

UDC 930.85(4-12)

ISSN 0350-7653
eISSN 2406-0801

SERBIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ARTS
INSTITUTE FOR BALKAN STUDIES

BALCANICA

XLVIII

ANNUAL OF THE INSTITUTE FOR BALKAN STUDIES

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BELGRADE
2017



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<https://doi.org/10.2298/BALC1748067G>
UDC 355.087.2-055.2(497.11)"1876/1878"
94(497.6)"1875/1878"
355:929 Меркис Ж.
Original scholarly work
<http://www.balcanica.rs>

Alone of All Her Sex? The Dutch Jeanne Merkus and the Hitherto Hidden Other Viragos in the Balkans during the Great Eastern Crisis (1875–1878)[†]

Abstract: This paper deals with the question as to whether the well-reported Dutch volunteer warrior Jeanne Merkus was indeed the sole female fighter at the time of the anti-Ottoman rebellions and the wars in the Balkan Peninsula from 1875 to 1878, when the Great Eastern Crisis raged. While this rich outlandish lady – who has only recently earned her official biography – attracted much attention from the contemporary press, and later often surfaced in memoirs of sorts as well, her few female colleagues, mainly home-grown and of modest background, went mostly unnoticed by the general public. This first attempt at settling the score of undeserved neglect sets out to establish the individual stories from the hard-to-find pieces of information in old newspapers and non-fiction literature. The existence of five other cases of actual fighting females could be proved, yet four of them were, unlike Miss Merkus, in male disguise. Moreover, a larger number of females trying to engage militarily on the battlefield have been discovered, some passing as males, some not.

Keywords: female volunteer fighter, rebellion, war, Great Eastern Crisis, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Romania, Turkey-in-Europe

Throughout human history warfare has been predominantly a male pursuit; females handling weaponry to wound or kill members of hostile groups are far less common. This contribution addresses the question as to whether the Western Balkans in the second half of the nineteenth century constitutes an exception to this rule, while focusing on the Great Eastern Crisis (1875–1878), the culminating point of the armed conflict of that epoch in the region. Our search for fighting females centres on not any less rare and often equally heroic instances of females who, when male support is lacking and utmost necessity prevails, defend their homes, their honour, their own lives and that of their offspring with weapons.

Looking at this part of Europe in those years one could easily come to believe that there was just one genuinely active female warrior: Jeanne Merkus (1839–1897), the shady forerunner of Sofija Jovanović (1895–1979), Milunka Savić (1892–1973), and the British Flora Sandes (1876–1956) – Serbia's indisputable heroines of the 1910s, a decade full of warfare. The mysterious and controversial Dutch lady, who has somehow escaped complete oblivion, was in her

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[†] Edited by Joan Bigwood.

Balkan heyday a popular subject in virtually all world's newspapers, which creates the impression that then and there she indeed was without any female competition in that martial role. This article tries to unearth her barely reported female colleagues, to grasp their motivations and careers, and to compare this usually defective biographical material with the much more thoroughly researched Merkus case. The theoretical pitch of the subject matter lies in determining the relative degree of autonomy and self-determination of females operating within a downright patriarchal framework, as well as ascertaining the varying levels of success of the individuals concerned in transcending this and other constraints, in freeing themselves of the strong bonds of homestead and family, religion and ethnicity, nation and homeland.

Jeanne Merkus: a great life in brief

Only recently have the fascinating life and times of Jeanne ("Jenny") Merkus been reconstructed, resulting in her first extensive and scholarly biography.² At the age of 36 she was catapulted into the role of the Joan of Arc of the Serbian-led struggle for South-Slav liberation from the Muslim yoke of the Ottoman Turks. Well into 1875, this unwed heiress of colonial assets in her native Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia), of which her father had served as Governor-General, had been active as a social reformer, philanthropist and missionary in France and Italy. The original strong Protestant faith of this individual, who had been together with several brothers and sisters orphaned in childhood and adopted in Holland by her father's brother, a vicar, became blended with socialist elements, and – mainly thanks to a long relationship in her twenties with a female composer and writer who shared that conviction – also with some feminist ones. Altruistically minded, she started dispensing of her fortune on the poor and the sick, while spreading the gospel. Shortly after becoming an adherent of chiliasm, she made in the years 1872/3 her maiden trip to the Holy Land, where she purchased a plot outside the city of Jerusalem for the construction of a palace of sorts, all on her own account, intended for the Second Coming of Christ which she expected to happen very soon after the liberation of Palestine, the land of her Lord, from infidel rule. While in all likelihood volunteering as a nurse, and doubtless being generally most supportive of the newly proclaimed Third

² R. Grémaux & W. van den Bosch, *Mystica met kromzwaard. Het opzienbarende leven van Jenny Merkus (1839–1897)* (Delft 2014). For shorter contributions see R. Grémaux, "Žana Markus – Holandjanka u ratovima 1875–1876", in S. Branković, ed., *Od Deligrada do Deligrada 1806–1876* (Aleksinac and Belgrade 1997), 297–301; R. Grémaux, "Merkus, Jeanne", in *Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland*, vol. 6 (The Hague 2008), 306–309; R. Gremo, "Merkus, Žana (Merkus, Jeanne)", in *Srpski biografski rečnik*, vol. 6 (Novi Sad 2014), 370–372; W. van den Bosch & R. Grémaux, *Jenny Merkus/Jovanka Merkusova: The Dutch Joan of Arc of Serbia and Herzegovina* (Belgrade 2016).

French Republic, she had experienced the Prussian siege of the French capital in late 1870 and early 1871, as well as the ensuing Paris Commune. During this short-lived left-wing experiment of spring 1871 she must have grown familiar with females as political and military leaders. She may well have become herself one of the “Amazones de la Seine”, combining functions on the barricades with taking care of the poor, sick and wounded.

By mid-December 1875³ this generous Dutch lady had, without resorting to disguising herself as a man, managed to enter the otherwise all-male ranks of the Herzegovinian insurgents. Personally she wanted to be instrumental in bringing down Muslim rule over Christians, starting in the Balkans but ultimately aiming at recapturing the Holy Land. She was admitted to the insurgent movement thanks to the open-minded indigent leader Mihailo Ljubibratić (1839–1889), who had in the first five months of this upheaval become the rallying point for dozens of West-European volunteers (mainly Italians, former Garibaldinians). This was the first time that men from Europe’s West took part in a Serbian-led revolutionary endeavour, thus following the great example set by Lord Byron on behalf of the oppressed Greeks.

Adopting the local men’s dress and giving ample proof of her fighting spirit and martial abilities, Miss Merkus also carried bandages for the wounded. On 10 March 1876 she was, together with *vojvoda* Ljubibratić and most of his staff, treacherously captured on Turkish soil by Austrian forces, while the company, on the run for the increasingly strong arm of Montenegro’s ruler, Prince Nicholas, in insurgent Herzegovina, tried to reach rebellious western Bosnia with its strong sympathies for Serbia. Whereas the chief insurgent was taken to Linz to live in internment in the Austrian heartland, his female companion, who had recently spent a small fortune on a battery of mountain cannons for the in-



Jeanne Merkus
by an unknown photographer
(c. 1860–1862), published in S. A. Reitsma,
“Een gouverneur-generaalsdochter. Jeanne
Merkus”, *Tropisch Nederland* (Amsterdam),
28 June 1937, p. 66

³ Dates are given according to the Gregorian or new calendar, but sometimes (always between brackets) in the Julian or old calendar as well.

surgents, together with ammunition and a trained crew from abroad (this major material contribution of hers eventually ended up in Montenegro), was free to go. Still wearing male attire, she headed for Belgrade, the capital of the Principality of Serbia, where she was warmly received in circles around the United Serbian Youth, a revolutionary liberal and patriotic organisation eager to employ her as a battering-ram for pressing the government of Prince Milan into adopting a much firmer stance in favour of the insurgence in Herzegovina, even if the consequence would be having to go to war against the vast and mighty Ottoman Empire.

When June blended into July, Serbia did embark upon this endeavour, and so did Montenegro which, however, pursued its own interests, or rather those of its ruler. For the larger Serbian principality the war would soon turn out to be hazardous. The country lacked proper preparation and was not supported by official Russia. Miss Merkus, capitalizing on the status of the “amazon of Herzegovina” and the “Joan of Arc of Serbia”, as well as being a major financial benefactor of the war effort, could hardly be refused in her military capacity by the Minister of War, Colonel Tihomilj Nikolić, or forced into accepting the role of a nurse, the only option deemed appropriate for the “second sex”. In the end, she was sent to the banks of the River Drina, facing Turkish-held Bosnia. At that westernmost front of Serbia she was supposed to become honorary adjutant of Ranko Alimpić, at the time Serbia’s one and only home-grown general. However, this supreme commanding officer refused the newcomer, claiming “women knights” not to be in accordance with the traditions of Serbia’s army and people. In her capacity as a volunteer she was transferred under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Gruja Mišković who led the unit of foreign nationals (mainly Serbs from Austro-Hungary and Turkey) in the vicinity of the Drina. At first he was not too pleased either, fearing the admittance of a female would turn into “a comedy”. Yet his reluctance gave way to adoration as soon as he had a chance to witness her fighting skills and spirit. Thenceforth the officer would confront male cowards in his army with her as a shining example of bravery.

Newspapers abroad depicted her as a foreign woman without whose presence and example Serbian men were unable to perform properly on the battlefield. Thus, a major blow was dealt to the patriarchal and nationalist underpinnings of the country’s warfare and politics. About the same time the tsarist Russian intelligence claimed her to be “a common Austrian Jewish spy”. Merkus herself actively engaged in her own downfall by not hiding her sympathies for the republican form of government and for the Commune. To make things even worse, she publicly criticised the Serbian commander-in-chief at the Drina for being passive militarily, while expending his energy flirting with a nurse. Moreover, Merkus had the gall to ask this general in front of others to resign and make way for a better one. This insubordination sealed her own dismissal from the Drina Army, a decision against which she revolted to the point that force

had to be employed to send her off. Returning to Belgrade she realised that her support among the elite and in the public opinion of the predominantly war-weary and almost defeated Serbia had drastically eroded. A few days later, in mid-August 1876, the hitherto national heroine left the Principality. By the water-route of the Danube and the Black Sea she reached Constantinople, to return from there also by boat to her base at the French Riviera.

