

SERBS, CROATS AND SLOVENES

A. NOEL FIELDHOUSE

THE treaties which reshaped the map of Europe, and more especially of Eastern Europe, on the morrow of the Great War, adopted in general the principle of ethnolinguistic unity as their criterion in drawing the frontiers of the new national states. In the case of Jugo-Slavia, the effect of the application of this principle was to unite in one state two populations of the same race and substantially the same speech, but with distinct differences of historic tradition, religion and culture. As a result, the political life of the country has been first embarrassed and now paralysed by the thorny problem of Serbo-Croatian relations. The fact that the Croats are Catholic while the Serbs are Orthodox, is probably less significant than is sometimes thought on this continent. What is more important is that, as a result of their 800 years under foreign rule, the Croats have acquired an ingrained dislike for centralization, and an almost instinctive habit of opposition to government. From the same source springs their jealously guarded local particularism. It is their former connection with the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, also, which probably explains their feeling that their culture is more western than that of the Serbs, whom they regard as more purely Balkanic. It must be remembered, too, that the same connection placed them on the opposite side to their Serbian cousins during the war. And, finally, the fact that the infant state was born into the critical conditions of post-war Europe has naturally not made the solution easier. The two branches of the Jugo-Slav family had to make their first experiments in re-union amid all the difficulties created by the abrupt transition from one régime to another, by economic dislocation, and by Bolshevik propaganda.

The man who was to personify Croatian aspirations was Stiepan Raditch. Raditch had already attracted attention before the war by his opposition to Magyar rule, but in 1914 he declared for the Central powers. By 1917, however, he was inclining to Jugo-Slavism, and when the National Council at Zagreb proclaimed Croatian independence in October, 1918, he was not long in raising the cry of "The Republic". His programme was sufficiently alluring: abolition of military service, lighter taxation, a reduction

of the cost of living to a pre-war level. His activities in support of this programme led to his imprisonment. Had the leaders of the Croat intellectuals been in effective contact with the rural elements, they might have been able to form a moderate party, and impose a check on the republican propaganda. As it was, their ill-advised attack on Raditch gave him the halo of martyrdom. The elections in Croatia-Slavonia of November, 1920, for the Constituent Assembly were a personal triumph for him; and when the middle-class party, the Croat-Union, consented to merge itself in the Croat "Bloc", his supremacy among the Croat leaders became undisputed.

Raditch has described himself as "A European of the French school," in philosophy, a pupil of Fouillée; in politics, of Deschanel; in history, of Sorel; in sociology, of Bourgeois. But he remains, above all, a tribune of the peasantry. The peasant nation is the beginning and the end of his political thought. It was this idea which inspired his nebulous Republicanism of 1919, and the Federalism which had become his ideal by 1924. These things were merely the form; the reality was his idea of a peasant democracy. If the notion of the Republic, as he used it in his speeches, could be employed to wean the Croats from their old ideals and prepare them for the new evangel, it would have served its purpose. It was the same dominant idea which made him put himself in line with the post-war ideology, with pacificism abroad and decentralization at home.

The elections of March, 1923, gave the Raditchists 69 seats in a House of 313. An immediate question was whether they should fall into line with the other parties in opposition, or whether they should continue to hold aloof from Belgrade, maintain an attitude of complete intransigence, and insist upon the exclusively national Croatian character of their party.

The Radical party which was then in power owed its position partly to the personal ability of its chiefs and especially of M. Pachitch, partly to the success of its European policy¹, and partly to its internal cohesion and discipline. As the historic party of the old Serbia, it had developed from somewhat socialistic origins until it had come to represent what may be called the National Conservative tendencies of a peasant democracy. It was this party which had carried the constitution of Vidovdan in 1921, and it was strongly attached to the unity of the new state.

