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Article

Nationalism, Myth and Reinterpretation of History: The Neglected Case of Interwar Yugoslavia

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Abstract

This article discusses and challenges some popular myths and perceptions about interwar Yugoslavia in post-socialist (and post-Yugoslav) Serbia. These include discourses that blame ‘others’ – ‘treacherous’ Croats and other non-Serbs, the ‘perfidious’ west, especially Britain – and that are also self-critical, of Serbs’ ‘naivety’ as exemplified in their choosing to create Yugoslavia at the end of the First World War, and of, later, embracing communism. The article also offers a reassessment of the interwar period, often neglected by scholars of former Yugoslavia.

Keywords

interwar Yugoslavia, myth, nationalism, Serbia

I

One of the bestselling history books published in Serbia in 2007 was a study of Prince Paul, Regent of Yugoslavia (1934–41), and the ‘truth’ about the coup d’état of 27 March 1941.¹ The Yugoslav government of Dragiša Cvetković (Serb) and Vladko Maček (Croat) signed an act of adherence to the Tripartite Pact on 25 March 1941. Less than two days later, in the early hours of 27 March, the government was overthrown by a military-led coup, which enjoyed popular support, especially among Serbs. Prince Paul was stripped of his regency, and King Peter II was proclaimed of age, six months before his eighteenth birthday.²

The book sold widely. Written by two journalists, it had a print run of 20,000 copies, and was published with the financial aid of Princess Elizabeth of Yugoslavia, Paul’s daughter. Its success may be only partially attributed to a

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low selling price; it was more likely due to the book's main argument. The authors contend that Prince Paul was an innocent victim of a British conspiracy to push Yugoslavia into the Allies' camp, irrespective of consequences, and they falsely claim that they were the first authors to use Paul's private papers.³ They support a popular view that the adherence to the Tripartite Pact would have preserved Yugoslavia's territorial integrity, and would have prevented the *Ustaša* genocide against the Serbs and the communist takeover at the end of the war. (The *Ustašas* were an extreme right-wing group installed in power by Berlin and Rome in April 1941 and given control over the Independent State of Croatia – a Greater Croatia, incorporating present-day Croatia (minus most of the Dalmatian coast, which went to Italy), Bosnia-Herzegovina and parts of northern Serbia. The *Ustaša* regime set up concentration camps and murdered, on racial grounds, tens, if not hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews and Roma as well as anti-*Ustaša* Croats. The Serbs were also exposed to policies of ethnic cleansing and forced conversion to Roman Catholicism).⁴

If Yugoslavia had not been invaded as a result of the conspiracy against Paul, goes the same argument, the communists would not have been able to come to power in 1945. Prince Paul is therefore seen as a doubly tragic figure: betrayed by western allies, he was unable to prevent his compatriots falling victims to wartime genocide and post-war communist dictatorship. Prince Paul's one error of judgment was, allegedly, granting the Croats autonomy in August 1939, when a Croatian *banovina* (province) was established within Yugoslavia; territorially, it was greater than the present-day Republic of Croatia, and, crucially, it incorporated a large number of Serbs. In reality, the devolution was a positive development overall, since it was clear that centralism was not working. Paul's legacy may have been largely negative, but this was because he never abandoned the dictatorship introduced by his cousin King Alexander in 1929 and then allowed his government to sign the Tripartite Pact, not because he granted the Croats autonomy.

The same revisionist discourse seeks to rehabilitate Dimitrije Ljotić, a minor far-right-wing politician in the 1930s, who became one of the chief collaborators with the Nazis, and General Milan Nedić, head of a puppet administration in German-occupied Serbia. Historical revisionism has gone hand in hand with political action: there have been attempts to politically rehabilitate both Ljotić and Nedić. Nedić's portrait was even put on display in the Serbian government building, together with portraits of all Serb prime ministers, but was taken down after a public outcry.⁵

Arguments such as these form part of a wider discourse that essentially claims that the Serbs made a fatal mistake when they liberated other Yugoslavs – especially the Croats – and created Yugoslavia at the end of the First World War. The Serbs should have created a greater Serbian state, an option that had been allegedly available to their leaders during the First World War, but which they forsook for a greater, Yugoslav ideal, out of noble, if not naive, motivations. According to this view, in Yugoslavia the Serbs only suffered, despite emerging as victors from both World Wars, unlike the Croats, Bosnian Muslims and

Albanians, who, despite losing the wars, benefited in Yugoslavia. Paradoxically, the non-Serbs also destroyed the Yugoslav state, with the help of external forces. As if the 'internal treachery' was not enough, the Serbs have also suffered a betrayal by their traditional western allies, the Americans, British and French. The authors of the book mentioned at the beginning of the article may not be academic historians, but that is not to say that the historical discipline has remained immune from this type of revisionism.⁶

These 'stories that Serbs tell themselves (and others) about themselves', to borrow from cultural anthropologist Marko Živković, emerged in the second half of the 1980s, when the disintegration of Yugoslavia began.⁷ Nationalist myths among Serbs vis-à-vis their medieval past (especially the Kosovo myth), the Second World War and Serbia in socialist Yugoslavia, and the myth of the Serbs' victimization by non-Serbs, have been studied extensively.⁸ However, the way the rise and ultimate fall of the Yugoslav kingdom has been perceived in contemporary Serbian nationalist discourse has been largely overlooked by scholars. This is surprising, since the neglected case of interwar Yugoslavia includes some of the main themes present in well-studied cases such as the Kosovo myth: the creation of a large, 'free' South Slav kingdom, instability caused by internal treachery, a powerful foreign enemy, betrayal by external allies, death of a king-martyr, and a noble, but ultimately tragic ending, which may be interpreted as both a moral victory and a sacrifice that would lead to a later resurrection.⁹

This article examines critically some of the main popular perceptions about interwar Yugoslavia in post-Yugoslav Serbia. This seems appropriate since recent western scholarship on Yugoslavia is overwhelmingly concerned with the country's violent break-up in the 1990s and with post-war developments. Although there is a near consensus among scholars that the burden of the past was one of the key reasons for the failure of the Yugoslav state, pre-1980 history is seldom seriously studied. Instead, the past is usually viewed through the present and since the present is post-Yugoslav, Yugoslavia is regarded as a project doomed to failure from the start.

Myths about the first Yugoslavia present in contemporary Serbian discourse may be described as follows: (a) even if it was not an artificial creation, invented by the Great Powers at the 1919–20 Peace Conference in Paris, Yugoslavia was doomed to failure from the start, due to the Croats' treachery, which led to the Serb–Croat conflict; (b) Yugoslavia was created by Serbs only, they were the ones who sacrificed most for the common country, and yet they were the main losers in Yugoslavia; (c) Croats and other former Yugoslav nations, apart from Serbs, were separatists who tried from early on to destabilize and destroy the country; (d) unlike the Croats, the Serbs were traditionally pro-democracy and western-oriented; (e) if the British and their collaborators had not carried out the 27 March 1941 coup d'état, Yugoslavia would have survived the Second World War in peace, and in one piece, the Ustaša genocide against the Serbs during the war would not have happened, and there would have been no communist government in Yugoslavia; and (f) the communists introduced a dictatorship in

Yugoslavia and a federal structure, the main purpose of which was to divide the Serb nation, traditionally in favour of a centralist government.

The term 'myth' in this work is used to describe popular and populist narratives about the past, unsupported by evidence, but sometimes propagated by writers of historical texts and by political leaders. The relationship between myth and history is closer than assumed, not least because historians have often created myths that served some non-scholarly purpose, for example nation-building.¹⁰ The aim of this article is to challenge mythical understandings of the past, but not by simply dismissing myths as an 'incorrect' interpretation of the past. Rather, an attempt is made to understand the origins of and context in which myths appear. It may be argued that understanding the interplay between the 'truth' and the 'myth' is as important as emphasizing differences between the history and the myth.¹¹

II

History is not a book that is normally read backwards, and the history of Yugoslavia cannot be understood if approached from the perspective of the disintegration and wars of the 1990s. Similarly, interwar Yugoslavia should not be viewed through the spectacles of the Second World War, when the country was invaded, partitioned and its peoples involved in a series of civil (inter-ethnic as well as intra-ethnic) wars that were often combined with wars of liberation. The Yugoslavia of 1918–41 is best understood if seen in its historical and wider regional context.