Although never ever to see the Western Balkans again, Miss Merkus – just back from a short trip to Java, the distant island of her youth – turned up in the Danubian Principalities (modern Romania) almost three months after Russia had declared war on the Ottoman Empire and started to attack it from Romanian soil. Serbia's prominence in the first phase of the Great Eastern Crisis was thus taken over by the mighty tsarist state, which had kept itself aside in 1875 and 1876. Now Serbia was to be pressed by its "big brother" to take up arms against their common enemy, and it yielded to the pressure by mid-December 1877, having hesitated for almost eight months. The few scant traces found in the press concerning Merkus's Romanian adventure are from early July 1877. In the first half of that month, when the military campaign for the liberation of the Bulgarian Christians was already in full swing, she was placed, as

a "rambling armed amazon", near the Russian headquarters on Romanian soil. Newspapers further claimed that she offered her military skills for that endeavour, but was allowed into the army and the war zone only as a nurse. Did she, unlike in the previous year in Serbia, subject herself to such a role, perhaps too humble for a former virago? Another newspaper placed her as an "amazon" at one of two main points of entry for the Russian forces into Ottoman Bulgarian territory. Without hardly any other source, and nothing to substantiate Merkus's



Fantasy portrait of Jeane Merkus
in or near Herzegovina or Bosnia
in 1875 or 1876 by the Austrian artist
Johann Wilhelm Frey, in M. B. Zimmerman,
Illustrierte Geschichte des Orientalischen Krieges
von 1876–1878 (1878), 181

presence in the killing fields south of the Danube, it is most likely that her new adventure in South-East Europe was ill-fortuned and short-lived. Never again was she to return to that part of the continent.

By the time of the final cessation of hostilities between Turkey and Russia (with Serbia at its side), which took place on the last day of January 1878 N. S., Miss Merkus was in Paris. Upon the signing of the peace agreement in early March the same year, she made a short trip to Beirut and Jaffa in order to restart her building project near Jerusalem that had been obstructed as a result of her anti-Turkish deeds during the Great Eastern Crisis. Whereas she was rapidly forgotten by most Serbs, the Muslim overlords in Turkish Palestine were much less forgetful, keeping a grudge against the person who had dared to fight their co-religionists in the Balkans. This resentment was an

important reason why her edifice, her aspired life's work, was never completed. Saddened by this and by the failed expectations of the imminent return of her Lord to earth, and personally reduced to utter poverty, her vital urge broke down in the end. Her family managed to retrieve her from a wretched Paris existence and brought her back to the Netherlands, where she, aged 57, passed away in the Protestant nursing house in the city of Utrecht.

The one and only period in Merkus's lifetime when she, beyond any doubt, wielded arms was in the Balkans during the first and second year of the Great Eastern Crisis, the big clash of interests over the future of Turkey-in-Europe in the wake of upheaval and war, which lasted in total from mid-1875 until early 1878. This international emergency was itself the *ouverture* of the Berlin Congress of mid-1878, by virtue of which Serbia and Montenegro ceased to be Ottoman vassal-states and gained, on enlarged territories, full independence.



Photograph of Jeanny Merkus
by Henri le Lieure, Rome (probably c. 1880),
according to an old photocopy in Kennisinstituut
Atria, Amsterdam

Bulgaria, a newly-autonomous principality of the Ottoman Empire, became territorially reduced as compared to a recent arrangement. Bosnia and Herzegovina, with their sizeable rebellious Serbian-Orthodox population that had several times in successful periods of upheaval expressed the desire to join Serbia and Montenegro, were handed over to be ruled by the Catholic-dominated Austro-Hungary, though both regions formally remained Ottoman. This crisis was, thus, for the Dutch lady fighter, by all accounts, the sole occasion for effectively launching a military career, but was she at the given juncture of time and place really the one and only woman warrior, as superficial reading of newspapers and other printed sources suggest? And if not, who were her colleagues and what were their personal circumstances and motivations? Which major traits did they share and what made them different? Did they disguise themselves as men, did they resort to “passing”, or were they allowed into the ranks of fighting males without having to commit this kind of deceit? This is the subject to which the following sections are devoted.

Successful passing as genuine fighters

Females from several countries and epochs determined to enlist and remain in the exclusively male ranks of the military have employed an occasionally successful stratagem. It consists in the painstaking and continuous pursuit of keeping their biological sexual self secret, convincingly dressing, posing, acting and talking⁴ like men, adopting an alias, while being in constant fear of detection.⁵ Miss Merkus was rich, influential and self-assured enough to surmount the obstacles to joining Serbia’s army without having to resort to the abovementioned form of deception. Moreover she had gained military accolades in Herzegovina. During any campaign she wore men’s clothes; she did so for practical reasons as well as to show symbolically her place in the realm of warfare. In the cultural idiom of that time and place donning male garb signified, “Beware! I have the ability and willingness to take lives, risking my own life in doing so,” whereas according to the same cultural rules, unarmed and otherwise appropriately dressed females were never targets of collective violence. Taking their lives would be most dishonest and shameful, and the same held true for targeting male lives by perpetrators simulating females.

⁴ Speaking Serbian in the first person involves using masculine (or feminine) verbal forms.

⁵ For this stratagem see e.g. R. Dekker & L. van der Pol, *The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe* (London 1989); J. Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maidens* (London 1989).



Serbia's fronts in the 1876 war;
 1) Drina Army; 2) Ibar Army; 3) Main Morava Army; 4) Timok Army

Stana Kovačević

If Miss Merkus deliberately chose not to pass as a member of the opposite sex, what about the others? A mixture of patriotic and romantic motivations is said to have prompted the person discussed here to resort to this act of deception, stealthily and on purpose. Unfortunately, no newspaper article of the time concerning this case or the person's *démasqué* has come to our notice. The first name of this impersonator was Stana, and her maiden name is unknown, as is her adopted male name. As such adopted names were often the masculine form of the first name, she might have called herself Stanko. Before the war she had married Stevan Kovačević, with whom she settled down in Šabac, his credible hometown, situated to the west of Belgrade on the southern bank of the River Sava, on Serbia's side of the border with Austria-Hungary.

Two early twentieth-century Serbian reviews of the 1876/8 volunteer movement mention briefly the active role played by only three women: Stana Kovačević, Jeanne Merkus, and Marina Veličković, née Grgić (see below).⁶

⁶ A. J. Milojević, *Za otažbinu 1804–1904* (Belgrade 1904), 341: "two women – Stana and Marina, and the famous miss *markiza Markusova*"; P. Lazarević, "Dobrovoljci", in the Latin edition of St. Stanojević's *Narodna enciklopedija SHS*, vol. I (Zagreb, c. 1925), 611, mentions for this period only Marina Veličković and Mara [sic] Kovačević.

However, the earliest mention of Stana Kovačević we have come across occurs in a short anonymous article in a Serbian monthly of 1901:

In the battles at the Drina, fighting side by side with Stevan Kovačević was his wife Stana. Stana originated from Crnjovode in Bosnia, and was born in the year 1850. Fearful that they would send her back home from the volunteer ranks, Stana donned men's clothing and fought for three whole months, as she herself says, "with the fellow volunteers". At the time, no one knew that she was a woman. But when the Turks wounded her husband at the battle near Batković [a village north of Bijeljina, eastern Bosnia], whence Serbian medical orderlies transported him to Šabac, it became apparent from her grief for her good comrade, that she was a woman. She was awarded a silver medal for bravery during the war itself, and at this year's volunteer celebration, she has received a medal for military merit as well. Stana now lives permanently in Šabac.⁷

In June 1901 Belgrade celebrated the volunteers who had taken part in the Serbo-Turkish war twenty-five years earlier. Here is what Gliša Marković (1847–1911), a retired major of Serbia's army and participant in the 1876 war on the Timok battlefield, says about the person he refers to as "Stana N." in his diary published in 1906:

After the religious service, at the 25th-anniversary celebration of the volunteers association, a female in the ranks of these brave war veterans from the Drina, Aleksinac [until 1878 this town was situated near Serbia's south-eastern border] and the Timok [a river near the country's eastern frontier], marched the streets of Belgrade with a firm step, her chest adorned with medals for bravery.⁸

A book about traditional Serbian-Montenegrin-Russian brotherhood published in 1936, written in Serbian by a man calling himself "Deda Rus [Grandpa Russian] Aleksandar", contains almost the same passage about "the Serbian volunteer Stana Kovačević" as the one cited above, until the description of what happened to her in 1901. Apart from a slightly different spelling of her place of birth (Crnovode instead of Crnjovode), her husband Stevan is described as a "soldier" as far as 1876 is concerned. Additionally, Stana is reported to have cut her hair and to have fought "together with Russian fellow volunteers", without specifying for how long. When Stevan was wounded, she revealed herself by "screaming, lamenting and crying over her good man". She was awarded a silver medal by Cherniaev (see below) while the war was still on.⁹

⁷ "Stana Kovačević, dobrovoljac u srpsko-turskom ratu 1876.g. [Uz naše slike]", *Nova Iskra* III/8 (Belgrade, Aug. 1901), 251. Her place of birth, Crnjovode or Crnovode, a hamlet in western Bosnia, is too small to be included in maps.

⁸ G. Marković, *Dnevnik srpsko-bugarskih dobrovoljaca na Timoku 1876.god.* (Belgrade 1906), 26; briefly reiterated in N. Nikolić, *Ratni dnevници 1875–1886* (Belgrade 2007), 104–105.

⁹ Deda Rus Aleksandar, *Knjiga o bratstvu srpskog, ruskog i crnogorskog naroda u prošlosti* (Niš 1936), 53–54. The author, apparently of Russian extraction, had reportedly lived in Niš for

Both the 1901 and 1936 texts imply that Stana, who was most likely childless at the time, first operated undetected in a volunteer unit on the Drina front in July and/or August of 1876, at about the same time as Miss Merkus, the so-called “Joan of Arc of Serbia”. Her secret finally revealed, Stana was nonetheless allowed to continue fighting, but now on the Morava front, in the south-east. All volunteers in Serbia’s army, who came from Bosnia, Herzegovina, Montenegro and Old Serbia, were by the end of August 1876 (N. S.) transferred to the main Morava front under the command of Cherniaev, the man who reportedly decorated Stana. Mikhail Grigor’evich Cherniaev (1828–1898), dubbed the Lion of Tashkent and the Russian Garibaldi, was a retired Russian general in the service of Serbia.

Apparently aware of these or similar sources on Stana, and perhaps mingling this information with some imagination of his own, the military historian and poet Slobodan Branković offered in 2012 a plausible explanation for the temporary break in Stana’s military career. We quote from his text in a popular Belgrade-based news outlet:

Stana Kovačević, born in the village of Crnovode in Bosnia, married to Stevan Kovačević, went to war in 1876 together with “her man”. A woman in uniform, carrying arms, fighting at the front against Ottoman soldiers, was not customary or acceptable in the Serbian tradition of warfare. That is why Stana disguised herself as a man, simply to pass as a warrior at the front. She donned men’s clothes and cut off her hair in order to fight together with the volunteers, the Russian brothers in particular.

At the battle on the Drina nobody had any suspicions about her identity as a brave fellow warrior. When her husband Stevan was wounded near Batković, Stana’s identity was revealed. Serbian medical orderlies carried him off to the hospital in Šabac. For Stana, that was a more difficult moment than fighting with the Turkish oppressors. Hearing her lamenting and crying, her fellow soldiers were astonished to realize that the bravest amongst them was a woman! For all the admiration for Stana’s prowess in battle, this meant that she lost her place in combat ranks, because it was inconceivable for a woman to be amongst Serbian soldiers on the front lines.

When, during the 1876 war, as a result of adverse developments on the main Morava front, the call was issued to the warriors at the Drina front to set off voluntarily for Aleksinac, those who had removed Stana from the ranks of the Drina heroes were put into a “quandary”! **According to abruptly changed criteria, women were allowed to sign up as volunteers for the severest front of the 1876 war!** [emphasis R. G.] For Stana, this was the opportunity to fight once again for freedom as the highest personal and national ideal.