1. In January, 1924, M. M. Pachitch and Nintchitch signed the Pact of Rome which regulated the long-standing quarrel with Italy over Fiume. Its value was seen on the occasion of the "coup" of Fan Noli in Albania five months later. Rome and Belgrade hastened to proclaim their mutual disinterestedness and goodwill.

Not differing very markedly from the Radicals in point of doctrine, were the Democrats. Whereas, however, the Radicals were peculiarly a Serbian party, the Democrats, since the war, had tried to unite Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in a policy which leaned rather more towards the Left. In that sense they formed a Jugo-Slav party in a way in which the Radicals did not. It is not surprising, therefore, that they were regarded as being rather more favorable than the government group towards a certain measure of political decentralization.

The Agrarian group, in this country in which all parties are predominantly agrarian, was numerically small, and its programme was a curious combination of the concrete and the chimerical. It was notable chiefly for its support of the co-operative movement.

There remained two parties which rested on a confessional basis. The Moslems rested upon the bulk of the landholders in Bosnia where Austrian rule had never disturbed the old feudal system of land tenure, and their organization was concerned chiefly to protect their tenurial interests against the threat of agrarian change. This special preoccupation with the landed interest of a single province naturally led them to support any policy which promised provincial autonomy. The Slovene Populist party, as its name indicates, was half national, half clerical, and as with similar parties elsewhere, it comprised those to whom the confessional elements in its Christian-Social programme were primarily important, and those who were more inclined to emphasize its social policy. It represented a largely Catholic population with peculiar economic needs, but its attitude towards Belgrade was less uncompromising than that so far taken up by the Croat Raditchists. Moreover, it feared the influence of the latter, even in its own Slovenia.

In the early days of 1924, the Democrats, Moslems, and Populists were allied in opposition to the government resting upon the Radicals and the Independent Democrats. If the Raditchists could be induced so far to moderate their republican and revisionist programme as to take their seats with the opposition in the Skoupchtina, the government would be placed in a minority. After some hesitation, the Croat deputies verified their powers and took their seats with the opposition "bloc"; M. Pachitch, finding himself in a minority, adjourned the Assembly throughout the summer, and when the King had twice declined to grant him a dissolution, resigned in July. A brief attempt by M. Yovanovitch to form a Radical cabinet without the fallen chief having failed, the King accepted the parliamentary situation and entrusted

the formation of a government to the Democrat leader, M. Davidovitch.

The new cabinet included both Democrats and Moslems, it was supported by the Opposition "bloc" as a whole, and its goodwill was exemplary. It announced its intention to approach the solution of acute national problems "in that comprehensive spirit without which nothing permanent can be achieved." It was not long, however, before the divergence between the Croats and the other elements of the "bloc" made itself felt. In the first place, M. Raditch still maintained his liaison with Moscow, a connection which was distasteful and embarrassing to the Democrats. Further, the Davidovitch government appeared to regard its own advent to power as being of itself a sufficient guarantee that a *modus vivendi* would be found between Croat and Serb. M. Raditch, on the other hand, treated the coalition as a preparatory step for a new election which should open the way to "a complete and equitable accord," an accord the nature of which he left discretely vague. Accordingly, while the "bloc" interpreted his participation as evidence that he had now accepted the unitary form of the monarchy, and while he himself contrived to strengthen that impression by declarations meant for Belgrade consumption, in his own province he was still nursing the forces of Republicanism and autonomy.

When the government fell, after a brief life of six weeks, the King attempted to secure a comprehensive cabinet in order to bring about a pacific settlement of the Croatian question. It had been an argument of the Raditchists under the last government that it was difficult to negotiate a satisfactory solution with one party only (the Democrats), when that party did not represent a majority of the Serbs, and was even dependent upon the goodwill of the Croats for its own tenure of office. Yet they now declined to take any part in the proposed national union, and as the Moslems and Populists also returned a thinly veiled "non-possumus", the King fell back upon the one really compact party. M. Pachitch undertook to form a Radical government with the support of independent Democrats under M. Pribitchévitch. As the Radicals could not command a majority in the Assembly, the elections were fixed for February, 1925, and it was hoped that by pronouncing between Radical and Democrat, the country would point the way out of the Croato-Serb impasse.

