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Occupation, Repression and Resistance Čačak District, Serbia, in 1915–1918

Abstract: The paper analyses the Austro-Hungarian occupation regime in Serbia 1915–1918 from the perspective both of its treatment of civilians and of resistance to occupation, focusing on the Čačak District, western Serbia. It examines actions against the occupation authorities, the composition of k. u k. military presence in the district, the measures applied to suppress armed resistance (e.g. disarmament, internment, public executions), the estimated number of military and civilian casualties.

Keywords: First World War, Serbia, Čačak District, 1915–1918, Austro-Hungarian occupation, Military General Governorate, violence, resistance, victims

For the Kingdom of Serbia the outbreak of the First World War meant direct military confrontation with a much more powerful enemy, Austria-Hungary. Yet, during 1914 and 1915 Serbia did surprisingly well against her formidable opponent, winning all major battles with the Austro-Hungarian army in 1914 and effectively holding her borders well into 1915. She was militarily defeated only in the autumn of 1915 by the joint invasion of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria, but the king, the government and the bulk of the Serbian Army, rather than to submit, chose to retreat across Albania to the Greek Adriatic coast. In late 1915 and early 1916 the Central Powers were in the process of dividing Serbia into zones of control: Germany chose to control the main land route and railway through the Velika (Great) Morava river valley and some mines in eastern Serbia; Bulgaria established two large occupation zones, the "Morava Military Inspection Area" with its centre in Niš and the "Macedonia Military Inspection Area" with its centre in Skoplje; Austria-Hungary occupied twelve districts of the Kingdom of Serbia with a population of about 1.4 million and at the beginning of 1916 established military rule over this territory with its headquarters in Belgrade: *k. und k. Militärgeneralgouvernements Serbien* (Military General Governorate of Serbia – MGG/S).¹ In late 1915 Em-

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¹ Božica B. Mladenović, *Grad u austrougarskoj okupacionoj zoni u Srbiji od 1916. do 1918. godine* [The City in the Austro-Hungarian Occupation Zone in 1916–1918] (Belgrade: Čigoja štampa, 2000), 28; Andrej Mitrović, *Srbija u Prvom svetskom ratu* [Serbia in the First World War] (Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 2004), 284; an abridged version of this book was published in English under the title *Serbia's Great War* (London: Hurst & Co.,

peror Franz Joseph I appointed Johann Ulrich Graf von Salis-Seewis as the first governor of the MGG/S. In July 1916 he was succeeded by Adolf von Rhemen zu Bärenfeld.² The Čačak District was officially established on 1 January 1916 and incorporated into the MGG/S in February the same year³ with the following military county commands (*Bezirkskommanden*): Čačak, Kraljevo, Ivanjica, Guča, Ušće and (from August 1917) Raška.⁴ At the head of each district was a district commander (*Kreiskommandant*) who was responsible for all military and civil affairs. He exercised his authority through subordinated commanders of the district subdivisions, counties, as well as through municipality presidents who were chosen from among locally prominent Serbian citizens who were deemed loyal.

Occupation of the town and district of Čačak

The town of Čačak in western Serbia did not sustain any significant damage during war operations, with the exception of a bridge over the Zapadna (West) Morava river which was mined twice: by the retreating Serbian forces in 1915 and by the retreating Austro-Hungarian army in 1918. Most of the town remained intact, as did most district seats in the interior of the country.⁵ The greatest change in the life of its citizens before the occupation was the approaching of the front line in 1914, when many public buildings and all larger inns and taverns were used as hospital facilities.⁶ Austro-Hungarian forces entered the town without meeting any resistance on 1 November 1915 and by the middle of the month took the entire Čačak District. The beginning of the occupation found most citizens in the town, and the occupying forces promptly began to make lists of citizens suspected

2007). Very disappointing and one-sided is: Jonathan E. Gumz, *The resurrection and collapse of empire in Habsburg Serbia, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

² Bogdan Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom: čačanski okrug 1915–1918* [Life under Occupation: Čačak District 1915–1918] (Čačak: Medjuopštinski istorijski arhiv, 2010), 27, 31.

³ Michael Jungerth, *Entstehung und Organisation des k. u. k. Militärgeneralgouvernements für Serbien* (Belgrade: K. u. k. Gouvernement-Druckerel, 1918), 5; Hugo Kerchnawe, “Die k. u. k. Militärverwaltung in Serbien”, in Hugo Kerchnawe et al., *Die Militärverwaltung in den von den österreichisch-ungarischen Truppen besetzten Gebieten* (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1928), 56; Mitrović, *Srbija u Prvom svetskom ratu*, 339.

⁴ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 42.

⁵ *Ibid.* 19–20.

⁶ Bogdan Trifunović, “Perceptions of the Front by Serbian Civilians during the First World War, 1914–1918”, *InterCulture* 5.1 (Florida State University, January 2008), 55.

of being hostile to the K. u. k. Army and liable to deportation to camps in Austria-Hungary. The town commander ordered the taking of civilian hostages chosen from among prominent and well-respected citizens, whose lives and property were meant to serve as a pledge for the peaceful behaviour of the population.⁷ The early months of occupation were marked by the purge of well-educated social groups, including teachers, priests and politicians. With active army officers already interned in camps in Austria, Bohemia and Hungary, these groups were seen as the remaining agents of Serbian national identity and cohesion and, therefore, as a threat to the occupation regime.⁸

