

# British Medical Missions in Serbia 1914-1915

Milan Radovanovic

**A**LTHOUGH AFTER THE FIRST YEAR OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR Serbia came not only as undefeated, but as a winner, Serbia has been exhausted due to the huge human losses and due to destruction of its most prolific areas. Additionally, difficulties were multiplied by enlarged occurrence of infectious diseases. In particular, there were disastrous proportions of epidemic typhus, transmitted by Austrian troops in Bosnia. When moving Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war from Valjevo to Nis, the epidemic spread throughout the country. The epidemic was suppressed not earlier than in the spring of 1915, mostly due to the presence of medical missions from the Allied and neutral countries.

According to the data of the Serbian Red Cross, in 1914 Serbia was in more difficult medical conditions compared with 1912. The Red Cross of Serbia was addressing the International Red Cross, which, because of the war that engulfed the whole of Europe, was not able to use its authority. The International Red Cross suggested that the Serbian Red Cross directly contacted the Red Cross organizations of individual countries. In response, medical missions, composed of medical experts were formed in many friendly countries and sent to Serbia, together with delivering aid in medicaments and necessary medical equipment. According to References 1 and 3, during the 1914-1915, and especially in the first half of 1915, there were more missions in Serbia: Great Britain with 370 members, of which 64 doctors, Russia with 111 members, of which 12 doctors, U.S. with 44 professionals of which 12 doctors, France, which was the largest with as many as 97 doctors (13), Greece with 16 members, of which 7 doctors, etc..

In January 1915, the British Red Cross sends medical aid to Serbia, known under the name of the Anglo-Serbian Hospital Unit. The English-Serbian hospital consisted of 12 men and 42 women and was attached to military hospitals in Vrnjacka Banja (spa), but it controlled and assisted six other hospitals, as well. At the same time this hospital became the main hospital for surgical intervention in the region (4). A very important role at that time played the Serbian Relief Fund created in the UK for medical assistance to Serbia. Patronesa of the Serbian Relief Fund was Queen Mary and board members were prominent politicians and persons of the time, Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, Cardinal Born, et al. According to (1,2), many British medical missions were in Serbia: the mission of the Scottish Women's Hospitals, the mission of the "Young Farmers", the mission of the "Association of Wounded allies".

The first unit of Serbian Relief Fund - the hospital with 600 beds, arrived in Serbia in mid-November 1914 and was located in the vicinity of Skopje. At its head there was a lady Leila Paget (Louise Margaret Leila Paget), the wife of an English diplomat in Serbia - Fig.1. Lady Paget's husband, Ralph Paget was appointed chief of all British units for assistance in Serbia. Lady Leila Paget, passing through a series of temptations (fever, typhus, dysentery), where she herself was the victim, did not want to leave Serbia in the autumn of 1915, neither did the staff and the patients, but waited for Bulgarian army. Despite the relatively tolerant behaviour of the Bulgarians, with the arrival of the German army she had to be evacuated. The second hospital units of the Serbian Relief Fund, named after Lady Cornelia Wimborn, which gave funds for medical equipment, was located in Skopje and the third, headed by Mrs. Stobart (Anne Mabel St Clair Stobart) arrived in late April 1915 in Kragujevac.

One of the key people of the Scottish Women's Hospitals Committee was Dr Elsie Maud Inglis (Fig. 1), who finished medical school in 1886 and became a surgeon for women. At the outbreak of

the First World War, Elsie Inglis, one of the founders of the Scottish Women's Suffrage Federation, suggested that women's medical units should be allowed to serve on the Western Front. With the financial support of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), Dr Inglis formed the Scottish Women's Hospitals Committee. By rejecting the offer from the British army, she offered medical assistance to Serbia, which the Serbian side accepted with gratitude. In April 1915 Elsie Inglis took a group of women to Serbia on the Balkan Front. Over the next few months they established field hospitals, dressing stations, fever hospitals and clinics. In May 1915 she became foreman of the all hospitals of Scottish women's hospitals in Serbia. In the summer of 1915 in Serbia, there were four hospitals of the Scottish woman's hospital in Serbia: in Kragujevac, Valjevo, Lazarevac and Mladenovac. During Austrian-Hungarian offensive in the autumn of 1915, Inglis and some of her staff were captured but, thanks to the help of American diplomats, she was released.