In the unequal battle, she amazed with her fearlessness. The commander, General Cherniaev, decorated Stana Kovačević for her heroism in battle at the

Morava. He took the medal for bravery from his own chest and conferred it upon the heroine from the Drina.¹⁰

Watching the photo of Stana Kovačević as a middle-aged country woman of seemingly humble standing, one is inclined to think that after her warrior's experience she returned completely to the traditional standards of womanhood. Shy as she appears to be, one finds it hard to picture her proudly marching with her former comrades-in-arms. She had proved unable to keep up her mimicry until the war was over; yet both of the following individuals were more successful in this respect.



Stana Kovačević

newly decorated for military virtues in 1901, photograph by an anonymous photographer published in "Stana Kovačević, dobrovoljac u srpsko-turskom ratu 1876.g. [Uz naše slike]", *Nova Iskra* (Belgrade), August 1901, 237; also in Deda Rus Aleksandar, *Knjiga o bratstvu srpskog, ruskog i crnogorskog naroda u prošlosti* (Niš 1936), 54. No other picture of any of the women discussed here except Jeanne Merkus could be found

An anonymous Serbian girl from Bosnia

About a Serbian girl from Bosnia, whose name as well as male alias have been lost, the abovementioned Gliša Marković wrote the following in 1906:

After the disbandment of the volunteers in the winter of 1876/7 even newspapers brought a notice about her, that she had first fought on the Drina, and later around Aleksinac, that she was a corporal, and decorated with medals for

¹⁰ S. Branković, "Legija kneginje Natalije", *Večernje novosti online* (Belgrade), 17 Feb. 2012 (retrieved 30 June 2017). Since we happened to discover the latter text just before learning that its author, professor Branković, had deceased, all our hopes to have its content properly validated seem to have gone up in smoke, leaving us for the time being with one option only: to take his claims at face value.

valour. It was only at the disbanding of the volunteers that it became known that she was a maiden girl; and she was financially rewarded from the highest places.¹¹

Unfortunately, the retired major was our only source in this case, a case bearing resemblance to that of Stana Kovačević.

Vukosava Nikolić (aka Vukosav Nikolić)

The information about the person we are now turning to also comes from a single source. The following “fine episode from Serbia” was published in a mid-1877 issue of the *Srbski narod*, a conservative clerical-Orthodox, Serbian language newspaper edited and printed in the then southern-Hungarian town of Novi Sad (Újvidék/Neusatz). It is most critical of the state of affairs in the Principality of Serbia, and also neglects to mention important information such as the person’s age, background, length and places of military service:

When the volunteers came to Belgrade for disbandment, one volunteer was given male clothes, just like the others. But he kept asking for other clothes, until they shouted: “But what other clothes?”, and he answered: “Female, because I am a woman!” The prince [Milan] was informed about this; the prince summoned her and rewarded her. When the princess [Natalia] heard about this, she also wanted to meet her and she rewarded her too. This woman is a real hero, she was already awarded a medal on the battlefield, was wounded and hospitalized, and still was not recognized as a female. Her name is Vukosava Nikolića, but as a volunteer bore the name Vukosav Nikolić.¹²

Whereas in the previous case rewards came from unspecified “highest places”, Vukosava Nikolić was received by the ruling couple, the same privilege as the one Miss Merkus had been granted in the *ante bellum* April of 1876. It is likely that Vukosava Nikolić was one of the “brothers” from Srem, the region between the Sava and Danube rivers where the article was written and whence it was sent. If we take the “prekosavski” (from across the Sava) origin of Vukosava Nikolić for granted, she might have been active in the Drina area in July and/or in the first half of August N. S. That front saw the highest concentration of volunteer Serbs from the Habsburg Monarchy – reportedly some 1,200 of a total of at first 2,700, and later 5,000 men, often operating under officers and non-commissioned officers formerly engaged in the k.u.k army.¹³ If Vukosava

¹¹ Marković, *Dnevnik srpsko-bugarških dobrovoljaca*, 26.

¹² “Dopisi. Iz Srema (Beograd i Srbija)”, *Srbski narod* 9/46 (Novi Sad), 14(2) July 1877, p. 2. The surname is archaically rendered as Nikolića, meaning “of the Nikolić family”.

¹³ General information about the Serb volunteers from Austria-Hungary used here comes from B. Bešlin, “Srbi iz Habsburške monarhije dobrovoljci u srpsko-turskim ratovima 1876–1878. godine”, in Branković, ed., *Od Deligrada do Deligrada*, 142.

Nikolić joined the Serbian forces as a volunteer later, she was probably assigned to the “Battalion of Princess Natalia” (*Bataljon kneginje Natalije*), named after its benefactress Natalia, the spouse of Serbia’s ruler Prince Milan.¹⁴ According to the late Slobodan Branković, this battalion was:

composed of Serbian volunteers from Hungary, and craftsmen and servants from Belgrade. [...] Its core, in the military sense, was made up of Serb volunteers from Austria-Hungary. Its strength varied from 230 to 500 men. Coming from Belgrade, the battalion reached Deligrad on 6 [18] August [1876]. As for clothing, the volunteers did not have greatcoats. Although it was midsummer, the nights were chilly, and some complained that they had gone stiff with cold.¹⁵

Thus Jeanne Merkus might have had two or three female colleagues at the Drina, all still undetected at the time of battle.

Draga Strainović (aka Dragutin Strainović)

After two accomplished, full-born careers of passing as male military volunteers comes a prematurely terminated one, after a month of undetected campaigning. The enlistment and the end of the military career of the person concerned has been vividly described by Gliša Marković, then a commanding officer in Serbia’s army, who had unsuspectingly accepted “him” at first. This officer’s previously mentioned recollections of his 1876 days devote special attention to the assertive and outspoken young lady who had almost reached her final goal of helping the Bulgarians in their struggle for freedom, but whose hopes were dashed upon her being ferreted out. About this case we are, sadly enough, informed by this single source. Furthermore, Marković relies entirely on the victim’s own testimony for the denouement. Marković’s story, too fine and rare not to be quoted here extensively, starts in the early morning of 1 July (19 June) 1876 when Nikolai Alexeevich Kireev – a Russian officer from St. Petersburg serving as commander of the volunteers in the Timok army with the rank of major – left Zaječar with 1,100 men and, following the Beli Timok River, headed for the border area near Knjaževac in the south. At noon, a sergeant brought another twenty-one volunteers from Negotin, a town north of Zaječar, north-eastern Serbia. To quote Marković for what followed:

With these volunteers came a lad, in uniform and a *kalpak* [high-crowned cap] with the Bulgarian coat-of-arms, “lafa” [lion]. To me, he appeared too young for

¹⁴ The Montenegrin *vojvoda* Gavro Vukotić wrote in his memoirs: “It is rumoured that Princess Natalia has given one million florins for the formation of the volunteer legion” (*Memoari vojvode Gavre Vukotića*, vol. 2, 357, as quoted by Lj. Perović, “Jaraganska legija ili leteći kor vojvode Maša Vrbice”, in Branković, ed., *Od Deligrada do Deligrada*, 129, who seems to suggest that the said sum went to Mašo Vrbica’s legion (see below) and not to her own.

¹⁵ S. Branković, *Nezavisnost slobodoljubivih* (Belgrade 1998), 189.

a volunteer, and so I asked: Lad, what are you doing among these volunteers? You want to fight the Turks? That's fine, but I think that you'd be better off serving in a supply unit or in some hospital. He puffed up his chest angrily and said: Sir, I won't be separated from my comrades, and you can do with me whatever you like! [...] Why did I spend money on this uniform? To tend to the supply unit's horses dressed like this? No! I want to fight the Turks; and if you won't take me, then I'll go all by myself.

I was not offended by his impudence, but I thought to myself: I'll get you; and I told him: Well, if you've made up your mind to fight the Turks, may luck be with you; but first you have to aim that small gun (calibre 18.) of yours with one hand at that shrub over there; because otherwise I can't be sure about your ability. – I ordered that more as a joke.

But he did not hesitate a second; he immediately stepped forward from the line, raised the gun with one hand and started aiming. I was surprised, and I shouted right away: Enough! You're accepted.

On 3 July (21 June) at dawn Marković, who was in position in the vicinity of Zaječar, received the order to send his twenty-one volunteers to seize an area on the left bank of the Beli Timok. In that context he states:

Upon the return of the volunteers from the iron bridge their sergeant reported that the young volunteer had proved himself very energetic in performing his duties; he also said that his rifle butt had an excellent effect on disobedient soldiers, and I commended him in front of his comrades.

On the 4th of July (22 June) the unit of *vojvoda* Rista Makedonski [an important Bulgarian emigrant leader in Serbia] arrived in Zaječar with 191 volunteers; I gave over these volunteers, and they were sent to Major Kireev at the Knjaževac border.[...]

Here Marković abruptly jumps to 31 July (19 July), the day when he set off hastily on a march to Boljevac, a place west of Zaječar. He arrived there at 7 o'clock next morning and encamped his troops for a short break. For himself and his staff he took a room in the inn, where he was soon informed by the innkeeper that "some female" was at the door asking to have a word with the officer in charge. Exhausted and already in bed as he was, he refused to see her, but to no avail. Even the soldier standing guard could not prevent her from entering the commanding officer's room:

I jumped out of my bed and shouted: What are you doing? What do you want in here?! The soldier released the woman and she struck the military pose just like a veteran and looked him straight in the eye.

Go away! I shouted at her coarsely; I'm not receiving anyone. Hasn't the innkeeper told you?... I want to rest; and I sat down on the bed.

She remained immobile; I gestured to the soldier to leave, and asked her again: What do you want? Instead of an answer, she came one step closer and said with a free voice: I ask Mr. Commander to listen to a word or two and then I'll be off at once.

Go away, I said, I'm not in the mood for your trifles, and I turned away from her. Then she [said] with a more serious tone: Neither am I, sir, in the mood for idle talk, as you might've thought?! – at that remark I flinched and turned to face her, and she went on: I only wanted to use this opportunity, because we're leaving for Lukovo [to the west of Boljevac] in an hour or two: and I considered it my duty to express my gratitude to you on this occasion...

And I stopped her with the question: And who are you? I'm not receiving anyone's gratitude today! After a night's journey I need rest. Please go.

While she was watching me more seriously: Oh Mr. Commander; today our army is on retreat from Zaječar, abandoning it to the Turkish arsonists; fatigue is, at least in my opinion, not permitted for a soldier... as a matter of fact, until just recently I have also been weapon in hand in the first lines of the volunteer fighters around Kadibogaz, Korito, Salaš and in front of Rakovitsa [a place across the border in Ottoman Bulgaria]; and I regret it strongly that I could no longer remain in their ranks and show the Turks that the Serbian woman also knows how to die fighting for her fatherland.

This story of hers was a big surprise to me! – and, almost ashamed for having treated her so roughly, I interrupted her by saying: What, what?! Have you been fighting weapon in hand?

