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## Introduction

### *Belgrade, Serbia, and the First Yugoslavia: Connections and Contradictions*

*John R. Lampe*

Professor Emeritus, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland

*jrlampe@umd.edu*

### Abstract

Read back from the 1990s, the scenario of a Greater Serbian agenda based in Belgrade and using Yugoslavia as a means to that end continues to tempt Western scholarship. Serbian exceptionalism thereby doomed both Yugoslavias. This special issue of *East Central Europe* addresses connections between Belgrade, Serbia, and Yugoslavia promoting contradictions that belie this simple scenario. Focusing on the first Yugoslavia, these six articles by younger Belgrade historians critically examine a series of disjunctures between the capital city and the rest of Serbia as well as Yugoslavia that undercut the neglected pre-1914 promise of Belgrade's Yugoslavism. First came the failure of the city's political and intellectual elite the First World War was ending to persevere with that promise. Most could not separate themselves from a conservative rather than nationalist reliance on the Serbian-led ministries in Belgrade to deal with the problems of governing a new state that now included many non-Serbs. From Serbian political divisions and a growing parliamentary paralysis to the Belgrade ministries' failure to support the Serb colonists in Kosovo, problems mounted. They opened the way for King Aleksandar's dictatorship in 1929, with initial Serbian support. But as the royal regime imposed an integral Yugoslavism on what had been the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes and punished disloyalty to the Crown in particular Serbs were punished as well as non-Serbs. Their locally organized associations were also placed under royal authority, whose ministries were however no more successful in uniform administration than their predecessors. At the same time, however, Belgrade's growing connections to European popular culture skipped over the rest of the country, Serbia included, to establish a distinctive urban identity. After the Second World War, what was now a Western identity would grow and spread from Belgrade after the Tito-Stalin split, despite reservations and resistance from the Communist regime. This cultural connection now promoted the wider Yugoslav integration that was missing in the interwar period. It still failed, as amply demonstrated in Western and Serbian scholarship, to overcome the political contradictions that burdened both Yugoslavias.

## Keywords

Western scholarship – bordered political space – Serbian exceptionalism – centralism – federalism – European popular culture

Anglo-American scholarship has responded to the wars of Yugoslavia's dissolution in the 1990s primarily by turning away from the two single states of the interwar and postwar decades. Since then, it has focused on the longer history of the now independent post-1945 republics and the contestation over Kosovo. Pre-1914 patterns in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Kosovo have on balance received sympathetic separate attention. Their prior experience in the Habsburg or Ottoman empires is viewed more favorably, while we are shown their treatment in the first Yugoslavia as confounding them from the start. Serbia, on the other hand, has faced criticism for its pre-1914 ambitions and for a dominant role in the shortcomings of the two Yugoslavias for non-Serbs. Even wider Western scholarship has not resisted the temptation of a moral narrative that reads history back from the conflicts and abuses of the 1990s. Witness the major new study of the origins of the First World War by Christopher Clark. His Introduction warns that "Since Srebrenica and the siege of Sarajevo, it has become harder to think of Serbia as the mere object or victim of great power politics and easier to conceive of Serbian nationalism as an historical force in its own right. From the perspective of today's European Union we are inclined to look more sympathetically...than we used to on the vanished imperial patchwork of Habsburg Austria-Hungary" (2012: xxviii).

Like such retrospective determinism applied to Serbian responsibility for the 1914 war, the history and post-1945 legacy of the first Yugoslavia has found itself similarly confined by collapse of the second Yugoslavia. Only ethnic divisions typically aggravated by Serbian hegemony have received close attention. I explored the recent shift in British scholarship to scrutiny of Serbia in a Review Essay simply entitled "Yugoslavia Vanishes" (Lampe, 2011). Three of the four volumes reviewed treat this period as essentially defined by these divisions. Only Djokić (2007) explores the interwar search for resolving the conflict between Serbian and Croatian interests. Drapac (2010) and Hoare (2007) concentrate on abuses of non-Serbs by the Belgrade government or local Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia, respectively, while Judah (2009) largely ignores the interwar period for the pre-1914 Serbian ambitions that fed subsequent division and Yugoslavia's dissolution in the 1990s. In American scholarship, these interwar years receive only two brief chapters in the longest recent survey of the full post-1918 century (Ramet, 2006). The devotes over half of its pages instead to the Second World