Besides Lady Paget and Elsie Inglis, one of the most prominent women who have led the hospital in the Balkan during the First World War was Anne Sinclair Stobart (Fig. 1). At the invitation of Serbian Relief Fund she came to Serbia and led the third hospital with seven doctors and 43 medical staff members. The necessary equipment for the hospital was delivered via Salonica to Kragujevac and had 60 tents. Due to excessive rush of patients from the neighbouring places, she later established several clinics and hired seven more doctors and 40 women. It was the largest medical mission in Serbia. During the combined attack of the military forces of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria in October 1915, despite insisting to be evacuated, Anne Sinclair Stobart, with a part of her team crossed the road to Albania, and lasted more than 80 days without any loss of staff. At the end of December she reached Albanian coast from where she was transferred to Italy and from there to England.



**Figure 1.** Elsie Maud Inglis, Lady Louise Margaret Leila Paget and Anne Mabel Sinclair Stobart.

Going no more into other details, because there is extensive literature and memoirs in Serbian and English published material (Refs. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11), the postal correspondence of the mission members and some of its characteristics will be discussed further on.

It is likely that all these missions had their marks, which were placed on the letters and postcards, but a large number of postal material appears not to have been saved and thus is not known. This is primarily related to small medical missions, where the personnel were fewer, less mail, and thus less able to retain it, especially because it mainly travelled abroad. Furthermore, an attempt will be made to describe available postal material from a modest collection.

### **Scottish Women's Hospital**

The Association of Scottish women struck a handstamp reading "Scottish Women's Hospital for Foreign Service" with dimensions 76 x 3.5 mm on the mail. The mark can be seen in Fig. 2 on Serbian picture postcard sent on 14 August 1915 from Kragujevac to Renton in Scotland. The card has no postage stamp as it qualified as military mail. There is a Serbian censor mark "Checked by military censorship" in purple. The "Scottish Women's Hospital for Foreign Service" handstamp is in the top right corner of the postcard.

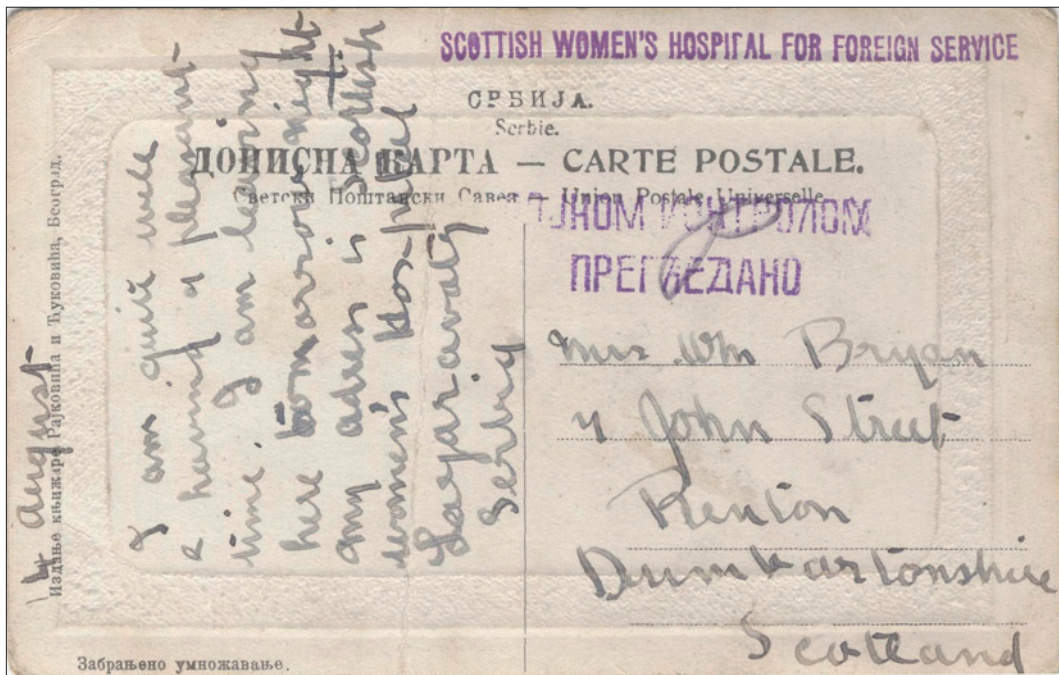


Figure 2. SCOTTISH WOMEN'S HOSPITAL FOR FOREIGN SERVICE handstamp.

