



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## 7. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929 to 1941)

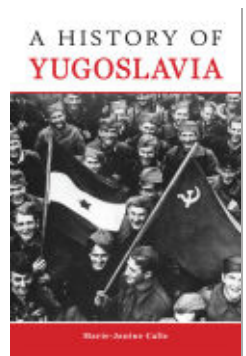
Published by

Calic, Marie-Janine.

History of Yugoslavia.

Purdue University Press, 2019.

Project MUSE. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72985>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72985>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-18 20:44 GMT)

## 7.

# The Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929 to 1941)

### *The Royal Dictatorship*

On the morning of 20 June 1928, Stjepan Radić appeared at the opening session of parliament. Although public confrontations in the preceding days had escalated to the point of murder threats, this consummate politician threw caution to the wind. One of the first people to speak that morning was Puniša Račić, a member of parliament for the Radical Party from Montenegro. Quite unexpectedly he found himself in a heated debate with the colleagues from the opposition. The president of the parliament was trying valiantly but unsuccessfully to restore order when Račić suddenly pulled out his pistol and shot in the direction of the Croatian Peasant Party faction. Two members of parliament died immediately; two others were wounded. Radić, who had been shot in the stomach, died in August of complications. The assassination marked the tragic culmination of the domestic crisis that had been fatefully escalating since 1927. It turned Radić into a martyr, welded together Croat national politics, and provided the Peasant Party with enormous political capital. However, Yugoslav democracy had shattered, and the king declared a state of emergency.

On 6 January 1929, King Alexander dissolved the parliament, abolished the constitution, and installed himself as a dictator in his effort to create Yugoslav unity. All ethnic or religious parties and organizations were banned and politicians from the opposition arrested. Ten months later, on 3 October, the country was renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. A new administrative structure was introduced in which the country was divided into nine regions, similar to French *départements*, each of which was named after a river: Drava, Sava, Vrbas, Littoral, Drina, Zeta, Danube, Morava, and Vardar. In six of these nine administrative regions, known as banovine, the majority of the populace was Serb. The royal dictatorship aimed to unify the people and the state into one nation and thus finally create an integral Yugoslav identity.

The new system of government reflected the trend toward powerful executives and authoritarian regimes that had been threatening parliamentarianism since Mussolini's ascension to power in 1922. Of the twenty-eight European democracies existing after 1918, only eleven were still in existence in 1939.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the model of royal dictatorship that was established not only in Yugoslavia but also in Albania, Bulgaria, and Romania differed qualitatively from that of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. First, Alexander's regime did not resort to a totalitarian ideology, a one-party state, although it also used mass mobilization. Second, the king's regime was supported by the older elites in the bureaucracy, church, and military and by traditional forms of legitimation, first and foremost the monarch's charisma. Third, it sought to achieve national unity by restoring conservative values and a patriarchal culture, not through revolutionary social change. All things tried and true were to be upheld, not toppled. It was a pitiful attempt to overcome the internal fissures that had been created by parliamentarianism and socioeconomic conflicts, especially by the lack of consensus over the constitution within the political class. However, instead of bestowing domestic peace and uniting the nation, the introduction of dictatorship ruptured the country all the more.<sup>2</sup>

During the royal dictatorship, the country's unity became its chief priority. King Alexander juxtaposed "tribalism" with Yugoslav "nationalism" in order to overcome internal divisions of different kinds. The regime used draconian royal decrees and the state's security apparatus to implement national and state unity by dictatorial means. Basic civil rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of association were suspended.<sup>3</sup>

The regime also undertook a great effort to standardize school curriculums in order to establish integral Yugoslavism in the educational system. Similar efforts tried to infuse unity into the army and athletic clubs.<sup>4</sup> Using new ways to disseminate information through the press, propaganda, film, science, and culture, the regime sought to reinforce the idea of a Yugoslav nation. The Belgrade magazine *Pravda* (Truth) started an inquiry on "creating a Yugoslav mentality"; as late as 1939, the publication "Characterology of Yugoslavs" tried to make a case that culturally the various tribes were truly one people.<sup>5</sup> In order to encourage patriotism, radio stations in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana started in 1938 to broadcast programs called the "National Hour" about things to know from all parts of the country. These programs were modeled after the German example. One-sided nationalistic material, including Serb, was forbidden. Despite it all, representations of national unity in a multinational state remained ambivalent, and the country's internal diversity could never be made to disappear completely. This is illustrated by the monument dedicated to the unknown soldier, located atop Mount Avala near Belgrade. While Germania and Marianne serve as the sole allegory to represent their

respective countries of Germany and France, eight female figures depicted in various traditional folk costumes were necessary to symbolize multicultural Yugoslavia at this monument.<sup>6</sup>

It soon became clear that the king's dictatorial rule would not be able to solve the multifaceted problems of the country. On 3 September 1931, the monarch imposed a new pseudodemocratic constitution on the country, in which he gave himself the right to appoint as many as half of the representatives to one of the two chambers of parliament. That same year the Yugoslav Radical Peasants' Democracy was founded (known as of 1933 as the Yugoslav National Party). This was a hodgepodge of various parties and politicians close to the regime who organized themselves under the banner of integral Yugoslavism. Associations and organizations of ethnic, regional, and religious nature remained banned.

