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A TRAVELER GUIDE TO UNDERSTAND THE EX-YUGOSLAVIAN AREA

Chapter 2.

1918 | 1939

THE POST-WAR INSTABILITY

The memorial of the uprising of Macedonian separatists against the
Ottomans, a current symbol of Northern Macedonian identity,
Kruševo, Northern Macedonia, 2020



THE POST-WAR ECONOMICAL INSTABILITY IN THE WORLD



• The winning countries of world war 1 are the capitalist democracies of Western Europe. The peace treaty of Versailles is negotiated by the UK, France, the US and Italy (which allied with the Triple Entente in 1915). These democracies have two goals:

- (1) Ensuring a long-term peace.
- (2) Rebuild themselves.

• The democracies want to develop around a market economy (private property and free market). The State intervention in the market is low and the industries are financed by the private investors at the stock exchanges.

• **Great Depression, 1929** Since the production in Europe and the US is going better after adapting to the post-war needs, stockholders invest a lot of money. This excess of production and the over-investment are some of the elements leading to the Wall Street crash. Another important element is Europe being dependant from the US loans since the war. When New York's stock exchange collapse, Europe (except USSR) encounters massive unemployment and social crisis as a consequence.

• Yugoslavia also struggles in finding an economic stability, but its territory is safe: the Empires collapsed, the Petite Entente (a military alliance of Yugoslavia,

France, Romania and Czech Republic from 1921 to 1938) protects the country from the Hungarian invasion, and Italy isn't ready to conquer its coveted territories.

• Yugoslavia's economy is mostly based on agriculture and the production of raw material. The Great Depression first affects the countries producing raw materials imported by industrialized countries. It is a disaster for the farmers: drop of the merchandise prices, drop of the demand, drop of the salaries, difficulties to pay off the post-war loans to the other countries. The land reforms aren't enough to overcome the situation. Despite being a diplomatic ally, France doesn't support Yugoslavia by buying its products, although some of them such as the Macedonian tobacco are well-reputed.



These major tensions will impact Yugoslavia. Find what refers to them with the circle colors and the lines along the text.



Hostility from Croats toward Serbia



Rivalry between Serbs and Albanian Kosovars for the independence of Kosovo



Rivalry between Serbs and Bulgarians (and Greeks and Albanians) for Macedonia



Tensions around the Albanian minorities in Macedonia



Rivalry between Serbs, Croats and Muslims for BiH

NATIONALISMS IN THE INTERWAR IN EUROPE



- Since the democracies develop a market economy, communism is identified as the main threat to peace. It is indeed an alternative model based on collective property and State regulation that threatens the powerful landlords and private investors. This threat is materialized by Russia which became a socialist regime in 1917 and is at the doors of Europe.
- Nevertheless, two immediate threats to peace are actually totalitarianism and nationalist ideologies (which embody in fascism and nazism for instance) growing within the liberal democracies themselves. Two elements set their ground:
 - (1) Troubles to find a new economic stability.
 - (2) Left out feeling of Germany and Italy after the peace negotiations: Germany must pay for the war damages in the democracies, and Italy didn't get the Croatian territories promised in exchange of helping the Entente in 1915.

- **Beginning of 1920** Some efforts from the European democracies and the US are made to lower the debt of Germany (which also is a capitalist democracy) and help rebuilding the country. The US also want to avoid UK and France holding too much power in Europe. European economy becomes more stable until the Great Depression.

- Adolf Hitler in Germany is already a growing political figure. He heads the Nazi party (NSDAP) since 1921 and Germany becomes the Third Reich in 1933 when he becomes Chancellor. The party takes advantage of the precarity of the working class and develops a nationalist ideology. It promises a better life to the German population and points out Jewishes, communists and other minorities as responsible for their precarity. The frustration of the treaty of Versailles, which is very violent toward Germany, is used to feed the idea that Germans must stand to make their nation great again at any cost.

- Meanwhile, Benito Mussolini in Italy also is a growing figure. He creates the National Fascist Party in 1921. Mussolini also bases on the post-war territory frustration to spread a strong nationalist feeling across Italy. He initially is a socialist, but he allies with former soldiers, powerful industrialists and the Italian bourgeoisie who enriched themselves during the war. These elites fear communism which directly threatens their wealth and rely on Mussolini's power to guarantee their prosperity in exchange of their support.

