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Crawling Towards Fascism

Peasant Politics and Croat Nationalism in Interwar Yugoslavia

Abstract

This article seeks to revise the commonly held scholarly assumption about the supposed incompatibility of the Croat Peasant Party and the Ustaša Movement. While important differences existed between the two organisations, they also had much in common. This article considers the areas in which they overlapped while also examining the extent to which both groups displayed certain Fascist tendencies. Moving beyond the popular notion that the Ustaša Movement was comprised of a fringe group of radicals who enjoyed no popular support, this article analyses the proclamations of many non-elite Croat nationalists who simultaneously supported both the Ustaša and the Croat Peasant Party.

On 5 April 1940, Don Ante Matačin, a Catholic priest from the Dalmatian town of Privlaka, came to the attention of the Royal Yugoslav Gendarmerie after acting in a way that allegedly endangered Serb-Croat relations and challenged the unity of the interwar Yugoslav Kingdom.¹ According to the incident report compiled by the local district prefecture, the clergyman had encouraged several guests at the wedding of Pero Mustać to sing a song that supported Croat separatist aims while also praising Ante Pavelić's illegal Ustaša Movement, which had organised the assassination of Yugoslavia's King Alexander Karađorđević in 1934. The song told the tale of a Croat maiden who wove a wreath with several branches of Croat history; the priest's narration of the story suggested a degree of continuity from the medieval King Tomislav Trpimirović to Pavelić, who was already planning the overthrow of Yugoslavia and the establishment of an independent Croat state in exile at the time. The song also featured two of the main leaders of Hrvatska Seljačka Stranka (the Croat Peasant Party, HSS): Stjepan Radić, who was assassinated by a Serb nationalist in parliament in 1928, and Vlatko Maček, who took the reins of the organisation after Radić's death. Explaining the supposedly unbroken progression from the Trpimirović dynasty to a future Croat state under Pavelić, Matačin sang: "The first branch belongs to King Tomislav, the second is for Zrinski Frankopan, the third for [Josip] Jelačić the ban², the fourth for Stjepan Radić, the fifth awaits Dr. Maček, and the sixth branch, that is for the one who lives abroad. His name is 'Ante' and you all know his last name. We want Ante [Pavelić] as our King!" Several people joined Matačin as he sang at the wedding, and authorities overheard local children and peasants singing the song in the following weeks.

The fact that many people throughout the towns and villages of western Yugoslavia simultaneously expressed their support for HSS and Ustaša leaders might appear

1 Hrvatski Državni Arhiv [Croatian State Archive, HDA], Banovina Hrvatska [Banovina of Croatia, BH], Odjeljak za Državnu Zaštitu [Department of State Protection, ODZ], 3715 "Don Ante Matačin, župnik iz privlake – rad za dr. Pavelića" [Don Ante Matačin, parish priest – working for Dr. Pavelić], 5 May 1940.

2 A term used to designate a governor-like administrator of a specific unit within a polity.

unsurprising when one takes into account that both organisations claimed to oppose the centralising, authoritarian tendencies of the interwar state towards the Croat nation. However, anglophone scholarship on Yugoslavia has generally highlighted the alleged incompatibility of the Ustaša Movement and the HSS, portraying them as two diametrically opposed organisations.³ Most historians of Yugoslavia present the Serbo-Croat conflict as one waged by an authoritarian Serb-dominated state apparatus, whose supporters sought to impose an artificial Yugoslav national identity on its subjects, against a nationally integrated Croat population that resisted the state's violent assimilationist project.⁴ The absence of works examining national indifference and uneven nationalisation in the Yugoslav context has left unchallenged the assumption that national integration had come to completion in Yugoslavia decades, if not centuries, before King Alexander's abortive attempt to "make Yugoslavs".⁵ In addition to arguing that non-elites knew to which national group they belonged, conventional accounts have taken for granted that ordinary Croats fully understood the differences between several movements working towards Croat 'freedom' and 'national liberation', goals that HSS, Ustaša, and even Croat Communist leaders had all endorsed. Most scholarship on Yugoslavia before and during the Second World War thus draws a rigid distinction between the supposedly moderate HSS and the radical Ustaša Movement. The fact that the Ustaša Movement seized power during the Second World War and engaged in extreme violence against Croatia's Serbs, Roma, and Jews in the wartime *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska* (Independent State of Croatia, NDH) has led some scholars to argue that, unlike the Ustaša, the HSS represented a tolerant, moderate, and respectable variant of Croat nationalism.

- 3 Scholars overwhelmingly agree with Marko Hoare's assertion that the Ustaša "were a fringe movement with whom the mainstream Croat national movement under Vlatko Maček cannot be equated". Marko Hoare, *Genocide and Resistance in Hitler's Bosnia. The Partisans and the Chetniks, 1941–1943*, Oxford 2006, 21. For additional discussion of the distinctions between the supposedly tolerant and popular HSS nationalism and the unpopular Ustaša extremism, see: Ivo Goldstein, *Croatia. A History*, Montreal 1999. For more detail on the HSS, see: Jill Irvine, *The Croat Question. Partisan Politics and the Formation of the Yugoslav Socialist State*, Boulder 1993; Hrvoje Matković, *Povjest Hrvatske Seljačke Stranke [History of the Croatian Peasant Party]*, Zagreb 1993; and Mark Biondich, *Stjepan Radić, the Croat Peasant Party, and the Politics of Mass Mobilization, 1904–1928*, Toronto 2000.
- 4 For more background on the Serbo-Croat conflict in Yugoslavia, see: Ivo Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia*, Ithaca 1984. For opposing approaches to this conflict, see: Jacob Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis, 1934–1941*, New York 1962; Dejan Djokić, *Elusive Compromise. A History of Interwar Yugoslavia*, London 2007; and Alex Dragnich, *The Serbs and the Croats. The Struggle in Yugoslavia*, New York 1992. See also: John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History. Twice there was a Country*, New York 2000; and Charles Jelavich, *South Slav Nationalisms. Textbooks and Yugoslav Union before 1914*, Columbus 1990.
- 5 See: Rogers Brubaker, *Rethinking Nationhood. Nationhood as an Institutionalized Form, Practical Category, Contingent Event*, in: Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Questions in the New Europe*, Cambridge 1996; Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*, Cambridge (MA) 1992; Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation. Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria*, Cambridge (MA) 2006; Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans. A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848–1948*, Princeton 2002; Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls. National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948*, Ithaca 2008; Anastasia Karakasidou, *Fields of Wheat, Hills of Blood. Passages to Nationhood in Greek Macedonia, Chicago 1997*; Ipek Yosmaoglu, *Blood Ties. The Politics of Nationhood in Ottoman Macedonia*, Ithaca 2014; Theodora Dragostinova, *Between Two Motherlands. Nationality and Emigration among the Greeks of Bulgaria, 1900–1949*, Ithaca 2011; and Holly Case, *In Between States. The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea during World War II*, Stanford 2009. For some works that consider implications of the literature on uneven nationalisation in Southeastern Europe, see: Dominique Reill, *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation. Adriatic Multi-Nationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste and Venice*, Stanford 2012; Luciano Monzali, *The Italians of Dalmatia from Italian Unification to World War II*, Toronto 2009; Emily Greble, *Sarajevo, 1941–1945. Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Hitler's Europe*, Ithaca, 2011; John V.A. Fine, *When Ethnicity Did Not Matter in the Balkans. A Study of Identity in Pre-Nationalist Croatia, Dalmatia and Slavonia in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods*, Ann Arbor 2006; Max Bergholz, *Sudden Nationhood. The Microdynamics of Intercommunal Relations in Bosnia-Herzegovina after World War II*, in: *American Historical Review* 118 (2013) 3, 679–707.

