

The King is Dead, Long Live the Balkans! Watching the Marseilles Murders of 1934

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Introduction

On the principle that a picture is worth a thousand words, this paper is constructed around six minutes of film footage shot in Marseilles in October 1934 (click [here](#) to view film footage in multiple formats). At the beginning of a state visit to France, King Alexander of Yugoslavia was greeted by the French foreign minister, Louis Barthou, and the two men then set out in a motorcade through the city. In the presence of a huge crowd, numerous policemen and a host of cameramen, a lone gunman jumped onto the running board of the King's car and fired ten shots at its occupants. The incident was captured on film by a Fox Movietone camera crew, and the footage edited into a newsreel. The French government banned the showing of the newsreel to domestic audiences, and their initiative was followed by the governments of Holland, Germany and Hungary, and reportedly, Yugoslavia; elsewhere, despite French efforts to control its dissemination, it was shown in either complete or edited forms.¹ Among the more famous viewers of the newsreel, allegedly, was Adolf Hitler, who watched it again and again, each time growing more convinced, from the police inadequacy and crowd panic it showed, that France was a spent force (Broche 1977:174-5).² In London, an English writer recovering from an operation heard about the assassination on the radio, arranged a private viewing of the newsreel and watched it again and again, fascinated by the images of the doomed king before and after his death. Humbled by how little she knew about the deeper causes of the tragedy, she set out to learn more, and the record of her investigation was published in 1941. She was Rebecca West, and the book, all 1181 pages of it, was *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*.

The scope of this paper is more modest. The research on which it is based was motivated by the relative scarcity of scholarly and popular attention paid to events of the interwar period of 1919-1941 in discussions of the violent break-up of the second Yugoslavia in the 1990s--a break-up which has left certain issues unresolved in every former Republic and autonomous region except Slovenia. Historians and commentators have tended to emphasize the importance of the 1940s in Bosnia and Croatia, and of the early twentieth century in Macedonia: in discussions of Kosovo, they lurch between discussions of post-war Yugoslav discriminatory practices, and the battle of Kosovo field in 1389. King Alexander and the first Yugoslavia have tended to remain at the margins of historical narratives. The murders in Marseilles 1934, then, which so energized Rebecca West's odyssey, have barely merited a mention in narratives which profess to demonstrate the patterns of history in the region.

This paper, then, responds to the same questions that the newsreel sought to answer for the benefit of international audiences in 1934: Who was King Alexander? Why did he die? Why should we care? The answers, of course, are different. But the issues that the newsreel raises, concerning political violence, the impact of media, and the internationalization of cause and effect in remote places, remain significant in the post-Yugoslav world sixty years on.

The film

This was the first political assassination captured on film, and at the time was billed as sensational and lurid. Although by the 1930s it was no longer the age of the Lumi?re brothers' early screenings, when the image of an oncoming train caused panic in a public unused to spectatorship, the immediacy of the Marseilles newsreel--showing close up the death of a monarch, the stampede of a crowd, and the undisciplined reactions of state officials and police--still had considerable impact. Obviously, the goalposts have shifted since then. The bar was raised by the Zapruder film of bullets striking President Kennedy in Dallas in 1963--footage with its own history of censorship, and fuel for theorists of conspiracy.

What the 1934 film demonstrates also is the limitations of the medium. Cameras were handcranked, and their operators had to change reels and locations frequently. They were best at handling carefully staged public events, and so the footage of Alexander's arrival and conversation with Barthou, and then the funeral ceremonies around the King's coffin is of far higher quality than the blurred, jerky images of the assassination itself. The absence of clear footage of the moment of action is effectively camouflaged in the Fox Movietone newsreel, first by using voice-over to create from the opening a sense of foreboding,³ and second by imaginative montage.

After the few seconds of footage of the action, which culminates in a swarm of police backs, we are shown the murder weapon, the Mauser, carried away from the scene in a policeman's hand. This is followed by a cut to a straw hat--ostensibly the assassin's--lying on the cobblestones, and the description, rather than the pictures, of the crowd's passing sentence on the killer "They have slashed and trampled him to death." The next cut is to the heir to the throne, Prince Peter in his school uniform in England. The juxtaposition of images--dangerous weapon, everyday item out of place and abandoned, English public schoolboy--deftly and efficiently conveys what the camera could not capture or portray in continuous footage--violence, disruption of the normal order of things, and bereavement, but the monarchy's survival.

