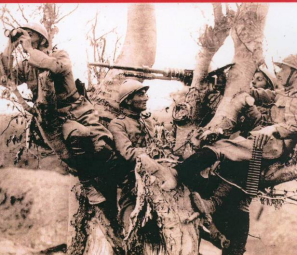


INSTITUTUL PENTRU STUDII POLITICE DE APĂRARE ȘI ISTORIE MILITARĂ

BĂTĂLIILE DE LA MĂRĂȘTI, MĂRĂȘEȘTI ȘI OITUZ ÎN DINAMICA PRIMULUI RĂZBOI MONDIAL



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Coordonator:

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SERBIAN ARMY AND INTER-ALLIED RELATIONSHIPS ON THE SALONIKA FRONT IN 1917

Lt. Col. Dr. Miljan Milkić¹

Serbia and Allies 1914-1916, the brief history

Serbia was a loyal allied even in the most difficult situations and, at the other side, Allies supported Serbian Army. Actually, the beginning of First World War proves difficulties in that relation. For example, under the Allied influence, Serbian Army decided to start a military campaign in September 1914 against Austro-Hungarian troops on Austro-Hungarian territory.² The lack of appropriate preparation caused the disaster defeat of Serbian troops. During the 1915 Serbian Army has slightly recovered and at the same time Serbia received support from Allied countries.³ During the Austro-German and Bulgarian attack in October 1915 the Serbian General Staff's plan was to secure the route of retreat Niš–Skoplje–Salonika, in order to come together with the Allied forces of General Sarrail. Under the attack of Bulgarian troops, the strategic plan of gradual retreat towards Allies in Salonika eventually failed

¹ Strategic Research Institute, MoD, Belgrade, miljan.milkić@mod.gov.rs.

² Milić J. Milićević, *Na pogrešnoj obali. Poraz trupa Timočke divizije u bici kod Čevrtnije (na Legetu) 6. septembra 1914. godine*, Zavod za udžbenike, Beograd 2015. Milić J. Milićević, "Serbian Army commanding officers during the Čevrtnija (leget) battle in September 1914", *The First World War, Serbia, the Balkans and Great Powers*, (Srđan Rudić, Miljan Milkić, Eds.), Belgrade 2015, pp. 291-301.

³ Andrej Mitrović, *Serbia's Great War 1914-1918*, London 2007.

after Maurice-Paul-Emmanuel Sarraill was slowing down the advance the French forces deeper into Serbian territory to meet the Serbian troops. At a joint conference of the representatives of France, Great Britain and Italy, held from 6 to 8 December 1915 in Chantilly (the Second Inter-Allied Conference at Chantilly), the French Chief of General Staff, General Joseph Joffre, pointed out the responsibility for the failure of Serbia.

The retreat of Serbian Army had to change direction and to head through Montenegro and Albania. The Serbian plan for reorganisation in Albania was impossible and under Allied supervision evacuation of the Serbian Army from the Albanian ports began to be made.⁴ In this regard, French initiative and the insistence of the Russian Emperor were of great importance. The salvation of Serbian Army of a dangerous situation started in mid-January 1916 and it was operated by forty-five Italian, twenty-five French and eleven British steamers. In accordance with a convention which was signed in early February 1916, at a conference in Paris, the French government took over most of duties and accepted to manage the supply and the reorganization of the Serbian Army. Under French supervision and with French equipment and machine guns the reorganization of the Serbian Army started on 27 February 1916.⁵ Corresponding with General Joseph Joffre plans from December 1915 that at least 50,000 Serbian soldiers should be recovered and ready for

⁴ *Veliki rat Srbije za oslobođenje i ujedinjenje Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca, knjiga XIV, 1916. godina, Treći period: Opšte odstupanje srpske vojske, IV faza: Prebacivanje iz Albanije na ostrvo Krf*, Beograd 1928.

