

MILITARY CLIQUES IN THE SERBIAN STRATEGIC CULTURE OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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Throughout the entire 20th century, the Serbian strategic culture was „torn” by various discontinuities, from the state system, through foreign policy and ideological, to strategic and doctrinal orientation, and it can be said that discontinuity is almost its only constant. Nevertheless, the existence of military cliques can be considered to be one of the constants of the Serbian strategic culture. They followed the Serbian Army and influenced the political life of the Kingdom of Serbia. The dynastic coup of May 1903 can be taken as an example of their actions. After that, younger conspirators established the so-called Black Hand, whose leader was Colonel Apis, who was shot after the Thessaloniki process in 1917. The interwar period was marked by the action of the so-called White Hand, under the leadership of General Petar Živković, which was active until the assassination of King Alexander Karađorđević in Marseilles in 1934. The Second Yugoslavia even had a formalized „military clique” represented in the League of Communists, which was an integral part of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia at federal level, together with the republican leagues. Thus, the influence of the party on the military organization was secured, and the influence of the army in the society was also „secured” by its representation in the party forum at federal level. Consequently, the Serbian political elite welcomed the dissolution of the SFRY with perhaps the only constant in its strategic culture, and that is the reliance on the military in resolving political crises, which can be vividly presented by the statement of Slobodan Milošević: „We do not know how to work, but we know how to fight”.

Key words: *military cliques, military organization, political elite, strategic culture, professionalism*

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Instead of introduction: the beginning of the establishment of military cliques in Serbia

The instability of the rule of King Alexander Obrenović, the marginalization of the Parliament, scandals in the Palace, the budget deficit and the increase in debts led to dissatisfaction in the Serbian society. This resulted in the establishment of a conspiracy group of politicians and ex-soldiers, who sought to secure the support of the Serbian Army for the execution of a military coup. Although there were hesitations in the last moments, the May Coup was conducted in 1903, when the King and Queen, the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Army were brutally killed.¹ The coup was carried out by military conspirators, and the organizers were a part of the political elite and senior officers. Among the prominent perpetrators of the coup was Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis, who became better known to the general public only after the coup.² He is an exceptional person who greatly influenced the events in Serbia at that turbulent time. The fact is that Apis was not the „spiritual leader“ of the May Coup, but only one of the perpetrators, whose role was significant because in critical moments he encouraged and led the hesitant coup plotters to the Palace. Apis was introduced among the conspirators by Lieutenant Antonije Antić, son-in-law of Đorđe Genčić, PhD, one of the few civilians who supported the conspirators and a prominent leader of the Liberal Party. By hiring Apis, Antić counted on his determination, honesty and popularity among the younger members of the officer corps.³ During the entry of the plotters into the Palace, Apis was seriously wounded by a guardian and, according to eyewitnesses, he did not want to receive help until the intention of the plotters was carried out. This behaviour further strengthened his influence not only among the officer corps, but also on the Serbian political scene. The violent change of power and particularly the cruelty shown by the conspirators was very negatively received in the European dynastic centres of power, so Serbia had many foreign policy problems.⁴ Even in mo-

¹ It is the dynastic coup which, at the dawn on May 29 according to the old calendar (June 11 according to the new one) in 1903, was carried out by conspirators against King Alexandar Obrenović and Queen Draga. They killed them in an extremely cruel way and threw them from the balcony of the Palace. Quoted from: Vasa Kazimirović, *Crna ruka – ličnosti i događaji u Srbiji od Majskog prevrata 1903. do Solunskog procesa 1917.*, Prometej, Novi Sad, 2016, pp. 67-156.

² The former president of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts and the Government of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in exile, our famous legal theorist Slobodan Jovanović also writes about this, *Apis, „Moji savremenici“*, Vindzor, Kanada, 1962.

³ See: Mile Bjelajac, „Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis“ in: Čedomir Popov (ed.), *Srpski bibliografski rečnik*, 3, D 3, Matica srpska, Novi Sad, 2007, p. 224; Strahinja Jeremić, „Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis i Karađorđevići (od Majskog prevrata 1903. do Solunskog procesa 1917.)“, *Vojno delo* 5/2017, pp. 450-451.

