

Genocide in Satellite Croatia Chapter

II. Regency, Concordat and the

Tripartite Pact



Continued from [Chapter I. The International Conspiracy Against Yugoslavia.](#)

King PETER II was only a child of eleven when his father was assassinated. A Regency was instituted in accordance with King Alexander's will, presided over by Prince Paul.

All the dissension, suspended but for a short time, began once more, and with greater intensity. For the parliamentary elections of May 5, 1935, an opposition bloc was formed, grouping Radicals, Democrats, the Serbian Agrarian party, the Croatian Peasant party, the Independent Democrats, the Catholic Slovene party, and the Yugoslav Muslim party. The head of the government, Bosko Jevtic, could not maintain his position and was succeeded by the economist, Milan Stojadinovic. This professor of economics obtained very satisfactory results from an economical and financial point of view. Politically speaking, he was able to rally the Radicals, the Catholic Slovenes and the Yugoslav Muslim party to his government. But in spite of the negotiations at Brezice, in 1936 and in January 1937, with the head of the Croatian Peasant party, Vlatko Macek, the latter refused to lend his support.

Stojadinovic thought he could reduce this systematic opposition, so destructive to the country, by making substantial concessions to the Catholic Church. He nourished the hope, considering the voting of the Concordat, concluded during the lifetime of Alexander and ratified by the Jevtic cabinet, that he could persuade the Catholic Church in Croatia to abandon its hostile attitude toward the state and the government. This project, drawn up secretly, caused an immediate and intense feeling in all circles as soon as its existence became known, resulting in violent polemics.¹ The Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as other churches, reproached the government for adhering to the terms of the Concordat which granted to the Catholic Church privileges and guarantees which they themselves did not enjoy. They believed that this was a violation of the constitutional principle of religious equality.

¹ The public knew about the signing only after someone had given it to Serbian church officials, who made it public.

The Concordat between Yugoslavia and the Vatican was discussed a great deal in the domestic as well as in the foreign press. It seems that the preliminary draft of the Concordat, drawn up by a Yugoslav Commission as a basis for negotiations, was rejected by the Vatican from the very beginning. It was rejected because the Italian Fascist regime had just come into power, and Pope Pius XI did not want to provoke any suspicion on Mussolini's part by opening any negotiations with Yugoslavia. It was only after Mussolini had suppressed all opposition and had consolidated his regime that secret negotiations between the Quirinal and the Vatican were initiated in order to solve this "fabulous" question. Therefore, Pope Pius XI consented to begin the official negotiations which were to be held in June 1925, and the Yugoslav delegation left for Rome.

But beside this delegation, Archbishop Bauer of Zagreb, with members of the leadership of the Croatian Catholic Episcopacy, also went to Rome. The purpose of their sojourn there became clear from the beginning.

During the first meeting of the Yugoslav and Vatican delegations, Mgr. Borgodini Duca said that the Bishops had discussed the Yugoslav draft of the Concordat and had reached conclusions which had been transmitted to the Vatican. The Bishops had asked the Holy See not to sign the Concordat before a number of their ecclesiastical and political conditions were fulfilled, which actually meant the return to conditions which prevailed in 1918 in Austria-Hungary. He further said that the Holy See had accepted the conditions submitted by the Bishops, and offered his counter-proposal to the Concordat, on his own responsibility, independent of the corresponding Congregations and the Holy See, and thus the discussions were resumed.

In fact, what the Vatican and the higher clergy wanted to attain by means of these negotiations was the negation of Yugoslav sovereignty, and to seek a privileged position for the Catholic Church in the country.

This inimical stand on the part of the Vatican and its higher clergy concerning the Concordat was discussed during a session of the Yugoslav Ministerial Council, at which time the Minister of Education, Stjepan Radic, as the head of the strongest Croat party, spoke with determination against the hostile attitude of the Vatican and its clergy. He accused them of clerical pretentiousness, and asked their full respect for the sovereignty of the state.

Thus, through Stjepan Radic's intervention, the negotiations with the Vatican were postponed but not discontinued. As a result of this and soon after, at the time when the question of St. Geronimo in Rome was brought up, the Vatican intensified its hostile stand toward Yugoslavia and its sovereign rights.²

² Sima Simic, *Vatikan protiv Jugoslavije* (The Vatican against Yugoslavia), (Titograd, 1958}, pp. 16-17.