Another important aspect of the policy of denationalization in the MGG/S was the banishment of the Serbian language and Cyrillic script from both official and unofficial communication. Thus, soon after the occupation of Čačak all Cyrillic public inscriptions were replaced with those in Latin script. In February 1916 Serbian books were banned in all of the MGG/S and seized from bookshops, public and even private libraries. Raids in search of banned books were conducted in the Čačak District in July 1916, but few were found. As for official documents, they were either in German or in some sort of a Serbo-Croatian mix but invariably in Latin script. Official public announcements were printed in German, in Serbian in Cyrillic and in Serbo-Croatian in Latin. Although the occupation regime sought to banish Cyrillic script, as an obvious symbol of Serbian national identity, its use in municipalities in the Čačak District continued well into 1916, before it was finally banned in all of the MGG/S with effect from 1 January 1917.⁹ Also, in May 1916 the MGG/S Central Command replaced the Julian calendar with the Gregorian in all of the occupied territory.¹⁰

After the occupation of Serbia by the Central Powers, its citizens were denied citizenship rights. Both Bulgaria and Austria-Hungary publicly announced in 1916 that the Serbian state had been wiped off the political map of Europe. Therefore, its inhabitants could not invoke the international rules of war, such as those defined by the Geneva Conventions.¹¹ This fact contributed significantly to the unceasing repression by Austro-Hungarian occupying forces in the MGG/S in 1916–1918, which included various

⁷ Ibid. 22–26.

⁸ Bogdan Trifunović, “Prisoners of War and Internees (South East Europe)”, in *1914–1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, eds. Ute Daniel et al. (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2014).

⁹ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 43, 44.

¹⁰ Ibid. 45.

¹¹ Rumen Cholakov, “Prisoners of War in Bulgaria during the First World War” (doctoral dissertation, Cambridge University, 2012), 56.

forms of ethnically-based discrimination, large-scale violence against and court-martialling of Serbian civilians, none of which had any grounding in law and court decisions. The first of four big waves of civilian internment, in November 1915,¹² was accompanied by requisitioning whatever was considered necessary for the war effort: wool, copper, brass, animal skins, food-stuffs, etc.¹³ The policy of repression and exploitation continued until the last days of occupation in October 1918. For instance, the MGG/S Central Command proclaimed more than once that only persons aged between 17 and 50 capable of bearing arms could be interned in labour camps in Austria-Hungary but, in reality, local commands regularly deported children, women and elderly people to camps.¹⁴ The biggest wave of internment both in the MGG/S in general and in the Čačak District took place in the autumn of 1916, following Romania's entry into the war. During that period a number of local priests were interned because they were part of the so-called intelligentsia regarded to be the most dangerous section of society (along with teachers and lawyers) to Austro-Hungarian rule. The district command compiled a list of fifteen priests to be interned, the oldest of whom was seventy-five at the time of deportation.¹⁵ According to Austro-Hungarian official records, between 30 August and 10 November 1916 a total of 928 persons were interned,¹⁶ and mostly in large camps in Austria-Hungary: Aschach an der Donau, Boldogasszony, Braunau, Nagymegyér, Nézsider, Heinrichsgrün and Czegled.¹⁷

In November 1915 a rear command (*Etappenkommando*) was set up in Čačak which had responsibility for all military and civil affairs in the district. It was basically temporary in character, between the military occupation by Austria-Hungary's regular army units and the establishment of the military government of occupied Serbia. By the end of 1915 the regular army units had left Čačak and were replaced by second and third call-up units which were to serve as a permanent occupying force. It was then that the *Etappenkommando* for the Austro-Hungarian 3rd Army was transferred

¹² Mitrović, *Srbija u Prvom svetskom ratu*, 383–384.

¹³ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 30.

¹⁴ In early June 1918 the Austro-Hungarian High Command (*Armeecoberkommando*) requested information on Serbian internees from the MGG/S command in Belgrade. Out of a total of 36,845 interned and confined persons 29,416 were capable of carrying arms (79.8%), 5,466 were unable to bear arms and older than fifty (14.8%), 779 were women (2.1%) and 1,028 were children aged fifteen or less (2.8%), cf. Trifunović, "Prisoners of War".

¹⁵ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 74.

¹⁶ Ibid. 75.

¹⁷ Trifunović, "Prisoners of War".

from Belgrade to Čačak where it remained until the establishment of the MGG/S in January 1916.¹⁸ After the creation of the MGG/S the *Etappenkommando* was returned to Belgrade, the seat of the MGG/S, and its powers were transferred to the MGG/S for occupied Serbia.¹⁹

By the spring of 1916 the occupation power issued all necessary regulations for the organization and administration of occupied territory, including the *General outline for k. u. k. military administration in the conquered area of Serbia* (*Allgemeine Grundzüge für die k. u. k. Militärverwaltung in den besetzten Gebieten Serbiens*), the *Statute of MGG/S*, and *Directives for the political administration in the areas of the Military General Governorate of Serbia* (*Direktiven für die politische Verwaltung im Bereiche des Militärgeneralgouvernements in Serbien*).²⁰ The Čačak District was territorially the largest administrative division of the MGG/S, but it was also the least populated (about thirty inhabitants per square kilometre) and among the economically least developed districts (many small landholdings owned by individual farmers).²¹

Austro-Hungarian military presence in the Čačak District

Upon the transfer of Austro-Hungarian fittest army units to the front, a one-battalion force was deployed in the Čačak District. Divided into smaller units stationed in all counties of the district, this force was under the command of the district commander headquartered in Čačak, which was also the seat of the District Gendarmerie Command which was responsible for organizing policing in all counties.²² The feasibility of the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Serbia depended on the effectiveness of military and police forces. Communication with the native population was a necessary condition for it,²³ and the gendarmerie ranks were usually filled with

¹⁸ Jungerth, *Entstehung und Organisation*, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 6.