The king's attempt to win support for the Yugoslav Radical Peasants' Democracy from members of the banned political parties failed. Instead, republican forces lashed out with a counterattack. In November 1932, the Democratic Peasant Coalition, an oppositional coalition of Serbs and Croats, demanded the reintroduction of parliamentarism and a federal restructuring of the state. A massive wave of protest engulfed the country. Leading politicians from the opposition were arrested, including Svetozar Pribičević, a Serb from Croatia, the Croat Vladko Maček, the Muslim Mehmed Spaho, and the Slovene Anton Korošec. Amid this upheaval, it was only a matter of time before the dissimilar opponents of the regime agreed on a common platform. This did indeed occur in the elections of May 1935 and December 1938, when Serb, Slovene, Croat, and Muslim parties joined forces to present a joint list as the "unified opposition" against the government.

On 9 October 1934, the day that Alexander set sail for Marseille on an official visit to France, the king was fully aware that his imposed integration had failed. Yet his solution to the Serb-Croat problem that had been announced as forthcoming died with him on the streets of Marseille in the assassination attack that also killed his host, French foreign minister Louis Barthou. Since Alexander's son and heir to the throne was underage, Prince Regent Paul governed the country during the minority of King Peter II.<sup>7</sup>

### *The Great Depression*

As was happening all over Europe, Yugoslavia was impacted by the severe economic and social ruptures that cracked open when the Great Depression hit. The full force of the shockwaves did not reach Southeast Europe until mid-1930 and thus somewhat later than in the industrial nations. But when the depression reached Yugoslavia, the consequences were all the more disastrous. As a result of worldwide overproduction, grain prices on international markets

had already begun to fall in 1926. Now they dropped sharply, plunging first the agrarian sector into ruin and shortly thereafter the entire Yugoslav economy. Since the industrial nations used protectionism in an attempt to ward off cheap imports, Southeast Europe lost its most important markets. Within a few months, the foreign trade volume, wages and incomes, domestic demand, and industrial production had plummeted.

The Great Depression hit the agrarian countries of Southeast Europe harder and longer than it did the industrial nations, because it cumulatively intensified all of the structural problems that had continually plagued their economies. In 1932, the value of Yugoslavia's foreign trade, which was based primarily on corn, wheat, and other agricultural products, fell by about 70 percent from what it had been in 1929.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the terms of trade worsened because prices for agricultural products sank faster than those for industrial goods, which threw the balance of payment severely out of whack. Yugoslavia had to sell its agricultural goods and raw materials cheaply but purchase finished goods at disproportionately expensive prices. When more and more European banks called back their loans in 1931, the National Bank was threatened with insolvency. Out of its concern for inflation, Yugoslavia had pursued a strict stability course and refrained from credit-financed investments, as had many other countries. First private demand and then public demand stagnated, which paralyzed the economy and caused unemployment to rise. Not until years later did the government shift to an anticyclical fiscal policy. The depression did not bottom out until 1934, much later than in West European countries. By the time the Second World War broke out, the standard of living had still not reached that of 1920.

The biggest losers of the Great Depression were the peasants. Not only did they sell fewer and fewer goods on the markets, but the prices for their produce also sank. Despite the government's intervention measures, poverty increased. Between 1925 and 1933, the income of an average peasant family dropped by two thirds. In 1934, wholesale agricultural products were only worth half of what they had been in 1926.<sup>9</sup> The price gap between agricultural and industrial goods widened alarmingly. "There are hundreds of farmers for whom a cigarette has become a luxury, and the purchase of a liter [of] gas to light up the house is no less than a veritable sensation."<sup>10</sup> The only way for farmers to save themselves was to take out loans and thus to put themselves deeply into debt.

The hidden unemployment in rural areas now emerged from the shadows to become quite visible. An increasing number of people pushed their way into the cities in search of a way to earn what they needed to survive. But industry and trade did not grow fast enough to absorb all of the migrants. Between 1930 and 1939, the number of registered jobseekers rose from 150,000 to 651,000. At the same time, short-term and seasonal work expanded. In order to lower

wage costs, it was becoming increasingly common for entrepreneurs to replace male workers with women and children, particularly girls. Between 1933 and 1935 the number of socially insured adults rose by 8.5 percent, while that of minors increased by 28 percent. For skilled workers and academics, it was nearly impossible to find a job.<sup>11</sup>

Many entrepreneurs cut wages. Between 1930 and 1935 the average daily wage fell by about 20 percent. The cutbacks were the largest in those branches of industry in which many unskilled workers and peasants worked. At the same time, there were significant regional differences. In Slovenia wages fell by 18 percent between 1930 and 1934, in Croatia by 25 percent, and in Serbia by 41 percent, so that the depression also enhanced the existing socioeconomic disparities between the regions. All in all, the incomes of those employed in Yugoslavia shrank during the crisis by more than 70 percent.<sup>12</sup>

The fledgling Yugoslav welfare state was completely overtaxed by the aggravated social situation. Since only a small percentage of the unemployed were entitled to benefits, the government helped by distributing food. Yet with every passing day the army of poor, sick, and hungry grew larger. Many remained dependent on charity facilities or had to find some other way to earn a bit more. The poverty took on untold proportions during the crisis years. The majority of jobseekers survived only under the most pitiful conditions. They lived in huts amid catastrophic hygienic conditions. Many did not even have a roof over their heads, shared a bed with others, and wandered homeless through the city.<sup>13</sup>

More and more people took to the road. Rumors of possible opportunities for work spread quickly by word of mouth. Jobseekers moved in packs from place to place and hung around in waiting rooms of labor offices and on the streets. This mobile labor force was absolutely bereft of means: "Unkempt, filthy, tattered, and barefoot, they aroused distrust with every step, and therefore it was very seldom that someone decided to hire them."<sup>14</sup> Belgrade had to cope not only with migrating masses from southern and eastern Serbia but also with the storm of destitute people arriving from Lika, Dalmatia, and Bosnia. Many became homeless: "They sleep in basements, attics, sheds in unfinished and half-deserted buildings. . . . Several sleep together in rooms that are not large enough for a single person," reported the social agencies and organizations as early as 1929.<sup>15</sup> As the crisis deepened, the number multiplied of those who had to resort to jobs that could barely keep them alive: "There is an entire army of a category of people who wander through the streets and cafes day and night and sell shoestrings, cigarettes, almonds, sugared fruit, razor blades, toys . . . postcards, and other snick-snack. They have to beg for twenty kilometers in order to earn five dinars (if even that)."<sup>16</sup> Others drifted into petty crime like smuggling, known as *šverc*, or prostitution.

