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NAPOLEON I, KARADJORDJE, AND THE GLORY OF THE GREATEST MILITARY LEADER*

Abstract: This article addresses a statement allegedly made by the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, in which he says that Karadjordje (“Black George”), the leader of the First Serbian Uprising, was a great war leader who was even greater than he himself. Every effort has been made to analyze all relevant sources for this anecdote. The purpose is to systematically prove or disprove this academically neglected but publicly influential rumor.

Keywords: Napoleon, Karadjordje, Jovan Hadžić, Velibor Berko Savić, 1809, Wagram, W. M. Petrovitch.

For over one hundred years, in literary works and newspapers, in television and radio shows, more recently on many internet sites, and even more so on various social networks, an anecdote has been mentioned that Napoleon Bonaparte once said the following:

It is easy for me to be great with our experienced army and vast resources, but far away to the south, in the Balkans, there is a leader who emerged from a simple peasant people, who gathered his shepards around him and without guns and with only cannons of cherrywood, was able to shake the very foundations of the all-powerful Ottoman Empire and free his enslaved people. That man is Karadjordje, and to him belongs the glory of being the greatest military leader!¹

There are numerous arguments supporting the authenticity of Napoleon’s praise. A historian of the First Serbian Uprising, one who was highly respected due to the meticulously assembled historical sources he published, mentions this anecdote. He

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¹ Even the well-respected daily Politika published this quote without any context as if it were incontrovertible and based on uncontested primary sources. Mirko Magarašević, “Srpska buna u Evropi”, Politika, 10. 03. 2007. (<http://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/23082/%D0%A1%D1%80%D0%BF%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D1%83%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B8-%D0%95%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%B0>, accessed 01.01.2021).

At the same time, in *Gallica*, the online library of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Napoleon and Karadjordje are mentioned in 452 books, magazines, and newspapers up until the 1980s. In most of them, the two men are not mentioned together, but around two hundred instances include recountings of known historical information connected to France and Serbia during the First Serbian Uprising, which will also be presented here.¹⁰

Historians and biographers of Karadjordje, do not mention this statement from Napoleon.¹¹ However, according to Radoš Ljušić, a biographer of Karadjordje, there is some indication it might be true. In the third edition of his biography, he writes, “When Napoleon took Vienna, he wanted to meet with the leader of the uprising because ‘I and Black George are great heroes and champions.’” This uncorroborated statement was retold in Belgrade in early June 1809, three weeks after the fall of the Austrian capital.¹² However, Ljušić never mentions this statement again anywhere else. At the very end of his biography, Ljušić writes that, “If by any chance Napoleon did admire Karadjordje, his Oriental policy contributed to the Serbian leader’s downfall.”¹³

Even today, numerous myths have been built around the relationship between the first French emperor and the leader of the newly restored Serbia, as is demonstrated by a French author’s recent claim published in a Serbian academic journal that, at some point in time, Napoleon gave a saber to Karadjordje as a gift. This is understandably not outside the realm of possibility, but the author provided no source for this information, and no other historians have mentioned this gift.¹⁴

Two contemporary sources for Napoleon’s statement about Karadjordje appear in the third volume of a detailed and far-ranging collection of sources connected to Karadjordje, published more than three decades ago by Velibor Berko Savić.¹⁵ According to the first of these, which aligns with the anecdote mentioned previously, after the Battle of Aspren-Essling, Napoleon gathered his marshals and asked them who they thought was the greatest current military leader. When they answered that it was he, Napoleon allegedly replied humbly and artfully.

D1%80%D1%92%D0%B5_%D0%BF%D0%B5%D1%82%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%9B, accessed 15. 06. 2020).

¹⁰ Karageorges, Napoleon

(<https://gallica.bnf.fr/services/engine/search/sru?operation=searchRetrieve&version=1.2&query=%28gallica%20all%20%22Karageorges%2C%20Napoleon%22%29&lang=en&suggest=0>, accessed, 13. 04. 2021); Even Serbian speakers do not try to deviate from known historical facts when giving speeches about the anniversaries of victories during the First World War. One of the two Yugoslav speakers at the celebrations in 1930 (Andrić or Mirković) claimed that after Napoleon received the letter on 16 August 1809, he asked: “Šta je onda srpski narod?” (Qu’est-ce donc que le peuple Serbe?) ‘La belle Manifestation du 26 Octobre à Chalon-sur-Saône’, *Le Journal des Poilus d’Orient*, Decembre 1930, 7^e Année, No 68, 1.

¹¹ Ljušić 2003; Vukićević 1981.

¹² Ljušić 2003: 274.

¹³ Ljušić 2003: 520–521.

¹⁴ “Mais Napoléon ne peut accepter de soutenir les insurgés. Adversaire de la Russie, il se méfie des Serbes parce qu’elle les protège; cependant leur héroïque résistance à Mišar, à Deligrad, partout, le pousse à conseiller aux Turcs pour les détacher du tsar de leur accorder des concessions, et il fait don d’un sabre au Chef serbe” - Fauriel 2017: 128; This gift is mentioned by a French author of a book that was also published in Serbia and Herzegovina in the late 19th century - Reinach 1876: 80.

