

УДК 070:82-7(497.11)''1917''
94(497.11)''1917''(093.3)

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Оригинални научни рад
Примљен: 29.09.2020.
Прихваћен: 18.10.2020.

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Back to the future, 1917–1947: The Issue of *Belgrader Nachrichten* from April 1, 1917

Abstract: *The article analyzes the “April Fool’s Day” edition of Belgrader Nachrichten, an Austro-Hungarian-controlled newspaper published in Belgrade, Serbia during World War I. Functionally satirical, this edition of the newspaper contains fictional accounts of absurd future events. This paper highlights selections from the issue’s fictionalized news reports and deconstructs their satirical content.*

Key words: Belgrader Nachrichten, Belgrade, World War I, satire, humor, April-fool joke, newspaper.

During World War I, newspaper reports were essentially the only source of war-related information accessible to the public. The authorities of varying countries were aware of this and, as a result, sought to keep a close eye on the content of these periodicals. In the view of authorities, when the information shared in papers had the potential to incite reactions from civil unrest to all-out hysteria, censorship functioned as a pragmatic tool of social control, for better or for worse. There was no room for criticism or for satire from those writing the news when information was so limited. On the other hand, humor and satire, but also creativity, managed to find the way to the readers, against all odds.

“Apart from the usual friendly artillery fire, today is like any other,” a writer humorously notes on December 2, 1916, in *Rovovac*¹. *Rovovac*, or *The Trencher*, was a handwritten satirical newspaper created and edited by Stanislav Krakov (1895–1968) in the trenches of the Salonica front². The paper contained amusing commentary about military decision-making, its chain of command, and governmental officials and affiliates. Newspapers like *Rovovac*, by nature of being written by hand and thus limited in its capacity for distribution³, were not seen as threatening to mass-produced, government-controlled newspapers. Like *Rovovac*, they often contained risky critiques of existing systems of power and they managed to avoid the scrutinizing eye of censoring authorities – at least for some time. *Rovovac* ceased publishing after only four issues⁴.

The Hoover Institution Library & Archives performed a move and a review of the newspaper collection in 2018-2019 and discovered a very interesting issue of a World War I newspaper. The newspaper issue was, unlike *Rovovac*, in printed form, as a regular and well known newspaper title. In form, it matched the style of other issues as it contained a masthead with title, date, publication information, enumeration, and other sections characteristic for that particular newspaper. However, in terms of its content, the issue more closely resembled the handwritten periodicals of the time, which were generally characterized by freedom of expression and a level of creativity with a satirical bent.

Namely, it illustrated a future in which there is a thirty-three years long world war, wherein Woodrow Wilson is lying sick, a Russian prince is assassinated, and thousands of Italian meteorologists fight on the frontlines as a form of special warfare. The newspaper title is *Belgrader Nachrichten*, controlled by the Austro-Hungarian authorities in Serbia during World War I. Published in Belgrade from December 1915 until October 1918⁵, *Belgrader Nachrichten*'s main purpose was to inform Austro-Hungarian officials and to disseminate propaganda. It presented occupying forces as friends and “saviors” of the occupied nation, as “Kulturvolk”⁶. The publisher also issued editions in Serbo-Croatian (*Beogradske Novine*) and Hungarian (*Belgrádi Hirek*) with the same purpose. During the review, a peculiarity was found in the date

¹ „Са нашег фронта”, *Рововац*, 2. децембар, 1916, 6. <https://velikirat.nb.rs/items/show/4030> (17.8.2020)

² Наташа Јовановић, „Рововац (1916) Рукописни лист Станислава Кракова”, *Књижевна историја*, 46, 154 (2014), 980. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=531499> (17.8.2020)

³ *Rovovac* ran approx. ten copies per each issue.

⁴ Јовановић, „Рововац (1916) Рукописни лист Станислава Кракова”, 981.

⁵ Гордана Б. Илић Марковић, „Окупациони лист *Beogradske novine/Belgrader Nachrichten* 1915/1918”, *Научни састанак слависта у Вукове дане, Први: Први светски рат и периодизација развоја српског књижевног језика: Два века од Вукове писменице српског језика* (Београд, Међународни славистички центар) 44/1, (2014), 144.

⁶ Илић Марковић, „Окупациони лист *Beogradske novine/Belgrader Nachrichten* 1915/1918”, 146.

1947) and the standard edition for April 1, 1917. In the regular issue, a headline reads, “America faces a decision” and “Revolution in Russia” while the April Fool’s Day edition reads “Counterrevolution in Russia” and “Thirty-Three Years War.”



