

Propaganda at Home and in Exile (South East Europe)

By [Samuel Foster](#)

This article explores the nature of propaganda in those South East European states and territories that participated in the First World War, specifically Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and along with Yugoslav separatists from the Habsburg Monarchy Austria-Hungary's South Slavonic territories. During this period, propaganda essentially represented a continuation of pre-existing ideological narratives, often centred on vague, patriotic shared notions of ethno-national unity through territorial aggrandizement or secession. However, the widely differing war aims among regional parties resulted in these narratives becoming increasingly dominated by the war's more immediate political contexts or specific domestic concerns. This growing divergence was accentuated by the diversity of wartime experiences, such as foreign occupation or internal division, among the belligerents. Nevertheless, a number of thematic similarities existed around narratives of such as honour, sacrifice, and national defence.

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Introduction

In contrast to other military theatres, the First World War in South East Europe's Balkan Peninsula followed a prolonged period of regional instability that had culminated in the [Balkan Wars of 1912 to 1913](#). By the outbreak of the first war in October 1912, the region's ruling elites and nationalist movements recognised the need to foster local support in contested territories such as Ottoman-ruled [Macedonia](#) and Thrace, and the significance of public opinion as an instrument for legitimising their expansionist agendas. Alongside political actors, cultural and scientific institutions and the region's various autocephalous Eastern Orthodox [churches](#) attempted to influence both public discourse in their respective homelands and perceptions of national identity in disputed territories. Within these earlier forms of [propaganda](#), vaguely defined questions of national honour based on a sense ethnolinguistic unity usually served as the main narrative subtext.^[1]

Following the outbreak of the First Balkan War, independent foreign observers, such as the International Commission set up by the Carnegie Endowment to investigate allegations of widespread [atrocities](#), emphasised the manner in which nationalist propaganda dehumanized the enemy and incited excessive violence. An extensive report on the Commission's findings, published in 1914, for instance, included posters depicting Greek *Evzones*^[2] gouging out the eyes of Bulgarian soldiers. The report also detailed the role propaganda had played in exacerbating inter-communal tensions, especially in rural Macedonia.^[3]

By 1914 however, the end of the Second Balkan War had seen propaganda's effectiveness diminish as a means of rallying public support. With the exception of [Bulgaria](#), the 1913 Treaty of Bucharest had gone some way towards satiating the independent states' territorial ambitions while socioeconomic pressures, created by the conflicts' military demands, had dampened public receptiveness. As a consequence, the [popular enthusiasm](#) that had greeted the outbreak of the First World War in other parts of Europe was markedly absent, or less pronounced, in the Balkans. For [Serbia](#) and [Montenegro](#), the conflict quickly devolved into an increasingly desperate struggle for national survival while Bulgaria, [Greece](#), and [Romania](#) initially sought to remain [neutral](#) until domestic and external pressures saw them gradually drawn into the fighting between 1915 and 1916

For the majority of the Balkan peoples, [nationalism](#) and foreign policy issues were of little relevance: "public opinion" mostly equated to that of a very small, albeit vocal, educated [urban](#) elite rather than the population at large. High illiteracy rates; poor communication and transport infrastructure; the presence of large, and often openly hostile, ethnic minorities; and a general mistrust of urban-based government among South East Europe's largely rural populace impeded propaganda's effectiveness as an instrument of persuasion. The absence of dedicated wartime institutions also made its dissemination a chaotic and uneven process reliant on direct appeals through public addresses and published ephemera, or the cooperation of local religious and educational figures. This was further

compounded by the disruptive impact of the war itself. By 1918, disease, invasion, human displacement, military [occupation](#) had, in some cases, destroyed the capacity of the region's national governments and political groups to sustain organized propaganda campaigns.

As a consequence, propagandists increasingly attempted to establish links with more immediate socioeconomic concerns, often informed by a rising sense of urgency over fears of military desertion or civil unrest.^[4] This article will consider how these convoluted and fluid developments were subsequently reflected in the diversity of regional propaganda, with each country attuning its narrative to accommodate differing political, economic, and even cultural circumstances, including domestic opposition and rising public ambivalence.

