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The role of Russian emigrants in the rise of popular culture and music in Belgrade between two world wars¹

A large number of Russian refugees who feared the persecution as a result of a defeat of the anti-Bolshevik military troops located in the southern parts of Russia (nowadays Ukraine) started to settle in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in May 1919. According to historian Aleksej Arsenjev² (2011), the first large wave of refugees was formed from May to November 1919 and included 1,600 persons, a majority of whom were offered residence at the periphery of the Yugoslav capital of Belgrade. Afterwards, there were several far bigger waves during the 1920 that consisted of both civilians and military personnel who fled in thousands to the ports of the Adriatic Sea and, finally, in November 1921, February 1922 and May 1923 that consisted mostly of the parts of Russian army military corps commanded by the general Pëtr Nikolaevich Vrangeľ. The historians who conducted research on the number of Russian emigrants in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes estimated that between 40,000 and 70,000 refugees crossed the Yugoslav border from 1919 until 1923, while around 30,000 to 40,000 settled permanently in its territory. A majority of Russians were located in the so-called Serbian parts of the

¹ This chapter was written as part of the project *Serbian musical identities within local and global frameworks: traditions, changes, challenges* (No. 177004 (2011–2014)) funded by the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development.

² Russian names and titles are transliterated using the simplified Library of Congress romanisation system. However, the name of Aleksej Arsenjev (an author of Russian descent who was born and raised in Serbia) is written phonetically, as it is pronounced and spelled in Serbian language (which uses both Cyrillic and Latin alphabets).

Kingdom, in Vojvodina and Central Serbia.³ Of among 300 Russian colonies established in the first Yugoslavia, 215 were located in the territory of Serbia with the largest one located in the capital city, Belgrade, consisting of 10,000 refugees (Arsenjev 2011, 29, 89).

Although the Russians experienced great hardship as a result of displacement, experiencing poverty, hunger, disease and often inhuman living conditions, they created exceptionally rich and multifarious cultural life in their host countries including the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) soon after their settlement. Early in the 1920s they started organising their own scientific, professional, artistic, humanitarian and cultural associations and publishing numerous journals and magazines (Đurić 1990; Sibinović 1994; Kačaki 2003). At the same time, they sponsored many public events in order to promote Russian cultural, scientific and artistic achievements and to foster the cultural emancipation of the local population (Đurić 1990; Sibinović, Mežinski, Arsenjev 1994; Arsenjev 2011).

There are several factors that can be regarded as critical in the process of cultural engagement of Russians in the Yugoslav regions. First of all, Russian refugees were focused on preservation of their national identity, hoping to return to their homeland in the near future. The idea of temporariness of their status led them to concentrate on the activities that helped the safeguarding of their cultural habits and lifestyle, sometimes leading them into social and cultural isolation from the host community. Moreover, some of the Russian refugees aimed at the continuation of their professional careers and improvement of individual accomplishments. Secondly, willingly or not, many Russians decided to conform to the specific character of Yugoslav social, economic, cultural and political reality trying to achieve some level of social integration.

The fact that Serbian parts of the Kingdom suffered massive destruction during the World War I, which heavily affected its economy, population and infrastructure, had a dual effect on the Russian refugees. On the one hand, the low standard of living in Serbia of that time contributed, to a certain degree, to the deterioration of their already fragile economic position. On the other hand, due to enormous

³ On the results of research on the number of Russian refugees in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and the phases of their settlement see: Maliković 1993; Jovanović 1994; Sibinović 1994; Jovanović 1996; Arsenjev 2011.

depopulation, Serbian regions increasingly needed human resources as a crucial factor for the economic recovery. Therefore, it is not surprising that a large part of Russian community, because of the prevalence of the individuals with higher and secondary education, with sufficient work experience and multilingual abilities, had easy access to the growing bureaucracy of the newly formed state, including the posts in the academic, artistic, scientific and cultural institutions. Moreover, many Russian emigrants, by virtue of their knowledge and areas of expertise, helped the instalment of diverse scientific, economic and artistic practices.

