

CULTURE OF MEMORY AND IMAGE OF SERBS IN THE PUBLICATIONS BY ARCHIBALD REISS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The main purpose of this paper is to investigate political and communicational dimension of Reiss's (Rudolph Archibald Reiss) engagement in changing the media image of Serbs in international context. International and especially Western European countries had demonised Serbs as barbarians and Russophiles, ignoring the Serbian people's readiness to cooperate and sacrifice for the preservation of the ideals of freedom and democracy. The aim of our work is to point out the potential of Reiss's communicological messages, which shaped the field of political sociology, by comparing the image of Serbs in the international environment and domestic public, a topic that is still insufficiently discussed in the academic community. The authors also made a comparative study about the process of demonisation of Serbian people that happened on the very beginning and the very end of the 20th century in order to make a qualitative analysis of the Western auditorium manipulation process.

Design/Methods/Approach: The methodological framework is based on applying a qualitative content analysis, primarily of Reiss's crucial work *Listen, Serbs! Beware of Yourself!* and other scientifically relevant studies, and certain media documents. Additionally, a degree of discourse analysis will also be applied. Furthermore, the authors made a comparative study about the process of demonisation of Serbian people that happened on the very beginning and very end of the 20th century in order to make a qualitative analysis of the Western auditorium manipulation process.

Originality/Value: The main value of the paper is to present the delicate work of Archibald Reiss when it comes to defending Serbian people and their image on international level. Besides, the authors highlight the value of the image creation and auditorium manipulation process analysis that can support certain aspects of foreign policies of Republic of Serbia.

Keywords: Archibald Reiss, culture of memory, media image of Serbs, characterology, propaganda, notion of justice.

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INTRODUCTION

The spirit of time in the Serbian political space at the beginning of the 20th century was difficult to identify, primarily due to the elusive security reality in international relations and the large geopolitical games invisible at the turn of the era. Therefore, for the young state and the ruling elites, in front of European public opinion and large centers of power, which were not in favour of the dynamics of the national movements of the Serbs, but also of the other Balkan peoples, it was important to open up the Serbian national issue. The Customs War of 1906 brought economic independence from Vienna and other states that wanted to control this area, while the First Balkan War of 1912, in addition to the liberation of Old Serbia and Macedonia, and the conflict with Bulgaria the following year, finally marked the end of long territorial disputes and conquest claims of neighbors. The fire of victorious wars was further inflamed by the "covenant thought of liberation and unification" of Serbs separated by state, political and religious borders, and intoxicated by the dreams of national homogenisation, state independence and democracy. The cultural revival was at that time also visible in the political orientation against spiritual colonisation. "They rejected Austro-Hungarian and German colonial patterns as tools of colonial subjugation; they referred to French, British, Swiss, and even American literary and artistic sources" (Ković, 2015: 15). Through culture and literature, the "moral renewal" of the nation was being prepared, but in the deep background there was a political activation of the entire people.²

The generations that actively participated in public life, trying to change the consciousness of the population themselves admitted that they did not achieve great results in the field of politics. The image of Serbs in the European environment was negative, stereotyped and propaganda-oriented, to which the Serbs themselves contributed. Jovan Cvijić, in his program speech *On National Work* (1907), read before King Peter and the members of the "The Circle of Serbian Sisters", argued that Serbia, with its geographical spread "is on the path to Central Europe that does not understand us" (Cvijić, 1907: 346-347), and international blows such as the Peace of San Stefano and the Berlin Congress brought disappointment and distrust towards the international community. Describing the crisis in which the society found itself, he states that "along with this came a turbulent and difficult internal development, which discredited us not only in the eyes of the cultural world, but in several cases even in our own eyes" (Cvijić, 1907: 341). The nation which had decisively contributed to the departure of the Turks from these areas, successfully defending its position against the tutelage and pressures of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in order to preserve their blood-earned sovereignty, was insufficiently engaged in valorising the results from the military fields when it comes to diplomatic and political practice. It was precisely at this historically important moment that Rudolph Archibald Reiss, a world-renowned