¹⁵ Savić 1988: 1579.

The author found this alleged statement in published material from the Zemun archives.¹⁶ However, this report from a confidant of the Zemun commander was written in German and translated into Serbian by the compiler. Under Point Four, is written: “A. C *exp[onierter] P[ortier]*: One of my confidants told me the following: That it was recounted to the Serbs in Belgrade that Napoleon had a very strong desire to meet with Black George, because the two of them, he and Black George, were great heroes and champions. The Serbs feared the Frenchman would prevent them from having their own country, so they were only told the most pleasant stories about Napoleon.”¹⁷ In the Serbian translation, at the end of the second-to-last sentence (“...because the two of them, he and Black George, were great heroes and champions”) there is an annotation in which “they say” that after the Battle of Aspren, Napoleon asked his marshals this question about the greatest military leader.¹⁸ Considering the other annotations that appear in these published documents, it would have been logical for the compilers to also add annotations to this document.¹⁹ The annotation in question does not appear in the original German document, even though this transcription was based on it.

Assuming that, for some reason, there might exist a Serbian translation of the German report to which contemporaries added this quote, we decided to search through documents from the Zemun magistrate, which are now inventoried differently.²⁰ They had been transferred to the Croatian State Archives in Zagreb after they were published, and are

¹⁶ *Grada iz zemunskih arhiva za istoriju Prvog srpskog ustanka 1809*, Knj. II, 1961, 195.

¹⁷ Komandant Vojne komande komandantu Generalne komande - o odlasku Rodofinikina i Ml. Milovanovića u Deligrad, o alarmantnim glasovima da je velika ruska vojska došla u Srbiju pa žuri prema Nišu i Drini i drugim vestima, 11. jun 1809, Corr. Prot. No. 106, Ibid.

¹⁸ “...4^{-tens} Einer meiner Vertraute eröffnete mir Folgendes: dass denen Serbiern in Bellgrad vorgemahlen wird, dass Kaiser Napoleon zu Wien söhnligst wünschet mit den Czerni George zusammenzukommen, wilen er und Czerni Geroge beide grosse Junaken oder Helden sind. Die Serbier fürchten sich, dass der Franzos ihr Reich wegnehmen werde, dero wegen ihnen von Napoleon viel Gutes vorgemacht wird.”

¹⁹ The source of Napoleon’s statement was not given in the annotations. Documents from the Zemun archive were compiled by Tanasije Ž. Ilić, Bosiljka Mihailović, and Vasilija Kolaković. As far as we know, only the first one, Tanasije Ž. Ilić (1901–1987), was a trained historian. Ilić was an archivist at the Belgrade Historical Archives. He studied history (1921–1925) at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade. He worked as a history teacher and substitute teacher at several secondary schools, but in 1945 he was released from his duties at the Second State Male Gymnasium in Belgrade. After this, Ilić worked at the archive until the early 1970s. In that time, he compiled several document collections that were primarily connected to the First Serbian Uprising during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. See “Ilić Ž., Tanasije” in Ćirković and Mihaljčić (eds.) 1997: 398. Tanasije Ž. Ilić was a child when one hundred years had passed since the end of the First Serbian Uprising. It is possible that stories from that period reached him in the same way we hear about stories from the First World War.

²⁰ Fond Zemunski magistrat, Odeljenje P, godina 1809., 774–980, Inv. broj 1904, Istorijski arhiv Beograda; Ibid., Odeljenje J, godina 1809, 1073 - 1199, Inv. broj 1916. The Belgrade Historical Archives contain reports from June and July of 1809 (a few documents are from May of the same year). There is not a single report among them. There are two documents from 11 June 1809, but they have no connection to this topic. Although the Belgrade Historical Archives are mentioned as the publisher on the covers of the document collections, the preface to the first volume of *Grada iz zemunskih arhiva za istoriju Prvog srpskog ustanka...* mentions there is a small part that is just partially preserved material from the Zemun Magistrate connected to the uprising, and is held in the Croatian State Archives in Zagreb (this is what the official website for the Hrvatski državni arhiv uses). This refers to the collection of the Zemun Brigade (militaria/ Semliner-Belgrade- Akten 1817?) and one in the archival book (one of the three preserved) Correspondence-Prothocol von 1^{ten} December 1808 bis 21^{ten} November 1809. *Grada iz zemunskih arhiva za istoriju Prvog srpskog ustanka 1804–1808*, Knj. I, XI.

now kept in a separate archive in the village of Kerestinac. We succeeded in finding the entire collection, and this particular document exists only in German. Not a single document originating from this period in this collection is written in Serbian.²¹ The Serbian version with the annotation regarding Napoleon's thoughts on Karadjordje appeared later. The document was not falsified or added to other documents in the archive. Rather, it is a translation written when the compilers published *Grade iz zemunskih arhiva za istoriju Prvog srpskog ustanka* (Documents from the Zemun Archives Related to the History of the First Serbian Uprising). Velibor Savić cited this notation in an appendix to his own document collection without any additional information, as if it were no question that he was citing a contemporary document.

