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YUGOSLAVIA IMAGINED. WOMEN AND THE IDEOLOGY OF YUGOSLAVISM (1918-1939)

“Kod mene gori u furuni, jutros je bilo mraza, voće je propalo sasvim, također neki vinogradi, žito stoji mišu do kolena. Ljudi proriču gladnu godinu. U srećnom znaku smo se ujedinili.”

“The fire is burning in my stove, there was a frost this morning, the fruits have spoiled altogether, some vineyards as well, and the wheat is not higher than the mouse’s knee. People are foretelling a hungry year. We have been unified under a fortunate sign, indeed.”¹

Isidora Sekulić (1877–1958), the most prolific Serbian woman writer and according to contemporaries “the greatest Serbian woman after the Empress Milica”, wrote this depressing note to a friend from a small spa resort in the Hrvatsko Zagorje in 1919. In the year following unification, the young State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs was showing its weaknesses, which were, indeed, more than mere infantile disorders. The unification, some thought, marked the beginning of Yugoslavia’s history, while others understood the unification as its culmination. The political debates and tensions came to a head in 1928, when the leader of the Croatian opposition, Stjepan Radić, was shot together with several other deputies during a session of the National Assembly in Belgrade. The proclamation of King Aleksandar’s dictatorship in January 1929 clearly marked a point at which Yugoslav politics turned to the practices that strongly resembled fascist dictatorships in the region. The Parliament and political parties were abolished, and a new constitution proclaimed. It specified the rule of King Aleksandar as not needing any intermediaries “between Him and His people”. The ruthless and violent methods introduced by the Government were intended to counteract anything liable to jeopardize the “national oneness” of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes that the King had proclaimed.

Women played a role in the pre-war origins and interwar development of Yugoslav politics in a number of ways that are investigated in this essay.

¹ A letter to Svetislav B. Cvijanović, 18 May 1919, quoted in: ISIDORA SEKULIĆ, *Moj krug kredom* (My Chalk Circle), ed. by RADOVAN POPOVIĆ, Belgrade 1984, p. 54.

Women – mainly middle-class educated women – had participated both in the disparate movements of national revival in the nineteenth century, and in campaigns asserting their claims to greater equality in politics and society. For some, national loyalties meshed easily with feminist concerns; for others, national concerns took precedence.

Rival visions of South Slavic Union before the First World War

The analysis of Yugoslavism as a national ideology requires a discussion of two main concepts of South Slavic union that have occupied the minds and hearts of South Slav ideologues during the last two centuries. The first arose out of the Illyrianist phase of the Croat national revival in the 1830s and 1840s, which advanced the idea of South Slavic unity and reciprocity. This ideology adhered to the political traditions of the Kingdom of Croatia, its constitution, institutions, and the Croat state right, and advocated the union of the other South Slavic nations with Croatia on the principle of their mutual reciprocity and federalism, though still within the Habsburg framework. The other concept, considered further below, was that of integral Yugoslavism: the notion that Serbs, Croats and Slovenes comprised a single Yugoslav nation.

The Illyrianist movement emerged primarily as a pragmatic reaction to the real and immediate threat of Magyarization and Germanization that confronted Croats. It was primarily a cultural movement, and was for the most part grounded in literary romanticism. Although it was not a mass movement, and the classes that were politicized by it were mostly liberal aristocrats and Croatian students of foreign universities, it nevertheless played an important role in Croatian political life throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.²

Women of noble and upper-middle-class background joined the movement and added to it a certain dimension of social life that was until then unknown. In the words of one of the Illyrianist activists:

“The nature and the character of our conscious women changed instantly, and they who by that time were almost entirely Germanized, started to learn and speak Croatian, adopted the national costumes, read the Croatian journals and books, sang Croatian songs in public as well as at home, and some of them even tried to enrich Croatian literature.”³

² On the Illyrianist movement see: JAROSLAV ŠIDAK, *Studije iz hrvatske povijesti XIX stoljeća* (Studies on 19th century Croatian History), Zagreb 1973.

³ IVAN KUKULJEVIĆ SAKCINSKI, *Glasoviti Hrvati prošlih vjekova* (Famous Croats of the Past Centuries), Zagreb 1886, p. 199.

Like their eighteenth-century French counterparts, Croatian women active in the Illyrianist movement introduced to Croatian society an important institution, namely the *salon*, which provided people active in the national movement with a place to meet and communicate. Josipa Vancas, who was dubbed “the Little Mother of Illyria” because of her contributions as an organizer and benefactor, provided in her salon not only food and drinks for needy Illyrianists, but also a place of informal gathering. People met there, amused themselves with singing songs or reading literary works in Croatian, discussing politics and socializing informally. This was a place where young people became acquainted, the setting in which Illyrianist mothers introduced their daughters to society, and where informal encounters led eventually to marriage. Other prominent Illyrianists were Sidonia Rubido, née Countess Erdödy, a singer and a sponsor of many artists and musicians, and Dragojla Jarnević, the first professional woman writer. Jarnević was concerned that women’s interest in the Illyrianist cause did not extend beyond attending parties. In her letters she complained about the women who were unwilling to read Croatian newspapers and literature. Jarnević was particularly concerned with the reluctance of women to take part in patriotic endeavours or to assume public roles. She was furious at women who claimed that only men were fit to work for the public good, and that women who take part in public life were no more than market women. According to Jarnević those women lacked the basic patriotic spirit and pride – and were in most cases unfit to care for their children properly.⁴