The April Fool *Belgrader Nachrichten* issue dated April 1, 1947 (Hoover Library)⁸

The responsibility

Considering that the newspaper was published by Austro-Hungarian military authorities in the Serbian capital, it is not a surprise that it was edited by army officers experienced in publishing. Some of the editors, like Willy Uher⁹, responsible for the first few issues, were affiliated with the War Press office in Vienna (Kriegspressequartier). Its primary function was the creation and dissemination of propaganda. The Kriegspressequartier was made up of prominent artists like Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), Stefan Zweig (1881–1942), Oskar Kokoschka (1886–1980), Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), Roda Roda (1872–1945)¹⁰. This information is very important, it demonstrates the level of professionalism the *Belgrader Nachrichten* editorial board had and the importance of the publication. The connection between

⁸ *Belgrader Nachrichten*, Nr. 89, 1. April 1947 [1917].

⁹ Илић Марковић, „Окупациони лист *Beogradske novine*/Belgrader Nachrichten 1915/1918“, 145.

¹⁰ Гордана Илић Марковић, *Рода Рода : «Српски дневник» измењача из Првог светског рата : Ратни пресбиро Аустроугарске монархије* (Нови Сад: Прометеј; Београд: Радио-телевизија Србије, 2017), 17–22.

the editors and this “War press office” was evident in that it was even referenced in one of the reports of the issue.

In 1917, Franz Xaver Kappus (1883–1966) was the editor. He became more famous after the Great War for his correspondence with Rainer Maria Rilke in *Letters to a Young Poet* (1929)¹¹. He also wrote satirical short stories about the military and war novels. Additionally, he acted as spoof writer and editor for the military magazine *Militärische Rundschau*¹² before World War I¹³.



Blut und Eisen, war novels written by Franz Xaver Kappus, published during WWI¹⁴

¹¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, and Stephen Mitchell, *Letters to a young poet*, (New York: Modern Library, 2001)

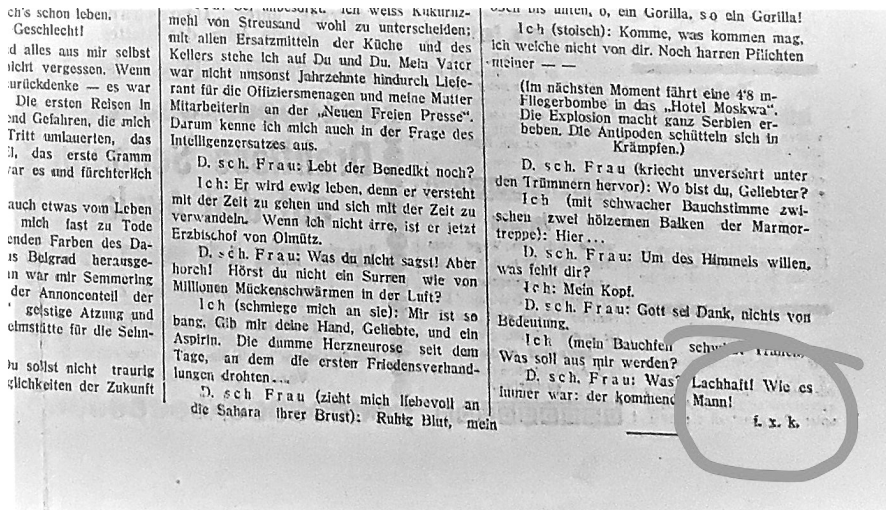
¹² *Militärische Rundschau: unabhängiges militärisch-soziales Organ*, Wien, published from 1912-1918.

¹³ Илић Марковић, „Окупациони лист Београдске новине/Belgrader Nachrichten 1915/1918”, 144.

¹⁴ Franz Xaver Kappus, *Blut und Eisen: Kriegsnovellen*, (Stuttgart: J. Hoffmann)

The initials “f. x. k.” appear in the feuilleton-style section of the newspaper titled “Die gute Partei.” The initials point to the author of the section, who was likely the creator of the entire issue. The issue’s unique satirical style is consistent with his manner of writing.

The story in the feuilleton-style section also takes place in 1947 and may help to confirm that the editor is the actual author of the entire issue. It is unclear if he wrote the other articles and reports, but he certainly approved the idea. More importantly, he did not hide his responsibility.



Initials of Franz Xaver Kappus after the feuilleton section¹⁵

Content of the Hoover Library Issue

Although the feuilleton should have been the only fictional section, the rest of the issue also depicts a fictional future. The writing did not contain whimsical descriptions as H. G. Wells (1866–1946) did with his time machines, with “Morlocks,” or the golden age of science¹⁶, popular at the time. Instead, it imagined a bleak future based upon events that were already happening at the time, though with originality and a certain degree of nerve on the part of the writers.

¹⁵“Die gute Partei”, *Belgrader Nachrichten*, Nr. 89, 1. April 1947 [1917], p. 1.