In any case, this anecdote traveled from Serbia to the Austrian authorities, and according to this confidant, the Serbs themselves were dubious of it. It is telling that not even Savić, who included this quotation in his document collection and correctly stated the name of the document collection (*Grada...*) it had come from, did not reproduce it in its entirety nor did he mention it was an annotation made by the compiler or that it contained reported speech without referring to its source. It is easy to conclude from his citation that this was a document confirming what Napoleon actually said, rather than being something written by the compiler.

More than three decades after 1809, a similar statement attributed to Napoleon was recounted in an article by Jovan Hadžić published in the newspaper *Serbski ulak*. This could very well be another version of the first statement. Hadžić wrote:

It was Karadjordje who revived the deadened spirit of bravery within the Serbs, who poured a love of freedom into their hearts, and their hearts danced. Under Karadjordje, the Serbs performed such never-before-seen miracles, that word of unprecedented heroism spread far and wide, and even the powerful French emperor Napoleon was in awe and immediately imparted to his first general Berthier, "Oh, that I could meet but once with the Serbian leader Karadjordje and see him and his Serbs, with whom, considering their disproportionate means and position, he did more than I could have with my Frenchmen."²²

Jovan Hadžić (1799–1869) was still a child when Napoleon ascended the throne. If he heard any stories from his contemporaries, then he would most likely have heard them well after 1809. If it was only this anecdote he heard, it most likely would have come from the same source that started the rumors swirling around Serbia during the uprising. It is also telling that the anecdote introduced a contemporary witness, General Berthier, which suggests that perhaps Napoleon's statement might not have come to him as a rumor. If he had read about it, then it must certainly have been in a book about Napoleon, and because of the nature of this anecdote, it had to have been published in Serbian. By 1867, eight books had been published in Serbian about Napoleon,²³ of which five had been published by 1843, when Hadžić wrote his article.²⁴ Only four of these, of which three (published by 1843), can

²¹ With the exception of two in Hungarian. The rest are in German.

²² Hadžić 1843: 6–8.

²³ Novaković 1869: 95, 129, 218, 244, 317, 414, 553.

²⁴ 1. Vuić 1814 = Вунчъ, Иоакимъ, Суваровъ и Кутусовъ у царству мертвыхъ, У Пешти, 1814; 2. Slava Napoleonova = Слава Наполеонова како главнога военачалника, У Будиму, 1814; 3. Magarašević 1822 =

be considered truly historical accounts. There is no connection made between Napoleon and the Serbs in any of these books.²⁵

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However, Napoleon knew about Serbia.²⁶ The turbulent and tumultuous 1810s saw at least two changes in French policy regarding the Ottoman Empire. Animosity gave way to friendship. After its victory over the Austrians, France became a neighbor to the Ottoman Empire and took greater interest in its internal affairs. Relations with Russia, however, which would eventually become hostile, dictated that France turn its back on Serbia. At this time, perhaps the only opportunity arose to cite Napoleon's position regarding Serbia. In its struggle to become a world leader, France could not permit a Russian army on the right bank of the Danube, in Serbia. Hence Napoleon's July 1810 letter to Metternich in which he announced, "One day, Serbia must belong to Austria."²⁷ He also wrote just as explicitly to the French ambassador in Constantinople that, "...it would please me if Turkey made peace by ceding the left bank of the Danube, but if Russia were to preserve something on the right bank and if it were to interfere in matters related to the Serbs, then Russia will have reneged on its obligations to me."²⁸

At this time in Serbia, and especially during the crisis in relations with Russia a year and a half previously, the possibility of approaching France and even accepting French patronage began to be considered. Under the influence of the pragmatic Mladen Milovanović and the French Colonel Boyer, Karadjordje wrote to the French emperor on 28 August 1809 (according to the new calendar):

The glory of Your Excellency's arms and exploits has spread throughout the entire world. In your August person the people have found a savior and bringer of law. The Serbian nation wishes to be worthy of this good fortune. Monarch! Bequeath your example upon the Slavic

