



## Reporting of the *Politika* Belgrade daily newspaper on the epidemic of typhus in Serbia during the First World War

Izveštavanje beogradskog dnevnog lista Politika o epidemiji tifusa u Srbiji za vreme Prvog svetskog rata

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### Abstract

**Background/Aim.** The epidemic of typhus lasted for several months in the Kingdom of Serbia during the First World War, and a vast number of people lost their lives. The objective of the paper was to investigate how the *Politika*, Belgrade daily newspaper, informed the then Serbian public about the epidemic of typhus in the Great War. **Methods.** By using statistical and historical-critical method, the analysis of all texts published in the *Politika* from February 1915, when the Serbian government and the Supreme Command allowed the press to write about the epidemic of typhus, until the outbreak began to calm down at the beginning of May 1915, was performed. **Results.** In the observed period, among the texts dedicated to the typhus epidemic, news about people who died of typhus (obituaries), news about the epidemic itself, as well as affirmative texts about the feats of doctors. There were more texts about allies' military missions than about Serbian Army Medical Corps. The reporting was balanced and highly professional. **Conclusion.** In the period February–May 1915, a number of different articles about the typhus epidemic in Serbia during the Great War were published in the daily newspaper *Politika*. The reporting was well-balanced, ethical and highly professional.

### Key words:

world war I; disease outbreaks; typhus, epidemic louse borne; newspaper article; serbia; history of medicine; history, 20th century.

### Apstrakt

**Uvod/Cilj.** Epidemija tifusa trajala je nekoliko meseci tokom Prvog svetskog rata na teritoriji Kraljevine Srbije odneviši veliki broj života. Cilj rada je bio da se istraži kako je beogradski dnevni list Politika izveštavao tadašnju srpsku javnost o epidemiji tifusa u Velikom ratu. **Metode.** Primenom statističkog i istorijsko-kritičkog metoda, izvršena je analiza svih tekstova objavljenih u dnevnom listu Politika u periodu od februara 1915, kada je srpska Vlada i Vrhovna komanda Srpske vojske dozvolila novinsko izveštavanje o epidemiji tifusa, do početka maja kada se epidemija počela smirivati. **Rezultati.** U posmatranom periodu, među tekstovima posvećenim epidemiji tifusa dominirale su vesti o osobama umrlim od tifusa (čitulje), novosti o samoj epidemiji, kao i afirmativni tekstovi o podvizima lekara. Bilo je više napisa o savezničkim vojnim misijama nego o srpskom vojnom sanitetu. Izveštavanje je bilo balansirano i visoko profesionalno. **Zaključak.** U periodu februar–maj 1915, u dnevnom listu Politika objavljivan je veći broj različitih tekstova o epidemiji tifusa u Srbiji tokom Velikog rata. Izveštavanje je bilo dobro balansirano, etično i visoko profesionalno.

### Ključne reči:

prvi svetski rat; epidemije; tifus, pegavi; novine; srbija; istorija medicine; istorija, xx vek.

### Introduction

Every war, and especially a global war, brings great human, material, and technology casualties. Apart from the losses on the battlefield in the conflict of the two armies, there are also losses resulting from various misfortunes accompanying any major armed conflict. "It is widely known that in addition to military operation adversities, wars bring

armies and civilian population sufferings such as starvation, infectious diseases and a dearth of every kind. In 1915, the Serbian army had a high mortality rate additionally contributed by major epidemics and infections (epidemic of typhus, typhoid fever, relapsing fever, dysentery, cholera, diphtheria), resulting in the death of 35,000 Serbian soldiers and about 30,000 Austro-Hungarian prisoners,"<sup>1</sup>. The epidemics of typhus, typhoid fever, and relapsing fever lasted for sever

