to which “Serbian aggression could not be questioned”, “Yugoslavia was criminal” and “Croatian involvement in Bosnia was positive”.³

Veterans view the Homeland War as the highlight of their lives. In the typology of political myths, veterans – and many in Croatian society – look at the Homeland War as a “golden age”. A myth of a “golden age” represents an idealised account of the past, when a particular group – may it be veterans or nation, people – were “great and glorious”, “the national genius flourished, and men were heroes”.⁴ Veterans tend to recreate, what they perceive, as a glorious period as it symbolises their most significant achievement and sacrifice in building a new state. To stress their importance and moral superiority in “defending the Homeland”, veterans are almost exclusively – as well as officially – referred to as defenders.⁵

In the interpretation of the veterans – and Croatian right-wing – “golden age” has its “Holy Trinity”: Tuđman, wartime Defence Minister Gojko Šušak and defenders.⁶ All of this ties into the political myth of unity, or the “united we stand myth”, referring to a time in the nation’s past when people came together to overcome a problem.⁷ In commemorating its biggest victories, Homeland War serves as a historical moment in which Croats united in defeating their enemy.⁸ In this mythical structure, Tuđman plays the role of the “Unifier”, allegedly unifying Croats of different political and ideological background in defeating the common enemy. Tuđman is a “Messiah” of “a Saviour”. Veterans see Tuđman as “a wise old man” who proved himself in a war and as “a good King”.⁹

These mythological structures nurtured a personal cult around Tuđman, with many veterans’ associations as its most devoted followers.¹⁰ Associations called him to their anniversaries, events and annual conventions, while many of them made him an honorary president or member.¹¹ Some military or police units felt personally very close to Tuđman. The first police unit loyal to the newly established Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) government from 1990 named themselves “Tuđman’s guys”. As they called Tuđman to participate in the fifth anniversary of their formation, they expressed their hopes that “the unit will always stay in one corner of his heart”.¹²

³ Ivor Sokolić, *International Courts and Mass Atrocity: Narratives of War and Justice in Croatia* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 77-78; For more on how veterans and general population view the Bosnian conflict and Croatia’s role in it, see: Ivor Sokolić, “Denying the unknown. Everyday narratives about Croatian involvement in the 1992-1995 Bosnian conflict,” *Südosteuropa [South-Eastern Europe]* 65, no. 4, (2017): 632-653.

⁴ Anthony D. Smith, “Ethnic myths and ethnic revivals,” *European Journal of Sociology* 25, no. 2 (1984): 292-3, Raul Žirarde, *Politički mitovi i mitologije [Political Myths and Mythologies]* (Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2000), 111-121.

⁵ Some researchers characterise terms like “Homeland War” and “defenders” as loaded term. See: Vjeran Pavlaković, “Fulfilling the Thousand-year-old Dream: Strategies of Symbolic Nation-building in Croatia,” in *Strategies of Symbolic Nation-building in South Eastern Europe*, ed. Pål Kolstø (New York: Routledge, 2016), 39.

⁶ Tomislav Karamarko, former President of the leading Croatian right-wing party, Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) vouched to introduce a sort of verbal delict for those who do not respect “values upon which the Croatian state is founded on ... Homeland War, defenders, our killed ones, political doctrine of Dr Franjo Tuđman and great deed by Gojko Šušak”. See: Jović, *Rat i mit*, 213.

⁷ Žirarde, *Politički mitovi*, 161-187.

⁸ Tamara Banjeglav, “Political Rhetoric and Discursive Framing of National Identity in Croatia’s Commemorative Culture,” *Journal of Language and Politics* 16, no. 6 (2018), 858-81.

⁹ Jović, *Rat i mit*, 361.

¹⁰ Wartime Defence Minister Gojko Šušak (1991-98) enjoyed a similar status among veterans, especially among members of the Croatian Military Disabled Veterans of the Homeland War (HVIDR).

¹¹ Correspondence from Đuro Dečak (in the name of UHVDR) to the President of the Republic of Croatia, May 2, 1996, UHVDR archives; Correspondence from Marion Novoselac (in the name of HVIDR Lipik) to the Office of the President of the Republic, February 26, 1998, 98-520/1, Office of the President of the Republic.

¹² Correspondence from Nenad Zovak (in the name of the association First Croatian Policeman) to the Office of the Croatian President, August 1, 1995, 95-1535/1, Office of the President of the Republic.

Besides symbolical power, Tuđman owed much of his autocratic tendencies to Croatia's semi-presidential system of government. As President, Tuđman was naming governments while having the prerogative to dissolve them as well. As his HDZ dominated the Parliament in the 1990s, government and Parliament were *de facto* Tuđman's organs, implementing his politics.¹³ His rule in the 1990-99 period can be described as semi-authoritarian or authoritarian, operating in a system of "defective" or "simulated" democracy.¹⁴ As a version of competitive or electoral authoritarianism, elections were regular and free but characterised by electoral fraud. Tuđman's regime would call elections after different successful military operations to maximise their monopoly on Croatian ethnic nationalism. The timing of elections meant that the opposition had little time to prepare for elections. Gerrymandering of electoral units was blatant, made in a way to maximise HDZ votes.¹⁵

In general, Tuđman showed little tolerance for political opposition. The most apparent such case was in 1995 when he refused to accept a mayor of Zagreb from opposition ranks.¹⁶ Tuđman's move caused a severe political crisis in the Croatian capital. During the 1997 presidential elections' campaign, his primary opponent, Vlado Gotovac, was physically assaulted while holding a speech in the coastal town of Pula. The attacker was a war veteran and active soldier from an elite military unit close to Tuđman. While state (or state-controlled) media tried to ignore the news, reporting with a considerable time lag, Tuđman did not condemn the act, unlike both the government and opposition.¹⁷

Aside from such direct and indirect pressures against his political opponents, the opposition was limited in accessing media during Tuđman's presidency. The government and HDZ kept most of the media under firm control, transforming them into a mouthpiece of Tuđman's regime. Freedom of expression was curtailed as authorities exerted massive pressure over independent media through formal and informal practices. The justice system's independence was minimal, as the executive branch and HDZ strongly influenced the judicial branch. The privatisation and transformation process of state and public-owned companies was not transparent, as many HDZ members got hold of

¹³ Davor Boban, "The Croatian Parliament and the Transformation of the Political System," in *Democratization in the Western Balkans: Promoting Multi-Ethnic Open Societies to Counter Radicalization and Polarization*, ed. Valeska Esch (Berlin: The Aspen Institute, 2016), 34; At the meeting of HDZ's National Council in 1998, Prime Minister Zlatko Mateša stated how the role of the government is to implement state policies articulated by Tuđman. This showed the level of government's subordination to Tuđman's wishes. See: Jakov Žižić, "Analiza izvora moći političkoga vodstva Franje Tuđmana" ["Political leadership of Franjo Tuđman: analysis of sources of power."] PhD diss., University of Zagreb, 2019, p. 146.