Out of the Illyrianist tradition emerged in the following decades other women writers like Jagoda Truhelka (1864-1957) and Ivana Brlić Mažuranić (1874-1938) who mostly wrote fairy tales for children. A writer and in all likelihood the best political journalist in Croatia of her time, Marija Jurić Zagorka (1873-1957), declined an offer to become a head of the press bureau for the Budapest Parliament only to come back to Zagreb, and work for the prestigious liberal daily *Obzor* (The Horizon). Her historical novels written in daily installments were meant to entice Croatian women and youth into reading Croatian. Zagorka was one of the first suffragists in Croatia, openly demanding and agitating for women’s right to vote.⁵

Meanwhile, an alternative concept of South Slavic union was emerging. On the eve of the First World War, liberal ideas of Croat national revival were rejected by the Nationalist Youth, a group of young urban intellectuals

⁴ Nacionalna i sveučilišna knjižnica (NSB; The National and University Library), Trezor R 6286, Correspondence of Dragojla Jarnević, (1863-1873).

⁵ After decades of neglect she has finally earned some respect and attention from literary critics: STANKO LASIĆ, Marija Jurić Zagorka. Uvod u biografiju (Introduction to a biography), Zagreb 1987.

who, in a complete break with Croat state traditions, articulated the idea of integral Yugoslavism. The notion of *narodno jedinstvo* (national oneness) specified that the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, regardless of their histories and political traditions, comprised a single Yugoslav nation. Especially for the Croat component of the Yugoslav unitarists, this represented a radical breach with political traditions and a definite anti-historicism. What had been until that time considered a valuable and legally recognized weapon to use in political struggle against Vienna or Budapest, was discarded in favour of a new ideological construct, an “imagined community” of Yugoslav spirit. Although the Nationalist Youth operated in the South Slav areas under Habsburg rule, i.e. Croatia-Slavonia, Dalmatia, the Slovene lands and Bosnia and Herzegovina, they collaborated with their associates in the Kingdom of Serbia. If anyone can be credited with the invention of Yugoslavia, then it was this wild and unkempt generation of the Nationalist Youth. “We will take a blank piece of paper, and on that paper we’ll write our history!” was their common cry. The proponents of Yugoslav integral nationalism expounded the ideas of a future homogeneous Yugoslav nation, which was grounded in what they supposed to be a unique Yugoslav culture. To achieve this, the particular cultures and histories of the existing South Slavic nations, Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, were to be rejected; other nations such as the Macedonians and Montenegrins were subsumed under the Serbs, while the nation-building capacity of the Jews and the Muslims of Bosnia was not recognized at all. The main inspirations were the ideas of Mazzini and Herder, but also the teachings of Charles Maurras and Maurice Barrès.⁶

The idea of integral Yugoslavism was to mature into a variant of a radical Yugoslav ideology in the State of the Slovenes, Croats and Serbs (SHS) during the 1920s, and achieve its final form during the royal dictatorship of King Aleksandar after 1929. Even if the proponents of Yugoslav integral nationalism had different concerns from those of their counterparts in Italy, they were sharing in a cultural and political framework already firmly set across Europe. Their most important ideas were essentially the same. Anti-parliamentarism and anti-intellectualism, anti-Marxism, the dismissal of materialism, capitalism and liberalism were the most important characteristics of this Yugoslav brand of fascism that was formulated by some of the most intriguing intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s. The ideali-

⁶ For the development of the Yugoslav idea see: IVO BANAC, The Origins and Development of the Concept of Yugoslavia (to 1945), in: Yearbook of European Studies 5 (1992), pp. 1-22. For the ideas of the Nationalist Youth see: MIRJANA GROSS, Nacionalne ideje studentske omladine u Hrvatskoj uoči I svjetskog rata (National Ideas among Students in Croatia in the Wake of the First World War), in: Historijski zbornik 21-22 (1968-1969), pp. 75-144.

zation of patriarchal peasant life, i.e. the Serbian peasant and the traditional Serbian village community, was a significant element of this south-eastern European variant of fascism. This component of national ideology had been inherited during the nineteenth century, via the leading Serbian socialist Svetozar Marković and his radical followers from the Russian populists, *narodnyiki*. Along with a radical cultural messianism and the mysticism associated with Kosovo it added a certain spice of historical authenticity to that distinctively modern ideological mixture.

Women's activism on behalf of the Yugoslav cause before the First World War could be found both in the Kingdom of Serbia as well as in the areas under Habsburg rule. One example in the Kingdom of Serbia was the *Kolo srpskih sestara* (Circle of Serbian Sisters), founded in 1903 with the aim of helping the national liberation of the Serbian lands, and of advancing the evolution from "a small Serbia towards Yugoslavia". It had its own popular almanac, *Vardar*, named after the main Macedonian river to signal the principally southern orientation of the group. The most prominent concern of this group was patriotic charity work to benefit the national mission.⁷ In Croatia, women of Yugoslav orientation began organizing during the First World War for the cause of Yugoslav unity, setting up the journal *Ženski svijet* (Woman's World) in 1917 to put forward their Yugoslav and feminist views. In addition, some prominent individual women lent their support to the emerging integral Yugoslav movement, notably the writer Isidora Sekulić, a Serbian nationalist who gravitated increasingly towards integral Yugoslavism, whose words were quoted at the beginning of this essay and to whose ideas and writings we shall return below.

