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The Great War and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia The Legacy of an Enduring Conflict

Abstract: The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, officially named Yugoslavia after 1929, came into being on the ruins of the Habsburg Empire in 1918 after the immense war efforts and sacrifices endured by Serbia. The experience of anti-Habsburg struggle both before and after 1914 and the memory of some of the most difficult moments in the Great War left a deep imprint on the minds of policy-makers in Belgrade. As they believed that many dangers faced in the war were likely to be revived in the future, the impact of these experiences was instrumental to their post-war foreign policy and military planning. This paper looks at the specific ways in which the legacy of the Great War affected and shaped the (planned) responses of the Yugoslav government to certain crises and challenges posed to Yugoslavia and the newly-established order in the region. These concern the reaction to the two attempts of Habsburg restoration in Hungary in 1921, the importance of the Greek port of Salonica (Thessaloniki) for Yugoslavia's strategic and defence requirements, and military planning within the framework of the Little Entente (the defensive alliance between Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Romania) in the early 1930s. In addition, it is argued here that the legacy of Serbo-Croat differences during the war relating to the manner of their unification was apparent in the political struggle between Serbs and Croats during the two decades of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia's existence.

Keywords: Great War, Yugoslavia, legacy, Habsburg restoration, Salonica (Thessaloniki), military planning, Serbo-Croat conflict

The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (officially called Yugoslavia after 1929, although the Yugoslav name was used even earlier for both the state and the South Slavs) was one of the successor states that rose from the ashes of the Habsburg Monarchy at the end of the Great War.¹ Essentially formed by victorious Serbia, although it included former parts of Austria-Hungary, the newly-fledged country rested on the Serbian tradition of anti-Habsburg struggle that preceded the Great War. However, Yugoslavia was perhaps the most

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¹ For a long view of the creation of Yugoslavia see M. Ekmečić, *Stvaranje Jugoslavije 1790–1918*, 2 vols (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1989); D. Djordjević, ed., *The Creation of Yugoslavia* (Santa Barbara: Clio Books, 1980); D. T. Bataković, "The Balkan Piedmont. Serbia and the Yugoslav Question", *Dialogue* 10 (1994), 25–73.

complex country in Europe in terms of her ethnic and religious structure, as well as cultural and economic diversity. This was the legacy of the two vanquished empires, the Habsburg and the Ottoman, in whose place Yugoslavia emerged in the Balkans. The vestiges of Austria-Hungary, together with the precarious international situation in interwar Europe, in which Yugoslavia was especially exposed as it was surrounded with the revanchist neighbours, ensured that the long shadow of the Great War was cast on the Yugoslav Kingdom throughout its existence. This was equally true in the realm of foreign policy, military planning and internal politics, especially in relation to the Serbo-Croat conflict, in which the memory of the war and the lessons it offered left a deep imprint. It is the purpose of this paper to look more closely at the ways in which the legacy of the war haunted Yugoslav, particularly Serbian, policy-makers and how they dealt with the challenges it posed.

The most obvious danger to Yugoslavia and the newly-established order in Danubian Europe came from the possibility of a Habsburg restoration, which did not seem altogether unrealistic in the wake of the war. This peril was linked with Hungarian irredentism and revanchist aspirations. The Treaty of Trianon was not signed before 4 June 1920 and the Hungarian ruling circles denounced the dismemberment of the lands of the Crown of St. Stephen. Yugoslavia was unsettled with sizeable Magyar and German national minorities that would be naturally attracted to a Habsburg monarchy to which, after all, they had pledged their allegiance for centuries. All other malcontents, especially separatists in Croatia, could also rally under the Habsburg banner to further their aims.² In the spring of 1919, the Yugoslav delegation at the Paris peace conference refused the demand of the Entente Powers to contribute troops to suppress the Bolshevik revolution in Hungary, since they suspected a plot to restore the Habsburgs and revive some sort of a dual Austro-Hungarian state. Nikola Pašić, the most prominent Serbian statesman and head of the delegation, was adamant that to assist such a development in Hungary would be a “colossal sin that would destroy our unity and freedom”.³ In early 1920, there seemed to be a real danger of an attempt to reinstate the Archduke Joseph Habsburg, and Belgrade and Prague joined forces to bring pressure to bear on the Entente Powers to prevent it. On 2 February 1920, the Allied Ambassadors in Paris accepted the resolution

² B. Hrabak, “Frankovačka emigrantska secesionistička organizacija i Hrvatska legija u Madjarskoj (1919–1921)”, *Zbornik Matice srpske za istoriju* 56 (1997), 97–123.

