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JUGOSLAVIA AND THE CROAT PROBLEM

SINCE the assassination of King Alexander at Marseilles on 9 October, 1934, Yugoslavia has occupied the equivocal position of a dictatorship without a dictator: and under the triple Regency of Prince Paul and MM. Stanković and Perović there has been a somewhat obscure internal evolution, described by some as the gradual and piecemeal liquidation of the old régime in preparation for a return to "normalcy," and by other more sceptical observers as a not unskilful camouflage, and even re-entrenchment in new positions, of the political clique which has controlled Yugoslavia since the war. The present writer, deeply disillusioned after so many high hopes, had since 1929 discontinued his visits to Yugoslavia, though remaining in the closest touch with many friends in every camp: but in the autumn of 1936, in response to urgent and repeated requests from some of them, he revisited Belgrade and Zagreb and had the opportunity of discussing the situation in great detail with representatives of every current of opinion from Right to Left. He received many confidences of an intimate kind, from friends old and new: but what struck him most of all was the absolute unanimity among men of the most conflicting views, as to the extreme urgency of ending the internal deadlock, and the shortness of the time available for that purpose. In one sense this was reassuring, for it meant that the political atmosphere was more favourable to a *détente* between Serb and Croat—which is of course the point round which every problem of Yugoslav home and foreign policy has revolved ever since the Union—and that even in political and military circles hitherto averse to action the dangers of drift were at last realised. Needless to say, the foremost of these dangers is the foreign situation: for if there should be a fresh European conflagration before a solution can be reached at home, there are many—not merely Croats, but eminently responsible Serbs—who are well aware that the Yugoslav army could hardly be relied upon as an *offensive* instrument, though of course every Yugoslav would unite to defend Dalmatia against a foreign invader.

Seven months have passed since the time when so many leading personalities not only freely admitted the urgency of the problem, but agreed that action must be taken in 1937 at the very latest and that 1938 would probably be too late: yet today not an inch of progress can be reported. It is this lamentable fact which has

decided me to break the absolute silence which I had imposed upon myself for the last two years : and I am confirmed in this by the knowledge that the long stores of patience in Jugoslavia are at last wellnigh exhausted.

I

As late as 1935 there were still serious Serbs who denied the gravity of the situation and still clung to a centralist solution : by October, 1936, it was difficult to find anyone in Belgrade who did not freely admit the existence of a Croat question and the complete solidarity of almost all Croats and Serbs of the former Habsburg Monarchy under the leadership of Dr. Vlatko Maček. Even among those who a year ago opposed concessions to the Croats, many now urge a rapid settlement as the only way of ending the internal deadlock and presenting an united front towards friend and foe in Europe. Nor is any attempt made by most Serbs to conceal a recognition of the fact that the dictatorship is long since bankrupt, that this was quite clear even to the King himself before his death, and that the present régime only maintains itself by relaxing the worst features of the former régime and reiterating its assurances of further concessions. A witty and prominent Serb summed up the extent of this bankruptcy as follows : “ The King had hoped to break the passive resistance of the Croats, and the result was to make them stronger and more united than ever before : he had also hoped to strengthen the Serb element in the state, and the result has been the complete disintegration of Serbian political and party life—to an extent for which there is no parallel in the history of modern Serbia.” This is no mere individual dictum : it is profoundly true, and admitted on all sides. What is so disquieting in the present situation is that the dictatorship succeeded only too well in undermining the old established Serbian parties, but has created nothing stable in their place. A certain number of the old leaders were content to follow a subservient and opportunist policy : most of them are now dead or used up politically. Those who stood firm and went out into the wilderness have saved their honour but are seen to be weak, incapable of a really united front, and losing their hold upon the masses.

The present Premier, Dr. Stojadinović, is much the ablest seceder from the Old Radical Party, and is certainly not to be condemned out of hand ; but there is nothing as yet to show that he has anything behind him save the all-important backing of the Regency and the power to mobilise in his own favour the votes of the bureaucracy and the many others who dare not oppose the régime