### Serbian Relief Fund

The first hospital of the Serbian Relief Fund was Lady Paget's Hospital. On the mail of this mission one can find the circular seal (diameter 33 mm) SERBIAN RELIEF FUND / UNIT and in the middle of the seal a three-line text LADY / PAGET'S / HOSPITAL (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Original letter by Lady Paget sent from Skopje (6 July 1915) to Nis stamped with SERBIAN RELIEF FUND / UNIT, LADY / PAGET'S / HOSPITAL in purple. Handwritten in red at the top of the front of the letter is *On Active Service - Serbia*. Not censored.

The mail from Lady Paget's Hospital from this period also bears the administrative two-line mark in Serbian language with Cyrillic letters: VI. REZERVNA BOLNICA / Misija Ledi Pedžet (Sixth Reserve Hospital / Mission Lady Paget).

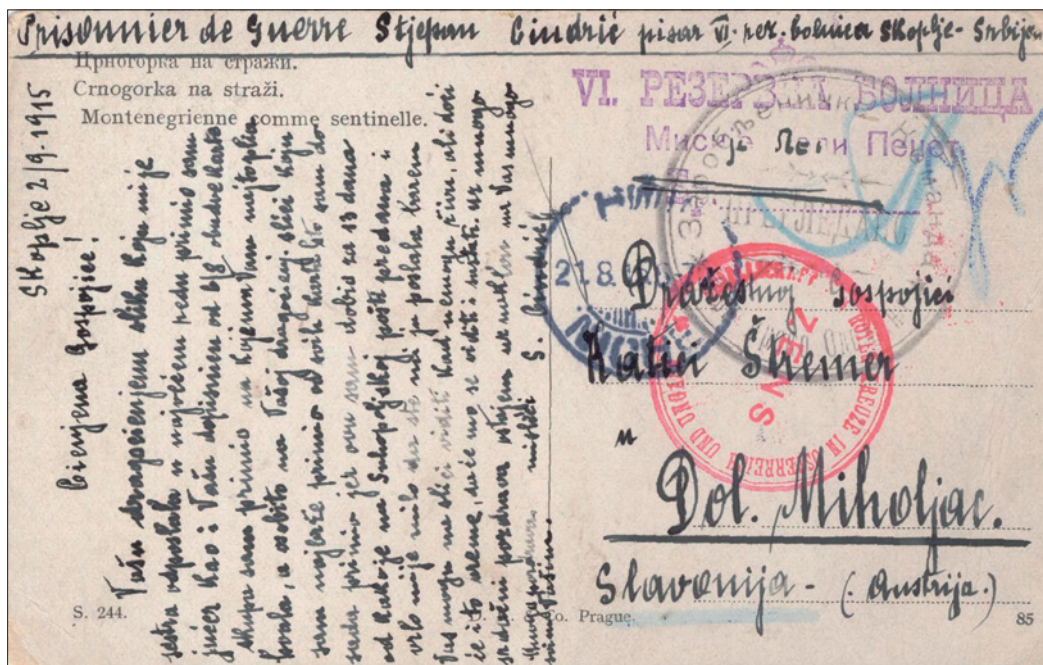


Figure 4. A Serbian picture postcard, used as POW card.

The card shown in Figure 4 was sent from Skopje 2 September 1915 (Gregorian calendar) to Dol. Miholjac, Slavonia, Austria, stamped with the administrative mark VI. RESERVE HOSPITAL / Mission Lady Paget (in Serbian) via Nis on 21 August 1915 (Julian calendar). Serbian POW censor mark for officers: POW COMMAND / DEPARTMENT FOR OFFICERS in grey-black and red



Figure 5. Greek postal stationery card correctly uprated for mail abroad from Greece with 5l cancelled in Thessaloniki (departure) and arrival in Skopje sent to Lady Wimborne Hospital, Skopje. Censored on arrival and handstamped CHECKED / BY MILITARY CENSORSHIP / SKOPLJE in black.

cancel mark of the Austro-Hungarian Red Cross (Gesellschaften vom Roten Kreuz in Oesterreich und Ungarn in / ZENS, d-27 mm). Two censor initials were added in blue.

