

MUSSOLINI ANTE PORTAS

Italian Fascism and Yugoslav Neighbourhood (1919–1925)

Summary

Relations with Italy were among Yugoslavia's greatest foreign policy problems and temptations during the entire inter-war period. The stability of the international position of the new Yugoslav state depended on their resolution, they had serious consequences on the domestic political situation and affected trade relations with Italy, a significant economic partner. Drawing a border with Italy, the status of the city of Rijeka, the fate of the Yugoslav population in the annexed territories (between 400,000 and 600,000 Slovenes, Croats and Serbs), and Italy's involvement in the internal conflicts of its eastern neighbour, were all questions that were persistently „on the agenda“ – especially in the first post war years.

The disordered relations with the Kingdom of Italy left serious consequences on the already complex domestic political situation, provoking accusations against the government in Belgrade for pursuing the wrong policy, „selling national territories“ and „capitulation“. These accusations mostly came from the ranks of the Croatian parties, but also from the Serbian opposition and influential Serbian and Slovenian newspapers. Territorial pretensions, the irredentist maximalism of Italy, the member of the victorious „club of great powers“, the presence of the Italian occupational army in Dalmatia, and on the islands, on the Montenegrin coast, and in Albania, together with the instrumentalisation of internal differences, political and national rivalries, faced the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes with great temptations. It was forced to be on the defensive and receive a subordinate role in the intricate diplomatic game. In this diplomatically and politically unequal confrontation, the official attitudes of the Yugoslav government always referred to the defence of common national interests and territories

276 | inhabited by Yugoslavs of all three „tribes“, simultaneously warning about the restrictions imposed by the unfavourable situation in which the state found itself.

The Kingdom of Italy and its policy, regardless of the occasional improvement in relations and changes in the highest government authorities in Rome, were viewed, with reason, as a key factor in threatening the territorial integrity and the survival of its Yugoslav neighbour. In the initial period of the First World War, especially after entering the war in 1915, Italy saw Serbia as a courageous small allied state, fighting against the common Austro-Hungarian enemy. The prominent Italian poet, nationalist Gabriele D'Annunzio, dedicated the *Ode to the Serbian Nation* to the Serbian allies in 1915. Also in 1915, the former socialist Benito Mussolini demanded for the utter respecting of the borders in the Eastern Adriatic, promised by the Treaty of London in favour of Italy, simultaneously accepting Serbia's right to access part of the Adriatic coastline. He criticised the stance of Italian nationalists who, through their immoderate policies, wanted to replace Austria-Hungary with Serbia as their new enemy. Mussolini saw good relations with the territorially enlarged Serbia as the basis for Italy's further political and economic penetration into the Balkans. However, already by 1916, Mussolini began radically changing this stance, further sharpening it in 1917 after the adoption of the Corfu Declaration. The adoption of a joint program of the Serbian government and the Yugoslav Committee (the representatives of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes from Austria-Hungary) for the creation of a Yugoslav state that would include the eastern coast of the Adriatic sea within its boards, which the Italian irredentism had aspiration over, influenced Mussolini to begin claiming that this document annulled the Serbian government's possibilities for further cooperation with Italy. He also began publicly denying the Slavic ethnic character of the population in Dalmatia, Istria, and Gorizia. After the Italian army's loss at Capporetto (Kobarid) in 1917, he softened his attitude, accepting Serbia's unification with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, as well as Croatia's „right“ to join, except for the coastal territories to which Italy had claims. Until the end of the war, he changed his opinion on this matter several times.

At the Paris Peace Conference, the Serbian (= Yugoslav) delegation was faced with difficult territorial questions, the hardest of which was how to resist the requests of Italy, to receive the territories that the Allies promised by the secret Treaty of London. For the Yugoslavs, the

demarcation had political and moral significance and, having in mind the unequal position of the new Yugoslav state, required making difficult decisions. Aside from the territories it annexed, Italian troops were stationed across the Dalmatian coast and islands, including the city of Rijeka, which was supposed to act as a buffer state and be under the governance of the League of Nations. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes fought for international recognition, invoking the principle of nationality, the prevailing ethnic composition of the population, the economic logic and the strategic importance of the territories that were under the attack of Italian irredentism. However, the Kingdom of SCS did not have the support of other great European Allied states, as they prioritised relations with Italy. In the first months upon the end of the First World War, danger of an armed confrontation between the Serbian and the Italian armies (Serbian had around 140,000 soldiers and Italy counted 4.5 million nearing the end of 1918) also arose. The support of the American president Wilson – an opponent of secret treaties and their promised territorial concessions, especially highlighted in his Declaration of the 24th April 1919 that rejected the Treaty of London – disappeared with the USA's retreat from European affairs, which further weakened the Yugoslav position.

