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The Church of Assumption of Blessed Virgin Mary in Belgrade: a Memorial to the Fallen French Soldiers on the Thessalonian Front

ABSTRACT: In 1938 there was an initiative to erect a sacral edifice in Belgrade as a memorial to the fallen French soldiers on the Eastern Front. Architect Branislav Marinković, who has spent his specialisation in Paris from 1930 to 1932, was chosen to develop a project for this memorial church. Building a memorial church dedicated to the so-called “other”, in this case foreign fallen soldiers, even though they were allies, is a specific example which speaks about the strong relationship between French and Serbian people, even though the political situation in the late 1930s indicated the weakening of the French-Yugoslavian relations. The paper also considers the importance of this project for the development of sacral architecture in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and possible references Branislav Marinković implemented from his Paris experience.

KEY WORDS: history, architecture, The Catholic Church, Branislav Marinković, memory.

It is estimated that France had around 1,327,000 military deaths in the First World War. Therefore, it was not unusual that post-war France was overwhelmed with war and commemorative monuments (GILLIS 1996: 187). Unlike other countries, where the State erected “war monuments”, in France they were called “monuments aux morts.”¹ The practice of mourning in France, both public and private, provided essential consolation for those in grief as a result of the Great War, as it was the case throughout all of Europe. Along with conventional memorials, a certain number of sacral objects were built for the purpose of commemorating First World War victims, like Notre Dame de la Consolation in Raincy or Chapelle du Souvenir in Flers, built in 1926 by Louis Pignard (FRÉMAUX 2007: 242). Chapelle Saint Yves de la Cité du Souvenir in Paris, also built in 1926 by F. Besnard and D. Boulenger, has a characteristic scene on stained glass windows, where Jesus Christ is carrying a dead soldier (FRÉMAUX 2007: 271). The religious discourse of war sacrifice (EDWARDS 2000: 6) was also visible on the Douaumont ossuary, designed in 1923 by a French architect Léon Azéma for commemorating the Battle of Verdun. The presence of Christian symbolism is apparent through a symbolic cross on

¹ “monuments for the dead”, translation mine.

the ossuary's tower. National monuments dedicated to the victims of the First World War became sites of the French national memory, and collective memory was reflected in the ceremonies and cultural production that commemorated the battle (EDWARDS 2000: 9).

The First World War also brought Serbia and France together as allies, which enabled them to build a firm political relationship. Therefore, it is not unusual that the Monument of gratitude to France was built by Serbian intellectuals in Belgrade, on Kalemegdan, in 1929 (PAVLOVIĆ, NOVAKOVIĆ 2005). France responded to that specific gesture by erecting a Monument of King Alexander Ist of Yugoslavia in Paris (SRETENOVIĆ 2008: 465). By 1935 another important edifice was built in Belgrade – the Embassy of France (JOVANOVIĆ 2001). Its exclusive location and specific Art Deco style implied that French Republic desired to represent itself in the most adequate way. Among mentioned examples, the idea of building a sacral edifice in Belgrade as a commemoration to the lost French soldiers on the Eastern Front also implies that there was a strong French presence in Belgrade during the interwar period. Strangely enough, this was not the first initiative to elevate a First World War memorial church in the Yugoslavian capital. In 1919 Serbian writer Ana Hristić initiated the erection of the Catholic church of Saint Ćirilo and Metodije in Belgrade as a memorial to the fallen Serbian and ally soldiers in the First World War. She even went to London to negotiate with their memorial organizations on that matter.² The church of Saint Ćirilo and Metodije was indeed built in 1929, but it remains unknown whether its elevation had any connection with the previous concept.