Bulgaria

Throughout the 1890s and early 1900s, Bulgarian nationalists were arguably the most adept at promoting their cause through propaganda directed at both domestic and international audiences: a concerted [press](#) campaign played upon popular anti-[Ottoman](#) sentiment in [Britain](#), [France](#), and [Russia](#), swaying foreign sympathies in favour of Bulgaria's territorial claims to Macedonia and Thrace. By 1914 however, Bulgaria's involvement in the Balkan Wars had eroded these initial advantages. Military defeats brought extensive territorial losses while leaving the country internationally isolated and surrounded by hostile neighbours. Moreover, despite the ruling elite's revanchist ambitions, the wars' economic and demographic toll exposed the limitations of nationalist propaganda's repeated appeals to popular patriotism: waning morale and rising political and social unrest among the ranks of the Bulgarian army played a significant role in its defeat in 1913.^[5] Even in 1912, government efforts to fully mobilise public support were partially frustrated by a growing resistance to nationalist rhetoric from both the emerging urban working-class and a sizeable portion of the peasantry. This discontent was further reflected in the 1913 parliamentary elections in which the anti-war Bulgarian Agrarian National Union and Social Democratic Parties secured over 40 percent of the national vote.^[6]

As in Greece and Romania, the mood that greeted the outbreak of the First World War in Bulgaria was generally sombre. The initial wave of [patriotic enthusiasm](#) seen in Berlin, Paris, and London in 1914 was largely absent in Sofia with the government awaiting a more opportune moment to intervene on terms that would fulfil Bulgaria's territorial aspirations. Following a series of diplomatic agreements with the Central Powers in the summer of 1915, domestic propaganda was revived. Entry into the war was construed as a punitive crusade against the other Balkan states for their perceived betrayal during the Balkan Wars and the annexation of lands considered an integral part of the Bulgarian nation; the Germanophile [Ferdinand I, Tsar of Bulgaria \(1861-1948\)](#), sought to rally public feeling around the popular anti-Greek and anti-Serb slogan *Sayuznitsi Razboinitsi* ("thieving allies").^[7]

Nevertheless, despite having satiated this narrativized desire for revenge through their successful

military campaigns against Serbia and Romania, by 1917 circumstances had again shifted against the Bulgarians. As had been the case in 1913, propaganda calls for national unity and patriotic sacrifice failed to assuage a collapse of national moral in the face of mounting [war losses](#), economic shortages and diminished public enthusiasm for further military adventures. [Russia's February Revolution](#) dealt a further blow to the official line, spreading anti-war and anti-monarchist sentiment and soliciting counter-narratives from the opposition Agrarian and Socialist movements. By September 1918, widespread civil unrest and open mutiny within the army demonstrated how ineffective nationalist propaganda had become.^[8]

Greece

Among the independent states, Greece's entry into the First World War was the most complex from a propaganda perspective. While arguably enjoying the greatest successes among the Balkan Wars' participants, the conflicts of 1912 and 1913 had also exacerbated existing political tensions in modern Greek society. By 1914 these had crystallised around the increasingly fractious relationship between the Liberal Prime Minister [Eleutherios Venizelos \(1864-1936\)](#), and [Constantine I, King of Greece \(1868-1923\)](#), who had ascended to the throne following his father's assassination in March 1913. The First World War heightened this antagonism with Greece's declaration of neutrality in 1914 dividing the political elites between pro-Entente Venizelists and Conservative Royalists who favoured continued neutrality. This precipitated a period of civil strife known as the National Schism (*Ethnikos Distasmos*) that determined the nature of Greek wartime propaganda. This volatile political climate was further exacerbated by Serbia's defeat and occupation by the Central Powers and Venizelos's granting the Entente permission to deploy a vast expeditionary force in the port of Thessaloniki towards the end of 1915.^[9]

Despite being the last of the Balkan states to enter the war in June 1917, the conflict's international reverberations had already spilled over into Greek national life. At the public level, polarised debates in the country's press quickly devolved into overt propaganda focused on incrimination and character assassination. Following Constantine's dismissal of Venizelos in December 1915, as a result of his diplomatic attempts to steer Greece into the Entente camp, Venizelist propaganda increasingly depicted the king as a German sympathiser motivated by dynastic connections and venal self-interest. Royalists, supported by the Greek Orthodox church, responded by accusing their opponents of jeopardising national security while both sides sought to construe their respective narratives as a question of Greece's historic destiny. Britain, France, and [Germany](#) also attempted to sway public opinion through their own subversive propaganda.^[10]

The crisis eventually came to a head following revelations in May 1916 that the new Royalist government had permitted German-Bulgarian forces to occupy several militarily strategic points along Greece's northern border. In August that year, pro-Venizelist army officers and politicians staged a *coup d'état*, with Entente-support, in Thessaloniki where they established a Provisional Government of National Defence (*Prozoriní Kyvérnisi tis Ethnikís Amýnis*). By December, Greece's

deteriorating political situation had escalated beyond vitriolic propaganda into virtual civil war. Violent clashes in Athens, and a subsequent blockade of pro-Royalist areas by the British and French navies, culminated in Constantine's forced abdication and Venizelos's triumphant return to office in June 1917.

