

History, as opposed to the past, is a literary creation because it is always interpreted through textualised relics which themselves are only to be understood through layers of interpretation as the historian's facts.

- Munslow¹

On December 1, 1918 in the Krsmanovi House on Terazije Square in Belgrade, Regent Aleksander proclaimed the formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Dejan Djokic writes, "If Yugoslavia was born on 1 December 1918, its baptism took place on 28 June 1919."² The date represented more than the signing of the Paris Peace Treaty. Throughout Serb history, June 28 is special. It is St. Vitus Day, a memorial to the Battle of Kosovo, and the day of Franz Ferdinand's assassination. It would also be the day, in 1921, when Alexander would proclaim the constitution of the new state. From the birth of Yugoslavia to its demise, June 28 weaves its way throughout Yugoslav historiography. For some historians, the day is a blessing, for others, a curse; some remain neutral. Competing historiography and charges of bias and revisionism riddles historiography of the first Yugoslavia. Blame of its failure often points to the role international actors played in its formation rather than internal strife, myth and false histories.

Analysis of post-World War II Yugoslavia overshadows historiography of the first Yugoslavia, and has led to a critical "historiography of the historiography" wrought with political intentions that make a common historiography impossible. Dejan Djoki charges historians with a failure to historicize Yugoslavia prior to the end of World War II, a trend he considers paradoxical given that historians focus on the misuse of history by Yugoslav

¹Munslow, A. 1997. *Deconstructing History*. New York: Routledge. 33.

²Djokic, D. 2012. Versailles and Yugoslavia: Ninety Years On. In *Re-imagining Yugoslavia: openDemocracy*. <http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-yugoslavia/debate.jsp>. Accessed 2 November 2012.

politicians and intellectuals.³ Connie Robinson provides an example of paradox in her work on the role of the Yugoslav Committee.⁴ Robinson analyzes how the Committee sought to gain international support for the creation of Yugoslavia through publications and speeches that drew on historical symbolism. She argues that the Committee prepared an international opinion for the unification of South Slavs by utilizing myths, symbols, and historical narratives. However, Robinson neglects an analysis of history that molded those narratives. Alex Dragnich adds that Yugoslav historiography is fragmentary and highly biased.⁵ Mark Biondich emphasizes bias by dividing Yugoslav historiography into two interpretive strands: nationalist or communist.⁶ The primary argument within both interpretations revolves around the failure of the first Yugoslavia, but defense and blame dominate interpretations. The communists, according to Biondich, maintain that the first decade of Yugoslavia was merely a façade. Djoki takes the façade a step further by arguing that the first Yugoslavia was an “abhorrent construction” doomed to failure.⁷ The failed façade view reiterates Tito’s stance that Yugoslavia began with nothing more than a “regime of gendarmes, of dungeons, of racial and national injustice” during which all Serbs “lived in the clutches of dictatorial ‘Great Serbian hegemony.’”⁸ Biondich highlights how Serbian nationalist historiography denies the existence of Serb hegemony, while consistently claiming Serbia’s actions were always an attempt to save the Yugoslav state from “Croat

3 Djokić, D. and J. Ker-Lindsay. 2010. *New Perspectives on Yugoslavia: Key Issues and Controversies*. New York: Routledge. 1.

4 Robinson, C. 2010. "Yugoslavism in the Early Twentieth Century: The Politics of the Yugoslav Committee" in *New Perspectives on Yugoslavia: Key Issues and Controversies*, eds Djokić, D and Ker-Lindsay, J. New York: Routledge.

5 Dragnich, A.N. 1983. *The First Yugoslavia : Search for a Viable Political System*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press.

6 Biondich, M. 2008. "The Historical Legacy" in *State Collapse in South-Eastern Europe: New Perspectives on Yugoslavia's Disintegration*, eds Cohen, LJ and Dragović-Soso, J, xxi, 413 p. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press. 43-44.

7 Djokić, 2.

8 Tito, J.B. 1977. *Sabrana Djela*. Beograd: Komunist. 95-96.

secessionist intrigues” which were to blame for country’s failure.⁹ Serbian historiography argues that Serbs were victims of irredentist attitudes and tense international circumstances that proved too difficult to overcome. Croat historiography echoes Tito’s words by claiming that the first Yugoslavia was a struggle against “Serbian hegemony”¹⁰ and an era of “political terror.”¹¹ Croat historiography defends its political behavior, but, as Biondich charges, does not examine its party’s role in undermining the Yugoslav ideal,¹² a charge that is not without its own biases.