¹⁶H. G. Wells, Shirley Bogart, and Brendan Lynch, *The time machine*, (New York: Playmore, 1987).

Thirty-Three Years War

The first report, *ThirtyThree Years' War*, is an obvious allusion to the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), one of the longest and most destructive conflicts in the history of Europe. It was used in the article as an allegory to communicate a level of devastation, violence, and casualties in both European conflicts. However, instead of presenting the fictional Thirty-Three Year's war as an unnecessary conflict that needed to end, the author is unexpectedly positive. The author writes that they're in the fourth decade of war and Europe proudly claims that this war has lasted three years longer than the famous Thirty Years War.¹⁷

He goes on to suggest the balance of power in Europe was finally achieved. The biggest difference between conflicts is stressed. While much movement and conquest occurred during the Thirty Years' War, absolutely nothing was happening in the Thirty- Three Years' War. The author satirizes this as a positive thing and depicts Hindenburg's (1847–1934) genial move to freeze positions on the frontlines—accomplishing in war what others couldn't accomplish in peace—as an intentional one and a result of his brilliance and competence in war. The biggest threat for this “status quo” was eliminated when Republic of Honduras decided not to enter the war on the Entente side. The author also mentions criminal “peace-hunters” who wish to end the war at all costs.

However, the situation in Verdun remained a source of frustration. The French fortress-city became a symbol of strength when it proved impenetrable by the German forces; it remained unconquered. After the offensive that the author puts in May of 1917, the French government and the people of Paris moved in by way of the tunnels beneath France. The entire France above ground is conquered, except Verdun. The author is probably trying to send the following message: you still have Verdun, but you don't have daylight. Verdun in fictional 1947 continues to resist.

In writing this fictional history in which war is endless and lasts for more than thirty years, the author communicates essentially human and deeply felt sense of longing for peace. Saturation with war is obvious and these metaphors elicit feelings of helplessness that being in a war can produce.

The Counterrevolution in Russia

The author tried to convey the rampant confusion that came as a result of the February Revolution in Russia. He wrote about four reports from Stockholm and Geneva, made by a Hungarian newspaper, *Az Est*¹⁸, each focusing-on Prince Aleksey

¹⁷“Der dreiunddreissigjahrige Krieg”, *Belgrader Nachrichten*, Nr. 89, 1. April 1947 [1917], p 1.

¹⁸*Az Est*, Budapest, published from 1910-1939

Nikolaevich Romanov (1904–1918). Two of the four reports allege that the prince had died. One writes that Tsar Nikolai (1868–1918) mourned his son’s death in an “Israeli monastery.” Another alleges that Prince Aleksey was assassinated in the Bais de Boulogne, in Paris, by a fictional character, Boris Dynamitschnikoff, who shot him 250 times. In the other two reports, allusions are made to the British having a growing influence in Russia after the February Revolution.

The hostility towards the enemy was demonstrated by the author’s attitude towards the heir of the Russian throne, who was thirteen at the time. But not even the enemy in their auspice could have predicted the terrible fate not just of the Prince and the most of the Russian royal family, but also of the Russian state in the forthcoming months and years.

84th Battle of the Isonzo

This headline is a clear allusion to the absurdity of war, in that almost ten times as many battles are described than actually occurred, by the moment of publishing¹⁹. The 84th battle of Isonzo overshadowed all others for a few reasons. Gabriele d’Annunzio (1863–1938) recited an ode forty kilometers away from the frontline which marked the official start of the battle, after which King Vittorio Emanuele III (1869–1947) rewards him for his courage on the frontline. The article goes on to describe two thousand meteorologists placed at the frontline with Italian soldiers and their command, utilizing the latest scientific methods to remove any obstacles that would impede military success. In the past, much of the Italian military defeat was chalked up to poor weather conditions. In the ninth battle of Isonzo, the battle was stopped as a result of inclement weather²⁰. On another occasion, the chief of staff, Luis Cadorna (1850–1928), suggested to the King that higher ranking officers lacked an offensive spirit necessary to secure a victory²¹. These facts probably incited the author to make fun of the Italian army.

America at the Crossroads

The author continues with something that seems like attempting to provoke the US to enter the war, imitating the style of typical war propaganda. Poking fun at President Wilson’s (1856–1924) “hesitance,” he suggests that the US still hasn’t made a decision to enter the war by 1947, and that the President, in flip flopping about declaring war, eventually acquired finger muscle spasm, as a result of writing

¹⁹ By the end of the War there were 12 battles at Isonzo.

²⁰ Petar Tomac, *Prvi svetski rat*, (Beograd: VIZ, 1973), 491.