Yes I have, sir, and I am very sorry that a volunteer on outpost guard, when we were on duty in pairs, attacked me ... with insulting expressions! Otherwise I would still be in the ranks of the brave volunteers, if I had not been – she said smiling – already eaten away by worms in some thorn-bush.

But how did it happen? I asked her; here is what she told me: the same day when our commander Major Kireev fell [in battle] before Rakovitsa; in the evening of that same day I was assigned to guard duty in front of our camp together with another volunteer: it was almost midnight; and... do you remember that young male volunteer in Zaječar?

Well, there were more of them, both Serbian and Bulgarian, but I don't recall any particular one.

Marković was waiting for the right moment to ask her how her stint on sentry duty had in fact ended, but before he was able to say anything, she suddenly grabbed his hand, kissed it and said with tears in her eyes:

I am the young volunteer you didn't want to accept at first! And whom you ordered to aim that heavy gun with one hand; you told me you wouldn't accept me unless I passed (the test), and believe me, I'm amazed myself how I managed! But my determination to fight the Turks prevailed; and you commended me; and after the fighting at Izvor you were satisfied with my performance at the iron bridge...

Hesitantly and faintly smiling, she went on to say: You are my first commander; and the second was *vojvoda* Rista Makedonski, with whom we left for the Knjaževac border area. I considered it my duty to thank you for your attention to me at my enlistment in Zaječar as a "young" – she smiled – male volunteer and your advice to be steadfast in the service; and indeed you gave me the op-

portunity to fight as a female with a gun in my hand for the liberation of both the Serbian and the Bulgarian people. I regret that it wasn't meant for me to persevere in battle with my honourable and brave comrades... and I'd be in the ranks of first-line fighters today if that comrade of mine, like some drunkard, didn't attack me while we were on sentry duty. – Uttering these words, she clenched her fists, her face glowing with anger. – As my gun was loaded, I took a few steps back and almost pulled the trigger; but I realized that firing the gun would sound the alarm in the entire camp, and the soldiers who were already tired after the fighting would have to take their arms; and so instead I reported myself to the lance corporal, who replaced me immediately with another volunteer.

The next day I was already on the way to Knjaževac. There they took away my weapons and military clothes, and gave me, as you can see, my natural uniform and assigned me to the accounting division of the medical corps. Yesterday we arrived here and in a few hours we'll be moving on to Lukovo.

I was enlisted in the volunteer registry under the name of Dragutin Strainović from Karanovac [present-day Kraljevo, central Serbia], but my name is Draga, the surname is the same.

I was the only one in that volunteer group from Negotin who had a uniform and *kalpak* with the Bulgarian coat-of-arms "Lafa"; and I earnestly believed that we would cross the border and raise the Bulgarian people to arms; if only I'd been able to win over yet another friend from Bulgaria, to fight for the liberation of her own people...

What happened that night between the two soldiers on sentry duty is far from clear; we only have one side of the story. It is reasonable to assume that the unnamed sentry found out his colleague's secret. Perhaps he tried to blackmail her, demanding sexual or other favours. Did she refuse and enrage him by doing so, causing him to call her names? Yet it is more than likely that – at least there and then – denouncement led to the end of active participation in war. Both parties seem to have been aware of that. Did the lance corporal who replaced her act on his own accord, or on the orders of his superiors? Maybe of *vojvoda* Risto Makedonski, who was on his way to his native Bulgaria with the troops? Or of Colonel Miloško Lešjanin, commander of the Timok Army? General Cherniaev, supreme commander of the joint Timok and Morava armies, but mainly occupied with the latter, does not seem a likely candidate as he is reported to have personally decorated Stana Kovačević for bravery after her involuntary coming out, which did not result in her being permanently removed from the fighting ranks. Is it possible that the Strainović case had occurred before and that of Kovačević after the shift in enlistment policy that Slobodan Branković claimed to have happened? A non-passing Bulgarian girl was allowed to join the volunteer force. She and some other openly female candidates were evidently given permission to stand in the volunteer ranks, as will be shown in the following paragraph.

In wrapping up the story of Draga Strainović, we quote Gliša Marković once more:

I would not have recalled that young volunteer had she not mentioned hitting the target with one hand. At the enlistment of volunteers I indeed had believed that young volunteer to be a naïve lad misled by the volunteers to obey them. And now, instead of that lad there stood in front of me a young woman with a tanned face, brownish skin, of a medium height, full-blown, well-built, with bright eyes from which two candid sparks were shining on me, as a symbol of respect and gratitude.

Analysis

Marković recalled having been astonished to hear that a female like Draga Strainović had been actually fighting. Having in mind two more cases from 1876 – the anonymous martial girl from Bosnia (see above) and Marina Grgić (Veličković), a brave nurse (see below) – in 1906 this retired officer advocated an end to male exclusivity in military matters by stating:

We think that such serious work by females – who take it on with full masculine energy and responsibility, and regardless of their earlier youthful pleasures – is nonetheless praiseworthy; because the females entering the ranks of more serious fighters in order to fight for the fatherland themselves are shining virtues which will serve as an example to the next generation.

And it is exactly because of this that we believe that Draga Strainović [...] deserves to have her name recorded alongside other brave volunteers; and also to make it easier, in future wars, for more serious Serbian females to show up, who, next to their maternal duty will fight with weapon in hand for the well-being of their fatherland, religion and people.¹⁶

This expectation did not materialize before the wars of the 1910s, and to a small extent only, as we have observed earlier on.

That Stana Kovačević, Vukosava Nikolić, the anonymous Serbian girl from Bosnia, and Draga Strainović all were ready to resort to deceit in order to enter the realm of warfare can also be deduced from what Alfred Wright, then a student of medicine in Great Britain, who in July 1876 decided to travel to Serbia as a medical free lance, heard from a local lady, called Miss Milojković, upon his arrival:

I wish I were a man instead of a woman, I would enlist in our army immediately. [...] I long for vengeance.¹⁷

¹⁶ Marković, *Dnevnik srpsko-bugarskih dobrovoljaca*, 19–25. Draga's story as told by Major Marković is rendered in short and without any additions from possible other sources in Nikolić, *Ratni dnevnic*, 104–105.

¹⁷ A. Wright, *Adventures in Servia* (London 1884), 52.

This was certainly a reflection of the state of affairs during the first two months of the war, when females were vehemently denied access, with the exception of Miss Merkus and the four cases of successful passing. But why is there no reference in Marković's text to a shift in admittance policy which, according to Branković, occurred as a reaction to the gloomy turn in the course of the war with its increasing shortage of fighting men? Can this discrepancy be related to a difference between a more conservative Serbian Timok front – where Marković had been active – and a rather modern, Russian-dominated front at the Morava – which Branković probably had in mind?

Accepted in the army without passing but lacking evidence of fighting

Whereas in the preceding four cases passing was the precondition for being able to enlist in the military, followed by a longer or shorter career as a fighter, the same number of female individuals was found to have entered armed formations operating on and from the territory of the Principality of Serbia as volunteer combatants without pretending to be males. Or rather, they are reported as being accepted, but it cannot be confirmed whether they really fought. Unfortunately, each case to be dealt with now is single-sourced, scanty in detail, and without any clue as to the further fate of the individual concerned.

A young Bulgarian woman

In mid-July 1876 the aforementioned conservative newspaper *Srbski narod* from Novi Sad quoted an unnamed Serbian correspondent of the *Russkii mir*, a liberal Russian newspaper, who after having left for General Cherniaev's Morava Army near Aleksinac, observed:

Apart from the Markus woman [Jeanne Merkus], there is among the Serbian libertarians (sg. *slobodnjak*) appointed for Bulgaria a young Bulgarian woman. After the call was issued she came as well, intending to instil enthusiasm into the insurgents and to fight side by side with them for the liberation of their homeland.¹⁸

Jeanne Merkus was not operating nowhere near Bulgaria, as suggested above, but in the opposite, western part of the country, bordering on Bosnia. And, what call, or invitation, does it refer to? Nothing of the kind has emerged from our research, nothing specifically addressed to females. Even so, the air was

¹⁸ *Srbski narod*, 15(3) July 1876, 4. Consulting the Russian original and similar relevant material from that country has thus far failed. *Russkii mir* had been started as a project of General Cherniaev and a few associates of his.

full of plans for the formation of volunteer units, several of which became reality. The only appeal to females that we know of was conceived by Mara Ljubibratić (c.1847 – c.1913), a close associate of Jeanne Merkus during the early months of 1876. Returning to Belgrade in early August 1876 from Austria, where her husband, the *vojvoda*, was still forced to stay, she brought along a blueprint of her own design. This draft, which had the approval of her spouse, called for the military participation of females, but only in defending Serbia's trenches and fortified cities behind the frontline, and under the guidance of old officers and other experienced males.¹⁹ In addition to this project, which was never adopted by the government or the army, probably for being at odds with the prevailing attitude in the country, the reader is reminded of Draga Strainović, who wished that Bulgarian females would come to take part in the struggle. It is certain that she belonged to the Timok army, and the same destination was by far the most likely for the nameless young Bulgarian woman. At the River Timok thousands of Bulgarian male volunteers gathered, but their attempts to attack Turkish positions in their native land soon proved to be a bridge too far.

Jevto Lapovac's "nephew"

Our information about the next case stems from the personal experience of the then well-known Serbian historian and politician professor Miloš S. Milojević, who had distinguished himself as a captain in the 1876–77 war, during which he raised and commanded several volunteer units. At the end of July 1876 he was astonished to see barely 15-year-old boys in Jevto Lapovac's newly-arrived volunteer unit in Sokobanja near Aleksinac, the main site of the Morava front. One of them, to whom Lapovac referred as "my nephew", appeared to be a girl, as Milojević later personally confirmed.²⁰ The youth was apparently the daughter of the unit leader's sister, so one may assume that at least he himself was from the very beginning fully aware of the passing, and must have approved of it as well.

A Herzegovinian girl from Belgrade

It was the progressive Serbian-language newspaper *Zastava* from Novi Sad that published a dispatch sent from Belgrade on 16 (4) October 1876:

¹⁹ Arhiv Hercegovine [Archives of Herzegovina], Mostar, Mića Ljubibratić Papers, inv. no. 1350, pp. 1–2; S. Ljubibratić & T. Kruševac, "Prilozi proučavanju hercegovačkog ustanka 1875–1878", *Godišnjak Društva istoričara Bosne i Hercegovine* 11 [1960] (1961), 153.

²⁰ M. Milojević, *Srpsko-turski rat 1877 i 1878 god.* (Šabac 1887), 22.