That the disputed Concordat of 1936 gave the Catholic Church a privileged

position was recognized by Archbishop Bauer and his vicar, Stepinac, in a declaration on March 31, 1936: "The Catholic Church is not at all opposed to the Serbian Orthodox Church also receiving all that it perhaps does not now have and which is guaranteed to the Catholic Church by the Concordat."³

³ Ibid, Also see Viktor Novak, *Magnum Crimen* (Zagreb, 1948), p. 440.

This condescending attitude of the Roman prelature could not but irritate the Serbian Orthodox clergy and to arouse a feeling of frustration. The political opposition seized upon this occasion and added fuel to the fire. Alarming news was circulated throughout the country, holding the Concordat responsible for the serious condition of the Serbian Patriarch, Varnava, whose illness had grown much worse.

The situation became even more precarious after street demonstrations by the Orthodox Serbs were prohibited by the authorities. The agitators refused to listen and the police force, in order to impress them, resorted to violence. Church banners were trampled on and there were many wounded, among them the Bishop of Sabac, Simeon, whose bishop's crown was demolished and thrown to the ground. "Such sights have never before been witnessed, even under the Turks," was the cry that rose up from the people.

The attitude of the Croatian Peasant party was expressed by its leader, Vlatko Macek, who made the following statement in May 1987 to the correspondent of the *Kuryer Warszawsky*: "We remain quite indifferent to the question because the Vatican is trying to conclude the Concordat with the Serbian Orthodox government and not with the Roman Catholic population of Croatia." ⁴

⁴ "Sima Simic, *op. cit.*, p. 139; Viktor Novak, *op. cit.*, p. 447.

King Alexander had early desired the settlement of ecclesiastical matters with the Holy See, and in conformity with this, negotiations for concluding a Concordat had begun as early as 1920, and its formulation was ready by the end of 1921, but conditions were not suitable just at that time for finalizing it. However, the year 1925 seemed to be favorable for its conclusion, since Stjepan Radic, at that time the leader of the Croatian Peasant party, was a member of the Government and Minister of Education. The Government was made up of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, representing their strongest parties. During a session of the Government, Voja Janic, who was Minister of Justice, submitted a report on the Concordat to the Assembly with the purpose of initiating the discussions which were to lead toward final acceptance. However, directly after the end of Janic's report, Stjepan Radic got up to speak and strongly objected against its proposal, stating that the Concordat was too clericalistic and that the Croats would never accept it; he practically reproved Janic—a Serb and an Orthodox—of being too clericalistic in proposing such a Concordat. Viktor Novak, *op. cit.*, p. 437.

In general, it can be said that all religions were against the Concordat in 1936, including the majority of the Catholic Croats. In a publication called, *Javnost*, edited by Niko Bartulovic who was a Catholic-Croat, an article was published analyzing the Concordat, and in trying to prove that a Concordat of

this kind was detrimental to the state, it said:

It is detrimental because it opens the doors for the Catholic Church to enter schools, homes, and among those willing and unwilling, actually everywhere; giving it control over everything, whereas the State is deprived of any rights of interfering in any of the Catholic establishments or organizations.

It is detrimental because it paves the way to clericalism which has never made any country happy.

It is detrimental because it gives the Catholic Church broad and exceptional rights by means of which it is acquiring a privileged position in comparison to other religions in the State.

It is wrong because it prompts other religions within the country to demand for themselves equal rights and privileges enjoyed by the Catholic Church, which means that the state is forced at the point of a knife to give concessions of all kinds to all of them.

It is wrong because it would not be politically opportune for our state to burden itself at the present moment with controversial ecclesiastic matters.

And finally, it is wrong because in word and in spirit, it is against the stabilization of present conditions in the political, social and economic sense, and instead of restricting some ecclesiastical rights, it is on the contrary forced to increase them and prompts other religions to demand the same rights.

