

SERBIAN PRIME MINISTER ALEKSANDAR VUCIC AND BRITISH FOREIGN SECRETARY BORIS JOHNSON PAY THEIR RESPECTS AT THE COMMONWEALTH MILITARY CEMETERY IN BELGRADE ON 11 NOVEMBER, 2016, ARMISTICE DAY



TIME TO REFLECT

Ambassador of Serbia Dr Ognjen Pribićević writes on the 180th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Serbia and the UK

T HIS YEAR MARKS the 180th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Serbia and the United Kingdom. This short review will focus on events that were particularly important in connecting our peoples and contributing to a better understanding between them. By their timeless importance and values they reflect, these events left a deep imprint lasting to the present-day.

It all started back in 1837, when Serbian Prince Milos Obrenovic received letters of credence from Colonel Hodges, a British consul in Kragujevac, the then capital of the Principedom of Serbia. This event marked the official start of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Colonel Hodges's main task was to create the conditions for British goods to reach the market of the Principedom. He achieved this, and cultural and scientific ties soon followed, strengthened through contacts among intellectuals, artists and men of letters. British diplomat David Urquhart even

wrote the first history of modern Serbia in English, called *A Fragment of History of Servia*.

Furthermore, these strong ties were reinforced by a close alliance in both World Wars. One of the best examples of this outstanding friendship can be found amongst the British and Scottish women who volunteered in Serbia as doctors, nurses and drivers during World War I. Lady Paget, Captain Flora Sanders, Miss Emily Simmonds, Mrs Ada Barlow, Miss Violet O'Brien, Miss Ada Mann, Miss Rebeca Hartney, Mrs Barber and Dr Elsie Inglis were heroines who selflessly and devotedly helped our wounded soldiers in the Great War. For outstanding acts of bravery, Dr Inglis was the first woman to be awarded the highest Serbian medal – Order of the White Eagle.

For the Serbian army's contribution to military victory in World War I, a considerable number of its highest representatives were awarded British decorations, including Duke Zivojin Misic, Duke Radomir Putnik and Duke Stepa



Stepanovic. Prince Regent Alexander was also decorated for his military valor. For her extraordinary bravery in the Great War, Serbian heroine Milunka Savić was awarded several military decorations, including some British, and became the most decorated female soldier in world military history.

The closeness and friendship between the two countries is also acknowledged by the fact that during World War I, British primary schools taught children about the heroism of Serbian people. We thankfully recall that hundreds of Serbian children – sick and exhausted from the horrors of war – were warmly accepted into schools in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK.

There is a well-known story about the ‘Serbian Herioters’ from that time. A group of 27 boys from Serbia was admitted into one of Scotland’s most prestigious institutions, George Heriot’s School, where they spent four years. Although they did not speak English, the boys achieved excellent academic results. They had never heard of rugby when they arrived at Edinburgh’s Waverley Station, but the youngsters immediately displayed a natural talent for the sport, and three of them were soon playing for the school’s highly regarded First XV alongside Scotland’s future international players. In 1918, the boys formed the first Serbian national team, winning a match played in Edinburgh in front of a crowd of more than 8,000. They eventually took the sport back to Serbia at the end of World War I, and set up the country’s first rugby club.

And again, in World War II, the Brits and Serbs fought on the same side against fascism committed to freedom.



Today, the relationship between Serbia and the UK remains diverse and significant. Britain remains a firm supporter of Serbia’s future membership of the EU. Furthermore, Prime Minister Theresa May recently announced that London will host the Western Balkans Summit in 2018, clearly demonstrating Britain’s commitment and presence in the region.

Aside from regular political dialogue, last year there were two extraordinary visits between the countries. In 2016, their Royal Highnesses the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall visited Serbia. At the end of the same year His Holiness Irinej, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, visited the UK at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby. These dialogues are indicators of the profoundness, diversity and importance of our political, social and cultural relationships that have developed over almost two centuries. Cultural events in both countries continue to connect our two peoples, while the Serbian diaspora consistently provides a specific and meaningful contribution to ties between our two countries.

As an active and cooperative member of the international community, Serbia’s aim is to have a dynamic and constructive role in the main international forums, and reaffirm its full commitment to regional cooperation. Keeping in mind the high level of political insecurity in the contemporary world and the big challenges that we all face, I wish to underline the importance of cooperation between the UK and Serbia, taking into account mutual understanding of our interests and goals.



SERBIAN PRIME MINISTER ALEKSANDAR VUCIC AND HIS SPOUSE TAMARA WITH THE PRINCE OF WALES AND THE DUCHESS OF CORNWALL DURING A ROYAL VISIT TO BELGRADE, MARCH 2016



PATRIARCH IRINEJ AND ARCHBISHOP WELBY IN LONDON, OCTOBER 2016