

THE SERBIAN RIGHT-WING
PARTIES AND INTELLECTUALS IN
THE KINGDOM OF YUGOSLAVIA, 1934–1941

Edited by
Dragan Bakić



INSTITUTE FOR BALKAN STUDIES
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PARTIES AND INTELLECTUALS IN THE
KINGDOM OF YUGOSLAVIA, 1934–1941**

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The Yugoslav People's Party "Borbaši:" A Fringe Extreme Right-Wing Party in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia

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The events that took place in the territory of Yugoslavia during World War II, the genocide against the Serbs and the Holocaust, have rightly attracted a lot of scholarly attention. In their quest to find the reasons that led to the brutal civil, religious and ideological war that broke out on the ruins of the Yugoslav state in the aftermath of Nazi Germany's invasion of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, scholars devoted a lot of attention to extreme right-wing political parties and organizations. The exception was the Yugoslav People's Party (JNSB), whose supporters were known as "Borbaši" (Fighters, Strugglers or Combatants). Because it *de facto* fell apart on the eve of the German invasion, which consequently meant that its supporters could not play a more prominent role during World War II, this party was only fragmentarily discussed in scholarship. The image of the "Borbaši" was directly taken from the party documents of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, almost without consulting primary historical sources. In the last twenty years or so, pioneering steps were taken in the research of this political organization.¹ Despite having had more followers than the

¹ Gojko Malović, "Svetislav Hodjera, manifestacioni zatočenik jugoslovenstva," *Srpske organske studije*, br. 3 (2002): 271–277; Bogumil Hrabak, "Jugoslovenska narodna stranka 1935. i 1936. godine," *Novopazarski zbornik*, br. 31, (2008): 73–81; Aleksandar Rastović, "Program Jugoslovenske narodne stranke," *Zbornik Matice srpske za istoriju*, br. 74 (2006): 125–132.

Yugoslav National Movement ZBOR, which has been a subject of in-depth research, the Yugoslav People's Party has remained under a veil of secrecy. The party archives that this paper is based on were discovered in 1975 but have not been used for academic purposes until now.

Drawing on the scarce documentation, Yugoslav and international scholars tended to portray the "Borbaši" as a mere imitation of fascism and Nazism, as the "only genuine Yugoslav fascists."² These views were taken from the mostly leftist press and publications unsympathetic to the "Borbaši."³ The influential left-wing satirical paper *Ošišani jež* led a particularly bitter campaign against the "Borbaši" and their leader Svetislav Hodjera.⁴ The paper's caricatures depicted Hodjera and the "Borbaši" as unpopular fascists and brutes, usually being egged by the masses. On the other hand, the contemporaneous Italian press rejected any similarities between JNSB and Italian fascism, claiming that the main objective of this party was a "socially fairer Yugoslavia."⁵ The aim of this paper is to use the extensive archival evidence and detailed analyses of "Borbaši" organs and brochures to reconstruct the political

² Slavoljub Cvetković, *Jugoslavija 1939–1941* (Beograd: ISI, 1999), 244; Ferdo Čulinović, *Jugoslavija između dva rata*, knj. 2 (Zagreb: JAZU, 1961), 39; Milorad Janković, "Zavera protiv kneza," *Večernje Novosti*, 26. 07. 2003; Todor Kuljić, "Srpski fašizam i sociologija," *Sociologija*, br. 16 (1974): 240; Gojko Malović, "Svetislav Hodjera, manifestacioni zatočenik jugoslovenstva," 273; Marko Atilla Hoare, "Yugoslavia and its successor states," in *Oxford Handbook of Fascism*, 416; Wayne Vuchinich, ed., *Contemporary Yugoslavia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 356.

³ IAB, 1929, k-7, S. N. K, "Opasnost fašizma," *Narodno kolo*, 25. 2. 1937; Bogomir Bogić, *Narodna demokratija i hrvatsko pitanje* (Vršac: privatno izdanje, 1936), 31; Dragoljub Jovanović, *Političke uspomene IV* (Beograd: Arhiv Jugoslavije, 1997), 17.

⁴ Svetislav Hodjera (1888-1961) was a Serbian politician. He was born in Niš, studied economics in Paris and then worked at the National Bank in Belgrade. He fought in both Balkan Wars and then graduated from the Faculty of Law in Belgrade. He also took part in World War I; he was a pioneer of Serbian aviation and the first to be wounded in air combat and survive his injuries. After the war, he opened a private law practice, participated in the organization of the air traffic association "Aeropot" and was politically active in the People's Radical Party. After the proclamation of the 6 January Dictatorship, he served as the chief of staff under General Petar Živković. See Rastko Lompar, "Politička biografija Svetislava Hodjere," *Studkon* 2, (Niš: Filozofski fakultet u Nišu, 2017), 39–49.

⁵ AJ, 38-351-499, Anonim, "Sviluppi e tendenze dei partiti politici in Jugoslavia," *Il Popolo di Trieste*, 16. 09. 1937.

activity and ideology of JNSB and to employ modern theories of fascism to reexamine the grounds to classify the "Borbaši" as fascists.

* * *

From the founding of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, two ideational currents emerged on the far right of the political spectrum. The first was the concept of integral Yugoslavism, embodied in the bold Organization of Yugoslav Nationalists (Organizacija Jugoslavenskih Nacionalista, ORJUNA), which emerged from the ranks of Yugoslav nationalists on the Adriatic Coast and was, as such, undoubtedly influenced by Italian fascism.⁶ The second, ideologically much less distinct current was made up of numerous "tribal" organizations, such as the Serbian National Youth and the Croatian National Youth.⁷ Besides them, the social life of the newly formed Kingdom also included many patriotic and seemingly apolitical organizations, such as the People's Defense, Adriatic Guard, Soko, veteran associations, etc.⁸ These organizations were not only bitterly at odds with communist and left-wing movements and national minority organizations but also fought amongst themselves. Some were more tools in the hands of influential politicians or parties deployed against enemies in showdowns than autonomous organizations. The Kingdom's political life was fraught with ethnic debates, social discontent and instability. The energetic King Alexander felt that the only way out of this crisis was to introduce a dictatorship. Euphemistically dubbed the "period of the monarch's personal regime," the dictatorship was proclaimed on 6 January 1929. All political parties and all cultural and patriotic associations with a national hallmark were dissolved. The highly influential general Petar Živković was appointed Prime Minister. Many prominent opposition

⁶ Ivan Bošković, *Orjuna: ideologija i književnost* (Zagreb: Hrvatska sveučilišna naklada, 2006); Branislav Gligorijević, "Organizacija jugoslovenskih nacionalista (Orjuna)," *Istorija XX veka: zbornik radova*, 5 (1963): 315–393. Vasilije Dragosavljević, *Ideje fašizma u Kraljevini SHS: Organizacija jugoslovenskih nacionalista* (Beograd: Odbrana, 2020).

⁷ Branislav Gligorijević, "Osobenosti fašizma u Jugoslaviji dvadesetih godina," *Marksistička misao*, br. 3 (1986): 32–44.

⁸ Norka Makiedo-Mladinić, *Jadranska straža 1922-1941* (Zagreb: Dom i svijet, 2005); Nikola Žutić, *Sokoli: ideologija u fizičkoj kulturi Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1929–1941* (Beograd: Angortrade, 1991); Branko Jevtić, *Istorija četništva* (Ruma: Panonija, 2017).

leaders were sent to prison or forced into exile.⁹ Integral Yugoslavism became the dominant ideology, but the blanket ban on political activity included even some of its staunchest proponents, such as the Organization of Yugoslav Nationalists.¹⁰

Given that the regime adopted many postulates of the far right from the previous period, little room was left for radical right-wing action beyond the political system. From the end of 1929, admittedly, associations and organizations that promoted integral Yugoslavism began to crop up (Zveza slovenskih vojakov/Slovene Soldier Association, Yugoslav Action). The non-parliamentary system proved unsustainable, and the first elections in the new political situation were held in November 1931. All candidates had to be pre-approved by the government, so the elections were *de facto* one-party, although formally no parties existed. Numerous dissidents from erstwhile parties, which were still banned, became MPs, as did a number of younger people, enthusiastic supporters of the King's manifest and the course of integral Yugoslavism.¹¹ Soon, they were used to establish the only allowed political party in the country, called the Yugoslav Radical Peasant Democracy (Jugoslovenska radikalna seljačka demokratija – JRSĐ).¹² Shortly after this party was founded, political frictions resurfaced once more but were put down by the state's repressive power.¹³ Expectedly, the Croats were the first to rebel, but they were followed by the so-called "children of 6

⁹ Many opposition figures of various political views, ranging from the future *Ustaša* leader Ante Pavelić to the King's formerly close associate and minister, Svetozar Pribičević, left the country. See Ivana Dobrivojević, *Državna represija u doba diktature kralja Aleksandra* (Beograd: ISI, 2006).