Women's activism and women's issues: an unresolved heritage from the pre-Yugoslav era

Women's involvement in national revival movements in the nineteenth century arose in parallel with organized campaigns on what could broadly be defined as women's issues. In the countries under Habsburg rule and in Serbia, women worked to bring about reforms relating to women's political and legal rights, access to employment and education, and the improvement of infant and child care. Croat ladies of the bourgeoisie and upper classes, for instance, used their leisure time to work for charitable and philanthropic societies such as the *Žensko društvo za održavanje pjestvovališta* (Ladies'

⁷ Kolo srpskih sestara, Uputstvo (Instruction), Belgrade 1928; Le Kolo srpskih sestara, Belgrade 1932.

Committee for Child Care, founded in 1855).⁸ Sometimes feminist campaigning overlapped with campaigning for national rights: for example, the Croat journalist Marija Jurić Zagorka combined her efforts, mentioned above, to promote the Croatian language with campaigning for the suffrage. Slovenian women's activities paralleled those of Croatian women in demanding the enhancement of women's education while at the same time working for the national movement. They operated primarily through charitable institutions such as *Družba sv. Ćirila in Metoda* (Society of St Cyril and Methodius) that had a separate women's section and worked in Trieste, a centre of the Slovene national revival. Since 1898 the *Udruženje Slovenskih učitelja* (Association of Slovenian Schoolteachers) started to express progressive views on women in academic professions, demanding equal pay and suffrage. Towards the end of the nineteenth century Slovene women started to publish their first paper *Slovenka*, and in 1901, founded the first women's association in Slovenia, *Splošno slovenske žensko društvo* (Slovenian Women's Society).⁹

As a rule, women organized along national lines: thus after the Austrian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878, women's organizations emerged there that corresponded to the national distinctions between the major communities. Serbian women were organized in some 22 societies that alongside charitable work and cultural activities promoted Serbian national ideology. At their last meeting before the outbreak of the First World War, they drafted a resolution expressing classic feminist demands: equality before the law, especially the right to inherit property, and the rights of children born out of wedlock. Croat, Muslim and Jewish women's groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina followed this example and organized primarily around charities and national or religious groupings.

Feminist campaigns often encountered bitter resistance. Thus, although the first Czech women doctors (graduates of foreign universities) had been practising in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1891, because of the specific needs of the Muslim population in that province, women were still not formally admitted to the medical profession in the Habsburg Monarchy until

⁸ JOVANKA KECMAN, *Žene Jugoslavije u radničkom pokretu i ženskim organizacijama* (Women of Yugoslavia in the Labour Movement and Women's Organizations) (1918-1941), Belgrade 1978, p. 8.

⁹ PETER VODOPIVEC, *Kako so ženske na Slovenskem v 19. stoletju stopale v javno življenje. Prispevek k zgodovini žensk v slovenskem prostoru* (How women in 19th century Slovenia entered public life. A contribution to the history of women in the Slovenian lands) (1848-1900), in: *Zgodovina za vse* 2 (1994), pp. 30-44.

1902.¹⁰ Maria Fabković, a prominent schoolteacher and activist, Czech by origin but working in Croatia, encountered intense hostility in her efforts to promote women's education. As the only woman to sit on the Croatian Educational and Literary Council, she was forced to retire prematurely when her views were forcefully opposed by influential members of the Catholic church at the First General Teachers' Conference in 1871. Meanwhile, women's access to higher education was barred: the University of Zagreb admitted women first as auditors only in 1895, and then as full-time students in 1901.¹¹

In the fields of education and employment, women achieved some partial successes before the First World War. The demand for suffrage, by contrast, went unfulfilled, despite intensified campaigning during the First World War. On this issue, women of Yugoslav orientation in Croatia emerged as a vocal force. Their mouthpiece was the journal *Ženski svijet* (Woman's World), whose editor, Zofka Kveder Demetrović, was an energetic Slovene writer and a socialist. The first, programmatic issue of her journal openly proclaimed its orientation: the journal was to work for women's suffrage, for Yugoslav unity and for the social and economic equality of women. The plea for women's suffrage was directed towards the representatives of the Croatian Parliament, which was due to discuss the issue of women's right to vote at its session on 18 May 1917. This issue was supported by the Croat journalist Marija Jurić Zagorka in the same issue of the paper. The representatives of the Croatian Peasant Party and its leader Stjepan Radić, the Social Democrats, and in a limited way, Starčević's Party of (State) Right and the Frank Party of (State) Right all supported women's right to vote. Stjepan Radić demanded female suffrage not only as a bid to extend his constituency, but also out of the firm belief that women had earned this right through their conduct during the First World War, enduring hardship while tending to the land and preserving family property. Despite such expressions of support, women in Croatia were denied suffrage at that point and it remained a political issue in the years to come. The struggle was to continue in the new Yugoslavia, where women remained unenfranchised.