The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes – as Yugoslavia was called between 1918 and 1929 – was proclaimed in Belgrade on 1 December 1918 by Serbia's Prince Regent Alexander, who had taken over from his ailing father King Peter I in the summer of 1914. The Prince Regent's proclamation was a response to an invitation by a delegation of the Zagreb-based National Council of the recently proclaimed 'transitional' State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, which had arrived in Belgrade after a 24-hour-long journey through war-ravaged territory, in order to seek unification with the Kingdom of Serbia, which had just united with the Kingdom of Montenegro on 26 November.¹² With the proclamation of the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, Habsburg South Slavs declared their independence from the Habsburg Monarchy. Croatia also abolished two institutions that had been preserved through centuries of foreign rule: *sabor* (Diet) and *ban* (governor). Strictly speaking, it is not therefore the case, as is sometimes argued, that Croatia lost its historic institutions when it entered into a union with Belgrade. This had happened just before the unification with Serbia, on the initiative of the majority of the Croatian political leadership (which included some ethnic Serbs, such as Svetozar Pribićević, one of the leaders of the Croat-Serb Coalition). Therefore, not only did Serbia not abolish Croatian independence in 1918, but it may be argued that it was Belgrade which in 1939 re-established the institutions of *ban* and *sabor*, after the Cvetković-Maček agreement of August 1939 (see below).

The creation of Yugoslavia was not inevitable, and in 1918–19 there certainly was not a long-established Yugoslav ‘civilization’ and ‘intellectual unity’, as Yugoslav statesmen claimed at the Paris Peace Conference. However, the peace-makers were correct that at the end of the First World War a united Yugoslav state was a *fait accompli*.¹³ Yugoslavia was the only realistic option acceptable to the Serbian government, representatives of the Habsburg South Slavs and the victorious Powers. Already in the early stages of the war, the Serbian government stated that its main war aim was the ‘liberation and unification’ of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. In 1916 the Serbian Prime Minister Nikola Pašić was apparently willing to accept a ‘minimal’ solution: an enlarged Serbia, rather than a Yugoslav state. In 1916 Serbia had been occupied by Austrian, German and Bulgarian troops, while its government, the king and a decimated army were in exile on the Greek island of Corfu. Moreover, the Allies put pressure on the Serbian government and the Yugoslav Committee (London-based Habsburg Yugoslav leaders) to give up territorial demands in Istria and Dalmatia. The eastern Adriatic had been promised to Italy by Britain, France and Russia under the terms of the 1915 Treaty of London – terms necessary to lure previously neutral Italy to the Allied side.

Was the Serbian government offered a ‘Greater Serbia’ as a compensation for the promises made to Italy? The Allied governments never even informed their Serbian allies of the negotiations with Italy that lasted for some six weeks in spring 1915. The Pašić government learned of the negotiations with Italy indirectly, but was unable to influence them and remained unaware of the exact terms of the Treaty until after the war. Serbia’s interests were considered, but so were those of its small ally Montenegro and of Croatia, which in 1915 had been but a Habsburg province.¹⁴ In August 1915 the British, French and Russians asked Serbia to give up its share of Macedonia – it would go to Bulgaria if it entered the war on their side – in return for territorial ‘compensation’ in Bosnia, southern Hungary, Slavonia, the southern Adriatic and northern Albania. Pašić was furious, complaining to Ante Trumbić, the Yugoslav Committee leader, that Serbia had to fight against its allies as well as its enemies. The Russians told him he had to choose between Macedonia and Bosnia and that he might end up with neither. In the end Bulgaria joined the Central Powers, sparing the Serbian leadership from having to make a choice.

Pašić was not against Yugoslavia (even though he was a Serb, first and foremost), and his thinking must be placed in the context of Serbia’s predicament at the time. By 1917, with the Serbian army revitalized, rearmed and fighting successfully on the Salonika front, Pašić would be back on the Yugoslav track. Unlike the Prime Minister, Prince Regent Alexander maintained a Yugoslav line throughout the war. At a reception in London’s Claridge’s Hotel in April 1916, Alexander told his British hosts that the Serbian army fought for:

[the] ideal towards the attainment of which we have striven for centuries. This ideal is the union in one single fatherland of all the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, who are one

people with the same traditions, the same tongue, the same tendencies, but whom an evil fate has divided.¹⁵

Meanwhile, leaders of the Habsburg South Slavs believed in a union with Serbia. Even the unpredictable, emotional and sometimes self-contradictory Stjepan Radić, leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, was not against a Yugoslav union. Radić's often cited – and almost as often misinterpreted – speech of November 1918 in the Zagreb National Council, when he warned deputies of the Croat-Serb Coalition to not rush 'like geese in the fog' to Belgrade, was inspired by his opposition to creating Yugoslavia on Serbia's terms, but it was not an anti-Yugoslav speech *per se*.¹⁶ Although in the immediate aftermath of the unification, Radić's policies arguably may be described as separatist, the Croat leader, whose party became by far the strongest Croat party in the interwar period, was not systematically opposed to the Yugoslav state.¹⁷ Radić, just like his successor Vladko Maček, sought to achieve the widest possible autonomy for a Croatia that would be territorially as large as possible. More than Maček, Radić believed in a common Yugoslav identity. Above all a Croat, he was a Yugoslav, too.¹⁸

Britain and France were not opposed to the creation of Yugoslavia, and yet they waited six months before formally recognizing it when the Treaty of Versailles was signed on 28 June 1919. There were several reasons for the delay, chief among them the Italo-Yugoslav dispute over Istria and Dalmatia and fears in London and Paris that Belgrade would not be able to exert full control over southern parts of the country, where Albanian and Montenegrin guerrillas rebelled. There was also a degree of mostly social unrest in some Croat areas, while all neighbouring countries except Greece were involved in territorial disputes with Yugoslavia.¹⁹

The United States was the first of the Powers to recognize the Serb-Croat-Slovene Kingdom in February 1919. America's support of the small nations and their right to self-determination – one of President Wilson's well-known, but often misunderstood, 14 points – suited the advocates of the Yugoslav unification (Lenin, too, supported the right to self-determination, albeit for different ideological reasons). Supporters of the new state sometimes exaggerated the similarities between various Yugoslav groups in order to secure the Powers' support; for instance pro-Yugoslav propaganda argued that Serbs, Croats *and* Slovenes all spoke one language, even though Slovene was distinct from Serbo-Croat. It is unclear to what extent this was due to pragmatism and to what extent due to idealism: throughout the interwar period the official name of the language was Serbo-Croat-Slovene. The official pro-Yugoslav discourse argued that Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were three 'tribes' of a single Serb-Croat-Slovene (i.e. Yugoslav) nation, and that this nation should have its own nation-state. Members of the three-headed nation nominally practised three major faiths: Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and Sunni Islam. The religious distinctiveness of the Muslim Slavs of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sandžak was recognized, but they were regarded as Muslim Serbs or Croats, although few of them actually felt Serb or Croat. Montenegrins were regarded – and many regarded themselves – as Serbian, while the Slavs of Macedonia, who spoke dialects that were closer

to Bulgarian than Serbian, were officially considered to be ‘southern Serbs’, regardless of how they felt.²⁰

The same year the US entered the war – 1917 – Russia was withdrawing, because of the March (February O.S.) Revolution. This development favoured the pro-unification forces, because Russia had viewed a united Yugoslavia with some suspicion and would have probably preferred an enlarged, largely Orthodox Serbia instead.²¹ In addition to the Russian and Austro-Hungarian, two more empires collapsed around the same time: the Ottoman and German. The break-up of the centuries-old Ottoman and Habsburg states seemed to indicate that multi-national, multi-confessional and multi-cultural empires were losing a battle with nationalism and nation-states, at least in Europe. Nationalist movements did not occur in imperial peripheries only and anti-imperial nationalism was not consigned to ‘subject’ nations. Post-Ottoman Turkey broke with the imperial past as radically as the Christian Balkan successor states, while Hungarian nationalism dealt a decisive blow to the Dual Monarchy. Austria was an exception among the successor states, having found itself independent more by accident than because of a well-executed nationalist programme.²²

Only in Russia did the empire strike back. The Bolsheviks, who seized power during the second Russian revolution of November (October O.S.) 1917, managed to preserve the territorial integrity of much of the vast empire of the Romanovs, transforming it into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – after a bloody civil war against the counter-revolutionaries, who were supported by their foreign allies. The Soviet Union was originally smaller than Tsarist Russia, but it ‘recovered’ the Baltic states and eastern Poland during the Second World War, while its post-1945 ‘informal’ empire spread further into Eastern Europe than ever before.²³ In any case, however unusual it may seem from today’s perspective, this ‘unmixing of peoples’ in the aftermath of the collapse of empires in the early twentieth century favoured advocates of a political union of the kindred Yugoslav peoples who had never before lived in one state.²⁴

III

Yugoslavia was at the same time the least Balkan and the most Balkan state in the region, if the verb ‘to Balkanize’ is taken to mean ‘[to] divide (a region or body) into smaller mutually hostile states or groups’ – a definition which first appeared following the Balkan Wars of 1912–13.²⁵ The creation of Yugoslavia could not have happened without the ‘Balkanization’ of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, which happened in no small part due to the South Slav question. However, Yugoslavia incorporated different ethnic, religious, cultural and historical identities, and its unification required a process that was the opposite to ‘Balkanization’.

