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Capital Punishment in the Serbian Army: The Case of Execution at Lake Plav in 1915

Abstract: This article attempts to reconstruct the key segments of the events that took place at Lake Plav on December 25th, 1915, when 21 Serbian soldiers were executed by order of Colonel Aleksandar K. Stojšić. The source base for this research had to rely on the memoirs and recollections of contemporaries due to the limited mention of this topic in official military correspondence. This unprecedented event signaled the appearance of a new type of war related violence in the Serbian army. Besides the issues of desertion, violence and punishment in the armed forces, this article also discusses the notions of sovereignty and citizenship in times of extreme hardships of war during the Great Serbian Retreat. Many Serbian soldiers who left their units in late 1915 tried to defend themselves by saying that the “military oath” was invalid because Serbia was “abandoned” or “lost”. Such a situation forced the military authorities to try to regain their shaken authority by “negotiating discipline” under completely new circumstances.

Keywords: deserters, Serbia, Great War, Colonel Aleksandar K. Stojšić, court martial

“The court martial works on Sundays and during holidays, at any time of the day...”¹
Guidelines for the work of courts martial, Belgrade 1901 (article 324).

In late May 1937, the Yugoslav public could read in the newspapers that another officer from the famed generation of Serbian war commanders

1 Милош Гојковић, *Зборник војних правосудних прописа (1839–1995)*, (Београд: Војноиздавачки завод, 2000), 181.

had left. People commented with sadness that famous officers were disappearing from the scene one by one. General Aleksandar K. Stojšić was 63 years old.² He did not belong to the most famous and oldest war figures. Although he became a general in 1923, after the war, he was widely known in Serbia as a courageous and capable officer. According to the standardized newspaper obituary, he was born into a respectable Valjevo family and after high school he entered the Military Academy in Belgrade. He gradually advanced through the military ranks, passing through lower positions in the infantry. Since 1912, his biography has been enriched with a series of war exploits and events. He entered the First Balkan War as a major, but in 1913 he was promoted to lieutenant colonel. Two years later, he became a colonel.

The fact that he took command of the XVII Infantry Regiment in May 1914 is of particular importance to this article. The history of this unit was inextricably linked with General Stojšić. He earned the highest Serbian military decorations and several foreign ones, including the French Legion of Honor. He remained in active service even after the war, commanding the new units of the Yugoslav army. By 1931, he was retired. It was an impressive track record. Stojšić was described in the usual terms associated with this generation of Serbian officers: he was seen as a “father-like figure”, “tactful and mild-mannered”.³ Contemporaries also knew him as a “daring and sang-froid man”.⁴ He also had a reputation of a commander who was present at the front line. As a result, he was wounded twice: once in 1914, and for the second time during the Kajmakčalan battle on the Salonika front. Namely, officer Stojšić particularly distinguished himself on September 13, 1916, when he personally took command of the frontline troops in order to motivate them to repel another Bulgarian counterattack.⁵ Thus he received a second wound, this time in his

2 The sources use two variants of his last name: “Stojšić” and “Stojišić”. Dimitrije Ljotić used the option “Stojšić”, while Stanislav Krakov, Živojin Lazić and General Živko Pavlović wrote “Stojišić”. Even the official military gazette (*Službeni vojni glasnik*) printed his surname differently. In this article, his surname is written as “Stojšić”, as his daughter Vera Verner put it on his grave at the New Cemetery in Belgrade.

3 Аноним, „Смрт хероја са Кајмакчалана. Алекса Стојшић, дивизијски генерал у пензији и резерви“, *Правда*, 28. 5. 1937, 5; Mile Bjelajac, „Stojišić K. Aleksandar“, *Generali i admirali Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1918–1941*, (Beograd: Dobra–INIS, 2004), 283.

4 Аноним, „Смрт хероја са Кајмакчалана“, 5.

5 The Battle of Kajmakčalan took place from September 12 to October 3, 1916. Kajmakčalan is the highest peak of Mount Nidza in northern Greece (2521 m) and was one of the most important strategic positions on the Salonika front. The battle was characterized by close combat between the trench lines and barbed wire. Control over the mountain top passed several times in different hands, before the Serbian army finally prevailed.

left hand, which he has never been able to fully use since then.⁶ A short note from the Belgrade occupation papers reveals that his family remained in Serbia while he and his soldiers left the country. His wife, Milica Stojšić, who lived in Valjevo, inquired about her husband's health at the Serbian Red Cross in Geneva after hearing that he had been wounded again.⁷

There seemed to be nothing problematic or controversial about this remarkable military biography. However, speaking at the general's funeral, his colleague, General Grgur Ristić, mentioned something unusual and somewhat interesting. He claimed that Stojšić took care of his men, but that he "knew how to control and influence the soldiers under his command with great success".⁸ Was this an allusion to a specific event or just an innocent, casual remark? Indeed, one major event was missing from the general's official biography. Everyone present at his funeral must have been aware of that. Namely, on December 25th, 1915, Colonel Stojšić ordered the execution of 21 men under his command which happened in Montenegro, right after his unit left the town of Plav. More precisely, Stojšić was desperate to stop the disintegration of his unit. Desertion was reducing the fighting capacity of his unit as it quickly evolved into a mass phenomenon. His decision had the elements of summary execution and was completely illegal according to the Serbian military legislation in force at the time. The execution itself represented one of the most drastic applications of the death penalty in the Serbian army during the First World War.

It can be argued that this event was the exception rather than the rule and that it was the logical last resort of a wartime commander. In addition, only a fraction of Serbian troops was affected by this type of violence. Consequently, does this "incident" even deserve the attention of researchers? However, upon closer inspection, the relevance of this event becomes apparent. The violence that was used in this case was so drastic, unprecedented and new in its form, that it had to shake the entire Serbian army. Dealing with this event, it is possible to address some of the most inaccessible processes that took place in the crumbling Serbian army at the end of 1915.