Such accounts present the Ustaša Movement as a fringe group of extreme nationalists whose violent methods were incompatible with the mainstream Croat nationalism of the HSS that most Croats allegedly supported.

Accounts that consider potential intersections between the Ustaša Movement and the HSS have either done so cautiously or encountered criticism from scholars who maintain that the Ustaša constituted nothing more than a handful of unpopular extremists. Fikreta Jelić-Butić's detailed history of the HSS notes that the party was not an ideological monolith and shows that it included many covert Ustaša operatives on the local level and several leaders who supported varying degrees of co-operation with the Ustaša Movement.⁶ The author of one of the most comprehensive histories of Yugoslavia during the Second World War, Jozo Tomasevich, discussed the interwar links between the two groups, acknowledging that the Ustaša Movement successfully incorporated many HSS supporters upon coming to power.⁷ Yet his overall treatment of the Ustaša Movement indicates that he sees them as an illegitimate group whose propensity for violence quickly antagonised Croats who had initially given the regime the benefit of the doubt. Moving beyond accounts that fixate on the supposed marginality, bloodthirstiness, and genocidal fanaticism of the Ustaša leadership, the historian Alexander Korb showed that the Ustaša Movement and some of their policies appealed to wider segments of Croatian society.⁸ Attempting to situate Pavelić and his followers within the broader framework of mainstream European Fascism, Rory Yeomans exposed the existence of a more moderate wing of the Ustaša Movement that distinguished itself from the more radically violent émigré returnees.⁹ Yeomans also showed the numerous non-violent ways in which the regime sought to engage the public while revealing that certain groups found the

- 6 Fikreta Jelić-Butić, *Hrvatska Seljačka Stranka [The Croat Peasant Party]*, Zagreb 1984. Jelić-Butić critically examined Machek's conciliatory stance towards the Ustaša after the 1941 Axis invasion. She also detailed the Ustaša's efforts to co-opt peasants and HSS members whom the leadership found agreeable, while marginalising the HSS as a meaningful political force. See also: Fikreta Jelić-Butić, *Ustaše i NDH [The Ustaša and the NDH]*, Zagreb, 1977. The author wrote that the HSS leaders were "conscious that Pavelić's conception and vision of the struggle was not consistent with the programme and politics of the HSS", 18-19. She nevertheless acknowledged that the two organisations were in contact and highlighted that their leaders met in Czechoslovakia in 1930. However, she maintained that Ustaša ideology resonated very poorly among supporters of the HSS and Croat peasants more broadly, and that Ustaša efforts to engage with the peasantry had very little success: "the village had turned inward", she claimed, and there were only a few cases in which local HSS organisations in smaller towns answered the Ustaša leadership's call to express their support for the new regime, 188.
- 7 Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945. Occupation and Collaboration*, Palo Alto 2002. For his discussion of initial links and the subsequent rupture between Maček and Budak, 38-39, where he referred to the HSS as the "only effective political party among the Croats". On the selective incorporation and subsequent alienation of the Croatian Peasant Guard into Ustaša units, 56-57. For his discussion of a broader Croat and HSS condemnation of Ustaša violence, 342. For a discussion of Pavelić's unwillingness to engage moderate segments of the HSS, 356. Although Tomasevich acknowledged some parallels between the two movements, his volume maintained that the Ustaša were incompatible with the more moderate and democratic nature of both the HSS and older Croat political traditions. The titles of the volume sections on the Ustaša Movement reflect the author's view of the Ustaša and the NDH as an entirely illegitimate and unpopular construction that was propped up primarily by Italo-German weapons and characterised primarily by terror. See for example Chapter 6: *An Italian-German Quasi Protectorate* and Chapter 8: *The Rule of Lawlessness and Terror*.
- 8 See: Alexander Korb, *Im Schatten des Weltkriegs. Massengewalt der Ustaša gegen Serben, Juden und Roma in Kroatien 1941–1945*, Hamburg 2013. See also his article in English: *Understanding Ustaša Violence*, in: *Journal of Genocide Research* 12 (2010) 1/2, 1-18. Korb argues that the Ustaša were "not just a marginal movement [...] and involved significant local backing", 2. He also cautions against a portrayal of the Ustaša as a barbaric group of German puppets and the NDH as a "so-called" state with no autonomous power or agency: "the depiction of the ruling Ustaša movement as a blood-thirsty militia comprising a sadistic membership has promoted the tendency not to take it very seriously as a contemporary political movement", 3.
- 9 Rory Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation. The Ustasha Regime and the Cultural Politics of Fascism, 1941–1945*, Pittsburgh 2013, 27, 350.

movement's cultural politics appealing. The important breakthroughs that Yeomans and Korb have made in enhancing our understanding of the Ustaša Movement have failed to convince historians who continue to adhere to a narrative about the supposed marginality of the Ustaša Movement. The historian John Paul Newman, for example, objected to Yeomans' characterisation of Pavelić and his followers as a "movement", noting that that it would be too "elevated" a term to describe a group that Newman, and many others, continue see as "a ramshackle and marginal group of gangsters and political failures" that cannot be compared to the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party or the Romanian Iron Guard.¹⁰

The HSS and the Ustaša differed in many important respects during the interwar period, yet their rhetoric overlapped in several areas that anglophone scholars of Yugoslavia have generally overlooked. While the authoritarian Yugoslav state prevented them from organising as openly as the Iron Guard and the Arrow Cross could in Romania and Hungary, both the HSS and the Ustaša exhibited tendencies that were consistent with far-right movements which emerged in more open and democratic European states. An analysis of some of the views shared by HSS and Ustaša leaders can further test commonly held assumptions about the rigid distinction between the supposedly mainstream and moderate nationalism of the HSS and the violent, racial nationalist extremism that the Ustaša represented. This approach reveals that the Ustaša Movement was not just comprised of obscure, violent extremists. Along with the core of publically unknown intellectuals who articulated the Ustaša's rigid, scientific, racial-national ideology, the movement also included more popular, high-profile figures such as Mile Budak, the famous novelist whose ideas were relatively consistent with the worldview of the HSS. In addition to emphasising the appeal that the Ustaša might have had to the broader public, this article will shift attention from the tolerant and inclusive overtures that many HSS leaders made during the interwar years and consider the extent to which the HSS might have exhibited certain Fascist traits that scholars of Yugoslavia have failed to acknowledge. Finally, this paper will explore how ordinary people perceived the relationship between the two organisations.

