

## **History of International Relations**

### **The Clash of Nationalisms: The Croats and Serbs in Interwar Yugoslavia**

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**Abstract:** On 3 October 1929, the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was officially renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Although Nikola Pasic had insisted on preserving the name Serbia, King Alexander sought to promote and protect the political-bureaucratic dominance of the Serbian bourgeoisie under the Yugoslav regime. The Serbs and the Croats are the most popular nations of Yugoslavia, after the First and the Second World War, and in many regions they lived together. This made it clear that Croat-Serb relations and the Croatian national question would present the Yugoslav state with its greatest problem in the coming decades.

**Keywords:** Yugoslavia; Croatia; Serbia; Nationalism; Kingdom

In negotiations between Serbs and Croats (who prefaced the moment 1<sup>st</sup> December 1918 representing by proclaiming the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes) it was originally the issue of building a state of the South Slavs (of federal type), but succeeding the order of military events (army actions in the Italian armies in the Adriatic area) has outlined the crystallization of unitary state, under the scepter of the Serbian Karadjordjevic dynasty.

The emergence of this new Slavic state on the map of Europe was not the result of intense diplomatic efforts (as in the case of Czechoslovakia), but of a fait accompli, with the broad will of Serbia, six weeks before the onset of the Peace Conference from Paris. (Goldstein, 1999, pp. 14-91)

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But the differences in historic experience, mentality and not least - the peoples' expectations constituent of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes have turned out to be too high.

The Serbian elite interpreted the state centralism as a logical materialization of its political economic and cultural hegemony. Nikola Pasic (prime minister of the Serb-Croat-Slovene Kingdom) was not initially a ardent supporter of the annexation of Croatia and Slovenia, but it finally accepted the idea of unification, provided the predominance of Serbs, meaning that all key decisions should emanate from Belgrade. By contrast, the Croats were advocates of a federal state, where the understanding with the Serb ethnic element was to be a condition, opposing any projects of domination of Croatia by Serbia, their prominent leader Stepan Radic, expressing this wish, with maximum clarity.

The 1918 political solutions seemed to be realistic, or the establishment of a South Slav state, or a possible division of the Croatian and Slovenian lands between Italy and Serbia or maybe even between Austria and Hungary.

According to the Joseph Rothschild historian, the interwar Yugoslavia was the most complicated of the new states appeared on the map of East-Central Europe.

The Historian Dejan Djokic notice in turn, that if it was used the more flexible interpretative grid of Slavism (within the meaning of the national identity concept) interwar Yugoslavia could have been labeled as a homogeneous nation-state, where the percentage of the South Slavs exceeded 80% of the entire population of country. (Djovic, 2007, p. 38)

Karadjordjevic Dynasty was a Serbian type, as perceived by many non-Serbs, being in fact a foreign dynasty. Usually, a foreign dynasty can aspire to legitimacy only if it is perceived as being completely impartial by others.

The elections to the Constituent Assembly of December 28, 1920 were based, however, on the census of 1910, the goal unreported by officials from Belgrade was an over-representation of the Serbian ethnic element, the most affected one on human losses during World War I. (Rannet, 2006, p. 23)

Nikola Pasic sketched the project of a future centralist constitution, proposing the disappearance of the provinces that enjoyed historical autonomy. The Kingdom of the South Slavs were divided into 33 administrative units ("oblastii"), each exceeding 800,000 inhabitants. Croats saw in this solution, a tactic of balkanization, conceived with the aim of maximizing the upcoming election, the

electoral strength of the Serbian vote. Pasic would have wanted in the new created context the crystallization of a Yugoslav nation as being homogeneous (but still for the purposes of favoring the Serbian element) by the gradual annihilation of minorities. Initially, however, the first Yugoslav state illustrated the formula of a constitutional monarchy based on democratic principles. The Unicameral parliament was based on proportional representation. All religions and denominations were recognized, the equality of all citizens before the law was enshrined, and the two alphabets (Cyrillic and Latin) received an equal official status. Lastly, the local autonomy seemed to be greatly encouraged. (Crampton, 2008, p. 58)

However, the internal tensions will soon manifest, since the preliminary moments before the Constitution of June 28, 1921 ("Vidovdan"). The Croats accused the Serbian politicians that they only wish for political domination of the state, under the pretext of articulating a unified Yugoslavia. Within the work of the Constituent Assembly, the leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, Stepan Radic, followed by 161 Croatian deputies boycotted the debates, not wanting to vote for a new constitution, which they deemed to be as equivalent to a mere copy of the Serbian one in 1903, categorically directed against the interests of Croatia. (Berend, 1998, p. 172)

65% of members of the first cabinet of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were Serb, another detail vehemently complained by Radic. From the percentage point of view, the ethnic Serbs represented 40% of the new state, but it should be noted that the official documents of Belgrade Montenegrins were considered to be still ethnic Serbs.