The Plav shootings deepen our understanding of the true conditions in the Serbian army. Besides, this incident reveals that the most essential military concepts were put under intense scrutiny in late 1915, among them the meaning of the military oath and flag, but also the honor of soldiers and of-

6 Аноним, „Смрт хероја са Кајмакчалана“, 5.

7 Аноним, „Nestali i korespondencija“, *Beogradske novine*, 16. 10. 1916, 3.

8 Аноним, „Скупштина и слава Удружења носилаца Карађорђевог звезде са мачевима“, *Београдске општинске новине*, LVI/12, децембар 1938, 1000.

ficers. The loss of national territory, one of the key elements of state sovereignty, further encouraged ordinary Serbian soldiers to question the capacity of the state and its right to executive power. The Plav shootings vividly testify that the social agreement between the Serbian state and its citizens, which had been gradually established since the early decades of the 19th century, was in deep crisis due to the outmost hardships brought by the last war. After all, the silence about this event was broken only after the Second World War, in emigration. In this respect, the Plav shootings are very important for understanding the memory culture, built and maintained around the Great Serbian Retreat or the “Albanian Golgotha”, as that event is colloquially known in Serbia.

Criminal law in wartime conditions

In order to suppress absenteeism, desertion and the practice of self-mutilation to avoid combat, the Serbian military system relied on the Military Criminal Code introduced in 1901. Its paragraphs 57 to 69 regulated unauthorized absences from units in peacetime, high alert and wartime. Several peculiarities were highlighted, so the law distinguished between a lone deserter and desertion in a group.⁹ The second option was seen as a more serious offense and the harshest punishment was reserved for a ringleader. The critical deadline for returning to the unit, without any sanctions, was three days. Within that framework, the absence could be tolerated and the soldier could still be pardoned. According to this law, the death penalty was provided only for those who had deserted more than once (Article 65).¹⁰ In wartime, the situation was quite different. An officer who deserted his unit on the battlefield would face the death penalty. For ordinary people who deserted on the battlefield, there were two possible sentences: ten years in prison or the death penalty. A prison sentence would practically mean freedom, because wartime conditions meant that the sentence would be served only after the end of the war. Until then, the soldier should have behaved in his unit as usual.

Article 66 of the Military Criminal Code referred to those who spread fear and panic, or encouraged others to flee. In this case too, the instigator should have been sentenced to death, while the other members of the group could have been sentenced to ten years in prison. However, self-mutilation on the battlefield carried only the death penalty.¹¹ Another important law for the functioning of the military court was the Law on the Procedure of Military

9 Гојковић, *Зборник*, 197–198.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, 198.

Courts in Criminal Offences, also promulgated in 1901 to define both the role and jurisdiction of the military court. The sole purpose of this type of court was to prosecute those caught under Article 66 of the Military Criminal Code, that is, those arrested for being absent from the battlefield or for spreading false rumors and panic at the front. The court-martial was supposed to consist of five members, four officers and one non-commissioned officer. It was emphasized that this court has nothing to do with regular court proceedings and that it should continue its work with as little bureaucracy and formality as possible. The work of the court had to be completed in 24 hours or in three days at the latest. However, the death sentence could not be passed by a simple majority but by the votes of four out of five judges. The decision would then be forwarded to the commander for execution.¹² If more than one member of the court disagreed with the death penalty, the accused would face a regular court.¹³ Despite such precise guidelines, military documents and diaries reveal a hidden world of informal day-to-day practices that included intimidation and discretionary amnesty.¹⁴

Before the desertion crisis it faced in Kosovo and Montenegro in late 1915, the Serbian army had already experienced a very serious moral crisis a year earlier during the defensive phases of the Battle of Kolubara. In October and November 1914, thousands of soldiers left their commands, witnessing the collapse of Serbian lines along the Drina. Obviously, the officers of the regiments could not cope with these problems alone. Various measures were discussed, including some draconian military punishments such as forced displacement of fugitives' families, and confiscation of their property.¹⁵ Finally, on November 20, 1914,¹⁶ special depot commands were introduced to "collect" soldiers who left their units.¹⁷ The depot command was to be placed directly under the authority of the Serbian Supreme Command, while each depot command was to be composed of several officers and non-commissioned officers.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*, 182.

14 *Велики рат Србије за ослобођење и уједињење Срба, Хрвата и Словенаца*, III, (Београд: Главни ђенералштаб, 1925), 401; Ђорђе Лукић, *Битка на Дрини 1914*, (Београд 1966: Војноиздавачки завод), 426.

15 *Војни архив* (Military Archives, Belgrade - VA) Register 3a, box 141, folder 1, document 1, Headquarters of the III Army to the Supreme Command, 16 (29) September 1914; Бранислав Глигоријевић, *Краљ Александар Карађорђевић*, том I, (Београд: Београдски издавачко-графички завод, 1996), 149.

16 VA, Register 3a, box 141, folder 1, document 1, Headquarters of the III Army to the Supreme Command, 16 (29) September 1914.

17 *Ibid.*

Any soldier who wandered away from his unit, without any permission, was to be questioned and court-martialed.¹⁸ Consequently, all the soldiers collected were not returned to their units without investigation. In the end, three depot commands were formed in Gornji Milanovac, Kragujevac and Mladenovac, near the front line in 1914.¹⁹ Moreover, the civil administration and military stations throughout the country were supposed to control the papers of all soldiers in their area. If caught, the fugitives would have to be brought immediately to the nearest depot command. By mid-November, a closely network of control and inspection was created, even in the most remote parts of Serbia. There were very few opportunities for deserters and fugitives to remain free for longer.²⁰ The idea was quite clear: to free combat units from dealing with deserters. Thus, the formation of this new type of unit, which focused strictly on desertion, had a huge psychological effect. This measure, together with the arrival of ammunition from the allied countries, reinforcements in manpower and a short pause in the fighting, were seen as key elements that enabled the counteroffensive on Kolubara in early December 1914.