²⁰ Božica Mladenović, "Promena naziva ulica u gradovima Vojno-generalnog gubernmana: prilog proučavanju odnosa između paralelnih društava" [The change of street names in the cities of the Military General Governorate: a contribution to the study of the relationship between parallel societies], *Istorijski časopis XLV-XLVI* (1998–1999), 289.

²¹ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 194.

²² Bogumil Hrabak, "Čačak u doba austrougarske okupacije (1915–1918)" [Čačak during the Austro-Hungarian Occupation 1915–1918], in *Viševjekovna istorija Čačka i okoline* (Belgrade: Udruženje Čačana, 1995), 159.

²³ Arhiv Srbije [Archives of Serbia; hereafter: AS], Ministarstvo inostranih dela Kraljevine Srbije (1871–1918) [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Serbia; hereaf-

Croat, Czech or Serb subjects of Austria-Hungary due to their common or kindred language. Another condition was the presence of military and police units in all larger or strategically important settlements in the district. Basically, military units were permanently stationed in Čačak and in county seats (Čačak, Kraljevo, Ivanjica, Guča, Ušće and Raška), while the gendarmerie had stations set up in smaller towns and larger villages from which it patrolled remote areas. Such stations usually had twelve to fifteen men.²⁴

According to the analysed sources and available literature, the MGG/S had a relatively small number of Austro-Hungarian troops. In late 1917, after the uprising in the Bulgarian-occupied Toplica District (*Toplički ustanak*), the total number of troops in the MGG/S was about 23,000.²⁵ Apart from the two districts bordering the Bulgarian occupation zone of Morava, all other districts of the MGG/S had a similar number of troops.²⁶ During the occupation, the Čačak District was garrisoned with four infantry companies, each 150–200 strong. There were also one gendarmerie unit (200–300 strong) and an additional force (four detachments) assigned to protect the Lajkovac–Čačak railway.²⁷ No artillery units were permanently deployed in the district. There was also one detachment, the 16th Company of the *Streifregimente* (Raiding Regiment), armed with rifles and machine-guns.²⁸ Most gendarmerie troops were posted in rural areas covering the entire territory of the district, while the rest were based in Čačak, including mobile patrols (*Mobilpatrouillen*) of up to fifteen men tasked with tracking and catching brigands and smaller groups of insurgents.²⁹ Since the 16th Company of *Streifregimente* was also engaged in field operations against armed resistance, it appears that it was probably the fittest and most operational of all in the district.³⁰ Overall, in July 1916 there was in the Čačak

ter: MID], Političko odeljenje [Political Department; hereafter: PO], microfilm, r. 507, f. XV (1916), Dossier II–VI, XV/573, Athens, 23 April 1916.

²⁴ Dragoljub M. Pavlović, “Osnovna škola u Kaoni (1866–1941)” [Elementary School in Kaona (1866–1941)], *Zbornik radova Narodnog muzeja XIII* (Čačak 1983), 187.

²⁵ AS, Vojni Generalni Guverman [Military General Governorate; hereafter: VGG], XVII/198; Vladimir Stojančević, “Gubici u stanovništvu Srbije i Beograda pod austrougarskom okupacijom za vreme svetskog rata 1914–1918. godine” [Population Losses in Serbia and Belgrade under Austro-Hungarian Occupation during the First World War 1914–1918], *Godišnjak grada Beograda XXI* (1974), 64.

²⁶ Kerchnawe, “Die k. u. k. Militärverwaltung”, 96–97.

²⁷ AS, VGG, XVI/84, confid. no. 103, 18 May 1917.

²⁸ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 52; Andrej Mitrović, *Ustaničke borbe u Srbiji 1916–1918* [Resistance movement in Serbia 1916–1918] (Belgrade: SKZ, 1987), 44–45.

²⁹ Kerchnawe, “Die k. u. k. Militärverwaltung”, 96–97.

³⁰ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 54.

District an armed force of more than one thousand permanently deployed men against a local population of about 114,000.³¹ The number of troops grew in a later period of occupation, when armed resistance intensified, as well as after Romania's entry into the war, when additional infantry units were deployed in all districts of the MGG/S.³²

The narrative sources confirm this relatively small number of troops in the MGG/S. As reported by the wife of the Serbian parliament member Miloje Jovanović in Corfu in November 1916: "They have few or, better still, no permanently deployed military men in Serbia. All the service is being done by gendarmes."³³ As far as the readiness of the stationed force is concerned, it should be noted that most were of inferior quality because those younger or better trained were needed on the front.³⁴ The Austro-Hungarian armed forces consisted of three major components, which reflected the genesis of the Dual Monarchy and inherited military traditions: the common imperial-royal army (*K. u. k. Armee*), conscripted from all provinces of the Empire, as the most important force; the Austrian imperial-royal army (*Landwehr*); and the Hungarian royal army (*Honved*). Auxiliary troops, such as militia and various garrison troops were designated as *Landsturm*.³⁵ From 1916 there were no *K. u. k. Armee* units in the Čačak District; all infantry troops came from the *Landwehr* which was filled with second and third call-up conscripts. It is no wonder then that the main role of these units was to protect vital infrastructure in the district (railways, roads) and to track down and destroy smaller groups of insurgents. The goal of the occupation policy pursued by the military administration in Serbia was to forestall all possibility of a large-scale rebellion, which is why the weak military presence was made up for by enforcing harsh measures against the civilian population such as hostage taking, internment, deportation and disarmament.³⁶

³¹ Hrabak, "Čačak u doba austrougarske okupacije", 160; Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 53.