Interwar Yugoslavia was formally a nation-state, but it was also among the most complex states on the map of the new Europe. Although it was not an empire, because of its heterogeneity Yugoslavia resembled somewhat its

imperial predecessors. Perhaps the main obstacle to the creation of an ethnic Yugoslav nation was the already existing collective identities of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, to mention but the three ‘tribes’ officially recognized in interwar Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, the Yugoslavist discourse was not merely ideological and dogmatic. Serb, Croat and Slovene identities were not necessarily in conflict with the wider Yugoslav identity, while ethnic divisions did not always coincide with cultural, regional and socio-economic divisions. For instance, Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs from Dalmatia had more in common culturally than Croats from Dalmatia and Slavonia, or Serbs from Vojvodina and Kosovo; similarly, Slovenes in Istria shared more with Croats from Istria than with fellow Slovenes from Maribor.²⁶ It is also debatable whether differences between Serbs and Croats in 1918 were greater than those between Piedmontese and Sicilians or Bavarians and Hanoverians several decades earlier, when Italy and Germany were united.²⁷

National identities have their history and it is wrong to assume – as is sometimes done – that the end of the history of national formation of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes had already taken place by 1918. It may be argued that the final stage in the formation of the Croat nation took place – paradoxically perhaps – only after 1918, within the context of the Yugoslav nation-state.²⁸ If various collective national identities continued to evolve after Yugoslavia was formed, what happened to the Yugoslav nation? Could it co-exist with other, ‘narrower’, national identities? Did it exist in the first place?

The belief that there existed a Yugoslav nation was a crucial – though not the only – factor behind the formation of Yugoslavia, yet even the most enthusiastic supporters of a Yugoslav nation agreed that it still had to be created.²⁹ The Yugoslav state, however, never created a dominant Yugoslav nation and that is probably one of the key factors behind the country’s disintegration in the early 1990s.³⁰ What scholars of former Yugoslavia have usually failed to note is that various Yugoslav leaders and regimes never seriously attempted to turn Yugoslavian citizens into Yugoslavs in the ethno-national sense. Out of some 70 years of the existence of Yugoslavia, only for five years, during King Alexander’s Yugoslavizing dictatorship (1929–34), did the state attempt to create a unitarist Yugoslav nation.³¹

The post-1945 communist-revolutionary government rejected interwar integral Yugoslavism as strongly as the Yugoslav regime rejected Habsburg-style Dualism in the aftermath of the First World War. However, socialist Yugoslavia was a multi-national federation with elements of a nation-state, at least until a greater degree of decentralization was permitted in the mid-1960s. Post-1945 Yugoslavia was a federation of six republics and six nations – five until the late 1960s, when Serbo-Croat speaking Muslims (living mostly in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sandžak, in south-west Serbia) were officially promoted into a constituent nation, thus joining the Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Montenegrins and Macedonians. Yugoslavia was also in some ways the South Slavs’ nation-state, because only the six South Slavonic nations had the right to their own republic and, in theory, to secession.³² Bosnia-Herzegovina was an exception in the sense that it was not merely a republic

of Bosnian Muslims, but also of Serbs and Croats living there. Not until 1971 did the Muslims become the largest ethnic group in Bosnia, just outnumbering the previously largest group, Serbs – according to that year's population census there were nearly 1.5 million Muslims, or 39.5 per cent of the republic's population, while Serbs numbered just under 1.4 million (37 per cent); at the same time there were 770,000 Croats (21 per cent).³³

The South Slavs were not considered a minority ('nationality' in the then official jargon), regardless of where they lived in Yugoslavia. For instance, ethnic Serbs made up 12 per cent (580,000) of Croatia's population in 1991, yet they were not a minority in Croatia, but one of the two constituent nations of the republic, together with Croats. Ethnic Croats enjoyed a similar status in Serbia, but ethnic Albanians living mostly in the southern Serbian province of Kosovo and in Macedonia were a 'nationality', despite numbering over 2 million in 1991, and making up 15.6 and 20 per cent of Serbia and Macedonia's population, respectively. As an official minority, ethnic Albanians did not have the right to their own republic in Yugoslavia (this was the status many of them demanded for Kosovo), while Montenegrins, as a South Slav nation, had their own republic; this despite Yugoslav Albanians outnumbering Montenegrins by nearly 4:1. The official discourse argued that during the Second World War the South Slavs carried out both a socialist revolution and a war of liberation; during the war they opted to (re-)join Yugoslavia, which would be, unlike the interwar Kingdom, a socialist federation united in 'brotherhood and unity'. The 'brotherhood and unity' ideology did differ from the interwar 'national oneness', but not as much as the post-1945 authorities liked to claim. Post-war Yugoslavia remained the state *of* and *for* ethnic Yugoslavs.

Although Yugoslavia is almost universally seen as a failure in the exercise of nation building,³⁴ it still promoted, if not created, at least three nations after 1945: Bosnian Muslims (also known today as the Bosniaks), Macedonians and Montenegrins. The Yugoslav state, both the interwar and the post-war one, also played a major role in forming the modern identities of the three 'older' nations: Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. During the last years of Yugoslavia the number of declared Yugoslavs rose markedly. In both the 1981 and 1991 population censuses, they far outnumbered the Montenegrins and came close to Macedonians and Slovenes in terms of numbers – unofficially, the declared Yugoslavs were called the 'seventh nation'. This phenomenon was paradoxical perhaps, considering that the state not only did not engage in creating the Yugoslavs, but it in many ways discouraged its citizens from declaring as such.³⁵ The paradox is even more striking considering this was Yugoslavia's last decade, when anti-Yugoslav ethnic nationalisms supposedly dominated public discourse. Scholars studying the 1980s and early 1990s have tended to concentrate, understandably perhaps, on nationalist leaders, such as Milošević and Tudjman, or anti-state movements, such as the Slovenian-based *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (NSK), the most celebrated member of which was the alternative band *Laibach*. However, little attention has been paid to pan-Yugoslav politicians such as the hugely popular reformist Prime Minister Ante Marković (incidentally, an ethnic Croat), or to the pro-Yugoslav counterpart to the

NSK, the Sarajevo-based *New Primitives* movement, which included pro-Yugoslav Bosnian artists such as film director Emir Kusturica and musician Goran Bregović.

IV

It would be wrong to disregard nationalism as a major source of instability in interwar Yugoslavia. The period was dominated by the Croatian question – the refusal of a majority of Croats to accept fully Serb-dominated or Serb-style Yugoslav institutions (the parliament, the Crown, and the Constitution). Because the Croatian and Serbian nationalisms were so inseparably linked, it may be more appropriate to argue that a Serb-Croat question was central to an understanding of interwar Yugoslavia. What was the essence of this question? Put simply, it was in different Serb and Croat visions of a common state. Most Serb politicians, certainly in the initial period following the unification, believed that Yugoslavia should be centralized, and governed from Belgrade, the capital. Quite understandably, such a state model was not received enthusiastically by Croats and other non-Serbs, even though it was not illogical: Serbia was traditionally a centralized state (on the French model), and unlike today, the Serbia of a century ago was a success story, at least in the Balkan context. In an age when independent statehood was the highest ideal among East-Central European nations, Serbia was the only South Slav state to be independent, with the notable exception of tiny Montenegro, whose rulers and Orthodox inhabitants in any case had overwhelmingly felt Serb or closely related to Serbs. In an era when pan-Slavism had a much more widespread appeal than today, only one other Slavonic nation was independent: Russia. Serbia was gradually being industrialized and its economy was prospering despite the customs war with Austria-Hungary in the early twentieth century (also known as the ‘Pig War’, after Serbia’s chief export to the neighbouring empire). In the early twentieth century Belgrade turned into a regional cultural centre, with some leading Habsburg South Slav intellectuals and artists spending significant time or moving there (such as, for example, the Croatian sculptor Ivan Meštrović, Croatian poet Anton Gustav Matoš and Slovene ethnographer Niko Županič).³⁶ Even before the 1912–13 Balkan Wars, when Serbia doubled its territory and further increased its prestige in the region, the country was viewed by other Yugoslavs as a South Slav Piedmont, as already noted.³⁷ This prestige notwithstanding, the Croats and other non-Serbs preferred Yugoslavia to be a decentralized state, fearing Belgrade’s domination.