War, when Yugoslavia ceased to exist, and to the late-1980s rise of Slobodan Milošević in Serbia and after 1991 to his rump state with Montenegro still designated as “Yugoslavia”—hence the choice for its main title, *The Three Yugoslavias*. Over 200 pages detail the genuinely greater responsibility of this “Third Yugoslavia” in the warfare of the 1990s, serving to discredit the first two. They are guilty by association with claims for a Greater Serbia under the Milošević regime and before then by the Chetniks under Draža Mihailović during the Second World War. Enter the infamous map for Serbian claims, drafted to include all Bosnian and Croatian territory by Mihailović’s Bosnian Serb advisor, Stevan Moljević. For the first Yugoslavia, its own legitimacy is dismissed with the projection of an initial alliance between the Radicals and the Democrats, the two major Serb parties, to approve the admittedly centralist constitution of 1921 into the rest of the decade. Ignored in the emphasis on “the question of Croatia” (Ramet 2006: 57–65) are the subsequent divisions among a number of Serbian parties that weakened their position in the parliamentary elections and coalition governments of the 1920s, opening the way for main Croatian party in particular. Its leaders were free to express discontent with the administrative abuses of the Belgrade ministries. These discontents and the mixture of discrimination and disadvantage behind them for non-Serbs should not be ignored. Nor are they ignored in recent Serbian scholarship. Some of it directly challenges the narrative of victimization surviving from the unscholarly revisionism published in Belgrade during the 1990s (see Stojanović 2009).

Yet Serbia’s struggles over own accommodation within a single Yugoslavia and Belgrade’s special position as a dual capital do not deserve to be ignored either. The recent Western interest in “transnational studies” points the way to acknowledging the complexity of cultural and social interrelations between territories viewed only as the “bordered political space” of the nineteenth-century nation-state.<sup>1</sup> Such relations were doubly challenging when Serbia, surely a previously established space, was included in another state’s borders, while its capital city was opening up to transnational European and American connections. Western and Serbian scholarship have recently paid attention to the mix of imported currents at work in Belgrade’s cultural history.<sup>2</sup>

1 On the recent interest in transnational history, see Clavin 2005: 421–439. A detailed argument against national narratives viewing modern European states only as “bordered political space” appears in Maier 2000: 807–831.

2 Norris (2009) provides an overview across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while Gašić (2005) explores interwar British and German influence and (Jovanović 2006) the role of the Russian emigres.

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Yet both Belgrade and Serbia are too often seen as working in tandem to use Yugoslavia as a vehicle for narrow, nationalist domination. The American sociologist Veljko Vujačić (2004) has posed an alternative narrative to the widespread argument that both Yugoslavias, but particularly the first, are best understood as vehicles for pursuing a Greater Serbia. His Serbian exceptionalism is instead a recent phenomenon. Only the first of its five “pillars,” the truly complex relationship between Serbia and Yugoslavia, reaches back before the Second World War. The next two pillars date from the 1970s, one from the “unintended consequences” for Serbia in Yugoslavia’s virtually confederal constitution of 1974, its capital downgraded as a center of political power. Another pillar rose with the subsequent narratives of Serbian victimization, powerful and widely read fiction from various writers based in Belgrade, led by the late Dobrica Ćosić. Then came a fourth pillar, Slobodan Milošević’s demagogic success in appealing both to Yugoslav Communist and Serbian populist constituencies by the late 1980s. The warfare of the 1990s added a final pillar. Refugees streaming into Serbia and Belgrade from Croatia and Bosnia and finally Kosovo in the 1990s revived memories of Serb abuses suffered there during the Second World War.