³² Kerchnawe, "Die k. u. k. Militärverwaltung", 91.

³³ AS, MID, PO, microfilm, r. 508, f. XV (1916), Dossier VII and VIII, XV/748, Corfu, 29 November 1916.

³⁴ Mitrović, *Ustaničke borbe*, 44.

³⁵ John R. Schindler, "Disaster on the Drina: The Austro-Hungarian Army in Serbia 1914", *War in History* 9.2 (2002), 160, 162.

³⁶ Dimitrije Djordjević, "Austro-ugarski okupacioni režim u Srbiji i njegov slom 1918" [Austro-Hungarian Occupation Regime in Serbia and its Breakdown in 1918], in *Naučni skup u povodu 50-godišnjice raspada Austro-Ugarske Monarhije i stvaranja jugoslavenske države* (Zagreb: Jugoslavenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, 1969), 220.

Disarmament of civilians

Mass deportations of civilians to internment camps in Austria-Hungary in late 1915 were followed by the operation of civilian disarmament in which all occupation military and civil structures were engaged and which was carried out strictly and harshly. The next raid in search of weapons was ordered in March 1916. Even though a certain number of distinguished members of all local communities had to guarantee by their lives for the success of the operation, mostly old and unusable weapons were found.³⁷ In May 1916, disappointed at the result, the MGG/S tried a different tack by setting a fixed deadline for voluntary arms handover without any consequences for the holders or owners. Noncompliance with the deadline incurred severe punishment, including the death penalty. This approach proved much more successful, as evidenced by the total of 136 military rifles, 61 hunting rifles, 30 revolvers, 22 pistols, 9,600 bullets, 42 bayonets and four grenades turned in in June and July 1916.³⁸ Despite these numbers, the district authorities were aware that there still were many hidden weapons.³⁹ Therefore, from August 1916 the monthly *Official Gazette of k. u. k. Čačak District Command*⁴⁰ repeatedly warned that possession of arms and ammunition by the population was strictly prohibited: "The people are once more cautioned about the order of the General Military Governorate of July, current year, to the effect that whoever is found in possession of arms and munitions shall be executed together with a designated hostage; at the same this is to remind that the voluntary handover of arms and ammunition shall incur no penalty."⁴¹

Nevertheless, further raids in the Čačak District came up with a large quantity of small arms. In July 1917, 1,000 rifles and pistols, and 29 grenades were discovered in the Ivanjica County, and five persons were executed by the firing squad in Kraljevo after the discovery of 18 hidden rifles and 5,000 bullets.⁴² Earlier that year 200 rifles and 20 grenades had been discovered in the Čačak County.⁴³ Until the end of the occupation the MGG/S did not

³⁷ Mitrović, *Ustaničke borbe*, 98.

³⁸ AS, VGG, XVII/6, no. 8384, 24 August 1916.

³⁹ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 55; Mitrović, *Ustaničke borbe*, 101.

⁴⁰ Marija Orbović, "Kulturna događanja u Čačku u delovodniku štamparije Stevana Matića" [Cultural Events in Čačak in the Register of Stevan Matić's Printing Office], *Zbornik radova Narodnog muzeja XXVII* (Čačak 1997), 262–263.

⁴¹ *Službeni glasnik c. i kr. okružnog poglavarstva Čačak* 1.3 [Amts-Blatt des k. u. k. Kreiskommandos Čačak], 15 October 1916, p. 4.

⁴² Mitrović, *Ustaničke borbe*, 476.

⁴³ Bogumil Hrabak, "Čačak u doba austrougarske okupacije", 172.

succeed in carrying out full civilian disarmament not only in the Čačak District but also in other districts, as evidenced by the fact that the withdrawal of Austro-Hungarian units from Čačak in late October 1918 was celebrated by gunfire in the town and surrounding villages.⁴⁴

Public executions

During the occupation years of 1915–1918 public executions were a measure taken only sporadically, at least in the Čačak District. Its main purpose, of course, was to intimidate the local population. There were only few public executions in the Čačak District, but almost every issue of the *Official Gazette* brought information about the executions of local Serbian civilians which were not carried out in public.⁴⁵ Public executions were usually staged as spectacles of power and terror in the presence of a large number of Austro-Hungarian officers and soldiers, occasionally also a photographer to record the event, as evidenced by the hanging of the priest Veljko Tankosić (of Guča County) in Užice on 21 July 1916. His execution was carried out in a prominent place, a small hill just outside the town, so that the gallows could be seen from a distance.

In the autumn of 1915, Čačak was visited by the war correspondent for the *Neue Freie Presse*, a former Austro-Hungarian army officer, Sandor Friedrich Ladislaus Rosenfeld (1872–1945). Rosenfeld was also a writer, and he left a written account of his travels under his pen name Alexander Roda Roda.⁴⁶ Remarking that the roads were covered in thick mud that threatened to suck off his boots, he described Čačak as a nice little town, the district seat where everything was in the service of the army and the war effort.⁴⁷ His impression was that the Austro-Hungarian army officers had good accommodation and felt at home. Many of them even spoke Serbian and were accustomed to the local circumstances.⁴⁸ Among the first occurrences that attracted Roda Roda's attention was the military commander's announcement of an execution: "The farmer Milan Cvetković was

⁴⁴ Siniša Paunović, *Pusta zemlja: roman* [An empty land: a novel] (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1948), 413; *Sloboda 1918*. [Freedom 1918], spec. issue of *Čačanski glas*, Čačak, 25 October 1993, 3.

⁴⁵ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 57–58.