Rearguard formations in Montenegro

Pursued for almost three months by advancing German, Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian troops, the Serbian Supreme Command found itself confined to a narrow territory along the state border with Albania and Montenegro by mid-November. In the end, the troops retreated mostly across the Montenegrin border or, to a lesser extent, by entering Albania directly. The plan was for the two groups to meet on the Albanian coast of the Adriatic where they would be assisted by Entente forces.²¹ Many processes characterized this retreat, one of which was desertion. In fact, Serbian troops experienced a severe numerical reduction as soon as they crossed the former Serbian-Ottoman state border. Crossing the old border of 1912 seems to have triggered a psychological shift for many soldiers, as if they became aware that they had gone too far from their families and homes. Colonel Dobrosav Milenković, commander of the Šumadija Division of the I levy, wrote about it. He mentioned that at the

18 Narodna biblioteka Srbije (National Library of Serbia, Belgrade), Manuscript Department, R. 736/VI/41, Headquarters of the Supreme Command to the Commander of the II Army, 5(18) November 1914.

19 Ibid.

20 VA, Register 3a, box 141, folder 1, document 1, Order of the Chief of Staff of the Supreme Command for 7(20) November 1914.

21 Милан Недић, *Српска војска на Албанској Голготи*, (Београд: Министарство војске и морнарице, 1936), 61.

Tenešdol pass, the officers of the XIX regiment forced out from the neighboring forest about 100 soldiers of the XII regiment of the I levy. The men tried to explain that they had lost the unit, but the truth was quite the opposite.²² As the troops arrived in Kosovo, desertion provoked bitter social conflicts and a rift within the units. Lieutenant Stojan Ivković wrote in his diary on November 22, 1915, when he was near Kosovska Mitrovica, that 93 men from his battery escaped. His personal orderly also fled, taking with him all of lieutenant's personal food provisions.²³ Desertion not only worsened the unit's performance, but also caused demoralization among the soldiers who remained.

The Serbian Supreme Command was very well aware of this problem and regularly addressed it in its communication. In late November 1915, it was estimated that the military strength of all regiments was below a quarter of the nominal strength.²⁴ Every night, many units lost hundreds of soldiers due to desertion. For example, on November 26, the commander of the Timok Division of the II levy reported that 132 of his men had fled to the enemy, while he had only 2,500 men left in his entire division.²⁵ Two days later, the commander of the units that belonged to the defense of Belgrade, General Mihailo Živković, wrote to the Supreme Command that morale and discipline had collapsed to such an extent that it was no longer possible to rely on soldiers and non-commissioned officers. He concluded that the scale of desertion was such that the officers were completely helpless.²⁶

The phenomenon evolved every day. At the end of November, there were cases when Serbian units clashed with each other, because the fugitives did not want to stop or return when they were ordered to. Instead, they would open fire on loyal troops or local Albanians.²⁷ An additional problem for the Serbian army was that the local Albanian population was acquiring rapid-fire rifles from Serbian deserters on a daily basis. Guns were left behind or exchanged for food and clothing. These weapons were later seen in the hands of Albanian rebels who sporadically clashed with Serbian units.

22 Добросав Ј. Миленковић, *Шумадијска дивизија I позива 1915*, III, (Крагујевац 1936), 166.

23 Стојан Ивковић, *Ратни дневник 1915–1918*, приредио Александар С. Ивковић, (Београд: А. С. Ивковић, 1998), 51.

24 *Велики рат Србије за ослобођење и уједињење Срба, Хрвата и Словенаца*, XIII, (Београд: Главни Ђенералштаб, 1927), 26.

25 Живко Г. Павловић, *Рат Србије са Аустро-Угарском, Немачком и Бугарском 1915. године*, приредили Видосав Ковачевић и Зоран Јаковљевић, (Београд: Медија центар „Одбрана“, 2017), 799.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*, 807.

It is important to point out that despite the fact that the retreat had elements of an utter collapse, in general, the Serbian army managed to maintain organization and a minimum of discipline during the retreat. During the operations throughout Montenegro, several units, mostly from the First Serbian Army, were given extremely difficult tasks. This included assisting Montenegrin forces at critical points along their front line with Austria-Hungary. Furthermore, the same troops acted as a rearguard along the main retreat junctions. These units not only had to be ready for combat, but also had to stay longer in inaccessible parts of Montenegro, far from food supply routes. These units soon encountered enormous problems in finding even the most basic food. One of such units was the Plav Detachment, formed on December 6, 1915, to carry out a specific operation. The exit from the mountain passes that connected the road from the Dečani monastery to the Montenegrin city of Plav had to be defended “in the most persistent way”.²⁸ There was also a fear that in the event of a major attack by the Albanian rebels, the retreat routes could be cut off.²⁹ The XVII Regiment of the I levy was the nucleus of this improvised battle group. In addition to this first quality unit, there were other units such as V Recruits Regiment, together with a machine gun squad and one platoon (two guns) belonging to V Mountain Battery. The Volunteer Squad was also attached to those formations.³⁰ The official correspondence reveal that the men stationed in this part of Montenegro were “tired, exhausted and dissatisfied”, adding that cases of death due to exhaustion and starvation began to appear.³¹ The commander of the Timok Army wrote from the north of Montenegro on December 10, 1915: “The feeling of despair with fatal consequences is slowly taking over even those who have shown courage and self-confidence in the most difficult situations”.³² The units in the field were still not sure of their numbers. It was estimated that upon leaving Serbia, a regiment was considered “strong” if it had “at least 800 rifles”.