Before and after these events, nationalist propaganda was also employed by the Venizelists in their effort to "Hellanize" Greece's newly acquired northern territories. Foremost among these were the upper and middle classes of Thessaloniki's Jewish community whom Venizelos was eager to cultivate as a basis of local political support. This was reflected in Greek propaganda's vehement championing for the creation of an independent Jewish homeland in Palestine, prior to the Balfour declaration in November 1917.^[11] By contrast, the use of wartime propaganda as a vehicle for post-war nation-building accompanied the continued persecution of Greece's other minorities. Macedonian Slavs in particular were derided as an "amorphous mass" lacking any distinctive cultural identity, their assumed pro-Bulgarian sympathies necessitating forced assimilation or expulsion.^[12]

Montenegro

Like Greece, wartime propaganda narratives in Montenegro were shaped by internal divisions and debates on national identity. This was initially centred on the nationalist belief that Montenegro would emerge as the "Piedmont" of a revived Greater Serbian Empire. By the early 1900s however, the country's autocratic ruler Nikola I, King of Montenegro (1841-1921), faced a growing political challenge to his authority from those Montenegrins who championed union with neighbouring Serbia under the Karadjordjević dynasty; suspected attempts by Nikola's pro-Serbian opponents to overthrow him and initiate such a union in 1907 and 1909 further strained relations between Cetinje and Belgrade.^[13]

Nevertheless, despite diplomatic overtures from Austria-Hungary, pro-Serbian public sentiment saw Montenegro declare war on the Dual Monarchy in August 1914. Despite Nikola remaining as nominal head of the army, an earlier military treaty placed two-thirds of his forces under Serbian control and granted extensive political influence to Serb military representatives dispatched to Montenegrin Supreme Command. Between 1914 and 1915, these representatives and their pro-unionist Montenegrin allies attempted to capitalise on public support by advocating for their countries' post-war unification. Propaganda depicting the war as a heroic struggle for the survival of the Greater Serbian nation was widely disseminated while the preservation of Montenegrin independence was progressively marginalised.^[14]

Serbia's occupation at the end of 1915 presaged Montenegro's military capitulation to Austria-Hungary in January 1916, with Nikola fleeing into exile in France. Despite efforts to preserve Montenegrin sovereignty, pro-Serb discourses continued to monopolise wartime propaganda. By contrast, the reputations of the Montenegrin royal family and their pro-independence supporters

became tainted through association with their country's surrender and the repressive military occupation that followed.^[15]

Romania

While Romania did not enter the war until 1916, its propaganda narratives followed a similar ideological trajectory in depicting it as the culmination of a historical struggle for national liberation.

Since the 19th century, this had found expression in nationalist calls for the unification of all Romanian speakers within a "Greater Romania" parallel to the formation of a Romanian national consciousness in adjacent territories, notably Russian-ruled Bessarabia to the north-east and Hungary's multi-ethnic province of Transylvania to the west. This significantly differentiated the geographical and political context of Romania's territorial ambitions from the other Balkan states while potentially setting it against two of the European Great Powers. Despite rising anti-Habsburg sentiment in the wake of the Transylvanian Memorandum incident of 1892, in 1914 Bucharest oscillated between the Entente and the Central Powers, electing to remain neutral despite having been a member of the Triple Alliance since 1883.^[16]

From 1914 to 1916, supporters of the pro-German [Carol I, King of Romania \(1839-1914\)](#), engaged in increasingly impassioned debates with those of the Francophone Prime Minister [Ion I. C. Brătianu \(1864-1927\)](#). At the heart of this dispute was the question of whether Romania should direct its expansionist energies east or westwards in an effort to avoid antagonising both of its larger neighbours.^[17] However, Carol's death and the ascension of his pro-Entente nephew [Ferdinand I, King of Romania \(1865-1927\)](#), saw any anti-Russian sentiments drowned out by more vociferous anti-Habsburg rhetoric that was only amplified with Romania's declaration of war on the Dual Monarchy in August 1916.^[18]