2 Jovan Skerlić, remembering the time of the founding of the Serbian Literary Herald, writes that in this way "in that murky era before 1903, a strong literary and moral group was created, which not only laid the foundations of this magazine, but also had a significant influence on the direction of domestic politics" (Skerlić, 1911b: 415).



criminologist, a Swiss of German origin, appeared, accepting the invitation of the Serbian government to investigate the crimes committed against the civilian population from the very beginning of the First World War. From this stems the subject of our paper – the research of the political and communication dimensions of Reiss's engagement in changing the media image of Serbs in the international, primarily European, public, which demonised them as *barbarians* and *Russophiles* ignoring the national readiness for cooperation and sacrifice for the sake of preserving the ideas of freedom and democracy. The famous criminologist also studied the characterology of ordinary people, highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of a society undergoing change.

The goal of our paper is to compare the image of Serbs in the international environment and the domestic public, to point out the potential of Reiss's communication messages that helped shape the field of political sociology, which is still insufficiently discussed in the academic community. Professor Šuvaković has recently published a book in which he speaks authoritatively about this thesis, but also warns that we have not changed much as a nation. Reiss observed our characterology rationally and from an emotional distance, so it is easier to understand his disappointment with the unwillingness to change our own flaws and behaviours in comparison to those times and phenomena.³

REISS'S CHARACTEROLOGY OF THE SERBIAN NATION

In the text below, we analyse the era preceding the Great World War, its course, but also the period immediately after its end, in which the bureaucracy and the intelligentsia, on the one hand, and the peasantry and the participants in the war, on the other hand, were socially confronted. In the clashes of tradition and modernity, the morality, patriotism and honour of a nation were rapidly disappearing, while greed, betrayal and superficiality overtook their place, thus overshadowing the reality. Specific geographical, historical, cultural, social and security conditions of life created a special psychological character of the Serbian people, firmly rooted in patriarchal upbringing and tradition.

Archibald Reiss, as a skilled psychologist, immediately recognised the importance of shaping a national characterology, based on ethnopsychological profiles of ordinary people. The proof that he was on the right track is the later example of a secret project by the British government just before the German unification, in order to perceive whether a political mistake was possible if the necessary consent was given⁴. Psychological specificities, character and behavioural models shape the mental structure of every society, which is especially pronounced in crisis situations and conflicts. "National character, therefore, is not something given in advance and forever shaped", states Dobrilo Aranitović, concluding that it is "exposed to the processes of change and transformation in the context of historical, social and cultural changes" (Aranitović, 2025: 17). Here we may also add security changes as an important social mechanism in shaping the will of actors who preserve the stability of the system.

The character traits of Serbs have been researched and analysed over a long period of time, but Reiss's works are characterised by the ever-present national spirit and feelings. Carefully observing Serbian society during an important decade in its historical development, he noticed how in security crises and spiritual fractures, social stratifications surface, and with them all the flaws and virtues of the entire nation. By carefully observing and analysing their consequences, Reiss left a legacy of Serbian

3 See more in: Šuvaković, U. (2024): R.A. Reiss - Neutrality is not possible in the face of crime, Matica Srpska, Novi Sad; Archives of Vojvodina, Novi Sad and Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Belgrade.

4 In the secret protocol, English ethnopsychologists saw the Germans as a people focused on themselves, prone to self-pity, with a pronounced need to be loved and without the same feelings for others. The negative sides of the German mentality are aggressiveness, rudeness, arrogance, fear, inferiority complex, self-indulgence and sentimentality. Their tendency to exaggerate is expressed especially in self-overestimation (Schneider, S.: "Who are the German", *Borba*, 1-2 September, 1990).

characterology, which is also important from the perspective of contemporary political sociology. In psychology, such teachings are close to the views of the Englishman William McDougall,⁵ who, through the theory of instinct, determines the behaviour of individuals, but also of the entire social groups in crisis situations. Exposed to various cultural, religious and ideological pressures, Serbian identity bowed before the onslaught of foreign influences - unification in the West and Christianisation in the East. Reiss excellently identifies the temptations to which an entire nation is exposed, especially during the war, understanding that collective behaviours, cultural patterns, and ethical values define the logic of identity features, because culture and its heritage are undeniably one of the most important segments of national identity (Arsenijević, Perić, 2025).