¹⁴ Mieczysław P. Boduszyński, *Regime Change in the Yugoslav Successor States: Divergent Paths toward a New Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 74-114; Marina Ottoway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2003), 109-130; Victor Peskin and Mieczysław P. Boduszyński, "International Justice and Domestic Politics: Post-Tudjman Croatia and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 55, no. 7 (2003): 1119; Nenad Zakošek, "Democratization, State-building and War: The Case of Serbia and Croatia," *Democratization* 15, no. 3 (2008): 600.

¹⁵ Boduszyński, *Regime Change*, 77-78.

¹⁶ Dejan Jović and Christopher K. Lamont, "Croatia after Tuđman: Encounters with the Consequences of Conflict and Authoritarianism," *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 1 (2010): 1614.

¹⁷ M. Šarić, "Brutalan napad na Gotovca," ["Brutal Assault on Gotovac,"] *Večernji list*, June 7, 1997, morning edition, domestic politics; "Vojni udar na Gotovca," ["Military Coup Against Gotovac,"] *Feral Tribune*, June 9, 1997, Informbiro; Tonko Vulić, "Državni su mediji na 24 sata zaustavili vijest o napadu na Vladu Gotovca: Izvještaj iz Pule bio je poslan u Zagreb, ali ga urednici nisu smjeli obznanimi!" ["State Media Blocked the News of Assault on Vlado Gotovac for 24 Hours: Report Was Sent from Pula to Zagreb, But Editors Weren't Allowed To Publish It!"] *Nacional*, June 11, 1997; Vlado Gotovac, "Hrvatska državotvorna laž," ["Croatian State-Building Lie,"] interview by Heni Erceg. *Feral Tribune*, June 16, 1997; Boris Rašeta, "Vrhovnikovi anđeli grobari," ["Supreme Chief's Angel Undertakers,"] *Feral Tribune*, June 16, 1997, Feralov dossier.

numerous factories.¹⁸ Besides the Parliament and government, Tuđman's autocratic style of government was visible not only from his influence on state institutions and organisations but also entering different spheres of life and society, like sports.¹⁹

From the 1990 parliamentary elections, Tuđman had built a strong personality cult around himself, leaning on the cult created by his predecessor, life-long Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito.²⁰ A central place in his cult was Tuđman's role mentioned above in "creating an independent state", a goal he pursued from the start. THE last US ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmermann, described him as a person "obsessed by nationalism", focused so much on creating an independent Croatia that he showed no "understanding of or interest in democratic values". He defined Croatian nationalism through Tuđman as being intolerant, anti-Serb and authoritarian.²¹

As country's independence lies in the heart of the veteran's identity – and not necessarily democratic character of the state – a view of Tuđman as the "Messiah" who "created" an independent Croatia dominated veteran circles. Tuđman was undisputed simply because Croatia won its independence under his leadership. As a supreme military commander in a liberation war, his role outshined all potential downfalls of this politics and regime he built. Therefore, though veterans often mention democracy as one of their core values, the country's independence has top priority.

Thus, ahead of the 1992 presidential elections, the association Croatian War Veterans calls the public to vote for Tuđman due to his role in creating an independent Croatia. The association stressed that he helped build the Croatian army and police "out of nothing", heading them to a victory over the "Yugo-Serbian army", which was a "phenomenal deed", "unprecedented in the history of warfare".²² In terms of giving their moral support, veterans acted as Tuđman's Praetorian Guards, rhetorically defending him from internal enemies. Therefore, in cases of internal struggles within HDZ, veterans would again support Tuđman, condemning those who were creating divisions when the unity was needed "in the moment of struggle for fulfilling the full territorial integrity and strengthening only recently established Croatian state".²³

Tuđman could also count on veterans' associations' support in his endeavours in Croatia's foreign policy. Throughout the 1990s, Tuđman and state media claimed how the international community

¹⁸ Jessica Kuntz, "(Re)Entering Europe: The Post-communist Transition of Croatian Political Culture," *Politička misao* 48, no. 5 (2011): 236; David Plotz, "Croatian President Franjo Tuđman," *Slate*, December 10, 1999, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/1999/12/croatian-president-franjo-tudjman.html> (Accessed Apr. 14, 2021); "The Tuđman Tirade," *New York Times*, November 27, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/27/opinion/the-tudjman-tirade.html> (Accessed Apr. 14, 2021); Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War* (Washington, D. C: The Brookings Institution, 1995), 231-232; Sven Milekic, "The Turbulent Times of Croatia's 'Feral Tribune'," *Balkan Insight*, July 2, 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/07/02/the-turbulent-times-of-croatia-s-feral-tribune-06-29-2018/> (Accessed Apr. 20, 2021); Sven Milekic, "Croatia's 'Feral Tribune': The State Strikes Back," *Balkan Insight*, July 3, 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/07/03/croatia-s-feral-tribune-the-state-strikes-back-07-02-2018/> (Accessed Apr. 20, 2021).

¹⁹ Dario Brentin, "'A lofty battle for the nation': the social roles of sport in Tuđman's Croatia," *Sport in Society* 16, no. 8 (2013), 994; Jović, *Rat i mit*, 208.

²⁰ Jović, *Rat i mit*, 288-289.

²¹ Warren Zimmerman, "The last ambassador: a memoir of the collapse of Yugoslavia," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 2 (1995). Gale General OneFile, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A16716108/ITOF?u=nuim&sid=ITOF&xid=f9c66e47 (Accessed 18 Apr. 2021).

