

Douglas Wilson Johnson A Forgotten Member of the Royal Serbian Academy of Sciences¹

Abstract: The paper presents a little-known foreign member of the Royal Serbian Academy of Sciences, the American geomorphologist Douglas Wilson Johnson (1876–1944), his role as an expert on border delimitation issues in support of the claims of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes at the Peace Conference in Paris in 1919, his collaboration with Yugoslav experts, notably Jovan Cvijić, and his election to the Royal Serbian Academy of Sciences shortly after the First World War.

Keywords: Douglas Wilson Johnson, Royal Serbian Academy of Sciences, 1919 Paris Peace Conference, border issues, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes

The reason that my search for the subject I shall speak about today has taken so long is the diversity of my scholarly interests and concerns. In the end, I have chosen to present to you a scientist who gave significant support to the newly-created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SCS) in its struggle for borders at the 1919 Peace Conference in Paris.

There has been yet another reason for making this particular choice. The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SASA) and its predecessor, the Royal Serbian Academy of Sciences (RSAS), have had persons from various walks of life among its membership – marshals, generals, ministers, diplomats and, of course, scientists of different disciplines and interests. Some of them have left a deep imprint and exerted a powerful influence on its activities. Some others, on the other hand, have been soon neglected and forgotten. Almost nothing is known of them today. One of them is the American scientist Douglas Wilson Johnson (1876–1944).² It is of him and of the reasons for his election as a member of the Serbian Academy that I wish to speak about on this occasion.

Little is known today of the merits that led to his election as an Academy member. After his election, he never came to Serbia, never stayed in Belgrade or set foot in the Academy building. It is my intention to give an account of what he did for Serbia and the Kingdom of SCS at the 1919 Paris Peace Confer-

¹ Inaugural address as a full member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 23 May 2013.

² Bucher, Walter H., *Biographical memoir of Douglas Wilson Johnson, 1878–1944*. Presented to the academy at the annual meeting, 1946, Washington, National Academy of Sciences, 1947.

ence, of the process of his election to the RSAS and of his collaboration with its members.

Who is Douglas Wilson Johnson?

He pursued higher education in Ohio, New Mexico and Massachusetts. In 1903 he received his PhD from Columbia University, where he would teach geophysics, geology and geography from 1912 to 1942, as professor from 1919. He was an officer of the US Armed Forces and member of a team that gathered material for future peace conferences. He was a friend of Mihailo I. Pupin, himself a professor at Columbia.

During the war years he spent some time in Europe for the purpose of making studies in “military geography”. He visited the battlefields in Belgium, France, Italy and the Balkans. He presented his findings in the book *Battlefields of the World War* (New York 1921). He described the operations on the Salonika (Macedonian) Front which he considered a natural continuation of the Western theatres of war.³

His assignment in Paris was to deal with issues of boundary geography and he sat on several commissions on border disputes (Austria, Kingdom of SCS, Italy, Hungary).

During his stay in France in 1918 he met Jovan Cvijić. The two men later closely collaborated, and their friendship lasted until Cvijić's death in 1927.

What did Douglas Wilson Johnson do for the Kingdom of SCS?

The Adriatic question

During his time in Europe in 1918 Johnson learnt about many controversial issues, including Italian territorial pretensions to the eastern Adriatic coast. He became aware of the severity of the conflict between Italy and the nascent Kingdom of SCS at the Peace Conference. He realised that Italy demanded that the terms of the 1915 Treaty of London be implemented and laid claims to the Adriatic city and seaport of Rijeka/Fiume.⁴ Firmly believing in the principle of equity for all nations and peoples, he considered such demands unacceptable and dangerous for peace. When, on 11 March 1919, the Italian delegation presented its demands, Johnson responded energetically. In a memorandum to President Woodrow Wilson of 18 March he insisted that Dalmatia and Rijeka

³ Johnson Douglas Wilson, “The Balkan Campaign”, *Geographical Review*, 2, 1916, 27–47.