Nevertheless, it would be too simplistic to argue that while the Serbs were centralists, the Croats were federalists, as is commonly done. During the interwar years the Croatian Peasant Party was by far the strongest Croatian party with some 90 per cent of the Croat vote. The Croatian Peasants demanded territorial autonomy for Croatia as well as the autonomy of their identity; in other words, they sought to establish a Croatia within Yugoslavia and to secure the official recognition of a separate Croat nation. However, there were also Croats who believed in a unitary Yugoslav nation – some genuinely, others out of pragmatism,

just like some Serbs opted for official Yugoslavism out of opportunism and pragmatic considerations – and at the same time wished the country to be decentralized. There were also centralist-unitarist Croats, though not many. Most of the Croatian economic elite were loyal to the regime in Belgrade.

While the Croatian Peasant Party called for autonomy for Croatia, it never considered granting autonomy to non-Croats who were eventually included in the Croatian province under the terms of the August 1939 agreement.³⁸ Not unlike the Serbs, the Croats were also centralist within the Croatian political space – both imagined and real. Most Croats probably wished Yugoslavia to resemble a dual state, not unlike former Austria-Hungary, in which Croatia would be Hungary to Serbia's Austria; this despite the failure of Habsburg-style Dualism in 1918. During the interwar period, the Serbs used terms such as 'complex state' and 'simple state' to describe what today would be called multi-ethnic federation and a centralized nation-state, respectively; they believed that 'simple states' were more stable and immune from disintegration. Generally, it is too simplistic to describe any Yugoslav nation as inherently either centralist or federalist. For example, although Serbs are traditionally inclined to favour centralism as a form of state, once the Yugoslav framework is removed the picture often changes. Before 1918, Serbs feared Croat domination in the Habsburg South Slav provinces; if a mini-Yugoslavia had been established within the Habsburg monarchy, the Serbs would have wished it to be decentralized, while the Croats would have preferred political control from their capital Zagreb.³⁹

During the 1930s, all major Serbian political parties came to support decentralization of Yugoslavia, if not outright federalism. Before Vladko Maček reached an agreement with Prince Paul (through Paul's de facto envoy, Prime Minister Cvetković) in 1939, he was the leader of a united Serb-Croat opposition and had called for the democratization of the country and autonomy for Croatia. In January 1933 Ljubomir Davidović, leader of the (predominantly Serb) Democratic Party, issued a statement calling for the establishment in Yugoslavia of four territorial units: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. Serbian Agrarians, especially its left-wing faction led by Dragoljub Jovanović, were even more strongly in favour of decentralization. Several leading Serb legal experts, such as Professor Mihajlo Ilić, were openly federalist as well as Yugoslav, while even those intellectuals with more nationalist views, such as Slobodan Jovanović, supported in the late 1930s the establishment of separate Slovene, Croat and Serb units *inside* Yugoslavia. Such nuances are generally left out of somewhat simplistic interpretations of interwar Yugoslavia; interpretations which emphasize Serb-Croat conflict, and according to which Serbs were centralists and Croats and other non-Serbs were federalists, united in their opposition to Serbian governments. Nor do these popular yet erroneous assumptions take into account the wider European context. As has already been suggested, the concept of empires – 'complex' states – was defeated at the end of the First World War. The nation-state model was generally seen as more stable as well as more just, in the Wilsonian sense, since it granted nations the right to self-determination. Throughout

East-Central Europe a contest between centralists and federalists was waged and in all but one case the former emerged victorious. The exception was Austria, where after a long political battle 'de-centralists' won.⁴⁰

It would be equally wrong to reduce the political instability in interwar Yugoslavia simply to the Serb-Croat conflict. The majority of Croats were supporters of the Croatian Peasant Party, which until 1924 refused to recognize the Constitution and the monarchy or to take seats in parliament (though the party regularly took part in elections). Even after the Croat Peasants ended the boycott and participated in government between 1925 and 1927, things did not necessarily improve. After a heated debate in the parliament in June 1928, Puniša Račić, a Radical Party deputy (and an ethnic Serb), mortally wounded Stjepan Radić, shot dead two Croat deputies and wounded two more. This led to a serious political crisis and opened the door for King Alexander to introduce royal dictatorship in January 1929. In October 1934 Alexander was assassinated while on a state visit to France (together with the French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou), by Croat and Macedonian revolutionaries. Nevertheless, the Serb-Croat conflict represented but one aspect of a complex political contest. The post-1918 constitutional debate may have turned into a Serb-Croat conflict, but there were many other layers of the political struggle in Yugoslavia which crossed ethnic and even party boundaries.

The relationship between King Alexander and Nikola Pašić – both ethnic Serbs – was not good. Alexander prevented Pašić's election as the first Prime Minister of the interim government immediately after unification. Instead, Stojan Protić, the second leading personality of the Radical Party, became the Prime Minister. It was Protić who, during the constitutional debate, presented an alternative constitutional proposal that envisaged wide regional autonomies. Yet Protić's proposal failed to win a majority, largely because Pašić secured support from Muslim deputies, while Radić's Croats were boycotting the parliament at the time.⁴¹ Protić's example shows that even immediately after unification there were leading Serb politicians opposed to centralism. In addition to the Croatian Peasants, Serb Republicans and Social-Democrats boycotted the constitutional debate in parliament, because there was to be no discussion on whether the country should be a monarchy or a republic, the former being accepted without a prior discussion.⁴²

During the 1920s, leading Serb and Croat parties achieved two 'national agreements', as contemporaries named them. The first was the Pašić-Radić agreement of 1925, which secured the entry of Radić and the Croat Peasant Party into the government (of Nikola Pašić) for the first time. The second agreement was between Radić and Svetozar Pribičević, and concluded after Radić left the government in 1927. This agreement was even more unexpected, given that the two men had been bitter political rivals since before the unification and given that Pribičević left the Pašić government two years previously because of Pašić's rapprochement with Radić. Moreover, Pribičević had broken away from the Democratic Party in 1924, to form the Independent Democratic Party, because the Democrats' leader Davidović had moved closer to Radić's anti-centralist position. Yet, the Peasant-Democratic Coalition of Radić and Pribičević – de facto a coalition between the

Croats and Croatian Serbs – would last throughout the interwar period and was the longest lasting political coalition in the entire history of Yugoslavia. These examples illustrate very well the complexity of interwar Yugoslav politics and the impossibility of reducing the political contest to its Serb-Croat dimension. They also show that even the largest party in the country – the People’s Radical Party – was not in a position to form a government on its own. Instead, the predominantly Serb Radicals sought political partners irrespective of their nationality or religion. Pašić was wrong to believe that merely bringing the Croatian Peasant Party into government would solve the Croat question. Radić, just like his successor Maček, was not interested in the spoils of power unless these included autonomy for Croatia. In that respect, there was an admirable and principled continuity in the politics of the interwar Croat leadership, often accused by historians for making too many U-turns.

V

The Yugoslav political scene became even more complex during the 1930s. Following the introduction of King Alexander’s dictatorship in January 1929, political parties were banned for being sectarian and therefore allegedly anti-Yugoslav. Legal grounding was provided by the Law for the Protection of the State, which was used in 1921 to ban the Communist Party. Yet, even before the relaxation of the dictatorship following the King’s assassination in 1934, all the main parties had renewed their activities and in the second half of the decade they were allowed *de facto* to function. The opposition press was permitted to publish, and the activities of the old political parties were widely reported; the only proviso was that parties had to be referred to as ‘former’; by the end of the decade even this proviso was dropped. The regime also created political parties: the pro-government Yugoslav Radical Peasant Democracy, which eventually became the Yugoslav National Party, was established soon after the dictatorship was introduced. In 1934 the Yugoslav Radical Union was formed, while the Yugoslav National Party joined the opposition.