²¹ Petar Tomac, *Prvi svetski rat*, (Beograd: VIZ, 1973), 254.

945 letters to Congress in the process. It wasn't difficult to guess that this was the move that the US would eventually make, but the author suggested that the 946th letter contained the official declaration of war.

The article continues by reporting that the one million American soldiers deployed for war lacked proper military training. To address the issue, the general staff planned to hire thousands of Prussian officers to train them. "How typically American," the editorial staff comments. Curiously enough, the US did enter the war shortly after this issue was published, on April 6, 1917. It would of course be a stretch to suggest that this April Fools' Day edition of the newspaper would have had enough of a reach to make that kind of an impact.

Austro-Hungarian Parliament Session

A "very quiet session of parliament" was to be expected, as it is said in the article, as only thirty-two of the five hundred and sixteen parliament representatives from the 1911 elections remained alive. The author claimed that there will be no new elections until the one surviving representative could be wheeled into the parliament building. At the time, the Austro-Hungarian parliamentary system was widely considered to be obsolete. This served as a commentary on the parliament's lack of efficiency and differences between German and Slavic representatives.

Another section included a journalist's scathing review of his stay in Belgrade, wherein he described the city's inhabitants as lacking hygiene and being overall dissatisfied with his stay. This "invader's humor" is repeated in the issue and it is similar to the first headline which says that the bugs in Belgrade are finally exterminated – after thirty years. A special report written by Alice Schmuzek, a fictional character, describes a battle for Ameisenberg (Anthill). This fictional strategic point, which changed flags twenty-eight times, is one-meter high with three meters in radius and controls the entire territory. As mentioned in the headline, the *Kriegspressquartier* reportedly did not approve this report.

The author also mentions *Belgrader Nachrichten*—rather boldly—as the most eminent newspaper in Europe, one free of censorship and which allows its journalists and editors uninhibited freedom of expression. Another interesting information from the April fool issue is the price of the newspapers, in Belgrade region—1,50 Kronen and free in enemy states so that the truth about Serbia could finally be heard.

The rest of the issue consists mostly of local news and advertisements from this fictional future. One piece of local news praised a train that only had two accidents per day. An advertisement emphasized the due date for the used toothpicks they were selling.

The conclusion

“The April Fool” issue represents a special issue of an official publication edited, among others, by military officers which contained twisted newspaper reports and battlefield news followed by fictional descriptions of the future. In the terms of its content it resembled the handwritten periodicals of the World War I which were characterized by satirical texts, distorted news and extremely small circulation. Similar to those, the “April fool” *Belgrader Nachrichten* issue contained descriptions of war and individual battles while utilizing humor as a device to alleviate the anxiety that comes with being involved in a war seemingly without an end in sight. But unlike handwritten newspapers this issue was part of well-known publication at the time. This fact made this resource especially important and interesting. It was extremely bold and could have been very problematic to publish an issue where the writers imagined a world in which war had become a permanent condition. Especially, if it was published within the official occupation newspaper.

In times of great crisis caused by war, natural disaster, or pandemic, it may seem that there is no end in sight. People tend to forget what life was like in times of peace and prosperity, when things were “normal.” This newspaper illustrates that experience. It would be, therefore, interesting to consider, for a person in 1917’s Europe, which was more plausible: a never-ending war or the assassination of a Russian prince?

Unfortunately, it is unclear how big the run of the April Fool issue was: was it restricted in distribution or was it available to the public? Also, it is unclear what type of impact the April Fool’s Day issue may have had on the public. We can only assume that we were not the only ones who were fooled.

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Резиме

Огњен Ковачевић

Бриана Келси-Цоел Тиодор

Повратак у будућност, 1917-1947: издање новина Belgrader Nachrichten од 1. априла 1917. године

Посебно издање листа *Belgrader Nachrichten*, званичног гласила Аустро-Угарских окупационих власти у Србији (1915–1918), од 1. априла 1917. године, представља занимљиви приказ будућности Београда, Европе и света, под снажним утицајем свакодневице Првог светског рата. Ово, „футуристичко” издање се по својој форми не разликује од осталих издања поменутог листа, док се по својој садржини разликује у потпуности и подсећа на шаљиву рукописну периодику Првог светског рата. Ову садржину, по којом одудара од уобичајених издања листа, чине потпуно измишљене информације које се односе на војне и политичке прилике, изокренуте вести засноване на стварним догађајима, политичка сатира и приче из замишљеног будућег времена. Суморна визија 1947. године и будућности у којој рат још увек траје представља веома интересантно сведочанство о размишљањима, надама и страховима, као и поимању хумора људи 1917. године.

Кључне речи: *Belgrader Nachrichten*, Београд, Први светски рат, сатира, хумор, првоаприлска шала, новине