

# *Serbia Is Not Siberia:* The French on Serbia and the Serbs at the Turn of the Nineteenth into the Twentieth Century<sup>1</sup>

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## I. Introduction

There has always been a belief that travel influences the acquisition of knowledge, thinking, perception, and new ideas. The image of the country visited remained in the minds of travellers for a long time. Also, travellers communicated their impressions to friends, family, colleagues, and a wide audience of listeners or readers. The development of the press, as well as the faster distribution of books and newspapers made distant and unknown areas more accessible to those who never travelled. In a time of romanticism, legends, myths, the lack of sufficient knowledge on the Balkans and its people, as well as the long rule of the Ottoman Empire in the area influenced the vague and inaccurate preconceptions about Serbia and the Serbs.<sup>3</sup> Travellers, even those highly

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<sup>3</sup> P. H. Lacombe, *Voyage sur la carte en Italie, en Grèce, en Turquie, en Arabie, en Egypte et aux îles de la Méditerranée, contenant une description des principales villes, suivie d'un tableau indiquant leur distance de Paris et leur population* (Paris, 1835); M. Pavlović, "Prosper Merime i njegove Gusle" [Prosper Merime and his Gusle], in *Gusle*, ed. Prosper Merime (Beograd: SKZ, 1991), 21; S. Sretenović, "Les philoserbs en France au temps du Royaume des Serbes Croates et Slovènes (1918–1929)," *Etudes danubiennes (Les relations Franco Yougoslaves dans l'entre-deux guerres 1918–1940)* 23:1–2 (2007): 121; A. Vujović, *Srpsko-francuska susretanja* [Serbian-French encounters] (Beograd: Učiteljski fakultet u Beogradu, 2011), 50; A. De Lamartine, *Souvenirs impressions pensées et paysages pendant un voyage en Orient (1832–1833)* (Paris, 1835); M. Todorova, *Imaginarni Balkan* [Imagining the Balkans] (Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2006), 143–144; A. Kolaković, "Interesovanje francuskih intelektualaca za Južne Slovence u 19. veku," [The interest of French intellectuals in the South Slavs in the 19th century], in *3rd Conference for Young Slavists in Budapest*, ed.

educated, often went to Belgrade and Serbia, often bringing stereotyped views which supposed the existence of two unequal European civilizations, one of them being the “inferior Eastern Europe,”<sup>4</sup> as formulated by Joseph-Marie de Maistre in 1819. However, romanticized ideas on Serbia and the Serbs began to fade especially from the second half of the nineteenth century with the Berlin Congress and the state independence (1878). Furthermore, the decline of the Ottoman Empire shifted the focus of interest to the *young* nations of the Balkans.

Serbia’s transformation into a country that could compare to other developed European countries began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This was not left unnoticed by foreigners travelling to Serbia for business or leisure. The French who often wrote about the Serbs and Serbia did not rely on solely known sources, but they rather described their own experience during their stay in the city.<sup>5</sup> Bits and pieces of that information about the ordinary life of Serbs and the Belgrade itself at the turn of the century can be found even in the reports of the French diplomats of the time who had Serbia as their duty station for a while. We can see what kind of memories did they take with them from their travels and work of literature, as well as from the correspondence between the French and the Serbian intellectuals of the time. All those remarks, their viewpoints and memories were transposed into the French environment. They built the idea of the other (or the same) Europe that exists in the Balkans, which was not well known and was therefore suitable for the development of stereotypes and prejudices.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Serbia and the Serbs were officially introduced to the French public by Albert Malet (1864–1915), a historian and a diplomat on his special mission at the Serbian royal house, who also served as a professor for the Serbian king, Aleksandar

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Urkom Aleksander (Budapest: Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Humanities, Institute of Slavonic and Baltic Philology, 2014), 116–120.