The result of the elections was more than pleasing to the advocates of national consolidation. On the one hand, the two confessional parties, Moslem and Populist Slovene, suffered marked

losses, and the smaller ethnic groups, the Germans, the Magyars, and the Moslems of Southern Serbia, disappeared almost completely. On the other hand, the Radicals made considerable gains. The Croat representation was substantially unchanged. The net result was a distinct triumph for Pachitch and the Radical idea of the essential unity and sovereignty of the national state. It remained to liquidate the Serbo-Croat quarrel.

Since January, Raditch and his lieutenants had been kept under strict surveillance in Croatia; but in the spring, unofficial conversations were opened between him and representatives of the cabinet. In March his nephew, M. Paul Raditch, made a significant gesture by announcing the public adhesion of his party to the foreign policy of the government, and followed it up by striking expressions of allegiance to the monarchy and the unitary state. When the Croat deputies had verified their powers in the Skoupchtina, a work which passed without untoward incident, the way seemed open for reconciliation. It was not, however, until July that the negotiations took on an official complexion, and then on the 11th a protocol defining the bases of co-operation between the two groups was signed by M. M. Nikitch, Choupérina, and Paul Raditch for the Croats and M. M. Jivkovitch, Trifkovitch, and Djouritchitch for the party in power. Two days later the Raditchists supported the government in a vote of confidence in the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and on July 14th the parliamentary accord between the two parties was ratified. Its bases have been described by Raditch himself in terms which embrace the whole Croato-Serb problem:

As Croats, we preferred a federal state, but we knew that M. Pachitch and the Serbs were opposed to federalism, not as being a Croat conception, but as limiting the sovereignty of the state. For M. Pachitch the sovereignty of the state is the supreme consideration, and it presupposes a unitary form of government and relative centralization. With us, what matters most is the peasant people. . . . But we never contemplated an autonomy which would lead to separatism. We hoped to set up a new constitution, but not in a spirit hostile to the Serbs. M. Pachitch, however, felt that a revision of the constitution might imperil the solidarity of the state. . . . Here lay our chief difference. Yet we had common ground in the social order. The Serbian Radical party is a peasant party. It was because it was a peasant party that in earlier days it opposed the Obrenovitch dynasty. It was because we are a peasant party that we adopted the republican ideal. . . . but the republic was only the form: the reality was the idea of peasant democracy. . . . So, beneath the unreal opposition of words, we found in Croat and Serb the same preoccupations and ideals; or rather our respective ideals were mutually complementary. The state must not oppose the people, nor the

people the state. M. Pachitch desires a strong nation... and we agree. But for the nation to be strong, the administration must be honest, tried, and modern. The Serb policy is one of reason of State. It needs to be supplemented by one of social solidarity and ordered justice; by ours. Once we had found that with our different mentalities we were pursuing the same ends, it only remained to discover a method whereby we might attain that end in concert. That method is obvious. It consists in co-operation in public affairs, the only way in which to know and understand each other.

There is no need to emphasize the outstanding importance of this reconciliation. It did more than promise the free and normal working of parliamentary government, no longer hampered by deeper cleavages of race. By reconciling the still turbulent particularism of the Croats with the more matured political experience of the Serbs, it seemed to open a new era for the Jugo-Slav family, an era in which it might at last attain in union to its full moral stature. As the King declared, the agreement between the two branches of the Southern Slav race must form the basis of the whole policy of the state. What His Majesty did not add, but what is doubly significant in view of the events of January, 1929, is that he had himself exerted his influence to the utmost in the effort to lift Jugo-Slav politics above the level of the quarrels of the clan.