Despite being formally composed of several units, the Plav Detachment was in reality numerically weak. On December 11, the Supreme Command received a report according to which the Plav Detachment consisted of 2,200 men.³³ The XVII Regiment was the strongest unit (more than 1,500 men), together with the Volunteer Squad, which was estimated to have about 575 sol-

28 Недић, *Српска војска*, 90–91.

29 *Велики рат Србије*, XIII, 274.

30 *Ibid*, 200.

31 *Ibid*, 202.

32 *Ibid*, 253.

33 *Ibid*, 261.

diers.³⁴ The next day, December 12, Colonel Stojšić reported that the food situation was so dire that the soldiers began to die of starvation.³⁵ Problems with bread supplies were the most serious. There were even cases when portions of bread intended for outposts were stolen by other units stationed along the way. Therefore, nothing reached the Plav Detachment.³⁶ Despite these problems, the detachment had to perform its duty. On the same day, December 12, the unit had to help local Montenegrin troops who were attacked by Albanian rebels near the village of Hoti.³⁷ The task of the Plav Detachment was also to organize an intelligence network and find reliable people who would then be sent to the town Peć in Metohija. It was important to find out what was happening on the other side of the mountain.³⁸

Soon, cases of dysentery also appeared, while the number of fugitives rose sharply.³⁹ The Drina Division of the II levy recorded as many as 232 deserters in the night between December 17 and 18. The same unit recorded four deaths caused by poor nutrition and exhaustion.⁴⁰ On the same night, 39 people from the Plav detachment, more precisely from Stojšić's XVII Regiment, deserted. These were soldiers stationed at vanguard positions, and the desertion continued every night. During the following night, on December 19 to 20, as many as 981 soldiers deserted from the Drina Division of the II levy. It was recorded that the number of people who died of starvation increased from four to ten soldiers, while 167 men requested medical assistance. The commander of this unit wrote in despair to the Supreme Command that morale was at "zero point" and that "soldiers openly express disobedience".⁴¹ The same thing happened tomorrow night, when another 863 soldiers left the 6th Regiment of the II levy. Thus, the regiment practically ceased to exist. The commanders begged to transfer them somewhere else, where it would be easier to find food, towards Shkoder or at least towards Podgorica.⁴² Fears grew that the troops would fall into "total lawlessness because of these intolerable conditions".⁴³ On December 21, the Supreme Command agreed that most of the troops of the First Army

34 *Ibid*, 362; Недић, *Српска војска*, 98.

35 *Велики рат Србије*, 273.

36 *Ibid*, 321.

37 *Ibid*, 279.

38 *Ibid*, 321.

39 *Ibid*, 330.

40 *Ibid*, 339.

41 *Ibid*, 346.

42 *Ibid*, 362.

43 *Ibid*, 363.

should move south, closer to Lake Skadar, towards the richer Montenegrin villages where they could at least buy food. Starting on December 22, 1915, all the troops of the First Serbian Army, except for a few that were still part of the Montenegrin command, moved towards the villages of Tuzi and Hoti.⁴⁴

Execution at Lake Plav

On December 25, 1915, after a 19-day stay in the city of Plav, the Plav detachment was supposed to be transferred to the village of Gusinje and reach Podgorica in four days. However, the night before, a group of soldiers unsuccessfully tried to desert, which changed the regimental commander's plans. There are four known sources that mention the events that took place that day to varying degrees. In 1952, the autobiography of Dimitrije Ljotić was published posthumously in Munich under the title "From my life". This famous interwar politician and German collaborator during the Second World War apparently wrote his autobiography between the two world wars. The publication of this manuscript in 1952 was the first public mention of the Plav events. Ljotić introduced this story as part of his contemplations on the nature of those in power. His thesis implied that if a strong and honorable person represented the state authorities, the citizens would forgive him for any possible mistakes. In that context, he mentioned the name of Colonel Aleksandar K. Stojšić and his decision to kill his own subordinate soldiers. However, Ljotić's testimony is of secondary importance because he was not at the scene when the events took place. His unit was the V Regiment, which was indeed retreating along the same route, but was not part of the Plav Detachment. What did Ljotić actually say? He wrote that after convening a court-martial, Colonel Stojšić ordered the execution of 24 soldiers. Everything happened in one hour. First, he ordered his soldiers to put down their rifles in front of them, in a pyramid shape. Four battalions formed a wide square on the field. The colonel then took out his watch and said that he was giving his men 10 minutes to reveal the "instigators" who were propagating the desertion of the "army flag". He also accused the "ring-leaders" of suggesting surrender to the enemy under the false pretext that "Serbia was lost". According to Ljotić, Stojšić ordered all the soldiers to line up and then threatened to apply an archaic and unusual form of military punishment: the removal of the "tenth" or Roman "decimatio". He chose one of every ten soldiers and ordered them to step out of line. Only after threatening with this measure, the instigators decided to step out of the crowd.⁴⁵

44 *Ibid*, 364.

45 *Ibid*.

As a lawyer by training and even briefly the Minister of Law in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Ljotić was not an outsider in legal matters. Consequently, he emphasized that Stojšić's act has nothing to do with legality: "There were most likely innocents among those shot, but certainly not as many as the guilty ones".⁴⁶ Ljotić had no doubt that this was an excessive example of "commander's diligence". However, he showed understanding as this was done by "a great hero and an honorable man".⁴⁷ It was a desperate move to prevent the complete disintegration of his regiment.⁴⁸ Dimitrije Ljotić made another important observation, saying that this drastic measure generally had positive consequences because the XVII Regiment brought the largest number of rifles to the island of Corfu, the final destination of the Great Serbian Retreat. More precisely, desertions have stopped. Ljotić emphasized that this regiment had the largest number of soldiers among the regiments that retreated across their peacetime service area, which meant that these units were even more tempted to desert and return to their families.⁴⁹

More importantly, Ljotić speculated that if one spoke to the veterans of this regiment between the two world wars, the topic of the Plav execution would simply be left out of the conversation. If mentioned after all, the speaker would limit himself to repeating the basic facts about the event, without making positive or negative comments, nor judgments.⁵⁰

