

UDC 930.85(4-12)

ISSN 0350-7653

SERBIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ARTS
INSTITUTE FOR BALKAN STUDIES

BALCANICA

XL (2009)

ANNUAL OF THE INSTITUTE FOR BALKAN STUDIES

Editor

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BELGRADE
2010



THE LEGACY OF KING ALEXANDER I OF YUGOSLAVIA,
THE UNIFIER

On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of assassination

by Slobodan G. Markovich

October 9, 2009 marked seventy-five years since the assassination of King Alexander I Karadjordjević/Karageorgevich (1888–1934; King 1921–34) in Marseille. In 1936 France commemorated the assassinated King in a grand way: an equestrian monument to King Peter I of Serbia and King Alexander I of Yugoslavia bearing the inscription “Alexandre I^{er} de Yougoslavie. L’Unificateur” was set up in the Bois de Boulogne in Paris. After an interval of sixty-five years, Serbia and France organized official commemorations again. Indeed, the King has been remembered by the Serbs and some other Yugoslavs as a knightly king and unifier.

Many recent nationally-inclined historical interpretations have depicted the emergence of the Yugoslav kingdom, in the creation of which King Alexander played a significant role, as belated. This is only partially true. What seems nearer the truth is that it emerged too late to be a single-nation state in central-European terms, but too early to be structured on cosmopolitan principles. In the age of explosion of nationalism after the First World War, only the odd cosmopolitan proved sincerely willing to give up a local ethnic identity for the sake of broader principles. It was the reason why Yugoslavism, as an amalgam of liberal nationalism and cosmopolitanism, turned out to be a conviction restricted to the portion of Yugoslav intellectual elites who naively expected that the spirit of the twentieth century would be able to overcome religious strife and exclusivity.

The King proved to be both a statesman and a soldier, but also a philanthropist. His military career was impeccable, both in his capacity as heir to the throne and later, while serving as regent and after acceding to the throne. He was the nominal commander of Serbia’s 1st Army in the First and Second Balkan wars (1912–1913), the Army that won the illustrious battles at Kumanovo, against the Ottomans in the First Balkan War, and at Bregalnica, against the Bulgarians in the Second Balkan War. During the First World War he and his father, King Peter, came to epitomize the Serbian Army. Two episodes can demonstrate why. During the epic retreat of the Serbian Army across Albania (in the winter of 1915), Regent Alexander,

although ill, chose to stay with his troops instead of being transported to the Italian coast. At a crucial moment, on 14 September 1918, with the Allied Command still wavering over what to do on the Salonika (Macedonian) Front, it was Regent Alexander who issued the order: Charge forward, to glory or death! What ensued was the glorious breakthrough of the Salonika Front, and the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes on 1 December 1918.

While he was heir to the throne (1909–14) and regent (1914–21), Alexander was able to learn how widespread the belief in the necessity of Yugoslav unification was amongst Serbian intellectual elites. By the beginning of the twentieth century, both the Serbian and Croatian political elites had reached similar conclusions. It seemed to them that the Serbs and Croats, surrounded by big states, could only survive and develop their nationality if they created a sufficiently large and powerful state together. Yet, for the two key ethnicities of the new state, the mathematics of Yugoslavia was not exactly the same.

The 1918 unification brought all Serbs and almost all other Yugoslavs under one roof for the first time in their history. The dissolution of Yugoslavia, therefore, necessarily meant that a larger or a smaller portion of Serbs would remain outside an independent Serbia. In other words, the collapse of Yugoslavia would inevitably entail, at least partially, abandoning the idea of all Serbs living in one state. The politically dominant part of the Croatian political elite gathered round the Croatian Peasant Party did not share Serbian enthusiasm for the unified state. Generally from 1921/2, and particularly from 1928, they perceived Yugoslavia as a dungeon for the Croatian people, and they made quite different calculations. Should Yugoslavia dissolve, they argued, Croatia would become either a self-governed entity or part of a new Danubian Catholic federation. In either case, it seemed to them, Croatia would be in a better position than it was in Yugoslavia. In Slovenia and to a certain extent in Dalmatia, the King was able to attract wider circles of society for the new state. In Croatia and Slavonia, he had to content himself with a rather small part of the intellectual elite who sincerely accepted the new state.