- As opposed to authoritarianism, totalitarianism is based on the popular support to an ideology. Order and security are perceived as a need to guarantee these new ideological structures and norms. Both Mussolini and Hitler use violent paramilitary organizations (Blackshirts in Italy, SA and SS in Germany) to repress anything identified as a threat to the ideology and thus to the common good: communists, Jewishes, minorities not fitting the society conception of fascism and nazism (in the case of nazism: homosexual men, disabled people...), political opponents, etc.

- Nationalist speeches also reach Yugoslavia. The Interwar period enlightens the problems that weren't discussed when creating the country: the recognition of the different identities and the political regime centered around Belgrade despite the Croatian will of a federation.

- Yugoslavia is perceived as a nation on the basis of a common ethnic group, the South Slavs. But concrete problems remain: there is no common language (Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian language is the official language, but Slovenes, Macedonians and Albanian-Kosovars have their own languages), no common currency (the Yugoslavian dinar is created in 1920) and no unifying symbols. Croatian, Serbian and Slovene intellectuals believe in a will to live together to reinforce the nation but there are no concrete measures affirming the South Slavic identity.

THE CROATIANS IN THE KINGDOM

- The strongest opposition comes from Croats, who contributed to the creation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Serbs, who are a rather homogenous population, don't understand the claims of the Croats regarding the recognition of their identity.

- **Vidovdan Constitution, 1921** The first Constitution of Yugoslavia is actually voted only in 1921, three years after the creation of the Kingdom. In 1919, a provisional representation (provisional parliament) gathers to elect a constituent assembly to establish a Constitution. The Assembly was mostly lead by a new Party, the Democratic Party. This party is a reunion of Serbian representatives and former members of Austro-Hungarian Parties, both promoting a centralized government around Belgrade. The Constitution puts an end to the Croatian institutions: the «Ban» (equivalent of the Prime Minister in the Croatian regions) and of the authority of the Sabor (Croatian parliament).

- The politician Stjepan Radić is already known for supporting a federal Yugoslavia that would preserve the Croatian institutions and ensure that Serbs would be minorities in the nations (apart from Serbia). He created the Croatian Peasant Party (CPPP, a party supporting the agrarian economy) in 1904 which becomes the main opposition Party to the Democratic Party and the People's Radical Party, both promoting a regime centralized around Belgrade.

- Radić's Party has 2 representatives at the provisional representation and 50 representatives at the constitutional assembly but they refuse to take their seats to oppose their centralized orientation (although some CPPP representatives participate to the Constitution voting). Radić also organizes protests. In 1923, he is arrested after a trip to USSR for associating with communists, whereas communist Parties are forbidden in the Kingdom. In 1925, Radić and his Party (henceforth named the Croatian Peasant Party) eventually recognize the centralized government and the dynasty to come back to the parliament.

- **Assassination of Stjepan Radić at the parliament, 1928** Radić is assassinated by Puniša Račić, a Montenegrin depute from the Radical Party supporting the Serbian interests. This assassination becomes the symbol of the opposition between Croats and Serbs in the Kingdom and will be used by the Croatian opposition a few years later.

- **1929** Vladko Maček becomes the new leader of the CPP.

- **Prorogation of the Vidovdan Constitution, 1929, September Constitution, 1931** Radić assassination is a pretext for the king Alexander I to prorogate the Vidovdan Constitution and establish a dictatorship centered around his power. The king bans nationalist parties, which targets especially Croatian parties.
- **1929** The Croatian Ante Pavelić (born in BiH while administrated by the Austro-Hungarian Empire) creates the movement of Ustashes, after receiving a training from the powerful separatist Macedonian organization Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO). It is a fascist, ultranationalist and para-military organization growing by maintaining the frustration of Croats toward Yugoslavia and a feeling of revenge toward Serbs.
- Indeed, the Croatian Party of Rights, from which Pavelić was a member, was banned. It rose nationalist tensions and lead to the creation of this para-military movement. The CPP though remains by far the most popular Croatian Party and doesn't ally with the Ustashes.
- Pavelić uses the figure and the heritage of Radić to exacerbate the Croatian nationalist feeling and the need to fight against Serbs. It also brings back and promotes the concept of a Great Croatia that would gather all the Croats.
- Aside of the IMRO, Pavelić allies with the fascist Italian government and the Hungarian separatists, which provide training venues and weapons. In the 1930's, Ustashes are known for placing bombs in trains going to Yugoslavia.
- **Assassination of the king of Yugoslavia Alexander I, 1934** The Ustashes, Macedonian separatists and Fascist Italy organize the assassination of Alexander I. The member of the IMRO Vlado Chernozemski shots and kills Alexandre I during his diplomatic visit in Marseille, France. It actually has the reverse expected effect, as it consolidates the will to live together across Yugoslavia. Alexander I last words actually were "Preserve Yugoslavia."

