

The National Question in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The Croatian Case

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Abstract *The dissolution of the multinational State of Yugoslavia after a half century of Socialistic regime and its violent transformation into several independent States during the 90's renewed the debate about the origins and the development of the "Yugoslav national question". The paper describes how the foundation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes after the WWI was an unsuccessful attempt to create a modern and unitary Nation-State for the Croats and the other Yugoslav nationalities.*

Keywords: *Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes; Croatian national question; Croatian Peasant Party; centralism; federalism.*

1. Introduction

At the end of the First World War the victorious powers of the Entente imposed a new European balance and redrew the political chart of the continent, failing those hopes and illusions that rose among the masses during the long and hard years of conflict. The several misinterpretations of Peace Treaties and the discontent of different national aspirations paved the way for a period of instability and unrest in Europe; the "Nation-States", risen from the ruins of the multinational Empires, often proved to be weak and fragmented as their predecessors. In the Balkans the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (*Kraljevina Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*, SHS, renamed Yugoslavia in 1929) – born thanks to the support of the allied powers to the aspirations of Serbia – did not represent a valid solution to the conflictual situation existing between the different South Slavic components of the State, and, moreover, the Croats opposed to the process of assimilation to a Serbian-centric State, considered a clear violation of their own right to self-determination.

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo was the dramatic culmination of an irreconcilable conflict which entailed, in the South Slavic area, the commitment of a Yugoslav unification of Serbia and the idea of forming an Habsburg multinational State (Tamborra, 367). The regent Aleksandar Karadjordjević and the Prime Minister Nikola Pašić, leader of the Serbian Radical Party (*Narodna radikalna stranka*, NRS), made the pan-Serbian ideal the inspiring principle of their political program, convinced that the time for achieving the expansionistic ambitions to the expense of the Habsburg Empire had come. From September 1914 they informed the allies of the Entente of their intention, in case of victory, of creating a powerful State of South Slavs, which included Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Banac, 116). Yet, the Government in Belgrade regarded the liberation and unification of South Slavs mainly as the unification and integration of other nationalities in a Greater Serbia.

2. The Croats from Habsburg to Karadjordjević

At the beginning of the century there was an increasing number of Croats and Slovenes who placed their hopes in Serbia. The Croatian society was deeply divided, as a consequence of endless protest movements. Two ideological orientations dominated the political life: from one hand, the Yugoslavist and anti-Habsburg approach of Frano Supilo and Ante Trumbić tended to an alliance with the Serbs of the

imperial lands; from the other, the Austro-Slavic and anti-Serbian orientation, supported by the pan-Croatian particularism of the Croatian Party of Right (*Hrvatska Stranka Prava*, HSP),¹ was prone to the solution of the Croatian question inside the Empire granting the autonomy to South Slavs, similar to the one bestowed to Hungarians in 1867. Moreover, in 1904 the two brothers Stjepan and Antun Radić founded the Croatian Peasant Party (*Hrvatska Pučka Seljačka Stranka*, HPSS) which, although it was created on a peaceful basis, gave rise to strong protest movements, giving itself the exclusive right of representing Croatian interests.

If the old Croatian political generation was very doubtful about the opportunity of an alliance with the Serbs, fully supporting the Austro-Slavist solution, younger generations were willing to break the imperial ties and create a Yugoslav State. In April 1915 Supilo and Trumbić, together with other exiles, constituted the Yugoslav Committee (*Jugoslavenski Odbor*),² and from that moment the real challenge for Pašić was reaching an agreement with it. The Yugoslav Committee was willing to collaborate with the government in Belgrade but not as a mere agency of Serbian propaganda, as it was in Pašić's wishes. Trumbić and Supilo regarded all Serbs, Slovenes and Croats as one people without distinctions of nationality, entitled to have an independent State which was based on the principles of national right and self-determination, and not on what Serbia achieved in the conflict. The Yugoslav Committee and the government in Belgrade were ready to collaborate for the unification but Pašić did not want to grant big concessions to Croats, willing to subordinate the annexed Habsburg territories to the pre-existing Serbian institutions (Banac, 118-119).