³ M. Milošević and B. Dimitrijević, *Nikola Pašić – Predsedniku vlade, strogo poverljivo, lično, Pariz, 1919–1920: Pašićeva pisma sa konferencije mira* (Zaječar: Zadužbina “Nikola Pašić,” 2005), doc. 20. Delegation to Prime Minister, str. conf. no. 13, 14 April 1919; for a discussion of the Habsburg problem see A. Mitrović, *Jugoslavija na konferenciji mira 1919–1920* (Belgrade: Zavod za izdavanje udžbenika, 1969), 186–192.

stating that the restoration of the Habsburg dynasty would be “neither recognised nor tolerated” by the Allied Powers.⁴

The ex-emperor of Austria-Hungary, Karl I Habsburg – who had reigned in Hungary as King Károly IV – was in exile in Switzerland and he intended to reclaim his throne. It was with a view to preventing a Habsburg restoration and safeguarding the *status quo* that Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia signed on 14 August 1920 a defensive treaty directed against Hungary, thus initiating the alliance which came to be known as the Little Entente. Italy and Yugoslavia concluded their own anti-Habsburg convention which formed part of the Rapallo Treaty, setting down the frontiers between the two countries.⁵ The Little Entente soon came to be tested when on 24 March 1921 Karl Habsburg sneaked out of his exile and reached Hungary via Austria. The escapade was met by a firm attitude on the part of Pašić who embarked on an energetic action in order to evict Karl from Hungary. He immediately proposed to Czechoslovakia, Romania and Italy to make a joint demarche in Budapest to the effect that their ministers would be recalled from Hungary if Karl did not leave the country; to jointly request from France and Britain to support their action in Budapest; and to lodge a protest in Bern because it allowed Karl to endanger European peace.⁶ However, the Hungarian Regent, Miklós Horthy, persuaded the ex-emperor to leave Hungary, which the latter eventually did under the protection of officers of the Entente Powers.

Karl's adventure had an important and lasting consequence insofar as Romania joined the Little Entente: she signed an agreement with Czechoslovakia just eighteen days after Karl's expulsion from Hungary (23 April). On 7 June 1921, Pašić and the Romanian Prime Minister, Take Ionescu, concluded an agreement on the same lines in Belgrade. As Pašić put it to Beneš, this was “a significant accomplishment the purpose of which is to maintain peace and secure the peace treaties which are the foundation of the future of our coun-

⁴ *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, ed. E. L. Woodward and R. Butler (London: HMSO, 1946–), ser. I, vol. XII, no. 80, Derby to Curzon, Paris, 2 February 1920; the text of the resolution is appended.

⁵ C. Sforza, *Diplomatic Europe since the Treaty of Versailles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1928), 101–102; I. Lederer, *Yugoslavia at the Paris Peace Conference: a Study in Frontier-making* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 307.

⁶ Arhiv Jugoslavije [Archives of Yugoslavia; hereafter AJ], Belgrade, London Legation, 341, folder I, confidential archive for 1921, Pašić to Prague, Rome and Bucharest Legations [forwarded to London Legation], 2 April 1921, conf. no. 4130; for an account of the Habsburg restoration attempts see Dj. Knežević, “Kraljevina Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca i dva neuspela pokušaja restauracije Habsburga 1921. godine”, *Vojnoistorijski glasnik* 18/1 (1967), 117–138, and V. Vinaver, *Jugoslavija i Madjarska 1918–1933* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1971), 153–160.

tries.”⁷ However, on 21 October 1921, Karl and the ex-empress Zita flew to Hungary, gathered some loyal troops and again descended on Budapest. Horthy reacted with force and stopped him after a minor skirmish on the outskirts of the capital. The Little Entente reacted even more decisively than in March and mobilization was ordered and implemented in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, though not in Romania. The Conference of Ambassadors struck a balance between Hungary and her neighbours: Budapest was requested to declare all the Habsburgs barred from wearing the crown of St. Stephen and the Little Entente to refrain from military measures. In early November, the Hungarian National Assembly passed a law that excluded the House of Habsburg from the throne. Karl was removed from Hungary on a British vessel and later interned on the Portuguese island of Madeira where he died in April 1922. But the prospect of a Habsburg restoration not just in Hungary, but also in Austria continued to daunt Yugoslavia and her allies. As late as December 1936, the Yugoslav government suspected that preparations for that purpose were underway in Vienna under the aegis of Italy and Vatican.⁸ Indeed, the Habsburg issue was regularly discussed in foreign ministries of the Great Powers and remained a matter of diplomatic exchanges for the rest of interwar period, but it never again created such an acute crisis.

