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PART II

THE FIRST YUGOSLAVIA (1918 TO 1941)

5.

The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (1918 to 1929)

The Paris Peace Conference and Its Consequences

In January 1919, a delegation from the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, better known as the Kingdom of SHS, arrived in Paris to seek recognition of its state at the international peace conference. It had to be accredited as a Serbian delegation because the Great Powers were still hesitant about this new state entity. Could it even survive? In February 1919, it was recognized as a sovereign state by the United States, and finally in June also by Great Britain and France.¹

The international system negotiated in the five Parisian treaties established the right to self-determination as had been defined in January 1918 by President Wilson in his “Fourteen Points.” This right became a key criterion for the political order in both East-Central Europe and Southeast Europe. Every people was to be free to create a nation state of its own, provided that certain language and ethnographic criteria were met. Economic, historical, and strategic factors also played a role. With the peace agreements of 1919/1920, the Great Powers created a corridor stretching from the Baltics to the Balkans of nation states that had liberal democratic constitutions and welfare state systems. These were to act as a *cordon sanitaire* against revolutionary Bolshevik Russia, on the one side, and revisionist Germany, on the other.

Of all the states to appear on the political map of Europe in 1918, Yugoslavia was undoubtedly the most diverse and complicated. The titular nation of Slovenes and “Serbo-Croats,” which also included Montenegrins, Bosnian Muslims, and Macedonians, represented around 83 percent of the Yugoslav population of roughly 12.5 million. In addition, about twenty other ethnic minorities lived within its borders. With respect to its socioeconomic composition, Yugoslavia also resembled a patchwork rug. The new borders divided and rearranged economic regions that had evolved over time. The multiethnic state inherited seven different historic entities with varying monetary,

taxation, infrastructural, and legal systems, and great disparities in the level of development. In this latter aspect it was not alone. Other successor states also struggled with considerable regional disparities, particularly Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania.

Among the most sensitive issues handled at the Paris conferences were those that determined borders in multiethnic areas. For the Yugoslavs, the relationship with Italy posed a particular problem. During the war, the Triple Entente had signed secret treaties with its allies that in part contradicted a people's right to self-determination. In the 1915 Treaty of London, Rome had been promised, as compensation for entering the war, the regions of Trieste, Gorizia-Gradišća, Istria, and a large part of Dalmatia—all areas in which the majority of inhabitants were Slavs. In order to create a *fait accompli*, the Italians had quickly invaded the coastal areas in question in November 1918 and then doggedly defended their claim to them. Even though the United States repudiated the secret treaties as undemocratic, the Yugoslav foreign minister eventually had to concede to Italy's demands. Istria, Zadar, and several islands were ceded to Italy in the Rapallo Treaty of November 1920, while the Dalmatian coast went to the Kingdom of SHS. In Fiume (Rijeka), which had been invaded in September 1919 by the poet Gabriele d'Annunzio and his legionnaires, an independent free state was created but then revoked and awarded to Italy in 1924, much to the chagrin of the Croats. The Yugoslavs were at least partially successful in asserting their territorial claims at Austria's expense. They received the Maribor Basin, which was inhabited by Slovenes, but then had to give up claims to southern Carinthia following the popular referendum in 1920. Whereas Hungary had to turn over the Vojvodina, Bulgaria remained essentially untouched by Yugoslav claims to its territory. All in all, the border-setting agreements were only a partial success from the standpoint of the South Slavic state. Nearly half a million Slovenes and Croats found themselves living as minorities under either Italian or Austrian rule.²

For the first time, the new European order included the protection of minorities, as guaranteed by the League of Nations. In treaties, the victorious powers compelled the new states of Yugoslavia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Greece to protect their minorities against discrimination and to ensure them religious freedom, the right to form organizations, and the right to elementary school instruction in their native tongue. Similar stipulations were imposed on other East European states through the peace treaties or in other legally binding declarations.³ Yet it seemed to the East and Southeast Europeans that the peacemaking powers had applied a double standard here and excluded themselves from having to make the same guarantees to protect their minorities. How was one to understand the fact that Hungarians and Germans in Romania and Yugoslavia were entitled to minority rights, but Slovenes and Croats in Italy were not?