⁴⁶ Nikola Baković, "Odeljak iz *Srpskog dnevnika* Rode Rode o poseti Čačku i Ovčarsko-kablarskoj klisuri 1915. godine" [An Excerpt from Roda Roda's *Serbian Diary* on his visit to Čačak and Ovčar-Kablar Gorge in 1915], *Izvornik: građa Međuoštinskog istorijskog arhiva* 30 (2014), 156.

⁴⁷ Baković, "Odeljak iz *Srpskog dnevnika*", 159.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 161.

sentenced to death by hanging for the murder of four wounded soldiers. The sentence was carried out today, and his house was burnt down.”⁴⁹ This execution took place at the very beginning of the occupation of Čačak, as the announcement was combined with another one, dated 11 November 1915, which advised the local population to act peacefully and accept the new situation in the country.⁵⁰

A written account of an execution in Čačak during the occupation is left by the priest Sreten Mihailović.⁵¹ In early 1916 Mihailović was selected as a hostage to guarantee the peaceful conduct of the townspeople. He had to report to the District Command every morning at 8 am. On the morning of 14 February 1916, he was told that he had to administer the last rites to three Serbian soldiers who were to be hanged at 11 am. The rite was performed in the church of the Ascension⁵² across the street from the prison.⁵³ The three soldiers were neighbours from the village of Studenica (Raška County), Radisav Bačkulja (aged 27–28), Miloš Božić (30–32), and Milan Živković (25). Retreating with the Serbian Army after the Central Powers’ invasion in the autumn of 1915, they had reached Priština. Amidst all the disarray and confusion, they had decided to abandon their units and return home. They had arrived in the village before enemy forces. An Austro-Hungarian unit which had subsequently tried to enter the village had met with armed resistance from the villagers. A stronger unit sent the following day had managed to enter the village and the three men had been arrested.⁵⁴

The gallows were set up in the courtyard of the District Command, only fifteen metres from the prison. Fr. Mihailović was informed that his presence at the hanging was mandatory, a grim duty he vainly tried to evade. The Austro-Hungarian military code required that all executions be attended by the area commander (in this case the Čačak district commander), legal officer, duty officer, priest, physician and executioner.⁵⁵ The sentence was read out for every individual prisoner first in German and then in Serbian. Hanged first was Bačkulja who, according to Mihailović, held himself

⁴⁹ Baković, “Odeljak iz *Srpskog dnevnika*”, 161.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 161.

⁵¹ Sreten Mihailović, “Neispunjen amanet (istinit događaj iz vremena okupacije – pre 15 godina)” [An unfulfilled last wish (a true story from the time of occupation 15 years ago)], *Pregled crkve eparhije žičke XIII.2* (1931), 60–70.

⁵² The church was kept locked and the key was kept at the District Command, see Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 57.

⁵³ The prison was housed in a nineteenth-century building in the oriental Balkan style, which now is home to the permanent exhibition of the local museum.

⁵⁴ Mihailović, “Neispunjen amanet”, 63–64.

⁵⁵ AS, VGG, XVIII/619, undated.

bravely, followed by Božić and Živković. The priest obtained permission to bury them in the town cemetery according to the Orthodox rite, but by the time he managed to find a cart and men for the funeral, the bodies had been taken to the district nursery garden and buried in an unmarked grave.⁵⁶

Serbian armed resistance

Armed resistance to the occupation culminated in early 1917 when a large-scale uprising broke out in the Toplica District in the Bulgarian occupation zone of Morava.⁵⁷ Armed resistance in occupied Serbia has been given much attention in historiography, but the attention has been mostly focused on the Toplica Uprising.⁵⁸ It has already been observed that most of occupied Serbia under the Austro-Hungarians and Bulgarians lived its usual everyday life during the Toplica Uprising. The population of the northern districts of the MGG/S were virtually unaware of what was happening in the Bulgarian zone of occupation.⁵⁹

A stronger wave of armed resistance to the Austro-Hungarians in the Čačak District took place at the very end of the occupation, when the last train from Čačak to Užice and further to Bosnia-Herzegovina, was blown up. This was the single most important act of resistance which has been proved to be true and successful among a whole host of half-information, oral traditions and urban legends,⁶⁰ but actions against the occupation forces were organized throughout the period from late 1915 to 1918.

The earliest reference to armed groups in the Čačak District comes from late 1915. These groups consisted mostly of runaway soldiers who had kept their weapons and hence were a potential danger both to local population and to enemy soldiers.⁶¹ Austro-Hungarian officers' reports at first termed these groups as *bandits* or *hajduks*,⁶² but after a while the term *komite* (sing. *komita*, denoting a "guerrilla fighter") came to prevail in official correspondence to designate all armed individuals and groups that caused trouble in occupied territory.⁶³ Armed groups undertook actions against

⁵⁶ Mihailović, "Neispunjen amanet", 66–67.

⁵⁷ Mitrović, *Ustaničke borbe*, 13.

⁵⁸ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 60.

⁵⁹ Mitrović, *Ustaničke borbe*, 355.

⁶⁰ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 60.

⁶¹ Paunović, *Pusta zemlja*, 20.

⁶² *Hajduk* was the term for armed rebels in the Balkan part of the Ottoman Empire who frequently acted both as robbers and as insurgents against local Ottoman authorities.