In the 1930s, urban destitution on a massive scale was a daily experience for many people. Each day one saw “many children on the street, children living without a thought for tomorrow, children of whom no one can say what they live from or what they do, where they sleep or what they eat.”<sup>17</sup> “We questioned several of these unlucky little things. . . . The majority only had one passionate desire—to be able to eat once to their heart’s content.”<sup>18</sup>

The Great Depression radicalized internal tensions—be they of a social or ethnopolitical nature—intensified the lack of prospects, narrowed the leeway for political action, and endangered what was already a precarious compromise among elites. The experience of crisis day in, day out, led many to question the credibility of a political system that, in the face of such existential concerns, was proving incapable to cope with the crisis and thus tried to compensate for its inadequacies by becoming more authoritarian.

### *The Stojadinović Era (1935 to 1939)*

A new era began when the former finance minister Milan Stojadinović assumed the office of prime minister in June 1935. Together with the former opposition politicians of the Slovene People’s Party and the Yugoslav Muslim Organization, he founded the Yugoslav Radical Union. The new regime party was still committed to unitarism and centralism but demonstrated greater flexibility regarding the national question. It spoke out in favor of self-administration and equality among tribes and religions. The authoritarian system was relaxed to allow a limited degree of party pluralism.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike the conservative regime of King Alexander, which cultivated traditional, patriarchal values, symbols, and culture, the financial expert Stojadinović presented himself as a modernizer. He took advantage of the palpable upswing in the global economy of 1935 to introduce a New Economic Policy. As in the United States and other European countries, government subsidy programs were to jump-start the economy. The government created state agencies and monopolies and set up an investment program based on job creation measures to stimulate heavy industry and the arms industry. In order to stabilize the agrarian sector, farmers’ debts were liquidated, and prices were subsidized by a state monopoly on foreign trade.<sup>20</sup>

Stojadinović’s semiauthoritarian regime adapted symbolic practices, political rituals, and semantics from Italian fascism and German National Socialism without adopting their ideologies, political content, and methods of ruling. New means of mass communication, particularly radio, film, billboards, and flyers, were used to present the dynasty and the government in a positive light and to improve Yugoslavia’s image abroad. Traditional folk singers were hired to perform centuries-old epic songs on the *gusla*, an ancient single-string instrument. Instead of telling the tales of the age-old heroes of

Kosovo, their lyrics praised the good deeds of the current authoritarian head of state.<sup>21</sup>

Despite these efforts, the national ideology of Yugoslavism remained nothing more than a chimera of the politically established elite, a utopian promise for the future that never won the undivided approval of regional, political, church, and intellectual authorities, let alone the complete trust of the population at large. Societal and political realities had exposed the unified Yugoslav city on a hill to be no more than a Potemkin village, leaving even the most modest hopes for economic development dashed. The ongoing political and economic crisis created a climate of uncertainty in which people of all nationalities perceived themselves as the losers in a precarious state entity. Disappointed, many politically thinking people turned their backs on the Yugoslav model. In political rhetoric, in commemorative practices, and within clubs, societies, and other organizations, greater emphasis was placed once again on the historic heritage of one's own people. Writers and scholars acted as the guardians of their respective communities by describing Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes as the original and true subjects of history, as peoples who were far more than merely a part of Yugoslav history.

Against the backdrop of dictatorship and depression, it appeared quite plausible to many people to attribute the obscure, conflicting economic and political interests to the seemingly obvious historical, linguistic, and religious differences between them. Pressing social problems—such as the half-hearted implementation of agrarian reform, the frightening decline of prices and incomes coupled with an increasing tax burden, and last but not least, the antimodern sentiments of rural society toward urban life and the diffuse fears of being overridden—were easily recycled into allegedly essential differences and conflicts between Serbs and Croats.

### *Ideologies and Paths of Development*

In the period between the two world wars, all of Europe was affected by the rise of fascism and communism. The powerful dynamics of change that had been set in motion before the turn of the century and had culminated in the upheavals caused by the First World War now intensified the search for alternatives to the liberal-capitalist order and its painful failings. Both ideologies propagated radical if thoroughly different alternatives to the conservative, liberal, and social democratic models. While fascism claimed that the health of a people could be restored by its racial pureness, Bolshevism prophesized the elimination of class differences in a humane, egalitarian global order.<sup>22</sup>

In the countries of Southeast Europe, which were suffering more from the decline of agriculture than they were from the crises of the industrial society, neither of these radically critical ideologies and their all-encompassing



explanations found many followers. Fascism remained a rather peripheral phenomenon. The most popular alternative to the bourgeois-capitalist model proved to be the agrarian ideology—quite unlike the case in the more industrialized societies of Europe.

