

# **State Building In Inter-war Eastern Europe : Yugoslavia Experience**

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by

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Yugoslavia is situated in the Balkan peninsula, and it was created officially in the aftermath of the First World War as 'The Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes' in December 1918. This was changed to 'Yugoslavia', which means 'Southern Slavs' in 1929. The country covers an area of 247,542 square kilometres, with a population estimated at 15.9 million in 1940. Of these, 80 per cent of her population were engaged in agricultural activities; most of the country is covered by mountains, and there is a small coastal strip facing with thousands of Adriatic islands.

This paper is concerned with the problems and crises of state building in order to raise a single Southern Slav nation state during the inter-war period in Yugoslavia. The discussions in this paper will cover the years from 1918 to 1940, with particular attention to the internal political crises and conflicts after the formation of the Yugoslav state in December 1918, and before the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939. This paper is divided into three parts. First, the background and the migration of the Slavs to the

Balkan peninsula, and the formation of the Yugoslavia states in December 1918. Second, the internal problems and crises of state building in inter-war Yugoslavia; the discussion will concentrate on political instability during this period. Finally, some conclusion will be made as to whether or not there was a single Southern Slav nation-state in inter-war Yugoslavia. The term 'nation' here is defined by cultural criteria, which include language, historical consciousness, and separate religious identities.

### **THE BACKGROUND AND THE FORMATION OF THE YUGOSLAV STATES.**

Generally speaking, the problems and crises of nation-state formation during the inter-war period in Yugoslavia can be viewed in terms of the past history of the Slav settlement in the Balkan peninsula. Historically, the Southern Slavs had originated from the area around Kiev in the Ukraine since the sixth century. There were settlements of the ancestor to the Slovenes in the Balkan peninsula, followed by the Serbs and the Croats between the seventh and tenth centuries respectively.<sup>1</sup> The land upon which they settled formed part of either the Roman or Byzantine empires.<sup>2</sup> In contrast with the Germanic people, who used the Balkan peninsula on their way to Italy and the west, the Slavs came to the Balkans as permanent settlers and were engaged largely with agricultural activities.

There were three main national groups in Yugoslavia, namely the Serbs, the Croats and the Slovenes. On the other hand, there were also Bosnians, Herzegovinians, Montenegrins and Macedonians. Generally speaking, all these national groups in Yugoslavia had been dominated by foreign powers such as the Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman and later the Austro-Hungarian empires. For example, the Slovenes were ruled by the Germans (Austria), and the Croats were ruled by the Hungarians until the end of First World War.<sup>3</sup> The Macedonians were ruled alternately by the Turks, Bulgarians and Serbs. In addition, after the defeat of the Serbian Kingdom in Kosovo by the Turks in 1389, the Serbs came under the influence of the Ottoman empire. This defeat of the Serbs, at the hands of the Ottoman empire separated the Serbs from the Croats and Slovenes, who were ruled by the Austro-Hungarian empires for nearly four centuries.

Consequently, under these different forms of foreign imperialism, the Croats, the Serbs and the Slovenes, in particular, were diverged in terms of

political culture, economic development, and religion in the twentieth century. More interestingly, the influences of the Roman and Byzantine empires in terms of religious and cultural hegemony over all these national groups remained intact in the inter-war Yugoslavia. For example, the Slovenes and the Croats were mostly Catholics and used the Roman alphabet, whereas the Serbs were Orthodox Christians who used the Cyrillic script. In Bosnia, the Roman Catholic, Orthodox Christianity and Islam coexisted. All these circumstances contributed to the disintegration between the national groups in inter-war Yugoslavia.