Dennison Rusinow accuses historiography of simplicity.¹³ He asserts that Yugoslavism was “a more complex, convoluted, and as an ideological, political movement by itself less important factor than in the portrait of an evolving but essentially single-minded idea . . . that is painted in most Yugophil and Yugo-nostalgic historiography.”¹⁴ Rusinow challenges the idea that the first Yugoslavia was a fabrication; it was not artificial or less natural than other nationalist ideologies. Rusinow argues that historians must extend analysis of the Yugoslav idea to the history of “Yugoslavism before Yugoslavia.” The Illyrianist awakeners, Rusinow argues, formulated the core of the idea in the 1830’s, and, as the most important contribution to the creation of the Yugoslav state, historians should begin with this legacy. Duško Sekuli also analyzes the creation of the new state in terms of earlier history, contending that the idea originated with the 1804 revolt and Serb expansionism.¹⁵ He defines the creation of Yugoslavia as “interpreted as the outcome of the expansionist policy of the Serbian elite which was justified

9 See also Dragnich, A.N. 1954. *Tito's Promised Land: Yugoslavia*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

10 Biondich, 47.

11 Janjatović, B. 2002. *Politički Teror U Hrvatskoj 1918.-1935*. Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za provijest.

12 Biondich, 48.

13 Rusinow, D. 2003. "The Yugoslav Idea before Yugoslavia" in *Yugoslavism : Histories of a Failed Idea, 1918-1992*, ed. Djokić, D. London: Hurst.

14 Ibid. 15.

15 Sekulić, M. 1944. *Yugoslavia. Health, Past, Present and Future*. London: The Royal Yugoslav Embassy.

by the inclusion of all the ethnic Serbs into one state and made possible by the geostrategically weak positions of the Croatian and Slovenian elites.”¹⁶

Mark Cornwall argues that historians focus too much on Serbia and have been slow to examine the culture of the grassroots ‘declaration movement.’¹⁷ Examining Slovene grassroots agitation within the Habsburg regions, Cornwall uncovers difficulties that would arise in the creation of Yugoslavia. He argues that war anxieties of German or Italian encroachment gave the “Yugoslav Club” opportunity to sway the grassroots toward Croat-Slovene unity and resulted in diverse and conflicting aspirations that chafed Serbian leadership in the new state. Cornwall noted that Serb Habsburgs welcomed a Serb union and Slovenes joined to secure their own existence with the collapse of the empire, but the Croatian question would “bedevil the new state’s stability.”¹⁸ Mitja Velikonja argues that the Slovene support was more than self-preservation, but that they were enthusiastic about the Yugoslav idea.¹⁹ Velikonja agrees that the threat of Italy (and Austria) played a key role in Slovene enthusiasm, but the Yugoslav idea also meant unification with other South Slavs. That enthusiasm, however, was marred when the Treaty of Rapallo left 350,000 Slovenes to Italy. Velikonja also expands on the idea of Slovene self-preservation by emphasizing that Slovenes rejected integral Yugoslavism and developed their own economic, educational, social, and cultural institutions.

¹⁶ Sekulic, D. 1997. "The Creation and Dissolution of the Multinational State: The Case of Yugoslavia." *Nations and Nationalism* 3, no. 2: 165-79.

¹⁷ Cornwall, M. 2010. "The Great War and the Yugoslav Grassroots: Popular Mobilization in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1914-1918" in *New Perspectives on Yugoslavia: Key Issues and Controversies*, eds Djokić, D and Ker-Lindsay, J. New York: Routledge.

¹⁸ Cornwall, 42.

¹⁹ Velikonja, M. 2003. "Slovenia's Yugoslav Century" in *Yugoslavism: Histories of a Failed Idea, 1918-1992*, ed. Djokić, D, xiii, 356 p. London: Hurst.

John Paul Newman broadens the cultural examination to include how the new Yugoslavs came to terms with the impact of the war and how it permeated society, politics, and culture.²⁰ Newman places war veterans into the narrative of creation and failure by examining how society struggled to respond to veterans' sense of entitlement and how the state used veterans as a symbol of moral conscious. He argues that the disparity between promises of the state throughout its creation and what it actually delivered produced a disillusion that represented failure of the democratic process.