The redrawing of borders and the issues connected to the various nationalities fed the fires of revisionism in the vanquished countries, which attempted to leverage the existence of ethnic minorities to contest their territorial losses. Actively supported by Sofia and Tirana, Macedonian and Albanian rebels in the southern regions of the country fought for unification with Bulgaria and Albania, respectively. The Germans and Magyars in Vojvodina, numbering a half a million each, found it very hard to accept the painful change in their role from ruler to the ruled. Berlin and Budapest instrumentalized ethnic politics in order to dislodge the postwar political order with ever new accusations of repression. On France's initiative, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Czechoslovakia created a system of bilateral treaties in 1920 and 1921, the Little Entente, in order to arm themselves against Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Austrian revisionism.⁴

Despite obvious structural weaknesses, the outcome of the five Parisian treaties cannot be simply dismissed a priori as artificial. It enabled most East and Southeast European peoples to be recognized for the first time as full-fledged members of the international community. A more convincing concept than that of self-determination was not on the table, even if the complexity of ethnic settlement in many regions appeared to make it thoroughly impossible to create a territorial order that would satisfy all sides. The British, French, and Americans, guided by the ideal of Western individualism and representative liberal order, sought to create citizenship nations in which ethnic particularism would sooner or later cease to play a role and special minority rights would become obsolete. What was left unsaid was that assimilation policy was considered an effective means to achieve this end.⁵

Unitarism and Centralism

The Kingdom of SHS, the first Yugoslavia, understood itself as the nation state for a single South Slavic people, a state built on individual liberties and not on collective rights. However, this South Slavic state was not yet called Yugoslavia, because the Serbs refused to strike their name from that of the state.

At the heart of the Yugoslav problem in the interwar period was the conflict over the constitution of the new state, a battle between centralism and federalism, between the Serbian state tradition and the Croat national idea. Before 1914, each group had used Yugoslavism above all as a vehicle to achieve the liberation, national unification, and integration of their own people, for which the South Slavic state also created the political prerequisites. Both the Serb and the Croat national ideologies were grounded in the idea of historical rights and political legitimacy derived from powerful empires in the Middle Ages. From the viewpoint of Zagreb, the compromise between Croatian autonomy and Yugoslav unity lay in federalism; only a minority of

Croats were calling for independence at the time. National-thinking Serbs, on the other hand, dismissed federalism as a Habsburg anachronism. In their minds, a strong, integrated Yugoslavia had to be built—like other states in Europe—on a centralized structure and on Serbian state tradition.

Starting with the Yugoslav Committee and the Corfu Declaration, the founders of Yugoslavia struggled over the constitution and then postponed the final decision to some point after peace was achieved. Prior to the election of a constitutional assembly, controversy broke out in 1919/1920 between centralists and federalists. Loosely speaking, politicians from the former Habsburg monarchy advocated a federalist solution, while Serbs, most Montenegrins, and all those committed to unitarism regardless of nationality wanted a strong central state. Croats and Slovenes had been particularly perturbed when the king, in the official act declaring the establishment of the new state and its provisional constitution on 1 December 1918, had preordained its unitary and centralist structure.