The idea of building a memorial church dedicated to the fallen French soldiers on the Eastern Front was initiated on the 20th anniversary of the Eastern Front breakthrough in 1938 by the Committee of Honor and Patronage, with Marshal Franchet d'Esperey as the president. That year the Committee also established that May 15th should be celebrated as a National day in France. In a pamphlet from 1938 Marshal d'Esperey turned to all the people who appreciated French aid to Serbia during the First World War and friendship between French Republic and Kingdom of Yugoslavia to help and contribute the erection of this monument.³ The concept of a memorial church was to imply the significance of French military intervention on the Eastern Front for the Serbian military and also for the future creation of Kingdom of Serbs Croats and Slovenes.

Father Privat Bellard, who was the vicar of the Assumptionist Church in Belgrade since 1927,⁴ bought a lot between Hadži Milentijeva and King Tomislav Street (now International Brigades Street) on Kotež-Neimar from engineer Boža Jovanović in 1931, which implies a larger church was planned to be built since then. There was an older Catholic church on that location which had been built in 1925 by the engineers Tuner and Wagner.⁵ Their authority still remains unconfirmed, since they also signed the project for the church residential building that was intended to be built in Kičevska Street, which was also signed by architect Milan Zloković on a later project from 1927. Due to the saved project, it can be concluded that the former church was planned to have a simple one-nave plan with a neo-baroque façade, but in

² AJ, Ministry of Religion Fund, f –69–44–72, A letter from Ana Hristić to The Ministry of Religion, 1919.

³ IAB, f IV–43–1925, Pamphlet for erecting the Memorial french church in Belgrade, 1938.

⁴ For this information I thank Father Leopold.

⁵ IAB, f VII–34–1926, Project for the church.

1935 certain modifications were performed on the old church and it lost its original appearance. In 1930 a bell tower with a clock designed by architect Dujam Granić was elevated.⁶ The bells for the tower were made in the Foundry Paccard in Annecy in France. The largest bell for the tower was a gift from King Aleksandar I Karađorđević to the Catholic community in Belgrade.⁷ Father Privat Belard was also the secretary of the Committee for the elevation of the memorial church of the Eastern Front.⁸

The church of Assumption of Blessed Virgin Mary was designed in 1938/1939 by a Serbian architect Branislav Marinković (BOGUNOVIĆ 2005: 948; BOROVIJAK 2013: 56). Marinković was born in 1903 in Batočina and he studied architecture in Belgrade. After graduation in 1927 (MANEVIĆ 2008: 254), he continued his education in Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Paris and returned to Belgrade in 1932 (BOGUNOVIĆ 2005: 944). After the First World War, Paris became the main center for specialization of Yugoslavian architects. Besides Branislav Marinković, many Serbian architects were educated in Paris, among which were Branislav Kojić, Milutin Borisavljević and Aleksandar Đorđević (PAVLOVIĆ, NOVAKOVIĆ 2005: 166). During the 1930s Marinković worked as an assistant at the University of Belgrade, School of Architecture and also had his own bureau. Although he was highly respected as an architect, it is not precisely known why the Committee chose Marinković for this project, but it can be presumed his education in France was one of the crucial reasons. The specific style of the Church of Assumption of Blessed Virgin Mary in Belgrade can be traced to the influences 20th century French sacral architecture had on Marinković's approach.

The French Republic was financing the erection of all sacral objects (FRÉMAUX 2007: 23), but in 1905 it was decided that the State should be separated from the Church, and in 1907 the declaration on religious tolerance opened a new chapter in the history of French sacral architecture (FRÉMAUX 2007: 7). With no financial help from the State, religious objects had to be built exclusively from donations (FRÉMAUX 2007: 23). The new built churches, mosques and synagogues began to follow the evolution of urban space, but at the same time they managed to stay in the iconographic limits of their religion (FRÉMAUX 2007: 7). However, the Separation brought the freedom of style for sacral architecture (FRÉMAUX 2007: 67). Roman and Gothic architecture were considered to be the official styles of the French Catholic Church, but after 1905 a new form of "brutalizing" the tradition appeared on the architectural scene (FRÉMAUX 2007: 81, 85).