²² "Poziv Hrvatskih ratnih veterana: Izborni proglaš klub HDZ-a," ["Croatian War Veterans Statement: HDZ Club Elections' Statement,"] *Večernji list*, July 29, 1992, morning edition, domestic politics; Tuđman also received veterans' support for 1997 presidential elections. See: M. Pr., "Podrška kandidaturi dr. Tuđmana," ["Support for Dr Tuđman's Candidacy,"] *Večernji list*, February 25, 1997, morning edition, domestic politics.

²³ "Potpora dr. Tuđmanu," ["Support for Dr Tuđman,"] *Večernji list*, May 3, 1994, morning edition, domestic politics.

unfairly treated Croatia. According to this narrative, a big part of the international community opposed Croatia's independence and sovereignty, as they could not settle with the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Therefore, as watchdogs of Croatia's independence, veterans backed Tuđman when they felt that certain "international factors" exerted pressure on Croatia.²⁴ Earlier, associations also supported Tuđman in his initiatives to end United Nations Protective Force (UNPROFOR) mandate in Croatia.²⁵ In his last years, veterans, also personally interested in impunity on war crimes committed by Croatian forces, supported Tuđman in his defiance in cooperating with the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY).²⁶

When veterans write to Tuđman to complain about the Parliament and government, none of the complaints is directed to him, despite his known control of both the executive and legislative branches of government. Tuđman is someone veterans see as a father figure, asking for his help with politicians who needed "to come down from their high castle" and "start working". Politicians are the ones who do not care about Croatian interests but only "bicker [between themselves] in struggling for power". They are the ones to be blamed for shady privatisation and transformation of state and public companies.²⁷ Although Tuđman exercised overall control over the executive branch, veterans never accused him of anything. He was either uninformed, misinformed or manipulated by his subordinates in the executive branch.²⁸ Even when veterans are specifically naming all those responsible for their misfortunes – from Prime Minister to close Tuđman's associates – Tuđman is again omitted.²⁹ According to this interpretation, Tuđman is not a politician or official but a leader and supreme commander concerned with more significant issues and cannot oversee his superiors.

Tuđman appreciated the support of veterans and knew how to win their love. On many occasions, he publicly stated that veterans are under his protection.³⁰ In a somewhat populist manner, Tuđman supported veterans' cause and instructed government officials to take special care of them.³¹ This care included a developed welfare system, or by generously financially supporting leading associations, Tuđman's regime cared for veterans, despite many cases of unsatisfied groups.³² Many veteran

²⁴ Correspondence from Đuro Dečak (in the name of the Association of Croatian Veterans of the Homeland War, UHVDR) to the Cabinet of the President of the Republic of Croatia, June 13, 1997, 97-1965/1, Office of the President of the Republic.

²⁵ Hina, "Zadovoljni i veterani," ["Veterans Pleased as Well,"] *Večernji list*, January 14, 1995, morning edition, domestic politics; Hina, "Potpora i HVIDRE," ["Hvidra's Support as Well,"] *Večernji list*, January 14, 1995, morning edition, domestic politics.

²⁶ Hina, "Pismo potpore predsjedniku Tuđmanu," ["Letter of Support for President Tuđman,"] *Vjesnik*, March 25, 1999, morning edition.

²⁷ Ratko Bubanj, "Drugi put: kada će se konačno riješiti status dragovoljaca Domovinskog rata iz 1991. godine?," ["Second Time: When Will Finally the Status of Volunteers of the Homeland War from 1991 Be Resolved?,"] *Novi list*, March 13, 1995, morning edition.

²⁸ N. J., "Šale: Birokrati daju predsjedniku krive informacije," ["Šale: Bureaucrats Are Giving President Wrong Informations,"] *Novi list*, April 26, 1996, morning edition, Domestic politics.

²⁹ Correspondence from Božo Budimir (in the name of the association Defenders of Croatia) to the Office of the President of the Republic, July 20, 1999, 99-1416/3, Office of the President of the Republic;

Correspondence from Šimun Horvat and Marijan Biščan (in the name of 130 Croatian veterans) to the President of the Republic of Croatia, Dr Franjo Tuđman, May 27, 1999, 99-1438/1, Office of the President of the Republic.

³⁰ "Imat ćete moju zaštitu," ["You'll Have My Protection,"] *Večernji list*, February 19, 1995, morning edition, domestic politics.

³¹ G. Galić, "Pomoć dojučerašnjim bojovnicima," ["Help for Recent Soldiers,"] *Novi list*, February 8, 1996, morning edition, domestic politics.

³² In 1999, Croatia spent approximately one percent of its state budget on 15 main veterans' and war victims' associations. For state support of veterans' associations between 1995 and 1999, see: Sharon Fisher, "Contentious Politics in Croatia: The War Veterans' Movement," in *Uncivil Society? Contentious Politics in Postcommunist Europe*, ed. Petr Kopecký and Cas Mudde (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 78-82.

leaders were active high-ranking members of HDZ, MPs or part of Croatia's executive branch.³³ Even some dissident voices among veteran leaders - eventually gave in and embraced Tuđman and his political doctrine.³⁴

Veterans largely remained silent to all undemocratic rule practices during Tuđman's reign. Veterans' associations avoided directing this criticism against Tuđman personally.³⁵ Seldomly associations would criticise the government for their mishaps, but they would predominantly centre the criticism on the state's treatment of veterans. Although associations sometimes criticised the dubious privatisation of Croatia's state and public economy, veterans would look at these regimes' transgressions from a self-centred perspective. Associations would often frame their criticism of privations as "when we fought, others were stealing/making money" or "veterans should have got stocks from best companies".