⁴ See: Milorad Ekmečić, *Istorija Srba u novom veku 1492-1992*, Zavod za udžbenike, Beograd, 2008, pp. 326-327; Milorad Ekmečić, *Stvaranje Jugoslavije 1790-1918*, Vol. II, Prosveta, Beograd, 1989, pp. 394-395; Vasilij Popović, *Evropa i srpsko pitanje u periodu oslobođenja 1804-1918*, Geca Kon, Beograd, 1940, pp. 142-146; Stevan K. Pavlović, *Istorija Balkana 1804-1945*, Klio, Beograd, 2004, pp. 255-257; David MacKenzie, *Apis: Čovjek koji je izazvao Prvi svjetski rat – Život pukovnika Dragutina T. Dimitrijevića*, Profil, Zagreb, 2014, p. 60.

dern times, the May Coup is cited among experts in the West as an example of „barbarism” and the essential nature of Serbs. After the change of senior conspirators, in 1906, which followed as an inevitability due to the conditioning of the normalization of relations with the great European powers, Apis remained in the service, as one of the promising officers close to the Royal Family. His reputation in the military and society grew. This was made possible by his leadership capabilities, and since he was a General Staff officer, he was appointed to the position of Chief of the (Intelligence) Section of the General Staff. The Coup introduced the term „conspirators” into the political life of the Serbian Kingdom, which was a political factor in internal politics, and later an increasingly important foreign policy factor. In the years after the Annexation Crisis, the secret organization „Unification or Death” was formed, popularly known as the Black Hand (1911). There are different opinions about the role of Apis in its establishment, and a key role is often attributed to him. Nevertheless, as he claimed, he was not among the founders, but was invited to join the organization that already had seven members, at the initiative of Bogdan Radenković and Velimir Vemić. However, over time, Apis becomes its undisputed leader.

Crown Prince Alexander gradually took a differentiated attitude towards Colonel Apis, when officers from his surroundings such as Petar Živković and Josif Kostić, tried to present him as ill-intentioned towards the Karađorđević dynasty. Later, Petar Živković became the leader of the second group of conspirators, the so-called White Hand (1916).⁵ An attempt to reconcile two opposing factions in the Serbian officer corps failed in Corfu. The newly elected Minister of the Army, General Božidar Terzić, persuaded Dimitrijević to give up all political activities because he will no longer tolerate any involvement in politics. Dimitrijević denied that he was involved in politics, but said that he would never stop being interested in the national issues of Serbia. Dimitrijević and Terzić parted their ways, each still strongly defending his own position.⁶ After the collapse of Serbia, a new Supreme Command was formed in Shkodra because Field Marshal Putnik, who was seriously ill, was dismissed and sent for treatment. Thus, Colonel Apis was left without support. He was sent to the front and did not deal with politics, but politics dealt with him.⁷ The White Hand and Crown Prince Alexander were preparing for the final showdown. Apis was arrested

⁵ See: David MacKenzie, *Apis: Čovjek koji je izazvao Prvi svjetski rat - Život pukovnika Dragutina T. Dimitrijevića*, Profil, Zagreb, 2014, pp. 94-107; Mile Bjelajac, „Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis” in: Čedomir Popov (ed.), *Srpski bibliografski rečnik*, 3, D 3, Matica srpska, Novi Sad, 2007, pp. 223-225.

⁶ Quoted from David MacKenzie, *Apis: Čovjek koji je izazvao Prvi svjetski rat - Život pukovnika Dragutina T. Dimitrijevića*, Profil, Zagreb, 2014, p. 261.

⁷ Asked by a close associate about future plans, Apis replied: „We must tell our friends to dedicate themselves to their military service because our main problem is to get out of this catastrophe and return to our homeland, and that moment will surely come. If we survive, we can meet then and talk.” It is clear from this statement that Apis had no plans for political engagement during the war. By the way, he and his associates participated in the conspiracy in 1903 and trusted them immensely. Quoted from: David MacKenzie, *Apis: Čovjek koji je izazvao Prvi svjetski rat - Život pukovnika Dragutina T. Dimitrijevića*, Profil, Zagreb, 2014, p. 262.

on charges that, along with a group of conspirators, he planned the assassination of Crown Prince Alexander. In the Thessaloniki process, which the historian Mile Bjelajac stated was „more about a political murder than a legal trial”,⁸ Apis, Vulović and Malobabić were sentenced to death by execution. Thus, the life and professional career of one of the most controversial officers in the Serbian history ended.⁹

The Black Hand essentially ceased to exist with the disappearance of Colonel Apis from life scene. Its members were convicted, then pardoned, and most received a pension. The well-known Black Hand sympathizers were, as a rule, labelled, so they were systematically transferred to secondary duties in the army or retired. That is how the power treated the competent officer staff that Serbia desperately needed at that time. However, this did not eliminate the practice of the existence of military cliques because the White Hand remained active and represented a significant factor in the Army of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.¹⁰