Магарашевић, Г. *Нове историческе памятидостойности живота Наполеона Бонапарте преведено съ немецкогъ языка*, У Будиму, Пис. Кр. Унив, 1822; 4. Simonović 1839 = Симоновичь, Максимь, *Наполеонъ царь Францускій*, У Пешти, Писмени Баймелови, 1839; 5. Zuban 1843 = Зубан, Лазо, *Наполеона Бонапарта себе истога описъ Изводъ изъ собственога Бонапартова рукописа одь еднога Американца Съ нѣмачкога превео Членъ Совѣта Княж Сербіѣ*, У Београду, 1843; 6. Nenadović 1850 = Ненадовић, Љубомир П, *Наполеонъ Бонапарта или тридесетъ година изъ исторіѣ Француске Драма у VI дѣйства одь А. Дима Съ Францускогъ превео*, У Београду у книгопечатни княжества Србскогъ, 1850; 7. Burić 1860 = Бурић, Димитрије, *Ратна начела Наполеонова Превео с Францускогъ питомацъ воене школе*, У Београду у правител книгопеч, 1860; 8. Čvarković 1867 = Чварковић, Александар, *Краљица Хортенза или црте Наполеоновогъ живота, Од Лујзе Милбах Посрбио с немачкогъ професор немачкогъ језика у вел гимн београдској*, I Свезка, У Београду у државној штампарији, 1867.

²⁵ Authors of the time saw a connection between France and Serbia during that era. For this reason, Lazo Zuban, a member of the State Council of the Principality of Serbia, when describing the concept of revolution in his 1843 biography of Napoleon, quoted the poem, "Početak bune protiv dahija" without any particular explanation, which was in fact an adapted translation of a book by an American author that was allegedly based on Napoleon's own writings - Zuban 1843: 34.

²⁶ Yannick Guillou, the author of the most recent synthesis about relations between France and the Ottoman Empire during the time of Napoleon, rarely mentions Serbia - Guillou 2021: 292, 306–309.

²⁷ Popov 2004: 371; The French Emperor even proposed that Austrian army should also take Belgrade - Popović 1933: 132.

²⁸ Popov 2004: 371.

Serbs, in which you shall find virility and faithfulness to their Benefactor; time and opportunity will justify this truth and their worthiness of being dignified as the recipients of the patronage of a great nation. With hope that your Imperial Highness will do me the highest honor of granting me His response, I remain, as ever, your most humble and obedient servant, Kara George Petrović, Supreme Leader of the Serbian people and their government.²⁹

Along with this grandiloquent letter, Karadjordje also sent Napoleon—the most powerful leader in the world—a fifteen-point “Resolution of the Serbian People,” which included some suggestions that Serbia become a French protectorate, garrisons be sent to its towns and cities, and the Serbian people, along with the peoples of Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Macedonia would be loyal and fight alongside one another.

Karadjordje and Serbia had their own diplomatic representative with Napoleon. Napoleon spent October 1809 in Vienna, and at that time, the Serbian representative Rade Vučinić, a former officer serving on the Austrian Military Border, was also in the Habsburg capital. Vučinić never met with Napoleon during that time nor did he during his long five-year stay in Paris, but he established contact and correspondence with Champagny, the French minister of foreign affairs.³⁰ By the end of January 1810, Karadjordje had written a new letter to Napoleon. He also had turned to Minister Champagne and General Mariage to seek protection and mentioned the “fortune and liberty” that had been brought to many peoples by the “Great Napoleon,” including the Illyrian people, “among whom our compatriots live.”³¹ This time, Rade Vučinić was sent to Paris. Vučinić also sent General Mariage a complete plan for a Serbian state delineating the borders for the future country and listing the benefits for France as its protector, while also including some more practical requests related to the ungoing war against the Ottomans.³²

Vučinić finally arrived in Paris in late May of 1810. However, there had been no change in France’s already cautious foreign policy regarding Serbia, and the possibility for any kind of change in it had become increasingly unlikely.³³ Two months before Vučinić’s

²⁹ Popov 2004: 357–358.

³⁰ Bop 1888: 116–133, 335–383, 603–631, 91–117, 225–254; Popov 2004: 363–364.

³¹ Popov 2004: 366.

³² Popov 2004: 367.

³³ There is no mention in the historiography of a personal letter Mahmud II sent to Napoleon that was written on 26 May 1810. In it the sultan appeals for the same assistance the French emperor had offered Karadörde. Out of thousands of documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the consulates and the empire, this letter –wrapped up in a red silk bag but preserved among documents regarding Portugal and Brazil– would be the only letter the Ottoman sultan sent to the French emperor in which Karadörde was mentioned. However, when conducting research in the National Archive of France, instead of this letter (but under the same inventory number), we found another, written in 1806, in which Sultan Selim III mentioned Serbia but not Karadörde. *Lettre personnelle du sultan Mahmoud à Napoléon pour se plaindre de l'aide qu'il fournit à Karageorges* [lettre enfermée dans un sachet de soie rouge], 26. mai 1810., No. 43, Archives du pouvoir exécutif, Consulat et Secrétairerie d'État impériale. Relations extérieures, RELATIONS EXTERIEURES, AF/IV/1671 - AF/IV/1706/F, Turquie (suite), Portugal et Brasil, AF/IV/1689; *Archives du Consulat et de la Secrétairerie d'État impériale: Relations extérieures (an VIII-1815)*, Inventaire analytique (AF/IV/1671-AF/IV/1706/F), Par Ph. du Verdier, repris par I. Chave (2015) Archives nationales (France), Pierrefitte-sur-Seine XXe siècle, 389.

