In 1918 Robert J. Kerner, who became one of America’s leading authorities on Yugoslavia, wrote an article entitled ‘The Jugo-Slav Movement’ the first sentence of which read ‘If there are miracles in history, the Jugo-Slav movement is a miracle.’ After surveying the main trends in south Slavonic history, he concluded his article by stressing that:

Religious differences, political rivalries, linguistic quibbles and the petty foibles of centuries appeared to be forgotten in the three short years which elapsed from Kumanovo to the destruction of Serbia in 1915. The Greater Serbia idea had really perished in 1915 as had the Greater Croatia idea in 1878. In their place emerged Jugo-Slavia. . . . Nationalism had proved stronger than opposing religions, more cohesive than political and economic interests. . . . The Jugo-Slav movement had ended in the formation of a nation which is neither a doctrine, nor a dream but a reality.¹

In that same year R. W. Seton-Watson, who had worked unceasingly during the war for the creation of the southern Slav state, hailed its formation also, but he was more sanguine about its future, perhaps because he had been so intimately involved in south Slavonic affairs during the preceding decade. Thus, in contrast to Kerner’s optimism, Seton-Watson’s realism led him to conclude that ‘a fundamental struggle between the Pan-Serb solution and the Yugoslav idea’² still confronted the southern Slavs. His analysis was correct.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how one historian, Milenko M. Vukičević, whose textbooks were officially authorised
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for use in the secondary schools, had significantly shifted his presentation of Serbian history in the 1914 or sixth edition of his textbook from the Serbianism found in the earlier editions to an acceptance of some of the principles associated with the Yugoslav idea. However, as will be explained subsequently, his change in interpretation came too late to influence appreciably Serbian opinion in a Yugoslav direction.

This article is based upon a study of the Yugoslav idea or movement from 1804 to 1918. As part of this study over 300 geography, history and literature (readers of čitanke) textbooks used in the elementary and secondary schools in Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Dalmatia, Bosnia-Hercegovina, Montenegro and Vojvodina between 1868 and 1914 have been examined. Of these, over 150 dealt with Serbia. The purpose has been to determine not only what the students learned about their own nation, but also what they were taught about the other southern Slavs who were to become their co-nationals in the kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

The importance of the textbooks cannot be overestimated when one considers the number of students who attended school. The statistics for 1910, which reflect the educational trend from 1890, show that there were 117,294 students in the elementary schools and 7,440 in the secondary schools (or a total of 124,734), but only 934 in the University of Belgrade. It is clear that it was in the lower schools, not in the university, that students learned about their nation. Furthermore, a careful examination of the educational journals discloses that the teachers and priests, who had the most direct contact with the students, were ardent patriots, who emphasised citizenship, loyalty and devotion to duty, and preached that one’s greatest obligation was to work for and, if necessary, to die for the liberation and unification of those Serbian lands still under foreign domination. The information they needed to support this point of view was found in the textbooks, which were held in the highest esteem. They informed the Serbian student about his nation, history, religion, language, customs, tradition, geography, resources, and about its victories and defeats.

There were four basic subjects which were discussed in the textbooks: the people, lands, language and religion. Since all the textbooks used in the classroom had to be approved by the minister of education, it is understandable that the basic point of view on these issues would be similar. Therefore, to appreciate the significance of the changes in Vukičević’s 1914 edition, it is necessary to indicate