

In December 1916, the Serbian Regent, Alexander, the son and heir of King Peter I, who had been installed in the bloody coup led by Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijevic ("Apis") in 1903, sensing a plot against the monarchy by Apis and his spy-terrorist apparatus, cracked down, ordering the arrest of Apis and his senior lieutenants.

Part of this clean-up in Serbia was driven by an attempt to come to terms with the Habsburgs, who were at that time occupying Serbia. A new Emperor, Karl I, had taken over in Austria in November 1916 and made clear in all directions that he wanted peace if at all possible, famously getting embroiled in the "Sixtus Affair": an attempt to pursue a separate peace with the Entente that ended with the final dissolution of Austria's autonomy from Germany, which had carried the Habsburg Empire since the smashing of its army in the opening weeks of the war.

In the case of Serbia, Karl had tentatively offered to restore the exiled government if Vienna could be sure there would be no further terrorist-subversion activities aimed at the Dual Monarchy originating in Belgrade. The result was the "Salonika Trial", which was undoubtedly politicised in its origins and to some extent in its conduct, but which did turn up a lot of evidence about what had happened in the years when Apis and his colleagues had operated what we now call a "rogue state", running an espionage apparatus beyond the oversight of Serbian civilian leaders that extended into Austria and engaged in terrorism, as well as spying and political agitation.

Apis was put before a firing squad on 24 June 1917. Two days earlier, he had written a letter to the Salonika Officers' Court, which was kept secret until it was published by the new Communist authorities in Jugoslavija in 1953.

The key portion from Apis' letter reads:

*As the Chief of the Intelligence Department of the General Staff, I engaged [or enlisted] Rade Malobabic to organise the information service [or intelligence network] in Austria-Hungary. I took this step in agreement with the Russian Military Attaché [Viktor] Artamonov, who had a meeting with Rade in my presence. Feeling that Austria was planning a war with us, I thought that the disappearance of the Austrian Heir Apparent would weaken the power of the military clique he headed, and thus the danger of war would be removed or postponed for a while.<sup>1</sup>*

Apis continues:

*For that purpose, I hired Malobabic to organise the assassination on the occasion of the announced arrival of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. I made up my mind about this only when Artamonov assured me that Russia would not leave us without protection if we were attacked by Austria. On this occasion I did not mention my intention for the assassination, and my motive for asking his opinion about Russia's attitude was the possibility that Austria might become aware of our activities, and use this as a pretext to attack us. Malobabic executed my order, organised, and performed the assassination. His chief accomplices were in my service and received small payments from me. Some of their receipts are in the hands of the Russians, since I got money for this purpose from Mr. Artamonov, as the General Staff did not have funds available for this increased activity.<sup>2</sup>*

Apis would repeat himself in taking responsibility: "I engaged Malobabic so that on the occasion of Ferdinand's scheduled arrival in Sarajevo he would organise an assassination on him".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Cowles (1969), *The Russian Dagger*, p. 306.

<sup>2</sup> James Lyon (2015), *Serbia and the Balkan Front, 1914: The Outbreak of the Great War*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>3</sup> *Serbia and the Balkan Front, 1914*, p. 63.