King Alexander wanted to be the artisan of a policy conducted in the spirit of Great Serbia, but with the means of an authoritarian regime, identified by many historians with a dictatorship. Of the 656 appointed ministers, between 1919-1938, 452 were Serbs.

Changing the name of the state into Yugoslavia (3 October 1929) illustrated the apparent will of King Alexander to end inter-ethnic friction, but he repeatedly stated (in some private conversations) that under this name he will continue to promote and preserve the predominance of the Serbian politico-bureaucratic bourgeoisie.

Neither the Constitution of 1931 was regarded with greater confidence by non-Serbs, especially the Croats. The latter began to seek solutions to their targets,

outside the Yugoslav state framework, the Ustasa movement (led by Ante Pavelic) being the best known example (and contradictory in terms of interpretations) in this regard. (Berend, 1998, p. 173)

The Serbian church supported him King Alexander, and he considered in turn as a tacit promoter of the Serbs ethnic interests.

In the interwar period, the traditional economic ties between Croatia and Central Europe (especially with Vienna and Budapest) experienced a certain deterioration. As other regions of the new Yugoslav state, Croatia was predominantly agrarian (about 70% of the active population worked in agriculture), but on the other hand it had an industrial capacity superior to other regions.

The wood industry (for instance) benefited from a safe internal market and the profile enterprises knew an obvious modernization of technologies, that there was in no other part of Yugoslavia. Zagreb remained a relatively developed city and a banking center, an aspect that favored the development of foreign investments in the area, much more significant than in other regions of Yugoslavia. The urban development in Zagreb and in other Croatian cities was comparable as rhythm to that known in other European cities. In Zagreb there was a radio station, appearing also an air route Zagreb-Belgrade. In many respects, the interwar Croatian middle class showed a sincere admiration for Western culture and civilization, especially in terms of innovation, a significant example in this respect being the avant-gardism which enjoyed by the many partisans in the selected society of Zagreb. A significant development experienced in the Croatian tourism, particularly in coastal area and islands, while the city-ports (especially Split) have become summer resorts increasingly popular and required. In 1925 it was inaugurated a railway route between Zagreb and Split, which contributed to boosting the tourism in Croatia. (Goldstein, 1999, p. 177)

The frustrations of the Croats compared to ever more visible desire of the Serbs to exert dominance at all levels within the Yugoslav state structures have become increasingly powerful, and the idea of a crystallization of an independent Croatia became the main theme of the Croatian nationalism. A nationalism increasingly more violent and warlike, which eventually was organized also politically, as the Ustasha (Uprising) Movement founded in 1929. In 1932 it was released the first issue, a publication where the doctrine of this organization was presented in a manner that was meant to be brief and also-significant. It was not random the appearance of the publication in Italy, a country which claimed more than a

decade, a revisionist policy and Rome had every interest for Yugoslavia to fall apart. Supporting an organization that was eager to break Yugoslavia represented a further advantage in favor of the Mussolini's diplomacy.

There was a Croatian emigration with radical nationalist views fairly active, not only in Italy but also in Germany, Austria and Hungary.

The Croatian Nationalism as it appeared ruled by Ustashi ideologies militated for full independence of Croatia, based on historical and ethnic arguments, postulating the idea according to which on the territory of the future Independent State of Croatia, the only nation that had to exist was the Croatian nation, the other will be melted into the great mass of Croats. The anti-Serbian accents were correlated with the anti-semitic and anti-gipsy terrorist methods, not only that they were rejected, but also they were strongly recommended, in the development of all future actions of the Ustasha adherents. It was a strange atmosphere within which there could be detected, so intense on Roman Catholic religiosity, and also symbols that were reminiscent of the occult practices of the initiates. The Bible had its role with a skull and crossbones, the grenade joining the dagger, and the candles flickering into the darkness into the reunion halls. The Ustasha will develop a special psychology, of fighters for a good cause in this regard is likely to unimaginable cruelties, in fact, being materialized in the coming years in the new international context represented by the events of the Second World War. The Croatian nationalists established already in the imaginary boundaries the Yugoslav state, meaning that a great just Croatia would become the most important state of South Slavs, a true hegemon at the Adriatic Sea.