¹⁰ Ivana Dobrivojević, *Državna represija u doba diktature kralja Aleksandra*; Branislav Gligorijević, "Osnove i karakter ličnog režima kralja Aleksandra Karadjordjevića," *Srpska politička misao*, br. 1 (1995): 27–48. Ljubodrag Dimić, *Kulturna politika Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1–3* (Beograd: Stubovi kulture, 1997).

¹¹ *Statistički godišnjak 1934/1935* (Beograd: Opšta državna statistika, 1936), 436–437; Čulinović, *Jugoslavija između dva rata*, 42.

¹² Todor Stojkov, *Opozicija u vreme šestojanuarske diktature* (Beograd: ISI, 1969), 134–135; Dragoljub Jovanović, *Političke uspomene*, knj. 2 (Beograd: Arhiv Jugoslavije, 1997), 222.

¹³ AJ, 38-351-499, Anonim, "Organizacija novih stranaka u Jugoslaviji," *Amerikanski Srbobran*, 3. o4. 1932; Todor Stojkov, *Opozicija u vreme šestojanuarske diktature*, 138; Čulinović, *Jugoslavija između dva rata*, 54.

January," a group of enthusiastic supporters of integral Yugoslavism who were supposed to be the lynchpin of the new order.¹⁴ The cause of their discontent was the return of the heads of banned parties to the country's leadership after the unpopular Živković was replaced by the former Democratic Party member Vojislav Marinković, as well as the softening of the iron-fist regime and the concessions made to the "separatists." In late 1931 and early 1932, a group of more than 150 MPs began meeting at the Belgrade hotel Bristol. Their informal leader was Svetislav Hodjera, General Živković's former chief of staff.¹⁵

Known as the "Bristol Action," they began to pressure the government from within, although the disagreements between the "young" and the "old" remained behind the scenes.¹⁶ The political course of a "faster pace of relaxing limitations to allow groups in the non-parliamentary opposition to organize themselves and work," implemented by Vojislav Marinković's cabinet, was sharply criticized.¹⁷ To many witnesses, it seemed that the still highly influential Živković was pulling the strings in the "Bristol Action." The pressure bore fruit and the government fell. The new cabinet, led by the former Radical Party member Milan Srškić, took a far more oppressive attitude toward the non-parliamentary opposition, which was becoming increasingly daring.¹⁸ In this situation, the regime had to alleviate the MPs' growing dissatisfaction, and the leaders of the "Bristolians" were invited for talks with the government. The epilogue was that the vast majority of the discontent MPs managed to find a common ground with the government and returned to its ranks, but a small group of ten MPs, led by Svetislav

¹⁴ Čulinović, *Jugoslavija između dva rata*, 50.

¹⁵ AJ, Yugoslav People's Party – „Borbashi” (Jugoslovenska narodna stranka – „Borbaši”), Collection no. 307, box. 2, Gentlemen and dear friends; Stojkov, *Opozicija u vreme šestojanuarske diktature*, 139.

¹⁶ AJ, 38-665, Anonim, "Veliki politički zbor u Lebanu," *Vreme*, 17. 02. 1932; AJ, 307, 2, Political situation.

¹⁷ Stojkov, *Opozicija u vreme šestojanuarske diktature*, 140–142.

¹⁸ Stojkov, *Opozicija u vreme šestojanuarske diktature*; Dobrivojević, *Državna represija u doba diktature kralja Aleksandra*; Ljubo Boban, "Zagrebačke punktacije," *Istorija 20. veka: zbornik radova 4* (1962): 309–366; Ljubo Boban, *Maček i politika Hrvatske seljačke stranke 1928-1941: iz povijesti hrvatskog pitanja*, 2 vols (Zagreb: Liber, 1974).

Hodjera, retained its uncompromising position.¹⁹ In November 1932, they formed the People's Caucus,²⁰ which would eventually become the heart of the future Yugoslav People's Party. The "Bristol Action" proved a passing phase, a large yet diffuse movement of staunch proponents of integral Yugoslavism dissatisfied with their share in power. They did not condemn the regime's ideology but its protagonists, seeing them as unworthy of leading the country. Their primary objective was to exert political pressure to ensure a larger share of power,²¹ and hence the group crumbled at the first obstacle.

Svetislav Hodjera surrounded himself with its most radical members and began the process of founding a party that would oppose the regime of JRSD. Most of his comrades were Serbs, but there were a few Croats among them, too. Taking advantage of their status as MPs, they filed numerous (153) interpellations, criticizing the government's moves to attract public attention.²² They shrewdly took advantage of the fact that there was no other lawful opposition group and began to attract some of the discontent people. Many critics saw them as "puppet," "fake" or "loyal" opposition to the government and believed that the regime wanted them to push opposition voters away from non-parliamentary parties.²³

The Yugoslav People's Party was officially founded in May 1933.²⁴ In terms of its structure and methods, the party was not that different from other organizations. It had a main and executive board, as well as local and county committees.²⁵ At the First Congress, held on 25 No-

¹⁹ AJ, 307, 2, Political situation; Gentlemen and dear friends.

²⁰ AJ, 38-665, Anonim, "Istup iz zastupničkog kluba JRSD," *Obzor*, 14. 11. 1932.

²¹ Stojkov, *Opozicija u vreme šestojanuarske diktature*, 141.

²² AJ, 38-351-499, Anonim, "Stranke u Jugoslaviji," *Sloga*, 5. 08. 1933; AJ, 307, 2, Anonim, "Kongres Jugoslovenske narodne stranke," *Politika*, 26. 11. 1934.

²³ Jovanović, *Političke uspomene*, knj. 3, 32.

²⁴ AJ, 307, 1, *Proglas, program, statuti i uput za opštinske izbore* (Beograd: JNS, 1933), 16-17; Svetislav Hodjera to a minister, 6 October 1933; Organizational manual, 1933; *Borba za slobodu, pravo i jednakost svih Jugoslovena*, 3. 06. 1933; *Spomenica borbaša* (Beograd: JNS, 1938); Bogumil Hrabak, "Jugoslovenska narodna stranka 1935. i 1936. godine," *Novopazarski zbornik*, br. 31 (2008): 79.

²⁵ AJ, 307, 1, *Proglas, program, statuti i uput za opštinske izbore* (Beograd: JNS, 1933), 47-48; List of Members of the Executive Committee; List of Members of the Main Committee.

vember 1934, Svetislav Hodjera was elected president of the party, and Stjepan Bačić, Živan Lukić and Ivo Potakar became its vice-presidents. By appointing a Serb, Croat and Slovene, the party wanted to underscore Yugoslavism as one of its principles.²⁶ Judging by the number of organizations in the field, it seems to have been most popular in the Dunavska, Moravska and Savska *banovinas* (banates).²⁷ The main party organ was the journal *Borba za slobodu, pravo i jednakost svih Jugoslovena* (Struggle for the Freedom, Rights and Equality of All Yugoslavs), and the party's members came to be known as "Borbaši" after the paper's name.²⁸ Besides fostering the cult of struggle, by emphasizing the name "Borbaši", the party underlined its distinction from JRSD, renamed the Yugoslav National Party. Its seat was in Belgrade.