Who was King Alexander?

The newsreel locates Alexander in a Balkan world of violence, mountaineers and looming fate. History is reduced to his warlike past, in which he carved out an empire and drove back the Turks: in the present, he is described as a rock of France's Balkan policy. Little is said of the fractured quality of his kingdom, beyond asserting that his assassin was a Croat. Nor does the newsreel comment on his suspension of the constitution in 1929 which made him, effectively, an authoritarian dictator.

All these factors were linked. Allegedly, Alexander had felt bound to assume the dictatorship to stabilize the country at a time when tensions between religious and ethnic communities with different histories ran high. A Bulgarian author, Kosta Todorov reported that at a meeting in early 1934, Alexander told him "Dictatorship outwardly resembles a splendid palace, but once you're in you can't find a way out. You get lost in labyrinths and dark corridors, and there's no door open for escape" (Todorov 1943:256). The king was committed to preserving the new Yugoslavia, and he sought to do so by weaving together a set of alliances with Great Powers and, perhaps more significantly, with other South-Eastern European countries.

In a definitive work on Balkan Federation, Stavrianos (1964) lays out some of the common initiatives undertaken by the new states in the region to bring about stability and cooperation. Drawing on international models, including the League of Nations and the International Labor Organization, heads of state sought to transform previous dynamics by which countries engaged in cut-throat competition for external markets elsewhere, and found themselves in neo-colonial relationships as a result. A series of conferences and meetings were held at which greater contact within the region was discussed as a potential way to break the shackles created by over-borrowing from Western powers, and increase security. Some issues in particular from this period have a distinctly modern ring: at the Bucharest conference of 1932, for example, delegates called for new measures to combat the traffic of women and children, including the recruitment of women police officers and more careful inspection at frontiers (Stavrianos 1964: 232).

Alexander's Yugoslavia played an important role in these initiatives. After signing a French treaty of friendship on November 11 1927 (Stavrianos 1964: 227), he set about creating close relations with old foes in the region. Particularly striking were his overtures to Bulgaria and Hungary, considered at the time as revisionist powers, bitter over their losses after World War I and the

peace settlements. Yugoslavia and Hungary made efforts at rapprochement, which included the closing down of refugee camps in Southern Hungary where Croat exiles had taken refuge and, according to some accounts, received training and arms to conduct anti-Yugoslav terrorism.

In November and December 1933, royal visits were exchanged with Bulgaria, where the question of Macedonia was a particular source of contention. As a result of Alexander's efforts, the Bulgarian government took action against the Macedonian Revolutionary Organization which though still notionally committed to the liberation of geographical Macedonia from Serbian and Greek rule, had increasingly turned to criminal activities and terrorism, as well as bloody internal factional warfare. In Sofia and Western Bulgaria, Ivan Mihailov controlled the Organization and a cadre of loyal followers, who carried out the purges he ordered. One of Mihailov's most trusted and effective lieutenants was Vlado Chernozemski, who killed at least two prominent leftist Macedonians in the 1920s. When the Bulgarian government shut them down, Mihailov fled East to Turkey; Chernozemski headed West. It seemed that progress was being made. Alexander's efforts, though, stirred his country's enemies to strike back.

Why did Alexander die?

The newsreel reports that the trigger in Marseilles was pulled by "a Croat terrorist, bound by a blood oath." Again, the sense given is of a man cut down by primordial forces at work in his own neighborhood. Over the next few days of media coverage, though, a different story emerged. On the assassin's body a Czech passport was found, identifying him as Petrus Kalemén. Nationality was less clear: was he Croat? Or was he Czech, or Hungarian? Before that discussion had subsided, it was reported that the passport was forged, and attention then turned to a more permanent mark of identification, a tattoo on his left arm. Although different details were given, all agreed it included a skull and crossbones and some capital letters. A Yugoslav journalist who saw the tattoo told the press corps it was the symbol of the Macedonian Revolutionary Organization: fingerprints were sent from Paris and Sofia to Belgrade, and on October 17 it was officially announced that the killer was Vlado Chernozemski, Mihailov's former right-hand man. A number of other individuals were arrested in France and charged as accomplices: all were Croats, and when they were interrogated, the plot thickened further. Ante Pavelic, the head of a Croatian nationalist and terrorist group known as the Ustashe, was implicated. The Macedonian connection was complemented by assertions of Hungarian complicity: allegedly, the killers had trained there before the camps had been closed down.