The immediate result of the pact was the dropping of the proceedings which had been begun against the heads of the Croat Peasant party, and the entry of four Raditchists into the ministry. Its effects were seen in the healthy working of parliament throughout the remainder of 1925, and the general work of reform and reconstruction which the government was thereby enabled to pursue.

It was not long, however, before a rift appeared in the Serbo-Croat entente. M. Raditch, who had entered the cabinet in November, has never been an easy colleague, and in the coalition government he sustained his reputation for intransigence. By the end of the year his flamboyant language and almost deliberate indiscretions, and his habit of encroaching upon the competence of his colleagues, had produced a distinct malaise in the cabinet. Above all, while professing his attachment to the "policy of the pact," he repeatedly threatened to dissolve the coalition if his own demands were not immediately granted. The habitual methods of the tribune could not be so speedily unlearned. Those who tend to hold Belgrade solely responsible for the present impasse would do well to remember that Zagreb has itself not been notable for the spirit of compromise.

In April M. Raditch asked for a premature session of the Skoupchtina, in order to consider a scandal in which the son of M. Pachitch was involved. The Radical leader pointed out that to grant this would involve a breach of the constitution: and when his allies made the question a Cabinet issue, he resigned in favour of the Radical, M. Ouzounovitch. The new equilibrium lasted exactly one week. Raditch charged the Minister of Communications, M. Milétitch, with culpable negligence, and the latter left the government with every circumstance of bitterness and anger. On April 15th, M. Raditch followed him. He had hoped, by taking all the Croat ministers with him, to turn the ministerial crisis into a formal breach of the pact of July, 1925. Two of their number, however, remained to give colour to the official pretence that the pact was still the basis of the government and its policy, and incidentally to cause a rift in the Croatian party.

From then until January, 1927, the Radical-Raditchist coalition persisted uneasily through repeated ministerial crises. In May, the government was beaten on a question touching affairs arising out of the Pachitch libel action, but on this occasion M. Raditch showed a greater spirit of conciliation than was customary with him, and the cabinet resumed the reins. In October, M. Raditch again appeared in the rôle of *enfant terrible*. During a visit of Czecho-Slovakian parliamentarians, he complained that the railway station at Zagreb had been draped only with the national flag and not with the Croatian colours, and he went so far as to interrupt the prefect and the mayor in order to substitute the expression, "Czechs and Slovaks" for "Czecho-Slovak." The Radicals viewed this explosion as an interference with the authority of the government official on the spot, and a wanton commentary on the affairs of a foreign state. M. Ouzounovitch again offered his resignation, and was again persuaded to remain. Two months later, a graver crisis supervened. The Foreign Minister, M. Nintchitch, resigned as a protest against the Italo-Albanian Pact of Tirana, and on December 7th the cabinet as a whole followed him. The crisis lasted until Christmas, before M. Ouzounovitch succeeded in forming a ministry by a triple combination of Radicals, Raditchists and Populists. It was clear, however, that the parliamentary alliance of the first two was approaching its end, and when in January, 1927, a slight incident proved sufficient to pull down the cabinet, the Raditchists lapsed definitely into opposition. A sixth Ouzounovitch government was patched together from Radicals and Populists. Well aware of the precarious nature of his majority, the first minister worked to enlarge its bases by bringing in the Democratic Union, a "bloc" comprising the Democrats and the Bosnian Moslems,

and on April 17th, his successor, the Radical, M. Voukitchévitch, formed a government of Radicals, Democrats and Moslems.