With the outbreak of the First World War, the Catholic church saw an opportunity to regain its influence after a significant decrease in attendance following the Separation by embracing the national cause with the aim of becoming reintegrated into the nation (EDWARDS 2000: 6). The end of the First World War also marked a new era in France called "La renaissance chrétienne",⁹ which took place until the Second Vatican Council in 1965. During this period a large number of young faithful joined the Church and religion inspired many artists. Cardinal Verdier advocated that churches should be built in harmony with the faithful, which excluded monumental edifices. The interwar period brought the inflorescence of modern

⁶ IAB, f VII-34-1926, Project for the bell tower.

⁷ For this information I thank Father Leopold.

⁸ IAB, f VII-34-1926

⁹ "Christian Renaissance", translation mine.

sacral art, especially architecture. Many architects gained an opportunity to experiment in the realm of sacral architecture and form a visual identity of a modern church (FRÉMAUX 2007: 68). The usage of concrete in church building was first applied on Notre Dame de la Consolation in Raincy designed in 1922 by Auguste and Gustave Perret, which in its time was thought to be “a pure act of avant-garde” (FRÉMAUX 2007: 25, 26). It was considered by the critics to be the “Sainte-Chapelle du béton armé.”¹⁰ (COHEN 2012: 128, 129). This religious edifice also became an inspiration for a phrase “Eglise est une machine à faire-croire.”¹¹ (FRÉMAUX 2007: 41). In the spirit of the Perret brothers’ architecture, art historian Paul Léon considered that all architecture, including sacral one, should be of its time and that new technologies should be used, so that the church of the 20th century can be simple, rational and functional (FRÉMAUX 2007: 85, 86).

Considering the fact that Branislav Marinković resided in Paris during “La renaissance chrétienne”, it can be said, with little doubt, that this artistic climate influenced the young architect. The experience Marinković gained in Paris and influence of French sacral architecture is visible on his project for the Church of Assumption of Blessed Virgin Mary. Marinković’s style is reflected in his attitude towards designing residential housing. In his article “Savremeni stan”¹² published in journal “Umetnički pregled”¹³ in 1940, Marinković refers to the interior conception as the “body” and the façade as the “suit” of the building. As we can see on the project for the only sacral object Marinković has ever designed, the concept of the “body and suit” was equally as applied on his numerous residential buildings. The spatial design of the church is highly functional and acoustic, which is one of the most important aspects of a sacral edifice.

One of the first images of the memorial church was printed on badges that were produced for the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Eastern Front breakthrough. The badge contained a minimalist drawing which shows that Marinković’s project from 1938 was more in the spirit of the French Art Deco, a dominant style in Paris during the second half of the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s (COHEN 2012: 129, 132). It is important to underline that at that point two of the most significant objects that represented French Republic in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the Monument of gratitude to France and the Embassy of France in Belgrade, were designed in Art Deco style. In the pamphlet from 1938 a preliminary sketch of the church is shown (fig. 1), which was very similar to the later project. Below the sketch there is a comment considering the tower of the edifice, saying it has “allure militaire”.¹⁴ It can be presumed that the military style in architecture was supposed to associate with a certain strictness and purity. The sketch shows the church with its high tower, almost monolithic, only to be decorated with a relief which on this version is not easy to determine.¹⁵ The tower was to be 34.5 meters high, with an inscription on the both sides in French and Serbian: “A la mémoire et pour le repos de l’âme des 25 000 soldats français tombés au Front d’Orient MCMXV – MCMXVIII”.¹⁶ The inscriptions were flanked with reliefs which imitated burning torches. Below the inscription

¹⁰ “Sainte Chapelle made of reinforced concrete.”, translation mine.

¹¹ “Church is a machine for creating faith.”, translation mine.

¹² “The Contemporary Apartment”, translation mine.

¹³ “Artistic Review”, translation mine.

¹⁴ Military look, translation mine.