Ljotić's report is very important because it testifies that other Serbian units also knew about the incident and that the news spread in a distorted and mythical way. He got many details wrong, as two first-hand accounts reveal. The first to testify about the Plav events was Stanislav Krakov, another well-known figure of interwar Yugoslavia. By coincidence, he was an officer in Stojšić's regiment and found himself at the epicenter of the event. He left a lengthy report of as many as 12 pages, describing not only the execution but also what happened before the shooting.⁵¹ He added all his literary talent to the story, creating a very tense and harrowing description of that day. This poses the question - did the "the most beloved military writer" add details for aesthetics, or did he perhaps overemphasize his own role in the event? As in the case of Dimitrije Ljotić, Krakov's account was written long after the event, in

46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*

48 *Ibid.*

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*

51 Станислав Краков, *Живот човека на Балкану*, (Београд: Наш дом; Lausanne: L'age de Homme, 2009), 123–135.

1968, as part of his planned autobiography. As Krakov passed away, his unfinished memoirs were published only in 1997.

In his autobiography, Krakov begins this episode by describing his heartfelt goodbye with his local Muslim hosts. Suddenly, he was summoned to be a judge in a court-martial that was to act immediately. He learns that another group tried to desert the night before, but this time they were intercepted and arrested by Chetniks from the Volunteer Squad.⁵² Krakov also heard that the regimental commander was “furious” and had given orders to his officers that all escapees, without exception, be shot. It also meant that court-martial judges were indirectly instructed to show no mercy.⁵³ If true, this instruction was a brazen violation of the Military Criminal Code because the commander had the right only to enforce the court’s decision, not to impose or even modify it.

Krakov added many details to his report. He noted the extraordinary security measures taken around the building where the court was located. He also saw how the Chetniks, as part of the investigation, beat with sticks two Montenegrins who were guides to the deserters the previous night. However, since they were not citizens of Serbia, they could not be prosecuted or killed, but “only” severely beaten.⁵⁴ Krakov gave a detailed description of the men who entered the room. The first, seen as the “instigator”, was a very tall uncommissioned officer from the 5th Mountain Battery. He explained how the Chetnik patrols met them in the gorge. Krakov reported that the man pleaded guilty, saying something that intertwined and intersected the notions of sovereignty and citizenship: “We left our country, Serbia, a month ago. As we are now in the territory of Montenegro, which is not part of our country, I believe that the oath given to the Fatherland no longer binds us. I think we belong next to our houses, not here, in a foreign country.”⁵⁵

This argument was already known to Serbian officers and was heard for the first time in November 1915, when it became clear that the retreat would continue across the state border. The President of the court-martial correctly assumed that these people would most likely end up in Austro-Hungarian captivity, since it would be almost impossible for them to reach their villages as they wished. The accused artilleryman responded with the naive argument that the role of local guides was to avoid enemy troops. However, arriving in

52 *Ibid*, 124.

53 *Ibid*.

54 *Ibid*, 125.

55 *Ibid*, 126.

Serbia meant crossing not only Montenegrin, but also Austro-Hungarian lines. He was unanimously sentenced to death. The next five soldiers from the same group were also sentenced to death. “It was like they made an agreement. Everyone confessed, everyone uttered the same stupid defense that at the same time presented the most serious self-accusation, which leads to a final verdict... No, always the same: “The oath no longer binds us since we are on foreign soil”⁵⁶

According to Krakov’s testimony, the soldiers did not complain about the lack of food or other things. They probably believed that, whatever awaited them, it could not be much worse than staying and starving in Plav. However, the arguments about the “oath” indicate that certain ties between the Serbian state and its citizens were significantly weakened. The seventh accused soldier was student officer, Svetomir Radovanović, a close friend of Krakov. It turned out that the Chetniks arrested him by mistake, in a completely different context. At Krakov’s insistence and persuasion, Radovanović was released, while the documentation about his presence in the court was immediately destroyed. Then the trial focused on another large group of deserters, 14 of them. Krakov noted that the situation in this case was very complex and that the group was really caught at the very exit from the village of Plav. Krakov wrote that the prosecution’s act here was “blurry and confusing”.⁵⁷ The soldiers were accused of planning to desert the previous evening during dinner, but they denied the allegations. They allegedly had an argument with the battalion cook who reported them. In the end, the military court decided to send the soldiers to a regular court, which in reality meant freedom.⁵⁸ Soon instructions arrived from Colonel Stojšić that the men would continue to be kept in custody and that he would personally inspect the verdicts. In the meantime, the regiment was ordered to march. However, shortly after leaving Plav, the entire Plav Detachment was ordered to get off the main trail leading to Gusinje and descend towards Lake Plav.⁵⁹ Four battalions of the XVII Regiment were ordered to create a hollow square. Krakov estimated that the regiment had 1,800 men at the time, but this probably means that all units of the Plav Detachment were present. Suddenly, the colonel, accompanied by several officers on horseback, rushed through the square. Krakov noted that Stojšić’s face was “completely red”. Just like Ljotić, Krakov recorded that the soldiers were first disarmed by placing rifles in the pyramids. Then it was ordered to increase the distance

56 *Ibid.*, 127.

57 *Ibid.*, 129.

58 *Ibid.*

59 *Ibid.*

between each man. The square now became much larger, as each man had to count 30 steps to increase the distance between them. These huge gaps between the disarmed soldiers left them very exposed, as Krakov noted. The next step was the installation of machine guns, aimed at each of the four battalions. The weapon was completely ready to fire, the gun was loaded with bullets, and the crew even brought water to cool the barrel. Soon, even two mountain guns were placed in firing positions.