The status of Rijeka (Fiume), a significant port city, became the main stumbling block in Yugoslav-Italian relation. The situation became especially complicated after the coup carried out in September 1919 by Gabriele D'Annunzio with his *arditi*, which more or less received tacit support from the Italian army. In the next fifteen months of preparations for finally joining Italy – as D'Annunzio saw it – he turned Rijeka into a stage for a political experiment that combined elements of different, often contradicting ideologies and policies: from anarcho-syndicalism to radical nationalism. All these differences were clearly noticeable in the libertarian-intoned Constitution (*Carta del Carnaro*), of *The Italian Regency of Carnaro*, as well as in the ethnic intolerance and violence against non-Italians. Delegations and persons from several separatist organisations arrived to Rijeka, asking and receiving support from D'Annunzio for action against the Yugoslav state (supporters of the former Montenegrin King Nikola, the Albanian Kosovo Committee, Frankists (Frankovci) – the Croatian separatists, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation).

Although D'Annunzio had lukewarm support from Mussolini, who saw the *poet-commander* as competition, some of the experiences of the

278 | *Dannunziada* represented a desirable role model in shaping the future practice of the fascist movement (the way of taking power, rituals, slogans, scenography, uniforms, the cult of the dead etc.). The division of society into ten corporations according to the *Carta del Carnaro* leads to the conclusion that this experiment certainly provided the fascists with many elements for „copying“. However, under international pressure, the Italian government was forced to publicly condemn the proclamation of *The Italian Regency of Carnaro* and declare D’Annunzio a rebel, forcing him to leave the city after a brief armed conflict in January 1921.

To the Yugoslav public, the fascists were, at first, only one of the extreme nationalist and irredentist groups that attacked Slovenian and Croatian institutions and their representatives in the annexed and occupied territories. The most well-known example of such fascist activity was the burning of the Slovenian *National Hall* and the attack on the headquarters of the Delegation of the Kingdom of SCS in Trieste in July 1920. Before October 1922, Mussolini’s followers in Trieste and other border centres of the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region, radical representatives of *border fascism*, were especially active in spreading anti-Yugoslav, anti-Slavic, racist intoned politics. They also organised numerous border incidents and carried out incursions into Yugoslav territory. A second coup was carried out by the fascists in March 1922, overthrowing the autonomist Rijeka government. In this way, they executed its informal annexation, which was formalised two years later, when the Treaty of Rome was signed by the Yugoslav and Italian governments.

The signing of the Treaty of Rapallo by the governments in Rome and Belgrade in 1920 did not satisfy the Italian irredentists, including Mussolini. The treaty was also criticised and condemned by the Yugoslav public as a result of unacceptable compliance and the capitulation of the government under Italian pressure. The treaties that the Yugoslav government later signed with Mussolini’s government (the Treaty of Rome in 1924 and the Treaty of Nettuno in 1925) created a similar climate. The unfavourable solutions for the Yugoslav state were a sign of its limited room for manoeuvring in international relations, the weaknesses of the young state and its diplomacy, the lack of support from allies, and internal conflicts. Nevertheless, in the circumstances of the mid-1920s, this policy was the only achievable solution. Due to its politics regarding Italy, the Yugoslav government was especially targeted in domestic policy disputes, most notably by the prominent Croatian (Republican) Peasant Party and its leader Stjepan Radić – who, himself,

was, however, counting on Italian support for the fulfilment of his own political goals.

In the period until the mid-1920s, due to domestic and foreign policy reasons, Mussolini had to, although involuntarily, accept and continue the course of relations with his Yugoslav neighbour that was traced by previous governments, including the ratification of the already signed treaties and the signing of new ones. From the mid-1920s, after consolidating his position and intensifying the process of the *fascisation* of Italy, his politics became more aggressive, increasingly threatening the Yugoslav position and borders on the south, too, through political and military presence in Albania. Italy also became the centre of the revisionist bloc of states in the Yugoslav neighbourhood and the main financier of separatist movements.