¹⁵ IAB, f IV–43–1925, Pamphlet for erecting the Memorial french church in Belgrade, 1938.

¹⁶ “In memory of and for the rest of souls of 25 000 French soldiers fallen on the Eastern Front MCMXV – MCMXVIII”, translation mine.

was supposed to be a relief of the church's patron Virgin Mary with Christ and angels (fig. 2). The church tower was deliberately designed to symbolize an "arc de triomphe"¹⁷, which was a common part of the war victory iconography.

Unfortunately, none of these elements were implemented on the façade.¹⁸ The top of the tower was supposed to have one higher and narrower part with a slim trifora on each side and a Latin decorated cross on the top. The entrance to the crypt is placed on the ground level, directly from the gate, as it was planned, but the project shows Marinković decorated the gate in the same style as the portal of the crypt, with a repetitive motive of a Greek cross. The portal was supposed to be flanked with reliefs of angels standing in line and praying. The grave of the unknown soldier was planned to be placed in the crypt, as well as the mask of King Aleksandar I Karadjordjević, medallions of the most important First World War generals and lists of military units that were located on the Eastern Front. The two lateral staircases lead to

the arcaded porch and the main entrance to the church. The interior has three naves, and it was designed without a transept (fig. 3). The central nave is 10 meters broad and 13 meters high, while the lateral naves are 4 meters broad and 7.5 meters high. The windows of the lateral naves were arched and above them are oculus windows that illuminate the main nave.

During the elevation of the church in 1939 the Society for beautification of Kotež-Neimar suggested to the Committee and to Branislav Marinković to subvert the old and in its place build the new sacral object in the center of the lot, since Neimar was a residential area with no regular plans for public buildings. Neighbour Stanislav Josifović even sued them for the same reason.¹⁹ The Ministry of Construction therefore demanded that the church should be positioned in the middle of the lot, which was, according to Marinković, impossible, considering that that meant the old church had to be taken down and Catholic citizens would be left without a church until the new one was built.²⁰ Marinković's conclusions on the matter put an end to the problem of the church position. The construction of the edifice was followed by an unfortunate



Fig. 1. Sketch of the Church of Assumption of Blessed Virgin Mary, Anniversary of the Eastern Front breakthrough pamphlet, 1938.

¹⁷ Triumphant arch, translation mine.

¹⁸ IAB, f IV-43-1925.

¹⁹ IAB, f IV-43-1925.

²⁰ IAB, f IV-43-1925, Letter from Branislav Marinković to Ministry of Construction, 20. 3. 1939.