In the articles that follow, a new generation of Serbian scholars examines Belgrade’s longer-standing relationship with the Yugoslav state and idea, as well as with Serbia, from before the First World War through the interwar period. Rather than any linear progression under a single Serbian agenda, we see a set of changing relations complicated by the magnetic attraction of European or American popular culture. The first two articles consider the connections and contradictions in Belgrade between Serbian political interest and a larger, multiethnic Yugoslavia. Focusing on the last pre-1914 decades, Dubravka Stojanović tracks the spread in Belgrade of public enthusiasm not for a Greater Serbia simply absorbing Bosnia but for a multiethnic Yugoslavia including Croats and Slovenes. Contrary to the long-standing Western consensus, this ill-defined, inclusive preference was shared if not openly expressed by ruling Radical party leaders until after Serbia’s 1912 victory in the First Balkan War. Turning to the start and the end of the interwar period, Ranka Gašić finds this preference confounded for a Serbian political and intellectual elite abruptly facing the challenges of actually administering this much enlarged, multi-ethnic territory surrounded by hostile neighbors. For this new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes as a single state, they were reluctant to abandon the pre-1914 administrative framework of centralized ministries ruling from Belgrade. And they were suspicious of Croatian proposals for federal decentralization. But as best represented by Serbia’s leading political intellectual, Slobodan Jovanović, these were doubts based on the legal standing of Croatian

and Slovene representatives and the political perils of a two- or three-state federation based on historical borders as set within Austria-Hungary.

Ethnic claims would not dominate the agenda of the Belgrade political and intellectual elite until the last years before the Second World War. Their own political divisions in the three parliamentary elections and dozen coalition governments of the 1920s blunted the Serbian advantage in the Belgrade ministries. Their disarray joined with Croatian resistance to open the way for King Aleksandar's royal dictatorship (1929–34). Still, Serbian political negotiations with their Croatian counterparts continued through the 1920s and into the royal dictatorship, as did their struggles with the King's political pressures.<sup>3</sup>

The next three articles turn directly to the authoritarian, repressive features of the Belgrade state ministries that culminated in King Aleksandar's royal dictatorship of the early 1930s. Dejan Zec details the authoritarian ambitions of the single Yugoslav Sokol, or gymnastic society, with which Aleksandar sought to replace the various rival organizations, Croatia's in particular. We see that this contest was already underway in the 1920s, but the King used the huge all-Sokol assembly in Belgrade in 1930 to ratify its transformation into a state agency, now ruled by royal rather than local Serb authority. Ivana Dobrivojević explores how pressures from this arbitrary regime and its expanded police powers restricted everyday life in Serbia, if less in Belgrade and more in the interior. She readily acknowledges their more repressive role in non-Serb regions but also notes that the centralized coordination of the ministries and agencies needed to turn expanded police powers into a police state failed to occur. Local authorities were left to commit the worst abuses of authority, Serbia included. Vladan Jovanović addresses a similar mismatch between several Belgrade ministries and their local representatives in Kosovo and Macedonia. Beyond the familiar forced dispossession of Albanian and Turkish landholders, we also see the flawed, failed efforts of the Belgrade ministries and Serbia's major parties to support the Serb colonists brought in from elsewhere in the new Yugoslav state to replace the departed non-Serbs. Their fate was left to the ministries' corrupt local appointees, and in any case the Albanian ethnic majority remained. Enough discouraged colonists had actually returned home by the 1930s to help revive the proposal for Albanian expulsion spelled out, but never carried out, according to the notorious 1937 memorandum of Vasa Čubrilović.