A girl from Herzegovina, who has been working for Janja Spiridonović, a local tailor, and has [now] been admitted to the Yataghan Legion [*Jataganska legija*], yesterday received military clothing, which she immediately put on and left for the battlefield between 15th [3] and 16th [4] this month. The same girl is said not only to be skilful with weapons and a good marksman but also to have the courage of a man.²¹

The aforementioned military skills must have been the result of some kind of private training, as the person in question was most likely a newcomer in the army, as Draga Strainović conjectured as well. The formation in late August 1876 of the Yataghan Legion, also known as the “Flying Brigade” (*Leteći kor*) or the “Montenegrin Legion” (*Crnogorska legija*), was the result of deliberations held by Mašo Vrbica (1834–1898), Montenegro’s deputy in Serbia, with the country’s political and military leadership.²² Only on the condition of receiving most golden ducats from Serbia’s public treasury, as well as obtaining the guarantee that their two armies would operate independently, each on the half of the still Ottoman-held territory each claimed as its own, could Montenegro be won over to sign the bipartite war agreement, which took place in Venice on 15 (3) June. Following the outburst of hostilities Vrbica, the prime warrior-diplomat the small state had on offer, was sent as his Prince Nicholas’s personal envoy to Serbia’s military headquarters.

The Herzegovinian girl left Belgrade for the battlefield between 15 (3) and 16 (4) October, thus after the brave exploits that had already cost so many legionaries their lives. Allowing this undisguised girl to enter the Yataghan Legion could have well had to do with these losses which were so hard to compensate for. The reader is also reminded of Branković’s claim that the re-admittance of Stana Kovačević after her “coming out” was the result of a change in policy.

Referring to the battle of Veliki Šiljegovac of 19–21 (7–9) October which ended in a defeat for Serbia’s forces, Branković writes about Vrbica:

[He] appealed to all officers, about 50 men, with the words: “Brothers Montenegrins and other Serbs!” He urged them to chase the enemy from the Serbian hearth, reminded them of battles and heroes and of everything that the nation would celebrate forever. The *vojvoda*, though wounded, kept on fighting. Janko Radulović substituted him as the commander.²³

By order of Serbia’s Ministry of War of the first day of the abovementioned battle, all male citizens of 17 to 60 years of age were conscripted into the army.²⁴ Following the Battle of Djunis of 29 (17) October, Serbia’s last great

²¹ “Vesti iz Beograda 16 [4] okt.,” *Zastava* (Novi Sad), 22 (10) Oct. 1876.

²² The financing of this legion is not clear. Princess Natalia may have been its benefactress – see n. 14 above.

²³ Branković, “Čestitka Knjaza Nikole”.

²⁴ *Das Vaterland* (Vienna), 21 Oct. 1876, 2.

defeat in the war, the Russian ultimatum of 30 (18) October led to the ceasefire of 1 November (21 October). In view of the truce of November 19 (7) 1876, the Montenegrin senator and *vojvoda* was called back to Cetinje.²⁵ According to a contemporary newspaper, the members of the national army were sent home, whereas the volunteers and the Yataghan Legion were to be encamped in the northern Serbian town of Smederevo on the Danube.²⁶ If the anonymous Herzegovinian girl really managed to enter the war zone, she could not have been taking part in fighting longer than from 16 (4) October until the ceasefire of 1 November (October 21), and in skirmishes until 19 (7) November 1876, the day the lasting truce came into force. As Vrbica's troops were also active in the decisive battles of Veliki Šiljegovac and Djunis, our anonymous girl from Herzegovina might have been among them. However, there is no trace of a daring female in the Serbian *Poem on the Serbo-Montenegrin war against the Turks of 1876* by Jovan Dj. Milutinović. About Vrbica, portrayed as the epitome of bravery, the ode claims that he issued a proclamation in which he "summoned the sons/ [...] I need heroes/ Cravens and women I do not need at all/[...] The fearsome army of men with yataghans."²⁷

A brave Herzegovinian girl

At an unspecified date in the summer or autumn of 1876, but given the evidence just presented October is the most likely month, an unnamed foreign correspondent was in the office of Jakov Tucaković, the prefect of the city of Belgrade, awaiting the dispatch of his accreditation, when a *Bošnjak* (Bosnian; in this context meaning: a Serb from Bosnia) came into the room, uttering only: A gun, a gun! The little man would not leave without being supplied with a gun, an old much too big for him. Our source for this, an item in a serial publication of the next year, continues:

After him a brave Herzegovinian girl entered. She briskly approached the administrator's desk and spoke, her eyes flashing fire: My mother's been killed by the Turks, my father's going to battle, give me male clothes and a weapon, I want to avenge my mother!

The text concludes that the request was granted.²⁸ Given this scarce information the possibility cannot be excluded that this Herzegovinian girl was in fact the same as the previous one.

²⁵ Branković, "Čestitka Knjaza Nikole".

²⁶ *Zastava* (Novi Sad), 22 (10) Nov. 1876.

²⁷ Jovan Dj. Milutinović, *Spev srpsko-crnogorskoga rata protiv Turaka 1876* (Belgrade 1877), 36.

²⁸ "Ratne beleške", *Orao. Veliki ilustrovani kalendar za godinu 1877*, vol. 3 (Novi Sad 1877), 22.

Analysis

For all of the four cases just mentioned, an equal number of frustratingly short pieces of information were available, leaving the curious researcher wondering about many things. Only with regard to the last one do we find a clearly stated personal motive for pursuing a fighting career. The urge to revenge slain close relatives or invoking some other grave plight might well have more often served to make otherwise reluctant authorities sympathetic. The accessibility of the armed forces for some highly motivated and capable females was – with or without passing – surely greater in times of severe peril, in the face of acute danger of losing battles or territory, as especially the Morava front often experienced. One should not forget that Serbia was, mainly thanks to Russia, in the very nick of time saved by diplomatic means from the Ottoman recapture of the fortified towns (Šabac, Belgrade, Smederevo, Kladovo; all relinquished in 1867) and the obligation to pay its suzerain huge reparations.

This being said, it remains an open question as to how long the persons discussed in this paragraph stayed in the army and whether they really engaged in combat operations. Sometimes military careers which started relatively late in 1876, such as that of the Herzegovinian girl who left Belgrade in mid-October, may have been cut very short simply because of the approaching November truce, the forerunner of the peace treaty signed early the following year.

Nurses decorated for valour

In order to understand the exceptional role played by the two nurses the following passage is devoted to, one should be aware of how inaccessible to females Serbia's theatre of war was. Montenegro had fewer restrictions in that respect (the latter issue is dealt with in the following paragraphs). Elaborating on this particular historical difference, the Serbian feminist Jelena Lazarević noted in the late 1920s:

Serbia's laws on the military and warfare are less well-disposed towards females coming anywhere near the front. As little are the sisters of mercy allowed to visit the military zone, let alone the line of fire.²⁹

With regard to the 1876 war, Miss Lazarević, who was also versed in the history of the Serbian Red Cross, continued by mentioning only "the volunteer-warrior on the Drina, the Dutchwoman *Jeni Merkus*, the Amazon of the Herzegovinian Uprising". She was either unaware of there being any others or regarded them as much less important. Not before the Balkan Wars of the early

²⁹ Jelena Lazarević, *Engleskinje u srpskom narodu* (Belgrade 1929), 216.

1910s does she see two “(female) Samaritans approach the battlefields”, adding that it was exceptional for Serbia.³⁰

Marija/Marijana/Marina Grgić (married Veličković) – an unarmed sister of mercy

Late in 1912 an anonymous article (in Serbian) entitled “The Serbian Joan of Arc” first devoted attention to Sofija Jovanović, a Belgrade heroine of the then just-finished First Balkan War, and went on to say:

We had such heroines in the Serbo-Turkish war of 1876–78 as well. Such a girl back then was Marija Grgić from Belgrade, nowadays married Veličković. She did not carry arms, unlike the above-mentioned Sofija, but she would go among fighting soldiers under the rain of bullets to pull the wounded back to the rear lines, where first aid was provided. For this she was awarded the silver medal for bravery and the war certificate for military merit. And on this occasion [the First Balkan War], she, a 53-year-old woman, wanted to go to the combat lines and give first aid to the wounded, and could barely be dissuaded from doing so. She even wanted to leave her husband, saying: the fatherland counts more than anything else.³¹

The latter part provides us with a rare follow-up, a rare glimpse of a person's life after the wartime period under study. Stana Kovačević and Marie Michailowna Sadowskaja (see below) were the only other cases in our sample of which similar information has come to light. In the Kovačević case there is no attested rekindling of the fighting spirit, as she perhaps did not live long enough to experience the sheer horror of the Great War, when the Austro-Hungarian occupation forces ravaged her Šabac and its countryside. She died between 1907 and 1925.

We failed to find newspaper articles mentioning Veličković née Grgić, but thanks to Major Marković some additional information is available. To quote the 1906 text of this former officer for the very last time:

And at the first celebration of these volunteers [most probably in Belgrade in 1903, when Stana Kovačević received much attention] a rather tall middle-aged woman was also attending as their full member; her chest was adorned with decorations for bravery and of the Red Cross.

During the fights around Knjaževac she had been, so I was told, a nurse; and had personally carried wounded away from the battlefield; and on that occasion she had, thanks to her caution, saved an entire supply unit with munitions from a Cherkess [Circassian] ambush. Her name is Marija-Marijana, a Serbian

³⁰ Ibid. The “Samaritans” mentioned were Miss Nadežda Petrović and Miss Kasija Miletić.

³¹ “Srpska Jovanka Orleanka”, *Ženski svet* vol. 27, no.12 (Novi Sad), 1 Dec. 1912, p. 279.

woman from Pančevo, now living in Bela Palanka [a town in southern Serbia; Smederevska Palanka in the north is much more likely].³²

Some twenty years later we find her mentioned once again, but now only very briefly. It would be the last time. The entry entitled “Dobrovoljci” (Volunteers) in the first joint South-Slav encyclopaedia puts “Marina Veličković from Pančevo (still alive today)” on a pedestal by naming only her, Stana Kovačević and the Belgrade volunteer nurse Natalija-Neti Munk (1864–1924) as distinguished women from “our liberation wars” of the late nineteenth century.³³

Marie Michailowna Sadowska(ja) – an armed sister of mercy on horseback

The second and last nurse we happen to know to have been decorated with military honours for her role during the 1876–77 Serbo-Ottoman war was of Russian extraction. At the Morava front in the days between 28 (16) August and 1 September (20 August) 1876, Dr Vladan Djordjević, Serbia’s Surgeon General and one of the founding fathers of the country’s brand new Red Cross organisation, recorded in his memoirs published four years later:

Arriving at the place where the Prugovac dressing-station was, we were met by the adjutant to the general [Cherniaev], Captain Maksimov, who had been on leave for several days in Belgrade, and now returned. But he did not return alone.

Next to him, riding a small Šumadija [central Serbia] horse was an unusual figure. The face feminine, quite beautiful, with long blond hair rolled up in a giant bun and, on top of the bun, our *šajkaša* [military cap] coquettishly tipped to one side. On the body, a military shirt, strongly swollen at the chest. Around the slender waist, a lacquer belt and, on it, a holster for some tiny revolver, like a toy. On the legs, wide blue trousers, tucked into small, very coquettish lacquer boots. In one hand a whip and, around the left upper arm, a white ribbon with a red cross.

³² Marković, *Dnevnik srpsko-bugarskih dobrovoljaca*, 26.