The long suppression of national identity in the centuries-old Ottoman and German environment influenced the mentality of the Serbian people, as well as their character traits. Reiss analyses the victims of the crime phenomenologically, paying attention to the way in which they put their own experiences in the foreground, but also to the status that the community assigns to them after the war is won. The Serbs brought everything into the war, and received a disingenuous Yugoslavism that worked to destroy its own home from day one.⁶ Collective behaviour was often characterised by impulsive and irrational decisions, with Serbs rarely admitting their own mistakes. Describing the political agenda of that time, Vasa Čubriločić states that Serbia was “the *apogée* of civic parliamentarism”, which can be compared to the most developed European countries: “With the Constitution of 1903, Serbia, as a constitutional and parliamentary monarchy, became a European-bourgeois state. This Constitution did not break its old bureaucratic system, but public opinion in the country was so strongly democratic, and the ruling power was so tamed, that Serbia was truly one of the most democratic civil states in the Balkans from 1903 to 1914” (Čubriločić, 1958:377). Belief in the common good formed the basis of public policy, but many individuals in power did not support these principles in practice. Reiss does not tolerate the hypocrisy of the elites, especially targeting their corruption: “Your people are brave... patriotic...hospitable...democratic, bright...”. Reiss praises, but at the same time criticises: “You are not great workers...you lose pride in wealth...you have become terribly ungrateful...you are jealous of those more educated, more refined and more advanced than you...”.⁷ The work on national education implies collective engagement, where the Swiss professor observes how, after major wars and crises, the masses prefer to indulge in rhetorical emotional promises rather than realistic cognitive judgments. “I will not hide anything important from you of what I have seen, because a true friend is not one who flatters you, but one who tells you the truth, the whole truth”, the author is honest, singling out ingratitude as a flaw with disastrous consequences for society: “You have become terribly ungrateful. Thus, your capital, Belgrade, once a martyr city, even today, ten years after the war of liberation, does not have the smallest cross, nor the smallest stone that would preserve the memory of the sacrifice of those who liberated you” (Reiss, 1997: 2-14).

5 A famous English psychologist important for the development of instinct theory and social psychology. He was an opponent of behaviourism, arguing that human behaviour is always goal-directed, defending the thesis that individuals are always motivated by a significant number of inherited drives. See more in: McDougall, William (1909): *An Introduction to Social Psychology* (2nd ed.), London: Methuen & Co, pp. 1–2 (n13–14 in electronic fields).

6 Belgrade's inability to govern the state it created itself was already evident during the conflict between Kosta Stojanović, Minister of Trade in the government of the Kingdom of Serbia, and Anton Korošec, leader of the Slovenian People's Party, in early October 1920. “The country is in difficult financial circumstances, and the cause of this position is not only material misfortunes, but also the difficulties we find ourselves in due to divergent views on the consolidation of our state, which go so far as not to hide and seek the destruction of the state that is being created... If I agreed to such an obvious way of sabotaging finances and loans, it would mean that I am an accomplice with Mr. Korošec and his party, that I am sitting in a government that is going to the elections for the Constituent Assembly, consciously preparing the country for anarchy and disorder.” (Stojanović, 1920v).

7 “Your ordinary, the peasant, uncorrupted by the influence of professional politicians, is not corruptible. Your ‘intelligentsia’ is, from the smallest official to the minister.” Reiss, Archibald *Ecoutez Serbs!* (2006): 1997, pp 2-14.