It showed that the French archivists compiling an inventory of documents from the time of the Empire had incorrectly read and classified the letter: It appears that “*Crno More* (Black Sea)” was read as “*Crni Dörde*

arrival, the war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire had begun anew. Politically isolated and without support from the Great Powers, the Serbian insurgents again began fighting alongside Russian troops. In the end, the first Russian detachment arrived in Serbia for the first time. Despite these developments, Captain Vučinić's mission continued. He sent memoranda to various state institutions in which he alluded to the danger the Ottomans posed to Serbia and the Illyrian provinces. He also declared the Serbian people's loyalty, claiming the Serbs had no desire to fight alongside the Russians unless forced to by a Turkish offensive. In these proposals, he also mentioned hundreds of thousands of soldiers and even more ducats for the taking. Although France had officially decided to abandon Serbia to the Habsburg Monarchy or Ottoman reprisals, the broader nuances behind the sovereign's predominantly negative position can be understood through an overview of the Serbian question sent to Napoleon by Minister Champagny. Napoleon had given the minister certain instructions the previous year, which the minister then reminded him in July 1810 that, "Your Excellency had then charged me to express our interest to the Serbian envoy and to convey your message that You '**could only look favorably upon a people that fights for its independence with so much bravery and persistence** [emphasis added],' but that Your Excellency cannot offer the Serbs any positive guarantee of Your assistance."³⁴

The emphasized portion is the most positive statement, albeit rather secondhand, that can be reliably confirmed concerning Napoleon's feelings about the Serbs— but not those concerning Karadjordje. Although somewhat reminiscent of the much more direct statement mentioned at the beginning of this article, which has since become the object of hyperbole, this diplomatically worded thought could have planted the seed that inspired it.

Napoleon did not think the Serbian Uprising should be given assistance, but in his minister's estimation, aiding the Serbs could drive a wedge between them and Russia, and then Serbia and the other Balkan peoples friendly to it might enable France to vastly increase its influence in the peninsula. This difference in opinion between the emperor and his official—who was not at all independent—may have eventually contributed to Vučinić remaining in Paris for so long. Despite not having any official position there, he would remain in Paris for four more years, even after the uprising had collapsed. An official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was tasked with keeping any eye on him. Vučinić had no money of his own, so he was periodically given financial assistance.³⁵ According to available sources, after numerous requests, Champagny was finally ready to grant him leave to return to Serbia, but it appears Napoleon had insisted he remain in France.³⁶ During this period, Napoleon had even threatened the Sublime Porte if it entered into an alliance with Great Britain by raising the possibility of losing Wallachia and Moldavia along with

(Black George)".

³⁴ Popov 2004: 372.

³⁵ Popov 2004: 373. Vučinić had received financial assistances several times in similar amounts, which in the end totaled 23,000 francs. This was a large sum of money for the time: Due to inflation caused by the 1813 war, a fish or a small chicken cost 5-6 francs. For the price of bread in Paris, see: Mansel 2003: 111; On the other hand, Napoleon's ministers were paid enormous sums, which over the years increased from 100,000 to 400,000 francs. *La Correspondance de Napoléon Ier: par ordre de l'empereur Napoléon III (1793-1815)*, Paris: Bibliothèque des Introuvables, 2002, n° 16, 223.

³⁶ Popov 2004: 373.

territory on the right bank of the Danube, including Serbia. He claimed that it would be to his liking to engage the Russian army on the lower Danube and that losing significant territories would lead to the fall of the Ottoman Empire, which was something he himself would “bitterly regret.”³⁷

During the following years, and up until 11 January 1814, Captain Vučinić wrote twice to Napoleon, fourteen times to the minister of foreign affairs, and three times to other dignitaries. He often went directly to the authorities and spoke with several functionaries.³⁸ When Napoleon II was born in March 1811, Captain Vučinić formally congratulated the emperor on the birth of his heir, saying, “I pray to God that this precious and unforgettable day for Your Excellency and His loyal subjects will also be a time of survival and good fortune for the Serbian people who, with full confidence and an unspeakable yearning, await the decision that must determine their fate.”³⁹

At that time, however, it was virtually impossible to expect any sort of change in French policy toward the Serbs. In January, the Serbian leader and the Assembly accepted Russian protection. Not even three weeks later, on 10 February 1811, a musket regiment from the Russian Imperial Army marched into Belgrade. Up until the end of the First Serbian Uprising, relations could not be altered, especially after the Grande Armée crossed the Russian border in June 1812. A month later, Russia concluded a peace treaty with the Ottoman Empire. From the perspective of international politics, the Serbian Uprising could now be stamped out. But despite all of this, and undoubtedly by the will of Napoleon himself, Captain Vučinić was still detained in Paris, and when he found himself in financial trouble, he was given rather substantial amounts of money.

