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Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War

The Yugoslav state of the interwar period was a child of the Great European War. Its borders were superimposed onto a topography of conflict and killing, for it housed many war veterans who had served or fought in opposing armies (those of the Central Powers and the Entente) during the war. These veterans had been adversaries but after 1918 became fellow subjects of a single state, yet in many cases they carried into peace the divisions of the war years. John Paul Newman tells their story, showing how the South Slav state was unable to escape out of the shadow cast by the First World War. Newman reveals how the deep fracture left by war cut across the fragile states of 'New Europe' in the interwar period, worsening their many political and social problems and bringing the region into a new conflict at the end of the interwar period.

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*Veterans and the Limits of State Building,
1903–1945*

John Paul Newman
Maynooth University, Ireland



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Preface

This book is a study of the consequences of the Great War, on the people who fought it and on the states to which they returned once the fighting was over. Its primary focus is on interwar Yugoslavia and the ‘New Europe’ created at the end of the conflict, but it is also concerned with Europe as a whole. The end of the First World War and the Paris settlements established a brief and unprecedented moment of apparent unity in Europe. For the first time ever, eastern and western Europe resembled each other, beginning a short-lived era of nation-states governed by liberal political institutions. In successor states such as Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland, and Yugoslavia, western European democracies such as Great Britain and France provided a model for emulation: not an imposed and patronizing tutelage – as in the mandatory countries of the Middle East – but an aspirational example to which the subjects and citizens of these new states could arrive on their own terms and in their own fashion. In turn, Great Britain and France seemed to pledge support for the fledgling new states in the region, giving many a sense that the sacrifice of the war years had created a new and better world, a world whose values were to be harmonized and espoused by institutions such as the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization. This was a prototype ‘international community’ to replace the empires and antagonistic alliance blocs of the past.

The political form of these new nation-states remained intact, but their content soon withered away: liberal political institutions collapsed almost uniformly throughout the region in the interwar period. Instead of the gradual consolidation of democratic governance, the region went through first the local authoritarianisms of the interwar period, then the imposition of Axis rule during the Second World War, and finally the establishment of Stalinist state socialism – achieved throughout the region by 1948 and remaining largely in place until the end of the ‘short twentieth century’ in 1989. From the chrysalis of ‘New Europe’ – a region of independent nation-states aspiring to be equal members of an international community – emerged the stunted butterfly of ‘Eastern Europe’ – a

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Cold War political power bloc in the thrall of Moscow. This metamorphosis is marked by some consistent historical processes: the rapid and irreversible corrosion of liberal politics, the collapse of institutions set up to produce such politics, and the abandonment by Great Britain and France of the kin states they had helped to establish with the victory of the First World War, an abandonment incontestably and fatally fulfilled at Munich, 1938. The First World War, the Second World War, and the Cold War – each of these conflicts begins in this region; its trajectory in the thirty years from the end of the First World War until the beginning of the Cold War is surely one of the most decisive passages in the shaping of Europe's twentieth century.

This book follows the first movement of this unhappy symphony: the failure of liberal politics in the New Europe of the interwar period and the return to war. It uses Yugoslavia as a case study for a pattern that was repeated across the region. Its subjects are the soldiers who had fought during the First World War (and in the case of Serbia, during the Balkan wars of 1912–1913). What role did veterans and their associations play in this seismic political shift? The answer, I believe, lies to a great extent in the fracturing experience of the war in central and eastern Europe, and the inability, or the unwillingness, of many people to fully disconnect from the war years. The borders of New Europe were superimposed upon a topography of conflict and killing; each of these new states housed men and women who had until recently been on opposing sides of the Great War and who carried into peace the divisions of the war years. Those divisions weighed too heavily on the fragile institutions of the new states; liberal politics (and to a certain extent liberal economies) were seen as ineffective in binding together the fragments inherited from the war; leaders and peoples soon succumbed to 'authoritarian temptations' as a temporary measure intended to realize the process of unification and state building. But once released, the genie could not be returned to the bottle: authoritarianism became more and more deeply embedded in the political culture of the states in question, leaving them easy prey for the dictatorships imposed during the Second World War and the Cold War.

I am thankful to many people who have helped me along the way to writing this book. First, my doctoral advisor Mark Cornwall, who took me on as a PhD candidate even though I had no degree in history and no higher degree of any kind. Thanks to Michael Watson, the commissioning editor at Cambridge University Press, who took an interest in the work and has been enormously helpful to me, a first-time author, at all stages of this book's production. Cathie Carmichael read through sections of this work at various stages, offering invaluable advice along the way. So too

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Abbreviations

Boj	Association of Combatants of Yugoslavia
ČSP	Pure Party of Right
DS	Democratic Party
FIDAC	Federation of Inter-Allied Veterans
HPSS	Croat People’s Peasant Party
HRSS	Croat Republican Peasant Party
IMRO	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization
JO	Yugoslav Committee
KPJ	Communist Party of Yugoslavia
NDH	Independent State of Croatia
NOB	People’s Liberation Struggle
NRS	People’s Radical Party
ORJUNA	Organization of Yugoslav Nationalists
PNP	Temporary National Representation
SDS	Independent Democratic Party
SRNAO	Serbian Nationalist Youth