<sup>4</sup> M. Ekmečić, *Susret civilizacija i srpski odnos prema Evropi* [Encounter of civilizations and Serbian attitude towards Europe] (Novi Sad: Fond za pomoć Srbima Toma Maksimović, 1997), 75.

<sup>5</sup> M Pavlović, *Od Esklavonije ka Jugoslaviji* [From Esclavonia to Yugoslavia] (Sremski Karlovci, Novi Sad: Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića, 1994), 222; A. Kolaković, *Susret sa Beogradom: Francuzi o Beogradu na prelazu iz 19. u 20. veku* (*Rencontre avec Belgrade : les Français parlent de Belgrade au tournant du XIXe siècle au XXe siècle, Meeting with Belgrade: French talking about Belgrade at the turn of the century*) (Beograd: Centar za istraživanje kulture i dijaspora, 2016).

Obrenović. *Dnevnik sa srpskog Dvora* (*Diary from the Serbian royal palace*) was written by Malet for his family and closest friends, and today, this remarkable work can be viewed as a memory with significant historical accuracy, since it shines a new light on how a foreigner, accustomed to the Parisian lights, saw Belgrade.<sup>6</sup> Malet was a French intellectual who spent over two years in Serbia and met people and witnessed the customs on a daily basis, writing down his thoughts along the way. For creating a full picture of Belgrade in Paris, significant were the texts in the daily papers that were coming more and more often since the Annexation Crisis (1908). That was the time when Paul Labbé (1867–1943), geographer and secretary general from La Société normande de géographie (The Norman Geographic Society) came to visit Serbia. After his visit, Labbé gave a series of lectures about Serbia all around France. He even published a manuscript *A travers la Serbie. Impressions d'un récent voyage*.<sup>7</sup> During the Balkan wars, numerous reporters came to the region of Balkans, Serbia and of course, Belgrade. It is rather interesting how Belgrade, the Serbs and Serbia was perceived by the mining engineer, Alphonse Muzet, during his exploration trip for the French financiers in order to analyse the economy of the Balkans. Muzet, who later became trade attaché in Belgrade, was exploring the possibilities of building a railway network. After his visit, a book was published, under the title *Aux pays balkaniques: Monténégro Serbie Bulgarie* whose significant portion was dedicated to the political situation in Serbia, ordinary people lives, economic subjects, but most notably, the natural resources of Serbia.<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was possible to make visual presentations of the Balkans and the Serbs, through means of photographic campaigns that were put together, under the patronage of French banker Albert Kahn, by geographer Jean Brunhes. This was made under the *Archive of the planet*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A. Malet, *Dnevnik sa srpskog dvora* [Diary from the Serbian court] (Beograd: CLIO, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Archives of Serbia, The Serbian Mission in Paris, folder 4, confidential, number 26, Ministry of National Economy to the Serbian Mission to Paris, Belgrade, February 13<sup>th</sup>, 1909; Archives of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Legacy of Jovan Cvijić, VII-94, Claud Labbé to Ljubica Cvijić, Paris, June 12<sup>th</sup> 1930; Archives of the Serbian Academy of Sciences, Legacy of Jovan Cvijić, VII-95, Claud Labbé to Ljubica Cvijić, Paris, June 23<sup>rd</sup> 1930; P. Labbé, *A travers la Serbie. Impressions d'un récent voyage* (Paris: Impr. de L. Gy, 1910);

<sup>8</sup> A. Muzet, *Aux pays balkaniques: Monténégro Serbie Bulgarie* (Paris: P. Roger, 1912).

<sup>9</sup> D. Okuefuna, *The wonderful world of Albert Kahn. Colour photographs from a lost age* (London: BBC Books, 2008); [www.albertkahn.co.uk/about.html](http://www.albertkahn.co.uk/about.html) (accessed 1 March 2020).

