

Tracing Archaeological Remains and Scholarly Research of the Central Powers in the Region of Prilep-Bitola during WW I (1915-1918) (MK 07/2024)

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Homepage: <https://maps-of-power.oeaw.ac.at/projects/tarsr>

1. Introduction

Our project aimed to shed light on the Southern Balkan Peninsula during the First World War (1914-1918) and in particular on the regions of Prilep-Bitola and Mariovo behind the so-called *Salonica Front* or *Macedonian Front* in today's Republic of N. Macedonia. Closely connected to wars and armed conflicts is their devastating impact on the World's Cultural Heritage. In our project we followed up on the question of Cultural Heritage and research on it during the First World War.

Various historical and ecclesiastical monuments were severely afflicted by the destruction along the *Salonica Front*. Examples are the church of Saint Christopher in the village of Krstoar and the Church of Saint Nicholas in the village of Gradešnica. Thorough scholarly research is needed to evaluate the relevant sources, especially the pictorial ones, on the particular monuments in the region from Byzantine and Post-Byzantine times in order to receive a comprehensive picture of the respective Cultural Heritage.

Three research questions were pursued in the project:

- a) Where was the Cultural Heritage behind the *Salonica Front* in the regions of Prilep-Bitola and Mariovo affected by the fighting and how did the Central Powers document the damage?
- b) Where did archaeological excavations by the Central Powers take place in the regions of Prilep-Bitola and Mariovo and who were the scholars involved?
- c) What kind of military infrastructure of the Central Powers can still be traced *in situ* in the regions of Prilep-Bitola and Mariovo (i.e. trenches, bunkers, roads, bridges, tunnels, railways, cable railway, cemeteries)?

2. The Historical Context

After the beginning of the First World War on 28 July 1914 the Kingdom of Serbia succeeded in resisting the Austro-Hungarian Empire throughout the year 1914 and during the first half of the year 1915. A momentous change in the overall strategic situation on the Balkan Peninsula occurred, when Bulgaria joined the Central Powers in autumn 1915 and declared war on Serbia on 14 October 1915.

Faced with simultaneous attacks from three sides (that is from West, North and East), the Serbian army started a retreat towards Kosovo and Metochia and from there via Albania to the Adriatic coast, from which it was finally evacuated to the islands of Vido and Corfu. After the victory of the German, Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian troops over Serbia in October 1915 and over Montenegro in January 1916, both countries were occupied by the Central Powers and their territories divided between three military commands as well as interests. Finally, the front came to a halt and was stabilised in today's Southern Albania and Northern Greece, where the so-called *Salonica Front* was established. The Central Powers divided the front-line into several zones of responsibility. The German Army was positioned in the regions of Prilep-Bitola and Mariovo with its headquarters in Prilep.

This front-line remained unchanged until May 1916. Then, the Bulgarian Army advanced with German and Austrian support and occupied the area to the East of the river Strymon/Struma (that is the towns of Drama, Serres and Kavala). In a counter-offensive the Allied Powers succeeded in conquering the town of Bitola in November 1916 after fierce fighting. The damage to the town's monuments and civil infrastructure was substantial. The impact of destruction along the Salonica Front was remarkable. Most of the settlements were destroyed within a breadth of 50 to 60 km. In 1917/18 the German Army withdrew the biggest part of its troops from South-East Europe in order to enhance its military potential in the West, thus weakening the position of the Central Powers in the Balkans. In the middle of September 1918 the Serbian Army, which after its recovery on the island of Corfu had been despatched to the Salonica Front in the spring of 1916, launched a major offensive with French and British support with the aim to breach the front. In the battle of Dobro Pole Serbian units achieved a breakthrough after heavy fighting creating a gap in the German-Bulgarian section of the *Salonica Front*. The Bulgarian government signed a truce on 29 September 1918 in Thessalonica, which signified the capitulation of the Bulgarian army. The Serbian troops continued their advance towards the North and reached Belgrade on 31 October 1918.¹

3. Results

We addressed **the first research question** based on the method of *Grundlagenforschung*. Our research focused on the archival material in the *Kriegsarchiv* and the *Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv* of the Austrian State Archives in Vienna, Austria. It turned out that useful pictorial sources (photographs)

¹ Cf. for example the following publications on the First World War on the territory of N. Macedonia: Jürgen Angelow, Gundula Gahlen, Oliver Stein, (ed.), *Der Erste Weltkrieg auf dem Balkan. Perspektiven der Forschung*, Berlin 2011; Cyril Falls, A. F. Becke, *History of the Great War based on Official Documents by Direction of the Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence. Volume I: Military Operations Macedonia from the Outbreak of War to the Spring of 1917. Volume II: Military Operations Macedonia from the Spring of 1917 to the End of the War*. Reprint London-Nashville, TN 1996; Richard C. Hall, *Balkan Breakthrough. The Battle of Dobro Pole 1918*. Bloomington, IN 2010; Bogdan Krizman, "Der militärische Zusammenbruch auf dem Balkan im Herbst 1918", *Österreichische Osthefte*, 10/1968, 268-293; Petar Stojanov, *Makedonija vo vremeto na Balkanskite i Prvata svetska vojna 1912-1918*. Skopje 1969; Aleksandar Stojčev, *Makedonija i Makedoncite vo Prvata svetska vojna 1914-1918*. Skopje 2017.

from Macedonia made by Austro-Hungarian and German official photographers and/or postcards could be found. Consequently, we expanded our research to auction houses and online collections of photographs from the First World War (e.g. Old Prilep, <https://www.oldprilep.com/>) as well as open source data in order to find and identify German photographs (and to some extent also Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian ones) made in the area of research (Prilep, Bitola, Mariovo) from 1915 until 1918. Thus, we managed to identify several cases of destruction of churches along the *Salonica Front* and to embed the respective data into our *Maps of Power OpenAtlas Database*, which can be queried via <https://maps-of-power.oeaw.ac.at/projects/tarsr/explore/place> and downloaded freely under the licence CC BY 4.0 International.