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In his article published in *Srbski ulak*, Jovan Hadžić does not mention a source for Napoleon’s praise. It seemed to have originated from the rumors that had been swirling around Serbia and various parts of Southern Hungary thirty years ago. However, the entrance of another player in this story may give some credence to rumors. At this time, Louis-Alexandre Berthier was one of Napoleon’s favorite marshals.⁴⁰ In a well-known biography of Berthier, there is no indication such a statement was made or, more importantly, what the source for it was.⁴¹ Frank Favier, the author of the newest biography of Berthier, says that there was no mention of such a statement regarding Karadjordje anywhere in the extensive number of archival documents or memoirs.⁴²

³⁷ Popov 2004: 373.

³⁸ Popov 2004: 374.

³⁹ Popov 2004: 374.

⁴⁰ Louis-Alexandre Berthier (1753–1815), First prince of Wagram, sovereign prince of Neuchâtel and marshal of the empire who served as war minister and chief of the imperial staff under Napoleon.

⁴¹ Favier 2015; Zieseniss 1985; Courvoisier 1959; Derrecagaix 1904–1905; There is nothing about any sort of connection between Karadorde and Napoleon or France in any of the first biographical entries for Karadorde in the French *Biographical Dictionary...* of 1834. “Czerni-George”, *Dictionnaire, biographique universel et pittoresque*, II car-gas, Paris: Aime Andre Libraire Editeur, 1834, 209.

⁴² “Cher Monsieur Antic, La Fondation vient de me transmettre votre message dont je vous remercie. En vérifiant mes archives et documents, je n’ai malheureusement pas retrouvé trace du fait que vous recherchez. Je dois m’y rendre d’ici peu et je vous tiendrai au courant de mes possibles découvertes. Bien cordialement F. Favier”.

Hadžić, however, was not the only one at the time to claim that Napoleon had given some thought to Karadjordje's actions and fate. In her book *Le Berger Roi*, published in Paris in 1845, Charlotte de Sor wrote:

'Kara-Georges, un de ces géants qui ébranlent le sol partout où ils posent le pied, et tout à la fois inhabiles à rien réédifier, à rien fonder!' disait Napoléon à Vienne en 1809, en parlant du chef de l'insurrection serbienne, qui, après vingt années de combats consacrés à l'émancipation de la patrie, n'avait pas su lui donner une forme de gouvernement stable, cette première condition de vitalité.⁴³

Even though this event occurred at the same time and in the same place and is attributed to the same person, this quotation is completely different from the two known versions. This all resembles a reconstructed rumor—an alleged anecdotal event that everyone interprets differently. Charlotte de Sor wrote this book to glorify and elevate the exiled Prince Miloš—the “Shepard King” of the book's title. It is believed that she had been strongly influenced by one of the exiled Serbian prince's supporters, which is likely where this new “anti-Karadjordje” anecdote came from.⁴⁴ A later author observed that Charlotte de Sor had presented Prince Miloš as the “Serbian Joan of Arc.”

* * *

In the absence of sources for this anecdote, most modern authors cite each other or a public encyclopedia that publishes unverified information. It is rare for one of these current articles to cite even one of these older sources. In his book about the First Serbian Uprising, Živko V. Marković cites a book by Giuseppe Barbanti-Brodano, an Italian volunteer in the first Serbo–Turkish War of 1876, in which the author recounted a much shorter version of Napoleon's praise of Karadjordje. The book, however, clearly states that Barbanti-Brodano heard this from Karadjordje's dedicated admirers in Serbia.⁴⁵

According to citations from newspaper articles, Napoleon's alleged praise of Karadjordje was reported by the *New York Times* in 1918 when reporting on an important speech by none other than the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, after a careful perusal of issues from that year's *New York Times*, it is possible to find the source but not a full quotation of the primary anecdote. In early 1918, it was highly significant that the prime minister's speech was held at the Trade Union Conference, which focused on manpower. In this wide-ranging speech on global topics, the prime minister mentioned Serbia and Montenegro, but only when pointing to the causes of the war and the

Franc Favier - Čedomir Antić, 30. 06. 2020., 16:25, (the complete correspondence is in the author's possession).

⁴³ “‘Karadžorđe, one of the colossuses who shake the earth wherever they trod, yet simultaneously incapable of even raising a banner once more!’ said Napoleon in Vienna in 1809 when speaking about the Serbian Uprising, which after twenty years of fighting for the liberation of their homeland, was not in any position to offer a stable government—the first condition for a robust state” - de Sor 1845: 6.

⁴⁴ Popov 2004: 398–399.

⁴⁵ Barbanti-Brodano 1877: 104; Ristić 2020: 150–151.