¹⁰ KAREN J. FREEZE, *Medical Education for Women in Austria. A Study in the Politics of the Czech Women's Movement in the 1890s*, in: *Women, State and Party in Eastern Europe*, ed. by SHARON WOLCHIK/ALFRED G. MEYER, Durham 1985, pp. 51-63.

¹¹ Information about women teachers in Croatia is taken from independent research conducted in the archives of the Croatian Museum of Education, Zagreb, Croatia, and from an unpublished paper: ANDREA FELDMAN, *Women Schoolteachers in Croatia at the Turn of the Century*, presented at the Women's Writing International Conference in Dubrovnik, Croatia, March 1986.

*Women in interwar Yugoslavia:
united by sex or divided by class and nation?*

Regardless of their national, religious or class differences, women of Central and Southeast Europe sought to define common bonds among themselves. For the women in Yugoslavia, very much like in the rest of East Central Europe during the interwar period, the experience of feminism was very important. Yugoslav women established links with women in the West. Academically-educated women joined international feminist organizations and campaigned for social reform. One issue that unified women of many different backgrounds and beliefs was education. Their reformist, socialist or nationalist ideologies notwithstanding, women of Yugoslavia saw educational opportunities as the most important priority. It was also an issue inherited, as has been shown above, from the times of the Habsburg Monarchy. Suffrage campaigning was another key focus where it seemed that women would join forces with each other. Even though the issue of suffrage was posed before Yugoslavia came into existence at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, women did not achieve it in the new state. Consequently, the demand for suffrage and the legal equality of women became a major issue in the interwar women's movement, and one that could potentially represent the needs and wishes of otherwise very diverse women's movements in Yugoslavia.¹² For all the common ground, however, those who campaigned on behalf of women could not always overcome obstacles that arose out of ideological differences linked to class and out of longstanding national tensions.

On 19 May 1925, chairing the founding meeting of the *Ženski pokret* (Women's Movement), one of the first feminist societies in Yugoslavia, Milica Bogdanović declared the need for an organization that would work for suffrage and was "going to educate and persuade women not to vote for the likes of a Hindenburg or a Mussolini".¹³ The meeting was held at the *Esplanade*, a luxurious fin-de-siècle hotel in Zagreb, and the audience consisted primarily of women intellectuals. However, her announcement met with harsh criticism from different sides. The leadership of the Kingdom of

¹² For an insight into the interwar women's movements in Yugoslavia see: KECMAN, *Žene Jugoslavije* (see note 8); LYDIA SKLEVICKY, *Karakteristike organiziranog djelovanja žena u Jugoslaviji u razdoblju do drugog svjetskog rata* (Characteristics of the organized activities of women in Yugoslavia before the Second World War), in: Polja 308-309 (1984), pp. 415-417 and 454-456; ANDREA FELDMAN, *Der Verband universitätsgebildeter Frauen Jugoslawiens (1927-39)*, in: *Frauenmacht in der Geschichte. Beiträge des Historikerinnentreffens 1985 zur Frauengeschichtsforschung*, ed. by ANNETTE KUHN, Düsseldorf 1986, pp. 125-133.

¹³ Hrvatski državni arhiv (Croatian State Archives), group IV/3537 (1925).

Yugoslavia (SHS) was hostile to the demand for suffrage, and for that matter to other demands for equal rights that emerged in the context of interwar Yugoslav development. An influential professor of law such as Slobodan Jovanović (who was otherwise seen as a liberal) argued against suffrage on account of women's "subjectivity".

Attacks on the suffrage campaigners also came from the so-called "proletarian", Socialist or Communist ideologues, who recognized the potential of the women's movement and its demands, but were unable to deal with the women whom they called "members of the bourgeoisie". The pearl necklace of the chairperson of the meeting mentioned above was enough to antagonize the ascetic revolutionaries. The feminists were labelled "agents of bourgeois influence", members of an elite who did not care about working-class women and who due to the limitations of their class origins and prejudices were unable to foresee the inevitability of communist revolutionary change.

The Communist agitators were in some ways not too far off the mark. Some of the most visible feminists who came of age with the establishment of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia were the offspring of propertied families that would comfortably accommodate themselves, when the time came, to the dictatorship. The ruling elite was without exception Yugoslav unitarist. Ruža Stojadinović, an active member of the Women's Movement in the 1930s, and an eager advocate of women's suffrage, was the first cousin of Milan Stojadinović, the Prime Minister from 1935 to 1938 who was to be instrumental in bringing Yugoslavia closer to the Axis powers. Whatever her views of her cousin's politics¹⁴, the family link gave substance to the accusations by critics of "bourgeois" feminism that prominent suffragists were elitist, fuelling an image which did not serve their cause.¹⁵

Nor was the Yugoslav women's network immune to problems deriving from unresolved issues of nationalism and Yugoslavism. In September 1919 Serbian women of *Narodni savez žena* (National Women's Alliance) organized a congress in Belgrade and invited women from different areas of Yugoslavia to participate. The major purpose of the meeting was to discuss the possibilities of the mutual cooperation between various women's organizations and their merger into one Yugoslav organization. The issues discussed at the congress were predominantly political and concerned nationalism and republicanism. Serbian representatives at the congress clearly found

¹⁴ She did not in fact live to witness his acts as Prime Minister, since she committed suicide in 1935, an act that scandalized Belgrade.