While this message was emboldened by Romania's initial military success, subsequent setbacks, deteriorating domestic conditions, excessive casualties, and the occupation of most of the country by 1917 prompted a drastic shift in wartime propaganda. A few weeks after the overthrow of [Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia \(1868-1918\)](#), King Ferdinand attempted to placate the Romanian peasantry by reopening the politically contentious issue of land reform. In an effort to stave off desertion or a possible revolt, soldiers – the majority of whom were conscripted peasant sharecroppers – were promised post-war smallholdings as well as universal male enfranchisement. Although this change in message may have contributed to a brief revival in Romanian national morale and military fortunes, Russia's withdrawal of support following the October Revolution sealed the country's fate, forcing Bucharest to negotiate an armistice with the Central Powers in November 1917. Ironically, Romanian territorial losses in the west were more than compensated for by a proclaimed union with Bessarabia in April 1918. Nevertheless, the fashioning of an aggressive Greater Romanian nationalist narrative through wartime propaganda, compounded by its actual realisation with the incorporation of Transylvania and the northern province of Bukovina immediately

after the war, would have increasingly disruptive and violent implications during the interwar period.^[19]

Serbia and Yugoslavian Secessionism

As with other irredentist agendas that emerged in South East Europe during the 19th century, Serbian (and Montenegrin) nationalist narratives emphasised the unification of all native Serbian speakers within a contiguous "Greater Serbia"; Kosovo and the large Orthodox Slav population of Bosnia-Herzegovina were the primary focus of this narrative in propaganda. This intersected with the crystallising pan-Yugoslavian movement, centred in Austria-Hungary's Croatian territories, that had been further strengthened by the [Dual Monarchy's annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908](#). Intellectual and cultural figures, notably the internationally celebrated Croat sculptor [Ivan Meštrović \(1883-1962\)](#), even depicted Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes as constituent tribes of a single "Yugoslav race" based on language and shared traditions.^[20] The First World War was instrumental in merging these overlapping ideologies within an internationally-oriented propaganda campaign.

Unlike its neighbours, Serbia's status as one of the First World War's initiating parties oriented its propaganda towards the immediate war effort, effectively eliminating any scope for opposition. Conversely, the extent to which propaganda simply needed to project the threat of impending foreign occupation to reinforce [military and civil cohesion](#) is highly questionable. In 1914 for instance, poor morale and the desultory condition of the Serbian military saw some divisions experience desertion rates of nearly 75 percent.^[21] Nevertheless, Serbia's unexpected victories against invading Austro-Hungarian forces at the battles of Mount Cer and Kolubara in 1914 established the country in Entente propaganda as a valiant ally, akin to [Belgium](#). This international dimension was further reflected in the Serbian government's propagandizing of its own war aims: the Niš Declaration in December 1914 declared Serbia's intention to be "nothing less" than the unification of all Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in a common state "on the ruins of Austria-Hungary".^[22]

Even before Serbia's occupation in November 1915, Belgrade's diplomatic and cultural representatives acted to ingratiate their country's [war aims](#) with those of the Entente. These envoys operated in parallel with the Yugoslav Committee, a Habsburg Slav secessionist group that was based in London for duration of the war, although this relationship became increasingly fractious. The Committee's mainly Croat and Slovene members sought to offset Italian territorial claims in the eastern Adriatic advocating for their homelands' unification with Italy's nominal allies Serbia and Montenegro.^[23] From 1915, the British public were presented with exaggerated depictions of a Yugoslav national culture, incorporating a broad pastiche of Croat, Serb, and Slovene elements. Meštrović's *Kosovo* exhibition, displayed at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1915, and British public commemorations of the Serbian national holiday *Vidovdan* in June 1916, were seized upon as an expression of a shared Yugoslav identity.^[24]

Despite its effectiveness in winning the sympathies of the wartime public in both Britain and France, neither Committee nor Serbian government propaganda succeeded in its key political objective of convincing London and Paris of the need for a post-war [Yugoslavian state](#). Following the February Revolution and the brief revival of a proposed autonomous South Slav entity by pro-Habsburg Slav politicians in May 1917, the Yugoslav secessionists gradually abandoned propaganda activities to focus on more direct political action, notably the signing of the Corfu Declaration in July 1917.^[25]

Conclusion

Despite the importance contemporary scholarship on the First World War attributes to propaganda, its use in South East European countries remains largely overlooked. While often displaying numerous similarities structured around themes that were ubiquitous across the region's various political movements, particularly in the case of nationalism, propaganda in the wartime Balkans was far from homogenous. As the war progressed, ruling elites and political actors were increasingly forced to adjust, or recalibrate, their narratives for both domestic and international audiences. The contrasting fates of Serbia and Montenegro are illustrative of this dynamic wherein placating larger, more powerful allies was often necessary simply to merit consideration within any post-war settlement.