⁴⁶ “Napoleon je hvalio Karađorđa, a NY Times je ovako izveštavao o tome!”, *Espresso.rs*, 06.08.2016, (<https://www.espreso.rs/vesti/drustvo/61857/napoleon-je-hvalio-karadjordja-a-ny-times-je-ovako-izvestavao-o-tome>, accessed 9 April 2021).

importance of restoring them. The reaction to the speech from the Serbian government-in-exile was negative, which is why Lloyd George was more reserved when speaking about restoring the occupied countries. It was for this reason that he clearly stated that the Allied powers were “not fighting to destroy Austria–Hungary.” In a letter to the editor published in the *New York Times* three days later, Vojislav M. Petrović, Chief of the Slavonic Division at the New York Public Library, commented very highly on the speech. Among other things, he wrote:

History is crowded with diplomatic triumphs. At least British history is. Napoleon’s victories have vanished just like the powder from his guns; what remained good from him is Code Napoleon. Good Generals are most often impossible diplomats. The maker of Serbia, Kara-George Petrovitch, the grandfather of our King Peter, was, relatively speaking and in the opinion of Napoleon himself, the greatest General of all times and nations; but he lost all through bad management of foreign relations.⁴⁷

What clearly emerges is that, according to this commentary also, Lloyd George did not mention Karadjordje. Petrović did. It is true that Lloyd George often mentioned Napoleon in speeches and in his memoirs.⁴⁸ An analysis of his speeches and writings in both contemporary newspapers and his published memoirs does not reveal that Lloyd George ever connected Napoleon with Serbia or Karadjordje. Based on all of this, it appears this quote originated with Petrović.⁴⁹ He brings up Karadjordje in his letter as “the grandfather

⁴⁷ Petrovitch 1918 advises South Slavs to trust in peace plans of Allies, as result of Lloyd George’s reference to Serbia and Austria–Hungary in his statement of Britain’s war aims.

⁴⁸ In his 1918 War Memoirs, Lloyd George mentions Napoleon six times - Lloyd George 1937: 21, 28, 137, 164, 345, 354.

⁴⁹ Vojislav M. Petrović (Vojislav Maximus Petrovich, 1885–1934) was a Serbian diplomat, philologist, and historian. Before and during the First World War, Petrović served as press attaché for the consulate of the Kingdom of Serbia in London. While living in Britain during the first phase of the Great War, he published a book about Serbia in English - Petrovitch 1915. Unlike most books of the time, this one went through numerous reprints, starting with the second edition of 1923 and ending with the editions published in 2007 and 2014. His book on Serbian folk tales and heroes is also very well known - Petrovich 1942. Along with books about Serbian grammar, he also translated the drama *Balkanska carica* (Empress of the Balkans) by King Nikola I of Montenegro into English. He moved to the United States with Čedomilj Mijatović. He was employed for some time at the New York Public Library, and he was an active public intellectual in New York City. He also wrote a few entries for the 1918 *Encyclopedia Americana*. Petrović’s restlessness was on full display in the US. He was employed by the library in early 1917 to replace Herman Rosenthal, the previous head of the Slavonic Division who had died unexpectedly. Petrović only served as head until the end of the year. By the time his letter was published in the *New York Times*, he was no longer employed at the library. In August 1917, he married Vera Winger, an American from North Dakota. Nine months later, their tumultuous divorce became a topic in American newspapers, including the *New York Times*. What is also interesting—and also relevant to his credibility—is that after the war he became one of a number of political émigrés. Despite claiming during his divorce that he had fought in the Serbian army “in one of the bloodiest battles of the war,” that all of his property in occupied Serbia had been confiscated, and that he had lost thirty-two of his relatives during that period, after 1918, he quickly threw his lot in with Croatian nationalists and emigrant loyalists to the Montenegrin king allegedly due to his Montenegrin descent. Just before his death—and it was never clear if it was murder or by suicide—he wrote a document called “The History of the Black Hand and the Great War.” Milan Jovanović-Stojimirović (2008: 721) described him as a gifted polyglot who was also weak, impressionable, and prone to drinking. He left London after the war, allegedly for bigamy. He later left

of our king” without making any connection between Lloyd George’s speech and Napoleon’s alleged opinion.

* * *

Clearly, this well-known quotation of Napoleon’s praise of Karadjordje came from rumors in Serbia. It also appears that not even those in Serbia who heard it thought it was particularly credible. It is highly significant that the quote itself does not exist in any German-language documents written for the Austrian government, on which the Serbian translation with the notation from the compiler was then based. It is possible the reason behind the dissemination of this praise lies first and foremost in the motives of the person who wrote it and included it as a notation from an unidentified compiler in the documents published from the Zemun archives. Was it an attempt to “do justice” to Karadjordje and the Serbian people and “confer on them a well-deserved yet forgotten honor”? We can never know for sure, but could such motives also be those of a sidelined historian, such as Tanasije Ž. Ilić, who had been removed from his position due to alleged collaboration with the Nedić quisling government of Serbia during World War II? It is telling that the diligent and meticulous Velibor Savić did not consider it necessary to critique this document nor did he present or explain the source of the quotation. He simply presented it as an indisputable statement made by Napoleon.