of the moment. The fact is that in Serbia it has always been a tradition to vote for the Government of the day; in the heyday of the victorious Radical Party, after the change of dynasty in 1903, elections were genuinely contested: but after the war the Radicals were themselves mainly to blame for a reversion to the old method, supplemented by gross terror throughout Macedonia, and of course under the dictatorial constitution and franchise of 1931 the word "election" has lost its original meaning. Two years have now been allowed to pass without the promised franchise reform: and there are many signs that the younger generation, in its resentment and impatience at long repression and negation, is growing increasingly radical in outlook and dabbling in communistic ideas. There is not the same soil for Communism in Jugoslavia as in Bulgaria and Greece, because there is not the same cleavage between the village and the town, and because the peasant far outnumbers the urban workman, and is passionately devoted to his holding of land. But today it is no longer possible to operate among the Serb masses with nationalistic catchwords, for the simple reason that the Serb national programme has been realised to 100 (some would say to 120) per cent.: the only possible basis for a wide popular appeal is a real constructive programme of social reform and social justice, and this none of the older parties have been able to evolve. Obviously this provides the extremists with their opportunity, and it may well be that some of the "cells" whose recent discovery has been announced, derive their inspiration from some secret foreign source. But on the other hand there is an unfortunate tendency in official circles to use "Communism" as a convenient label to discredit what is in its essence a confused outburst of youthful idealism. The best proof of this is that the great majority of the students of Belgrade University are infected by radical views: and the foolish methods of repression adopted—as, for instance, the relegation of Montenegrin students, or the deporting of others to different parts of the country, where they at once spread their views further among the peasantry—have had the exactly opposite effect from that intended.

II

Very different is the situation in Croatia. Here the peasant masses have a long tradition, not of subservience to the Government of the day, as in Serbia, but on the contrary of opposition at all costs—indeed, often quite unreasoning opposition. In the decade preceding the War, despite an extremely narrow franchise, open voting and official pressure, successive Hungarian Governments and

their nominees in Zagreb never managed to crush the Croat national Opposition: and even at the worst moments the small Peasant group led by Stephen and Ante Radić held its own. After the War, under Universal Suffrage, the Peasant Party swept all before it, and no amount of official pressure or terrorism could avail to break its discipline and enthusiasm. After the Skupština murders in June, 1928, this solidarity of the "Prečani"¹ was upheld: it resisted all the efforts of the dictatorship, and at the "elections" of 1935, under the dictatorial constitution of 1931, all the terrorist methods of the Jevtić Government were still unavailing. No one in Belgrade today would challenge the view that Dr. Maček, Radić's successor as leader of the Croat-Peasant Democratic Bloc, has at least 90 per cent. of the electorate in Croatia and Dalmatia solidly behind him, and the view generally held in Zagreb is that 95 per cent. would not be an exaggeration: while there is good reason to believe that the great majority of the Voivodina population is also with him. In Croatia national demands still take precedence over social: for, from the purely political point of view, the Croats have actually lost by the changes of 1918 and look to the recovery of their lost autonomy, in some form or other, as the best means of solving their most burning problems. For the present Dr. Maček is in full control of the movement (for it is a movement rather than a party) and can hold in check the extremists both of the Left and of the Right. But if a settlement of the Croat problem is delayed much longer, or if public opinion becomes finally convinced that the authorities in Belgrade are merely playing with Maček and are not ready for a real settlement, then political chaos might easily result, and "Belgrade" might suddenly find itself forced to deal with entirely new leaders, men whose names are today virtually unknown, and who would, both from inclination and necessity, be far more radical and unreasonable in their aims and demands. I was both impressed and alarmed to find how many men of high position, with a stake in the country, shared this grave view.

III

The problem which faces Jugoslavia is one of a triple nature—constitutional, national and economic—and it is not the least blunder of the dictatorship that the three have become inextricably mingled

¹ The name applied, from the angle of Belgrade, to "those from the other side," from beyond the rivers Save and Danube, in other words, Croats and Serbs of the former Habsburg Monarchy (first Croatia-Slavonia, but also Dalmatia, Banat, Bačka and Bosnia-Hercegovina).

and can no longer be solved separately. The problem may be summed up as follows :—

(1) To transform a dangerously over-centralised State into a free federation, while preserving unity in all the most essential services of the State, and thereby to restore constitutional liberties—i.e. liberty of speech, association, press and elections, and yet to avoid a return to a mass of small parties with fissiparous tendencies.

(2) To reconcile the Croats in particular, and all the Prečani, by assuring them a minimum of autonomy, equality of status with the Serbs of Serbia, and equal opportunities of advancement in the state service.