³³ Lazarević, “Dobrovoljci”, in the Latin edition of the *Narodna enciklopedija*, 536, and the Cyrillic edition, 610–611 (“Mara Kovačević from Šabac”, i.e. Stana Kovačević). Born in Belgrade’s Jewish quarter, Natalija-Neti Munk (née Tajačak) started her long and splendid career as a humanitarian worker and voluntary nurse in the Serbo-Bulgarian war of 1885. Dealing with some 340 male members of the Union of Volunteers of the Kingdom of Serbia in the years 1903–1912 the Serbian historian Ljubodrag Popović, “Savez dobrovoljaca Kraljevine Srbije 1903–1912”, in P. Kačavenda, ed., *Dobrovoljci u oslobodilačkim ratovima Srba i Crnogoraca* (Belgrade 1996), 58, observed: “Besides these we also mention the names of two women – female members, who participated in the wars very actively [...] Natalija Munk from Belgrade and Marina Veličković from Pančevo, who was then living in Smederevska Palanka.”

Captain Maksimov approached the general to report, and then introduced his travelling companion.

Cherniaev just smiled, nodded, and said:

– That is the job of our physician-in-chief! and pointed at me with his hand.

Both of them now approached me, and Captain Maksimov said:

– This is my sister, Missus Sadovska from St. Petersburg, who has come in order to become a sister of mercy in our army!

I greeted her most courteously.

– I am delighted, my lady. May I see your permit for providing private help to the wounded?

– Oh, you speak Russian – the martial lady said clapping her hands gladly like a child – that’s very lucky. Here is your “document”, but, my dear doctor, you are going to put me in the most terrible place, aren’t you, aren’t you?

The general was already ahead of us and we all followed him, but as he was in the habit of riding fast, the obligation to give an answer to the romantic desire of Miss Sadovska fell on me.

But it was as if she had forgotten what she had asked me, so much did she like to ride with the general’s numerous and splendid suite at such a furious pace, and I only heard her say to her “brother”:

– O Sasha, this is good! I’m staying at the headquarters, verily!

Riding fast, we soon reached Šumatovac [elevation near Aleksinac].³⁴

From the Aleksinac-Deligrad area, the heart of the Morava front, the attractive Russian lady somehow moved to the Ibar front, where she served under her countryman, the retired General-Major Semen Kornilovich Novoselov, who despite his 64 years of age and decaying health had come to Serbia during the armistice of late summer 1876 together with about 1,000 Russian volunteers, including some 50 officers, two colonels and three lieutenant-colonels, medical doctors, medical orderlies, members of supply units, and a few sisters of mercy. General Novoselov had arrived with the volunteer corps from the Caucasus, via Odessa. From the end of September to the middle of November 1876, he served in the armed forces of Serbia, where he was appointed commander of the

³⁴ V. Djordjević, “Na granici, ratne uspomene iz prvog srpsko-turskog rata god.1876” (Belgrade 1880), 458–459. Branković, *Nezavisnost slobodoljubivih*, 184 (without citing his source) states: “Captain Maksimov, the adjutant to General Cherniaev, returned from his leave in Belgrade with his Sadovska sister. The Russian lady had come from St. Petersburg as a volunteer to be employed in the Serbian [military] medical corps. Her appearance was unusual for the daily wartime troubles. With a *šajkača* on top of her bun, a whip in the right hand, a white ribbon with the red cross around the left upper arm, she inadvertently drew attention to herself.”

southern Ibar army by princely decree,³⁵ replacing Serbian Lieutenant-Colonel Ilija Čolak-Antić.³⁶

A soldier since 1835, Novoselov had fought in the Caucasian War in 1842/3, received the honour of being called “Conqueror of Yalta” during the Crimean War, and was wounded in the Polish campaign of 1863. According to a despatch in an Amsterdam newspaper of 10 October 1876, General Novoselov had, in the company of (Lieutenant-)Colonel Djordje Vlajković, a Serb previously serving in the Russian army, left for the Ibar army with twelve Russian officers.³⁷ After the Ottomans took the dominant Javor mountain range, there were no great clashes on the Javor/Ibar front any more.³⁸ A front on which not much success could be expected as Montenegro’s ruler had insisted on waging a separate war on a separate territory, the dividing line between the zones of responsibility of the armed forces of the two countries running just to the south of the Ibar front.

The much later published wartime notes of Dimitrije Mita Petrović show that General Novoselov and his volunteers arrived from Belgrade in Ivanjica, a small town between Mt Javor and the River Ibar in the evening of 29 September (probably O. S.). About their new commander, this source states:

The grey-haired general arrived, followed by quite a number of lower- and higher-ranking officers. He was also accompanied by Colonel Djoka Vlajković, a famous hero of Sevastopol [referring to the Crimean War], and by a young and rich Russian lady – Sadovska.³⁹

In mid-November 1876 the Vienna *Neue Freie Presse* praised Novoselov, describing him as “ordinary and upright”, while stressing the alleged rivalry and personal differences between him and Cherniaev, the highest-placed Russian officer in Serbia’s army. Novoselov, who had reportedly given his own clothes to wounded soldiers in the snow, was – as the article further claims – adored by his men and in his Ibar army “exemplary order” reigned.⁴⁰

Novoselov’s female assistant was probably first introduced to a wider audience in January 1877. Under the title “A sister of mercy on horseback” an

³⁵ Branković, *Nezavisnost slobodoljubivih*, 184.

³⁶ Apart from Cherniaev and Novoselov there was yet another Russian general in Serbia’s army: Vissarion Vissrionovich Komarov, chief of staff of the Russian 37th infantry division and chief of staff of the Serbian Morava army.

³⁷ *De Standaard* (Amsterdam), 10 Oct. 1876, p.1 – Uit Semlin wordt heden gemeld.

³⁸ Branković, *Nezavisnost slobodoljubivih*, 206.

³⁹ D. M. Petrović, *Ratne beleške sa Javora i Toplice 1876, 1877 i 1878. Sveska prva: Dogadjaji sa Javora 1876* (Čačak 1996), 204.

⁴⁰ *Neue freie Presse* (Vienna), 17 Nov. 1876, p. 2.

Austrian provincial newspaper quoted what a Russian writer had said about the battlefields of Serbia's Ibar army:

The shortage of officers was so large that the staff constantly had to go to the front line and General Novoselov was often left all alone. As a consequence, the following episode occurred on 19 October [31 N. S.?), a day of fierce fighting. All the officers were in position; in the general's vicinity only a sister of charity, Miss Sadowskaja, had stayed behind. When in the heat of the fight it came to the test, to send an order to a spot that was under heavy Turkish fire, the General, lacking an adjutant, entrusted Miss Sadowskaja with transmitting the order. The undaunted lady rode very fast through the worst hail of bullets and discharged her commission to the letter, and then returned to the general with the announcement that the order had been executed. The brave lady was unanimously awarded a silver medal for bravery.⁴¹

Two memoirs provide a closer look at this lady: the already mentioned one by doctor Djordjević, published in 1880; the other, published in 1889, was written by Richard von Mach, a former Prussian officer who had been serving in Serbia's army thirteen years earlier. Novoselov's portrait as painted by this former subordinate officer of his is all but flattering:

The new supreme commander, General Novoselov, was not giving them a shining example. This sad knight never appeared outside his block-house, which had been built for him at a safe distance; neither I nor any of the other officers on the outpost lines had ever seen him. His aide-de-camp, Maria Michailovna S., by contrast, would make us happy by her frequent visits. This aide-de-camp was a graceful young woman who preferred campaigning to her husband, and now rode on horseback, in Cherkess uniform covering her beguiling figure, all over our camp and participated in all our doings. It was always an exciting sight to see this young woman in her colourful Cherkess dress on a Serbian brisk grey horse rushing through the forests; not less exciting it seemed to us to lie around a fire in the cave with Marie Michailovna and chat drinking Serbian wine. [...] For all the frivolity and all her unusual inclinations, Marie Michailovna was nothing less than a tomboy (Mannweib); I believe that in the Javor heights many a young heart beat for her and surely with less luck than the exhausted heart muscle of Novoselov, our wreck of a general.⁴²

⁴¹ *Steyer Zeitung*, 11 Jan. 1877, p. 3 – Eine barmherzige Schwester zu Pferd.

⁴² R. von Mach, *Elf Jahre Balkan. Erinnerungen eines Preussischen Officiers aus dem Jahren 1876 bis 1887*. (Breslau *Elf Jahre Balkan*), 71–73. Donning Cherkess dress does not seem very likely for a Russian given the animosity between the two ethnicities, as the expanding Russian empire had driven most Muslim Cherkess into the arms of their Ottoman co-religionists. In the war fought in the Balkans Cherkess were the culminating-point of Muslim cruelty. On the snowy 31st (19th) October 1876 Cherkess and bashi-bazouks (irregular forces) burnt down, according to Branković (*Nezavisnost slobodoljubivih*, 221), all Serbian villages between the Morava river and the Deligrad–Ražanj road.

Von Mach was probably not exaggerating about Novoselov's poor health, as the general passed away in St. Petersburg in March 1877 after a longer illness.⁴³ And the Prussian proceeded to say:

The young woman was in possession of a considerable fortune, of which she had spent quite a lot for Serbia; she belonged to those enthusiastic Russian females who sacrifice wealth, happiness and life for their hobby-horse, and among whom the nihilists for choice and with result are recruiting.⁴⁴

Jeanne Merkus also spent considerable amounts of money for the Serbian cause, being sometimes deemed a nihilist, too. Von Mach's recollections of the Russian lady shed some light on the person's vicissitudes after the war, whereas in other cases post-1876/7 information could only be found about Stana Kovačević and M. Veličković née Grgić. To quote Von Mach once more:

Years later I heard from a Russian officer of our Javor corps that Marie Michailovna, because of participation in nihilistic activities, had been sentenced to lifelong exile in eastern Siberia, where she is said to have shot herself, after being violated by her guards.⁴⁵

Rounding off her case, Von Mach returns to her attitude towards Novoselov and other Russian men:

Our old general was treated by her like a parrot by its mistress, neither better nor worse. Marie Michailovna energetically kept most Russian officers at bay: once she gave a Russian captain a lash to the face with her riding-whip which was still visible six weeks later.⁴⁶

With the possible exceptions of Draga Strainović, our sample does not contain any clues to the difficulties individual women experienced for being too attractive for the opposite sex, and Jeanne Merkus herself cannot be expected to have drawn attention of this kind. "[Miss Merkus] hopes to win from Mars the victories denied her by Cupid",⁴⁷ a newspaper of the time cynically remarked alluding to her unwomanly appearance.

In an attempt to test the Prussian's harsh judgement on the Russian adversary, one looks for what other people who may have been observing there and then said about related issues. By far the closest to the Sadowskaja case can be encountered in the memoirs of Colonel Mihajlo Marković published in 1906. This Serb who was appointed head of the military medical corps on the Morava front later in the war, recalled a lady he had met in mid-October (most prob-

⁴³ *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung*, 27 Mar. 1877. Beilage, p.1: St. Petersburg, 18. März.