During 1934, as the party was being formed, the debates about relaxing the iron-fist approach and gradually liberalizing the country's political life continued. In their speeches, the party's leaders opposed these tendencies and sharply criticized the new election law, seeing it as too lenient toward the "separatists" and the non-parliamentary opposition.²⁹ In parallel with "defending" the manifest of the dictatorship, the party implemented its organization in the field, introducing a system of ten-strong and fifty-strong units. Borrowing from local military terminology, members were organized into squads with ten people headed by a squad leader (Sr. *desetar*, with *deset* meaning ten), and five squads made up a *pedesetina* headed by a five-squad leader, i.e.,

²⁶ AJ, 307, 2, Anonim, "Prvi kongres Jugoslovenske narodne stranke," *Vreme*, 26. 11. 1934.

²⁷ AJ, 307, 1, Main Committee to the Minister of the Interior, Živojin Lazić, 24 January 1934; AJ, 38-352, Anonim, "Ozvaničenje Jugoslovenske narodne stranke," *Pravda*, 26. 01. 1934; Anonim, "Političke bilješke," *Obzor*, 27. 01. 1934.

²⁸ AJ, 38-352-500, Anonim, "Proglas članova Jugoslovenske narodne stranke," *Politika*, 26. 02. 1934; Milica Kisić and Branka Bulatović, *Srpska štampa 1768-1995*, (Beograd: Medija centar, 1996), 292; Vuk Dragović, *Srpska štampa između dva rata* (Beograd: SANU, 1956), 43-44.

²⁹ AJ, 307, 2, Honorable members of the National Assembly; Svetislav Hodjera's Speech at the National Assembly, 7 February 1933; Svetislav Hodjer's Speech at the 57th Session of the National Assembly; *Stenografske beleške narodne skupštine Kraljevine Jugoslavije* (Beograd: b. i., 1933), 78-98.

pedesetar.³⁰ Internal-use documents reveal that the party saw this task as the “most important matter” and that, on the other hand, this method made the organization of its membership much slower than the leadership hoped.³¹ Their electoral campaign underscored the economic exploitation of the peasantry and the poor and criticized ubiquitous corruption and the vast power in the hands of large industrialists, bankers and landowners, inviting the common people to put up resistance and fight for their “rights, freedom and equality.”³²

King Alexander was killed on 9 October 1934 in Marseille by Croatian and Bulgarian emigrants.³³ The assassination of the king, the undisputed authority in the country, led to a power vacuum, as his son and heir Peter II was still underage. The king’s cousin, Prince Paul, emerged as the most influential actor, and he also headed the council of regents. The political crisis in the country resulted in the appointment of Foreign Minister, Bogoljub Jevtić, as Prime Minister, the amnesty of political detainees and a new round of parliamentary elections. The new elections were met with great optimism among the “Borbaši,” who believed that they could win many opposition votes. However, due to procedural reasons, the court of cassation rejected their electoral list.³⁴ Svetislav Hodjera appealed to the Justice Minister and Prince Paul, asking him to let them run in the elections and claiming that theirs was the only party that held “the monarchy, national unity and the state union sacred” and that “patriotism and nationalism were the most pronounced characteristics of its members.”³⁵ Regardless, they were not allowed to run in the elections. Resentful of the government’s

³⁰ AJ, 307, 1, Yugoslav People’s Party Membership Card; AJ, 307, 2, Pedesetar Identification Card; AJ, 307, 1, *Proglas, program, statuti i uput za opštinske izbore* (Beograd: JNS, 1933), 44; *Spomenica borbaša* (Beograd: JNS, 1938).

³¹ AJ, 307, 1, For expediated organization, 24 December 1934; To all Yugoslav People’s Party’s Activists and Organisations, 15 November 1935.

³² AJ, 307, 2, Programatic speech; AJ, 38-352-500, Anonim, “Za narodna seljačka prava,” *Jedinstvo*, 17. 2. 1934; AJ, 38-352-500, Anonim, “U borbi za narod,” *Jedinstvo*, 13. 01. 1934.

³³ Ivan Miladinović, *Kada govori mrtav kralj: politička pozadina atentata na kralja Aleksandra u svetlu novih i starih činjenica* (Beograd: Jasen/Novosti, 2019).

³⁴ AJ, 307, 1, Your Royal Highness; *Politika*, 22. 04. 1935.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

decision, the "Borbaši" called on their supporters to vote for the most prominent opposition list, led by Vladimir Maček, which included the most important Croatian political party, the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS), and a number of Serbian democratic parties.³⁶ Paradoxically, this was precisely the group that the Yugoslav People's Party had tirelessly criticized and accused of separatist and anti-state aspirations.

At the elections held on 5 May 1935, the government's electoral list won around 60% of votes and the opposition 37%. However, due to the electoral law, the government won 304 seats and the opposition just 64.³⁷ The "Borbaši" believed that they were the most deserving for the opposition's success, claiming that they had contributed with 50% of the votes.³⁸ Although certainly exaggerated, these claims were not entirely unfounded. Local-level research has shown that the "Borbaši" were responsible for the opposition's success in some counties in Serbia.³⁹ Even their great opponent, the left-wing leader of the People's Peasant Party, Dragoljub Jovanović, acknowledged that.⁴⁰ The post-election period was marked by large-scale changes that prompted the party's leadership to reassess their position in the changing political landscape of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. For the first time after 1931, the Yugoslav National Party, until then the main target of their criticism, was no longer in power – it had been replaced by the newly formed Yugoslav Radical Union and its leader Milan Stojadinović.⁴¹

³⁶ AJ, 307, 1, Executive Committee Resolution, 24 April 1935; Stojkov, *Opozicija u vreme šestojanuarske diktature*, 303.

³⁷ AJ, Royal Court (Kraljev Dvor), Collection no. 74, box. 12, Electoral Results, 5 May 1935; Stojkov, *Opozicija u vreme šestojanuarske diktature*, 311.

³⁸ AJ, 38-665, Anonim, "Uspeo zbor borbaša u Kruševcu na kojem je govorio naš vođa Svetislav Hodjera," *Napred Borbaši*, 29. 3. 1936.

³⁹ AJ, Milan Stojadinović Collection (Zbirka Milana Stojadinovića), Collection no. 37, 37-53-335, Paja Jovanović to Milan Stojadinović, undated; Borivoje Perić, *Moravska svitanja: hronika opštine Velika Plana* (Velika Plana: Opštinski odbor SUBNOR-a, 1986), 108; Dragoljub Jovanović, *Političke uspomene*, knj. 3, 132.

⁴⁰ IAB, Collection of Materials on the Revolutionary Movement in Belgrade (Zbirka gradje o Revolucionarnom pokretu grada Beograda), Collection no. 1883, doc. No. I-15, Excerpts from the Report of the Belgrade Police, 30 July 1936.

⁴¹ Bojan Simić, *Propaganda Milana Stojadinovića* (Beograd: INIS, 2007), 31; Dragan Tešić, *Jugoslovenska radikalna zajednica u Srbiji 1935-1939* (Beograd: ISI, 1997); Todor Stojkov, *Vlada Milana Stojadinovića* (Beograd: ISI, 1985).

The new regime quietly abandoned the policy of integral Yugoslavism, opting instead for a much more pragmatic course.

In this situation, voices of dissent grew louder and louder, claiming that all movements that supported integral Yugoslavism should unite to defend the “legacy of King Alexander” from the separatists, the opposition and the ruling regime. Over the following two years, the Yugoslav press kept reporting that the creation of a “national front” that would include the Yugoslav People’s Party, Yugoslav National Party, Yugoslav National Movement ZBOR and the Yugoslav Caucus was near. There are contradictory testimonies on who initiated this rapprochement.⁴² Some believed that it was Dimitrije Ljotić, some that it was Svetislav Hodjera, and it also seems possible that the initiative came from the palace and the entourage of Radenko Stanković, a member of the council of regents.⁴³ From December 1935, the abovementioned groups held secret talks about their unification but no agreement was made due to frictions about leadership.⁴⁴ In public, however, the “Borbaši” claimed in their party organs that they were not involved in any talks and that the creation of a national front would be damaging.⁴⁵ They said that they were only aware of the “division of citizens into economic exploiters and the exploited, which splits them into those who do nothing and have everything and those who spend their whole lives working but can never acquire anything.”⁴⁶ Even the mediation of the influential regency council member Radenko Stanković failed to result in cooperation. However, the party was fraught with disunity

⁴² AJ, 38-665, Anonim, “Politički položaj,” *Obzor*, 24. 08. 1935.