There are several events that had led to the formation of the new state of Yugoslavia in December 1918. Anxiety over Italian designs on Southern Slav territories was a major factor in encouraging the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes to form a Pan Southern Slav state. As there were no way out at that time, the only realistic alternative to this appeared to be a possible partition of Croatian and Slovenian lands amongst Italy, Serbia, Austria or Hungary.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the idea of 'Yugoslavism' was the force that had made the creation of a state of the Southern Slavs possible after the First World War. 'Yugoslavism' as a form of theory, was characterised by a common cultural identity, a programme of liberation from the Hungarian Empire and the unification of all Southern Slavs. According to this theory, there would be no Serb, Croat or Slovene communities, and hence in organising the country, no special treatment would be meted out to any single national groups, and all national groups would be subsumed under this new country. All religious, social, cultural and political differences among the Croats, the Serbs and the Slovenes should come to an end, and they had a single nation-state for collective security and political survival of the Southern Slavs.

In October 1918, political leaders in Zagreb formed a National Council of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs. The Zagreb National Council subsequently voted to join with Serbia and Montenegro; the former had gained full independence in the late nineteenth century, and the latter enjoyed a quasi independent status.<sup>5</sup> However, there was strong opposition from the Serbian government who refused to engage in discussions, nor did they co-operation with the Yugoslav Committee to form a new state. The Serbians would have preferred to be the spokesmen for all of the Yugoslav people. However, the Serbian government did agree to co-operate on condition that a single nation of Southern Slavs was formed. Therefore, in December 1918, Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia,

Herzegovina and Slovenia were united under the Serbian leader, Peter Karageorgevic to form the 'Kingdom of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs'.<sup>6</sup>

The creation of these states, to a large extent, symbolised the liberation of the southern Slavs from the domination of external empires such as the Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian. Moreover, the political leaders who participated actively to form a single Southern Slav nation state, hoped that the problems of nationalities, which had given rise to difficulties in the Austro-Hungarian empire, could be resolved in the new state. In addition, it was a 'turning point' for Serbian-Croatian co-operation, and they worked together against their common enemies, rather than engage in disintegration between them. Then, the parts of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire (Croatian, Slovenian and Dalmatian), which had joined the core grouping to form a new state in 1918, seemed to be natural elements of what could constitute a stable new nation-state- *Greater Serbia*. Basically, this concept means the union of the southern Slavs under the leadership of the Serbian nation; it was however, strongly condemned by the Croats and Slovenes during the inter-war period.

#### PROBLEMS AND CRISIS IN INTER- WAR YUGOSLAVIA

After the formation of the 'Kingdom of Croats, Serbs and Slovene' in December 1918, however, the intentions and aspirations of the intellectuals and political leaders to create a single nation-state for southern Slavs was challenged by several factors in inter-war Yugoslavia. The most challenging factor was the potentiality for conflict and the unhealthy relationship between the different national groups, particularly between the Croats and the Serbs.

The grievances and dissatisfactions of the Croats were evident with the domination of Serbs in key ministries and high ranking posts in the new state. For example, in 1919, Stojan Protic became Premier, Korasec Vice Premier and Trumbic Minister of Foreign Affairs. All were members of the Serbian Radical Party.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, there was a crisis with the army in Croatia. This was due to the desire of the Serbian army to be the sole defender of the new country. Consequently, the Croat units of the old Habsburg army were disbanded, and the Croat professionals who wished to join the new army faced many difficulties. For instance, they had to apply in order to join the new army, whereas the officers from the former Serbian army did not need to do so.<sup>8</sup> Then, there were discriminatory practices, such as the posting of Croats to distant troubled

areas. Hence, under such restrictions, only one tenth of Yugoslavian officers in the army were Croats in 1939.

As a result, the principle claim by the Croats was equality in political opportunities in the new state. This was because, before the formation of the new state, the Croats had had an extensive school system, a university, an official language and a parliamentary assembly in Zagreb.<sup>9</sup> The new state was seen to be not an improvement in the Croatian position, but rather a weakening of the existing system. In addition, the new state was governed from Belgrade, and all political decisions, internal and external policies which affected all the other national groups in the new state, were made in Belgrade. As a result, the relationship between the Croats and the Serbs was dominated by tension, mistrust and hesitation.