Of greater significance however, is the recurrent evidence of popular wartime resistance to messages explicit in nationalist propaganda, exemplified by high rates desertion and rising concerns among ruling elites regarding their subjects' political loyalties, particularly in rural areas. This ultimately calls into question the extent to which populations in South Eastern Europe, when framed against the fluidity of wartime developments, willingly accepted the official narratives of nationalist governments and demonstrates a pressing need for further scholarly enquiry.

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Notes

1. ↑ See Biondich, Mark: *The Balkans: Revolution, war, and political violence since 1878*, Oxford 2011; Despot, Igor: *The Balkan wars in the eyes of the warring parties: Perceptions and interpretations*, Bloomington 2012; Yosmaoğlu, İpek: *Blood ties: Religion, violence and the politics of nationhood in Ottoman Macedonia, 1878–1908*, New York 2013.
2. ↑ Elite units of Greek infantry often deployed to fight in mountainous terrain.
3. ↑ Carnegie Endowment for international peace: *Report of the international commission to inquire into the causes and conduct of the Balkan Wars*, Washington D.C. 1914, pp. 92-98.

4. † Hall, Richard C.: Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania, in: Hamilton, Richard F. / Herwig, Holwig H (eds.): *The Origins of World War I*, Cambridge 2003, p. 389.
5. † Hall, Richard C.: *The Balkan Wars 1912-1913, Prelude to the First World War*, London 2000, pp.127-128; Hall, Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania 2003, p. 391; Despot, *The Balkan wars in the eyes of the warring parties* 2012, pp. 149-158.
6. † Crampton, R.J.: *A concise history of Bulgaria*, Cambridge 2005, p. 135; Malešević, Siniša: *Obliterating heterogeneity through peace: Nationalisms, states and wars in the Balkans*, in: Hall, John A. / Malešević, Siniša (eds.): *Nationalism and War*, Cambridge 2013, p. 271.
7. † Marinov, Tchavdar: *Famous Macedonia, the land of Alexander: Macedonian identity at the crossroads of Greek, Bulgarian and Serbian nationalism*, in: Daskalov, Roumen / Mishkova, Diana (eds.): *Entangled histories of the Balkans, volume two: Transfer of political ideologies and institutions*, Leiden & Boston 2014, p. 304.
8. † Crampton, *A concise history* 2005, pp. 142-143.
9. † Theodoulou, Christos: *Greece and the Entente, August 1, 1914 – September 25, 1916*, Thessaloniki 1971, pp. 4, 23.
10. † Veremis, Thanos / Gardikas-Katsiadakis, Helen: *Protagonist in politics, 1912-20*, in: Kitromilides, Paschalis M. (ed.): *Eleftherios Venizelos: the trials of statesmanship*, Edinburgh 2008, p. 116; Nanakis, Andreas: *Venizelos and church – state relations*, in: Kitromilides, Eleftherios Venizelos 2008, p. 360.
11. † Molho, Rena: *Salonica and Istanbul: social, political and cultural aspects of Jewish life*, Istanbul 2005, pp. 195-197.
12. † Banac, Ivo: *The national question in Yugoslavia: Origins, history, politics*, New York 1988, p. 318.
13. † *Ibid.*, p. 277.
14. † Pavlović, Srdja: *Balkan Anschluss: The annexation of Montenegro and the creation of the common south slavonic state*, West Lafayette 2008, pp. 72-74.
15. † *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83, 93-94.
16. † Torrey, Glenn E.: *Romania and World War I*, Iași 1998, p. 29.
17. † *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
18. † Fischer-Galati, Stephen: *Twentieth century Romania*, New York 1991, p. 22.
19. † *Ibid.*, pp. 24-28.
20. † Mladinić, Norka Machiedo: *Prilog proučavanju djelovanja Ivana Meštrovića u Jugoslavenskom odboru [A contribution to the study of Ivan Meštrović's activities on the Yugoslav Committee]*, *Revue d'histoire contemporaine*, (2007), p. 133.
21. † Lyon, James: *Serbia and the Balkan Front, 1914: the outbreak of the Great War*, London 2015, pp. 214-215.
22. † Stanković, Đorđe Đ: *Srbija i stvaranje Jugoslavije [Serbia and the creation of Yugoslavia]*, Belgrade 2009, pp. 65-66.
23. † Robinson, Connie: *Yugoslavism in the early twentieth century: The politics of the Yugoslav Committee*, in: Djokić, Dejan / Ker-Lindsay, James (eds.): *New perspectives on Yugoslavia: Key issues and controversies*, London 2011, pp.11-16.
24. † Mladinić, *Prilog proučavanju djelovanja Ivana Meštrovića* 2007, pp. 142-149.
25. † Stanković, *Srbija i stvaranje Jugoslavije* 2009, p. 232.

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