THE MAIN OTHER TENSIONS

MACEDONIA: THE IMRO

- After World War I, Yugoslavian Macedonian borders didn't satisfy Bulgarian separatists (and Albanian separatists). The IMRO, initially created in 1893 to fight the Ottomans, now aims to unite the Yugoslavian Macedonia to Bulgaria or to make it an independent province related to Bulgaria. Indeed, it is believed that a proper Macedonian identity emerged later.
- It gathers 36 Bulgarian armed groups, 12 local groups and 5 Albanian armed groups. It is a powerful organization, attacking Serbian territory and murdering Serbian and Yugoslavian militaries. It is also implemented worldwide and has a very strong influence over Bulgarian government.
- **Resolution of the Comintern on the Macedonian question, 1934** The Comintern publishes a resolution acknowledging a separate Macedonian nation and language. Although it doesn't have a lot of influence, this is the first time an official organization recognizes a Macedonian identity (whereas Macedonia was related to Bulgarian, Greek and Serbian identities).
- Indeed, Moscow sees the IMRO as an opportunity to extend its influence over the Balkans. Its aim is to rely on the right of self-determination to divide the Balkans and destabilize the monarchy. The monarchy is indeed considered as protecting the rights of the bourgeoisie, hand in hand with the liberal democracies, over minorities mostly coming from rural and poor social classes. The Comintern also considers Yugoslavia as the "satellite of France". It supports the project of a Balkan Federation existing since the 19th century and gathering the Balkans as one left-wing country. IMRO declines an association with the Comintern though as it fears to become dependant from Moscow.
- In the end, the IMRO prefers an alliance with the Ustashes and Fascist Italy, with whom they share direct interests in weakening the Serbian monarchy. It will lead to the assassination of the king Alexander I in 1924 by the Bulgarian member of the IMRO Vlado Chernozemski.

ALBANIANS FROM KOSOVO: THE CNDK AND THE KACHACKS

- Albanians from Kosovo weren't invited to the negotiations to create Yugoslavia. This territory is very important for Serbs, especially for its Orthodox monasteries and the battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389. The Vidodan Constitution is signed on the 15th and the 28th of June, which are very symbolic days for Serbs as they respectively are the days of:
 - (1) The battle of Kosovo Polje.
 - (2) The assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Archduke by a Serb.

- Yugoslavian policy aims to force the assimilation of Muslim and Catholic Albanians among the Serbs (Orthodoxes), by controlling the education in Albanian schools. The goal is to deprive Albanians from a proper political education that may lead them to constitute themselves as a political entity. Despite that, Albanians from Kosovo manage to get an education in their own schools, especially in the clerical and secondary school of Skopje (there also is an important minority of Albanians in Macedonia) which becomes a center of the nationalist Kosovar activities.
- Yugoslavian government also goes on with its colonization policy by giving Albanian-owned lands to Serbs.
- On the other hand, the Committee for the National Defence of Kosovo (CNDK, created in 1918) along with the Kachaks (name given by Serbs to the armed Albanians opposing the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) organize uprisings from 1919 to 1924. The most important is the uprising of Drenica in 1919.
- The CNDK has tight connections with the Comintern, which perceives the Yugoslavian assimilation policy as an attempt from the Yugoslavian bourgeoisie and the liberal democracies supporting Yugoslavia, to maintain their power. The Comintern supports the CNDK to destabilize the Yugoslavian monarchy and extend Moscow's influence.

MONTENEGRINS: THE GREENS

- **1918** The movement relies on the fact that Montenegro wasn't invited to the post-war negotiations for Yugoslavia. It is mostly composed of farmers. It opposes the Serbian centralism and mostly requests a federal Yugoslavia instead of a complete independence of Montenegro.
- In the 1930's, they ally with the League of Communists of Yugoslavia.