(3) To restore economic prosperity by raising prices and purchasing power, to complete land reform on equitable lines (for the minorities no less than for the Jugoslavs themselves), and to evolve a programme of social reform (health, housing, etc.) sufficiently comprehensive to divert attention from nationalistic grievances and take the sting out of Communist theory.

Either a constructive solution of this triple problem must be boldly faced, or the régime must resign itself to governing by those old methods of "Fortwursteln"—jogging along and hoping that something might turn up—which ruined the old Austrian Empire, or at worst by reversion to open dictatorial and totalitarian principles. There is every ground for believing that the present Government genuinely desires a *détente*, but that inside it there is a strong current which shrinks from the difficulties of a full solution and would prefer half measures and homeopathic treatment. In particular, one argument is often put forward—that it is impossible to make big constitutional changes during the young King's minority, and that it is the duty of the Regency to uphold the main principles of the existing constitution until Peter II reaches the age of 18 in 1941 and can himself deal with the situation. For many reasons this argument will not bear close analysis. In the first place, both the national and constitutional aspect of the problem is far too over-ripe to permit of its being kept on ice for another five years: and it is essential to reach a solution before the foreign situation comes to a head, and while at home the few remaining political leaders still enjoy the necessary prestige. Above all, it is contrary to the very elements of common sense to expect from a youth of 18, however carefully brought up, the capacity to solve such problems, already formidable enough but still further envenomed by years of neglect. It is simply inviting him to imitate the fatal example of King Alexander Obrenović, who, faced as a minor with a situation too

difficult for him (but simplicity itself compared with that of Jugoslavia today !) acquired arbitrary habits and tampered with successive constitutions, until he made himself altogether impossible. It is on the contrary the bounden duty of the responsible Jugoslav statesmen of today to save their future ruler from such temptations by presenting him, on his real accession, with a loyal and consolidated kingdom, so that he may be free to fulfil his true function as the link binding together so many disparate elements.

IV

What, then, is a possible basis of settlement? It may at once be said that Dr. Maček does not accept (and if he accepted, could not persuade either Croat opinion or the Croat masses to accept) the constitution of 1931 as a basis : this is not surprising in view of its drastic restrictions upon the press, association and assembly, its franchise provisions (open ballot, complete prohibition of parties on a regional, racial or religious basis, etc.), the Crown's control of Senate nominations, and unrestricted right of appointment and dismissal of ministers, bans, army officers and high officials, and other scarcely less objectionable features.²

The plain fact is that no one who stands upon a programme either of democracy or of representation can accept this constitution as a basis for the future : the only question is how to secure its replacement. And here a compromise should not prove impossible between the two rival points of view. The Regency and the Government cannot be expected to abolish or suspend the constitution until a satisfactory substitute has been agreed upon, and until there is a reasonable certitude of its acceptance by the future constituent Assembly. The suggestion put forward by many Croats, that a Constituent should be convoked, and that it should be left to hammer out the necessary laws, is obviously impracticable, and might easily lead to anarchical conditions. If on the other hand an agreement could be reached between M. Stojadinović, as representing official Serbia, MM. Korošec and Spaho as representing the majority in Slovenia and Bosnia respectively, and M. Maček as representing the former Triune Kingdom (Croatia-Slavonia-Dalmatia) and the Voivodina, and if this also could be counter-signed by the leaders of the three Serbian Opposition groups (Radical, Democrat, and Agrarian), it could at once be referred to a committee

² For full details see my articles "The Jugoslav Dictatorship" in *International Affairs*, January, 1932, and "The Background of the Jugoslav Dictatorship" in *The Slavonic Review*, December, 1931.

of non-party constitutional experts, who would sit urgently and embody its results in a new draft constitution. Elections could thus be safely held, for all the party chiefs would be bound by their signatures, and the deputies elected on their respective lists would equally be bound, with the result that the draft would pass through the Constituent without undue delays, and then, *and only then*, would the existing constitution lose its validity.

The main lines of settlement may be briefly indicated. The dynastic question is no longer in dispute, Maček having abandoned the old demand which prejudiced so many Serbs against his predecessor Radić—namely, that the status of the Karagjorgjević dynasty should be the first point of discussion in a Constituent Assembly. The first essential Croat demand is the acceptance of the Federal principle, and this has already been conceded in theory in all the more recent discussions between the Croat leader and the delegates of the various Serb parties. It is very largely a matter of interpretation and degree. It involves (a) the definition of the "Common or Joint Affairs" to be reserved to a central Yugoslav Parliament in Belgrade, (b) the acceptance of a certain number of self-governing federal units, (c) the division of the Budget into two—common and provincial—and the establishment of a scale or proportion between the two. (Here it would be possible to follow the precedent of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 and the Hungaro-Croatian Compromise or Nagoda of 1868—e.g. Law XXX (1868) par. 12 and XL (1889) par. 1.)