During the three failed attacks of Austria-Hungary to Serbia in 1914, 50.000 officers and soldiers were captured. One part of the medically-educated prisoners of war, especially of the Slavic origin, was used in hospitals (Ref. 12). In this way, the marking shown on the card, written by a Croat prisoner of war who was probably working in the hospital, can be explained.

The second hospital of Serbian Relief Fund was Hospital Lady Wimborn. The only postal item recorded associated with this hospital so far is the Greek stationery sent from Thessaloniki to Hospital Lady Wimborn in Skopje shown in Figure 5.

The third hospital of Serbian Relief Fund was the Stobart Hospital. This mission used the circular mark (diameter 40 mm) and, according to existing data, was situated in Kragujevac (the main hospital) and other dispensaries. In the inner circle, STOBART HOSPITAL KRAGUJEVATZ is written, and in the middle in four rows, bilingually, Serbian / Relief Fund / STOBARTOVA MISIJA / Kragujevac. Figure 6 illustrates a Serbian military correspondence card of the Serbian Warriors sent from Kragujevac to London, franked correctly with a 10 para King Peter adhesive and cancelled with military mark – Military post / Supreme Command (23 May 1915, Julian calendar). Two-line CHECKED / BY MILITARY CENSORSHIP mark in rare blue-green and initials of Serbian censor. On both the front and back are administrative marks of the Stobart Mission in Kragujevac in dark blue.



**Figure 6.** Serbian military card from Kragujevac to London dated 23 May 1915 (Julian calendar).

The dispensary had a similar mark with the difference that instead of the text STOBART HOSPITAL KRAGUJEVATZ there was the STOBART DISPENSARY text and the name of the place where dispensary was situated. Marks of the Stobart hospital in Kragujevac and Stobart dispensary in Vitanovac. Figure 7 shows a military postcard of the Serbian warriors sent from Vitanovac to London used as military post (free of charge) cancelled with postmark of the municipal post office (11 IX 1915). Seal of the Stobart mission from Vitanovac - STOBART DISPENSARY-VITANOVA TZ plus four rows Serbian / Relief Fund / STOBART Mission / Kragujevac. Serbian censor mark CHECKED / BY MILITARY CENSORSHIP in violet and the initials of the Serbian censor in blue. The card probably travelled via Greece to Marseille (transit censor mark MINISTERE LE GUERRA / CONTROLE POSTAL MARSEILLE in black). Additionally card bears Croix Rouge in manuscript in the upper left corner.



Figure 7. Postcard sent from Vitanovac to London 11 September 1915.

In some cases mail sent from Stobart mission, Kragujevac, was without Seal of the Stobart mission. An example is given in Figure 8, a military postcard of the Serbian warriors sent from Kragujevac to Dartmouth used as military post and without postal mark of Kragujevac and without mark of the Stobart mission. On the back is written: *I am now in Kragujevac on the road to Uzice...* . Serbian military censor mark used in Kragujevac CHECKED / BY MILITARY CENSORSHIP in violet and initials of Serbian censor in red. Arrival postmark in Dartmouth on 31 May 1915.