The Many Enemies of Yugoslav Authoritarianism

The notion that the HSS represented a homogenously moderate national party which reflected the views of the overwhelming majority of Croats has precluded scholars from considering how the political positions that the HSS leadership advocated in its propaganda related to Fascism. The repressive authoritarian manner in which Yugoslavia was governed after King Alexander declared a royal dictatorship on 6 January 1929 constitutes a major obstacle to a scholarly consideration of Fascism in Yugoslavia. Democracy, which theorist Robert Paxton claims as a contingent factor in the development of Fascism, was lacking in the interwar state.¹¹ Some scholars have even attempted to make the case that the Alexandrine state itself bordered on Fascism.¹² In addition to banning the Communist Party and the Ustaša Movement, the Yugoslav government penalised even the slightest violation of regulations

10 John Paul Newman, review of Rory Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation. The Ustasha Regime and the Cultural Politics of Fascism, 1941–1945* (Pittsburgh, 2013), in: *H-Net Reviews in the Humanities and Social Sciences, H-Soz-u-Kult* (June, 2013), 2; www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/rezbuecher-18999 (1 November 2017).

11 Robert Paxton, *Anatomy of Fascism*, New York 2007, 367.

12 Ivan T. Berend, *Decades of Crisis. Central and Eastern Europe before World War II*, Berkeley 1998, 328.

prohibiting the “incitement of tribal and religious hatred” among Yugoslavia’s peoples.¹³ By forcing the Ustaša and the Communists underground and driving some of their leaders into exile, the Yugoslav regime further obscured the distinctions that existed between the Ustaša, the HSS, and some more nationalistically oriented Croat Communists. Unable to organise on their own, many Communist Party members and Ustaša activists infiltrated the ranks of different HSS organisations with the tacit support of local HSS leaders.

The authoritarian nature of the Yugoslav regime and its hostility towards Croat Communists and nationalists ensured that animosities between Communists and supporters of the far right remained weaker in Yugoslavia than elsewhere in Europe. Radical anti-Communism, which inspired Conservatives and Fascists in other European settings, remained less pronounced among the Ustaša and the HSS even though both groups’ leaderships formally opposed Communism. In Yugoslavia, the shared antagonism that the Croat Communist Party, the Ustaša Movement, and the HSS felt towards ruling Greater Serbian elites and the violently authoritarian Yugoslav state apparatus made convenient bedfellows of the three groups.

The Croat Communist Party appropriated a Croat nationalist rhetoric that often treated Communist internationalism as a matter of secondary importance.¹⁴ “The Croat Communist”, the illegal interwar Communist newspaper *Proleter* explained, “is not some sort of ‘internationalist’ who hangs unattached in the air; he is a Croat who devotes all of his energies to the victory of the Croat nation over the Greater Serbian politics of the Serbian ruling classes.”¹⁵ Such attitudes made Croat Communists significantly more acceptable to both Ustaša and HSS leaders.

The widely held belief, which was also held by many Communists and Ustaša at the time, that Vladko Maček was not just leading a political party but a broader national movement representing Croats of all political affiliations complicates the rigid distinctions that historians have drawn between Nazi-inspired Ustaša extremism, Maček’s allegedly moderate peasant nationalism, and Croat Communist leaders’ class-based opposition to the Greater Serbian bourgeoisie. Maček’s supporters often referred to him as the ‘leader of the Croats’ (*vođa Hrvata*) and as the figurehead of a broader Croatian Peasant Movement (*Hrvatski Seljački Pokret*) which transcended any ideological divisions that might have existed within the Croat national community.¹⁶

Maček embraced his role as the leader of all Croats and refrained from publically condemning the Ustaša and Croat Communists for much of the interwar period. Branimir Jelić, a co-founder of the Ustaša Movement, considered Maček the primary leader of all Croats. In his memoirs, Jelić argued that Maček refused to recognise any divisions among the Croat nation prior to 1939. Jelić recounted an instance that occurred in December 1928, after Yugoslav authorities suppressed Croat protests that had broken out in Zagreb.¹⁷ Jelić claimed he invited Maček to address a crowd of young Croat nationalists several days after the police had quelled the unrest.

13 See for example: Christian Axboe Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs. Identity in King Aleksandar’s Yugoslavia*, Toronto 2014, 216.

14 For an elaborate discussion of the Comintern’s fluctuating and often ambiguous positions towards the nationalities problem in Yugoslavia, see: Aleksa Djilas, *The Contested Country. Yugoslav Unity and the Communist Revolution, 1919–1953*, Cambridge (MA) 1991, 49–79.

15 *Internacionalnost i narodnost* [Internationality and Nationality], in: *Proleter*, 1 January 1937.

16 See: Jere Jareb, *Političke uspomene dra Branimira Jelića* [Political Memories of Dr. Branimir Jelić], Cleveland 1982; Većeslav Holjevac, *Zapisi iz rodnog grada* [Records from my Native City], Zagreb 1972, 19; Benedikta Zelić-Buča, *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska u mom sjećanju* [The NDH in my Memory], Zagreb 1994.

17 Jareb, *Političke uspomene dra Branimira Jelića*, 27.

Responding to allegations made by several Belgrade newspapers, Maček told the crowd that the unrest that occurred during the protests on 1 December was not, as the Belgrade press had argued, the work of a handful of Ustaša radicals, but the response of the entire Croat nation to Belgrade's tyranny:

“Every Belgrade newspaper writes that yesterday's events were orchestrated by Frankist mobs. (Its not true, they're lying! Long Live the Frankists!!! the crowd chanted.) But I can tell you that it was done by the entire Croat nation, and carried out by its loyal youth. Long live the conscious Croat youth!”

Instead of directly supporting the Ustaša, Maček suggested that no divisions existed within the Croat nation, with the crowd allegedly chanting in favour of the Frankists, as Ante Pavelić's followers were commonly referred to prior to the outbreak of the Second World War.

Maček would take a similar approach every time circumstances demanded that he define his position towards Pavelić's Ustašas. In 1935, the prestigious Belgrade magazine *Vreme* published an article entitled *The Separation of Dr. Maček from the 'Frankists'*.¹⁸ *Vreme* praised Maček for allegedly cutting ties to the Frankist separatists and thus demonstrating a genuine commitment to the preservation of a unified Yugoslav state. The article stated that Maček had recently denounced Dr. Matej Mintas and Dr. Antun Buć after the two Ustaša leaders had encouraged the Croat masses to rise up and fight for Croat independence. The HSS leader issued a harsh response to the praise he received from *Vreme*, claiming that most of the article's contents amounted to lies. The article's intention, he argued, was to sow division among the Croats by suggesting that the Croat opposition to Yugoslavia had splintered into mutually hostile camps:

“I have to emphasise that absolutely no conflicts have occurred among the Croats. No! There are within the Croat peasant nation neither real nor imagined so-called Frankists, or anyone else, who would try to distinguish themselves from the single-souled political struggle of the Croat nation.”

The notion that groups of people who called themselves Frankists had committed excesses, he remarked, constituted a fabrication on the part of the regime-controlled media. Maček argued that the state had invented the emergence of a more radical alternative to the HSS in order to legitimise the violence Yugoslav authorities routinely perpetrated against ordinary Croats. Provided an opportunity to affirm that his party's struggle differed from the purportedly extremist aims of the Ustaša, Maček refused to distance himself from Pavelić and his followers. Even though Maček's rebuke of *Vreme* did not indicate that he considered the Ustaša partners, his reluctance to acknowledge the existence of a more radical Ustaša Movement could have easily signalled to the public that HSS and Ustaša leaders fought for the same cause.