## II. From Lack of Knowledge and Incomprehension to Impressions

When Albert Malet was coming into Serbia at the beginning of October 1892, the first thing that he noticed was, “in between of two huge rivers, Belgrade is sitting charmingly on a cliffs’ edge, with the Domes from the Kings palace shining in the morning Sun.”<sup>10</sup> The first depiction of Belgrade was rather short and vague, but he noticed immediately the buildings erected in French style, and also train cars, made by French engineers. On his path from the Belgrade railways station towards the hotel Imperial, where he took a room. Malet notices with a bit of disappointment, “The endless sea of dust that, during the rainy days, turns itself into a lake of mud, covering even the hilly little streets made out of horrid oval stone, surrounded with the ugliest of houses covered in white facades.”<sup>11</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, Belgrade looked rather dirty and lacking seriously in care, but that was just at the first sight, “with the Sun easing down a bit this negative impression,”<sup>12</sup> Malet concluded. Though his first impressions were changed after he got to know Belgrade and the Serbs a bit better.

A traveller going through the Balkans and parts of Serbia noticed some elements of *Orientalism* and shared these thoughts about it to the French society. The common belief which prevailed on Serbia as an exotic and backward environment, together with the expectations that Belgrade is closer in appearance to far Eastern cities sometimes created a surprise at the first encounter, which has been developing by the Western model.<sup>13</sup> During one of his travels, Malet stayed at a hotel called

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<sup>10</sup> A. Malet, *Dnevnik sa srpskog dvora*, 67.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 68; Aleksandra Kolaković, *Susret sa Beogradom: Francuzi o Beogradu na prelazu iz 19. u 20. vek*, 3, 11, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> S. Nedić, “Urbanističko uređenje Beograda od 1886. do 1914. godine” [Urban development of Belgrade from 1886 to 1914], *Godišnjak Muzeja grada Beograda* [Annual of the Museum of the City of Belgrade] 23 (1976): 175–216; B. Maksimović, “Urbanizam i arhitektura Beograda od 1830. do 1941. godine” [Urbanism and architecture of Belgrade from 1830 to 1941 Urbanism and architecture of Belgrade from 1830 to 1941], in *Istorija Beograda* [History of Belgrade] (Beograd: SANU, 1995), 235–247; B. Nestorović, “Razvoj arhitekture Beograda od kneza Miloša do Prvog svetskog rata (1815–1914)” [Development of Belgrade Architecture from Prince Miloš to the First World War (1815–1914)], *Godišnjak Muzeja grada Beograda* [Annual of the Museum of the City of Belgrade] 1 (1954): 167–181; J. Petrović, “Istorijski, društveni i ekonomski razvoj Karadorđeve ulice

*Europe* in Svilajnac,<sup>14</sup> where he spotted a toothbrush in the room, which was used by every traveller.<sup>15</sup> About Hotel Europe, he wrote: “There is a taste in the building, which the builder could not execute nicely. Almost every town in Serbia has such inns with different names. On the front there are steps with finished Corinthian ornaments; the painter’s work is colourful; dining room; our rooms are the best - just towards the barn and the garbage can,” he concluded: “If you are traveling to the East, avoid the inns named Europe.”<sup>16</sup> Malet also described the appearance of Svilajnac, which he emphasized as “a larger village as well as all other Serbian towns except maybe Belgrade and Kragujevac.”<sup>17</sup> In the late nineteenth century, the French intellectuals emphasized, in particular, the problem of the underdevelopment of Serbian cities in the interior, not only in terms of population but also in their lifestyle.

