

THE PROBLEM OF YUGOSLAVIA

TO free a country is one thing. To consolidate it is another. In some cases the latter task is more difficult. Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, now reunited after centuries of separation, are fusing so violently that intermittent sparks often threaten conflagration. Freedom, and the application of true Liberal principles have put an end to political murders once endemic in the Balkans (we find them nearer home nowadays), but discord and local jealousy prevail. Each branch of the race has found out that the other is far from perfect, and the disappointment is extreme. At first, quarrelling was conducted in best parliamentary style.

"You won the war," said Croat to Serb, with hyperbolic magnanimity. "We cannot forget the tremendous sacrifices you made. You are the first factor in our new State. You have great prestige and honour abroad. You are bound to dominate. There is little regard for us who are shoved altogether in the background."

"Flatterer!" retorted the Serb, disconcerted at having his chief arguments forestalled and finding his merits arrayed against him. "Mine was but the rough work, and now it is your turn to shine. How can an uncouth soldier compete with you in the arts of peace? You are immeasurably beyond us in the higher paths of civilization. Croat savants, artists, scientists are proficient in all we had no time to think about. Why should you dread being swamped by the handful of us extant after the war?"

But the exchange of polite, bitter remarks soon gave place to envenomed diatribes, and the order of compliments was reversed. At the present moment opinion is sharply divided on the constitutional form of the new State. Serbs, in the main, advocate

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centralism, while the Croats and Slovenes, after due deliberation, have come to the conclusion that federalism would best protect their separate interests. Unity, they say, cannot be produced by a stroke of the pen, between elements divergent in custom, tradition, and creed. They claim a large measure of autonomy in default of a Croat parliament.

For the better comprehension of the problems now agitating the new Southern Slav State a glance at history is necessary. The Slav tribes that settled in the Balkan Peninsula in the sixth century became Christians in the ninth through the efforts of Saints Cyril and Methodius who are claimed as patrons alike by Catholic and Orthodox. At this time the schism was in its infancy and had not penetrated to the people who were concerned less with doctrine than ecclesiastical disputes.

Before the various tribes had found time to coalesce, the irruption of the Turks hindered unification and development. The brunt of the resistance offered to the invaders was borne by the Serbs, more immediately exposed owing to their geographical position. Serbs were the last to submit to the Moslem yoke that Europe shamefully allowed to be imposed on Christians of the South-East, as Serbia was the first to rise after five centuries of oppression. On the famous field of Kossovo her Emperor, knights, and the mass of her people died in a last superhuman effort to preserve soil, faith, and freedom. On that field, let it never be forgotten, were present large contingents of Croats, unconscious of racial or creed differences between them and their brethren. Rivalry and hostility were fomented at a later date by the German usurpers, glad to gather the routed Slavs into their Empire. In spite of wiles, threats, and periods of cruel repression, the Croats, under the Austrian Crown, maintained a distinct national entity and were finally

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recognized as an individual kingdom, their vassalage being in many respects akin to Ireland under England.

The great Serbian Empire, on the other hand, defeated and dismembered at Kossovo in 1389, survived but a century and finally sank out of sight. Turkey reigned, and the hunted, tortured Christians had apparently accepted their fate of slaves and victims without hope of redress. The legends of Kossovo, however, were kept alive in the humble hidden homes of the despised "rayahs," and here, as elsewhere, the priests continued to nurture the secret flame of Faith. How fruitful was their work, how potent the mothers' cradle-song was proved when the providential moment came for a Christian upheaval. Never had the Austrian Empire made a move against the Turks without Serbs and Croats joining to support her. But the consequences of Austrian victories were so little beneficial to the Slavs that they finally bethought themselves of striving alone, and counting but on themselves for any amelioration of their sufferings. The insurrection of 1804 was the beginning of a long, determined struggle for emancipation from Ottoman rule on the part of the Serbs, and the same period saw under the influence of Napoleon a movement by the Croats to assert their status in the formation of a State called Illyria, which was, however, short-lived. We must remember that the Croats had a more difficult enemy to deal with than the Serbs. Austria had the resources of civilization at her disposal to crush a subject-race, whereas Turkey had no policy beyond blind, ferocious repression and extermination. Serbia, by dint of hard fighting, was the first to wrest independence from her tyrants, and thenceforward the attraction towards her of the other Southern Slavs gradually increased until it culminated in the Pact of Corfu, signed on July 20, 1917, by the representatives of Serbia in exile, and those of Croatia still

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under Austrian rule, but resolved to get free. Beyond the fact of reunion in one indivisible State, to be a kingdom with the Serbian dynasty, there was no further specific condition. A constituent assembly, composed of members of all the peoples concerned, elected by secret, universal ballot, was to decide on minor questions as soon as peace, crowned with victory, supervened. Serbia's privileged position with the Allies made her easily, inevitably, the leader, and thus the Croats, relegated in the world councils to an inferior place, soon began to feel sore at having to refer to Serbia for all communications with other nations. They were not recognized as a separate people, notably by the French, whose passport service wrote them down as "Serbs," if they would be treated as friends and allies. Their rôle in hastening the end of the war was overlooked. It was, nevertheless, not inconsiderable. Without the surrender of the Slav regiments Italy's boasted victory on the Piave would never have been won. Their attitude had reduced the Austro-Hungarian army to passivity and disorganization before the triumphant entry of the Italians on Hapsburg territory. The 16th, 28th, 53rd, and 78th Regiments, formed mainly of Croats, had thrown down their arms and set out for their homes, where a sullen opposition to the war had existed from the very outbreak of hostilities. The Croats had, moreover, formed a secret society under the Presidency of Mr. Drinkovic, which numbered 16,000 members pledged to work for a united Yugoslavia outside the Hapsburg Monarchy. The conspirators were also in touch with Czechs and Poles affiliated and directed from the Central Committee of patriots at Zagreb. It is noteworthy that not one betrayer was found in this vast organization.