While they bestowed their allegiance to Tuđman, politicians – except Šušak and occasionally a few individuals – were a reincarnation of everything wrong with the country. Associations and their leaders swore to stir away from politics, although many of their members were politicians and ties to HDZ were almost impossible to avoid. Veteran leaders rhetorically described the associations as "apolitical", "non-party", or even "supra-party". They would often warn about the risk of being "instrumentalised" by politicians, parties that are trying to subdue associations to their will.³⁶ Many veterans complained about these close ties between associations' leaderships and political parties – almost exclusively HDZ. According to them, the veteran identity should be an umbrella one, under which people should incorporate their ethnic, religious, or political belonging.³⁷ As Zvonimir Trusić, a veteran leader, put it: "We don't allow to be [politically] adopted by anyone ... because we all fought and will fight [against the enemy] not asking who is from which party".³⁸

Veteran associations created almost a "black and white" narrative regarding the wartime merits in a newborn state. While they were the heroes and victims, politicians, or people high in state administrations (bureaucrats), were their antipodes. Thus, Independent Croatian Volunteers (NDH) claimed that "all high-ranking political positions are occupied by war profiteers", with "deserters"

³³ Slavica Bakić-Gazdek, "Đuro Dečak: Pripadam struji centra dr. Tuđmana, ali ona danas u HDZ-u nije na cijeni," ["Đuro Dečak: I Belong to Dr Tuđman's Centrist Fraction, Which Isn't Valued in the HDZ Nowadays,"] *Jutarnji list*, February 16, 1999, morning edition, politics.

³⁴ Correspondence from Branko Borković (in the name of the Association of Croatian Defenders Volunteers of the Homeland War) to the President of the Republic of Croatia Franjo Tuđman, November 23, 1996, Office of the President of the Republic; "Informiro," ["Info-Bureau,"] *Feral Tribune*, September 30, 1996, Glede & unatoč.

³⁵ One of rare exemptions was an issue of the magazine *HVIDRA* (published by HVIDR-a), where a cartoon ridiculed Tuđman and his popular catch phrase "we have Croatia", as if he is not giving anything to the people. This issue of the magazine was published at the height of HVIDR's frustration over state's treatment in the summer of 1996. See: *HVIDRA: Glasilo Saveza Hrvatskih ratnih vojnih invalida Domovinskog rata*, Jul/Aug., 1996; Another example was the association Defenders of Croatia who condemned Tuđman for allegedly belittling former JNA officers who transferred to the Croatian Army (HV) in 1991-92. See: "Tuđman dijeli branitelje, časnike HV, na 'naše' i one 'druge'," ["Tuđman Divides Defenders, HV Officers, On 'Ours' and 'Others',"] *Novi list*, May 8, 1996, morning edition, domestic politics.

³⁶ B. Stipić, "Dragovoljci – ispit za državu," ["Volunteers – Test for the State,"] *Večernji list*, February 27, 1994, morning edition; I. Bralić, "Puna pomoć žrtvama rata," ["Full Support for Victims of War,"] *Večernji list*, March 13, 1994, morning edition; A. Malenica, "'Merčep nije predsjednik!'," ["'Merčep Is Not the President!',"] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, March 24, 1994, morning edition, domestic politics; "Merčepovi ljudi u Zagrebu"; Heni Erceg, "Zašto Tuđman štiti Šuška," ["Why Does Tuđman Protect Šušak,"] *Feral Tribune*, April 11, 1994, Glede & unatoč.

³⁷ Zvonko Pandurić-Stric, "Za udругu u kojoj neće biti zagonetki," ["For an Association in Which There Won't Be Any Mysteries,"] *Novi list*, March 17, 1994, morning edition, domestic politics.

³⁸ D. Dukić, "Jedino se silom vraća okupirano," ["Only Force Brings Back What Is Occupied,"] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, May 15, 1994, morning edition, domestic politics.

taking all the available jobs, while volunteers remain jobless.³⁹ In their eyes, politicians were corrupt, money-grabbing individuals that use their public positions for personal gains and enrichment.⁴⁰ Even right-wing politicians, former Yugoslav dissidents who took an active part in the HDZ government, were at risk of receiving heavy criticism from veterans.⁴¹ Simply put, party politics were seen as a “dirty game”, while only the veterans had the moral legitimacy to create politics of the country they “created”.⁴²

Besides politicians, veterans demonised bureaucrats – civilians without any wartime merit who presided over their destinies. Veterans often depicted bureaucrats as unfair, unprofessional, incompetent, lazy, but above everything else, corrupt. This perspective was not created out of nothing; it materialised from a common perception of bureaucracy stemming from Yugoslav times. Also, Tuđman seldomly criticised bureaucrats, portraying them as “inherited remnants” of the old regime, who tirelessly work against Croatia since Yugoslav times.⁴³ Tuđman shows the bureaucracy as those “who never got over Yugoslavia”, going against state policies and, therefore, going against veterans’ interests.⁴⁴ Tuđman created a narrative where bureaucrats, remnants of Yugoslavia, in cooperation of part of the media and international actors, plot against Croatia and veterans, creating divisions among Croats.

This idea of Communists and remnants of the Yugoslav intelligence apparatus controlling Croatia was quite popular among veterans. Thus, veteran leader Petar Marković complained how certain quasi-Croats, “Yugoslavs, commies and petty sleazy informants “of Yugoslav secret services, took control of the state.”⁴⁵ Another volunteer, frustrated by the unresolved housing problem in Rijeka, depicts city authorities as Communists, asking himself a rhetorical question “for whom have I fought for” – variations of which become a mantra for Croatian veterans.⁴⁶ Veterans saw the bureaucrats as “the population that evaded direct involvement in war”, which tried to push veterans to the margins of society, transforming them from winners in War into “social, psychological and moral losers in peace”.⁴⁷ Discursively, upon returning from the battlefield, veterans found themselves on a “bureaucratic front”, fighting for their rights against the invisible enemy.⁴⁸ Bureaucrats ignore veterans’ pleadings for benefits and service they are entitled to, while those who did not fight enjoy

³⁹ H. Pavić, “Na položajima – ratni profiteri, na radnim mjestima – dezerteri,” [“On positions – war profiteers, with jobs – deserters,”] *Novi list*, February 3, 1996, morning edition, domestic politics.

⁴⁰ Ratko Bubanj, Dejan Raspor, and Anđelko Kojić “Kada će se konačno riješiti status dragovoljaca Domovinskog rata iz 1991. godine?,” [“When Will Finally the Status of Volunteers of Homeland War from 1991 Be Resolved?,”] *Novi list*, July 16, 1994, morning edition, domestic politics.

⁴¹ “Merčepovi ljudi u Zagrebu”.

⁴² “Kada smo kretali u rat, nije nam rečeno da čekamo...” [“When We Were Going To War, No One Told Us To Wait...”] *HVIDRA: Glasilo Saveza Hrvatskih ratnih vojnih invalida Domovinskog rata*, Jul/Aug., 1996.