Military cliques from the Serbian Army to the Army of the Kingdom of SCS/Yugoslavia

The Army of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was established in the period 1918–1921. The basis for its establishment was the Army of the Kingdom of Serbia (about 145,000 people) and the so-called troops of the National Council (of about 15,000 fighters). During 1919–1920 about 3,500 Serbian, 2,590 Austro-Hungarian, 469 Montenegrin, 12 Russian and 3 Albanian officers were recruited into the Army, which was over 2,000 less people than the required number defined by the formation.¹¹ The historian Mile Bjelajac rightly called the Army of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes the army of reconciliation, which was not true only for the Serbian officers, members and sympathizers of the Black Hand, although the Serbian officer corps suffered heavy losses during the Balkan wars and the First World War.

The newly established Army of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was more than three times more numerous than the pre-war Serbian Army. The increase in the required number of officers, in addition to the expansion of the state territory, was also influenced by technical innovation that was introduced into the Army during the Great War, including the separation of the Air Force as a special type of the Armed Forces. Moreover, the Adriatic Sea with the coast became a part of the national

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Veljko Blagojević, „Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis kao simbol srpske strateške kulture”, *Vojno delo*, 4/2020, Beograd, 2020, p. 74.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 75.

¹¹ Mile Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine SHS 1918-1921*, Narodna knjiga, Beograd, 1988, 91-92; Mile Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine SHS/Jugoslavije 1922-1935*, Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, Beograd, 1994, 13.

territory, so the imperative of the new state and military leadership was the establishment and development of the Navy. Only former personnel of the Austro-Hungarian Navy and its insignificant war equipment were available. The establishment of the Air Force was also a very demanding and complicated job. All of this led to a significant increase in the number of the positions for officers¹², and their education and career development became increasingly complicated. In the first post-war years, the personnel problem was still great, so until 1924, there were 2,886 less active officers in the Army than the prescribed number.¹³

With the adoption of the amendment to the Decree on the General Staff and the General Staff Profession from 1927, which was passed in April 1932, graduating from the College of the Military Academy was no longer a condition for General Staff course, so another, albeit only partially, formal obstacle to protection was removed, while in theory a General staff officer could become one who skipped some necessary steps in career development. On the initiative of King Alexander, the competencies of the Chief of the General Staff were reduced at the expense of the Ministry of the Army, which was regulated by the new Law on the Army and Navy from 1923.

During that time, there was a clique in the Army that used its position with King Alexander Karađorđević. Until 1926, almost all positions in the Ministry of the Army were occupied by members of the White Hand.¹⁴ The personal regime of King Alexander, established in January 1929, whose main support of power was the Army, also contributed to the strengthening of protectionism.

The officer clique called the White Hand unhinderedly spread its influence in the Army and had an impact on key processes, especially its personnel policy. Its undisputed leader, Petar Živković, became a General and the closest associate of the King, and at the same time the Guard Commander¹⁵, and he submitted his reports only to King Alexander. The Guard was in many ways a specific unit. According to the 1923 Decree on the competencies of officers in the Army, it was directly subordinated to the first King's Adjutant, and he directly to the King. The Guard formation grew continuously, from a small and protocol unit, to a serious and numerous formation that was engaged in peacetime by order of the Commander, without the usual procedure that included the chain of command - from the Minister of the Army, through the Government, to King Alexander. During the dictatorship of January 6, 1929, General Petar Živković was even appointed Prime Minister and Minister of Interior of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The White Hand and its leader were grey eminence of

¹² The Army of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was more than three times more numerous than the pre-war Serbian one, with a total of 8,864 peacetime positions for officers.

¹³ Mile Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine SHS/Jugoslavije 1918-1921*, Narodna knjiga, Beograd, 1988, pp. 47-108.

¹⁴ Dalibor Denda, „War Veterans and Peace-time Military Service – Yugoslav Experience after WWI”, in Andrzej Krzak & Dariusz Gregorczyk (ed.) *The Art of War in the Balkans from the Middle Ages to the 21st Century*, Jan Dlugosz University in Czestoshowa, Poland, 2018.