The agrarian movements, which were strong not only in Croatia but also in Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romania, strove to develop ways to counteract the crises of capitalism. Above all, they wanted to create a worthy and socially secure place in the modern world for the peasantry, which had been economically neglected and politically ignored by bourgeois governments. They were under the illusion that, in the long run, agriculture would prove to be the leading economic sector, despite industrialization and the market economy. With the help of a comprehensive campaign for spreading literacy, credit, and cooperatives, the agrarian population was to be made fit for the capitalist era, and villages were to be empowered to assume greater responsibility for themselves. While the rhetoric of these movements was backward-looking, the program, strategies, and instruments of the peasants' parties were well abreast with the times.

Even though the agrarian movement in Southeast European countries turned out to be the leading ideational, social, and political force in this period, its outreach to other parts of society was limited. Unlike communism and fascism, which attracted broad sectors of industrialized Europe in the twentieth century, the agrarian movement did not offer a comprehensive, universal explanation of the world, coupled with the intent to enforce certain norms and claim absolute power. Instead, it concentrated solely on the matters vital to peasants and was neither interested in nor able to address the social problems of the middle classes and of industrial workers. Its natural and exclusive milieu was rural society, specifically the small independent farmer. There were villages in Croatia in which Radić's people won over 90 percent of the vote, while failing to gain even 7 percent in bourgeois-proletarian Zagreb. Not until the late 1930s did the agrarian movement begin to propagate solutions to the national question beyond the framework of the agrarian social milieu.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, the agrarian movement lacked the cast-iron will to rule and the organizational prerequisites to make this happen. The Croatian Peasant's Party acted as a populist movement that used all the instruments offered by modern mass politics. However, it never undertook an intensive effort to create a stringent party organization with rigid hierarchies, extensive training, and strict discipline among its cadres. It rejected violence as a political means, sought compromises instead, and thereby took surprising sidesteps from time to time.<sup>24</sup>

Contrary to Italy and Germany, the ultra-right and fascist movements remained powerless. Only in Croatia did the extreme right make a name

for itself at all in the form of the separatist but politically irrelevant Party of Rights. Often referred to by the name of their earlier party leader Josip Frank, the “Frankians” fought Yugoslavism and referred to historic rights stemming from the Middle Ages in justifying the creation of an independent, ethnically homogenous Croatian nation state. After King Alexander banned nationalist Croat agitation in 1929, leading party members emigrated. Abroad they founded the fascist, separatist underground organization Ustasha (from *ustaša*, insurgents), whose spokesman became the lawyer Ante Pavelić. Support for their ideas came first and foremost from students, intellectuals, the self-employed, and former Austro-Hungarian military officers and veterans. The Ustasha ideology was militantly anti-Yugoslav, anti-Serb, antiliberal, and anticommunist. Its stated aim was to use armed, terrorist actions to establish an independent, ethnically homogenous Greater Croatian state, to which Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sandžak, Montenegro, and part of Vojvodina were to belong. The movement was based on the leader principle, glorified violence, and operated paramilitary units. It propagated the overthrow of the old order and cultivated religious-like, mystic communal rituals. Its ideology, self-image, organization, and forms of representation were similar to those of Italian fascism, and it took its inspiration from the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO), with which it cooperated closely.<sup>25</sup>

Although the extreme right found support among the urban petty bourgeoisie and in some Catholic areas, rural Croatia proved quite resilient to the violence-laden activity of the Ustasha movement. Only in Lika, Dalmatia, and Herzegovina did some of the impoverished peasantry sympathize with the subversive, ethnic-populist slogans and the agitation against Serbs and communists. In September 1932, an attempted uprising in Lika against the local authorities, which had been orchestrated by Italy, failed miserably. The king’s security forces crushed the insurgency, and many of those involved landed in prison. Its base of support remained limited, even though the Ustasha movement was able later to operate openly following an amnesty in 1937 brought about by the Axis powers and to expand its radius of activity to include Catholic high schools, academic organizations, and patriotic societies. Only a few Frankians, rightist supporters of the Croatian Peasant Party, and a part of the Catholic clergy ever joined their ranks, so that even in 1941 the movement only had 4,000 members.<sup>26</sup>

The picture was not much different in Serbia, where the counterpart to the Ustasha movement was formed in 1934/1935 as the Yugoslav National Movement Zbor. Its leader was Dimitrije Ljotić, a man with religious-clerical, anticommunist, and anti-Semitic leanings who admired National Socialist Germany. He combined race theory and blood-and-soil ideology with Orthodox mysticism and a romanticized Serb nationalism. No more than 5,000 to 6,000 students, teachers, low-level employees, and a handful of priests

constituted his base of support.<sup>27</sup> However, as in Croatia, there was a milieu of sympathizers, where radicalism and intolerance could potentially grow out of the deep-seated insecurity that existed. The pluralization of lifestyles and the advance of the modern state resulted sometimes in decidedly anti-Western stances. People were upset by the egoism, rationalism, materialism, and decadence that the new era also brought with it in Yugoslavia and that, in the minds of critics, was tolerated far too much by some of the elite.<sup>28</sup> In intellectual and church circles, visions of the future were nationally exclusive, ethnic, and religiously fundamentalist. For example, the writer Miloš Crnjanski moved away from his earlier cosmopolitan position and railed against liberalism and Marxism in his published contributions to newspapers. He put forth the case for corporatism and a “Jacobian nationalism” because “the new nation is not yet finished. Next to external enemies, a worm of emigrant cliques, strange ‘cultivated’ ideals, foreign capital . . . national snobs and separatists eats away at us.”<sup>29</sup> In other parts of the country, authors also complained about moral decline and the “decayed West,” and about godlessness and the gravediggers of the monarchy, namely the communists.