The question of settling religious matters in our country is of great significance to the state. Therefore, the Concordat should be looked upon from the state's standpoint as well as from perspective of its own aims. But if looked upon only from the religious side, it should not be accepted. The state has the right and duty to organize religious matters within its own borders from its own way of looking at them and for its own good ends.⁶

⁶ Politicus, "The General Characteristics of our Concordat," *Jaunost* (Belgrade, 1937), No. 9, pp. 156-159.

Viktor Novak, Professor of History and a Croat Catholic, wrote about the Concordat and especially about the clause concerning church services in the Slavic language, the following:

For the long lasting development of the Croat Glagolica, i.e., the holding of Church services in the old Slavic Language, this was one of the greatest and hardest offenses, intensified by the tragic silence of the Croats.

If the Concordat were to be legalized such as it stands, it would mean that the already atrophied Glagolica in its oasis would be doomed to

die, which would lead toward a point of no return, and that in the very near future. However, the worst of all things is the *signum temporaria*, i.e., the lack of political maturity of our times. Who will take the responsibility for this before history? Will it be the people or its "spiritual leaders"? Will it be the Government? If so, which one? Who will be the one to speak the last words at the end of the tragic trilogy of the Croat "Glagolia"—"La Tragedia e finita."⁷

⁷ Viktor Novak, "The Tragic Trilogy of the Croat 'Glagolism,'" *Javnost*, No. 9, pp. 160-168.

The hardest blow against the Concordat that came from the Croats was, however, the one given by the Democratic Peasant Coalition, whose President was Vlatko Macek, and which was formed from the Croat Peasant party and the Independent Democratic party. The first purely Croat, and the second having Serbs in a majority (but in itself very small). The Executive Committee of the Peasant Democratic Coalition took a very negative stand against the Concordat during meetings held on January 24 and 25, 1937. It was said in its Resolution that the Concordat which was signed between the Vatican and Yugoslavia, was now being used to harangue the Orthodox masses—while on the other hand the pastoral letter issued by the Catholic Bishops proposed a Fascist arrangement of the State.⁸

⁸ Viktor Novak, *op. cit.*, pp. 446-447.

It is obvious that only a small minority of the Croat people were protesting against the non-legalization of the Concordat. These were the Croat ultramontanes and "Starcevites" with extreme nationalist inclinations.

In parliament, after somewhat agitated debates, the project was adopted on July 23, 1937 by a vote of 166 to 129. That same evening, during a dinner given by the president of the government for the deputies who had voted favorably, all at once the bells of all the Serbian Orthodox churches started tolling the death knell of the Patriarch, Varnava.

Such a coincidence made a great impression on public opinion.

The stormy atmosphere that hung over the entire country forced the government to postpone the debates before the Senate until sometime later, and ultimately the whole project was dropped. Subsequently, according to Yugoslav newspapers, Prime Minister Milan Stojadinovic declared that "the Concordat with the Vatican, in such a form, will not be submitted for approval to the Assembly. In any further settlement of relations with the Vatican and in regulating its position with the Roman Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav Government will respect and enforce to the fullest extent the principles of equal rights of all legally acknowledged religions in the country, guaranteed by the Constitution and existing laws."

But the attitude of His Grace, Stepinac, coadjutor *cum jure successionis*, of Archbishop Bauer, was quite the opposite. Archbishop Bauer at eighty was on his deathbed when, on December 6, 1937, the Apostolic Nuncio of Belgrade, His Grace Pellegrinetti, on his way to Rome to be ordained Cardinal, passed through Zagreb. His Grace Stepinac went to greet the prelate at the station

and in his address, made the following statement: "Rest assured, Excellency, and also assure the Holy Father, that any storm that threatens the ship of St. Peter's these days, will never alarm us." ⁹

⁹ Viktor Novak, op. cit., p. 461.

In pronouncing these words the bellicose coadjutor eloquently corroborated the legend of the "persecuted" Roman Catholic Church, and in so doing he concealed a truth which could be easily checked, i.e. the adoption of the Concordat was due to the favorable votes of the Serbian Orthodox deputies.