Frequent references to easy social forgetfulness reveal his anger towards the elites of the time who did not see what was happening around them, who were greedy and incapable of helping the people who brought freedom. Addressing the entire nation, he warns against national bias and loyalty to leaders as dangers that distance society from democratic frameworks. From a discursive point of view, he shows us how the process of interpretation can lead to different types of social stratification, thereby polarising public opinion. Although in the early 1920s Edward Louis Bernays was just laying the foundations in the field of propaganda and public relations, Reiss noticed, before he did, the power with which the media portray reality, but also erase the past,⁸ to which the Serbian people were (and are) exposed then, as well as now (Perić, Jevtović, 2024, 2025). At the same time, the participants in the war skillfully use the carelessness and unpreparedness of the Serbs for the propaganda battle, trying to generalise the shortcomings of one people in the press as a limitation that is transferred to the entire country. For example, the Bulgarians apply this trick by pointing out the lack of schools in Macedonia, presenting the Serbs in the West as the sole culprits. Reiss recognises the technique of transferring responsibility in crisis reporting, and advises our authorities: “So, establish schools that will be centers for education and nationalisation. But do not send just anybody to be a teacher. Send the best people and single out the teachers in Macedonia with a decent salary, because these people are the pioneers of Serbism...” (Reiss, Bonasije, 1919/1921: 311). He strategically responsibly investigates the misuse of traditional values in creating propaganda narratives that overshadow the domestic public, and which only benefit the already separated corrupt elite. He is concerned about the silence of our official bodies and the slowness in reacting to imposed narratives, full of sensationalism, one-dimensionality.

REISS'S IMAGE OF SERBS IN THE WORLD AND DOMESTIC PUBLIC

By interpreting and analysing the reporting, we will see how the stereotyped image of Serbs was formed, how intense and increasingly ruthless it was, with the comprehensive and skillful use of hostile propaganda that aimed at the collective flaws of the targeted people. The expert from Lausanne, with his texts in the European media, significantly improved the stereotyped and propaganda-negative matrix about Serbs during the time of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which is given additional weight by the fact that by participating in the Serbian army (as a volunteer) he objectively and credibly testified about the crimes committed against the civilian population. “The big media that like to exercise its fact-checking machinery on often minority and financially weaker competition, are reluctant to recall their own mistakes, lies and malfeasance”, writes Serge Alimi, noting how they force “self-justifying rhetoric” (Alimi, 2020: 21). Considering the migration movements of the Balkan population, Reiss singles out the character of the Serbs, taking into account historical and geographical factors. Although he was drawn into the conflict in order to research into the crimes of the Austro-Hungarian army, he soon expanded his field of engagement to include broader expertise on all victims of the war, especially the crimes of the Bulgarians in the areas of Macedonia, southern Serbia, and Kosovo and Metohija. Reiss is a direct witness to the horrors and suffering he was exposed to, and what is being kept silent about in Europe. By sincerely deciding to communicate the truth, he moves in the circle of rare European intellectuals who loudly point to the destruction of people because of their ethnicity, revealing the marginalised side of the war in which Serbs were allowed to be killed. His texts are uncompromising, sharp, painful and loaded with facts, where in the name of “higher goals” the people of the victims are sacrificed on the altar of rights and freedoms of European values.

⁸ “The three elements of public relations in practice are as old as society: informing people; persuading people; and integrating people with people. Of course, the means and methods of realising goals have changed as society itself has changed,” says Bernays. (Bernays; 1952: 3).



The silence of Europe is ominous, which is why his texts have an incredible resonance in public opinion, especially in those countries that were against the war. Unlike the German, Austro-Hungarian or Bulgarian press that demonised the Serbs as “barbarians”, he says the following, writing about the act of their courageous resistance: “You are giving the world an example that has never been seen before and that will not be forgotten. Before the war, in our vanity of “Europeans”, we often underestimated you as “Balkans”. After this gigantic struggle, when the name of Serbia is mentioned, one must take off one’s hat” (Reiss 2014: 18).