If the relationship between the Serbs and the Croats was coloured by mistrust, tension and hesitation, the situation was different for the Slovenes. The Slovenes did not suffer from such 'discrimination' as the Croats claimed. There were two Slovene generals and a Slovene minister (Karošec as Vice Premier); they represented Yugoslavia in diplomatic affairs.<sup>10</sup> Also, the Slovenes were linguistically different from the Serbs, and the lack of bilingual bureaucrats enabled them to preserve some local control over the administrative machine. As Archibald pointed out, 'the Slovenes have probably benefited most from the union, for, while keeping their own little country to themselves, they have been able to make a profitable use of the rest of Yugoslavia'.<sup>11</sup>

However, the principal Slovene grievance was the exercise of centralisation which meant that all important decisions dealing with the Slovenes in particular were decided in Belgrade. Moreover, the Slovenes claimed that this centralisation was corrupt and inefficient. For instance, the building of new roads, bridges, the appointment of school teachers and the choice of text books had to be referred to Belgrade.<sup>12</sup> It normally took six months for any approval to filter down. Moreover, the local council were powerless when it came to control over its own finances; and taxes were collected and sent to Belgrade.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Muslims formed the largest segment of the population, were under pressure to support the new government in Belgrade. Even though the Bosnians and the Herzegovinians felt concern over giving support to the Orthodox Christian Serbia, they had no real alternative. It was better to support the new government in Belgrade rather than to oppose it. This was

because, they feared that if the Serbian government would break up Bosnia and redistribute it to other regime. As a result, there was no unity among the Muslims in the new state, and they become a minority group within the new nation-state.

In contrast, the distribution of the Serbs were large, compared to the other national groups. This was because the Serbs formed the largest national group, with 38.83 per cent of the total population in 1918.<sup>13</sup> The Croats were the second largest national group, with 23.77 per cent, followed by the Slovenes with 8.53 per cent, and the Bosnian Muslims 6.05 per cent. Therefore, the Serbs were widely dispersed around Yugoslavia. For example, Serbia and Montenegro were predominantly Serbian, and nearly a fifth of the population in Croatia were Serbian. The Serbs could also be found in Vojvodina, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, Bosnia and Herzegovina supported the Belgrade government under the Serbian leadership, in order to foster the survival of the Muslim population during the inter-war period.

Furthermore, there were serious two constitutional crises, in 1921 and 1931 in inter-war Yugoslavia. In the former crisis, the basic conflict centred around whether the new state should proclaim a centralist or federalist system after the November 1920 election. The second crisis occurred when King Alexander proclaimed a dictatorship. The new state called for an election in November 1920, and forty political organisations competed for the 419 seat Assembly. However, those nationals of German or Hungarian origin were disenfranchised in this 1920 election.

On the one hand, the most influential political party in Serbia was the Serbian Radical Party under the leadership of Pasic.<sup>14</sup> The party membership comprised mainly of Serbian middle class elements such as merchants, businessman, military and bureaucrats. In 1919, however, the left wing broke off to form the Democratic Party under the leadership of Ljubomir. Both parties supported a centralized government, and, therefore, they were able to work together. On the other hand, the most popular party in Croatia was the Croatian Peasant Party under the leadership of Radic who was imprisoned up until the November election of 1920. Basically, the Croatian parties rejected a centralized organisation of the state and maintained their attitude of extreme opposition to the concept of it.

In addition, there were three political parties in Slovenia, namely the Liberal Party, the Slovene People's Party and the National Party.<sup>15</sup> The Slovene

People's Party, which was under the leadership of Korasec, enjoyed the popular support four-fifths of all Slovenians. This was because the People's Party had fought for Slovenian rights, supported a union with the Croats and the Serbs in 1918, and formed a part of the Radical Union Government after the 1920 election. Another political organisation that participated in the 1920 election was the Communist Party. It was established in 1919 as the Socialist Worker's Party, changing its name to the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in 1920. The Communist Party was quite popular and was supported by the peasants in the early 1920's.