And so, ten days later, on December 16, 1937, Pope Pius XI duly informed of the incipient "tempest" which, according to His Grace, Stepinac, threatened the ship of St. Peter's, started to spread apocalyptic remarks during the consistory where the new cardinals, among whom was His Grace Pellegrinetti, were being consecrated: "The day will come," continued His Holiness, "when there will be many who will regret not having accepted fully, generously and efficaciously the great blessing offered to their country by Christ's Vicar, and offered not only to the ecclesiastical and religious body of the nation but, above all, to the political and social life, although His Holiness is loathe to make his business and his work a question of politics." ¹⁰

¹⁰ Osservatore Romano, December 17, 1937.

The threat against Yugoslavia and the Serbian Orthodox Church, held responsible for the failure of the Concordat, was only too evident.

SPORAZUM (agreement) CVETKOVIC-MACEK

At the climax of the political and religious crisis of October 8, 1937, the parties of the Opposition signed a mutual agreement called "The Agreement of Farkasic." In case of an electoral victory, they proposed forming a government which would abolish the Constitution of 1931 and substitute another that would remain valid until the decisive vote.

In the election of December 11, 1938, the Opposition ticket received 1,364,524 votes, and that of the government 1,643,783, a small majority.

This slender success added to the unsettled situation in Europe, incited the Regency to seek a *modus vivendi* (an arrangement or agreement that allows conflicting parties to coexist in peace) with the Croatian Peasant party, all the more necessary because Stojadinovic seemed to be drawing closer and closer to the Axis powers, while the Regency tried to preserve a friendly relationship with France and England. Already on March 25, 1937, a political and economic agreement had been signed with Count Ciano for a "sincere and lasting friendship" between the two countries.

Prince Paul, after the elections of 1938, dismissed his government leader and replaced him with Dragisa Cvetkovic, whose mission was to discover a common ground of understanding with the Croatian Peasant party. Negotiations for this purpose began on March 8, 1939 but they were destined to drag on, for at the same time, Macek, playing a double game, started negotiating with Ciano, through his agents, Cernelutti and Count Bombelles.

According to the diary kept by Ciano, which was published after the war, Macek was ready to organize an uprising in Croatia for which he would ask help from Italy in forming a Croatian republic that would eventually unite with Italy.

On March 21, 1939, Ciano received Cernelutti and gave him instructions to save time by prolonging negotiations with Belgrade. Bombelles, on the other hand, after an interview on April 5th with the Ustashi leader, Pavelic, paid a visit to Ciano and then returned to Zagreb to see Macek before going back to Rome.

After his second audience with Cernelutti, Count Ciano wrote the following in his diary on May 26, 1939, regarding their conversation:

I had a meeting with Cernelutti, who had just returned from Zagreb. He confirmed to me that Macek had firmly decided to discontinue any negotiations for an agreement with Belgrade, and to support the uprising. We agreed upon the following points:

- 1-Italy will finance Macek's Croat uprising with 20,000,000 Dinars;
- 2-He accepts the responsibility of starting the uprising within four to six months;
- 3-He will invite the Italian troops at once to insure peace and order;
- 4-Croatia will proclaim its independence and confederation with Rome. It will have its own Government, but foreign and military affairs will be one with Italy...

The Duce has read the report and agrees with it.

At this same moment negotiations with Cvetkovic reached a dead end because of Macek's unacceptable demands in claiming the non-Croatian provinces and, above all, certain parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Such exigencies met with the vehement opposition of the Serbs of both religions, Orthodox and Muslim. The leader of the latter, Dr. Mehmed Spaho, Minister of Communications, threatened to resign if the Regency consented to dividing up Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Macek denies this in his autobiography,¹¹ but the events which took place and Macek's attitude toward them, lead one to believe that Count Ciano was telling the truth. One is forced to make such a conclusion because of the way in which he left the Government, in which he was Vice-President. He arrived in Zagreb on April 10, 1941, and appealed to the Croat people over the radio to accept loyally the Independent State of Croatia, created by Hitler and Mussolini, and to help their new government. He did this seven days before the Yugoslav government signed the act of capitulation. This is considered an act of betrayal, punishable by law in any organized country.

¹¹ Vlado Macek, *In Struggle for Freedom* (New York, 1957), pp. 186-187 and 189-190.