Reiss is among the few in Serbia who understood that war must be waged simultaneously in two realities: real and symbolic, because he knew how: “the media easily build a perfectly shaped world of stereotypes, symbolically seductive, but also experientially identifying” (Jevtović, A. 2022: 1064). A prominent doctor, a forensic scientist from Lausanne, after submitting to the Serbian authorities a documented report on the crimes of the Austro-Hungarian army with evidence of the use of ammunition prohibited by international conventions, held a major press conference at which he informed the world media about the scale of the crimes against Serbs.⁹ In order to awaken the dormant intellectual public of Europe, he gave several lectures on the crimes against Serbs at the Sorbonne, and in London in 1916 he published a book illustrated with numerous examples - *Austro-Hungarian Atrocities*. Taking care not to damage the newly restored ties with the European centers of power, the Serbian authorities did not dare to publish this major work even after the end of the war, so the same practice continued in AVNOJ federal state, when it was kept quiet so as not to damage relations with the “fraternal republics”.¹⁰ Reiss’s contribution to the media field is immeasurable: several books and over 800 articles in widely read and respected world newspapers changed the image of the Serbs, giving them communication visibility and awakening world public opinion. In the most difficult times of crisis, between 1914 and 1918, through the *Lausanne Gazette*, the public read about the real situation on the battlefields where Serbs were actors, and many did not like the truth. In the German-speaking world, the oldest daily newspaper, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, was particularly critical of the professor’s engagement, claiming that “the Serbs paid him for it” and that he was secretly working for the interests of France, as its agent. Reiss gave them as good as he got, because he used the right of reply to forward piles of photographs and evidence of crimes, enriched with statistics that no lie or manipulation could deny.¹¹ The tactics of the European media, which silenced, minimised and reduced Serbian suffering to rare, isolated examples, were demystified by a prominent criminologist whose authority was beyond doubt. Reiss restored a picture that was not in accordance with the simplified matrix of Serbian guilt, destroying the propaganda scenario that had previously branded the culprits. Black and white images within the media demonisation of Serbs, supported by the dominant political, military and security architecture, fell before the truth that came from the addresses of various world media inspired by the evidence of Archibald Reiss.

9 Reiss collected evidence in the field that soldiers of the 16th Varaždin Regiment “Freiher von Giesl”, the 26th Karlovac; 27th Sisak and 28th Osijek Home Guard Regiments; 28th Viktor Emanuel Regiment, 78th Osijek Regiment “Gerba”, 78th Karlovac Regiment “Romanian Crown Prince Ferdinand” and the 100th Infantry Regiment “Freiher von Stejberg” used prohibited ammunition to shoot live targets.

10 From the Report of Professor Reiss, which was submitted in April 1915 to the Prime Minister of Serbia, Mr. Nikola Pašić, it is clear that the responsibility for the war lies with the top of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, with the wholehearted diplomatic assistance of the Vatican and the support of the Austrian, German and Bulgarian press. “Indoctrinated Austrian soldiers, often of Slavic origin, spread lies about Serbs and Serbian soldiers, presenting them as barbarians, savages, robbers and murderers.”

11 “In the Pocer, Mačva and Jadar districts and in seven municipalities outside them, 1,300 civilians were killed. Among the killed were 994 men and 306 women... As for the manner in which they were killed, the statistics are as follows... killed with a rifle 34/564; bayoneted 181/64; hanged 7/6; slit open 2/4; burned alive 35/96; cut off nose 28/6....” (Reiss’s Letter, 17th March, 1915.).



The same assessment applies to the image in the Serbian public, especially in its culturally influential section. The recognition first comes from *Politika*, which confirms the great diplomatic progress on the international scene, accepting it as part of Reiss's reporting: "The world public was horrified by the monstrous deeds of our enemies, who felt Reiss's blow", and even after that he continued to "fight for the Serbian cause with words and pen", 1921 (1921: 1). Considering the Serbian public, we highlight Reiss's writings in the oldest and most influential daily newspaper *Politika*, in which he, irritated by the inadequate social status of war participants, insisted on building a *culture of remembrance*. Forgotten heroes, neglected cemeteries of soldiers and fallen civilians, indifference towards heroic victims and deeds... aroused in him a sense of shame and disgrace, so the honorary reserve captain first class now continued the fight on the pages of the oldest and most influential daily newspaper, calling for the awakening of national pride. This means that Reiss excellently recognised, identified and explained the concepts and perspectives of the development of Serbian society. By comparing it with the contents of the *Police Gazette*, a newspaper of the time that interpreted and explained deviant phenomena from a police perspective, we understand how vulnerable post-war society was: "They reveal connections within society, cracks in the police and judicial systems, and the vulnerability of the community, reinforcing the tendency to emotionally connect the audience with the protagonists of criminal activities" (Jevtović et al. 2023: 118).