Several prominent supporters of the Ustaša Movement assumed that the Ustaša stood for the same principles as the HSS, further complicating the notion that rigid distinctions existed between the HSS and the Ustaša. Benedikta Zelić-Buča, an Ustaša sympathiser in the interwar period, recalled that she considered the HSS and the Ustaša different branches of the same organisation, working towards a common

18 Izjava predsjednika dra. Vladka Mačeka povodom pisanja beogradskog 'vremena' broj 5034 pod naslovom: "odvajanje g. dr. Mačeka od 'frankovaca'" [The Declaration of President Dr. Vladko Maček after the Issues of Belgrade's 'Vreme' Number 5034, titled: "The Separation of Mr. Dr. Mačeka from the 'Frankists'"], in: Vladko Maček, Voda Govori: ličnost, izjave, govori i politički rad vođe Hrvata dr. Vladka Mačeka [The Leader Speaks: Personality, Proclamations, Speeches and the Political Work of the Leader of the Croats, Dr. Vladko Maček], Zagreb 1936.

goal. During the 1930s, Zelić-Buča noted, the “Croat struggle occurred according to two paths: in the homeland through a peaceful and wherever possible parliamentary path [represented by the HSS] and abroad through revolutionary methods [of the Ustaša]”.¹⁹ In his memoirs, Josip Braenović, an interwar Ustaša sympathiser who would serve in a variety of official positions during the Second World War, noted: “For the majority of us youths, Maček constituted the essence of the struggle for Croat freedom.”²⁰

Though key differences existed between the HSS and the Ustaša, the degree to which people supportive of each movement recognised these divisions remains disputable. Maček’s failure to renounce the Ustaša and his insistence on the indivisibility of the Croat national struggle suggests that many people did not see the two groups as completely separate. The fact that several Ustaša supporters considered Maček the undisputed leader of the Croat nation and believed that the HSS and the Ustaša worked towards the same, vaguely defined goal of Croatian ‘freedom’ and ‘national liberation’ suggests that the two groups’ aims appeared compatible to many contemporaries.

Peasant Fascism?

Heavily censored HSS pamphlets and newspapers could not state that the party shared common goals with Communists or the Ustaša. However, HSS propaganda materials regularly engaged in a rhetoric that could have easily appeared supportive of both Fascist and Communist ideas. The party’s newspaper *Seljački Dom* regularly stressed its commitment to social justice and highlighted the importance of elevating the peasantry from poverty. Some writers acknowledged that opponents of the HSS accused the party of bordering on Communism and defended the HSS leadership from such accusations.²¹ Several articles critical of liberal capitalism and its commodification of peasant labour echoed Socialist ideas that Communists would have found appealing. Articles in *Seljački Dom* regularly recommended that Communists switch over to the HSS, which would welcome them with open arms and enable them to pursue similar goals.

The majority of HSS propaganda, however, remained consistent with the conservative side of far-right ideologies that easily merged with Fascism in other parts of Europe. In many ways, HSS propaganda articulated a rhetoric that pursued what Barrington Moore Jr. has called an “alternative route to modernity”, attempting to bypass both Capitalism and Communism.²² Official HSS ideology displayed several of the “mobilizing passions” that Robert Paxton identified as essential to all Fascist movements. HSS newspapers lamented the Croat peasantry’s decline under the corrosive effects of modernity, blaming individualistic liberalism, class conflict, and alien influences for the deterioration of traditional peasant society.²³

Modern trends, as one *Seljački Dom* article by Imbro Stivić noted, led to the deterioration of the most sacred institution, marriage, which comprised the cornerstone

19 Zelić-Buča, *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska u mom sjećanju*, 13.

20 Josip Braenović, *Uspomene: 1939–1952* [Reminiscences: 1939–1952], Dubrovnik 2003, 18.

21 Ivan Kuzmić, *Niti desno niti lijevo nego ravno svojim putem* [Neither Right nor Left but Straight on their Way], in: *Hrvatski Seljački Dom*, 11 February 1937.

22 Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Boston 1966, 229.

23 Paxton, *Anatomy of Fascism*, 219.

of the Croat peasant household.²⁴ Younger people in the cities refused to get married, while married couples refrained from having multiple children to carry on Croat peasant traditions. Influenced by progressive foreign culture, “women have forgotten their natural calling and do not adhere to old Croat customs. They refuse to be mothers and guardians of the family hearth and aspire to become playthings for their men.” The HSS also condemned the atomisation of society, which the French Revolution had allegedly brought about by dismantling the feudal order.²⁵ The importance of Vlatko Maček as a figurehead also placed the HSS closer to Fascism; authorities often referred to his followers as Mačekists (*Mačekovci*), while HSS newspapers celebrated him as the supreme and unquestionable leader.

In 1935, the HSS established a militia, the Hrvatska Seljačka Zaštitna (Croatian Peasant Guard, HSZ), providing the party with an armed wing, another feature characteristic of several other Fascist movements in interwar Europe.²⁶ The HSZ members who paraded through the countryside in peasant-themed uniforms resembled Corneliu Codreanu’s Fascist Iron Legion that emerged in interwar Romania and donned similar outfits when interacting with peasant masses. Official HSS propaganda eschewed other mobilising passions that Paxton deems integral to Fascism. Censored publications could not openly proclaim the Croats’ right to justified violent action against presumed victimisers; HSS leaders did not officially endorse the beauty and efficacy of violence against outsiders. Government censorship prohibited them from stating outright that Croats deserved the right to dominate over non-Croats. However, HSS speeches and writings frequently highlighted the need for all people who lived on lands the HSS claimed for the Croat nation to support Croat national goals. Even though censorship precluded HSS propagandists from directly threatening those who opposed or remained indifferent to Croat nationalism, many HSS articles implied that a person’s failure to support the Croat nation might lead to unwanted consequences.

Ustaša publications did not have to refrain from inflammatory rhetoric because they were illegal under Yugoslav laws. Illegal Ustaša pamphlets routinely called for violence against Serbs and other non-Croats. Additionally, Ustaša racial ideologues living in exile produced elaborate treatises that called for the purification of foreign racial elements from the Croat nation.²⁷ While Ustaša texts calling for violence existed, censorship limited the degree to which ordinary people could access such writings in Yugoslavia. Additionally, the sophisticated racial ideology advocated by some Ustaša leaders would likely have made little sense to non-specialists even if these texts were more widely available to the public. While some people might have accessed Ustaša propaganda overtly calling for violence against non-Croats, one might safely assume that most peoples’ understandings of the Ustaša Movement were more directly informed by Ustaša authors whose work had not been outlawed by Yugoslav authorities.

The lawyer Mile Budak, one of Croatia’s most respected interwar novelists and an important leader in the Ustaša Movement, featured prominently in its popularisation during the interwar period. Budak’s prominent public profile and the relatively

24 Imbro Stivić, Sretan Dom – Sretna Domovina [Happy Home – Happy Homeland], in: Hrvatski Seljački Dom, 5 February 1936.

25 Bit i Pojam Hrvatskog Seljačkog Pokreta [The Soul and Essence of the Croat Peasant Movement], in: Maček, Voda Govori.

26 Sabrina Ramet, Vladko Maček and the Croatian Peasant Defense in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, in: Contemporary European History 16 (2007) 2, 215-231.