The All Yugoslav Peasant Union and the Yugoslav Muslim Organisation also participated in the 1920 election. The former was an alliance of Croats, Serbs and Slovene peasants; its stronghold centred on the peasants in Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The party was dedicated to a centralist state, rather than a federalist system. The latter political party represented the interests of Muslim Bosnia.<sup>16</sup> At first, it opposed the centralist system, which meant the replacement of their religious headquarters from Sarajevo to Belgrade. However, in the latter years, fearing the break-up of Bosnia by the Serbs, brought an end to this anti-centralist sentiment in Bosnia.

To a large extent, the 1920 election symbolised the practices of democracy within a fledgling Yugoslavia, with forty political organisations participating in the election. However, the practices of democracy changed in the latter years with the arrest and imprisonment of opposition leaders and the disbandment of political parties. For instance, even though the Communist Party was the third most popular party in the 1921 election, it was disbanded after the election as a result of the murder of the former interior minister.<sup>17</sup> Hence, the Communist Party operated illegally, and did not, in practice play a major role in Yugoslavia during the inter-war years. In addition, most of the political parties which participated in the 1920 election were largely based on geographical origin, and these political parties remained predominant in inter-war Yugoslavia until it was disbanded by King Alexander in 1931.

The full result of the 1920 elections showed that the Serbian Democrats was the most popular party with 94 seats out of the 419 seats contested in the Constituent Assembly.<sup>18</sup> Second, was the Serbian Radical Party with 89 seats, followed by the Communist Party with 58. The Croatian Peasant Party only gained 50 seats, the Slovenian and Croatian clerical parties 27 seats, the Bosnian Muslims 24, and the Social Democrats 10. Therefore, a new government was

formed with the coalition of the Serbian Democrats and the Radicals, with Nikola Pasic as prime minister.

As a result, the Croats, under the Croatian Peasant Party, were left out of the government and against the Constitution for the new state in 1921. This was due to the refusal of the Croats to accept a centralist system for the new state centred in Belgrade. For instance, a quarter of the elected representatives of the Croatian Peasant Party boycotted the Assembly. Therefore, the Constitution, which was drafted in 1921, was approved by the Serbian representatives with majority of 233 votes.<sup>19</sup> The 1921 constitution brought into existence the formation of a centralist state, with a single chamber Parliament, the 'Skuptina'. To ensure the success of centralisation, the country was divided into thirty three districts, each one ruled by a prefect appointed by Belgrade.

Moreover, in 1923, the Croat elected representatives declared that laws passed in Belgrade were invalid in Croatia. In 1925, however, the opposition of the Croats, who demanded a federalist state and an autonomous character rather than centralist system, was ended with a peace agreement.<sup>20</sup> The Croats united under the Radic leadership, which lead the Croatian Peasant Party into formally accepting and recognising the 1921 Constitution, paving the way for a coalition of Serbs and Croats. The Croats felt that the coalitions of Serbs and Croats would ensure the practice of balanced representatives and equality through political unity of the Croats and the Serbs. Hence, the acceptance of the 1921 Constitution from all parties confirmed that the prestige and authority of that Constitution was unquestionable, since it had been legally voted on by the people, sanctioned by the King, and freely accepted by a majority of the Croats in 1925. The Constitution, in effect was the real source of the political right and sovereignty of the monarchy in the country.

Unfortunately, once again a constitutional crisis arose in Yugoslavia when King Alexander created a new Constitution, which was proclaimed in September 1931, and imposed upon the country. Before that, King Alexander had proclaimed a royal dictatorship, and assumed personal responsibility for the government in 1929.<sup>21</sup> All national and regional political parties were banned, and the 'Skuptina' was replaced by a Legislative Assembly with advisory power. Following on from this, most political leaders such as Macek were arrested, and the only official government party - the Yugoslav National Party was permitted. In other words, King Alexander had placed himself above the Constitution, and



concentrated into his own hands the legislative, administrative and judicial powers.