⁴³ Franjo Tuđman. *Glasnik HDZ*, October 8, 1993.

⁴⁴ Mirjana Priščan, “Problemi invalida bit će riješeni,” [“Disabled veterans’ problems will be resolved,”] *Večernji list*, September 15, 1996, morning edition.

⁴⁵ Petar Marković, “‘Anegdote’ iz Ogulina,” [“‘Anecdotes’ from Ogulin,”] *Za dom*, October, 1994.

⁴⁶ Stjepan Belošević, “Za koga sam se borio?,” [“For Whom Have I Fought For?,”] *Novi list*, March 8, 1994, morning edition, domestic politics.

⁴⁷ V. Barišić, “Zakon bez pravde i – branitelja’,” [“Law Without Justice and Defenders’,”] *Večernji list*, October 27, 1996, morning edition.

⁴⁸ Mladen Pavković, “Poraz na činovničkoj fronti,” [“A Defeat on the Bureaucratic Front,”] *Vjesnik*, June 27, 1994, morning edition, domestic politics; Some soldiers returning from the front did encounter ruthless treatment by their employers and were often laid off, left without any financial resources. See: Stanko Bašić, “Otkaz ratniku,” [“Notice for Warrior,”] *Slobodna Dalmacija*, July 4, 1994, morning edition, news.

their privileges.⁴⁹ For this reason, major veterans associations had the ambition of promoting their members or other veterans into state administration, police and secret services.⁵⁰

Serbian World War I veterans

Like Croatian 1990s veterans, their Serbian counterparts also came out of World War I (WWI) victorious. With massive casualties, the Serbian army overcame the losses from 1915-16 and defeated the armies of the Central forces. Besides defeating Serbia's enemies, their soldiers had the satisfaction of building the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes – a decades-long aspiration.

During the interwar period, Serbian veterans presented these victims as the wartime sacrifice for liberty and unity of Southern Slavs. It would play a central role in their “self-victimising narrative”.⁵¹ This narrative of sacrifice was an integral part of a strong culture of victory present in Yugoslav society and, especially, among Serbian and Montenegrin veterans. In other words, military victors won by Serbian and Montenegrin soldiers brought freedom to Southern Slavs, for the first time unified in one country, under one king – Serbian King Aleksandar I Karađorđević.

The King, state and numerous veteran and patriotic associations will vigorously promote this culture of victory in interwar Yugoslavia. It included King Aleksandar's policy of promoting a sort of integral Yugoslavism built on Serbian wartime victory. Though a Serb himself, even before Yugoslavia's inception, in 1916, King Aleksandar was following the Yugoslav line – unlike some other Serbian political leaders. King Aleksandar, known as the Unifier, advocated a position that Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were one people with shared language and culture, divided by “evil fate”.⁵² In this sense, King Aleksandar actively worked on moulding a new Yugoslav nation, especially during his dictatorial phase (1929-34).

Despite the dominant culture of victory and the significance of “liberty and unity” built on the sacrifice in building a united state of Southern Slavs, the idea of integral Yugoslav emanated Serbian nationalism. Serbian nationalism became especially visible during King Aleksandar's dictatorial years when Serbian nationalist elites finally recognised the importance of Yugoslav unitarianism as “an instrument of spreading and preserving the Greater-Serbian hegemony”.⁵³ Despite vowing to create a state of Southern Slavs, King Aleksandar did not forget his national background. Even during WWI, when talking to his soldiers, he “emphasised Serb primacy” in forming a new state.⁵⁴ After all, as a military commander in a country that waged three wars between 1912 and 1918, King Aleksandar was “first and foremost a Serb soldier”.⁵⁵ Thus, as “a Serb soldier”, King Aleksandar felt closest to

⁴⁹ “Izmijeniti zakon o hrvatskim braniteljima Domovinskog rata,” [“Change the Law on Croatian Defenders from the Homeland War,”] *Novi list*, April 24, 1994, morning edition, domestic politics.

⁵⁰ B. Stipić, “Za demokratsku i sretnu Hrvatsku!” [“For Democratic and Happy Croatia!”] *Večernji list*, May 15, 1994, morning edition, domestic politics; Tomislav Merčep, “Država će biti časna koliko se dostojno bude odnosila prema ljudima koji su je stvorili,” [“The State Will Be as Honourable as Much It Will Decently Treat People Who Created It,”] interview by Tadija Babić. *Zora: hrvatski tjednik*, January 18, 1996.

⁵¹ John Paul Newman, “Forging a United Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes: The Legacy of the First World War and the ‘Invalid Question’,” in *New Perspectives on Yugoslavia: Key Issues and Controversies*, ed. Dejan Djokić and James Ker-Lindsay (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), 47.

⁵² Dejan Djokić, “Nationalism, Myth and Reinterpretation of History: The Neglected Case of Interwar Yugoslavia,” *European History Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2012): 75-76.

⁵³ Stevo Đurašković, “Ideologija Organizacije jugoslovenskih nacionalista (Orjuna),” [“The Ideology of the Organization of Yugoslav Nationalists (Orjuna),”] *Časopis za suvremenu povijest [Journal of Contemporary History]* 43, no. 1 (2011): 244-246.

⁵⁴ Christian Axboe Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs: Identity in King Aleksandar's Yugoslavia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 27.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

Serbian veterans, to whom he “harboured love and obligation”.⁵⁶ Serbian veterans reciprocated, as they saw the army and monarchy as the two central institutions of the new state. After all, he was their chief of staff from 1916 onwards.⁵⁷

From its conception, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia had a very undeveloped democratic system under King’s authoritarian rule that relied on the repressive apparatus.⁵⁸ The 1920s in Yugoslavia were years of constant political instability, marred by constant government changes and fragile political alliances across the national and ideological spectrum. Yugoslav parliamentarian was not able to overcome an extremely complex political reality. Serbian and Croatian political elites could not find a solution that would appeal to both sides, which were focused on resolving the national question. Parliamentary parties, solely national, focused exclusively on staying in power and paying attention to their national constituencies’ needs, disregarding the state’s interests.⁵⁹ The situation finally spiralled out of control in June 1928, when Puniša Račić, deputy of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), shot Stjepan Radić – President of the leading Croatian party, Croatian Peasants Party (HSS) – in the Parliament in Belgrade. The assassination caused a complete breakdown in political relations within the country and threatened to break the state into two.⁶⁰