It will be seen that the causes and the results of these successive crises were equally factitious and barren. The truth is that in the multiplicity of groups and parties a sound working of parliamentary government was becoming impossible. In the absence of stable party connections, politics became a matter of parliamentary groups and tactics, centring around certain personalities. Personal attachments took the place of programmes, and adroitness in parliamentary manoeuvre was naturally at a premium. Only this parliamentary embroglio can explain the arbitrary combinations of parties which have been seen since 1924. The Democrats, regarding themselves as representing the intellectual Left, on the French model, form "bloc" with the confessional group representing the Moslem landed interest of Bosnia. The Radicals, traditional guardians of Serb orthodoxy, ally with the Slovene Clericals. And the day was not far off when Raditch, the truculent champion of Croat particularism, was to be found in harness with the especial enemy of Croat ambitions, M. Pribitchévitch. Even in the Radical party there have been signs of internal dissension, and since the death of M. Pachitch in December, 1926, there have been at least three groups inside its ranks. The Pachitch tradition is represented by M. Trifkovitch and the "old" Radicals; the newer men tend to centre around M. Voukitchévitch; while a third, "Centrist," group attaches to M. Ouzounovitch and the central committee of the party.

It was in the professed hope of clearing the parliamentary ground of this complexity of political groups, that the new premier decided in June to dissolve the Assembly and appeal to the country. If this was his purpose, M. Voukitchévitch can have extracted but slight satisfaction from the elections of September. Their chief result was to restore to the Democrats the position lost in 1925, and to emphasize the cleavage between Pachitchist and government Radicals. The Radical representation fell from 142 to 111, and the Raditchists from 68 to 60. The Democrats rose from 37 to 61, and the smaller groups, Populist and Agrarian, made slight gains. As a step towards the final merging of the various racial, religious, and political particularisms of the country in a wider Jugo-Slav consciousness, the election of late 1927 could hardly be called more than a beginning.

The events of the twelve months which followed are still fresh in the public mind, and need only be briefly recapitulated here. Early in 1928 M. Raditch and M. Pribitchévitch, himself a Serb, but now convinced of the need to redress Croat grievances,

launched a violent campaign in Croatia, and after successive crises compelled the resignation of the government. Raditch, however, failed to form a cabinet when invited to do so, and M. Voukitchévitch returned late in February with the chief of the Slovene Populists, the Abbé Korochets, as his Minister of the Interior. This was the situation when the spark was fired by the wild shooting affray in the Skoupchtina on June 20th. Following upon some obstructive tactics by the Croat members, a Montenegrin Radical drew a revolver and shot down five of the members opposite. M. Raditch was wounded, and his nephew Paul killed. The results of this murderous folly, coming on top of the existing acute tension, were disastrous. The Croat Peasant party seceded en bloc from the Chamber, and were followed by the dissentient Radicals. M. Vouketchévitch resigned, and all attempts to find a successor were wrecked on the refusal of the Croat leaders to have anything to do with the existing parliament. When, late in July, the Abbé Korochets succeeded in putting together a cabinet mosaic, and announced a meeting of the Chamber for August 1st, the seceding Croats revived the old Diet at Zagreb as a rival assembly, declared the constitution of 1921 abrogated, and called for its complete reconstruction. From then until the end of 1928 the deadlock remained insoluble, the stages of its development being marked by political murder and rioting in Zagreb in August and December, by the death of M. Raditch on August 8th, and by the rapid crystallization of the Croat demand for decentralization on extreme lines under members of the Peasant party such as Krnievitch and Matchek. On the last day but one of the old year the Korochets government resigned, being unable to agree on the front to be presented to Croat intransigence. A personal interview between the King and the Croat leaders failed to suggest any way out of the impasse, and on January 5, 1929, the former declared the constitution invalid, and his own personal régime begun.

Those whose facile habit it is to enumerate from time to time the dictatorships of Europe will simply add the new régime to the list which began with Mussolini and now ends with Alexander. We may be content to suspend judgment. It is of little use to say that the King's action is a violation of the Constitution. Since July, 1928, the spokesmen of one of the two branches of the race over which he rules have repeatedly insisted that the constitution is at an end, and the limits to which they have pushed their interpretation of federal autonomy would strain the existing constitutional forms to breaking point. It may well be that what the Spaniards call the "desertion" of parties has compelled the Throne to have a policy of its own.