¹⁵ Quoted from: Mile Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine SHS/Jugoslavije 1922-1935*, Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, Beograd, 1994, p. 37.

the authorities in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia during the life of King Alexander Karađorđević.¹⁶

As a reaction to the situation in the Army, various initiatives for the rehabilitation of Colonel Apis were unsuccessfully launched, but this was not possible while King Alexander and the White Hand were in power. The sympathizers and admirers of Colonel Apis and the Black Hand were very dissatisfied and disappointed with the new state, its internal policy and the situation in the Army.¹⁷ Thus, dissatisfaction with cliques, which was less dealt with by the state institutions, whose competence it was, grew more and more in the Army and society. At the same time, the negative selection of officers led to decadence and disrespect for the established professional norms, whose criteria were lowered to an ever lower level¹⁸.

During this period, there were changes in the Yugoslav military doctrine. The old Serbian pattern based on the Prussian principles of self-initiative and the idea of a manoeuvre war, which the Serbian Army inherited and improved for decades, was abandoned. Instead, „a rather modern” French approach based on centralized command was adopted. The reasons for this were mostly of political nature. Namely, as an Adriatic country, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia counterbalanced Italian aspirations. As the strongest continental military power, France took a main role in European interwar policy, fighting to preserve the Versailles order by preventing the Habsburg Restoration in the Danube region, another German incursion into the East, and Soviet infiltration into the West. Therefore the Little Entente was formed, a military alliance that, from 1920 to 1938, consisted of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was the mainstay of French foreign policy in the Balkans. This foreign policy orientation also had repercussions on the military doctrine of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Gradually, German military thought and doctrine, influencing the Serbian Army, was replaced by French military doctrine. The change of doctrinal orientation of the officer corps was mainly imposed by King Alexander, who believed that he could interfere in professional is-

¹⁶ Veljko Blagojević, „Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis kao simbol srpske strateške kulture”, *Vojno delo*, 4/2020, Beograd, 2020, pp. 75-76.

¹⁷ Veljko Blagojević, „Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis kao simbol srpske strateške kulture”, *Vojno delo*, 4/2020, Beograd, 2020, p. 77.

¹⁸ Such a situation is confirmed by foreign military representatives accredited in Yugoslavia, especially pointing to the activities of General Živković and his followers, who resorted to protection. The British military attaché pointed out that such a system of negative selection of officers could lead to great dissatisfaction. The reports of the French military attaché, General Lepetit, also testify of negative selection, which indicated the level of competencies of Yugoslav officers, who attended various military schools in France. As a rule, at the end of education, they were worse than other foreign students, which was attributed to the fact that protectionism plays a significant role in the selection of students. The protection and circumvention of professional rules in the advancement of officers led to the fact that, according to contemporaries, „all those high moral qualities, which are implied for survival and progress in a civilized society” and which were „philosophically” exposed in the Yugoslav Rule of Service Part I, were only a subject of phrasing, „but of which in practical life of our officer corps there is not a shadow left”. Quoted from: Dalibor Denda, *Šlem i šajkača: vojni faktor i jugoslovensko-nemački odnosi (1918-1941)*, Matica srpska, Novi Sad, 2019, p. 102.

sues, since he was on command duties in the Balkan wars and the First World War. Thus, the Army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia took over the doctrinal orientation that proved to be insufficiently rational and efficient during the First World War. Since the level of professionalism of officers was low and they „deserved“ their appointments by personal loyalty to King Alexander and the White Hand, there was no great resistance to the introduction of new doctrine. Of course, there were honourable exceptions that were not enough to challenge the decision to change the doctrinal orientation of the Army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.¹⁹

The assassination of King Alexander Karađorđević in Marseilles in 1934 marked the end of the significant influence of the White Hand on the command of the Army, and General Živković was removed. Nevertheless, members and sympathizers of the White Hand remained in high positions in the Army. Prince Regent Paul Karađorđević and the Yugoslav government, led by Cvetković and Maček, decided to sign the accession to the Tripartite Pact on behalf of Yugoslavia in Vienna on March 25, 1941, after many years of strengthening political relations between Belgrade and Berlin.²⁰ The agreement was prepared in such a way that it provided great benefits in relation to neighbouring countries, and it implied that German forces will not enter the territory of Yugoslavia and that it is not obliged to deploy its armed forces against a common enemy outside its territory.²¹

A group of civil and military conspirators, led by the Air Force Generals Dušan Simović and Borivoje Mirković, carried out a military coup on March 27, 1941. The organization of the coup was wholeheartedly assisted by the British intelligence service. After the coup, the British War Prime Minister Winston Churchill readily stated that the Yugoslav nation had found its soul, which was a great foreign policy success for the British in difficult times for this colonial power. The Regency and the Government led by Cvetković and Maček, were removed, and the minor King Peter II Karađorđević was declared an adult, and after that he came to the throne. It should be emphasized that Generals Simović and Mirković made their careers at a time when General Petar Živković and his White Hand had a key impact on personnel policy in the Army. It is a curiosity that one of the junior officers of the conspirators presented as a young king addressed the people on radio, which publicly announced a military coup in the country. The Government was formed, headed by the Army General Dušan Simović,²² and academic Slobodan Jovanović was elected Deputy Prime Minister.