The contribution of Russians in the field of music was investigated by many authors in the past three decades, including the ones who participated in the very influential scientific conference in 1993 organised by the Department for Slavic Studies of the Faculty of Philology of the University of Belgrade, dedicated exclusively to the research of different aspects of life of Russian diaspora settled in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Kingdom of Yugoslavia (Mosusova 1994; Pavlović 1994; Petrović 1994; Šukuljević-Marković 1994). Majority of them, including, Roksanda Pejović (2001), Aleksej Arsenjev (1994, 2011), Milica Jovanović (1994) and Melita Milin (2003) focused on the activities of Russian emigrants in the National Theatres in Belgrade and Novi Sad, or, more precisely, on their role in the establishment of opera/operetta and ballet ensembles, as well as opera/operetta and ballet productions. Based on the date collected from the press of the interwar period and from the published testimonies of the contemporaries, these historians and musicologists gave insights on the accomplishments of individual Russian opera singers, ballet dancers, directors, costume designers and choreographers, discussing in detail the comments and views of the local music critics and music specialists.

Because of the specific objectives of the aforementioned research, the diverse music activities of Russian emigrants that took place outside the state-funded institutions were excluded from the authors' perspective. In order to examine more closely the scope and characteristics of the music activities of Russian emigrants in the sphere of commercial or popular culture, it was necessary to go through a number of archival documents and published sources, including music scores, press articles, music reviews, memoirs, etc. Most importantly, I surveyed the collection of archival documents of the Ministry of Education of the Kingdom of

Yugoslavia and its Artistic Department which is the property of the Archive of Yugoslavia. To be precise, a part of the fund number 66 which consist of folders Nos. 359, 599, 617, 619, 623, 624 and 625 came under detailed scrutiny.

After analysing the data collected from both archival and published sources it was possible to partially reconstruct the types of musical forms and genres that occupied a prominent place in the field of commercial culture in the interwar Belgrade. Using the results of my previous research on the music programme of Radio Belgrade between two world wars (Vesić 2013) and the music publishing house founded by Jovan Frajt (Vesić 2014) that, among other things, appoint to the tendencies in music consumption of the inhabitants of Belgrade, as well as the results of the historians' research on the sociocultural and socioeconomic phenomena in the capital during that period (Marković 1990; Dimić 1996), I was able to assess the factors that influenced the participation of Russian emigrants in the emancipation of commercial or popular culture in Belgrade, and, also, their contribution to the processes of transformations and differentiations of Belgrade's urban culture.

The activities of Russian emigrants in the spheres of popular and commercial culture

The cross-examination of data shows the prevalence of four types of musical and theatrical genres among the Russian emigrants that could be classified as belonging to the commercial culture. One of them was the early twentieth-century operetta of Franz Lehár, Emerich Kálmán and a number of other Russian, Czech, French, Austrian and Yugoslav composers that resembled in many aspects the so-called 'boulevard theatre plays'. Although Lehár's and Kalman's works with their colourful and brilliant orchestration, skilled vocal arrangements and masterful use of popular dances differed profoundly from the less ambitious forms of musical theatre of that time, they were not attributed artistic value, due to the strict aesthetic criteria adopted by the music professionals and officials in the interwar Belgrade. A negative view of the operettas from the beginning of the twentieth century was common among Belgrade music professionals and critics in the interwar period (see Pejović 1999: 80–87, 135–140, 179–185). According to them, none of the modern operettas, including the Viennese ones, were considered as artistically valuable, and,

therefore, they were not perceived as appropriate for the repertoires of serious theatrical institutions.⁴ For example, Stevan Hristić, the director of Opera of the National Theatre in Belgrade, gave an opinion on the possibility of opening private theatrical companies in the Kingdom of SCS and proposed to the Artistic Department of the Ministry of Education to radicalise their cultural policies by not letting the Austrian and Hungarian operettas spread throughout Yugoslav regions.⁵

Apart from operettas, Russian emigrants often took part in the production of cabarets that contained musical parts along with dancing acts, comedy sketches etc. Finally, Russians were involved in the production and distribution of popular songs or the so-called *schlagers*, as well as the performances of Gypsy and Russian folk songs and folk dances that were popular in urban centres of the pre-revolutionary Russia.