⁴³ AJ, 307, 2, Electoral Programme; AJ, 37-9-48, Belgrade Police Report, 25 December 1935; Belgrade Police Report, 16 July 1936; Mladen Stefanović, *Zbor Dimitrija Ljotića* (Beograd: Narodna knjiga, 1984), 47; *Istorija gradjanskih stranaka u Jugoslaviji 1918-1945* (Beograd: ISI, 2008), 365; Bogumil Hrabak, “Jugoslovenska narodna stranka 1935. i 1936. godine,” 75.

⁴⁴ AJ, 37-9-48, Belgrade Police Report, 25 December 1935; AJ, 38-665, Anonim, „U znaku razbistravanja,” *Vreme*, 05. 07. 1936.

⁴⁵ AJ, 307, 2, Borbaši and the National Front, 20 June 1936; AJ, 38-665, Anonim, “Hodjerina stranka ne ulazi u Nacionalnu frontu,” *Jutarnji list*, 2. 07. 1936; AJ, 38-665, Anonim, “Borbaši neće da saradjuju ni sa jednom drugom strankom,” *Politika*, 20. 07. 1936.

⁴⁶ AJ, 307, 2, Everything needs to be adjusted to the prices of agricultural products!

because some members headed by the party secretary Miloš Dragović favored unification. These dissidents were expelled from the party at a session of the Executive Board in July 1936.⁴⁷ The expelled members returned to the Yugoslav National Party, accusing Svetislav Hodjera of having "sold his soul" to Milan Stojadinović and betrayed the party's principles.⁴⁸ The "Borbaši" were also losing members, particularly in Vojvodina, with most of them joining the more radical Yugoslav People's Movement ZBOR.⁴⁹ Although the question of a national front was still open in 1937,⁵⁰ after removing its supporters, the party decided to continue on its own.

The failure of the "national front" project meant that the party now faced a very challenging task. It had to push the party program into the foreground and build a clear ideological framework that would set it apart from similar groups on the right side of the Yugoslav political spectrum. A large part of the public opinion felt that there was no distinction among the "cartels of the right" and that their programs were the same. To distinguish itself from its rivals, the party in 1936 focused on formulating its own ideology and the "Borbaši" view of contemporary problems. Later, the anonymous author of a report of the Directorate for State Security on the political parties in the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia branded their program "the worst piece of hogwash and demagoguery, a compilation of every imaginable trope and phrase."⁵¹

⁴⁷ AJ, 38-665, Anonim, "Borbaši odbijaju saradnju sa JNS," *Politika*, 13. 07. 1936; Anonim, "Križa Hodjerine stranke," *Hrvatski list*, 17. 07. 1936; Anonim, "Kraj jednog diktatora," *Jugoslovenska zastava*, 16. 07. 1936; Anonim, "Un confit dans le parti populaire yougoslave," *La Bulgarie*, 16. 07. 1936; Anonim, "Borba medju borbašima," *Pravda*, 17. 07. 1936; Anonim, "Po JNS se politika uvek vodi na kapidžiku i u mraku," *Vreme*, 20. 07. 1936.

⁴⁸ AJ, 37-9-48, Belgrade Police Report, 16 July 1936; Belgrade Police Report, 26 July 1936; AJ, 37-9-52, Dimitrije Grujičić Report, 21 April 1937; AJ, 307, 2, Anonim, "Jedinstvo o Milošu Dragoviću," *Borba za slobodu, pravo i jednakost svih Jugoslovena*, 10. 09. 1936; AJ, 307, 2, Leaflet by Miloš Dragović, 28 July 1936.

⁴⁹ AJ, 37-9-48, Belgrade Police Report, 16 July 1936.

⁵⁰ AJ, 307, 1, To the editorial board of *Pravda*, 19 May 1937; AJ, 38-351-499, Anonim, "G. Janko Baričević o nacionalnom frontu," *Vreme*, 18. 05. 1937; Anonim, "Politička situacija," *Politika*, 18. 05. 1937; Stefanović, *Zbor Dimitrija Ljotića*, 49; *Istorija građanskih stranaka u Jugoslaviji*, knj. 1, 366.

⁵¹ *Istorija građanskih stranaka u Jugoslaviji*, knj. 1, 364.

Similarly, drawing on August Thalheimer's theory of fascism, the Croatian left-wing author Josip Beker saw their program as a reflection of the "muddled" *Zeitgeist*. In his opinion, the "Borbaši" claimed to represent the interests of all classes, from peasants to bankers, incorporating even socialist mottos, but that was, Beker felt, "just empty bourgeois talk."⁵²

And yet, the view that the "Borbaši" ideology was fascist was already becoming prevalent among the public. At the first glance, there was plenty of evidence for such an opinion. From 1934, the party had used the slogan "One king, one people, one state," seemingly mimicking the infamous Nazi motto "Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer" [One people, one realm, one leader].⁵³ This slogan had appeared in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes already in 1918, long before the Nazis' rise to power. The "Borbaši" did not invent it nor were they the only ones who used it.⁵⁴ "One king, one people, one state" was also the slogan of Milan Stojadinović's electoral list at the elections of 1938.⁵⁵ From 1935, members wearing blue shirts began to attend the party's meetings. From the inception of the party, blue was the color of its leaflets, posters and banners, which, besides the country's tricolor flag, also bore a blue ribbon with the party motto "Struggle for freedom, rights and equality." They began to be known as the "Blue Shirts."⁵⁶ The party program did not officially proscribe wearing uniforms, and the blue shirts seem to have spontaneously become customary for some of the most "battle-ready" members tasked with maintaining order on their meetings.⁵⁷ Although the "Borbaši" claimed that "fascism was not re-

⁵² Josip Beker, *Socijalizam ili fašizam?* (Zagreb: Naš front, 1936), 14.

⁵³ AJ, 38-352-500, Anonim, "Proglas članova Jugoslovenske narodne stranke," *Politika*, 26. 02. 1934.

⁵⁴ Ljubodrag Dimić, *Kulturna politika Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, 263; Božidar Jezer-
nik, *Jugoslavija, zemlja snova* (Beograd: XX vek, 2018), 267; Martin Mayer, *Elementärbildung in Jugoslawien (1918-1941)* (München: Oldenburg Verlag, 1995), 60.

⁵⁵ Simić, *Propaganda Vlade Milana Stojadinovića*, 300.

⁵⁶ Anonim, "Yugoslav Blue Shirts Start Reform Drive," *The News Journal*, 30. 10. 1935.

⁵⁷ AJ, 38-352-500, Anonim, "Veliki zbor borbaša u Jagodini," *Napred Borbaši*, 26. 04. 1936; AJ, 307, 2, The People had rightfully Expected!

flected in shirts but in programs" and that their program was not fascist in nature, the party uniforms brought more damage than benefit.⁵⁸ Under a barrage of criticism, the practice of wearing blue shirts was quietly abandoned in 1936/1937.⁵⁹ Another similarity with fascism, many observers thought, was their tendency to resort to physical violence. Any attempts to disrupt their meetings were met with violence, and the party organs proudly reported that the provocateurs "left with bloody heads and bruises on their backs."⁶⁰ Sometimes the "Borbaši" made organized attacks against their political opponents. At a meeting of the United Opposition in Sanski Most in 1935, the "Borbaši" attacked the speakers, who were forced to flee by jumping into a nearby river.⁶¹ Nevertheless, their violent behavior never became systemic and was nowhere near the terror of the Italian fascists.