King Aleksandar decided to untie the Gordian knot and keep the unity of Yugoslavia at all cost. To do that, he decided to remove the intermediary between him and his subjects – the parliamentary system. Thus, on 6 January 1929, King Aleksandar issued a manifesto in which he emphasised his “sacred duty ... to preserve State and National Unity”. He blamed the Yugoslav parliamentary system for leading to “spiritual disintegration and to national division”. Under this pretext, he decided to invalidate the constitution, suspend the parliamentary system, and introduce a whole set of royal decrees and laws that would help him establish a personal dictatorship – 6 January Dictatorship.⁶¹ King Aleksandar acted as if he did this unwillingly, pressured by his patriotic feelings of keeping the country together.⁶²

The idea of removing an intermediary between a ruler – often a monarch – and his or her subjects was not King Aleksandar’s invention. The scholarship on autocratic leaders throughout history shows how everyday people – usually peasants – tend to think that the ruler, king, is not aware of the problems people experience at the local officials’ hands. Shielded by propaganda and charisma, an autocratic leader’s reputation could survive severe political, social, and economic downfalls.⁶³ Such a view of rulers could be called a myth of “a good, fair and [often] old King”. A ruler to which no ills could be attributed to; a king who lives for his people but is unfortunately surrounded by devious, corrupt and incapable associates: commanders, politicians, state officials, bureaucrats. According to this narrative, the King, either due to his old age or generally kind heart, is not aware of all the misdeeds of his/her associates. Usually, autocrats tend to nurture this narrative in public, claiming to be uninformed or

⁵⁶ Ibid., 238.

⁵⁷ John Paul Newman, "Serbian and Habsburg Military Institutional Legacies in Yugoslavia after 1918," *First World War Studies* 5, no. 3 (2014): 328.

⁵⁸ For the character of Kingdom Yugoslavia polity, read: Hrvoje Čapo, "In company with Offenders from the Neighborhood: Polity of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes 1918-1941," *Review of Croatian History* 9, no. 1 (2013): 115-140.

⁵⁹ Ivana Dobrivojević, "Living Under Dictatorship. Oppressive Practices in Yugoslavia," *Istraživanja – Journal of Historical Researches [Research – Journal of Historical Research]* 27, (2016): 227.

⁶⁰ Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs*, 41-73.

⁶¹ Ibid., 77-79.

⁶² Ivana Dobrivojević, "'Između kralja i naroda nema posrednika'. Dinastička propaganda u vreme šestojanuarskog režima," ["'No Intermediaries Between the King and the People'. Dynastic Propaganda in the Time of the January Sixth Regime,"] *Tokovi istorije [Currents of History]*, no. 4 (2006): 159-160.

⁶³ Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs*, 97.

wrongly informed about issues of the everyday people. This is why sometimes ordinary people call for no intermediaries between the ruler and themselves.

Similarly, some of Aleksandar's subjects praised his move to "save" the country.⁶⁴ A big part of the public felt relieved that the King stepped in and took power. This public feeling has little to do with the alleged King's popularity as much as it has to do with highly inefficient Yugoslav party politics in the 1920s.⁶⁵

King's dictatorship was grounded in the ideology of integral Yugoslavism, assimilating all three nations – Serbs, Croats and Slovenes – into one nation.⁶⁶ Enforced by intense state propaganda, the regime started to build a cult of personality around King Aleksandar while promoting an allegedly supranational Yugoslav identity.⁶⁷ Besides propaganda, other essential features of King's dictatorship were intimidation, coercion, and persecution. Different "tribal" and religious associations were banned, while all parties were supposed to dissolve themselves. Many former party leaders – especially Croat and Muslim ones – were put under surveillance and forbidden to leave the country, while others were banished and interned in isolated towns or villages.⁶⁸ Only regime-founded Yugoslav unitary parties were allowed.⁶⁹ Censorship of the media was extremely harsh, not limited to *post festum* bans and fines of media, but also a proactive sort in which the regime proscribed the media how they should report about "national unity, royal family or the King himself".⁷⁰

The repression apparatus became a strong pillar of the state, necessary for policing and suppressing all potential attempts to challenge Yugoslav unity and King Aleksandar's regime.⁷¹ Ordinary people denounced their neighbours for insults made against the King or the royal family.⁷² According to the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 98-99; Dobrivojević, "Između kralja i naroda," 161-165.

⁶⁵ John Paul Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War: Veterans and the Limits of State Building, 1903–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 213.

⁶⁶ Pieter Troch, "Yugoslavism Between the World Wars: Indecisive Nation-Building," *Nationalities Papers* 38, no. 2 (2010), 232-233.

⁶⁷ On building of King Aleksandar's cult of personality, read: Marijan Buljan, "'Kult ličnosti' kralja Aleksandra I. Karađorđevića u splitskim međuratnim (nacionalističkim) novinama," ["'Personality Cult' of King Alexander I. Karadjordjevic in the Split (Nationalist) Newspapers Between the Two World Wars,"] *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 47, no.2 (2015): 347:375.

⁶⁸ Dobrivojević, "Living Under Dictatorship," 227-228; Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs*, 91; Hrvoje Čapo, "Državni represivni aparat na području Hrvatske od 1918. do 1941. godine," [State Repressive System on the Territory of Croatia from 1918 To 1941.] PhD diss., University of Zagreb, 2012, 210-212; Ivana Dobrivojević [Ivana Dobrivojević], "Надзор и интернације политичких првака предшестојануарских странака у доба шестојануарског режима краља Александра," ["Supervision and internment of political champions of pre-January 6th parties during the king Alexander's January 6th regime,"] *Историјски записи [Historical Records]* 85, no. 3-4 (2015): 111-130.

⁶⁹ Hrvoje Čapo, "In company with Offenders from the Neighborhood: Polity of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes 1918-1941," *Review of Croatian History* 9, no. 1 (2013): 134.