27 See: Nevenko Bartulin, The Racial Idea and the Independent State of Croatia. Origins and Theory, Boston 2013, 90.

wide circulation of his novels, which remained legal, made the Croat public far more familiar with him and his work than with the numerous Ustaša leaders who operated covertly within Yugoslavia or organised Ustaša cells in Hungary, Italy, Austria, and Germany. The simplicity of some of his novels and short stories, which overwhelmingly chronicled the hardships that Croat peasants from the Lika region endured, made Budak's writings more intelligible to the public than the sophisticated illegal texts that Ustaša ideologues produced and distributed among themselves and among a narrow circle of educated followers. Even though Budak would become one of the most zealous advocates of the Ustaša's violent campaign against the Serbs during the Second World War, his interwar writings generally eschewed the overtly violent rhetoric that appeared in some illegally circulated Ustaša propaganda materials. Budak's writings from the period were relatively consistent with the discourse one could find in HSS newspapers and other writings by Vladko Maček, who was a friend of Budak's and co-operated with the novelist to defend Croat nationalists persecuted by the Yugoslav state. While neither Budak nor HSS leaders directly called for violence in legally circulated materials, their critiques of the interwar order regularly stressed the need for all non-Croats to act loyally towards Croats and support Croat national goals. In some cases, their demands for national devotion implied that those who failed to support Croat nationalism did not deserve the same privileges as Croats.

Despite heavy censorship, the state could do little to intervene against political parties discussing the disastrous economic conditions endured by the peasantry. However, HSS propagandists had to exercise caution in allocating blame for the peasantry's destitution. Instead of condemning individual Yugoslav leaders, parties, or groups of people, which could have alerted censors and caused HSS leaders trouble with the authorities, the party's activists discussed the decline of the peasantry indirectly. HSS publications and speeches regularly detailed the social and economic hardships that modernisation had brought upon the peasants.

Vladko Maček's 1935 pamphlet entitled *The Soul and Essence of the Croat Peasant Movement* highlighted many of the party's concerns in a way that conveyed the party's platform, yet abstained from saying anything incendiary enough to alert the authorities.²⁸ After recognising some positive contributions that the French Revolution had delivered, Maček stressed that the Revolution's abolition of the feudal order had exerted a devastating impact on the peasantry. Despite its shortcomings, feudalism had allowed the head of a peasant household to produce everything he needed to provide for his family. By dismantling the feudal order, Maček argued, the French Revolution obliterated traditional ways through which peasants sustained their families and gave rise to capitalism, which caused humans to begin worshipping money. Such a shift made peasants dependent on industrial and commercial products they could not afford, while simultaneously reducing the prices of goods the peasants produced. The *gospoda*, urban bourgeois elites, earned fortunes making the peasants reliant on such products. While the feudal lord may have exploited the peasants under his supervision, Maček noted that feudal lords had at least some obligations towards their peasants. The *gospoda*, on the other hand, merely bought peasant products at cheap prices and exhibited no concern for how the peasants survived. The modern system of "unrestrained, unjust, exploitative, and inhuman capitalism", an article in the main HSS publication *Seljački Dom* argued, caused "millions upon millions of people to live hungry, barefoot, and naked", as truckloads

²⁸ Bit i Pojam Hrvatskog Seljačkog Pokreta.

of food “are thrown into the ocean and wasted, just so we can retain the high prices of goods”, and put tremendous profits into the hands of people who had more than they could ever spend, but did nothing to create the foodstuffs and goods that were wasted.²⁹

Mile Budak’s works similarly condemned liberal capitalism and the devastation he believed it wrought upon Croat peasants. Budak articulated his critique of capitalism primarily through one of his main protagonists, dida Vidurina (Grandpa Vidurina), an elderly village sage who appears in a number of the author’s novels. In these novels, Vidurina attempted to talk some sense into younger generations who had adopted modern ways that, the sage warned, would lead society towards imminent destruction. Budak opened his most famous and widely circulated work, the 1933 children’s book *Opanci Dida Vidurine* (Grandpa Vidurina’s Sandals), by noting that Markić, Grandpa Vidurina’s son, “began instituting novelties as soon as he returned from America and wrested the farm from his father’s hands”.³⁰ Markić justified the changes he introduced at the farm by explaining that the farm had to start generating money. Vidurina could not understand his son’s logic and wondered why a self-sustainable family needed currency. Concluding that money is unnecessary, Vidurina suggested that “only tricksters and salesmen, not the poor and honest people that live on our Likani soil” needed money.³¹ His main issue with money, Grandpa Vidurina remarked, was that it made honest peasants indebted to rich men. “Before we had no money and no currency, but we had no debts. Today”, Grandpa Vidurina berated his son, “the whole world talks about your money – your dollars – but you have nothing to show for it since all you have is debts!”³² Ignoring Vidurina’s advice, Markić continued to spend a lot of money and began frequenting the tavern with increasing regularity. Soon, a local merchant paid people from outside the village to dress up as urban *gospoda* and instructed them to go around the villages of Lika telling the peasants that the price of the dollar would plummet. Desperate to get rid of his potentially depreciating cash, Markić traded away all his dollars at a low rate and lost the family farm.

Interwar Croat national leaders linked the Yugoslav state and its predominantly Serb supporters to the western capitalist systems that had eroded traditional peasant societies. At the same time, however, some HSS publications engaged with an older discourse that Croat national ideologues had developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These ideologues presented Croatia’s eastern Serb neighbours as uncultured oriental others against whom a Croat nation could define itself. HSS publications stressed that the Croats’ ‘peasant soul’ distinguished them from the populations of the capitalist West. Yet HSS propagandists also reminded readers that the Croats were firmly anchored in the progressive civilisation of Western Europe. One Seljački Dom article, entitled *The Croat Nation – The Firm Bulwark of Europe*, presented the Croats as the guardians of Europe’s eastern border. Standing unified, the article noted, the Croats remained aware of their “power, and the duty which we have carried out for centuries in this part of Europe”.³³ Ustaša leaders also criticised the decadence and corruption of the liberal capitalist West, and some

29 Jeli ovakav napredak sreća ili nesreća [Is this Sort of Progress a Fortune or a Misfortune?], in: Hrvatski Seljački Dom, 25 December 1936.

30 Mile Budak, *Opanci Dida Vidurine* [Grandpa Vidurina’s Sandals], Zagreb 1933, 28.

31 Ibid., 28.

32 Ibid., 32.

33 Hrvatski Narod – Čvrsti Bedem Evrope [The Croat Nation – The Firm Bulwark of Europe], in: Hrvatski Seljački Dom, 5 February 1936.

Ustaša ideologues even encouraged Croats to abandon their reputation as compliant, refined, western gentlemen.³⁴ At the same time, however, Ustaša thinkers highlighted the Croats' western characteristics by contrast to the oriental, Byzantine backwardness of their Serb enemies.