A cult of personality was carefully created around the party leader, Svetislav Hodjera. Hodjera was consistently called the "Leader" although the party nomenclature recognized no other function but president of the party.⁶² Besides the epithet "Leader," other phrases were used to describe him, such as "protector of the poor," "new Stambolijski," "dear leader and duke," etc.⁶³ Poems and short stories were written in his honor and used as party propaganda. Hodjera was considered the architect of the "Borbaši" program, the greatest fighter and victim, who had managed to overcome "thorns and stones and fire and storm" and

⁵⁸ AJ, 307, 2, Borbaši and the Blue Shirts.

⁵⁹ AJ, 38-665, Anonim, "Kraj jednog diktatora," *Jugoslovenska zastava*, 16. 07. 1936.

⁶⁰ AJ, 38-352-500, Anonim, "Veliki zbor borbaša u Jagodini," *Napred Borbaši*, 26. 04. 1936.

⁶¹ AJ, 307, 2, Anonim, "Provokatori," *Borba za slobodu, pravo i jednakost svih Jugoslovena*, 18. 10. 1935.

⁶² The practice of referring to the head of the party as "leader" was common in many political organizations in the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia. It was also used for Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović and the opposition leader Vladimir Maček. See Simić, *Propaganda Milana Stojadinovića*; Željko Karaula, "Naš vodja – stvaranje kulta Vlatka Mačeka," in *110 godina Hrvatske seljačke stranke* (Zagreb: Matica hrvatska, 2015), 149–164.

⁶³ AJ, 307, 2, To the Borbaši of the Paraćin County; The Borbaši song by Ljuba Novaković; Jovo T. Smiljanić, Three Songs and stories about Svetislav Hodjera, the leader of the Borbaši.

become the “brother and father of all Borbaši.”⁶⁴ Once the rest of the people realize his greatness, “then [he] will be the leader, ideal and idol of the entire nation.”⁶⁵ There are also other ideological aspects that can be found in both fascism and the ideology of the interwar Yugoslav right. For instance, the “Borbaši” contrasted the honest, poor peasantry with “urban scum” and claimed that the rural population had immediately embraced them, unlike the inhabitants of towns and cities.⁶⁶ At the same time, there was a degree of anti-intellectualism coupled with glorifying action and deeds. They wrote with disdain of their opponents caught up in intellectual debates and phrases, claiming they did not have “the courage to stand on the frontlines for the defense of the people’s rights and freedom.”⁶⁷ They insisted that the struggle must be fought and not negotiated and that a nation cannot be forged “sitting at a green-cloth table, in talks, negotiations or agreements.”⁶⁸

However, a closer look at the movement’s ideology reveals that it was far from a rounded and fascist one. As much as they claimed that their program was the “Scripture” for their members,⁶⁹ they attracted supporters with the edge and simplicity of their propaganda rather than any distinct ideology. Their opponents noted that they had “sharper slogans than the Agrarian or Democratic Party” and that this was the reason that people followed them.⁷⁰ Indeed, their slogans were short and simple, such as “the gallows for the corrupt,” “unity of the fatherland above all,” and “only those who have it good are against Borbaši.”⁷¹ Their propaganda primarily used socially themed slogans, on which the party insisted. The party’s program was almost exclusively devoted to economic matters and specific measures that the “Borbaši” advocated. Unlike ZBOR, the party did not focus on “high” politics, and

⁶⁴ AJ, 307, 2, Oskar Tartalja, “Hodjera! Hodjera! Hodjera!,” *Spomenica borbaša*.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ *Rasinski borbaš*, 21. 07. 1935; AJ, 307, 2, *Borba za slobodu, pravo i jednakost svih Jugoslovena*, 18. 10. 1935; *Spomenica borbaša*.

⁶⁷ AJ, 307, 2, To the Borbaši and all Voters!

⁶⁸ AJ, 307, 1, Executive Committee Meeting, 15 September 1940.

⁶⁹ V. Puljević, “Ideologija borbaša,” *Spomenica borbaša*, 22.

⁷⁰ Dragoljub Jovanović, *Političke uspomene* 3, 249.

⁷¹ AJ, 307, 2, Vote for the Borbaši!; *Spomenica borbaša*.

hence fewer classic ideological texts have survived. Instead, they offered concrete suggestions for a system reform that would allow a "policy of [earning] bread and working and protection of the weakest."⁷² The program included introducing secret ballot, de-politization of public service, broader municipal self-government, reducing taxes, abolishing the land tax and progressive taxation.⁷³ They advocated stricter control of capital, banning monopoly and cartels, the death penalty for corruption crimes, gradual elimination of foreign capital and reducing imports.⁷⁴ Although they wanted the state to play a larger role in the economy, they did not deny the existence of private property and private initiatives. In addition, they also claimed that their program rested on the principle of "class cooperation rather than class struggle."⁷⁵ Although they accepted the division into exploiters and the exploited, they believed that "social justice" could be attained through more decisive state intervention and encouraging traditional cooperatives. Although observers tended to see this as a modified corporatist program, the "Borbaši" emphasized that "a state has to be governed by lawfulness, order and discipline, but [that] this does not preclude a fully democratic system."⁷⁶

The main postulate of fascism, according to the "new consensus" in fascism studies, the palingenetic myth, is completely absent from the movement's ideology. Although the "Borbaši" claimed that they wanted a "generation change and to introduce new, young forces, new mottos and a new *modus operandi*," they did not advocate radical reform or rebirth of the nation.⁷⁷ Instead of the revolutionary remaking of a new man, their aim was a return to the state of affairs in 1929 and after the king's coup d'état. Paradoxically, they professed to be in favor of "complete freedom and democratic parliamentarism" and argued that

⁷² AJ, 307, 1, *Program Jugoslovenske narodne stranke* (Novi Sad: JNS, 1936).

⁷³ AJ, 307, 1, *Program Jugoslovenske narodne stranke*; AJ, 307, 2, Ljuba Stojković, the Land Tax.

⁷⁴ Perić, *Moravska svitanja*, 107.

⁷⁵ AJ, 307, 2, Anonim, "Socijalna politika borbaša," *Spomenica borbaša*.

⁷⁶ AJ, 307, 2, Gentlemen and dear Friends.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

they had nothing to do with either fascism or Hitlerism.⁷⁸ They said that fascism meant war and that their ideal was “French parliamentarism.” Trying to reconcile their idealization of the king’s personal regime with the democratic aspirations that the party professed to have, they claimed they were in favor of “discipline on a democratic basis.”⁷⁹ At the party meetings, the crowds sometimes chanted “down with fascism” and were attacked as opponents of fascism.⁸⁰ Another difference from fascists was their idealization of the French Revolution.⁸¹

Besides the absence of the palingenetic impulse, a lack of the usual fascist negations is also apparent (anti-liberalism, anti-communism, anti-semitism). Despite underlining democracy and parliamentarism, the “Borbaši” were not particularly concerned with the threat of communism. In his speeches in the parliament, Svetislav Hodjera equally criticized communism and the democratic “separatist opposition” as potential threats to the state.⁸² Regardless, he also criticized the way in which the Communist Party of Yugoslavia had been banned in 1920, arguing that those who banned it “had left many heavy blows on the people’s back.”⁸³ The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was one of the few countries that did not recognize the Soviet Union, but the “Borbaši” were the only integral Yugoslav party that openly called for resuming relations with “fraternal Slavic Russia,” which could be quite dangerous.⁸⁴ At the same time, statements were issued to the effect that their program was “left-wing” and that the “Borbaši” were a “far-left” party.⁸⁵ They were also one of the few political groups that advocated women’s suffrage

⁷⁸ AJ, 307, 1, *Bilten JNS*, br. 8, 5. 06. 1937.

⁷⁹ AJ, 307, 2, Political Situation.