Reiss as a skilled communicator whose sources of information came from the very top of the state, did not hesitate to criticise ministers and intellectuals of the time for being fashionable and short-lived. Already in the interwar period, Reiss saw changes, Europeanization and the influence of different fashion, customs and behaviour among the people, which were not characteristic of Serbs, Topalović and Berić note, concluding that Reiss wanted to warn the Serbian people with a kind of rebuke that traditional values and customs were being lost in the face of "unbridled snobbery and increasing immorality" (Topalović, M.; Berić, J.: 2023: 58). Recognising the interests of political elites, he understood that their actions were changing traditional ethical patterns, not only in the sphere of politics and culture, but also in public policies in general. In a comprehensive interview published on September 11, 1928, he honestly admitted that in defending the truth about Serbia, he "went to war with half of the world", spent almost all his property, and neglected even his family, who did not approve of his propaganda engagement. How accurately he predicted our character and behaviour in crises is shown by this sentence: "If black clouds once again loom over this country, it should not be a surprise, because it will be nothing more than what its people themselves have been preparing for" (*Politika*, 11.09.19286).

CONCLUSION

Factually precise, journalistically grounded, Archibald Reiss used his stay in Serbia, before, during and after the Great War, to change the values of the propaganda-imposed image of the West about Serbia as a "barbarian state" into an acceptable and truthful narrative about a "loyal European ally" and a people who became victims of ethnic cleansing. This work pointed to a lesser-known area of his engagement, because in addition to criminalistics and forensics, he made a great contribution to the sphere of communication studies, especially the media image of Serbs in the European and world public. However, it can be noted that regardless of Reiss's great efforts, the West had a well-established attitude towards Serbs, which in terms of media narrative began to re-emerge in the late 1980s, escalated to a large extent in the 1990s, and has been constantly present since then (Perić, 2019; Mitrović, Perić, 2022).



As a war reporter, he had justice and truth at the center of his reporting, and his sometimes romantic approach to the fight against the violence of the then centers of military power and state imperialism shows that consistency and knowledge ultimately open the locked gates of propaganda power in a marketing campaign. Writing for a newspaper from Lausanne, as well as numerous press outlets around the world, the Swiss scholar overturned the dominant narrative about Serbs responsible for world conflicts, proving that they are victims with a burden of suffering that very few nations on the planet could bear.

As an investigator and witness to war crimes, he does not take sides, pointing out to Serbs the virtues and flaws with which they can predict their own actions in crisis situations. For the history of social, class and socio-political relations in the young state, this is a valuable contribution to the constitution of the broader characterology of the Serbian people, especially the new elites and progressive currents of national thought.

In the contemporary public sphere, “the memory of his character and work is used to point out certain phenomena in Serbian society or to confirm an argument regarding some of our characteristics”, researchers write (Vujanović, J. 2023: 120). The culture of memory, for which he advocated so much, protects him from collective oblivion nowadays. The man whose heart remained in Kajmakčalan, a great humanist and sincere friend of Serbia, will be remembered as a reporter who changed the course of the propaganda war, which is why the Supreme Command of the Serbian Army said that he was worth “as much as a division”. The extent to which the Serbian people respected him is also proven by the obituary on the front page of *Politika* after his death: “A great friend of our people has departed his life; and more than a friend, one of our own, and to a great extent one of the valuable collaborators in our Liberation” (*Politika* 1929, 1).

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