Both HSS and Ustaša writings thus presented the Croat nation as a victim of western-style liberal capitalism while also insisting that Croatia was firmly situated in the orderly civilisation of Western Europe. Such rhetoric implied that Croatia's enemies might have been complicit in the social dislocations caused by capitalism while also endorsing the belief that the Croat's national rivals and oppressors were culturally inferior to the western-oriented Croats. Legally circulated propaganda materials could not directly call for violence against national rivals. Yet official publications could insinuate what kind of behaviour the Croat majority expected of non-Croats in the territories that Croat nationalists had claimed for the nation.

Conditioning the Tolerance of Non-Croats

HSS writers often took steps to overstate their professed commitment to inter-ethnic harmony and their friendliness towards non-Croats living among Croats. However, the sincerity of such HSS tributes to tolerance remains dubious at best, as HSS writers usually made the Croat acceptance of non-Croats contingent on several factors. They generally required non-Croats to fully support vaguely defined Croat national goals. The Ustaša maintained a very complicated and often contradictory position towards non-Croats despite the violent campaign the movement ultimately launched against Croatia's minorities during the Second World War. While many of Budak's interwar writings appear quite antisemitic, he shared the ambivalence many other Ustaša leaders felt towards Jews and refrained from condemning them directly in documents he legally published in Yugoslavia. When the authorities allowed Budak to begin legally publishing the newspaper *Hrvatski Narod* in 1939, he noted in the newspaper's first edition that the publication "is not and will not become an antisemitic medium, but since it will not promote any foreign group's politics, it will refrain from promoting Jewish politics, and remain committed only to advancing Croat national politics".³⁵ While Budak half-heartedly distanced himself from antisemitism in public, HSS leaders adopted a more proactive approach in condemning instances of antisemitism among their followers. HSS condemnations of xenophobia, however, also placed pressure on non-Croats to support national goals.

In December 1936, the HSS deployed Robert Neuman, a prominent Jewish HSS supporter from Zagreb, to deliver a speech entitled *Croat Jews as a National Element*.³⁶ Expressing alarm at the growth of antisemitism among Croats, Neuman noted that Jews had, to some extent, brought antisemitic attacks upon themselves by failing "to fully serve the Croat nation" and refusing to become "Jew-Croats" (*Židovi-Hrvati*). Instead, many Jews betrayed Croat interests by supporting pro-Yugoslav policies or becoming Zionists who wished "to separate Jews from the Croat nation". Jews could help change the antisemitic views of some Croats by condemning Zionism and restricting their political activities to solely "working in every direction with

34 In addition to Bartulin, *The Racial Idea in the Independent State of Croatia*, see also: Yeomans, *Visions of Annihilation*, 130.

35 Mile Budak, *Hrvatski Narod*, 22 June 1939.

36 HDA, Sava Banovina (SB), ODZ, 3914, "Robert Neuman iz Zagreba – predavanje-podaci" [Robert Neuman from Zagreb –Lecture – Information], 19 December 1936.

the Croat nation towards unity” and by “supporting their beloved Croat homeland and its freedom”. While stressing the HSS’s commitment to accepting Jews as members of the national community, Neuman also asked that Jews fully committed themselves to Croatia’s struggle for ‘freedom’, whatever that might have meant, if they expected the Croat majority to tolerate them.

The HSS produced similar arguments when discussing the treatment of other minorities. In an article entitled *The Croats Accept and Respect Everyone’s Nationality – Whosoever Lives and Works with Us Will Have an Equal Life*, the anonymous author sought to elaborate on the HSS’s openness towards non-Croats.³⁷ Despite the tolerant tone of the title, the article itself placed several demands on people who were not Croats but wanted to continue living on lands the HSS claimed for their nation. The article acknowledged that members of other nations lived on “Croat land and among the Croat nation as minorities”, and noted that the Croat peasants, for the most part, had no reason to hate these people. The Croats only asked that minorities “respected the Croat nation, that they do not inhibit its liberation struggle, and that they support it”. Since the state prohibited all Yugoslav parties from calling for Yugoslavia’s dissolution along national lines, no officially approved HSS publication or speech directly called for independence. Instead, HSS propagandists defined their aims as a struggle for Croatian national ‘freedom’ or ‘liberation’, without clarifying what they meant by such terms. In spite of such a lack of clarity, the HSS insisted that non-Croats endorse the Croats’ struggle.

Just as the Croats never asked other national groups to organise their homeland in a specific way, the article demanded that national minorities allow Croats the same privilege and refrain from meddling in Croat affairs. The author reminded readers of the unparalleled kindness the Croat nation had supposedly demonstrated to non-Croats throughout history, emphasising that Croats had welcomed foreign settlers with open arms. Many of these people, the author suggested, lived significantly better than the Croats, even though they inhabited land that rightfully belonged to the Croat nation. Croats helped minorities build their lives in Croatia even at times when the presence of national minorities directly damaged Croat interests. “In that way, we are different from most other nations – our kindness is interpreted as weakness, and others exploit our kindness”, the article claimed. Referring to years of Austro-Hungarian rule, the article claimed that foreign rulers often encouraged national minorities to work against the Croats. Minorities in Croatia habitually succumbed to external pressures, the article charged, and helped foreign rulers oppress Croats. If non-Croats wanted to remain in Croatia, the article suggested, they could not serve as agents of Croatia’s foreign enemies and would have to fully support the Croats’ national aspirations. While the article did not mention Serbs directly, one might easily have concluded that it referred to the descendants of Serbian Orthodox peasants who had settled the Habsburg military frontier after fleeing Ottoman incursions into Serbia and Bosnia. Many Croat nationalists had previously accused Croatia’s Serbs of helping Austro-Hungarian leaders suppress Croat national aspirations during the years of the Habsburg Monarchy. In spite of its elusiveness, the article in *Seljački Dom* insinuated that Croatia’s Serbs needed to refrain from supporting Serb-dominated and centralist parties if they wanted the Croat majority to tolerate them. In one of his writings from 1934, Budak recognised the presence of Serbian Ortho-

37 Hrvati priznaju i poštuju svačiju narodnost. Tko s nama živi i radi imati će jednak život [The Croats Accept and Respect Everyone’s Nationality – Whosoever Lives and Works with Us Will Have an Equal Life], in: Hrvatski Seljački Dom, 5 February 1936.

dox peasants throughout Croatia and noted that they would be permitted to stay, provided that they behaved as loyal Croat citizens and refrained from activities that subverted the Croat national cause. He even suggested that the Croat nation would welcome the help of more westernised Serbs in their struggle against Belgrade-based Serb elites.³⁸ Much like several HSS publications, Budak made his tolerance of Serbs in Croatia contingent on their supposed loyalty to Croat nationalism. While Ustaša ideologues like Mladen Lorković had laid out a more rigid, race-based plan on the basis of which Orthodox Serbs could (or could not) remain in Croatia, it is safe to assume that the Croat public knew less about Lorković and his complex and scientifically advanced views on the relationship of racial-biological factors to Croat national belonging.³⁹ Ordinary people were likely more familiar with the more approachable treatises, short stories, and novels that Mile Budak produced than with the works of Lorković, which were more suitable for an urban, educated audience and would have been incomprehensible to a large segment of the Croat peasantry.