Therefore, the constitution of 1931 differed from that of 1921 in three essential points. First, the Constitution of 1931 increased the effective powers of the King, and accordingly reduced the rights and powers of the people. Second, the Constitution had divided the country into nine provinces and the provincial governors represented by the central power of Belgrade. Finally, the Constitution of 1921 was boycotted and voted against by the Croats; in 1931 both parties, the Serbs and the Croats, were dissatisfied with the new constitution which restricted civil liberties. The constitutional crisis of 1931 ended the constitutional monarchy in Yugoslavia which had been in operation since 1921.

In addition, King Alexander proclaimed the state was to be renamed 'Yugoslavia', which means 'nation of Southern Slavs', and the former thirty three districts were replaced by nine larger provinces which were called 'banovinas', in order to weaken traditional loyalties. The 'banovinas' were given the names of rivers and other geographical features. This was used in an effort made by the King Alexander to promote unity among the national groups in Yugoslavia. However, King Alexander faced extreme opposition from the Croats and the Slovenes, leading to his assassination in 1934.

After the 1935 election, Milan Stojadinovic, who led the Yugoslav National Party, was appointed Prime Minister, and Prince Paul was Regent. In contrast to King Alexander's policies, Stojadinovic tried to reduce political control, police supervision and censorship in inter-war Yugoslavia. For example, Stojadinovic released Macek, Trumbic and Korosec with about 10,000 other political detainees.<sup>22</sup> In the next election of 1938, however, Stojadinovic was defeated by the opposition parties led by the Croatian Peasant Party, which united with some Serbian political parties, such the Democratic Party and sections of the Radical Party. As a result of this defeat, Stojadinovic was replaced by Dragisa Cvetkovic in 1939 who tried to reach a compromise with the Croats. In August 1939, the Croats had gained an autonomous power within the state, and its area included Croatia, Slavonia, Dalmatia and some Bosnian and Herzegovinian territory that were inhabited by the Croats.<sup>23</sup> The population of this autonomous region was made up of 77 per cent Croatian nationals. It had its own Assembly, and Macek became Vice Premier of Yugoslavia. To a large extent, the struggle of the Croats for political equality in inter-war Yugoslavia was achieved, and the con-

lict between the Croats and the Serbs came to an end. However, most Serbs maintained their desire to have a Serbian dominated Yugoslavian.

### CONCLUSION

Three main conclusions can be made from the above discussion. First, there was no single nation-state of the southern Slavs in Yugoslavia during the inter-war period. In other words, there was a multinational state instead of a Yugoslav nation, which was the intention of intellectuals and political leaders of this period. The desire to create a single nation-state of southern Slavs was challenged by a constitutional crises, diverse views over the implementation of a centralist or a federalist system, conflict among the national groups, religious differences, and the dictatorship of the King. Therefore, Yugoslavia in the inter-war period was hampered by political instability, and was full of mistrust, hesitation and tension among the various national groups particularly between the Croats and the Serbs.

Second, the Serbs were much more attracted to the concept of *Greater Serbia*,<sup>24</sup> rather than Yugoslavia. The latter represented the reformed option of most Croats and the Slovenes. Basically, the Croats and the Slovenes accepted the idea of creating a single Slav nation-state, but not under the influence and domination of a Serbian leadership. They felt that all national groups which were incorporated into the Yugoslav state should have equal opportunities in internal and external state affairs. Therefore, the principle evoked by the Croats during the inter-war Yugoslavia was political equality based on a federalist system, rather than a centralist government in Belgrade. In contrast, the Serbian political leaders desired a new Yugoslav state, which followed the same pattern as the Kingdom of Serbia before First World War. The Serbs claimed that they had political experience in administrating the former Kingdom, which gained independence in 1878 from the Ottoman empire. The Serbian army had also suffered more than the other nationalities during the First World War to liberate the Southern Slavs the domination of foreign powers such as the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. Therefore, the Serbs argued that they should retain rights than the other nationalities in the new state; their claim was manifested in expansionism and domination in the new government machine.