Mussolini, through the intermediary of a Swiss bank, granted the twenty million dinars needed to finance the uprising in Croatia. But a new development, the sudden death of Dr. Mehmed Spaho, head of the Muslims in

Bosnia-Herzegovina, on June 29, 1939, facilitated the conclusion of an agreement between Macek and the Regency in Belgrade, annexing certain parts of this province to Croatia. Public opinion was convinced that the Muslim leader had been poisoned.

The concession, thus obtained, and perhaps also Berlin's somewhat repugnant attitude on seeing Croatia fall entirely within the Italian orbit, caused Macek to abandon his project. Consequently on August 26, 1939, a compromise *in extremis* intervened at Belgrade. By the *Sporazum* (agreement) signed by the Croatian Peasant party, Croatia was granted an extensive political and financial autonomy, with its own government and its own assembly. A Ban (governor) represented the royal power in Zagreb, while Belgrade controlled foreign policy, national defense, finance in part, the postal service, the telegraph, telephone and other communications, and, in general, interests of a purely national character.

The autonomous affairs of the Banovina of Croatia comprised: Interior Administration, Justice, Public Education, Agriculture, Forestry and Mining, Finance, Construction, Health, and Social Policy.

The principle of a centralist state was therefore definitely abandoned, and Yugoslavia, thence forward, adopted a federalist formula, never very clearly defined.

The very day that the agreement was signed a new Cvetkovic government was formed in Belgrade, with Vlakdo Macek taking over the vice-presidency.

The *Sporazum* explicitly counted on its text being ratified by parliament, but realizing that this body would not give a favorable vote and that the *Sporazum* would be rejected, the Cvetkovic-Macek government dissolved parliament immediately, and on August 26th abolished the electoral law, as well as all other political laws, which had become obsolete. In reality, the Constitution of 1931 survived. Thenceforward the Cvetkovic-Macek government, by failing to organize the promised free elections, agreed to in the *Sporazum*, governed without a parliament, and thus it became quite evident that the Croatian Peasant party, instead of fighting for a real democracy, had fought only for the aggrandizement of Croatia's territory. Thus it found itself enlarged by nine districts from Bosnia-Herzegovina, and two from the province of Srem, which is to say, 13,809 square kilometers, populated by 656,000 souls, the majority being non-Croatian. Dating from this time, the population of the Croatian Banovina amounted to 4 million 500 thousand inhabitants, among whom were 3 million 180 thousand Catholics, around 1,000,000 Orthodox Serbs, 204,000 Muslim Serbs, and the remainder composed of diverse faiths.

The Serbs, Orthodox and Muslim, who were thus disposed of by a mere scratch of the pen, without being previously and publicly consulted, vigorously protested against this arbitrary action, and straightway began to organize a resistance. The *Sporazum* had been the cause of general discontent in the country; shortly after it had been signed there was a rumor of Croatian hegemony. And this was not exaggerated, according to a confidential letter at that time addressed to all the organizations of the Peasant party in Croatia,

and especially points 13 and 15 of this letter, which gave precise details on the attitude expected of the adherents. Point 13 was expressed as follows: "It must always be emphasized that the situation created by the *Sporazum* represented only the first phase toward the realization of our program of tomorrow. This is the reason why we should always speak of a free and independent Croatia. . . ." ¹²

¹² **Amerikanski Srbobran** (Pittsburgh), September 6, 1948.

Point 15 specifies: "In following these instructions we shall profit from every circumstance for the realization of our goal. The Versailles Treaty is about to crumble and Yugoslavia was one of its artificial creations. Our leaders will vacillate between the powers of the axis and the democracies. We have men who will side with either one or the other of these political systems. Our principal pre-occupation is the disintegration of Yugoslavia. To accomplish this we can count on the Catholic Church on one side, and International Communism on the other." ¹³

¹³ *Ibid.*, September 7, 1948.

Radic's successor, Macek, "reoriented the Croatian Peasant party into a rabid nationalist movement which, by becoming increasingly bold, became an active factor for the growing political tension inside Yugoslavia. From this period onward, separatism became the key-word of Croat Nationalism, with the result that the latter began increasingly to play into the hands of the Catholic Hierarchy and thus into those of the Vatican." ¹⁴

¹⁴ Avro Manhattan, *Terror over Yugoslavia* (London, 1953), p. 35.