The names of the two government parties clearly indicate that the regime wished to unite the major political groups into one party, loyal to the Crown, and thus effectively create a one-party state (its communist successor succeeded in doing this after the Second World War). In 1929, only one party officially joined the government: the Slovene Populist Party of Anton Korošec; other government ministers were ‘dissidents’ from all other major parties, including the Croatian Peasants. The Yugoslav Radical Union was formed by the merger of a faction of the Radical Party led by the new Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović, the Yugoslav Muslim Organization and the Slovene Populist Party. The latter two parties were supported by the vast majorities of Bosnian Muslims and Slovenes, respectively, while Stojadinović’s Radicals were the strongest Serbian political group, although they did not command an absolute majority of the Serb vote. In addition to being party leaders, Mehmed Spaho, of the Yugoslav Muslims, and Korošec, of the Slovene

Populists, were also national leaders of Bosnian Muslims and Slovenes, respectively. The same was true of Radić and Maček in the case of Croats. On the other hand, no leader with such an undisputed position among Serbs emerged during the interwar period.⁴³

Stojadinović did not hide his desire to become the overall Serb leader, but there were other reasons why in the second half of the 1930s he encouraged his followers to greet him as '*vodja!*' (leader). His ideology was not fascist, but his fascination and flirtation with fascism was obvious to contemporaries such as Count Ciano. Italy's Foreign Minister believed the Yugoslav Prime Minister was a fascist, if not one 'by virtue of an open declaration of party loyalty', then 'certainly ... by virtue of his conception of authority, of the state and of life'.⁴⁴ Contrary to popular wisdom, Stojadinović was neither the first nor the only interwar Yugoslav politician whose followers addressed him as 'Leader'. The London *Times* correspondent from the Balkans reported after the Yugoslav elections of May 1935, which saw a victory for Bogoljub Jevtić, Stojadinović's predecessor as Prime Minister, that 'the Yevtitch deputies were returned to Parliament, where they greeted the Prime Minister with cries of "Vodz!" [*sic*] or "Leader!", so infectious in these days are the methods of National Socialism and Fascism'.⁴⁵ Vladko Maček was also often referred to as 'leader' (*vodja*), as was Radić, who was also known as the 'teacher' (*učitelj*). Like Stojadinović, Maček too had a paramilitary guard.⁴⁶

The Peasant-Democratic Coalition joined the Cvetković-Maček government following the August 1939 Agreement. Therefore, only Serbia-based opposition parties continued to oppose the government: the Democrats, the Agrarians⁴⁷ and the Main Committee of the Radical Party (i.e. those Radicals who did not join Stojadinović's faction). These three parties had gradually come together in the mid-1930s to form the (Serb) United Opposition (UO). The UO took part in the general elections of 1935 and 1938 together with the Zagreb-based Peasant-Democratic Coalition. The leader of this Serb-Croat opposition on both occasions was Maček.

Political parties and parliament were in a state of crisis even before King Alexander introduced dictatorship in 1929. This reflected the wider crisis of democracy in interwar Europe. In East-Central Europe only Czechoslovakia remained a democracy throughout the period, while all other countries became authoritarian (and even the Czechoslovak democracy was not without its limitations). Yugoslavia, where the extreme ideologies of the right and of the left never gained strong support, was no exception. After Pašić's death in 1926, the Radicals, the country's oldest and best-organized political party, began to disintegrate gradually into a number of factions. A contemporary observer⁴⁸ pointed out that the King did not pronounce a death sentence for the parties but rather announced their death, which had taken place during the long parliamentary crisis of the 1920s. Pašić's death and Radić's tragic loss of life two years later, as well as King Alexander's assassination in 1934, created a power vacuum that was hard to fill. However, it is usually overlooked that several other political leaders died in the second half of the 1930s: Pribičević (1936), Spaho, the Agrarian leader

Jovan Jovanović (both 1939), Davidović and Korošec (1940). Stojadinović's career came to a premature end when he was replaced by Prince Paul in 1939 and later interned and deported as a potential Nazi-collaborator. The career of Aleksandar Stanojević, leader of the Radicals' opposition faction, was also coming to an end, due his advanced age (b. 1852; d. 1947). Therefore, it was perhaps inevitable that party politics suffered an identity crisis, as several initiatives for the fusion of parties into supra-political groupings (such as the Yugoslav Radical Union) or the creation of entirely new parties during the late 1930s showed. Thus, it is too simplistic to argue that the Communists eradicated the interwar bourgeois party politics and introduced a dictatorship in 1944–45. The dictatorship, though not a communist one, had been introduced in 1929 and a major power vacuum had been created well before the Second World War destroyed most remnants of interwar political life.

VI

Although King Alexander's dictatorship failed to create an integral Yugoslav nation, the regime inadvertently helped bring the Serbs and Croats closer together. As already mentioned, a Serb-Croat opposition had emerged by the mid-1930s, united in pursuit of two common goals: a return to democracy and a solution to the Croat question. Predominantly Serb parties – the Democrats, the Independent Democrats, the Agrarians and the Radicals' Main Committee – believed that the prime aim should be the abolition of the 1931 Constitution – which essentially legalized the dictatorship – and the reintroduction of democratic institutions; once democracy was in place again, the Croat question would be solved. The Croatian Peasant Party believed that the Croat question must be solved first, while democracy could wait.

Despite the disagreement among the opposition parties over prioritizing their political goals, the regime was seriously shaken in 1937–38. First, a crisis over the signing of the Concordat that would regulate the position of the Roman Catholic Church in Yugoslavia broke out in summer 1937. The Serbian Orthodox Church strongly opposed the terms of the Concordat, arguing, without much justification, that it would place it in an inferior position in relation to the Roman Catholic Church in Yugoslavia. The same night the Concordat received majority support in parliament, the Serbian Patriarch died; rumours that he had been poisoned by the regime quickly spread. Mass demonstrations in Belgrade and other Serbian towns broke out, but were violently suppressed by the gendarmerie. This was a good example of a clash between Serbian nationalism and the Yugoslav state, which historians tend to overlook.⁴⁹

In the autumn of that same year, the Serb-Croat opposition formed the Bloc of the National Agreement, demanding the abolition of the constitution and a solution to the Croatian question.⁵⁰ The opposition thus sent the government, shaken by the Concordat crisis, a clear message of unity. The Serb and Croat opposition leaders agreed to disagree over the priority of their main aims: democratization and

Croat autonomy. In August 1938 Maček visited Belgrade and was greeted by perhaps as many as 100,000 Serbs from across Serbia. This event and a narrow defeat by the united opposition list in the general elections of December 1938, led Prince Paul to conclude that he needed to get rid of Stojadinović. That the Prime Minister increasingly appeared to see himself as a Yugoslav Mussolini only strengthened the Prince Regent's resolve. Paul also realized that the success of the Serb-Croat opposition was due to a growing discontent with the regime across the country, despite the support in Slovene and Bosnian Muslim areas, as well as the government's continued strength in most Serb areas. As events would show, the greatest success of the united opposition was also the beginning of its end.

VII

Throughout the 1930s Maček kept close contacts with the Royal Court, even during the periods of close cooperation with the Serb opposition parties, and his relations with Prince Paul were regular and cordial. The electoral defeat in December 1938 was a turning point: Maček concluded that he could not achieve autonomy for Croatia merely by cooperating with Serbian democrats, while the Prince Regent acknowledged the danger posed to the regime by the united Serb-Croat opposition. An agreement between the two was made more likely by Maček's willingness to postpone, if not actually abandon, calls for the abolition of the dictatorship. The new Prime Minister Cvetković negotiated with Maček as a de facto envoy of the Crown; the two men signed an agreement on 26 August 1939, only days before the Second World War broke out. Yet, external factors alone could not explain the Cvetković-Maček agreement – the internal dynamics of the Yugoslav political scene played a major part, too.

With the August 1939 agreement and the creation of an autonomous Croatia, integral Yugoslavism was effectively abandoned only 10 years after the late King introduced it. Although some Croats criticized the Agreement, many more Croats, including the leadership of their largest party seemed content. In many ways the Croatian question was finally solved, for the time being at least. However, the creation of the Croatian *banovina* opened up the Serb question, and led to calls among Bosnian Muslims and Slovenes for the creation of their own *banovinas*. While everyone seemed to blame them for dominating Yugoslavia, the Serbs had no clearly demarcated territory of their own, while the Croats secured wide territorial autonomy and the Slovenes had been enjoying a free hand in their lands since 1929. Macedonia was considered to be part of the Serbian sphere, as well as Montenegro and Vojvodina, but Bosnia-Herzegovina provided a real bone of contention between Serbs and Croats. The Bosnian Muslims themselves sought autonomy after August 1939.

In addition to the Serbian church, Serb intellectuals, gathered around the Serb Cultural Club, carried the flag of Serb nationalism in the late 1930s. They were joined by some opposition politicians, disappointed with Maček and his betrayal of

the democratic opposition. Yet, nationalism failed to homogenize the Serbs. Even the most vocal critics of the Cveticović-Maček agreement did not argue that Yugoslavia should cease to exist, rather that it needed to be merely restructured, so that Serbs would have their own *banovina*, too. Just as most Croats opposed the 1921 and 1931 Constitutions, many Serbs objected to the 1939 Agreement.