An essential role in the Ustasha Movement had the Ante Pavelic, the one who will become in time the undisputed leader of the radical Croats nationalists. Pavelic was born on July 14, 1889 in Bradina (Herzegovina) and he was trained as lawyer. His position really became one of the fore since 1925, when he was deputy of Zagreb. Then he was perceived as the leader of Croatian nationalists and the main opponent to the pan-Serbian policy of the government in Belgrade. In 1929, Pavelic had established the Ustasha Movement, to which central authorities have expressed from the beginning an attitude of extreme hostility, that otherwise, Pavelic had to go into exile for fear of repercussions. The controversial personality, strange, but incontestably – charismatic, the one who was proclaimed himself Poglavnik (leader of all Croats) who possesses some traits of character that made him extremely loved by its supporters. Photos and records of era presents a stately man, with

extremely large ears and a severe look, which for some may be an indication of a violent nature. Pavelic possess a dose of shyness, which would seem strange if we think especially that his actions (especially those in Exile) recommended him as an orchestrator of terrorist attacks, the most famous of them being the one in the autumn of 1934 (Marseille), which resulted in the murder of King Alexander I of Yugoslavia and French Prime Minister Louis Barthou. (Goldstein, 1999, pp. 120-121)

For Ante Pavelic and his followers, the independent Croatian state was not just an ideal or geopolitical state, but also almost a mythical projection, which can be decrypted as the symbolism reminiscent of the early medieval period. For the Croatian nationalists, a coexistence with the Serbian element would amount to an absurdity, in the sense that the latter would have had a totally nefarious influence on the Croatian identity. The Croats have always considered themselves an outpost of the West in the Adriatic Sea area, and the expression of belonging to Roman Catholic Christianity has played a key role in stating their representation. The old trade and political connection with the Venetian and the Austro-Hungarian world shaped in a way, the Croatian collective character and psychology, imprinting the firm conviction that the Croats were a people different from Serbs, primarily in terms of mentality and civilization. For the Croatian political and cultural elite, the Serbs would only be a people relatively regressing, fanatical in the Orthodox faith, a people who had on its side the argument of brute force, represented by an army truly feared in the Balkan area. It was thus shaped at imagistic level increased gap between Croatia, which claimed to be cosmopolitan and urban, as opposed to a Serbia with a socio-demographic profile predominantly agricultural, conservative and aggressive. The traditional relations of friendship (facilitated clearly also by the common orthodoxy) between Serbia and Russia it was another argument for Croats in watching the Serbs with contempt and distrust, the Tsarist Russia with having in the Catholic world a rather negative image, troublesome, by the symbol of autocratic, absolutism and last but not least an amazing ignorance.

The annihilation of the Yugoslav state resistance by Nazi Germany (1941) was received with utmost satisfaction by the Croats, avoiding them to effectively engage, in the sense of defending a state that they did not even consider it being theirs. Moreover, the Serbs would accuse other nations within the former Yugoslavia of treason, considering mainly the Croats.

On April 10, 1941, the German troops entered in Zagreb, during which Colonel Kvaternik (one of the leading Croatian nationalists) has lectured at the local radio station, the proclamation of independence of his country. Taking advantage of the fact that in that year the Easter feast was to be celebrated on April 13, and the proclamation was pronounced as being the spiritual-religious component. It was specifies that it had practically become an act of historical justice and the Croatian people returned to independence after centuries of continuous oppression and struggle, a crucial role in this respect, having as leader Ante Pavelic, the Ustasha movement, and last but not least the Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy. (Goldstein, 1999, p. 133)

Kvaternik assumed (in the name of Pavelic) the lead to the armed forces and effective power management within the new Croatian state. Soon, Ante Pavelic (accompanied by 300 supporters) has returned to Croatia (from his Italian exile), together with the Italian military units. Meanwhile, other Ustashi groups came back on the Croatian territory from Germany and other European countries, where they were forced to sit a while, fearing reprisals of the Yugoslav authorities.