The archival records reveal a number of individuals, mainly Russian operatic singers, ballet dancers and pianists who participated in the productions of operetta works in Belgrade and other urban centres of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. These artists were gathered in small private theatrical companies that gave performances in popular Belgrade restaurants, hotels and halls, as well as the concert halls and theaters in Vojvodina, Croatia and Central Serbia and many spa centres. Relying on the data from archival documents, I made a list of companies in chronological order with the names of their owners/managers, members and repertoire (Table 1).

⁴ Many negative remarks on the operetta and cabaret performances made by the officials can be found in folders Nos. 599, 619 and 623 of the Fund 66 – Ministry of Education of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Archive of Yugoslavia.

⁵ 'A Note to the Artistic Department of the Ministry of Education of the Kingdom of SCS', 2 August, 1925. Archive of Yugoslavia, Fund 66 – Ministry of Education of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, folder 599. Hristić argued that the modern operettas only served as mediators for the so-called *schlagers* – 'the latest product from Vienna'. He understood the economic reasons that governed the work of private companies, but, at the same time, warned about the devastating effect of Austrian operettas on the local culture. The same remarks can be found in a letter from the management of the National Theatre in Belgrade to the Artistic Department of the Ministry of Education (1 August, 1926. Archive of Yugoslavia, Fund 66 – Ministry of Education of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, folder 619). While giving an insight into the repertorial policies of the regional theatres of the Kingdom of SCS, the management warned against 'frivolous operettas from Budapest and Vienna'.

Table 1. *List of operetta companies owned by or employing Russian emigrants*

<p>Slobodno pozorište [Free theatre], address: unknown owner: Vojislav Turinski (opera singer); members: unknown; period of activity: January 1925–?; repertoire: unknown</p> <p>Operetta company, address: Jakšićeva 11 owners: Vera Burago Balaban (operetta singer, director and producer) and Ivan Dinulović (operetta singer); members: 10 professional musicians; period of activity: June 1925–?; repertoire: <i>The Csárdás Queen</i> (E. Kálmán), <i>A Night of love</i> (Valentinov), <i>The geisha</i> (S. Jones), <i>The Countess Marry</i> (E. Kálmán).</p> <p>Operetta company, address: restaurant <i>Ruska kruna</i> [Russian crown], Belgrade owner: Sergije Strahov (Sergei Strakhov); members: female singers – Elsa Radomskaia, Ol’ga Ianchevetskaia, Ekatarina Dej-Avrampenka, Lydia Ivanova, Milica Enwald, Ivanka Rajković, Nada Petrović, male singers – Viktor Stajnić, Aleksandar Cvetković, Vladimir Volzhskii, Sergei Strakhov, Vladimir Konchakh; Margareta Froman (ballet dancer), Antipov and Mamontov (painters), Meshcherskaia and Zaidado (pianists); period of activity: November 1928–?; repertoire: unknown</p> <p>Vodvilj opereta [Vaudeville-Operetta], address: travelling theatre owner: Alexei Orlov; members: female singers – M. Ercegović, M. Kralj, G. Istomina, Z. Zorina, J. Polyremin, K. Potemkina, I. Rajković, A. Sanuarskaia, male singers – V. Volzhskii, I. Gorskii-Horak, I. Gudara, V. Masl, A. Orlov, A. Ostrovskii, V. Smolniov, A. Tamarov, A. Topornin; period of activity: March 1929–?; repertoire: <i>The volunteer Zoro</i> (Aleksin), <i>Chump lady</i> (Bremau?), <i>Waves of passion</i>, <i>A night of love</i> (Valentinov), <i>The apartment of Madam Emeraldine</i> (Varney), <i>The geisha</i> (S. Jones), <i>Susanne</i> (Giloda), <i>Vagabond</i>, <i>The csárdás Queen</i> (E. Kálmán), <i>Count of Luxembourg</i> (F. Lehár), <i>Polish blood</i> (O. Nedbal), <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (Nelson), <i>Sweet nightmare</i> (Sarmatov), etc.</p> <p>Kooperativna beogradska opereta [Cooperative Belgrade Operetta], address: terrace <i>Kleridž</i> [Claridge] owners: Iraida Komarevskaia, Ivan Đurđević, Božidar Vranicki, Anton Žunić and Milivoj Nikolić; members: 45 musicians and technical personnel (12); period of activity: July 1937–?; repertoire: <i>Little Florami</i> (Ivo Tijardović), <i>Bosnian Love</i> (domestic composer), <i>Song of Tahiti</i> (domestic composer), <i>The Countess Marry</i> (E. Kálmán), <i>Saint Anton</i> (J. Beneš), <i>Kiss and nothing more</i> (foreign composer), <i>Silva/The csárdás Queen</i> (E. Kálmán) etc.</p>
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What is noticeable from the above list is the fact that various operetta companies mainly relied on a very similar repertoire. A majority of them shared an affinity for modern European operettas including French, Austro-Hungarian and Slavic as the most prominent. ‘The Cooperative Belgrade Operetta’ company certainly held a unique place among other companies, considering the sheer number of works on its repertoire and the orientation towards Yugoslav operetta composers. The archival documents that I have examined reveal that most of the companies were short-lived, being active in average from several months to one year.