VIII

In spite of relaxing the dictatorship and despite his Anglophile sentiments, the Oxford-educated Prince Paul was not a democrat, as is often assumed in present-day Serbia. Interested in fine arts more than in the art of politics, the Prince Regent nevertheless displayed impressive political skills. He managed to replace, seemingly with ease, two Prime Ministers, one of whom, Stojadinović, was increasingly displaying autocratic tendencies and was widely assumed to be growing more powerful than even the Prince Regent.

Prince Paul founded the first modern museum in Belgrade – the present-day National Museum – and spent significant time and effort in acquiring, often as gifts, a large collection of impressionist paintings. He gave the impression that he could not wait for King Peter II to turn 18 in September 1941, so that he could leave politics and devote his energies to art. This may well have been true, but Paul did not have any intention of abolishing his late cousin's dictatorship. His explanation, that he was simply a caretaker and that he could not weaken the position of the Crown while King Peter II was a minor, was disingenuous. In 1936, Prince Paul was advised by the country's four leading experts in constitutional law that a return to democracy would not have weakened the young's King's position in any way, but he apparently ignored their expert opinion.⁵¹

Paul is sometimes unfairly accused of being a Nazi sympathizer because Yugoslavia signed the Tripartite Pact during his regency. The Prince Regent was unquestionably pro-British and did not like Hitler; if anyone among the Yugoslav leaders at the time was pro-German and pro-Italian, it was former Prime Minister Stojadinović. However, after France's quick capitulation in 1940 and with Britain not in a position to aid Yugoslavia in the event of an Italo-German offensive, Paul believed that the only hope of salvation for Yugoslavia was neutrality. When in early 1941 pressure from Berlin and Rome grew to such an extent that it became impossible to continue the policy of neutrality, Paul had little choice but to give in and instruct his government to sign the Tripartite Pact. The terms offered to Yugoslavia seemed favourable: in exchange for joining the Pact, the Axis powers guaranteed the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty; Belgrade was under no obligation to take part in the Axis's military campaigns; and the Yugoslav territory would not be used for transit of Axis troops. Moreover, a secret annex to the treaty promised Yugoslavia the Greek port of Salonika when Balkan borders were redrawn. Paul was not the only Yugoslav leader who thought that there was

little choice but to sign the Tripartite Pact. Although pro-British and pro-French personally, Maček was in favour, too, fearing that in the event of war Croatia would suffer most, due to its geographic proximity to Austria, since the 1938 *Anschluss*, part of Germany.⁵²

Yugoslavia's international predicament in early 1941 was indeed such that the country's leaders had very little, if any room to manoeuvre. It is impossible to say whether the Nazis would have honoured the terms of the 25 March agreement, but they broke treaties with far more powerful countries than Yugoslavia – such as the Soviet Union. Even if Hitler and Mussolini kept their promises, it is by no means certain that Yugoslavia could have avoided war and disintegration, while its position after the war would have likely resembled that of Bulgaria and Romania, which came under almost total subjugation by Moscow. In a century in which they made some catastrophic choices, the Yugoslavs, and especially the Serbs, should be proud that they rejected an alliance with the Nazis and Fascists. The price for such bravery was high indeed – around one million dead in a country of 16 million, not to mention a high number of wounded and misplaced, a destroyed infrastructure and economy and the legacy of a civil war which came back to haunt the Yugoslavs half a century later – but rejecting the Tripartite Pact was the only right choice, even in retrospect.

There is a popular wisdom, not least in Serbia, that while the Serbs are traditionally pro-British and pro-French, the Croats are pro-German. However, while under Stojadinović's premiership (1935–39; the Serb politician was also the Foreign Minister during the period) the country moved closer to Berlin and Rome, the Croat leader Maček believed in the final victory of the western democracies in their clash with Fascism and Nazism. He refused to leave the country together with other ministers and the King in April 1941, but he also rejected a German-Italian offer to become the leader of an independent, enlarged Croatian state, at a time when not many dared to say no to Hitler and Mussolini. Only after the rebuttal from Maček did the Axis turn to Ante Pavelić and his Ustašas. Maček refused to collaborate with the Ustašas and spent much of the war confined to his farm near Zagreb; he was also sent by Pavelić to the notorious Jasenovac concentration camp for a while.⁵³ At the same time, Maček's party colleagues were members of the London-based Yugoslav government-in-exile. Although many, probably a majority of Croats, welcomed independence, many soon turned against the brutal rule of the Ustašas. During the war the Croats also played a prominent part in the Yugoslavs' struggle against the occupiers. The man most responsible for the success of the Communist-led Partisan resistance was Josip Broz Tito, a half-Croat (and a half-Slovene). There were even Croats who joined another resistance movement, the predominantly Serb and royalist Yugoslav Home Army of General Mihailović (better known as the *Četniks*). The Serbs may have been traditionally pro-western and they may have made the most significant contribution to the resistance movement(s) in occupied Yugoslavia, but despite the existence of the Ustaša state, many Croats took part in resistance, too, and many expressed pro-western sympathies.

IX

Despite the seemingly perennial crisis during the interwar period, the creation of Yugoslavia represented a success; it was above all the success of the Serbian elites. Those same elites, however, were ultimately largely responsible for the failure of the state they had done so much to create.⁵⁴ Tragic though it was, historians must approach Yugoslavia's break-up in the 1990s with a cool head. The Yugoslav state was not the multi-cultural haven it was sometimes made out to be by its advocates, but it was not a 'prison of nations' either, as its opponents have claimed. It was by no means an ideal state as Yugo-nostalgic discourses would have it, and not only because for most of its existence it was a dictatorship.⁵⁵ However, Yugoslavia represented the best and the most innovative solution to the region's national questions. Long before the architects of a united Europe, the South Slavs sought to create a union that would overcome many differences and to find common ground for the sake of peace, stability and prosperity.

It may be argued that the dissolution of Yugoslavia affected Serbs most and that they are now suffering from an identity crisis more acute than any other former Yugoslav nation (inasmuch of course as one can talk about collective identities).⁵⁶ They were the most scattered group across the country and the self-perceived liberators and creators of Yugoslavia. Not unlike Russians, Serbs attempted to build – and to a large degree succeeded, at least for a while – a large, multinational state, but in the process failed to create their nation-state.⁵⁷ Many Serbs understood Yugoslavia's disintegration as a defeat of their national policy of the past two centuries. This is why many of them believed that they were the last true Yugoslavs, and this was in many ways true; ironically, however, it was their leadership, under Slobodan Milošević, that dealt Yugoslavia a fatal blow in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The main aim of this essay was to attempt to dismantle nationalist myths about interwar Yugoslavia that exist in both public and academic discourse in post-socialist Serbia. Interwar Yugoslavia remains in the shadow of better-known debates about Yugoslavia in the Second World War or socialist Yugoslavia and its disintegration. Yet, misperceptions and myths about the interwar period, and the Serb-Croat relationship in particular, persist. The main reason for this is a lack of a genuine debate among historians. After the end of communist, one-party rule, the blame no longer rests chiefly with the authorities. Historians, and not only nationalist historians, are at fault, some notable exceptions notwithstanding. They must not be reluctant to challenge nationalist myths and accepted wisdoms, and must be prepared to face criticism from colleagues and the public and from the media, which admittedly often looks for sensationalist and simple answers. Historians should know that simple answers are rare and that sometimes there are no answers, even less sensationalist *truths*, such as the 'truth' supposedly uncovered by authors of the book about Prince Paul, referred to at the beginning of this article. Arguably it is more important to ask the right questions,⁵⁸ even when those questions might be painful and risk leading to inconvenient answers; perhaps especially then.