¹⁹ See: Dalibor Denda, *Šlem i šajkača: vojni faktor i jugoslovensko-nemački odnosi (1918-1941)*, Matica srpska, Novi Sad, 2019, pp. 115-116.

²⁰ At that time, the Yugoslav ambassador in Berlin was Ivo Andrić, who was excluded from the process of negotiations on joining the Tripartite Pact. The whole business was run by people trusted by the Prince Regent and the Government, which indicates the beginning of the trend of the Serbian strategic culture to avoid institutional action in foreign policy field. It can be said that the existence of cliques was immanent not only in the military profession, but also in diplomacy. Namely, the exclusion of Andrić, as a prominent diplomat of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, from the negotiation process for Nazi leaders was certainly some indicator of the situation in Yugoslavia at that time.

²¹ Prince Paul was pro-British oriented, but he continued the foreign policy of King Alexander, who began a political rapprochement with Nazi Germany.

²² He was also the Chief of the General Staff of the Army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Analyzing the development of the Armed Forces of the Kingdom of Serbia and Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia, it can be objectively concluded that from the beginning of the 20th century until the military collapse of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in the April war in 1941, the Army was influenced by various military cliques. For the period from the May Coup in 1903 until 1916, the Black Hand was the primary one. Its members, to tell the truth, were characterized by a high level of professionalism, patriotism and sacrifice proven in the Balkan wars and the First World War. After the Thessaloniki process, the White Hand took over the primacy, which was much less devoted to the professional matters of the officer profession than the members of the Black Hand and used its position to ensure the advancement of its members and sympathizers. All of this clearly indicates the fact that in unprofessional relations between politics and the military, there is a high probability that this will result in the weakening of professional competencies of the officer corps and, ultimately, the efficiency of the military organization. Although there are many other reasons, which refer to unresolved political issues in Yugoslavia, one of the reasons for the military defeat is the great interference of King Alexander in the issues of the military profession, in which the White Hand undoubtedly played one of the key roles. Its members systematically removed professional officers who criticized the adoption of the new military doctrine.²³

With the rapprochement of Yugoslavia to Germany and the Tripartite Pact, especially after the annexation of Austria, the Croatian personnel in the Army gained high command positions at operational level. This contributed to the strengthening of the Croatian separatism, which was present since the establishment of the common state, but now gained patronage in Nazi Germany.²⁴

The consequences of such a situation were visible in the April War, although defeatism and betrayal of members of certain nations who lived in it should be added to that.²⁵ After the military defeat and capitulation, the territory of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was fragmented, and thus all the efforts of Serbian patriots to live in a common state were annulled. The Independent State of Croatia was created, and other territories were distributed to neighbouring states as a kind of booty. The Serbs were particularly exposed to persecution, conversion to Catholicism and faced physical extermination. The Chetnik and Partisan military formations were formed, in which the majority were oppressed Serbs, and their mutual conflicts were often fratricidal. There is no doubt that the Serbs paid the highest price of the Second World War in Yugoslavia, and one of the causes should be sought in the traditional practice of military officers interfering in political processes, which, as a rule, led to great strategic consequences. The existence of military cliques, made up of professional offi-

²³ Veljko Blagojević, „Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis kao simbol srpske strateške kulture”, *Vojno delo*, 4/2020, Beograd, 2020, p. 75.

²⁴ Branko Petranović, *Srbija u Drugom svetskom ratu 1939-1945*, Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, Beograd, 1992, pp. 38-63

²⁵ Veljko Blagojević, „Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis kao simbol srpske strateške kulture”, *Vojno delo*, 4/2020, Beograd, 2020, pp. 76-77.

cers, was an organizational precondition for interfering in political processes (in internal and foreign policy) that twice resulted in a military coup. At the same time, politics had a reciprocal impact on the professional development of the Armed Forces, mainly in a negative context.