“I was haunted by the suspicion that Colonel Stojšić had gone mad”, Krakov wrote after seeing the rifles pointed at him and his soldiers. He considered using a hand grenade on the machine gun position in front of him, as he always kept one with him. Suddenly he heard the scream of Colonel Stojšić: “Bring the traitors!”⁶⁰ Krakov was very careful with the numbers here, saying he counted 21 men. There were 6 convicted and 14 practically acquitted of charges that should have waited for a peacetime trial. At first, he did not know who that last 21st soldier was. Finally, he recognized his voice, it was the battalion cook. Krakov firmly believed that only six soldiers would be publicly executed and that the others would be “mere statist” in this spectacle.⁶¹

Krakov described the atmosphere very carefully. There was mention of complete silence in which every sound could be heard. Krakov was not very close to the colonel, so he could only partially hear what was being discussed. Apparently, the President of the court martial, Major Matić, was trying to defend the court decisions made in Plav. However, this short discussion ended with the words of Colonel Stojšić: “There is no mercy for traitors! I sentenced them all to death”.⁶² Major Matić’s effort to explain the position of the cook, who in the meantime started screaming and begging, was in vain, which further enraged the colonel. Krakov recorded Stojšić’s bizarre comment: “Traitors do not die with the death of a soldier. They are being slaughtered like cattle... Bring the regimental butcher to slaughter them all”⁶³ Krakov then concluded: “I am convinced now: the colonel has gone mad”⁶⁴

It created a sense of utter horror that Krakov described with all his talent. It seems that the regimental butcher was indeed called and the whole regiment waited for him for several minutes, but in the end he did not appear.⁶⁵ Officers, known as the bravest and most cheerful, tried to intervene. Lieuten-

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*, 132.

62 *Ibid.*

63 *Ibid.*

64 *Ibid.*

65 *Ibid.*

ant Colonel Dragomir Popović spoke to the colonel, but Krakov was too far away to hear him. Obviously, it was in vain, because Stojšić continued to rage. He commanded the orderlies of that regiment and battalion to step forward. These were now the only armed men in the regiment. They formed a firing squad and killed all 21 men. They had to shoot twice to kill them all.

The blood-stained snow on the shores of the beautiful Lake Plav inspired Krakov to call this event the „Ballet on Lake Plav“.⁶⁶ However, this was not the end because Stojšić was not satisfied. He demanded that the names of the other instigators be provided to him immediately. He gave two minutes to his regiment. If the men did not come out, the whole regiment would be destroyed by machine guns and artillery. He promised to wipe out the regiment he felt had been disgraced. In addition, the colonel promised to kill himself and thus disappear with his embarrassed unit.

”One soldier, like a madman, cries two names“.⁶⁷ The same soldier repeated the names of the two non-commissioned officers over and over. After they were ordered to get out of line, Stojšić ordered additional execution. However, their commander, Captain Petar J. Tešovčić, bravely approached the colonel and offered him the strongest guarantees of their military value and loyalty. After initial hesitation, Stojšić accepted these guarantees. It should be added that Captain Tešovčić was a holder of the Order of Karađorđ’s Star, just like the commander of the regiment. The regiment continued its march.

Fortunately, another soldier left a written testimony of the same incident. Known as “the most famous Salonika veteran”, Živojin Lazić kept some kind of notebook which, apparently, was edited after the war. It is written in the form of a memoir with a very precise list of names, dates and places. Lazić died in 1986 and could not have known about Krakov’s book (1997), which dealt with a similar topic. The diary of Živojin Lazić appeared only in 2006, while it was published in parts in the daily press in the 1970s.⁶⁸ Strikingly, Krakov’s and Lazić’s descriptions overlap in several gruesome details.

Živojin Lazić was an ordinary soldier in the XVII Regiment, albeit in a machine gun squad. He did not specify, but he was most likely among the soldiers standing behind the rifles pointed at the regiment. Živojin Lazić’s report was short, just a few paragraphs, but very telling. First, he gave a very precise time frame. He wrote that the unit arrived in Plav on November 23 (December 6), which coincides with official military documents. He added that his unit re-

66 *Ibid.*

67 *Ibid.*, 134.

68 Живојин Лазич, *Ратни дневник*, (Београд: Хришћанска мисао, 2006).

mained in Plav until December 12 (December 25). This is the only reliable information about the time of the execution. Živojin Lazić wrote the following:

“The day we left for Gusinje, 25 soldiers were shot. They were shot by the commander of the XVII Regiment, Aca Stojšić, lieutenant colonel, a false witness at the Salonika trial.⁶⁹ Lazić stated that 25 and not 21 soldiers were shot. He also called the commander “lieutenant colonel” even though Stojšić was a colonel at the time. In line with the post-1945 narrative, when it was desirable to openly criticize the staged Salonika trial, Živojin Lazić added a reference to his former commander that he obviously could not have known in 1915. Lazić listed several names of those killed. He wrote that the three shot men were originally from the village of Jazovik, near Valjevo. More interestingly, the detail about the butcher mentioned by Krakov can also be found here:

“He shot three people from the village of Jazovik: two brothers named Marković and Milo Negić, a stonemason. When Aleksandar asked the lieutenant colonel to shoot him and spare his brother because he has two children, the commander replied: ‘Call the butcher Luka to slaughter you both’. When they were shot, my platoon stayed with Second Lieutenant Dragoljub Lješović to bury the soldiers. We dug a grave in a field under the road near the shore, about a kilometer from Plav.”⁷⁰

If Lazić was in the burial group, is it reasonable to suggest that he knew the exact number of bodies better than Krakov? Were there 25 or 21 dead? However, Krakov’s position as an officer who was part of the court-martial implies that his access to data was more comprehensive.

The local population was obviously watching this event and some approached indignantly. “While we were burying them, Montenegrins came and complained why we allowed our brothers and friends to be shot.”⁷¹ Krakov also mentioned two elderly Montenegrins who commented as his troops were passing by: “Why did you shoot these wonderful people, may God judge you.”⁷² Their bitter remarks suggested that a certain “disgrace was now placed upon their arms” because the soldiers were killing their own.