⁷⁰ Buljan, "Kult ličnosti," 358-359; Ivana Dobrivojević, "Cenzura u doba šestojanuarskog režima kralja Aleksandra," *Istorija 20. veka* 23, no. 2 (2005): 51-68, Čapo, "Državni represivni aparat," 164-165.

⁷¹ Čapo, "Državni represivni aparat," 176-180; In 1934, despite certain cuts, the Ministry of Interior still had a budget that was twice bigger than the ones of Ministries of Agriculture and Construction. See: Ivana Dobrivojević, "Policija i žandarmerija u doba šestosiječanjskog režima kralja Aleksandra (1929. – 1935.)," ["Police and Gendarmes During the Personal Dictatorship of Yugoslav King Alexander, 1929-1935,"] *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 38, no.1 (2006): 99-100.

⁷² Ivana Dobrivojević, "Privatnost pod nadzorom – ograničavanje ličnih sloboda u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji (1929-1935)," ["Privacy Under Scrutiny: Limitations of Individual Freedoms in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929-1935),"] *Historijska traganja [Historical Searches]*, no. 2 (2008): 122-126; Stipica Grgić, "Neki aspekti poimanja uvrede vladara u vrijeme diktature kralja Aleksandra I. Karađorđevića," ["Certain aspects of Lèse majesté during the dictatorship of King Alexander I Karađorđević,"] *Radovi - Zavod za hrvatsku povijest [Journal of the Institute of Croatian History]* 41, (2009): 347-365; Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs*, 193-198.

criminal code, such insults were considered a verbal delict and sanctioned by a minimum of three months in prison. In some severe cases, people were sentenced to ten years in prison.⁷³ The cases were prosecuted at the newly established State Court for Protection of the State.⁷⁴ The regime relied on police, gendarmery and secret service for massive surveillance of the population, limiting many freedoms. There were many cases in which the gendarmery and police used excessive violence – often ignored by the central government – that resulted in massive resentment among the citizens, sometimes expressed in violence against police and gendarmery units.⁷⁵

Already in the 1920s, major veterans' associations were quite sceptical of parliamentary politics, not aligning themselves with any political parties. Associations publicly represented themselves as apolitical, as existing above all existing political and religious divisions, fighting for “the King, army and Homeland, for happiness and wellbeing of the people”.⁷⁶ Although veterans' associations often omitted to name their enemies, their implications were more than clear to everyone. Associations saw the parliamentary system – with its political representatives advocating different national separatist tendencies – as having a destructive effect on the national unity of South Slavs.⁷⁷ Besides working against national unity, veterans blamed politicians for how state institutions failed to provide welfare and provisions they felt entitled to.⁷⁸ As many veterans found employment as bureaucrats in the post-war period, every time different 1920s Yugoslav governments announced “a reduction of bureaucrats” – or when such gossips spread – associations would strongly react, defending their privileges and demanding to be left out from such cuts.⁷⁹ In the light of the Great Depression, the discrepancy between the amount of welfare delivered and promised to veterans became considerable.⁸⁰

Veterans were losing patience over political parties being unable to form a stable and lasting government. But besides incredibly inefficient Yugoslav parliamentary politics, Serbian veterans were quite suspicious of parliamentary politics and bargaining and negotiating to form political alliances and coalitions.⁸¹ Everyday politics relying upon bargaining and negotiation were hurtful for the country's unity they fought for. According to one Yugoslav veteran journal, the former combatants needed unity more than ever because politicians were tearing down the state “for the sake of provincial party interests” and “their selfish interests”.⁸² Veterans saw Yugoslav parliamentary politics as profoundly flawed and working against the state existence and unity itself. Veterans' associations claimed that this seemingly paradoxical situation allowed “anti-state” politicians, like Radić, to remain in the political arena.⁸³ They saw Radić as anathema to Yugoslav unity, as his republicanism and pacifism refuted the most important state institution: monarchy and army.⁸⁴ His

⁷³ Dobrivojević, “Između kralja i naroda,” 172-176.

⁷⁴ Ivana Dobrivojević Tomić, “Sudstvo i sudije u doba šesto januarskog režima kralja Aleksandra (1929–1935),” [“The Judiciary and the Judges in the Time of the King Alexander's Dictatorship (1929–1935),”] *Tokovi istorije*, no. 3-4 (2005): 45-52.

⁷⁵ Dobrivojević, “Policija i žandarmerija,” 135-136; Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs*, 172-184.

⁷⁶ Danilo Šarenac, “Udruženje rezervnih oficira i ratnika 1919–1941,” [“Society of the Reserve Officers and Warriors 1919–1941,”] *Istorija 20. veka [20th Century History]*, no. 1 (2011): 32; Despite this, many associations leaders were members of political parties and only some used their position for significantly improving the veterans' position. See: Šarenac, “Udruženje rezervnih,” 31.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷⁸ Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow*, 61, 69-70.

⁷⁹ Šarenac, “Udruženje rezervnih,” 30.

⁸⁰ Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow*, 196.

⁸¹ Šarenac, “Udruženje rezervnih,” 30-31.

⁸² Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow*, 70.

⁸³ John Paul Newman, “War Veterans, Fascism, and Para-Fascist Departures in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 1918–1941,” *Fascism 6*, (2017): 57-59.

⁸⁴ Newman, “Serbian and Habsburg Military,” 328.

republicanism was the primary reason why veterans saw any political compromise with Radić as utterly unacceptable and contrary towards the unity they fought for.⁸⁵

Veterans despised this “post-war atmosphere”, as they called it. According to them, the Yugoslav youth did not fully respect warrior traditions, living in a society where individuals selfishly pursued personal enrichment.⁸⁶ Veterans and patriotic associations saw a widening gap between wartime and post-war generations. The wartime generation was teaching the post-war one about values they fought for. The post-war generation, growing up in a politically non-functioning state, felt frustrated, while, at the same time, their lack of enthusiasm weakened the fibre of national unity.⁸⁷ According to this narrative, veterans’ sacred ideals that lead to “liberty and unity” were cast away in favour of “war profiteers and post-war speculators”.⁸⁸ Veterans saw politicians as primary culprits in taking the state in the direction of internal conflict and institutional paralysis that would inherently destroy the very fabric of society for which they sacrificed so much.