Another controversy in Yugoslav foreign and military policy that essentially derived from the painful experience of the Great War concerned the relations with friendly Greece. Athens was anxious that Yugoslavia might seek an outlet to the Aegean Sea by taking from her the port of Salonica (Thessaloniki), whether alone or in conjunction with Bulgaria. The Yugoslav demand for a free commercial zone in Salonica with extensive rights that infringed on the Greek sovereignty was a major theme behind Belgrade’s denouncing the 1913 pact of friendship with Greece in 1924 - it would be resumed five years later. In reality, Yugoslav interest in Salonica was grounded in strategic considerations rather than economic necessity and it concerned defense requirements unrelated to any alleged plans for territorial aggrandizement. The importance of Salonica in Yugoslav strategic thinking stemmed from the retreat that the Serbian Army had had to undertake in the fall of 1915 after having been exposed to the combined offensive of the much stronger Austro-Hungarian, German and Bulgarian forces. As it became clear that the army would have to retreat from Serbian territory or capitulate, the plan was to withdraw southwards down the Vardar valley and join the Franco-British troops which had occupied Salonica and its sur-

⁷ AJ, London Legation, 341, folder 1, confidential archive for 1921, Pašić to Gavrilović, 8 June 1921, conf. no. 7222; also Pašić to Gavrilović, 31 May 1921, str. conf. no. 486; Gavrilović to Pašić, 3 June 1921, no number.

⁸ AJ, London Legation, 1936, I-4 (Austria, Hungary), Stojadinović to Grujić, 25 December 1936, str. conf. no. 2063/V.

roundings.⁹ The Bulgarian attack in the rear cut off the envisaged fallback route and compelled the Serbian army, accompanied by considerable number of civilians, to retreat over the inhospitable Albanian mountains under difficult winter conditions. The Serbs suffered horrific losses until they had reached the coast and had been transported by the Allied shipping to the island of Corfu. This traumatic collective memory was termed the “Albanian Calvary” and remained alive in the minds of policy-makers after the war. The recuperated Serbian Army launched, along with its French and British allies, an offensive from Salonica which ended not just in the liberation of Serbia, but was also a decisive campaign of the war as it forced both Bulgaria and Austria-Hungary to capitulate.

The prominent Yugoslav diplomat and later minister at the Court, Milan Antić, succinctly explained the importance of the fighting at Salonica for both the past and the future: “The Salonica front in the First World War left such a deep impression ... in our army that it became an integral part of our struggle for liberation and unification and its history. Salonica entered into strategy and became an integral part of operational necessity of our army in defence of the country.”¹⁰ Such an impact was amplified by the strategic position of the new Yugoslavia which was surrounded from the west, north and east by hostile or potentially inimical revisionist neighbours. The only frontiers that seemed safe were those with the allied Romania and Greece. In addition, as early as during the Paris Peace Conference, Italy, the most dangerous neighbour, made sustained efforts, later to be continued and crowned with success, to entrench itself in Albania at Yugoslavia’s flank.¹¹ From the strategic point of view the Yugoslavs were frightened of the peril of the Italians linking from Albania with the Bulgarians across the Vardar valley in Serb Macedonia, thus cutting off the vital Belgrade–Salonica railway in much the same fashion as the Bulgarian army had done in 1915. This consideration was central to Yugoslav military planning. At the time of considerable tension in relations with Rome, Major Antoine Béthouart, French military attaché in Belgrade, was told by the assistants of the chief of the Yugoslav General Staff that neutralisation of Bulgaria would be a primary goal of the army in case of a general war, even at the price of a temporary withdrawal at the western front against Italy. Another military attaché, Colonel Moritz von Faber du Faur from Germany, was of opinion on the eve of the Second World War that Yugoslavia viewed Greece as a bridge to Britain

⁹ A. Mitrović, *Srbija u Prvom svetskom ratu* (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1984), 252–253.

