

***The Long Road to War*, Directed by Miloš Škundrić. Belgrade: Paradox Film, 2018**

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At the beginning of summer 2022, mostly because it became widely available through the streaming platform Netflix, the European public became interested in the documentary film *The Long Road to War*. It is a documentary film that had its premiere showing actually a few years ago. It was produced by Paradox Film, a company from Belgrade, and completed with the help of funds from the Film Center of Serbia and the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia, within the project “The Great War 1914-1918”. The screenwriter, director, and producer of the documentary is Miloš Škundrić, and the film itself is described as “the first documentary film from Serbia to be released on Netflix and the Serbian film with the largest distribution on this film platform to date”, which “has as its theme one of the most important issues of contemporary world history, and that is why and how World War I occurred, an event that shaped the entire 20th century. With the help of the world’s most prominent historians and the use of film and documentary archive material from the Yugoslav Film Archive and 15 other archives from around the world, this ‘tense political thriller’ traces political events in Europe from the end of the 19th century to the July 1914 crisis and explains how the First World War was planned and prepared years before the Sarajevo assassination.”¹

In its essence, *The Long Road to War* mostly combines scenes from other films produced in the early 20th century in various countries of Europe, with a narrator describing the events. Visually, the film makes a more than good impression, because parts of these older films quite authentically introduce the viewer to the past. The documentary is organized chronologically, from the 1870s until the beginning of August 1914, when the war became global. The clips used are very well organized and, for the most part, closely follow the action described by the narrator, who also reads specific excerpts from historical sources. The film includes short reviews by a number of world experts dealing with the topics of European history at the turn of the century, World War I, military history in general, etc. Historians from Great Britain, France, Germany, Austria, Russia, and Serbia (Hew Strachan, Dominic Lieven, John Rohl, Alan Sked, Georges Henri-Soutou, Jean-Paul Bled, Annika Mombauer,

¹ “The documentary film ‘A Long Journey to War’ by Milos Škundrić will be available tomorrow on Netflix in 30 European countries”. *Film Center Serbia*. <https://www.fcs.rs/dokumentarni-film-dugo-putovanje-u-rat-milosa-skundrica-od-sutra-u-ponudi-netfilksa-u-30-drzava-evrope/> (accessed on July 14, 2022)

Lothar Hobelt, Stig Förster, Oleg Airapetov, and Dušan T. Bataković), in general, complemented each other well and expertly explain the phenomena, events, and motives of individuals in the background of the years leading up to the Great War.

The film skilfully rounds off previous knowledge of events in Europe in the time leading up to this global conflict. In doing so, emphasized are the diplomatic relations among the “Great Powers”, but also the area of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina as stumbling blocks that led to the outbreak of war. Incidentally, other crises that preceded the war are mentioned, e.g. the Moroccan crisis, however, they only play a side role. Similarly, the internal situation in Austria-Hungary is described very briefly. For example, the situation in Croatia-Slavonia is described only in two short segments (28:25; 42:01), through the prism of the establishment and operation of the Croat-Serb Coalition, without describing the activities of other parties, the issues of development, acceptance, and rejection of the concept of Austro-Slavism or the Yugoslav idea, etc.

Although the documentary lasts almost two hours, due to the possible reduction of the script, there are issues related to the simplification of certain descriptions. This is evident when showing photographs of Branislav Nušić (48:45) or Alexander von Hoyos (1:34:19), and only those more familiar with the topic will recognize why the Serbian writer and the Austro-Hungarian diplomat can be found in these places in the film; their role is in no way clarified by the narration. In general, the system of military alliances of European states should also have been described in more detail in order to be more understandable to the average viewer. It is also unclear what the screenwriter wants to say in some places, e.g. what and why are the targets of assassins on officials in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia-Slavonia or who is the “progressive Serbian-Croatian youth from Sarajevo” (1:02:04)?

In other places, we again have certain contradictions. For example, when describing the views of the Kingdom of Serbia during the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (47:47) – does the Serbian ruling leadership seek to prevent or obtain certain compensations for the annexation? Who even lives in Bosnia and Herzegovina is another issue, since, according to the documentary, it is a place where Serbs have a majority, where Muslims are mentioned only in passing, and Croats – not at all, while on the other hand, mentioned in several places is the Serbian minority in other parts of Austria-Hungary.

Furthermore, the descriptions of Gavril Princip and his colleagues, as well as the role of the Black Hand and the Kingdom of Serbia in general in the assassination of their apparent Franz Ferdinand are perhaps the most problematic because of the choice of information served to the viewer. Princip was described

as “a young Bosnian pupil” (5:42) at the outset without any further detailed explanation of how he perceived himself overall, where exactly he went to school in the middle of 1914, immediately prior to the assassination, etc. The assassins’ motives were also portrayed unequivocally, as if they all thought alike and had the same objectives, were organized, whereas, from their hearings and subsequent trial, they showed that there was significant disagreement among them on many issues. Furthermore, the old conclusions of Vaso Čubrilović, historian, politician, and – assassination participant, will also continue to be emphasized, describing him as “an authentic endeavor of Gavrilo Princip and comrades” (1:31:29). Even if we put aside the heterogeneity of the group of assassins, this might have been true only if the Black Hand had not, for example, supplied weapons and poisons to the assassins (the last undoubtedly to go to their death without revealing where they came from and how they came to be armed) or in such a way as to ensure their secret transfer across the Serbian border to Bosnia and Herzegovina. These are the parts that seem to have been intentionally skipped. No one wonders and asks where these “authentic assassins” would have received this kind of support elsewhere, and would there have been an assassination of the Austro-Hungarian heir apparent on the Serbian holiday of Vidovdan (St Vitus) in 1914 if it had not been for persons who worked directly or thought they were working for the interests of the Kingdom of Serbia, were in high positions in its military and (informal) political circles – receiving payments for this from the state treasury?

Although the vast majority of scenarios are actually very factually based and the interlocutors are well focused on describing the individual segments that they have explored in their works, some parts that would be more polemical may have been omitted due to too many plastic and unambiguous descriptions. One must accept that the film was primarily reviewed and produced for the international market, with a narrator who moves the plot along in English and expert interlocutors who also, for the most part, describe the plot in English. Nevertheless, the question arises as to whether any other high-quality interlocutors might have been included? Without mentioning historians from, for example, Bosnia and Herzegovina, often referred to in the film, or Croatia, which is seldomly mentioned, but nevertheless seem to be the object of the politics at the time. I am thinking primarily of authors such as the famous Christopher Clark, whose relatively recent book is entitled *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012) precisely described the entry of European countries into the First World War, for which she received much praise and numerous prestigious awards. However, in Serbia, it was not well received by critics because of the parts in which the expansionist policy of the Kingdom of Serbia was analyzed at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. It is precisely this phenomenon that is also significantly diminished in this film.