Reservation towards Yugoslav parliamentary politics was a common denominator for King Aleksandar and veterans. To a degree, King emanated the publicly expressed view of the Yugoslav parliamentary democracy held by major veterans’ associations in the 1920s.⁸⁹ Coming from a highly statist position – focusing on Yugoslav unity – veterans feared “anti-state” elements, gravitating towards King’s galvanising charismatic authority as the symbol of the culture of victory.⁹⁰ For a whole decade, veterans were disappointed with parliamentary politics, calling upon King Aleksandar to step in, scrap the parliamentarian and take power himself, preserving the national unity that they fixated on.⁹¹ Veteran groups in National Defence – patriotic association – advocated the organisation’s active role in state politics, supporting a potential King’s autocratic rule.⁹² King Aleksandar probably used veterans’ tacit support for gaining confidence in putting his dictatorship into motion.⁹³ The hostility of veterans towards parliamentary politics paved the way for his consolidation of power in alliance with the army, militaristic organisations and veterans’ associations.⁹⁴

While they were highly dismissive of politicians and political parties, veterans had a very benevolent view of King Aleksandar, with whom they cherished a wartime bond. Veterans very much supported King Aleksandar, whom they saw as a symbol of national unity that was their wartime goal. Their affection towards the king did not pass unnoticed. He financially supported veterans’ associations while taking part in their parades and events, strengthening the mutual links.⁹⁵ Keeping in mind the tradition of military coups, King Aleksandar knew how important military and veterans’ support is. Specific figures in his circle at court encouraged King Aleksandar to seize power and use the military for resolving the national question.⁹⁶ Seeing them as the pillar of the new regime, he willingly became

⁸⁵ Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow*, 70-71.

⁸⁶ Šarenac, “Udruženje rezervnih,” 30-31.

⁸⁷ Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow*, 218-219.

⁸⁸ Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow*, 61.

⁸⁹ John Paul Newman, “Volunteer Veterans and Entangled Cultures of Victory in Interwar Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 54, no. 4 (2019): 732.

⁹⁰ Newman, “War Veterans,” 65.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 64; Newman, “Volunteer Veterans,” 732.

⁹² Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow*, 75.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁹⁵ Newman, “War Veterans,” 59-60.

⁹⁶ Ivo Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origin, History, Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984): 147.

their symbol of national freedom and unity. With such a strong bond between the two, the large support of Serbian veterans' associations for his dictatorship should not come as a big surprise.⁹⁷

Veterans' associations played an important role in King's programme of promoting integral Yugoslavism from above. Together with the military, King and veterans were symbolic pillars of Yugoslavia, the embodiment of national "liberty and unity". Some veteran leaders became a well-known companion to the King in his promotion of Yugoslav unity.⁹⁸ Leading associations were not just passive supporters, manipulated by King Aleksandar. These associations genuinely believed that they elevated the state above all previous political divisions and created Yugoslavia as a political and cultural whole.⁹⁹ Organisations like National Defence, who were calling for King's dictatorship in the 1920s, emanated Aleksandar's new course, which seemed like a "Great Serbianism cloaked in a Yugoslav mantle".¹⁰⁰ Veterans unanimously welcomed King Aleksandar's dictatorship from the beginning, comparing his suspension of party politics to Jesus's ejecting of lenders from the temple. In their eyes, Jesus (King Aleksandar) cleaned the national church (state) from corrupt and selfish lenders (politicians).¹⁰¹ His imposition of dictatorship was seen as the "arrival of the new era", "a historic event" in which King Aleksandar carried out "a knightly and salutary task".¹⁰²

When King Aleksandar was assassinated in 1934, the veterans' movement lost its talisman. While he remained the "Unifier" of South Slavs, King Aleksandar became the "Martyr". To them, he was "a good King", who was let down by state institutions, politicians, egoistic civilians lacking true patriotism and interested only in "personal enrichment".¹⁰³ As parliamentary democracy was partially restored in the second part of the 1930s, veterans' associations went back to criticising the politicians who were the ones responsible for their hardships.¹⁰⁴ Veterans looked upon King Aleksandar and parliamentary democracy through the ideological lenses of national liberty and unity – the ideology he built. These lenses made a choice between their wartime commander and abstract form of government all too easy. King's charisma embedded in his wartime role was something that enchanted the veterans. From the perspective of the veterans, no politician, especially a civilian, could truly understand their position and the sacrifice they made for Yugoslavia. After all, Serbian veterans fought for national liberation and unity of Southern Slavs under the Serbian crown. Although most veterans would not openly criticise the very concept of parliamentary democracy, this is not what they fought for. Soldiers fought for national liberation from the "Habsburg and Ottoman yoke" and for uniting the South Slavs in one state. They did not fight to end monarchic autocratic tendencies or for establishing a truly developed parliamentary democracy.

Conclusion

When veterans return from victorious wars – especially the ones in which they defend the country – they are often critical of post-war politics. Either criticising lack of unity, betrayal of specific values or diminishing or non-existing benefits, veterans are rarely entirely pleased with the post-war setting. Croatian veterans from the 1990s War and their Serbian counterparts from WWI are no exception. However, both Croatian and Serbian veterans were interested in how they free their wartime leaders and post-war rulers from any political responsibility for all the shortcomings of the regime. According to veterans, both rulers were either uninformed about the misdoings of politicians, manipulated by

⁹⁷ Newman, "War Veterans," 59-60.

⁹⁸ Newman, "Volunteer Veterans," 731.

⁹⁹ Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow*, 216.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 239.

their lies and deception. While the rulers proved their Messianic roles in wartime, politicians and bureaucrats were “squandering” both material and symbolic wealth, values they fought for. Although both Tuđman’s and King Aleksandar’s rule showed many direct or indirect autocratic tendencies and practices, veterans turned a blind eye to them. As they stayed in rulers’ inner circles, they placed all the blame on politicians and bureaucrats – people who did not take an active part in building their respective cultures of victory, nation-funding myths upon which Croats and Yugoslavs were built upon. Veteran associations did identify certain autocratic features as problematic, as long as they did not jeopardise wartime goals, independence and integrity of the state or their benefits and position in society. To replicate wartime relations, veterans did not want any intermediaries between themselves and the ruler. In this way, and especially in the Croatian case, veterans slowed down or stopped democratisation processes and, thus, hurt their Homeland in the long run.

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