Cynical as it appears, the instructions of the Croat Peasant party explained the situation precisely. The Roman Catholic Church and Moscow, though from different angles, agreed perfectly on this point.¹⁵ As early as 1925, George Dimitrov, then general secretary of the Comintern, before a special commission of that body consecrated to the Yugoslav question, made the following statement: "No serious Communist work will be possible in the Balkans until Yugoslavia disintegrates. So Yugoslavia must be made to disintegrate by our helping the Separatist movements there." ¹⁶

¹⁵ Still more recently, on August 11, 1951, the, official paper of the English Catholics (*The Tablet*) spoke of the necessity of disintegrating Yugoslavia ("disestablishment of Yugoslavia").

¹⁶ Stephen Clissold, *Whirlwind* (London, 1949), pp. 101-102.

For Dimitrov, of Bulgarian origin, the problem was to form a greater Macedonia by uniting the parties of this region which had been annexed by Yugoslavia, Greece and Bulgaria. This new state, controlled by Bulgaria, would then become a sort of "springboard" for Russia, which would give the Soviet access to the Adriatic for the control of the Straits of Otranto, and therefore of all of the Eastern Mediterranean seaboard. It was only on November 26, 1942, during the session of AVNOJ (Anti-Fasisticko Vece Narodnog Oslobodjanja Jugoslavijske, or Anti-Fascist Council of the National Liberation of Yugoslavia) at Bihac, that the Yugoslav Communist party gave up the idea of a complete disintegration of its country and declared itself in favor of

federating the small provincial entities.

THE COMING OF THE WAR

The signing of the *Sporazum* gave the signal for the "purging" of the administrative staffs in Croatia, which had now become autonomous and known as the *Banovina Hrvatska*. This was realized by direct methods, with Serbian functionaries expelled or obliged to leave because of vexatious treatment and, above all, because of threatening letters. They were falling in the streets of Zagreb by the dozens, struck down by assassins whom the police "never succeeded" in discovering. Yet no one was unaware that the guilty ones belonged to the semi-military organization (Croatian Civilian Defense) affiliated with the Peasant party of Macek.¹⁷

¹⁷ "Individual Serbs were murdered by terrorists, and Macek took no strong measures against the guilty... . Macek never abandoned his aim of a democratic, peasant-ruled progressive federation of all South Slavs. But this dream receded while Macek left freedom to those who were sabotaging his ideas, sabotaging Croatian democracy and sabotaging the Yugoslav state." (Hugh Seton-Watson, *Eastern Europe Between the Wars* (Cambridge, 1945), pp. 239-240.

A boycott was organized of Serbian shops and everything that was Serbian. In all places where mixed elements, that is Serbs and Croats, lived, so-called "economic societies" were formed which were called "Each One to Himself." The purpose of these organizations was to boycott all Serbian economic life.

Hrvatski Dnevnik, the newspaper of the Croat Peasant party, published the following in its issue of August 28, 1939: "Croatia will not be able to keep on its territory certain people [meaning Serbs] who have no confidence in the Croat people; beside Croatia will not be able to give them pensions, because they do not deserve them."

The Croats went so far in their provocations and hostility that the Croat municipality of Privlaka even discharged Steva Nikolic, a dog catcher, because he was an Orthodox Serb: Even the Government newspaper *Vreme* (Belgrade), published an article from Osijek on November 26, 1939, which said the following regarding the dismissal of Serbs: "The dismissal of Serbs from city employment and city enterprises is continuing. Beside the dismissals which have been reported recently, seven more Serbian workers were dismissed from the city's street car enterprise, and now the number of discharged people totals up to thirty."

All these regrettable and unpardonable measures were the direct consequence of the fascist and Ustashi influence which had taken control of the Croatian Peasant party. During a meeting of this party at Split, August 23, 1937, the secretary of the party said: "I can promise you that dawn is breaking over sovereign Croatia, and independence will follow. Once Croatia is free then you can settle up your accounts for those years since 1918."

It is very obvious that this was an appeal for the kind of violence so characteristic of all racists.