⁴ Johnson Douglas Wilson, “The story of Fiume and the Adriatic question”, *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, Jan. 8 1921.

should be incorporated into the Kingdom of SCS. In support of his case, he cited statistical and economic arguments, as well as the sentiments of the local population. Italy's invoking "historical rights" was seen by him as an anachronistic relic of the past. Rijeka was indispensable to the economy of the Kingdom of SCS and Central Europe.⁵

Johnson's views met with resistance from within the American delegation, since some of its members advocated the annexation of the disputed areas to Italy. The resistance did not discourage Johnson from proceeding with his activities, nor did it make him change his convictions. He suggested American mediation in the dispute between Italy and the Kingdom of SCS, which Wilson approved and the Italians rejected. The Italians also rejected the proposal by the Kingdom of SCS for the dispute to be settled by a plebiscite. As a result, Johnson and other experts addressed a letter to Wilson emphasising that relinquishing Dalmatia and Rijeka to Italy would be a big "robbery" and that the USA would betray the rights of small nations by letting it happen. Wilson concurred and rejected the Italian claims in a statement issued on 23 April. Johnson informed Pupin about it, and the latter passed the information to Dr Ante Trumbić. In the following weeks, Johnson exchanged opinions with them. He also bombarded Wilson with proposals and advised him against making any concessions to Italy. On 27 June he sent him a lengthy memorandum laying out his view on the Adriatic question and the way of resolving it. Reminding the President of the statements and promises concerning territorial concessions on the eastern Adriatic coast, he urged him not to back down on his principles and to remain the "champion of justice for small nations".⁶

Until his return to the USA in September 1919, Johnson was instrumental in preparing the memorandum, and busy replying to the proposals and offers concerning the resolution of the Adriatic question made by the delegations of great powers. He called on Trumbić not to accept a buffer state as the way of resolving the Rijeka question. Should that turn out to be impossible, he believed that the city should be placed under the administration of the League of Nations and the port rented on a 99-year lease. He assured Trumbić that the offshore islands should be incorporated into the Kingdom of SCS, neutralised and placed under the supervision of the League of Nations. The neutralisation of the coast and islands would prevent an armed conflict between the two countries. This was Johnson's legacy to the Kingdom of SCS as regards the Adriatic question.⁷

⁵ Johnson Douglas Wilson, "The problem of Fiume", *Geographical Review* 9, 1920, 173–175.

⁶ Johnson, Douglas Wilson, *Role of Geology in the First World War*, New York: The Society, 1942.

⁷ Johnson Douglas Wilson, "A geographer at the front and at the peace conference", *Natural History* 19, 1920, 511–621.

The Banat

The process of border delimitation in the Balkans involved a sharp conflict between Romania and the Kingdom of SCS. On 31 January 1919 the Romanian delegation submitted a memorandum to the Peace Conference demanding the implementation of the Bucharest Treaty of August 1916 according to which the Romanian border was to fall along the Danube and Tisa/Tisza rivers. In other words, they claimed the whole of the Banat. The claim caused much debate and harsh words were exchanged given that Romania had exited the war in the autumn of 1919, thereby losing the right to request the implementation of the Bucharest Treaty.

The Kingdom of SCS formulated its claims in the Banat in mid-February 1919, envisaging the division of the region. Its delegation supported its claims by invoking historical rights, and economic and strategic reasons. The Kingdom claimed the flatland part of the Banat, Torontal County, part of Temes County, Temesvar and the port of Bazias on the Danube. Possession of the western and central Banat would ensure the defence of Belgrade and the confluence of the Morava and Danube rivers. A part of the problem was the presence in the Banat of Serbian troops in the Eastern Army. Neither side was willing to make concessions.