Except for the operetta companies, Russian emigrants were also members of many private theatrical companies dedicated to the performances of cabaret or variety plays. There are archival records that confirm the existence of several companies of that kind: ‘Be-Ba-Bo’, ‘Firebird’, ‘The Jolly Theatre Kri-Kri’, ‘The Jolly Hen’ and ‘Russian Grotesque-Artistic Theatre’ (Table 2).

Table 2. *List of theatre companies dedicated to cabaret and variety plays owned by Russian emigrants*

<p>Vesela kokoška [The Jolly Hen], address: unknown owner: Evgeni Gabaev; members: 14 artists; period of activity: August 1926–1929?; repertoire: concerts and variety shows</p> <p>Bi-Ba-Bo [Be-Ba-Bo], address: restaurant <i>Zagreb</i>, traveling theatre owner: Iasha Iakovlev; members: unknown; period of activity: December 1926–1929; repertoire: cabaret-like plays</p> <p>Ruski groteskni-umetnički teatar [Russian grotesque-artistic theatre], address: the hall of palace <i>Luksor</i> owner: unknown; members: unknown; period of activity: October 1926–?; repertoire: cabaret plays</p> <p>Žar-ptica [Firebird], address: travelling theatre owner: Petr Shtrunov; members: Borovitskaia and Velbitskaia (female opera singers), Tarakanova (actress), Pashkova (ballet dancer), Enwald (ballet dancer), Bajdarov and Vladimirov (male opera singers), Leonskii (actor) and Potekhin; period of activity: April 1927–?; repertoire: dramatic works by foreign and domestic writers for chamber theatres and fragments from operas, operettas, dramas and ballets.</p> <p>Veselo pozorište Kri-Kri [The Jolly theater Kri-Kri], address: unknown owner: Alexei Orlov; members: male – M. Minyin, D. Orlov, V. Turoverov, A. Orlov, A. Tamarov, A. Toparnik, female – M. Enwald, L. Aksenovaia, E. Potemkina, I. Charskaia, V. Istomina; period of activity: April 1927–1928; repertoire: unknown</p>

The ‘Firebird’ theatre was focused on the ‘family-friendly pieces including the dramatic works of foreign and domestic writers for chamber theatres and fragments from operas, operettas, dramas and ballets’.⁶ On the other hand, ‘Russian grotesque-artistic theatre’ produced cabaret-like performances. Table 3 shows the example of a typical play performed by

⁶ ‘A plea to the director of the artistic department’, 20 April 1928, Archive of Yugoslavia, Fund 66 – Ministry of Education of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, folder 617.

that company. It consisted of two parts which were based on the musical segments (songs, folk songs and a fragment from opera), dancing numbers, musical parodies and short dramatic sketches. Unlike operetta companies owned by Russian emigrants, the troupes dedicated to cabaret-like performances were active for a longer period – from one to several years in average. This can be explained by the less-demanding character of cabaret performances, both in aesthetic and economic terms. Actually, the lesser requirements in the performance process, in addition to a flexible and eclectic structure of cabaret plays, made it easier for the companies to change performance venues and the performance structure itself and, therefore, to adapt to the audience's preferences.