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Notes

1. Miodrag Janković and Veljko Lalić, *Knez Pavle: Istina o 27. martu* (Belgrade 2007).
2. For an up-to-date analysis of the last months of the first Yugoslavia by a leading specialist in the field, see Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder: The Second World War in Yugoslavia* (London 2008), ch. 1. On Yugoslavia's foreign policy in the second half of the 1930s see Jacob Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis, 1934–1941* (New York 1962). On the establishment of autonomous Croatia see Dejan Djokić, *Elusive Compromise: A History of Interwar Yugoslavia* (London 2007), ch. 5.
3. Janković and Lalić, op. cit., 6. Photocopies of the papers have recently been made available to researchers in Serbia for the first time; the originals remain at the archives of Columbia University in New York, where they have been accessible for several decades, though admittedly seldom used.
4. See Aleksa Djilas, *The Contested Country: Yugoslav Unity and Communist Revolution, 1919–1953* (Cambridge, MA 1996), ch. 4; Mark Biondich, 'Religion and Nation in Wartime Croatia: Reflections on the Ustaša Policy of Forced Religious Conversions, 1941–1942', *Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 83, No 1 (January 2005), 71–116; Yeshayahu Jelinek, 'Nationalities and Minorities in the Independent State of Croatia', *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 8, No 2 (1980), 195–210, and Pavlowitch, op. cit., 22–48, 132–8.
5. Momir Turudić, 'Ko kači, a ko skida sliku Milana Nedića?', *Vreme* (Belgrade), 14 May 2009.
6. The argument that Serbs usually win wars but lose in peacetime became widespread in the 1980s, and was central to the then predominant discourse among nationalist intellectuals. See Jasna Dragović-Soso, *'Saviours of the Nation': Serbia's Intellectual Opposition and the Revival of Nationalism* (London 2002). The same discourse still survives, most notably in writings and public statements by such prominent figures as Vojislav Koštunica, the former president of the rump Yugoslavia and Prime Minister of Serbia, and Dobrica Ćosić, an eminent writer and a former Yugoslav president, but also in the work of many historians. See, for example, Ljubodrag Dimić, *Srbi i Jugoslavija* (Belgrade 1998), and numerous writings, mostly in Serbo-Croat, by historians such as Milorad Ekmečić and Vasilije Krestić. There are exceptions, however: see Predrag J. Marković, 'Lični stav: Za i protiv stvaranja Jugoslavije. Država bez građana', *Vreme*, 4 December 2008.
7. Marko Živković, 'Stories Serbs Tell Themselves: Discourses on Identity and Destiny in Serbia Since the mid-1980s', *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 44, No 4 (July–August 1997), 22–9.
8. See Stevan K. Pavlowitch, 'Conclusion: A Plea for Saint Guy', *Serbia: The History Behind the Name* (London 2002); and Dejan Djokić, 'Whose Myth? Which Nation? The Serbian Kosovo Myth Revisited', in János M. Bak et al., eds, *Uses and Abuses of*

- the Middle Ages: Nineteenth to Twenty First Century* (Munich 2009), 215–33. For nationalist grievances in socialist Yugoslavia see Dragović-Soso, op. cit., and for an account of anti-western conspiracy theories see Jovan Byford, *Teorija zavere: Protiv novog svetskog poretka* (Belgrade 2006).
9. See Djokić, ‘Whose Myth? Which Nation?’
 10. See Stefan Berger, ‘On the Role of Myths and History in the Construction of National Identity in Modern Europe’, *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No 3 (July 2009), 490–502; Dennis Deletant and Harry Hanak, eds, *Historians as Nation-builders: Central and South-East Europe* (Basingstoke 1988); Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpflin, eds, *Myths and Nationhood* (London 1997); Pål Kolstø, ed., *Myths and Boundaries in South Eastern Europe* (London 2005); and Maria Todorova, ed., *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory* (London 2004).
 11. See Milica Bakić-Hayden, ‘National Memory as a Narrative Memory: The Case of Kosovo’, in Todorova, op. cit., 25–40.
 12. For more details on the background to the unification see Djokić, *Elusive Compromise*, ch. 1.
 13. *Memorandum Presented to the Peace Conference, in Paris, concerning the claims of the Kingdom of the Serbians, Croats and Slovenes* (Paris 1919).
 14. ‘Tekst Londonskoga pakta’, in Ferdo Šišić, ed. and compiler, *Jadransko pitanje na Konferenciji mira u Parizu. Zbirka akata i dokumenata* (Zagreb 1920), 6–9. The text appears to have been translated from Émile Laloy, ed., *Les Documents secrets des archives du ministère des affaires étrangères de Russie, publiés par les Bolcheviks* (Paris 1920).
 15. ‘Deputation to the Prince Regent: A Nation’s Ideal’, *The Times*, 6 April 1916. It was at the same hotel where in July 1945 Alexander’s grandson and namesake would be born. An apartment at Claridge’s was proclaimed by the British government a Yugoslav territory for 24 hours, so that heir to the throne would be born in ‘Yugoslavia’. At the end of the Second World War, the Yugoslav Communist-dominated authorities ousted the Karadjordjević dynasty and banned it from returning to the country.
 16. For an analysis of the speech see Djokić, *Elusive Compromise*, pp. 29–30.
 17. Mark Biondich, *Stjepan Radić, the Croatian Peasant Party, and the Politics of Mass Mobilization, 1904–1928* (Toronto 2000), 161–2.
 18. Stjepan Radić, ‘Hoćemo u jugoslavenskom jedinstvu svoju hrvatsku državu’, in S. Radić, *Politički spisi: Autobiografija, članci, govori, rasprave* (compiled by Zvonimir Kulundžić) (Zagreb 1971), 319–22. In this article Radić called for a ‘Croat state within Yugoslavia’ and argued that ‘we, Croats, Slovenes and Serbs really are one nation, both according to our language and our customs’.
 19. See Ivo Lederer, *Yugoslavia at the Paris Peace Conference: A Study in Frontiermaking* (New Haven, CT 1963); Andrej Mitrović, *Jugoslavija na Konferenciji mira, 1919–1920* (Belgrade 1969); and Dejan Djokić, *Nikola Pašić and Ante Trumbić: The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes* (London 2010).
 20. Ivo Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia, Origins, History, Politics* (Ithaca, NY 1988) 270–90 (Montenegrins), 307–27 (Macedonians), and 359–76 (Bosnian Muslims).
 21. The complex international and internal politics of Serbia in the First World War are best analysed in Andrej Mitrović, *Serbia’s Great War, 1914–1918* (London 2007).
 22. There is a vague parallel with post-Yugoslav Serbia, which became independent only after Montenegro left a loose union with Belgrade in May 2006.

23. For the concept of 'informal empire' and for an excellent comparative analysis of the Russian, Soviet and other empires, see Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (London 2000).
24. The phrase coined by sociologist Rogers Brubaker in his article 'Aftermaths of Empire and the Unmixing of Peoples: Historical and Comparative Perspectives', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 18, No 2 (April 1995), 189–218.
25. Definition cited from *The Oxford Dictionary, Thesaurus and Wordpower Guide* (Oxford 2001). On definitions and the political meaning of the 'Balkans' and 'Balkanization' and western stereotypes about the region see Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* (New Haven, CT 1998), Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York 1997) and Traian Stoianovich, *Balkan Worlds: The First and Last Europe* (Armonk, NY 1994), esp. 1–3. Recent historical surveys of the region include R. J. Crampton, *The Balkans since the Second World War* (London 2002); John R. Lampe, *Balkans into Southeastern Europe: A Century of War and Transition* (Basingstoke 2006); and Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *A History of the Balkans, 1804–1945* (London 1999).
26. For more on the complexity of Yugoslav identities see Aleksa Djilas, 'Fear Thy Neighbor: The Breakup of Yugoslavia', in Charles Kupchan, ed., *Nationalism and Nationalities in New Europe* (Ithaca, NY 1995), 85–106. See also Dejan Djokić, ed., *Yugoslavism: Histories of a Failed Idea, 1918–1992* (London 2003).
27. The extent to which the German and especially Italian unification movements influenced the thinking of the Yugoslav nationalists remains unexplored. References to the *Risorgimento* and comparisons between Serbia and Piedmont were frequently made in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, not just by Serbs, while Garibaldi was celebrated by some Serbs alongside Karadjordje ('Black George') Petrović, a peasant and revolutionary who led the First Serbian Uprising against the Ottomans (1804–13). For the *Risorgimento* and Serbia as a Piedmont: G. M. Trevelyan, 'Aims of a Small Nation' (letter to the editor), *The Times*, 14 September 1914; for Garibaldi and Karadjordje: Mihajlo Pupin, *From Immigrant to Inventor* (New York 1960, first published in 1922), 8.
28. Biondich, *Stjepan Radić*, 5–6 and *passim*. Biondich uses Miroslav Hroch's three-stage model of national formation in Europe – see Hroch, 'From National Movement to the Fully-formed Nation: The Nation-building Process in Europe', in Gopal Balakrishnan, ed., *Mapping the Nation* (New York and London 1996), 78–97 – and builds on the work of Mirjana Gross, 'The Integration of the Croatian Nation', *East European Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No 2 (1981), 209–25.
29. Andrew B. Wachtel, 'Ivan Meštrović, Ivo Andrić and the Synthetic Yugoslav Culture of the Interwar Period', in Djokić, ed., *Yugoslavism*, 238–51, 238.
30. Andrew B. Wachtel, *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation: Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia* (Stanford, CA 1998), 14–18.
31. See Dejan Djokić, '(Dis)Integrating Yugoslavia: King Alexander and Interwar Yugoslavism', in Djokić, ed., *Yugoslavism*, 136–56.
32. The question whether the constituent nations or republics had the right to secession from Yugoslavia has caused a considerable debate in the country and among western politicians and scholars at the time of the disintegration and wars of the 1990s; a debate that continues to this day.
33. For an analysis of population figures and various ethnic, religious and linguistic categories, see Bogoljub Kočović, *Etnički i demografski razvoj u Jugoslaviji od 1921. do 1991.*