The first clashes took place as early as 31 January 1919 at the meeting of the Council of Ten. They were caused by the Romanian demand for the implementation of the Bucharest Treaty, which the delegation of the Kingdom of SCS refused to discuss. On 1 February the Council of Four set up a commission on territorial claims which was to deliberate the question of Romania's border and recommend a fair settlement. A day later, on 2 February, the Council of Ten discussed Romania's behaviour during the war and its claims to Erdely/Transylvania, Bukovina, Bessarabia, Dobrudja and the Banat. The Romanian delegation demanded the withdrawal of Serbian troops from the Banat and their replacement by Allied troops. No decision on the issue was made because President Wilson asked for an expert opinion. On 4 February, General Franchet d'Esperey, commander of the Eastern Army, ordered the withdrawal of Serbian troops from the Banat. The government in Belgrade asked for the postponement of this operation until after the decision on the Banat was made.⁸

How did Johnson conduct himself? He was not a member of the commission on the Romanian border, but his close associates Charles Seymour and Clive Day were. His attention was focused on the developments in the Adriatic but he kept abreast of the Banat affair. He had meetings with members and experts of the delegation of the Kingdom of SCS who sought advice and support

⁸ Johnson Douglas Wilson, *The geographic and strategic character of the frontier imposed on Roumania by the treaty of Bucharest*, Department of State, Tests of the Rumanian Peace, 1918, 168–171.

from various sources, the Americans, the British, the French. Johnson's most frequent interlocutor was Jovan Cvijić, the chief adviser on territorial issues. Participants in these discussions were also Jovan Radonić and Stanoje Stanojević, who were particularly engaged with the border issues in Vojvodina. There was also Mihailo Pupin, who was directly interested in the fate of the Banat. In several discussions with Cvijić, Radonić and Stanojević, Johnson openly expressed his opinion on the Banat problem. He argued that the "ethnic question and ethnic relations" would be the main consideration in the deliberation and decision process. Economic and strategic considerations would also be taken into account. The border in the Banat would depend on a Romanian or a Serbian majority. All Slavic peoples living in the region would be counted as belonging to a Serbian majority.⁹

During March, meetings with Johnson became ever more frequent as a result of the proposal the Yugoslav delegation had submitted on 18 February. A day later the Council of Ten rejected the Romanian claim to the Banat, though only in principle. Territorial experts were not able to agree on the issue, while the Americans backed the argument concerning the defence of Belgrade and the confluence of the Morava and Danube rivers. Towards the end of February, the commission had reached an agreement on the border in the northern Banat in spite of Italian insistence on the whole region being annexed to Romania. On 10 March the decision to divide the Banat was made. Two days earlier, on 8 March, Radonić and Stanojević had visited Johnson and argued for the necessity of annexing the requested areas to the Kingdom of SCS on grounds of the need for securing food for the parts of the country with low-productivity land. The memorandum they had presented to him on that occasion requested Bela Crkva, Vršac and Kikinda for the Kingdom. Radonić and Stanojević had learnt that no decision on the Banat had been made yet. Johnson had informed them about strong opposition to the Yugoslav claims. On 6 April the commission on borders decided that the western Banat, except Temesvar, belonged to the Kingdom of SCS.¹⁰ The Romanian delegation responded by requesting that a plebiscite be held.

In mid-July, the Council of Ten rejected the claim of the SCS to the Danube island of Ada Kale as well as the proposal for reconsidering the Yugoslav claims. On 8 June, at a meeting of the American delegation, Johnson made a motion for a new discussion about the Banat question. The motion was rejected by the committee of experts.

⁹ Johnson Douglas Wilson, "Territorial problems of the peace conference", *Historical Outlook* 11, 1950, 260–264.

¹⁰ Johnson Douglas Wilson, *Battlefields of the World War, western and southern fronts; a study in military geography*, with a foreword by General Tasker H. Bliss, New York: Oxford University Press, 1921.

In that way an end was put on the border question in the Banat. In August the Yugoslav delegation officially accepted the border solution in the Banat. Johnson had done all that lay in his power.

Carinthia

Johnson played an important role in the deliberations on the fate of Carinthia. The Carinthia problem was a complex one because of the conflicting positions of great powers, the presence of a part of the Eastern Army on its soil and armed conflicts between local forces of Slovenians and Austrians in which the Italians also became involved. The effort to put a stop to the conflicts and ensure the withdrawal of foreign armed forces from Carinthia failed, which led to its division into eastern and western parts with the Mur/Mura river as a boundary.