¹⁵ RUŽA STOJADINOVIĆ, Srkinja pred zakonom and Zašto tražimo politička prava? (A Serbian woman before the law and Why do we demand political rights), in: *Ženski pokret* 1 (1933), p. 12.

it hard to accept other representatives on an equal footing. In this early stage of the development of Yugoslavia, it was difficult for them to exchange their Serbian for imagined Yugoslav nationalism. Their reluctance to even consider a possibility that anyone except a Serb could ever head the organization was based on their strong opposition to the tradition of Croatian republicanism, and the opposition of Croats to the Serbian king and dynasty. At this stage, the adjective Yugoslav was almost impossible to understand except as a merely geographical term. For the Serbs, too much was invested in the idea of Serbdom to compromise it by changing their identities into a new Yugoslav one. The Croats and Slovenes agreed that they would not renounce their own national names for the time being either, but nevertheless proclaimed their belief in a future Yugoslavia. The congress did not pass without a major scandal, however. Speaking about the ills of luxury, Mrs. Iveković from Zagreb accused the Jewish women as the major proponents of unnecessary extravagance. A few representatives of the Jewish women from Belgrade present at the congress challenged this clearly anti-semitic statement. Among them Miss Löbl expressed her own, rather nationalistic view that the Serbian Jews have been “faithful sons of the (Serbian) state who have always tried to match the heights already set by their environment”.¹⁶ The discussion about the contribution of the Jews to the emerging Yugoslav state was preceded by a fierce polemic between Zofka Kveder and Vera Ehrlich on anti-semitism in *Jugoslavenska žena* (The Yugoslav Woman, as the journal *Ženski svijet* was renamed in 1918). At the core of the dispute was the contested view that regarded Jews as a foreign element hostile to the formation of Yugoslavia. The acquisition of fresh national identity, it seemed, could never proceed without problems.¹⁷

Although the closed circles of Yugoslav politics in the 1930s provided little manoeuvring space, women voicing feminist demands continued to make themselves heard. One of the most prominent organizations was *Jugoslovenski ženski savez* (Yugoslav Women’s Association) that stemmed from the *Srpsko žensko društvo* (Serbian Women’s Association) of 1910 and inspired numerous social and political activities. The first feminist umbrella organization was *Alijansa ženskih pokreta* (The Alliance of Women’s Movements). It was a network of women’s organizations that emerged in the interwar period and worked for suffrage, the improvement of secular legislation concerning divorce, and the reform of labour law. It also instigated

¹⁶ Ženski kongres u Beogradu, *Jutarnji list* (Morning Herald), Zagreb, 30 September 1919, pp. 3-4. Marija Jurić Zagorka covered the congress for Croatian press.

¹⁷ ZOFKA KVEDER, *Jugoslavenke i židovsko pitanje* (Yugoslav Women on the Jewish Question), in: *Jugoslavenska žena* 3 (1919), pp. 107-116; VERA EHRLICH, *Još o židovskom pitanju* (More on the Jewish Question), in: *Jugoslavenska žena* 5 (1919), pp. 206-208.

discussions of paid and unpaid women's work, the struggle against prostitution, alcoholism and – as a related issue – domestic violence. Only two years before the introduction of dictatorship, an interesting experiment was initiated in Belgrade: a Women's Party (*Ženska stranka*) was founded as an exclusively political organization lobbying for suffrage. However, its efforts too remained unsuccessful.

Another new departure was to be found in the activities promoted by Communists in the latter years of the interwar period to forge links with the women's suffrage movement it had previously condemned as elitist. This was a part of a general Popular Front policy ordered by the VII. Comintern Congress in 1935. Communists infiltrated the bourgeois organizations and worked from within them to undermine the government. *Žena danas* (Woman Today), an independent women's magazine published in Belgrade from 1936 to 1940 by a clandestine communist section within the Youth Division of the Women's Movement of Belgrade, began to call for women's suffrage on the eve of the introduction of the new electoral law in the autumn of 1939. They invited Women's Movement representatives to support the action, but the leadership of the Women's Movement was reluctant to do so "on account of the political situation" and "because the government should be allowed to settle the situation in the country".¹⁸ Under pressure from the affiliated groups throughout Yugoslavia, the Women's Movement was finally forced to support the action. Cooperation between the ideologically diverse women's groups in Yugoslavia during the interwar period, even if achieved in this instance, was generally fraught.

Meanwhile, the non-communist political opposition had its own feminists. *Naša žena* (Our Woman), a journal under the patronage of the Croatian Peasant Party, the main opposition party of the interwar period, understood women's suffrage as part of the wider democratic programme and used it as an argument against the Government. "The government of Mr. Stojadinović has two responsibilities: to calm the spirits and tensions in the state and to organize the transformation of contemporary democratic life." The new election law and the granting of women's suffrage were clearly perceived as a part of that process.¹⁹

¹⁸ Borba žena Srbije za emancipaciju i ravnopravnost i njihovo učešće u revolucionarnom radničkom pokretu 1941. godine (The struggle of women in Serbia for emancipation and equality and their activities in the revolutionary labour movement in the year 1941), Belgrade 1969, pp. 68-69.