⁵ Slavica Ratković-Kostić, „Vojska Kraljevine Srbije 1916. i 1917. godine. Organizacija i formacija”, *Prvi svetski rat i Balkan – 90 godina kasnije*, (Milan Terzić, Ed.), Beograd 2011, pp. 101-117. Slavica Ratković-Kostić, „Reorganizacija vojske Kraljevine Srbije 1916. i 1917. godine”, *Srbi i Prvi svetski rat 1914-1918*, (Dragoljub Živojinović, Ed.), Beograd 2015, pp. 463-480.

the continuation of the war operations, Allies counted with a certain number of Serb soldiers. On 26 February 1916 General Piarron de Mondésir, the head of French mission on Corfu, informed the Serbian Supreme Command about General Sarraill demands concerning the number of commanding officers in the Serbian units on Salonika Front. The commander of the Allied Eastern Army demanded one regiment commander, one battalion commander, and eight company commanders. During the Serbian retreat through Albania, General Piarron de Mondésir was tasked with collecting information about physical and mental condition of the Serbian soldiers.⁶ During this reorganization, Serbia was in a similar position as Romania several months later: there was pressure from the Allies that the Serbian Army had no independent command and to be directly under the allied command. A similar situation occurred in August 1916 when the Treaty of Bucharest was signed between Romania and the Entente Powers. The Romanian government requested that the Romanian army cannot be subordinate to any other command.

After reorganization, transportation of the Serbian Army to Khalkidhiki began on 12 April and ended on 30 May 1916. Before the troops were sent, the Serbian military mission was established in Salonika. The head of the mission, Colonel Lešljanin, was under the pressure of the allies' officers and mistrust was his dominant impression. In August 1916, Serbian Army was deployed on the Salonika front. In accordance with the fact that in the summer of 1916, the Allies had successfully ended negotiations on the Romanian entry into the war, and to

⁶ *Veliki rat Srbije za oslobođenje i ujedinjenje Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca, knjiga XIV, 1916. godina, Treći period: Opšte odstupanje srpske vojske, IV faza: Prebacivanje iz Albanije na ostrvo Krf*, Beograd 1928.

Allied Commands were given the task to prepare and start an offensive on Salonika Front. One of the biggest military success during the offensive was the joint French, Russian and Serbian liberation of one part of Serbian territory and capture of city Bitola on 19 November 1916.

Serbian Army on Salonika Front in 1917

The two most important events in 1917 for allies were the entry of the United States into the war and the end of Russian participation. An important event for allies on the western front was the formation of the Supreme War Council. During the Rapallo Conference from 5 to 7 November 1917 British Prime Minister Lloyd George proposed the formation of the Supreme War Council.⁷ The roll of Supreme War Council was to co-ordinate military action across each of the Allied armies, and was based in Versailles. The end of the year 1917 was marked with the dismissal of General Maurice-Paul-Emmanuel Sarrai. After 27 months in service, by the decision of the French Government, he was recalled on 10 December 1917 from the position of commander-in-chief of the Allied forces on front. This change came mainly due to his disagreement with the attitude of the English and the Italians about the role of the Salonika Front. According to the English-Italian view, the Salonika Front had a defensive role. However, General Sarrai believed that the Salonika Front should be defended at all costs.

An important moment for the Serbian Army and inter-Allied military relations was the Third Chantilly Conference from 15 to 16 November 1916 at which the Serbian delegate

⁷ Milan Nedić, "Problem komandovanja u savezničkim trupama", *Ratnik*, July-August 1926, p. 7.

explained the strategy for the coming year.⁸ The Conference participants were gathered to discuss about General Joseph Joffre's Memorandum in which issues related to military operations during 1917 were suggested. Serbian representatives at the conference were General Mihailo Rašić, a Serbian Army delegate at the French Supreme Command, and Colonel Petar Pešić, Assistant Chief of Staff of the Serbian Supreme Command. The Serbian Supreme Command has filed a special memorandum stating the importance of the Balkan war. It was noted that the success of the Serbian Army in 1916 was not exploited due to the weakness of allied forces.⁹ It was stressed that the number of divisions in the full composition on the Salonika Front should increase, so that the total Allied forces should increase to a minimum of 300,000 soldiers. However, despite the confirmed importance of the Salonika Front and the need to expel Bulgaria as soon as possible from the war, the demands of the Serbian Supreme Command were only partially adopted. It was accepted that Allied army should be strengthened to the total number of 23 divisions and that all divisions, except than Serbs, should be strengthened with new soldiers. At the Conference it was agreed that in 1917 a joint offensive on all fronts should be undertaken. It was agreed that the Serbian Army gets reinforced by the accession of volunteers who were prisoners in Russia and Italy. After the war, the colonel Petar Pešić estimated that this Conference was favorable for the Serbian Army.¹⁰ The joint offensive was not realized because individual offensive was undertaken on the Western Front, while the February revolution broke out in Russia.