The travellers wanted to get to know not just Belgrade, but also the life in the countryside of Serbia. In 1893, Alfons Magrou, the French language professor of the Serbian King Aleksandar Obrenović, visited by foot the villages of Avala and the Kolubara region, and from these visits he got the impression that the “pure, genuine Serbian people, despite the railways, electric lighting, telegraph, remained pastoral and peasant.” They also brought to France *a pretty picture* of a Serbian village: “the houses are away from each other, and each is surrounded by an orchard. The surface is clean, green, smiling. Peasants dressed - somewhat like our buzzards - in wide puffed jackets.”<sup>18</sup> The French intellectual was particularly impressed by the need of a Serbian peasant to enjoy: “As shepherds of ancient idylls, he can play in the flute or hum with songs, sing or make lyrics. The nature is beautiful there, and give him no literature, please – because he is a great ignorant – do not spoil

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u Beogradu do 1914. godine” [Historical, social and economic development of Karadžordje’s Street in Belgrade until 1914], *Godišnjak Muzeja grada Beograda* [Annual of the Museum of the City of Belgrade] 57 (2010): 135–150.

<sup>14</sup> Svilajnac is located 100 km south-east of Belgrade, on the banks of the river Resava and bordering the river Morava.

<sup>15</sup> A. Malet, “Uskršnje uspomene iz Srbije” [Easter memories from Serbia], *Zora* [Aurora] 8–9:1.8 (1899): 305.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 306.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, 305.

<sup>18</sup> A. Magrou, “Srbi i Srbija (uspomene od četiri godine provedene u Srbiji od 1899 – 1893. godine)” [Serbs and Serbia (memories of four years spent in Serbia from 1899 to 1893)], *Delo* [*l’Oeuvre*] 73 (1915): 79.

the impressions he receives from it [...] Indeed, there are no peasants who are more of a natural poets or musicians, than those peasants from Drina, Kolubara and Šumadija. What he loves is, first and foremost, *keolo* (national folklore dance), and especially songs performed with *gusle* (national instrument), national epics or songs so numerous and so passionate, but all anonymous, that came directly from the soul of the people.”<sup>19</sup> “It is wonderful to travel from Svilajnac to Manasija in the fresh morning and clear morning air. The nature is very tempting: on the left side of the road flows the Resava River, which winds through the countryside and sparkles, and wherever it runs, it is caught by the paddle of a watermill. Far right there in the plain, the view narrows and falls on the silvery surface of Morava,” Malet described his Easter journey to the old Serbian spiritual centre.<sup>20</sup> Serbia’s natural beauties and “the delicate life” that takes place in its mountains were also spotted by the future writer Valery Larbaud on his return trip from Northern and Eastern Europe in 1898, when he travelled through Belgrade for his visits to Russia, Constantinople and Sofia. In his later works, he remembered the scent of rose gardens, the virgin Serbian mountains, small train stations with boys and girls in “lovely folk costumes,” who followed colorful wooden full-wheeled cars like the ones from Homeric period, as well as new buildings, white and red houses and pictures of a horseman in blue and red on the streets of Niš.<sup>21</sup>

Patrimonio, a long-time French ambassador in Belgrade, often noticed that “there are no more distrustful people than Serbs, but they are generally loyal and good.”<sup>22</sup> Most likely, he was influenced by the fierce political struggles in Serbia at the time. Malet’s mission in Serbia was to instruct the young prince Alexander in the history of diplomacy, but he also worked for the French government in the hopes that he would increase French influence. Alphonse Magrou observed that “the first line that is surprising with the average Serb, especially the peasant type, is his pride. They look you straight in the eye, give you a wide hand, and shake yours, with vigour.”<sup>23</sup> During his early travels to central Serbia,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, 82.

<sup>20</sup> A. Malet, “Uskršnje uspomene iz Srbije,” 305.

<sup>21</sup> M. Pavlović, *Od Esklavonije ka Jugoslaviji*, 224–225.

<sup>22</sup> A. Malet, *Dnevnik sa srpskog dvora*, 70.

<sup>23</sup> A. Magrou, “Srbi i Srbija (uspomene od četiri godine provedene u Srbiji od 1899 – 1893. godine,” 123.