¹⁰ Arhiv Srpske akademije nauka i umetnosti [Archives of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts; hereafter ASANU], Belgrade, Milan Antić Papers, 14387/8662, undated Antić’s note.

¹¹ D. Bakić, “The Italo-Yugoslav Conflict over Albania: A View from Belgrade, 1919–1939”, *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 25/4 (2014), 592–612.

which she did not want to burn and it was this consideration that informed the attitude towards Salonica.¹² He was no doubt accurate in his assessment of the Yugoslav frame of mind. Aleksandar Cincar-Marković, Yugoslav foreign minister, argued in mid-February 1941 that it was better for Yugoslavia to fight the Germans than to let them have Salonica in which case they would “strangle us completely”.¹³ It was Belgrade’s strategic preoccupation with the Greek port that lay behind negotiations with Germany about Salonica in 1941 with a view to preventing other powers to take it from Greece and block Yugoslavia’s access to the Aegean Sea.

The notion of another general European war modelled on that of 1914–1918, which seemed increasingly likely to Belgrade in the 1930s, was also central to military planning against Hungary - and Bulgaria - within the framework of the Little Entente. On 11 May 1931, the Little Entente countries concluded a new tripartite military convention at Bucharest, which replaced all previous conventions and their annexes and modifications.¹⁴ This document also introduced a substantial change in the planned reaction of the Little Entente to potential Hungarian aggression. While heretofore no preparatory measures had been contemplated prior to a Hungarian attack on a member-state, the new convention went so far as to call for mobilization in anticipation of military action on the part of the enemy. This change was brought about by a new frame of mind in which the Hungarian danger was perceived in an entirely different context. Whereas during the 1920s conflict with the Magyars was considered a local affair, the grim outlook in Europe in the early 1930s suggested the possibility of a European war. Should that be the case, Hungary would naturally be expected to come down on the side of a German-led revisionist bloc but she would not present the main threat to the Little Entente. She would rather be a nuisance launching an attack to the rear of the Little Entente forces, the vast majority of which would be engaged elsewhere. In the view of the Little Entente’s military planners, such a contingency dictated a rapid full-scale attack that would knock Hungary out of war and enable the three allied countries to concentrate all their available troops against other more powerful enemies.

Simultaneously with the tripartite military convention, a new military convention between Yugoslavia and Romania dealing with the Bulgarian danger was concluded and annexed to the former instrument (ratified on 14 October 1932).¹⁵ The conventions were supplemented with operational plans designed to

¹² D. Bakić, “The Port of Salonica in Yugoslav Foreign Policy, 1919–1941”, *Balcanica* XLIII (2012), 197.

¹³ *Ibid.* 211–212.

¹⁴ M. Vanku, *Mala Antanta 1920–1938* (Titovo Užice: Dimitrije Tucović, 1969), 358–361.

¹⁵ Vojni arhiv [Military Archives; hereafter VA], Belgrade, register 17 [Army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia], box 105, folder 4, doc. 12.

meet different contingencies. The first plan was devised to respond to a Hungarian attack on Romania while the other two allies were not engaged elsewhere; the second one, between Yugoslavia and Romania, provided for coordinated action against Bulgaria were she to menace either country.¹⁶ In addition, a detailed plan was drawn up in case of a combined attack on the part of Hungary and Bulgaria on Romania.¹⁷ Once again, the assumption was that the conflagration would become a general one, and the aim was to defeat first the Magyars and then the Bulgarians, thus allowing a free hand for action on other fronts. The urgency of preparation for armed conflict seemed to be all the greater in light of the erroneous conviction that the other side had already reached a formal understanding for joint action. The Yugoslav military attaché in Budapest assured his superiors in Belgrade that a military alliance of some sort had been concluded between Hungary and Italy following Dino Grandi's, Italian foreign minister's, visit to Budapest and the return visit to Rome of General Gyula Gömbös, the Hungarian Defence Minister, in 1929.¹⁸ This assumption was commonly held to be true among the diplomatic corps in Budapest because close relations existed between the two General Staffs. The latest preoccupations of the Little Entente's military commanders reached their logical denouement at the Prague meeting of 14 December 1931 in the drafting of the first war plan for a full-blown general conflict on the pattern of the Great War.¹⁹ The work of the General Staffs' representatives was continued in Belgrade where another two versions of general conflict plans were adopted on 17 November 1932. The worst-case scenario for Belgrade envisaged a simultaneous attack on Yugoslavia by Italy, Hungary, Albania, and Bulgaria, together with Soviet and Bulgarian aggression on Romania and an Austro-German offensive against Czechoslovakia. Another plan assumed Bulgarian neutrality, while Hungary would attack Yugoslavia instead of Czechoslovakia.²⁰ All this meticulous contingency planning eventually amounted to nothing, but it clearly demonstrated that the military leadership of