Important differences existed between the leaderships of HSS and the Ustaša Movement. Yet the fact that the views of the HSS and some Ustaša leaders such as Budak intersected in many important areas indicates that scholarly accounts of the incompatibility of a supposedly moderate HSS nationalism with Ustaša extremism warrant some revisions. Several sources indicate that many non-elite Croat nationalists did not distinguish between the HSS and the Ustaša Movement and, at times, expressed their support for both groups simultaneously. The fact that the Ustaša and the HSS shared a number of vital concerns likely led many non-elite supporters of Croat nationalism to believe that the two stood for the same cause and, perhaps, would jointly govern a Croat national homeland in the future.

Simultaneous Support for the Ustaša and the HSS

Yugoslav officials tasked with monitoring Croat nationalist subversion often struggled to identify differences between the Ustaša and the HSS on the local level. Many viewed the two groups as different branches of the same organisation. In several reports, prefects referred to the Ustaša as a faction within the Croatian Peasant Movement, which they believed remained firmly under Maček's control. One report from 1937, for example, noted that some tensions emerged between factions of the Croatian Peasant Movement, as one group wanted Pavelić to become "the leader of the Croats" instead of Maček.⁴⁰ The fact that the prefect treated the emergence of divisions as an alarming development, rather than a given, indicates that many people did not view Ustaša and HSS nationalism as incompatible. According to a 1937 report by the district prefect for Slavonski Brod, most politically active people living in the area he oversaw were Ustaša supporters who "all stand behind Dr. Maček be-

38 Mile Budak, *Jugoslavija. Srpska Podvala* [Yugoslavia: A Serb Trick], Madrid 1964, 163.

39 For the most thorough discussion of Ustaša intellectuals, specifically of Mladen Lorković, see: Nevenko Bartulin, *The Racial Idea in the Independent State of Croatia. Origins and Theory*, Boston 2013, 16, 133-137, 141-142. Although Lorković published one of the clearest blueprints for what features distinguished Croats from Serbs (and other non-Croats) and which lands belonged to Croatia, *Narod i Zemlja Hrvata* [The Croat People and Soil] with *Matica Hrvatska* in 1939, it is not clear how widely this extremely complicated piece was distributed. It is very unlikely that ordinary peasants, many of whom were only nominally literate at the time, would have read the volume, and even less likely that they would have understood the broader implications of the works.

40 HDA, SB, ODZ, 94, "ŽAP – frankovačka omladina podaci" [ŽAP – Frankist youth information], 25 June 1936. [hda.145.box21.1936_1].

cause they believe he is following the orders of Dr. Pavelić”.⁴¹ The assumption that the Ustaša and the HSS worked together was not restricted to the reports of Yugoslav state officials, who might have been inclined to portray all Croat nationalist activity as equally subversive.

Many ordinary people faced fines and prison sentences from the Yugoslav regime for simultaneously expressing their support for the HSS and the Ustaša. On 7 September 1935, a peasant named Nikola Dundović from the prefecture of Osijek was arrested after he praised the Ustaša assassination of King Alexander and called for the dissolution of the Yugoslav state: “We killed King Alexander, soon we will kill [his heir] King Peter, and then we will all serve Maček.”⁴² Other peasants also assumed that Maček was involved in Alexander’s assassination even though the HSS leader had condemned the murder and expressed his condolences to the royal family. On 24 September, a peasant named Ćorak from the village of Pisac declared that “it was a good thing that Maček had King Alexander killed since he was a worthless leader” and added that “Maček will soon kill King Peter and assemble an army that will free Croatia” from Serb domination. Peasants frequently chanted the names of Ustaša and HSS leaders at the same time. In December 1935, a chimney cleaner and several of his friends were arrested at a tavern in Gospić for saying “long live a free Croatia, long live Dr. Maček, long live Stjepan Radić, long live the Croatian Ustaša”.⁴³ In Karlovac, authorities arrested a carpenter, Slava Bajić, who predicted that “Maček will soon become the president of an independent Croatia and that Dr. Ante Pavelić will be his prime minister”.⁴⁴

Such concurrent endorsements of the Ustaša Movement and the HSS frequently included calls for violence against Serbs. On 28 November 1934, for example, a man named Petrović from the outskirts of Zagreb said that Croatia would soon rid itself of the Serbs, cursed their mothers and then chanted: “Long live Ante Pavelić, [émigré Ustaša leader Eugen] Kvaternik, [HSS representative Josip] Predavec, Stjepan Radić, and a free Croatia.” On 25 April 1935, a peasant named Ivan Lulić from the village of Perušić told everyone to vote for Maček and to beware of the “treacherous” Serbs. He recited a rhyme which suggested that Serbs would perish in the area once Maček came to power: “There will be joy. But the Serbs, there will be no more.”

While some non-elite Croat nationalists who supported both the Ustaša and the HSS made verbal threats and called for violence against non-Croats, members of HSZ, the HSS’s armed militia, engaged in violence against political opponents, Serb peasants, and even against Croat peasants whom HSZ activists deemed were insufficiently supportive of their national goals. While the HSZ was formally an organisation of the HSS, several reports from Yugoslav authorities suggested that the HSZ was thoroughly infiltrated by Ustaša sympathisers who overtly called for Yugoslavia’s dissolution and threatened Serb peasants and Croats who refused to support them.⁴⁵ According to a 1937 report from the Desinić-Turinić area, the local HSZ

41 HDA, SB, Upravno Odjelenje [Administrative Division, UO], box 312, missing document number, “Srezki Načelnik iz Slavanskog Broda – bansknoj upravi savske banovine odeljku za državnu zaštitu” [District Prefect from Slavonki Brod – To the Security Department of the Savska Banovina], 10 February 1937.

42 HDA, BH, ODZ, 829, “Mesečni obaveštajni izvještaj za mesec septembar 1935 godine dostavlja” [Monthly Intelligence Report for the Month of September, 1935], 23 September 1935.

43 HDA, BH, ODZ, box 284, folio number missing, “Gospićka žandarmerijska četa obaveštajni izvještaj” [Gospić Gendarme Contingent, Intelligence Report], 24 December 1935.

44 HDA, SB, ODZ, 844, “Izvještaj o političkim prilikama i događajima u mesecu aprilu 1935” [Report about Political Circumstances and Developments during the Month of April 1935], 7 May 1935.