The dominant critical view of the Yugoslav public towards Mussolini and the fascists was determined by the negative experiences with *border fascism* and its brutal attacks on minorities' institutions and persons, threats and incursions into Yugoslav territory. The fascists especially entered the focus of interest of the Serbian, Slovenian and Croatian publics in the time of the Italian government crisis in the autumn of 1922 and after the March on Rome. Mussolini's personality, the ideology of his movement and his *methodology* of gaining power were subject of live coverage, in the daily press and numerous journals where analytical texts about fascism by prominent intellectuals of different political orientations, including active diplomats, were published. In the almost complete lack of Yugoslav diplomatic archival materials, which shared the fate of the country in the Second World War, these texts made it possible to track the opinion on fascism in Yugoslavia until the mid-1920s.

One of the distinctions of that period was the attempt to not generalise and thus to divide the criticism of the fascist regime and its anti-Slavic policy from the image of Italy, as one of the most important historical role models to the Balkan Slavs, in their struggle for national emancipation and unification from the 19th century. The conclusion imposed by this research, when it came to the nature of fascism, is that very early on, it was clear to the Yugoslav public what the movement was and especially what its foreign policy goals were. The texts of, for example, Jovan Jovanović Pižon, Živojin Balugdžić, Miodrag Ristić, Ivo Andrić, Josip Smodlaka, Milan Durman, as well as other authors, testify to that. It should be emphasised that some of these authors gave

280 | a precise and accurate „mass-psychological“ analysis of the changes that fascism produced in the political and social life of Italy in its early phases, including the consequences of these changes, as well as its influence outside of Italian borders (Hungary, Germany).

On the other hand, the radical part of the supporters of the ideology of an *integral* Yugoslav nation, especially numerous in Dalmatia and Slovenia, with strongholds in Vojvodina as well, founded the *Organisation of Yugoslav Nationalists* (Organizacija jugoslovenskih nacionalista – ORJUNA) in Split in 1921. They saw the reason for founding this organisation in the danger imposed by Italian irredentism and Italy's politics in the annexed territories. The organisation of ORJUNA, the militarisation of the movement, propaganda vocabulary and brutal methods of confrontation with opponents (in addition to fascists: communists, national „tribal“ organizations and political parties, primarily the Croatian Republican Peasant Party, minority organisations, etc.) were „modelled“ after Mussolini's movement. Still, it lacked some important elements in order to be classified as a „pure“ fascist organisation (strong hierarchy and centralised organisation, the cult of the leader, massive strongholds on the entire state territory and the widely accepted concept of integral Yugoslav nationalism). Furthermore, ORJUNA did not question the state order (the monarchy, parliament), nor advocate its overthrow. Extreme narrow national counterparts and opponents of ORJUNA also had similarities with the Italian model: The Croatian Nationalist Youth (Hrvatska nacionalistička omladina – HANA O), The Serbian Nationalist Youth (Srpska nacionalistička omladina – SRNAO), the Muslim Nationalist Youth (Muslimanska nacionalistička omladina – MANAO), as well as several other similar organisations. ORJUNA attempted to create its cells on the Italian territory and organise actions as a response to the fascist policy of the repression of Yugoslav (Croatian and Slovenian) minorities. Abandoning the ideology of *integral Yugoslavism* from the mid-1930s and the loss of support from the government authorities led to the growing impact of national parties and to the subsequent weakening and extinguishing of this organisation.

One may conclude that, during this period, the existence of a gap between the possibilities of the Yugoslav state in finding an adequate response for the suppression of negative effects of fascist Italy and the requests and expectation of the public was also noticeable. In this unequal „game“, the Kingdom of SCS was, and remained, a passive player. On the other hand, the Kingdom of SCS and the Kingdom of

Italy, with all of their political problems, had great interests for the improvement of economic cooperation, having in mind the compatibility (and weaknesses) of their economies. Economic exchange remained the most positive segment of their politically instable relations in the inter-war period.

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The participation of Italy, the main ally of the Third Reich, in the territorial dismemberment of Yugoslavia in 1941, the occupational policy, and repression of the population were, with tragic consequences, the wartime metastasis of these relations. Through new challenges, these negative experiences would go on to mark the period of post-war relations between the two states. The disputed issues between the Republic of Italy and socialist Yugoslavia were removed from the agenda by signing the Treaty of Osimo in 1975.

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