On 20th July 1917 Pašić e Trumbić signed the Declaration of Corfu, the agreement that made the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes – under the Karadjordjević dynasty – possible. As a constitutional, democratic and parliamentary monarchy, the new State was about to recognize the two alphabets (Cyrillic and Latin), the three names, the three national flags and the three religions (Catholic, Orthodox and Islamic), adopting universal male suffrage for the election of the future constituent assembly.³ Trumbić, from his own side, looked favourably upon an unitary solution with the devolution of legislative and administrative powers, to ensure that other national entities could have a degree of autonomy in internal affairs (Tamborra, 409).

Yet, the Pact of Corfu left some unresolved issues that would have showed the limits of the agreement. First and foremost, the Yugoslav Committee did not receive any official mandate from the South Slavs of the Dual Monarchy, thus representing exclusively the aspirations of a political and intellectual elite, which actually differed from the real feelings and desires of the population. The most delicate issue remained deliberately open: Pašić and Trumbić just proclaimed the Yugoslav peoples as one nation, as for blood, language and territorial continuity, but did not provide indications about the institutional aspects of the common State. The Karadjordjević dynasty would have ensured a stable union between people of different traditions, languages and religions, but it was not established whether the organization of the new State was characterized by centralism or federalism. The former corresponded to the dominant practice of the Serbian Kingdom extended to the acquired lands, the latter being rather more suitable to safeguard the political and civil rights of the different Yugoslav nationalities (Lederer, 34-35).

During 1918 the initiatives in favour of unification became more frequent. At the end of September the Dual Monarchy was subjected to offensives on all fronts and the authorities of Vienna and Budapest rapidly collapsed in the Southern Slavic provinces. To fill the gap of power of the Empire, on 5th October the National Council (*Narodno vijeće*) of the South Slavic peoples of the Empire was convened in Zagreb, representing the highest institutional body of all Croats, Serbs and Slovenes of the Habsburg territories (Goldstein, 110-111). On 29th October the Croatian *Sabor* declared the end of the union with Hungary and gave the highest state authority to the national Council of Zagreb which, in turn, declared itself in favour of the union with Serbia and Montenegro, without mentioning further conditions. The proposal was approved and only Stjepan Radić, leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, voted against, advancing republican requests for the Croats. On 24th November the Serbian government recognized the

¹ The "Right" in the party's name refers to the Croatian historical right to achieve national independence.

² The Yugoslav Committee was conceived in Florence on November 22, 1914, during a meeting between Croatian and Bosnian-Serb political emigrants, and then set up in Paris and London the following year.³ The text of the Declaration of Corfu is available in: F. Šišić, *Dokumenti o postanku Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca 1914-1919*, Zagreb: 1920, pp. 96-100; P. D. Ostović, *The Truth about Yugoslavia*, New York: 1952, pp. 275-276.

National Council in Zagreb as the legal representative of the new kingdom of the South-Slavs and the two sides proclaimed the national unification: after having been appointed member of the delegation in charge of carrying out the negotiation in Belgrade, Radić delivered an outraged speech in favour of Croatian independence, being thus excluded from such talks. Executive and legislative powers were temporarily given to special delegations, waiting for the formation of a constituent assembly and the drafting of a constitution. The agreement sought to satisfy both the needs of the centralized State and the federalist requests (Tanner, 118-120).⁴

On 25th and 26th November Montenegro and Vojvodina were officially annexed to Serbia and, finally, on 1st December 1918 Aleksandar Karadjordjević proclaimed the birth of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which should have preserved the integrity of Slovenian and Croatian lands, occupied by Italian troops, and ensure the order in those territories where the risk of unrest was high, due to food shortage and wartime sacrifices.