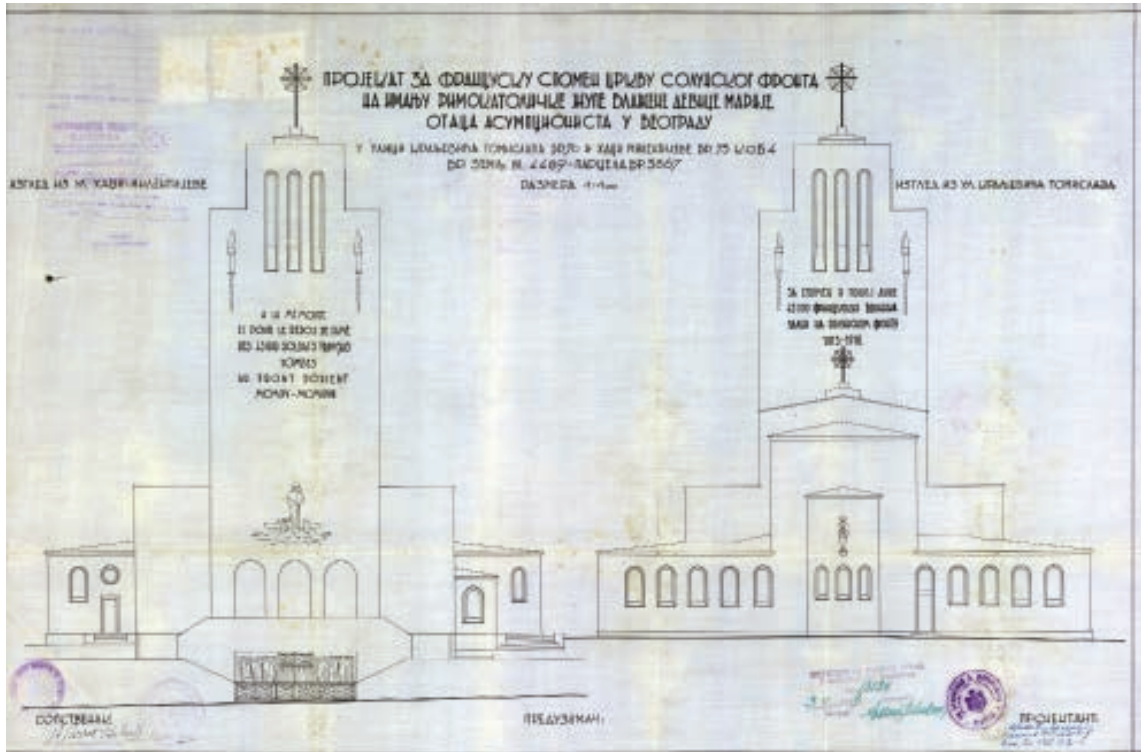


Fig. 2. Branislav Marinković, Project for the Church of Assumption of Blessed Virgin Mary, façade design, 1939.

event – the concrete ceiling crashed down in September 1940, killing three and injuring five workers on the site. The contractor engineer Srba Marković even got arrested as responsible for this accident.²¹

The final appearance of the Church of Assumption of Blessed Virgin Mary turned out to be quite different than the project. The Second World War caught the church unfinished, with only the walls, a part of the tower and the roof built. After the Assumptionists left in 1982, the vicar Anton Hočevar was placed in charge of the project and the church was finally finished in 1988. The project was supervised by Slovenian architect Franc Kvaternik.²² Since the church lost its initial purpose to celebrate bravery of French soldiers in the First World War, the façade turned out to be less decorated and there are no visible signs of commemoration that were previously present on the project. Instead of the intended signs on both sides of the tower, the eastern façade is now decorated by three hyper monumental painted arches and a cross in the middle one. This simplicity reduced on the level of a sign of a religious object gives a powerful

²¹ Аноним, „Под срушеном великом бетонском плочом која је имала да буде таваница погинула су три човека.“ *Политика* (11. 9. 1940): 11.

²² For this information I thank Father Leopold.

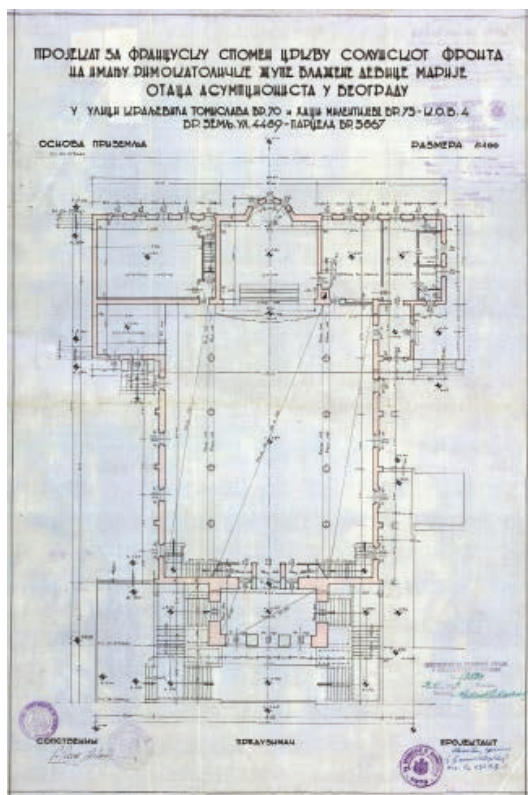


Fig. 3. Branislav Marinković, Project for the Church of Assumption of Blessed Virgin Mary, ground plan, 1939.