THE IMPOSSIBLE POLITICAL STABILITY

VIDOVDAN CONSTITUTION, 1921

- According to the negotiations of the constituent assembly, Yugoslavia is:
(1) a parliamentary regime, which means it is a democracy (the citizens vote for their representatives, the executive and legislative powers are separated).
(2) a monarchy, which means the monarch possesses the executive power which is limited by the legislative power (parliament).
- The regime is centralized around Belgrade and its king is the former King of Serbia from the Karađorđević dynasty. Concretely, all the diplomatic positions are occupied by Serbs and Serbs represent the largest ethnic group (35%). For Croats and Kosovars, Yugoslavia seems like a Greater Serbia: a South-Slavic country lead by Serbs.
- The two main Parties (Radical Party and Democratic Party) are both in favour of a centralized State, and maintain themselves with the votes of Slovenes and Muslims from BiH.
- This post-war centralization isn't a fatality. It is also widely encouraged by France, which wants a country with a strong unique identity to stand in the way of communism. In 1903, the king of Serbia Peter I had established a constitutional monarchy allowing Croats and Slovenes to establish themselves freely in Serbia. France uses its diplomatic connection with Yugoslavia (it helped Serbia during World war 1 and still protects Yugoslavia) to pressure the king.

SEPTEMBER CONSTITUTION, 1931

- **1929** Radić's assassination is a pretext for the king Alexander I to abolish the Vidovdan Constitution and dismiss the parliament. For two years, the King runs a dictatorship aiming to create the Yugoslavian unity. He names the country «Kingdom of Yugoslavia» instead of «Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes». He divides the country into 9 banovinas instead of the 33 former oblasts which aren't related to the ethnic distribution. Croats are divided among two banovinas.
- **1931** The new Constitution establishes a constitutional monarchy, but actually gives a lot of power to the king. Elections are a direct universal (male) suffrage, but the king pressures public employees to vote for him and orders the arrest of several political opponents. It also establishes a bicameral legislature, but half of the upper house is appointed by the king, and the house

can approve a law on its own (if three-fifth of favourable votes) if the king also approves it.

- The Constitution also establishes new symbols for the country: its arm (two-headed eagle on a red shield) and its official language (called «Serb-Croat-Slovene»).

CVETKOVIC-MAČEK AGREEMENT, 1939

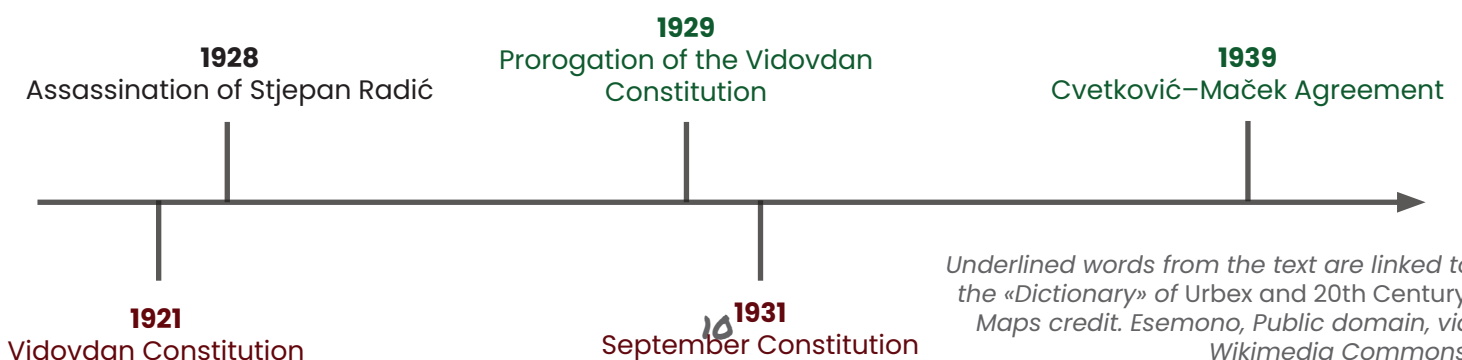
- The Nazi expansion across Europe urges the Yugoslavian prime minister Dragiša Cvetković to negotiate with the head of the CPP Vladko Maček in order to solidify Yugoslavia.
- **1939** Cvetković and Maček agree to create the Banovina of Croatia, finally allowing the Croats to have their own federal region.
- The agreement doesn't satisfy the Serbs and the Ustashas, who want to extend their territory to the whole BiH. The nationalist tensions are already too strong, and Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, with their expansionist policies, seem to be interesting allies against the Serbs...



The 33 oblasts from the Vidovdan Constitution



The 9 banovinas of the September Constitution & the Banovina of Croatia after the Cvetković-Maček Agreement



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