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Yugoslavism, Jews and Ustasha Ideology, 1918–1941

Abstract: This chapter examines the three dominant national ideologies in the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia: Yugoslavism, anti-Yugoslavist Croat nationalism and Greater Serbian nationalism. The chapter explores the development of racial theories in Croatia/Yugoslavia and its importance to all three ideologies, and how the Jews fitted into these theories. A larger section is devoted to the Ustasha movement, which derived its political origins from the philo-Semitic Croatian Party of Right, but adopted racial anti-Semitism in the 1930s. An overview of Jewish life in Yugoslavia is also provided in this chapter.

The South Slavic nation state

In 1918 a British advocate of Yugoslav nationalism, Fanny Copeland (1872–1970), stated that ‘from the ordeal of war, pestilence, famine and persecution, the Yugo-Slavs have emerged as one people, as homogeneous as they were when they first descended from the Carpathians’.1 The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was founded in November 1918 (renamed Yugoslavia in 1929) upon the basis of the theory of South Slavic ethnolinguistic–racial homogeneity. The Croat political elite, largely made up of Yugoslavist nationalists, had agreed to the unification of the Austro–Hungarian South Slav provinces with the Kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro because the ‘modern principle of nationality’, according to which the Croats were an integral part of the South Slav ethnolinguistic family, logically demanded the establishment of a nation-state for the ‘Yugo-Slavs’.2

Life in the new Yugoslav state, however, only highlighted more clearly the stark differences between Serbian and Croatian political customs and cultural traditions.3 Serbia, which had existed as an independent state for more than a century and which was motivated by an expansionist ideology that aimed to unite all Serbs into one state, undertook a policy of centralisation.4 In contrast, the Croats were historically accustomed to a political system that preserved Croatia’s traditional autonomy, and wanted equality with Serbia in the new state.5 Belgrade had no real intention of meeting Croatian national aspirations, so that no separate Croat administrative unit existed until 1939. Between 1918 and 1939, Croatia was wiped off the political map of Europe, administratively divided (from 1929) between the Banovine (‘banates’ or districts) of Savska (northern Croatia), Primorska (most of the coastline) and Zetska (southern Dalmatia with Montenegro).6 The South Slav state bore an undeniably Serbian political, military and cultural stamp, headed as it was by the Serbian royal dynasty of Karadjordjević, while the new army was based entirely on the former Serbian army (in everything from uniforms to medals and to its predominantly Serbian officer corps).7 The official ideology of the ‘trinomial Yugoslav nation’, according to which Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were considered three equal ‘tribes’ of one ‘people’, in reality meant the domination of Serbian political customs and culture in the administration and cultural life of Yugoslavia.8

Serbian nationalists, who led the two dominant Yugoslav political parties, the Democrats and Radicals, believed that they could eventually