⁸ Petar Pešić, "Solunski front. Vojno-politička akcija", *Ratnik*, January-March 1921, pp. 24-28.

⁹ Milivoje Alimpić, *Solunski front*, Beograd 1967, p. 257, 258.

¹⁰ Petar Pešić, "Solunski front. Vojno-politička akcija", *Ratnik*, January-March 1921, p. 28.

On the Salonika Front at the beginning of 1917, both sides crossed into trench warfare that lasted until the break-up of the front in September 1918. According to the official instruction of the French Supreme Command on 11 December 1916, allied armies were to be established trenches and to be organized against enemy attacks. At the same time, the armies were supposed to be prepared for the future military offensive. One article of the French directive was: "Provide the possibility of rapid military action against Greece in case of need".¹¹

In the Spring of 1917, the Allies tried unsuccessfully to break the enemy front line. This was the result of the preparations that were carried out at the end of 1916. According to the Allied directive of 14 December 1916, on the Salonika Front the offensive should be undertaken as soon as the situation in Romania stabilized and the Russian-Romanian forces converted into the offensive.¹² However, Allied armies on the Salonika Front were not ready. This decision was also disabled by the attitude of the British and Italian governments. Nevertheless, at the conference Allied in January 1917 in Rome, the British and Italian military delegates, declaring that they could not give more than one soldier to strengthen the Salonika Front, even demanded that the Allied armies should leave the conquered regions in the Kingdom of Serbia (Bitola and the surrounding area). General Saraj had a very difficult struggle to convince them on the harmful consequences of this attitude. Britain was against this front because it considered the main solution to be sought on the Western Front and grouped the maximum number of soldiers there. Italy considered that the presence of the Allied armies would impede its aspirations to Albania, which was its main political goal.

¹¹ Milivoje Alimpić, *Solunski front*, Beograd 1967, p. 259.

¹² Milivoje Alimpić, *Solunski front*, Beograd 1967, p. 265.

However, the Allied Spring offensive began on 22 April with a British attack on the Bulgarian positions in the Dojran Lake zone.¹³ In the night attack on 25 April, two British divisions managed to capture enemy front trenches, while the Bulgarians tried to retaliate them on 28 April. The new British attack failed. In these fierce battles, the British lost about 3,000 people. On the front of the Serbian armies, military operations began on 8 May with a powerful bombing of hostilities on the entire front. After three days of fighting, the Serbian army took over the Bulgarian positions, but its further progress was halted. General Sarrai ordered the suspension of the offensive on 23 May. Allied spring offensive was completed without results. The strategic sense of this offensive was lost when the anticipated offensive of the Russian and Romanian armies failed. The total Serbian losses in the Spring offensive in 1917 amounted to 1,049 soldiers (200 dead and missing). For the failure of the spring offensive, General Sarrai accused the Serbian Supreme Command.¹⁴

An important moment on the Salonika Front was the entry of Greece into the war. Entent Powers were additionally strengthened on 30 June 1917 when Greece officially entered the war and the Greek Army become a part of the Allied Forces on the Salonika Front. For Serbian-Greek relations it is characteristic that the Greek government, as a government of neutral country, opposed the arrival of the Serbian Army on its territory, and for that reason, on 16 January 1916, the Greek government gave its envoy to the Serbian government “an indefinite absence”, which lasted until September 1917.¹⁵

¹³ Milivoje Alimpić, *Solunski front*, Beograd 1967, p. 272.

¹⁴ Milisav Sekulić, “War actions on the Salonika Front in 1917 and 1918”, *Vojnosanitetski pregled*, 65, 2008, 9-18.