⁴⁴ Von Mach, *Elf Jahre Balkan*, 71–73.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Winona Daily Republican* (Winona, Minnesota), 4 Aug. 1876, p.1 – Tea-Table Talk.

ably O. S.) 1876 when he was still acting physician of the Rudnik brigade. He describes her as a “pre-eminently beautiful and tall blonde of about 25–26 years of age” who introduced herself as “V.V.N...ska”. Springing from a noble Polish family, she was highly educated, speaking several foreign languages. To quote Dr. Marković:

Miss V. married an Austrian higher officer, but divorced her husband shortly after the wedding. I cannot explain till this day how such a tender, angelically beautiful and well-educated woman could have ended up in Serbia as a sister of charity.⁴⁸

By her beauty, approximate age, being a divorcée and a sister of charity, Miss V. resembled M. M. Sadowskaja. As Marković claims, Miss V. felt lonely among her colleagues, and was once slightly intoxicated all by herself. He also claims that “she hated Russian officers out of all proportion”, which could be due at least in part to the overall Russian-Polish rivalry. Upset by their numerous uninvited visits, she finally brutally told them to stop. She, so the medic writes, followed him wherever he went, never leaving his side.

She complained to me about the boring Deligrad fair, about Russian physicians and officers behaving very discourteously towards ladies, and about them not considering them to be sisters of mercy who had come to Serbia to show their Slavic brothers compassion, but as something completely different, ugly and terrible! With tears in her eyes she begged me to rescue her from that intolerable company, and to take her with me to a place where she could peacefully do the job for which she had come to Serbia.⁴⁹

During the few hours the doctor spent in Deligrad, he became convinced that the complaints of “Miss V.” against Russian officers were grounded. In his opinion the sisters of charity were not treated as they deserved. So he granted her wish and took her with him to his camp, wondering how to get rid of her, should it turn out she had other intentions. The lady remained twelve days in the doctor’s camp, during which time he got to know her and her life story better. “One day Miss V. received a letter from somewhere, packed her belongings, said her farewells and left. Six weeks later I received her letter from [Austrian-held] Cracow, thanking me for the hospitality.”⁵⁰

The doctor’s testimony strengthens the impression that Serbia in late summer 1876, as flooded by Russian militaries as it was, was not at all a safe place for single foreign women who wanted to lead a decent life. Unlike the Serbian Grgić (Veličković) woman and the Russian Sadowskaja, the (Austro-?) Polish Miss V. V. N.–ska was not reported to have been decorated in Serbia,

⁴⁸ M. Marković, *Moje uspomene* (Belgrade 1906), 182–184.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

either for military bravery or for charitable work with the wounded, which puts her fully outside our sample.

Analysis

As far as M. Grgić (Veličković) from Pančevo in Hungary is concerned, nothing is known as to how she came to be involved in the humanitarian relief effort. We do not know if this most probably Serbian-Orthodox young woman had moved to Serbia and its nearby capital before 1876, or she left her country and place of birth because of the war? Nor do we know if she acted on her own initiative or under the guidance of some male relative(s). The young divorcée Sadowska had clearly come to Serbia following in the footsteps of her brother. Whether she had martial aspirations before becoming a nurse is not known. Was her tiny gun primarily intended to be used against the Turks or to protect her from the assault of men from her own ranks? In wartime Serbia Jeanne Merkus had, as we have seen, managed to escape the only available role, that of a nurse, but whether she managed to do so later in Romania/Bulgaria as well is highly questionable.

Women-at-arms from outside the main area of interest

Andjelija (Andja) Miljanov

Following 28 (16) June 1876, St. Vitus's Day (*Vidovdan*), the anniversary of the equally heroic and fatal Battle of Kosovo of 1389, Montenegro declared war on the Ottoman Empire. As opposed to the prevailing practice in Serbia of keeping women far from combat, the customs of its mountainous and somehow archaic little brother were generally more lenient toward female presence near the battlefield. According to the already quoted Jelena Lazarević, a feminist from Serbia writing in the 1920's, Montenegro's females had overall a much more active role in the 1876–78 wars than their sisters in Serbia. She saw female participation in many battles in and around Montenegro, mentioning in particular the siege of the Turkish fortified town of Onogošt (Nikšić). They wore, so the author claims, military clothes. Courageously they pulled wounded men behind the firing-lines, took care of provisioning, changed linen, washed laundry, etc. Although Miss Lazarević in her contribution about the Red Cross falls short of naming Montenegro's female combatants,⁵¹ we know of at least one relevant case from the 1875–78 military conflicts in and around that mountain fortress. The person, named Andjelija, was 17 years of age when she started, by mid-1876, to participate in the war armed and in male dress. She was the oldest child, yet

⁵¹ J. Lazarevićeva, "Uzajamnost Crvenog krsta i srpskih žena", *Domaćica* (Belgrade), vol. 42, nos. 1–4 (Jan.–Apr. 1927), pp. 28–33.

still untied by betrothal or matrimony, of Marko Miljanov Popović (1833–1901) and his wife Milosava (died 1876). Miljanov was the famous *vojvoda* of the Kuči, a tribal confederation situated just outside the Montenegrin state and, hence, nominally still in Ottoman territory. Under the title “Montenegro’s amazon” a Viennese newspaper of 13 October 1876 introduced Andjelija to its readers:

As is written from the Montenegrin camp in Kuči-Drekalović, since the beginning of the war one finds there the oldest daughter of *vojvoda* Marko Miljanov, the brave Andzelija. *Vojvoda* Marko has no sons, and therefore he is accompanied by his daughter, who graduated with distinction from the Girl’s School in Cetinje [Montenegro’s capital]. She is tall, lithe and slender, accustomed to all the heavy fatigues of a mountain war and jumps in her light *opanci* [traditional leather footwear] like a chamois from rock to rock. Yet, she is a heroine as well. On 14 [2] August she had, under the command of her father, at the battle of Fundina [in the Kuči area] distinguished herself so much that the Kuči honoured her with a very beautiful “puška” (rifle) as a token of remembrance of that day. In this battle she was all the time standing in the first lines during the deadliest fire, and participated in the memorable charge by the Kuči men against the Turks wielding a shiny sabre.⁵²

The Battle of Fundina was a great victory for the joint Montenegrin and Kuči warriors, with Marko Miljanov as one of their two military leaders. For this role in the great success of the tribesmen under his command he was hailed as the hero of Medun, his birthplace. In the aftermath of this victory many Turkish heads were severed from the bodies. Whether brave Andjelija also took part in this ultimate reckoning, history does not reveal.

A Serbian-language source of 1877/8 states that Andjelija accompanied her heroic father “in all battles as an apparition amidst the bullets. A falcon breeds a falcon!”⁵³ Arsa Pajević, a journalist of the Novi Sad newspaper *Zastava* reporting from that area during the war, is luckily not sparing with details:

Andjelija inherited tall stature from her father, she is willowy and with a fine figure, which we see only seldom in females in Montenegro because of the extremely hard work the poor devils have to do since their early childhood. For that reason, you do not often find females as physically well-built as their male counterparts.⁵⁴

After the flattering words about the girl’s beautiful eyes and posture, the ex-war correspondent continued:

⁵² *Neuigkeits Welt-Blatt* (Vienna), 13 Oct. 1876, p. 11 – Die Amazone Montenegros.

⁵³ Milko, “Vojvoda kučki Marko Miljanov”, in Jovanović-Zmaj’s *Ilustrovana ratna kronika* (Novi Sad), afl.6, Jan. 1878, p. 378.

⁵⁴ Ar[sa] P[aje]vić, “Vojvoda Marko Miljanov i kći mu Andjelija”, *Orao. Veliki ilustrovani kalendar za godinu 1877* Novi Sad 1877), vol. 3, p. 90; A. Pajević, *Iz Crne Gore i Hercegovine. Uspomene vojevanja za narodno oslobodjenje 1876* (Novi Sad 1891), 363–364.

Andjelija is the oldest daughter of the prime hero, *vojvoda* Marko, who has no male children and for that reason has treated his daughter as a son, but leaving her female name, since she truly is always hovering above him like a guardian angel.⁵⁵

Here we encounter for the first and only time in this particular type of research an undeniable allusion to the occasionally reported practice of sonless families from the tribal region in the vicinity of Montenegro to have a sister lastingly replace the missing brother. This emergency measure of the fictitious son usually entailed for the person concerned adopting the status of a social male, which also included embracing celibacy.⁵⁶ However, Andjelija does not seem to have been transformed completely, her female name not being changed into a male one, as was common in such cases. By all accounts, she acted as a son as long as the war lasted, until 1878, and got married afterwards. It is an established fact, though, that in 1914 one of her two sisters, Milica Lazović Miljanova, then a middle-aged married woman or widow, became a volunteer in the Montenegrin army and distinguished herself as a fighter and worthy of her father's name.⁵⁷ Even in the far-off and much less patriarchal Belgrade of 1912, at the beginning of the First Balkan War, the father of Sofija Jovanović, a man without a son, was overwhelmed with joy to see his daughter, who had just completed secondary education, becoming a warrior, and a heroic one at that. To continue Andjelija's story as told by Pajević:

But as far as heroism is concerned, she is a true lad. Only a few girls in the world have been given a gun by the army for heroism. After the fierce battle and the Turkish defeat at Fundina on 2 [14] August [1876] the heroic army of vojvoda Marko, a valiant Kuč, solemnly presented a small gun to the heroine Andja, who, at her father's side, stood the heaviest fire of that day's battle, from the beginning until its completion, in the first lines.⁵⁸

Outstripping the rest of this accolade by far, Pajević's last sentence on Andja reads:

O heroic Serbian land, you are blissful now and in eternity if on your fringe such exemplary daughters are being born!⁵⁹

⁵⁵ P[aje]vić, "Vojvoda Marko Miljanov i kći mu Andjelija", 90; Pajević, *Iz Crne Gore i Hercegovine*, 363–364.

⁵⁶ See e.g. R. Grémaux, "Woman Becomes Man in the Balkans", in G. Herdt, ed., *Third Sex, Third Gender. Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History* (New York 1994 and 1996), 241–281, 548–554.

⁵⁷ A. Djurić, *Žene-solunci govore* (Belgrade 1987), 8; Petar Opačić, "Žene-junaci", in *Juriš u porobljenu otadžbinu*, spec. issue of the Belgrade weekly *Intervju* no.5, 25 Aug. 1988, p. 52.

