

THE MARSEILLES TRAGEDY

by

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The royal drama in Marseilles and the death — by a tragic accident — of M. Barthou, French Foreign Minister, was a shocking event.

But behind that royal drama there looms large the drama of a whole people — nay, of whole peoples —, without which that royal drama would surely never have been enacted. It is evident that this was a political murder. King Alexander fell a victim to a conspiracy called into being by a system of political oppression not particular in its choice of methods. Though our human sympathy is entirely with the unfortunate victims, nevertheless as publicists we have a duty beyond the mere moments of sentiment, a duty making it incumbent upon us to deal also with the events — the political and historical background — leading up to and rendering possible the lamentable and horrifying attempt.

This duty is all the more incumbent upon us in view of the fact that the official communiqué relating to the Belgrade Conference of the Little Entente describes as decidedly international in its connections the monstrous crime which has been received with horror all over the world, and declares that the causes of that crime must be located outside the boundaries of Yugoslavia. This statement indubitably involves insinuations against other countries; and, seeing that the hostile propaganda launched in the foreign press has done its best under all circumstances to implicate Hungary in the conspiracy, we must raise our voices in protest and must point out that it is solely and exclusively the work of Croatian *émigrés*, and that the causes leading to this terrible misfortune are well-known circumstances and conditions arising out of the internal situation in Yugoslavia.

The basis in principle of the Yugoslav State formation was set down in the so-called "Corfu Convention", — the first attempt to put on paper this organisation resting upon the union of various peoples and upon a combination of heterogeneous cultures. The Convention — the nucleus of the subsequent Vidovan Constitution — was signed on the Island of Corfu, on July 7th., 1917, by Premier Nikola Pashitch on behalf of the Serbian Government then in exile and on behalf of the Yugoslav Union by Ante Trumbitch, who later on became Yugoslav Foreign Minister and ultimately was subjected to a lengthy confinement by the Yugoslav Dictators.

There can be no doubt that the leaders of the Croats who went into exile during the Great War

desired to bring into being a united Yugoslav State and a united Yugoslav nation: and when that was effected on paper, they all believed that their most important historical ideal had been realised. However, the Serbs never took the idea seriously; and during the early years of this *symbiosis* they made away entirely with the Yugoslav State idea, ensuring their hegemony by instituting a centralistic system in the machinery of the new State. In this attempt they succeeded completely. But what means they had to employ for the purpose!! They confiscated all civil rights, introduced corporal punishment, employed principally for the purpose of intimidating the peasantry, and afflicted the population generally with all the most ruthless means of persecution. Financially they positively stripped bare the several provinces, devoting special attention in this respect to the districts which had previously formed part of Hungary and to Croatia — which territories are still paying six times as much in taxes as the inhabitants of Old Serbia.

From the very outset the Croats took to the cudgels against this system of forcible absorption. The conflict became exceptionally bitter between the centralistic politicians in Belgrade and the persons responsible for directing the political life of the Croatian people; and the continuous aggravation of the situation finally culminated in the bloody attempt in the Skupstina on January 20th., 1928, one of the victims of which was Stephen Radič, the leader of the Croatian Peasant Party.

This murder profoundly affected the soul of the Croatian people and led to revolutionary movements which impelled King Alexander, on January 6th., 1929, to answer by proclaiming a dictatorship. The Parliament was dissolved; the selfgoverning bodies were suspended; in Croatia the independence of the judiciary and the continuity of the administration of justice was annulled and a general reign of terror instituted which will for some time to come make Croats unable to forget this lamentable era. The Croatian patriots found themselves opposed also by irresponsible elements; the police organised bands of gangsters whose business it was to gradually dispatch the most eminent political leaders of the Croatian people. This is how the powers that be did away with Deputy Predaveč and with Milan Šufflay, the prominent politician and *savant* who was murdered in the very heart of the city of Zagreb.

Those provinces which after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy joined the Yugoslav

State formation to all appearances of their own accord, watched these events with feelings of disillusion and horror; though these events were merely the prelude to the terrors which the Dictators still had in store. The Slovene people, the Croatians and the Mussulmans of Bosnia were practically excluded from any share in the State life of Yugoslavia; and when Koroseć, former Prime Minister, Maček (Radić's successor as leader of the Croatian people) and Spaho, the first man in Bosnia, were arrested, what the powers that be really did was to confiscate the liberty of the peoples which these personalities represented.