Malet also made a similar observation. “Serbian people are proud,” he wrote. In his introductory texts, while translating Serbian folk songs of the *Kosovo Cycle* associate of Serbian diplomacy, the slavist and journalist Ivan de Malkyhazouny, emphasized the role of monasteries and churches in Serbian history and tradition, which was to bolster both the patriotism and the courageous spirit of the congregation.<sup>24</sup>

The transformation of the Serbian capital, the introduction of electricity, trams, the paving of streets, the refurbishment of old buildings, the erection of new buildings in the spirit of modern European architecture were not missed by the curious eye of French visitors. At the end of the nineteenth century, Belgrade was beginning to shed its Oriental atmosphere, replacing it with a European model, while still retaining its Balkan character. With the opening of the first power plant in 1893, street lighting appeared, and the city began to be electrified. Electric trams began replacing horse-drawn trams.<sup>25</sup> Although Malet considered Serbia to be a “semi-European-semi-eastern” country, he noted the changes introduced by Serbian “returnees from Paris and Vienna” and predicted that they would cause major upheavals in Serbian society.<sup>26</sup> French intellectuals also noticed changes in the way of everyday life, women’s clothing, the difference between life in a big city - Belgrade - and the smaller cities, as well as life in the countryside. For instance, Malet emphasized the modest and not always tastefully decorated interior of houses and restaurants. He also noted that during his stay he enjoyed the food of a French restaurant in Belgrade, which was run by an Italian, more than he did the local cuisine, which he considered too caloric for a Frenchman.<sup>27</sup> Two decades later, Muzet also noticed defects in the cobblestone of Belgrade, as well as “peppery and fatty foods,” which, according to the judgment of a French intellectual, was a consequence of the overuse of peppers in Serbian cuisine, especially in Southern Serbia.<sup>28</sup>

While certainly possessing more knowledge of Serbian than the average Frenchman, those French intellectuals who came to Serbia

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<sup>24</sup> I. de Malkyhazouny, “La Bataille de Kosovo. L’Épopée serbe,” *La Revue slave* (1907): (special edition)

<sup>25</sup> See: D. Stojanović, *Kaldrma i asfalt: urbanizacija i evropeizacija Beograda: 1890-1914* [Cobble and asphalt: urbanization and Europeanization of Belgrade: 1890-1914] (Beograd: Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> A. Malet, *Dnevnik sa srpskog dvora*, 148.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, 71.

<sup>28</sup> A. Muzet, *Aux pays balkanique: Monténégro Serbie Bulgarie*, 77.

lacked in-depth information regarding the country. In 1909, Paul Labbé observed democratic and patriotic elements in Belgrade as well as the rest of Serbia. He visited Belgrade as well as Šabac, which he said was called *Little Paris* by the Serbs. He also travelled to Loznica, Valjevo, Zaječar, Bor, Niš, Kruševac, and Novi Pazar. Paul Labbé, a geographer, was delighted with the “lovely games” performed in folk costumes with “beautiful music.”<sup>29</sup> He noted the existence of a family atmosphere in Serbian homes and the nurturing of patriotism, and was particularly keen on the folk customs of fraternity, communal labor, and hospitality. He particularly emphasized that Serbia was a country of small holdings and that there were virtually no social classes, and compared the love of the Serbs towards their homeland with the feelings of the French for France.<sup>30</sup> At the time of the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Labbé presented the economic and democratic capacities of Serbia to French high society, as well as the Serbian respect for the French society and culture, and especially highlighted the similarities of the French and Serbian understandings of patriotism.

The Balkan wars confirmed that the Serb “in moments of crisis, the strong aspirations, aspirations for self-sacrifice and enthusiasm for sacrifice, exist.”<sup>31</sup> Based on the texts by Muzet and other French intellectuals, journalists, and diplomats, depictions of life in Serbia and Belgrade were being made. French authors observed problems in the functioning of the city and state, as well as the daily concerns of citizens. Muzet in 1912 noticed a tendency towards borrowing without prudent thinking, illiquidity of small financial institutions in the interior of the country, problems in the functioning of the bureaucracy, slow communication, and embarrassing behaviour of officials. In the report of a long time French envoy in Belgrade in 1913, it was written that the Serb “lives by his imagination and his dreams.” The envoy was alluding to the cult of the Kosovo Serbian folk songs and traditions which “for centuries supported the national spirit.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> P. Labbé, *A travers la Serbie. Impressions d'un récent voyage*, 9–13, 15, 17.