Fig. 4. Branislav Marinković, Church of Assumption of Blessed Virgin Mary, present appearance

impression on the beholder. Branislav Marinković envisioned that the façade should be made of artificial stone,²³ but now it is just plastered in two colors (fig. 4).

The entire concept of a French memorial church in Belgrade was designed to reestablish cultural dominance in the Yugoslavian capital, which was declining over the period of 1930s. The anniversary was an ideal opportunity to regain powerful influence that France had in Belgrade during the 1920s. Therefore the representation of French war memorial was of extreme political importance. The symbolic aspect of the church was meant to make Belgrade and Yugoslavian citizens remember the French role in the First World War by creating a collective memory through a memorial site. The Myth of the Great War and French heroism was a part of designing the memory of war (EDWARDS 2000: 8). This project also represents an attempt to reestablish French-Yugoslavian cultural politics of the 1920s, but the entire situation changed due to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. Unfortunate events influenced the modification of Branislav Marinković's project for the church of Assumption of Blessed

²³ IAB, f IV-43-1925, Technical description, january 1939.

Virgin Mary, and it is with no doubt a loss that Marinković's original project was not implemented. The strong remembrance on the First World War victims was greatly weakened after the Second World War and the changing of Yugoslavian politics. Although the church lost its initial purpose as an important memorial, the artistic value of this sacral object can be summed in Marinković's statement: "Nothing can be beautiful unless it is logically used, on the right place, economical, in one word, justified. (Ništa ne može biti lepo ako nije logično upotrebljeno, na pravom mestu, ekonomično, jednom rečju, opravdano.)" (MANEVIĆ 2008: 254).

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Владана Путник

ЦРКВА УЗНЕСЕЊА БЛАЖЕНЕ ДЈЕВИЦЕ МАРИЈЕ У БЕОГРАДУ: СПОМЕНИК ПАЛИМ ФРАНЦУСКИМ ВОЈНИЦИМА НА СОЛУНСКОМ ФРОНТУ

Резиме

Пријатељство између Француске и Србије учвршћено је захваљујући заједничкој борби у Првом светском рату. Иницијатива да се подигне меморијална црква посвећена француским војницима погинулим на Солунском фронту покренута је 1938. године од стране Комитета на челу са адмиралом Франшеом д'Епереом. Спомен-црква француским војним жртвама је делом била замишљена да овековечи значај француске помоћи српској војсци у Првом светском рату. Том приликом је изабран архитекта Бранислав Маринковић за израду нацрта такозване „Француске цркве“ на Котеж-Неимару. Маринковић је по завршетку студија архитектуре у Београду провео две године

специјализације у Паризу, тадашњем центру образовања за југословенску интелектуалну елиту. На основу анализе француске сакралне и меморијалне архитектуре међуратног периода може се закључити да је Браниславу Маринковићу управо његово искуство у Француској донело посао на овом пројекту, јединственом у његовом стваралаштву, које карактеришу махом профани и стамбени објекти. Изградња спомен-цркве такође говори о снажном односу између Француске и Србије и током четврте деценије двадесетог века, када је француски културни и политички утицај у Краљевини Југославији ослабио. Црква Узнесења Блажене Дјевице Марије је пројектована тако да обилује поред хришћанске и ратном симболиком и иконографијом, као и формом која указује на тријумф и победу. Нажалост, већина елемената предвиђених пројектом никада није изведена услед прекида радова на изградњи цркве са Другим светским ратом. Француска спомен-црква завршена је пола века касније, лишена оригиналне иконографије, али се и поред тога може сврстати у објекте који су обележили значајан искорак у развоју сакралне архитектуре у Краљевини Југославији.