3 Dictatorship and Compromise

The Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes had proven, in effect, ungovernable owing to the failure of its politicians to accept the necessity for compromise and concession implicit in parliamentary government in an environment characterised by a series of strongly held cultural identities. Despairing of the politicians, King Alexander saw the solution in an autocratic government, appealing to the people over the heads of the political process as the one source of power with sufficient legitimacy in the wider community to command the ordering of the state. What the 1920s had demonstrated was that Yugoslavia was viable as an economic unit but that it lacked any one group with sufficient legitimacy in the population as a whole to function as the focal point around which the state could be organised. The principal element giving it cohesion was the threat of external enemies who saw the South Slav state as the factor in the way of dominance of the Balkan peninsula. This combined with the economic crisis which afflicted the world economy at the end of the 1920s to drive the monarch to adopt more autocratic methods of government. Retrogressive though this solution was, it was in keeping with the general tendency in the region in this period towards stronger royalist influence, which resulted from disappointments with early experiments with democracy that had been made difficult by the international uncertainties both political and economic which threatened to worsen the already weak condition of the south-east European domestic economies.

In 1929, Yugoslavia entered a new phase in its development in which the difficulties were suppressed rather than addressed. Although this proved temporarily stabilising, and may even have been essential owing to the onset of worldwide economic depression, it did nothing towards solving the underlying problems which had been created with the union of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The use of coercion left the most deeply disaffected elements at the extremes of the political spectrum with little recourse but to adopt illegal and covert activities, often organised from outside Yugoslavia’s borders. These cells of political dissidents
became tools of the great ideological movements which fought for political control of the region during the Second World War.

Monarchical Autocracy, 1929–31

Throughout the 1920s, King Alexander had attempted to remain above the factionalism of his politicians. Genuinely eager to create a Yugoslav state rather than an enlarged Serbia, he had attempted to achieve this goal through constant urgings of compromise and conciliation. When the assassinations of June 1928 convinced him that reliance on the methods of parliamentary democracy could not succeed, his temperament and training led him to resort to authoritarian methods. The King was himself a military man, and had spent his formative years in Tsarist Russia. Naturally suspicious of people, he relied on a group of trusted advisers rather than seek the ideas of less known but intellectually original thinkers. His solution to Yugoslavia’s problems was consistent with this upbringing and outlook.

On 6 January 1929, under conditions of great secrecy, the King abrogated the Vidovdan Constitution. Using royal prerogative, which he expressed in the first person rather than the conventional royal ‘we’, he identified himself in the most personal way with this essentially illegal act which transferred all legislative power to the Crown.¹ Recognising the need for fusing the various elements in order to establish a single identity, the state was renamed ‘Yugoslavia’ and vested entirely for the time being, in the person of the monarch. A new law was promulgated on the defence of the state under which any and every activity against the new régime carried the risk of arbitrary arrest. Political parties were effectively abolished, since they could only exist if authorised by the Crown, and any activity which was based in sectional interests was banned. Even the army, the one unifying element still remaining and on which the monarch depended for support, was required to modify in order to recognise the emphasis on Yugoslav identity. Accordingly it abandoned its prized emblems which were associated with Serbian traditions rather than with those of the South Slav community in its widest sense.

The centrality of the military was manifest in the King’s choice of General Peter Živković as Prime Minister. Živković’s loyalty, having once been a leader of the White Hand, was unquestioned and since the war he had served as commander of the Royal Guard as well as being Alexander’s closest adviser. The remainder of the King’s cabinet were Serb, with the exception of the redoubtable Slovene, Anton Korošeč.