The more precise anecdote given by Jovan Hadžić seems to indicate something did happen in Vienna, and perhaps Napoleon did in fact say something about Karadjordje.⁵⁰ After all, there is also the 1810 report in which Champangy reminded his emperor that he had said he “could only look favorably upon a people that fights for its independence with so much bravery and persistence.” It should also be noted that Napoleon’s praise of Karadjordje was not mentioned in any book published in Serbian during this period. This praise was not recored by anyone present at the time, no historians of the French court ever

Belgrade in 1929 under suspicion of being a foreign agent, only to reappear in various South American capitals where he presented himself as a diplomat on a special mission and swindled the people he met for his own material gain. Jovanović-Stojimirović says he was born in Niš in 1878 and died in 1930. He also mentions his nickname, “Gramatikus.”

⁵⁰ It is quite possible that all the sources for Napoleon’s praise originated from rumors that had spread throughout Serbia in 1809. However, so many sources and retellings do raise a small possibility that at one point Napoleon may have said something favorable about Karadorđe, which was later blown out of proportion by secondhand sources for a number of reasons. To date, a primary source confirming its authenticity has never been found, and it is almost certain that it either never existed, or if it did, it now no longer does. Nevertheless, the broad range of secondary sources makes it difficult to completely dismiss the possibility of its existence, as some authors such as Dejan Ristić have. As he writes, “There is not even the slightest dilemma that Napoleon I never uttered such praise or flattery regarding Karadorđe that was then attributed to him without question at the end of the century in which he lived, and which was then revived and embellished by a few publicists in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries” - Ristić 2020: 154. In this rather unclear sentence (which should probably have begun with, “There is not even the slightest *possibility* that that Napoleon I ever uttered...), Ristić shows that he had not read the document published in *Grada iz zemunskih arhiva...*, because if he had, he would have realized the compiler’s annotation was connected to contemporary rumors and that, despite being incorrect practice, the insertion was not completely unrelated to the contents of the original document. Subsequently, he did not consider Minister Champangy’s July 1810 report, or Jovan Hadžić’s later article and Charlotte de Sor’s suggestion, which are decades older than Giuseppe Barbanti-Brodano’s book.

encountered it, and no biographer of either Napoleon or Berthier has ever mentioned any such praise of the Serbian leader. Stories about Napoleon's opinion of Karadjordje had probably circulated for thirty years after they were first heard in Serbia, which is how they reached Hadžić and Charlotte de Sor. Although unreliable, Petrović did not add anything to the stories that have apparently persisted in Serbia even a century later. By then they could have been heard by a boy named Tanasije Ž. Ilić, later a learned historian in the old tradition, who curated the materials in the Zemun archives connected to the First Serbian Uprising.

Petrović commented positively on Lloyd George's speech in which he mentioned Serbia while inserting his own claim that Napoleon had considered Karadjordje to be "the greatest general of all time." It is interesting to note that each commentator had his or her own interpretation of this anecdote: Hadžić tried to emphasize the importance of Karadjordje's achievements. Charlotte de Sor wrote of the impermanence of Karadjordje's deeds, while Petrović wrote of the ephemeral nature of Napoleon and Karadjordje's achievements. Petrović's letter shows how using an authoritative source such as the *New York Times* can easily reawaken fame. In our current age of an information revolution, a letter about Lloyd George, one of the most significant politicians of his time (who also often mentioned Napoleon), along with a statement about Napoleon's judgment of Karadjordje as an additional argument in favor of the Serbian people, has breathed new life into an unsubstantiated claim.

Translated by *Elizabeth Salmore*

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НАПОЛЕОН, КАРАЂОРЂЕ И СЛАВА НАЈВЕЋЕГ ВОЈСКОВОЂЕ

Резиме

Ова студија је посвећена наводној изјави француског цара Наполеона Првог, према којој је Карађорђе, вожд Србије и предводник Првог српског устанка, велики војсковођа, већи и од њега самог. Ова изјава је цитирана у српској јавности, француској литератури, аустријским државним документима и чак на страницама Њујорк Тајмса.

Постоји пет различитих извора ове наводне Наполеонове изјаве. Они су анализирани у овом раду. Према расположивим изворима Наполеон никада није непосредно споменуо Карађорђа. Вероватно је, према одређеним наводима, да је француски цар о српском војду разговарао са сардницима и изразио се похвално и са дивљењем о српском ратном напору. Управо су власти устаничке Србије имале интерес да ове гласине прошире како би оправдали и ојачали своју привремену политику приближавања Француској. Ипак, каснија препричавања и рационализације, те коначно непотпун и прогрешан начин објављивања једног аустријског документа из 1809. године, учинили су да ова навода анегдота почне да буде прихватана као истинита.

Кључне речи: Наполеон, Карађорђе, Јован Хаџић, Велибор Берко Савић, 1809. година, Ваграм, Беч, Војислав М. Петровић.

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