The role of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in the Yugoslav People's Army

Crowned with the glory of the victor in the Second World War, like King Alexander Karađorđević before, Josip Broz Tito developed a specific political system. He ruled personally over significant processes in the country through the Marshal's Office, which was not formally a part of the political system of the Second Yugoslavia.²⁶ Although the comparisons of two orders never give completely reliable data, the similarity of the Marshal's Office in Communist Yugoslavia with the Guard in the First Yugoslavia, whose Commander was the leader of the White Hand, General Živković, for a long time, cannot be overlooked. Therefore, in both cases, these are key administrative bodies that were not under the control and/or influence of other state bodies, but only under the personal leadership of King Alexander Karađorđević, i.e. Marshal Josip Broz.

The shortcomings of the society in the First Yugoslavia resulted not only in the occupation and fragmentation of the territory, but also the civil war, which hit the Serbian national corps particularly hard. The National Liberation War divided the Serbian national corps into the Partisans and Chetniks.²⁷ That conflict marked the second half of the twentieth century, and in some segments it is still present today. The Yugoslav People's Army, like the army of the previous state, was a kind of hostage of political relations within the federal state structure. Thus, in terms of personnel, „the national key” for appointments to high positions in the defence system was respected.²⁸ This practice lasted as long as the Yugoslav People's Army itself, and it is certainly an example of political interference in the military profession and personnel policy as, perhaps, its key segment, having in mind the principle of single seniority in every military organization. In addition to commander, each unit had a commissar, who „took care” of the morale of its members, which had to be based on the principles of communism, Titoism, a one-party organization and the tradition of the National Liberation War. In the later stages of the development of the Yugoslav People's

²⁶ See: Milan V. Terzić, *Titova vještina vladanja: Maršal i Maršalat 1943–1953*, Podgorica, 2005.

²⁷ See: Branko Petranović, *Srbija u Drugom svetskom ratu 1939–1945*, VIZ, Beograd, 1992; Velimir Terzić, *Slom Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, I-II, Narodna knjiga, Delo, Pobjeda, Beograd, Ljubljana, Titograd, 1982; Mile Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine SHS 1918–1921*, Narodna knjiga, Beograd, 1988; Mile Bjelajac, *Vojska Kraljevine SHS/Jugoslavije 1922–1935*, Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, Beograd, 1994; Mile Bjelajac, *Jugoslovensko iskustvo sa multietničkom armijom*, Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, Beograd, 1999; Mile Bjelajac, *Generali i admirali Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1918–1941*, Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, Beograd, 2004.

²⁸ Drago Nikolić, *Razvoj OS SFRJ 1945–1985, Kadrovi i kadrovska politika*, VINC, Beograd, 1989.

Army, the model of dual seniority of commanders and commissars was abandoned because it proved to be problematic in the practice of peacetime development of the Armed Forces.

There was the strong politicization of the military organization in the Yugoslav People's Army in accordance with the communist ideology, but „the rules of the game” were known and recognized for those who aspired to high positions in the defence system and did not deviate from them. The absolute loyalty of the officers to Marshal Tito and the lifelong president of the SFRY and the Communist Party was not questioned. There were great challenges to that loyalty, but Josip Broz knew how to overcome them with a combination of Stalinist and dogmatic methods, which included Goli Otok, political schools and the systematic oppression of those who dared to think and act critically. The crisis with the communist camp in the period 1948–1952 can be considered a turning point in the ideological sense because the SFRY and Tito from „the communist-Stalinist hawk” becomes more open to the West and through the Balkan Pact comes to the NATO „lobby”. Since one-party socialism did not fit into the NATO ideological matrix, Tito waited for the agreement on the Western military aid to come to an end and then turned to a foreign policy alternative - the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement.

In the Yugoslav People's Army, as well as in the former army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the influence of politics on profession was significant, which, by the nature of things, was reflected in the professional development of the officers. As a rule, war commanders from the Partisan units were not trained officers, so Broz kept some officers of the royal army in the military academies of the new state. They gradually trained war commanders for the military profession, and most of them, after the first decade of the SFRY, left active service, leaving the communist personnel to conduct professional training of personnel at the military academies of the Yugoslav People's Army. The High Political College for professional officers of the Yugoslav People's Army, who were supposed to take over the leadership of „the avant-garde” Communist Party in the Yugoslav People's Army, was gradually introduced. At the same time, at the highest professional levels of the officer training, the courses dealing with strategy as a key and most complex segment necessary for senior military leaders were systematically reduced and even abolished. Quite simply, the mentioned field was too complex for war commanders and it was an obstacle for their comrades to be appointed in key positions in the defence system.²⁹

The Yugoslav communist government criticized the actions of Alexander Karađorđević towards the leaders of the Black Hand. In April 1953, at the suggestion of the Federal Secretary of Interior, Aleksandar Ranković, one of the most influential persons of the political elite at that time, an initiative to renew the Thessaloniki process was launched. This was not accidental because the communist power implemented the principle that personnel from ethnic corps „deals with counter-revolutionary and retrograde personalities and ideas” from their organization. A pu-