How do we explain the fact that a fascist mass movement never gained a foothold in Yugoslavia? Southeast Europe had certainly suffered the far-reaching consequences of various crises of modernization since the turn of the century: devastating world war experiences, an unfinished process of nation building, disruption in the operation of the political system, class conflicts, cultural pessimism, and criticism of civilization. What was missing were the relevant ideological and social milieus, the leadership cliques, and the followers on which the ultra-nationalist right thrived. Disoriented, status-threatened, or déclassé members of the middle classes, especially from the bourgeoisie, did not constitute the critical mass necessary for such movements, as they did in the highly industrialized countries. Revolutionary reactionaries simply did not have as many ways to penetrate the world of intact and steadfast religious, family, and social relations in which so many people still lived. Moreover, many citizens of Yugoslavia may not have felt that they were being personally spoken to by the rabble-rousing campaign of the ultra-nationalist right. Unlike in Italy, Germany, and Spain, the conservative and monarchist forces in Yugoslavia did not strike a compromise with the radical right on the power to rule. Without Hitler’s rise to power and his later intervention, these movements would have remained no more than a footnote in history.<sup>30</sup>

### *The Nascent Communist Movement*

Conservative and extreme rightist circles considered communism to be the most dangerous thing imported from the decadent West. King Alexander also certainly would have liked to destroy it, had he been able. Unlike fascism, communism had been able to take root in the South Slavic countries starting

in the nineteenth century, despite the fact that the working class to which it appealed was never large. However, the bourgeois-capitalist economic order and its periodic crises had pushed a large number of landless peasants and those with tiny plots (“dwarf farmers”) into destitution, and the Great Depression had further swelled the ranks of the distraught and disappointed. In the Orthodox regions of the country, Russia had traditionally been considered a major role model, an attitude that was reinforced by a belief in the blessings brought about by the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. This explains why the communists won 12.5 percent of the vote in Yugoslavia’s first postwar election in 1920. In Bulgaria they won 20.4 percent and thus clearly more than in Poland (7.9 percent), for example. With 200,000 votes, the communists joined the constitutional assembly as the third largest delegation. In backward Macedonia, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) garnered an astonishing 33 percent of the vote and in Montenegro even 36 percent.<sup>31</sup>

One of the factors contributing to the attractiveness of the illegal communist movement was its approach to the national question. Since 1924, the underground CPY had taken a strong stand on the issue by being the only ones to recognize Macedonians and Montenegrins as distinct peoples and by claiming that all peoples should have the right to self-determination and separation. Faced with the growing danger of fascist aggression years later, they shifted their position in 1935 to support the continued existence of Yugoslavia and spoke out in favor of a federal state, modeled on that of the Soviet Union, in which all nations and nationalities were of equal standing.<sup>32</sup> The German social democrat Hermann Wendel, whose South Slavic sister party had been pushed to the political sidelines by the communists, was disgusted: “The subsistence farmers of Montenegro and the goat herders of Macedonia—people who live in a completely medieval world of imagination, have never seen a factory smokestack, and have never voted for a parliament—have abruptly metamorphosed into such ‘class conscience’ enthusiasts for the ‘Soviet idea.’”<sup>33</sup> Actually, the communists were also surprisingly strong in Zagreb, Belgrade, and other big cities.

During the party’s years of illegality starting in 1921, the CPY had numerous sympathizers, especially among the 300,000-member-strong trade unions and in the youth movement. The communists had a solid base of support in Croatia, where Josip Broz was born in 1892 as the offspring of a Slovene-Croat marriage. In search of employment, Broz, a locksmith and trade unionist, had traveled to Zagreb, Pilsen, Munich, and Mannheim, among other places, before he was sent to the Serbian front during the First World War and then into a Russian prisoner of war camp.<sup>34</sup> As a communist, party functionary, and professional revolutionary, he was later imprisoned in Yugoslavia for nearly six years. In 1934, the CPY appointed Broz, who

now called himself Tito, to the Central Committee and sent him to the Soviet Union for training. Unlike many of his comrades, he survived the Stalinist Great Purge unharmed. Tito returned home in 1935 and became the party's secretary general in 1939.<sup>35</sup>

For talented young men from lower-income backgrounds like Josip Broz, the trade unions and the party provided the only available avenue to education and social advancement. Since political work offered them the chance not only to pursue class-specific interests but also to develop individual abilities and careers, many skilled laborers and artisans joined the party. The CPY used cultural organizations, reading societies, and athletic clubs to spread its ideas in rural areas. Communist ideas were further disseminated by two new social groups: the young generation of village teachers who had been trained in the cities and the young class of worker-peasants, who moved back and forth between the worlds of urban libertarian cosmopolitanism and rural traditionalism.<sup>36</sup>

In the 1930s, leftism was becoming increasingly attractive, not the least among intellectuals and the middle classes who rejected the antidemocratic, repressive Yugoslav regime. Marxism justified the necessity for a more just world in a quasi-scientific, theoretical way, and its vision of society offered an alternative to the stuffy patriarchal culture that was being rejected, particularly by the educated young. Concerned about the rise of militarism and fascism, they saw communism as the most outspoken and resolute opposition to Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini, from whom the political establishment did not seem to be sufficiently distancing itself. After the Comintern decided in 1935 on a new Popular Front policy that directed communist parties to form alliances from that point on with social democrats, liberals, and all other antifascists, the communists in Yugoslavia were more accepted as a patriotic force by a broader, no longer exclusively leftist-oriented public.<sup>37</sup> Increasingly the left gained a foothold in schools and at universities. For example, they thoroughly infiltrated the law faculty in Belgrade. The students became politicized over the existing police state, the deficit in democratic participation, widespread social plight, and old-fashioned morals. In growing numbers they began to organize underground.<sup>38</sup>

Later, during the Second World War, the communists would be in a good position to take power because the CPY had been restructured into a disciplined Leninist cadre party during the thirties. Tito heralded a generational change at the leadership level through which the party became not only younger but more modern, convincing, and forceful. Three men who belonged to Tito's innermost circle were the Montenegrin Milovan Djilas, the Serb Aleksandar Ranković, and the Slovene Edvard Kardelj; these men would later become the architects of the second Yugoslav state.