The ensuing realization that federal options were no longer being seriously considered and that the constitutional process was headed in the direction of an autocratic royal decision embittered a significant part of Croatia's political class and undermined the credibility of the historic compromise reached by the elite during the world war. Based on a universal, equal, direct, and secret electoral franchise for men over the age of 21, a constitutional assembly was elected in the winter of 1920. At the time, women still did not have the right to vote in many countries, including France and Italy. Proportional representation produced a political standoff between advocates and opponents of federalism. In absolute terms, the centralists had a slim majority, because the Croatian Republican Peasant Party had decided to boycott the assembly. The vote on the constitution was held on the very symbolic St. Vitus Day (Vidovdan), 28 June 1921. Following turbulent debate and discussions, the representatives of the Serbian, Muslim, and Turkish parties cast 223 votes out of 419, a total of 53 percent, in favor of the draft constitution establishing a highly centralized state that reflected the motto of "one nation, one king, one state." The constitution also included strong elements of local and regional self-administration. The majority of the Slovenes, Croats, and communists boycotted the vote.⁶ This electoral procedure contradicted the spirit of the agreements that had been concluded before the end of the war. In order to protect minorities from simply being outvoted, the founders of Yugoslavia had postulated in the Corfu Declaration that the principle of a "qualified majority" be adhered to, whatever that meant.⁷ In the end, the so-called Vidovdan Constitution was declared ratified. Yet from the start, these origins left the new state with a dangerous deficit in legitimacy that its opponents would condemn time and again from then on.

In order to overcome internal divisions, the state propagated a unified, “tri-named” South Slavic nation. Unlike today, when the ethnic differences between Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes are no longer doubted, at that time the overwhelming majority of the intellectuals and the political elite believed these only to be the “tribes” of a single people. European experience inspired such views: the differences in cultures, religions, dialects, temperaments, and mentalities between Slovenes and Serbs did not seem any greater than those between Venetians and Neapolitans or between Bavarians and Prussians. If Italy and Germany had succeeded in creating a unified nation state with a high culture valid across regions and accepted by the populace, why shouldn’t this also be possible in Yugoslavia?

The theory of the “tri-named people” described the relationship between Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs as being trinitarian, analogous to the biblical Trinity; certainly, it was thought, this would make things clear even to the uneducated classes. Notwithstanding what would later become political practice, the trinitarian idea implied at first that all three parts of the whole were of potentially equal standing; in fact, this was the original idea.⁸ A coat of arms for Yugoslavia represented this unitarism by combining national symbols from each of the historic regions and by stipulating the official state language to be “Serbo-Croato-Slovenian.” To demonstrate how deeply rooted the dynasty was in all parts of the country, King Alexander named his three sons Peter, Tomislav, and Andrej, each after a Serbian, a Croatian, and a Slovenian medieval ruler, respectively. That it would not be easy to amalgamate the tribes into one Yugoslav nation was indeed obvious to the constitutional founders when they laid out plans in 1921 to promote a national consciousness in the spirit of national unity and religious tolerance.⁹

In reality, the situation was far more complicated than the new national ideology made it seem. Official statistics recorded only people’s native tongue and religious affiliation, not their nationality, which is why the composition of the population at the time is rather controversial. According to the calculations of the communists, who expressly opposed unitarism, about 39 percent of the population in 1924 were Serbs and Montenegrins, 24 percent Croats, 8.5 percent Slovenes, 6.3 percent Bosnian Muslims, and 5.3 percent Macedonians or Bulgarians. In addition to these major nationalities were innumerable smaller ethnic groups. No one group was large enough to claim an obvious or even absolute majority.¹⁰

Even though the architects of this first Yugoslavia did acknowledge some measure of distinctiveness about Montenegrins, Bosnian Muslims, and Macedonians, they did not accept them as “tribes” in their own right. No one represented their interests when the new state was constituted. Even the most ardent advocates of federalism from the Croatian Republican Peasant

Party at first only acknowledged Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs, but considered Montenegrins, Muslims, and Macedonians to be “half-historical” entities whose affiliation to one of the three national peoples would have to be decided later.¹¹ The communists were the only ones who recognized different nations and nationalities at the time.

The further course of events shows that at this point it was probably already too late to merge the various identities into a common Yugoslav one. Although the existing collective identities were varied and in part shifting, it was far from easy to simply give up long-standing affiliations with a community in favor of something new. Too dense were the networks of social communication and too diverse the interests and political cultures of these communities that this new construction of a nation, imposed on them “from above,” could have been met with widespread enthusiasm and acceptance. Apart from that, however, the concept of the three tribes left sufficient room for some measure of multiculturalism.