<sup>30</sup> N.N. “Beleške” [Notes], *Srpski književni glasnik* [Serbian Literary Gazette] 29:11 (1912): 875.

<sup>31</sup> A. Kolaković, *Susret sa Beogradom: Francuzi o Beogradu na prelazu iz 19. u 20. vek*, 5, 13, 22.

<sup>32</sup> M. Pavlović, *Francuzi o Srbima i Srbiji 1912–1918* [The French about Serbs and Serbia 1912–1918] (Beograd: Narodna knjiga, 1988), 247.

### III. Meeting with Serbian Customs, History, and Orthodoxy

Holiday celebrations and customs revealed the character and daily life of Serbs, whose traces are also preserved in the works of other French intellectuals. The customs and celebrations of the Serbs were reported by Alphonse Magrou and Albert Malet at the end of the nineteenth century, and by Paul Labbé after his visit to Serbia in 1908, and by Alphonse Muzet in 1912. Serbian religious holidays, celebrations, weddings, celebrations of Christmas, Lazar's Sabbath - Vrbica, Flower Week, and Easter, as well as the accompanying customs, were especially inspiring to French intellectuals. In his *Diary from the Serbian royal palace*, Malet left testimony of the customs that followed the celebration of all major Serbian religious holidays. The impression that Malet gained was that the Serbs had more interest in the customs related to the holidays than in the holidays themselves. During his first visit to the Belgrade Cathedral Church, he emphasized: "in truth, there was no service [...]. Despite the large number of religious images, I did not get the impression that these people were truly pious."<sup>33</sup> In describing the celebration of religious holidays, Malet also emphasized the lack of order and discipline, explaining that Serbia is "a true country of democracy, because every individual is considered equal to his neighbour and because it would not be understood why he and that neighbour would have an advantage over him."<sup>34</sup>

The French travel writers paid special interest to the customs related to the marking of the family patron saint day. "The day when a family celebrates their patron, for the sake of remembering the day her ancestor left polytheism for the sake of Orthodoxy, is the most popular day, dearest to the heart of a true Serb. It is called glory," wrote Alphonse Magrou.<sup>35</sup> He described the feast and customs associated with the celebration: "When the weather permits, the celebration is performed under clear skies; large fires are burning in the yard or garden; they roast whole piglets, *suckers*, or beef pieces on a spit, large (ćevap), small (ćevapčić). Tradition requires that every guest take a piece, by using only his hand. The celebration becomes tyrannical when toasts come. It

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<sup>33</sup> A. Malet, *Dnevnik sa srpskog dvora*, 93, 131.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, 132.

<sup>35</sup> A. Magrou, "Srbi i Srbija (uspomene od četiri godine provedene u Srbiji od 1899 – 1893. godine)," 121.

demands that they be measured on the table, and after they drank, the glass raised.”<sup>36</sup>