Such communists saw themselves as the political and social avant-garde and part of a worldwide movement that conferred its legitimacy and backing on them. They believed in a universally applicable, historical legitimacy and the development of a more humane society throughout the entire world in which revolutionary consciousness would triumph over ethnic aversions. They shared not only their ideological premises but also biographical experiences and convictions, such as years of underground political work, faith in a just future, and a steadfast will to change the way things were. Many had volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Reminiscent of the Young Bosnians before the First World War, Yugoslavism for the communists was not just a vision but a way of life. The party enforced a strict code of values and behavior emphasizing ideological loyalty, willing sacrifice, familial solidarity, Spartan discipline, and somber Puritanism. By the end of the decade, the party was tightly organized, authoritatively led, and peacefully focused on a pro-Yugoslav aim.<sup>39</sup>

#### *Radicalization, Religious Fundamentalism, and Political Violence*

In the late 1930s, the radicalization and militarization of the political spectrum that was evident throughout Europe could also be found in Yugoslavia. The authoritarian rule of the royal dictatorship, the rise of fascism and National Socialism, and growing external pressure encouraged extremism and accelerated ideological polarization. State repression intensified and many communists and ultranationalists were jailed, tortured, or disappeared.<sup>40</sup>

In turn, this strengthened an antidemocratic discourse that aimed at overcoming the internal fragmentation by creating a unified Yugoslav nation with authoritarian means. Political confrontations were carried out primarily on the streets and no longer in parliament or in the media.<sup>41</sup> Militant political actions increasingly impacted public life, irrespective of ideology or nationality. The incidents of students from both the left and the right violently attacking each other became more frequent. In October 1940, a shootout in Belgrade between the supporters of the anti-Semitic Zbor and the communists left five dead and 120 wounded.<sup>42</sup>

Every party had paramilitary units deployed to propagate and advance their cause. Yugoslav Action was a group founded in 1929 with close ties to the regime. It fought for a populist totalitarian Yugoslav ideology by staging mass marches, while the communists sent armed units of proletarian street fighters to disrupt the rallies of the fascists. Nationalist-minded Serbs joined the ultra-nationalistic Chetnik units, whose membership rose between 1935 and 1938 from 200,000 to over a half million.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, the Croatian Peasants' Party formed peasant and citizen militias allegedly as a defense

against Chetniks, communists, and the “Green Shirts” from the camp of Stojadinović supporters. In 1940, this force comprised 200,000 men, which Yugoslav authorities were not completely wrong to view as the nucleus of a later Croatian army.<sup>44</sup>

With the rise of nationalism, antidemocratic thinking, and religious intolerance, antagonism heightened not only among the political parties but also between the churches. One of the points of rivalrous contention was the education of children from mixed-religion marriages. The Concordat with the Vatican that resulted from long negotiations failed the ratification process in 1937 because the Serbian Orthodox Church opposed it. The Orthodox Church feared the Catholic missionary zeal of converting believers of other faiths, and so it threatened all members of parliament who ratified the Concordat with excommunication. In various cities violent demonstrations protested against the Concordat. Embittered, the Catholic Church subsequently adopted a confrontational stance toward the Yugoslav state. The fragile balance of religious coexistence broke apart.

Soon militancy manifested itself in the overall atmosphere, and also within the various religious communities. The lay organization Croatian Catholic Movement fought against liberalization and secularization, as did ultranationalist and profascist groups with names like “Eagle” and “Crusader.”<sup>45</sup> In Serbia this fervor was channeled into an extremist Orthodox trend that celebrated religious cults, the Kosovo myth, nationalism, and antimodernism in the guise of *svetosavlje* (the ideology of the Saint Sava). Influenced by the cultural theories of Russian Slavophilia and the reception of Oswald Spengler’s work, these ideas caught on among theologians, the peasant lay movement known as the Bogomoljci (literally, God-prayers), and on the far right end of the Serb elite, but never on a widespread basis.<sup>46</sup>

Radical militarism was also found among the Muslim population. The dissolution of their traditionally closed societal order in both their religious and secular worlds, the disappointment over the unfulfilled promises of progress, and especially a deep-seated identity crisis may have moved Bosnian intellectuals to retreat into the universal and ultimately justifying system of religious dogma and embrace the utopia of a pan-Islamic societal and world order. They concentrated their energies on the reform movements in the Arab world. Confronted by the alleged decline of human civilization in general and of Muslim culture in particular, the university-educated youth sought inspiration in the work of Islamic and Western authors who criticized civilization, like Oswald Spengler. They joined the pious societies Trezvenost (Sobriety) and Ihvan (Brotherhood) to revive Muslim customs and traditions like the study of the Koran and the observance of Ramadan. Modeled after the

Egyptian group Young Muslims, a handful of intellectuals founded a group of the same name in Sarajevo in 1941. It was the first militant organization in Bosnia-Herzegovina that propagated the “training and struggle” for a pan-Islamic state.<sup>47</sup>

### *A Reorientation in Foreign Policy*

The ongoing rivalry since the nineteenth century among the major powers for dominance in Southeast Europe intensified in the 1930s. The region proved to be both a good supplier of agrarian products and raw materials vital to industry and a good market for finished industrial goods. For Germany in particular, the region became important for its war industry after the Nazi regime announced its New Plan in 1934.<sup>48</sup>