The assassination in the Yugoslav Assembly in 1928 of Croatian deputies challenged the very survival of the new state and fuelled dissatisfaction in Croatia. It was at that point that some Serbian politicians also began to harbour doubts about Yugoslavia. They pressed King Alexander to reconsider the future destiny of the country that he led and to take into consideration, at least for a brief moment, the possible amputation of Croatia. Except for that particular moment, the King remained imprisoned by the idea of Yugoslavia's preservation until the end of his life. He championed a new ideology of Yugoslavism and ardently pursued the idea that the "three-

tribe people" (Serbs, Croats and Slovenes) could be melded into Yugoslavs. Once he determined that the preservation of Yugoslavia was his mission, he took the only possible course of action under the given circumstances: on 6 January 1929 he introduced personal rule, thereby suspending traditions of Serbian democracy and political freedoms established in the Kingdom of Serbia by the Constitution of 1888 and confirmed, during the reign of his father, King Peter, by the Constitution of 1903 which had ushered in the so-called golden years of Serbian democracy (1903–1914). More a soldier than a politician, more a statesman than a diplomat, he easily resolved the intricate dilemma between state unity and political freedom by opting for the former. The price paid was enormous: from then until the final dissolution of Yugoslavia seventy-two years later, the state was unable to restore a democratic system. The failure cannot be attributed entirely to the King the Unifier in spite of his occasional authoritarian tendencies. The seed of the failure had been planted into the very foundations of the new state which, despite its considerable advancement and Europeanization, remained predominantly agrarian, economically underdeveloped, and with great inter-regional differences. Under such conditions the creation of a Yugoslav nation would have been an impossible mission even if the political and intellectual elites of Serbs and Croats had shared the same vision of Yugoslavia.

King Alexander, being a great philanthropist, was instrumental in resolving the question of invalids. He and his wife, Queen Mary, established and supported many a foundation. The King's philanthropy, but also a sentiment of special gratitude to Imperial Russia for her support to Serbia during the Great War, can explain his extraordinary concern for the well-being of tens of thousands of Russian refugees who came to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes with Wrangel's army, many of whom chose it for their new homeland.

In marked contrast to the other three Balkan kingdoms ruled by branches of German dynasties in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, all three Serbian dynasties in late modern times were "home grown" (Obrenović/Obrenovich and Karageorgevich in Serbia, and Petrović Njegoš/Petrovich Negosh in Montenegro), and their founders all had quite modest beginnings. King Alexander was the first modern Serbian monarch to fashion a European court and the first ruler in Serbia's modern history who was a genuine European. He was closely followed in this by his first cousin, the Anglophile Prince Paul, who married Princess Olga of the Greek royal family, while her sister Marina was married to George, Duke of Kent. Alexander had spent his formative years in cosmopolitan Geneva. His close companions and his personal experience made him a citizen of Europe and, in religious terms, the most tolerant ruler in modern Serbian history. His respect for Islam and Judaism, as well as Roman Catholicism,

ought to be acknowledged and seen as a sound example of how to act in a multi-religious society.

Being a European, he sought to assure a proud place for Yugoslavia in the post-Versailles world. His greatest strength as a statesman was in that he realized very early that the preservation of the new state mainly depended upon securing peace in the region. Consequently, in 1920/1 he was instrumental in creating the Little Entente, an alliance that gathered into one camp the Francophile Versailles winners: Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Romania. The alliance established in 1933 its Permanent Council and Secretariat, and encouraged economic cooperation, thus foreshadowing similar West-European economic integrations after the Second World War. It was under King Alexander that an entity emerged which played an influential part in the creation of European policy. This was the first such instance in the history of modern Serbian statehood. This was done through Yugoslavia's participation in the League of Nations, where she was supported by France, which remained the King's main foreign partner throughout his reign. Amongst his other European achievements, one should include the Pact of Friendship with Italy in 1924, and that with France in 1927.

Towards the end of his life King Alexander was instrumental in establishing the Balkan Pact, which brought together Yugoslavia, Romania, Greece and Turkey. The organization had a single aim: to secure long-term peace in the Balkans. The King's assassination in Marseille in 1934 prevented him from accomplishing the project by drawing Bulgaria into the Balkan Pact, and from further contributing to stabilizing the situation in the Balkans.