¹⁵ Miladin Milošević, *Srbija i Grčka 1914-1918. Iz istorije diplomatskih odnosa*, Zaječar 1997. Efpraxia S. Paschalidou, “Greece’s Prolonging Neutrality Perception during WWI. Stance towards Serbia”, *The First World War*,

The Serbian Army cooperated with the Russian Army (the 4th brigade of the Russian Army) in the military operations against the Bulgarian Army until mid-May 1917 when the combat morale of Russian soldiers began to decline as a direct outcome of Russian February revolution.¹⁶

Supplying the Serbian Army on Salonika Front with weapons, ammunition, money, food, clothing, footwear, and camp equipment was done neatly from France.¹⁷ The Serbian Army was supplied with allied weapons. The supply of ammunition was also tidy. On the other hand, the use of artillery ammunition was enormous. For a period of one year, from 13 September 1916 to 13 December 1917, Serbian artillery has thrown 2,089,107 artillery projectiles. At the same time, the infantry used 42,409,968 rifle bullets, 11,236,259 machine gun bullets, 3,591,617 light machine gun bullets, and 101,806 hand grenades. At the beginning of 1917 the infantry got 1,772 light machine gun и 3,455 rifle grenades.¹⁸ The Serbian Army used French machine guns the “St. Etienne Mle 1907”, which was mainly used in the early years of the First World War.

In the Serbian Army there was a significant number of allied soldiers, as well as allied weapons and aircraft. On the basis on archival sources from Military Archive Belgrade we can see the number of soldiers on 31 July 1917: total number on Salonika Front 128,941; on Corfu 3,928; in Africa 8,536;

Serbia, the Balkans and Great Powers, (Srđan Rudić, Miljan Milkić, Eds.), Belgrade 2015, pp. 125-136.

¹⁶ Dalibor Denda, “Serbian Army and Russian Troops on Macedonian Front: Historiography and Reality”, *Serbia and the Russian Revolution of 1917. New Issues and Challenges*. (Aleksij J. Timofejev, Ed.), The Institute for Recent History of Serbia, The Institute of Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Belgrade 2017, pp. 113-127.

¹⁷ Milivoje Alimpić, *Solunski front*, Beograd 1967, p. 287.

¹⁸ Milivoje Alimpić, *Solunski front*, Beograd 1967, p. 287.

French and British soldiers in Serbian Army 1,970; Serbian Army total number 138,468.¹⁹ At the same time, in the Serbian First Army there were 180 artillery guns, then, heavy French artillery with 16 cannons, and two squadrons with 24 planes. In the Serbian Second Army there was a total number of 144 artillery guns, heavy French artillery with 19 cannons, heavy British artillery with two cannons, and one French squadron with nine planes.

As prelude to breakthrough of Salonika Front, on 20 September 1917 the Serbian Supreme Command proposed to the Allied command the general offensive on the frontline Veternik – Dobro Polje – Sokol, in order to split the Bulgarian front in two parts and make a crucial breakthrough behind the enemy lines. Both, General Sarraill and his successor General Marie Louis Adolphe Guillaumat, assumed command in December 1917, were unwilling to accept the Serbian proposal.²⁰ The proposal of the Serbian Supreme Command was taken into account in June 1918 after the Allied command was entrusted to General Franchet D'Esperey for the general offensive more intensive. Finally, the offensive at the Dobro Polje front, based on the Serbian proposal from 1917, was planned for mid-September 1918.²¹

In accordance with the conclusions of the Third Chantilly Conference, a large number of volunteers started to join the Serbian Army since the Summer of 1917. Until the beginning of the breakthrough of the Salonika Front, from North and South America, about 7,000 volunteers arrived.²² From

¹⁹ Military Archive Belgrade, 3, 101, 2, 3/13.

²⁰ Milivoje Alimpić, *Solunski front*, Beograd 1967.

²¹ Petar Opačić, *Solunska ofanziva 1918. godine. Srpska vojska u završnom periodu Prvog svetskog rata*, Beograd 1980.