The Slovenes in particular proved to be dedicated supporters of the Kingdom of SHS, because they were allowed for the first time to cultivate and develop their own language and culture.¹² Slovenian was finally recognized as an official state language; a university was founded in Ljubljana in 1919, followed by the Slovenian broadcasting system in 1928 and the Slovenian Academy for Arts and Sciences in 1938. Two of the state’s thirty-three administrative districts (*oblasti*) covered the exact territory in which Slovenians lived. What is more, the Kingdom of SHS offered them protection against the overreaching territorial demands of Italy, which was pushing for hegemony in the Adriatic region. The clerical Slovenian People’s Party (SLS), by far the strongest Slovenian voice in the entire interwar period, opted for federalist solutions only in the early years. Under the charismatic leadership of Anton Korošec, who later became the prime minister of Yugoslavia, the party mutated into a pillar of support for unitarism and centralism. Thus, it is a myth that the Slovenes always fought against being absorbed into Yugoslavia.¹³

The Bosnian Muslims also found a *modus vivendi* for coping with this new state, although they had been the people least committed to its founding. At this point no clear ethnic identity had yet evolved. Instead, people saw themselves primarily as part of a cultural and religious community. In 1920, the Yugoslav Muslim Organization (JMO) explicitly pledged its support of Yugoslavism in its program.¹⁴ The following year, it voted in favor of the constitution for a centralized state, once it had been assured that the autonomy of Muslim religious institutions would be guaranteed and that people would be compensated for the expropriation of their land in the course of agrarian reform. The ideology of a unified Yugoslavia shielded Muslim identity from the pressures of Serbian and Croatian assimilation and offered a niche in which to cultivate that specific historical and religious, prenatal group identity

that—in the minds of Bosnian Muslims—only lacked a tribal label. This developed within a frame of reference, backed by Islam, which at the time did not inevitably imply either theological, ideological, or even an ethnonational affirmation. The Muslim elite were divided into four camps: pro-Croat, pro-Serb, pro-Yugoslav, and pro-autonomy. No unified view of Muslim religious and ethnic identity yet existed. For the most part, the common folk remained unaffected by these political and intellectual debates.¹⁵

Far more problematic was the situation of the Macedonians, who already demonstrated a vivid awareness of their own clearly defined ethnic identity, despite the fact that they were not acknowledged as being a tribe and had obviously been instrumentalized for Bulgaria's revisionist aims. In the early 1920s, more than 1,600 armed rebels belonging to the extremely nationalist and pro-Bulgarian Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO) carried out terrorist attacks against Serbian security forces and settlers. To counteract the irredenta, Yugoslav authorities started a ruthless policy of Serbianization. All things Bulgarian had to vanish from public life; the exarchal (Bulgarian) religious community was placed under the jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Thousands of political prisoners landed behind bars. Not until it was discovered that VMRO was planning a coup d'état in 1934 in Sofia did Bulgaria become willing to liquidate the underground organization and recognize the borders of Yugoslavia. The idea that Macedonians were a people in their own right, eligible for self-determination, and not merely an appendage of Bulgaria was a position embraced only by the leftists and communists in the mid-1920s and prompted them to call for a unified and independent Macedonia.¹⁶

Like the VMRO, armed Albanian rebels, the Kachaks, fought against annexation by Serbia in western Macedonia and in Kosovo. They were supported politically and militarily by the Kosovo Committee from Albania. In 1918/1919, the Serbian army harshly suppressed rebels and civilians alike, and some of the fighters surrendered when an amnesty was granted in 1921. Yet things did not really quiet down until Albania ceased to back the rebels in 1923/1924. Even then, the Yugoslav state considered the approximately 440,000 Albanians living within its borders as particularly unreliable citizens who needed to be assimilated. Entire libraries of pseudoscientific literature attempted to prove that the "Arnauts" were in fact Albanianized Serbs. Tens of thousands of Albanians and Turks emigrated.¹⁷

The "Croatian Question"

