Centralization Versus Decentralization in Interwar Yugoslavia

From the evening of December 1, 1918, when Yugoslavia was first called into being by the then-Prince Regent of Serbia, Alexander, under the rather cumbersome title of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, it has been plagued with the problem of finding its identity. A country composed of different peoples with widely separated cultural traditions, speaking different languages, worshipping gods with different names and possessing a long history of mutual mistrust and lack of communications, Yugoslavia was from the start a political nightmare. The primary goal of many of Yugoslavia's political leaders has been to awaken the country from that nightmare and bring political and social order to the South Slavs. But none has been able to achieve his goal. Some have tried to impose on Yugoslavia a cross-national pan-Yugoslav tradition, but this has resulted largely in hollow clichés and hidden nationalist resentments. Others have concentrated their hopes on the older nationalist traditions of Yugoslavia and have worked for cooperation rather than conformity. But this too has resulted in increased national tensions and internal divisiveness.

Certainly one of the crucial issues in this Yugoslav search for identity has been the role of the central government in Yugoslav internal affairs. During the first two decades in the country's existence, its leaders interpreted that role in many different ways. Few were in any sense successful; some were outright disastrous. But all are for our purposes important, for by looking at the reasons why Yugoslavia's interwar politicians failed to find a stable equilibrium between central control and local or regional self-government we can better understand the overall complexities of this remarkable country.

The Yugoslav politicians of the interwar period viewed the issue of centralism versus decentralism in essentially two ways. Some considered it a matter of administration and bureaucratic decision-making, believing that the only question before them was how much control the central government should have over local and regional concerns. Others considered such a view too narrow and insensitive. The true issue, they asserted, was one of national identification. It did not matter how much administrative power local units of government possessed if demands for national autonomy were ignored. The struggle, these persons said, concerned whether Yugoslavia would be a federal state of several national groups, as its original title implied, or a unified state recognizing only the Yugoslav nationality and obliterating the old national traditions. Few of Yugoslavia's leaders perceived the dual nature of the problem, and consequently few attempted to answer both sides of the issue. The result was continual frustration and misunderstanding, the administrators unable to comprehend the failure of the national leaders to appreciate their efforts at bureaucratic reform and the national leaders just as unable to tackle the more concrete issues of day to day administration. But frustration did not stop these men from trying.

There were four ways in which the interwar leaders attempted to achieve the balance they sought both in terms of administration and in terms of nationality. The first of these
was that employed by the politicians of the 1920's. Representing almost exclusively partisan political interests of one sort or another and concerned first and foremost with mere acquisition of power for themselves and their parties, these men had a hard time even forming a stable governmental coalition, let alone any definite policy towards centralization of the country. Each sought to exercise as much control as possible over the administration of the country while he remained in power, but each conversely sought to limit the exercise of that control by his rivals as soon as he should lose his position in the government. As a result a situation of de facto stalemate existed in Yugoslav administration with no individual or political clique able to keep control of government long enough to make much impact on the administrative apparatus. From December, 1918, until the end of the parliamentary period in January, 1929, twenty-four governments sat in Belgrade, thus making the nominal administrative leadership little more than a revolving door of personalities and parties.1 While most of these governments advocated a centralist position, their incessant struggles for power left little time to translate their words into effective policies.

Underneath, however, administration was considerably more stable. Like the French under the Third Republic, the Yugoslavs developed an administrative army of bureaucrats who gave the continuity the political leadership could not provide. As a result, these bureaucrats usually divorced themselves from active participation in partisan politics and turned their loyalties to the administration itself. They would serve whichever party and leader happened to be in power, but they made decisions on the basis of administrative tradition, not party platform. They became in effect a party all their own.

Because so many of these bureaucrats identified with the bureaucracy rather than with the regional or confessional interests represented by the political parties of the time, they tended to reinforce the growth of centralism within Yugoslavia. Responding to the centrally focused lines of authority instituted by the 1921 Vidovdan Constitution, the local administrator quite naturally thought more about how to please his immediate superior than about finding the solution to the problems of his village or district, and he often treated the wishes of his constituents with bored disdain. While there were always those who diverged from this pattern and really did respond to the needs of the people they served, such usually left the ranks of the bureaucracy for the more active political parties. The backbone for the administration was apparently provided by the plodding.