Table 3. *Content of a cabaret play performed at 'Russian grotesque-artistic theater' [Ruski groteskni-umetnički teatar]*

Part I: 1. The arrival of aeroplane, the song of Russian grotesque theater (singers: Sara Lin, R. Raitch, V. Kirasnov, A. Dolinin, N. Lukashevitch, V. Konchakh, 2. The dream of a child (acting), 3. Balangatchyk (acting), 4. Sailors at Volga (Russian folk song), 5. Russian village festivity

Part II: 6. Dwarfs (male dance ensemble), 7. Kozakhs of Don (male dance ensemble), 8. Spanish fan (dancing by E. Arison), 9. In the moonlight (acting), Italian painting (fragment from an opera), 11. Our choir (parody)

announcer: Anna Morozova; director: M. Minin; music director: V. Lakhnovskii; ballet master: E. Arison

Apart from contributing to the development of popular/commercial music theatre in many Yugoslav regions, Russian emigrants took part in other spheres of popular culture. According to the available data from the historical study by Ostoja Đurić (1990) and preserved published music scores from the interwar period, Russian emigrants had an important role in the production and distribution of popular music of that period. Among them the distinguished place belonged to Sergei Strakhov (in Serbian: Sergije Strahov), one of the most prominent members of the Association of Russian writers and journalists between two world wars. Strakhov wrote the lyrics of the majority of popular songs/or *schlagers* composed by authors from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and also adapted

numerous texts of foreign popular songs (mainly German, Italian or Russian) to Serbian language.⁷ For instance, Strakhov collaborated with Jovan (Jan) Frajt and composers like Nikola Butaš, Jovan Urban, Lav Veselovski, etc. and, at the same time, adapted texts of many popular *schlagers* of that time. Apart from that, Strakhov dedicated himself to the publishing of popular songs/*schlagers* through his own edition – ‘Edition Strahov’. Dozens of volumes from his collection are preserved at the National Library of Serbia and the Library of Matica srpska in Novi Sad.⁸

In Strakhov’s published collection one finds numerous arrangements of Russian urban folk songs that gained popularity in Yugoslav urban centres in interwar period with the help of famous Yugoslav and Russian singers of that time. Among them, an important place belongs to a Russian emigrant, Ol’ga Ianchevetskaia (in Serbian: Olga Jančevecka), who performed regularly on Radio Belgrade shows, as well as at some popular Belgrade’s venues. Her repertoire consisted exclusively of Russian romances. Except Ianchevetskaia, Russian urban folk song heritage was spread in Yugoslav towns owing to interpretations of Iurii Morfezi, Anna Stepovaia, Nadezhda Plevitskaia and others. There are records of their performances in Belgrade (Morfezi), Zemun, Zagreb, Sarajevo, Ljubljana, Niš, Subotica, Veliki Bečkerek, Šabac, Negotin (Stepovaia) and Zemun and Novi Sad (Plevitskaia) in the archival documents.⁹

Beside chamber-like character of performances of Russian urban folk songs typical, for example, for Stepovaia’s and Plevitskaia’s concerts, there are testimonies of a more spectacular type of performances of the same

⁷ Strakhov also composed many popular songs in Serbian in the rhythm of tango or foxtrott and published them through his own edition – for example, *Ta idite u peršun!* [Damn you!], *Sunce, more i ti* [Sun, sea and you], *Dve, tri suze* [Two, three teardrops], *Još pet minuta* [Five more minutes], *Ni jedna, ni druga, ni treća* [Neither the first, nor the second, nor the third], *Čik pogodi* [Just guess], *Pod južnim suncem* [Under the southern sun], *Šta ćeš, takav je život!* [What can you do, that’s life], etc. It is important to notice that Strakhov was the owner and member of operetta company founded in the late 1920s (see Table 1).