The last article considers Belgrade's popular culture across the entire interwar period. Jovana Babović examines the interwar period and the city's ensuing

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3 See Djokić 2007 on the repeated Serbian-Croatian negotiations and Nielsen 2014, 41–76 on royal pressures on Serbian political leaders that began in the 1920s.

transnational linkages. Films, popular music, dance, and their new venues and press coverage connected Belgrade's growing population with the European mainstream, but not with the rest of Yugoslavia or even with the rest of Serbia. As with interwar Sofia, this process went relentlessly ahead in the face of official or conservative nationalist opposition.<sup>4</sup> But unlike Sofia's post-1945 Communist regime, Tito's Yugoslavia allowed Hollywood films to compete the obligatory Soviet imports even before the break with the Soviet Union in 1948. And from the 1950s forward the interwar preference for Western popular culture returned in full force. More commercially competitive than before the war, its music and media outlets had begun by the 1980s to play to the flood of rural migrants that had swelled the city's population. Fed by competitive Western-style vulgarization as well as Serbian nationalism, folk music was adopted to reverse the long-standing flow of cultural influence from Belgrade to the provincial interior.<sup>5</sup> The contradiction pitting a European or a Yugoslav Belgrade against "the real Serbia" was there for the rising regime of Slobodan Milošević to exploit. The contradiction between Belgrade and the rest of Serbia has remained into the present.

In sum, these six articles suggest a set of connections between Belgrade, Serbia, and the first Yugoslavia that were often more contradictory than cohesive. The simple scenario of Belgrade as the center of an agenda for a Greater Serbia to be called Yugoslavia does not emerge here. Instead we see the pre-1914 Serbian capital as center of popular and even official interest in a Yugoslav state that would include Croats and Slovenes on a vague but equal footing. Then, confronted with the reality of a single state after 1918, much of the Serbian political and intellectual elite fell back on the French pattern of ministerial authority from the capital city to deal with a divided political spectrum and a fractious parliament. Despite the challenges of parliamentary government and the fear of a further divided federation, elite leaders like Slobodan Jovanović did not turn to a Serbian nationalist agenda until the eve of the Second World War.

Yet by the 1920s there was growing concern in Belgrade over the gap in governance left not only by contentious political parties but by also by the Serbian-led and staffed ministries in Belgrade, their disconnection and dysfunction illustrated by their treatment of Serb colonists in Kosovo. It was in this context

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4 On Sofia's experience with European popular culture and resistance from the region's only temperance movement, see Neuberger 2013: 78–107.

5 Ramet 1996, 65–116. For a summary in English on the immediate postwar period, see Markovic 1996, 515–524. Janjetović 2011 provides the most recent and comprehensive survey.

that a majority of the Serbian political elite accepted Aleksandar's royal dictatorship. Yet its cultural promotion of a single Yugoslav identity used the all-Sokol youth rally in Belgrade in 1930 primarily to insist on the King's central role. So did the penalties for disloyalty, punishing royal disrespect in particular. The dictatorship's police and censorship powers, notoriously expanded and arbitrary, were not consolidated within the Belgrade ministries or modernized with centralized training. Much of the enforcement was left to still more arbitrary local authorities. It was they who committed the worst abuses in Serbia, albeit on a smaller scale than in Croatia. And then King Aleksandar was gone, leaving a royal void that a Serbian-led unity party failed to fill.

Against this unpromising political background, the King's effort to turn Serbs as well as Croats and Slovenes into Yugoslavs also ran into Belgrade's growing connection to European popular culture. Its films and fashions, music and dances jumped over Serbia and the rest of the interwar Kingdom, ignoring connections to either of them. The same, now Western attraction confronted the new Communist regime after the Second World War. Belgrade's new younger population took the lead in forcing its acceptance by the 1960s, just as the royal dictatorship's cultural controls had been pushed aside in the 1930s. This postwar generation also made the broader cultural connection to Yugoslavia that had been missing before the war. Economic connections also tied the second Yugoslavia better together than the first. But the supranational Communist formula for holding the state together politically had no more success than did the royal enterprise of the interwar years, even prior to the King's assassination in 1934.

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