The icon of opposition against Serbian centralism was Stjepan Radić, the leader of the Croatian Republican Peasant Party and the spokesman for the Croat faction set up in parliament in 1921. During the phase of the country's formation, he had railed against the unitary position of the Zagreb National Council, denounced the founding of the state as undemocratic, and boycotted

the constitutional assembly. His agitational stance was built on two pillars: the supposed illegitimacy of the Yugoslav state, as it had been founded, and the demand for a Croatian peasant republic, as he had already called for in November 1918. In May 1921, he submitted his own draft constitution in which Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes were labeled as individual nations, each with its own claim to sovereignty. Once recognized as such, they would then found a federal state.¹⁸

The son of a peasant with a diploma from the Sorbonne and nostalgic for village life, Stjepan Radić was a man full of contradictions.¹⁹ Before 1918 he had preached the cause of unifying Serbs and Croats and even spent years in prison for his politics. Then he mutated into an unrelenting advocate of exclusively Croat interests. He raged against communism, only to beg for support shortly thereafter in Soviet Moscow. Although deeply religious, he hated the clergy and the church and was in the habit of starting off his rallies by crying out: “Praised be Jesus and Mary—down with the priests!” Impulsive and charismatic, often demagogic, the gifted orator used his remarkable whispery voice to enthuse the peasant masses for the Croatian cause. He dangerously enraged the Serbian political establishment and was viewed with skepticism abroad.

Once universal male suffrage was introduced in 1920, the extraordinary attractiveness of socially utopian agrarian ideology began to manifest itself. That year the Croatian Republican Peasant Party received the third largest mandate in the Kingdom of SHS with about 230,000 votes. Three years later the party garnered nearly a half million. Large-scale information and election campaigns mobilized thousands of new voters using catchwords like “peasant democracy,” “justice,” “sovereignty,” and “people.” The utopia of a unified, organic, and solidaristic national community bundled together all the aspirations and tribulations that worried the crisis-plagued peasants. Josip Smodlaka, a politician and lawyer, reported the following on the 1923 election in Zagora: “They even carried the gravely ill on stretchers for several hours in order not to lose a single vote. One saw something that had never been seen before: in the most remote and scattered mountain villages, 90 percent or more of the voters took part in the elections. . . . Never had these people ever been so enthusiastic and so unified at an election . . . as they were in this election for Radić.”²⁰

Radić’s political program focused, for one, on the social problems of village life and, for another, on the sovereignty of the Croat nation—topics that for him not only belonged together but were indivisibly linked. His argument was that only in a nationally unified, democratic peasant state would it be possible to ensure substantial participation by the third estate in state and society. Moreover, the vision of an egalitarian Croatian peasant republic made it easier for the rural population to identify with what they viewed as a bureaucratic

and exploitive state and its signum, urban embourgeoisement. It was only through the mass mobilization of the 1920s that Croatian national integration was achieved. Today Radić is revered as a pioneer for Croatian independence.

The national question, as expressed most stridently by the Croatian Republican Peasant Party, was driven by huge social, cultural, and economic disparities throughout the entire country. In 1921, the rural population made up 76 percent of the total population, but this figure varied from 63 percent in Slovenia to 86 percent in Montenegro. Every other person over the age of 12 could not read or write, but in Slovenia this figure was less than 9 percent, while in Croatia and Slavonia it reached 32.2 percent, in Serbia 65.4 percent, and in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia over 80 percent.²¹

Domestic politics were therefore inevitably overshadowed by tough, ongoing conflicts over the economy, monetary reform, and tax law, in which Croats and Slovenes felt they were being put at a structural disadvantage by Belgrade. The Croat economist Rudolf Bičanić complained that the former Austro-Hungarian region contributed more than 80 percent of the tax revenue while, at the same time, Serbia and Montenegro were awarded more than 70 percent of the investments made in infrastructure.²²