On April 16, 1941, Ante Pavelic was forming in Zagreb the first government of the independent Croatian state, and assigning the title of "Poglavnik" (head of state), besides holding the post of prime minister, the warrant of foreign minister. The overall atmosphere seemed to be one of enthusiasm, understanding that the public opinion was witnessing a new beginning in the history of the country. The German soldiers were greeted warmly, being regarded as liberators. Pavelic benefited in the first instance of about 2000 partisans who had lived until then clandestinely, changing the status of Croatia just making them return to the forefront of the public life. Among these were to be selected in general the officials and technical staff members, without which the government in Zagreb would have not functioned. Gradually, more people applied for inclusion among the Ustasha, so that in May 1941, the organization already numbered 100,000 members. Most of those who had opted for Pavelic's group were Croats with a low level of education and precarious living standards. (Goldstein, 1999, pp. 133-134)

Popular euphoria did not last long as, following the agreements signed in Rome (May 18, 1941), almost the whole of Dalmatia was assimilated into Italy, despite the fact that 90% of the region's inhabitants were of Croat ethnicity. It was a clear signal addressed to the Pavelic government by the main powers, meaning that as long as Croats had obtained independence themselves in Germany and Italy could

have dispose of the Croatian territory according to their interests. The dislike for Italy increased (it existed in the preceding years, fueled by the Venetian historical legacy), especially since the price of Croatia's independence seemed to have paid a too high price in terms of territorial concessions, meaning that Italy had annexed almost Croatia's Adriatic coast throughout all the islands (except Pag, Brac and Hvar), cities Pula, Rijeka, Zadar, Split, Sibenik, Trogir, etc. Dubrovnik remained part of Croatia, but had been virtually isolated from the economic and geostrategic aspects. Subsequently, the new Croatian state had to cede some parts of its territory – to Hungary. The Internal policy of the Pavelic government will prove increasingly hostile, on the one hand to the communities of Serbs, Gypsies and Hebrew, and on the other part - to all those who in one way or another were opposed or considered enemies of the regime. Thus it was created a schism more evident even inside the Croatian nation, and the sense of terror and insecurity will become gradually a feature of those years. The economic situation will worsen, given that the cost of their maintenance of German and Italian troops stationed in the country were paid exclusively by the Croatian authorities, and the essential branches such as shipping, shipbuilding and sectors of agriculture which had become Italian or Hungarian monopoly. (Goldstein, 1999, pp. 134-136)

Under the political-administrative terms, the Ante Pavelic's regime was quick to introduce a legislation that he already conceived, since the period of emigration. The Croatian state was to be a purely totalitarian state, in which the Croatian nation was the only one who had the right to exist. The only admitted political party was the Ustasha organization, and its members were the ideal prototype of the Croatian citizen: a human body and soul of his country, ready to execute faithfully the indications of the president, inflexible to the enemies of Croatia. The idea of the motherland having a spiritual connotation, but also ethnic-racial one, attempting an autochthonous process of this image, making contact with old mythical representations of medieval Croatian kings. There was, of course, an influence of the patterns of Nazi-fascist state organization, but Pavelic's and his followers' ambition was for the nationalist paradigm of local inspiration to prevail and to be the dominant one. The Ustasha members were not to represent only the members of the party-state, but also an ideal of virtue and valor, an example of selfless patriotism and cruelty to all enemies who dared to threaten in one form or another the Croatian independence.

Eventually the Pavelici's regime was definitely compromised, especially due to the true acts of genocide, exerted on ethnic Serbs, Hebrew and Gypsy, a real carousel



of horrors. The echoes of the conflicts between the two nationalisms were maintained, leading over decades to Croatia's secession from Yugoslavia in an international context, which Zagreb knew how to exploit in its interest.

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The defeat of the Axis had destroyed the chances of those native movements that had thought of a solution to Yugoslavia's problems by withdrawing into the confines of sectional nationalism under foreign protection. The outcome of the Second World War thus led again to a united Yugoslavia, this time under Communist rule. (Pavlowitch, 2002, p. 154)

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