²⁹ See: Đorđe Stanić, *Razvoj OS SFRJ 1945-1985, Vojno školstvo*, VINC, Beograd, 1986.

blic letter was sent to the Public Prosecutor of the People's Republic of Serbia, stating that new information had been obtained regarding the true nature of the Thessaloniki process. At his suggestion, the Supreme Court of the People's Republic of Serbia decided to renew the court procedure. In the same year, in the trial that lasted from June 2 to 13, the decisions of the Thessaloniki process were declared null and void, and the convicted persons were acquitted.³⁰

The fact is that the government did not have just and law-based motives for resuming the trial of Colonel Apis and his comrades. Namely, efforts were made to use the symbol of Colonel Apis on internal and foreign policy level by renewing the Thessaloniki process. The atmosphere created due to persecution and captivity on Goli Otok and other dungeons, as well as forcible confiscation of property, had to be relaxed.³¹ Furthermore, it was necessary to eliminate every possibility and idea of the Serbian national corps to return the Karađorđević dynasty, using the fate of Colonel Apis and his comrades. Moreover, they tried to show that the former dynasty was unscrupulous towards those who brought it to power, unlike the socialist government, which took care of its revolutionaries and comrades. There was clear and unequivocal evidence for this. Apis was known to wide masses and was placed in a mythical context during his lifetime, and his tragic end made him a symbol of an uncompromising fighter for national liberation and a great informant. In the national press, he was presented as a revolutionary who, like communists, did not shy away from destroying traditions and rules of political behaviour and actions.³² Thus, the communist government tried to justify its actions and present it as legitimate, and the final result was that military cliques still exist and affect the entire society. The actions of military cliques continued with the legalization of the activities of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in the Yugoslav People's Army, and also the collapse of the professional standards of the officers.

After the death of Marshal Josip Broz, the institution of the Marshal's Office was abolished, which essentially decapitated the unified management of key processes in the state and facilitated the path to secession. The beginning of the crisis of the Federal Yugoslavia, at the end of the 1980s, again actualizes the importance of the influence of military cliques in the political life of the people. In such context, Slobodan Milošević can be considered a representative example of the Serbian strategic culture, which is perhaps most strikingly indicated by his famous statement during the negotiations on the future of the Yugoslav federation: „We (Serbs) do not know how to work, but we know how to fight“. The causal relationship with this attitude of the Serbian representatives at that time is also confirmation of the hypothesis that military cliques are immanent to the Serbian strategic culture.

³⁰ Milan Ž. Živanović, *Pukovnik Apis, Solunski proces, hiljadu devetsto sedamnaeste*, Beograd, 1955. (fototipsko izdanje 2015. godine), pp. 638–639.

³¹ See: Desimir Tomić, *Kolektivizacija u Jugoslaviji 1949–1953*, Službeni list SRJ, Beograd, 2002.

³² More about myths see in Vojislav Stanovčić, *Politička teorija I*, Službeni glasnik, Beograd, 2008, pp. 279–283.

Concluding remarks

The May 1903 Coup represents a key event in the Serbian history of the 20th century which, in addition to the dynastic change, introduces a rather negative phenomenon of the existence of military cliques into the Serbian military and social practice. From the beginning, they were a negative phenomenon, and the true nature of the Thessaloniki process and the fate of the leader of the Black Hand, Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis, further complicates the society's attitude towards military cliques and hides its negative consequences for building the defence system and stability of political authorities. It can be said that the inadequate reaction of the political authorities and the rigged trial to the Black Hand leaders enabled the existence of other military cliques. Namely, if the Black Hand members had been convicted of plotting and killing the Supreme Commander military cliques would not have existed. Thus, in the context of strategic culture, it can be said that in the conflict between the members of the Black and White Hand, the second option won and that they received the support of the political elite as a reward.

It is clear that the return to the essential values of Serbs has to be appropriately done, including understanding historical facts and behaving in accordance with long-term strategic goals. It should also be pointed out that the military was under the influence of military cliques for most of the twentieth century. From the May Coup in 1903, until the Thessaloniki process, it was the Black Hand, and then the White Hand until the assassination of King Alexander Karađorđević in 1934. In the Yugoslav People's Army, this role is formalized in the function of commissar and the activities of the communist organization in the army, which was a constitutive part of the republican party organizations at federal level.