⁶³ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 60–61.

occupying forces from the beginning of the occupation. Thus, six Austro-Hungarian soldiers were killed near Čačak as early as the autumn of 1915. Budimir Stevanović from the village Baluga in the environs of Čačak was tried for the crime several times, but was invariably acquitted.⁶⁴ Ljubisav Perić (43) from Dolac and other four Serbian men fired at an Austro-Hungarian patrol assigned to requisition food, metal objects and other supplies in November 1915, killing one soldier. Perić was caught and hanged on 1 August 1916.⁶⁵

Resistance to the occupation in the Čačak District gained in intensity in the spring of 1916, when the Austro-Hungarian intelligence service reported the presence of *komite* and bandits in the district. In April and May 1916 there were arrests of a group of nine persons from Ročevići (Kraljevo County) for robbery, theft and rape, and of nine members of the Miložević family from Cervanja for killing and robbing an Austro-Hungarian soldier in December 1915.⁶⁶ According to an intelligence officer's report sent from Čačak to the MGG/S headquarters, a group of five bandits from Gornji Dubac (Guča County) attacked and killed a woman who had wanted to denounce them to the gendarmerie, and two groups of *komite* robbed and killed a merchant by the name of Lotinac from Vranovina.⁶⁷ After the appointment of von Rhemen as military governor in July 1916, more aggressive operations against *komite* and *hajduks* were undertaken, which coincided with Romania's entry into the war on the side of the Entente and the rising optimism of the people that the war might take a turn in the Entente's favour.⁶⁸ It was then that a more general term for such armed groups was introduced in the Čačak District – outlaws (*odmetnici*).⁶⁹ This change in official terminology possibly reflected the situation of frequent and fierce attacks on Austro-Hungarian forces in the district in 1916. Six men from the village of Premeća (Čačak County) as well as five men from Dolac are known to have carried out several attacks on k. u. k. forces in 1916. Some of the names of "outlaws" active in that period were recorded: Milosav and Milan Milošević from Cervanja; Pavle and Petar Čorbić from Reke (probably Ivanjica County) and Milovan Mihailović from Breževa (in fact Brezova,

⁶⁴ Istorijjski arhiv Čačak [Historical Archives of Čačak; hereafter: IAČ], Opština zablacka [Zablaće municipality: (OZ)], K-21, 26 November 1918.

⁶⁵ AS, VGG, XVII/6, no. 8384, 24 August 1916.

⁶⁶ AS, VGG, XVII/1435, 5 June 1916.

⁶⁷ AS, VGG, XVII/1436, 25 June 1916.

⁶⁸ Trifunović, "Perceptions of the Front", 64.

⁶⁹ Hrabak, "Čačak u doba austrougarske okupacije", 171–172.

Ivanjica County), who attacked and destroyed an Austro-Hungarian patrol near the Studenica monastery.⁷⁰

Actions carried out against the outlaws at the beginning of 1917 were more thoroughly prepared than before. Since Mt Kopaonik was marked as the gathering place of the outlaws, the MGG/S launched a search for rebels and outlaws on and around it. The Čačak District set up a 73-strong gendarmerie detachment to participate in the search, but the results were disappointing.⁷¹ This was also the period of significant resistance put up by the citizens of Čačak and surrounding villages who had chosen “to take to the woods”, which was a euphemism for taking to arms against the occupying forces.⁷²

Even though the Toplica Uprising which broke out in the latter part of February 1917 was mostly confined to the Bulgarian occupation zone, its direct consequences were felt in the Čačak District as early as March 1917.⁷³ Deportations of politically suspicious citizens of Čačak and other counties continued, as well as executions of those arrested on the grounds of illegal possession of weapons.⁷⁴ In April 1917 reportedly 200 rifles and 20 grenades were found in the district and, on 20 April, five *komite* were killed near Raška (two are known by name, Dragomir and Jevrem Živković), which may have been in connection with the collapse of the Toplica Uprising.⁷⁵ One of the leaders of the Toplica Uprising, Uroš Kostić, was killed somewhere between the Čačak and Novi Pazar districts. In May and June 1917 groups of up to twenty men were spotted around Čačak, and one of these was pursued by Austro-Hungarian troops. Armed rebels obviously moved from the south to the northern districts.⁷⁶

In the second half of 1917 the Čačak District saw frequent clashes between occupying forces and armed groups. The group led by Mašan Stojović, which operated mostly in the Dragačevo area (Guča County), has remained in the popular memory of local people. Oral tradition has it that Stojović arrived in Dragačevo in August 1917 with a group of six men in their early twenties (Stojović himself was born in 1887).⁷⁷ Interestingly,

⁷⁰ AS, VGG, XVII/1438, July 1916.

⁷¹ Andrej Mitrović, *Ustaničke borbe u Srbiji*, 204.

⁷² Bogumil Hrabak, “Čačak u doba austrougarske okupacije”, 173.

⁷³ Mitrović, *Ustaničke borbe*, 335.

⁷⁴ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 62; AS, VGG, XVII/1450, 4 March 1917.

⁷⁵ AS, VGG, VIII/883, confid. no. 236, 8 May 1917; Mitrović, *Ustaničke borbe*, 377.

⁷⁶ Hrabak, “Čačak u doba austrougarske okupacije”, 172; Mitrović, *Ustaničke borbe*, 477.