The Croats immediately showed a strong opposition: on 5th December the armed soldiers refused to take their oath of allegiance to the king and dispersed in the streets of Zagreb giving rise to violent demonstrations of dissent (Goldstein, 115). The Croatian secessionist spirit was growing unceasingly, intolerant of a domination which was considered inferior, as for culture and traditions. Even the intellectual groups which initially greeted with enthusiasm Yugoslavia's unification, were about to change their minds, embracing Croatian national cause.

The Croats, however, politically weak, were forced to accept the Serbian conditions also in order to ensure international protection from Belgrade, in order to counter the Italian aspirations for national completion and strategic security in the Adriatic Sea. Tension between Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes arose at the end of the war, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire dissolved and Italy occupied ethnically mixed territories – with Slovenes and Croats composing over the half of the population of the region – assigned to it by the Treaty of London of 26th April 1915. On 12th November 1920 the dispute was solved signing the Treaty of Rapallo, that annexed to Italy the Western part of Carniola, Istria, the city of Zadar and the small Dalmatian islands of Lošinj, Cres and Lastovo. According to the treaty, the city of Rijeka (*Fiume*) would become an independent and free State, thus ending the military occupation of Gabriele D'Annunzio's troops. Finally on 27th January 1924 Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes signed the Treaty of Rome, which gave Fiume to Italy and Sušak to the South Slavs.⁵

3. The Vidovdan Constitution

Yugoslav internal contrasts and divisions were clearly visible in the negotiations for the formation of a government which included the parties of the different national components. The conflict between advocates of centralism and proponents of federalism caused a governmental paralysis, which marked the first years of life of the country. In March 1919 the Constituent Assembly was convened in Belgrade, composed mainly of the parties already existing among the various national realities and dominated by Pašić's radical followers, who could count on the support of Svetozar Pribičević, leading figure of ex-Habsburg Serbs, and of his Democratic Party (*Demokratska stranka*, DS), created from the union of radical Serbian dissidents and representatives of the old Croatian-Serbian coalition in Zagreb.

The absence of an absolute majority at the *Skupština* led to the formation of a coalition government and brought to the elections for the Constituent Assembly in November 1920. In order to obtain the approval of a centralized constitution, Radicals and Democrats sought the support of smaller national groups, included Bosnian and Sandžak Muslims, in exchange for cultural and religious autonomy. Seeking the temporary support of some nationalities to obtain the power, in exchange for financial and administrative privileges, was the political stream in Belgrade during the 1920's; however, despite contingent agreements, Serbian leaders had no intention of leaving their own political leadership.

Even with the enlargement of the radical-democratic coalition towards smaller groups, the parliamentary majority remained however modest. The Croatian Peasant Party – with the new name of Croatian Republican Peasant Party (*Hrvatska Republikanska Seljačka Stranka*, HRSS) – thanks to a program of federal and republican leanings, reported a triumphant success among the Croats (who voted for the

⁴ Regarding the claims of the National Council during the negotiations see the document with specific instructions to the delegation in F. Šišić, *Dokumenti*, pp. 275-276.

⁵ For the text of the Treaties of London, Rapallo and Rome see A. Giannini, *Documenti per la storia dei rapporti fra l'Italia e la Jugoslavia*, Roma: Istituto per l'Europa orientale, 1934, pp. 7-161.

first time through universal male suffrage) becoming the first opposition party and generally the third in the Parliament in Belgrade. Yet, at the crucial point of voting on the constitution, Radić made the wrong choice of abstaining from parliamentary sessions, to protest against the abrupt procedures of Radicals who did not take into consideration the projects presented by the opposition; the result was a constitution that clearly matched Serbian political interests (Pirjevec, 37-39).