It can be concluded that the interference of politics in military issues is disastrous, as well as the influence of military force on internal politics and social life. That is why we should look at our history realistically and learn lessons for the future, which we as a society are often not able to fully carry out. Considered in such a context, it can be said that the historical role of the White Hand and General Živković is realistically defined. On the other hand, the role of the Black Hand and Colonel Apis continue to be the subject of controversy and differing perception. The fact that contemporaries of different professional, political and value orientation refer to the symbol of Colonel Apis, indicates the importance of studying his personality from the aspect of strategic culture, regardless of their value orientation. Apis often stands out as a shining example of patriotism and sacrifice for the Serbian cause, but also as the leader of the dynastic coup, who acted contrary to the legal order and thus introduced the unprepared Serbia into the war against great powers. By giving an adequate and realistic measure to the mentioned dichotomous views on the symbol of Colonel Apis, we would not only provide essential lessons for the present and the future, but we would also have the opportunity to get closer, at least a step, to the necessary social consensus.

The answers to these rather complex questions are essentially simple. They lie in respecting the code of professional officers' ethics, which clearly denies every possibility of engaging officers in internal politics and emphasizes loyalty to the military oath. Therefore, no other professional virtue has priority. On the other hand, every political elite should adopt the principles of „good governance“. Thus, due to his objective sacrifice at the rigged Thessaloniki process, Colonel Apis became the Serbian strategic symbol that essentially indicates the futility of professional development and personal courage and sacrifice in the fulfillment of national interests, which in some way compensates for his unconstitutional and unprofessional role in the May Coup. On the other hand, the political elite essentially created a negative image of the independent judiciary in Serbia and a tendency towards ruthless protection of personal and particular interests by a rigged trial. All of this, in a certain way, obscures the basis of the problem and makes it difficult to face the truth, which, in this case, is quite clear, so we need to face it. The question remains why we are still in conflict over the role of Colonel Apis and why we are not able to reach a consensus at least on this issue, for which it is clear that it is not difficult to give an answer from this historical distance.

Since strategic culture is not exclusively a self-aware concept, but it is also an analytical instrument in the function of foreign policy decision-making, it is necessary to look at the way in which we Serbs are assessed by other subjects of international relations. In such a context, we should remember the great thoughts of Jovan Dučić: „Only our friends judge us by our virtues, and our enemies judge us only by our shortcomings“. The judgement on Colonel Apis and the actions of the Black Hand is also stated by many Western experts, who study the Serbian strategic culture. Among them is the controversial Australian historian Christopher Clark, who tends to view Serbs as barbarians who are to blame for all the misfortunes that befell the Balkans in the 20th century. It is also the fact that after the assassination of the Prime Minister of Serbia, Zoran Đinđić, they remembered the May Coup and Apis. These events were „read“ in those analytical circles as continuity of uncivilized problem solving in the Serbian society. Of course, they do not point to the fact that their national histories testify to similar political assassinations. Nevertheless, that is only an additional reason why the Serbian society should face historical truths and learn lessons for the future. The main motive should certainly be our well-being and the building of a better society and a prosperous state based on the reputation of the Kingdom of Serbia. Throughout history, the Serbian people have shown that they can do it.

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Summary

Throughout the entire 20th century, the Serbian strategic culture was „torn” by various discontinuities, from the state system, through foreign policy and ideological, to strategic and doctrinal orientation, and it can be said that discontinuity is almost its only constant. Nevertheless, the existence of military cliques can be considered to be one of the constants of the Serbian strategic culture. They followed the Serbian Army and influenced the political life of the Kingdom of Serbia. The dynastic coup of May 1903 can be taken as an example of their actions. After that, younger conspirators established the so-called Black Hand, whose leader was Colonel Apis, who was shot after the Thessaloniki process in 1917. The interwar period was marked by the action of the so-called White Hand, under the leadership of General Petar Živković, which was active until the assassination of King Alexander Karađorđević in Marseilles in 1934. The Second Yugoslavia even had a formalized „military clique” represented in the League of Communists, which was an integral part of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia at federal level, together with the republican leagues. Thus, the influence of the party on the military organization was secured, and the influence of the army in the society was also „secured” by its representation in the party forum at federal level. Consequently, the Serbian political elite welcomed the dissolution of the SFRY with perhaps the only constant in its strategic culture, and that is the reliance on the military in resolving political crises, which can be vividly presented by the statement of Slobodan Milošević: „We do not know how to work, but we know how to fight”.

Key words: *military cliques, military organization, political elite, strategic culture, professionalism*

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