Since assuming power, the National Socialists had worked determinedly to bind the countries of Southeast Europe to Germany through trade agreements. Intensive economic relations seemed an apt way to exert political influence and, where possible, to undermine French security interests. In March 1933, the undersecretary at the foreign ministry, von Bülow, underscored in a memorandum that Yugoslavia and Romania could “in this manner be significantly influenced regarding the direction of their foreign policy.”<sup>49</sup>

In the bilateral trade agreement of 1 May 1934, Germany contracted to purchase Yugoslav agrarian products at prices higher than those on the global market, which would take place in exchange for German export goods in a clearing process.<sup>50</sup> Unerringly, the Reich succeeded in becoming Yugoslavia’s most important trading partner. Whereas Germany received 14.1 percent of Yugoslav exports between 1931 and 1935, this figure had already risen to 25.44 percent in 1936 and even 45.9 percent by 1939.<sup>51</sup> Yugoslavia had made itself dangerously dependent on Germany economically and thus also politically.

The security system that France had put into place in 1918 in East and Southeast Europe began to erode when King Alexander and France’s foreign minister, Louis Barthou, were murdered in October 1934. French investigators uncovered close ties between the assassin and the Macedonian VMRO and the Croat Ustasha, which, in turn, could then be traced to Italy and Hungary. Belgrade later failed in its effort to get the League of Nations to condemn Italy unequivocally, in addition to Hungary, even though it had been proven that both countries tolerated the existence of Croat fascist training camps on their territory. However, no country was willing to publicly expose Mussolini, not even France.<sup>52</sup>

Faced with growing international tensions and the intervention practices of the Axis powers, Yugoslavia adopted neutrality as its strategy to survive. Prince Regent Paul, who governed the country during the years that Alexander’s heir, Peter, was a minor, attempted to keep his country out of



the looming international disputes by pursuing a policy of equidistance. This meant maintaining good neighborly relations in all directions without making any alliance commitments, which is why Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović established closer relations to Berlin and Rome. In 1937, Yugoslavia and Italy signed a friendship and nonaggression pact.

Hitler became more forceful in his dealings with Southeast Europe starting in 1938. In preparation for the war, he made Yugoslavia part of the “Greater German Economic Sphere—Southeast” and assigned it the task of supplying armament-relevant raw materials, like iron ore and copper, and food, for which the country received weapons and airplane technology in exchange.<sup>53</sup> In order to ensure that the supply of resources would not be seized by enemy countries, Germany pressed the countries of Southeast Europe to enter the Tripartite Pact. When Prince Regent Paul paid an official visit to Germany in the early summer of 1939, the German government started an unexpected charm offensive, underlaid with intimidating demonstrations of military might. This visit led the prince to draw the long overdue conclusion that, if Yugoslavia was to repel foreign threats, his nation had little choice but to negotiate solutions to its internal conflicts in order to forge the much stronger unity it needed.<sup>54</sup>

### *The Serb-Croat Settlement (Sporazum)*

In February 1939, domestic and foreign policy motives prompted Prince Regent Paul to dismiss the powerful prime minister Milan Stojadinović, a man who advocated a strong centralized state and thus stood in the way of solving the “Croatian question.” In the December 1938 elections, the “United Opposition” under the leadership of the Croatian Peasants’ Party had won an impressive 45 percent of the vote, while the governing party only garnered 54 percent. So it had become quite apparent that Stojadinović’s politics were not sufficiently supported by the electorate.

Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia (1935/1936), Germany’s annexation of Austria (1938), and the partitioning and eventual demise of Czechoslovakia (1938/1939) demonstrated dramatically that Great Britain and France would not defend their East European protégés against military aggression. It thus seemed essential that the small Balkan countries maintain good relations with the Axis as a defense against their own destruction. As the influence of London and Paris diminished in eastern Central Europe, so did the foreign backing of Yugoslavia and its centralist political system, which had been based on the model of the Western powers.<sup>55</sup> The founding of an independent Slovakia by Nazi Germany aroused the fear that, sooner or later, the rebellious Croats might also seek Hitler’s help to achieve their demands for autonomy. Moreover, Rome secretly continued to try to incite the Ustasha movement

and the Peasants' Party to an uprising that would bring about the demise of Yugoslavia and an intervention by Italy. Therefore, there was no choice but to give the leader of the Croatian Peasants' Party, Vladko Maček, a role in government.

On 26 August 1939, Prime Minister Dragiša Cvetković and Vladko Maček agreed on a settlement a few days before the outbreak of the Second World War. The *Sporazum* (Agreement) established for the first time an autonomous Croatian administrative district within Yugoslavia with Zagreb as its capital. This so-called Banovina of Croatia covered the greater part of Croatia, Dalmatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina and was inhabited by over four million people, of whom nearly 20 percent were Serbs and 4 percent Muslims. Economic affairs, domestic matters, the educational system, and the judicial system were now in the hands of the Croatian self-administration, led by Ivan Šubašić as the new governor. The agreement went into effect on 26 August 1939 at the same time that the new "Government of National Agreement" was sworn into office. Cvetković remained prime minister, and Maček became his deputy.<sup>56</sup>

Although the agreement satisfied the Croats' most tenacious demand, it created new problems. Both the Ustasha and the communists criticized it for not going far enough. Once the Second World War started, the economic situation was further aggravated by rising inflation, tax increases, and a shortage of goods. Dissatisfaction with the situation grew in Croatia, for which the former opposition leaders were held responsible. Due to the outbreak of war, most stipulations of the *Sporazum* were not fulfilled.