⁷⁷ [Ljubomir Marković], Svetislav Lj. Marković, “Usmena svedočenja o pokušaju širenja Topličkog ustanka na moravički kraj” [Oral testimonies about the attempt to spread the

Stojović's main support came from municipality and village heads in the district, which indicates that his group's actions were mainly targeted at occupation forces and property. In late autumn 1917 Stojović's group spent nights in the house of Viliman Šarčević, president of Lisa (Guča County), and hid in a nearby cave by day. Other heads of local municipalities also helped Stojović, who presented his group as protectors of the weak and the poor against "Fritzes and their servants"⁷⁸. The fame created around Mašan Stojović and his comrades inspired common thugs and robbers to pretend to be his men.⁷⁹

Stojović's actions eventually drew greater attention and the county commanders notified the heads of all municipalities in which his group operated that the presence of *komite* had to be reported immediately to higher commands; in case a previously unreported *komita* was captured dead or alive the president of that particular municipality would be hanged. Later on, a considerable reward was offered for helping eliminate Stojović's group, 100,000 dinars for Stojović, 50,000 for each member of his group, a strategy which proved successful. In December 1917 the group was staying in the house of Andrija Grbić, president of Jevac municipality, who eventually betrayed them. His house was surrounded in the night of 20 December 1917. In the fighting that started at dawn and lasted until two in the afternoon, all *komite* were killed, but the Austro-Hungarian side also suffered losses: one officer killed and several soldiers wounded.⁸⁰

The death of Mašan Stojović and his group echoed so strongly among the local people that the house of Andrija Grbić was set on fire. After the war, in 1922, he and his helpers stood trial at the court of Čačak. Grbić was given a life sentence for treason and Marjan Ristić, president of Kosovica municipality, was sentenced to eighteen years in prison.⁸¹ To actually sentence somebody for unworthy conduct during the occupation was a rare court decision; most such cases ended in charges being dropped.⁸²

The elimination of Stojović's group made some impression on the people, but it did not prevent others from choosing the life of outlaws, as evidenced by the last year of the war. The number of armed groups rose, and so did the effort of the occupation authorities in the Čačak District to cope

Toplica Rebellion into the Morava region], *Zbornik radova Narodnog muzeja XXXVI* (Čačak 2006), 146–148.

⁷⁸ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 64.

⁷⁹ Marković, "Usmena svedočenja", 150.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 151–154.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 154.

⁸² Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 89.

with the situation. A group of three men was destroyed near Ušće (Ušće County) on 10 January 1918, and in March the MGG/S headquarters in Belgrade warned that Čačak is one of the districts where signs of approaching turmoil were obvious.⁸³ From spring 1918, every district of the MGG/S engaged an additional unit of 40 soldiers and mobile gendarmerie patrols to respond to such unrests.⁸⁴ Yet, the violence continued, affecting even civilians. In early March 1918 six unidentified men broke into the Serbian Orthodox monastery of Nikolje west of Čačak, tortured a monk and took all the money and valuable church objects.⁸⁵ By the summer of 1918 the number of armed groups of 10–20 outlaws multiplied. Resistance to the occupation became centred west of Čačak in the Ovčar-Kablar gorge of the Zapadna Morava and in the mountains Ovčar, Kablar and Jelica. Austro-Hungarian forces combed the area in early autumn 1918 but were only able to capture 20 Serbian deserters and one armed *komita*.⁸⁶ At almost the same time, on 16 September, two gendarmes were killed and one wounded in the vicinity of Čačak.⁸⁷

In mid-September 1918 Allied forces achieved a decisive breakthrough on the Salonika Front, effectively knocking Bulgaria out of the war by the end of the month. When the news reached the Čačak District the insurgents stepped up their actions,⁸⁸ all of which caused tension among the Austro-Hungarians and their nervous reactions. Acts of violence against civilians and arbitrary killings increased in number. In a bid to restore their shaken authority and deter those who were thinking of joining resistance, occupation forces fuelled the atmosphere of terror. The people were warned on a daily basis to remain calm, to comply with the closing hours for their shops and taverns, to obey curfew, to report all deserters, war prisoners or suspicious persons.⁸⁹ President of Atenica municipality Veljko Mišović was murdered just a few days before the liberation of Čačak in October 1918, when the Austro-Hungarian army was already retreating towards the west and north. In the state of collective euphoria caused by the false news that Serbian troops had entered Atenica (they were still in Kraljevo) the picture of the Habsburg emperor in the local courthouse was torn down, and

⁸³ Mitrović, *Ustaničke borbe*, 494.

⁸⁴ Mitrović, *Srbija u Prvom svetskom ratu*, 463–464.

⁸⁵ Mitrović, *Ustaničke borbe*, 506.

⁸⁶ Hrabak, “Čačak u doba austrougarske okupacije”, 172–173.

⁸⁷ Mitrović, *Ustaničke borbe*, 516.

⁸⁸ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 65–66.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 66.

Mišović was accused of it without clear evidence. He was shot dead by three retreating gendarmes at the side of the road between Kraljevo and Čačak.⁹⁰

October 1918 marked the final stage in the occupation of Serbia. Many legends and oral testimonies depict clashes between Austro-Hungarian troops and insurgents in the Čačak District, but few can be verified by the surviving documentary sources. In October 1918 there was a clash between gendarmes and a large group of insurgents on the slopes of Mt Kablar, which ended in the gendarmes retreating back to Čačak.⁹¹ Another big incident took place in the Ovčar-Kablar Gorge on 25 October 1918, the day Čačak was liberated. The insurgents led by Mihailo and Vojko Čvrkić from Rošci (Čačak County) sabotaged the last Austro-Hungarian train from Čačak to Užice and caused it to fall into the Zapadna Morava river.⁹² During the evacuation of the last troops from the city the bridge over the Zapadna Morava was mined, but the retreating units were attacked by the *komite* led by Božidar Karaklajić on the hill called Ljubić.⁹³

Civilian victims of occupying forces

The outbreak of the First World War and the subsequent Austro-Hungarian occupation of the Čačak District inevitably changed the lives of the local people. A visible change was the emergence of new cemeteries for those who died or were killed in battle. They were established for both Serbian and Central Powers' soldiers, as well as for civilians who died in military hospitals. The biggest graveyard, just opposite the military hospital in Čačak, for all soldiers who were killed in the environs of the town or died in the hospital, was tended by the occupation forces. The graves were marked with wooden crosses and there was a central monument of white marble, visible from the town, which bore the inscription: *Es starb ein jeder für sein Vaterland* (All died for their fatherland). One part of it was reserved for the Serbian soldiers who died in the hospital.⁹⁴ After the war there was an ini-

⁹⁰ "Vešanje u Čačku" [Hanging in Čačak], *Čačanski glas* 2.7, Čačak 1933, 2.