Serbian medieval history, embodied in numerous monasteries and the artwork they guarded, was admired by most French intellectuals, from Malet, through Labbé, to Gabriel Millet. In 1906, Millet was staying in Serbia for one month. He visited: Manasija, Ravanica, Annunciation (near Stragar), Vracevšnica, Vednje, Shepherd and Kablar monasteries (John, Nicholas, Trinity, Annunciation), Arilje, Bella Crkva (near Karana), Čačak, Veluce, Rudenica, Kruševac, Prokuplje, and Kuršumlija, and then presented them in high French society to French intellectuals, creating by this an interest in Serbian cultural heritage.<sup>37</sup> Photographic campaigns further indicated to travellers the aforementioned cultural monuments in the Balkans and the surrounding nature. However, coming to Belgrade and Serbia, French intellectuals still lacked sufficient information. Malet, by his own admission, prior to his arrival in Belgrade, was “quite ignorant of Serbs” and it was only after reading the book of Saint-René Taillandier – *Serbia: Karadjordje and Miloš*, when he realized that Serbian history was “beautiful and very exciting.”<sup>38</sup> At the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the jurist, geographer and ethnologist Paul Labbé, compared Serbia’s unfamiliarity in the world to the similar case of Siberia.<sup>39</sup> Labbé was one of several French intellectuals who clearly stated in their works that there was much information about Serbia being presented to the French and European public because of an organized Austro-Hungarian propaganda campaign. Serbia’s natural beauties, such as Đerdap and places where religion, tradition, culture, and past were merging (Ravanica, Studenica, and Žiža) were also of interest to Labbé and many other French intellectuals. On his arrival to Serbia in 1914 and during his retreat with the Serbian army, Auguste Boppe, a French diplomat and ambassador to the Serbian government in exile

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>37</sup> J. Ćirić, “Gabriel Millet et Djurdje Bošković: l’étude conjointe des monuments médiévaux de la Serbie moravienne,” in *La Serbie et la France: une alliance atypique: relations politiques, économiques et culturelles, 1870–1940*, ed. D. T. Bataković (Belgrade: SASA, 2010), 545–556; D. Preradović, “Prvo putovanje Gabrijela Mijea po Srbiji” [Gabriel Millet’s first trip around Serbia], in *Srbi o Francuzima – Francuzi o Srbima* [Serbs about the French - The French about the Serbs], ed. Jelena Novaković, Lj. Ristić (Beograd: Filološki fakultet Beograd, Društvo za kulturnu saradnju Francuska Srbija, 2015), 188–189.

<sup>38</sup> A. Malet, *Dnevnik sa srpskog dvora*, 74.

<sup>39</sup> P. Labbé, *A travers la Serbie, Impressions d’un récent voyage*, 4.

during the Great War, recalled Studenica, which he had visited in 1891. He left it with fondest memories: “I can see even now a little beautiful path that took me through the woods to the small valley where the monastery lies, with its walls, its courtyards, its church, a masterpiece of Serbian-Venetian art, which remained intact for centuries, testifying the glory days of St. King Stevan.”<sup>40</sup> Besides customs related to big holidays, Paul Labbé and Alphonse Muzet were particularly attracted to celebrations and wedding customs. The need to comment on Serbian customs and to point out some elements of the Orthodox faith and customs were also reported by French diplomats in their reports. Reporting on his mission to close shops in Skopje on Orthodox Christmas Day in 1913, Léon-Eugène Coulard Descos, a French ambassador in Belgrade from 1907, also wrote several lines dedicated to the Feast of Epiphany and the way it is celebrated among Serbs.<sup>41</sup> French intellectuals, despite existing stereotypes, were able to understand the importance of the relationship between Serbs and national traditions, history, legends, myths, and Orthodoxy.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The French intellectuals were very aware of how much more effort, research, and studies were needed to be made in order to introduce that part of Europe to others. Although small in scope, the texts of French intellectuals describing Belgrade and the interior of Serbia contributed to the French’s acquaintance with Serbia and the Serbs. It is difficult to say precisely how well the individual texts have succeeded in this job. It is quite certain that those texts whose authors were able to market them to the general public or the French elite had a more decisive influence on the creation of the idea of Serbia and the Serbs. After returning to France, Alfons Magrou and Alber Malet enjoyed excellent reputations for their expertise on Serbia. Labe’s *A travers la Serbie: Impressions d’ un récent voyage* contributed to the presentation of Serbia in France because the author, as a secretary-general of the Normandy Geographical Society, had sufficient professional authority to have his work echoed in French scientific and business circles.