⁸⁰ AJ, 38-352-500, Anonim, “Borbaši su u Kruševcu održali zbor,” *Politika*, 23. 03. 1936; AJ, 307, 2, Political Situation; Question no. 1; *Bilten JNS*, br. 8, 5. 06. 1937; People, take the Reigns of Politics into Your Hands!; *Borba za slobodu, pravo i jednakost svih Jugoslovena*, 23. 11. 1935.

⁸¹ AJ, 307, 2, Borbaši and the Blue Shirts; The People had rightfully Expected; Mobilization Rally!

⁸² AJ, 307, 2, To the Members of the National Assembly.

⁸³ AJ, 38-352-500, Anonim, “Narod u borbi za život,” *Jedinstvo*, 21. 03. 1936.

⁸⁴ AJ, 307, 1, Main Committee Meeting, 4 June 1935.

⁸⁵ AJ, 307, 1, The People Wonder from Time to Time; AJ, 307, 2, *Borba za slobodu, pravo i jednakost svih Jugoslovena*, 23. 11. 1935; AJ, 38-665, Anonim, “Kraj jednog diktatora,” *Jugoslovenska zastava*, 16. 07. 1936.

and whose meetings featured female speakers.⁸⁶ Socialist historiography saw these statements and their focus on social matters as a trick of the regime intended to lure away the working-class masses from the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and the workers' movement.⁸⁷

Unlike the Yugoslav People's Movement ZBOR, in whose ideology anti-semitism featured heavily, there was none of it among the "Borbaši." The "Jewish question" was not mentioned in the party press nor were there any statements about a "Jewish conspiracy." There was a degree of economic xenophobia directed against foreign capital and workers from abroad, with "Hungarian Jews" mentioned in that context. Local Jews and other national minorities "have for centuries shared our fate and we should see them as brothers, which they are in essence."⁸⁸ The party went to great lengths to involve national minorities in its work, portraying this as the pinnacle of "national work" and encouraging national unity.⁸⁹ The "Borbaši" proudly claimed that no other political organization had so successfully managed to attract national minorities. Germans most commonly spoke at their meetings, but there were also Hungarians, Slovaks and Wallachians.⁹⁰

Applying Stanley Payne's theoretical model, the "Borbaši" clearly belong on the far-right rather than among fascists. Wedged between the fascists and the conservatives, they represent a hybrid political group that can, from one country to another, veer closer to one of the poles. More conservative than the fascists and unwilling to accept the "societal, economic and cultural change demanded by fascism," they

⁸⁶ AJ, 307, 2, *Spomenica borbaša*; AJ, 38-665, Anonim, "Veliki zbor Jugoslovenske narodne stranke u Odžacima," *Dan*, 17. 03. 1936; AJ, 38-352-500, Anonim, "Veliki zbor borbaša u Jagodini," *Napred Borbaši*, 26. 04. 1936.

⁸⁷ *Istorija gradjanskih političkih stranaka*, knj. 1, 365; Perić, *Moravska svitanja*, 108; Čulinović, *Jugoslavija između dva rata*, 39.

⁸⁸ AJ, 307, 2, Andra Popović, "Jugoslavija," *Spomenica borbaša*.

⁸⁹ AJ, 307, 1, Letter from Svetislav Hodjera to Milan Stojadinović, undated, circa 1936.

⁹⁰ AJ, 38-665, Anonim, "U Odžacima održan je zbor borbaša na kome je govorio g. Hodjera," *Politika*, 17. 03. 1936; Anonim, "Veliki zbor Jugoslovenske narodne stranke u Odžacima," *Dan*, 17. 03. 1936; AJ, 38-352-500, Anonim, "Borbaši su u Staroj Pazovi održali zbor," *Politika*, 27. 04. 1936; Dragoljub Jovanović, *Medaljoni*, knj. 3 (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2008), 431.



*Светислав Хођера као резервни ка-
петан за време светског рата —
1915 године у Албанији*
*Svetislav Hodjera kao rezervni kape-
tan za vreme svetskog rata — 1915
godine u Albaniji.*

Svetislav Hodjera during the First World War, 1915
(Courtesy of the Archives of Yugoslavia, fond The Yugoslav People's Party "Borbaši", 307)



Borbaši leadership, 1938
(Courtesy of the Archives of Yugoslavia,
Spomenica borbaša, Belgrade: JNS, 1938)



Borbaši identification card, 1935

(Courtesy of the Archives of Yugoslavia, fond The Yugoslav People's Party "Borbaši" 307)



Svetislav Hodjera depicted as Mussolini's clone in the leftist satirical journal *Ošišani Jež* (Courtesy of the National Library of Serbia, journal *Ošišani jež*, 20. 4. 1935)

were happy to accept "reorganized monarchism." Although not radical enough in terms of their ideology, in practice, they were as or even more violent than the fascists.⁹¹ The Yugoslav People's Party was wedged between the ruling conservative party (Yugoslav National Party or Yugoslav Radical Union) and the fascist opposition (Yugoslav National Movement ZBOR). Failing to clearly distinguish itself between the two poles, it meandered on its course, making contradictory decisions that even its own members struggled to understand.

* * *

The first test of the party's strength, in the new circumstances, was the municipal elections in 1936.⁹² Those were the first elections in which the Yugoslav People's Party ran on its own. Hence they were given a lot of attention, and the members were encouraged to get as involved as possible in the election process.⁹³ Great efforts were made to increase the number of organizations in the field, but the "Borbaši" were under immense pressure from the regime.⁹⁴ Positioning themselves as the only party representing the interests of the "common people" and not the "fat, rich gentlemen from Belgrade and Zagreb," the "Borbaši" tried to win over as many discontent voters as possible.⁹⁵ At these elections, the party's result was nowhere near Svetislav Hodjera's optimistic prognosis of one million votes,⁹⁶ but still enough to be the third strongest stand-alone party with 45,000 votes and 68 municipalities. They were most successful in the Moravska and Dunavska *banovinas*.⁹⁷ Having come to power for the first time, albeit only at the local level, the party

⁹¹ Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism* (Routledge e-book, 2003), 15–19.

⁹² Simić, *Propaganda Milana Stojadinovića*, 237–240.

⁹³ AJ, 307, 2, Slogans for Municipal Elections; AJ, 307, 1, To Mister Svetozar Marinković, 25 February 1936.

⁹⁴ AJ, 307, 1, To Mister Damjan Trbusić, 12 March 1936; To Mister Kosta Nikolić, 11 March 1936; To Mister Vladimir Todorović, 11 March 1936; To Mister Petar Dončić, 11 March 1936; To Mister Miloš Dragović, 11 March 1936; To Mister President, 25 February 1936; To the Minister of Interior, 17 April 1936; Dear Friend, 30 April 1936.

⁹⁵ AJ, 307, 2, People, Vote for Borbaši!; Jovo Smiljanić, Three Songs and Stories about Svetislav Hodjera, the Leader of Borbaši; *Borba za slobodu, pravo i jednakost svih Jugoslovena*, 10. 09. 1936.

⁹⁶ AJ, 38-352-500, Anonim, "Borbaši su u Staroj Pazovi održali zbor," *Politika*, 27. 04. 1936.

⁹⁷ Bogumil Hrabak, "Jugoslovenska narodna stranka 1935. i 1936. godine," 80.

continued its efforts to ideologically educate its members. In January and February 1937, an ideological course for members was held at the party headquarters in Belgrade.⁹⁸ At the same time, a special publication titled “The Borbaši Memorial Book,” meant to commemorate their “five-year-long struggle for the people’s rights,” was being prepared.⁹⁹ Despite many difficulties in its production, the book, full of ideological texts and members’ photographs, was nonetheless published on 3 June 1938, the fifth anniversary of the launch of the party organ *Borba*.¹⁰⁰

The regime had seen the municipal elections as a popularity test, and, happy with the results and the international course of events, Milan Stojadinović decided to call general elections in December 1938. In the new electoral campaign, the “Borbaši” held a mass rally near the town of Kragujevac, at which they presented their electoral agenda. The majority of demands were economic in nature.¹⁰¹ Although the party continued to criticize Prime Minister Stojadinović, their criticism was becoming increasingly directed at the opposition. In view of this and the strength that the party had shown at the municipal elections, Stojadinović decided to win over the “Borbaši.” In the summer of 1938, Hodjera and Stojadinović held secret talks, and already in early September, the Prime Minister informed the Prince Regent that cooperation with the “Borbaši” seemed likely. In those letters, he asked Prince Paul to see Svetislav Hodjera and “encourage him a little to keep fighting, but on our side.”¹⁰² Although his decision to include the “Borbaši” on the regime’s electoral list seemed unfathomable to many observers, this was a good political move on Stojadinović’s part because the Yugoslav People’s Party had firm (albeit fragmented) strongholds in some parts of Serbia.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ AJ, 307, 1, Classes Schedule; Lecture Topics.