⁹¹ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 66.

⁹² Radovan M. Marinković, "Ginuli u osvjet slobode" [They died at the dawn of freedom], *Čačanski glas* LXVII.39, Čačak, 25 September 1998, 9.

⁹³ Goran Davidović and Miloš Timotijević, *Zatamnjena prošlost. Istorija ravnogoraca čačanskog kraja*, vol. I [An obscured past. The history of the members of the Ravna Gora movement from the Čačak area] (Čačak – Gornji Milanovac – Kraljevo: Narodni muzej Čačak, 2002), 24.

⁹⁴ Teodosije Vukosavljević, "Spomenik ratnicima Prvog svetskog rata na groblju u Čačku" [Monument to First World War Soldiers in the Čačak Cemetery], *Zbornik radova Narodnog muzeja VI* (Čačak 1975), 233.

tiative in Čačak to collect all the remains of soldiers buried in the town or its vicinity during the war regardless of their nationality or army they had fought for. In 1934 a memorial of “four faiths” (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Muslim and Jewish) was built to mark the ossuary with the remains of 918 recovered bodies (of which 262 Central Powers’ soldiers).⁹⁵

Other cemeteries and individual graves in the Čačak District show that danger to life during the occupation could come from more than one side. The practice of civilians denouncing other civilians to occupation authorities was not uncommon. Such allegations usually resulted in the interment of the denounced, as may be seen from the tombstone of Živko Četrović from Adrani (Kraljevo County) who was deported to Hungary upon denunciation by other Serbs in 1916. The inscription on a gravestone in Ušće claims that three members of the Planojević family were shot by Austro-Hungarian soldiers because they had been denounced by a certain Nikolija Barlova.⁹⁶

It is not yet possible to come up with the exact number of people from the Čačak District who perished during the First World War, particularly during the occupation period of 1915–1918. According to some estimates, the military and civilian death toll for Čačak alone exceeds 4,000 people, mostly Serbs.⁹⁷ After the war Serbian authorities tried to make a record of the names of all people who had been killed or gone missing during the occupation, but hardly completed the task. It came up with a total of 119 names for Čačak,⁹⁸ and 20 names (17 male and three female, some of them hanged in Guča) for the municipality of Kaona in Guča County.⁹⁹ According to the list of Čačak citizens compiled in February 1919 for the purpose of sugar rationing, the town had a population of about 4,800 compared to some 6,000 in 1914, which shows a wartime decline of some twenty per cent. According to the pre-war census of 1910, Čačak had 5,671 and the Čačak District 138,911 inhabitants. According to the census the Austro-Hungarian authorities carried out in the MGG/S in July 1916, there were 4,156 people in Čačak and 114,783 in the district, which shows that during the war and occupation the decline in urban population was greater than in rural. The 1921 census data for the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes

⁹⁵ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 68.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 83–84.

⁹⁷ I express my gratitude to the historian Goran Davidović of the Historical Archives of Čačak for permission to publish this information from his as yet unpublished “List of Casualties during the Balkan Wars and the First World War in Čačak”.

⁹⁸ IAC, Opština čačanska [Čačak Municipality (OČ)] (1918–1941) K-1, no. 3194/21, 29 March 1921.

⁹⁹ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 134.

show 121,888 citizens in the Čačak District, still 14 per cent less (over 17,000 people) than in 1910.¹⁰⁰

The Austro-Hungarian occupation system was quite systematic and meticulous in collecting data regarding the Serbian population in the MGG/S, as shown by the census carried out in 1916. So we know that in 1916 there were in the Čačak District a total of 1,931 births and 2,436 deaths, which is a negative population growth (a loss of 505 people).¹⁰¹ Of these 2,436 civilian deaths, only 14 were registered as violent (nine murders and five suicides), but the category “other” in the same group of statistical data contains 56 deaths not caused by diseases, tuberculosis, natural causes or acts of violence.¹⁰² It may be assumed that these 56 cases included people executed by the Austro-Hungarian authorities.

Conclusions

It may be said in conclusion that the Austro-Hungarian occupation authorities in the Čačak District pursued a repressive policy designed for the whole of the MGG/S with the initial aim of pacifying the hostile Serbian population. Even though the Čačak District was a relatively peaceful part of the MGG/S considering its sizeable territory and large remote areas in the south, many civilian and military victims provide enough evidence that its complete pacification was an impossible task. The described measures of the Austro-Hungarian military authorities such as mass civilian internment and disarmament and public executions probably helped prevent large-scale civilian unrest and deter some of those willing to put up armed resistance. But these often extremely brutal actions did not achieve their primary goal, to forestall every form of resistance, and therefore the problem remained unresolved of extreme violence committed by occupation Austro-Hungarian authorities or in response to it in the Čačak District throughout the occupation period of 1915–1918.

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¹⁰⁰ Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 133–135.

¹⁰¹ AS, VGG, XIV/70, 1 January – 31 December 1916.

¹⁰² Trifunović, *Život pod okupacijom*, 138.

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