Serbs and Croats each harbored their own tacit arrogance. The Croat bourgeoisie indulged itself in a feeling of cultural superiority based on its affiliation with what was considered to be the superior Western civilization, compared with the barbaric East. The Serb political class derived what it believed to be unassailable claims to supremacy from its strong state tradition and its military successes in the First World War. Angered by the renitence of the Croats, who made demands alleged to be harmful if not hostile to the state and repeatedly boycotted parliamentary sessions, Serbs began in the mid-1920s to consider the idea of ridding themselves of the Croats through territorial “amputation.” Wouldn’t a unified Greater Serbia be stronger in every way than the heterogeneous SHS state?²³ King Alexander feared a bloodbath. Even Stjepan Radić recognized the danger: “We have intermingled to a degree that forces us to come to an agreement. . . . Not even through a civil war could we ‘cleanse’ every region if we do not want to mutually exterminate and fully annihilate one another.”²⁴ Today his words sound like a grim prophecy.

The aspect that provoked the most acrimonious confrontations was the privileged position held by the Serbs in the government, military, bureaucracy, police, and many important societal areas. Of the 656 ministers who served the short-lived Yugoslav cabinets, 452 of them were Serbs, as opposed to only 137 Croats, 49 Slovenes, and 18 Bosnian Muslims.²⁵ In the army and government administration, things did not look much different. Political practice discredited the concept of Yugoslav multicultural unity and alienated significant groups of people from their state.

Domestically, the outcry expressed by the Peasant Party had a great impact because the party further incited the national question by also referring to historical and cultural commonalities and socioeconomic interests shared by all Croat people. With such explosive topics as the unfair distribution of the tax burden, failed agrarian reform, and the Serb dominance throughout the entire country, it also jarred other population groups to feel collectively disadvantaged.²⁶ “The Croatian question,” wrote *Nova Evropa* (New Europe) in 1936, represents “the symbol and synthesis of the fight against the overall unbearable situation (not only in a political and legal but also socioeconomic sense).”²⁷ By referring to gravamens of a very principled nature, namely constitutional order and justice, it posited the antithesis that the creation of the state was imperfect. Therein lay its legitimation and brisance.

The Structural Crisis of Parliamentarism

Before the First World War the protagonists of Yugoslavia had agreed on a constitutional monarchy as a compromise between the democratic premises of the emerging bourgeois intelligentsia and the traditionalism of conservative elites. The new order respected both the values of a liberal democracy and the rule of law. It guaranteed political pluralism, if only to a limited degree and for a certain period. Over time laws and regulations were passed that banned communist ideas and activities, such as the so-called proclamation (*Obznana*) of 1920 and the Law for the Protection of the State of 1921.

Most political parties that participated in elections after 1918 could be classified as falling into the moderate bourgeois camp. With regard to their understanding of state and constitution, strange constellations resulted. The strongest party was the Democratic Party under the leadership of Svetozar Pribičević, a former Serb politician during the Habsburg rule who had campaigned before 1918 for Serbo-Croatian cooperation. The party propagated an integral Yugoslav nation and a strong centralized democratic state. Its main competitor was the Radical Party led by Nikola Pašić, the long-serving prime minister of Serbia. The party leaned more toward the conservative national camp. The Yugoslav Muslim Organization and the Slovenian People's Party also cultivated an ethnic veneer but were bourgeois and pro-Yugoslav. Only two political parties fundamentally opposed the system itself: the Croatian Republican Peasant Party, which was radical in its rejection of the monarchy, and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, founded in 1920 and dedicated to fighting for a democratic workers' and peasants' state based on the Soviet model.²⁸

Similar to the situation in Germany and other countries, the election system of proportional representation was conducive to the fragmentation of the political landscape. In 1925, there were forty-five parties, nearly all of

which represented specific ethnic and regional interests. They were known primarily by their leaders and only secondarily by their respective political programs. Publicly they usually took uncompromising stances toward their opponents or reluctantly formed instable coalitions. Changing alliances between parties, known as “blocs,” were formed time and again for elections, which resulted in chronically short-lived cabinets: by 1929, Belgrade had seen twenty-four cabinets come and go; by 1941 the number had risen to thirty-nine. Parliamentarism did not run in a smooth and orderly fashion but seemed instead to create instability and dysfunctional political structures, which undermined its acceptance.