¹⁶ VA, register 17, box 105, folder 4, doc. 14 and 15 respectively. Both scenarios were deemed highly unlikely except as an attempt to provoke a wider conflict.

¹⁷ VA, register 17, box 105, folder 4, doc. 16.

¹⁸ AJ, Bucharest Legation, 395-22-220, confidential no. 22389, subject: Checking news of a military alliance between Italy and Hungary, Political Department of the Foreign Ministry to Minister, 12 November 1930.

¹⁹ VA, register 17, box 105, folder 4, doc. 20. Hypothetical situation presaged in "Projet No 1 CG [Conflit Generale]": Czechoslovakia was being attacked by Germany, Austria and Hungary, while Yugoslavia was being invaded by Italy, Albania and Bulgaria, and Romania by the Soviet Union and Bulgaria.

²⁰ VA, register 17, box 106, folder 1, doc. 6, "Projet No 3 CG" and doc. 7, "Projet No 2 CG" respectively. See doc. 2 in the same folder for a protocol on delimitation of the three occupation zones that were to be used to carve Hungary up in case of war.

Yugoslavia, just like those of Czechoslovakia and Romania, regarded the repetition of an armed conflict with their former enemies highly likely and spared no effort to meet it prepared.

As for the internal struggle between the Serbs and Croats in Yugoslavia, it has been noted that it was essentially “an issue of the Jacobin state versus the old Habsburg constitutional complexity of historic units”.²¹ The Serbs had lived in their independent national and unitary state for decades before the First World War (since the 1878 Congress of Berlin) and saw no reason to change that in a new state which was predicated on the national unity of South Slavs (Serbs, Croats and Slovenes) expressed through slogans “one people with three names” or “the three tribes of the same [Yugoslav] nation”, reflecting their common ethnic origins and language - as opposed to religious differences. For them, the complex constitutional solutions advocated by Zagreb smacked too much of the hated and dismantled Austria-Hungary and were not compatible with the notion of a strong and powerful state. In contrast, the Croats had been part of the multinational Habsburg monarchy for centuries and used to having their status arranged through negotiations and contracts such as that of 1868 concluded between them and the Hungarians (*Nagodba*) on the pattern of the Compromise between the Austrians and Hungarians concluded a year earlier. In their dealings with Budapest and Vienna, the Croats had based their autonomous status on the concept of Croatian state right, an equivalent of the Hungarian historical claim to the lands of St. Stephen that took no account of ethnic structure of the territories that Hungary comprised. Regardless of the fact that much of Croatian historical and state rights were, in fact, nominal and that the Croatian Diet (*Sabor*) had dissolved itself prior to the creation of Yugoslavia, political elites from Zagreb clung to their concept of Croatia’s status in a common state with the Serbs.

A cleavage in the vision of a prospective Yugoslav state was apparent during the First World War and it was reflected in a clash between the Serbian government headed by Pašić and the Yugoslav Committee, an organization of the Yugoslav exiles from Austria-Hungary. It was Pašić who initiated the formation of the Yugoslav Committee, which he envisaged as a purely propaganda bureau that was supposed to facilitate the achievement of a Yugoslav union, Serbia’s proclaimed war goal after December 1914. He also financed the activities of émigrés gathered in the committee, with the notable exception of two Croat politicians from Dalmatia, Frano Supilo and Ante Trumbić. However, these two Croats were the leading members of the Yugoslav Committee and held their own distinct views on the constitutional arrangement of a prospective Yugoslav state that was supposed to preserve the autonomous rights of Croa-

²¹ S. Trifković, “The First Yugoslavia and Origins of Croatian Separatism”, *East European Quarterly* 26/3 (1992), 355.