Yugoslavia issued charges against Hungary. In defense, Hungary's foreign minister Tibor Eckhardt pointed to Yugoslavia's internal woes, where at least some Croats and Macedonians nursed resentment at their second-class status and Serbian oppression. Eckhardt further asserted that Alexander's death sentence was passed not in Hungary, but in Croat communities such as those in Buenos Aires and Youngstown Ohio (Chicago Daily Tribune December 8 pp.1-2: Eckhardt 1964:164). Lastly, he launched a counter-attack, indicating the much stronger evidence of Italian involvement which Yugoslavia, and her West European allies, appeared to be ignoring. Other sources also cast the net of conspiracy further. The Daily Mail on October 12 carried a story that what the assassinations in Marseilles confirmed was the existence of a murder plot to destroy peace in Europe. The violent deaths of Alexander and Barthou were the successors to those of Ion Duca, Rumanian leader killed by right-wingers, and Dolfuss, chancellor of Austria, victim of Nazi thugs. The story speculated that Titulescu, Rumanian foreign minister, might be next.³ Newspapers in the internationally governed Saar region of Germany and in Russia accused Hitler's Nazi Régime of involvement--a line taken up after the Second World War in East Germany, where researchers claimed the existence of a plan code-named Teutonschwert. (Thorndike, Thorndike and Roddatz 1959).⁴

The mix of rumor and hard evidence regarding criminal conspiracy was further complicated by allegations that the negligence of the French police was not accidental, but the product of planning. Potentially embarrassing too was the discrepancy between the number and direction of shots fired by the assailant, and the number of civilian spectators killed or wounded by gunfire: some officers, it appeared, panicked and fired into the crowd.⁵ Italy and Germany did not cooperate in the investigation. Neither Britain, where appeasers remained powerful, nor France where the strongly anti-German Barthou was replaced by Pierre Laval, mustered the political will to challenge their recalcitrance. The small fry who had been captured in France all served some prison time, and Hungary was censured. No further efforts were made to delve too deeply into an issue, which many saw as a flashpoint that might spark a new war in Europe. And so the causes for Alexander's death were pinned on the local squabbling that he and other Balkan leaders had been striving to end.

Why should we care?

The course set by the Marseilles murders brought Europe to 1939. With Alexander dead, the Franco-Yugoslav bond weakened and Balkan cooperation in tatters, German economic hegemony in the Balkans tightened. Hitler acquired the confidence and resources to risk large-scale war. Other players in

Marseilles secured their rewards: Laval threw in his lot with the German occupation, and later ruled Vichy France, where he supervised the deportation of French Jews. Pavelic headed the puppet Ustasha regime in Zagreb, which murdered Serbs in concentration camps. Mihailov lived in Berlin for much of the war, but withdrew from a plan to establish a Macedonian state in 1944: on a visit to Skopje he saw the tide had turned in favor of Yugoslav partisan forces, who had harnessed Macedonian enthusiasm for liberation. He campaigned against Tito's Yugoslavia from exile until his death in 1990.

To presume that this would all have been different had Alexander and Barthou not died in Marseilles might sound like old-fashioned "great man" theory. But when an absolute ruler dies, or a government official whose long-term plans are in the process of being drawn together, some things do change. In 1934, Alexander's enemies were close to defeat. Although the ustashe found supporters in the Croatian diaspora, and among the most recent political exiles who had taken refuge in neighboring countries, a more moderate Croatian Peasant Party, under Vladko Machek, held sway in Croatia (Despalatovic 2000:87). The concentrations of political exiles in Hungary had been broken up, as had VMRO's state within a state in Pirin Macedonia, Bulgaria. On the broader canvas, Franco-Yugoslav relations were stronger than ever, and Barthou was still in the process of crafting a web of alliances that would contain the threat of violence from European states unhappy with the status quo, the most powerful of which was Germany.

Marseilles gave revisionists hope again. In more general terms, the murders exemplify the power of political violence to stop and even reverse other processes. They also provide a vital reminder that historical causes and consequences do not stop at the boundaries between countries and even regions. Re-examination of the record suggests that external forces and connections were far more involved in the realization of these murders than media accounts of the time, including the newsreel, indicated. How did a recent issue automatic Mauser pistol get into the hands of a Macedonian terrorist? Who bankrolled the journeys, papers, clothes, and hotel stays of the team of assassins? Why was the police escort reduced in size? These questions were raised, but quickly brushed aside or forgotten in an emergent consensus that further investigation either was fancifully conspiracist or could be dangerously revealing.