The *Vidovdan* Constitution was approved on 28th June 1921. With a tiny majority obtained through compromise with the Yugoslav Muslim Organization (*Jugoslavenska Muslimanska Organizacija*, JMO), the constitution was formulated in such a way as to ensure the supremacy of a government which did not have the capacities to exercise the power without resorting to the army and the gendarmery; the constitution of the Yugoslav State, in its final form, was unacceptable to the other nationalities of the kingdom and did not receive the approval from Trumbić and some radical deputies. Two days before the officialization, also Radić and other Croatian politicians asserted the invalidity of the constitution; Korošec, instead, who was sensing pan-Serbian leanings, accused the leadership in Belgrade of destroying the historic tradition, the cultural life and the political-economic growth of Slovenes and Croats. On 29th June, the solemn ceremony of the promulgation of the constitution was disturbed by a worker who attempted, failing, on the prince regent Aleksandar's life; similar situation but different ending for the Minister of Internal Affairs Milorad Drašković, who was killed, one month later, by a young Bosnian communist, Alija Alijagić. These attacks gave the government the right excuse for the suppression of dissident political parties and for the parliamentary approval of a series of decrees aimed at defending the State from terrorist attacks: the communist party was declared illegal, its fifty-eight deputies were expelled from parliament and its activities were kept secret since then.

The constitution of 1921 impaired the situation between Serbs and Croats once and for all, worsening the imbalance between centre and periphery. The following years witnessed a relentless iron hand between the government and Radić's party: republican and antimilitarist, Radić cherished the illusion of creating a peaceful rural Republic of Croatia in a wider Yugoslav confederation. He firmly opposed to any kind of collaboration and he based his strategy on the boycott of parliamentary sessions, rejecting any form of dialogue with other political parties which stood against Belgrade centralism. This strategy proved to be disastrous and even fostered the Serbian government in the realization of a State that totally matched his own interests.

4. The Croatian Peasant Party's Politics and the Murder of Radić

Radić desperately pursued the support of European powers. In August 1922 he addressed the League of Nations to denounce the situation of the Croatian people, whose conditions were even worse compared to the Habsburg period; he also stated that Croats had lost the autonomy they enjoyed during the Habsburg Empire – albeit limited by Hungarian interference – therefore they did not recognize the *Vidovdan* Constitution and formally demanded the recognition of Croatian independence. In Zagreb an assembly of notables turned into a demonstration claiming the revision of the constitution (Goldstein, 119); as a result, the Croatian leader Radić was accused of “republican unrest” and tried to avoid arrest escaping abroad, in July 1924, and spent several months around Europe denouncing the Serbian oppression. Nevertheless, Yugoslavia was for France and Great Britain a fixed point in the policy of containment of Germany and Soviet Union in the Balkans and destabilizing the area to support the Croatian cause was pointless. Discarded by Western powers, Radić decided to approach the Soviet Union, that looked at the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes as a capitalist outpost in the Balkans; this attempt was unsuccessful for the Croatian leader, who was arrested at the beginning of 1925, charged with conspiracy against the Yugoslav State together with Comintern (Pirjevec, 51-55).

The following period was extremely tough for the Croatian Peasant Party: Pašić and Pribičević violently repressed Croatian political activities, taking into account the possibility of dissolving the party; yet, the repression had a scanty influence on the constituency and at the elections in February 1925 the party obtained great success again (Magaš, 517-519). Since repression failed, Pašić decided to undertake a new course, which then led to amazing changes in Yugoslav political life. The radical leader began negotiations with Radić, still in prison, for the formation of a governmental coalition between Serbian Radical Party and Croatian Peasant Party. First signs of rapprochement appeared in March 1925, when Pavle Radić, Stjepan's nephew, announced that the Croatian Peasant Party accepted the constitution of 1921 and recognized the national monarchic dynasty, asserting that Croatian autonomist claims would not in any way damage the Yugoslav unity (republican and separatist propositions were largely abandoned). In July, the Croatian Peasant Party and the Serbian Radicals – free from the alliance with Pribičević – were

ready to form the governmental coalition and a new executive power was immediately constituted, once Radić was released: he was going to enter the cabinet in November as Minister of Education – his first and only governmental appointment in the Yugoslav Kingdom (Tanner, 121-122).