⁹⁹ AJ, 307, 1, To the Local Committee in Priština, 24 March 1936; Svetislav Hodjera to Mirko?, 21 November 1937; Dear Friend, 29 November 1937.

¹⁰⁰ *Spomenica borbaša* (Beograd: JNS, 1938).

¹⁰¹ AJ, 307, 2, Borbaši Resolution, 21 August 1938.

¹⁰² AJ, Microfilm Collection (Zbirka mikrofilmova), no. 797, Prince Paul Karadjordjević Papers (Arhiva kneza Pavla Karadjordjevića), reel 4, scans 505-507.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, scans 511-512; *Istorija građanskih stranaka u Jugoslaviji*, knj. 1, 366; Dragoljub Jovanović, *Političke uspomene*, knj. 5, 30; Mirko Bojić, *Jugoslavenski narodni pokret Zbor 1935-1945* (Beograd: Narodna knjiga, 1996).

Their cooperation became official on 10 October 1938 when Svetislav Hodjera joined the cabinet as a minister without portfolio.¹⁰⁴ The pro-regime press, which had previously accused Hodjera of being a fascist, now treated him as a serious political figure and a war hero.¹⁰⁵ His ministerial appointment, however, was met with apprehension in the Jewish press, which protested against a "well-known" antisemite joining the cabinet.¹⁰⁶ As the election law allowed one list to have multiple candidates in the same electoral unit, the Yugoslav People's Party, although part of Stojadinović's list, tried to retain its distinctiveness and nominate as many of its members as it could as candidates. However, Stojadinović and the members of his party did not want the "Borbaši" to freely implement electoral agitation under the protection of state authorities. October and November 1938 saw a feverish electoral campaign, with the clashes between Svetislav Hodjera and Milan Stojadinović and their respective candidates growing increasingly bitter.¹⁰⁷ Ultimately, the "Borbaši" managed to wrangle 97 of their own candidates, including Hodjera himself.¹⁰⁸ In the electoral race, there was no gentleman's agreement between their candidates who, although formally on the same list, were often caught in bitter clashes.¹⁰⁹ There were even some physical altercations between their supporters and a few cases of murder.¹¹⁰ Svetislav Hodjera's counter-candidate wrote to the Prime Minister to let him know that Hodjera was acting disloyally, adding: "he doesn't mention you at all and keeps attacking the Gov-

¹⁰⁴ Anonim, "Yugoslav Parliament Ends, Elections Set," *The Arizona Republic*, 11. 10. 1938.

¹⁰⁵ Simić, *Propaganda Milana Stojadinovića*, 184–185.

¹⁰⁶ Anonim, „Anti-Semites in Yugoslav Government“, *Jewish Chronicle*, 21. 10. 1938.

¹⁰⁷ AJ, 37-47-304, Milan Stojadinović to Svetislav Hodjera, 27 October 1938; Milan Stojadinović to Svetislav Hodjera, 29 October 1938; Svetislav Hodjera to Milan Stojadinović, 8 November 1938; Milan Stojadinović to Svetislav Hodjera, 15 November 1938.

¹⁰⁸ *Politika*, 8. 12. 1938.

¹⁰⁹ AJ, 37-21-151, Milorad Dimikijević to Milan Stojadinović, 4 December 1938; T. Dimitrijević to Milan Stojadinović, 1 December 1938; Svetislav Rajić to Milan Stojadinović, 14 November 1938; Milan Stojadinović to Svetislav Rajić, 14 November 1938.

¹¹⁰ Perić, *Moravska svitanja*, 108.

ernment.”¹¹¹ Behind their leader’s back, many of the “Borbaši” wrote to Stojadinović and promised to join his party after the elections.¹¹²

The elections of 11 December 1938 were a great disappointment for Milan Stojadinović, who had expected a sweeping victory. Although his electoral list won in seven out of nine *banovinas*, it won just 54% of all votes and lost the elections in Croatian areas (the Savska and Primorska *banovinas*).¹¹³ These elections were a failure for the Yugoslav People’s Party, too. The decision to join the government cost them many pro-opposition voters, who instead chose to support ideologically different but firmly anti-regime movements, such as the Agrarian Left or the Yugoslav People’s Movement ZBOR.¹¹⁴ Due to their short stint in the ruling coalition, the Yugoslav People’s Party lost almost one half of its voters, and its candidates won just 27,790, i.e., 0,925% of all votes.¹¹⁵ Only two out of 97 of their candidates became MPs.¹¹⁶ An additional blow came from Milan Stojadinović, who, ten days after the elections, informed Svetislav Hodjera in a letter that he was dismissed from the cabinet, cynically adding that he “hoped [they] would stay on friendly terms.”¹¹⁷ Both of the “Borbaši” MPs immediately joined the Yugoslav Radical Union.¹¹⁸

¹¹¹ AJ, 37-21-151, T. Dimitrijević to Milan Stojadinović, 1 December 1938.

¹¹² AJ, 37-21-151, Josip Grča to Milan Stojadinović, 19 November 1938; Sima Dokmanović to Milan Stojadinović, 26 November 1938; Mladen Živković to Milan Stojadinović, 23 November 1938; The Maribor Committee of the Yugoslav People’s Party to Milan Stojadinović, 8 December 1938; Rok Milošić to Milan Stojadinović, 8 December 1938.

¹¹³ Tešić, *Jugoslovenska radikalna zajednica u Srbiji 1935–1939*, 234–255; *Politika*, 12. 12. 1938.

¹¹⁴ AJ, 307, 2, To the Members and Friends of the Yugoslav People’s Party in the Drava Banovina; Dragoljub Jovanović, *Političke uspomene*, knj. 5, 295.

¹¹⁵ *Politika*, 12. 12. 1938.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ AJ, 37-47-304, Milan Stojadinović to Svetislav Hodjera, 21 December 1938; Anonim, “Nova Vlada g. dr Milana Stojadinovića,” *Politika*, 22. 12. 1938.

¹¹⁸ AJ, 37-5-34, The Letter of the Citizens of the Gora County to Milan Stojadinović, 21 December 1938; AJ, 37-21-151, The Case of Mister Hodjera; Milan Jovanović Stoimirović, *Dnevnik 1936–1941* (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 2000), 329; *Istorija građanskih stranaka u Jugoslaviji*, knj. 1, 366.

With no representative in the cabinet and no MPs in the parliament, having compromised their position in the eyes of pro-opposition voters by their cooperation with the regime, the party seemed doomed. At the first session of the Main Board, some members, at least according to the reports, were ready to make their feelings known to Hodjera and the party leadership by physically attacking them.¹¹⁹ However, Hodjera still commanded enough respect among other members to retain the position of the president of this rapidly diminishing and increasingly irrelevant political group in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.¹²⁰ Milan Stojadinović did not fare much better. Namely, pressured by the palace, he had no choice but to step down, and he handed in his resignation on 4 February 1939. The new Prime Minister was the former Minister of Social Policy, Dragiša Cvetković, and the most pressing issue was reaching an agreement with the Croats gathered around the Croatian Peasant Party and Vladimir Maček.¹²¹ The Cvetković–Maček Agreement was signed on 26 August 1939, and the Banovina (Banate) of Croatia was created.¹²² Over the course of 1939, the main debates in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia concerned finding an appropriate solution for the so-called “Croatian question,” i.e., the nature of the autonomous Croatian territory in the country. The “Borbaši” denied the existence of a separate Croatian question, arguing that this issue was all-Yugoslavian, a matter of justice and the people’s economic position rather than ethnic oppression.¹²³ They underscored the danger of federalizing the country, which, they claimed, had been detrimental for Czechoslovakia, and vowed to wholeheartedly fight for a unitary Yugoslavia.¹²⁴ They saw the ongoing talks between Cvetković and Maček as illegiti-

¹¹⁹ AJ, 37-21-151, The Case of Mister Hodjera; AJ, 307, 2, About Živan.