The new autonomy granted to the Croats made many in Yugoslavia nervous and triggered a domino effect for comparable demands by other peoples. Serbs, Slovenes, and Bosnian Muslims each called for their own banovina. The Muslims were particularly bitter over the fact that Croats and Serbs had—seemingly bilaterally—divided up their country among themselves, and in doing so they had not only trampled the historical borders of Bosnia-Herzegovina but had also treated with contempt the regional identity of the populace. Religious and secular elites banded together to submit several resolutions demanding territorial autonomy. Particularly explosive in a political sense was the proposal put forth by the Serbian Culture Club led by the historian Slobodan Jovanović, one of the most important scholars in the interwar period. This proposal presented a plan to create a banovina of "Serb countries," which was to include Bosnia, Montenegro, and Macedonia. In other words, the banovina would closely embody the historical concept of a Greater Serbia.<sup>57</sup> By the end of the decade, the ideology of unitarism and centralism was dead, and a great majority of Yugoslavs, including Serbs, now favored federalism.

### *Operation Retribution*

Whether the *Sporazum* would have been able to establish domestic peace on the long run will always remain an unanswered question. On 1 September 1939, Hitler invaded Poland, thus further darkening the political skies over Europe. Mussolini seized the opportunity to still his appetite for Yugoslav territory. Following the dismantling of Czechoslovakia back in March 1939, Hitler had given his partner a free hand in the Mediterranean realm. The next month, in early April, Italian troops marched into Albania. In August of that same year, Hitler urged Mussolini—so as to appease his Axis partner before the German aggression against Poland commenced—to “deliver the coup de grâce [to Yugoslavia] as soon as possible.” In January 1940, Pavelić promised to provoke a revolution and then to call on Italy for help. Under the code name E, Rome began to prepare a military intervention that would create a Croatian state by the grace of Mussolini.<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile, Hitler had changed his mind and wanted instead to maintain peace in the Balkans. Otherwise, the risk seemed too great that the British would engage them militarily in the Mediterranean or that Stalin might even be provoked to intervene. However, the Axis partners did agree that there would be no place for Yugoslavia in the “New Europe” they were planning.<sup>59</sup>

After Italian troops invaded Greece on 28 October 1940, the German leadership modified its strategy. To come to the aid of the militarily hard-pressed Mussolini, Germany intended to invade Greece in its Operation Marita. At the same time, Hitler sought to protect his southern flank during the impending attack on the Soviet Union, to drive the British out of the Aegean mainland permanently, and to secure the exploitation of Southeast Europe for the war industry, especially Romania’s oil fields. To do this, the German army—the Wehrmacht—required a deployment zone.<sup>60</sup>

Yugoslavia found itself in a quandary. To support Germany’s aggression against Greece would have meant war with Great Britain sooner or later, maybe even with the United States and the Soviet Union. This is why Belgrade denied the Axis permission to transport their troops through Yugoslavia. At the same time, the General Staff knew very well that its army would not be able to effectively counter any German attack. So, how was Yugoslavia to maintain the neutrality so vital to its survival?

Once the Wehrmacht started marching through Bulgaria in the direction of the Greek and Yugoslav borders, these considerations became obsolete. Against the backdrop of domestic turmoil, growing social dissatisfaction, and massive threats from Germany with serious political consequences, Prince Regent Paul followed the path taken by his neighbors Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania, and joined the German-Italian-Japanese Tripartite Pact of 1940 on 25 March 1941.<sup>61</sup> Hitler assuaged Belgrade’s overriding concerns by assuring

the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia and, at least at first, forwent asking Yugoslavia for military support in the impending campaign against Greece.<sup>62</sup>

That very evening, major demonstrations occurred in various cities. Encouraged but probably not incited by the British, Serb generals toppled the government on 27 March 1941 in a bloodless coup and placed King Peter II, who was still a minor, on the throne. Air Force general Dušan Simović became prime minister, and following some initial hesitation, the Croatian Peasants' Party leader Maček assumed a cabinet post. Simović was deeply committed to the *Sporazum*, and both men believed it would be possible to keep Yugoslavia as a whole out of the war if they acted quickly and offered Berlin a declaration of loyalty to the Tripartite Pact. The vast majority of the political class thought that even the worst of all possible Yugoslavias was a better alternative to no Yugoslavia at all. Thousands gathered on Belgrade's streets to celebrate the return to neutrality.

That same day, Hitler convened a secret meeting in Berlin. The Germans viewed the coup both as a rebuff and as a potential risk. They feared Britain would be able to convince the Yugoslavs to switch their alliance and then to permit the British to use their air bases for attacks against the German troops amassing in preparation for the attack against the Soviet Union. Hitler ordered that Yugoslavia be "considered an enemy and crushed as quickly as possible." As retribution, Belgrade was to be destroyed through a continual series of daytime and nighttime bombing raids by the German air force.<sup>63</sup> Besides the strategic military motives, Hitler was also being driven by ideological ones, namely his desire to reverse the outcome of the First World War and to eliminate Serbian influence once and for all.<sup>64</sup>

In the early morning hours of 6 April 1941, German aircraft began without warning to bomb the defenseless capital, which the government had declared earlier, to no avail, as an "open city." These attacks destroyed 9,000 houses and killed 3,000 people—more than in Warsaw, Rotterdam, and Coventry taken together.<sup>65</sup> Eleven days after the completion of Operation Retribution, the Yugoslav army was forced to surrender. Thus, the first Yugoslav state met its demise through foreign aggression and not as a result of its own internal conflicts and contradictions.