The decision of the Croatian Peasant Party to abandon the hard line and reach a compromise with Belgrade revealed the eclectic orientation of its leader, who tried several times, during the 1920's, to find a solution to the Croatian question taking into consideration each and every possibility (like the approach towards Soviet Union). The governmental coalition lasted few months: Pašić repeatedly interfered with the work of the Croatian leader, who lost prestige among the Croats. The coalition was quite a failure among Croats and Serbs too: there was discontent among Serbian officers, afraid that the approach between the two parties could threaten Belgrade's centralism and Yugoslav unity.

In February 1927, the Croatian Peasant Party went back to the opposition: two months earlier, on 10th December 1926, Pašić, the real proponent of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, died. Aware of the big problems threatening Yugoslav unity, the Serbian leader tried, till the end, to consolidate the State involving Croats too. At his death, the situation worsened still further: Pašić had created a vast system of patronage that allowed him to control interests and affairs of *Čaršija*, the ruling oligarchy, in order not to call into question its authority. The Serbian ruling class, made of politicians close to the court, orthodox clergymen, Belgrade's upper middle class and army officers, took exclusively care of its own interests. The profiteering behaviour of the Serbian *establishment* stirred up the Croatian protest: large masses of people, regardless of nationality, were hostile towards the government and bearing the burden of destitution and ignorance contributed to the instability of the State, already unsettled by social disparities. When the old leader died, his own system fell into pieces and the chaos of the Serbian *establishment* spread, with increasing corruption – even Pašić's son was involved in a business scandal – and without a charismatic figure capable of curbing the most detrimental behaviours (Pirjevec, 58-60).

In November 1927 Radić made another unexpected move forming an alliance with Pribičević, the democratic leader exponent of ex-Habsburg Serbs. They had been political rivals and the latter at that time supported Belgrade's centralism, that eventually proved to be oppressive towards Serbs of Croatia (former Habsburg provinces were subjected to a greater tax pressure than the territories of the old Serbian Kingdom) and Pribičević ended up in opposition ranks (Magaš, 519-520).

Yugoslav internal conflict reached its peak in 1928, year of growing tension in the kingdom. On 20th June, in parliament, the radical deputy Puniša Račić shot to death Pavle Radić and another Croatian deputy; he shot Stjepan too, who died a few days later. During the funerals, attended by around 100.000 people scattered in the streets of Zagreb, impressive demonstrations and violent uprising took place all over Croatia (Kulundžić, 1967, 173).

5. Conclusions

The existence of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes came actually to an end. A few months later, the State assumed the name of "Yugoslavia", with the pointless purpose of reinforcing the State and creating a common feeling of national union. King Aleksandar took actual sovereignty of its own kingdom only after Pašić's death: in 1929 he changed the denomination of the Yugoslav State, strengthening the authoritarian regime in a dictatorship and leading to an increasing discontent of Yugoslav nationalities and a rapid development of centrifugal nationalist movements. The attack that killed the king was going to be organized right by Croatian *ustaša*.

In the 1990's the Yugoslav experience came to an end, with the dissolution of the Yugoslav State and its transformation into several small States, although Second World War had already showed how dangerous and difficult the coexistence of Yugoslav nationalities was. The aggression of the Axis in 1941 exacerbated internal rivalries of South Slavs with a disastrous outcome, worsening the predicament of war-ravaged Yugoslavia; yet, the situation did not improve when the socialist regime collapsed. Many people, poisoned with relentless propaganda and exhausted by socio-economic unease, thought that their identity and freedom were at risk; they gave rise to fanatic forms of nationalism and ended up rejecting what had been, despite difficulties, the most original and praiseworthy feature of the Yugoslav State (monarchic or socialist it was), namely the cultural and religious pluralism, which had always been the symbol of the coveted, exploited and unfulfilled Yugoslav spirit.

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