The final source that discussed this incident is the most official, but it was never made public. In fact, as part of the investigation into the disastrous treatment of the youngest Serbian soldiers who took part in the Great Retreat, young men or boys, aged 15 and 19, the National Assembly formed an Inves-

69 *Ibid*, 24.

70 *Ibid*, 24–25.

71 *Ibid*, 25.

72 *Ibid*.

tigative Committee in December 1919. The deputies searched for evidence in various directions. One of the measures was to invite the public to share all information about these events. A dozen anonymous reports arrived, one of which mentioned the shooting in Plav when Colonel Stojšić ordered to kill between 17 and 21 soldiers. It was noted by mistake that the event took place at Lake Skadar instead of Lake Plav. In addition, a different reason for the execution was given - allegedly the soldiers rebelled, while the date in this anonymous letter is "December 1915".⁷³ Members of the Investigative Committee persistently followed this lead.

The statement was made by Dr. Milenko Stojić, former prosecutor of the XVII Regiment. He defended Stojšić, pointing out that he personally tried to provide the soldiers with bread from several local flour mills. He claimed that, despite such measures, desertion became a common occurrence. The prosecutor of the former regiment wrote that in just one night as many as 40 to 50 people disappeared. When it comes to the Plav shootings, Dr. Stojić said that 20 men were convicted and killed. Just like Ljotić, he confirmed that after this execution there were no more desertions.⁷⁴ On January 28, 1920, this position was supported by the commander of the First Army, Field Marshal Petar Bojović. He also had to report to the Supreme Command on the Committee's investigation. Bojović claimed that Stojšić's act had successful repercussions and that it was then approved by his superiors. Bojović practically rejected any criticism. He further complained about the "illegal entry" of the Investigative Committee into the subject, insisting that this body "is not empowered to inquire into this matter". Bojović ended his report by ridiculing the anonymous person who reported this incident to the Committee.⁷⁵

Conclusion

The procedure for the work of the court martial meant that it could also work outdoors. In this case, the troops should form a square while the judges are placed in the middle. Then they would investigate the potential guilt of the accused.⁷⁶ This way of acting implied a certain level of public spectacle that could have a deep psychological impact on the remaining soldiers. Obviously, Colonel Stojšić was inspired by this part of military regulations. How-

73 Владимир Ј. Радојевић, Добросав Ј. Миленковић, *Пронаст српских регрута 1915*, (Београд: САНУ, 1967), 202–203.

74 *Ibid.*

75 *Ibid.*

76 Гојковић, *Зборник*, 185.

ever, he combined this with cases used in the distant military past. Instead of organizing a court-martial there, perhaps for the second time, he decided to take the law into his own hands. This was by no means legal. What did he want to achieve by expressing his anger and vengeance? Was he really as crazy as Stanislav Krakov thought? Natalie Zemon Davies argued that there must be a logic behind the “seemingly senseless violence”.⁷⁷ Studies about the cases of coercive discipline, even in cases of ancient ‘decimatio’, have indicated that the discipline was often ‘negotiated’ between soldiers and their commanders.⁷⁸ Studies have shown that “decimatio” was used more as a rhetorical construct in later periods of Roman history and was only used acutely 3 to 4 times in the entire Roman military history. Colonel Stojšić’s final conversation with Captain Petar J. Tešovčić, one of the battalion commanders, also points to this explanation.

Moreover, it can be argued that during its retreat, the Serbian army slowly but steadily lost the characteristics of a modern army. After destroying all of its modern military equipment, before leaving the state territory, the continuous deprivation of food and rest was now destroying its morale and discipline. By December 1915, it seemed as if segments of the Serbian army had reached a kind of pre-modern state. Here the observations made by Foucault are of enormous value for understanding what happened at the Plav’s Lake. His remarks about pre-modern states, where the body was used as a stage and where spectacular public executions aimed to strengthen legitimacy, proved to be very important.⁷⁹ The Plav case fits neatly into this model. Stojšić obviously considered that his violent outburst was the only remaining tool for reaffirming his shaken authority. Such brutal violence also had the role of strengthening group bonds and cleansing their “sins of desertion” as in ancient Roman times.⁸⁰

It is worth mentioning here the order of the Serbian Supreme Command issued a month earlier, on November 9, 1915, while the Serbian army was still fighting in central Serbia. This document practically gave a free hand to unit commanders in re-establishing morale and discipline: “To implement this, I leave a completely free hand to the commanders in choosing the means to achieve it, because the above objective must be achieved by any means, without any hesitation regarding legal responsibilities. Commands of military courts

77 Michael J. Taylor, “Decimatio: Myth, Discipline, and Death in the Roman Republic“, *Antichthon* 56/2022.

78 Ibid, 115.

79 Philip Dwyer, *Violence. A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 9.

80 Taylor, “Decimatio“, 106.

and depots must perform their duties most energetically and mercilessly, without any formalities or other procedures”.⁸¹ This document encouraged disobedience of the Serbian Military Criminal Code and this order could have had a significant impact on Stojšić.

Apparently, the soldiers who deserted or planned to do so did not seek conflict with officers or other soldiers. They lived for a long time in conditions of the most terrible scarcity and hardship. The case of the British Army deserves special mention here. The death penalty in the British armed forces was abolished in 1930 for almost all military offences, including desertion. This change came about as a result of numerous investigations and heated public debate about the military executions during the war years 1914–1918. Finally, it was accepted that each individual has his own limits which are different for each person. As a result, no British soldiers were executed for desertion in Second World War. The cases of France, Germany and Italy saw similar fierce debates in the interwar period.⁸²

The unlawful killing did not destroy Stojšić’s career. On the contrary. However, this case, despite being defended by military officials and part of the public, was not celebrated nor publicized as an example to be emulated. Everything was more or less swept under the rug which signaled that something terrible had happened. The role of Montenegrin “neutral” observers of the “spectacle” testified that the shooting was wrong, not only from a strictly legal point of view, but also from the perspective of traditional, patriarchal morality and warrior ethos.