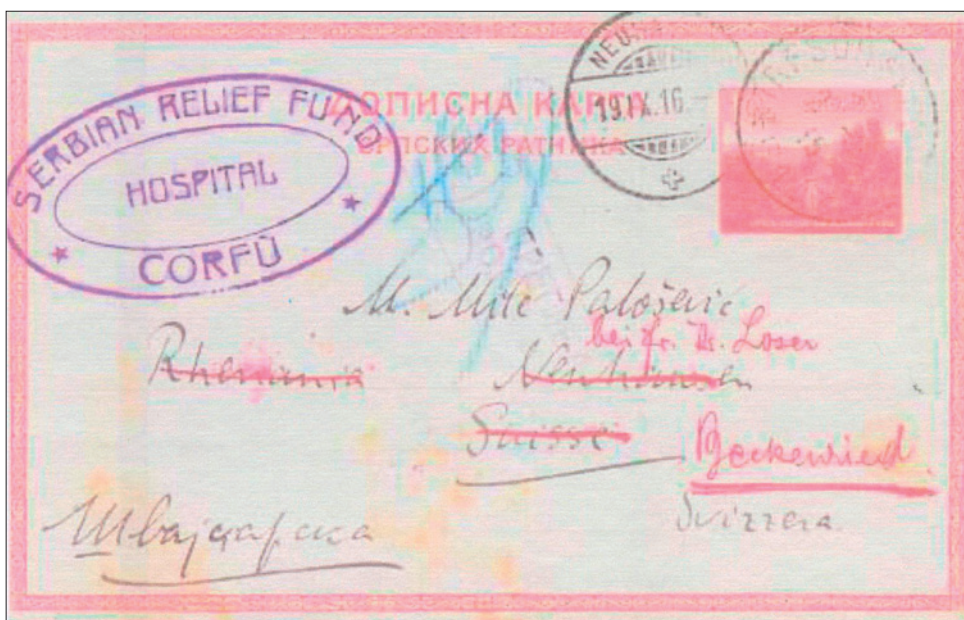


Figure 8. Postcard sent from Kragujevac to Dartmouth, arrived 31 May 1915.

British medical missions continued with their humanitarian work even after crossing Albania and Montenegro (Fig. 9): in Corfu and Salonica. The two postal items illustrated as Figures 10 and 11 confirm these conclusions.



**Figure 9.** Original illustration published in *Sphere* on 8 January 1916 captioned: First Unit of the Scottish Women's Hospitals during retreat from Serbia.



**Figure 10.** Military correspondence card of the Serbian warriors, issued in Corfu (Aspiotis), sent from Corfu via the French Tresor et Postes 512 to Neuchatel, Switzerland (arrival date stamped at Neuchatela 19 Sep 1916) and then re-addressed to Beckenwied with oval seal of the Serbian Relief Fund (SERBIAN RELIEF FUND CORFU / HOSPITAL and the Serbian Corfu censorship (1) CHECKED BY MILITARY CENSORSHIP, both in violet. Blue initials of Serbian censor. *Courtesy of George Alevizos.*



**Figure 11.** French military postcard sent from English-Scottish hospital, Salonica to the battlefield via Serbian Supreme Command (VP 999) (14 October 1916 in Julian calendar) and French Tresor et Postes / 502 (28 October 1916 in Gregorian calendar). Seal Tresor et Postes / 502 belongs to the Command of the Allied Armies (Commandement des Armees Alliees et Direction de l'Armee), Salonica. Card bears an oval handstamp Scottish Women Hospital / L'Administrateur with the text in the middle Hopital auxiliaire benevol ... / L'Armee d'Orient. The card was censored with Serbian Salonica censor mark (2) CHECKED / BY MILITARY CENSORSHIP in violet.

## References

1. Stosic A., "They Treat us and Love", *Great Days of Serbia (1914-1918)*, (in Serbian), Krusevac-Beograd, 1994.
2. Stosic A., "Blonde Noble Woman", *Great Days of Serbia (1914-1918)*, (in Serbian), Krusevac-Beograd, 1994.
3. Petrovic I., *Believers the Fatherland*, (in Serbian), Cvetnik, Novi Sad, 1998.
4. Michaelsen K., *Medical Services - International Organizations*, University of North Carolina, USA.
5. Abraham J.J., "Surgeon's Journey", *With the Serbian Mission in 1914-1915*, Heineman, London.
6. Powell A., *Women in the War Zone: Hospital Service in the First World War*, The History Press.
7. Kripner M., *The Quality of Mercy: Women at War, Serbia, 1915-18*.
8. Mead W., "With a British Hospital in Serbia - the experiences of Lady Paget's Unit at Skopje", *World's Work*, No. 26, 1915.
9. Popovic S. Filipovic, Zizic Borjanović S., Filipovic S., *Scottish Women's Hospitals in Serbia and the Serbs on the Fronts in World War 1914-1918* (in Serbian).
10. Mikic Zelimir, *Scottish Women's Hospitals - 90th Anniversary of their Work in Serbia* (in Serbian).
11. Lubardić S., *History, Good Teacher, about the Relations of Serbs and British History, Mercy and Noble People*, (in Serbian), Orthodoxy.
12. Skoko S., Opacic P., *Duke Stepa Stepanovic...*, third edition, BIGZ, (in Serbian), Belgrade.
13. Pesic V., Pavlovic B., Jovanovic Simic J., Garnier G., *Founder and First Director of Children's Dispensaries in Serbia?* (in Serbian).