al months in the Kingdom of Serbia during the First World War, and a vast number of people lost their lives. The epidemic of typhus (especially *typhus exanthematicus*) has been well addressed in the professional and scientific literature, and one of the earliest scientific papers on the subject was published by British Army Medical Corps colonel William Hunter, M.D, entitled: *The Serbian Epidemics of Typhus and Relapsing Fever* in 1915<sup>2</sup>. The importance of Dr. Hunter's work is reflected in the fact that he was one of the key physicians devoted to preventing the spread of the epidemics and that as a commanding officer of the British Army Medical Corps mission, he provided enormous assistance to the Serbian army and people in the fight against the epidemics. Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Stanojević stands out among the Serbian authors who wrote on the epidemics following the Great War with his proceedings *The History of Serbian Army Medical Corps and Our Wartime Medical Experience* (1925 edition)<sup>3</sup>. Lieutenant Colonel Stanojević held significant duties in the Serbian Army Medical Corps during the epidemic of typhus, and the significance of his work is reflected in his collection of (in the proceedings) the experiences of other Serbian Army Medical Corps officers on the epidemics of typhus. Among recent research endeavors, Goran Čukić's book *Prevention of Typhus in Serbia in 1915*<sup>4</sup> is worth mentioning. In *the Vojnosanitetski Pregled*, Čukić published a remarkable paper entitled: *Serbian, the first phase of the suppression of epidemics in 1914 and 1915*<sup>5</sup>. The aforementioned professional and scientific papers deal with typhus from the point of view of doctors – medical corps officers who participated in the prevention of the epidemics, and the authors of the texts present the medical aspects of the disease, the methods of treatment, the evaluation of medicine administration success, the methods of depedication, etc.

Our work aims to investigate, analyze, and systematically present how the oldest daily newspaper in the Balkans, the *Belgrade Politika*, reported on the epidemic of typhus in Serbia during the First World War. Although much has been written about the epidemic of typhus, it is evident that there are not enough papers dealing with media reporting, or more precisely, reporting in the then daily newspapers on the major epidemics. This is a particularly big challenge if we know that in the first phase of the outbreak, the attitude of the military authorities, but also the Serbian government, was that the truth about the scale of the epidemic should be concealed. This was primarily true of the print media at the time. There was a prevailing fear of severe consequences of the enemy's gaining the impression that the epidemic had weakened the country's military and economic strength or had broken its morale<sup>2</sup>. The military and civilian authorities' ban imposed on the then print media about the reporting on the epidemic of typhus was partly annulled in February 1915, and it is, therefore, essential to analyze the typhus epidemic through the media which even then played a significant role in the education of the population. The significance of the media on the suppression of typhus was best evidenced by the following quotation: "Thus, on March 16, 1915, *Srpske novine* (printed in Niš) published an article entitled *Fighting*

*the Typhus* (from the letter of a battalion commander)", which showed that his battalion was stationed in dugouts in a small, poor and dirty village on the border. In one newspaper, the commander read a lecture given by Dr. Subotić (originally written with double t – author's note) at a doctors' meeting in Niš, where it was said that disinfection furnaces could be built everywhere. He, too, made them in a cave with his soldiers... This feat of the nameless battalion commander showed what an individual's initiative means and can do. He saved his battalion (several hundred soldiers?) from typhus infection"<sup>7</sup>.

## Methods

By using statistical method, historical-critical method, content analysis method, comparative method, and media discourse analysis<sup>7</sup>, the *Politika* analysis was done on a day-by-day basis, covering all issues from February 1915, when the Serbian government and the Supreme Command allowed the press to write about the epidemic, until the outbreak that followed at the beginning of May 1915. It was not necessary to analyze the paper editions before February 1915 as there were no texts on typhus (except for the obituaries which sporadically mentioned the cause of death) due to the strict prohibition of writing about the epidemics imposed by civilian and military authorities.

The *Politika* newspaper was taken as a representative medium which began to be published on January 25, 1904, and was owned by the Ribnikar family. The first issue was printed in 2,450 copies. Before the First World War, the newspaper was rated as a reputable, objective, and media-balanced daily information and political newspaper<sup>8</sup>. Some of our most celebrated and most prominent journalists and editors who worked before and after World War I wrote in the *Politika*. At the onset of the war, the founders of the *Politika* themselves, the Ribnikar brothers, lost their lives while performing their military duties: "Immediately after the announcement of the mobilization, the two Ribnikar brothers – Vladislav and Darko, were mobilized as reserve officers – captains. The third brother, Dr. Slobodan, was hired as a military doctor. Unfortunately, the war brought a great tragedy to the founder of the *Politika* and his family. Darko and Vladislav were killed at the very beginning of the war, on August 31 and September 1, 1914."<sup>9</sup>.

## Results and discussion

The average number of texts in the period we observed are presented in Table 1 as part of the research results analysis.