It is generally agreed that Common Affairs would consist of (1) Foreign Affairs, diplomatic and consular service, (2) Army and Navy, (3) Finance, Post Office, Radio, Customs, legal codes and commercial legislation, weights and measures, etc. In order to avoid disputes as to competence, it might be laid down in the new constitution that all matters not expressly defined as belonging to the sphere of the local assemblies should remain, until otherwise determined, within the sphere of the central Parliament.

The crucial point of the settlement is the acceptance of the federal principle. Jugoslavia consists of eight very distinct units: (1) Serbia, (2) Montenegro, (3) Macedonia, (4) Croatia-Slavonia, (5) Dalmatia, (6) Bosnia-Herzegovina, (7) Voivodina, (8) Slovenia. In theory there is nothing against eight federal states: but in practice the Serbs insist upon Montenegro and Macedonia remaining united with Serbia and contend that their local problems can best be solved by special autonomous provisions, but not by laying renewed stress upon their separate character. To this the Croats reluctantly

consent, recognising that the south belongs to the Serbian sphere, but for that very reason they contend that the former Austro-Hungarian territories belong to *their* sphere—with the exception of Slovenia, which both Serb and Croat are agreed to leave to its own development. It is also generally agreed that Dalmatia should go with Croatia-Slavonia, this being undoubtedly the wish of both provinces. The real point of discord relates to the Voivodina (Banat, Bačka, Baranja—the districts formerly forming part of Southern Hungary to the north of the Danube and Drave rivers). The Serb view is that it is in the main Serb by race and should therefore form part of the Serbian unit: the Croat view on the other hand is no longer that it should form part of the Croatian unit, but a separate unit of its own, and this is based on a well-founded belief that the great majority of the population of the Voivodina—Serbs no less than Croats, Slovaks, Ruthenes, Germans and Magyars—desires self government instead of Belgrade centralism (which has proved not only highly arbitrary and inefficient, but is keenly resented as the financial and economic exploitation of the richest districts of the new Kingdom in the interests of the more backward). The attitude of the Serbian Opposition towards this question is an unhappy illustration of their narrowness of outlook. For while Maček is perfectly ready to abide by the decision of the Voivodina itself (whether at an election, conducted under guarantees, or through a plebiscite), the representatives of the three democratic parties of Serbia fight shy of applying the democratic principle of “self-determination,” thus putting themselves into an altogether untenable position. It is quite impossible for Dr. Maček to yield on this point, not merely as a matter of principle, but because he is pledged up to the hilt to his Serb allies inside the Peasant-Democratic Bloc, and because their betrayal would break the solidarity of his own front in Croatia-Slavonia, Dalmatia and Bosnia, by automatically detaching about 25 per cent. of his adherents. The keenness of feeling in the Voivodina itself may be illustrated by the remark of a prominent Serb, once a centralist, but converted to autonomous views—“The Serbs of Serbia have forced us into opposition by their exploitation and have betrayed our cause: and now, if Zagreb should also betray us “ [he meant Maček and his movement],” there would be no choice for us but to turn back to Budapest.” But Zagreb will not betray him.

There are two further points of great interest in this connection. One reason why a section of Belgrade opinion is reluctant to concede autonomy to the Voivodina is the fear lest in the new province the

Jugoslav element might be in an actual minority towards the other races. An answer to this is to be found in the close co-operation between Serb autonomists—men whose loyalty to the Yugoslav creed has never been questioned—and both the Germans and the Magyars of the Bačka and Banat. This co-operation dates from the pre-war period, when German, Serb, Roumanian and Slovak worked in closest harmony in the Hungarian Parliament against the Chauvinist and Magyarising tendencies of those days.³ Moreover, a practical corrective is offered to any danger of racial trouble by the proposal that Syrmia and perhaps two of the most easterly districts of Slavonic should be detached from Croatia-Slavonia and added to the Voivodina unit, to which they in any case gravitate—thereby augmenting the Yugoslav population by about 150,000 in the proposed new unit. For this there are various precedents in the experiment of Voivodina autonomy from 1848 to 1859 (which failed for quite other reasons) and in the history of the Serbian Patriarchate under Hungarian rule. But naturally enough Maček is not prepared to make these concessions merely in order to augment still further the Serbian unit, but only as a contribution to the final solution of the Serbo-Croat dispute, and, he also contends, towards appeasement in the extremely important question of minorities.⁴