A supplementary clause makes it clear that this declaration was not just fortuitous but part of a political and systematic propaganda. Ivan Pernar, then deputy of the Croatian Peasant party (and who today resides in the United States), was one of the closest collaborators of Vlatko Macek. In an address he made on October 10, 1987, at Nasice, he also threatened that "all foreigners would be expelled within twenty-four hours and sent to Tsar Dusan's empire (alluding to the Kingdom of Serbia during the fourteenth century). Needless to add he was making a direct appeal for the expulsion of the Serbs from Croatia.

The Croatian Peasant party's newspaper, the *Hrvatshi Dneunik* (September 20, 1940), published the following article filled with praise for the clever Nazi Reich:

The Croatians are a people, who, regarding their relationship with Germany, had no need to be re-oriented, for they were never hostile. We have always respected the rights of a great people such as the German people, and we were persuaded that this people, thanks to their great sense of organization, would rise again after the heavy blow dealt to them by the treaty of Versailles. Although Germany has never meddled with the internal policy of Yugoslavia, we have noticed with satisfaction all that has appeared in the German press, and which on various occasions has shown great understanding for the position of the Croatian people and the role it has been given to play in this part of Europe. The signs of sympathy which Germany has given us have been spontaneous. (November 20, 1940.)

Hardly had Croatia become master of its fate than it began sinking into the mire of disorder, anarchy and corruption. Thus, when the Axis Powers began their attack on April 6, 1941, it had become the most vulnerable part of the whole country.

The war drew closer and closer to Yugoslav territory, and the Cvetkovic-Macek government did not possess the necessary authority to concentrate the forces of the country and prepare them for the great ordeal. Furthermore, the Germano-Italian pressure had become more seriously felt since the Pact of Steel (May 22, 1939). Once hostilities were started in Europe, Germany's repeated victories (her advance up to the national frontiers, and her presence in Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria), with the Italians, at the same time, occupying all of Albania and attacking Greece, made a tremendous impression on the population. Despite the Francophile and Anglophile sympathies of the majority of the representatives, the government was gradually weaned away from the traditional friendly relationships. On February 14, 1941, Hitler, in order to help the Italian troops in their perilous situation on Greece, asked Belgrade, or rather ordered Belgrade, to permit the transportation of war material through Yugoslavia. On March 5th, Prince Paul had an interview with the Fuhrer at Berchtesgaden, where the conditions of a tripartite pact were presented to him, bringing Yugoslavia into the Germano-Italian orbit, Hitler guaranteed the security of the Yugoslav frontiers just as he had done with Czechoslovakia, and Ribbentrop solemnly declared that Germany had no political interests whatsoever in the Balkans. Furthermore, a part of Greek Macedonia, with the port of Salonika, would be ceded to Yugoslavia.

From the 18th to the 20th of March, the Council of the Regency deliberated its adhesion to the Tripartite Pact. The Serbian representatives were divided, but the Croats, Slovenes and Muslims gave their acceptance. It should be noted that His Grace Stepinac, on his return from Rome, at the beginning of the month, informed Vlatko Macek, vice-president of the Council of Ministers, that the fascist government had a plan already drawn up for dividing Yugoslavia. On March 6th, an agreement was reached between them to establish a spiritual and temporal uniformity of viewpoints concerning Croatian policy in general.

On March 25th, Dragisa Cvetkovic, head of the government, and Dr. Cincar Markovic, his minister of foreign affairs, signed the Tripartite Pact in the presence of Hitler at the Belvedere in Vienna.¹⁸ But when the announcement was made, the people of Belgrade rose up in protest crying: "A war rather than a pact!" (Bolje rat, nego pakt!) These proud words were pronounced by the Patriarch Gavriilo: "If we are to live, let us live in liberty, and if we are to die let us die for liberty!" On March 27th, at dawn, a *coup d'état*, organized by Serbian officers and the garrison at Belgrade, overthrew the government and the Regency. A coalition government, comprising all remnants of the democratic parties, was formed that morning, with General Dusan Simovic as president of the Council of Ministers. Peter II was to sit on the throne five months before he was of age.

¹⁸ The only good thing about the agreement was the Yugoslav government's refusal to accept Hitler's offer of a part of Greek territory.