For King Alexander the structural weaknesses of parliamentarism were all but inopportune because they provided him with far more leeway to make autocratic decisions and develop informal power relations outside the democratic process. At the same time, the already precarious internal balance of power was also being undermined by the influential camarilla at court, the pro-dynastic secret army organization White Hand and a dense and clientelistic entangled web of interests. In particular, the close relationship between the army and the king would hinder efficient parliamentary control.²⁹

Nor did the civil rights and liberties guaranteed in the constitution count for much in practice since people could be brought to trial because of their political ideas and activities. Belgrade brandished an attitude of superiority and used police force to suppress certain oppositional activities. Time and again, leading functionaries and politicians of the democratic parties landed in prison on charges of alleged traitorous behavior. The dominant political culture was still one in which dissidents were seen as enemies and compromise was considered a weakness. It took the elites in the bureaucracy, military, church, and political parties a long time to understand that they could not govern the country simply at their own discretion and according to their self-made rules.

The system encouraged the existence and activities of nationalistic, even paramilitary and violence-prone groups. These included the athletic movement Sokol and the right-wing paramilitary Organization of Yugoslav Nationalists (ORJUNA) founded in Split, which worked to propagate the state ideology of a unitary state among the populace. Tens of thousands of veterans, both of the Austrian-Hungarian army and of the Serbian army, formed associations on the fault lines of the First World War. Old conflicts seemed to live on in their hearts and minds. Many could not be reconciled with the parliamentary system and would later, after the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1941, engage in ultranationalist organizations and resort to civil war.³⁰

Much like the German free corps, organizations of Serb nationalist veterans acted as the extended arm of the state security forces and violently attacked communists, separatists, and state enemies of all sorts. The ultraconservative

Chetniks (from *četa*, meaning band) were former fighters of irregular units that had battled since the nineteenth century for the liberation of Macedonia and in the First World War for Serbia. Their ranks were recruited from the Serb peasantry. The Chetniks did not cultivate an elaborate national ideology or run a stringent organization; instead they broke up into various, sometimes competing groups. The smallest common denominator among them was their view of themselves as patriots. They all cultivated typical symbols and rituals and commemorated the myth that the nation originated out of the wartime experiences on the front. Above all, they understood themselves to be a protective force against Serbian enemies, whatever the political color.³¹

In the eyes of the regime, the main enemies of the system were the communists, who had become the third strongest faction in parliament after the first general election in November 1920 during the precarious socioeconomic postwar situation. In April 1919, the socialist and social democratic parties fused into the Socialist Workers' Party of Yugoslavia, then in 1920 renamed themselves the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY), in order to join the Communist International. Because it was very well organized and in many regions received help from the unions, the party succeeded in mobilizing about 200,000 voters from among the socially disenchanted and in winning 12.4 percent of the votes.

The CPY denounced the SHS state as a product of Western imperialism, in which the Serb bourgeoisie took every liberty to repress the South Slavic peoples and exploit the working class.³² Obsessed with the "red peril," the government banned all communist activities in December 1920 and annulled the mandates of all communist deputies. Following the assassination of interior minister Milorad Drašković in mid-1921, the Law for the Protection of the State forced the CPY deep into illegality. Party members were arrested, tortured, or driven out of the country, and the press was repressed. The politburo fled into exile in Vienna, and party activities were transferred to the trade union movement or were organized underground. It is for this reason that the CPY played an insignificant role in domestic affairs during the 1920s. The size of its membership dwindled within three years to about 700 people. However, during this period communists set the main ideological course for the future takeover of power. The third party congress of the CPY in January 1924 addressed the national question for the first time by stating that Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes were three different peoples, just as the Bosnian Muslims, the Montenegrins, and the Macedonians each had their own individuality. The communists called for the right to self-determination for all peoples, including the Albanians in Kosovo. The founding of an independent republic for each nation was declared to be one of the aims of the revolutionary class conflict.³³