Third, the idea of democracy worked imperfectly in inter-war Yugoslavia. It was true that democracy was only practised at the early stages of the new

state, but failed in the subsequent years, particularly after the 1920 election. Serbian leaders were arrested, opposition political leaders were imprisoned, and political parties such as the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (1921), and the Peasant Party (1924) were disbanded. In addition, all political parties were made illegal when King Alexander proclaimed his dictatorship. This was followed by the two serious constitutional crises of 1921 and 1931, the latter led to the assassination of King Alexander. More importantly, the constitutional crisis of 1931 ended the Constituent Assembly in inter-war Yugoslavia. Hence, the idea of democracy, which was introduced immediately after the formation of the new state in 1918, could not get a foothold in inter-war Yugoslavia.

Finally, the differences between the national groups in terms of political, economic and cultural which lead to the disintegration and conflict between these groups was a result of their different experiences in the past. The Croats, Serbs, Slovenes, Montenegrins, Bosnians and Herzegovinians had all suffered from foreign domination such as the Romans, Byzantine, Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman empires. The Croats and the Slovenes were under the influences of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, whereas the Serbs had suffered under the Ottoman domination. Therefore, the situation was always extremely complicated in Yugoslavia during the inter-war period. Internal political stability within the framework of a single nation-state was needed in the inter war period Yugoslavia. This was not impossible, if only the three main national groups - the Serbs, the Croats and the Slovenes had really desired it with loyalty, sincerity, unity and willingness to collaborate one another.

## NOTE

- 1 Ivo Banac. (1984) The National Question in Yugoslavia : Origin, History, Politics, London, Cornell University Press, pp. 31-47. See also Roger Portal. (1969) The Slav, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, pp. 21-25 for discussion on the origin of the Slavs people in Europe.
- 2 H.T. Norris. (1993) Islam In The Balkans : Religion and Society between Europe and the Arab World, Hurst and Company, London, pp 11-14.
- 3 Barbara Jelavich. (1983) History Of The Balkan : Twentieth Century, Vol. 2, London, Cambridge University Press, p. 51.
- 4 Ibid., p. 125.
- 5 Ibid., p. 124.
- 6 Ibid., p. 147.
- 7 R. J. Crampton. (1994) Eastern Europe In The Twentieth Century, London, Routledge, p. 131, and Barbara Jelavich, (1983), p. 147.
- 8 R. J. Crampton. (1994), p. 132.
- 9 Ibid., p. 133.
- 10 Lyall, Archibald. 'The Making Of Modern Slovenia' in Slavonic and East European Review, Vol. 17, No. 50 (Jan. 1939), p. 413.
- 11 Ibid., p. 414.
- 12 Ibid., pp. 414-415.
- 13 Ivo, Banac. (1984), p. 58.
- 14 Barbara Jelavich. (1983), p. 148.
- 15 Lyall Archibald. 'The Making Of Modern Slovenia', p. 413.
- 16 R. J. Crampton. (1994), p. 135.
- 17 Barbara Jelavich, (1983), p. 150.
- 18 R. J. Crampton. (1994), p. 135.
- 19 Lazar Markovic. 'The Yugoslav Constitutional Problem' in Slavonic and East European Review, Vol. 16, No. 47 Jan. 1938), p. 356.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Barbara, Jelavich. (1983), pp. 200-202, and Wayne S. Vucinich (ed.) (1969) Contemporary Yugoslavia : Twenty Years of Socialist Experiment, Barkely and Los Angeles, University of California Press, pp. 18-22.
- 22 R. J. Crampton, (1994), p. 141.
- 23 Barbara, Jelavich. (1983), p. 203.
- 24 An idea to create homogeneous state where Serbs would live in unity, reincorporated the territory which Serbs claimed belongs to them based on historical evidences, and free from the minorities such as Muslims, Croats, Germans, Albanians and Slovenes.