It was the Croatian people that protested against the dictatorship by armed resistance too; though that resistance cost the people infinite suffering and the sacrifice of many lives. The insurrection that broke out in the Karst Mountains and on the Dalmatian seaboard was mercilessly suppressed by the Yugoslav army and police. A well-known Croatian politician who succeeded in making his escape has written the story of the tragic end of the insurrection of the Croatian National Party. Whole villages were wiped out of existence and their inhabitants flogged and beaten black and blue; more than fifty houses were demolished and in addition innumerable homesteads and country settlements were destroyed by fire. In one single district more than 600 head of cattle — besides other animals — were driven away, and hundreds of farmers' families were reduced to beggary. Old men of eighty and ninety were put on the rack, old women were beaten black and blue; and the number of victims claimed by this war of extermination in the town of Sebenico exceeded the number of its citizens killed during the Great War. The Mayor of this town was tortured, his ears cut off, his nails wrenched off and his ribs crushed; while twenty-eight Dalmatian villages were compelled to supply prisoners and hostages — more than 400 in number. The persons arrested were kept for days without food or drink in crowded cellars, where they had to sleep on the floor; they were then dragged off to various prisons and internment camps. The whole of Dalmatia was the scene of indescribable sufferings.

It was these deeds of terror that brought into being the Memorandum submitted in June, 1933, to the League of Nations by the Croatians living in foreign countries — the Memorandum being drafted on behalf of 320,000 American Croatians and of all the Croatian Associations existing in Europe. In this well-known Memorandum the Croatians gave a retrospective survey of their whole historical past. They pointed out that in 1102 Croatia entered into a personal union with Hungary, and that the Croatians preserved their independence for twelve centuries. In 1918, after the Great War, — so runs the Memorandum — without the consent of the constitutional representatives of the Croatian nation and in defiance of the wishes of the vast majority of the Croatian people, — when the Allied troops were still in the country and conditions were still chaotic — the Serbian army and Government authorities, referring to the Corfu Convention, forced a union. The real representatives of the Croatians lodged protests against the *fait accompli* of December 1st., 1918, — which surrendered Croatia against her will

to Serbia — with the Paris Peace Conference (on February 27th., 1919) and with President Wilson (in the following month). The Memorandum then enumerated a whole series of petitions previously submitted to the League of Nations and concluded by saying that *of the responsible international factors failed to put an end to the intolerable state of things described, the Croatian people repudiated all responsibility for any subsequent events incidental to a campaign of self-defence which was but natural.*

Terrible things must have happened to bring to this pass the long-suffering Croatian people, which even after the proclamation of the dictatorship still continued to believe in the possibility of a constitutional solution!! This is shown also by the well-known "Zagreb Points" made public on November 7th., 1932, by Dr. Vlatko Maček.

This peaceful *rapprochement* was however repudiated by Belgrade, which resorted to even severer measures. That things would come to this pass, would surely never have been expected by Louis Gaj, the originator of the Illyric-Yugoslav idea, or by Supilo, or even by Svetozar Pribičević, the first Minister of the Interior of the Yugoslav State, who is now an exile in Paris, where he has published a fulminating bill of indictment against the Serbian dictatorship. And what a bitter irony of fate that the ranks of the accusers should be joined also by the British writers who always led the van in the work of trying to win foreign opinion over to the idea of a union of the Southern Slavs, — by Seton Watson and Wickham Steed. On the occasion of the condemnation of Maček these writers published in the columns of the "Manchester Guardian" an Open Letter directed against King Alexander and the dictatorship in which they showed, by an exhaustive treatment of the subject and by abundant quotations, that the charge against Maček was entirely without foundation, whereas on the other hand the demand of the Croatians to the effect that the Yugoslav Government should adopt a democratic federal system was supported sincerely by at least nine-tenths of the population of the country. King Alexander — the Open Letter continued — had at last succeeded in inciting all his subjects against himself and the dictatorship. According to the writers of the Open Letter, though the persons responsible for maintaining the dictatorship will themselves answer in full for the internal consequences of their rule, at the same time they would commend the threatening international results of the embitterment of the Croatians to the attention of all quarters still interested in the peace of South-Eastern Europe.

We repeat : these are the words of "Scotus Viator" and Wickham Steed, written more than two years prior to the attempt at Marseilles!

The letter-writers were here thinking, not of Great Britain only, but also of Italy, — which latter country has however recently been very sensibly offended by a series of assaults delivered against it by Serbian aggressivity. Last year saw the mutilation of the winged lions of Tran; a few weeks ago appeared in the Yugoslav Press serious attacks on the Italian army and Italian valour: and the Italian Consul in Laibach has just been beaten black and blue.