Military law existed not only to maintain discipline in the Serbian army, but also to protect Serbian citizens who were then under arms. Perhaps a more compassionate policy would have allowed Stojšić to preserve his regiment and still continue the retreat with still a considerable military force. It is also questionable whether the death penalty was as effective as military officials believed. The fear that research on this and similar topics could taint the Great Serbian Retreat is unjustified, as shown by the cases of British, German or French historiography.⁸³ The Plav case deserves to be included in the “grand

81 Милан Зеленика, *Рат Србије и Црне Горе 1915*, (Београд: Војно дело, 1954), 335–336; *Велики рат Србије*, XI, 316.

82 Steven R. Welch, “Military Justice“, 1914–1918-online. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, eds. Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10393.

83 See: Guy Pedroncini, “Les cours martiales pendant la Grande Guerre”, *Revue Historique* 2/1974, 393–408; Ulrich Bröckling, Michael Sikora, *Armeen und ihre Deserteure. Ver-*

narrative” of the retreat of 1915–1916, just like many other controversial episodes, about which we still know so little. Labeled as taboo, these and similar phenomena were often ignored in official correspondence, as was the case after the war. For example, in the most famous multi-volume postwar book and source collection about Serbia’s Great War (*Veliki rat za oslobođenje i ujedinjenje*), the Plav events are not even mentioned. Although the evidence for the Plav execution is still anecdotal, these accounts are generally credible enough to allow discussion of the episode. It is reasonable to expect that this incident will be mentioned in the documentation of the Serbian units that operated in Montenegro, or that some preserved records of military courts will appear in future research.

Summary

The article deals with the incident of the mass execution of Serbian soldiers from the Plav Detachment in December 1915. Based on the four sources that mention this event, an effort was made to reconstruct the context and the shootings that eventually took place. By analyzing this event, the article also focuses on the possibility of deepening the understanding of the Serbian army during the Great Retreat. The incident reveals that the most important military concepts were put under intense control at the end of 1915. This includes the concepts and meaning of the military oath, unit flag, and soldier’s and officer’s honor. In addition, the loss of national territory, one of the key elements of state sovereignty, further pushed ordinary Serbian soldiers to question the capacity of the state and its right to executive power. After all, the silence about this event was broken only after the Second World War, in emigration. In this respect, the Plav shootings are very significant for understanding the culture of memory that was built and maintained around the dramatic events of 1915–1916.

nachlässigte Kapitel einer Militärgeschichte der Neuzeit, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1998); Snezana Dimitrova, “The Soldier’s Death Sentence (1915–1918): Trauma, Archives, and Witness (A case study of N. Iliev’s unpublished war plays and published war short stories)“, *Годишњак за друштвену историју* 1/2009, 7–44; For the Serbian case study see: Данило Шаренац, „Војно судство и српски официри на Солунском фронту“, *Први светски рат, Балкан и велике силе*, ур. Срђан Рудић, Миљан Милкић, (Београд: Институт за стратегијска истраживања, Историјски институт, 2015), 303–314.

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Резиме

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СМРТНА КАЗНА У СРПСКОЈ ВОЈСЦИ:
СЛУЧАЈ СТРЕЉАЊА НА ПЛАВСКОМ ЈЕЗЕРУ 1915. ГОДИНЕ

Апстракт: У чланку се реконструише ток догађаја који су довели до стрељања 21 српског војника којим је командовао пуковник Александар Стојшић. Истраживање је утемељено на мемоарској грађи и сећањима савременика, а све услед оскудног помињања ове теме у интерној војној преписци. Овај догађај без преседана показао је да је нова форма ратног насиља прожела и српску војску. Поред питања дезертирања, принуде и кажњавања унутар војних снага, овај чланак такође истражује концепте суверенитета и грађанских права у време најтежих војних напора, какви су виђени током Албанске голготе. Наиме, бројни српски војници који су напустили своје јединице крајем 1915. године правдали су свој чин изјавом да их војна заклетва више не обавезује, јер је Србија „напуштена“ или „пропала“. То је приморало војне власти да покушају да поврате свој уздрмани ауторитет „преговарајући о дисциплини“ са својим војницима, у сасвим новим околностима.

Кључне речи: дезертери, Србија, Велики рат, пуковник Александар К. Стојшић, војни суд

Чланак се бави сасвим занемареном и готово непознатом темом егзекуције 21 српског војника која се догодила 25. децембра 1915. код Плавског језера. Стрељани војници припадали су Плавском одреду, претежно XVII пуку I позива. Услед оскудног помињања ове теме у преписци и документацији војних јединица, чланак је написан највећим делом на основу сећања и утисака савременика. Коришћена су објављена дела Станислава Кракова, Димитрија Љотића и дневник *солуница* Живојина Лазића. Овако специфичан фокус на анегдотске изворе отвара посебна питања везана за усмена сведочења, њихову веродостојност и укупни кредибилитет. Овај рад реконструише и оно што је претходило стрељању, попут покушаја бекства војника и каснијег рада војног суда. Чланак се бави и ширим феноменом дезертирања током „Албанске голготе“ као и реаговањем државних власти на масовност ове појаве. Егзекуција од 25. децембра 1915. тумачи се као криза српске војске и државе, изазвана дуготрајним екстремним ратним напорима. Незаконито стрељање српских војника сведочи о појави нове форме насиља које се овога пута одвија унутар једне војске. Рад указује и на чињеницу да је велико повлачење из 1915. године довело у питање тадашњу дефиницију суверенитета, као и разумевање сопствених права од стране држављана Краљевине Србије.