The American delegation sent Prof. G. A. Coolidge and Colonel Sherman Miles on a mission to Carinthia to sound out the sentiment of the population. The mission proposed, as the best solution, that a plebiscite under the supervision of the League of Nations be conducted.

The delegation of the Kingdom of SCS, particularly its Slovenian members, sought to incline the American delegation to support the annexation of Carinthia to the Kingdom. Focusing their efforts on Johnson, convinced that he would support their claim, they conferred with him on several occasions during March 1919. The Slovenian delegate Ivan Žolgar presented him with a memorandum detailing the future border between Austria and the Kingdom of SCS. On 25 March they spoke about Villach/Bejak, and on 27 March Žolgar submitted a memorandum on the ethnic situation in Carinthia. The conversations and meetings continued into April.¹¹

In mid-May 1919 the commission on territorial issues endorsed the proposal to hold a plebiscite. In the event that a majority opted for unification with the Kingdom of SCS, the great powers were willing to accept it as a definitive solution.

The American territorial experts were not of the same mind on the border issue. Towards the end of May, Johnson, Seymour and Miles presented a memorandum on the Klagenfurt/Celovec basin to President Wilson. All except Johnson believed that the population of the Klagenfurt basin would remain in Austria and that the division of the basin as proposed by the Kingdom of SCS might lead to a conflict in the long run. Johnson was resolutely against such views. He refuted Miles's arguments. He argued that it was necessary that the region belong to the Kingdom of SCS considering the Slavic self-sentiment of

¹¹ Johnson Douglas Wilson, *Battlefields of the World War, western and southern fronts; a study in military geography*, with a foreword by General Tasker H. Bliss, New York: Oxford University Press, 1921

its population. He emphasised that the strategic, economic and ethnic considerations had more bearing than the others that had been put forward. Wilson disregarded Johnson's arguments, which was confirmed by the decision of the Council of Four of 29 May that Villach/Bejlag belonged to Austria, that the border in the Klagenfurt/Celovec basin would be provisional and that the outcome of the plebiscite should be accepted as the definitive solution.¹²

Johnson arguing against the plebiscite

Objections to the decision were raised by Nikola Pašić and Milenko Vesnić, but they had no effect. Johnson lodged his energetic protest, and some other members of the American delegation were also opposed to it (White). Nothing of it brought any result. On 2 June Johnson put forth a compromise proposal, but Wilson rejected it too. Two days later, on 6 June, the Council of Ten decided that a plebiscite would be held. The partition of the region into two zones was discarded. The same day Johnson advised Wilson of the Italians wanting to divide Carinthia into a northern and a southern part, and called on him to prevent it. There was no response.

On 20 June, a week before Wilson's departure from Paris, Johnson made one last attempt to make him change his stance. Italy's intention was to take control over the Jesenice railway junction and Villach/Bejlag–St. Veit/Šentvid railway. This would lead to the occupation of an area with a Slovenian majority in the southern part of the Klagenfurt basin, and to an armed conflict with the Kingdom of SCS, which was exactly what the Italians wanted. Such a development would certainly have an effect on the objective outcome of the plebiscite, leading to the annexation of the region to Austria. As a possible solution, Johnson proposed the withdrawal of Austrian and Yugoslav troops from the region and their replacement with American, British and French troops. If that was infeasible, the conflicting parties could be placed under the control of Allied officers. Johnson concluded by asking that the deployment of Italian troops to the disputed areas be prevented. There was no response to his belated proposal.¹³

After Wilson's departure from France, Johnson continued in his role as an intermediary between the Americans and the Yugoslav delegation. A problem was the reluctance of the Yugoslav side to sign a peace agreement with Austria before the dispute with Italy was settled. Johnson was of the opinion that the SCS delegation had no reason to insist on the settlement of the dispute with Italy as a precondition for signing the treaty with Austria. That was all that could be done.

¹² Johnson Douglas Wilson, "The story of Fiume and the Adriatic question", *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, Jan. 8 1921.