²² *Jugoslovenski dobrovoljci*, (N. Popović), Beograd 1980, 234. Bogumil Hrabak, „Skupljanje Jugoslovenskih dobrovoljaca u Severnoj Americi 1914-

Odessa was sent 1,185 soldiers, and the First Yugoslav Brigade arrived from Murmansk via France. In Russia existed Serbian Volunteer Corps formed during the 1916 by Austro-Hungarian prisoners. In a political sense, in order to understand the creation of a new Yugoslav state, it should be emphasized that at a session on 6 April 1917, the Serbian Government agreed to the name being changed to the Volunteer Corps of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and to all officers from Yugoslav areas being equal in all respects to officers from Serbia if they so desired and if they personally submitted a request for acceptance.²³ At the request of the Yugoslav Committee, the Serbian Supreme Command renamed the Vardar Division into the Yugoslav Division. The Yugoslav Division was composed of the First Yugoslav Brigade (1st and 2nd Volunteer Regiment) and the First Vardar Brigade (21st and 22nd Infantry Regiment). The Yugoslav division was part of the Serbian Second Army. In Autumn of 1917, in Serbian Army there were many volunteers who belonged to different religions and nations.²⁴

Allies officers regarded the Serbian Army with a certain amount of suspicion. According to the report of the Staff of the Allied Army on East dated 5 April 1918, Serbian officers on the Salonika Front were under German influence during the 1917 and 1918.²⁵ Such behavior by Serbian officers was explained by

1916", *Istorijski zbornik*, VII, Banja Luka 1986, p. 167. Bogumil Hrabak, „Dobrovoljački pokret u Južnoj Americi 1914-1918. godine”, *Ratno dobrovoljaštvo na srpskim etničkim prostorima*, (N. Pešić, P. Pavlović), Beograd 2004, p. 235.

²³ Andrej Mitrović, *Serbia's Great War 1914-1918*, London 2007, p. 296.

²⁴ Milan Micić, *Srpsko dobrovoljačko pitanje u Velikom ratu (1914-1918)*, Novo Miloševo-Beograd 2014.

²⁵ Velimir Ivetić, Mladenka Ivanković, “Drugo odeljenje Glavnog štaba savezničkih armija na Istoku o moralu srpske vojske na Solunskom frontu 1916-1918. godine”, *Vojnoistorijski glasnik*, 3/1998, pp. 214-225.

their German and Austrian military education. According to the same report, the Russian and Romanian defeats in the war were very badly affected on Serbian officers. In this report, the Main Staff of Allied Armies resented the Serbian soldiers for having confidence in captured Bulgarian soldiers.

In fact, Serbia did not have a Navy on the Salonika Front. It was a Fleet Command with a single ship called "Serbia".²⁶ The Serbian government bought this ship in February 1916 and transformed it into a transport ship for the needs of the Serbian and Allied soldiers, first on Corfu, then on Salonika Front. The ship arrived in Thessaloniki on 31 May 1916. By the end of December 1916, the ship transported 33.062 soldiers and 759.965 kilograms of military supplies. Allies allowed that ship "Serbia" can sail under the Serbian flag, although this was not in accordance with international conventions given the fact that Serbia was not recognized as a maritime state. Allied Comand was responsible for the sailing of this ship. One of the typical situations occurred when Commander of the Brodar Command, Lieutenant Colonel Milan Radojević, asked the Serbian Supreme Command on February 5, 1917 to travel from Thessaloniki to Hilandar with the ship "Serbia".²⁷ Despite the positive opinion of the Traffic Department of the Serbian Supreme Command, as well as the positive intent of the Serbian representative to the Allied Supreme Command, Colonel Milojević, the French vice admiral Henri Salaun, commander of the maritime division on the Oriente, did not allow the expedition due to danger of enemy submarines.

Together with Army reconstruction on Corfu, reconstruction of Serbian aviation started, also under French super-

²⁶ Boško Antić, *Srpska odiseja*, Beograd 2002.

²⁷ Military Archive Belgrade, 3, 221, 2, 14/4.

vision.²⁸ Serbian air force was re-organized on 30 May 1916 by forming five squadrons detached from the Allied Eastern Army and placed under the responsibility of French captain Vitroa. In this way, French-Serbian squadrons were formed, and each unit was under the command of a French officer whose assistant was a Serbian officer. These squadrons played an important role in the final offensive on the Salonika Front in September 1918. In December of the same year they were officially disbanded.