To sum up, the much-asserted fundamental ethnic conflict between Serbs and Croats as a result of allegedly deep-rooted historical, cultural, and attitudinal differences does not adequately explain the Yugoslav problem in the interwar period.³⁴ On the contrary, tactical calculations, ideological and political differences, and concrete economic interests contributed just as greatly to the internal destabilization of multiethnic Yugoslavia as did the national question. When it was politically opportune, then alliances between Serbs, Croats, and others, or between government and opposition worked very well. For example, Stjepan Radić underwent a spectacular change after he and other leaders from his party were arrested in January 1925. The occasion for the arrest was his trip to Moscow and his joining the Red Peasant International (*Krest'intern*), which the government interpreted as a treasonous act. Still, the Croatian Peasant Party was allowed to participate in the 1925 elections in exchange for its formal recognition of the constitution and the Serbian dynasty and its removal of the word "Republican" from its name. Radić decided to collaborate with the Radical Party and entered the government of Nikola Pašić as education minister in November 1925. At the same time, he still advocated the federalist reform of the state and publicly attacked his Serb colleagues in the cabinet, which led him to resign soon afterward in April 1926.

In November 1927, Radić changed course yet again. The Croatian Peasant Party and the Yugoslav Democratic Party, an oppositional party that supported an integral Yugoslavia and was led by the Serb Svetozar Pribičević, joined forces in what was called the Democratic Peasant Coalition against Belgrade centralism. After that, the government and the joint opposition were in constant and very antagonistic conflict. Peasant leader Radić resorted to a no-holds-barred polemic when condemning what he considered to be a police state and tax exploitation. "Heads will roll," he once threw at the Serb radicals in one of the chaotic and aggressive sessions of parliament.

The streets also became enveloped in a climate of violence following the bloody police repression in May 1927 of demonstrations in Split, Zagreb, Ljubljana, and Belgrade against the ratification of the Treaty of Nettuno with Italy.³⁵ The treaty had been signed in 1925, prompting a storm of outrage in parliament and from the public because, among other things, it regulated the rights of the Italian minority in the SHS state but not those of the Croat and Serb minorities in Italian Istria. It was attacked for abandoning Croat interests and for the concessions made to Italian fascism. Not until the summer of 1928 was the treaty ratified.

Since his ascension to power in 1922, Mussolini had indeed been working to alter the postwar order and gradually to expand his sphere of influence in southeastern Europe and in the Adriatic region. However, Yugoslavia, France's

protégé, stood in his way. In June 1927, he approved the shipment of arms and money to underground right-wing terrorist groups, on the condition that they fight against the South Slavic state, just as the Macedonian, Albanian, and Croat separatists were doing. Until the mid-1930s, Mussolini continued to support the idea of destroying Yugoslavia through subversive terrorist activity.³⁶

In the early summer of 1928, parliamentarism in the Kingdom of SHS was on the verge of collapse. The domestic polemic, incited by the media, had become so virulent that parliament and the state apparatus were nearly paralyzed. The country found itself in a very serious national crisis, and the king feared that Radić would declare Croatia's independence in July. It was apparent that the parliamentary system had failed to produce a basic consensus on vital matters of domestic and foreign policy, which indicates that the national question was not the sole cause of the crisis.³⁷ The SHS state suffered from symptoms similar to those of other democracies in the interwar period: instable political systems, authoritarian mindsets and the inability to compromise, precarious economic conditions, and aggressive revisionism with respect to the issue of national borders.³⁸ However, one specifically Yugoslav problem was the chronic lack of legitimacy and a functional order in the centrally governed, multiethnic state, which propelled and radicalized exclusive nationalisms. The crises and corruption permeating everyday political life and the climate of structural violence undermined trust in the transformative power of democracy and international law and discounted high-flying hopes for a just future. It was not a historical antagonism between Serbs and Croats that paralyzed the state, but a political system whose numerous weaknesses were the spark that enflamed this antagonism in the first place and then continued to fuel it.³⁹