Croatia was certainly ripe for independence when the Great Dual Empire fell asunder. Whether she

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was ripe for cohesion to the rest of her kindred is another matter. Austrian intrigue had done much to sow dissension and inspire mutual distrust. Each branch of the Southern Slav people had been encouraged to claim a particular individuality and hold aloof from the others. The Bosnians, for example, were told that they spoke the "Bosnian" tongue, in reality a perfect Serbian dialect, and the Croats were persuaded that by fraternizing with the "Serb schismatics" they would be false to their Catholic faith. Such fictitious barriers had indeed given way in the Balkan War when Serbia finally delivered all her Christian brethren from Islam misrule, and hastened, with due regard for the Catholics of Macedonia, to conclude a Concordat with the Holy See. But wounded pride, and a certain, not quite unjustifiable, misgiving still influenced a large section of the Croat population. It is less their absorption of Latin culture, as opposed to the Russo-Slav, than their custom of compromise, of carefully planned arrangements, their policy of mutual concession to wring desired measures of political justice, that hinders an understanding with Serbia. So often tricked and baffled by the Governments of Vienna and Budapest, they are suspicious of laws promulgated at Belgrade, and in spite of the participation of their own delegates, do not believe in the possibility of impartial administration.

"Serbia was victorious. Serbia has the ear of the world. Serbia is strong and united within her own borders. She will never treat us as equals. We must try to maintain our particularist autonomy or consent to be swamped." Thus it will be seen that Yugoslavia has, in a manner, her Ulster, and that grave internal difficulties succeed to the sanguinary struggle that brought liberty from external pressure.

Serbia, in the past, had a wider and more daring vision. No pact with the Turks was aught but tem-

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porary in her mind. She strained ceaselessly to complete emancipation, and when it was secured she turned her attention to the emancipation of the Croats and Slovenes. Those who had suffered most, the cruelly downtrodden vassals of the Sultan, were the first to throw off the alien taint, to embrace a true spirit of democracy and invite others to join with them and share alike the blessings of democratic government.

Serbia fears nothing from perfect equality in all things with the other branches of her race. She calls for uniform laws, for the abolition of past geographical frontiers, for a unique system of administration, for identical methods of education. Serbia calls out to her kin, to those she has freed by generously shedding her blood: "Trust us! All we have won is at your service. Come and share the liberty we bought with a heavy price. Join up and help to form the State. Spend the forces you have accumulated in healing our wounds. Spread your boasted civilization among your neglected brethren in Macedonia whence we have routed the Turk but not yet effaced his trail. Consent to a partnership on equal terms and let the best win!"

But the Croats view things differently. They are by no means sure that what suits Serbia would suit them. They had by degrees reached a *modus vivendi* with their German and Magyar masters and are reluctant to part with certain favours gained from these in order to merge in the full rush of the Serbian tide and risk their individuality. They want guarantees that Serbia shall not interfere in their local concerns. After deliverance from the alien oppressors so abhorred they dread possible domination by their own kin. Vainly the Croats have tried to prove that their policy of decentralization does not mean separatism. Owing to party divisions they had but a poor and wavering minority to support their revendications in the Con-

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stituent Assembly. Autonomy for the several provinces was opposed by the compact Serbian majority as being redolent of the Dual Empire whose device, "Divide et impera," was pursued in the invention of a "Bosnian" people, and a "Bosnian" tongue, and the fiction of a non-Serb State of Montenegro whose inhabitants should be called "Montenegrins!"

After having consistently refused to join the other Slavs and form a unity within the Hapsburg Empire, Serbia will neither relinquish her national dynasty nor allow herself to be isolated from the distinctly Serb provinces that claim union with her. In Croatia itself the number of Serbs would make a cleavage line difficult to determine.

For the present the Serb vote has carried the day. The Centralistic form of Government has been voted, and with all due deference to Serbian assurances that it will not hamper provincial administration, and that it is the best means of producing true national solidarity, it behoves the Croats to rally and unite if they would preserve their privileges and enforce their principles within the new State. It is undeniable that neither Orthodox Serb nor free-thinking Croat are much concerned with the cause of religious education in schools. That cause, rightly cherished by the Catholic Croat, can be better served by a strong Catholic Party, such as Croatia can furnish to the general parliament, than by autonomous exclusiveness. The Serbs invite criticism, opposition, and co-operation in the framing of the laws. Let Croats come forward and give it, thus influencing the destinies of fourteen and not six millions; of Yugoslavia and not Croatia alone.

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