The Serbian Army transport service was completely in the hands of the French Army, which had a negative impact on the regularity of transportation, the supply and evacuation of the Serbian Army. The health condition of the Serbian soldiers was satisfactory. Hygienic measures in sanitary facilities, as well as on the front, were well organized. The necessary number of appliances were obtained for disinfection, and the bathing and dressing of the soldiers was neat. The supply of medical and pharmaceutical materials was carried out neatly from the French army warehouse. Large quantities of medical and pharmaceutical materials were received from the English and American Red Cross. Based on the available data, wounded and sick Serb soldiers were housed in 19 allied military hospitals on the Salonika Front (British, French and Russian).²⁹ As an example, the British Humanitarian Society "Serbian Relief

²⁸ Marie-Catherine Villatoux, "La France Et Les Débuts De L'aéronautique militaire serbe", *Sto godina srpskog vojnog vazduhoplovstva*, (Dragana Marković, Ed.), Beograd 2014, pp. 35-36.

²⁹ Samuel Foster, "British Medical Volunteers and the Balkan Front 1914-1918: The Case of Dr. Katherine Stuart MacPhail", *University of Sussex Journal of Contemporary History* 14 (2013), pp. 4-16. Aleksandar S. Nedok, "Russian medical help during liberation and defence wars of Serbia in XIX and early XX century (1804-1917)", *Vojnosanitetski pregled* 66 (7) 2009, pp. 587-596.

Fund” formed a military hospital in village Amindeo (Greece). This Society was founded on 23 September 1914 in London with the aim of providing humanitarian assistance to Serbia. One of the founder and executive member of the Serbian Relief Fund was a British political activist and historian Sir Robert William Seton Watson.³⁰

In allied military hospitals, Serbian soldiers had complete medical care and were supplied with all necessary things. On 13 December 1917, in the Hospitals on the Salonika Front there were 8,346 diseaseds (168 officers and 8,178 soldiers) and 1,308 wounded (35 officers and 1,273 soldiers).³¹

In each of the allied military hospitals, one Serbian military priest was deployed. At the end of March 1917, the Serbian Ministry of Defence ordered to Serbian military attaches in Paris and London to refer all unassigned priests to the Supreme Command in Thessaloniki to be deployed in hospitals.³² On 15 September 1917, the Serbian Supreme Command received the opinion from the Ministry of Defence about the mental state of the wounded Serbian officers who were in the French and British military hospitals. It was a recommended necessity of the spiritual aging.³³ Approval for sending new Serbian military priests to Allied hospitals was to be approved by Inspector of the East Army General Ruotte. He was supposed to make a selection of priest.

³⁰ S. Stefanović, *Fragmenti građe za istoriju našeg povlačenja i izgnanstva*, Naše ratno sanitetsko iskustvo, Beograd 1992, pp. 396, 397. A. Nedok, B. Popović, V. Todorović, *Srpski vojni sanitet u Prvom svetskom ratu*, Beograd 2014, p. 335.

³¹ Milivoje Alimpić, *Solunski front*, Beograd 1967, p. 288.

³² Miljan Milkić, *Verska služba u srpskoj vojsci u Prvom svetskom ratu*, Beograd 2016.

³³ Miljan Milkić, *Verska služba u srpskoj vojsci u Prvom svetskom ratu*, Beograd 2016.

Conclusion

The Serbian Army was part of the Allied armies on the Salonika Front. During their stay on Corfu and on the Salonika Front, the Serbian Army relied on allied assistance in supplying food and war material. The Serbian Army was supplied with allied weapons and used allied logistics in every sense. The Serb army participated in combat operations in accordance with the decisions of the Allies. This was the reason why there were disagreements during the spring offensive when the Serbian army requested the inclusion of new forces, and in the end it was accused of failure of offensive. The year 1917 was important for the Serbian government due to the arrival of volunteers in the Serbian army. A large number of volunteers regarded themselves as Yugoslavs. It turned out that the year 1917 represented tactically and strategically preparation for the events that followed in 1918 - breakthrough of the Salonika Front and the creation of the Yugoslav state.

ABSTRACT

The paper evaluates and discusses the position of Serbian Army within the Allied troops on the Salonika Front in 1917. The role and position of Serbian Army concerning the inter-allied tactics, techniques, and procedures were crucial for military operations. Some attention is paid to the roll of British and France troops regarding the logistics support of the Serbian Army. The Serbian Navy Command, the Serbian Air force and Serbian military hospitals directly depended on British and France support. Also, a certain number of Allied soldiers were incorporated into Serbian troops.

KEYWORDS: *Serbian Army, Salonika Front, Allied troops, First World War.*