⁵⁸ P[aje]vić, "Vojvoda Marko Miljanov i kći mu Anđelija", 90; Pajević, *Iz Crne Gore i Hercegovine*, 363–364.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Instead of a conclusion

As a female warrior, Jeanne Merkus by all accounts had no competition in Herzegovina, since not a single genuine contestant, either home-grown or from abroad, has popped up for that area – or in Bosnia – during the entire Great Eastern Crisis, that is to say: from the very start of the rebellion in July 1875 until its final collapse in early 1878. At least in this first phase of her Balkan military career – which probably started as late as 10 December 1875 and lasted until 10 March 1876 – she was truly unique. Yet, things changed when Serbia, the country she had moved to, went to war in the summer of 1876. Apart from her, another four genuinely fighting females could be found, and at least seven more *attempted* to pursue a martial career in that country. The quartet of fully proved cases consists of: 1) Stana Kovačević; 2) an anonymous girl from Bosnia; 3) Vukosava Nikolić; and 4) Draga Strainović. All four were Serbian-Orthodox. All were already residing in Serbia before the war, with the possible exception of the third one, who might have come to the Principality specifically for enlistment. Moreover, each of them was admitted as a volunteer owing to the passing ruse. Whereas in the second and the third case this deceit was not revealed prior to the disbandment, the other two were unable to keep their secret hidden long enough. By the time the trick of the first was disclosed, she had already been decorated for bravery in battle. Following a shift in the admittance policy, which allowed a few strong-spirited warlike females to enlist as females, she was again given admittance, but on a different front from the one where she had started her military career in disguise. Yet, when the deceit of the fourth person was disclosed, she was promptly removed from active duty to an administrative function in the army. As the circumstances in these latter cases diverge largely (the one who was allowed to stay and fight on had already been decorated, and the other was not; they were fighting on different fronts under different direct commanders), it is hard to say whether there was a general policy in the volunteer section of the army as to how to respond to such curious cases. The second and third cases – to our knowledge, the only examples of sustained passing and fighting – were reportedly awarded from Serbia's very top in the end, when the battles were over and after the individuals' *démasqués*. It is hard to imagine that passing in times of national peril and for an undisputed patriotic cause was really considered to be such a grave misdemeanour or offence.

Of the few other females who joined Serbia's volunteer units, but whose actual fighting cannot be supported by evidence, Jevto Lapovac's "nephew" resorted to passing, whereas the Herzegovinian girl entering the special Montenegrin-led corps within the Principality of Serbia did not, and neither did her avenging heroic compatriot. Miss Merkus's own case strengthens our belief that passing was not always and everywhere a *conditio sine qua non*, but even the acclaimed amazon of Herzegovina, the Serbian Joan of Arc, experienced difficulties before being admitted to the world of Serbia's military. No wonder that some indigenous females, truly determined ones with a cause but without the

prestige and grandeur of Merkus's kind, used passing as an effective tool to avoid refusal at the very start, and the risk of suffering harassment while living among male volunteers and soldiers.

The need to resort to deceit in order to be allowed into the realm of warfare seems to have been the strongest at the still hopeful beginning of the war, when able-bodied fighting males were not yet in short supply, and naïve expectations of easy success were still rampant. A couple of months later, after suffering many military setbacks, with thousands killed, maimed and wounded, Serbia's war prospects turned very bleak, and hence the need for extra "manpower" grew. Under these altered circumstances the young Bulgarian girl, the girl from Herzegovina and the "brave Herzegovinian girl" seem to have been allowed to enlist as volunteers without having to hide their sex.

As for our "outsider", Andjelija Miljanov, she is the sole fully proved case of a female fighter from Montenegro and its surroundings we have been able to trace, which is bewildering given the scope and intensity of the anti-Ottoman struggle in that area during these years combined with a reportedly considerable degree of female participation (and casualties) both at the 1858 battle of Grahovac (where Serbs from Montenegro and Herzegovina jointly fought against the Turks) and in the 1869 revolt of the Serbs from the Gulf of Kotor and adjacent Krivošija against conscription imposed by the Austrian government. So the broader Montenegro region, with its living tradition of rebellion and war (not to mention feuding), in which females also participated in different ways and degrees, and, if need be, temporarily under arms, produced only one of our cases, whereas Serbia – a country that had largely lived in peace since its successful revolutions against its Ottoman overlord six or seven decades earlier, resulting in *de facto* independence – had four home-grown Balkan military maidens in its midst, of course in addition to the outlandish Miss Merkus. The disproportion cannot be simply explained away by referring to the huge difference in geographical size and population numbers in Serbia's favour, but should also be linked to the latter's much greater openness towards volunteers. Serbia opened its door to thousands of Serbs from its neighbourhood, to Russians, Bulgarians and other Slavs but also to dozens of West and Central Europeans, including Miss Merkus, as fighters. In contrast to the fairly modernized and liberal Serbia, the much more conservative and autocratic Montenegro proved to be generally closed and self-sufficient in this respect.

In Serbia's war of 1876/7 some 10,000 native and foreign volunteers took part, and much less on the Serbian side in the Russia-led war effort of 1877/8. The overall number of Serbia's effective fighting force (soldiers and volunteers combined) in the 1876/7 war may have been 115,000.⁶⁰ Another estimate for

⁶⁰ For the maximum figure of 115,000 soldiers and 10,000 volunteers see V. Stojančević, "Opšte prilike u Srbiji i učešće dobrovoljaca u ratu 1876. godine", in Branković, ed., *Od Deligrada do Deligrada*, 99.

the number of men under arms is 180,000–200,000.⁶¹ In the course of the first war only five females could be proved to have really engaged themselves in martial exploits, and another seven made at least a serious attempt to become active militarily. Not a single piece of evidence, not even a circumstantial hint, has come to the surface pertaining to active military female participation in the second war, which was admittedly much less thoroughly investigated as compared to the previous one. All we know is that Miss Merkus reportedly tried to join the Russian army in Romania on its way to Ottoman-held Bulgaria, but instead of being accepted in the fighting role, the former heroine was – so the story goes – only allowed as a sister of mercy.

The lists that we have seen of the many hundreds fallen insurgents, volunteer fighters, and soldiers against the Ottomans during the entire 1875–78 conflict, both in the western and in the eastern half of the Balkan Peninsula, fail to mention a single female, thus rendering it all the more certain that the active military participation of females in that arena of combat was extremely rare and highly abnormal. Nor do we see them in the Serbo-Bulgarian war of November 1885.⁶² It was only in both Balkan Wars (1912–13) and the First World War that the first well-reported native female heroines stepped forward, whose glory – unlike their rare predecessors of the 1875–78 period – *did* strike roots in national memory. The heroines of the 1910's to be best remembered are Sofija Jovanović and Milunka Savić, both young maidens at the time. A third one was the inevitable British volunteer Flora Sandes, much older but likewise still unwed. That in 1912 and a few ensuing years at least a part of Serbia's army was still an almost impregnable fortress for females, no matter how brave they were, can be seen from the case of Milunka Savić, who could only enter it in disguise and under a male alias. Which suggests that the opening of the ranks of the Serbian armed forces to exceptional females, as indicated for the autumn of 1876 on the Morava front, remained without a follow-up. Nevertheless, Sofija Jovanović, probably Serbia's first female warrior of the 1910's, was in 1912 admitted to a volunteer unit from the north without having to resort to disguise. Miss Sandes was the first female warrior from far away to follow in the pioneering footsteps of Miss Merkus – whom she rivalled in social status, wealth and philanthropy – into Serbia's armed forces. Having started her Serbian career

⁶¹ Branković, *Nezavisnost slobodoljubivih*, 228.

⁶² Western newspapers of October and November 1885 wrote about a then recently established ethnic Bulgarian squadron of twelve adult amazons on horseback led by Miss Raïna, youthful director of the orphanage in Philippopolis (Plovdiv), Eastern Rumelia. All were armed with sabres, and Raïna also carried a pistol. They took part in the successful unification of that Ottoman-held territory with the semi-autonomous Principality of Bulgaria created in 1878; e.g. *Le Figaro* (Paris), 31 Oct. 1885, p. 3 – *Les amazones bulgares*; *Hamburger Nachrichten*, 6 Nov. 1885, p. 21. Nothing points to the participation of these or other females in the clash with Serbia's army that was to follow as a consequence of the unification.

as a nurse, Miss Sandes, a reverend's daughter, was to become the one and only female from Central and Western Europe to be militarily active in the Balkans since the close of the Great Eastern Crisis. The activities of Miss Merkus are described as "pioneering" as she presumably was the first ever fighting female in the Balkans coming from afar.⁶³

Jeanne Merkus was the only one of the few female warriors operating in Serbia's armed forces in July and early August 1876 who was non-passing from the beginning. As far as timing is concerned, she was also unique since, unlike the others, she started her Balkan fighting career not in Serbia of the second half of 1876, but in Herzegovina at least more than six and a half months earlier. In this respect she was for sure the very first of her four rivals, and the same holds true for Andjelija Miljanov, the one and only case from Montenegro and its tribal outskirts, because she did not start fighting earlier than mid-1876, when the war broke out. Seen from another angle, Merkus was – with a single exception – also at the top of the list as far as their age at the time is concerned: 36 or 37 years old, she was almost twice as old as any of the others taken into account in this article for whom some indication to that effect exists. With the exception of the married Stana Kovačević and the divorced/estranged Marie Michailowna Sadowska(ja), all persons in this sample were single at the time, and all of them almost certainly childless. Merkus would stay unwed and without children all her life, Grgić married, and for the others information is lacking.

Now is the time for the tricky task of situating Miss Merkus and the other discussed contestants about whom at least some relevant information is available on an imaginary scale. This is to say between the opposed principles of (a) strict compliance with kinship and wider spheres of the in-group of extraction, and (b) full personal autonomy and self determination as females associating and acting in solidarity with people outside the confines of their own social context exemplified by family, home space, rank/class, religion, ethnicity, nation, and culture.

By far the closest to the first principle is Andjelija Miljanov who fought on her native soil under the command of, and side by side with, her father, whose temporary fictitious son she was. If we look at Stana Kovačević, we do not see the importance of the father, but of the conscripted husband, whose wartime fate she wanted to share, a romantic motive to be found nowhere else in the presented material. At first trying to help liberate adjacent Bosnia, her country of origin, she was, after her unintended *démasqué*, forced to move to a distant front, probably without her wounded husband. The urge to avenge a slain parent, the

⁶³ Yet, a woman from the Netherlands in male disguise, a mercenary, is said to have been among the victorious Austrian-led troops fighting the Ottomans at Petrovaradin (opposite of Novi Sad across the Danube) and/or Belgrade at some point in the first decades around the year 1700.

paramount motivation of the heroic Herzegovina girl, is strongly linked with the individual's familial affiliation as well. Operating in the unit of a relative not far from home, as the "nephew" of Jevto Lapovac was reported to do, points to an overriding importance of family and local ties, too.

Primordial influences of the kind are much less observable in the young Bulgarian girl, whose motive for joining the army was to raise the fighting spirit of the volunteers setting out to liberate her country of origin. The idealistic, altruistic motivation was even stronger in the case of Draga Strainović, a citizen of Serbia from its central part, who tried to assist the neighbouring Bulgarians to liberate themselves. And the same applies to the brave nurse M. Grgić, an ethnic Serb from Hungary who came to tend to Serbia's wounded. Not internal Serbian solidarity as in the previous case, but a wider Slavic-Orthodox singleness of purpose was the driving motive behind M. M. Sadowska's leaving native Russia to help her wounded brethren, Serbian and Russian, as a Samaritan in distant Serbia, where she was introduced by her brother.

Of all the individuals covered in this contribution, Jeanne Merkus was doubtless most detached from patriarchy and the other rather narrow ties of traditional society and culture. Only she had come from a distant and distinct world. She did so in order to alleviate the plight of fellow believers of quite another branch of Christianity, of people of another nationality, language, and the like. She helped them in every possible way, risking bankruptcy and death. In this religiously inspired self-sacrificing globalist idealism she really stood all alone.

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