There are many delicate technical questions still outstanding. It would above all be necessary to define the respective competence of the central and local bodies and to devise constitutional guarantees for the new system being put in force and not tampered with. But all this, given mutual good will, would seem to depend on skilful drafting by constitutional experts: and this view is confirmed by the success with which an informal committee of independent experts has in recent months hammered out such details in an as yet confidential memorandum. In repeated conversations with Dr. Maček I gathered that he was assailed by the same doubts as those which assailed Francis Deák in concluding the Compromise of 1867 with Francis Joseph. Deák's main concern was to prevent any repetition of unconstitutional experiments in Hungary, such as those in which the Habsburgs had for generations past indulged:

³ I personally first met one of the leading Serb autonomists of today as a young man, nearly 30 years ago, working closely with Dr. Paul Blaho and other Slovak political leaders.

⁴ It may be assumed that the town of Zemun and the aviation centre beside it would in any case be detached from Syrmia and be included in the administration of Greater Belgrade, whose special status would remain under the new constitution.

and therefore, while careful to link up the new document at every point with earlier legislation, he aimed at making the text as definite as possible and fought shy of any facilities for its revision. It is of vital importance that this aspect of the problem should be considered most carefully; for in my opinion it was the lack of any legal machinery for constitutional revision and amendment that was one of the main causes of the failure of the Dual System and the consequent downfall of Austria-Hungary. It seems clear—and this was confirmed to me by high legal authorities—that it would be advisable to fortify the new constitution by the creation of a supreme constitutional court, composed of a few non-party irremovable judges and modelled on the “*Verwaltungsgerichtshof*” of pre-war Austria and on the Supreme Court of the U.S.A., to which doubtful constitutional points could be referred and from whose interpretations and verdicts there would be no appeal.

V

It would lead too far to discuss the bearings of this whole question upon foreign policy. There are some who reproach the Stojadinović Government for an all too opportunist attitude and suspect it of promoting a settlement, first with Bulgaria, and then with Italy, not merely for its own sake, but with a view to isolating the Croats and compelling them to accept a much lower price than that for which they have hitherto held out. This is an unfair and superficial verdict: for the restoration of good relations with Bulgaria was an obvious interest of the state as a whole, and the best proof that it was not inimical to the maintenance of the Little and Balkan Ententes is the whole-hearted satisfaction of the Czechs, who have always desired a Jugoslav-Bulgarian rapprochement and who would at the same time be most affected by any weakening of the Double Entente. In the same way no reasonable person can blame Jugoslavia for accepting the proffered hand of Italy, while not taking at their face value the hollow assurances of Fascist diplomacy and carefully noting its ulterior motives and its constant efforts to divide rather than unite the Danubian states. That the agreement with Italy has induced the latter to modify the worst of its repressive measures towards the unhappy Jugoslavs of Venezia Giulia, and to drop, at any rate for the present, the Croat terrorists to whom she had for years extended a helping hand (and a hand by no means empty!), are in themselves sufficient reasons for Belgrade to respond. An advantageous commercial accord between the two countries provided an additional incentive, and the impartial

observer will note that Jugoslavia has committed herself to nothing dishonourable, and to nothing that conflicts with treaty obligations or existing friendships. We can therefore only wish that her leaders may now show the same active and constructive statemanship in grappling with the very urgent internal problem as they have shown in foreign policy. Dr. Stojadinović in particular has an unique opportunity of going down to history as the man who made Jugoslav Unity a reality and the position of the dynasty finally secure.

The present article makes no pretence to indicate, even in outline, all the problems which await settlement between Belgrade and Zagreb : this no foreigner is fully competent to attempt. It follows the more modest aim of indicating, in a free press, the general nature of a problem whose discussion is still burked at home in Jugoslavia by a timorous and unenlightened censorship. That a solution should be reached is not merely the heartfelt wish of all Jugoslavia's foreign friends, and they are many : it is also an European interest, and not least of all a British interest, that there should be peace and consolidation on the eastern shores of the Adriatic.

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