The descriptive statistics for all variables of this research point to the following elements: there was genre diversity in the *Politika* when it wrote about the epidemic of typhus in Serbia. The newspaper's editorial staff showed great media interest in allies' assistance in military medical missions. The research suggests that when compared with other text categories, the newspaper text structure was dominated by obituaries dedicated to persons who died of typhus.

**Table 1****Number of texts on typhus epidemic in Serbia in the Great War published in the *Politika* in the period February–May 1915**

Text category	Total number of texts on the epidemic	Average number of texts on the epidemic*
Feuilleton	2	0.022
News	72	3.08
Report	23	1.13
Coverage	7	1.00
Comment	17	1.12
Obituary	85	7.32
Other	2	1.00
Authorial text	15	1.13
Has statistics	6	1.17
Motivational text	14	1.21
Critical text	18	1.00
Educational text	16	1.06
Text about the death of a doctor	41	1.37
Text with medical advice	3	1.00
Text on a foreign medical corps mission	56	1.70
Text on the Serbian medical corps	22	1.09
Affirmative text on doctor feats	19	1.11

\*per single issue of the *Politika* printed in the observed period.

The *Politika* wrote more about foreign military missions than about the Serbian Army Medical Corps, which can be interpreted as gratitude of journalists and the entire Serbian people to allies' military doctors. Serbian journalists and editors thus paid tribute to allies' military missions – doctors and medical corps staff who, risking their own lives, came to a small Balkan country to help its army and people to fight the epidemics of typhus.

The *Politika* had the highest number of texts affirming the feats of doctors, but there was also a relatively large number of critical texts stating editorial staff objections to the ineffective work of individual government bodies on combating the epidemics. One example of critical texts is the following text in which the editorial staff of the *Politika* highlighted the problem of lack of hygiene in Serbian trains, which was one of the reasons for the rapid spread of the typhus epidemics: "A few years ago, our Railway Directorate purchased a wagon and train disinfection device for 85,000 Serbian dinars. Now the wagons and trains are so contaminated and infected with insects and dirt, filth and germs of terrible diseases, that a man shudders and risks his life when getting on a train. It is about time to disinfect wagons. But they cannot find this expensive and much-needed device!"<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, it should be noted that there were very few educational texts on the epidemic that would give medical advice as to how to protect oneself from the epidemics.

It was especially important to investigate, in the paper, the media presentation of affirmative texts on the feats of doctors during the outbreak and duration of the epidemic of typhus, typhoid fever, relapsing fever in Serbia during the First World War. The *Politika* made doctors, who sacrificed themselves and gave their lives to fight the typhus epidemic, the media heroes, and an excellent example of a media initiative was the acknowledgments the newspaper published. We believe that this is a fair and ethically acceptable approach in the media. The *Politika* published acknowledgments from

ordinary citizens-readers who were rescued or had a member of their family healed by the doctors. An example is: "To Mr. L. Coyen – Medical Corps Major and Head of Surgical Department at Palanka Reserve Hospital"<sup>11</sup>.

Based on the obtained research results, we can conclude that the *Politika* daily reported on the epidemic of typhus in Serbia during the First World War in a balanced, ethically-based, and, in terms of the media, highly professional manner.

In the first phase of the epidemic, due to the strict State prohibition on writing about typhus, it was not possible to publish articles on that topic. In the next phase (since February 1915) it was allowed to write about typhus, and journalists and editors were supposed to publish more educational texts about the epidemic. It was necessary to publish specialized texts, written by doctors, in the *Politika* and they were published every day. Journalists and editors could interview domestic and alliance military doctors who would give advice on how to stop the epidemic. Confidential data were obtained from the Chief of Medical Corps of the Supreme Command and other high medical officers. Although a significant part of the population was illiterate at the time, this medical action for typhus suppression was effective because the literate soldiers and citizens would read to those who could not read. Hence, a significant portion of the population "consumed" those articles. The target audience for those educational articles was the whole population of the Kingdom of Serbia. It would raise awareness and enhance sanitary measures and prevention in order to suppress the epidemic.

Based on the research, we can conclude that at the time of the typhus epidemic, the *Politika* newspaper wrote more about allies' military missions (56 units of analysis in the corpus) than about Serbian Army Medical Corps (22 units of analysis in the corpus).

As to the genre structure of the *Politika*, it was dominated by the news on the epidemic of typhus (72 units of

analysis in the corpus) and had the least feuillets (2 units of analysis in the corpus).