That evening of the same day, Prince Paul, first Regent, took the train for Slovenia but was stopped on the way and advised to return to Belgrade. He got off, however, at Zagreb, where he consulted Dr. Vlatko Macek, vice-president of the fallen government, and Dr. Ivan Subasic, "ban" of Croatia, about the recent developments.

Macek sought to influence Prince Paul to take up the resistance. He argued that he was master of the situation in all the Croatian provinces, having control of the Croatian troops, and he even summoned the Chief of Police of Zagreb, Rikard Vikert, asking him to guarantee that he would be able to arrest General Nedeljkovic, commander of the region, in case he might be opposed to the plans. But the Prince, fearing that his attitude would be regarded as taking action in a rebellion against Peter II and inciting a civil war, advised Macek to rally around the government of General Simovic.¹⁹ And it was Simovic who greeted Prince Paul the following day at the station in Belgrade, and accompanied him to the Ministry of War, where the Regent signed his abdication.

¹⁹ Macek, *op. cit.*, pp. 216-218.

That same day, by special train, Paul reached the Greek frontier with his family, where the English were waiting to conduct him to Kenya, British colony in East Africa. This became his residence in exile where he would remain until after the war.

On April 4th, Macek, having received a guarantee that the *Sporazum* would be

respected, finally accepted the vice-presidency in the new government, and returned once more to Belgrade.

Macek awaited Engineer Kosutic's return from Belgrade before going there, and wrote in his autobiography the following: "Kosutic was back in Zagreb on the morning of March 31. He brought good news as far as the new Government's willingness to grant more power to the Banovina of Croatia was concerned."²⁰ He was interested only in "more power for the Banovina of Croatia" but not in the tragic situation of Yugoslavia. Such a great patriot!

²⁰ Macek, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

In his relations with Berlin and with the desire to serve Croatia, Macek was not too honest in matters concerning Yugoslavia. Probably influenced by a sense of guilt, he gave a naive twist to this in his autobiography, stating: "Meanwhile Mittelhammer, the correspondent of the German DNB News Agency, transmitted to me the advice of the German Foreign Ministry to 'keep away from Belgrade.'" ²¹ This took place directly after Kosutic's return from Belgrade, which is March 31st. Then he went on speaking about the visit of Hitler's emissary from the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "On the afternoon of April 3, just before I was to leave Zagreb, Maletke, a special emissary from von Ribbentrop, brought me a message that the time was at hand to sever Croatia from Serbia. I was offered German aid in carrying out this project. I answered that such a separation would be possible only through the medium of war, and that, therefore, I would undertake no such thing." ²²

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 220-301.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 220-221.

Mittelhammer warned Macek on March 31st, "to keep away from Belgrade," which meant that Germany had decided already at that time to attack Yugoslavia. Maletke made his proposal to Macek on April 3, which confirms even more strongly that Germany's decision was final. This could have been precious information for Simovic, and there is not a doubt that it would have helped him very much if he had learned it at the same time that Macek did. The question actually is, did Macek fulfill his role of a loyal citizen toward his own country and did he transmit this information to his government, whose Vice-President he was? Even if his relations with Berlin were truly of a naive nature, as he wishes to present them, there still remains the question of his loyalty to his own state.²³

²³ There is ample evidence, from photographs and otherwise, that Macek and some of his close collaborators in the Peasant party were seeing German diplomats in Zagreb with fair frequency, which in itself may mean much or little.

Meanwhile, immediately after the "Putsch" of March 27, 1941, in Belgrade, the Wilhelmstrasse discontinued relations with the Yugoslav Legation and strengthened them with the Ustashi abroad, at the head of which stood Branko Benzon, a doctor, who was working as a cardiologist at one of the Hospitals in Berlin. Since this group was not very strong, Benzon, in agreement with the Nazis, invited the Ustashi, Adrija Artukovic, who was in Slovakia, to Berlin, and he arrived by plane from Bratislava on April 9, 1941. The Nazis established these Ustashi in the well-known hotel, "Kaiserhof." In order to

spread misinformation, the Nazis placed several radio broadcasts at the disposal of the Ustashi. This Ustashi group of emigrants consisted mainly of the following: Adrija Artukovic, Branko Benzon, Nicola Rusinovic, Vilko Riger, Ivan Derezic, Josip Mamic, Percevic, et al.

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