Who cares? Rebecca West did. She saw Yugoslavia not as a source of problems for the wider world, but rather a victim of tensions generated elsewhere--specifically, by Hitler and Mussolini. Others had similar reactions. Louis

Adamic, for example, wrote "The Balkans have been the keg, but the Great Powers have been filling it with powder." (1943:350). R.W. Seton-Watson, at Chatham House, stated that

..in the light of what has happened in Germany, it seems to me that to talk in superior tones of the "Balkanization" of Europe is to-day either impudence or hypocrisy. All the troubles of the Balkans for a century past were due to foreign interference, especially from the Great Powers" (1935:36).

These understandings have been eroded over time: the richness of West's vision, in particular, impoverished in its use by Robert Kaplan, who finds in her work only confirmation of a crude historical determinism driven by Balkan sentiments. The assassination that provided West's driving question nonetheless remains an event where external agency and extremism can be demonstrated to be working in destructive tandem, and also where one can trace how representing the Balkans as home of violence replaces serious causal analysis. If we want proof of the impact of geopolitics, and the disastrous effect that recourse to violence has for its perpetrators as well as its victims, Marseilles in 1934, and a map of the forces that killed the King of Yugoslavia, are as good a place to start as any.

ENDNOTES

1. Louis Adamic (1943) claims that the film was not on show in Yugoslavia. *The Daily Mail* on October 16, p.9, records that it was. The same *Daily Mail* article reports that in France, only the first part of the newsreel - up to the point when King Alexander gets into the car - was shown. The film was banned outright in Germany for reasons of "international tact." In Holland, the censor banned the film, and was asked to review his decision by foreign newsreel companies. He did not change his opinion. In Britain, the shots of the dead king were considered "too graphic" and it appears that this carried over to the US.

2. The inadequacy of security precautions led to the resignation of high-ranking officers in the Paris-based Sureté, which had taken sole responsibility. The police cordon was composed of one officer every six yards: there were no outriders apart from one mounted officer on each side of the car: the car traveled barely above walking-pace, and its running board provided the assassin with easy access. All of this was visible on the newsreel, and was supplemented with accounts that Britain and Yugoslavia had offered additional personnel, which had been refused: a large motorcycle escort was dismissed to other duties at the last minute: and the car was one normally used to transport

criminals. All of this was grist to a conspiracy mill, that security was deliberately withdrawn, that provoked Adamic to ponder who paid for French complaisance? (1943:483). De Launay reports that an eyewitness said that rumors were everywhere that an attentat would occur (De Launay 1974:331).

3. As the images show Alexander's landing, in blaze of festive celebration, the voice-over, provided by Lowell Thomas, intones "Perhaps the deepest tragedies always begin this way." The sigh, noted by Adamic and West, is also commented on, and is followed by the reminder that here is "the most threatened man in Europe." And then we are told that "In that crowd, though, is a man with a pistol bound by a blood oath--a Croatian terrorist, ready to strike."

4. The source for this *Daily Mail* story was possibly an interview with M. Koester, a German, anti-Nazi ambassador in Paris after the assassination of Duca in December 1933 (Broche 1966:147).

5. A key player, according to this work, was Hans Speidel, military attaché at the German Embassy in Paris in 1934. Two key documents formed the core evidence for the theory: a letter to Speidel, providing details of the route and security precautions to be taken during Alexander's visit, and one from Speidel, reporting a meeting with Vancho Mihailov and includes the ominous statement "Vlada the Chauffeur is ready." At the time of the revelations in the late 1950s, Speidel was a high-ranking NATO general who had been involved in the plot against Hitler towards the end of the war.

6. The French government remained unwilling to release forensic evidence in the 1970s. According to one account based on some access, Chernozemski's ten rounds all hit the king, General Georges, and Agent Galy, who tried to arrest him. Barthou, and the other dead--three women, and the son of one of them--were killed by bullets from "unknown revolvers" of the same caliber as police-issue weapons (De Launay 1974:332)

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Photography: George and Raymond Mejat. Narrator: Lowell Thomas.
(Available at the National Archives in College Park MD: Control Number NWDNM (m) RSMTH-RSMITH-418, along with 2nd reel of out-takes)

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