There is no doubt that the ideas that inspired King Alexander to work towards forging the Balkan Pact were also behind his generous support to the creation in early 1934 of the Balkan Institute in Belgrade, whose founders were Ratko Parežanin and Svetozar Spanačević. In a foreword to the first volume of the series entitled "The Book on the Balkans", Parežanin, the Institute's first director, described the cultural and political ideals that guided them:

Let us say immediately and openly what our aspirations and ideals are: we wish all Balkan states to get closer together, to create strong mutual political and economic agreements and alliances, we wish Balkan peoples to complement and support each other, to develop a deep and lasting feeling of *solidarity* and *community* for which there are many favourable circumstances and an even greater need.¹

¹ *Knjiga o Balkanu*, vol. I [A Book on the Balkans] (Belgrade 1936), vii. The text was republished in German: R. Parežanin and S. Spanačević, "Der neue Balkan", *Revue Internationale des Etudes balkaniques* IV (1936), 321.

The King personally supported the Institute with a monthly grant of 50,000 dinars, and was ready to assist its founders in their plans to have a Balkan House built in Belgrade.² Sadly, the King's assassination in October 1934 made sure that some more ambitious plans became unfeasible.

When it comes to publishing activities, however, the Institute was more than successful. Its best known product was a journal, *Revue Internationale des Etudes balkaniques*, which had distinguished contributors from all of the Balkans and Europe, and which was received very well among Balkan specialists. Six volumes were published before the closing of the Institute by the Gestapo on 27 August 1941.

It was on St. Vitus's Day in 1934, shortly before his death, that King Alexander laid the cornerstone for the memorial honouring the fallen soldiers in the Balkan Wars and the Great War on Avala, a mountain overlooking Belgrade. St Vitus's Day, or *Vidovdan* in Serbian, was not only the date of the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, and of the assassination of Francis Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, in Sarajevo in 1914; more importantly, it was the date on which the 1919 Treaty of Versailles had been signed. Thus the symbolism of this date was twofold: it combined national myth and a universal message of peace.

The Avala monument is exceptional among similar monuments set up throughout Europe in that it was named the Monument to the Unknown Hero rather than Soldier, in order to emphasize the universal. Its designer, the famous Yugoslav and Croatian sculptor Ivan Meštrović, used eight caryatids symbolizing the eight regions of Yugoslavia (Šumadija, Pannonia/Voivodina, Montenegro, Bosnia, Macedonia, Croatian Zagorje, Dalmatia and Slovenia), and he found historical inspiration in the mausoleum of the Persian king Cyrus the Great in Pasargadae, which was spared from destruction only due to the false belief that it was the tomb of Solomon's mother.

The date on the Avala memorial, "1912-1918", honoured the memory of the Serbian Army in the Balkan Wars and in the Great War. At the time, most Serbs viewed the monument as commemorating the sacrifice of Serbs in the Great War, which in turn was seen as central for the creation of the new state. To them, the eight caryatids represented five Serbian women, two Croat and one Slovenian or, in other words, a Yugoslavia where Serbs expected to have at least the corresponding share of power. In the vision of most Croats, the caryatids were to transform into at least six federal units in a new federation where each of its constituent parts was to have the power of veto. Both visions were quite different from how the monument was

² *Knjiga o Balkanu*, vol. I [A Book on the Balkans] (Belgrade 1936), iii. The first issue of the *Revue internationale des Etudes balkaniques* was also dedicated to King Alexander.

understood by the man who commissioned it and the man who designed it. The former saw in it eight regional identities that would be fused into a single Yugoslav one; the latter saw it as a universal vertical axis connecting countless generations.

The Balkan Institute dedicated the first volume of “The Book on the Balkans” to the King, emphasizing his role as peacemaker and echoing the King’s messages from the last years of his reign:

The ideal of Balkan understanding and cooperation found its most stalwart advocate in the knightly figure of King Alexander I the Unifier, always ready for self-sacrifice without which no progress is possible ... A new era in Balkan history — an era of peaceful cooperation, mutual respect and solidarity among the Balkan peoples — is marked by the name of Alexander Karageorgevich, the apostle of a better destiny for the Balkans.

By untiringly pursuing the task we have set ourselves, we shall pay due honour to this great Balkanite and European in the best possible way.³

A Serbian soldier, a Yugoslav ideologue, a Balkan and European statesman, all these roles were combined in a single person: King the Unifier. No sooner had King Alexander fallen at the hands of nationalistic assassins and fascist plotters in Marseille than all the roles that he had successfully played were challenged. What remained of his legacy was the symbolism of an unfulfilled vision carved in stone on Avala: the vision of a state which respects its own traditions but is capable of overcoming national and religious divisions; a state which at the same time understands regional exigencies and strives for a proud place in Europe.

³ *Knjiga o Balkanu I* [Book on the Balkans] (Belgrade 1936). The first issue of the *Revue Internationale des Etudes balkaniques* was also dedicated to King Alexander.