⁸ Strahov’s published music scores that have been preserved can be browsed at the so-called Virtual Library of Serbia (Cobib.sr) available at: <http://www.vbs.rs/scripts/cobiss?ukaz=BASE&bno=99999&id=2324086982943347>.

⁹ Archive of Yugoslavia, Fund 66 – Ministry of Education of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, folders 624, 625.

repertoire characteristic for the exclusive bars in Belgrade and other Yugoslav urban centers of that time. The published memoirs of Dimitrije Knežev (1987: 41–66, 119–122) suggest that some elite Belgrade bars ('Kazbek' and 'Kasina') promoted a specific type of entertainment shows based on the performances of Gypsy and Russian urban folk music and dances by the famous amateur and opera singers, balalaika orchestras and dance groups. Unfortunately, there are no available records on the form and content of these shows, including the titles of songs, genres of the instrumental music, costumes, scenery, etc.

Conclusion

The results of the analysis of the collected data on the involvement of Russian emigrants in the commercial activities in the fields of music and theatre suggest a number of possibilities for further generalisations. They are valuable primarily for the broadening of existing insights on the socioeconomic position of Russian community in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia as well as its socioeconomic and sociocultural reality in interwar period. Namely, it is clear that, beside their proper education and experience, many Russian artists were unable to become full members of the ensembles in state-funded theatrical institutions, which could guarantee them a certain financial security and social privileges as well as a better basis for a more profound social integration. The reason for this was the fact that number of available posts in these institutions was limited and even tended to be reduced since the beginning of the economic crisis in the early 1930s. Therefore, numerous Russian opera singers, ballet dancers and musicians who found themselves outside the state-sponsored sphere and sought to secure regular incomes had two options – either to continue with their artistic careers, finding profitable ways to use their skills and talents or to reorient themselves professionally.

A number of Russian artists opted to risk, using their existing professional knowledge, by focusing on commercial segment of music and theatre, that is, to the genres of operettas and cabarets which gave them promising prospects. The dissolving of the regional operetta house in Osijek (Croatia) – the only established operetta ensemble with regular performances in the Kingdom of SCS/Yugoslavia in 1927, as well as the reduction of subsidies for central and regional theatres, brought on crisis

in the sector of commercial music theatre.¹⁰ The result of it was the scarcity of commercial theatrical productions for which there was a great demand according to many sources. For example, Vojislav Turinski, in his pleas to the Ministry of Education on 5 January and 22 April, 1925 for the foundation of 'Free theatre' company, claimed that Belgrade 'lacked one such (commercial, added by I.V.) theatre' and that 'the programs of state-funded theatres were too strict and purist'. He concluded that the 'expansion of "light" music was inevitable' and that the large part of the audience 'rightly requested the foundation of theatres dedicated to comedy and more commercial music genres'.¹¹ At the same time, reviews of the operatic performances in the National Theatre in Belgrade in the 1920s and 1930s showed that the audiences preferred to listen to 'less serious' works with comic or vaudeville-like content, thus showing more interest in the performances of operettas and *opera buffa* than the works of other kind (see Pejović: 1999, 80–87, 135–140, 179–185). A preference for more commercial products in the sphere of music and theatre is also confirmed by the polls and programmes of Radio Belgrade, published memoirs, press articles, etc. (Vesić 2014).

Both the decrease in number of performances in the sphere of popular/commercial music theatre and an expansion of the need for more commercial products among consumers in Yugoslav urban centres since the mid-1920s created the opportunity for many Russian artists to resolve their financial problems, at least for the short period of time, by founding private theatrical companies dedicated to operetta or cabaret performances or becoming their members. Because of the growing interest of Belgrade citizens for commercial products as well as the diversification of their taste throughout 1920s and 1930s, the possibilities for the employment of Russian artists were widening, which also affected their socioeconomic status in a positive way. Actually, Russian artists could find a new job opportunity more easily after the bankruptcy or dissolving of the private theatrical companies they belonged to, owing to the increasing number of private theatrical companies from the mid-1920s onwards, as well as their diversification, including companies oriented

¹⁰ On the effect of removing the Osijek operetta house from the Osijek regional theatre see Dragutinović 1928.