¹²⁰ AJ, 307, 1, On the Day 29 December 1938.

¹²¹ Milan Stojadinović, *Ni rat ni pakt* (Buenos Aires: privatno izdanje, 1963), 563–582; Simić, *Propaganda Milana Stojadinovića*, 46.

¹²² Mira Radojević, *Udružena opozicija 1935–1939* (Beograd: ISI, 1994); Ljubo Boban, *Sporazum Cvetković-Maček* (Beograd: Institut društvenih nauka, 1965).

¹²³ AJ, 307, 2, The Question no. 1; AJ, 37-21-151, Svetislav Hodjera’s Speech in Loznica, 19 March 1939; Oskar Tartalja, *Hrvatsko pitanje* (Split: privatno izdanje, 1939), 3–5; Malović, “Svetislav Hodjera, manifestacioni zatočenik jugoslovenstva,” 274.

¹²⁴ AJ, 37-21-151, Svetislav Hodjera’s Speech in Loznica, 19 March 1939; AJ, 307, 2, Dear Friend, Dear Borbaši!

mate and an act of treason.¹²⁵ They reactivated their slogans about the need for all genuine Yugoslav nationals to unite, and the main party organ announced that the “Borbaši [were] calling on all Yugoslavs, regardless of party affiliation, to come together and organize their ranks for the defense of the endangered unity of the people and state.”¹²⁶ Like in 1936, any possibility of unification was thwarted by conceptual differences and personal animosity.¹²⁷ Their criticism of Vladimir Maček and publishing reports of attacks against Serbs in Croatian areas ultimately resulted in the banning of the paper and the arrest of some party members.¹²⁸

Criticizing the agreement, the “Borbaši” argued that the Serbs and Croats were too ethnically mixed for a demarcation line to be fairly drawn between them.¹²⁹ The Yugoslav People’s Party held its last major rally in Novi Sad, on 19 November 1939. On this occasion, Svetislav Hodjera bitterly criticized the regime of “national degenerates and traitors,” branding the new coalition leaders “demons,” “jesuits” and the like.¹³⁰ Besides a barrage of criticism, they also described attacks against the “Borbaši” in Croatia, which targeted not just Serbs but all other “honest Yugoslavs.”¹³¹ In 1939, a new tendency emerged in their texts and speeches. The Yugoslav People’s Party began to specifically address Serbs, pleading for their unification.¹³² They expressed regret about the difficult situation of the Serbs in the *Banovina* of Croatia, more and more frequently accusing the Croats and Slovenes of having betrayed

¹²⁵ AJ, 37-21-151, Borbaši!, 15 May 1939.

¹²⁶ AJ, 37-21-151, *Borba za slobodu, pravo i jednakost svih Jugoslovena*, 31. 05. 1939.

¹²⁷ Dimitrije Ljotić, “Naše mišljenje o okupljanju jugoslovenskih nacionalista,” *Sabrana dela*, 7, 165–168.

¹²⁸ AJ, 37-21-151, Statement by Svetislav Hodjera, 22 October 1939.

¹²⁹ AJ, 37-21-151, Executive Committee Resolution, 29 October 1939; Dear Friend, 3 December 1938; On the 550th Anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo; Dragoljub Jovanović, *Političke uspomene*, knj. 5, 159.

¹³⁰ AJ, 307, 2, Svetislav Hodjera’s Speech in Novi Sad, 19 November 1939.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² AJ, Dimitrije Ljotić Collection (Zbirka ZBOR Dimitrija Ljotića), Collection no. 115, Aca Stanojević to Dimitrije Ljotić, 13 May 1940; AJ, 307, 2, *Bilten JNSb*, br. 1; *Bilten JNSb*, br 8, 5. 06. 1937; Aleksandar Stojanović, *Ideje, politički projekti i praksa Vlade Milana Nedića* (Beograd: INIS, 2015), 90.

the ideals that Yugoslavia was built on. They claimed that the Serbs did not get their independent state "on a plate, but with swords" and that they would, therefore, defend it with swords.¹³³ Although he still believed that unitarism was the best system, Svetislav Hodjera stated: "We can agree that not a single Serb should remain in the territory of the Banovina of Croatia, but then we don't want a single Croat in Serbian territory. All Serb-inhabited territories are to be united and, together with Serbia, merged into one indivisible territory."¹³⁴

From 1940, references to the party grow increasingly scarce in historical sources, and records of its activities from that point on are only fragmentary. During that year, there were talks of cooperation with Milan Stojadinović, now also in the opposition. However, any such talks had to be abandoned after Stojadinović's arrest in 1940.¹³⁵ In this period, the party also lost its premises due to financial hardship, and its sessions were now held in Svetislav Hodjera's private apartment.¹³⁶ Almost all of its Croat and Slovene members left the party as it increasingly moved toward a pro-Serbian position.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, in the few statements that the press deemed worthy of reporting, the "Borbaši" emphasized that "the building of unitary Yugoslavia should be continued and realized with all available resources."¹³⁸

The Nazi invasion of Yugoslavia on 6 April 1941 put an end to the political work of the Yugoslav People's Party, and it was never resumed. Despite allegations of fascism, the known personal fates of the "Borbaši" members show that the party was against collaborating with the occupiers, unlike other right-wing movements. As a reserve officer, Svetislav Hodjera led an air force attached to the Third Army in Srem, and "during a retreat from a battle with the much stronger German aviation, his group was destroyed near Bijeljina, and he was taken

¹³³ AJ, 307, 2, Svetislav Hodjera's Speech in Novi Sad, 19 November 1939.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ AJ, 38-352-500, Anonim, "Sednica Izvršnog odbora borbaša," *Vreme*, 10. 03. 1940; AJ, 37-65-386, Milan Stojadinović to Dimitrije Ljotić, 16 March 1940; Simić, *Propaganda Milana Stojadinovića*, 46.

¹³⁶ AJ, 307, 1, Executive Committee Meeting, 15 September 1940.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

prisoner.”¹³⁹ Hodjera spent the whole war in German captivity. German sources report that the Nazis considered freeing and sending him back to Serbia to participate in the collaborationist government. However, aware of Hodjera’s insufficient popularity among the people, the collaborationist organs chose not to take that step.¹⁴⁰ In the POW camp, with a group of fellow party members, he founded an organization called the “national program of POWs.”¹⁴¹ After the war ended, he returned to the country and remained politically inactive until he died in 1961. However, the secret police saw him as an “enemy element” and believed that he maintained ties with people suspected of working for the British secret service.¹⁴² Svetislav Hodjera’s son also fought in World War II as a member of the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Tomislav Vlahović, *Vitezovi Karadjordjeve zvezde s mačevima* (Beograd: privatno izdanje, 1989).

¹⁴⁰ IAB, BDS, Svetislav Hodjera Dossier (H-37).

¹⁴¹ Milo Bošković, *Šesta kolona: nastanak, organizacija i delovanje antijugoslovenske fašističke emigracije* (Zagreb/Novi Sad: Birotehnika/Dnevnik, 1985), 242.

¹⁴² IAB, BIA, Julius Hanau Dossier, Information on the Retired General Mihailo Bodi.

¹⁴³ Zoran Hodjera, “Prva omladinska brigada Mihailo Naumović,” *Naša reč*, 15. 11. 1949; Dragan Tošić, *O ljudima: eseji, zapisi, sećanja* (Beograd: S. Mišić, 2001).