¹⁹ *Naša žena* 8 (1935).

Women advocates of Yugoslavism: feminist and nationalist?

One of the most contentious questions concerning women and interwar Yugoslav politics is that of the links between feminism and Yugoslavism in its most radical, integral nationalist form. Having outlined some features of the particular national women's movements in different areas of Yugoslavia, as well as the Socialist and Communist-inspired women's movement, we will now focus on women intellectuals who in addition to their feminist or women-oriented activities advocated Yugoslavism as an integral nationalist ideology.

The journal *Nova Evropa* (New Europe), a strong proponent of Yugoslav unity, decided in January 1922 to devote one of its issues to the discussion of women's concerns. Under the common title "The Yugoslav Woman" the editors fashioned the picture of what an ideal Yugoslav woman was supposed to be like. Women were understood as "a neglected, predominately conservative" element of society, reluctant to accept new concepts and currents of thought. Women were alleged to be representatives of the hysterical and backward past, prototypical separatists and egoists, insisting on prominence within "their own hen-house".²⁰ This kind of woman, it was argued, had to go and a new kind had to emerge, a New Yugoslav Woman – since, as nationalists everywhere know, without Yugoslav women there can be no Yugoslav men!

Not surprisingly, the favourites of the "New Europe" crowd were Isidora Sekulić and Adela Milčinović, the first women to publish in that particular publication. In a note to Milan Ćurčin, the editor of "New Europe", Isidora Sekulić praised the spirit of the journal as the "air, the purity and freshness, and that good virtue that constitutes the foundation on which our Yugoslavia is supposed to be built".²¹ Adela Milčinović had a somewhat different experience and background. A member of the Socialist Party, she was an ardent supporter of the Croats of Yugoslav unitarist persuasion like Ivan Meštrović or Ante Trumbić. She moved with her family to the United States in the 1920s, where she soon became aware of the high-handedness with which the Yugoslav Government was treating the representatives of non-Serb descent. Though both Sekulić and Milčinović participated in feminist conferences in the 1920s, there was a difference in their attitudes to feminism. While Adela Milčinović remained faithful to the principal feminist demands such as suffrage, as well as different socialist demands, Isidora Sekulić continued to be a member of the rather right-wing *Kolo srpskih sestara* and

²⁰ L. Jugoslavenska žena (The Yugoslav Woman), in: *Nova Evropa* 1 (1922), pp. 1-3.

²¹ SEKULIĆ, Moj krug kredom (see note 1), p. 85.

made that organization an executor of her last will and testament. In the early days of her career, she had written extensively about women's education, women's schools, and her own profession as a teacher. In spite of that she frequently felt estranged from other women, and considered men "the better and worthier half of mankind." In what she considered a sign of progressive thinking, she proposed that women were by nature more conservative than men, and that liberty was essentially man's realm, whereas fidelity was women's.²²

A perceptive observer of Serbian provincial life, Isidora Sekulić was born in a petty bourgeois family in the small village of Mošorin in Bačka, in the region of Vojvodina. As a young woman she had started to write for various literary journals. In the euphoria of the First Balkan War, she had contributed a series of nationalistic and propagandistic articles to the journals *Slovenski jug* (The Slavic South) and *Zora* (The Dawn). In the article *Srpskoj ženi* (To the Serbian Woman) she claimed in 1912:

"This is not a time for women's emotions or Christian patience, to love one's enemy and to forgive him. Neither is this a time of Buddha's forbearance that indicates that we will all revive again. No! In this country and in this nation the time is of impatience, and fury and vengeance, a time of hard sacrifices and death without resurrection. Women and children share the responsibility for the extinction of the nation."²³

Sekulić wrote this in 1912, during the war in which Serbia and Montenegro joined Bulgaria and Greece in expelling the Ottoman Turks from the Balkans. In the course of that campaign, the Serbian and Montenegrin army perpetrated many crimes against Albanians, from burning and pillaging to outright slaughter. These actions were depicted by the report of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace as the means by which the Serbs and Montenegrins were hoping to transform "the ethnic character of regions inhabited exclusively by Albanians."²⁴ In Sekulić's view, this was a justifiable policy, since it was the expression of the nation's will. Her article *Kult sile* (The Cult of Force) insisted that

"an individual cannot, but a whole nation, and certainly the whole race can have that primordial will to life that makes life possible even when all the circumstances indicate that it was better to die [...] in the name of blood and origins [...] the wild racial will that is primordial [...] one national idea was carved into

²² ISIDORA SEKULIĆ, *Ženska konservativnost* (Women's Conservatism). Utisci sa jednog internacionalnog kongresa žena, in: *Sabrana dela* (Collected Works), vol. 12, Belgrade 1966, p. 179.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁴ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars*, Washington, D.C. 1914, p. 151.

a racial idea [...] that nations and races awake, win and revenge by force alone.”²⁵