¹¹ See: Archive of Yugoslavia, Fund 66 – Ministry of Education of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Archive of Yugoslavia, folder 617.

exclusively to classical operetta repertoire, then, companies oriented to both classical and modern operetta repertoire, to merging popular opera and operetta fragments, to looser types of performances with the elements of spectacle (cabaret, music hall, music review, etc). This is also confirmed by the comparison of the lists of employees of different private companies which show the existence of the same artists. For instance, singers Milica Enwald, Ekaterina Potemkina, Alexei Orlov and Vladimir Volzhskii were members of several companies with operetta and cabaret repertoire in successive seasons.

On the other hand, the analysis of archival documents points to the financial fragility of the private music theatre companies which was probably the result of unstable economic standard of Yugoslav population and the state's cultural policy. The economic downfall caused by the World War I in the Serbian part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and, later on, the global crises in the first half of the 1930s that struck heavily the whole Yugoslav economy, had an overall negative impact on the sphere of urban entertainment by reducing the consumption rates and profits. Besides, the repressive cultural policy of Yugoslav officials contributed to the destabilisation of the 'entertainment sector' and, concurrently, threatened to prevent the gradual improvement of the socioeconomic position of Russian artists in the interwar period.¹²

¹² For example, when Iasha Iakovlev, the owner of the private company 'Be-Ba-Bo' (see Table 2) asked for permission to give performances, the director of the Artistic Department of the Ministry of Education imposed some restrictions – the company should not bear in its name the term 'theatre', it should focus to cabaret-like instead of dramatic performances and should not start the performances before 9pm (12 December, 1926. Archive of Yugoslavia, Fund 66 – Ministry of Education of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, folder 617). The answer to Iakovlev's plea was probably affected to a great extent by the director of the National Theatre in Belgrade, Milan Predić. In a letter to the director of the Artistic Department written on 30 October, 1926 Predić asked for the ban of the private theatre 'Be-Ba-Bo' and other companies that held performances in the famous taverns 'Takovo' and 'Slavija', because they were giving both cabaret-like and dramatic programmes. Predić saw them as threats to the National Theatre because the audiences preferred their informal atmosphere. 'It is known that tables where food and beverages are served attract the audience and damage the National Theatre, which has a role to emancipate the audience to a more noble type of entertainment' (30 October, 1926. Archive of Yugoslavia, Fund 66 – Ministry of Education of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Archive of Yugoslavia, folder 599).

According to available archival records, state bureaucrats as well as the management of the National Theatre struggled continually against the products that stood outside the high-art aesthetic and creative norms. Pointing to their ‘inadequate’ ethical, aesthetic and political content, they were trying to discourage their distribution and consumption by restrictions and bans. In that way, they also fought to secure the financial stability of state-funded theatres aiming at monopolisation of the sphere of entertainment and, at the same time, strict control of the field of cultural production. The elitist approach of the state officials, whether motivated by ideological or financial reasons, or both, indisputably restricted in a part the development of commercial culture and its diversification in Yugoslav urban centres in the interwar period.

Since there are no comprehensive studies of popular culture in the Kingdom of SCS/Yugoslavia, it is not easy to valorise the importance of reduced and fragmented data on the activities of Russian emigrants. Comparing and merging the results of different types of research on the popular culture of that period (both Yugoslav and European) and dispersed data on that topic from both unpublished and published sources could facilitate this undertaking. Based on my hitherto research of popular culture in the interwar Belgrade and Serbia, I may conclude that, thanks to their professional abilities and experience and their knowledge of a wide variety of popular musical and theatrical products of that period, Russian emigrants contributed thoroughly to the differentiation and sophistication of the local commercial culture, enriching the existing repertoire of genres and works with the inclusion of creations of their compatriots, as well as a large number of domestic and foreign composers.

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