tia.²² Although Supilo died during the war, Trumbić was the president and most influential member of the committee, and he gradually came to oppose the official Serbian policy embodied in Pašić. In July 1917, the Serbian government and the Yugoslav Committee held a conference on the Greek soil and issued the well-known Corfu declaration that confirmed their dedication to the formation of a Yugoslav state, whereas details of constitutional arrangement were left to be resolved later by a constitutional assembly. This glossed over the differences that existed between Pašić and Trumbić for the sake of presenting a united front against Italian pretensions on the Slovene- and Croat-populated lands and impressing the Entente Powers.²³ It is interesting to note that even the name of Yugoslavia was a matter of contention, since the Croats favoured it on the grounds that it emphasised the Yugoslav as opposed to an exclusively Serb character of a future state. Pašić and his Radicals, on the contrary, took a dim view of the Yugoslav name as it echoed the Austrian concept of Yugoslav unity within the trialist framework of the Habsburg Monarchy. This practically meant that the unification of Yugoslavs in Austria-Hungary would be carried out contrary to Serbia's ambitions and goals, even in respect of the Serb population outside Serbia. Therefore, the Serbian Radical government frowned upon such name as being an Austrian brainchild "directed against the Serb name".²⁴ Fearing Serbia's predominance, Trumbić and his supporters came into open conflict with Pašić in 1918 and advocated something of a dual confederation under the Karadjordjević dynasty, in which pre-war Serbia and the Yugoslav lands of the former Habsburg Monarchy would be two equal constituent units. This was the background against which the Geneva declaration was made in November 1918 resulting from a conference between Pašić and the representatives of the newly-formed National Council from Zagreb, a revolutionary government of the Yugoslav-populated Habsburg lands, Serbian opposition parties and the Yugoslav Committee. Having been isolated, Pašić was forced on that occasion to accept the requests of the Yugoslav Committee in order to preserve the appearance of Yugoslav unity before the Entente Powers and European public opinion. He accepted the principles of an essentially confederal constitution, which was a negation of his own unitary conceptions.²⁵ But ministers in his government re-

²² A. Dragnich, *Serbia, Nikola Pašić and Yugoslavia* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1974); Dj. Stanković, *Nikola Pašić i jugoslovensko pitanje*, 2 vols (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1985).

²³ D. Janković, *Jugoslovensko pitanje i Krfska deklaracija 1917. godine* (Beograd: Savremena administracija, 1967).

²⁴ *Krfska konferencija* (Belgrade: Štamparija "Škerlić", 1934), 82, 84.

²⁵ B. Krizman, "Ženevska konferencija o ujedinjenju 1918. godine", *Istorijski glasnik* 1–2 (1958), 3–32; D. Janković, "Ženevska konferencija o stvaranju jugoslovenske zajednice 1918. godine", *Istorija XX veka* 5 (1963), 225–262, and "Još o Ženevskoj konferenciji o stvaranju

signed in protest and thus invalidated the Geneva agreement. It was the Serbian military victory and the prospect of annexation of large parts of Croat territory by Italian troops that decided the matter and brought about the Yugoslav unification on 1 December 1918 under the Serbian terms.

During the peace conference in Paris, the Serbs and Croats in the Yugoslav delegation presented a united front, despite their occasional frictions, in order to secure the best possible territorial settlement. The conflict continued nevertheless with the Croat opposition to the centralist St. Vitus (*Vidovdan*) constitution of 1921 both before and after its adoption. The Croat opposition took the shape of passive resistance of the Croat Peasant Party (CPP), which became a virtual Croat national movement led by mercurial Stjepan Radić, to the very existence of a unitary Yugoslavia.²⁶ In 1925, Radić came to an agreement with the Pašić government and it seemed that Serbo-Croat internecine strife had been finally brought to an end. However, Radić's death at the hands of a Serbian member of parliament in 1928 led to Croats' abandoning state institutions and disputing once again the legitimacy of a unitary Yugoslavia. The introduction of King Alexander's dictatorship next year and the imposition of integral Yugoslavism, an ideology aimed at suppressing Serb, Croat and Slovene national identity alike, only exacerbated the situation in the country. Radić's successor, Vladimir Maček, refused any cooperation with the government in the existing constitutional framework: he wanted a highly autonomous status of Croatia within Yugoslavia, or alternatively an independent Croatia.²⁷ On 7 November 1932, the Croat opposition issued the Zagreb Points (*Zagrebačke punktacije*) that called for the return to the pre-constitutional situation of 1918 from which a negotiated settlement between the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes would determine the internal composition of the country. The resolution vaguely mentioned "the association of interests" based on the freely expressed will of the constituent units. Trumbić, the author of the text and now formally a member of the CPP, claimed that such a state would not be a federation, "even such as Switzerland".²⁸ Clearly, the Croat demands increased radically and surpassed those made by Trumbić and Supilo during the war; they most resembled a kind of personal union in which constituent parts of the country would be nearly independent and only