The woman who carried on waving small Serbian flags at the anniversaries of the battle of Kumanovo well into the 1930s consequently exchanged her Serbian for Yugoslav nationalism. “The great idea, a modern idea”, as she called it, was to be modeled on the Italian Fascist example. The dead traditions of long ago, the torpid and conservative tradition and history should be changed, as she had written in 1911:

“The consciousness of Vidovdan [St Vitus’ Day] should not be of the museum kind, the glory of dried laurels and yellow candles, but it should be a live and vigorous awareness of the *Sokols* [Falcons], soldiers and cultural workers. In tradition we look for a remembrance, not predestination. For we are not only the progeny of Dušan and Marko, we are the children of a naked and obscured nation, soiled by sin and barbarism in a spiritual darkness. Vidovdan should not be a day of *parastos* [a part of the orthodox church interior] only, it should become a day of a rebirth and rebuilding of a great and living idea; the idea itself will make unbreakable walls out of us; the idea will tie us into a chain that will with love and cultural force fasten and embrace the seven detached parts of our national body!”²⁶

Her attitude toward “detached parts”, the different nations of the area, was one of sheer contempt. She was especially hostile towards the nations under Habsburg rule. At the occasion of a *Sokol* meeting in Zagreb in 1911 she had encouraged Serbian *Sokols* to

“march forcefully, march heroically, let the beautiful Croatia see you and be unnerved; Croatia once a nest of falcons, now a dwelling of worms, that should once again become a home of falcons, and it should see how a proud race is growing and pulsating with blood.”²⁷

The separatist ideas and trends should, in her view, be transformed into “a better energy and more useful work”, the work for Yugoslavia. Out of opposition to the Habsburg Monarchy there arose her hostility towards anyone who professed national difference. On the eve of the introduction of the dictatorship in 1928 Sekulić argued that Yugoslavia was not a compromised ideal. The heterogeneous character of the Yugoslav nations should be resolved, and that process should if necessary involve the use of force: “Yugoslavia is our life, and whoever hates her and despises her is a

²⁵ SEKULIĆ, *Sabrana dela* (see note 22), p. 111.

²⁶ Vidovdanska ideja (St Vitus’ Day), in: *Slovenski Jug* (1911), quoted in: SEKULIĆ, *ibid.*, pp. 46-49.

²⁷ ISIDORA SEKULIĆ, *Pred Sokolski slet u Zagrebu* (Before the Sokol meeting in Zagreb), in: *ibid.*, pp. 54-56.

weakling ... The ten year old Yugoslavia is a holy germ of a new life, a foundation, the new beginning.”²⁸

In some of her early works, Sekulić had glorified death with extraordinary eagerness:

“I see death coming, a magnificent death. Not the feverish and debilitating death that brings about the strangling of the heart, not death which is a skeleton in a black attire, but death which is vigour and pride, music and a banner, honour and heroism; there comes the death that is a life, because it revitalizes, death that does not hurt, since it kills only what is past, death after which the century and the spirit of the nation begins anew; death which is a poem and a joy, because out of sacrifice, blood and screams arises eternal and true poetry.”²⁹

The affinity of this imagery with that of proto-fascist and later fascist texts, with their emphasis on the heroic death and rebirth of the nation, is clear.

Zofka Kveder Demetrović (1878-1926) was another prominent advocate of Yugoslav unitarism, although she came to espouse it from a different background. This polyglot Slovene writer, inspired by the literary achievements of modernism in Central Europe, was a forceful supporter of socialist ideas, which she, like many other European intellectuals, embraced after the traumatic experience of the First World War and under the influence of the Russian Revolution. Her feminist and socialist cosmopolitanism was fed by the ideas about the insignificance of national allegiances in the face of the act of unification, which she, like all the other proponents of Yugoslavism, welcomed as a revolutionary act. She was a founder and the editor of the first feminist journal *Ženski svijet* which she published in Zagreb. Her socialist and feminist ideas slowly evolved into a radical Yugoslav nationalism. She shared a belief in the superiority of unitarist Yugoslavism with her husband Juraj Demetrović, a journalist, a politician and finally a minister in General Petar Živković's government, who dutifully supported the royal dictatorship.

Yugoslav unitarists annulled history in order to construct a new, indeed invented tradition. From their perspective, the different and separate histories of particular nations had to be questioned, if not erased. It was therefore necessary to argue that the particular Slovenian or Croatian histories had an inherent tendency towards unification. It was necessary to show that before unification the histories of “the detached parts were worthless, tragic, sad”. Serbian history was an exception to that rule. A striking example of the re-writing of history – and of women's history – in the name of Yugoslav unitarism was a lecture organized jointly by the *Kolo srpskih sestara* and the

²⁸ ISIDORA SEKULIĆ, O Vojvodini (On Vojvodina), in: *ibid.*, p. 240.

²⁹ ISIDORA SEKULIĆ, Šta ja vidim (What do I see), in: *ibid.*, p. 119.

