CHAPTER THREE

RACE THEORY IN HABSBURG CROATIA, 1900–1918

Introduction

In the age of nationality, or national self-determination, in which every European nation was supposed to have its own independent state, anti-Yugoslavist Croat intellectuals had to prove to the wider world that they were indeed a nation in every sense of the word, and in an age of science, they needed firm scientific arguments to convince doubters, including the proponents of Croat Yugoslavism. Accordingly, the question of racial anthropology began to increasingly interest the minds of anti-Yugoslavist intellectuals in Croatia, who looked to the prevailing ideas of racial anthropologists and theorists in Europe (particularly Austria and Germany) as a guide to studying race in the western Balkans.

Since the late nineteenth century racial theories had aided a large number of nationalist politicians and academics in the interpretation of national conflicts in central, eastern and southeastern Europe. As George Mosse noted, ‘racism gave new dimensions to the idea of rootedness inherent in all of nationalism, while at the same time sharpening the differences between nations, providing clear and unambiguous distinctions between them.’\(^1\) One of the most significant racial ideas that found widespread acceptance in both popular and intellectual circles in fin-de-siècle Austria-Hungary was the notion that the Slavs had historically been incapable of forming and/or maintaining states on their own. Therefore, all the Slavic states known to history were actually founded by Germanic or Turkic martial castes, which succeeded in establishing their rule over a mass of Slav subjects (this had occurred, for example, in the early history of the medieval kingdoms of Russia and Bulgaria).

---

\(^1\) Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution*, 55.
The idea of Slav inferiority in the area of state building had a long history. In St. Petersburg in 1749 the Russian imperial historian, Gerhard Friedrich Müller (1705–1783), argued that the medieval Kievan state (*Rus*') was founded by Norsemen or Vikings.² Indeed, in the case of Russian history, ‘in the West, and particularly in Germany, it was quite common formerly to distinguish between the élites or ruling class in Russia, thought to be of Aryan or Germanic origin, and the people who were of mixed or Mongol blood.’³ In a chapter of the *Cambridge Medieval History* from 1911, the Czech historian Jan Peisker (1851–1933) wrote that ‘all so-called Slav States of which we have sufficient information turn out to be either Germanic or Altaian foundations.’⁴ The early medieval Slavs were considered natural slaves: ‘The Slav was the most prized of human goods. With increased strength outside his marshy land of origin… industrious, content with little, good-humoured, and cheerful, he filled the slave markets of Europe, Asia, and Africa.’⁵

Slavic (particularly Russian) scholars had always felt uncomfortable with a passage from the medieval Russian ‘Chronicle of Nestor’, which seemed to strongly suggest Slavic inferiority and political dependence on the West. The particular passage recounted how Slavic tribes appealed to the Vikings by telling them that ‘our land is great and rich, but there is no order in it. Come and rule over us.’⁶ Slavophile thinkers of the nineteenth century had tried to turn the prevailing idea of the inherent Slavic incapability of higher organisation and state building on its head by arguing that the pacific and democratic nature of the Slavs was a sign of their greater humanity and ethical morality. The founder of the Slavophile movement in Russia, Aleksey Stepanovich Khomyakov (1804–1860), argued that Slavic acceptance of the Vikings (or Varangians) was actually ‘proof of the basic pacifism of the Slavs and of their moral superiority.’⁷

---

² Davies, *Europe*, 656.
⁵ Ibid., 429.
⁷ Ibid., 125.