¹³ Ivo J. Lederer, *Yugoslavia at the Paris Peace Conference : a study in frontiersmaking*, Yale University Press, 1963

The election to the RSAS and collaboration with Jovan Cvijić

In September 1919 Johnson was back in New York to resume his teaching and scientific career. In November 1919 Johnson's Serbian acquaintances and interlocutors Jovan Cvijić, Jovan Radonić, Stanoje Stanojević, Jovan Žujović, Sima Lozanić and other experts were back in Belgrade. All of them returned to their duties at the University and the Royal Academy. The capital city's university and public libraries had been ravaged and pillaged by the occupying forces. The war had taken its toll in death and illness. The election of new Academy members and University teachers was a necessity.¹⁴

During the last days of 1919 the nomination of candidates for the membership of the Royal Academy's Science Department began. The nominators were Lozanić, Cvijić and Žujović. They nominated Juraj Majcen, Artur (Franović) Gavazzi and Douglas Johnson as corresponding members. An excerpt from the statement of reasons for Johnson's nomination signed by Lozanić and Cvijić reads: "Mr Douglas Johnson, vice-president of the National Academy of Sciences in New York, a renowned geomorphologist, who was the chief adviser on our territorial issues to President Wilson and rendered a great service to the cause of truth and justice." In the issue of the annual journal of the Royal Serbian Academy for the years 1914–1919 a short biography of Johnson was published (*Godišnjak SKA XXVIII*, Belgrade 1921, pp. 322–329). It said, inter alia, that he was professor at Columbia University, a member of the National Research Council, a former major of the American Armed Forces and chief of the boundary geography division on the American delegation at the Peace Conference. In that way, Johnson was presented to the members of the Academy and the Serbian public.

During the following years, until Cvijić's death in 1927, the two scientists kept up a scientific and friendly correspondence. Faced with the bleak state of his department library, he appealed a few times to Johnson to send him some maps and atlases necessary for the teaching of geology and geography. Johnson responded to his appeals and urged various government institutions such as the Geology Survey and the Smithsonian Institution to send the requested material to Belgrade. He wrote commendably about Cvijić's book *La Péninsule balkanique*, and about their collaboration in Paris. They spoke about meeting each other in France and frequently mentioned Pupin.

In late February 1920 Cvijić informed Johnson of his election to the RSAS, and Johnson replied: "I am deeply grateful for the honor of being elected a member of the Royal Serbian Academy." And he thanked Cvijić.

¹⁴ Vidojko Jović, Ana M. Petrović, eds: *150th anniversary of Jovan Cvijić's birth : proceedings of the international conference held at the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade ASSA 2015*,

The signing of the Rapallo Treaty in November 1920 reminded Johnson of the dispute with Italy at the Peace Conference. He was eager to learn Cvijić's opinion about the treaty and the circumstances in which it had been concluded. He enquired about the status of Rijeka and suspected that its becoming an independent state would be a step towards its being annexed by Italy. What Cvijić replied is not known. In the autumn of 1921 Cvijić invited Johnson to contribute an article to the *Glasnik SKA*, and Johnson accepted. Owing to Johnson, the exchange of scientific publications was established between the USA and the Kingdom of SCS. In 1923 Cvijić invited Johnson to visit the Kingdom, but administrative hurdles prevented the visit from taking place. Johnson was willing to come to Belgrade "to meet old friends from Paris". Cvijić's death put an end to a fine friendship.¹⁵

Cvijić's death did not, however, put an end to Johnson's ties with scientific circles in Serbia. In 1931 he was elected an honorary member of the Geographical Society in Belgrade, and in 1933 he was awarded a medal by the same Society. A year later, he was awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of St Sava with Star.

Johnson's support to the delegation of the Kingdom of SCS in Paris earned him great respect among the membership of the Royal Serbian Academy of Sciences. That and his scientific work was the reason for his election as a member of the most distinguished Serbian scientific institution.

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¹⁵ Bucher, Walter H., *Biographical memoir of Douglas Wilson Johnson, 1878–1944*. Presented to the academy at the annual meeting, 1946, Washington, National Academy of Sciences, 1947.

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