As to the evaluation text structure in the *Politika*, it was dominated by affirmative texts on the feats of doctors (19 units of analysis in the corpus), which makes them the most represented category of evaluation texts in the newspaper. On the other hand, there are fewer educational texts (16 units of analysis in the corpus). Also, the research results indicate that in the *Politika* there were more articles about the deaths of Serbian military doctors.

In the professional and general public of the observed period, there were differing opinions about the origin of the typhus epidemics in the Kingdom of Serbia during the Great War. There are discussions in scientific papers as to whether the epidemic of typhus was brought by Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war from Galicia or there were other sources of infection in the country itself. Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Stanojević, a war doctor at the Combined Division Polish Hospital and the head of the Moravian Military Hospital in Niš, wrote about the occurrence of typhus: "Apart from this, the first cases, even before the epidemic typhus on the battlefield, were officially recorded in southern Serbia. These were reported by the Chief of Medical Corps of the Supreme Command at Ministry of Defence on October 10, 1914, with LO No. 368, reporting that there were only three cases of epidemic typhus in Serbia, 1 in Debar Hospital and 2 in Mitrovica, one of which died" <sup>6</sup>.

As far as the source of epidemic is concerned, it should be noted that a competent source, such as the Chief of Medical Corps of the Supreme Command Colonel Dr. Lazar Genčić, emphasized that there were several sources of outbreak, both imported and domestic. Southern Serbia (the territory of today's Northern Macedonia) was identified as one of the places, and it was assumed that the epidemic started in the Western Serbia. Colonel Dr. Genčić wrote: "Our victorious army, marching and fighting the enemy, occasionally carried the typhus germ, but also, in the places where Austro-Hungarian army retreated, came across many more sources and was exposed to a typhus contagion on a large scale" <sup>12, 13</sup>.

Although there was no news of typhus, the first news of cholera in the Austro-Hungarian Army was published already in 3,839th issue of the *Politika* dated 03/10/1914: "Vienna, September 29. Today, three cases of cholera are registered in Vienna, one in Lower Austria, Styria and Silesia, four in Galicia. Therefore, in most military centers of the northern battlefield" <sup>13</sup>. It was the beginning of the war, but also the an-

nouncement of severe typhus epidemics that stroke the Serbian Army and civilians.

In the *Politika*, we find evidence that the Serbian Army also suspected the biological war being waged by the Austro-Hungarian troops, as on the cover of the edition dated 15/01/1915, the text Danube Hunting reported on soldiers taking barrels of wine and rum out of the river: "But our officers thought it was also possible that the Austrians poisoned the wine with cholera or some other bacilli, and ordered the barrels to be immediately thrown back into the Danube" <sup>14</sup>.

Although the military and civilian authorities imposed a ban on writing about the typhus epidemics, as early as in January 1915, the cause of death of some distinguished citizens could be clearly read in the obituaries: "Dr. Milutin Perišić, a well-known Belgrade doctor who has been the head of one of the hospitals in Skopje since the beginning of this war, as a reserve medical corps major, died in that city. A few weeks ago, Dr. Perišić lost his wife in Skopje after her long and severe illness, and now he too has succumbed to typhus" <sup>15</sup>.

A major problem was the inability of Serbian doctors to mark lice as the main carrier, about which the *Politika* wrote in the article "On Epidemic of Typhus – Interview with a Regiment Doctor": "When asked how come so many doctors got infected with typhus, this doctor said: I do not believe that the typhus was passed on to doctors by lice; all of them are people who could and wanted to protect themselves from the plague" <sup>16</sup>. It should be emphasized that typhus caused huge losses not only to the Serbian Army but also to the civilian population since, according to competent authors' estimates, Serbia lost between 100,000 and 200,000 civilians in the epidemics <sup>6</sup>.

All of the above elements should be kept in mind when reaching the conclusion of the *Politika* daily writing on the epidemic of typhus in Serbia in 1915.

This research is the first research on media coverage of typhus epidemic in the World War I in Serbia, and we hope it will be useful for future authors writing on the topic relevant to the history of Serbian medicine and military medical corps.

## Conclusion

In the period February–May 1915, a number of different articles about the typhus epidemic in Serbia during the Great War were published in the daily newspaper *Politika*. The reporting was well-balanced, ethical and highly professional.

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