- godine (po svim zvaničnim a u nekim slučajevima i korigovanim popisima)*, 2 vols, (Paris 1998).
34. In the traditional, nineteenth-century European sense of the term, not to be confused with post-colonial jargon in Britain in reference to Africa and Asia or more recent American-sponsored 'nation-building' in the Middle East and the Balkans.
 35. For an analysis of the evolution of official Yugoslavism in socialist Yugoslavia see Dejan Jović, 'Yugoslavism and Yugoslav Communism: From Tito to Kardelj', in Djokić, ed., *Yugoslavism*, 157–81.
 36. See Ljubinka Trgovčević, 'South Slav Intellectuals and the Creation of Yugoslavia' in Djokić, ed., *Yugoslavism*, 222–37 and Wachtel, 'Ivan Meštrović'. Dubravka Stojanović's recent social and cultural history of Belgrade in late the nineteenth and early twentieth century offers an insight into pan-Yugoslav feelings among 'ordinary' people; Stojanović, *Kaldrma i asfalt: Urbanizacija i evroepizacija Beograda, 1890–1914* (Belgrade 2008).
 37. A parallel of sorts may be made with present-day Slovenia, the only former Yugoslav republic so far to be admitted into the European Union. Slovenia, not unlike Serbia a century ago, has attracted many former Yugoslav students, artists and intellectuals.
 38. Out of just over four million people living in autonomous Croatia (29 per cent of Yugoslavia's population), there were over 750,000 Serbs (19 per cent of the population of Croatia) and over 150,000 Muslims (nearly 4 per cent); *Godišnjak Banske vlasti Banovine Hrvatske* (Zagreb 1940).
 39. In present-day Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbs are either separatists, who wish to join Serbia, or they support the maintenance of the quasi confederal arrangement of the post-war Bosnia. Most Bosnian Croats would probably prefer the establishment, within Bosnia, of a third, Croat entity, rather than the preservation of the Muslim-Croat Federation, which, together with the Bosnian Serb Republic forms today's Bosnia, while some would like to see Bosnian Croat areas in western Herzegovina join Croatia. Bosnian Muslims, on the other hand, have transformed from supporters of a decentralized Yugoslavia to champions of a centralized, even unitarist Bosnia. Similarly, Kosovo Albanians, who declared independence from Serbia in February 2008, following decades of struggle with Belgrade over the level of autonomy for Kosovo, today reject granting autonomy to Serb-populated enclaves. And so on.
 40. Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London 1998), 7. Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe Between the Two World Wars* (Seattle and London 1974) remains the best account of the period.
 41. Deputies of the Yugoslav Muslim Organization and of the *Džemijet* – the main parties of Slav and non-Slav Muslims, respectively, voted for the centralist Constitution in exchange for Pašić delaying agrarian reform which would have stripped Muslim large landowners of their land. In addition, the Bosnian Muslims secured that historic borders of Bosnia would not be violated by the administrative division of the country into 33 municipalities.
 42. It is highly likely that even if the issue was discussed, the supporters of the Karadjordjević dynasty, who included many Croats and Slovenes, would have prevailed overwhelmingly.
 43. Not counting Tito, not until the emergence of Slobodan Milošević in the late 1980s would Serbs have such a leader. Even in the case of Milošević, his near-absolute support only lasted for approximately five years, from c. 1987 to c. 1992, after which he would be

- seriously challenged by the opposition until he finally lost power in 2000. For an intelligent analysis of Milošević's rule, which argues that the former Serb regime remained in power not because it was strong but because it managed to destroy alternative options, see Eric Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives* (University Park, PA 1999).
44. See Dejan Djokić, "'Leader' or 'Devil'? The Ideology of Milan Stojadinović, the Prime Minister of Yugoslavia (1935–39)", in Rebecca Haynes and Martyn Rady, eds, *In the Shadow of Hitler: Personalities of the Right in Central and Eastern Europe* (London 2011).
 45. 'The Yugoslav Regency: Is Reconciliation in Sight?', *The Times*, 10 July 1935.
 46. See Mirko Glojnarčić, compiler, *Vodja govori. Ličnost, izjave, govori i politički rad vodje Hrvata Dra. Vladka Mačeka* (Zagreb 1936).
 47. Despite an Agrarian joining the government as a cabinet minister.
 48. Slobodan Jovanović, leading Serbian historian and jurist. Jovanović became one of two Deputy Prime Ministers in the government of General Dušan Simović, formed on 27 March 1941. (The other Deputy Premier was Maček.) Jovanović was the Prime Minister of the London-based Yugoslav government-in-exile between January 1942 and August 1943 and Deputy Premier once again between August 1943 and June 1944. Sentenced *in absentia* after the war by the Communist government to 20 years of hard labour and loss of political and civil rights for 10 years, he died as an émigré in London in 1958 and is buried at the Kensal Green cemetery. He was officially rehabilitated in Serbia in October 2007.
 49. See Djokić, *Elusive Compromise*, 152–7. For a history of the Serbian Orthodox Church during the period see Radmila Radić, *Život u vremenima: Gavriilo Dožić, 1881–1950* (Belgrade 2006).
 50. For the text of the Agreement and for a first-hand account of negotiations written by one of the participants, see Lazar Marković, 'The Yugoslav Constitutional Problem', *Slavonic Review*, Vol. 16, No 47 (January 1938), 356–69.
 51. Bakhmetteff Archive of Russian and East European Culture, Columbia University, New York, Papers of Prince Paul of Yugoslavia, box 2: Anton Korošec [Interior Minister] to Milan Antić [Minister of the Royal Court], Belgrade, 16 January 1937. Among those consulted by the Prince Regent were Professors Slobodan Jovanović and Mihajlo Ilić.
 52. For a detailed account of events that led to the invasion of Yugoslavia by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in April 1941 see Hoptner, *op. cit.* 170–292.
 53. For details, see Maček's memoirs: Vladko Maček, *In the Struggle for Freedom* (University Park, PA 1957).
 54. Stevan K. Pavlowitch, 'Yugoslavia: The Failure of a Success', *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (November 1999), 163–70.
 55. 'Yugonostalgia' is demonstrated by the commercial and critical success across former Yugoslavia of two books that deal with popular memory of everyday life, culture and music during the socialist period: Iris Adrić et al., eds, *Leksikon Yu Mitologije* (Belgrade and Zagreb 2004), and Petar Janjatović, *Ex Yu Rock Enciklopedija, 1960–2006*, 2nd revised edn (Belgrade 2006). See also Nicole Lindstrom, 'Yugonostalgia: Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia in Former Yugoslavia', *East Central Europe*, Vol. 32, No 1/2 (2005), 227–38, and Zala Volčič, 'Yugo-Nostalgia: Cultural Memory and Media in Former Yugoslavia', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 24, No 1, March

- 2007, 21–38. More recently, nostalgia for Tito has emerged as a major feature of Yugonostalgia. See Mitja Velikonja, *Titostalgia: A Study of Nostalgia for Josip Broz* (Ljubljana 2008). ‘Yugonostalgia’ is, of course, part of a wider phenomenon of nostalgia for socialism across former Eastern Bloc countries. See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York 2001) and Maria Todorova, ed., *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation* (New York 2009).
56. See Thomas A. Emmert, ‘A Crisis of Identity: Serbia at the End of the Century’, in Norman M. Naimark and Holly Case, eds, *Yugoslavia and its Historians: Understanding the Balkan Wars of the 1990s* (Stanford, CA 2003) 160–78; and Susan Woodward, ‘Milošević Who? Origins of the New Balkans’, Discussion Paper No. 5, The Hellenic Observatory, The European Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science (July 2001).
57. See Veljko Vujačić, ‘Perceptions of the State in Russia and Serbia: The Role of Ideas in the Soviet and Yugoslav Collapse’, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 20, No 2 (2004), 164–94. For Russia see also Geoffrey Hosking, ‘Can Russia become a Nation-State?’, *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (October 1998), 449–62.
58. ‘The Culture of the Europeans: An Interview with Donald Sassoon’, *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (December 2006), 271–8.

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