jugoslovenske zajednice 1918. godine", *Zbornik radova Pravnog fakulteta u Novom Sadu* 3–4 (1966), 247–264; M. Stefanovski, "Nikola Pašić na Ženevskoj konferenciji 1918. godine", in *Nikola Pašić: život i delo* (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike, 1997), 331–354.

²⁶ B. Hrabak, "Stjepan Radić i HPSS 1918–1920. godine", *Zbornik Matice srpske za istoriju* 59/60 (1999), 71–105.

²⁷ Lj. Boban, *Maček i politika Hrvatske seljačke stranke, 1928–1941: iz povijesti hrvatskog pitanja*, 2 vols (Zagreb: Liber and Rijeka: Otokar Keršovani, 1974).

²⁸ Lj. Boban, "Geneza, značenje i odjek Zagrebačkih punktacija", *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 1 (1971), 153–209.

a few, carefully limited functions be left to the central government in Belgrade. This political platform had the air of a confederal structure of the defunct Austria-Hungary which reflected the mentality and traditions of Croat political parties. For that reason, it was deeply distasteful to Serbians who regarded it as an undoing of their military victory and a request to abandon the Serbs of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to Zagreb. To be true, the Serbian-dominated governments never showed themselves capable of at least trying to initiate some compromise solution with the CPP. The Serbian opposition parties did reach an understanding with CPP in 1937 and formed the election coalition, but they failed to appreciate that for Maček, unlike for themselves, the national question was far more important than restoring democratic rule in the country.

Following King Alexander's assassination in Marseilles in 1934, the regime of Prince Paul, Regent of Yugoslavia, had to deal with the Croat opposition in the increasingly volatile international situation. It was Prince Paul's anxiety to consolidate the country at the outbreak of the Second World War that led him to give way and reach an agreement with CPP, which resulted in the formation of *Banovina Hrvatska*, a Croat province with extensive autonomy, in 1939.²⁹ This was the realisation of Croat demands, including their rather excessive territorial ambitions, and it also meant that considerable number of Serbs found themselves within the Croatian province. The views of Trumbić and other Croat leaders grounded in the experience of a confederal union of Austria-Hungary appeared to have triumphed twenty years after the Great War and the demise of the Habsburg Empire. A Serbian legal expert remarked that the Croats "imagine the relationship between Banovina Croatia and the [Yugoslav] state as a relationship between two equal authorities which constantly make agreements".³⁰ This description of the Croats' attitude of mind regarding their status in Yugoslavia clearly shows that they perceived it as stemming from another compromise (*nagodba*) on the pattern of those that had constructed Austro-Hungarian political edifice. With such solution of the Croat question, it turned out that Serbia failed to achieve even the integral unification of all the Serbs, despite the preserved Yugoslav state. It seemed that Serbo-Croat relations came full circle: while there had been a consensus in 1918 that the Serbs and Croats (and Slovenes) constituted a single Yugoslav nation, which had served to justify the creation of Yugoslavia on the nationality principle, the formation of Croatian *banovina* was a return to the notion that they were two separate nations. The Yugoslav interwar experience with nationalities conflict proved to be reminiscent of Austria-Hungary's difficulties to put its house in order. The 1939 Serbo-Croat agreement offered a prospect for Yugoslavia to settle her thorniest

²⁹ Lj. Boban, *Sporazum Cvetković-Maček* (Beograd: Institut društvenih nauka, 1965).

³⁰ M. Konstantinović, *Politika sporazuma: dnevničke beleške 1939–1941: londonske beleške 1944–1945* (Novi Sad: Agencija "Mir", 1998), 42, 551, 564.

issue, but such hopes were not fully justified immediately after establishing of the Croatian province due to somewhat provisional character of the settlement. What its long-term effects would be, however, can only remain a matter of speculation, since Yugoslavia's involvement in the war brought about the destruction of that country.

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