In addition, we used the respective archival data and secondary literature to write an article about the **second research question**, namely:

Mihailo St. Popović, „Friedensarbeit inmitten tollsten Kriegeres“ – Hochschulkurse, Denkmalkunde und Archäologie im Hinterland des deutschen Abschnittes der Salonikifront während und nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg. *kunsttexte.de - Journal für Kunst- und Bildgeschichte* 2025/1 – Ostblick, Themenheft: *Kunstschutz-Initiativen im Ersten Weltkrieg in Ostmitteleuropa* (free download via <https://maps-of-power.oeaw.ac.at/projects/tarsr#publications>)

The **third research question** was addressed during two surveys in the region of Prilep, Bitola and Mariovo. The first survey took place from 1 May 2025 until 10 May 2025 (Viktor Lilchikj Adams, Guillaume Bidaut, Toni Filiposki, Filip Markovski, Lukas Neugebauer, Ordanče Petrov, Mihailo Popović), the second from 29 September 2025 until 6 October 2025 (Viktor Lilchikj Adams, Lukas Neugebauer). During the second survey Trenčo Dimitrioski, a local historian, provided valuable insights and assistance, to whom contact was established by the N. Macedonian project team. During both surveys substantial data was gathered on the remnants of the military infrastructure of the Central Powers (here the German Army) *in situ* in the regions of Prilep, Bitola and Mariovo (here trenches, bunkers, roads, bridges, tunnels, railways, cable railway and cemeteries). This data was also embedded into our *Maps of Power OpenAtlas Database*, which can be queried via <https://maps-of-power.oeaw.ac.at/projects/tarsr/explore/place> and downloaded freely under the licence CC BY 4.0 International.

The joint research work undertaken by both project teams *in situ* was filmed and documented by Lukas Neugebauer. Based on this approach, we decided to transform our idea to write and publish a joint scholarly article in English on our project results into a film project. Thus, Lukas Neugebauer has gathered material and data, which will enable him to create a film of about 30 minutes on our project and its results, which will be used for purposes of promotion in academia as well as in the Austrian and N. Macedonian society, but also in entire Europe.

4. Dissemination

During our project we have chosen various ways to present and promote our research and to communicate it to academia and the interested public. Apart from the aforesaid published article (see above, 3. *Results*), Mihailo Popović presented relevant posters/papers nationally and internationally:

A poster session entitled “Wie die Byzantinistik Denkmalschutz betreibt ...” at the *Lange Nacht der Forschung 2024* (Vienna, 24 May 2024)

A paper entitled “A Monumental Crisis in Times of War: Endangered or Researched Medieval Cultural Heritage in Macedonia during the First World War?” at the *International Medieval Congress 2024* (University of Leeds, Leeds, 2 July 2024)

The project and its novel approaches and methods in Historical Geography have been introduced by Mihailo Popović to the interested public in the digital version of the Austrian daily newspaper “Der Standard”. The online article can be accessed via:

<https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000234089/im-fadenkreuz-der-kriegsfotografie>

Our project and its data can be freely accessed via our homepage:

<https://maps-of-power.oeaw.ac.at/projects/tarsr>

The aforesaid film will be finished in the year 2026 and shown at the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, N. Macedonia. It will also be submitted to various Film Festivals in Europe, as has been the case with another short film in the project “Beyond East and West: Geocommunicating the Sacred Landscapes of ‘Duklja’ and ‘Raška’ through Space and Time (11th-14th Cent.)” (<https://maps-of-power.oeaw.ac.at/projects/holdura>).

5. Possible Follow-Up Projects:

During our project the N. Macedonian team members visited the Austrian team members two times in Vienna in order to coordinate our research, to discuss the respective results so far as well as to plan the two surveys in N. Macedonia.

The first visit to Vienna was undertaken by Toni Filiposki, Viktor Lilčikj and Ordanče Petrov from 8 September 2024 until 15 September 2024. The second by Toni Filiposki, Viktor Lilčikj, Filip Markovski and Ordanče Petrov from 8 September 2025 until 14 September 2025. This cooperation was expanded in the sense that both project teams provided their input for a scholarly project entitled

“Archäologie, Denkmalkunde und Hochschulkurse im Hinterland der Front: auf den Spuren deutscher Wissenschaft in Mazedonien während des Ersten Weltkriegs”, which was submitted to the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung in Germany in order to acquire a third party funded project for three years. The application was obviously discussed in the last stage of the selection process, but finally rejected in February 2025. Still, we plan to elaborate a new proposal, which we could submit to another funding agency in the near future.