The threat of Italian domination and the role of international actors in the Balkans after World War I is a common thread in Yugoslav historiography. In the early years of the Second Yugoslavia, Berkeley historian Robert Kerner described how the Italians repudiated the Treaty of London and sought strategic control of the Balkans.²¹ Concessions made to Italy, according to Kerner, were at the expense of not only the Croats and Slovenes, but also Germans trapped in the new borders. Kerner argued the discussion with Italy was dominated by imperialist attitudes of the British, French, and the United States, marking their tendency to maintain that the Italians were a "superior" race and the Yugoslavs an "inferior" one. A Pan-Slav Wilsonian idealist, Kerner noted that Wilson's ideology tempered American attitudes. Dragan Živojinović contends the American role was a prominent factor in the creation of Yugoslavia and the Italian question.²² The Americans were a "moral and political force which no contending side dared to irritate beyond certain limits."²³ Živojinović argues that Yugoslavia did well to avoid trouble and keep the Americans on their side, while the Italians demonstrated shortsightedness, lack of

²⁰ Newman, J.P. 2010. "Forging a United Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes: The Legacy of the First World War and the 'Invalid Question'" in *New Perspectives on Yugoslavia: Key Issues and Controversies*, eds Djokić, D and Ker-Lindsay, J. New York: Routledge.

²¹ Kerner, R.J. 1949. *Yugoslavia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

²² Živojinović, D.R. 1972. *America, Italy, and the Birth of Yugoslavia (1917-1919) East European Monographs*,. New York: Columbia University Press.

²³ Ibid. 305.

wisdom, and aggressiveness. Still, the proposed “Wilson Line” dividing the Istrian peninsula between Italy and Yugoslavia ultimately failed, forcing the new Yugoslavia to yield vital districts to Italy. However, Yugoslavia did gain “more than its share” from Hungary, Rumania, and Bulgaria.²⁴ According to Kerner, territorial losses and acquisitions shaped Italian policy and influenced Hungarian and Bulgarian vengeance, and the manner in which the Yugoslavs made use of their new liberty.

Vladimir Dedijer, a member of the Yugoslav delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, argued that the new Yugoslav state was simply a “link in the chain of French domination in Europe.”²⁵ Dedijer’s history of Yugoslavia is an international analysis with emphasis on Italy’s attempts to undermine the new Yugoslav state in favor of Austria and in accordance with the secret clauses of the London Treaty, which promised Italy large strips of Yugoslav occupied territory in return for its entry into the war. Dedijer claimed Italy sought to send “secret agents” in to incite workers and peasants and to bribe newspapers to publish propaganda, spending large sums of money to counteract France’s program of unification. According to Dedijer, resulting fear and unrest was a principal reason for unification.

Historians Hayden White and F.R. Ankersmith posit that historians can infer facts about the past from evidence, but the way they interpret those facts and the relations between them is colored by their own creative imagination that reflects personal interests and vision.²⁶ This accusation is particularly poignant when applied to Yugoslav historiography. The lack of a

²⁴ Kerner, 103.

²⁵ As a communist politician and Tito’s official biographer, Dedijer’s historiography is clearly written from a communist point of view. Dedijer, V. 1974. *History of Yugoslavia*. New York: McGraw-Hill. 507.

²⁶ Ankersmit, F.R. 2012. *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. , McCullagh, C.B. 2000. "Bias in Historical Description, Interpretation, and Explanation." *History and Theory* 39, no. 1, Munslow, A. 1997. *Deconstructing History*. New York: Routledge. 39-66.

common historiography paired with competing narratives complicates analysis of development of the first Yugoslavia. Most histories of Yugoslavia, from conception to demise, point out the shortcomings and failures of previous Yugoslav histories. Historiography of the first Yugoslavia, the Kingdom of Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes, is sparse, yet tangled with “creative imagination.” Some common threads connect historiography: defense and blame, communist or nationalist discourse, and the role Italian motivations played pushing unification. With the violent demise of Yugoslavia still fresh in the historical mind, it may take another generation of historians to begin to untangle the power of politics from historical interpretation.

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