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<sup>40</sup> A. Boppe, *Za srpskom vojskom od Niša do Krfa* [With the Serbian Army from Nis to Corfu] (Beograd: Čigoja, 2014), 25.

<sup>41</sup> M. Pavlović, *Francuzi o Srbima i Srbiji 1912–1918*, 245.

Prudence and the prevailing belief in the European public in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century regarding Serbia, as a country that belongs to the Orient, are visible in the attitudes of diplomats who spent part of their careers in Belgrade and Serbia. Such belief apparently was common among French intellectuals, who knew the history and the political and social scene in Serbia. Neither their contacts, links, and cooperation with the Serbs were not always strong enough to change the image of Serbia as *an exotic country* in a constant struggle between the traditional and the modern. Maria Todorova in her book *Imagining the Balkans* believes that the idea of the inhabitants of the Balkans as primitive barbarians and abusers rounded off in the first decade of the twentieth century. Actually, the Serbs were at the centre of this picture of the Balkans because of the events of 1903 and 1914.<sup>42</sup> In France, the image of the Serbs changed by time and had certain specific characteristics. The courage and the successes of the Serbian army during The Balkan Wars resulted in a belief in French intellectual circles that Serbia was the dominant Balkan state that could be counted on in the pursuit of French politics.<sup>43</sup>

French intellectuals and publicists noted the characteristics of the Serbian way of living, as well as some traits of the Serbs, and they also shared with their readers all available information or their personal views of Belgrade and other Serbian cities. The general impression was that the information provided by the French publicists, especially after the Balkan Wars, introduced Serbia to the French public who knew it as much as Siberia. After the initial information, from the Annexation Crisis and the Balkan Wars, more positive images of Serbia and the Serbs started spreading among the French public.<sup>44</sup> In order to investigate the Balkan wars and the military power of the Balkan states, General Hert visited Belgrade in early November 1912. After admitting that he expected to find “a noisy town, a people with southern instincts, striking and delighted with success,” the general admitted that the Serbs had shown him “what efforts could be required of a young nation, inspired by noble sentiments, under the guidance of energetic leaders. Serbia has been

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<sup>42</sup> M. Todorova, *Imaginary Balkan*, 117–120.

<sup>43</sup> A. Kolaković, “French Intellectuals and the French Policy Change in the Balkans (1912–1913),” *Journal of Turkish World Studies* 12:2 (2012): 199–212.

<sup>44</sup> A. Kolaković, “Road to Great War. Serbian Intellectuals and Austro-Hungarian Policy in the Balkans (1894–1914),” *Serbian Political Thought* 1 (2014): 67–89.

preparing and deserving of its success.”<sup>45</sup> The texts of French intellectuals, with a wealth of different information, made possible the creation of a picture of the changes that engulfed the young Balkan state, observed in the West only through the colonial prism of prejudice and blurred representations. Thanks to these texts and information on everyday life, the appearance of Serbian villages and towns, monasteries, and character traits, a new perception of the Serbs was developed in the eyes of the French. This was especially important because the mentioned change was happening at the time of the strongest struggle of the Serbs for their national goals.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, these texts’ impact on the political circles of France, which was possible because writers such as Malet or Labbé were in official state diplomatic and economic missions, was crucial for getting to know the Serbs and understanding the national goals of the Serbian people on the eve of the Great War.

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<sup>45</sup> N.N. “Beleške” [Notes], *Srpski književni glasnik* [Serbian Literary Gazette] 31:18 (1913): 636.

<sup>46</sup> A. Kolaković, “Francuski intelektualci i Srbija u predvečerje Velikog rata” [French intellectuals and Serbia on the eve of the Great War], in *Srbija i geopolitičke prilike u Evropi 1914. godine* [Serbia and geopolitical situation in Europe in 1914], ed. M. Stepić, Lj. Ristić (Lajkovac, Beograd: Gradska Biblioteka Lajkovac, Institut za političke studije, 2015), 279–301.

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