

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF CROATIA

**T**he territory of present-day Croatia was the home of Illyrian tribes when the Romans conquered it in the first century B.C., creating the provinces of Pannonia and Dalmatia, and subsequently most of the population was gradually Romanized. The Slavs and the Croats moved to the region by the end of the sixth century, when the age of the great migrations of peoples was coming to an end. At the beginning of the ninth century, a state was organized under the Trpimirović dynasty, replaced in 1102 by the Hungarian Arpad dynasty. In this way, Hungary and Croatia created a union that was to last until 1918, but within which Croatia always retained a degree of autonomy. In 1526, the Hapsburg dynasty was elected to the throne of Hungary-Croatia, and thus Hungary-Croatia became part of the huge Austrian Empire. At that time, the Ottoman Turks held large parts of Croatia, almost two-thirds, and much of the coast belonged to the Venetian Republic from even earlier times.

By the end of the seventeenth century, after it was gradually liberated from the Ottomans, the territory of Croatia acquired its characteristic horseshoe shape, and its borders have since changed very little. In those days, the territory inhabited by the Croats, which included parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, was divided by state frontiers among the Hapsburg Monarchy, Venice, and the Ottomans. It was socially, culturally, and

climatically heterogeneous, and had poor road connections. The National Revival began in the 1830s, but, due to prevailing conditions, it developed very slowly.

Croatia was peripheral to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and was alternately governed from the two centers, first Vienna and then Budapest. When the Monarchy disintegrated in 1918, Croatia became part of a newly formed state of Yugoslavia, more by the dictate of conditions in general than by the will of its political leaders and people. Yugoslavia bridged the area from the Alps almost to the Aegean Sea, which had not been under a single administration since the fourth century. Life in the new state placed Croatia in a completely novel situation: the central-European environment, which had been very important for it, gradually eroded, and attempts were made to replace it by a new South Slav (i.e., Yugoslav) cultural and national self-awareness. National dilemmas were always in the foreground, both when ideas about separate nations or about a single Yugoslav nation were being promoted. At the same time, growing social stratification and the development of the proletariat led to class issues. Various solutions were offered to solve these problems, and totalitarian concepts, either right- or left-wing, gathered strength. As the Second World War approached, political development, especially on the international level, did not favor middle-class and democratic solutions.

Although after 1918 the very important ties with central Europe—especially Vienna and Budapest—waned as time passed, at first the Croatian economy did very well in the new community. Croatia was still a predominantly agricultural country (the population that depended on agriculture did not fall below 70 percent until the 1920s), but, all the same, its industry was much stronger than in the poorly developed eastern parts of the new country. Thus, Croatian industry, especially the wood industry, was assured of an internal market. The increased use of mechanization favored the processing industry and trade. Zagreb became a commercial and banking center, and Croatia, and Yugoslavia with it, was a country with good developmental potential, profitable businesses, and a basis for rapid growth. This led to more foreign investment in Croatia than in other parts of Yugoslavia. Until 1926, the Croatian economy expanded, and, until 1930, conditions remained relatively good. Despite these favorable circumstances and great profits, during the 1920s the workers' purchasing power was lower than in 1914. Zagreb and Croatia lagged behind most western- and central-European lands, but were better developed than most of the eastern and southeastern parts of Yugoslavia, or the other European

countries farther to the south and southeast. Zagreb most of all, but other urban centers too, developed much like the urban centers in some other parts of Europe: Zagreb Radio began broadcasting, a Zagreb–Belgrade airline route was opened, and the development of a rich urban class with sophisticated tastes fostered greater art production that was partially influenced by the avant-garde currents of postwar Europe. Zagreb University also expanded after 1918, because it was now more difficult to study in the former Austro-Hungarian centers.

On the other hand, as a result of the Communist Party's success in elections for the Constituent Assembly, and because of the demonstrations and strikes that were spreading throughout the country, laws were passed in 1920 making it possible to imprison people for political ideas and activities. According to the Yugoslav government, "the freedom of public activities and writing remains untouched, provided that it does not insult the State and demoralize the people." Be that as it may, in the interwar period, thousands of people were arrested and tried in accordance with these and other laws, which later grew increasingly repressive, and scores of people were killed by police violence.

The assassination attempt on the life of Stjepan Radić, head of the Croatian Peasant Party, and his associates in the Belgrade Assembly in 1928, and especially Radić's death a month later as a result of the wounds inflicted, caused great unrest in Zagreb and in other parts of Croatia. For months the atmosphere remained tense, as a result of which, on January 6, 1929, King Aleksandar issued a manifesto abolishing the Constitution, dissolving the National Assembly, and banning all political parties of national, religious, or regional nature (because of the date, this was known as the "Sixth-of-January Dictatorship"). Laws were passed making the king the supreme state authority and establishing absolute royal prerogatives. The persecution of political opponents, including moderate middle-class politicians, increased.

At the same time, the state was administratively subdivided into nine units called *banovinas* without any ethnic, economic, or geographical justification. The banovinas were designed to annul the boundaries and continuity of historical and national provinces, and to impose Yugoslav national unity under the leadership of the ruling Serbian circles.

Things got worse in 1930, greatly influenced by the world economic depression: foreign capital was withdrawn from the Croatian economy, and Croatia did not receive the necessary financial aid from Belgrade, which signaled the beginning of the end of economic prosperity for Croatia's var-

ious regions. In 1931, after more than eighty years of unbroken economic growth and expansion, Croatia experienced a catastrophic financial crash. The brutal suppression of national freedom and identity led to extremist nationalistic reactions, which in Croatia gave rise to the activities of the Ustasha organization.

To decrease internal pressure, in 1939 the Belgrade government developed what was known as the Cvetković-Maček Agreement. In an attempt to solve the Croatian national question, the Prime Minister, Dragiša Cvetković, signed an agreement with the leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, Vladko Maček, establishing the Croatian banovina as an administrative unit and agreeing to found a joint government. Unfortunately, it turned out that this solution, although realistic and workable in some respects, came too late (and, in the long run, it was doomed to failure because it did not take the Muslim question into consideration). By that time, internal tensions and foreign pressure had mounted beyond the control of even an effective policy.

The Axis Powers attacked Yugoslavia in April 1941, and the Yugoslav army quickly capitulated. The Independent State of Croatia (ISC) was created on the territory of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, under the rule of the Nazi-Fascist Ustasha movement, which launched a policy of genocide against Serbs, Jews, and Roma (familiarily known as Gypsies). They also persecuted many Croats who opposed them, or might oppose them in any way. All this quickly led to an anti-Fascist resistance under the leadership of the Communist Party and Josip Broz Tito. The Partisan movement in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina was unparalleled in Europe in its massive popular support and its level of organization, exceeded only by the one in occupied parts of the USSR. Skillfully combining broad anti-Fascist goals with their own social and national agenda, the Communists turned the Partisan units into an indigenous force that, after the Second World War, was in a position to impose its own government.