Women's Movement on the occasion of the visit of the Women's Little Entente in October 1924. It was presented in French in a beautiful hall of the *Kolo's* headquarters. Minka Govekarjeva and Alojzija Štebi, Slovenian members of the Women's Movement provided the information for the Slovenian part of the discussion. The lecture aimed to show how the different 'tribes' (*plemena*) that had come together at the moment of unification had suffered enormously during their separate existences. Therefore, the Slovenes were presented as having the most tragic past. Under German hegemony, without even a pretense of nationhood, they barely existed until the great turbulence generated in 1848. Their women suffered even more; the few that managed to create a poem or a verse in Slovenian, died young and were neglected in that cold, foreign environment, claimed the lecturers. The fact that Slovenian women had a relatively well developed women's movement and a very vivid cultural scene in the second half of the nineteenth century was barely mentioned. The number of women's journals published in Slovenian lands had actually been remarkable. The main Austrian port of Trieste had been a centre of the Slovenian national revival in the mid-nineteenth century: it boasted libraries, reading rooms, theatres, cafés, press-rooms, and indeed fashion stores that were sites of a lively interchange. However, that particular night the public was led to believe that before the appearance of the *Kolo Jugoslavenkih sestara* (the unitarist sister organization to the Serbian *Kolo*) in Ljubljana there was very little that could be ascribed to Slovenian women's achievements.

Instead, there was a presentation of Serbian history, an unmistakably heroic one. The members of the Women's Little Entente were reminded repeatedly that the Serbian people were members of the great Slavic family, very closely related to the Russians. The layers of Serbian mythology followed: how the Serbs came to the Balkans, how they lived the ideal tribal life, the paganism, the unification of the Serbian people in Dušan's Empire, the downfall at the Battle of Kosovo and the sufferings under the Ottomans. Then came the arrogant assertion that "the status of Serbian women in family and society was never too arduous, at least to the extent to which it depended on the Serbs themselves". As a few additional ornaments, the audience was reminded of a few folk figures: the Mother of the Jugović brothers, the Kosovo maiden, and Jevrosima, mother of Prince Marko. After mentioning the tragic sacrifices of the Balkan Wars, the sufferings of the Serbs inside the Habsburg Empire and the pressures that were the worst for the Serbs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the lecture concluded with the hope

that the unified Serbian, Croatian and Slovenian women would continue to work for the progress of women, state and mankind.³⁰

Conclusion

After the introduction of the royal dictatorship in 1929, life in Yugoslavia became arduous and frustrating for those who sought to continue participating in political and intellectual debate. Feminists and anti-feminists, revolutionaries and conservatives obviously reacted to the new circumstances in different ways. However, they did not avoid discussions of nationalism and Yugoslavism, federalism or centralism, dictatorship and democracy. These were the issues that were tearing apart Yugoslavia in its early years and women accepted the responsibilities of dealing with them. The suppression of diverse national identities was a serious problem; at the same time the insistence on a newly introduced Yugoslav identity was overpowering.

Diverse as their histories had been, women in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia developed in various political and cultural directions. At times they succeeded in identifying common interests, though more often they took different, uncompromising routes. The issue of women's access to education was one of interest to all women, regardless of their background or political orientation. A second major issue for the women's initiatives in the interwar period was suffrage. Although this issue was the core of women's activities before unification in 1918, suffrage was not achieved in Yugoslavia until the end of the Second World War. In the interwar period, middle-class women joined the network of international feminist organizations and worked to reform society. At the same time, socialist women combined their feminist demands with revolutionary political ideas – as they had done since the turn of the century.

³⁰ The historiographical interpretations of this particular period and topic are burdened by post-1945 developments. To be sure, the Communists correctly depicted the 1930s as the times of “a monarchical-fascist dictatorship”, but as newcomers in the art of state rule they needed legitimation. Since intellectuals played an important role in forging Communist legitimacy, it was necessary to turn a blind eye to their personal histories, however embarrassing. Thus Isidora Sekulić became the only woman at the board of the Alliance of the Writers of Yugoslavia and the president of the Alliance of Serbian Writers. Ivo Andrić's presence at the signing of the Tripartite Pact was conveniently forgotten in the face of his acceptance of Communist rule as well as the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1961. Miloš Crnjanski, the greatest Serbian writer and the editor of a pro-fascist journal *Ideje*, was allowed to return from London when it became clear that he would not attempt to challenge communist rule. He was satisfied with the opportunity to die in his homeland, albeit silenced.

Like most of the other political or cultural movements of that time, however, the women's movement in interwar Yugoslavia was permeated with nationalism. That was obvious from the geographical set up of the regional organizations as well as from the ways in which political parties understood the importance of women's involvement with politics. The nations of the areas once a part of the Habsburg Monarchy, having experience of national oppression, would soon recognize the newly established unitarist Yugoslavia as an intolerant, undemocratic and centralist concept. The nationalism of "the detached parts" became a response to the denial of their particular identities. On the other hand, political Yugoslavism as a state-sponsored ideology could not fulfill its proclaimed mission. It never succeeded in developing a mature Yugoslav nationhood, since the older, already developed nations were firmly set in place. In the same vein, the Yugoslav language never evolved into the accepted vernacular. The favourable political disposition toward it notwithstanding, unitary Yugoslav culture never became a reality. The diverse, particular histories of the distinct peoples and identities that were parts of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia proved too resilient to be suppressed continuously. Until its demise in 1990 Yugoslavia remained a region of seldom-acknowledged cultural, gender and national diversity.