45 HDA, SB, ODZ, 1085, “Rad članova Hrvatske Seljačke Zaštite – frankovaca” [Activities of the Members of the Croat Peasant Defense], 6 December 1937.

leader, a certain Maks Čavlek, held a speech in front of a group of peasants, telling them that “very soon we will conduct exercises under German leadership, since the Germans are stronger than the Serbs and we have no business being together with Serbs. We just have to wait for the night on which a Croat state will come into being, when Yugoslavia will disappear. This state will collapse and all Croats must attend the exercises [of the HSZ]. Whoever decides not to attend the exercises of the HSZ will be killed immediately. We will burn the houses and property of those we cannot catch.”⁴⁶

On 22 March 1937, the district prefecture in Slunj reported that HSS leaders and supporters from the village of Ladjevac had recently begun conducting elaborate military-style exercises.⁴⁷ The dispatch noted that several local HSS members had organised meetings at the house of Franjo Butina in Donji Ladjevac. The few local leaders who spoke German taught newly recruited members several military terms in German and then had them march in formations following these German orders after night had fallen. The local gendarmerie singled out a former law student from Slunj, Tomo Peričić, as the main organiser. The report described him as a supporter of Pavelić, but went on to note that he was the HSS’s most trusted leader – Maček’s right hand – in the Slunj area. The prefect reminded his superiors that the escalation of HSZ activity in the area was especially alarming since the villages outside of Slunj consisted predominantly of Serbian Orthodox populations. Several peasants from these Serb villages noted that members of the Ladjevac HSS had threatened them and told them that they would soon receive weapons from abroad, which they would then use to attack local Serb villages.

In addition to documenting the growing activity of Ustaša and HSS sympathisers under the auspices of the HSZ, Yugoslav authorities attributed several murders of high-profile state supporters to HSZ activists. In 1940, the Zagreb chapter of the Serb-dominated Fascist Zbor organisation accused the HSZ of murdering their most important leader in Croatia, the Serb lawyer Zdravko Lenac. Zagreb authorities suspected the HSZ of involvement in the murders of several other people belonging to organisations that were far less controversial than the Zbor. In some cases, the people targeted by the organisation came from Croat Catholic backgrounds. On 12 October 1939, for example, an assailant emptied eight bullet casings into the treasurer of Zagreb’s Kustošija-Vrapče Yugoslav Sokol chapter, Antun Biban, causing his immediate death.⁴⁸ Members of the Yugoslav Sokol, an organisation that opposed Croat nationalists and aimed to cultivate a Yugoslav identity among the country’s inhabitants, frequently came under attack from HSZ supporters and other Croat nationalists. In some cases, bystanders joined assaults that activists initiated against supporters of the Yugoslav state. In October 1939, a Yugoslav Sokol pin inspired a group of people to attack Jovan Petrović, a train conductor from the Serb-inhabited village of Srpske Moravice, as he took a stroll down Frankopanska Street in Zagreb with his wife.⁴⁹ As he walked past the offices of the newspaper *Zagrebački List*, a group of people approached Petrović and accused him of being a member of the pro-Serb Chetnik veterans’ association that had earned notoriety for their brutal perse-

46 HDA, SB, ODZ, 64661, “Ministarstvo Unutrašnjih Poslova u 1840 dostavlja sljedeće” [The Ministry of Internal Affairs Submits the Following at 1840], 24 November 1937.

47 HDA, SB, ODZ, box 22, likely folio number 331-1937, “Hrvatske Seljačke Zaštite osnivanje i rad” [The Establishment and Activities of the Croat Peasant Defense], 22 March 1937.

48 HDA, BH, ODZ, 56862, “Incidenti sa sokolima u Banovini Hrvatskoj” [Incidents with the Sokols in the Banovina of Croatia], 27 November 1939.

49 HDA, BH, ODZ, 47783, “Petrović Jovan, mašinovođa iz Srpskih Moravica – napadnut” [Petrović Jovan, Train Conductor from Srpske Moravica – Attacked], 11 October 1939.

cution of Croat nationalists during the interwar period. Several men then began smashing his head with brass knuckles. Attempting to flee the mob, Petrović tried to seek refuge in the offices of *Hrvatski Dnevnik*, another newspaper, but the staff members chased him out of the building as they screamed “Get out of here so they can kill you outside”. On the street, the mob chanted “kill, kill, kill a Chetnik so he cannot walk through a Croat Zagreb”. The group attacked Petrović’s wife as well, shouting “kill her also, she deserves it because she is walking with a Chetnik through a Croat Zagreb”. By the time policemen intervened, Petrović lay motionless on the pavement in a pool of his own blood. While Croat nationalists did not have the resources to match the violence that the Yugoslav state deployed against them during the interwar period, many were quick to resort to acts of intimidation on behalf of the national cause. Such developments might help explain the eruption of violence that occurred in the countryside after the establishment of Croat independence in 1941, when the repressive Yugoslav state apparatus disappeared and was no longer able to suppress the excesses of Croat nationalists.

Conclusion

Robert Paxton, the renowned theorist of fascism, has called for scholars to broaden their scope of analysis when thinking about fascism.⁵⁰ A narrow scholarly focus on “pure fascism” and its intellectual expressions, he noted, has led scholars to treat Fascism in isolation, cutting it “off from its environment and accomplices”.⁵¹ Instead of only studying the people who clearly defined themselves as Fascists, Paxton believes that scholars would be better served by thinking of Fascism as a “compound” that can only function as a “powerful amalgam of different but marriageable conservative, national-socialist and radical Right ingredients bonded together by common enemies and common passions for a regenerated, energized, and purified nation”.⁵² The authoritarian, dictatorial, and extremely violent nature of the Serb-dominated interwar Yugoslav state, which itself displayed a number of fascist tendencies, complicates an analysis of Croat Fascism, which did not develop as freely as Fascist movements emerging in more democratic European polities. However, the pushback that the Yugoslav state encountered from different nationalists who claimed to represent the Croat nation makes the application of Paxton’s framework to Croat national politics a worthwhile endeavour.

The Ustaša Movement differed from the HSS in many important ways, especially once Pavelić and his subordinates began to openly mould themselves after the Fascist and National Socialist prototypes that had achieved success in Italy and Germany. Yet the scholarly tendency to portray the Ustaša as a movement that was diametrically opposed to the more mainstream HSS remains problematic precisely because it overlooks the importance of other forces in Fascism’s success. As Peter Fritzsche has shown, many Germans who ended up backing the Nazis did not necessarily have to agree with all of the movement’s positions. Even some Germans who hated the movement came to admire and support its ‘accomplishments’ such as the *Anschluss* and the sense of German national unity cultivated in the ‘Third Reich’.⁵³

50 Paxton, *Anatomy of Fascism*, 206.

51 *Ibid.*

52 *Ibid.*, 207.

53 Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich*, Cambridge (MA) 2008, 35.

In addition to the fact that both the Ustaša and the HSS faced a brutal Yugoslav state apparatus that readily employed violence in response to the slightest expression of discontent, the views of the two groups overlapped in several ways. The HSS displayed a considerable share of Paxton's Fascist "mobilizing passions", especially when one takes into account the fact that they operated in a state that devoted tremendous resources to violently suppressing all opposition forces. At the same time, the extremely violent blend of racial nationalism that came to characterise the Ustaša regime after 1941 did not represent all aspects of the movement during the interwar period. The Ustaša included leaders such as Mile Budak, who narrowly survived an assassination attempt by Yugoslav agents in 1932. While Budak emphasised his hostility towards Serbs and Jews more openly than the authors of HSS publications, the overwhelming majority of his written works focussed on the plight of the peasantry under the Yugoslav state in particular and liberal capitalism more generally. The many areas in which Ustaša and HSS views overlapped can help explain why many people simultaneously expressed their support for both organisations. It can also explain why the more active sympathisers of both groups co-operated with each other on the local level even though their leaders generally abstained from uniting and overtly endorsing one another.

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